

In the heart of the Caribbean, a

St Kitt's smaller neighbour, Nevis, was named by Columbus for the snows of the Pyrenees. Snow may be in

by RICHARD POWELL

BOARD the ferry at St Kitts and you'll soon be breezing across The Narrows, the three-kilometre channel that separates one Caribbean paradise from its smaller sibling, Nevis, at the top of the Lesser Antilles archipelago.

The short journey to this tiny 36 square mile island is dominated by its magnificent cone volcano, Nevis Peak, rising spectacularly overhead to nearly a thousand metres to pierce wisps of swirling white cloud that conjure adventure.

It was this marvel that led Columbus to name the island Nuestra Señora de las Nieves (Spanish for 'Our Lady of the Snows') on his second voyage to the New World, in homage to the snow-capped mountains of the Pyrenees.

Disembarking at Charlestown, the island's capital, the differences between here and St Kitts are

immediate. It's cleaner, easier-going and less hectic... little wonder, perhaps, when you consider that Kittitians outnumber Nevisians three-to-one, and St Kitts is only twice the size.

Nevis also doubles as home to hundreds of corporate residents, with many foreign companies registering there – at least in name – to take advantage of favourable tax laws and Swiss-style secret banking rules. But space remains plentiful and it's easy to get away from the crowd and find your own piece of paradise, as I was soon to find out.

Meeting me off the boat was Ritchie Lupinaci, proprietor of The Hermitage hotel: a family-run boutique and rustic hideaway in Gingerland up in the St John's parish, which sits on the southern shoulder of the Peak.

The Hermitage is set amid peaceful, leafy surroundings reached via a short drive up



Where the Atlantic meets the Caribbean: Nevis, seen from St Kitts (Image: Flickr/CJ Sugg)

winding private roads, and has the feel of a plantation house museum crossed with a wealthy expat's winter home in the sun.

An ornate lobby, well-stocked library and elegant dining room all ooze centuries-old authenticity, which when paired with homely decor quickly fostered the desire to move in and live here... if I won the lottery tomorrow.

No doubt Ritchie's father felt the same when he first arrived here, having since meticulously restored the main house and grounds after buying the estate as a weed-ridden ruin in the 1970s. Its re-development has clearly been a lifelong project of passion for both father and son.

The criss-cross timber frame of what is now the lobby was all that stood intact when the Lupinacis found it, having been erected by Welsh settlers to Nevis almost 400 years ago. A book: 'Caribbean

Style' by author Jack Bertholet, even cites it as 'the oldest surviving wooden house in the entire Caribbean'.

Ritchie speaks proudly of the settlers' handiwork, describing how the structure has stood, unmoved, against untold tropical storms and hurricanes, over the centuries.

He also likes to tease guests about the island's "Lady in White" ghost who may or may not reside in the grounds, but reassures visitors that any bumps in the night are more likely monkeys jumping across their tin roofs, when they come down to pillage the garden's ample mango trees.

The hotel's 15 guest houses – spread around the estate's manicured gardens and pool – are charming cottage-like huts, most with their own living room and kitchen, plus a porch or balcony complete with a hammock to doze

on. The four-poster beds also make great frames for the mosquito nets you'll want to make use of in this humid, pastoral part of the island.

Sleeping in this enclave of civilisation on the cusp of the Peak's rainforest means acclimatising to a hullabaloo of animal activity at night: parrots call, crickets chirp, mongooses forage and vervet monkeys swing between the treetops... rum-punch nightcaps from the bar make for a neat native solution to forgetting your earplugs.

Word-of-mouth has ensured the hotel receives a steady but select group of guests who clearly relish its unique offering and location, including rock star deity, eschewing the shiny Four Seasons hotel on the beach in favour of rural privacy and a taste for the quirky. Ritchie asks me not to name names, so all I can say is that they show the place A Whole Lotta Love, and enjoy downtime on their balconies, where they Can See for Miles.

Exploring on a scooter

A single main road encircles Nevis around the foot of the volcano, connecting most of its towns, so getting lost – off the boat – is all but impossible. With that in mind, I hired a moped and headed out to explore all of the island's five parishes.

Scooting around the base of the misty mountain, lush green jungle whizzing by on one side and dream-like crystal blue sea and cloudless skies on the other, I would stop now and again to walk around a historical church – of which there are dozens – or a sugar mill ruin, or pull up a pew at one of the island's many bar shacks, and cool off with a cold Carib beer.

The island's best-known watering hole is no doubt Sunshine's Beach Bar and Grill on Pinney's Beach, next to the Four Seasons hotel. This area is currently being developed into a park that will adjoin the island's thriving night-life area: Nevis's answer to The Strip in St Kitts. Here, locals, tourists and the island's international medical students 'lime' (party) together into the

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tiny island with a huge welcome

short supply in this corner of the Caribbean, but there are white beaches, fresh lobster and history aplenty



Harbour and mountains on Nevis (Image: Flickr/ClatieK)



Enjoy an ice-cold beer while the Caribbean passes; at right, the Hermitage



small hours... Sunshine's is a must-visit for its famous "Killer Bee" rum punch, no doubt enjoyed by Princess Diana, Britney Spears, Rodger Daltrey and Beyoncé, to name just a few of the famous faces pictured propping up the bar in days past, with its eponymous proprietor. Less lively perhaps, but no less highly-recommended are the island's five-acre botanical gardens, located off the beaten track adjoining the Montpelier Estate. Here you can enjoy a tranquil walk around a tropical plant kingdom filled with diverse orchids, cactuses and fruit trees, overlooked by Asian lions and Buddhas... with a replica Columbian Olmec head a centre piece in the park's Victorian-style Rainforest Conservatory.

Ascending on foot

A more challenging walk can be found in the daily tours that go up to the Peak, strictly for early-risers

who can keep up with a guide and navigate a good few miles of dense jungle to reach the prized views that reward those reaching the top.

The path is often marked with little other than ribbons tied around trees, leading through several acres of untouched rainforest and babbling springs to the summit, where it's actually surprisingly chilly. The panorama from the top is breathtakingly beautiful, with the entire island laid out beneath you and further out, St Kitts and its French and Dutch island neighbours.

Back at The Hermitage, it was Hog Roast day. The suckling pig had been turning on its spit since lunchtime, and the resulting banquet was fit for a king – just the job after a tough but fulfilling day on the trail up to the Peak. Food is a serious business at this place, and mixing the menu up every couple of days ensures that it draws diners

from across the island – residents and visitors alike, creating a social hotspot in the evenings.

Descending in style

For all of its homeliness and history, I wanted to contrast my stay at The Hermitage with the island's famous international getaway, the Four Seasons...

This polished oasis for wealthy privacy-seekers on vacation is set across a sprawling estate, whose plush resort and blocks of guest rooms start on the pristine sands of Pinney's Beach and extend up to private residences on the west side of the mountain. Between these boundaries sits surely one of the world's most picturesque golf courses – with the Peak as its backdrop – plus a spa, tennis courts and gardens.

Having dropped by Nevis's Indian Castle Race Track earlier that day and even been let loose on one of their prized thoroughbred

racehorses for a couple of laps, I headed to the spa for a Deep Tissue massage.

The set-up was, as you'd expect, world-class with professional therapists offering a range of treatments, including some obscure sounding Ayurvedic treatments and rituals, in a secluded section of the resort, complete with a stone plunge pool and chill-out terrace.

After reaching a heightened state of relaxation, dinner was in order and crab cakes and fresh lobster at the Coral Grill restaurant in the Great House, paired with a crisp Chablis by their expert sommelier, did not disappoint.

The island's other eateries compete to lay on the finest spreads of red snapper and lobster fresh from the sea, including the super-smart Yachtsman Grill on Hamilton Beach, which also features a great stone pizza oven for quicker bites, and top-notch

service – all of which draw the great and good of the island's social and business scene, making for a colourful upmarket hangout.

All in, as I pondered this beautiful island on the eve of my departure, gazing at the distant lights of St Kitts from the Yachtsman's beach-front balcony, the majestic Peak at my back and soothing ocean sounds filling my ears, I realised Nevis had usurped any previous choice of Caribbean haven to live out my years... if only that choice were mine.

Hermitage: www.hermitagenevis.com

Four Seasons: www.fourseasons.com/nevis

Words and Pictures: Richard Powell *Richard Powell is a freelance journalist who also works for Media Contacts Database firm Presswire, but does not work with or for any of the parties mentioned in this article.*

Seven great reasons to travel the world

by STAFF REPORTER

IN the current economic doldrums, many of us who yearn to wake up looking at a mountain range or a bright blue sea we've never seen before feel a certain kind of guilt that keeps us home. We couldn't be more wrong. Six reasons you should book that flight, now!

1 Creates lasting relationships

People you meet while on the road usually become some of the most valued ones in your address book, giving you points on the map to visit later on.

2 Develop skills you didn't know you had

The satisfaction you get when reaching the top of the mountain, or simply successfully ordering from a menu at a restaurant in rural China.

3 Learn a language

There's something satisfying about being able to throw around a few words of how to say hello and thanks in different languages.



4 A sense of adventure

After zip lining over the jungle canopy in Peru, successfully navigating the alleys of Marrakech, or Jeeping out with the grazing animals in Tanzania you get a feel for what being an active human being is like.

5 To prove to yourself you can do it

Finishing a trip gives you the satisfaction that you were able to accomplish what you set out to do. And to give you energy to set up the next challenge too.

6 Makes all your dreams come true

If you want to do it now you've probably always wanted to. You imagined it, daydreamed about it, envisioned it. Guess what? Now's the time to do it.

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