

Under the volcano, Montserrat rebounds

Its ruins and its hardy population attract tourists

By Necee Regis
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

LITTLE BAY, Montserrat — Reggae on the radio. It's 95 degrees outside and even hotter in the cab as we pass a sign with ominous red text: You are now entering ZONE B. We continue driving after the pavement ends, the sides of the car scraping low scrubby brush, and enter a landscape of hardened mud, slate grey ash, and the silvery remains of trees stripped bare of leaves. Dominating the horizon, the smoking hulk of the Soufrière (sulphur in French) Hills Volcano smudges an otherwise brilliant blue sky.

We park on the mud-filled Belham River, adjacent to what used to be a golf course, the abandoned Vue Pointe Hotel, and the formerly vibrant neighborhood of Old Towne. My skin feels gritty. My driver, Reuben Furlonge, is talking seismic events and pyroclastic flows. The residents of Montserrat, this small Caribbean island 300 miles southeast of Puerto Rico, don't just live beneath an active volcano; they're conversant in the science of eruptions.

"This volcano as it is, doesn't give any sign or warning," said Furlonge. "The flow moves fast. From the mountain down to Plymouth took 90 seconds."

Plymouth, the former capital city of this United Kingdom Overseas Territory, is now completely buried by volcanic debris and ash. Referred to as a modern-day Pompeii, it can best be viewed from a boat offshore, where only the upper stories of buildings are visible in what looks like a lunar landscape.

Although two-thirds of the island is closed because of continued volcanic activity, visitors need not worry. After the first eruption on July 18, 1995, the Montserrat Volcano Observatory, or MVO, was established to continually monitor the situation.

"Outside of the exclusion zones, it's absolutely perfectly safe to come here," said Paul Cole, the MVO director who arrived from the United Kingdom after working on volcanoes all over the world.

Anyone interested in geology, or appreciative of the power of nature, has a rare opportunity to safely observe an active volcano from the MVO viewing deck. The visitors center also offers a crash course in the science of volcanoes, including a riveting 20-minute film describing the volcanic history and impact on Montserrat. Thrill-seekers and adventurers, however, are discouraged from visiting the island as travel is strictly forbidden in the exclusion zones. Want to scale the side of a volcano? You can't do it here.

Called the "Emerald Isle of the Caribbean," Montserrat is known for its scenic and rugged coastline, as well as for its Irish heritage. St. Patrick's Day, a national holiday, is a weeklong celebration culminating in a parade to the Heritage Day Fair, where people sell local specialties (including goat water, the national dish) and enjoy live entertainment.

During the rest of the year, this is an island for people who



PHOTOS BY NEECE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Belham River is mud-filled since the Soufrière Hills Volcano (visible through the smoke) eruptions that began in 1995. A traditional dress of madras fabric and Montserratian colors.

want an authentic, low-key Caribbean experience in a friendly, safe environment. Snorkeling, boating, kayaking, bird-watching, and hiking are some of the simple pleasures here. And the water's so pure you can drink it from the tap.

"Montserrat is what the Caribbean used to be, an island without cruise ships or casinos," said Troy Deppermann, owner of the Green Monkey Inn and Dive Shop. He also skips a 10-seat boat offering tours of Plymouth from the water.

"The island was saved from development by its lack of sandy beaches," added Deppermann. "We have five or six beaches that you'll have to yourself, unless it's a holiday. You're not going to have someone braiding your hair or serving a pina colada."

At Woodlands Beach, I found an outside shower and picnic tables, but the only sounds were birds in the almond trees and waves breaking on volcanic sand. The same was true at Bunkum Bay Beach, where a wooded path strewn with almond leaves and palm fronds led to a small curve of black sand, book-ended by rocky bluffs.

There is one stretch of a yellow sand beach accessible by a moderate 1.3-mile hike, or by boat. One late afternoon, when the rental shops were closed, my friend and I were lucky to bump into Scuba Montserrat owners Emmy Ashton and Andrew Meyers, who offered to open their dive shop, inflate two kayaks, and then joined us for an impromptu paddle out to Rendezvous Beach. (We discovered, on more than one occasion, that the island seems to operate this way. People go out of their way to be helpful.)

Along the route, an easy 15-minute paddle, we skirted the edge of 30-foot-high cliffs and nosed into the mouth of bat caves. Arriving at the beach, we found it blissfully empty, and swam and lounged until the sun dipped low.

According to Ashton and Meyers, there are 15 recognized dive sites of varying depths on the island. In shallower areas adjacent to the cliffs, it's common to see brain corals, star corals, pillar corals, sea plumes and fans, colorful reef fish, a variety of sea snails, and an occasional octopus



or spiny lobster.

Farther out to sea, at a depth of 40 to 50 feet, there are enormous barrel sponges, sea turtles, copper sweepers, spotted drums, and other fish of all sizes, including large pelagic fish.

Bird-watchers will want to visit the Montserrat National Trust, a small organization working to preserve the island's heritage, to learn about the rare national bird, the Montserrat oriole, and purchase a card illustrating the island's 34 species of resident land birds and migrant songbirds, including the purple-throated Carib, the forest thrush, and the mangrove cuckoo. Trail maps are also available for purchase, and arrangements can be made for hiring birding guides.

The government is working hard to build a new capital city in Little Bay. If any island can accomplish this task, it's Montserrat, which rebuilt Plymouth after Hurricane Hugo destroyed 95 percent of its buildings in 1989, only to have it irreparably destroyed by the volcano.

"Before the volcano, nothing was in Little Bay. There was no reason to come up here," said Deppermann, whose business is one of several that have settled along this northern cove.

If you go . . .

Getting there, getting around

WinAir (www.fly-winair.com) and Fly Montserrat (www.flymontserrat.com) both make daily scheduled flights from Antigua. Car rentals run \$30-\$50 per day; you need to apply for a local driver's license at the point of entry (about \$18). Taxi with guide is \$25 an hour, but ask for daily rates. Taxi guide: Reuben Furlonge, 664-492-2790.

What to do

Montserrat Volcano Observatory

Flemmings
664-491-5647; www.mvo.ms
Safely observe volcanic mountains from deck. Informative video and interactive kiosks in the Interpretation Center, \$4.

Plymouth Boat Tour

The Green Monkey Inn and Dive Shop
Little Bay
664-496-3483
www.divemontserrat.com
Observe the buried former capital from the water. Full dive shop services, 2½-hour tour \$55.

Scuba Montserrat

Little Bay
664-496-7807
www.scubamontserrat.com
Scuba diving, snorkeling, kayak rentals, guided beach trips, picnics, and diving certification classes. Prices vary per activity.

Montserrat National Trust

Salem Main Road
664-491-3086
www.montserratnationaltrust.ms

Historic exhibitions, botanic gardens, research library, and gift shop with local crafts. Birding and hiking maps and guided tour info, \$5.

Where to stay

Olveston House
Olveston
664-491-5210
www.olvestonhouse.com
Three rooms with fans and porches; three rooms with air conditioning. Pool, tennis, Wi-Fi,



Scuba Montserrat in Little Bay offers the water-bound tourist an extensive menu.

and full service restaurant.

Doubles \$99.

Gingerbread Hill

St. Peter's
664-491-5812
www.volcano-island.com
Mountain aerie with views of the sea. Ham radio tower and Wi-Fi, \$35-\$125.

Mount Pleasant Eco Lodge and Campsite

Brades
664-491-2933
www.greenlivingmontserrat.com
Mountain campsites with views of the sea. Amenities: lanterns, inflatable beds, cots, lamps, ice boxes, cooking pots, dishes, cutlery, stoves, grills, and baking ovens. Platform, tent, and amenities for two \$45.

Where to eat

Olveston House

www.olvestonhouse.com/restaurant.html
British favorites infused with an island flair. Open most days for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and tea. Reservations required except for Friday open house Pub Night. Entrees \$20-\$45.

Tina's Restaurant

Brades Main Road
664-491-3538
Roadside house serving local fare for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Local fish, stewed mutton, Creole shrimp, and homemade pies. Entrees \$9-\$24.

musicians with emotional ties here held a concert to raise money for the new cultural and performing arts center in Little Bay. And the local artists? They never stopped singing.

John, Paul McCartney, Sting, Stivie Wonder, and Eric Clapton — who sometimes lived here in the 1980s, and recorded at the AIR Studios of Sir George Martin, who produced all but one of the Beatles' original albums.

"God knows how many famous elbows rested here," said Walker, referring to the wood bar he rescued from the destroyed and abandoned studios. Storms have battered this island and the volcano has covered it with ash, but the spirit to persevere is strong. Many of the AIR

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