

LIFE

Bermuda offers British charm, pink sands and easy access



Gibbs Lighthouse, built in 1846, is 117-feet tall and provides sweeping views of the island of Bermuda. Photos by Nicole Pensiero

Just 650 miles off the U.S. coast, Bermuda delivers sub-tropical beauty with an unmistakably British soul.

Nicole Pensiero for *Advance Local*

It had been 25 years since my last visit to Bermuda. Could this small island possibly live up to the memories? Back then, we'd enjoyed two blissful days in this sub-tropical paradise before a looming hurricane whisked our cruise ship away to the less-exotic shores of Cape Cod.

That trip always felt unfinished to me because, well, it was. We'd gotten a taste of Bermuda's charms, but not enough time there to savor them. I always figured I'd return one day, but those days turned into decades.

This time, we were set for a full five-day getaway. And in the 20 minutes it took us to drive from the airport to the Rosewood Bermuda, it all came flooding back: sparkling blue water framed by pink sand beaches, the craggy limestone cliffs, the pastel-colored buildings.

Time had certainly passed, but Bermuda's allure remained unchanged — and again, I was enchanted. Even in the winter, during an intense cold snap that included the late January snowstorm, a Bermuda vacation proved utterly enjoyable.

When I told friends I was headed to Bermuda, many confessed that they weren't exactly sure where Bermuda is.

Several assumed it is a Caribbean island. But this 22-square-mile island is smack dab in the North Atlantic, about 650 miles off the coast of North Carolina. Meaning, it's a four-season destination — and while winter there was (thankfully) not like winter in New Jersey, it was hardly steamy.

We enjoyed temperatures in the high 60s/low 70s during our four-night wellness-themed escape, so we could relax by the pool, and even once took a dip in the ocean. I left convinced that this is the most beautiful island I've ever visited.

Easy to get to — direct flights take just a couple of hours from Newark and Philadelphia — Bermuda is closer to the U.S. than it is to the U.K.

England's oldest colony (formally since 1684), Bermuda has remained decidedly British in its traditions, complete with afternoon tea. Driving is on the left, the speed limit is only 22 miles per hour, and you still can't rent a regular car. While scooters were all the rage when I first visited here in the late 1990s, today, two-seater electric "micro cars" are an equally popular way to get around.

"Twizys" — nickname for the Renault Twizy — offer a four-wheeled, enclosed alternative to scooters. There are plenty of places to rent them, including the historic Hamilton Princess hotel. (You can go from one end to the other of this the 22-mile-long island in less than two hours, even at those slow speeds.)

WHY BERMUDA

With its gorgeous beaches, excellent restaurants and many places to explore, including caves you can swim in, it's no surprise that more than half a million visitors flock to Bermuda each year.

While international business is now the top-ranking industry here, tourism is still a heavy-hitter. In fact, the island's largest



Downtown Hamilton is the place for shopping on the island. There's even a very English Marks & Spencer department store.



A ferry is seen traveling in Hamilton, the capital city of Bermuda.

hotel, the Fairmont Southampton — opened in 1972 and closed since 2020 — is undergoing a massive, much-anticipated \$550 million redevelopment expected for completion in the next few months.

We stayed at the lovely Rosewood Bermuda, which has a golf club, spa, private beach and four freshwater pools. Built in 2009 and overlooking the stunning Castle Harbor, this exclusive resort (with only 88 rooms and suites) is big on service and offers many wonderful amenities.

Our two-room, harbor-view suite could easily accommodate up to four people and came complete with a bar and tea service setup, two showers and a soaking tub. Each morning, we enjoyed a lovely breakfast at the resort's Island Brasserie, adjoining the popular Tucker's Bar (which is a great place to have a rum-and-ginger beer Dark 'n Stormy cocktail, an island favorite).

Even in the off-season, we discovered there was plenty to do in Bermuda, both indoor and outdoor. As one local told me, "When you come to Bermuda, the whole island is your resort." How true. Here are some ideas for a visit:

ENJOY GREAT MEALS

On our first night, we savored steaks at Harry's on the Waterfront, overlooking Hamilton Harbour. The winner of many "Best of Bermuda" awards, the cuisine and service here were excellent. We visited during the island's annual Restaurant Weeks, when more than 50 participating eateries offer an array of two-course lunches and three-course dinners for between \$35 and \$69. (Bermuda can be a pricey island; these prices were a great bargain).

pitcher, you can order by the glass or jug — but remember, a little goes a long way with this potent combo of Gosling's Black Seal and Amber rums, mixed with fruit juices.

The Conservatory Bar in the Rosewood is known for handcrafted cocktails and lively vibes in a cozy space. The Frog & Onion Pub has been a favorite with tourists and locals alike for more than 30 years. Housed in an 18th century Cooperage at the Historic Royal Dockyard, it is the island's oldest microbrewery.

When it came time for our spa treatments, we had to go with the famed Natura Cave Spa at the Grotto Bay Beach Resort — the island's only hotel to offer an all-inclusive stay if desired. This spa is unlike any other I've experienced. Reason being: it's in a massive 300,000-year-old cave, complete with stalagmites. The 50-minute Signature massage (\$175) was worth every penny, as I floated into bliss on an actual floating pontoon. You can also take a swim at the adjoining Cathedral Cave, complete with crystalline water and awe-inspiring views, both above and below.

If you want to explore more of the island's caves, check out the famed Crystal Caves of Bermuda. There are 88 steps down to the caves, so wear good shoes. You can't swim in these two caves — known as the Crystal and Fantasy caves — but the views are amazing. Discovered in the 1800s and popularized by Mark Twain, the best value is to visit both caves via a combo ticket: \$35 for adults, \$12 for kids 5-12 and 4 and younger are admitted free.

TEA TIME

As Britain's oldest colony (settled in 1609), and a cultural, legal and political system deeply rooted in British traditions, it's no surprise that you can enjoy afternoon tea here. From the Grotto Hotel or the Rosewood, to the famed Lili Bermuda perfumery, and the elegant Crown & Anchor at the Hamilton Princess, there are many options available.

ENJOY NATURE

The beaches of Bermuda are gorgeous. Horseshoe Bay and Elbow Beach, on the South Shore, are both known for their soft pink sand and dramatic coastal scenery. For off-the-beaten-path snorkeling, check out Church Bay in the West End.

The historic Gibbs Hill Lighthouse, built in 1846, is one of only two cast-iron lighthouses still in existence in the world. Open seven days a week, visitors can climb 185 steps to the top for stunning, panoramic views of the island. And for something truly different, local vegan chef Doreen Williams-James offers a 90-minute Wild Herbs N Plants tour, where participants can enjoy edible plants, and sample plant-based local dishes.

SHOPPING TIME

Downtown Hamilton has plenty of options for shopping.

The Washington Mall, Bermuda's largest shopping center, has more than 50 retailers offering everything from leather goods, furniture, and clothing to locally made jewelry. Gibbons Company is Bermuda's department store.

And for the quintessential British shopping experience, there's even a Marks & Spencer (M&S) in the center of town. But don't be surprised to see men wearing the so-called "Bermuda Suit" — a blazer, dress shirt, solid-color Bermuda shorts and knee-high socks. It's accepted professional attire on the island.



The Natura Spa at The Grotto resort is an amazing place to be pampered.

In the capital of Hamilton, we savored a tasty pub lunch at the popular Devil's Isle Café, which serves its version of the "go-to" Bermuda Fish Sandwich: deep-fried fish (usually snapper, wahoo, or rockfish), tartar sauce, hot sauce and coleslaw, served on toasted cinnamon-raisin bread. Another fun place to try to a fish sandwich is at Mamma Mia, a casual roadside snack bar popular with locals.

We also enjoyed a delicious dinner on the porch of the Huckleberry Brasserie, located at the historic Rosedon Hotel. There were also cocktails and roasted watermelon at the 1880s "Pink Palace," aka the Hamilton Princess hotel, which is also great for a walk-around to admire the impressive art collection on public display. For Sunday brunch, we enjoyed a three-course meal with a windswept, beachfront view at the Pink Beach Club at The Loren.

But if you're hankering for a Starbucks drink or a fast-food burger, you'll need to let that one go: In 1977, Bermuda passed legislation prohibiting most foreign restaurant franchises, designed to protect local businesses, preserve the island's unique culinary culture, and maintain its high-end image. The law prevents chains with specific branding, uniforms, or menus from operating, with only one exception: a downtown KFC grandfathered in.

RUM SWIZZLE AND OTHER DRINKS

There are many fantastic places to sip a cocktail or enjoy a beer in Bermuda. The island's oldest pub, The Swizzle Inn, has the distinction of having created the rum swizzle back in 1932 and now considered Bermuda's national drink. Served from an iced