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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

How to adjust to Caribbean island time

There's rarely a rush on authentic Bequia — and that, eventually, suited our man just fine

Jonathan Futrell Published: 9 December 2012



Now that's entertainment: a busy morning on Bequia (M Mesgleski)

For a restaurant to be as good as Fernando “Nando” Morgan’s, the days need to start very early indeed. As dawn slowly illuminates the Bequia channel, Nando, a tall, lean, easy-smiling man, is already aboard his motorboat, Skylark. He’s casting for the fish that he’ll fry tonight at Fernando’s Hideaway, his candlelit restaurant on the slopes above Lower Bay. By 9.30am, Nando turns Skylark — heavy with barracuda, mahi mahi and red snapper — for home, and another day of food preparation.

Fernando’s Hideaway is the Caribbean restaurant you always dreamt you’d come across, with the kind of chef you’d always hoped for, on the Caribbean island you always imagined you’d find. And seven-square-mile Bequia, touted as the loveliest, the most relaxing, the most unspoilt of them all, is wall to wall with

characters every bit as engaging as Nando: from the model-boat-building Sargeant brothers to the urbane restaurateur Coco, who rivals Nando for fresh fish, but maybe has the upper hand on terrace views across the harbour; from bosomy Tante Pearl, the warm-hearted matriarch of her eponymous family restaurant at the top of the steepest street in Port Elizabeth (don't leave without tasting the lime meringue), to Orton "Brother" King, the cantankerous owner of the Old Hegg Turtle Sanctuary, Bequia's busiest tourist attraction. Then there's Doris, owner of Doris Fresh Food, the Caribbean equivalent of the Selfridges food hall. Rumour has it that Roman Abramovich shops here when he drops anchor in the harbour.

Jenson, the man who picks me up after my 45-minute flight from Barbados, via Union and Canouan, speaks slower than anyone I've known. The only thing slower is his driving: we don't exceed 18mph on the way to my hotel. I determine to curb my usual haste and tune in to Bequia time.

My hotel — one of only four on the island — is the Gingerbread, a two-storey building on the water near Port Elizabeth. It was built in the 1980s, but its steep gable and hand-cut fretwork on the balconies make it seem much older. The pretty garden is shaded by almond, coconut, white cedar and frangipani trees, and tended daily by the owner, Pat Mitchell, ex-wife of the former prime minister, James Mitchell. One of her daughters runs the Frangipani Hotel, next door, where every Thursday there is an evening "jump up", with a steel band, a BBQ and plenty of rum.

Port Elizabeth is deemed the finest natural harbour in the Grenadines, and it's one of the real pleasures of Bequia to sip a lime cordial in Pat's garden with the locals, watch the comings and goings of ferries, fishing and cruise boats, rusting cargo ships and stubby tug boats as they ply the turquoise waters. A few hundred yards to the south is one of Bequia's best beaches, Princess Margaret, so named because the spirited young royal swam there in the 1950s. Beyond it is Lower Bay, about twice as long and just as lovely, with a string of restaurants, bars and lodgings. The water taxi from Gingerbread is the slow, scenic way to either beach, and costs about a fiver each way.

Moves are afoot to bring Bequia at least partly up to 21st-century speed.

The Bequia Beach Hotel, on Friendship Bay, near where Anthony Eden once had a cottage, is gated and low-lying, with green roofs and large, seductive air-conditioned beachside rooms and villas, furnished in dark wood. It's the closest thing to the modern world on the island, but it too is kept in check by the hotel's Swedish manager, Carina Petersson. She treasures the island's core values — its tranquillity, calm, localism and neighbourliness. Guests are encouraged to catch the "reggae" bus into town, chat with the fishermen at the far end of the beach and get to know the island.

One day, Jenson takes me inland for lunch, to the Firefly Plantation Bequia (00 1 784 458 3414, fireflybequia.com), a 30-acre working fruit farm that is also a restaurant with rooms, and slicker than the Bequian norm. When we arrive, there's a buzz about the place: the staff are smooth and well groomed, the other diners are clearly comfortable in elegant surroundings, and the food doesn't disappoint. It has a handful of newly appointed rooms with views, if you have the legs for the steep climb to them (and £245 a night for B&B).

Next week, Bequia's accommodation stock will increase when Sugar Reef opens its doors. It's a traditional stone building where the rooms have four-poster beds and share a vast tree-canopy veranda with unsurpassable views across to Mustique and Canouan. Sugar Reef has beach rooms and a beachside restaurant; all the fruit will be grown in its own plantation.

You'll find fabulous beaches and mountains across the Caribbean, but Bequia's charms, those that get under your skin — its peacefulness and the characters you meet daily — are subtler. As such, the island won't suit everyone; you either get it or you don't. But if you do, like me, you can't wait to return.

Jonathan Futrell travelled as a guest of Just Bequia

NEED TO KNOW

Just Bequia (01373 814244, justbequia.co.uk) has a week at the Gingerbread Hotel (gingerbreadhotel.com)

from
£1,255pp,
room-only;
or two weeks, combining Sugar Reef (sugarreefbequia.com) and the Bequia Beach Hotel (bequiabeach.com),
from £1,735pp, B&B. Prices include flights from London to Barbados with Virgin Atlantic, interisland flights
and transfers. Or try W&O Travel (020 7666 1214, wandotravel.com) or Tropic Breeze (01752 880880,
tropicbreeze.co.uk).

Undiscovered shores: six more lovely little Caribbean islands

Carriacou

No golf course, no posh hotels, no spas: no problem. Carriacou, a few hours' ferry ride from Grenada, is proof that backpacker-style paradise can still be found in the Caribbean. Paradise Beach has plank-and-nail bars pouring "under the counter" rum, and Anse La Roche must be one of the region's best arcs of sand — a turtle nesting area reached via a steep hike through poisonous manchineel trees. There's wooden-boat-building, big-drum dancing and, in a museum in the capital, Hillsborough, paintings by Carriacou's most famous son, Canute Caliste (1914-2005). His daughter Clemencia will give you the tour of his Lowry-esque depictions of island life. Local dive outfits will take you out to, among other desert islands, Mopion, literally one sun shade on a circle of sand, or to the waters off private Petit St Vincent, where guests pay £1,000 a night and will be having nowhere near as much fun as you. *Regaldiver* (01353 659999, regaldiving.co.uk) has a week at the Green Roof Inn from £1,157pp, B&B, including flights from Gatwick to Grenada and the ferry.

Martin Hemming

Nevis

Considering its glamorous reputation, the lack of posh properties and A-list attitude on Nevis comes as a surprise. The only big hotel here is the Four Seasons Resort Nevis (00 1 869 469 1111, fourseasons.com). It's perfectly fine, in a generic haute luxe way, but exudes an air of slight embarrassment at finding itself plonked between the driftwood bars and family-run hotels on Pinney's Beach. The beaches are wonderful — don't miss deserted Lover's Beach, reached down a rutted, unsigned jungle track — but the trick is to check in at a plantation property higher up the slopes of Nevis Peak. Here, the climate is permanently spring-like and the living addictively easy. The Hermitage (00 1 869 469 3477, hermitagenevis.com) is renowned for its weekly pig roast, lethal planter's punch and delightful staff. *Just St Kitts & Nevis* (01373 814210, juststkittsnevis.co.uk) has a week there for £1,299pp, B&B, including flights from Gatwick to St Kitts via Antigua and boat transfers.

Chris Haslam

Eleuthera

One of 700 islands that make up the Bahamas archipelago, Eleuthera mainly consists of a string of fishing villages connected by a single main road. About 110 miles long and a couple of miles wide at most, it's a 30-minute flight from Nassau, or a two-hour ferry ride. And you could have its pink- and white-sand beaches all to yourself. There's a range of small, locally owned hotels and guesthouses, and islanders will fall over themselves to suggest where to eat and drink, or tell you whether Lenny Kravitz, who has a studio on the island, will be jamming at Elvina's, a bar and restaurant in Gregory Town. Base yourself here or at Governor's Harbour — both are perfect for island exploration and have plenty of shops and bars. *Bahamas Flavour* (0870 066 9975, bahamasflavour.co.uk)

200 bird species. Local guides run free nature tours, taking in bat caves, birds such as brown boobies, the Cayman Brac Museum, a heritage house, the Brac Parrot Reserve and walking trails (for details, see itsyourstoexplore.com). *Turquoise Holidays* (01494 678400, turquoiseholidays.co.uk) has seven nights at the Alexander Hotel, a lovely little boutique place, from £1,335pp, B&B, including flights from London.

Robert Ryan

Barbuda

Antigua's satellite is a 15-minute flight and a world away from the tourist haunts of the larger island. You come here for empty, shell-strewn beaches, the frigate birds that patrol them and a pre-tourism Caribbean vibe. Fishing and farming are the main island activities, so there's not a huge range of places to stay. Try North Beach (00 1 268 721 3314, barbudanorthbeach.com), four simple cottages sleeping two, accessible only by boat. Prices start at £300, including all food and drink, transfers and use of the sailboats; there's a minimum two-night stay. *Fly to Antigua with British Airways* (0844 493 0787, ba.com) or *Virgin Atlantic* (0844 209 7777, virgin-atlantic.com); from about £600. From there, *SVG Air* (00 1 784 457 5124, svgair.com) has returns from £70.

Robert Ryan

Culebra

It's only seven miles long, but this island off the Puerto Rican coast has some of the world's most picturesque beaches, as well as the 1,500-acre National Wildlife Refuge, and nesting leatherback and hawksbill turtles. Culebra has just one town, Dewey, which makes an art of indolence — horses remain a popular mode of transport and opening hours a guideline. BA (0844 493 0787, ba.com) flies from Gatwick to Puerto Rico; from £616. The ferry from Fajardo costs £3 return (for details, visit seepuertorico.com). *Tamarindo Estates* (00 1 787 742 3343, tamarindoestates.com; doubles from £92, self-catering; two-night minimum stay) is a beachfront resort with 12 cottages and one of the island's few pools.

Robert Ryan