

That's the way to do the Caribbean

Forget the big, exclusive hotel chains in the Caribbean – we've three ways to get closer to the locals and live the real island life. Plan your trip here

Robert Ryan Published: 9 January 2011

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The
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Book in to a brilliant and cheap Caribbean option - then hit the waves laughing (PR)

Breakfast

I had just had one of those perfect Caribbean days. In the morning, I'd explored the rough back-country tracks of St Kitts on a quad bike, crisscrossing fields of sugar cane, coconut plantations and thickets of creeper-draped forest, stopping off at Lambert's, a hugely evocative ruined sugar mill on a bluff overlooking the ocean.

Then I'd sat down to an excellent, locally sourced lunch – at the Spice Mill, on Cockle-shell Beach, on the soon-to-be-developed southern peninsula of the island – followed by my first swim of the trip in the warm, shallow sea. Afterwards, with the mountains of verdant Nevis seemingly close enough to touch, and a signature Lion rum punch from the eponymous beach shack in hand, I had listened to a storming, funk-inflected set by a band from Martinique.

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When they had finished, I'd slipped onto a lounge and studied the row of whitecaps marking the restless juncture where Caribbean meets Atlantic, until it was time to decamp to the nearby Reggae Beach Bar for a last beer as the heat and light of the day started to fade, and the rising chorus of crickets threatened to drown out the bar's sound system. As I said, perfect.

Trouble started in paradise only when I tried to get a cab back. I had forgotten to bring the address of the place where I was staying. "Rock Haven," I said to the cabbie. He looked puzzled, which, as it is a two-room establishment, was hardly surprising. I tried to describe its location, high on a ridge overlooking the island's capital and the Atlantic. "Who owns it?" he asked. "A lady who used to make ice cream," I replied. At which point, his face lit up. "Healthy Scoops!" he shouted. And we were off.

Judith Blake, who is actually Dominican by birth, but adopted the island when she married her dentist husband, no longer makes Healthy Scoops ice cream, but it was clearly fine enough to make a lasting impression on St Kitts. I soon discovered you only had to say "Ice Cream Lady" to any cabbie and you were as good as home. Judith now rents out two rooms in that home, which does indeed overlook the Atlantic (position yourself carefully and you can block out the ugly bulk of the Marriott hotel, which blights that coastline at Frigate Bay), Monkey Hill and Basseterre, the sprawling capital, which deceptively glows like a metropolis at night (its population is 20,000).

The two units she offers at Rock Haven are a self-contained lower-floor apartment and a smaller room upstairs. I would opt for the latter, simply because you feel part of the home, with its enormous veranda and comfy sofas, not to mention the kitchen, where Judith produces brilliant breakfasts, almost as renowned as her ice cream. As the sun goes down, you can sneak in there and join her for a quick passion fruit and gin. ("I find it just livens it up a little.")

The Ice Cream Lady cossets her guests, suggesting which beach to go to, which bar to frequent (she will phone ahead and insist you are well looked after) and where to dine, as well as meeting every client at the airport and chaperoning them to Rock Haven, even if they have hired a car. It is the perfect soft landing. "It's a style of hospitality that is, sadly, dying out across the Caribbean, as people choose to stay in resorts. But I love doing it," she gives a wink, "and it's more fun than making ice cream."

Details: Rock Haven (00 1 869 465 5503, rock-haven.com) has doubles from £100, B&B, including transfers. Quad-bike tours cost £48 for three hours, with refreshments (www.spectrumatv.com). The Spice Mill restaurant (spicemillrestaurant.com) is one of the best places to eat on the island; the Reggae Beach Bar (reggaebeachbar.com) is a great hang-out. The St Kitts Tourism Authority is on 020 7376 0881 or at stkittstourism.kn.

Also consider

On sleepy Nevis, the excellent Banyan Tree B&B (00 1-869 469 3449, banyantreebandb.com; from £43pp) has three rooms and sits on a lush six-acre site crammed full of tropical trees, flowers and spices. On the wild east coast of Barbados, the Sea-U Guest House (246 433 9450, seaubarbados.com; doubles from £80, B&B) has six rooms, but an intimate feel. On Grenada's neighbour, Carriacou, the laid-back Green Roof Inn (473 443 6399, greenroofinn.com) is a lovely five-room property (with two more cottages) set in large gardens on a low bluff above the sea near Hillsborough, the capital. From £25 for a single room or £44 for a double, B&B.

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