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Green party

They know how to celebrate on the volcanic island of Montserrat – but why all the leprechauns and lashings of Guinness? **Nigel Tisdall** finds out

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **STEVE DAVEY**



Montserrat attractions: clockwise from top left, Mango Falls villa; tomatoes for sale in St John's; the 'naughty' volcano; egret in Olveston House. Opposite, solitude in Rendezvous Bay



Cloud nine: Bunkum Bay has a great reef for snorkelling. Opposite, clockwise from top left, an island iguana; boutique-chic in St John's; an islander in full costume; tuna with plantain and rice at Olveston House

i've taken a fair few taxis in my time, but it's a first to meet a driver who puts 'Goatwater Specialist' on his business card. 'It's Montserrat's national dish,' Reuben Furlonge explains as we drive into the deep-green interior of this soaring volcanic island, 43km southwest of Antigua. 'A spicy stew made with goat or lamb – I'll cook you some.'

As we chat, I start to wonder if I've booked a ticket to some eccentric fairytale. The island, I soon learn, is home to the rare mountain chicken (which is actually a large frog) and the once critically endangered Montserrat oriole, a prize tick for birdwatchers visiting the region. For sports fans, its national football team, the green-shirted 'Monster Rats', is famous for vying determinedly with Papua New Guinea and American Samoa to secure bottom place on FIFA's world ranking.

More bizarrely, even though Montserrat is a British Overseas Territory, complete with a governor and annual celebrations for the Queen's Birthday, its topsy-turvy hills are infused with memories of Ireland. This blending of Celtic charm and Caribbean swagger began in the mid-17th century, when persecuted Irish Catholic families settled here and were in turn followed by slaves shipped in to work the sugar plantations. The national flag is decorated with a harp and the Irish figure of Erin, and the maps are dotted with place names such as Kinsale and Davy Hill. Open the phone book and you can call up the likes of Carlton O'Garro and Wellington Sweeney – they even stamp your passport with a pretty little shamrock on arrival.

Now why on earth would you want to holiday here? 'Montserrat's a lovely, peaceful island,' suggests Debra, who

befriends me as I wait to catch the ferry over from Antigua's capital, St John's. 'We leave our doors unlocked, there's no crime or drugs, and people are real friendly. You'll see...'

My induction into the great big life-loving family that is Montserrat starts on the 75-minute crossing aboard the *MV Fjortof*, which used to buzz around the tattered coast of Norway but has now, rather sensibly, absconded here for an indefinite sunshine holiday. Downstairs, the local radio station delivers a soundtrack of gospel and rap, while up on deck the hot gossip is that our delayed departure is all down to the fact that last night the skipper met some Jamaican girls at a poolside party.

'Are you over for St Patrick's Week?' everyone asks. As pub-quiz fans will know, Montserrat is the only other country in the world where Paddy's Day is a national holiday. The accompanying cultural festival is a time for homecoming, and I have a touching natter with the smartly hatted Veronica, who is returning for the first time in 13 years. 'I lived in Wales for a while,' she confides, 'but it was just too cold.'

As we near this little-known island, it becomes clear that it is one almighty heap of mountains cut through with deep ravines known locally as *ghauts*. Rising to 900m, and only 16km by 11km, Montserrat has few of the trappings you'd expect from the standard Caribbean holiday. Most of its beaches are small, with black sand; there are no all-inclusive resorts, no big cruise ships, no glitzy marinas – not even a hip little hotel (entrepreneurs please note). No golf course, no casino, no duty-free malls, disco pirate cruise or speeding banana boats... Just 5,000 islanders who have stayed loyal to the traditional, easy-come lifestyle that makes this region so compelling. 'Montserrat is how the Caribbean used to be,' reflects Troy Deppermann, a hard-grafting >

American who’s lived here for five years and runs the popular Green Monkey Inn and Dive Shop. ‘Here the locals are still friendly and visitors are not seen as walking ATMs.’

How can this be? Just look up, and there’s your answer: Soufrière Hills, a bald, ashen-faced volcano that for 400 years slept as happily as the numerous dogs here that like to lie down in the middle of the road. Then, in 1995, it started steamin’ and rumblin’, the first in a series of increasingly violent eruptions over the next two years that eventually led to some 8,000 islanders leaving the island. ‘The clouds blew up like this,’ Reuben tells me, pointing to a vase of white plastic carnations decorating a table at the Oriole Cafe, where lunch seems to be a competition to get the entire menu onto one plate. When I order a pork chop, it comes with sweet potato, rice, beans, coleslaw and macaroni cheese.

The eruptions wiped out Plymouth, the island capital, and claimed 19 lives. Today almost two-thirds of Montserrat is fenced off in an exclusion zone, where the only residents are pigs, goats and other animals that have gone feral. When I stare up at the deathly slopes of Soufrière Hills – the peak is often covered with a cloud of shame – I find it an emotional experience. It’s rather like knowing a schoolchild who has seriously messed up, or a good friend who suddenly throws up at a posh dinner party – and boy, was Montserrat having fun before the fireworks started.

Visit the Belham river, and you can see the old golf course – now covered in a deluge of mud. Close by, luxury villas that were once ‘like Beverly Hills’ lie abandoned. In the ’80s rock stars such as Eric Clapton, The Police and Stevie Wonder came here to record at the nearby Air Studios. They were brought by Sir George Martin, the music producer who launched The Beatles. Today his home, Olveston House, is a tranquil guesthouse with a garden that occasionally gets lightly coated in volcanic ash. Rampant pot plants, cane rocking chairs and black-and-white photos by Linda McCartney create a style that is irretrievably

Our delayed departure is down to the skipper meeting some Jamaican girls at a poolside party

bygone. There’s an airy terrace restaurant where I dine on wahoo fish and chips, and the manager, Carol Osborne, beavers away to ensure guests get the best from their time on the island – arranging tours and boat trips, or wangling invites to parties at the Governor’s House, where the dress code is ‘Very Casual’ and the arrival instructions say to look for a shuttle bus driven by Elvis.

Ironically, Montserrat’s volcano is now one of the main draws for visitors, including a good number of daytrippers from Antigua. The devastation is spectacular. Drive up to Jack Boy Hill and you can see the old airfield swamped with volcanic debris that fans out into the sea, with the tower of a sugar mill still poking out defiantly. Take a boat trip to the ghost town of Plymouth, and although no-one is allowed ashore, you can still gaze across at its deserted streets and half-buried buildings.

The place to get a handle on what happened is the Montserrat Volcano Observatory, where a 20-minute film of the eruptions reveals the terrifying powers that lie beneath our feet. Here is Soufrière Hills in all its raging glory, crowned with clouds of ash that resemble giant grey cauliflowers – and still the villagers go on playing cricket. After seeing this, I wonder what the hell I’m doing on this volatile island. I guess it was much the same for people who found themselves in the same room as boxer Mike Tyson, just after he’d bitten off a part of Evander Holyfield’s ear. Only last February,



Caribbean dream: clockwise from left, despite its name, encounters are few at Rendezvous Bay; snorkelling session; table for four at the Colonial-era Royal Palm Club; a bedroom at Olveston House, where the likes of Sting and Paul McCartney used to stay; resident goats

the volcano had a moment, firing off pyroclastic flows and ash clouds that briefly disrupted flights and provoked a chorus of ‘*sacré bleus!*’ from neighbouring Guadeloupe.

So is Montserrat safe? ‘Yes’ says Dr Paul Cole, the Observatory’s director, who hails from Coventry and assures me I’m absolutely fine providing I remain outside the exclusion zone. ‘You might smell gases or get a bit of ash fall, but that’s all.’ This is encouraging, and there is speculation that the island is a smart place to buy property – a new capital is being built at Little Bay, and there’s talk of a geothermal power station that could bring much-needed riches. In the meantime, though, Montserrat is all about enjoying the Caribbean without the crowds. Its central hills are criss-crossed with trails that will appeal to hikers and twitchers, and the diving is rewarding because you have the reefs pretty much to yourself. There’s even a good sandy beach, Rendezvous Bay in the north, which I reach on a 15-minute kayak trip with Emmy Aston and Andrew Meyers, two American dive instructors who were drawn to the island for its lack of commercialism and the fact that ‘people still have time for you’. The sand is soft, the sea as warm as a bath, and – incredibly – we are the only people there.

While the eruptions clearly disturbed Montserrat’s party, they certainly haven’t stopped it. The island’s music scene rocks on, and whether it’s calypso, soca or reggae, once you hear local singers Hero, Tabu and Shaka Black playing live it’s impossible not to dance. Montserrat’s best-known star is Alphonsus Cassell MBE, aka Arrow. He’s the chap who gave the world *Hot, Hot, Hot*, and today he runs a ‘Manshop’ in Sweeney’s that I assume will be devoted to massaging the male ego, but which, rather disappointingly, now sells cornflakes and flip-flops alongside the >

CARIBBEAN



Hot tropic: clockwise from top left, the Tropical Mansion Suites at Woodlands Bay; the weekend's line-up at Soca Cabana, Little Bay; Murphy, owner of Rootsman's Bar, Carr's Bay; pink hibiscus

ginseng and uplifting Irish Moss drinks. 'Aren't you sick of that song?' I ask. 'Never,' he replies. 'It's served me very well.' To which the only possible reply is 'O-lay o-lay, o-lay o-lay...'

With temperatures reaching 30°C, Arrow's planet-conquering lyrics seem appropriate as I join the St Patrick's Week partying. Suddenly the school buses are filled with leprechauns and everyone's wearing the national costume of emerald-and-gold madras cloth. Sadly, I don't make it to the Creole breakfast and the Ole Time Bingo, but I do catch the Emerald Community Singers, now in their 39th year, performing in a cultural centre built with money raised by Sir George Martin and his A-list friends.

As they sing of cockles and mussels, with a Caribbean sway of the hips, I realise this is going to be a St Patrick's Day like no other. Look, here's Seamus and Makenya over from St Kitts, and Tom and Denise from Dublin, and I can't decide if I should be drinking Guinness or rum punch, or maybe both. What's clear is that I'm now surrounded by familiar faces. There's Debra from the ferry, and Nigel from Immigration, and Danny who taught Sting to surf, and good ol' Reuben, who's waving from his taxi.

'I've brought you some goatwater,' he says. 'You can't leave Montserrat without trying some.'

And so we sit by an upturned fishing boat, looking out at a black-sand beach full of Montserratians in green top-hats. Reuben's speciality tastes good, a rich and nourishing soup that would go down a treat on a cold, damp night in – well, Galway. But instead I'm here, ha-ha, on this self-proclaimed Emerald Isle of the Caribbean, with its balmy breezes and barmy history, enjoying the fine company of its truly hospitable residents – and one very naughty volcano. ■

Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT

BA (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com) flies from Gatwick to Antigua, from £566 return. Transfers to Montserrat are by air with **Fly Montserrat** (00 1 664 491 3434, www.flymontserrat.com), returns from £95; and **Winair** (00 599 545 4237, www.fly-winair.com), returns from £90. Or go by sea with **Twin Island Ferries** (00 1 268 721 0756); returns from £60.

WHERE TO STAY

Olveston House (00 1 664 491 5210, www.olvostonhouse.com), near Belham Valley, is a six-room guesthouse with a pool; doubles from £63, room only. **Tradewinds** (00 1 664 491 2004, www.tradewindsmontserrat.com) has a selection of villas to rent: Mango Falls overlooks Woodlands Bay; a week costs £1,609 (sleeps eight).

GO PACKAGED

Motmot Travel (01327 830918, www.motmottravel.com), a specialist in the lesser-visited

Caribbean, recommends combining a trip to Montserrat with time in Antigua: a tailor-made break starts at £1,175pp, including flights from Gatwick, air transfers, four nights' room only at Olveston House and three nights on Antigua. It also offers seven nights at Tropical Mansion Suites on Montserrat from £995pp, including flights and transfers. Or try **Tropic Breeze** (01548 831550, www.tropicbreeze.co.uk), **Dive Worldwide** (0845 130 6980, www.diveworldwide.com), or **Birdwatching Breaks** (01381 610495, www.birdwatchingbreaks.com). For day trips from Antigua try **Jenny Tours** (00 1 268 461 9361, www.jennytours.webs.com).

FURTHER INFORMATION

December to April is high season in the Caribbean, when the weather is best. Next year's St Patrick's Week Celebrations will run from March 12–20. For more details, contact the **Montserrat Tourist Board** (www.visitmontserrat.com).



MAP: SCOTT JESSOP