

ENTRY

Bermuda has always been a strategic stopover for cruising sailors, but it's also a destination worth visiting for more than rest and repairs.

BY WENDY MITMAN CLARKE

BY SEA

Morning on St. George's Island, Bermuda, after a cold front has blasted through — the air is as clear and fine as a New England autumn day but soft-edged and gentle, without the chill.

Every detail on the surrounding hillsides stands out, from the crisp white corners of the sloping, terraced roofs to the round green back of a neatly mowed lawn over on St. David's. Sounds, too, are clarified. The bell-like trill of the nighttime's whistling tree frogs is fading, while the rhythmic, lilting song of the kiskadees takes over the day — “Kiss-ka-dee,

kiss-ka-dee!” — mingled with the ubiquitous whine of motorized scooters, the prime mode of transportation here. I catch a sweet, floral scent, probably pittosporum, whose delicate white blooms pack a wallop completely belying their size. To open your eyes in Bermuda is to have every sense awakened and rewarded. Around us in the anchorage a few boats are



hauling up and heading over to the Customs House to clear out. It's June, and many sailors are bound across the Atlantic to the Azores, to Spain, or to the United Kingdom. We've met a couple from the Netherlands in a steel schooner on their way home after several years in the Caribbean, a couple from North Carolina who sprinted over here for a few weeks' visit, and a young family that has just completed the

"Entry by Sea."

It's 750 nautical miles from Whale Cay Cut in the Abacos — Bermuda's port of entry — and after a squally, rough first 24 hours, the passage turned perfect: steady reaching in gentle seas, sunny days and star-shot nights. Every morning just after sunup, white-tailed tropic birds — much loved in Bermuda, where these ocean travelers come ashore to nest — visited

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the town of St. George is the oldest in the country, founded in 1612, and for cruising sailors, it's the ideal place to drop the hook, take a deep, fragrant breath and start to explore. Everything you need is easily accessible here: a free dinghy dock, a sail loft and local services, an excellent grocery and laundry, scooter rentals, the public transportation system of pink buses and

BERMUDA IS A CROSSROADS, A FOCAL POINT FOR MARINERS TRANSITING WEST TO EAST, OR HEADED TO THE CARIBBEAN OR BACK.

Annapolis to Bermuda race and is about to begin an even bigger adventure — a transatlantic to the Mediterranean. Bermuda is like Panama in that regard; this is a crossroads, a focal point for mariners transiting west to east, or headed to the Caribbean or back.

For us on *Osprey*, our 45-foot steel cutter, the decision to sail to Bermuda from the Bahamas, and then on to Newport, Rhode Island, to spend a summer in Maine and Nova Scotia, was a no-brainer. As soon as a family friend who spends most summers here suggested that we drop by for a visit, we said, "Great idea!" For my husband, Johnny, and me, Bermuda is always a homecoming. We were married in St. George 21 years ago and had returned as often as we could, either racing boats to The Onion Patch or hopping a plane for a long weekend of diving. For our son, Kaeo, and daughter, Kailani, it was a chance to finally visit the fabled island they'd heard about their whole lives. And all of us would earn that stamp on our passports that makes me feel particularly proud when I get it here:

Osprey, wheeling near the masthead and making their odd, unmistakable cry, a chirping squeak like the sound of two balloons rubbing together. It felt like they were urging us on, and an exhilarated crew spent much of the final day reaching just off the southern length of Bermuda Island, passing first the lighthouse at Gibb's Hill on the southwest corner, then St. David's at the northeast, and finally turning through the narrow, high-walled Town Cut passage into the storied harbor of St. George.

fast ferry, and restaurants and pubs aplenty for the obligatory Dark 'n' Stormies. And the harbor's bottom, though fairly deep, provides excellent holding. Since Bermuda changed its law to allow visiting sailors to spend 90 consecutive days in the country, rather than only 21, there's no excuse to rush away. In the past the longest we'd stayed was a week, barely enough time to shake off the regatta parties. Now, with *Osprey* as our home base and plenty of time before we needed to be in New England,





Osprey, the Clarke family's 45-foot steel cutter, rests on a mooring in peaceful St. George's Harbour.

a 350-foot-thick limestone cap that formed over the last million years or so, created by the remains of corals, plants and animals. Ten thousand years ago, sea level was 100 feet lower than today, and the landmass that is now a mere mile across stretched for 42 miles, covered in mangroves and dunes. (You can get a fascinating overview of Bermuda's geologic history with a visit to the Natural History Museum that is part of the Bermuda Aquarium, Museum & Zoo in Flatts Village.)

The Spanish mariner Juan de Bermudez discovered the island in the early 1500s, but it was the English ship *Sea Venture*, which wrecked in 1609 en route to the Virginia Company's Jamestown Settlement in the New World, that led to Bermuda's English colonization. Having survived on the island for 10 months, *Sea Venture's* people built two more ships and finished their voyage to Jamestown in May 1610. Two years later, the first 60 permanent settlers arrived in Bermuda from England, making St. George their home.

What this means is that you can't take a step in St. George without treading on some pretty deep history. Our first stop (it's always our first stop, since it's full of wedding memories) after clearing in was St. Peter's Church, about a block from the dinghy dock. Originally built in 1612 of Bermuda cedar and thatch, this was the settlers' first house of worship and doubled as the site of the first Bermuda Parliament, which convened in 1620. The structure that stands today is a relative youngster, dating mostly

we were happy to slow down and smell the frangipani.

"What you don't realize is that there's a ton of cruising here," says Mark Soares, director of Bermuda Yacht Services, which is based in what was the cruise-ship terminal just past the Customs House on Ordnance Island. BYS saw a niche when cruise ships, growing ever more gigantic, no longer could safely navigate Town Cut. Though his company caters mostly to large yachts (*Mirabella V*, for instance, and the 295-foot *Athena*), Soares' mission is to promote Bermuda, and St. George specifically, as

a destination for cruising sailors rather than just a stopover. "Yachtsmen have been coming here for hundreds of years," he says. "It's not that we [St. George] have been ignoring them, but we haven't been doing much for them either."

To that end, he and his right hand, his mother, Sandra Soares, whom everyone calls "Momma," provide whatever help and information they can to visiting sailors. On his to-do list is developing an updated cruising guide for the islands. "There are so many great anchorages, and people just

don't know about them," he says. "I've been all over the world, and there are few places more beautiful."

Bermuda is really an archipelago of some 170 islands (depending on who's counting) that together form a fishhook shape about 21 miles long and averaging about a mile wide. The largest is Bermuda Island, with the capital, Hamilton, more or less in the middle. St. George's anchors the northeast corner of the archipelago, with its neighbor St. David's Island forming the southern side of the harbor. Perched atop a volcanic seamount, the islands rest on



from 1713. To mark the site's 400th anniversary, in 2012 Queen Elizabeth designated it "Their Majesties Chappell," the name it carried in the 1690s. Among its treasures are a marble baptismal font that the settlers brought with them and the original altar. These notable facts,

though, do it thin justice. You must walk in, stand here and breathe quietly. Elegance and strength are inherent in its open beams, a humble grace that tells a story of isolation, endurance and faith that the grandest cathedral can't touch.

A block or so from the

church is Somers Market, where we stopped one day for a takeout lunch, noting the detailed marine weather being broadcast on two television screens over the beverage cooler. "Are you on a visiting yacht?" the cashier asked us, and when we said yes, she immediately took

Fort George offers a commanding view of the harbor. Town Cut, the harbor entrance, can be seen on the left. St. Peter's Church (below) was established in 1612.

10 percent off our bill. (This is no small thing, since the only downside to Bermuda is that it'll leave your wallet gasping, another reason why

Bermuda Radio

Fort George is the home of the Bermuda Maritime Operations Centre, which includes the Rescue Coordination Centre and Bermuda Radio. Martin Williams (right) is one of the officers who keep watch on radar screens and monitor the radio for mariners who need assistance. Visit cruisingworld.com/1309radio to read about the Clarke family's tour of the center.



WENDY MITMAN CLARKE

Color is everywhere in Bermuda, from the pink oleander blossoms to the many shades of blue of the surrounding waters.

coming here on your own boat is so much better than any other way.) Tourism is a major economic driver here, second only to the international banking industry, and Bermudians are among the most friendly, genteel people I have ever met, both to visitors and each other.

You can't start a conversation without a "good morning," or "good afternoon," and if you get mixed up, "you can always say 'good day,' and cover your bases," as a gentleman reminded me when I couldn't nail down the time.

Bermudians never forget that they are on a speck of land in a vast ocean, separated from North America by the volatile Gulf Stream and from Europe by thousands of miles of deep blue sea. They know it's not especially easy to sail here on a small boat, so when they learn that you're a sailor, or yachtsman as they say, they treat you with a respect and kindness that I've never experienced anywhere else.

We took our lunch over to Somers Garden, a beautiful swath of immaculate green grass, oleander hedges and pebbled paths, where a group of uniformed schoolchildren was horsing around, evidently on an outdoor break from classes. Sitting under a towering royal palm, surrounded by the bright orange flowers of royal poinciana and the deep rich green Norfolk Island pines, we picnicked near the memorial to Admiral Sir George Somers, who had commanded the *Sea Venture*. According to a tourism brochure, Somers loved Bermuda so much he asked that his heart be buried here, and upon his death, his nephew complied; he



Bermuda To-Do List

There's way too much to do in Bermuda to cram it into one visit, but here's a list of our top 10 gotta-do's in no particular order:



1. Visit the Bermuda Aquarium, Museum & Zoo in Flatts Village. *Home of the Natural History Museum, this remarkable facility also has a 140,000-gallon coral reef exhibit, an outdoor sea turtle pool and animals from all over the world, including Galápagos tortoises, wallabies, an enormous flock of pink flamingoes and lemurs. Founded in 1926, the Aquarium's exhibits focus on island ecology and biology worldwide.*

2. Go diving. *Hundreds of ships over the centuries have piled it up on the reefs that protect Bermuda — bad for the ships, crews and reefs, of course, but great for wreck divers today. And because the reef is relatively shallow, it's a good place for beginners and those who are happier at 30 feet rather than 300.*

3. Visit the Botanical Gardens in Paget. *Established in 1898, this 35-acre park of greenhouses, trees, gardens and open spaces is free and open 365 days a year. It's known for its orchid collection, and is the site of Camden House, an 18th-century Georgian mansion that is the official home of Bermuda's premier (even though he doesn't live there).*

4. Visit Bermuda Radio. *Call ahead of time to make an appointment, tell them you're a visiting yachtsman, and they'll be happy to show you around. They're also a great resource on weather and routing strategies when it's nearing time for you to depart.*

5. Pack a picnic and dinghy down the Ferry Reach into Castle Harbour, between St. David's Island and the main island, and go gunkholing. *These small, scattered islands are among the country's most lovely, and this is also home of the Castle Harbour Islands Nature Reserve. Snorkeling here is exquisite, as are the beaches.*

6. Rent a kayak and paddle Harrington Sound. *Enclosed by Hamilton and Smith's parishes, the wide water of Harrington Sound is fed by the sea through the narrow entrance at Flatts, where the current roars twice a day. Inside the sound, you're surrounded by high rock walls, and the shoreside paddling is beautiful. Most stunning is Abbott's Cliff, another national park, on*

the northwest side, and you're nearly guaranteed to see nesting tropic birds in this area.

7. Climb the lighthouses. *Gibbs Hill, built in 1844 of cast iron, stands 362 feet above sea level and can be seen 40 miles away, while St. David's, standing 208 feet over the sea, was built in 1879.*

8. Tour the forts. *Bermuda has dozens of them. You can see the Bermuda Isles Pipe Band perform a traditional bagpipe, or skirling, ceremony in Fort Hamilton, or gaze at the famous pink sand beaches and study Bermudian history at Fort St. Catherine in St. George's, begun in 1619. Really, they're all over the island, small or grand, crowded or isolated.*

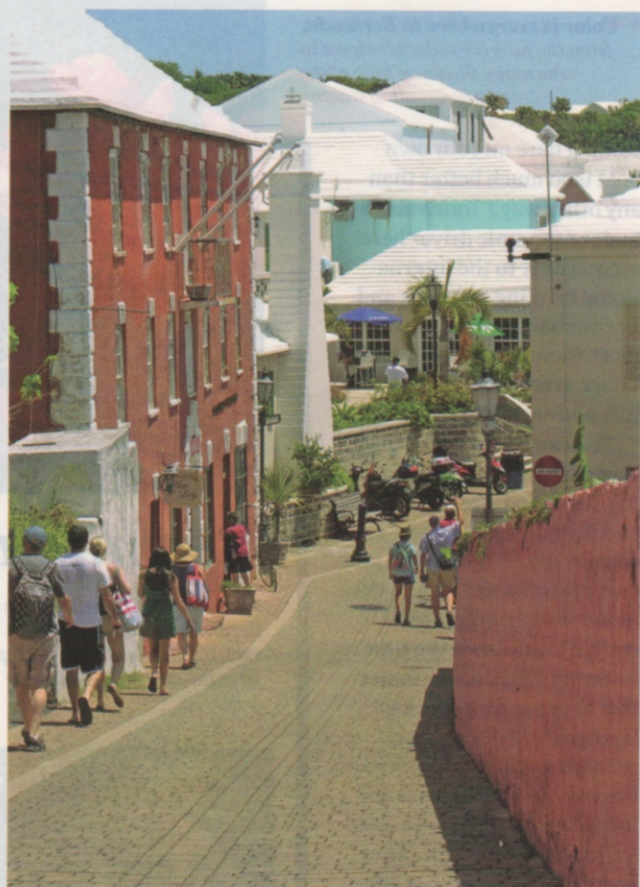
9. Hike the Railway Trail. *The Bermuda Railway covered nearly 22 miles from 1931 to 1948. Today, it's a walking and biking path that you can access all over the islands, providing a unique way to see Bermuda, from its quiet forests to its bustling streets in Hamilton.*

10. Hit Harbour Nights on Wednesday nights in Hamilton. *Front Street is closed to vehicles and becomes a huge street party, with food, drink, music, and the colorful, raucous Gombey dancers, whose wild costumes and relentless drums make you want to move like a Bahamian Junkanoo.*

W. M. C.



Scenes from St. George: A statue of Admiral Sir George Somers (above), who is credited as the founder of the English colony of Bermuda, is on Ordinance Island, located in St. George's Harbour. Cobblestone streets, white terraced roofs, bright colors and interesting street names are part of the town's charm.



"removed his heart and entrails and buried them near what is now Somers Garden, then shipped his body back to England (inside a barrel of rum)."

Entombed entrails notwithstanding, Somers Garden is typical of this country's commitment to open spaces. With a population density of about 3,000 people per square mile — one of the highest in the world — it's amazing how Bermuda manages to make so much land available to all. This concept began in 1622 when legislators passed a law that all islands and small spots of land not divided into the "tribes" — what are now called the parishes: large tracts of land

parceled to investors of the original Virginia Company — would be common land. In 1663, that numbered about 192 acres. Today, about 1,040 acres have been set aside for more than 60 national parks and 13 nature reserves ranging in size from 0.12 to 103 acres.

Some of these, like Nonsuch Island, are left in as pristine a state as possible to encourage restoration and preservation of native species, such as the cahow, or Bermuda petrel. Thought to be extinct for three centuries, about 18 nesting pairs were discovered in 1951 on islets near Nonsuch. Other common lands are beaches, railway trails, historic forts,



and places devoted to the Bermudian passion for horticulture, which is in evidence everywhere, in windowsills and public spaces, in tiny yards and in pots along stairways. Color abounds in bougainvillea and oleander, frangipani and hibiscus. Nothing is dull, and even the gray-black of the limestone rock that is the foundation for everything — roadways,

houses, sea walls — serves its purpose in the color scheme, offering the eye a contrast to the richness everywhere else, the way a pure blue sky frames a thunderhead.

I was thinking about this late one morning as we hiked up a narrow road, its bordering wall overrun with blankets of nasturtiums and morning glories, backed with hedges of oleander,



Kaeo and Kailani Clarke hang out with King Neptune at the Dockyard. The statue is a replica of a figurehead that was once on a British warship.

Bermuda palm and wild fennel. The road and the flowers eventually gave way to a hilltop where the walls of Fort George, dating from 1619, stood watch over all

waved to each other.

Transportation for visitors is limited to four modes: taxis, ferries, rented scooters or buses. Taxis are expensive, and while scooters are

bow of the cruise ship *Veendam*, one of the last that still call in downtown Hamilton, we walked to the Sea Express terminal and hopped a fast ferry to the historic

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of St. George's Harbour and Town Cut.

It's easy enough to immerse oneself wholly in St. George, but you'd miss out on too much elsewhere, so one day we hopped the pink bus into Hamilton. "I can see why they don't let you rent cars here. Yikes!" an overfed American woman whispered loudly to her camera-clad husband as we careened around a corner, narrowly missing an oncoming light truck. Typical of Bermuda traffic etiquette, the two drivers merely tapped horns and

a total blast they should be handled with care, since driving on the "wrong side" of the narrow, walled roads has landed more than one tourist in the hospital or worse. The public transportation system is clean, safe, coordinated, comparatively inexpensive and, like all such systems worldwide, a great way to meet the locals. From Hamilton's central terminal we walked a few noisy city blocks down to the waterfront, dodging scrums of scooters revving at traffic lights. Under the looming

Royal Naval Dockyard on Bermuda's far northwest end.

Back when the upstart American colonies told the mother country to stuff it, England suddenly found herself without a naval base between Halifax, Nova Scotia, and the West Indies. So began the Dockyard, in 1795, which over the years grew into a sprawling amalgam of breakwaters, fortifications, barracks, storehouses, workshops, sail lofts and a huge victualing yard. Today, the Dockyard's 16 acres are the site of a cruise ship

terminal, a public marina, a boatyard and the National Museum of Bermuda. Poised as it is like a catcher's mitt to scoop up all the cruise-ship passengers, this is ground zero for tourism, which can be a little overwhelming (or underwhelming as the case may be).

It's possible, though, to find quiet, history and beauty throughout, nowhere so much as within the massive, walled Keep itself, and the restored Commissioner's House. Perched on a hill overlooking all of the Dockyard, the Commissioner's House dates from the 1820s, and today each magnificent room is dedicated to some aspect of the country's history, from slavery to maritime art to "Bermuda's Defense Heritage" to even the venerable biennial race from Newport. Beyond its wide, cool verandas, the sea sparkles like a sapphire, and I was imagining myself an admiral or commander, here to receive orders, right up until "Macarena" started playing on the docked cruise ship. Whatever. Undoubtedly it made logistical sense to place the cruise ship terminal here, but it did kind of taint the moment.

Ah, well, nothing is perfect, not even in Bermuda. It comes so very close, though. It was hard to watch the customs officer stamp our papers and hear him wish us godspeed, and then, like the white-tailed tropic bird, to leave the island in our wake until we can return.

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Back home on the Chesapeake Bay, the Clarke family is currently between voyages.