

Basseterre, St Kitts

Today we are taking a tour of the island of St Kitts, partly by coach and partly by train. We have heard that it is an excellent tour and we are looking forward to it very much. Owain is acting as courier on the tour, and has a coach of 20 people to look after.

The tour starts in the port area, which was constructed on reclaimed land a few years ago. We pass through the centre of Basseterre where our driver points out buildings of interest. He is both knowledgeable and interesting and speaks very good English. We see many fine large college buildings, a medical school and a hospital, before we drive out into the country.

St Kitts has a population of 40,000, and its sister island Nevis - just a mile away - around 12,000. St Kitts, officially known as St Christopher, was ruled by both the British and the French who mounted a combined attack on the indigenous Carib Indians in 1626. Over 2000 people were massacred at a place which later became known as Bloody Point.

Driving northwards and hugging the coast, we pass through lush tropical scenery, with scattered small villages. The houses are mostly brightly coloured concrete, although there are some older more traditional wooden houses. In common with many of the Caribbean islands, the houses are raised off the ground on pillars, and are called "Chattel Houses". After Slavery was abolished, the freed slaves built their own houses on plantation land, and the pillars allowed them to move their houses when the land they stood on was sold by the owners. Most of the window openings have louvers - with or without glass - for coolness in this hot climate. Further up the mountains, where it is cooler, we can see the large colonial style houses of the plantation owners.



As in Tortola, there are many different religious denominations here, often 4 or 5 different churches in each village. They too are often painted in shades of yellow purple and green.

The oldest hamlet on the island is called Old Road Town, and here the houses are made of locally quarried stone which gives them a drab, almost sinister appearance. We pass through many other small villages with intriguing names such as Middle Island and Half Way Tree Village, and our driver points out a nesting area for White Egrets. The birds are common here and can be seen perched on the backs of animals where they feed on animal tics.

After 11 miles we arrive at Sandy Point town where we board the train for the second part of our tour. The St Kitts Scenic Railway is a sugar plantation train which has double decker carriages pulled by a diesel engine. It was completely restored in 2003 and now takes tourists instead of the crates of sugar cane it hauled in its heyday. The tracks are not exactly level and the motion of the train is a little like a ship as it rolls from side to side. This makes taking photographs quite a challenge!



The 17 mile journey takes 2 hours on this narrow gauge railway which takes us through fields of tall sugar cane, almond groves and coconut trees. We see the many stone sugar mills and old machinery quietly being reclaimed by the lush undergrowth. Life goes on as usual for the people who live by the railway; children are washed in tin baths outside houses, women wash clothes and hang them out to dry and men repair their rusting cars. A whole class full of children, all neatly dressed in their yellow T-shirts, cheer and wave from their classroom windows as we pass by.

As we travel along we are treated to an ice cold drink and some sugar cane biscuits, as we listen to the excellent commentary, and are serenaded by live Caribbean singers.

Nearing the end of the tour we pass over 3 bridges which span deep ravines - we think it best not to look down! Here there are also beautiful views of the Atlantic Ocean with its crashing surf.



Having made sure that our passengers are all back on board the Braemar, we decide to head off into town to buy a few souvenirs, and catch up with our emails. There are many jewellery shops here, all promising duty free prices, and other incentives to part us from our cash. Alvina would like to look at some of the jewellery on offer, but it is almost impossible to do so without being harassed by over-eager sales staff that are obviously on commission. One sales assistant even tells us that she has spoken personally to our captain who asked that special discounts be given today for his passengers, "Because they are disappointed that they will not be able to dock in St Lucia due to damage caused by the hurricane". This is news to us, as we expect to be in St Lucia tomorrow! However, we find souvenir shops where we buy some local clothing and a birthday present bracelet for Owain!



As far as St Lucia goes we will have to wait and see....