

Ahhh, the Caribbean.

by Jim Mahaffie

A special part of the world, these islands are in many ways a world of their own. A world of long, lazy sunny days. Warm, languorous breeze-kissed nights. Full of music and laughter. Where beckoning blue waters are never far. Where the clock doesn't rule our lives.

When the St. Kitts and Nevis Visitor asked me to write about life here, I was more than a little flattered. It also got me thinking. Thinking, nostalgically, about years of roaming around the West Indies. Sleeping in hotels out of Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous and in the back rooms of rum shops. Nibbling on extravagant buffets in plantation houses and munching on incendiary jerk chicken in a ramshackle bar. Admiring the world's greatest cricketers at historic Kensington Oval and watching kids strive every bit as valiantly for wickets and runs on a makeshift pitch. Luxuriating in the smooth vocals of Nancy Wilson at a jazz festival and skanking to the latest reggae rhythms at a ruff'n'ready dancehall.

My personal experience is that life's quite different here. These islands have become home to a smorgasbord of people from every nook and cranny of the globe, as exotic a collective mix as you'll find anywhere.

The best piece of advice I offer a visitor: Relax. Take your time. Take it all in. Enjoy.

Things are slower here. Most people like it that way. The smaller the island the slower the pace tends to be. People from St. Kitts, population an uncongested 35,000, often hop over to Nevis, population 9,000, to get a break from the bigger island's hustle and bustle. No kidding.

Life is so diverse I would never presume to try to define it in print. But, for what it's worth, I'd be delighted to take visitors on a strictly personal tour of a few aspects of Caribbean life I think they might enjoy.

The Music.

It probably plays a bigger part in people's daily lives here than anywhere else in the world. And, with the international success enjoyed by talented Caribbean musicians in recent decades, it's also a significant economic factor.

Music usually means reggae or soca. Both have their roots in Africa, and you'll hear them virtually anywhere you go in St. Kitts and Nevis.

Island bands include master calypsonian Ellie Matt and his GIs (the current incarnation of St. Kitts' near-legendary GI Brass, one of the most popular bands in the Caribbean for much of the late 70s and early 80s), reggae aces Small Axe, and the multi-talented Toucan. If you're lucky, you might catch a performance by Tamboura Kitwana, a GI Brass veteran whose reemergence on the scene a couple of years back was warmly welcomed by all local devotees of roots reggae.

But you don't have to catch a live show to hear music. Stroll up Fort Street in Basseterre any late Friday afternoon, when sound systems are in full flight. One may be pounding out the latest dancehall reggae hit. On the other side of the street, the competition's trying to drown it out with the hottest soca shot. It's an authentic slice of Caribbean musical life. Admission's free although you may feel inclined to drop into one of the bars for a cold one. Or two, come to that. Next thing you know it will be breakfast. Which brings us, quite neatly, to another aspect of Caribbean life:

The Food.

One thing people here take seriously is their stomachs. West Indians love their food. Hardly surprising, because Caribbean food, with its wonderfully diverse range of influences, can stand proudly alongside any of the world's cuisines.

West Indian food can be sublime. It might be a road-side roti (a flat, Indian bread wrapped around a spicy, curried meat and/or vegetable filling), jerk pork (marinated in an incendiary mixture of Scotch Bonnet peppers and various spices) or mountain chicken (plump frogs' legs, deep fried or sautéed in garlic butter). Every island has its specialty, and if there's one dish Kittitians and Nevisians are particularly proud of, it's goat water.

Goat water, for the benefit of the uninitiated, is a soup, not a drink. It appears on tables in local eateries on Saturday. It's so popular that anyone with a reputation for making it really well rarely has any left by mid-afternoon.

So, exactly what is goat water? Visitors will doubtless have noticed the small herds of goats roaming all over. That's one ingredient. Others include onions, garlic, hot peppers, salt, black pepper and — what gives the soup its unique flavour — cloves. Find the mix just right, and you've stumbled on culinary nirvana.

Goat water isn't the only local delight. Fish, usually served steamed or crisply fried, is a real treat for visitors who've never sampled snapper or grouper cooked West Indian-style. Salt fish — dried, salted cod, imported from Newfoundland — is another favourite, often served with dumplings or in sandwich form stuffed into the local equivalent of a baguette. Salt fish, a legacy of the days before refrigeration or widespread commercial fishing when trading vessels used to carry Caribbean rum to Newfoundland and return with salted cod, is soaked in water before cooking. This process eliminates much of the

salt and remoisturises the fish, although it retains a distinctly different flavour and texture from fresh cod.

An ideal way to sample Caribbean food is to head for the local sports stadium virtually any Saturday afternoon, check out what the food stalls have to offer and settle back to take in the action on the field. Which brings us, quite neatly, to another aspect of Caribbean life:

The Cricket.

The Caribbean takes cricket seriously. In fact, it's probably the nearest thing you're going to find to religion without actually setting foot inside a church.

Cricket, you see, is one of the few areas in which the Caribbean's island nations form a united front. The West Indies team has dominated the international scene for the better part of three decades. If an international Test match is being played, virtually every TV or radio will be tuned in. Every aspect of the game will be discussed and analyzed. A cricket triumph — particularly over one of the “old enemies”, England or Australia — will be celebrated, triumphantly, in bars and rum shops all over. A defeat will be mourned, disconsolately, in those same places.

At the time of writing, the West Indies team was going through — by its high standards and by its supporters' sky-high expectations — something of a lean period. But no one in the region expects that to last, and the team's temporary troubles don't detract at all from the delights of an afternoon at a local park watching the game played at an astonishingly high level.

For the uninitiated, cricket can be baffling, and I can't even start to delve into its complexities. But it's a wonderful sport. As a Canadian friend once remarked watching the game, “any sport where you can have three maidens before lunch can't be too bad.” He was referring, I hasten to add, to a term used when a bowler completes six deliveries without conceding a run.

To sum it all up: It's a Saturday afternoon in St. Kitts or Nevis and you're at the local playing field, munching on delicious West Indian food, watching cricket and sipping a cold Carib while reggae or soca music's wafting through the air.

Welcome to life in the Caribbean.

(sidebar on Caribbean drinks)

Ahhh, the Drink.

Meaning rum or beer -- emphatically not pina coladas, passion fruit punches or frozen daiquiris.

Rum is up there with reggae when it comes to famous products of the Caribbean. It's a subject, I confess, that I've studied with considerable enthusiasm over the years. More about that later. First, let's talk beer. I'll use this opportunity to take a public position on a subject of spirited discussion for quite a few years:

I, Jim Mahaffie, being of reasonably sound mind, having been an enthusiastic beer drinker for longer than I care to remember, and having sampled, to the best of my knowledge, most of the beers the English-speaking Caribbean has to offer, hereby pronounce that St. Kitts' Carib beer is, far and away, the finest in the region and one of the best in the world.

Before going any further, a little background is in order. Carib beer is brewed both in St. Kitts and in Trinidad. Not unnaturally, Trinidadians think their Carib's best and Kittitians are equally adamant that their brand's No. 1.

The ongoing dispute surfaces virtually every time a Trini and a Kittitian get together over a beer, but I can't understand what the fuss is about. The St. Kitts product is so clearly superior, with a distinct flavour that makes it one of the finest lagers I've ever had the pleasure of drinking. I can only conclude Trinidadians argue for arguing's sake when comparing it with their acceptable but by-no-means exceptional version.

Having settled that matter, let's move on to the hard stuff. That means rum, and there's no doubt that Caribbean rum is in a league of its own. An annual sampling has long since topped 120 different brands, and that's by no means all the region's rums.

A wide selection of rums from all over the region are available anywhere in St. Kitts and Nevis. However, we don't make our own rum here. What we do make — and it's a product unique to St. Kitts — is CSR, which stands for Cane Spirit Rothschild. CSR is distilled in St. Kitts by a company owned by the Rothschild family, whose catering to a world-wide weakness for the hard stuff has kept them above the poverty line for some time now.

A clear sugar cane-based spirit is referred to locally simply as rum. However, it does differ quite significantly from the white rums of the region. CSR is more like a vodka with a hint of white rum. It mixes well with virtually anything, but it's most popular with Ting, a grapefruit-flavoured soft drink.

But enough of drink. I'm writing this around 8 in the morning, and that's a trifle early to get into the sauce. Even in the Caribbean...