

Travel

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2013

THE CARIBBEAN ISSUE

Drifting ALONG

Delightful waters:
The pristine sea of Little
Corn Island, where
every bay or cove invites
visitors to swim.

MARCO C. PEREIRA/SARA WONG/4SEE/REDUX

Sea splendor on Turks and Caicos

BY VALENTINA PASQUALI
Special to The Washington Post

We fell in love even before touchdown. The clouds that had blocked our view during the flight to Turks and Caicos mercifully dispersed right before we landed, and we caught our first glimpse of the radiant sea. We watched as the little snail-shaped island of Providenciales materialized in the middle of the ocean, dazzled by the turquoise, aquamarine and emerald hues of the water surrounding it.

Throughout our stay, my husband and I made a point of never letting that water out of our sight. We found it a force so relaxing that it quickly canceled out the noise of daily life.

Up to that point, 2013 had been a frantic year. Work and family had taken us all over the world, including to such taxing destinations as Afghanistan and Syria. When not traveling, we'd been drowned in paperwork buying a condo.

So we'd shopped for a nearby holiday destination

TCI CONTINUED ON F7

It's oh so easy to fall under the peculiar spell of Nicaragua's Corn Islands

BY COLLEEN KINDER • *Special to The Washington Post*

THE LOBSTER TRAWLERS BOB LIKE TOYS IN A BATHTUB, tipping to and fro with every swell of gray sea. I watch from a crowd of Nicaraguans about to board the day's last panga, or public ferryboat, wondering whether the storm is as bad as it looks. ¶ The word I keep overhearing is "angry." In Spanish, English and a Creole that sounds like English flipped inside out and set to a beat, everyone's calling the sea — our only highway — angry. ¶ Such is the medley of languages 40-some miles off the coast of Nicaragua, on the Corn Islands. For centuries, these two landmasses — faint crumbs on the Caribbean map — had little to do with mainland Nicaragua. They were pirate territory, coconut-tree-lined refuges for the likes of the ruthless privateer Captain Morgan. ¶ It wasn't until 1894 that Nicaragua claimed these fringe islands, but with no roadways linking the capital to the marshy eastern coastline, the Corns remained a world apart. To this day, islanders still bear surnames such as Quinn and Campbell, play more reggae than salsa, and every August,

NICARAGUA CONTINUED ON F5

Taking it slow and simple on Nevis

BY NEECE REGIS
Special to The Washington Post

It begins even before I clear customs in St. Kitts, a sense that Nevis is an island apart from others in the Caribbean.

A guy with a guitar slung on his back starts chatting with people beside me in the queue, and before long, I'm in a three-way conversation, learning where to hear live music, which restaurants are closed on Mondays, and where to find trails leading to newly discovered waterfalls. (Hike up from the prison.)

In Nevis, everyone knows everyone, or so it seems, and they're happy to share news, gossip and helpful information.

Nevis (pronounced "NEE-vis"), six miles wide by eight miles long, is the smaller of two sister islands, former British colonies that make up the Federation of St. Kitts and Nevis. Located in the leeward portion of the Caribbean's Lesser Antilles, both islands have lush foliage, dormant volcanoes and uncrowded

NEVIS CONTINUED ON F6

INSIDE

Whose loss is it?

The Navigator thinks a fee charged by rental car firms could set a dangerous precedent. **F2**

Swimming with the giants

"I looked into the cavernous mouth of a hungry, 15-ton whale shark." **F2**

Blooming in the valley

Bed Check visits a 19th-century house where the DuPonts summured. **F3**

THE CARIBBEAN ISSUE

On Nevis, 'a distinctive sense of disconnect'

NEVIS FROM F1

beaches, though Nevis, population 12,000, is quieter and less developed than its big sis.

Revealing Nevis as my destination to other travelers is like sharing a secret handshake in a club where those who love beach casinos, bars with DJs and nightlife turn one way as they exit the airport, remaining in St. Kitts, while the rest of us hop into cabs to the ferry. Crossing the two-mile channel to Nevis, we arrive at a destination with one sleepy harbor town and more than 50 churches, where wild sheep and donkeys roam freely, an island reported to have more vervet monkeys than people.

"Nevis offers a distinctive sense of disconnect, which I think is so difficult to find in today's global world," said Nancy Beckham, a former Nevis resident whom I met in Miami. "No buildings are higher than a coconut palm, there aren't many vehicles, the people are educated and kind, the surroundings are lush and green, and there's plenty to explore, including wonderful historical ruins that have disappeared from other Caribbean islands."

For a recent visit — my second in five years — I lured my pal Libby down from Portland, Maine, with promises of swimming, touring, cocktail imbibing, eating and lounging in the sun. Call it Lollygagging 101.

A taste of sugar

Arriving at our hotel, Montpelier Plantation & Beach, Libby and I were greeted by Ziggy, a friendly, honey-colored hound dog. Javier Stanley, a bartender with an oval face and a thousand-watt smile, served us a welcoming rum punch in a tall chilled glass.

"Nevis is simple, subtle," he said. "There's not too much hustle and bustle." "Compared to other Caribbean nations, Nevis is a step back in time," said Nikolas Mantas, the food and beverage manager. And he meant that in a good way.

Settling into island life was as easy as kicking off our shoes. After our cocktail and a dip in the pool, we took a taxi to Lime, a rustic beachside restaurant and bar with wood floors and a porch looking out at the stars. Michael Jackson rocked the sound system — "Oh baby, give me one more chance" — and we sighed over crispania (an island root vegetable) fritters, watermelon and feta cheese salad, and grilled grouper, sauteed onions and pickles folded in a flour tortilla. We washed it all down with a cold Carib beer.

In the morning, wild sheep were grazing outside our room as the sun rose hot on a breezy day. The hotel had once been a sugar plantation — complete with an old mill where you can now dine in candlelit splendor — one of several renovated plantations on this island, vestiges of an industry that dominated the economy in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Montpelier's 19 cottage rooms, with wooden beams, lazy ceiling fans and louvered windows, are reminiscent of a time when the island was a stomping ground for well-heeled British colonists such as Lord Horatio Nelson, who married Frances Nisbet beneath a silk-cotton tree on the property.

Montpelier sits high on a mountain slope, near the often cloud-shrouded Nevis Peak (3,232 feet), and offers partial views of the distant windward shore. (The hotel offers daily shuttle service to a private beach on the leeward side.) Swimming backstroke in the pool, watching clouds skitter through the cerulean sky, I was acutely aware of being on an island afloat in a vast, pale green sea.

Slipping out of the pool and into a robe, I padded to the adjacent veranda, where Libby was sipping her morning coffee. Over a full Nevisian breakfast — farm-fresh eggs, local pork sausage and French toast with nutmeg and island honey — we met Dr. Erin Moore and his wife, Kara Wanchick, from Jacksonville, Fla. This was their fifth visit to the island since they'd gotten married on Montpelier's beach three years earlier.

"If you come to Nevis, come with a sense of adventure," said Moore, who showed me his Nevis driver's license, a square pink card (\$25).

Moore and Wanchick like to explore the island by Jeep, finding small coves and beaches each time they return. He recommended renting a car through the hotel (\$50 a day) rather than directly through rental companies (\$75 to \$125 a day).

Neither Libby nor I felt comfortable driving "English style" — on the opposite side of the road — so we asked the hotel to hire a driver for a day of touring. Alston Smithen, a.k.a. "Champ," arrived in his dusty, trusty passenger van, and we set off to circumambulate the island at a leisurely pace.

Sleepy sites

Champ's lilting voice provided a backdrop to our tour. We stopped at the remains of the New River Estate Sugar Mill, the last operating sugar mill on the island (closed in the 1950s), where sunlight filtered through vines partially covering a crumbling chimney and the rusting gears of steam-driven cane crushers.

At Nisbet Plantation Beach Club, another former sugar plantation turned inn, patrons in a shaded beachside bar sipped frozen rum cocktails and nibbled quesadillas with a side of plantains. "The lady married to Admiral Nelson came from this plantation," said Champ.

High on a bluff overlooking St. Kitts, St. Thomas's Lowland Church, circa 1643, is the oldest church on the island, and supposedly the oldest Anglican church in the Caribbean.

Thirsty, I requested a detour to Mansa's Last Stop, a roadside store stocked with



Arc of triumph: A view of St. Kitts from a quiet beach on the leeward side of Nevis.

PHOTOS BY NECEE REGIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



Full plates: From top, the sleepy capital, Charlestown; conch fritters served at Sunshine's, a beachfront hangout; and pan-seared red snapper served at the Montpelier Plantation & Beach hotel.

staple groceries, beer, produce grown on a small organic farm and homemade seasonal juices such as carambola, sorrel, passion fruit and cucumber. Out in the extensive growing fields behind the shop, we found Mervin "Mansa" Tyson, a reed-thin man with Rasta dreads and a big smile, who offered us a tomato, warm and sweet off the vine.

A low key, laid-back approach to tourism is what I appreciate about the island, so it was a surprise to learn that Nevis was home to the first resort for Europeans in the Caribbean. The therapeutic hot springs at the Bath Hotel, built in 1778, attracted such noteworthy visitors as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Prince William Henry, the Duke of Clarence. The hotel is closed now, but you can still dip into its hot springs in a small outdoor pool.

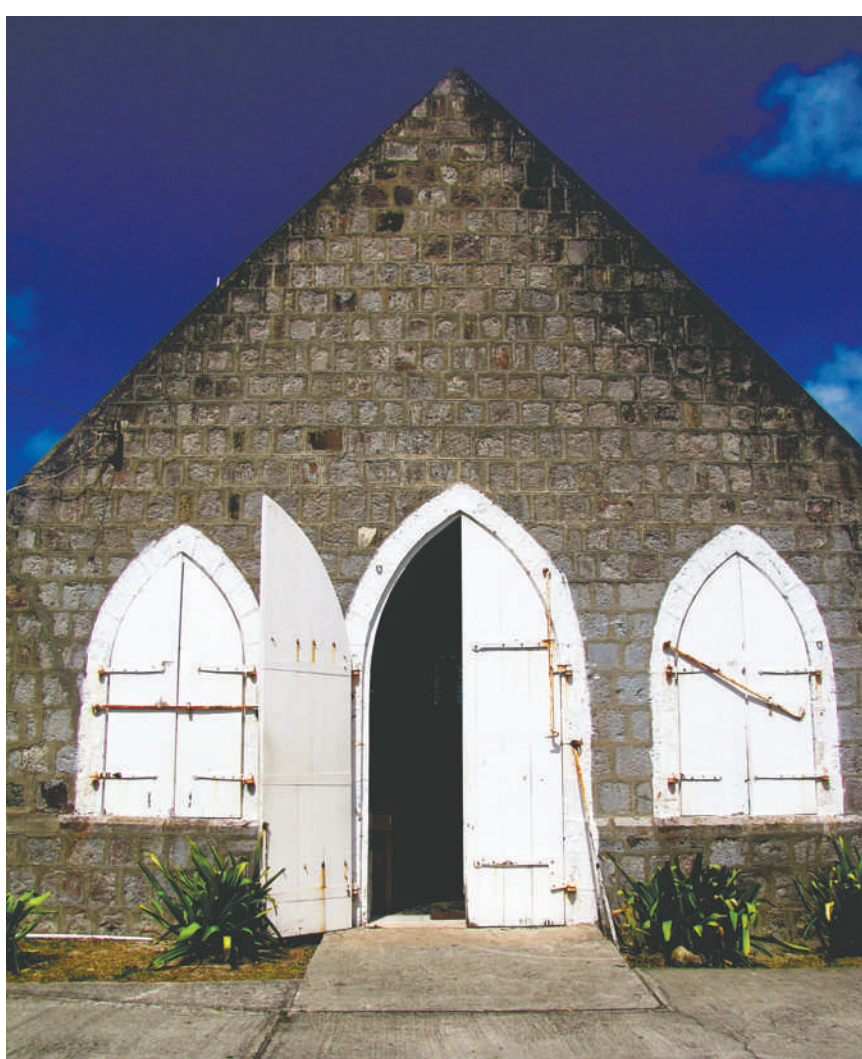
We made a pit stop for sunscreen in the capital city of Charlestown, where street names such as Prince William and Prince Charles recall the British colony, and the more quirkily named Featherbed Alley and Upper Happy Hill Drive made me smile. With perhaps the sleepest town center I've ever encountered, Charlestown is home to the ferry terminal to St. Kitts, the tourism office, a sports store, a sports bar, government offices, Chinese restaurants (the island version of fast food), small souvenir shops, a pharmacy, banks and, on certain days, a market selling spices, fruit and produce.

"In Charlestown, everything closes at 5 p.m.," said Champ. "It's like a ghost town."

Island time

Nightlife on the island consists of a rotating schedule of special dinners — pig roasts, West Indian barbecues, seafood grills — sponsored by hotels, plantation inns and bars, many times featuring live local string bands or Calypso music. On Friday nights, the Water Department sponsors a cookout with chicken, ribs, music and beer.

Charlestown is celebrated as the birthplace of Alexander Hamilton, a U.S. Founding Father and first secretary of the Treasury, and his family home has been



Hallowed ground: St. Thomas's Lowland Church, built around 1643, is the oldest on the island and said to be the oldest Anglican church in the Caribbean.



Down on the farm: Mervin "Mansa" Tyson stands in the fields of his organic farm. Mansa's Last Stop stocks juices such as carambola and cucumber.

reconstructed as a museum. A lesser-known fact is that in the 17th and 18th centuries, Charlestown was home to Sephardic Jews expelled from Brazil who were active participants in the sugar cane growing and processing industry. In the Jewish cemetery, grave markers bear inscriptions carved in Hebrew, English and Portuguese.

I was curious to see the developments at the Golden Rock Inn, another former sugar plantation that, at the time of my previous visit, had been purchased by New York artist Brice Marden and his wife, Helen. As we made our way up the steep, narrow road, our progress was blocked by an ambulance. In a perfect example of "island time," Champ didn't honk the horn or shout or get out to investigate. He simply pulled over to the side of the road and waited.

"An old lady lives here," he offered as explanation. "She must not be feeling well today." A full 10 minutes later, the ambulance driver escorted an elderly woman to the van, helped her in, and we continued on our way.

Miami-based landscape architect Raymond Jungles worked with the Mardens to redesign the gardens and the grounds at the Golden Rock, and the result is a man-

aged chaotic wildness that suits the island and the artists. Stone paths meander past rock formations, cacti, succulents and enormous palm fronds to colorful cottages scattered across the hillside. A simple swimming pool overlooks the sea, and a new outdoor dining area, designed by architect Ed Tuttle, hosted visitors feasting on a lunch of conch chowder, grilled lobster tail and jerk pork sandwiches.

Golden Rock is also the trailhead for a hiking path through the rain forest, one of many trails on the island.

The fantasy life

Our favorite meals were the simplest ones. At Montpelier one morning, we watched a cooking demonstration by chef Benjamin Voisin and gobbled the results at lunch beside the pool: chilled cucumber and lemongrass gazpacho, and pan-seared red snapper with papaya, red onion, green pepper and tomato salsa.

"Ninety percent of the fruits and vegetables I use come from the island," said Voisin. "It's the real Caribbean. Raw and unspiced."

Diane Hallstrom, who works in the gift shop at the nearby Botanical Gardens of Nevis, agrees.

"We're known as a green island. We



GENE THORP/THE WASHINGTON POST

GETTING THERE

American Airlines offers one-stop flights from all three Washington area airports to Basseterre, St. Kitts and Nevis. The ferry ride between Basseterre, St. Kitts, and Charlestown, Nevis, takes about 45 minutes. One-way fare is \$8.

American Airlines, JetBlue and United offer flights from Reagan National to Nevis via San Juan, Puerto Rico, but connection times are longer.

WHERE TO STAY

Montpelier Plantation & Beach

869-469-3462

www.montpeliernevis.com

Relais & Chateaux property on a 60-acre former sugar plantation, 750 feet above the Caribbean Sea, with 19 contemporary plantation-style rooms. Rates from \$205, including breakfast, use of private beach with transfers, and WiFi.

Golden Rock Inn

869-469-3346

goldenrocknevis.com

Lush 100-acre property on the slopes below Nevis Peak. Former sugar plantation with 11 rooms, a pool, and alfresco dining, creatively restored and expanded by artist-owners Helen and Brice Marden. Rates from \$210, including breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT

Sunshine's Beach Bar & Grill

869-469-5817

www.sunshinesnevis.com

Popular beach bar featuring barbecued meats and locally caught seafood, including conch fritters, and Killer Bee rum punch. Light meals \$8 to \$18; dinner \$12 to \$40.

Lime Beach Bar

869-469-1147

Casual beachside bistro and bar serving lobster, shrimp and grilled chicken sandwiches plus burritos, burgers, fritters and salads. \$8 to \$25.

Indigo

Montpelier Plantation & Beach Lounge bar dining overlooking the pool. Tapas-style menu features fresh local seafood, meats, produce and fruit. Sharing plates from \$11, grill from \$26.

Oasis in the Gardens

869-469-2875

www.botanicalgardennevis.com

Authentic Thai cuisine plus a variety of herbal and tropical drinks. On the grounds of the Botanical Gardens of Nevis. \$6 to \$30.

WHAT TO DO

Oualie Adventure Packages

869-469-9735

oualiebeach.com

Guided tours: snorkel colorful reefs (2½-3 hours, \$65); hike the rain forest (2½ hours, \$30); horseback riding on beach and mountain trails (1½ hours, \$75).

The Botanical Gardens of Nevis

869-469-3509

www.botanicalgardennevis.com

Five terraced acres of tropical fruit, orchid, cactus, and palm gardens; Asian and Mayan sculptures; and rain forest conservatory with live butterflies and parrots. Monday-Saturday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. \$13, ages 6-12 \$8.

Alexander Hamilton Museum

869-469-5786

www.nevis-nhcs.org

Explores the life of Alexander Hamilton and interprets the history and culture of Nevis. Monday-Friday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturday 9 a.m. to noon. \$5, children \$2.

INFORMATION

www.nevisisland.com

— N.R.

have wind power. We're quiet. We're peaceful," she said. "We're back to nature. There's no gambling, no casino, and no traffic."

A visit to Nevis isn't complete without sampling a Killer Bee rum punch at Sunshine's Beach Bar & Grill. Sunshine himself served us conch fritters with a side of his special hot sauce. We hid from the heat of the day under jaunty saffron-hued umbrellas, watching kayakers paddle past as the house monkey chugged a beer. ("Come take a photo with the monkey 5 U\$," read the sign on the cage.) Reggae music played, palm trees swayed, the warm turquoise sea beckoned, and life was pretty much perfect.

"You realize this is a complete fantasy," I said to Libby.

"Yes," she answered. "That's why we travel. Real life is tedious enough."

True, that.

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