

DIPLOMAT

DECEMBER 2013/JANUARY 2014 £10



KAZAKHSTAN REPORT

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ST KITTS SENDS THE WORLD A MUSICAL INVITATION

By turns sumptuous and seductively shabby,

Richard Powell finds 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 17th music festival on St Kitts that happily proved the catalyst for my first foray there, drawing thousands of visitors every year from neighbouring islands and the wider world to the capital, Basseterre’s, Warner Park cricket stadium.

The three-day party culminated in spectacular form with none other than Lionel Richie taking to the stage and telling fans: “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.

Practising 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.

St Kitts gained independence from Britain in 1983, though its Carib indigenous population had been there for thousands of years. Small wonder then that the island’s rich history leaps

out to greet visitors. 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 pre-emptively decimate the island’s indigenous people. 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.

Explore further across the Pelham River to discover one of the best petroglyph collections in the Caribbean, with around 100 carvings. 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, and to see the 400-year-old Saman tree whose ancient limbs majestically span the plantation’s front garden.

A few miles’ drive from there takes you into the Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park: a UNESCO World Heritage Site built at the end of the seventeenth century. Sitting on the remnants of a dormant volcano that still vents sulphur, this so-called ‘Gibraltar of the West Indies’ offers a breathtaking panorama of the island.

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 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 eighteenth century Otrley’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 of 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.

On the southeast peninsula, Reggae Beach is 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 nightlife, a favoured hangout for Kittitians and visitors is The Strip on Frigate Bay, where dozens of beach shacks serve cocktails, local Carib beer and rum punches into the

early hours.

The perfect remedy to partying too hard on the Strip is a relaxed coastline cruise aboard Mr X’s catamaran, which leaves from the Shiggidy 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 shipwreck at the southern-most point and you’ll be feeling fresh in no time, surrounded by an underwater paradise of coral sponges, lobster, stingrays, turtles and parrot fish.

British Airways flies from London Gatwick to St Kitts and American Airlines has recently announced it will add two new flights from Miami to St Kitts, with new non-stop flights from New York to St Kitts, from November 2013.

