

# Forces of NATURE

In their quest to harness the wind, sailors have shaped Bermuda's culture for four centuries. **CELIA BARBOUR** explores the tiny island's thriving mariner scene.



**I** WAS ROARING. JUMPING UP AND DOWN, fists pumping the air, hollering full-throated into the Bermuda wind. I'm normally a decorous person, but SailGP (plus a Dark 'N' Stormy or two) had unraveled me. It's among the most beautifully thrilling sporting events I've ever witnessed. Twelve sleek,

ultra-high-tech catamarans fly over the water at speeds up to 60 mph, careen around hairpin turns in breathtakingly close proximity to one another, and then dart off, their crews dashing from hull to hull while helicopters and drones buzz overhead.

A yacht-club hobby for the gin-and-tonic set it's not.



I collected myself and turned to see if anyone had witnessed my outburst. Sitting a few feet away was a neatly dressed gentleman with a snow-white mustache. I introduced myself, learned his name was Stephen West, and asked if he was a sailor. He was. Indeed, he'd been a reserve for Bermuda's Olympic sailing teams in 1968 and 1972, and competed in the Pan American Games in 1979.

"So what do you think of all this high-tech stuff invading your sport?" I asked him. Just that morning, I'd toured the "backstage" of the Apex Group Bermuda Sail Grand Prix (SailGP) operations, a kind of pop-up traveling circus of tents and shipping containers where the F50 racing vessels are assembled and disassembled—carbon-fiber hulls; titanium foils; lightweight, airplane-like wing sails—and from which the two-day races are managed at each of 13 different sites around the globe, from Halifax to Abu Dhabi. I'd even stepped inside the race's command center, where a bank of screens and monitors receives a constant data stream from 125 sensors on each boat during the races, a setup that looked for all the world like NASA mission control—if NASA and its rockets were powered entirely by wind.

"I love what they're doing," West said. "It's absolutely staggering." He was particularly impressed with the innovative new design of the foils, T-shaped titanium blades that emerge from the bottom of each hull and allow the vessels to fly above the water at high enough speeds. "My only complaint is that the races don't last long enough," he added.

Turns out, protracted sailing voyages are in West's blood. His ancestors journeyed from England to Bermuda in 1636, a trip lasting roughly two months. Just 27 years earlier, the very first English ship had crashed onto Bermuda's reefs (a shipwreck that was believed to have inspired Shakespeare's *The Tempest*). After its crew made their way ashore, some of them decided to stay put, becoming the island's first inhabitants and establishing Bermuda as an English colony.

I could see why those castaways opted to stay. Bermuda checks all the dreamy-beach-vacation boxes—turquoise waters, sugar-

soft sand, balmy weather, an endless supply of rum cocktails. But it also is weirder and cooler than this implies, and unlike just about any other place on earth.



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—PHILIPPE ROUJA

A tiny squiggle of an archipelago, Bermuda measures just 21 square miles, but is surrounded by 230 square miles of coral reefs. Over the centuries, those reefs would shape the islanders' character. Early settlers quickly discovered that in addition to farming and shipbuilding, they could make a tidy living scavenging shipwrecks. To support their mission, savvy islanders would light fires that would trick captains into making the wrong approach, instead guiding them onto reefs;

once the boats were stuck, a rate would be charged for rescue and the wrecks pillaged.

"The whole island in some ways developed around wrecking ships," said anthropologist Philippe Rouja, Bermuda's official custodian of historic wrecks, over dinner with a group of journalists the following night. "In the 1600s, ships are coming back from the New World carrying gold. They're trying to figure out how far across the Atlantic they are." For them, Bermuda was a reassuring landmark. "So you want to see Bermuda, but if you're being blown in from the southwest, that reef is nine miles out, and the minute you see Bermuda you're already on top of the reef. You're screwed. Plus, those ships couldn't turn back; they couldn't sail to windward." Early Bermudians—short, as they were, on raw materials—were all too happy to salvage what they could of the cargo, launching a native practice of



FROM TOP: In the capital city of Hamilton, pastel buildings line the harbor. • Bermuda is home to hundreds of shipwrecks, like the *HMS Vixen*. PREVIOUS PAGE: Teams from around the globe compete at the 2026 Apex Group Bermuda Sail Grand Prix.



licensed piracy that continued well into the 20th century. Today, keeping salvaged treasures from Bermuda's 250 known shipwrecks is forbidden by law.

Shipwrecks, in part, also spurred Bermuda's legendary sailing prowess. "Those early shipwreck survivors, those mariners—the first ships they built were amazing," Rouja said. "They needed to sail to windward, so that's the origin of the Bermuda sloop rig, which allows you to turn back against the wind." This rig, which consists of a main-sail set behind the mast and a jib (or headsail) in front of the mast, remains the standard sailboat configuration to this day; even the F50 vessels employ a highly evolved version of it.

The wind would shape the architecture, too, after hurricanes huffed and puffed and blew down early settlers' first palmetto leaf-and-cedar dwellings. The next generation of sturdy buildings were made from the island's coral-limestone bedrock, a porous and lightweight stone soft enough to be cut with a saw, but highly resilient. Because there's no fresh water on the island—it sieves out through that porous bedrock—the Bermudians also came up with a clever way to collect it. Houses have stepped roofs that allow rain to cascade slowly into a channel near the eaves, which in turn directs it into a cistern. Every house on the island has its own cistern, and every few years, the ziggurat-like roofs are cleaned and re-limed bright white, ensuring that the water supply stays pure. Mostly. "If I visited that house, I would ask to be served wine," said local historian Kristin White, indicating a dingy roof as we toured St. George, Bermuda's oldest town.

"Architecture is Bermuda's vernacular art form," she added, noting that Bermudians also invented window shutters with push-out slats and a water-shedding window frame, all in response to the climate.

Living as I do an hour north of New York City, I often take for granted that human innovation happens in defiance of nature, as a way to dominate, suppress, or even control it. But my visit to Bermuda was showing me an alternative vision—one that gives me hope. For all its technological wizardry, SailGP

was created in 2019 as a way to make sail racing fairer and more sustainable, as well as faster. With some traditional sailing competitions, such as America's Cup, teams develop their own boats, so the winning team can use its prize money to capitalize on its advantage year after year. "SailGP catamarans are identical, which creates a level playing field," explained Sir Russell Coutts, an Olympic gold medalist in the sport and CEO and cofounder of SailGP. "This shifts the focus to the skill and strategy of the athletes." And to the vagaries of the wind.

The league also requires the teams to include women and men. In a sport historically dominated by men, "there's something really inspiring about that," said Mali Boykin, a beauty entrepreneur from Atlanta whom

**ABOVE:** The Bonds Flying Roos Team from Australia speeds to victory. **INSET:** White, stepped roofs and painted shutters are common in Bermuda.

I met on a beach a few hours after the races. She and her husband, George, a sports and entertainment executive, were total newbies to SailGP.

But that didn't stop them from being wowed by it. "The sport is just so fascinating," said Mali, as parrotfish the size of flattened watermelons swirled around our ankles. "It's fantastic that the sailboats are totally dependent on the wind; there are no motors. I left wanting to discover more."

Me, too. About SailGP, and about Bermuda, its people, and its history. As those shipwrecked sailors first realized, human innovation and cunning work best when they're aligned with—and respectful of—whatever nature offers up, whether that's a palm frond or a chunk of limestone, a steady breeze or a hurricane. ♦

