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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Big times on the little islands

To find the coolest parts of the Caribbean, you need to downsize. Vincent Crump grabs a beer by the bay in itty-bitty beautiful Bequia

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*Vincent Crump* Published: 12 October 2014

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Bequia makes Barbados look like Birmingham (Robert Lench/Getty)

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It's not every airport where you get performance poetry in customs. But then not every airport employs Silma Duncan, excise officer and self-styled poet laureate of Bequia. In singsong voice — and pausing occasionally for floaty hand gestures — Silma launches into a soulful ode about island life as she rifles through my smalls.

It's a surprising turn of events — but not that surprising in Bequia, the Cinderella of the Grenadines.

It's home to 5,000 people, and after spending four days here, I feel like I've met 4,000 of them.

There's Roxanne, super-sassy proprietress of the Giggles Boutique, who invites us to drink Campari and soda in the bar above her store. There's Andy the pirate, patrolling the prow-like balcony at Maria's Cafe with his straggle-haired shipmates. And there's the cabbie who greets me at the airport, helps me into his pick-up and declares himself my unofficial driver for the duration of the stay. "Name's Jenson," he offers shyly. "Like Jenson Button... but a whoooooole lot slower."



Just arriving on Bequia feels like an old-time, off-track

Best buddies: making new pals in Friendship Bay (Frank Heuer/laif)

adventure. You judder across from Barbados in a four-seat Cessna, sitting face to face with your fellow passengers and chatting to the pilot about what's in his sandwiches. En route, you might touch down on Mustique, the next island in the chain, the one everyone's heard of, where Wills and Kate holidayed, Cheryl Cole got spliced and the natives mostly occupy a tucked-away compound, separate from the A-list expats.

In topography, the islands appear alike: a rumpled green ridge rising from the Caribbean Sea, just a few miles long and ringed with wondrous white beaches. But the vibe couldn't be more different. On Bequia, villagers wave from their porches as you bump on by. Electricity didn't arrive here until 1969; the first plane touched down 23 years later. So everyone wants to know you — where have you come from and how do you like the place?

I am staying at the island's standout hotel, Bequia Beach, the only one with resort pretensions, which sunbathes in flower-filled gardens behind Friendship Bay. It has half a mile of superlative sand to itself, a singing waitress named Bridget and suites arrayed with jazz-era posters and mahogany umbrella stands. It pulls off the unlikely trick of being luxurious but homely, and is possibly the only five-star Caribbean resort where your room comes with a cat. She's called Diva, and the staff quietly place her water bowl under the steps of whichever guest she takes a fancy to. This week, it's me.

From here, I could stroll across the spine of the island to Port Elizabeth, Bequia's only town, inside an hour, but Jenson is forever on call. One morning, he gives me a tour of the entire island. It's over by lunchtime.

We visit the (slightly rickety) Old Hegg Turtle Sanctuary and climb to the viewpoint at Mount Pleasant, where the villagers are descended from Scottish sailors shipwrecked here in the 18th century. Most surprising is the minnow-sized whaling museum, charting a heritage that very much abides here. Bequians still go after humpbacks, flinging their harpoons in the antique manner. "It's

allowed because it's part of the patrimony of the island," Jenson tells me, a little shamefacedly. "We don't catch one every year, but there's a mighty party when we do. People climb the hilltops with their spyglasses to watch the boat being towed behind the whale, thrashing up the sea. Once it surfed all the way to St Lucia."

Whaling in the West Indies? It's another mark of Bequia's strange, sequestered atmosphere. Our tour concludes in Port Elizabeth, known to locals as "Da Harbour". The town is ramshackle but vivid, exactly how you want the Caribbean to look. The main drag, Front Street, squiggles around Admiralty Bay, a muddle of hand-painted shops, saloons and sail lofts converging on the "island parliament" — a fat almond tree beside the quay, where grizzled oldsters gather to chew over Bequian affairs.



Rasta-  
men  
ride  
bicycles  
with  
jackfish  
hanging  
from the

Beers in Port Elizabeth (Frank Heuer/laif)

handlebars, big-haired matrons hand out Bible tracts, and lazy-eyed gents perch on their doorsteps whittling miraculous model boats decorated in multicoloured marquetry, whole fleets of them. Like the rest of the island, everything here is slow-motion, sun-saturated and busy doing nothing.

The posh end of Port Elizabeth has a slim concrete catwalk running right beside the water. It's your route to a parade of scuba shacks, down-home deck bars and places to eat — notably Gingerbread, where I lunch on lip-tingling curry tuna roti with home-churned nutmeg ice cream. There are tasty rooms here, too, if you'd rather lodge in town.

To reach Princess Margaret Beach, Bequia's loveliest, you must scale the headland on a stairway they never quite finished — as long as you don't mind paddling the last bit. Or else hail a water-taxi man such as Radio, who chugs me there for a fiver in what may or may not be his own dinghy.

"Your first time to the beach, right?" he asks me. "Eh, man, it's a treat."

He's not wrong. Princess Margaret got its name after the Queen's tipsier sister sailed there for a dip while on honeymoon in 1960. Today, the beach scorches away into the distance, yacht-speckled, footprint-free and very nearly naked of souls. There is a wooden jetty for diving off and just one beach bar for beer-getting. It may not be the best strip of sand I've ever reddened myself on — that's Anse Lazio, in the Seychelles — but it's a clear second.

Two hours later, Radio is waiting to zip me back to town. "You loved it, right?" he grins.

When I tell him I'm going to Barbados next, he looks distraught. "Stay with us in paradise," he

implores. “After Bequia, Barbados is Birmingham with palm trees.”

*Vincent Crump was a guest of Bailey Robinson.*