

# *Into the wild side of the Caribbean*

*Project: Montserrat*





“I don’t swim in the ocean after five, that’s when the big boys come out to play.” Captain J was pacing up and down the shore as we begged him to get into the water to watch the sunset with us. “While you’re waiting for that green light to flash which I’ve seen a thousand times”, he winked, “Let me tell you about one of the evening swims I had a while back. So my boys and I were spearfishing on this side of the island,” Captain J smirked and quickly added, “I think it was around here. Spearfishing is a lot of fun, and that’s why you can easily lose track of time when you dive ninety feet down equipped with nothing but your lungs and a spear gun. The five of us were fishing for hours until I noticed that the sun was already gone. Of course, no one listened when I said it was time to leave; the next thing we knew, one large shark was swimming in our direction. A few moments later, she was followed by three other sharks.” A spark of excitement lit up his eyes as he reminisced. Captain J continued with pride, “Basically, it was five of us and four of them circling around. Becoming someone’s exotic meal was not in my plans for the evening, I was looking forward to a few drinks at People’s Place that night. The decision was made: we were going to swim to the shore in a circle back to back, spear guns facing out at all times. I believe it was the last time I ever swam after sunset. However, enjoy your sunset swim guys! I’ll be waiting for all of you in my truck. Hopefully.” As he registered our fear, Captain J let out a loud chuckle and said, “Welcome to Montserrat, the most fun place in the entire Caribbean!”

Located thirty miles or a one and a ninety minute boat ride southwest of Antigua, Montserrat is one of the few unspoiled and wild Caribbean islands. An off the grid destination, Montserrat is for adventure seekers - except, no one really knows about it. It is an island that is awash with stories of volcanic eruptions, sugar plantations, slaves, voodoo magic - almost overwhelming for the eyes of a newcomer. Our photographic assignment for a documentary on Montserrat has given us five weeks to explore the island. What we are about to learn as soon as our feet touch the ground in Montserrat is that we are to become members of an official media team for a political underdog party whose ideas and plans have led to an uprising of the local folk. Endless hours at rallies, clashes with the current dictatorial power, hikes through the luscious jungle, encounters with wild animals, and haunting stories of Montserratians’ past and present will define our lives for the next five weeks. As much as we are intrigued to observe the revolution unfold on such a small island, local stories about the Soufriere Hills volcano and the deserted town of Plymouth get the best of us.

## Montserrat is one of the few unspoiled and wild Caribbean islands.

“It was the Indian curse. The volcano was sleeping over four hundred years until one day, some people disrupted the peace of the dead. When Indian bones were taken out of their graves, the volcano rumbled into life and shocked Montserratians with its force of destruction. The ash turned days into nights - long nights - when dozens of bright lightning bolts would shoot through the sky setting fear upon Montserrat.” Shaking her head, Sharon continues with a sad smile, “Plymouth was a town with great character. Today, it’s a modern Pompeii where people can see how powerful and violent the nature can be.” Sharon, an amazing self-taught opera singer and writer, has been asked to host us during our stay on the island. Without any doubt, Sharon must be one of the most knowledgeable people in Montserrat concerning local culture, history and traditions. In spite of multiple warnings given by scientists about the inevitable eruption of Soufriere Hills volcano, most Montserratians refused to leave their homes in Plymouth, a beautiful capital located right at the foot of the volcano. The idea of luscious, ever green hills suddenly spitting out lava seemed impossible but, unfortunately, the predictions were true. As we were listening to Sharon’s stories at a breakfast table, Captain J’s truck pulled up. Since it was Saturday, we were dismissed from work, and the captain, our appointed tour guide and driver, was excited to organize a trip to the exclusion zone where the old town of Plymouth was resting under heavy layers of ash and pyroclastic flow.

“I give you five minutes to get ready for our trip to town.” As he was making a conversation with Sharon about mango trees and avocados growing in her beautiful garden, we were loading our film equipment and ourselves in the back of the captain’s truck.

Going to the wild Southern coast of the island must be one the most adventurous things one can do in Montserrat. Marked as the exclusion zone after the volcanic eruption, the area has turned into an unbelievable jungle paradise where wild donkeys have formed colonies of hundreds now roaming around the deserted town streets where they can feed on wild plants and vegetation growing all around including living rooms, bathrooms, kitchens and bedrooms of the unfortunate and abandoned Montserratian homes.



From top: A local girl is seen in a crowd gathered at a political rally. A woman is celebrating the local elections

**The idea of luscious, ever green hills suddenly spitting out lava seemed impossible**

Captain J stops the truck by a five star Point View Hotel, a once famous social hub on the whole island. As the captain walks us through the grand hallways of the old hotel, we try our hardest not to step on any unfamiliar plants that seem to spring out of every inch of the floor. The interior of the Point View Hotel feels surreal when your eyes keep running into old phones, lamps and chairs scattered all over the green living floor, bath tubs filled with ash, and shabby old bed frames with plants sprouting from right underneath them. On our way out of Plymouth, Captain J surprises us with a quick stopover at a new beach formed by the pyroclastic flow from the volcanic eruption. The beach is a hypnotic black color caused by the mix of the volcanic ash and sand. As we are enjoying our “volcano” swim of the most perfect temperature, a strange and scary thing happens - we are hit in the face by something that unexpectedly leaps out of the water. While having a nervous laugh about the attack, we get hit again. This time, we finally saw the attacker - a flying fish. In fact, it was a small school of fish with quite long wings attempting to make a flight somewhere. To make things more wild, our eyes caught a large, black and scaly iguana who sauntered along the black sand.

## Bath tubs filled with ash, and shabby old bed frames with plants sprouting from right underneath them.

Having seen Plymouth, we can think of only one thing that can bring us back to our normal reality, and that is homemade bush rum, the notorious Montserratian spirit prepared by our new friend Adley, a local hunter and herbal expert at the botanical gardens. Excited for the evening’s feast, fun and frolics, our small group of friends gathers at Jack Boy Hill, a stunning place chosen by Adley himself overlooking the remains of the old airport that was destroyed by a tsunami of hot molten ash. Whilst helping Adley start a fire to grill an incredibly big fish which he caught earlier today, everyone gets to try an aromatic dark green spirit and listen to the huntsman’s tales of living in the wild. “To me, nothing compares to going to the bush with my eight dogs. Nine of us hunt and eat together for days every other month; as for night time, we all sleep in a cave until the sun comes out again.” As the bush rum is emptied, everyone is eager to talk about voodoo magic, a quite serious matter in Montserrat.



Inside Point View Hotel  
The exclusion zone, Plymouth

Given the island’s history of slavery and plantations, it is a common knowledge that voodoo magic was brought to Montserrat by slaves from Africa where it originated. It is respected and feared by many people on the island. As Sharon says, voodoo dance is considered to be so powerful that dancers are told to never listen to drums; you must only count steps in your mind. Apart from voodoo magic, Montserrat is believed to be haunted as well. According to Sharon, souls of the slaves who got tortured to death still walk among the living on the island, “When I see somebody on the road at night, I let them say hello to me first, then I know they are alive.” It took us one work trip to Providence, the most notorious colonial house in Montserrat, to open our minds to the mysterious world of spirits. As we walked around the ground floor and garden, we suddenly felt overwhelmed by an unpleasant and eery presence that we couldn’t see with our eyes or touch with our hands. Later, we would find out those were the areas where the slaves would get punished and tortured. It would take a book to tell all stories of people’s encounters with the local spirits in Providence and other significant places in Montserrat.



## The huntsman’s tales of living in the wild.



Adley watering plants at the botanical garden

Those who live in the urban jungle will view Montserrat as a place from a different time dimension. Here, life goes on at a snail’s pace which you’ll find quite amusing once you fully embrace it like the locals do. On our free days, we take great pleasure at spending hours floating in the ocean, mango picking, star gazing or playing with local goats who seem to have colonized the entire island. Apart from accommodating the lonely spirits from the colonial past, the island serves as a cradle for a young, new life like baby turtles who flood the shores of Montserrat between August and September of each year. To save and protect lives of the small and innocent creatures from hungry predators, a wild life ranger Joe is always on the watch to collect turtle eggs as soon as the mother leaves her nest. In addition to that, Joe is also responsible for releasing the newly borns in the ocean as soon as they hatch their eggs. In complete darkness and silence, we are waiting for Joe to show up at Woodlands beach with a bucket of forty nine baby turtles to be released in the open ocean.

**P**ropped on large rocks with Captain J by our side, we are gazing at the night sky that seems to have exploded with thousands of stars. With pure luck, we get to witness a sizzling head of a massive meteorite swoosh through the night sky with its long, smokey grey tail. As the captain gestures to cut out our screams of excitement, he points at a spot in the ocean that turns out to be an enormous, Darwinian leatherback turtle making her way to the shore to lay eggs. To be frank, that night filled with surprises at Woodlands has brought us closer with this small, wild island. Now, with Montserrat in our hearts, life seems to have become a bit more exciting, a bit more fun, and definitely a bit more full. As for the revolution and its outcome, let's just say that the island is currently in good hands of a humble and talented artist, Donaldson Romeo - the new premier of Montserrat - who helped hundreds of Montserradians who were in search of a shelter when the Soufriere Hills volcano erupted and took away their homes. In spite of the tragedy caused by the volcano, most locals stayed and others keep coming back to the beautiful island of Montserrat that has always been their home.

- OLGA BURYMSKA

## The island serves as a cradle for a young, new life



Local farmer holding up roses that he grows in his backyard