

St Kitts

With more monkeys than people, uncrowded and unspoiled are words that perfectly describe the Caribbean island of St Kitts.



1. Sugar train For centuries, the tiny island of St Kitts was entirely devoted to growing sugar cane. Much of the industry is gone but the little train that once chugged its way around the island carrying its sweet harvest still runs. The 100-year-old track no longer transports cane but it does carry sightseeing tourists. And what a ride! For two hours the open, double-decker carriages wind through undulating fields of sugar cane, overlooking a blue Caribbean Sea and alongside the dusty green hillsides of St Kitts' volcano, Mount Liamuiga. Add to the trip a travelling choir singing folksongs and some homemade sugar cake served onboard, and you've got the sweetest trip in the Caribbean. See www.stkittsscenicrailway.com.

2. South Friar's Beach (below right) St Kitts is rich in beaches, secret coves and hot strips of bars. But for bona fide relaxing, to "live de life", as the saying goes, hit South Friar's Beach. Goats skitter along a road lined with clammacherry trees full of velvet monkeys. The sweet curve of South Friar's sugar-white sand is broken only by the occasional colourful refreshment shack with a scattering of plastic chairs placed for a perfect view of the turquoise sea.

3. Cricket fever Actor Robin Williams once called cricket "baseball on valium", but on St Kitts the graceful colonial sport is almost a religion. So taken with cricket are Kittitians that each time an important game is played a national holiday is declared. Visitors who enjoy the game will be bowled over by the number of chances to see, or even play, in a match; there is always someone playing somewhere. Catch a professional fixture at shiny new Warner Park Stadium or an after-work game with the locals.

4. Kittitian cuisine To taste some authentic Caribbean flavour, try Mr X's Shiggidy Shack Bar and Grill (Frigate Bay; tel: 869 762 3983). Two worn, upright surfboards stuck into the sand mark the entrance to one of St Kitts' most atmospheric eateries. A jumble of old picnic tables shares the sand with bleached wooden fishing boats. Bonfires, music and tasty "cook-ups" – one-pot meals of red beans, rice, pork, chicken, fish and lots of garlic – abound. In the main town of Basseterre, grab a stool at the counter of Netta's Deli (Fort Street, tel: 869 466 7808) for coconut dumplings and salt fish. Just as tasty but a little more polished is Island Spice (Sugar's Complex, Frigate Bay; tel: 869 465 0569), where there's a cosmopolitan twist to local food such as "The National Dish", a combination of salted codfish, eggplant and plantain.

5. Plantation houses St Kitts is dotted with historic sugar plantations: some are tumbledown ruins; others have been restored and turned into elegant guest-houses. One of the quirkier lodgings is the Golden Lemon (www.goldenlemon.com). More than four decades ago, former *House and Garden* editor Arthur Leaman went to St Kitts on a tramp steamer and converted a 17th-century mercantile building into an inn that would become one of the Caribbean's most eccentric destinations. In the blissfully undeveloped village of Dieppe Bay, the Golden Lemon's eight stylish rooms and villas, hidden away in more than five hectares of palms, pink bougainvilleas and yellowbell hibiscus, are each distinctively decorated with antiques. There's no TV, no radio and no organised activities, and that's just how the now octogenarian Leaman and his guests like it. A good book from the guesthouse library, a beach chair on the little crescent

volcanic-sand beach and a view of the sea are all Leaman's regulars need.

6. A hike into the clouds: Mount Liamuiga Guided tours of the island's 1,000-metre-high dormant volcano with nature maven Oliver Spencer (tel: 869 465 6314) offer spectacular views of the sea and surrounding islands. Hikers trek through swathes of sugar cane, past mango and breadfruit trees, on paths of twisted banyan roots then higher up into the lush rainforest, all the way to the rim of the crater. There are no smoky eruptions (there hasn't been one for hundreds of years), just wisps of clouds around the peak.

7. Lady Luck on the beach On a Caribbean island still so relatively unburdened by tourism, it is a surprise to find a casino at all, let alone the largest casino in the region. When the sun goes down the party heats up at the Royal Beach Casino (below left; www.royalbeachcasino.net), a gorgeous venue with a dizzying ceiling mural of a cerulean blue sky and puffy white clouds. With 31 table games, 365 slot machines, a private plane at the ready to pick up casino elite anywhere in the world and a chance of rubbing elbows at the baccarat table with the likes of Julio Iglesias, what could be better?

8. Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park The drive on the narrow twisting road up to this 17th-century fortress (www.brimstonehillfortress.org), called the Gibraltar of the West Indies, is not for the faint-hearted, but the fortress, a feat of intricate military engineering 250 metres above sea level, is worth the trip. Stand behind one of the 17th-century cannon engraved with the seal of the old British empire, and you can

well picture the soldiers who fought here and the African slaves who built the complex volcanic-rock-and-limestone structure. Check out the small museum or just hike around the hillside and enjoy the panoramic view.

9. The Circus A table on the second-floor outdoor terrace of the Ballyhoo Restaurant (The Circus, Basseterre, tel: 869 465 4197) is the best spot for a view of the liveliest area of St Kitts. The Circus, a town square at the centre of the capital city, is marked by a big green standing clock. Modelled on London's Piccadilly Circus, the area is busy every day. On Fridays, locals and tourists come into town to "lime" (chill and chat) to the accompaniment of traditional folk music from a string band. Inveterate shopaholics can pop into nearby Kate Design (www.katedesign.com) for sunny paintings by local artists or Faaces (Banks Street, Basseterre, tel: 869 466 1002) for unique contemporary African art.

10. Authentic Caribbean crafts West African-inspired masks, handmade dolls and contemporary pottery with glazes that resonate with the colours of the Caribbean are a few of the souvenirs worth buying in St Kitts. Although there is an outdoor market for crafts in the capital, you should also watch out for treasures displayed at the side of the road, in home studios such as The Potter's House (www.thepottershousest Kitts.com) and in off-the-beaten-track places such as the post office in Dieppe Bay village, where the postmistress sells her handcrafted dolls. Look out, too, for the coconut shell toys next to the beach at the Golden Lemon.

