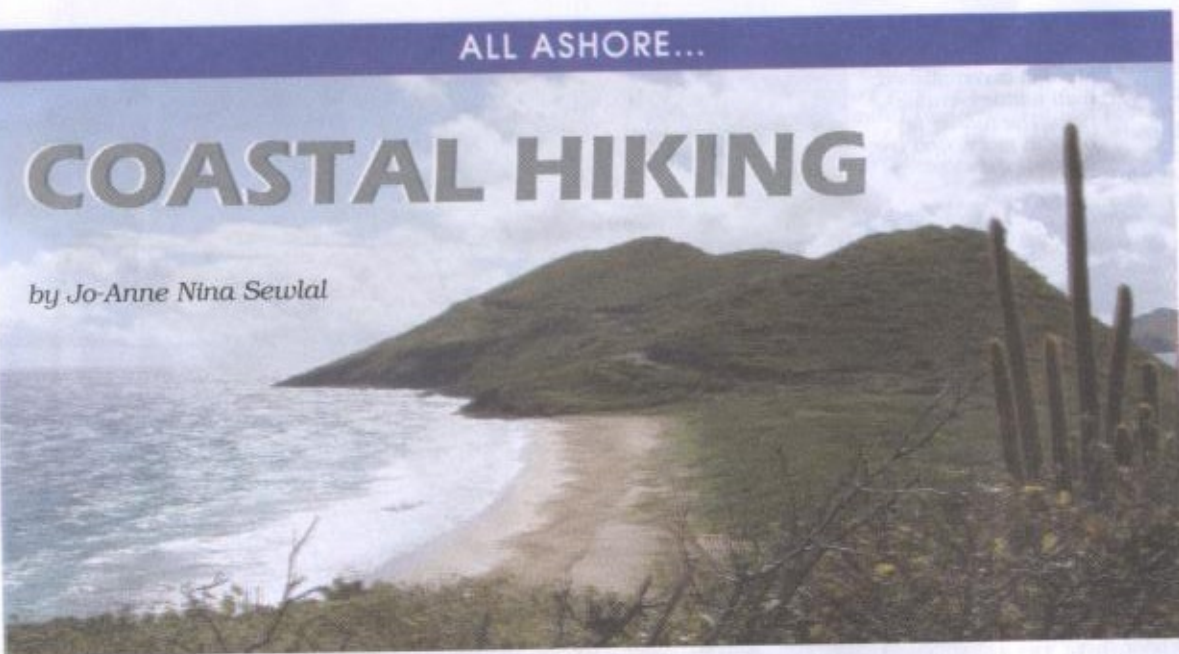


COASTAL HIKING

by Jo-Anne Nina Sewlal



At first glance you might be thinking, "Coastal hiking — what a concept!" But, whether you are sailing between the islands or just taking a boat around the coast to fish or down to one of the offshore islands to lime (Trinidad & Tobago slang for "hanging out"), it is a way of getting close to nature. So why hike if you took to the waters to get away from the land? This is why I came up with the concept of coastal hiking, as you do not have to venture very far inland since the coast provides many opportunities to hike, so you get to enjoy the best of both worlds.

Many islands have trails that take you along the coast, and some coastlines are so flat that you don't need a trail. One such island that I have visited is Nevis, where the area along Indian Walk takes you to the ruins of various sugar plantation stone structures such as windmill bases, a great house, a refinery and a lime kiln. And as you walk along the coast you see the ocean on one side and Nevis Peak in the distance. On this walk you are not alone as there are lots of feral sheep, goats and donkeys. Despite the fact that they are feral, they rarely pose a threat and will often run at the sight of you.

As you move inland you see distinct changes in the vegetation. Along the coast there is short, gnarly vegetation shaped by the wind action. These plants have tough succulent leaves that can withstand the sea spray. This gives way to grassland which is dotted with shrubs, and this leads to thicker vegetation. However, if you do venture inland from this route, as you get to the grassy area you come across a network of trails. But you must exercise caution as some of these were made by these feral animals and if you follow them you might get lost or end up in unusual places like under bushes, which is where these animals go to get shade from the hot sun.

However, this series of vegetation types is not typical of all islands. Bear in mind that the conditions and vegetation along the coast of one side of an island are not necessarily constant all the way round. Varying currents along different parts of the coast produce rocky beaches or beaches with lots of sand. Then, all sandy beaches do not have white sand; some, such as Pinney's Beach in Nevis, are black.

When it comes to vegetation, variation is also seen: coasts with gentle breezes have larger vegetation including seagrape and sea almond trees, while others with heavy winds tend to have short, twisted vegetation. An example of this is on Anguilla, where Windward Point is much drier, so as you move from the shore you meet a small strip of windswept vegetation and then patches of Turk's Cap cacti. Some of the islets lying off the larger islands in the Caribbean are so tiny that there is even less variety in vegetation. Anguilla again presents itself as an example; one of its offshore islands is Prickly Pear Island, so called because of the abundance of this cactus there.

Of course when you think of hiking, you think of barrelling your way through vegetation, but with coastal hiking the vegetation is sometimes so dense that you end up going around it rather than through.

Coastal hiking is not without its dangers. Most of the coastal areas in the islands have the manchineel tree. The sap from this tree is very caustic and is said to strip the paint off a car. When it rains, the water that drips from the leaves is a dilute solution of this caustic sap. So if you were to use it as shelter, your skin would get very irritated and probably blister. This diluted sap has been known to cause temporary blindness. This tree can be identified by its leaves, where a tiny dot (actually a gland) is present at the junction where the stem started from the base of the leaf. **DO NOT EAT THE SMALL, GREEN APPLE-LIKE FRUITS OF THIS TREE.**

There is not much gear involved in coastal hiking, beyond light cool clothes, sneakers or boots (cactus spines can easily penetrate flip-flops), a hat and sun-screen. But, as with hiking farther inland, it is a good practice to walk with a few first-aid supplies, such as bandages, insect repellent to prevent bites (mostly from mosquitoes and sandflies), and an antihistamine cream in the event you do get bitten or scratched. Also, we all think of hiking as a means of getting close to nature and away from society and technology. But you should walk with a cell phone or hand-held VHF, so you can contact help in case you get into difficulty. You may also want to carry a camera to capture the memories.

Islands have no shortage of coastline and in turn no shortage of coastal hiking opportunities. But no island is ever the same and every hiking experience is unique.

Above: St. Kitts' southeast peninsula. The allure of hiking along the Caribbean coastline speaks for itself

Below: Sun-, wind- and salt-tolerant vegetation, such as the Turk's Cap cacti in Anguilla, are tough and prickly, so wear stout shoes. Also drought-tolerant, they serve to remind hikers to carry plenty of drinking water!

