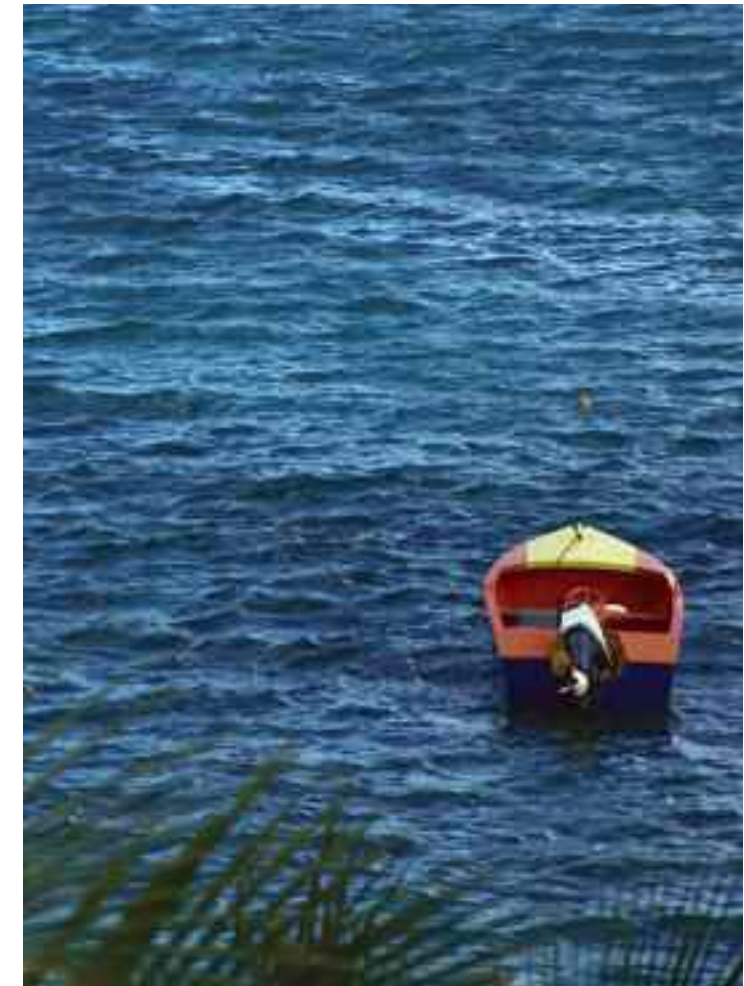




# island of clouds

There are clichés to island living, and then, as photojournalist Rachelle Gray discovers, there is Bequia  
Story and photography by Rachelle Gray



*Opposite top: View of Hope Bay from Mount Pleasant  
Bottom left: Beach at Blue Tropic Hotel – Friendship Bay  
Bottom Right: Fishing boats at Le Pagent fishing village  
This page above: Fishing boat at La Pompe*





Startlingly beautiful, Bequia heralds the storybook entry into the Grenadines island-chain that is defined by crystal waters, idyllic scenery, and ample Caribbean sunshine. Here, the Trade winds sweep away worry, sunsets induce calm, and the pulse of azure water lapping at the shores evokes delight. It's worth the journey to fly into mainland St.Vincent and ferry over to Bequia. From St.Vincent, the ferry ride is a detoxifying, hour-long sail along the nine-mile stretch that separates the two largest islands in the island nation of St.Vincent and the Grenadines.

Rounding the verdant unspoiled Bequian cliffs, the picturesque capital of Port Elizabeth unveils itself, perched on the central shoreline of Admiralty Bay. Whether you arrive by ferry, schooner, yacht, or water taxi the sight is a breathtaking tapestry of mountains, dotted with festive coloured houses and blonde stretches of beach.

Bequia has the charm of a simple island girl. She is warm and inviting with a new-world innocence that puts visitors at ease. A visit to Bequia is not an action packed affair; it is an opportunity to practice the art of relaxation. Everything seems scaled to fit: the beaches and the mountains beyond all work comfortably together with the 5000 or so residents who occupy this cozy seven-square-mile island.

Coming to shore is an informal affair. Port Elizabeth - quaint yet adequate - is inviting to the day-tripper, the long-stay vacationer or those like me who need of a three-day getaway. Here, everything is a stroll away, and walking is the preferred mode of travel. However, I opt

for one of Gideon's open-back taxis to take me around.

After a quick check-in at the famous Gingerbread hotel, run by the wife of former Vincentian Prime Minister, Sir James Mitchell, it's off to Lower Bay for lunch at the much talked about De Reef restaurant. Lower Bay and Princess Margaret beach are considered the island's top beaches and are populated just enough to remind you that you are not alone though it could easily feel that way.

After lunch it's over to Friendship Bay in the east for some sightseeing. Bequia is a seafarers' island. In the late 1800's the island's post-slavery heritage was reshaped from plantation work to life at sea when North Americans introduced whaling to the island.

Today's international laws that protect whales still permits whaling on the island, because it is acknowledged as being of historical and cultural relevance to the Bequian way of life. Though the quota of four whales a year is rarely met, when it does happen a whale catch can easily bring the day's business to a halt as Bequians gather to take in the spectacle. Heading from Friendship Bay over to the fishing villages of La Pompe and Le Pagent, you can view the island where caught whales are brought.

My second day in Bequia takes me up to Mount Pleasant. I'm a sucker for the open-back taxi and appreciate the running commentary of my driver Bill. With each bend of the winding road leading up

*Opposite page top left: View of Port Elizabeth from Tanti Pearl's restaurant*

*Top right: St. Mary's Church*

*Bottom: View of Admiralty Bay from Fort Hamilton*

*This page above: Sailboats at Lower Bay during the Bequia Easter Regatta*





*Above: Work in progress – model whale boats hanging in the Sargeant Brothers Model Boats workshop*

*Opposite page top: The entrance to Sargeant Brothers Model Boats*

*Bottom: Yachts moored in Admiralty Bay*

*Right: Model boat builder Hamilton putting the finishing touches to a model schooner*







Mount Pleasant, the view of Admiralty Bay becomes increasingly mesmerizing.

Bequia is an island for those who love to look beyond and take in the vastness of the world around them. It's a place where you can take time to reflect, actually hear you own thoughts, and seldom feel inclined to do more than introspect. From the top of Mount Pleasant, Bill points out Hope Bay to me. It's a secluded beach accessible only by footpaths. I'm captivated and make note that on my next visit a trek down to Hope Bay is a must.

Then Bill whisks me away back to Port Elizabeth to another look out point - 19th century Fort Hamilton that once guarded the entrance to Admiralty Bay. As we take the winding road along the Admiralty Bay coastline, heading up to Fort Hamilton, we stop for a worthwhile visit to Sargeant Brothers Model Boats, a bustling workshop of model boat builders just a brief drive north of Port Elizabeth.

If imitation is truly the greatest compliment, there is much that is complimentary about the miniature schooners, yachts, and Bequian whale boats that have been made here for the past three decades. Carved out of the trunk of the locally forested gum tree, and designed using the varying hues of mahogany, pine, and purple heart woods, the dull grays of the traditional whale boats have been replaced with attractive replicas – complete with cotton sails, harpoon and oars. Visitors can witness first-hand the craftsmen at work. These miniature boats are as majestic as their life-size counterparts and often are patterned from existing sea vessels or customized from the builders' or clients' imagination.

Lunchtime takes me to a Creole spot affectionately called Tantie Pearls. It is a refreshing stop, with yet another advantageous view of the Bay. From there, I venture out with Bill to the north east of the

island for a drive through the countryside in an area called Spring. At the Spring Pottery and Art Gallery, visitors are welcome to roam the premises and watch pieces being made on the spot.

On this side of the island, the coconut trees are plentiful. The road winds gently around a windswept coastline that is pounded by the strong Atlantic waves. This serene drive is perfect for a wandering mind and a peaceful spirit. Bill takes me up to an area called Industry. The name is misleading as there is nothing to show but The Old Hegg Turtle Sanctuary, by the rough waters of Park Bay, where its founder, Brother King, has saved Hawksbill turtles from near extinction. In their save haven, mere meters from shore, you can see and interact with these gentle creatures.

I reserve the tour of Port Elizabeth for my last day, after which I plan to slip onto an afternoon ferry and return to the “real world”. Downtown Port Elizabeth consists primarily of a main street that runs along the Admiralty Bay shoreline north to the 19th century Fort Hamilton, where the road ends, and south through a seamless mix of villas and villages. Quiet, clean and uncluttered cafes, gift shops, bookstores, and some commercial and government buildings complete the small town setting. Potted plants and blossoming bougainvillea beam by the clear waterfront. The stores and restaurants lining the walk are close, intimate, and laid back.

I Follow the Belmont boardwalk along the sea: it takes me past welcoming establishments ranging from dive shops, quaint hotels, and restaurants offering local and international fare as well as a slice

*Opposite page clockwise from top left: Playing dominos in Le Pagent; Inside St. Mary's church; View from La Pompe; Fish sign at Blue Tropic beach side bar Above: Shopping at Spring Pottery and Art Gallery*





of their own angle on Admiralty Bay. I then head north and come to the fish and vegetable market. There I find Clyde, an elderly jeweler and a real gentleman who shows me hand-crafted pendants, bangles, earrings, and hair pieces inspired by whales and sea turtles, all crafted from black coral.

Souvenirs of all kinds can be bought at this mini market which, though relatively small, is fully stocked and brimming with hospitality. Fresh fruits and vegetables, homemade wines and even fashionably designed shopping bags made from local crocus material are plied by some “level-vibes” Rasta brethren who are quick to assist the inquisitive visitor.

Heading further north takes me past the brightly coloured, one-room shanty called the Penthouse. It’s an obvious misnomer, but one which was most likely influenced by visions of grandeur than by the actual character of the place. (I’ve been told that this is definitely the spot to visit when your really want to party “island-people” style.)

Modern day Bequia now has its attention turned towards a casually styled tourism. Some notable high points of activity include the Christmas festivities and the annual Easter Regatta that is patronized by yachts from the region and around the world. This island intuitively knows how to cater to the seasoned traveler and still

keep its local charm. Bequians are contagiously polite – a quality that you are sure to encounter during a stay on the island.

After doing some last minute souvenir shopping, I’m offered the opportunity to visit Hope Bay. My ferry leaves in two hours, but the drive to Hope Bay and back, punctuated with a quick dip in the challenging waters, is doable. After all, this is Bequia! There’s no traffic on the road and everything is close by, even the most deserted beach. Making my way down the steep but manageable incline is like a trek back in time. Although there are houses at the top of the pathway, and surprisingly enough a partially dilapidated house cum artist’s residence at the foot of the descent, the feeling of seclusion takes over. This is my kind of place, lush, bushy, with soaring coconut trees upon a vast open space.

Close to the beach there is make-shift seating supported by two coconut trees. As I sit there, listening to the rough and tumble of the sea, I have my defining Bequian experience: peace. On the island of clouds, Hope Bay is truly “cloud nine”.

*Above top left: View of the Grenadines from Mount Pleasant*  
*Above top right: View of Port Elizabeth from Fort Hamilton*  
*Opposite: Sunset at Admiralty Bay*