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Saint Patrick



...Then the Saint raised his eyes and behold, he saw at first a small light arising from Ulydia, the which at long time contended with the darkness, and at length dispersed it, and illuminated with its rays the whole island... Nor ceased the light to increase and prevail, even until it had restored to its former fiery state all Hibernia.. Then was the heart of the Saint filled with joy.
JOCELIN'S "ACTS OF SAINT PATRICK."

ST. PATRICK'S DAY 2009

By Ray O'Hanlon
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If St. Patrick had relied on a plant from Montserrat to explain the trinity it would have been a three fronded palm.

Montserrat was a little out of reach for a Roman Briton in the fifth century, but that hasn't stopped the present day inhabitants of the "Emerald Isle of Caribbean" from celebrating St. Patrick's Day over a good deal more than just a 24-hour span.

Montserrat - the only other place on earth other than the Republic of Ireland where St. Patrick's Day is an official holiday - likes to stretch out its celebrations.

As a result, St. Patrick's Day on the island is reason enough for a full week of festivities.

This year's celebrations get underway March 14 in the specially constructed festival village.

As is the case the world over where March 17 is a standout, Montserrat marks St. Patrick's Day with a varied menu of events that run from the religious and spiritual to the very worldly.

A kite festival, a "Freedom Run/Walk," an Irish cabaret show, musical concerts, a tour of local establishments that provide Guinness and Rum in potentially equal measure and traditional costume dances are but some of the events lined up for Montserratians and their guests during the week running from the 14th to the 21st.

Those guests, visitors to the island, will have their passports stamped with a shamrock when they arrive, leaving them in little doubt that they have set foot on another piece of old sod, this one rather warmer and drier than the original, located, give or take, 5,000 miles to the northeast.

So why all this Irishness and devotion to the Irish national saint?

Montserrat, according to the island's official website, is known as the Emerald Isle of the Caribbean not just because of its lush, green, tropical landscape, but also because of its unique Irish connections, which date back centuries.

Named after a Spanish monastery by Christopher Columbus as he sailed past the island in 1493, Montserrat was originally inhabited by Arawak and Carib Indians.

According to the website, the first European settlers to arrive in 1632 were English and Irish Catholics brought over from the nearby island of St. Kitts by Englishman Thomas Warner.

"Whilst Catholics were unwelcome in other British colonies, the religion was tolerated on Montserrat and the island became a refuge for persecuted Irish Catholics. In addition, Cromwell sent some of his Irish political prisoners to Montserrat following his victory at Drogheda in 1649.

"By 1678, a census showed

Emerald Isle II

St. Patrick's Day a holiday on Caribbean jewel



Dancers in masquerade gather in the specially constructed St. Patrick's Day festival village.

that more than half the people on the island were Irish, with the remainder a combination of English, Scots and Africans. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Irish had the strongest influence on the developing culture of Montserrat, which is still apparent today."

Culture apart, there are a number of clues on the island to an Irish past, not least in local place names, surnames and figures of speech. Montserrat has its very own "brogue" and place names like Roche's Mountain, Sweeney's Well, Farrell's Mountain and the village of Fogarty.

The capital, Plymouth, speaks more of the island's English heritage, but it is flanked by the villages of Kinsale, St. Patrick's, Broderick's, Galway's and O'Garro's, a name derived from O'Gara.

It also had an active volcano which makes a visit to the villages of St. Patrick's or Cork Hill or Plymouth itself a rather more difficult proposition than it would have been prior to July, 1995, when the Soufriere Hills Volcano reawakened after what scientists reckon was a snooze lasting roughly 400 years.

The volcano has managed to upend the island's economy though lately the island authorities have been making a virtue of a mountain that is a spectacular sight, and safe to view as long as you keep a required distance between you and its smoking peak.

More than half of Montserrat's 39 square miles is off limits to residents and tourists alike. The population, once about 12,000 souls, now numbers fewer than 5,000 although that number will be swelled by visitors in this special week.

The island of Montserrat is a dot in a big sea. A little over 12

miles long by about 7 miles at its widest point, it rises from the ocean as one of Leeward Islands, which are in turn the northerly spur of the Lesser Antilles chain.

Looking at the island on an approach from either east or west, Montserrat has three distinct ranges of hills. The highest mountain is at the island's southern tip, in the Soufriere Hills. It is called Chances Peak and reaches from sea level to about 3,000 feet.

The top summit, just a little to the north of Chances Peak, varies in height. It seems to have a permanent cloud hanging over it. Upon closer inspection, this companion reveals itself as the Soufriere Hills volcano.

Montserrat's recent run-ins with nature began in 1989 when the island took a direct hit from Hurricane Hugo. The island was just about back on its feet by 1995 when the sleeping giant of Soufriere Hills woke up. The date after which all was to change so utterly on the island was July 18 of that year.

A couple of years after the first eruption, in 1997, the island was naturally partitioned. Plymouth, considered a jewel among Caribbean island capitals, and its surrounding villages succumbed to the relentless flows and showers of lava, pumice stone, mud and hot ash "surge clouds."

The worst of the bad days fell on June 15 of that year. Nineteen people were killed by a wave of explosions and pyroclastic flows.

The lights went out in the shadow of the biggest fireworks display in the western hemisphere and the map of the island was redrawn to accommodate a zone of exclusion that covers the southern end of the island, and reaches into its wide midriff.

The exclusion zone is an area where people are not currently

permitted to live or work, but it's not completely closed. Islanders and visitors can venture into parts of it during daylight hours and it is possible to get quite up front and personal with the volcano, though not too close.

The volcano is monitored around the clock by the Montserrat Volcano Observatory which publishes weekly reports on the volcano's activity, or relative lack thereof.

Here's a recent update: "Weekly Report for the period 27 February - 6 March 2009.

Activity at the Soufriere Hills Volcano remained at a low level. There was one pyroclastic flow in the Tar River Valley on the morning of Friday 6 March at about 10:30 a.m. The flow reached the sea.

Helicopter observations on 5

March showed no major changes in the dome or in fumarolic activity. There was still a very large block of dome material sitting on the talus above the Tar River Valley, although part of it had broken off. The entire block was removed during the pyroclastic flow on 6 March.

Seismic activity was low, with five rockfalls and fifteen volcano-tectonic earthquakes during the week. Sulphur dioxide flux remained steady at an average of 591 tons per day with a minimum of 467 and a maximum of 667.

An increase in volcanic activity could occur at any time and with no warning. Lahars are always a potential hazard in river valleys around the volcano during and after periods of heavy rain. The Hazard Level is 3."

What that report is saying is essentially that things are relatively quiet right now, but take nothing for granted.

The volcano did unleash what the MVO called an "eruptive episode" in early January but activity has been subsiding since then. That threat level of three was recently at four, but was reduced at the end of February.

Anything over four would be an actual eruption as opposed to just the emission of a sulphur dioxide plume.

Islanders are hoping and praying - presumably to St. Patrick this week - that the volcano behaves itself to the point of meeting a mandatory list of scientific criteria over the span of a year before people are allowed return to live in the exclusion zone.

But from that part of the island that is open, the policy is anything but exclusion.

Montserrat has its own version of a hundred thousand welcomes, and the welcome mat is writ with them all in this week of weeks. For more details on the island and its St. Patrick's Day celebrations go to www.visit-montserrat.com.



I'll have one of those! Celebrating St. Patrick's Day on Montserrat.