

Montserrat after the volcano

Abandoned by most, Montserrat holds a strong appeal in its eruption-scoured purity

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LITTLE BAY, Montserrat — This tiny Caribbean island made headlines twice in its history. Once in 1979, when former Beatles record producer George Martin built a famous recording studio here, and a second time when the island's dormant volcano erupted and consumed much of Montserrat.

Martin first fell in love with Montserrat in 1977 while visiting with his wife. Two years later he opened AIR studios. Over the next decade this little bump on the horizon saw the kind of superstars you would expect to see in neighboring St. Barts. Unfortunately the party came to a tragic end on July 18, 1995, when Montserrat's Soufriere Hills volcano, after remaining tranquil for more than 500 years, suddenly erupted, sending hot gas, ash and boiling mud over much of the 10-by-7-mile island.

When all was over, the capital of Plymouth, the airport, the harbor and Martin's studio were buried under about 5 feet of ash, 19 people on the island were dead, and most of the inhabitants left. Today, neither the British territory's population nor the economy has rebounded. Plymouth remains a ghost town, and a large portion of the island is off limits because of potential for future eruptions.

While this paints a rather grim picture, my visit to Montserrat was one of the most memorable of a two-week sailing tour of the Leeward Islands. Considering that I'm comparing this ill-fated rock to St. Martin, St. Barts and Antigua, that says a lot.

It's hard to point to exactly what it is about Montserrat that makes it so appealing. Perhaps it's the island's rich, verdant phoenix of lush vegetation rising out of the piles of gray ash, or the stark contrast between its peaceful virgin beauty and the brooding volcano that emits a 24-hour cloud of steam, smoke and sulfur. One thing is certain: There's magic and purity here that sets Montserrat apart from its touristy and often tacky neighbors.

Photographer Michaela Urban and I sailed into Montserrat from St. Kitts on a chartered sailboat. We were headed to Antigua when we stopped to visit Montserrat. We had received mixed reports about sailing to the island, because its southern shore is off limits when Soufriere Hills is active; apparently the volcano can rain ash and boiling hot rocks down on your boat. In spite of these reports, I couldn't pass up the chance to visit the island, especially because I've followed its history since the AIR studio opened.

We dropped anchor in Rendezvous Bay, a well-protected and tranquil cove on the northwest tip of the island, and took our dinghy around the corner to Little Bay to pass customs.

Near the port is a dive shop/bar called The Green Monkey. Enjoying a beer, we chatted with the co-owners, Troy Deppermann and wife Melody Schroer, who raved about Montserrat diving. On their recommendation, we spent our afternoon snorkeling along the coast near Rendezvous and found some incredibly bright and healthy coral and schools of dazzling neon fish.

The next day we hired a taxi for a tour of the island. We started with the Montserrat Cultural Center, built by Martin to bolster the spirits of the islanders after the disaster. On the day we visited, there wasn't much going on, but it was worth it just to see the collection of bronze handprints of artists who recorded with Martin.

Our next stop was a tour of the volcano and what it did to the island. Within 15 minutes of leaving the Cultural Center, we were driving up one of the main volcanic flows that buried a golf course. We drove past the former clubhouse, half covered in mud. Fortunately our cabby had a four-wheel-drive vehicle, because this turned into a serious off-road excursion. Getting stuck is easy.

The most telling part of the tour was at Garibaldi Hill, the one high vantage point from which you can get a clear view of the entire abandoned city of Plymouth, once home to 4,000 of the more than 12,000 people who lived on Montserrat before the eruption. Today only about 5,000 people remain on the island, the rest having fled to neighboring islands or the United Kingdom.

The only comparison to Plymouth I can think of is pictures of the horrific damage left by the nuclear bomb in Hiroshima at the end of World War II. Plymouth, once heavily populated with busy city streets, residential neighborhoods, bustling shops and a booming medical college, is now a ghostly white-gray moonscape of gray mud, dotted here and there with the skeletal concrete husks of burned buildings and collapsed church steeples poking through the hardened ash flows.

To get a more technical understanding of Soufriere Hills and what it did to Montserrat, visit the Montserrat Volcano Observatory (mvo.ms). Scientists from all over the world come here to study the volcano, and the experts there can tell you everything you want to know about geology and pyroclastic flows.

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And though the volcano is an important part of Montserrat's history, present and future, like most tropical islands, there are many outdoor activities to enjoy here, including jungle hiking, bird watching, kayaking, fishing, turtle watching, boat touring and, of course, beach-going. And while you can find these activities on most Caribbean islands, the advantage here is you'll likely have them all to yourself. You can connect with these activities either through The Green Monkey or by visiting the island's website at visitmontserrat.com. Or you probably could just ask anyone. We found our taxi driver by talking to our customs agent.

For those who travel a lot, island destinations often blend together, making it hard to remember the exact location of a specific beach or jungle hike. Not so with Montserrat; this island will hold a specific place in your memories. And just so you don't forget, you get the coolest green clover stamp in your passport.

If you go

Getting there: Fly Montserrat (flymontserrat.com) flies daily from Antigua; \$193 round trip.

A ferry from the island of Nevis (next to St. Kitts) runs infrequently; \$111 round trip (300 Eastern Caribbean dollars).

I chartered a 44-foot Jeanneau sailboat from Sunsail (sunsail.com) in St. Martin. Sunsail has a huge base in

St. Martin and a smaller but more elegant one in Antigua. Rates run into the thousands per week, but it's the best way to experience the islands. For details: visitmontserrat.com.

Getting around: For taxis, call Cecil Wade at 664-491 5214 or Daniel Morton at 664-491-7819.

Diving: The Green Monkey Inn and Dive Shop provides diving and snorkeling gear and also arranges kayaking, fishing and boat excursions. 664-491-2960, divemontserrat.com

Dining: Pont's Beach View (664-496-7787) for midlevel and Ziggy's Restaurant (664-491-8282, ziggysrestaurant.com) for high end.

Accommodations: Bunkum Beach Guest House (664-491-5348, bunkumbeachguesthouse.com) and Gingerbread Hill (664-491-5812, volcano-island.com) for budget stays and Olveston House 664-491-5210, olvestonhouse.com) for midrange.