

Palm Trees and High Teas

Musing on the inscrutable identity of **Bermuda** — the Caribbean island that isn't.



Combining British heritage and a beachy scene, Bermuda delivers subtropical charm. Opposite: Hamilton's Front Street.

THE SUN SHINES. PALM FRONDS whisper in the breeze. Beachfront hotels shelter behind stately entryways while crystal-clear waters lap the shore. It's a picture-perfect beginning to my Caribbean vacation. But something's different. A scarlet British-style mailbox sits next to a receptacle marked *LITTER*. Cut-stone walls and box hedges flank the narrow roads instead of fruit stalls and sheet-metal bus shelters. No stray goats or chickens scurry across my path. And is that distinguished gentleman *really* wearing pink shorts and knee-high socks with his jacket and tie? Welcome to Bermuda.

Lying in North Atlantic waters about 650 miles east of the United States, this 20-square-mile subtropical archipelago is closer to North Carolina than to its nearest Caribbean "neighbor," the Bahamas, more than 900 miles away. Yet the island gets lumped in with the region in guidebooks. And we put it on our map in this magazine — in a little box labeled "not to scale." So is Bermuda Caribbean or not?

As I make my way from the airport into the capital, Hamilton, the sight of Bermuda's red telephone boxes brings back fond memories of my British childhood, and I note that colorful bougainvillea bushes run as rampant here as they do in Kingston, Jamaica, where I later lived, and in South Florida, now my home. Given my own patchwork background, I'm particularly intrigued by the island's mash-up of cultural influences, and I'm here to discover just how much "Caribbean" exists on this Atlantic isle.

"There is an undeniable connection to the Caribbean," William Griffith, Bermuda's director of tourism, originally from Barbados, tells me at his office on a hilly street lined with scooters. Commonalities of tourism and significant black populations — about half of Bermuda's can trace its roots to St. Kitts or Nevis — link the archipelago with the Caribbean. "We have a unique identity, but we certainly have a position within the Caribbean brotherhood."

Yet I find that Bermudians are swift to correct any misconceptions about their origins. "When I was at school, we were

taught that we were much better than the Caribbean," says Keibo "Mackie" Hart, my talkative 60-something taxi driver. "We have no poverty, no slums, no real ghettos," he crows. And growing up in Jamaica, I'd heard Bermudians described as snobbish. I'd been told they didn't consider themselves like "us."

As I stroll the town of St. George's the next day, I learn the differences start with the island's history. In 1609, British colonists bound for Virginia ran aground on the reef offshore, eventually establishing this picturesque waterfront town, the oldest continually inhabited English-speaking settlement in the Western Hemisphere. Africans were soon brought in as slaves, but Bermuda's topography, unlike most of the Caribbean's, didn't allow for a plantation-based economy.

Slaves labored primarily on ships and as household servants. Emancipation was declared in 1834, but Bermuda continued a form of institutionalized segregation (unheard-of in the Caribbean) until 1960, and citizens who didn't own land won the right to vote only in 1968. Today foreigners — employed mostly in the international banking, finance and insurance industries — make up roughly 30 percent of the workforce.

The dissimilarities are social and economic as well. More than 40 percent of Bermuda's population is white, a ratio far greater than in most other Caribbean nations. Standard of living and cost of living are both high: The island of 65,000 people has one of the highest per-capita incomes in the world, and until recently the unemployment rate was 0 percent. Overseas investment and limited land have driven housing prices into the stratosphere. Studio apartments can fetch rents up to \$1,500 a month, and a house here can easily cost the better part of \$1 million. In short, when compared to the vast majority of their Caribbean counterparts, Bermudians are decidedly well-off.

The island's "first" and most famous tourist, Queen Victoria's daughter,



Princess Louise, gave the island rave reviews following her 1883 visit, which precipitated the first wave of tourism here — long before Caribbean tourism took off in the mid-1900s. "In the mind of the public, Bermuda is in the Caribbean," Muriel Richardson, dynamic manager of the 60-year-old Rosedon Hotel, tells me, "but we invented tourism in Bermuda; for a long time it was all we had." Invented tourism? It's a bold statement, and a little ironic. Another manager I meet opines that Bermudian hoteliers, once industry pioneers, are now playing catch-up to their Caribbean protégés.

The author Mark Twain, a frequent visitor, famously declared of Bermuda: "You go to heaven if you want to; I'd druther stay here." More than a century later the island retains its reputation as an upmarket destination. During Bermuda's high season — April to October, opposite the Caribbean's because winter temperatures here can fall as low as the 50s — it's a convenient getaway for well-heeled East Coasters, less than 90 minutes' flying time from JFK.

Hamilton's Front Street teems with visitors dressed in preppy country-club-casual clothes. Shoppers emerge from the Scottish Wool shop with cashmere "essentials." Trim young mothers in brightly colored Lily Pulitzer shift dresses stock up on the

latest styles at Cecile. And in hotels and restaurants, there's little evidence of the carefree "no-problem" atmosphere visitors often encounter in the Caribbean.

Yet Bermuda offers almost everything Caribbean-lovers enjoy. Laze on scenic sands. Settle into world-class resorts such as brand-new Tucker's Point or the venerable Cambridge Beaches. And socialize with locals who are, across the board, friendly to a fault. To be fair, Caribbophiles who prefer their getaways rustic and a little rough around the edges — those who gravitate toward Negril, Jamaica, or Tulum, Mexico — won't find that boho brand of charm here. But Bermuda's highly developed infrastructure and social sophistication appeal in much the same way as high-end Caribbean destinations such as Anguilla, St. Barts, and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The truth is, Bermuda defies easy categorization. Albeit separate from the region, it seems in many ways Caribbean-like. While the island lies beyond the cradle of the Caribbean basin, the same Gulf Stream waves that wash, say, Antigua's shores also break on Bermuda's. And a global citizen like me feels instantly at home here, whether indulging in a proper English tea at that genteel landmark, the Fairmont Hamilton Princess, feasting on fish and chips at the Hog Penny pub or sunning on the beach at Horseshoe Bay. — SARAH GREAVES-GABBADON

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