

# LOSE THE PLOT

LESS ATTITUDE THAN ANTIGUA, MORE LAID-BACK THAN NEVIS, BEQUIA IS THE SMALL CARIBBEAN ISLAND WITH ALL THE BEST STORIES

BY ANTONIA QUIRKE



PHOTOGRAPHS: JEROME GALLARD



From left: a bookshop in Port Elizabeth; Lower Bay Beach; model boats in a shop. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Bequia Pizza Hut; lobster at De Reef Bar; Industry Bay; Bequia Beach Hotel; the garden at The Old Fort hotel. Previous pages, from left: Lower Bay Beach; a terrace at Bequia Beach Hotel



PHOTOGRAPHS: JEROME GALLARD; AMANDA MARSALIS

IN THE SEVEN-MILE LUMP OF BEQUIA in the lazy arc of the Windward Islands, light browses with a supernatural brightness off sand piled with faded maritime rope and coral like dinosaur bones and hunks of conch, pink as a Cadillac. World-crossing yachts swing in their moorings and, prowling between them, little local boats painted canary and scarlet sell ice and bread to sailors. Seamen, racers, traders, eccentrics. Along the waterfront are stalls of stubby bananas and crimson-raw nutmeg. Wooden houses climb up steep, rounded hillsides, their beams stabbing shades of orange and lime, with picket-fence porches as oyster-pale as the outer petals of the frangipani that grow everywhere, fat with lunatic rain.

The Union Jack flew over the island for around 200 years. Before that it was French, and before that, home to a smattering of Caribs. The little port was renamed Elizabeth in 1937 after the then princess, but everybody still calls it the Harbour. And if the Queen's face smiles on the East Caribbean dollar, it's a picture dating from what must be the 1970s, when she looked like a sensible movie star, recalling a time of rayon kaftans and heated rollers and tumbler of neat bourbon knocked back with burnt-freckled hands. There have been sugar and cotton plantations here. New England whalers were frequent visitors. Bequians came to be some of the finest shipwrights in the West Indies. In 1717 Blackbeard refurbished a captured French vessel here,

relaunching it as his *Queen Anne's Revenge*, and Captain Bligh passed nearby with Tahitian breadfruit saplings, which still grow in these parts, along with mangos and sapodilla and creole plums. Although everything you buy in the shacks and shops – the yellow-skinned passion fruit, the deodorant soap called Cashmere Explosion, the Montecristo cigars for guzzling millionaires and the glacé cherries and giant tubs of coconut oil – will likely have been brought over by ferry from St Vincent nine miles away, or beyond. Always trading and bartering, it's a place open to talk of other places and people – but secure. The rest of the world is an intriguing maelstrom. 'What part of London you from?' a little girl asks me one day. 'Mexico?'

Along the port near the fruit and vegetable market run by rastas, in the window of a drinking shack, is an 18th-century print of the steeple of St Nicholas Cathedral in Newcastle. The punch the owner pours me is made with the local Sunset Very Strong Rum, 84.5 per cent proof and mixed with a token slug of pineapple cordial – the cocktail equivalent of a seat-belt sign being flicked off. Why Newcastle? I wheeze. Why not, he says. His fingers are heavy with sovereigns. Tiny black hummingbirds stud a bush nearby, their backs streaked with a screaming flash of peridot. On the water, rocking in a light breeze, is a schooner called *The Friendship Rose*, which from 1967 used to travel between the islands carrying mail and passengers and



This page, by the fruit stall in the market. Opposite, from top: a bedroom at Sugar Reef hotel; Lower Bay Beach; an Ocean Room at Bequia Beach Hotel



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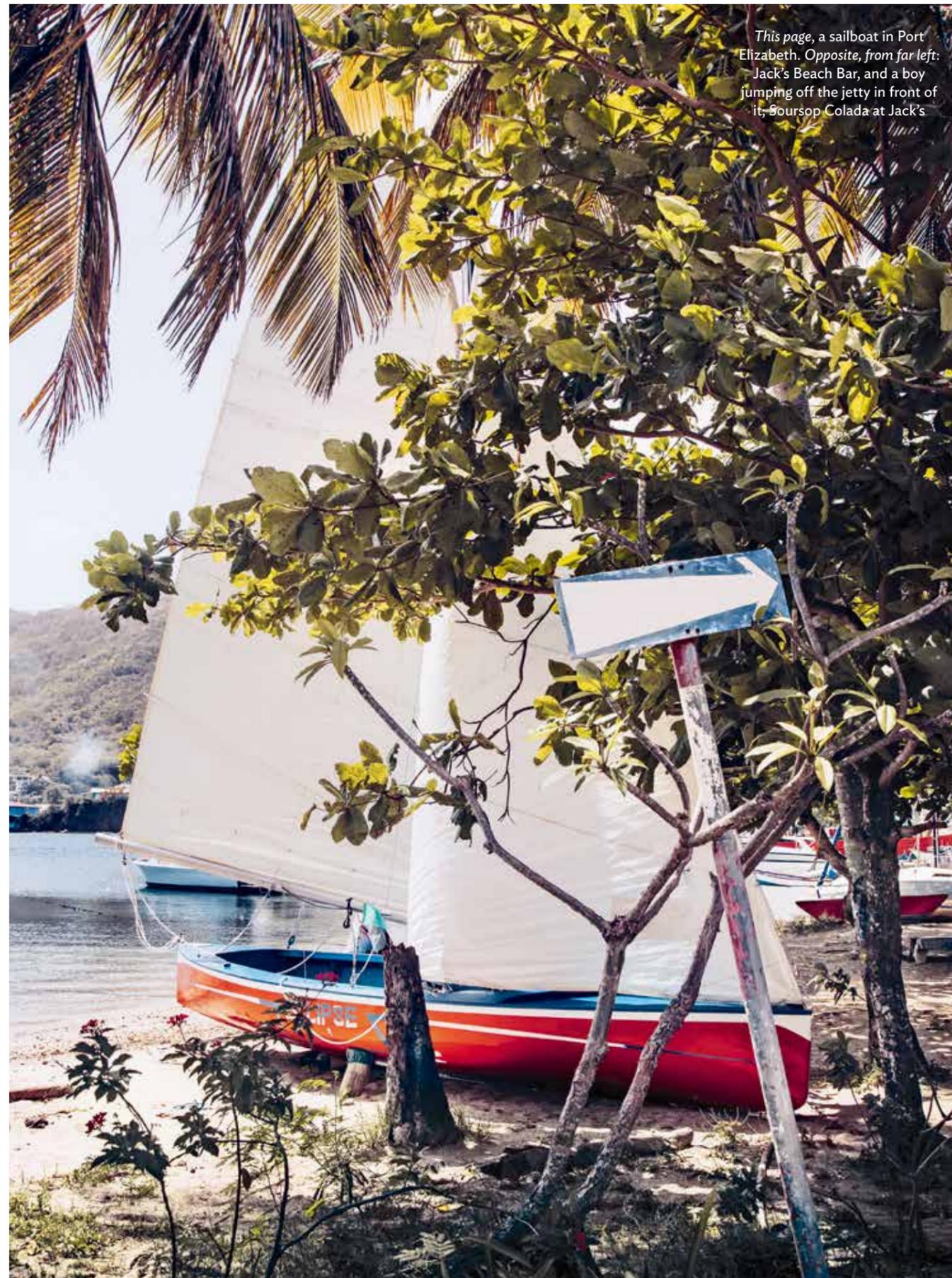
cargo. It was so admired by Bob Dylan that he had his own boat built here, *Water Pearl*, which eventually ran aground in Panama. *The Friendship Rose* is painted a sugary blue and white, the colours of the interior of the Anglican church of St Mary the Virgin, which sits on the main drag. One Sunday I watch the rector, the Venerable J Everton Weekes, take to the pulpit by an open window in robes of green satin that flutter in the wind like a superhero's cape. He'd seen the film *The Exorcist* the night before, he tells the congregation, and it had given him mighty pause for thought. Lightning and thunder are in his voice. 'Send your holy spirit to stir our hearts, oh Lord.' Next to me in the pew the handsome local MP, Dr Friday, nods reassuringly. A group of small children rest their heads against their older sister, who's wearing a dress as frothingly purple as the bougainvillea that overhangs the wall in the cemetery, her Sunday-best ballerina bun studded with a diamante pin.

Tramping the waterside path, the Belmont Walkway, out of the Harbour, I pass the Whaleboner Bar (good for sundowners) and the old Gingerbread Hotel (best ice cream on the island). Three little boys throw themselves into the sea in their underpants. The new doctor's office in the Frangipani Gardens has an advertisement that reassures patients they can expect 'first-class medical attention' – just don't expect anyone to wear shoes. When I get to Princess Margaret Beach (she stopped off here on her honeymoon), the tide lazily washes backwards and forwards along clean white sand perfectly bordered with cedar. There are no private beaches on Bequia. By a jetty someone is gutting fish into the water and a fisherman wanders up and down with his

THE RECTOR HAS WATCHED 'THE EXORCIST' THE NIGHT BEFORE, HE TELLS THE CONGREGATION, AND IT HAS GIVEN HIM MIGHTY PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

notebook pre-selling lobsters to sunbathers, offering to bring them ready-broiled if you don't have a pot big enough. Time thickens. The day slips by in floods of sunshine, but always with a breeze, so your head never aches, and you never feel restless. At Jack's Beach Bar they're mixing Piña Colodas with soursop and twisting okra tempura into biteable chunks as the best-looking local stray, Rusty, lies with his head on his paws, his fur the exact hue of a nicely cold pint of lager. Everybody drinks and waits for the fast and startling sunset, which happens on Bequia like a door being kicked shut – none of that sentimental European leave-taking.

Some say this is a quiet island. Others say, just open your ears. Walking along the harbour late-ish one evening looking for a taxi, I don't see a soul about, apart from one man sitting on the steps of the post office reading the paper in the dark. But I can hear a vague thumping somewhere north and toil up the hill towards it, to Papa's bar, to find it rammed with Swedish sailors zig-zagging about to reggae and making ecstatic homicidal sounds. Swedes have been coming to Bequia since the 1950s. I see one of them, the ageless Kjell, his hair sun-bleached to a frosty crown of white paint, with startled, slanted blue eyes, like Rutger Hauer before the fall in *Blade Runner*. Every night he chugs ashore from his moored boat in a dinghy. On such a small island, a whole cast of faces quickly becomes familiar. Young hotelier King King, in a straw trilby, with a smooth open expression, tough but wistful. Sir James Mitchell, a much-loved former prime minister, who



This page, a sailboat in Port Elizabeth. Opposite, from far left: Jack's Beach Bar, and a boy jumping off the jetty in front of it; Soursop Colada at Jack's

resembles Castro in old photographs and has endless arms that he sweeps all about when telling stories, like a magician about to find a gold doubloon behind your ear. Hunter Davies, the great biographer of the Beatles. And ninety-something Charles Brewer, an American architect who taught at Yale with Frank Lloyd Wright and lives out at Moonhole, a rocky peninsula at the very west of the island, once an alternative community started in the 1960s, which now looks like Phoenician ruins. And then, on Fridays, at the weekly Penthouse street party, the Baptiste Brothers, Kyron, Kasron and Biyu, move in rhapsodic sync to dancehall while everybody buys barbecue ribs and goat water from hawkers, and beautiful girls lean impassively against a pyramid of speakers, drinking Sparrow rum and Hairoun beer.

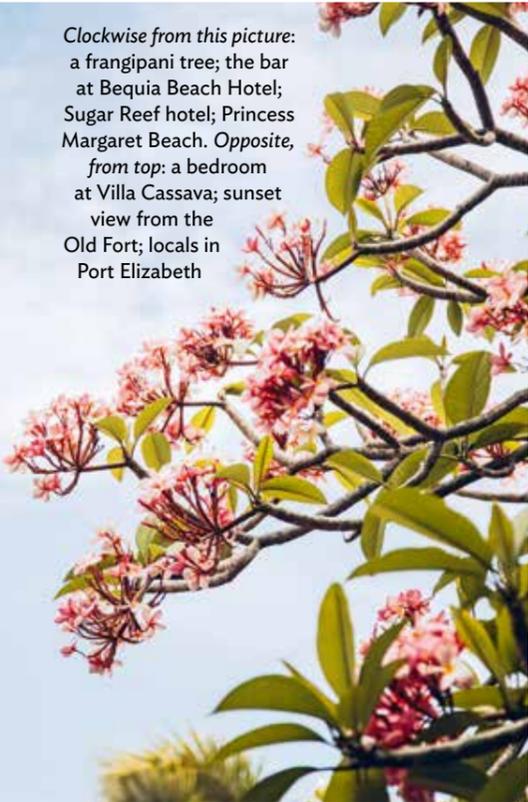
Friendship Bay is my favourite. The water on this southern side is more theatrical, and the view is of distant Mustique. Fewer boats moor here because of the swell and the sound is of clapping masts and of occasional sailors chucking themselves into the brine and coming up snorting. It rains. Real rain. Hibiscus buds and little lizards spin down guttering until everybody walks for cover and waits... until the rain dies as quickly and astoundingly as it rose. I collapse back on my towel, eating a handful of fried plantain from Bequia Beach Hotel's epic breakfast bar. The soft, hot sand is eternally hospitable, the optimism in the rain-sun routine a powerful characteristic of the island. That, and the

intensity of its history. I take a drive in the afternoon up into the hills with thirty-something Garvin Ollivierre whose family have been boat builders and whalers since the 1800s – humpbacks are still occasionally caught here. We stop at the cricket pitch, where he plays with the local team, to find it covered in lambs and yellow-green butterflies blowing about like unfolding wads of tissue paper. He talks to me about the names of his teammates, one Cosmos Hackshaw (a moniker straight from *Moby-Dick*) and a Max Kydd. African, Scottish, Carib, French. Everybody is somebody's third cousin of a cousin going back centuries. There's a Napoleon Ollivierre and a Leonorra Kydd in the old graveyard near the airport.

The squeaking and bumping four-wheel-drive passes around potholes at the grey ruins of an old plantation house. Climbing up, the path is lined with in-leaning tamarind, and croton plants with leaves like feathers coloured cochineal and orange. A white cockerel crows in a garden of papaya trees. Near the top of the island, by the Old Fort hotel, the sea at the horizon looks like a great blue sword. Somewhere to the north is Industry Bay, with its narrow beach, as though the white sand had been thrown down during an encore; a last-minute indulgence. On the way back to the Harbour we stop to pick up Philisia who's hitching a lift to work at her brother's restaurant, Fernando's Hideaway. Fernando, aged 64, goes out fishing at 4am for snapper and barracuda, and

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Clockwise from this picture: a frangipani tree; the bar at Bequia Beach Hotel; Sugar Reef hotel; Princess Margaret Beach. Opposite, from top: a bedroom at Villa Cassava; sunset view from the Old Fort; locals in Port Elizabeth



then spends all afternoon cooking, his treehouse restaurant tucked into massive trunks of almond, its few tables lit with candles stuck into old paper bags of flour. Fernando is skinny and tall, glad-handing the appreciative diners, his white chef's jacket undone to mid-chest. When I ask him how he always knows where to find snapper, he says, vaguely, 'Oh, I come here, I come there, ya know...' He only ever goes out alone, and only in his own boat, *Skylark*. How fondly people talk of their boats here (I live on one, and can tell you it's not always the case.) The names seem especially prophetic. In Lower Bay (where the best food is at Dawn's café: callaloo soup with toast; banana bread still oozing through three layers of greaseproof paper) there's a termite-destroyed wreck pulled in among the trees. It was once a Bequia whaleboat, more than a century old and the fastest on these seas. Its name – *Trouble* – is the only part still perfectly intact.

At Plantation Hotel in the harbour one night, three bronzed boys come wheeling into the bar, muscles like Tarzan, walking like drunks in deck shoes trodden to shreds. They've not slept for five days, they say, having shuddered through squalls to deliver a catamaran 280 miles out of the Virgin Islands. All through the last night they thought they'd sink, but the craft kept cutting across the foaming pit of the Caribbean. What's the name of this boat?, I ask, impressed, and one of them turns to me with red eyes and whispers '*Pocketknife*'. Beyond him, down by the water, rushing in and out of the pale surf are two children with tangled hair, playing with Rusty, who trots amiably alongside them, keeping his muzzle dry. After a while all three disappear up the hill and deep into an overgrown shock of almond and palm, where they switch on a hand-torch and move around the headland through the jungle darkness, their small light pulsing like a lone glow-worm or a jewel under a tattered spring moon.

## WHERE TO STAY

### BEQUIA BEACH HOTEL

In gardens of red cherry and coconut on mile-long Friendship Beach, this place might well be full but never feels it. You'll always have a wide stretch of beach to yourself, and the waterfront suites are close enough to the surf for the rhythmic thrum to give a sense of amplitude and freshness. There's a bar on the sand and lobster-barbecue nights, and often dancing. Most guests treat it as a retreat, only rousing themselves occasionally to catch taxis to the harbour. The set-up is gorgeously relaxed; the hotel is owned by a genial Swede, Bengt Mortstedt, who first saw the bay some 15 years ago and in effect never left. [bequiabeach.com](http://bequiabeach.com). Doubles from about £160

### SUGAR REEF

Along the further-flung Industry Bay, this hideaway noses onto a narrow sprinkle of white sand, and serves the best rum punch on the island (mostly fresh lime.) It's remote here, though. The keynote: stillness. [sugarreefbeckia.com](http://sugarreefbeckia.com). Doubles from about £85

### A FEW MORE LOVELY LITTLE PLACES

The Old Fort ([theoldfort.com](http://theoldfort.com)) has doubles from about £110. Villa Cassava ([cassava-house.com](http://cassava-house.com)) costs from about £1,930 per week, sleeps six

## GETTING HERE

Audley Travel (+44 1993 838275; [audleytravel.com](http://audleytravel.com)) offers tailor-made trips to the Caribbean. A nine-night trip costs from £2,322 per person, including five nights B&B at Bequia Beach Hotel and three nights on Barbados, flights and transfers.



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