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Postcard from . . . St Kitts and Nevis

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A concentration of plantation-style hotels with fabulous gardens mixed with ruins from the days of sugar



©Matthew Cook

The kedgerie is moist and spicy, and the salt fish stew rich with fried onions and peppers. This morning's fortifying juices are mango and passion fruit, or there is fresh ginger beer. As for the feather-light French toast with coconut — well, there can be no holding back when you sit for Caribbean Sunday brunch at the venerable Hermitage hotel on Nevis.

Tucked away in the rainforested hills of St John Figtree parish, this cheerfully painted, 14-room property opened in 1984 and is a bastion of old-school charm. Every island in this seductive region has its heritage properties, but only on the tiny, twin isles of St Kitts and Nevis will you find such a joyful concentration of plantation-style hotels.

What does that term mean? It means you can expect fabulous gardens with mature tropical trees mixed with evocative ruins from the days of sugar. It guarantees antiques-filled Great Houses with spacious verandas and louvred doors and windows that demonstrate how,

with good design and a few fans, life is so much better without air conditioning. There will be no TV in your room (but you do get WiFi); afternoon tea will undoubtedly feature formidable homemade cakes, while the rum punches will be properly made in the traditional style using sour orange, bitters and grated nutmeg.

Richard and Maureen Lupinacci, from Philadelphia, bought the Hermitage as a wreck in 1971, and it gradually evolved into a hotel. “One season we entertained 54 friends in six months,” he recalls. “Then they started asking for a tennis court . . .” Its centrepiece is a splendid Great House that dates from 1676, built from rock-hard lignum vitae wood. Dr June Goodfield, a British writer and historian who has been visiting Nevis for 30 years, has penned an affectionate memoir about the hotel that includes an anecdote about the day a gardener mowing the lawns decided to take a short-cut through the house without switching off his machine. The result was one very tattered oriental rug, which he attempted to repair by nailing the myriad pieces to the floor.

Quirks, smiles and characters are all hallmarks of the plantation hotel, and their common link is that they remain resolutely small, independent and family-run. Check in at the 19-room Montpelier Plantation and Beach, which opened in 1966 and is set on a breezy hillside in Gingerland, and you will be greeted by Cosmo, a mischievous puppy who is part of a long line of golden labradors that have been nuzzling up to guests for decades.

Muffin Hoffman, from New York, took over this aristocratic property in 2002 with husband Lincoln. In her view, the core values of such hotels are “commitment, open-mindedness, and a sense of style and elegance”. Every evening at cocktails, beautifully turned out, she greets guests, ensuring they get the best from their time here. At Montpelier, it’s that personal.

Genial retainer staff are another core ingredient. “Out of 72 employees,” says Alistair Forrest, general manager of the 36-room Nisbet Plantation Beach Club near Newcastle, “26 have been with us for over 20 years.” Some of his guests, which he describes as “serial repeaters”, are just as loyal, with one having stayed 28 times.

How do you attract such devotion? Private ownership helps. David Dodwell, a Bermudan hotelier, bought Nisbet in 1989, and while there has been rolling modernisation (last summer, the shower curtains finally gave way to glass screens) it has remained true to his idiosyncratic vision of how a plantation hotel should be. “Unhurried. Unspoiled. Uncommon,” pipes the Nisbet notepaper, and that’s exactly what you get. Two miles north-west, across a stretch of water known as The Narrows, St Kitts is home to arguably the most magnificent example of all. Heralded by sweeping lawns and a majestic avenue of royal palms, the 23-room Ottley’s Plantation Inn has been owned by the Keusch and Lowell families, from New Jersey, since 1998. With 35 acres of grounds, including rainforest trails and a spa, it is crowned with a splendidly restored Great House painted in white and yellow. Book a first-floor room at the front and you can stand on its broad, wraparound veranda drinking in the lordly views of the gorgeously blue Atlantic like a portly 18th-century plantocrat.

And there’s the rub. As we all know, sugar is evil — and without slavery there would be no romantic plantation hotels for us to enjoy today. At Ottley’s, the old boiling house is now home to a heavenly, 66ft, spring-fed swimming pool where you can do your lengths while contemplating how the iniquities of the past come to frame the pleasures of the present. “We should never forget these origins,” cautions Dr June Goodfield, but after three decades of visiting, she also believes these are islands where people have learnt to “forgive and move on together”.

“In 1985, the most prominent portrait in homes and government buildings here was of Queen

Elizabeth II,” she reflects. “Today, it is Nelson Mandela.”

Details

Nigel Tisdall was a guest of British Airways, which flies from London to St Kitts from £667 return. For hotel reservations see hermitagenevis.com, montpeliernevis.com, nisbetplantation.com and ottleys.com. For general information on St Kitts & Nevis see stkittstourism.kn and nevisisland.com

Illustration by Matthew Cook

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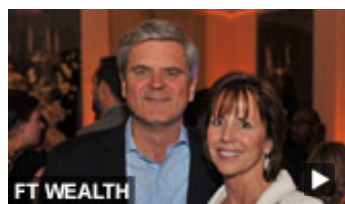
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