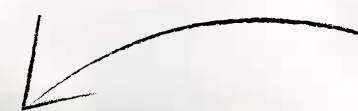
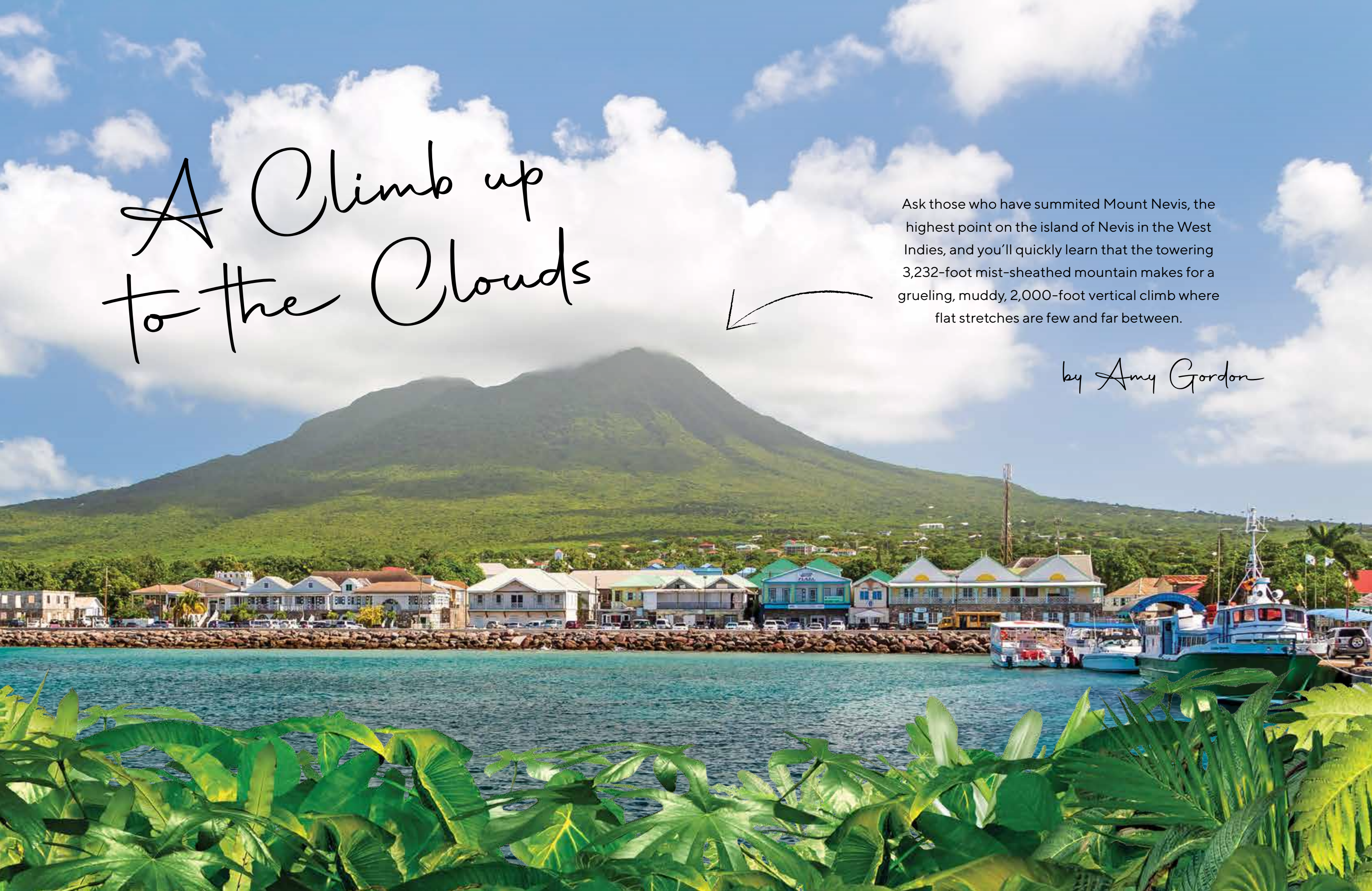



A Climb up to the Clouds



Ask those who have summited Mount Nevis, the highest point on the island of Nevis in the West Indies, and you'll quickly learn that the towering 3,232-foot mist-sheathed mountain makes for a grueling, muddy, 2,000-foot vertical climb where flat stretches are few and far between.

by Amy Gordon

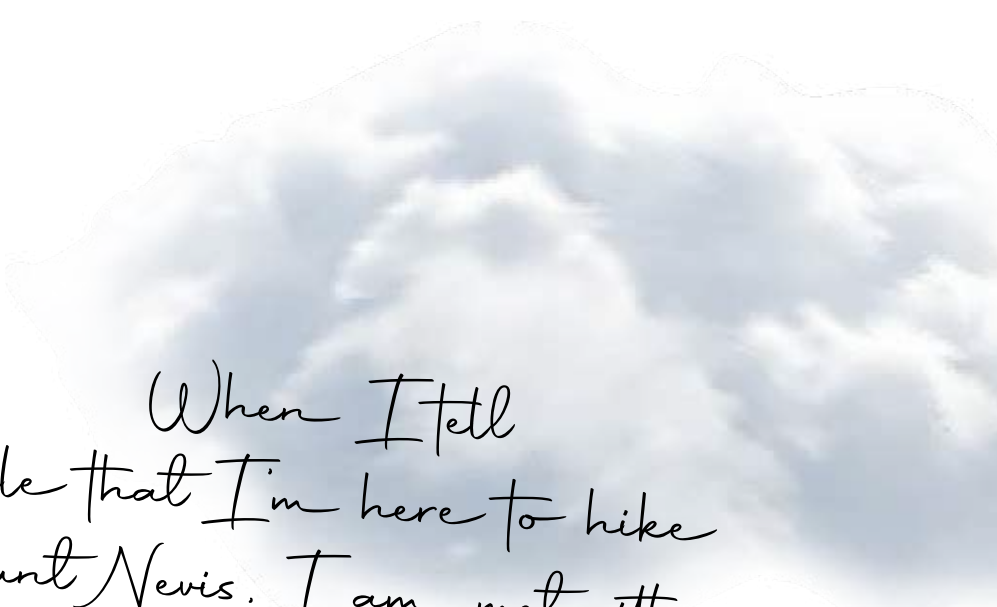




"It's about
the journey"

Reggie tells me after I ask him for at least the tenth time how much farther we have to climb. "Just take it one step at a time." Then he adds, "You'll know we're getting close when the trees start to get shorter."

We are nearly two hours into our ascent to the top of Mount Nevis, a 3,232-foot-high volcanic peak set in the middle of the island of Nevis. The air is humid and heavy, bearing the fresh scent of soil wet from the rainstorm the night before. Surrounded by a dense jungle of strikingly verdant trees, knotty vines, and wild orchids, we follow a vertical path that Reginald "Reggie" Douglas, my guide and the owner of Nevis Adventure Tours, has traversed countless times (he stopped keeping track at 1,000). Tall and lithe, he is a 42-year-old former triathlete with ebony skin, a graying beard, dreadlocks that fall to his chin, and a wide smile that reveals just how much he loves what he does. He is not even close to breaking a sweat, and his clothes are spotless. I am a 39-year-old writer who opts to get my exercise in hourlong yoga and TRX classes, not in half-day mountain climbs. My arms, legs, and sneakers are covered in mud, and the pained expression on my face is at once doubtful and determined. I do my best to follow Reggie's instructions to regulate my breathing with deep inhales and long exhales, and I hold off as long as I can before I ask him – again – if we can stop for a water break. He hands me my Hydroflask and points to an opening in the dense branches to our left. Through the leaves I catch a clear view of the sandy lowlands of the island, the pristine turquoise waters that surround



When I tell people that I'm here to hike Mount Nevis, I am met with mixed reactions. However, everyone seems to agree on two things: It's going to be muddy, and I am going to be sore.



it, and neighboring St. Kitts in the distance. I shake off the struggle for a moment and let myself appreciate the beautifully unpolished serenity of Nevis.

I had actually arrived to the island two days prior to this climb, after catching an hour-and-a-half flight with Cape Air from San Juan, Puerto Rico. Part of the Leeward Islands of the Lesser Antilles, Nevis's human history can be traced back to the Kainos, who occupied the island as early as 5000 BC. Indigenous peoples including the Kalinago, Siboney, Arawaks, and Caribs followed, and in 1493, Christopher Columbus arrived with 70 boats and 2,000 men thinking he had reached Japan. The cloud-shrouded tip of Mount Nevis reminded him of snow, so he declared the island "Nuestra Señora de las Nieves" (which translates to Our Lady of the Snows). For the next 200 years, Spain, England, France, Denmark, and the Netherlands battled for control of this tiny speck in the Caribbean Sea, one of the region's most important sugar producers. Though it is still affiliated with the United Kingdom, the two-island federation of St. Kitts and Nevis was declared independent in 1983.

Today's Nevis, with its laid-back vibe and relatively undeveloped landscape, offers travelers a coveted oasis to disconnect from the hectic pace of modern life and reconnect with the slowed-down simplicity of the natural world. The island's circumference measures roughly 36 miles, and you can drive the full loop in less than 90 minutes on one road without making a turn or encountering a traffic light. But the most prominent feature on the island? Mount Nevis – also sometimes referred to as Nevis Peak.

Mount Nevis sits at the center of the island, and no matter where you are, you can see and feel its imposing presence. Visitors come from all over the world to experience this unique and not-for-the-faint-of-heart hike up the peak, where the habitat changes from dry forest to humid forest to rainforest as you ascend into a cloud forest at the summit. In the days leading up to my climb, the towering behemoth both welcomes and taunts me, inviting me to test my limits and discover its secrets. When I tell people that I'm here to hike the summit, I am met with mixed reactions. Some wince and wish me luck, while others break into smiles, telling me how much I am going to love it. Everyone seems to agree on two things: It's going to be muddy, and I am going to be sore.

On the morning of our trek, I meet Reggie around 9 a.m. at Dunbar Mill, a former sugar mill that is now a private home. He wears a collared shirt, baggy shorts, socks pulled up halfway to his knees, and sneakers, not hiking boots. He looks as if he's out for a leisurely stroll, which makes me think that this outing might not be so rigorous after all. And it isn't...at first. While the trail itself

After a half-hour or so, we arrive at a nearly vertical wall of rocks and tangled tree roots, with nylon ropes that dangle over the facade from the tree branches above. "We're climbing that?" I ask in disbelief.

is unmarked – hence the need for a guide, like Reggie – the first half-mile is a tame section that wanders through what resembles a grassy countryside. But after a half-hour or so, we arrive at a nearly vertical wall of rocks and tangled tree roots, with nylon ropes that dangle over the facade from the tree branches above. I tilt my head up, and, as far as my eyes can see, there are only trees, rocks, and dirt – no sky. "We're climbing that?" I ask him, almost in disbelief. The journey is going to take every ounce of strength and courage I have, and I hope that it will be enough.

Reggie coaches me step by step, instructing me on which roots to grab and which ledges to stand on as we go. When nature's tools aren't available, I grab the ropes, and where there are no ropes, Reggie's outstretched hand helps pull me to the next stopping point. At times, the trail flattens into a hike, but it quickly returns to a steep, muddy climb. Other than a quick glimpse of one African green vervet monkey, a common species here, and the occasional chirp of tree frogs, there are no major signs of animal life – no birds singing, no insects to swat away, no lizards scurrying in the dirt. There are, however, plenty of huge banks of tree ferns and massive cabbage palms resembling something out of the Jurassic Period – vegetation you don't see in the lower altitudes. Still, the world is eerily still, with barely a breeze. In this place, at this moment in time, there is only the mountain, Reggie, and me.

During the less-intense stretches, Reggie explains how Nevis was once a hub for the Caribbean slave trade and that escaped slaves would hide on this mountain. They had no trail, no ropes,

no guarantee of what unseen obstacles they might encounter up here. When I feel like I can't go any farther, I think about the brave souls who risked their lives in search of freedom. I hoist myself up on rock after rock and apologize to Reggie for the sometimes seemingly endless string of obscenities coming from my mouth (I later learn that cursing is illegal in Nevis). "Dig deep!" he says, "You're capable of more than you think."

Reggie's advice becomes my mantra. "One step at a time. Deep inhales. Long exhales. One step at a time. Deep inhales. Long exhales." I repeat it over and over again, sometimes in my head, sometimes out loud, until I hear Reggie say, "We're here." It's a little bit before noon and we've covered an elevation gain of 2,000 vertical feet. As we emerge from the brush, the air suddenly feels different. Without tree cover, it's windy and at least 10 degrees cooler. I pull on my long-sleeved shirt and sit down on a rock in both relief and disbelief. We are high in the mist that gave the island its name, so it is hard to see anything except fog at first. But soon the clouds open up enough to reveal a bird's-eye view of the lowlands of Gingerland Parish – named for the abundant ginger crops once grown here – on the southeastern part of the island. Prior to my climb, I was told that on days when the peak is completely free of clouds, there are remarkable views not only of the island itself, but also out over the Atlantic Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, and the many surrounding islands of the Leeward chain.

A few feet from where I'm sitting, I hear Reggie quietly reciting a prayer as if he is engaged in an intimate conversation

with the mountain. We sit and talk, and he explains the tenets of his Rasta beliefs and how they inform his life philosophies. I share aspects of Judaism, my religion, with him, pointing out the tattoo on my wrist that reads "strength" in Hebrew. His face breaks into a pleased smile. "See, I knew you had it in you."

We snap a few photos of the landscape and pose for obligatory selfies, but mostly we just stand agape, appreciating the world around us. Every time the breeze picks up, I worry that it's going to knock me over the edge, and Reggie laughs and tells me not to worry. He identifies landmarks in our sight line to try to help me get my bearings, and he points out places he used to swim and ride his bike when he was a kid. We take it all in before turning around to head down the same steep path that led us here.

I'd love to say that the way down is easier than the way up. But, it's essentially retracing your steps, requiring you to lower yourself via those same tangled tree roots or nylon ropes. Sometimes, I try my best to navigate the rocks from a sitting position when I can. After about another two hours (a grand total of more than four hours since we embarked on our journey), with a quarter-mile left on the descent, my legs begin to give out on me. I am not used to engaging in such intense physical activity for this long. After falling down a few times, I tell Reggie I'm scared that I won't be able to finish, but his patience knows no bounds. He breaks off two large branches and gives them to me to use as walking sticks for support. He extends his hand to me and tells me to hold onto his shoulder when I need to. When we finally get to the bottom, I am depleted but proud. I hug Reggie. I did it.

The next morning, from the moment I wake up in my airy tropical room at the intimate Mount Nevis Hotel – a former lime plantation – my legs scream in anger. But as that saying goes: "The island has a way of giving us what we need." I hobble past the property's other two- and three-story pavilion-style buildings and three two-bedroom villas out to my rental car and drive the 25 minutes to the historic Nevis Hot Springs, a shaded, manmade pool on the side of the road fed by a natural hot spring. The mineral-rich waters here are said to have healing effects on everything from rheumatism to muscle tension, and it is one of the most popular destinations on the island for both tourists and locals. As I lower myself into the 108-degree pool, my muscles instantly begin to relax. I close my eyes and reflect on the day before. Reggie was right: Reaching the top feels incredible, but the true gift is the journey. I am grateful that Nevis is a part of mine. ■

"I'd love to say that the way down is easier than the way up. But, it's essentially retracing your steps, requiring you to lower yourself via those same tangled tree roots or nylon ropes."

Where to Stay

MOUNT NEVIS HOTEL

Set on 17 acres on a former lime plantation, this intimate Caribbean hotel sits in the northern shadow of Mount Nevis. In addition to 44 airy rooms, the property includes other amenities like the laid-back restaurant and bar, an outdoor pool with a sundeck and palm trees, and a free shuttle to Oualie Beach.

869-469-9373

mountnevishotel.com

Where to Book a Guide

NEVIS ADVENTURE TOURS

Owner and operator Reginald Douglas (best known on the island as just "Reggie") leads guests on a variety of hiking and bike tours across the island, including two different options up Mount Nevis – one that ascends and descends on the same trail, and one that travels up and over the mountain.

869-765-4158

nevisadventuretours.com



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