

a brush with the clouds

Hike into a volcanic crater,
dine at a sugar plantation,
shop duty-free, dive and
swim in the Leewards

From the sea, Oranjestad, St. Eustatius, is nearly invisible. The little town sits atop cliffs, crouched behind the ancient Fort Oranje. A couple of centuries ago, the fort overlooked the town, which grew along the shore at the foot of the cliffs. In those days, the town nestled behind a sea wall, and the island produced about 600,000 pounds of sugar annually. Smuggling was officially approved, everyone grew wealthy, and Statia, the local name for St. Eustatius, became known as the Golden Rock.

In its heyday, Statia was the trading capital of the Caribbean and home to about 8,000 English, Dutch and Jewish merchants, to say nothing of the imported slaves (imported because the European settlers had long since killed off the indigenous peoples). The island was the conduit for fine fabrics, gold, silver, the aforementioned slaves, guns, tobacco, cotton, plus sugar from its own plantations and the those of islands nearby. Hurricanes washed away the original town (some of the ruins still stand along the road at the base of the cliffs), and now, Statia is a sleepy, friendly little island of about 1,600 souls.

Statia was our last and northernmost stop on a charter cruise aboard the wonderful 112' staysail schooner *Seljm* from Antigua through St. Eustatius, St. Kitts & Nevis, Monserrat and Saba—the group Chris Doyle's "Cruising Guide to the Leeward Islands" calls the Islands That Brush the Clouds. Statia is five miles long, maybe three across and about half a mile high. It's part of the Netherlands Antilles and not on everyone's list of stopovers. More's the pity, because its tranquillity quickly melts away the layers of stress most of us bear. One reason Statia isn't as popular as St. Kitts, for example, is because the anchorage off Oranjestad is fairly open and can be a little roly. A second reason: shopping and nightlife are seriously limited.

Shopping and nightlife were at the very bottom of my list of priorities, so Statia promised a chance to see real life in the Caribbean.

Seljm's skipper, Steve Ray, booked a taxi to take a few of us to the foot of the hiking trail that leads to The Quill Crater, an extinct and very old volcanic crater. The rim of the crater is about 2,000' above sea level, and the trail starts its climb at about 400'. Runoff from frequent rainfalls had carved ruts into the rocky dirt trail, so footing was a gamble. Roughly 200' into the climb, the trail steepens dramatically and made us throttle back a bit. Slow and steady was the order of the day, and we drank plenty of water.

After a short rest on the rim, we hiked to the bottom of the crater and into another dimension. Silk cotton trees grow to massive proportions and support themselves with buttress roots, 6' to

The view north from the hills at the southern end of St. Kitts. A cloud hangs over Mt. Liamuiga (3,792').

text and photography by dennis caprio

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On Stacia, Rachael, Robert (right) and the author hiked into the ancient volcanic crater, Quill Crater. Dinner in the saloon (below). *Seljm* under full sail off St. Kitts (top, facing page). Silent sugar mills dot the island of Nevis (bottom, facing page).



7' high. Strangling trees decorate the base of the crater with their convoluted wood sculptures. These trees form when a sticky seed germinates high in the branches of another tree and the seedling's roots grow and grow until they strangle the host. This was too much like life to suit me—a shiver ran up my spine.

Back in town, we stopped for ice cream, toured Ft. Oranje and climbed to the top of the bell tower at a roofless church. A few of the locals were gathering for private worship. We exchanged smiles and left them to their prayers. Goats grazed lazily in the nearby courtyard, and everything seemed right with the world. The heat, humidity, the West Indian tongue, the utter peacefulness—where's my hammock?

We descended steep, cobble-paved Slave Road to the main road along the beach. "*Seljm, Seljm*, this is *Seljm* mobile, over...." In a few minutes, the dinghy was on its way to collect us for lunch aboard.

As sailing charter isn't much good if the crew doesn't like to sail, which is *not* the case aboard *Seljm*. This whole cruise started with my request to get some sailing time. I met the boat in Antigua, a convenient destination from Connecticut. Although Antigua didn't figure into the charter scheme, I'll never forget the Red Octopuss [sic] Bar & Grill on Shirley Heights Road in English Harbour. Capt. Ray, *Seljm's* chef, Jessica Devereau and I ate dinner there the night before we set sail for Nevis. Murphy, the restaurant's owner, and Capt. Ray have known one another for some time, so Murphy extended himself a little. The fish and wine were the best the island had to offer. Murphy's chef, Billy, cooks everything on coal pots—deep, flare-side pots of charcoal—and the results are astonishingly good, especially when you add Murphy's hot sauce. As we were leaving that evening, he presented me with a bottle of his hot sauce and a beautifully striated trumpet shell. Murphy, if you're reading, I love you, man.

We cleared customs mid-morning, then set sail for Nevis, about 50 nautical miles from Antigua on a course a little north of east and about five hours sailing time. The prevailing winds are easterly, which put us on a broad reach in 15-20 knots of wind. These are schooner conditions to be sure, and *Seljm* loved it. She's an unbelievably comfortable boat. She heels very little in the normal sailing conditions of the Caribbean, even with her fisherman set; her motion is gentle enough to go almost unnoticed; and she easily averages double-digit speeds. Her speed means that charters can schedule lots of destinations, if they're type-A, or simply sail for the pleasure of it. In fact, we spent the morning of our last day sailing around with all sail set. Spectacular.

Seljm's decks are wide and uncluttered, so you can walk about, take pictures, lounge in the sun, read, chat with the crew (all of whom are delightful), sleep. God, it was relaxing. *Seljm* is wood outside and in. Her spars are wood as well. She was designed by Franco Anselmi Boretta

and built by Sangermani, an Italian yard. She's a time machine, recalling the Golden Age of Sail but stepping back 90-odd years calms the nerves. In those days, even hurrying was slow.

She houses charter guests in four staterooms, arranged in a block abaft the saloon and down a few steps. They are about equal in size and degree of luxury; each has a head, shower, two big single berths and enough stowage to swallow Imelda Marcos's shoe collection. Although *Seljm* has a lot of natural ventilation, we ran the air conditioning and the night generator every night. Urbanites may find this soothing—I did because I normally sleep to the hum of a white-noise machine (That's a bit sick, isn't it?). Crew's quarters are forward of the galley. The galley, by the way, is outstanding. I love to cook and I love kitchen stuff. Jessica was kind enough to let me dawdle in the galley from time to time and admire the setup and equipment. She knows how to use that stuff, too—she's a master of island-style and continental cuisine. The food was excellent.

We dropped anchor in Charlestown Harbor, Nevis, a short while before sunset. The days go quickly in the Caribbean winter, more so because I associate warm air with summer, and summer means 10-11 hours of daylight. In the morning, I went into Charlestown to meet a taxi for a tour of the island.

Nevis is worth a trip to the Caribbean all by itself. Its main source of revenue was sugar, and old plantations dot the island. Although the mills have long since been abandoned, the plantation houses have been converted to hotels. Most have the ambiance of a bed & breakfast, but the ones I visited operated more like small hotels, each serving three meals a day. Even if you have no intention of staying ashore, you at least have to see the plantations; stop by for a bite of lunch or dinner, the hosts are gracious, almost to a fault, and the food is excellent. We lunched at Ottley's Plantation Inn—a marvelously Victorian moment.

The Caribs, natives of St. Kitts, called their island Liamuiga, or the fertile isle. The peaks of St. Kitts collect cloud formations, which soon dump rain over the island. Unlike a lot of the islands in the Caribbean, which are deserts, St. Kitts has a rain forest and is wet enough to maintain a healthy sugar industry. One of the island's tourist attractions is the narrow-gauge railway that runs through the sugar fields to collect bundles of hand-harvested cane. The sight of descendants of slaves, most likely imported from Africa (the French and English wiped out the entire population of Caribs in the late 1600s), harvesting cane by hand is a window to the past for us; pure drudgery for them. I felt guilty for looking.

Basseterre is the capital of St. Kitts & Nevis (the two islands are an independent entity) and is a deep-water port. This was the site of the original French settlement, which post-dates the arrival of



The sugar mills have been abandoned, but the plantation houses are preserved



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English settlers in 1623 by about 10 years. The French and English shared St. Kitts—more like battled over it—until a treaty between the countries in 1783 awarded St. Kitts to the English. Although the architecture in town is English and French, reconstruction after a fire in 1876 tilted the influence toward the English. The Circus in the center of town, for example, is modeled after Piccadilly Circus in London.

Anyone who goes on vacation primarily to shop will forget and forgive the underdeveloped nature of this group when they set foot in Basseterre. Cruise ships stop there, so the variety ought to please all but the most obsessive shoppers. Same goes for restaurants—you can even get a hamburger in Basseterre, though only God knows why you'd want to. We stopped at the market on Bay Road to stock up for our last few meals aboard. Pickings were slim that day, especially fresh fish, which you buy on the beach opposite the market. You have to know your fish, because you may get something that won't suit your North American palate. Fruits and veggies are like the ones you buy at home, sort of.

We spent the night in Ballast Bay on the southern end of the island off Great Salt Pond. A short dinghy ride north to White House Bay puts you on New Road, where a taxi can meet you for a tour around the island or a trip to the airport. The views from the cab are magnificent, as are the ones from the Brimstone Hill Fortress. It's a huge fort begun by the English some time during the 1690s. It's made from volcanic stone and wasn't completed until 1794. This 100-year construction overrun included a 12-year occupation by the French. Some of the rooms in the fort are set up as they were in the 1700s to give visitors a glimpse of military life in the Caribbean. The mere thought of soldiers in full-dress uniforms in the Caribbean heat and humidity distressed my personal cooling system and sent me to the snack bar for a Ting, a Caribbean carbonated grapefruit drink that's most refreshing.

Our last night aboard, anchored in Ballast Bay, we toasted the crew with champagne and made a verbal pact to hook up again when *Seljm* gets to the South Pacific leg of her seven-year circumnavigation. I was sad to leave her and the crew after our full-sail romp in the morning breeze, not so much because winter awaited me in Connecticut, but because *Seljm* felt like home. □

Contact: Northrop & Johnson-Newport, Dept. Y, 19 Brown and Howard Wharf, Newport, RI 02840. (800) 868-5913; fax (401) 848-0120; njri@edgenet.net; or your charter broker. *Seljm* charters for \$31,500 per week, plus expenses.

This petroglyph on St. Kitts was drawn by Caribs, the island's aboriginal inhabitants whose history dates back 2,500 years.



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