

BERMUDA

TOURISM AUTHORITY

Contact:
Lauren Ryback
Lauren.ryback@turnerpr.com
212-453-3483

History and Culture Fact Sheet

Overview

Due to its English heritage and deeply rooted Caribbean and African traditions, Bermuda has a rich and diverse culture. From the colonization of the island, to the modern day Bermuda shorts trend, Bermuda's unique history makes it unlike any other place in the world. Visitors can immerse themselves in Bermuda's past by visiting the historic towns, churches and forts in addition to the National Museum of History.

Founding and Early History

- The islands were first discovered in 1505 by the Spanish sea captain, Juan de Bermudez, but it wasn't until Admiral Sir George Somers and his crew aboard the Sea Venture, got caught in a storm and shipwrecked on the islands' eastern shore, did Bermuda settlement begin.

Local Tip: Local legend says that Somers loved the island so much that he asked to be buried there. Though his body was returned to England, it's rumored that his heart is buried in Bermuda, in the area now known as Somers Garden.

- In the early 17th century the Virginia Company then the British Government would gain control of the islands, naming the settlement the Bermuda Company and designating St. George parish as the capital.
- Bermuda's port played an important role as a staging area in Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, aiding first the U.S. then Britain, respectively. Civil War blockade-runners made stops in Bermuda and during the Prohibition, Bermudian ships profited by running rum to the United States.

Local Tip: In 1864, the Mary Celestia, a Civil War blockade-runner, sank off the coast of Bermuda, mysteriously abandoned by its crew and loaded with cargo. In 2011, divers were able to explore the wreckage of the ship and discovered a hidden box of cargo containing a pair of intact perfume bottles. This 150 year old perfume came from Piesse and Lubin, an elite perfume house in London during the 19th century. While in Bermuda, visitors can see and smell the perfume at the Bermuda Perfumery. A replica of the scent can be purchased, with part of the proceeds from the sale benefiting the preservation and promotion of Bermuda's historic shipwrecks.

Three Hubs for History and Culture

Town of St. George

Originally called "New London" when settled in 1609, the Town of St. George was one of the first English settlements in the New World and served as Bermuda's capital until 1815. St. George and its related fortifications and military structures have been consistently strengthened and occupied since its founding. In recognition of its historical value and preservation, St. George was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000.

Local Tip: Visitors can immerse themselves in the history of St. George by taking a free guided walking tour or view The Ducking Stool - a historical re-enactment of an 18th century public trial. Don't miss a chance to visit St. Peter's Church, Their Majesties Chappell one of the first churches built in the New World. During the holidays, the Bermuda National Trust Christmas Walkabout is another favorite event during which the community is invited to explore some of the oldest buildings in the area and enjoy refreshments about town.

Royal Naval Dockyard. Established in 1809 and built as a direct result of the independence of the English American colonies in 1783, the Royal Naval Dockyard is the most visited site in Bermuda and home to the National Museum of Bermuda. The Dockyard played an important role in Bermuda's economy, accounting for more than 15 percent of the Island's income and employing more than a thousand Bermudians at a time.

Local Tip: While at the Royal Naval Dockyard be sure to visit the 15-acre property of the National Museum of Bermuda, in particular the Commissioner's House, which initially served as the private residence for the civilian head of the Dockyard. Check out the Hall of History: a two-story mural painted by famous local artist Graham Foster. This mural, completed after 7000 hours of painting, depicts 500 years of Bermuda history and culture. The Bermuda Craft Market, Rum Cake Company and Snorkel Park Beach can also be found at the Royal Naval Dockyard.

City of Hamilton

The City of Hamilton is the capital of Bermuda and named after former governor, Sir Henry Hamilton. There are several historic buildings, shops and churches set along the Hamilton harbor, including a heavily used port for tourism and business. Churches in Hamilton, such as the Holy Trinity Church, are some of the oldest in the New World. As the capital of Bermuda, Hamilton truly lives its motto, "sparsa collegit" meaning "brought together the scattered."

Local Tip: Nearby Hamilton, the Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art within the Bermuda Botanical Gardens is not to be missed. This collection of Bermuda inspired art, created by famous artists such as Winslow Homer, Georgia O'Keefe and many others, visually represents Bermuda's history, culture and heritage. Then head to Front Street to shop, dine at some of Bermuda's top restaurants and explore the historic harbor.

Heritage and Traditions

Gombey Dancing

Representative of the mixture of cultures, Gombey is a traditional Bermuda masquerade performance of dancing and drumming troupes. The British military bands inspire the snare drum-driven rhythms while the performances tell cultural stories.

Local Tip: Visitors can see Gombey performances during Harbour Nights, a festival held every Wednesday night during the summer in the City of Hamilton. Performances traditionally take place on the streets of Bermuda during Boxing Day and New Year's Day and also in May during the Bermuda Day Parade.

Bermuda Shorts

This iconic fashion staple was created in Bermuda when British troops sought a comfortable uniform solution for Bermuda's warm climate. The trend quickly caught on and businessmen, women and tourists alike adopted the style. Adhering to Bermuda's traditionally conservative dress code, policemen used to carry around yardsticks and measure shorts worn in public to make sure they met the length requirement. Today, the universally recognized fashion staple is still a popular option while on island.

Local Tip: If you forgot to pack your own Bermuda shorts before your trip to the island, rest assured that you can buy the perfect pair while shopping in Hamilton – and that a policeman won't be waiting with a yardstick.

Moongates

Moongates were brought to Bermuda in 1860 when a homesick Chinese sea captain built a circular rock structure in his private garden. They originated in China as entryways

into private gardens, and today young couples and honeymooners will walk through them for good luck.

Onions

Onions were introduced to Bermuda in 1616 and quickly became the island's major export crop. They supplied onions to the United States and United Kingdom in mass quantities, at one point shipping more than 30,000 boxes to the United States weekly. Farming and exporting onions created work, profits and a great sense of pride for the people of Bermuda. People began referring to Bermudians as "onions" and Bermuda as the "onion patch." Today, the onion legacy lives on in Bermuda cuisine and culture.

Local Tip: While on island, don't be alarmed if you overhear somebody being called an onion. Unlike the average onion that will make you cry, it refers to an upstanding citizen, worthy of respect and admiration.

Shipwrecks

There are massive coral reefs spanning across 200 square miles near Bermuda's shores, making it difficult for ships to navigate around the islands before modern day navigation systems. As a result, divers and snorkelers can visit Bermuda's hidden underworld by exploring more than 300 shipwrecks.

Churches

Bermuda has one of the highest churches per capita in the world. The majority of the population identifies themselves as Christians, with Anglican churches being the most prevalent. Churches such as St. Peter's, Their Majesties Chappell in the Town of St. George and the Holy Trinity Church in Hamilton, date back to the early 17th century, making them some of the first churches in the New World.