



Kittitian Greg Pereira leads visitors into the wild on safaris that reveal stunning vistas such as Frigate Bay (right) and natural wonders including tropical hummingbirds (below).



"I'm knitted into the social fabric here," Pereira chimes in the singsong Caribbean rhythm that confirms he's local. "I'm a fifth-generation islander." He knows everyone. He carries their stories. We haven't even reached the first stop on his Off the Beaten Track sugar plantation tour, and I already feel like I'm beginning to glimpse the depth beneath the island's pretty exterior.

At Shadwell Great House, Pereira parks under a banyan tree taller than the building itself and strides across the front lawn as we scramble to keep up. Patches of paint peel back from the walls like birch bark, but the house appears a livable fortress against the elements. Settlers refined what Pereira calls a "hip-and-blouse" design: The stone foundation stabilizes the structure, while the wooden second story flexes to survive earthquakes and hurricanes. The information doesn't come out as recitation. Pereira sounds like he actually cares whether the dwelling, part of his island, survives calamity.

The nearby White House once belonged to absentee English sugar plantation owners, and then for a brief interlude Carmelite nuns repurposed it as an abbey. The place is empty now, but visitors swear they've heard footsteps across floorboards, doors creaking open and chords escaping the untuned piano. Pereira leads us through grounds studded with mahogany, bay and eucalyptus trees. The spiky leaves of a mango tree thrash as we pass — yet there's no wind. Ghosts? No, it's the new groundskeepers, a team of vervet monkeys snatching at the tree's fruit.

The monkeys flee as if spooked when we appear. Demonstrating how to approach them, Pereira walks forward noiselessly, head down to avoid eye contact. The monkeys don't retreat, and soon, curious, they swing closer to investigate. Pereira's rapport with the islanders obviously extends across species. Everyone seems at ease.

We paying primates return to the truck and drive up the mountain. Bayfords, a home 1,000 feet above the coast, offers unobstructed views of the town and sea below. In the shade of a flamboyant tree, Pereira lays out a spread of coconut fudge, tamarind balls, sour cherries and coconut cakes. He pours cups of guava juice and locally made Belmont Estate rum. As we

take in the view, I realize it's not every guide who can tell ghost stories, analyze monkey behavior and segue into plantation history without losing his audience. History is often served dry; Pereira dishes it up with a side of coconut fudge.

Hopped up on sugar, we make tracks into the rainforest. In the cool air under the canopy, fat vines coil around trees, waging a war in millimeters against their hosts — both hungry for the scarce sunlight above. Around each bend of the dirt two-track, Pereira shares a bit of botany.

"This tree is sought after for hearts of palm. You know that delicacy?" He gestures toward a mountain cabbage tree. "It grows only in the wet forest, never on the hot coast. When you get above 2,500 feet, that wild palm is the dominant tree."

He teaches us to identify the guava tree's football-shaped leaves, which can be chewed on or brewed into tea to soothe the travel-weary stomach. He displays the purple centers of the passion fruit tree's blossoms erupting with a fringe of white

tendrils. Then he gently passes his hand over a wispy plant like he's waving a wand. A member of the bean family, it recoils from his touch like a frightened animal. Pereira is presenting a manual on the rainforest — what's edible or medicinal, what's merely fascinating. He issues detailed local knowledge like he's casting a spell. As I listen to him, the beauty of the island grows more layered, more meaningful.

"This tree, the gommier, known simply as a gum tree, has highly flammable sap that smells like turpentine," he says. "The pre-colonial people of St. Kitts, the Carib Indians, harvested these logs to make canoes. They could burn and scrape with a conch shell to hollow the log. No steel tools needed." I feel like I could carve a canoe if I were shipwrecked here, in between eating guava and tickling plants.

Enlightened, we emerge from the rainforest and wind through a field of sugar cane. The stalks sway overhead in the breeze, and a sweet, minty scent surrounds us. At the top of the hill, there's a

lone windmill, built in 1711. "The windmill was treated like a ship of the land," Pereira says. "They usually had women's names — Mary's Hope, Nancy's Fancy." Every windmill had a captain tasked with ensuring the smooth sailing of sugar production. He greased the cogs with tallow and stretched the canvas panels of the windmill. The boatswain, second in command, fed cane stalks through the cast-iron rollers, careful to keep his fingers clear.

Inside the mill, Pereira explains the sugar-making process. Sales of the byproduct, molasses, covered the cost of running the estate. The sugar itself netted pure profit. The crop made many men wealthy, he says, and helped fund the industrial revolution.

As Pereira tells the story of how sugar shaped the history of St. Kitts and even the world, I realize I have edged to the front of the group, eager to hear every word. And now I understand why all the island kids flock to him. I want a high-five too. — BROOKE MORTON

# The Local Route

To appreciate **St. Kitts**, navigate its trails less traveled with the islander who knows them best.

**T**HE KIDS' FACES CRINKLE IN DELIGHT AS THEY RACE TOWARD US, shouting and waving their arms. Greg Pereira, guide at and owner of Greg's Safaris, on St. Kitts, slows the truck almost to a halt as the kids crowd around, bouncing with excitement. "Reggie, man, how's your brother?" Pereira booms. "I haven't seen him round." Reggie, a lean boy, just laughs.

Pereira, who looks like a dark-haired Steve Irwin, offers his hands to the group buzzing around him, and I start to wonder if he moonlights as an ice-cream man. But as he dispenses high-fives, I realize these kids just hunger for his attention. More kids jog alongside our open-air Land Rover as we rumble through town, and he greets them all by name. They continue waving till we're out of sight.

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