

Take a hike (or a dive) and relax

Moira Muldoon

Publication Date: October 30, 2005 Page: D1 Section: Travel Edition: Final

CHARLESTOWN, Nevis -- Choose your cliché; fill in the blank: "the water was as blue as . . ."

Whatever you choose, you'll be wrong. There's nothing the water is as blue as; there's nothing as blue as this water.

Five days. Only five days on Nevis Island, the slow sister to St. Kitt's. The two-mile-wide island southwest of St. Kitt's broke away from the British Empire in 1983 and is now independent.

No casinos, little shopping and almost no nightlife. Only sand and water and food. Only diving, biking, hiking, rainforests, mountains and white beaches.

My mother, grandmother and I were traveling together, staying in the extraordinary Four Seasons Resort: tall open windows, clean white marble, exotically bursting flowers. A golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones II, a gym with a staff member who brought patrons water and minty, cold face cloths, a spa spilling over with flowers, including under the massage table, so patrons always had beauty to look at.

The enormous sea.

In the mornings and later afternoons, while my grandmother rested, I played. An exuberant if relatively inexperienced diver, I was well looked after: An old Scotsman, who looked weathered and kind enough to captain a fleet of island boats, kept an eye on me. A young doctor from the Nevis medical school, University of the Americas, was on our boat; he swam over and placed tiny, spiny sea creatures in my hands. (I actually squealed in delight while underwater -- it's an odd sensation.)

We glimpsed shrimp and parrotfish and coral and colors bright enough that the memory alone could mitigate a gray Scottish winter.

Training for the Austin Danskin Triathlon, I tumbled out of bed at 6:30 or 7 each morning to exercise. One weekday morning, I rented a bike and zipped down the road to Charlestown, birthplace of Alexander Hamilton and the island capital. The place bustled, less a tourist town than a real, breathing one -- people walked with purpose, as if going to or coming from work; the traffic actually blocked up one or two of the narrow Caribbean streets; the bank seemed to be doing brisk business, finance as well as tourism being crucial to the Nevisian economy.

Everyone was friendly, kindly reminding me when I biked on the wrong side of the street -- Nevis, former British colony that it is, drives on the left -- or missed a one-way sign. They're used to bikers; in fact the island hosts a triathlon or two every year.

The hills here could give Westlake a run for its money: Nevis has a volcano at its center, just over 3,200 feet. Adventurers looking for more than lazy days on the beach can hike through the trees and vegetation that surround the peak. But I raced home, skipping the former sugar plantations, the re-creation of Alexander Hamilton's house (now a museum), the Horatio Nelson museum, the Anglican churches and the Caribbean's 16th-century synagogue. I wanted to get back on the beach, to watch the waves roll in and have a rum punch (made with freshly grated nutmeg) in the middle of the day.

I almost persuaded my grandmother to have one with me. Sitting outside, we chatted and drank our beverages. I told her what I'd seen and what I thought was most remarkable about this island of 12,000 that has a literacy rate of nearly 99 percent. There were signs along the island's main road that said things like "Is it beneficial?" as if the whole population were thinking together about the island and its well-being. (The folks at the tourism authority weren't sure who put them there or why -- nor could they tell me exactly what the signs said. I remember their spirit better than the actual words.) One afternoon my mother and I took a local ferry over to the casino in the marble grandness of the St. Kitt's Marriott Resort and Royal Beach Casino. Every Nevisian on the ferry made eye contact, smiled and said good morning or good evening, just as everyone had in the taxi, the hotel and the airport.

An entire island with inviting manners.

We played blackjack in the unexpectedly quiet space for a couple of hours, neither winning nor losing much, chatting with the Greek pit boss, then caught the last boat home.

"Good afternoon," a young woman nursing a baby said.

"Good afternoon," we replied.

(box)

If you go ...

For everything from lodging to diving, call the Nevis Tourism Authority, (866) 55-NEVIS, or visit www.nevisisland.com.

Nevis has a small airport, though many people fly to St. Kitts and take a ferry over. Roundtrip airfare between Austin and Nevis, using multiple carriers, starts at \$757 per person. If you land in St. Kitt's, the rates start at \$673.

Ferry information: www.nevisisland.com. The ferry takes about 45 minutes and begins at \$4, depending on the class and ferry. The Four Seasons also runs its own private ferry.

Price: \$25 each way if you are a guest of the hotel and \$42.50 if you are not.

The currency is the Eastern Caribbean Dollar, though U.S. dollars are widely accepted.

Rooms at the Four Seasons Resort begin at \$325 per night during low season. A luxury suite during high season can cost \$3,395 per night. www.fourseasons.com/nevis.

The St. Kitts Marriott Resort & The Royal Beach Casino offer gambling.

marriott.com/property/propertypage/SKBRB.

You can rent mountain bikes from Mountain Bike Nevis; price ranges from \$20-\$35 per day. Weekly rates and tours are also available. www.mountainbikenevis.com/index.htm. Scuba Safari is the only scuba shop on Nevis. All the others are on St. Kitt's. A standard two tank dive is \$95, plus equipment. Local contact: (869) 469-9518.

Caption: Four Seasons Resort Nevis is on two-mile-wide Nevis Island. With a population of 12,000 friendly residents, expect a 'good morning' or 'good evening' from everyone you pass. // St. John's Fig Tree Church, built in the 1680s, is one of Nevis Island's areas of interest. The island has no casinos and little nightlife but is ripe with places to go diving, hiking and biking. // Mt. Nevis Peak, the remnant of a volcano, stands 3,232 feet high in the center of Nevis Island.