

# Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Photographs: Tina Thuell Photography

## Watch the world go by

**Bernadette Fallon** finds an unspoilt idyll on Nevis, one of the smallest Caribbean islands, where monkeys outnumber people

The island of Nevis doesn't have an airport big enough to land international aircraft. Instead we land at St Kitts, drive for 20 minutes to Reggae Beach and board a water taxi for a six minute speedboat ride across the bay, arriving James Bond-style.

Nevis is one of the smaller and lesser known Caribbean islands, despite the fact it was ruled by the British for over 200 years and was for a time the home of Admiral Nelson. Which means the Queen's head is still on the banknotes and English is the first language. Your bank card will work in the cashpoints and you don't need a visa to enter.

The island measures just 36 square miles and has a population of 11,000. Offering the "luxury of exclusivity" says its Minister for Tourism Mark Brantley, there are "no high rises or fast food chains, all-inclusives or mass tourism". Neither are there cruise ships, traffic lights or bustling crowds, here you'll find more

monkeys than people and sheep and goats grazing freely at the side of the road. It's a stunningly beautiful natural paradise, where the local people are genuinely welcoming and the visitors come back year after year.

Princess Diana used it as a refuge, holidaying here with the young princes, and Harry returned on a visit in 2016. It's a favourite spot with Oprah Winfrey and Beyoncé, Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones, John Travolta and Meryl Streep. It's the birthplace of Alexander Hamilton, one of the founding fathers of the United States whose face features on America's \$10 bill.

The island was named by Christopher Columbus in 1493, surely the most misguided traveller

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**Hammocks on the Nisbet Plantation Resort, main; view of the Nevis, above**

in history, who mistook the clouds at the top of the island's highest peak for snow and named it Nevis – derived from the Spanish "Nuestra Señora de las Nieves" (Our Lady of the Snows). The name is correctly pronounced 'Neevis', it does not sound like the word that goes with 'Ben'.

Today, despite average year-round temperatures of 30 degrees, Nevis peak remains almost permanently wreathed in mist. You can climb the 3,232 feet to the top, following one of three routes, with a guide. I prefer to stay on flat ground, admiring the island's lush, green, mountainous interior from the palm tree fringed

white-sand beaches that surround it. Climbing into a hammock with a book in blazing sunshine, waves rolling ashore a few feet away, it's not hard to feel you've reached nirvana.

But there's a lot more to Nevis than just hammocks and beaches, and its history is a lot more turbulent than gently lapping waves might suggest. One of the slave capitals of the Caribbean until the 18th century, African slaves were landed here to be distributed among the islands. Today their stories are traced through the sugar plantations they worked on and recreations of the tiny huts they lived in – and you can visit both places.

The New River Estate, the last working sugar mill on the island, is currently being redeveloped as a museum while over at the Heritage Village an engaging lady called Pat will explain the importance of the island's housing history for its population today. "If this story is not told to our children they won't know where they've come from and can't know where they're going".

The best way to see the island and get a whistle-stop tour of its history while racing over beaches, up the sides of mountains and through



green fields is on the off-roading Funky Monkey tour, led by the inimitable Waz. Another local legend is Patterson, who will take you on a pub crawl around the local island bars, the places you might not find – or feel comfortable enough to enter – by yourself.

That's how I meet Patrick, who runs 'Lil Cherry Tree, the only bar in the smallest village, complete with tiny grocery, who produces a large bottle of "moonshine" rum, full of "herbs", from under the counter. I have rum punch in Yubrenta, more moonshine in the tiny Squeeze Up bar and a final rum punch in Passion, with its beautiful gardens, home to pecking chickens and chilled-out travellers. Nearby is the very stylish Montpellier Plantation hotel, where guests are equipped with a torch if they want to walk down the road to Passion; this is the place where Nelson married local woman Fanny Nisbet back in 1787.

I'm staying in Fanny's former home, the Nisbet Plantation, where the wonderful Avenue of Palms stretches from the cosy colonial lounges of the Great House down to the sea. It's here I have my hammock moments and eat my breakfast every morning on the beach. Here I meet visitors who've been coming to the island year after year and hang out with the friendly staff – one of whom I meet up with again at the local music session at nearby Esme's bar, a rousing 12-piece string band playing their hearts out.

I eat food that has travelled just minutes to get to my plate; chunky snapper and mahi-mahi fish, juicy prawns, fresh avocado, mangos, bananas and starchy breadfruit, coconuts cut down from the palm trees on Nisbet, conch soup and johnny cakes. Many restaurants don't have menus, just specials chalked up on a board and smiling staff who list off the rest.

Chef Wilma in the island's capital Charlestown has cooked for the Royal Family and Paulette at Paradise has fed johnnycakes – deep-fried cornbread – to Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. On Saturdays you can eat on a picnic bench outside Paulette's house – just phone your order in advance and rock up to sit with the locals enjoying barbecue chicken, goat water (a type

of stew) and those very same j-cakes.

I hang out at the beach bars on Pinney beach and follow a Killer Bee cocktail at Sunshine (after four you start to feel the buzz, after five you've been stung) with a Friday afternoon roadside barbecue, where locals roast meat and sell beers and everyone is welcome.

And I treat my arthritic hip to a dip in Nevis hot springs where I meet Ella, who returned to the island after living in the UK, awaiting a knee replacement operation. After several weeks of daily dips in the spring, she cancelled it. Mineral-rich and searing hot, the water is a shock to the senses when I lower myself in – but the pain in my hip is gone when I get out!

I meet people who have lived here all of their lives and those who have made the island their new home. People like Richard, who owns the Hermitage Plantation, his former family home turned hotel and the oldest wooden structure in the Caribbean; Mark, who came here as a backpaker 31 years ago and now produces the island's Clifton Estate rum and runs regular rum tastings in his L&L shop in Charlestown; and Tim and his wife Tina, who were enticed back to the island after a break of nine years, jumping at the chance to return to run Nisbet Plantation.

Three times a week they take interested guests on a five-mile walk from the beaches of Nisbet to the hills above, a leisurely two-hour stroll through nature and local stories, meeting some of the people who supply the hotel with produce and services (and the occasional puppy) along the way. It's a fascinating insight into local life and landscape – the local life and landscape that give Nevis its magic. ■

*Bernadette Fallon is a travel journalist and publishes her stories on Travellingwell.net*

**BA (British Airways.com) flies direct to St Kitts from the UK with a short stop in Antigua; book Nisbet Plantation Resort through British Airways Holidays or directly with the resort at Nisbetplantation.com; organise tours of the island at Funkymonkeytours.com; for more information visit Nevisisland.com**



Charlestown, the capital of Nevis

STAYCATION



Discreetly overstated

The Kimpton Fitzroy London is opulent and utterly fabulous, finds Emma Newlands

Having stayed in many a London hotel over the years, a combination of sometimes-discreet external branding and my questionable sense of direction means they can prove mysteriously elusive to locate at street level.

Not so the Kimpton Fitzroy London, whose grandiose, terracotta-clad presence I am pleased to discover is highly evident almost immediately on exiting Russell Square Tube station.

The building was originally designed by Charles Fitzroy Doll in 1898, with the Château de Madrid in Paris proving a key inspiration. It overlooks well-to-do Russell Square, an oasis of relative tranquillity in a very central location of London, in the literary heartland that is Bloomsbury.

The building radiates a powerful sense of occasion before I've even entered – little wonder given that four life-size statues of British queens flank the entrance, for example.

I then find myself inside the vast reception, with an epic chandelier and dramatic staircase just two of the features attracting my attention.

The property has undergone a major revamp, boasting 334 rooms, ranging from City singles to decadent corner suites with the likes of a cocktail cabinet and 'walk-through'

wardrobes. After checking in, I head up to my superior king room, which has a classic, grey-based colour scheme offset with touches of burnt yellow.

The door opens into a cosy living area that includes two chairs, table, TV and floor-length mirrors as well as a WC discreetly hidden away.

The adjoining bedroom is elegant and maintains the sanctuary-like feeling, also continuing the various shades of grey. The main bathroom is a mixture of white with grey-flecked marble and gold fittings. As well as two sinks there is both a sizeable shower and large freestanding tub – and I make use of both during my stay as well as the fluffy dressing gowns (obviously), which are hung up on the bathroom wall.

There is also more information about Doll, who after an 'illustrious' design career, become the Mayor of Holborn for two terms, as well as being a Justice of the Peace in his home town of Much Hadham in Hertfordshire.

He also received what would become his most famous commission – the RMS Titanic – partly as a response to his work on what was known as the Hotel Russell.

The Titanic had an exact replica of Lucky George – the hotel's bronze dragon, which can be found on the landing of the main staircase – while

the ship's grand dining room was based on the hotel's restaurant.

And Neptune – the hotel's 'modern seafood-focused neighbourhood restaurant' from Brett Redman and Margaret Crow – certainly has a sophisticated, ocean-going air, a relaxing but elegant Art Deco space decorated in coral pinks with shells on display in the bar in the centre.

There is plenty to be tempted by on the menu, including several steak options cooked over oak and charcoal, but once I hear the description of the chilled seafood platter, no other dish is going to get a look-in. It's an embarrassment of

*The building radiates a powerful sense of occasion before I've even entered*

delicious riches, including ultra-fresh tangy oysters, and reddish crab claws whose shells give way with a satisfying crunch. Also yielding under the pressure of cutlery is dessert of triple-decker millefeuille, a highly satisfying end to the meal.

I then peek into Fitz's bar, named after Doll, which has touches of Neptune's coral scheme but mainly features darker woods plus an amazing glitterball in the centre that combine to create a decadent speakeasy feel.

Cocktails include nods to free spirits

**Clockwise from main: the reception area; the exterior of the Kimpton Fitzroy London; a deluxe bedroom**

familiar to Bloomsbury, including the Zola in Exile named after the novelist, while also featuring in the menu are illustrations by Jazz Age artist John Held Jr, which originally appeared in magazines such as *Life*, *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker*.

The next morning my main challenge is deciding which of the hotel's in-house options to choose for breakfast.

But I opt to return to Neptune after seeing its menu. This includes some of my favourites such as a vegetarian breakfast complete with halloumi, and kedgeree. However it's the buttermilk pancakes with crème fraîche and berries that win my attention, and they arrive piled high with a layer of jam inbetween each.

It's a far more elegant start to the day than I'm used to, and I set out with a spring in my step to explore. The British Museum is less than a hop, skip and a jump away, while the likes of Soho and Covent Garden are within easy walking distance.

And due to its fabulous frontage the bonus is I can find my way back for a change. ■

**Kimpton Fitzroy London, 1-8 Russell Square, Bloomsbury, WC1B 5BE. (Reservations, 020 7520 1800; hotel: 020 7123 5000, kimptonfitzroylondon.co.uk). Rooms start from £225.**

48 HOURS IN

Camargue

**Friday, 5pm**  
Check in at L'Auberge Cavaliere du Pont des Bannes (aubergecavaliere.com; from €143), which has luxury rooms in waterside farmhouse-style villas with two (unheated) pools.

**7:30pm**  
Dine at the hotel's Pont des Bannes restaurant for Provençal dishes such as red tuna ceviche and millefeuille of Nimes pigeon (€40-€50pp).

**Saturday, 10am**  
Get your bearings by ascending the Romanesque steeple of the Eglise de Notre Dame de la Mer. Reedbeds, lagoons and sandy beaches stretch for miles on all sides.

**11am**  
Stroll through Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, a picture-postcard seaside village that's all whitewashed cottages and narrow lanes.

**Midday**  
Seaside lunch at La Playa (la-playa-en-camargue.fr) where the accent is on local fish and shellfish served with the famed rice of Camargue (€15-€30 each).

**2pm**  
Spend the afternoon beachcombing along the long, sandy spit that separates the vast Étang de Vaccares from the Med, where you'll see locals dredging for palourdes (clams) in the shallows.

**5pm**  
Visit the Parc Ornithologique du Pont-de-Gau (parcornithologique.com; €7.50), where walkways get you up close to hundreds of waterbirds.

BARGAIN BREAKS

A drop of Raasay

The Isle of Raasay Distillery is hosting a Burns and Whisky Weekend, from 25-27 January 2019. From £339, you'll get a two night stay for two including dinner at the distillery on Friday, lunch on Saturday, a whisky tasting and warehouse tour with the distillery's co-founder, Alasdair Day, plus a traditional Burns supper on the Saturday evening.

**Call 01478 470178 or see www.raasaydistillery.com**

Tasting notes

Rockliffe Hall's first Festival of Food (2-9 February 2019) will welcome some of the country's best chefs for a series of special lunches, dinners



**Sunday, 11am**  
Explore sand dunes, wetlands and wildflower meadows on horseback at Domaine de la Palissade (cheval-camargue-palissade.fr); one-hour guided tour costs €19).

**Midday**  
Lunch at La Chassagnette (chassagnette.fr). Sharing and discovery menus at the Michelin-starred restaurant start at €69.

**5:30pm**  
Go to the Étang de Fangassier, where up to 15,000 pairs of flamingoes nest. (details and booking through Arles tourist office, arlestourisme.com)

**8pm**  
Dinner at Spanish-flavoured Ambiance Tapas (platters €15-€25).

**Monday, 6:30am**  
Check out early to drive back to Marseille airport for your flight to Edinburgh. ■

Robin Gauldie

**Fly to Marseille with Ryanair (www.ryanair.com), then a 90-minute drive to Les Saintes Maries; arlestourisme.com**

and events. Andrew Pern, Mark Greenaway, James Mackenzie and Mark Jordan will join the five star hotel's three executive chefs, for events including a Taste of the North East banquet and a wine evening. Stay overnight from £220. Festival of Food events are priced individually.

**Call 01325 729999 or see www.rockcliffehall.com**

Sunshine in Madeira

Jet2Holidays are offering seven nights bed and breakfast in Machico, Madeira, at the three star Dom Pedro. This includes flights from Edinburgh on 21 January, all from £319pp based on two sharing including transfers.

**Call 0800 408 5594 or see www.jet2holidays.com**