



At left, St. Kitts Marriott Resort and Royal Beach Casino; above, its cafe

St. Kitts Marriott Resort

This resort opened in 2003 and made it possible for the island to do niche marketing

BY LAURA WATILO BLAKE

Compared to other Caribbean isles, St. Kitts, with its lush rainforest and unspoiled beaches, has remained virtually undiscovered for some time. A favorite with travelers who seek it out for its quiet, laidback nature and genuine Caribbean flair, St. Kitts is now on the verge of discovery, as the Kittitian government focuses its effort on developing tourism on a mass scale and promoting leisure activities. In fact, the tiny island is expecting record-breaking tourist arrivals when it hosts the ICC Cricket World Cup next month.

Accommodating so many visitors might have been difficult without the addition of the 537-room St. Kitts Marriott Resort and

Royal Beach Casino in 2003. Not only has the resort helped increase the island's room capacity, the Marriott name makes it easier to attract more visitors.

"Marriott has given St. Kitts, if not a household name, then at least more recognition in the marketplace," says Robert Kelly, the director of the St. Kitts Tourism Authority in New York City. "The resort has made a world of a difference in terms of name recognition and name brand."

After the hotel's first year of operation, St. Kitts saw a 32.6 percent increase in stay-over visitors, according to an economic report from the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB), released the following year.

"The 'full' opening of the Royal St. Kitts Marriott Beach Resort and the re-opening of the St. Kitts Golf Course at Frigate Bay changed the tourism landscape in St. Kitts and Nevis and introduced 'niche' marketing, especially for meetings and conferences, romance

tourism (weddings and honeymoons), and sports," the CDB report stated.

Later in 2004, the resort—owned by Royal St. Kitts Beach Resort Ltd., and located along the Atlantic coast on the windward side of St. Kitts, received the Hotel of the Year award from the government's Ministry of Tourism.

There's no question that the big, bustling resort offers something for everyone—from families to honeymooners, golfers to gamblers—with accommodations and amenities to match.

The resort's five-story main building, called the Frigate Bay House, has 237 guest rooms with either golf-, resort- or ocean views. All rooms are oversized

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Fast Facts

St. Kitts Marriott Resort and Royal Beach Casino

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and well appointed, and most have large, private balconies furnished with chaise lounges and other outdoor furniture. The one-bedroom Royal Suites on the fifth floor (featuring ocean or golf views and ranging in price from \$825 to \$1,025 per night), as well as two Presidential Suites, are reserved by request only and are not available over the GDS.

"We use them for the high rollers in the casino," says Randall Doty, the director of marketing for the property.

The most requested accommodations, though, are not in the main building but in the three-story garden houses that surround the three swimming pools between the main building and the beach, Doty says.

These units have an additional 234 rooms that are especially well suited for families and can be configured as

one-, two- and three-bedroom suites. "They are perfect for families or two couples traveling together," he says. "The three-bedroom units can sleep up to 12 people because the couch has a bed, too."

A Family Affair

The key to the Marriott's success, though, has undoubtedly been its full range of amenities and activities for kids and adults contributing to its reputation as a "Caribbean cruise ship for landlubbers."

Children between the ages 5 to 12 can participate in Kidz Club activities (free with inclusive packages) including games, contests, handicrafts and painting. The entire family can come together in the evening for movies on the big screen in a room filled with big, overstuffed chairs and bean bags.

Golf at the adjacent Royal St. Kitts Golf Club can also be a family affair. Introduced last year, Marriott's "Kids Golf-4-Free" program enables kids up to 15 years old to play for free when accompanied by a paid adult. In

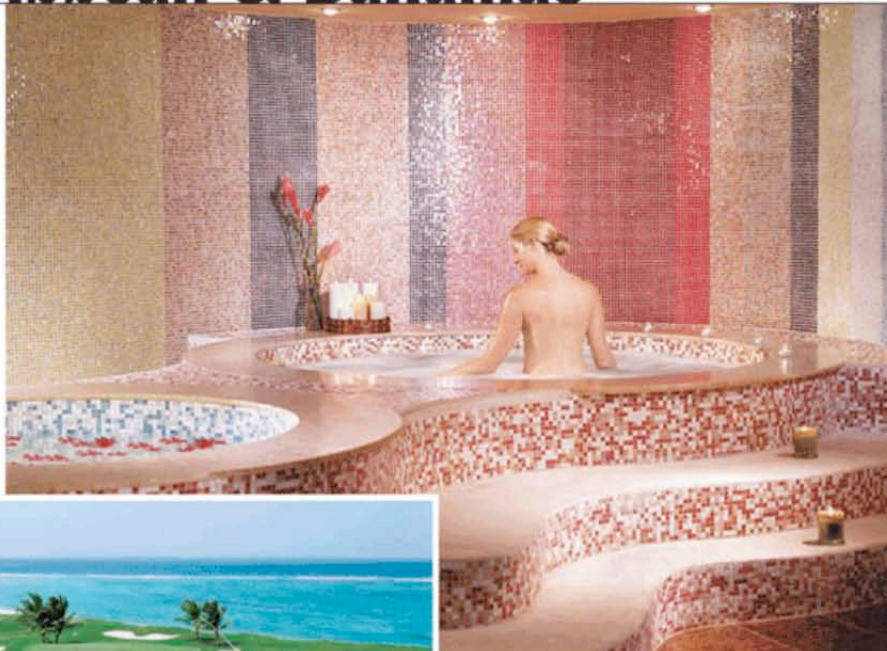


addition, kids receive a free golf lesson when accompanied by an adult who is paying for a lesson. Director of Golf Greg Downer makes sure that all golfers feels comfortable on the course by offering a range of clinics for men, women and children. He says golf lessons are essential for families that want to "play and stay together."

"The worst thing you can do is learn with a spouse," Downer laughs. "I've seen more fights when the husband is trying to teach his wife to golf."

World-Class Spa

If guests do need to cool off after hitting the links—or in lieu of golf altogether—the soothing Emerald Mist Spa can help restore tranquility. The 15,000-square-foot facility features eight oversized treatment rooms, a private couple's room and mens' and womens' wet rooms equipped hot and cold plunge pools, saunas and steam rooms infused with eucalyptus oil. By far, the most popular spa treatment is the Kittitian



The resort's golf course (left) offers lessons for any age and level; afterward, relax in the Emerald Mist Spa (above)

massage, known elsewhere as a Swedish massage, says Rachel Stormes, the spa director. While all spa technicians are adept, Roosevelt is "very, very good," according to hotel staff.

In keeping with the family-friendly theme, the spa offers a Princess for a Day package, which includes a manicure, pedicure, glitter make-up, an up-do hair style, lip gloss and sunscreen. Men can get the Coral Reef Gentlemen's Facial, designed to ease irritation from shaving and sun exposure.

What's New?

When it comes to food, guests can expect the same quality and service they are used to from the Marriott brand. The eight restaurants on the property ensure a variety that can appeal to all palates—whether it be Caribbean comfort food at Café Calypso or Italian fare at La Cucina (are reservations recommended).

With the recent arrival of Executive Executive Chef Andreas Mahl, a past recipient of the prestigious five-star rating from Mobil Travel Guides, the menus are in the process of being

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reconceptualized. First, the food and beverage team is working to raise the quality of the food ("You have to get the basics right," Mahl says). Second, "It was important for us to bring the local food to the next level. It's simply seafood, fish, prawns and good lobster with some strong spices," Mahl adds. Third, "We're trying to realign the food with the atmosphere, the uniform and the music," says Kevin Anderson, the food and beverage director.

Getting There

The big drawback to selling St. Kitts is the hurdles required in getting there and back, agents say.

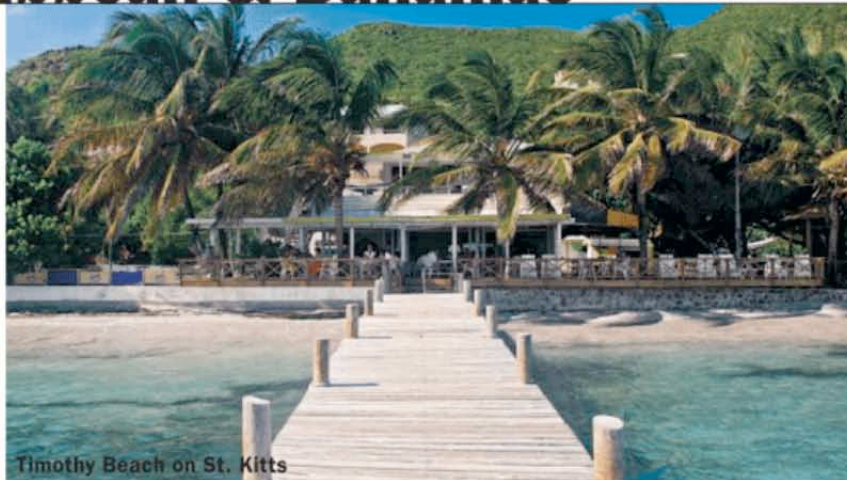
"To get to St. Kitts out of Cleveland is extremely difficult," says agent Barb Mazzola, who works for Carlson Wagonlit Travel Pearl Travel Inc. in Middleburg Heights, OH. "That is why people go to Punta Cana and Cancún."

With a total travel time of nearly 12 hours and two connections in some cases, travelers tend to balk, especially people with families.

"Nobody wants to fly, unless it's non-stop," says Becky Veith, a Conde Nast Traveler-recognized Caribbean travel specialist in Edinboro, PA (15 miles south of Erie). "I don't have many people that request St. Kitts; I generally suggest it to people. But, as soon as I tell [clients about the layovers], they say, 'forget it.' They want to get somewhere, and get there fast."

Getting anywhere in the Caribbean has become more of a challenge since January 23, when the United States government implemented the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), which requires U.S. citizens to present a passport upon re-entry into the country. According to Melanie Lucardi, the director of marketing for Libgo Travel Inc., vacationers are now shifting their attention to destinations like the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico to bypass the need for a passport.

"With the passport issue, it becomes more of a difficult sell," says Lucardi. "If clients have kids who don't have pass-



Timothy Beach on St. Kitts

ports, it may affect their decision to go to St. Kitts. It definitely doesn't help."

Lucardi says that places like Paradise Island in the Bahamas have taken a proactive approach by offering free passports for those who book a trip to the former British colony. While she hasn't seen a similar offer from St. Kitts, Lucardi does frequently keep in contact with the St. Kitts Tourism Authority in order to disseminate news and other promotions to Libgo's retail travel chain Liberty Travel and GoGo, its wholesale division. "If the tourist board says they want to do an island-wide promotion, that information is communicated to our product support team and disseminated to agents," she says.

Despite its drawbacks, Lucardi says travel to St. Kitts is on the rise. "Over the last couple of years, we've seen double digit increases. I would say that a portion of that is related to the introduction of the Marriott, but I see growth coming from some of the other properties on the island as well."

The key to selling people on St. Kitts, agents say, is to understand the type of client that the island would appeal to, and what features would be most important to them.

"We get more requests from seasoned travelers who are looking for a true overall experience that allow them to travel outside of the hotel to experience different things," Lucardi says. What she calls a "niche destination on a smaller scale," St. Kitts offers many different kinds of experiences, whether it's the Timothy Beach Resort ("More of a value

hotel that is great for families who don't want to spend a lot of money," she says), an all-inclusive stay at the Marriott property or Ottley's Plantation, a small luxurious inn tucked away in a mountain hideaway with breathtaking views.

An Island Worth Discovering

Agents agree—once people decide on traveling to St. Kitts, they are pleasantly surprised. It's all a matter of educating them on this little-known destination.

"It's not going to be the most top-of-mind," says Lucardi. "But the reality is, there are going to be people who don't want to just go to Jamaica or the D.R. They've been there, done that."

For clients who do go, Lucardi recommends dining at Turtle Beach Bar and Grill, "one of those places you don't dress up for," she says. On the island's southeast peninsula, the waterfront bar and restaurant specializes in seafood and barbecue dishes, such as fresh grilled fish or lobster.

"That to me is a place to kick back and relax if you just want to chill and look at the view."

Upcoming Island Events

Upcoming events on the island may require booking the property well in advance. Kelley says there are rooms still available during the ICC Cricket World Cup in March. Another busy time is during the 11th Annual St. Kitts Musical Festival, June 21-24. This year, Grammy Award-winning artist Michael Bolton will be among the top acts performing. ■