

A CARIBBEAN WITHOUT THE CROWDS

Bequia: Getting Away From the Getaways



Todd Heisler/The New York Times

A water taxi tied to a pier on the island of Mayreau in the Grenadines. [More Photos »](#)

By JEREMY W. PETERS

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I JUST wanted to make a dinner reservation. But the restaurant owner had other uses for me.

It was my first morning on the sleepy Caribbean island of [Bequia](#), and I had wandered into the Fig Tree, a harbor-side bistro known for its sunset views. A woman with waist-length dreadlocks introduced herself as Miss J and said she'd be delighted to grill some [lobster](#), or whatever fresh fish she was getting in later that day. Then her phone rang.

Wrist-deep in a bowlful of unpeeled bananas, she nodded at me. "You'll have to get that."

I did not pick up much through the heavy West Indian accent on the other end. I heard "coconuts" and maybe something about a truck. "Coconuts?" I repeated, which prompted a heavy sigh followed by a sucking noise, a sound I recognized as the universal [Caribbean](#) utterance for lost patience. I cupped my hand over the receiver and called toward Miss J, who was making steady progress through the pile of bananas.

"Something about the coconuts," I said.

"Oh!" she chirped, her mouth turning upward in a toothy grin of recognition. "Tell her I'll pick them up."

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Judy, a resident pet at Firefly, a luxury resort on Bequia. [More Photos »](#)

It was a uniquely Caribbean moment. There I was, standing under a canopy of palms looking out at the sparkling harbor. I could hear the buzz of a dinghy’s motor in the distance. A stiff tropical breeze was blowing.

And I had just brokered a coconut sale.

As much as the Caribbean is known for its don’t-worry ethos and “island time” rules, many of us only experience it Atlantis-style, isolated inside compounds where we can eat the way we do back home and commune with, if not our neighbors, then people who could just as well be our neighbors. Even for me, someone who spent two years living in the Caribbean as a reporter, my encounter with Miss J was a surprisingly novel experience. And so, as I would learn over the course of the next five days, was Bequia itself.

The largest of the Grenadines — that necklace of 32 islands west of [Barbados](#) that unfurls south from [St. Vincent](#) — Bequia (pronounced BECK-way) is only about seven square miles, around a third the size of Manhattan. It’s not so tiny that you find yourself eating at the same restaurant every night, but it’s manageable enough that you can get just about anywhere you need to go in less than 15 minutes by taxi.

It has a variety of locally owned small hotels and inns, some high-end boutiques and modest guest houses. But no major chains, no super-saver deals popping up on Expedia. The locals are friendly and approachable, swimming at the same [beaches](#) tourists do, drinking with them at the same bars at the end of the day. Dogs roam freely. Goats tend to be tethered to trees.

The only drawback (though also a plus, as it keeps out the riffraff) is that getting there requires a bit of effort, patience and expense. First you need to get to Barbados. From there it is about 45 minutes by small prop plane; you may end up stopping at a couple of neighboring Grenadines to drop off and pick up passengers on the way. I left New York at 8 a.m. and didn’t slide the key into my hotel room door until 5:30 that evening.

ABOUT 5,000 people live on Bequia full time, and Port Elizabeth is their hub of activity, home to the bank, government offices and the main market square. Ferries deposit and pick up passengers shuttling between St. Vincent and the other islands of the Grenadines. Women amble down the main street, balancing large baskets of laundry on their heads with seemingly little effort. Local vendors sit at card tables in the shade, selling handmade baskets and jewelry.

I decided to spend my first three nights at [Bequia Beachfront Villas](#), about 15 minutes away on the other side of the island in the old whaling village on Friendship Bay, primarily because hotels there have beach access, which many in and around Port Elizabeth don’t. There’s no central square or commercial center near Friendship Bay, just a crescent-shaped beach where the water is calm and shallow enough that you can swim out a good distance from the shore and survey the surrounding hillsides.

On the easternmost end of the bay, a grassy peninsula juts out into the cyan-colored water and then curls back in toward the shore like a comma. If you scan the hills all the way to the westernmost end, you’ll see a small concrete bunker used as a whale lookout. But it’s not as innocent as it sounds. Locals use it to spot breaching humpbacks during whaling season. (The tradition runs deep on Bequia, where many locals take pride in the annual harpooning expeditions that are permitted in their waters under international regulations.)

My villa, a clean and simple one-bedroom, was a decent bargain at around \$200 a night. Given what I’d paid for and experienced on other Caribbean islands, a large wrap-around deck just steps from the water was a nice surprise. Every morning I would sip coffee

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(instant because the local supermarket was out of regular), listen to the [surf](#) and watch the sun come up over the bay. Sometimes I'd take a leisurely stroll up the beach and chat up one of the fishermen; many will take you for a sightseeing ride in their boats for a modest and negotiable fee.

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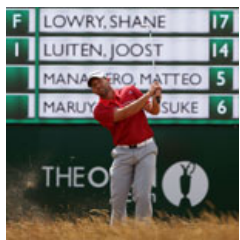
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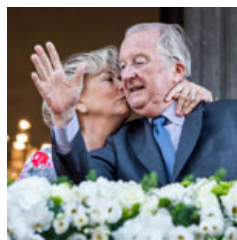


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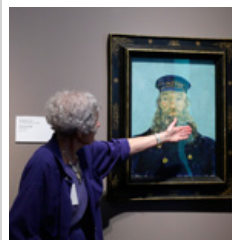


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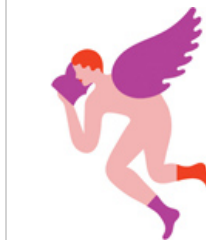
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