

Put to the test: Barbados vs Bequia! A fortnight of Caribbean luxury to discover which idyllic island is the best

- Barbados and Bequia are great Caribbean breaks - but which is best?
- From hotels, to flight routes, and local character, they are put head to head

By HUNTER DAVIES FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY

PUBLISHED: 18:34 EST, 31 May 2015 | UPDATED: 18:34 EST, 31 May 2015

I said I was never going to Barbados again – 29 consecutive years was quite enough, thank you. Bequia, the little Grenadine island a short hop away, was my new Caribbean love.

But when the time came for my annual trip to the West Indies, I thought: 'Hmm, can I really drop Barbados, after all we have been through?'

So I decided I would go to both Barbados and Bequia and rate the four things that really matter to me on each island. Then, finally, I can make up my mind...



Tattoo-free zone: 'Cobblers Cove is a five-star hotel, luxurious but discreet and understated'

Getting there

After always flying with British Airways, I decided on a change this year.

For three years running our flight was late arriving in Barbados, which meant that after checking in to my hotel, I took my first swim in the sea in the dark, which was very silly.

Oh, I do miss the old days of Concorde.

The four-hour time difference meant you left London at 9.30am and arrived in Barbados at 9am, in time for another breakfast.

This time I decided to give Virgin Atlantic the pleasure of my company, splashing out on Upper Class – and it was brilliant.

Virgin's Gatwick lounge was wonderful, the plane comfy. I liked the witty security instructions video, brightening up that boring stuff with cartoons, jokes and funny voices.

I asked the steward if I could keep the two aeroplane-shaped plastic salt and pepper pots to give to my grandchildren as presents – I do spoil them.

When I handed them over, I discovered that on the underside it said: 'Pinched from Virgin Atlantic.'

Alas, on the way back, still on Virgin, I was apparently on an Airbus A330 as opposed to a Boeing 747, not that I know the difference between planes.

It was more crowded, had less space, and was not nearly as good. The seat, for which I had paid a fortune, when laid back flat was so uncomfortable I never slept.

I realise that getting there, on BA or Virgin, is probably much the same, but Barbados scores heavily against Bequia in that you fly there direct.

And there are so many flights from the UK. Getting to Bequia is a drag. You have to change in Barbados, which means hanging around, with the chance of delays and missed connections.

The little Grenadine planes are good fun, holding only 20 passengers, so you feel special.

It is supposed to take just an hour, but they often go round the islands, stopping at St Vincent, Union or Mustique.

Score: Barbados 10 – for all those direct flights. Bequia 5.



© Alamy

Turquoise retreat: Town beach of Port Elizabeth, Admiralty Bay, Bequia

Island attractions

Barbados is a much bigger island, with a population of 284,000, mostly well-off. It's well organised, safe and efficient, with much to see and do, modern facilities, the poshest, most luxurious hotels in the Caribbean, many wonderful restaurants plus all those celebs and footballers posing on the beaches.

Bequia is titchy in comparison, with a population of scarcely 5,000. It's just five miles long, with a laid-back atmosphere, not to say a bit dozy and cut off – but a real, working island.

There's little chance of a selfie with your favourite soap star here. It is a paradise for yachties, with hundreds of little boats dotting the enormous bay at Port Elizabeth, many of whom have just crossed the Atlantic.

Little fleets of service and water taxis buzz back and forth, taking supplies. There's so much to watch.

The interior seems bigger than it is, with all the hills and peninsulas and hidden trails.

Score: Barbados 8 – it has much to offer. Bequia 10 – so unspoiled, natural, like the West Indies used to be.



© Food and Drink/REX - Shutterstock

Local cuisine: Fisherman's Pub bar in Speightstown, Barbados

Local character

On each island, I have a fave place which for years I have walked to every afternoon to poke around, have a rum punch, stare at people, have a rum punch, talk to the locals, have a rum punch, convincing myself I am communing with the spirit of the island.

In Barbados, it is the little town of Speightstown, in the north, away from the flesh pots and boutiques and glitter of the Holetown area.

So many of Speightstown's shopfronts remind me of Carlisle in the 1950s.

Alas, its old-world charm is beginning to grow tatty. The attractive pier, built not long ago, is being left to decay. There seemed more litter around, more empty premises.

I still love the Fisherman's Bar, so very genuine, and Juma's restaurant is a nice newcomer. Nearby, there seems to be growing affluence with the new luxury marina development at Port Ferdinand.

In Bequia, there are two places I can poke around for ever, never growing bored.

Port Elizabeth, the harbour and island's only town, is fascinating and even easier to walk to or from now, with a new walkway along the rocks from Princess Margaret Beach.

The other is Lower Bay, not a town as such, but hidden away along its wonderful beach there are three excellent restaurants, including Fernando's – run by Nando, a fisherman who catches his fish each morning, then cooks them in the evening.

Then there are four cafe bars, Petra's grocery shop and Jacquie's organic fruit and veg haven.

Score: Barbados 5. Bequia 10.



© Alamy

Barbados is a much bigger island than Bequia, with a population of 284,000, mostly well-off

Hotels

By which I mean the ones I always stay at, so my opinions are personal and subjective. Since 1986 I have gone at the same time every year to Cobblers Cove.

It's a five-star hotel, luxurious but discreet, understated, no tattoos, beer bellies or footballers, great food, beautiful gardens, and nice suites, but it is beginning to date a bit, which I think adds to the charm.

However, some of the regulars have begun to moan about things not working, such as the phones, which doesn't bother me.

But two things annoyed me on my last visit – the reception desk seemed to have turned charmless, which could be my fault for being a pain, and my room booking, which I was sure I had made well in advance, got mucked up.

The prices are going up too – and, for the first time, I was asked for a deposit, one year ahead. Bloomin' cheek, after all these decades.

In Bequia, there wasn't anywhere classy to stay, so over the years I moved around, but now there is the **Bequia Beach Hotel** on Friendship Bay.

It is so artistic, yet efficient, with rooms bigger, and more stylish, than those at Cobblers Cove, yet mostly cheaper. Like Cobblers, it appeals to the discerning.

No vulgar TVs in the bedrooms. I should think not.

What it doesn't have yet is a hard core of regulars. I have stayed at the same time for the past three years and hardly seen the same people.

In Bequia I also stay a few days at a cheap apartment on Lower Bay called **Kingsville**, where they are all regulars, snow birds from the UK and North America who stay for months.

One of the pleasures of Cobblers Cove is that it is like a house party, the same people staying at the same time, just like moi.

And, of course, I love them all dearly. Oh yes.

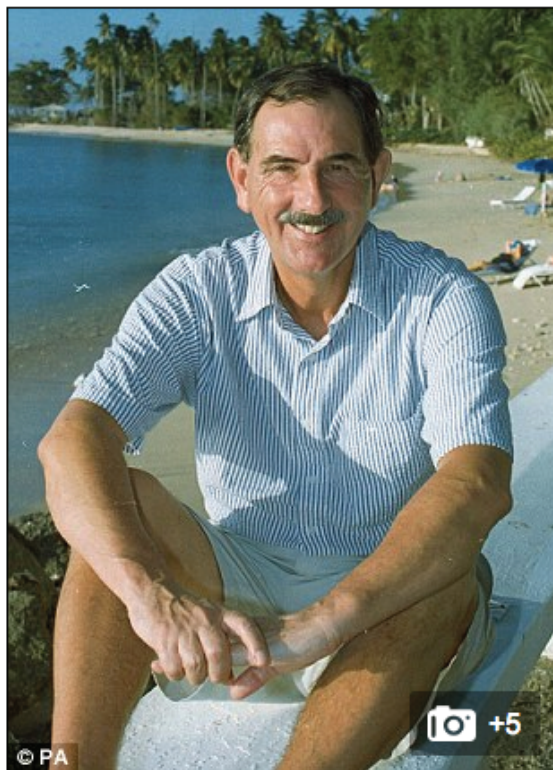
Score: Cobblers 6. Bequia Beach Hotel 9.

Hmm, I seem to have made Bequia the winner – by 34 points to 29. From now on, should I just go to Bequia?

However, I have decided to go to both islands again next January. Perhaps it will be my final time in Barbados.

It will be my 30th year at Cobblers Cove, so naturally the reception desk staff will be holding up the Welcome Back flags.

Anyway, I have paid my deposit – £1,200 for three nights' B&B – so I'm not going to lose that, am I?



Hunter Davies travelled to see which location offers the best experience for holiday goers

Travel facts: Plan your own stay

Virgin Atlantic, 0844 2092 770, offers return Upper Class flights from Gatwick to Barbados from £2,539pp.

SVG Air offers return flights from Barbados to Bequia from US \$420 – about £275.