



The sweet spot

From sugar producer to superyacht honeypot, St Kitts and Nevis is changing fast. *Sophia Wilson* gets a taste and feels the rush



A

nchored off in a Caribbean bay, with cobalt blue waters lapping against the curving sand, 88-metre *Maltese Falcon* and 86-metre *Aquijo* sit side-by-side. Around the headland

are equally notable yachts including 74-metre *Pls Ultra* and 62.5-metre *Party Girl*. It's peak season and it would be no surprise to find this calibre of yacht fighting for slots in St Barths' Port de Gustavia or lined up at English Harbour in Antigua - but not anchored off the dual-island nation of St Kitts and Nevis. Yet this winter season, the larger island of St Kitts has rivalled the more traditional Caribbean hotspots for popularity.

The island is within striking distance of some of the region's most beloved cruising grounds, but its lack of marina infrastructure and luxury tourism offerings has previously held it back. But this is changing fast. Superyacht owner and property developer Charles "Buddy" Darby III has spent the past decade transforming 1,000 hectares in the south of the island into Christophe Harbour.

One of the largest marina developments ever attempted in the Caribbean, the project encircles a former salt pond that has now been opened to sea water. It will include a Tom Fazio-designed golf course, but at its heart sits a superyacht marina, which opened in 2014 and can accommodate yachts of up to 76 metres.

Darby's former superyacht captain Aeneas Hollins is now at the helm of the marina and has been a fan of St Kitts' charms long before Christophe Harbour started to become a reality. "I spent more than 25 years at sea and this is the only place that made me want to swallow the anchor and come on shore," he explains. "It's a combination of the nature, the people and its connection to the past."

The island is no stranger to foreign investment - in the 17th and 18th



NEW HEIGHTS

For those seeking a challenge, the 1,156m stratovolcano Mount Liamuiga is the highest peak on St Kitts. A two-hour ascent on foot will take you through vibrant rainforest to the edge of the deep crater.



Attractions in St Kitts include fresh lobster (above) and Romney Manor (left), which dates back to the 1600s



centuries it was one of the Caribbean's leading sugar producers. Home to 68 plantations during a time when sugar was known as white gold, it was one of the richest colonies in the Caribbean and as a result was fiercely defended by the British.

A bold reminder of its past still sits on the north-west coastline - the massive Brimstone Hill Fortress. Nicknamed the Gibraltar of the West Indies as it looks similar to the fortifications on the famous Rock, the UNESCO World Heritage Site was built by African slave labour to British military standards. Sitting

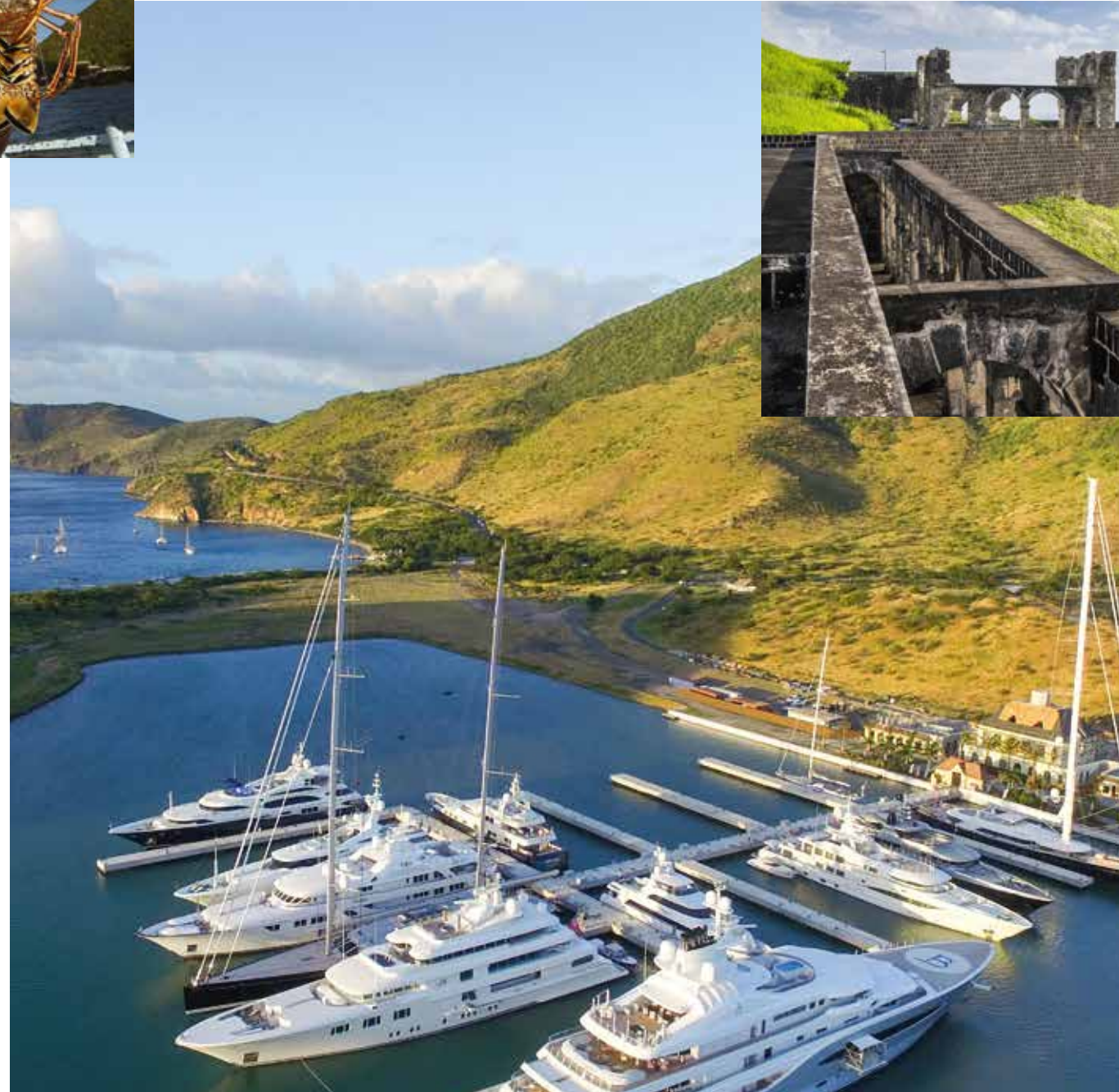
230 metres above sea level, it took more than a century to create and is made of limestone quarried from the hill beneath it. The fortress is enough to keep history buffs entertained for hours but even philistines can't help but be enthralled by the views

across the Caribbean Sea (from where pirates and other nations would have attacked).

The island's plantation history is also apparent elsewhere. Old sugar mill chimneys are dotted along the shoreline and green vervet monkeys, which were initially brought to the island as pets by the French (who shared the island with the British between 1627 and 1713), now outnumber Kittitians.

In the capital city of Basseterre, the British links are even clearer. Independence Square, which was once the site of slave auctions and known as Pall Mall, features paths that were shaped to resemble the Union flag. Nearby sits Piccadilly Circus, a small roundabout modelled after the London landmark and surrounded by Georgian-style buildings.

St Kitts and Nevis achieved full independence as recently as 1983 (the latest Caribbean island to do so) and sugar production wasn't halted until 2005. This is one of the reasons why the nation's history is so keenly felt but it also means that, despite its natural beauty, its tourism industry has been slower to develop than that of its neighbours. However, Hollins believes improvements over the past decade mean the islands can now truly cater for superyacht owners and guests.



PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL ANNE/LAIF/CAMERA PRESS; ALAMY; ADOBE STOCK



RAISING THE BAR

The island isn't just about fine dining. On the shores of Cockleshell Bay (just a five-minute walk from the Park Hyatt in St Kitts) is a selection of colourful beach bars and shacks.

The red, gold and green-hued Reggae Beach Bar and Grill serves up grilled lobster and coconut shrimp, and many a salty sea dog has whiled away a long afternoon at the Lion Rock Beach Bar.



From top: Brimstone Hill Fortress; Christophe Harbour marina, with 93m Mayan Queen IV; St Kitts carnival





Across the water

As well as exploring St Kitts, many yachts also head to neighbouring Nevis, which has its own unique character. Offering a slower pace, a sprinkling of colonial-style hotels and a Four Seasons resort, Nevis's laid-back vibe means it attracts its fair share of celebrity visitors and homeowners, including Meryl Streep and John Cleese. However, it is Alexander Hamilton (above) who has really put Nevis in the limelight in recent years. Born on the island in 1757, the Founding Father of the US inspired the Tony Award-winning modern musical. "We can arrange a private tour venturing through historic Charlestown," says Aeneas Hollins. "The excursion will then make its way to Alexander Hamilton Museum and the birthplace of Alexander Hamilton in 1757."



RUM O'CLOCK

The best sunset views can be taken in from Christophe Harbour's barefoot bar, the SALT Plage. Arrive early to recline on its overwater hammocks or sailcloth-covered day beds, and then order a Jumbie (a frozen rum cocktail) as the sun starts to dip below the horizon.



"We've come a long way," he explains. "We now have four key high-end amenities for visiting yachts – us, the Four Seasons, the Park Hyatt and the Kayan Jet lounge."

With an increasing amount on offer not only are more superyachts visiting but they are also staying for longer. "We have the marina and four or five nice anchorages in all weathers to ensure diversity of experience aboard and people enjoy exploring the island," he adds.

The Park Hyatt, which opened as part of Christophe Harbour in 2017, is seen as a key milestone in St Kitts' tourism development. Overlooking Banana Bay at the southern tip of the island, it benefits from easy access to St Kitts' best beaches and has stunning views over the neighbouring island of Nevis. "The further down the island you get, the more expensive it becomes, so I guess it's the perfect destination for this hotel," jokes my driver as he drops me at the entrance – a lantern-lit portico lined with fish-filled pools. Commanding the highest room rates on the island, it blends modern architecture – its airy rooms are housed within three-storey glass buildings – with plenty of nods to St Kitts' heritage, including a replica sugar mill used for morning yoga sessions, and plantation-style arches intersecting its adults-only infinity pool.

"We have four or five nice anchorages... and people enjoy exploring the island"



ESTATE OF THE ART

Situated on the edge of the rainforest, Romney Manor, which has been lovingly restored by its owner Maurice Widdowson, is home to the Caribelle Batik. Employing 36 staff to create batik (dye fabric) products, there is a demonstration area and shop – or you can just wander the tropical gardens that have been planted and painstakingly maintained by Widdowson.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERT HARDING; ALAMY; ADOBE STOCK



How to get there

British Airways return Club World flights from London to St Kitts start from £2,279. ba.com/stkitts

Stay on shore

Rates for a Park Suite King at Park Hyatt St Kitts start from £336 per night. hyatt.com

the attention of luxury travellers but the north of the island also has plenty to offer, with the Mount Liamuiga stratovolcano creating dramatic vistas and black-sand beaches. A train, which runs along tracks that were previously used to deliver sugar cane, gives a picturesque overview of the changing topography as tropical palms give way to vibrant rainforest. Or if you want to dodge the cruise ship crowds, a drive along the Atlantic coast's main road gives a similar overview.

At this less explored northern end of the island, Belle Mont Farm is taking luxury in a new direction with its farm-to-table philosophy. Sitting among 160 hectares of organic tropical farmland, the sustainable farm resort sits on the slopes of Mount Liamuiga. For those not staying, Belle Mont hosts a twice-weekly farm-to-table evening. Guests are invited to dine at a long candle-lit table with views of the sun setting over the islands of St Eustatius and Saba. Head chef John serves up homemade focaccia with fish gumbo and fresh salads. The wood-fired brick oven produces platters of grilled chicken, duck and freshly caught fish. The food is delicious and the setting spectacular but what makes the evening special is the way guests chat and share stories throughout the evening. It's testament to St Kitts' charm that it can bring 20 people from across the globe together in shared admiration for this special island.

A quick sail along the sheltered Caribbean coast can only enhance the sense of wonder. Jumping into the warm waters in Shitten Bay, less than two nautical miles from the marina at Christophe Harbour, we are the only boat in the bay. As I paddle in the water, with a shallow shipwreck to explore, the only life in sight is the goats that scramble up the surrounding hillside. With secluded anchorages, wild natural beauty, a rich history and now the luxury amenities to support superyachts, St Kitts' future looks sweet indeed. ■

