



ECO SPIRIT

NEVIS IS ON A MISSION – TO BECOME THE GREENEST PLACE ON THE PLANET. THIS MARINE SANCTUARY IS A HAVEN FOR TURTLES AND OFFERS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR LOVERS OF THE BIG BLUE TO SUPPORT THE ECO-CONSCIOUS EFFORTS, SAYS JULIA HORTON



GLIMPSE ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST ENDANGERED MARINE ANIMALS

Swimming south along a tropical coastline, dotted with luxury hotels nestled in lush green hillside behind miles of near-deserted white beaches, I encounter more pelicans than people.

At first there is little obvious sign of other wildlife in the clear, turquoise sea, until a young turtle darts out of a forest of bright seaweed below, apparently as startled as me.

The creature propels itself into deeper water and disappears, a tantalising glimpse of one of the world's most endangered marine animals. It is a sight that conservationists, politicians and the tourism industry on this Caribbean island all hope will not vanish forever.

Nevis is aiming to become 'the greenest place on the planet' under government plans to harness natural geothermal power from the volcanic isle through an ambitious renewable energy project, due to go live in 2018.

The joint administration of Nevis and neighbouring St Kitts, which together form a two-island nation, has pledged to protect one-fifth of marine areas by 2020 under a wider Caribbean conservation initiative.

Unlike St Kitts, Nevis has banned large cruise ships, while planning laws restrict buildings to no more than 1,000ft above sea level – so nothing man-made towers over the coconut palms. Visitors can still hire jet skis but there are growing numbers of more eco-friendly activities.

The latest are new aquatic tours that UK firm SwimTrek is launching this month (April 2015), featuring guided swims averaging 6km per day exploring coastlines like the one where I spot my first turtle here. They also include a dip in hot springs heated by the same volcanic energy that is due to fuel the island, and the annual 2.5 mile cross-channel mass swim to St Kitts.

However, serious concerns remain over growing threats to marine habitat. A report published in 2014 by global environmental charity, The Nature Conservancy, found that St Kitts and Nevis was the "most exposed nation to coastal hazards" in the world. The unwelcome ranking was based on combining data from global aid agency partnership, the Alliance Development Works, with additional environmental factors such as loss of coral reefs, mangroves and fish stocks – all of which have significantly damaged ecosystems across the Caribbean.

Walking along Lovers Beach on Nevis, island geography teacher turned conservationist Lemuel Pemberton welcomes the 2020 commitment as 'a good start. But he warns: "This is one of the best nesting beaches for turtles here and coastal erosion is a real problem."

Crouching beneath a tree along the shore he digs into the sand with his hands, extracting several soft, white pieces of egg shell from an old nest left when last season's turtles hatched.

"These were all successful," he says, before picking up the near-perfectly preserved remains of one tiny hatchling that clearly wasn't. Hungry mongooses are another threat to turtles that he



thinks little can be done about. But action could and should be taken to protect turtles from people's appetites, he says.

Some locals believe turtle meat, blood and eggs are aphrodisiacs, although poaching is "less of a problem than it was". But despite greater protection globally, fishermen can legally hunt all turtles here - Hawksbills, Leatherbacks and Greens - from October to February. There are restrictions on location and turtle size but no quota, "so they can catch as many as they want".

Calling for an outright ban on hunting, Lemuel adds: "No restaurant would dare to sell that sort of stuff now [to tourists] but the meat is sold to islanders in barshops [local eateries]." The Nevisian Government, however, believes that the current arrangement provides a working compromise supporting fishermen and protecting turtles.

Since Lemuel founded the Nevis Turtle Group in 2003, populations have grown. The number of nesting adults tagged rose by more than five times by 2013, from a dozen to about 65. But he credits that success to the group's educational work and monitoring reducing poaching.

Since 2006 local volunteers have been joined on beach patrols by tourists as paying guests to help fund the group's annual running costs of about \$20,000. Support from Nevis hotels and conservation charities also helps.

Peak nesting and hatching time is from August to October. Arguably the best place to see the creatures is in the ocean. The toughest way to do that is by entering the channel crossing, held around April.

Organiser and owner of Bike Nevis, Winston Crooke, says: "Lots of people see turtles during the swim."

Winston offers numerous 'naturally powered' green activities on and offshore from Oualie Beach, including windsurfing, kayaking and snorkelling with fellow island Guide Nedd Lestrade. Paddling along Paradise Beach, Nedd says that overseas tourists also need to be educated to stop them taking coral 'souvenirs' from badly needed reefs.

To really submerge yourself in the ocean and conservation you should dive. Scuba Safaris at Oualie Beach runs an 'eco reef course' training divers to survey corals to help monitor damage worldwide. I

join a standard dive where instructors often spear lionfish, an invasive species that 'eats everything'. Their 'catch' helps reduce numbers and is sometimes served at Oualie Beach Resort.

The hotel also works to protect natural grasses and to combat erosion, while the Nisbet Plantation hotel built an artificial reef to tackle the issue. Back underwater, we see several turtles, including one that stays put, allowing us to marvel for minutes not seconds at a vision that no-one wants to fade from view.

Julia visited Nevis courtesy of the Nevis Tourism Authority (nevisland.com). With thanks also to: Bike Nevis (bike-nevis.com), the Nisbet Plantation (nisbetplantation.com) and The Hermitage (hermitagenewis.com). Follow Julia's travels on Twitter @HortonJulia.

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