



Sisters of the Sea



IF YOU'RE LONGING FOR A BEACH escape that's more royal than rustic, look no further than St. Kitts and Nevis in the heart of the Caribbean, where state-ly plantations offer old-world elegance, modern amenities and tropical bliss.

Text and photos by Vickie McIntyre

Even from the air, the view is breathtaking. Doused by a recent shower, the sugarcane shimmers like the wings of a million dragonflies, while Mount Liamuiga, the island's 3,792-foot volcano, wears a crown of mist. It's my first glimpse of St. Kitts, an eastern Caribbean island first named St. Christopher by Columbus to honor the patron saint of travelers. Across the water, a mere two miles away, I see Nevis, the "little sister" that completes this two-island nation. My husband and I have come here on a whim, hoping our gamble on two low-fare tickets will net big results. We have no idea we've just hit the jackpot.

On the ground, the heat is intense. But within minutes, we sail away in an air-conditioned van with "Chiefy," a driver from Ottley's Plantation, a 17th-century sugar plantation-turned-resort, where we'll spend the next seven days. Promising gourmet meals, luxurious accommodations and exotic surroundings, Ottley's owner, Art Keusch, has assured me we won't be disappointed. Of course, it's his Penn State connection (his granddaughter is attending) that makes him so trustworthy.

The 20-minute ride is all uphill, past chickens, goats and iguanas staring at our intrusion. As our van lurches and shudders on a narrow bend, I notice only a patch of tall grass separates

us from the sea below. The parade I see in the distance is not people, but a herd of cows, marching single-file down the railroad tracks.

"Here we are," our driver announces, turning onto a dirt road crowded with sheep.

There is nothing but scrub grass. No buildings, no pool, no sign of civilization—until we round the final bend where a brick driveway lined with palm trees leads us to a majestic yellow inn surrounded by porches edged in white railing. Beyond that lies some 35 acres of rolling lawns and colorful gardens attracting neon green hummingbirds.

Nancy, Art's daughter who manages the resort, greets us and walks us to our cottage at the far end of the property, a lovely spot that overlooks the sea.

"On a clear day," Nancy says, pointing toward the horizon, "you can see [the island of] Barbuda rise out of the water."

Ottley's offers 24 rooms, some in the inn, which is also known as the Great House, and others in more upscale, private cottages that feature patios and plunge pools. Wicker chairs, mahogany tables and Caribbean paintings adorn every room and regardless of room type, no one is short-changed on hospitality.

Nancy suggests we take a walk before dinner. "Explore the rain forest," she says. "We have our own little ravine that everyone loves."

Each step down the stone stairway takes us further from the sun and into a mysterious world of contradictions, where darkness and decay are graced by ribbons of light and luminous ferns. Rotting mangoes are everywhere, as well as giant vines that slither along the forest floor, wrapping their tendrils around anything that doesn't move. Although we are alone, noise envelops us—insects buzz, birds caw, branches snap.

"I think we're being followed," my husband whispers as a shadow passes.

Without warning, mangoes fall from the sky, landing all around us. One after another, they explode at our feet. Then, gleeful chattering. We look up and spot our assailants—a half-dozen vervet monkeys, perched in the treetops, grinning like the victors of a game of dodge ball.

It's a pleasant surprise—and the perfect welcome to an island full of hidden delights. Nevis, a short

ferry ride away, is much the same, but on a smaller scale, complete with its own cloud-covered volcano, great beaches, and monkeys that love to play tricks.

Here are just a few of the reasons these islands are so special:

PLANTATION INNS Imagine dining in the belly of an abandoned sugar mill or getting a massage under the mango trees, relaxing in a hammock strung between palms or swimming in a spring-fed pool. Imagine that the only noise you hear is the flutter of the wind and every night you fall asleep to a chorus of tree frogs. If your next thought is one of natural serenity, you've got it. The plantation experience is far different than that of the mega resorts like the Marriott on St. Kitts or the Four Seasons on Nevis.

Borrowing from the land they occupy, plantation inns manage to combine old world treasures—a stone wall here, a parlor there—with modern touches to create spaces with ambiance and comfort. You won't find wall-to-wall beach chairs or a rowdy bar crowd. It's all about quiet conversations, serene surroundings and personalized service.

Dining, which is usually open-air, could be the best reason to upgrade to a plantation experience. Whether it's the banana rum pancakes at breakfast or the savory monkfish at dinner, entrees are freshly prepared and served on china. (Our waitress even told us it was her job to unfold the linen napkins and place them on our laps.) Each inn offers its own meal plans, which often include afternoon tea—a treat that might feature a plate of coconut tarts, scones with clotted cream, and miniature sandwiches.

There are some expectations: wearing shorts or jeans for dinner is generally frowned upon, and socializing between guests and hosts is encouraged, making dinner the noisiest time of day.

And just for fun, most inns host weekly events like rum punch socials or lobster cookouts. If you can't afford to stay at a plantation, make reservations and splurge on dinner at one.

Although most plantation inns are located in the mountains, free shuttle service is provided daily to beaches or shopping. But if you'd rather charter a boat or picnic on a deserted beach, your host will be happy >



Ottley's began as a colonial sugar plantation but now offers luxury and quiet relaxation in the mountains. At left: Crystal blue waters and sparkling white sands make up the deserted beaches of St. Kitts and Nevis.

