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L I F E



ST. KITTS

Sends The World A Musical Invitation

≡ RICHARD POWELL

By turns sumptuous and seductively shabby, St Kitts, or Saint Christopher's Island, has seen a surge in global interest thanks to its increasingly popular annual music festival. The scattering of former British, French and Dutch island territories that form the Eastern Caribbean are bucket list destinations for many; but without a specific reason to visit, they can remain just that.

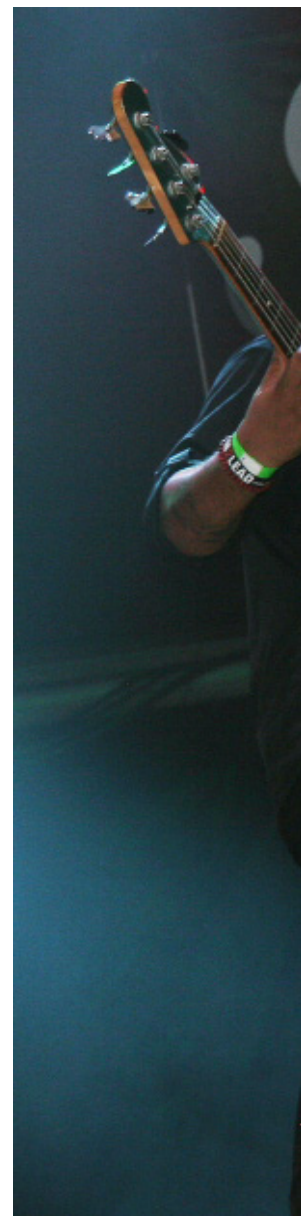
It was the music festival on St. Kitts that happily proved the catalyst for my first foray there, drawing thousands of visitors every year from neighboring islands and the wider world. The 17th St. Kitts music festival saw the capital Basseterre's Warner Park cricket stadium jam-packed with revelers, known in the islands as 'limers', taking in dozens of acts from local Rap, Soca and Reggae artists to international superstars.

The three-day party culminated in spectacular form with none other than Lionel Richie taking to the stage and telling fans: "Sugar City, I don't know why it has taken me so long to get here, but I am here to stay!" To the delight of the crowd, the soul icon added: "I've been all around, but now I understand what Shaggy was saying, 'You're gonna come here and you're not gonna wanna leave, brother!'"

The chart-topping Jamaican pop star Shaggy had headlined the second night, among other artists including Reggae legend Beres Hammond and veteran calypsonian, Relator. Practicing what they preached, Shaggy, Lionel and a lot of the other acts could be seen soaking up the St. Kitts sun days after the show had finished, and it wasn't hard to see why they stuck around.

At just 68-square miles, St. Kitts is one of the Caribbean's smaller islands, but just as well-stocked with pristine beaches and plenty of other sights, all within easy reach.

While some might prefer to lounge in all-inclusive luxury, the adventurous can also explore pretty much everything the island has to offer in just a few days. Small as it is, wide areas remain agricultural or undeveloped, thanks in part to the closure of its sugar mills in 2005, pushing tourism and offshore finance to the fore as the island's main revenue earners.



TRAVEL







St. Kitts' colourful half-millennium among the expanded horizons of the New World started when Christopher Columbus landed there in 1493. Possession of the coveted Caribbean jewel has since changed hands several times: firstly, from its indigenous Kalinago Indian or 'Carib' inhabitants to British and French settlers, before in-fighting saw it pass back and forth until the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, where Britain finally laid claim to the island in its entirety.

St. Kitts gained independence in 1983 - making it the youngest and smallest sovereign state in the Americas - although Queen Elizabeth II of England remains its reigning monarch.

Small wonder then that the island's rich history leaps out to greet visitors to what the British Empire called its 'Mother Colony of the West Indies'. Noteworthy sights include Bloody Point at Caribelle, the Carib Petroglyphs, Wingfield Manor, and the imposing military citadel at Brimstone Hill.

The first, Bloody Point marks the decisive battleground that saw a combined force of French and British troops preemptively decimate the island's indigenous people, as they prepared an offensive that they hoped would send their unwanted overseers back to Europe.

The Caribs made their final stand in 1626, three years after the foreign troops had arrived. But following the familiar colonial motif, they were hopelessly outgunned, with bows and arrows against rifles, and their subsequent massacre turned the river red, bringing to a conclusive end their claim to the island.

Journey further up the road to the nearby Wingfield Manor Estate and the Carib Petroglyphs, religious stone carvings by the same original islanders, provide a haunting memorial to lives long since vanished. While many of St. Kitts' present occupants can trace their ancestry back four to five hundred years on the island, the Caribs arrived from the Americas five millennia ago.

Two of the ancient etchings are easily accessible from the road, but intrepid explorers are richly rewarded by traversing the overgrown banks of Pelham River that flows through Bloody Point. After half an hour or so, one of the best petroglyph collections in the Caribbean of approximately 100 carvings, reveals itself on the canyon walls. Guides on the island will take you there, including Greg Pereira of Greg's Safaris, who also hires scooters, although pothole-ridden roads mean four wheels are generally better than two on St. Kitts.



The Wingfield plantation also hosts Romney Manor, well worth visiting for a walk around its six acres of botanical gardens. The pièce de résistance is a gargantuan 400-year-old Saman tree whose ancient limbs majestically span the plantation's front garden. Caribelle Batik, a working wax print workshop housed in the Manor itself, produces clothes, books and artwork using a 2,000 year-old Indonesian batik technique that make great gifts.

A few miles' drive from there and a sharp climb up narrow, winding roads built for horses and carts takes you into the Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park: a UNESCO World Heritage Site designed by British military engineers and built by African slaves at the end of the 17th Century.

Sitting magnificently astride the remnants of a dormant volcano that still vents sulphur, hence its name, the so-called 'Gibraltar of the West Indies,' offers a breath taking panorama of the island's crystal waters, idyllic beaches, lush green rainforests and sprawling fields. On a clear day, you can also see its closest Dutch island neighbours, St Eustatius and Saba, out at sea.



I stayed at the St. Kitts Marriott on the northern part of Frigate Bay. Its white sand Atlantic coast beach, sprawling swimming pools and proximity to plenty of bars and restaurants make this a great place to stay, swim and soak up the sun during the day. However, it's a colossal hotel resort for such a small island, especially when you factor in its arena sized casino floor.

If it's peace and quiet you seek in a more refined setting, the 18th Century Ottley's Plantation Inn set on a 35 acre hillside estate on the island's northeast coast is the last word in luxury accommodation on the island. Here you can dine in style while drinking in the surroundings at the Royal Palm Restaurant.

Excellent dining is also to be had at the Waterfalls, offering local dishes such as cornmeal dumplings or 'johnnycakes,' and green bananas in lime butter sauce, framed by superb views of the harbour from its open air veranda. Ballahoo meanwhile serves up enticing blackened grouper and salt fish on a breezy balcony overlooking Basseterre's bustling centre, worthy of island time indulgence while people-watching.





On the southeast peninsula, Reggae Beach offers probably the best beach on the island to swim, sunbathe and snorkel in relative solitude. Cockleshell Bay, encompassing Reggae Beach, is a secluded three-kilometre stretch of powder-white sand with a great view of nearby Nevis across the channel that separates the two islands, the Narrows.

For night-life, a favoured hangout for Kittitians, visitors and students from the island's US veterinary college is The Strip on Frigate Bay, where dozens of beach shacks serve cocktails, local Carib beer and rum punches into the early hours.

In this lively avenue of action; peeling, weatherworn huts sell bootleg rum alongside smart upmarket bars mixing Mojitos, club music and Reggae to keep all comers happy. Here you can hit open-air dance floors with or without a major music festival in town, or simply sit around a beach fire and marvel at the stars.

The perfect remedy to partying too hard on the Strip is a relaxed coastline cruise aboard Mr X's catamaran, which leaves from the Shiggy Shack Bar and Grill at Frigate Bay. The tour navigates the waters around the island's south peninsula, whose rainforests double as nature reserves rich in wildlife, including monkeys, goats and the island's national bird, the pelican.

Dive in and snorkel off the ship-wreck at the southern-most point and you'll be feeling fresh in no time, surrounded by an underwater paradise of coral sponges, lobster, sting rays, turtles and parrot fish.