

## The warm, friendly heart of gold of the island of Bequia



Bequia, the second largest island in the Grenadines [www.4cornersimages.com](http://www.4cornersimages.com)

---

**Amanda Linfoot**

Published at 12:01AM, December 27 2014

Though the A-list playground of Mustique has an aloof charm, beautiful Bequia is a perfect island in its own right

Looking out to sea from Friendship Bay, on the island of Bequia, Mustique sits squarely on the horizon. This is the Grenadines — not short on fabulous vistas — but this scene is particularly appealing: blue sky, sea twinkling in the sunlight, a holiday island that radiates glamour.

Roughly opposite my viewpoint at the Bequia Beach Hotel sits the Cotton House, Mustique's only hotel. Guests there can sit on the manicured beach and enjoy the reverse of my view. Except that they will have paid considerably more for the privilege.

Playground of royalty and A-listers, Mustique might seem off the travel radar of mere

mortals. But here's a secret: you don't need to remortgage if you want to visit. It's just perfect for day trips, as are the up-and-coming Canouan island, home to Sandy Lane's sister hotel, and other Caribbean idylls. Base yourself at Bequia and you get to stay on a lovely island in its own right, which also turns out to be the perfect base for a luxury island-hopping holiday.

But first you have to get there. Bequia is the second largest of the Grenadines but it's one of those islands that requires a bit of effort to reach. After flying into Barbados, you can either take a shared charter to Bequia, or, as I did, jump on a short-hop flight to St Vincent, spend the night there, and then take the ferry on to Bequia.

St Vincent might be the alpha male in this island state — “the mainland” — but looks-wise, it is simply unable to compete with the sheer gorgeousness of the Grenadinian side of the family. Still, if you find yourself there, the best place to stay is the Grenadine House hotel. Formerly the home of the British governor, it's now a restful hideaway up the hill from Kingstown's bustle.

The island is beautiful enough: volcanic, rugged and hilly, it has stunning sheer hillsides covered in lush forest, and rocky headlands punctuated by little coves. I take a drive up the leeward, Caribbean side of the island and see about ten tourists all day. But that drive is hard work: it is five hours of going up and down impossibly steep hills, round and round hairpins, on boneshaker concrete roads. I soon feel queasy.

It is from here that I head to Mustique for my day trip. I could have waited until I was at Bequia, and chartered a boat for about \$300 (£191) for the round trip. But as it is just me, my best option seems to be the nine-minute flight from Kingstown, for \$75 return, before pushing on to Bequia.

As you dip down to land on Mustique's tiny airstrip, it is clear from the bird's eye view of the immaculate gardens that this is no ordinary Caribbean island. Michael, one of three taxi drivers on Mustique, is driving me around for a couple of hours. When I realise the island is only two miles square, I wonder how we're going to fill the time. Listening to Michael gossip, as it turns out. Only some of which is not libellous.

But the first thing on his mind is seaweed. As we approach our first stop, Macaroni beach, where Cheryl Cole became Mrs Fernandez-Versini in July, there is a tangy pong of crisp-dried algae. To me it smells like my childhood on the south coast of England; to him it smells like a rubbish tip. The weed has washed in from the Sargasso Sea and is blanketing every Atlantic shoreline in the Caribbean.

We progress on to L'Ansecoy beach where he points out Bryan Adams's low-level villa, Point Lookout, beside which sit Mick Jagger's two homes, Stargroves and Pelican Beach. At the other end of the sand is Tommy Hilfiger's mansion-like Palm Beach. Back in the car, we skirt Blackstone House, Shania Twain's place, and pass a paddock where 30 or so wild tortoises are grazing. At Tortoise Corner, there's a 5ft-high statue of two of them having sex, a precarious-looking pastime. It was commissioned by the late Felix Dennis, who owned two villas just down the road: he bought the first, Shogun, from David Bowie and then next door too. They are round the corner from the Firefly, a five-bedroom guesthouse with a view that knocks your

socks off and an atmospheric restaurant, fitted out in teak, which is a favourite with the Middletons. (Its sister hotel in Bequia is a great place for lunch too.)

Next up, the Cotton House, for a quick drink. The staff get a bit antsy if you take photos, as the clientele don't like it. Today, there are only nobodies on the beach, but it's fabulous people-watching. And finally lunch at the legendary Basil's Bar, which stretches out over the water at Britannia Bay, and has been the scene of some seriously A-list partying: everyone from William and Kate to Amy Winehouse, Kate Moss and the Beckhams have let their hair down here.

Mustique is beautiful and fascinating, but feels a bit alien. The 120 villa owners can dictate, via the island's management company, exactly how day-to-day life unfolds: if they want the road in front of their house shut to stop people gawping at them, it happens. There are security guards everywhere. Which makes absolute sense if you're very rich and famous, but makes me feel like a ne'er-do-well.

Michael fears Mustique has lost touch with the fun, hedonistic idyll that Colin Tennant intended when he started selling off plots of land on the island at the end of the Fifties. When Tennant celebrated his 50th birthday on Macaroni beach in 1976, his guests — including Princess Margaret — were greeted by an honour guard of local teenagers whose get-up for the night consisted principally of a gold-painted coconut shell codpiece. The place seems a bit too uptight for such shenanigans these days.

After Mustique, it's a bit of a relief to be boarding the ferry at Kingstown for the 50-minute crossing to Bequia, which feels much more like home. Port Elizabeth, where the ferry docks, is a charming place, with a main street that has interesting shops on one side and colourful boats pulled up on to the beach on the other. There's a stand selling scrimshaw — carved whalebone — and the teeth of some poor humpback. By a quirk of history, Bequia is the only Caribbean island with an aboriginal whaling quota — four can be landed per year.

The beach gives way to the tree-lined, harbourside Belmont walkway on the south side of town, along which bars and restaurants provide good stopping-off points for a drink in the shade as you watch the boats go in and out. Soon you'll be able to continue on to Princess Margaret beach, which was hastily renamed after Her Maj's sister came ashore from a yacht for a swim in 1958.

The Bequia Beach Hotel makes a handy base because it's only five minutes by car from Port Elizabeth. More than that, it's refreshingly individual. It's the labour of love of a retired Swedish property developer called Bengt Mortstedt, who fell for tranquil Friendship Bay in 2004 and dreamt of building the sort of hotel he would want to stay at. So forget notions of the identikit resorts that pepper the Caribbean, with their naff, floral soft furnishings: the Bequia Beach Hotel is a triumph of tasteful cream interior design.

There are 59 rooms — mine is about ten yards from the tree-fringed beach — spread in little blocks and individual units across a spacious site, which also houses a spa and watersports centre. The rooms are comfortable, quiet and filled with squashy chairs and handsome wooden furniture — all shipped from Europe.

I could have stayed there on the beach for days, but there is exploring to be done. I'm soon back at Port Elizabeth for another island-hop day trip. This time, I'm there to catch the Jaden Sun express service. It's a 50-minute, EC\$100 (£23) journey to the jetty at Canouan ("Can-oo-wan"), which is set to be the next big thing in the Grenadines. The five-star Sandy Lane in Barbados has built a sister resort, the Pink Sands Club, on the island but is taking an absolute age to get it open. It's part of a large closed resort that occupies two thirds of Canouan and includes a golf course. There's a construction boom under way, with 1,000 workers putting up villas and building a marina down by the airport.

At the moment, though, the marina is nothing but an embanked basin full of murky water, and Charlestown, where the ferry docks, feels like a one-horse town. Having exhausted all possibilities within an hour (including a drive round the accessible bit of the island), I retreat to the Tamarind Beach Hotel for lunch and a laze on a sunlounger. Frankly, I wish I'd stayed on the ferry, paid another EC\$10 and gone on to Mayreau or Union Island, which has a pretty little harbour with good restaurants and shops.

At dinner that night — a tasty meal of parmesan chicken, breaded plantain and sautéed vegetables — Mortstedt wants to hear all about Canouan. He might have trained as a lawyer and worked in property development, but he seems to have found his métier with hotelkeeping. He's a natural host, constantly doing the rounds of his guests for a chat, and even manages to get everyone dancing.

I've more or less decided that Bequia is my favourite Grenadine, until a late contender bowls me over. Tobago Cays is a marine reserve that safeguards five photogenic sandy little islands in the middle of a horseshoe-shaped reef. It's uninhabited, so there's no public transport to get me there, but I've found the next best thing: the Friendship Rose, a wooden schooner built in Friendship Bay in 1967, which used to serve as the Bequia-St Vincent ferry. It now ferries tourists down to Tobago Cays and, because Bequia is only 7 sq miles, you'll find yourself on board with people you've run into elsewhere on the island.

It's a dawn start to allow for the three-hour sail down there, watching the flying fish and the gulls that shadow the hunting tuna, but good things come to those who wait: the Tobago Cays are stunning. I'm not sure I've ever been anywhere so lovely. It has everything a tropical idyll needs. Crystal clear water in a dazzling array of azures and aquamarines? Oh yes. Bright blue sky with big fluffy cumulus clouds? As far as the eye can see. Interesting marine life for a bit of snorkelling? That'll be the green and hawksbill turtles.

As we land on Baradal cay, the crew point us towards an area offshore where sea grass is growing. After a 50-yard swim past some mean-looking sea urchins, you go into stealth mode — these turtles are not too at ease with man, so noise and movement have to be kept to a minimum. And then you spot one scooting along the seafloor, tearing off the grass toothlessly, like a granny who's left her dentures at home. You hardly dare move as it breaks off to float to the surface to gasp for air for a couple of seconds and then descends again.

Next, it's off across the lagoon on a tender for some more snorkelling. Nothing is quite as impressive as the first creature we catch sight of by the reef — a stingray, serenely drifting past — but between us we spot blue tang, sergeant majors, hogfish, Nassau grouper, scrawled filefish and parrotfish.

On the tender, my eye is caught by a tree line that seems strangely familiar, just outside the reef, on Petit Tabac. The jaunty angle of the palm trees was last seen in *Pirates of the Caribbean* — it is the desert island Johnny Depp and Keira Knightley were marooned on in *The Curse of the Black Pearl*. Which really can't have been a bad day at the office, even for those two.

Still, you can't stay on Tobago Cays, so after a few hours in paradise, it's back to the Bequia Beach. That evening, though, contentedly sitting down to goat's cheese tart and shrimp tempura, as the waves wash up the beach just a few yards away, I conclude that bliss comes in many forms. And a great hotel on Friendship Bay is one of them.

There's talk that Bequia could be touted as the new Mustique. Personally, I hope that's not the case, because while Mustique has an aloof charm, Bequia has a warm, friendly heart of gold. Please don't change. You're perfect just the way you are.

### Need to know

Amanda Linfoot was a guest of the Bequia Beach Hotel ([bequiabeach.com](http://bequiabeach.com)) in the Grenadines and Carrier (0161 492 1354, [carrier.co.uk](http://carrier.co.uk)), which has seven nights at the hotel from £1,500pp, B&B. This includes return flights on British Airways to Barbados, connecting and transfers. The flight from St Vincent to Mustique costs \$75 return, and the day trip to Tobago Cays costs \$150, including breakfast, lunch, drinks and snacks.

### More information

The St Vincent and Grenadines Tourism Authority ([discoversvg.com](http://discoversvg.com))

2 comments



Bengt Mortstedt

1 person listening

+ Follow

Post comment

Newest | Oldest | Most Recommended

Mr David Webster

13 days ago

Bequia is a beautiful island which we have returned to for many years and long may it continue. Lovely people, good food and weather and beautiful

beaches.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

**Tsara Lawrence**

13 days ago

This is completely charming.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Livefyre

© Times Newspapers Limited 2014 | Version 5.13.0.2(137029)

Registered in England No. 894646 Registered office:

*1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF*

[My Account](#) | [Editorial Complaints](#) | [RSS](#) | [Classified advertising](#) | [Display advertising](#) | [The Times Whisky Club](#) | [Encounters Dating](#) | [Sunday Times Wine Club](#) | [Privacy & Cookie Policy](#) | [Syndication](#) | [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Contact us](#) | [iPhone](#) | [Android smartphone](#) | [Android tablet](#) | [Kindle](#) | [Kindle Fire](#) | [Place an announcement in The Times](#) | [Sunday Times Driving](#) | [The Times Bookshop](#) | [Times Tutorials](#) | [Times Currency Services](#) | [Times Print Gallery](#) | [Handpicked Collection](#)

---