

Travel

Montserrat



■ Montserrat's volcano rises above the lush tropical landscape

Irish gem in Caribbean

by Kate Popham

DUBLIN – obviously. New York, Chicago or London – also understandable. But the Caribbean? It seemed an odd choice of destination for a St Patrick's Day knees-up.

Beyond the Irish bars of cities across the world though, the tiny island of Montserrat lays greater claim than most to Ireland's national day; and it was for that reason I found myself winging my way to the Caribbean to join in the craic.

Known as 'The Emerald Isle of the Caribbean', Montserrat is the only country outside Ireland where St Patrick's Day is a public holiday. Not to be outdone by its famous namesake, it celebrates the occasion with a week-long festival each year.

Montserrat is set apart from its Caribbean neighbours by its Irish heritage which dates back to the seventeenth century.

At that time, the island was known as a safe-haven for Irish Catholics who were not welcome on other islands. Although officially under English rule, by 1678 a census showed that over half of those living in Montserrat were Irish.

It seemed St Patrick's Day in Montserrat was not as big a secret as I had thought and over the following few days I found myself surrounded by fellow Brits, Irish, Americans and Canadians – as well as visitors from other Caribbean islands.



As would be expected from any Caribbean carnival, St Patrick's Week in Montserrat was a colourful time punctuated by music, dancing and cultural displays. The Guinness may have been bottled, but the Irish spirit was strong.

Throughout the week, locals wore national dress with pride – and green was of course the dominant colour. At street parties and performances, we were treated to traditional Irish songs like 'The Old Rover' and 'Danny Boy', sung with a calypso rhythm and accompanied by school children on steel pan drums.

As I found out, though, St Patrick's Week in Montserrat is not just a celebration of the island's Irish roots.

The African heritage of the majority of the population is also commemorated by remembering an important slave uprising that took place on St Patrick's Day in 1768.

March 17th itself began with

an early morning 'Freedom Run' and although I didn't take part, I cheered on the runners and joined in the community breakfast that followed.

Events then shifted to a 'Slave Village' where stalls sold goat water (the stew-like national dish), Guinness, 'green Heineken' and traditional Caribbean rum punch.

St Patrick's Week aside, Montserrat struck me as unusual for the Caribbean simply because it is not a typical 'sun, sea and sand' destination.

The island oozes laid-back charm, but I found myself itching to explore its diverse attractions.

I hiked the wooded walking trails and found myself surprisingly excited at spotting not only the rare Montserrat oriole, but also a handful of coral-coloured hermit crabs making themselves at home amongst the tree roots.

I scuba dived with turtles and tropical fish before stepping ashore at the island's one and only white sand beach where ours were the only footprints in the sand.

But for me, the highlight was viewing the island's active volcano, which dominates the southern skyline with its gently puffing peak.

The south of Montserrat has been uninhabitable since 1997 when a series of eruptions buried the capital, Plymouth, but the protruding roof tops of this 'modern day Pompeii' can still be viewed from certain hilltops or on an island boat trip.

I found it fascinating touring the Montserrat Volcano Observatory to watch the scientists at work; viewing the volcano's red, glowing dome at night; and peeking into evacuated houses where dust-filled possessions still lined the shelves.

For an island that has been dealt its fair share of bad fortune, I found it admirable that Montserrat has successfully turned what was once its biggest threat into a burgeoning volcano tourism industry – perhaps that's what they call the luck of the Irish.

■ Montserrat's St Patrick's Week 2009 festival runs from March 14-21, 2009. For further details, including events listings and information on travelling to Montserrat, see www.visitmontserrat.com

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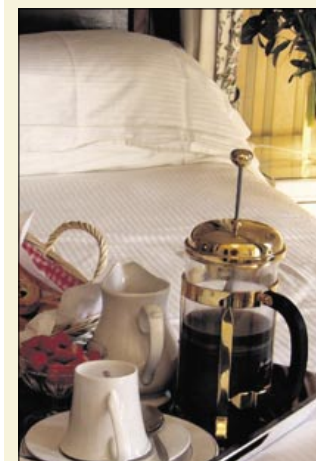
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