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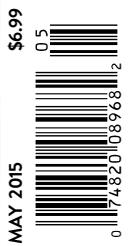
BEACHES

FOR SAND CASTLES • TOE TEMPTATIONS
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I S L A N D S

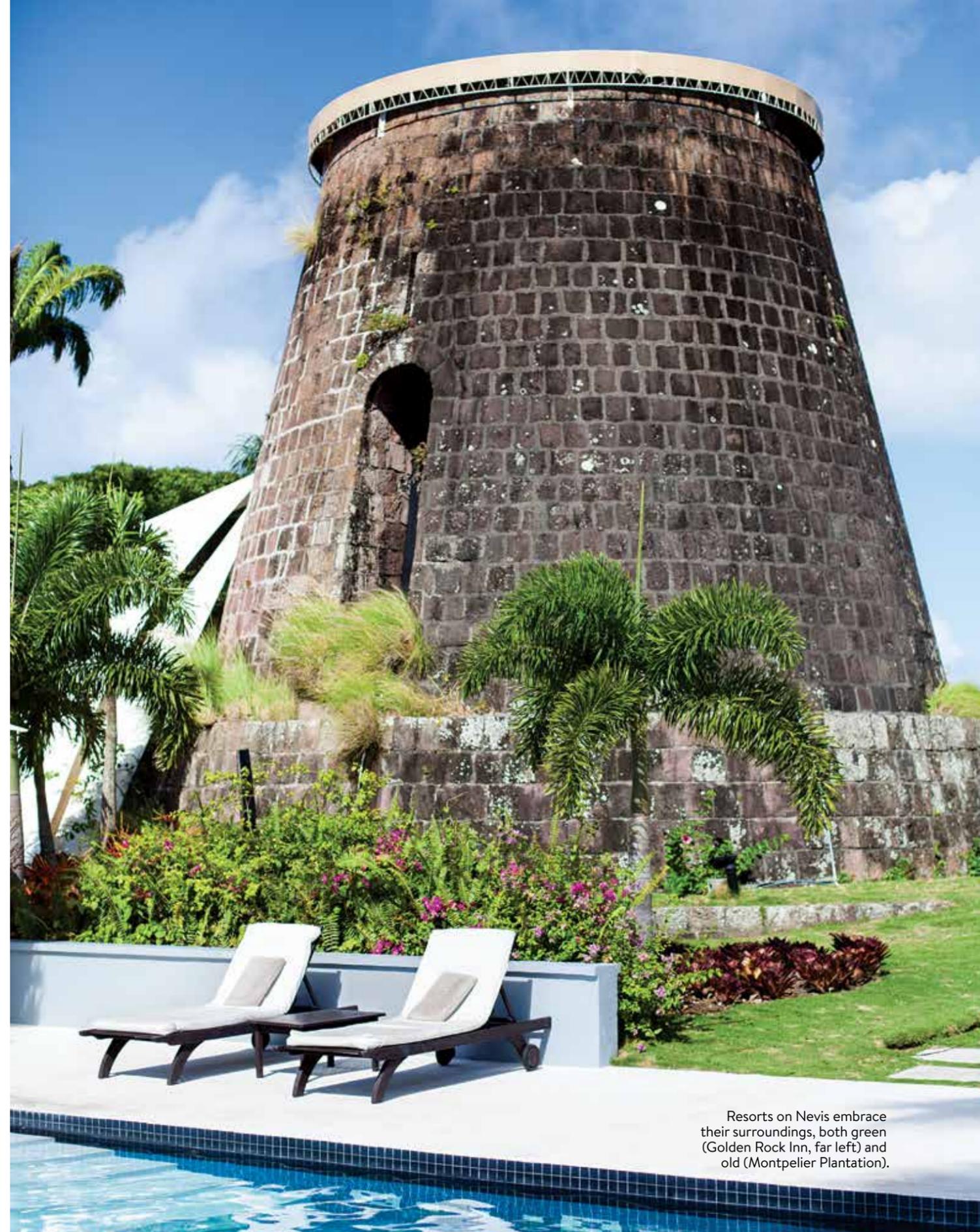
APRIL/MAY 2015 • NEVIS TIME CAPSULE • OUT ISLAND BAHAMAS • TOP STRANDS OF SAND • LIFE ON A BALL RICE TERRACE

NEVIS

FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Here's a Caribbean twist: Beautiful island, a cultish following, and visitors fresh off the ferry who don't run for the beach.

STORY BY DAVID LANSING
PHOTOS BY JON WHITTLE



Resorts on Nevis embrace their surroundings, both green (Golden Rock Inn, far left) and old (Montpelier Plantation).

THIS ISN'T A TYPICAL ISLAND TOUR. We're not heading for the beach. At least not yet. It's my first night on Nevis and Muffin Hoffman, who owns the Montpelier Plantation resort, set in the lush hills shadowed by Nevis Peak, is driving down a narrow moonlit road thick with vegetation on either side.

"Keep an eye out for donkeys," she says. "I hit one last week."

I cringe. "Was it harmed?"

"Oh, the donkey was fine, but it put a dent in my car." She chuckles. "There are donkeys all over. Lots of people on the island still ride them to work."

"No."

"Yes. You see, that's just old Caribbean."

I've heard this phrase — "old Caribbean" — hundreds of times across dozens of

islands, in all sorts of settings. Each time I wondered, just what is it? Stone ruins? An ancient rum distillery? A replica pirate ship on a cocktail cruise? I've done those cruises. But nowhere are the words "old Caribbean" more prevalent than on Nevis, an island of less than 36 square miles. Here donkeys dent cars. And for some, they *are* cars.

Earlier in the day, when my taxi driver, Hubert, picked me up from the ferry landing, he pointed out old concrete bus benches circled around a fire pit in Charlestown, population 1,500, the only town of any significance on the island.

"Right there is the place to get barbecued ribs on a Friday night," he told me.

I saw no signage, no cooking shed, no tables — just the fire pit and repurposed

concrete benches. So I asked Hubert what the name of the place was. He looked perplexed. "He just be da rib place." When I asked him how anyone could possibly know where to go when you said let's eat at some rib joint with no name, he said, "That be old Caribbean."

The next day, I'm wandering around Charlestown. I pass revelers dressed mostly in white, joyously laughing, singing, dancing as if it's carnival week.

"What are people celebrating?" I ask an old woman on the street.

"Be a funeral," she says. She sees my startled expression and laughs. "Oh, hon, dat just be old Caribbean style."

A few nights later, Muffin hosts a barbecue on the resort's private beach, 6 miles down the hill from Montpelier.

Here I am on a tiny Caribbean island, yet being at the beach seems novel. Nevis isn't exactly known for its beaches, though there are few (Oualie and Pinney's are a good start). But on this evening, the beach feels anachronistic, reminiscent of a time when colonialists would never consider donning bathing suits and getting wet.

Around me, wooden tables are lit with kerosene lanterns. A smartly dressed waitress offers glasses of pinot gris. Guests are freshly showered, women in little black dresses, men in crisp white shirts. No cans of Carib beer here, no bikini-clad limbo dancers or faux Marley bands.

The scene is such a throwback, I half expect novelist Graham Greene, wearing a white tropical suit, to wander out from the softly lit pavilion where Harry Belafonte

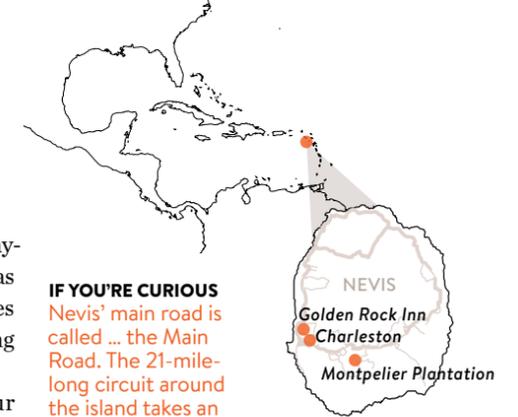
is singing "The Banana Boat Song."

A young couple from Florida, also staying at Montpelier, lounge on a white canvas couch in the pavilion, smiling. Their names are Kara and Erin and they are celebrating their wedding anniversary.

"We got married on this beach four years ago," says Kara. Her husband mentions this is their ninth vacation on Nevis. "Ninth?" I ask. That can't be right.

"Yes," says Kara. "Our friends always ask us about what we do when we're here. We tell them nothing. We like how quiet it is and how gentle the people are."

Muffin announces that dinner is ready and accompanies us to the barbecue island, encircled by tiki torches, where several women in chef's outfits fuss over chicken and ribs roasting on a wood fire.



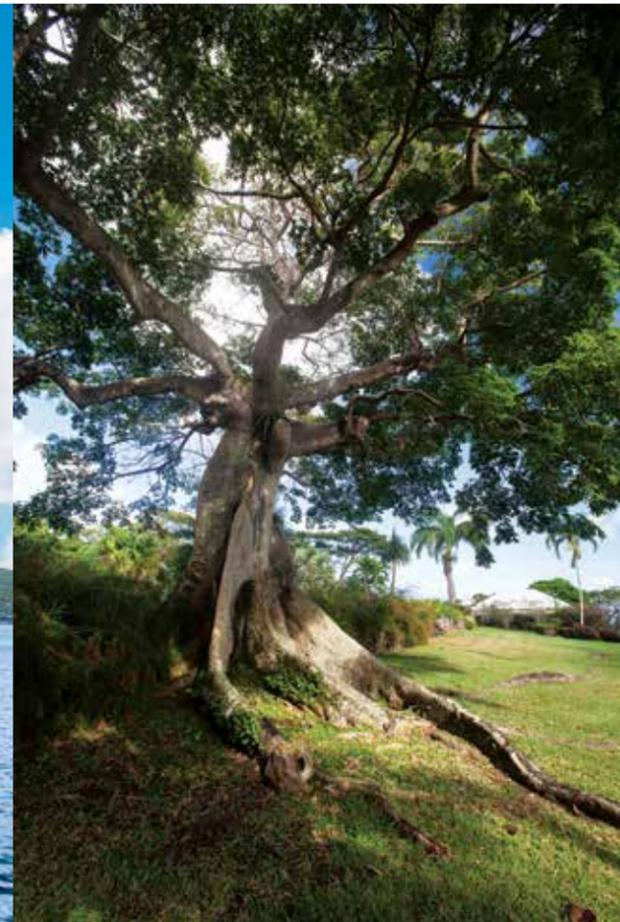
IF YOU'RE CURIOUS

Nevis' main road is called ... the Main Road. The 21-mile-long circuit around the island takes an hour to drive. It was built by an Irish road gang on one side and a Taiwanese gang on the other. Locals still debate who did the better job. What isn't debatable is the best island drink: Ting with a Sting, made from local white rum and grapefruit soda.

IF YOU'RE SERIOUS

Getting to Nevis entails flying to nearby St. Kitts. Nonstop flights exist from Miami, Atlanta, New York and Charlotte. From St. Kitts, six ferries service Nevis. The ride is 45 minutes, and easy on the eyes.

Nevis Peak and a silk cotton tree where Horatio Nelson married in 1787 qualify as Nevis high-rises. Muffin and Ziggy (the dog) love the view.





The Golden Rock Inn's lush 100-acre property is a seven-minute walk from the nearest beach. Its guests include green vervet monkeys.

WHEN HE READS ABOUT EDEN IN THE BIBLE, HE IMAGINES IT MEANS NEVIS.

"What should I get?" I ask Angie, who's tending to the meat.

"Ribs," she whispers. I ask her if they're better than the ribs at that place with no name in Charlestown.

"Oh, darlin', how can you even ask me that? I slow cook mine first and then finish them on the fire. The meat just fall off the bone. That's the old Caribbean way."

I rejoin the young Florida couple,

telling them that this is the first time since I arrived that I've seen a beach. They tell me that the first thing they do when they arrive on the island is visit the old ficus tree at Montpelier and place their palms on the trunk.

"Pilar, the manager's wife, told us the tree has a spiritual energy and you can feel it if you put your hands on it," says Kara. "So that's what we do. Don't you think that qualifies as old Caribbean?"

I do.

They tell me that their other ritual is to drive to the Golden Rock Inn, halfway up Nevis Peak.

"We go to watch the monkeys and eat lobster sandwiches," says Kara, who invites me to join them the next day.

The Golden Rock Inn, like Montpelier

Plantation, is another old sugar plantation turned resort. It's all giant palms and old mango trees, lily ponds and limpid pools surrounding mossy stone outbuildings accented with peppery red doors and Kelly green chairs.

Sure enough, the green vervet monkeys, first brought to the island as pets in the 17th or 18th century, are everywhere around Golden Rock. Gorging on mangoes in trees near the junglelike gardens, they do not disappoint. Neither do the lobster sandwiches.

We dine alfresco on a patio paved with lava stone repurposed from the old sugar mill. Dragonflies buzz, mourning doves coo, monkeys holler.

"I'd be happy sitting in this chair for an entire afternoon doing nothing more than

watching the monkeys," Kara says, taking a deep breath of fragrant, musty air.

Me too.

On my last day, Hubert offers to drive me to St. James Anglican Church in Hicks Village. The church is famous for its statue of a black Jesus, one of three in the Caribbean. Hubert assures me the gospel choir there is the best on the island, though he admits to being a little partial (this is his parish church).

I ask Hubert as we drive if he's ever been off the island. "No, sir," he says. I ask him why not. "Be a naughty boy," he says. "If he leave, maybe they not let him back."

See, Hubert knows the Bible inside and out. His favorite part is the Book of Genesis. When he reads about the Garden of Eden with all its lush vegetation and

wild fruit just falling off the trees, he imagines it must be talking about Nevis.

"Because," he says, "that's just what it's like here." And like Adam, Hubert has on occasion nibbled on forbidden fruit. But unlike Adam, Hubert has no intention of getting kicked out of paradise. Ever. That's why he's never been off the island.

Back at Montpelier, I pack my things during a five-minute deluge that makes the air smell grassy and brings out bright green frogs the size of salad plates from their hiding places in the lush gardens.

Hubert and Muffin wait for me at the front gate. Heading down the mountain, I ask Muffin what, exactly, old Caribbean means to her. She thinks for a moment.

"Hard to explain. It's just something you feel here that you don't feel

elsewhere in the West Indies."

So before I depart from Nevis, here's what I think "old Caribbean" means. It means people who still do things — like riding their donkeys to work — the way their daddy did and their granddaddy before him. It means living in a place with no traffic lights but "Monkey Xing" signs. It means goat herds and scurrying chickens in dusty streets lined with wooden houses painted candy colors. It means an island of five parishes with over 50 churches, including a 17th-century stone edifice with a black Jesus over the altar, where a local choir sings old gospel songs accompanied by an energetic elderly woman playing an organ, bouncing on its bench as if she's being stung by hornets.

That's old Caribbean.



WHAT I DO HERE

1. ANGUILLA DAY

May 31 is when floating barges with bands follow the boat races. An epic beach party.

2. BEACH BBQ

Wednesday nights at Cap Juluca the Caribbean food includes traditional rice and peas, which really aren't peas at all (they're pigeon peas).

3. HERITAGE COLLECTION

The museum, run by Colville Petty, reveals Anguilla's history.

“



Anguillans know each other. Tell your taxi driver your server last night was Fiona. ‘Oh yeah, Fiona. My mom cuts her hair.’ ”



CHANGING ANGUILLA

“It used to be that when kids grew up they had to leave the island because there was no work. With the resorts and restaurants came jobs, and now you can grow up on the island and stay here. That's changed family life for the better.” — CC

ANGUILLAN HAPPINESS

HE IS A WORLDWIDE SUPERSTAR IN A SPORT WE MISTAKE FOR A BUG. NOW HOME, HE SHARES WHAT MATTERS.

I spent a night in jail when I was 12. I was playing cricket in the park and it got dark and I didn't have a way home, which was 8 miles away. So I went to the police station. They fed me and let me spend the night in an empty cell. The next morning I got up and walked the 8 miles home.

There was no electricity on the island when I was a kid. When I left for England to play cricket in 1976, there were a few guest houses. No hotels.

All Anguilla kids grow up loving boat racing. It's in our culture. When fishing boats would come back in the afternoon, we'd go to the shore and help pull the boats out. The fishermen gave us a fish as a thank-you. The fishing boats are also used in the boat races.

The big boat race is called August Monday. It starts at 4:30 a.m. (Aug. 3 this year) with revelers at Sandy Ground. Women on the island wear as little as possible.

My favorite Anguilla beach is Little Bay. It's unknown because you have to either boat there or climb down by rope. The beach is protected. You'll likely see turtles and all kinds of fish in the bay.

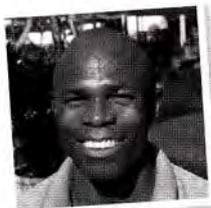
Get on Happiness and go to Sandy Island for the day.

Happiness is the sea shuttle from Sandy Ground to Sandy Island. The island has a beach and a little beach shack where the thing to get is the crayfish. That and JoJo's rum punch.

At night go to Dune Preserve.

That's Bankie Banx's beach bar on Rendezvous Bay. Bankie and his son Omari are the most famous reggae artists on the island.

Every kid here dreams of playing for the West Indies cricket team. The first to do so was Omari Banx. When he went to the airport to leave, the entire island showed up. It became a national holiday. That's how big cricket is to us. — as told to David Lansing



CARDIGAN CONNOR

AGE

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OCCUPATION

Guest Relations, Cap Juluca; Cricket Development Officer

FORMER LIFE

Cricketer in England and Australia