

The sand, the shorts, the onions . . .

Bermuda has its icons, but where's the pink stuff?

By Robert Cross

Published October 1, 2006

HAMILTON, Bermuda -- I'm skeptical about beaches with big reputations.

The ones billed as having pure white sand usually prove to be slightly beige.

And pink beaches, the icons of Bermuda, typically appear, to my eye at least, just...sandy.

"Some beaches along the South Shore are very pink," an employee of the 9 Beaches resort insisted after I had pretty much given up the search. All nine beaches at 9 Beaches--which is not on the South Shore--were as pale and tan as cafe au lait.

"I believe there's a pink beach by the airport," 9 Beaches guest Frances Roby told my wife, Juju, and me as we ate breakfast on the terrace of the resort's main building. "There used to be more, but the coral that makes them pink has been fading away."

Roby, who lives in Oxnard, Calif., knows a lot about Bermuda because she grew up here. She returns periodically to visit relatives and relax.

We asked her about Bermuda's picturesque, pastel-painted homes.

"All the houses are made of concrete and stone," she said. "My father built his first house by hand. It had a white roof like all the others. The whitewash sterilizes the rainwater."

Nearly every house has a white slate roof, stepped so that the rain tumbles gently toward a gutter, which deposits it into a basement holding tank. The island would have precious little fresh water otherwise.

Bermuda onions? "Oh, there's still a few farms around."

Why do so many planes and ships mysteriously disappear in the Bermuda Triangle?

Like almost everyone else we asked, Roby shrugged.

I wondered why we hadn't seen any sea gulls out here some 650 miles east of Cape Hatteras, N.C. "We have a sort of sea gull," Roby replied. "It's called a longtail, and it's native to the islands." I had seen a few longtails gliding around, but they seemed quiet and passive compared to the average squawking, garbage-grubbing gull.

Despite the paucity of flamingo-hued beaches, pink does indeed dominate Bermuda's color scheme. It's on lots of houses, hotels, polo shirts, trademark knee-length Bermuda shorts, and all the transit-system buses that careen back and forth over winding roads.

The Atlantic Ocean adds to the palette a satisfying, pristine blue, something it does extremely well in the balmy climes. The water comes in several shades, contrasting nicely with the beaches and greenery of Bermuda's cluster of islands (seven with names and another 170 islets).

Bermuda spreads out in the shape of a fishhook, covering 24 miles from end to end and averaging only about a mile in width. Its compact size and relatively large population works against any notion of perfect solitude, but the pleasant tradeoff is an atmosphere of non-stop congeniality.

Juju never met a taxi driver who didn't call her "love," or darlin', or "princess." At the annual cricket showdown called Cup Match Weekend, the stadium in Somerset held one big gala, full of smiles and party-hearty antics. The cricket seemed incidental.

"Bermudians are just about the nicest people I've met anywhere," I heard one spectator remark at a refreshment counter sponsored by the Bermuda Hotel Association and the Department of Tourism. Smiling locals there handed out free beer, soft drinks and snacks to visitors, or anyone else not affiliated with one of the many social clubs that had set up bars around the pitch.

With 65,000 citizens and guest workers more or less rooted here permanently, traffic often thickens. Hamilton, the capital city, tends to fill up with a mix of tourists and office workers on lunch break, regularly joined by seasonal throngs of cruise line passengers.

Juju and I spent our day of arrival--a Sunday--strolling around Hamilton, lulled by its apparently sleepy nature. Handsome blocks of pastel-tinted shops and restaurants lined Front Street. Most were closed.

Farther north, into the city's interior, we came upon blocks of offshore enterprises--banks, investment firms, insurance companies, etc. Their no-nonsense, modern office buildings looked not only incongruous but empty, and we supposed the executives were off somewhere enjoying their untaxed profits from the reinsurance game.

We dined that night at our first hotel, the Waterloo House (9 Beaches came later). Its Wellington Dining Room features the creations of chef Justin Leboe and--in good weather--serves them on the torch-lit terrace beside the town marina.

It was what one might expect in such a setting: foie gras in two forms, a carpaccio of yellowfin tuna, a liquefied Maine lobster "cocktail," summer corn risotto flavored with tarragon and summer truffles--dishes like that.

The breezes were balmy, as advertised. Palm trees swayed. Lights twinkled across Barr's Bay. A pianist managed to compete successfully against the incessant chirping of the tree frogs. At one point, he played "Isn't It Romantic?" And it was.

The next day, we thought we'd walk up Front Street again after breakfast, and when we reached the sidewalk, we couldn't believe our eyes. Overnight, two huge cruise ships had commandeered the skyline--towering above the boutiques, the ferry terminal and everything else.

Bermuda had awakened. Visitors and workers vied for space along the sidewalks, motor bikes and scooters buzzed on high, and traffic lights chirped their "walk" signal with a high-pitched tree frog cadence.

Somehow, we had left home thinking Bermuda would be a land of quiet lanes, scattered cottages, bucolic simplicity--maybe like rural Ireland, only with sunshine.

Oh, the bobby-helmeted policeman in Bermuda shorts and knee socks did direct rush hour traffic from his cute little birdcage station at the main intersection, and a few gentlemen did wear Bermudas and knee socks with their blazers, suit jackets and neckties. The travel brochures got that right.

Otherwise, we were watching "The Wild One" on mopeds.

At one of the ubiquitous motorized bike rental agencies, we watched new customers take a quick lesson. They wobbled, jerked and stalled. A few almost tipped over.

Juju and I glanced at each other. "Taxis it is," I said.

But at the main ferry terminal, just west of the cruise ship dock, we learned that Bermuda's public transportation system would take us almost everywhere we wanted to go. We could use cabs to fill in the gaps.

So for our first excursion, we hopped on the ferry to St. George, Bermuda's oldest town, a World Heritage site at the far eastern tip. Initially, the ferry headed west. That was confusing, but from the top deck I enjoyed a fine view of the houses and resorts along Pitt's Bay.

After 20 minutes, the tidy little vessel (painted white, not pink) stopped at the Royal Naval Dockyard on Bermuda's far west end. Some passengers filed off and a few filed on. Then we proceeded to make a 45-minute swing (eastbound this time) along the north shore and its nearly unbroken line of villas and resorts.

In a lot of areas, Bermuda might leave the impression that resorts and tax shelters, beaches and golf courses, shops and restaurants say it all.

St. George tells a different tale that goes deep into Bermuda's DNA. So far as anyone can tell, around 1503, Spanish explorer Juan de Bermudez spotted the island chain before any other European. Spain, however, had no interest in settling the place, reasoning that the islands were too remote and probably not worth plundering.

Nonetheless, Bermuda did play an important role on the trade routes. Storms, combined with her treacherous reefs, scuttled many a sailing ship. On calm, clear days, the islands served as a navigation aid, showing Spanish galleons the way home.

The town of St. George is near the northeastern end of the island group, which points in the general direction of Europe. Near there, in 1609, a severe storm tossed Adm. Sir George Somers' ship, *Sea Venture*, into a reef. All 150 on board survived.

Sea Venture was part of a Virginia Company fleet carrying much-needed supplies from England to colonial Jamestown. Using wreckage from the ship and native cedar, the survivors built two new ships, *Patience* and *Deliverance*. In 1610, they continued on to Virginia. Such was the pace of travel in those days.

Two men stayed put to establish English ownership of the islands. Bermuda today is the oldest colony of the United Kingdom and perhaps the most romanticized. Some scholars believe Shakespeare's "The Tempest" draws on the hardships that befell Adm. Somers and his crew.

At any rate, a full-scale replica of *Deliverance* greeted us as we left the ferry. St. George--founded in 1612--looked like the sort of charming settlement we had been led to expect.

But it was puzzling. Signs and souvenirs kept referring to "St. George's." We knew the town was named for England's dragon-slaying patron saint. Still, why the possessive? Maps and guidebooks usually call the settlement St. George. On the street, we heard otherwise.

"It is the town of St. George, officially," a clerk at the Bermuda Shop (all things Bermuda) told me. "But we always say 'I'm going to St. George's'"

And going to St. George's is a most enlightening experience. "What's there to do here?" Juju asked at the visitor center.

"You should visit St. Peter's Church, which is the oldest Anglican church in the Western Hemisphere," replied Maureen Harrison, the woman in charge. She proceeded to recite a tempest of historic facts and places to see--too many centuries for one little jaunt.

We paused to look at the stocks in King's Square, apparently the same model as the stocks we had seen a year earlier in Colonial Williamsburg, Va., right near Jamestown.

People waited in line to put their heads and arms through the holes in the stocks for a hilarious snapshot. We lacked the patience for that, so we moved on.

St. Peter's is a handsome but austere structure with ceiling beams and simple hand-hewn pews. Settlers built the original wooden church on the site in 1612. In 1620, the Bermuda parliament held its first session there.

After looking around St. Peter's we just wandered where the old streets led: Broad Alley, Duke of York, Duke of Kent, Old Maid's Alley. . . . We paused at Somers' Garden, where the heart of Adm. Sir George Somers is said to be buried. "Eeeww!" Juju remarked. "Why would they do that?"

Up Duke of Kent Street, past ancient fortress walls, we came upon the broken remains of a structure known simply as Unfinished Church. Congregants broke ground for the Victorian-Gothic place of worship in 1874. It was meant to replace humble St. Peter's, but troubles beset the project almost from the start--lack of funds, a damaging storm and squabbles within the Anglican community. So the flying buttresses never took off.

We looked in on the St. George's Historical Society Museum, Printery and Garden, where fine examples of Bermuda cedar furniture are on display, along with the press that churned out Bermuda's first newspaper.

After shopping awhile, we caught a pink bus back to Hamilton. Bus stops throughout the island are marked with a painted pole--pink on the routes headed toward Hamilton and dark blue on those going the other way.

After two nights at the Waterloo, we took a taxi to our next accommodation--the far-flung 9 Beaches resort near Bermuda's western end. I figured--pink sand or no pink sand--this would be our main beach experience. Because the resort's canvas-walled huts are sprinkled around a peninsula notched with tiny coves, we had--duh--nine beaches from which to choose.

We picked the one just south of our unit. There was no beach outside our door, because the cottage, or cabana, stood over the water, held up by thick pilings. That enabled us to view the ocean bottom through a Plexiglas panel in the floor.

It was relaxing for awhile, lounging there, swimming a bit. Just as we were wondering how some people spend day after day doing this, a bank of really dark, "Tempest"-level clouds appeared and rain began to fall. We retreated to our cloth-sided digs, more complex than a tent but far simpler than a suite at the Ritz.

The weather cleared in time for us to make a late-afternoon jaunt to the Royal Naval Dockyard. We arrived in time for an early evening concert on the mall beside the old navy administration building.

That structure--long and imposing with a clock tower in the middle--has become another sort of mall, full of shops selling clothing, cosmetics and a wide array of souvenirs.

Elsewhere on the property, the Grandeur of the Seas stood majestically at the cruise dock and a pottery shop, crafts market, glassworks, the Maritime Museum, Snorkel Park (complete with beach) and Dolphin Quest water feature all vied for attention.

Just as the reggae-style music started, more rain came down. Juju and I retreated to the Clock Tower Mall and its Beethoven's Restaurant.

I liked the classy name until I realized the Beethoven in question was that St. Bernard dog who starred in third-rate films with the likes of Charles Grodin and Judge Reinhold. Still, the food rated two thumbs up.

By the time we finished, the showers had stopped but the concert was rained out. A taxi returned us to 9 Beaches. The wind was picking up, and by the time we went to bed, the sides of the cabana flapped and whistled from the force of 40 m.p.h. gusts.

Lying awake in our trembling unit, we could feel Bermuda's vulnerability to the ocean's moods.

It was a relief in the hot, sunny days that followed just to wander by bus and taxi. We went up to the Gibbs Hill Lighthouse, built in 1846, for a fine island panorama. I hacked around the Port Royal golf course (see sidebar). And, of course, we trundled down to a few beaches.

We stopped for a drink at The Reefs, a highly regarded resort on the South Shore. The outdoor bar overlooked a private beach.

After only a sip or two of our Dark `n' Stormys (Gosling's Black Seal rum and ginger beer), Juju and I agreed that the sand down there did look somewhat pink. No doubt about it.

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