

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

BRITISH WEST INDIES

EMERALD ISLE OF THE CARIBBEAN

St. Patrick's Day on Montserrat is party time under the volcano

By Patricia Harris
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MONTSERRAT, B.W.I. — True to the island's laid-back spirit, Montserrat's St. Patrick's Day parade did not kick off until about three in the afternoon. That's when the police band's rhythm section picked up their drumsticks and cymbals and set up a marching pace. Scores of marchers in vibrant costumes fell in behind. I listened for the familiar piercing skirl, but there wasn't a bagpiper to be found.

I wasn't in Boston anymore. For a change of pace, I was celebrating St. Patrick's Day in Caribbean style.

Everyone seems to claim to some Irish blood on St. Patrick's Day. On Montserrat, that boast is more than wishful thinking. The 5,000 or so citizens of this British West Indies island trace their roots to 17th century Irish indentured servants who came here for a fresh start after working off their passage on neighboring islands. Over the years, the Irish married the descendants of enslaved workers on Montserrat's sugar plantations and created a vibrant Afro-Irish population. They all seem to have inherited a soft lilt in their speech and a propensity for having a good time.

One of 14 British Overseas Territories, Montserrat is the only island nation (besides Ireland itself) where St. Patrick's Day is a national holiday. On this "Emerald Isle of the Caribbean," the week of festivities unfolds with a characteristically Caribbean joy.

I arrived with my friend Patti a few days before the March 17 finale so we could ease into an appropriately relaxed but festive state of mind. We walked on sandy beaches, checked out the orchids and medicinal plants at the Botanic Garden, and cruised around the island with soundtrack provided by a roots reggae band.

We also visited the Montserrat Volcano Observatory to get a good look at the Soufrière Hills volcano that woke from a 400-year dormancy in 1995. The observatory was established to monitor the volcano and sound warning sirens if activity again reaches alarming levels. The observatory's observation deck provides as clear a view of the volcano as anyone can get — the mountain is often shrouded in cloud. We lucked into a day when, as the locals say, the volcano had lifted her skirts.

It's a charmingly light-hearted image for a force of nature that destroyed the southern side of the island in a series of eruptions at the end of the 1990s. Mud and lava flows overwhelmed the old airport and the capital city of Plymouth, and scoured away the village of St. Patrick's — once party central for its namesake holiday.

More than half of island residents were forced to relocate and many settled in Boston, where a Montserratian community has flourished in Roxbury and Dorchester since the 1930s. Whenever possible, Montserratians head back to the island for the holiday. Many activities are now centered in the town of Salem. (The northern side is considered far enough from the volcano to be safe; observatory scientists rated last year's risk of eruption at 20 percent.) The St. Patrick's Day celebration seemed an expression of

"Montserrat Strong" — a show of determination and resilience in the shadow of a rumbling volcano. By March

16, everyone is dressed in green. Plenty of t-shirts are emblazoned "Kiss Me I'm Irish" and the like. But islanders have upped the sartorial ante by sewing their signature green, orange, and white Madras plaid into everything

from vests and shirts to dresses and skirts.

Things get going early on March 17 at the Heritage Village in Salem. "Jump Up" begins around 5 a.m., as people get up early in a celebration of the emancipation of the slaves. (March 17 also marks an unsuccessful 1768 slave revolt.) Picking up where they left off the night before, people dance in the streets behind a moving truck playing soca and calypso. The infectious rhythms have barely faded when island women begin preparing a traditional Caribbean breakfast of salt cod, greens, breadfruit, pumpkin fritters, and local baked and fried specialties at Heritage Village. The Traditional Breakfast, as it's called, serves as a restorative for those who have been up dancing most of the night as well as those who have been celebrating Jump Up.

As we waited for the afternoon parade, Patti and I poked around in a few shops, checked out crafts vendors, and watched still more music and dance performances. And we ate. The mouth-watering aroma of jerk chicken cooking on outdoor grills wafted over the fairgrounds, but I wanted to try the island's signature dish: a spicy Caribbean take on Irish stew called "goat water."

It is a specialty of many island women, including Virginia Allen, who managed to keep her beauti-

ful outfit sparkling clean while tending an immense cauldron of goat water. The name suggested a thin broth, but Allen ladled a hearty stew into a styrofoam bowl before handing me a piece of bread to sop up every last drop of the clove-scented broth.

The parade was well worth the wait. Another advantage, it seems, of a warm climate is that costumes can be much more creative when marchers don't need to keep warm. One group of women sported hula skirts and coconut bras. Another group dressed in exuberant floral prints trimmed with lace, stylized face masks, and head-dresses — and red Converse All-Star sneakers. Others memorialized the 1768 slave revolt, right down to carrying harmless wooden machetes. I only wished the parade had been a little longer. But when it ended, the music hardly stopped. Soca beats simply replaced the regimental march rhythms.

Even in this colorful crowd, Sandra O'Connor of Gardiner, N.Y., stood out. A green tartan shawl draped over her brief white shorts and tank top, and she sported a green garter above her left knee. She was sipping rum and orange juice from a huge mug emblazoned " 'Tis Lucky to be Irish." We agreed that the Montserratians throw a great holiday.

O'Connor ought to know. She and other members of the Traveling Sons & Daughters of Erin — a fun-loving group if I ever met one — have visited 30 different places for St. Patrick's Day. Along the way, they have distributed the ashes of a late group member, O'Connor's boyfriend Bob. She used to carry the ashes around in the Irish mug.

"It is down to earth, fun, and authentically friendly here," she said. "And the food is fantastic."

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PATRICIA HARRIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



HERE

ALL-MAPLE WEEKEND IN VERMONT

Indulge your sweet tooth at the Maple Open House Weekend, a two-day event celebrating sugaring season (March 25-26). Participating sugarhouses throughout Vermont invite visitors to experience how maple syrup is made as well as other activities, including tours of the woods and sugarhouses, maple candy making demos, pancake breakfasts — with pure maple syrup, of course! — and opportunities to taste traditional sugar-on-snow, maple donuts, maple cotton candy, maple creams and other maple goodies. An interactive map details participating locations with links to individual websites. New this

year: The inclusion of breweries, distilleries, and restaurants that highlight uses for maple in their products and on their menus, as well as partnering inns and B&Bs. vermontmaple.org/openhouse

LIGHTHOUSE PHOTO BOOKS

Lighthouse geeks — and you



know who you are — love to travel from one coastal beacon to another. Now educator and photographer Allan Wood has published two books of lighthouses in New England (one Southern and one Northern) that you can savor from the comfort of your couch, or use to plan a future trip. Each book contains more than 360 color photos and maps as well as practical directions, historical tidbits and folklore related to each lighthouse, and organizations involved in local preservation. Also includes information on nearby tours, attractions, and other sites of interest in the surrounding coastal communities. \$24.99 www.schiffer-books.com/lighthouses-and-coastal-attractions-of-southern-new-england-connecticut-

rhode-island-and-massachusetts-6150.html

THERE

QUEBEC MUSEUM'S FACE RECOGNITION CONTEST

Do you look more like Caesar or Venus? A Roman athlete or a Greek nymph? The Musée de la civilisation in Quebec City has a fun new project — My 2000-Year-Old Double — that aims to answer these questions. Working in partnership with two Swiss art institutions, the museum encourages everyone to submit a photo of their face. Using face recognition software, the museum then matches your mug with those of some 60 sculptures created 2000 years ago. The museum will then will create an exhibition of 30 selected contest participants, immortalized by Québec art photographer François Brunelle, and pair them with works from the Greco-Roman and Egyptian collections of the Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève and the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art. Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève. (Oct. 24, 2018-Oct. 27, 2019) Submit photos online through April 30. Free. mon-sosie.mcq.org/en/

SIP AND SLEEP AT THE DISTILLERY

London's first gin hotel has arrived with a splash on Portobello Road in the heart of Notting Hill. The Distillery offers four floors of all-things-gin including a restaurant, museum, and three luxury, boutique guest rooms. In the Resting Room, enjoy a selection of international spirits aged in hand-built

barrels suspended above the bar; in GinTonica, a Spanish-inspired bar and kitchen, sample numerous varieties of G&Ts including some garnished with orange, lavender and cocoa nibs. The Distillery is also the new home of The Ginstitute, a below ground space where guests can enjoy a three-hour gin-making experience led by master distiller Jake Burger, learn the spirited history of London's favorite drink, and leave with their own personally blended gin (\$140). Accommodations from \$186. www.the-distillery.london

EVERYWHERE

STYLISH COMPRESSION LEGWEAR

Cramped airline seats and long flights can cause troublesome swelling in the legs, as well as blood clots and other health complications. Recent studies show that airline passengers who wear compression stockings during flights lasting longer than four hours can significantly reduce these risks. In the past, these types of socks came in two styles: ugly and ugly. Not anymore. Now you can look fashionable and take care of yourself with VIM & VIGR's new and stylish compression socks for men and women. Stripes, argyles, polka dots, camouflage, floral styles, and more are available in a variety of colors, and fabrics including cotton, nylon, wool, and mois-



ture-wick nylon. Women's compression tights and unisex sleeves are also available. From \$32.95. vimvigr.com

BACKPACK COOLER TOTE

Mountain Khaki's Compass Cooler Backpack Tote is a unique way to transport chilled beverages to your next beach party or camping trip. Holding up to 50 dry-stacked cans, the backpack features one-half inch (15mm) foam for insulation, tote handle, water-resistant zippered top with security pocket underneath, concealable backpack straps. Climbing rope grab handle on side, and an attached bottle opener lanyard. Seamless vinyl drop-in liner is easy-to-clean. Available in two colors. \$149.95. www.mountainkhaki.com/products/gear/bags/compass-backpack-cooler-tote-664/black

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