

St. Kitts

The sister islands of St. Kitts and Nevis (pronounced nee-vis) have developed a sibling rivalry. They're competing for increasingly upscale visitors, and it's a tight race: Both islands have uncrowded beaches, lush rain forests, historic ruins; charming if slightly dilapidated capitals in Basseterre (St. Kitts) and Charlestown (Nevis); and restored 18th-century plantation inns. And yet, despite their rivalry, both blissful islands have remained mellow.

Mountainous St. Kitts, the first English settlement in the Leeward Islands, crams some stunning scenery into its 65 square miles (168 square km). The island has a rain forest replete with waterfalls, thick vines, and secret trails; a central mountain range dominated by the 3,792-ft (1,174-m) Mt. Liamuiga; and Brimstone Hill, known in the 17th century as the Gibraltar of the West Indies. Vast fields of sugarcane run to the shore.

Colonized in 1624, St. Kitts is known as the mother colony of the West Indies, because it was from here that English settlers sailed to Antigua, Barbuda, Tortola, and Montserrat, and French settlers dispatched colonizing parties to Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Martin, and St. Barths. The island is as rich in history as its land is fertile, and it is still developing its tourism industry.

In 1493, when Columbus spied a cloud-crowned volcanic isle during his second voyage to the New World, he named it Nieves - the Spanish word for "snows": Nevis rises from the water in an almost perfect cone, the tip of its 3,232-ft (1,174-m) central mountain smothered in clouds. In 1628 settlers from St. Kitts sailed across the 2-mile (3-km) channel that separates the two islands. At first they grew tobacco, cotton, ginger, and indigo, but with the introduction of sugarcane in 1640, Nevis became the island equivalent of a boomtown.

The island's restored plantation homes that now operate as inns are true sybaritic lures. Though there's plenty of activity for the energetic, the going is easy here, with hammocks for snoozing, lobster bakes on palm-lined beaches, and candlelight dinners in stately dining rooms and on romantic verandas.

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St. Kitts and Nevis, along with Anguilla, achieved self-government as an associated state of Great Britain in 1967. In 1983 St. Kitts and Nevis became an independent nation. Nevis papers sometimes run fiery articles advocating independence, and the sister islands may separate someday. However, it's unlikely that a shot will be fired: any war will probably be waged through ad campaigns.

Arriving & Departing

By Air

Robert L. Bradshaw Golden Rock Airport (SKB) (no phone) is the airport on St. Kitts, and Newcastle Airport (NEV) (no phone) is on Nevis.

Most carriers from the United States fly to Antigua, St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. Martin/St. Maarten, and San Juan, Puerto Rico, where connections to St. Kitts (and, less frequently, to Nevis) can be made.

The flight from New York to San Juan, Puerto Rico, takes 3_ hours; from Miami to San Juan it's 1 1/2 hours. Nonstop flights from London to Antigua and Barbados and from Paris to Guadeloupe, Martinique, and St. Martin are about 7 hours. Once you've arrived in the Caribbean, hops between the islands range from 20 minutes to 2 hours.

Carriers

American (PHONE: 869/465-0500; 800/433-7300 in the U.S.)

Delta (PHONE: 800/221-1212; 800/241-4141 in the U.S.)

American Eagle (PHONE: 869/465-0500; 800/433-7300 in the U.S.)

Continental (PHONE: 800/231-9856; 800/231-0856 in the U.S)

United (PHONE: 800/241-6522; 800/538-2929 in the U.S.)

Transfers Between the Airport and Town

By Taxi

Taxis meet every flight at the Robert L. Bradshaw Golden Rock Airport on St. Kitts and Newcastle Airport on Nevis. The taxis are unmetered, but fixed rates, in EC dollars, are posted at the airport and at the jetty. Note that rates are the same for 1-4 passengers. On St. Kitts the fare from the airport to the closest hotel in Basseterre is EC\$18; to the farthest point, EC\$72. From the airport on Nevis it costs EC\$20 to Nisbet Plantation, EC\$37 to the Four Seasons, and EC\$45 to Golden Rock. Before setting off in a cab, be

sure to clarify whether the rate quoted is in EC or U.S. dollars. There's a 50% surcharge for trips made between 10 PM and 6 AM.

On St. Kitts you can call the St. Kitts Taxi Association (PHONE: 869/465-8487; 869/465-4253; 869/465-7818 after hrs).

On Nevis, taxi service (PHONE: 869/469-5621; 869/469-9790; 869/469-5515 after dark) is available at the airport, by the dock in Charlestown, and through arrangements made at your hotel.

Getting Around

Overview

"Whimsical" might best describe Caribbean addresses. Streets change name for no apparent reason, and many buildings have no numbers. To find your destination, you might have to ask a local - and be prepared for such directions as "Take a right at the fish market, then a left where you see the cow pasture."

By Air

LIAT (PHONE: 869/465-8613) has two flights daily between St. Kitts and Nevis. Air St. Kitts-Nevis (PHONE: 869/469-9064 on St. Kitts; 869/465-9241 on Nevis), Carib Aviation (PHONE: 869/469-9295 on St. Kitts; 869/465-3055 on Nevis), and Nevis Express (PHONE: 869/469-9755) are reliable charter operations providing service between St. Kitts and Nevis and to other islands.

By Bus

A privately owned minibus circles St. Kitts. Check with the tourist office about schedules and fares.

By Car

Car Rentals

Car rentals start at about \$40 per day for a compact; expect to pay a few extra bucks for air-conditioning. Most agencies offer substantial discounts when you rent by the week. St. Kitts agencies include Avis (Golden Rock Airport, PHONE: 869/465-6507), which has the best selection of Suzuki and Daihatsu four-wheel-drive vehicles,

Requirements

You'll need a local driver's license, which you can get by presenting yourself, your valid driver's license, and \$20 at the police station on Cayon Street in Basseterre (on Nevis the car-rental agency will help you obtain a local license at the police station). The license is valid for one year.

Road Conditions

You may not want to drive on Nevis. The island's roads are pocked with crater-size potholes; driving is on the left, and to make it more difficult, you may be given a right-drive vehicle. Pigs, goats, and cattle amble along the road, and if you deviate from Main Street in Charlestown, you're likely to have trouble finding your way.

Rules of the Road

Driving is on the left. Speed limits are low because it's often hard to find a road long and straight enough to safely get up much speed. Drivers are generally courteous; for example, if someone flashes car headlights at you at an intersection, it means "after you."

By Ferry

The 150-passenger government-operated ferry M/V Caribe Queen makes the 45-minute crossing from Nevis to St. Kitts twice daily except Thursday and Sunday. The schedule is erratic, so confirm departure times with the tourist office. Round-trip fare is \$8.

The former cargo ship, Sea Hustler is larger and makes the trip twice daily. Call PHONE: 869/467-9702 or 869/467-9826 for exact times. An air-conditioned, 110-passenger ferry, the M/V Spirit of Mount Nevis, makes the run twice daily Thursday and Sunday. The fare is \$12 round-trip. Call Nevis Cruise Lines (PHONE: 869/469-9373) for information and reservations.

Sea-taxi service between the two islands is operated by Kenneth Samuel (PHONE: 869/465-2670) and Auston MacLeod of Pro-Divers (PHONE: 869/465-3223) for \$20 one-way in summer, \$25 in winter; discounts can be negotiated for small groups.

By Taxi

Taxi rates are government regulated and are posted at the airport, the dock, and in the free visitor tourist guide. There are fixed rates to and from all the hotels and to and from major points of interest. On St. Kitts you can call the St. Kitts Taxi Association (PHONE: 869/465-8487; 869/465-4253; 869/465-7818 after hrs).

On Nevis, taxi service (PHONE: 869/469-5621; 869/469-9790; 869/469-5515 after dark) is available at the airport, by the dock in Charlestown, and through arrangements made at your hotel. Sample fares from the dock: EC\$40 to Nisbet Plantation, EC\$18 to the Four Seasons, and EC\$30 to Golden Rock.

Contacts & Resources

Business Hours

Although shops used to close for lunch from noon to 1, more and more establishments are remaining open Monday-Saturday 8-4. Some shops close earlier on Thursday. Hours vary somewhat for banks but are typically Monday-Thursday 8-3 and Friday 8-5. St. Kitts & Nevis National Bank is also open Saturday 8:30 AM-11 AM. Post offices are open Monday-Wednesday and Friday 8-3, Thursday and Saturday 8-noon.

Customs & Duties

Arriving in the Caribbean

Most islands wave tourists through immigration and customs with only a cursory question or two. Exceptions include major hubs within the Caribbean, such as Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and Antigua; to allay their concerns about smuggling or drug running, some countries inspect most baggage at customs. If you're yachting through the islands, note that harbor customs are often thorough, as well.

These general rules apply throughout the Caribbean: You're limited to bringing in 2 liters of alcohol, 2 cartons of cigarettes, and a reasonable amount of duty-free goods for your personal use. More than that, and you'll be asked to pay a hefty import tax.

Electricity St. Kitts and Nevis function on 100 volts, 60 cycles, so all North American appliances are safe to use.

Emergencies

Police: PHONE: 911.

Pharmacies: On St. Kitts, Parris Pharmacy (Central St., Basseterre, PHONE: 869/465-8569) is open Monday-Wednesday 8-5, Thursday 8-1, Friday 8-5:30, and Saturday 8-6; City Drug (Fort St., Basseterre, PHONE: 869/465-2156) is open Monday-Wednesday and Friday-Saturday 8-7, Thursday 8-5, Sunday 8 AM-10 AM; the branch at the Sun 'n' Sand Beach Resort (Frigate Bay, PHONE: 869/465-1803) is open Monday-Saturday 8:30-8, Sunday 8:30-10:30 and 4-6.

On Nevis, Evelyn's Drugstore (Main St., Charlestown, PHONE: 869/469-5278) is open weekdays 8-5, Saturday 8-7:30, and Sunday 7 AM-8 PM; the Claxton Medical Centre (Main St., Charlestown, PHONE: 869/469-5357) is open Monday-Wednesday and Friday 8-6, Thursday 8-4, Saturday 7:30-7, and Sunday 6 PM-8 PM.

Hospital Emergency Rooms

Joseph N. France General Hospital (Cayon St., Basseterre, St. Kitts, PHONE: 869/465-2551).

Alexandra Hospital (Government Rd., Charlestown, Nevis, PHONE: 869/469-5473).

Etiquette & Behavior

People are friendly but shy; always ask before you take photographs. Also, be sure to wear wraps or shorts over beach attire when you're in public places.

Health The staff at your hotel can recommend a doctor, dentist, clinic, or hospital should a need arise. Doctor visits, incidentally, can be costly - even on islands where the general cost-of-living would make you think otherwise.

Pests & Other Hazards

The major health risk is sunburn or sunstroke. A long-sleeve shirt, a hat, and long pants or a beach wrap are essential on a boat, for midday at the beach, and whenever you go out sightseeing. Use sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15 - especially if you're fair - and apply it liberally on nose, ears, and other sensitive and exposed areas. Make sure the sunscreen is waterproof if you're engaging in water sports, limit your sun time for the first few days, and drink plenty of liquids, monitoring intake of caffeine and alcohol, which hasten the dehydration process.

Language

English with a strong West Indian lilt is spoken here.

Mail

Airmail letters to the United States and Canada cost EC90¢ per half ounce; postcards require EC80¢; You'll find branches of the post office in Basseterre on St. Kitts (on Bay Road off the Circus) and in Charlestown on Nevis (at the corner of Main and Prince Charles streets). St. Kitts and Nevis issue separate stamps, but each honors the other's. The beautiful stamps are collector's items, and you may have a hard time pasting them on postcards. As usual in the Caribbean, you needn't worry about a postal code, or even a street address (though sometimes there's a postal box number): the person's name, the town, and the island name will usually suffice.

Money

ATMs

Debit cards aren't widely used in the islands, although bank cards and major credit card are helpful for withdrawing cash (in local currency) at automated teller machines (ATMs), which can be found on most islands at airports, cruise ship terminals, bank branches, shopping centers, and other convenient locations. Although ATM transaction fees may be higher abroad, the rates are excellent because they're based on wholesale rates offered only by major banks.

The Royal Bank of St. Kitts (Independence Square, Basseterre) has an ATM that accepts CIRRUS and PLUS cards.

Currency

Legal tender is the Eastern Caribbean (EC) dollar.

Exchanging Money

On most Caribbean islands U.S. paper currency (not coins) is usually accepted. When you pay in dollars, however, you'll almost always get change in local currency; so it's best to carry bills in small denominations. Canadian dollars and British pounds are occasionally accepted, but don't count on this as the norm. If you do need local currency, change money at a local bank for the best rate.

U.S. dollars are accepted practically everywhere on St. Kitts and Nevis, but you'll usually get change in EC currency. Most large hotels, restaurants, and shops accept major credit cards, but small inns and shops often do not.

Taxes

There is no sales tax on either St. Kitts or Nevis. Hotels collect a 7% government tax. The departure tax is \$16.50. (There's no departure tax when you depart from St. Kitts for Nevis, or vice versa.)

Passports & Visas

Entering St. Kitts and Nevis

U.S. and Canadian citizens need a valid passport or must prove citizenship with a birth certificate (with a raised seal) accompanied by a government-issued photo ID.

Passport Offices

The best time to apply for a passport or to renew is during the fall and winter. Before any trip, check your passport's expiration date, and, if necessary, renew it as soon as possible.

Australian Citizens

National Passport Information Center (PHONE: 900/225-5674; calls are 35¢ per minute for automated service, \$1.05 per minute for operator service).

Safety

Visitors, especially women, should not jog on long, lonely roads.

Telephones

The area code for St. Kitts and Nevis is 869. Numbers start with a 3-digit access code (465, 466, 468, or 469) and the local four-digit number. To make a local call, dial the seven-digit number.

International Calls

To make calls from the islands, dial 0 + country code + area code + the number. The country code for the United States and Canada is 1.

Tipping

Hotels add a 10% service charge to your bill. Restaurants occasionally do the same; if it isn't printed on the menu, ask. In restaurants, where there's no service charge included in the bill, a tip of 15% is appropriate. Taxi drivers typically receive a 10% tip, porters and bellmen \$1 per bag; if you feel the service was exemplary, leave \$3-\$4 per night for the housekeeping staff.

Visitor Information

Tourist Offices

Before leaving home, contact the St. Kitts & Nevis Tourist Board (414 E. 75th St., New York, NY 10021, PHONE: 212/535-1234 or 800/582-6208, www.stkitts-nevis.com; 365 Bay St., Suite 806, Toronto, Ontario M5H 2V1, Canada, PHONE: 416/368-6707; 10 Kensington Ct., London W8 5DL, U.K., PHONE: 020/7376-0881).

For Caribbean-wide information, contact the Caribbean Tourism Office (80 Broad St., New York, NY 10004, PHONE: 212/635-9530; Vigilant House, 120 Wilton Rd., London SW1V 1JZ, PHONE: 020/7233-8382; www.caribtourism.com).

When to Go

The Caribbean high season is traditionally winter - from December 15 to April 14 - when northern weather is at its worst. During this season you're guaranteed the most entertainment at resorts and the most people with whom to enjoy it. It's also the most fashionable, the most expensive, and the most popular time to visit - and most hotels are heavily booked. You must make reservations at least two or three months in advance for the very best places (sometimes a year in advance for the most exclusive spots). Hotel prices drop 20%-50% after April 15; cruise prices also fall. But saving money isn't the only reason to visit the Caribbean during the off-season. Temperatures are only a few degrees warmer than at other times of the year, and many islands now schedule their carnivals, music festivals, and other events during the off-season. Late August, September, October, and early November are least crowded.

The Caribbean climate is fairly constant. The average year-round temperatures for the region are 78°F-88°F. The extremes of temperature are 65°F low, 95°F high, but as everyone knows, it's the humidity, not the heat, that makes you suffer, especially when the two go hand in hand. You can count on downtown shopping areas being hot at midday any time of the year, but air-conditioning provides some respite. Stay near beaches, where water and trade winds can keep you cool, and shop early or late in the day.

As part of the fall rainy season, hurricanes occasionally sweep through the Caribbean. Check the news daily and keep abreast of brewing tropical storms. The rainy season consists mostly of brief showers interspersed with sunshine. You can watch the clouds

come over, feel the rain, and have the sun to dry you off, all while remaining on your lounge chair. A spell of overcast days is unusual, as everyone will tell you.

High altitudes can be cool, particularly when winter winds hit Caribbean peaks (late November through January). Since many Caribbean islands are mountainous or at least hilly, the altitude always offers an escape from the latitude.

Holidays

New Year's Day, Ash Wednesday (March 7), Easter Monday (April 16), Labour Day (May 7), Whit Monday (May 24), Emancipation Day (Aug. 6), Independence Day (Sept. 18), Christmas, and Boxing Day (Dec. 26).