

# *“We race yachts as others do – we race fishing boats as no one else can!”*

*Sir James Mitchell*

Seamanship, boatbuilding, shipbuilding and all manner of related maritime activities lie at the heart of Bequia’s centuries-old history and culture. When the “two-bow” whaleboats were introduced to Bequia from New England in the early 1870s, this double-ended form became the template for all Bequia’s whaleboats, seine boats and smaller inshore fishing boats thereafter. With sizes ranging from 12 to 27 feet, these locally-built sprit-rigged vessels provided the engines of the island’s local economy.

Given that excellence – whether in the skill of the skipper, the shape of the hull or the cut of the sail – would most likely bring in just that little bit more for the family, it is not surprising that competing to show the best of those skills has always been as much a part of life in Bequia as the boats and sailors themselves. For as long as anyone can remember, Bequia’s fishing boats have raced on high days and holidays, with bragging rights, a few dollars, or more than a few measures of rum likely the only reward.

According to Clive Frank, author of *“History of Begos: The Grenadines from Columbus to Today”* (1976), the idea of having a formal Bequia Regatta for both local boats and yachts was conceived in 1967 “... at a time when charter yachts and hotels were doing well...” The event then was organized jointly by the St. Vincent Tourism Board and Ministry of Tourism, The Bequia Tourist Committee, and the St. Vincent Yacht Club. Activities took place over the Whitsun weekend, with yachts departing Saturday from Villa point in St. Vincent to sail across to Bequia, round the island and into Admiralty Bay where onshore activities were in full swing.

Whitsunday was the turn of the fishing and work boats to race, setting out from the harbour, down to West Cay and then racing “in a triangular fashion” back to Admiralty Bay. As Frank notes: “To do this calls for men of great seafaring skill, and to see the Bequia sailors operate is indeed a spectacle to watch”. Whit Monday saw the yachts race the return leg to St. Vincent, ending up in the Aquatic Club. Yachts were classified according to size and a simple handicap system allowed for results to be tabulated according to corrected time.

Over time however, Bequia’s Whitsun regatta lost its direction and its support, and it was not until the formation of the Bequia Sailing Club in 1981 that the Bequia Easter Regatta was finally established. Brainchild of Sir James Mitchell and Hodge Taylor (later founding Commodore), the Bequia Sailing Club had the emphasis firmly on the “Sailing”, and was specifically designed to be “all things to all sailors, yachtsmen, fishermen and youngsters.”

1986 saw the announcement that local boats would now be racing over three days rather than two. The inaugural Easter onshore fair that year – selling jams, jellies and crochet – was accompanied by a now familiar plea for “no deafening music”. Safety regulations stipulated that no anchors should be carried over the bow while racing, and Sunday was fully established as Lay Day for the yachts.

The Racing Class, requiring an official CSA (then CYA) measurement certificate, was introduced in 1993; a comparable CSA Class for cruising boats was in place by 2002, with non-CSA measured cruising boats now rated under the CSA Simplified rating system. The J24 One Design Class with their six-race series was launched in 2005 to immediate success, followed by the Surprise One Design Class in 2010.

Today the local Bequia and Grenadine boats now have races on each of the four days of racing, and the Yacht Division has grown to six classes with the addition of the Windward Island Sloop Class in 2018. The future is, as ever, bright with promise, and the unique atmosphere of Bequia at regatta time – the love of racing and the celebration of excellence in sailing – remains undimmed after more than fifty years.

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