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St. Kitts Scenic Railway

Ride the last surviving sugarcane-hauling line in the Eastern Caribbean for the scenery, winter warmth, and rum punch

by Richard Luckin



St. Kitts Scenic Railway's tourist train rides atop a trestle near the Caribbean Coast (above). Cars include open and closed decks (right). All, Richard Luckin

While on a Caribbean cruise a few winters ago, my wife and I discovered a remarkable tourist railroad that operates on 18 miles of former sugarcane railroad. The St. Kitts Scenic Railway operates a 30-inch-gauge rail line on a tropical island located where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Caribbean Sea. This warm-all-year island offers a great winter escape, and the railroad boasts a fantastic ride with stunning views of the countryside and the blue Caribbean waters.

Investors built the rail line between 1912 and 1926 in conjunction with a sugar processing plant in the city of Basseterre. Sugar production on the island dates to 1643 during an era when the island changed hands several times between British and French colonial rule. From the line's construction until 2005, it moved sugarcane from fields along the Caribbean coast to the plant.

Scenic tour trains began running in 2003, as the island grew in prominence as a destination for cruise ships. The line bills itself as the "Last Railway of the West Indies."

Operations take place with five bilevel coaches built at Hamilton Manufacturing Co. in Burlington, Wash. Three Romanian-built diesels, veterans of Poland's rail lines, do the pulling. A Colorado Railcar generator car pro-

vides head-end power.

The bilevel coaches have an open-deck top and an enclosed, air-conditioned lower level. After riding a tourist train in Costa Rica, I expected old, worn-out passenger cars in need of paint and lacking proper restrooms, but I was in for a pleasant surprise.

From the train, visitors see abandoned sugar plantations, small villages with children waving, and spectacular ocean views for the entire 2-hour-30-minute trip. From the top level, you can spot the volcanic crests of the island's Verchild's Mountain and Mount Liamuiga.

Frequent rainstorms and sometimes oppressive heat can make the top deck undesirable at times, so expect to spend some time in the climate-controlled comfort of the lower level.

During the ride, the courteous on-board crew offers complimentary refreshments, including, appropriately, rum punch. There are also free snacks.

When the trip is complete, an hour-long bus ride takes visitors back to the starting point at Basseterre. From the bus, it's a whole new set of views: The train follows the island's eastern shore, while the bus takes the west.

Most cruise lines that call at St. Kitts offer shore tours aboard the train.

If you'd like to ride, visit: www.stkittsscenicrailway.com. **I**

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