

THE DRAW OF ST. KITTS

A woman waits by a doorway in Basseterre city.

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Instinct is not always the best course of action. This becomes clear while I'm driving an ATV up a mountainside in St. Kitts. Though it's meant to handle all terrain, I find that this particular vehicle has a tendency to swerve to the right upon acceleration. Each time I veer off the path that consists of deep wheel ruts cut into long grass, my natural reaction is to stick my legs out to stabilize the vehicle. I realize this could lead to broken bones even before the tour operator pulls up alongside me and warns, "That is very dangerous." I pull my feet firmly into place, intending to make them stick, and then give the accelerator another squeeze, determined to stay on course and catch up to the group. At the summit, my reward is a spectacular view of a coastline village, waves crashing onto the shore and, in the distance, St. Kitts' sister island Nevis.

Located in the Eastern Caribbean, St. Kitts is 23 miles long and five miles wide at its widest point. But the small island boasts diverse terrain, from volcanic mountains to lush rainforest, from beige sands on southern beaches to black volcanic sand beaches in the north, from the pounding Atlantic surf on the eastern coast to calm Caribbean waters on the west. An ATV proves to be an efficient way to tour the island, but other options include hiking, riding a scenic rail-

way or a scooter, bicycle, horse or rental car.

Or golf cart. The Royal St. Kitts Golf Club is the only course in the Caribbean bordered by both the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. The 18-hole, 71-par championship "links"-style course was remodeled in 2003 by Canadian architect Thomas McBroom to showcase St. Kitts' natural terrain. While playing, golfers often glimpse the green monkeys that outnumber the 36,000 people who call St. Kitts home.

Golf is just one of the amenities offered at St. Kitts Marriott Resort. After the bumpy ATV ride, I opt for a luxurious "Kittitian Massage" at the Emerald Mist Spa. The treatment incorporates long strokes that foster relaxation. For continued peace of mind after the rubdown, I hang out in the mint-scented steam room for a while.

Soon the beach beckons. Nothing comforts like the feel of soft sand between the toes. North Frigate Bay Beach is just beyond the three swimming pools. I could recline in a lounge chair under a cabana, but instead walk along the beach looking for shells and feeling waves splash onto my feet.

With eight restaurants on site, our group dines at the resort for most meals. Blu serves fresh seafood dinners; La Cucina specializes in Northern Italian cuisine; Calypso emphasizes local ingredients like fish, mangos, coconut and papayas; and at the Royal Grille Steakhouse, the Caesar salad is prepared tableside whether you opt for turf or surf entrées. Though we've savored every meal,

one evening we taxi off the resort to Mr. X Shiggidy Shack, a beach restaurant that specializes in grilled lobster so yummy it draws tourists and locals. Back at the resort's Lobby Bar, we sample indigenous cocktails with inventive names like Killer Bee, Ting with a Sting and the Creep Up—all tasty concoctions that pack a wallop.

Open 24 hours, the Royal Beach Casino is the largest casino in the Caribbean and the only one on St. Kitts. Its 34 gaming tables and 400 slot machines provide betting options from one penny to \$120. But there's no need to lose a cent: All resort guests receive \$10 credits to both the slot machines and table games upon check-in.

I opt for a night swim then head back to my spacious room and slip between soft sheets on an ultra-comfy bed. Though I relish the resort's modern conveniences, over the next few days, I explore island history.

"People don't realize all the history of little St. Kitts," says Lavern Stevens, tour guide. "We were the mother colony for the West Indies." We explore Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park, a 38-acre world heritage site with centuries-old architecture and breathtaking views; Independence Square in the historic city of Basseterre, once a site of slave markets; and Romney Manor, an estate once owned by Thomas Jefferson's ancestors and now home to the Caribelle Batik factory—all fascinating and picturesque.

One instinct you can trust is the urge to visit St. Kitts. **SP**

The flora is most foreign in St. Kitts.

A view framed at Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park.

PHOTOS/HOPE S. PHILBRICK

IF YOU GO

Getting There...

- Delta has new, direct nonstop flights from Atlanta to St. Kitts that operate on Saturdays.

Know Before You Go...

- You'll need a passport to enter St. Kitts. When leaving, you'll pay a departure tax of approximately \$22 at the airport.

Where To Stay...

- St. Kitts Marriott Resort and The Royal Beach Casino
800-223-6388
www.stkittsmarriott.com

When To Go...

- Through May 31, St. Kitts Marriott Resort is offering a "Let's Be Direct" package with deluxe accommodations, daily breakfast, arrival gift and two rounds of golf at the Royal St. Kitts Golf Club. Guests traveling on Delta's new nonstop flight will also receive a \$100 resort credit to use at any facility on property. The package starts at \$292 per night based on double occupancy, including room tax and gratuities, with a minimum four-night stay required.

More Information...

- St. Kitts Tourism Authority
800-582-6208
www.stkitts-tourism.com