



Horseshoe Bay Beach

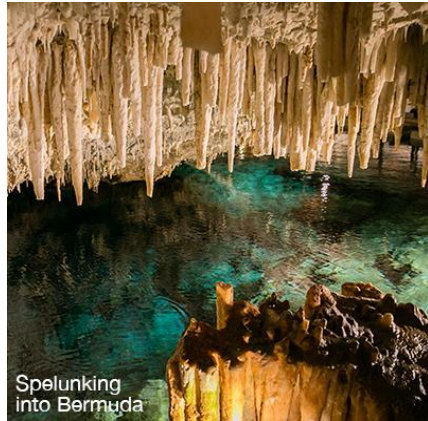
Spelunking into Bermuda

Ashley pointed down a shaft of moss-laden stairs, illuminated by a few dimly-lit lights that dangled along the deep descent into a dark, golden abyss. We glanced at each other with that look children get before they open their first Christmas present of the morning. I grabbed onto the cold steel rail and began my descent.

Dropping down into the cavernous tunnel you could smell the softly flowing scent of the water-soaked limestone walls. Not a sound could be heard except our boots grinding onto the graveled stairs under our feet. The descent got darker and the stairs rougher as we passed by each lantern. Thirty-feet, Fifty-feet, Eighty-feet passed by as I heard the slow drips of water popping below.

A few moments later, complete darkness. Blackness surrounded us and the air was thick, stale, and had an eerie breath that tickled the back of your neck.

Flash. The lights turn on and the most incredible sight burst in front of our eyes. These are the caverns of Bermuda. Hollowed out over thousands of years from water soaking into the limestone, the cavern now opened un-



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front of us. We passed through azul-blue pools of water below our feet as we navigated a floating walkway that zigzagged between stalactites and stalagmites. Ashley's voice chimed in behind us as she explained the history of the caverns.

The Bermuda caverns were first discovered by two boys who, whilst playing Bermuda's favorite sport: cricket, lost their ball in a small hole in the earth. As it was their only ball, and being 12-year-old boys, they climbed down into the pitch-black craggy chasm. Scrapping between the rock walls with only a small flashlight, they broke through into a huge cave filled with water. In the still of darkness and virtually no light, they dropped their shorts and jumped in making the first splash into a pool of water that had been untouched for thousands of years.

Today the caves are better travelled and have been tourist-proofed with some metal rails and guides who can tell you the history as well as point out some cavernous kissings (the term for when a stalactite gets so long it joins to its corresponding stalagmite).

The caves of Bermuda are one of those hidden gems that give the island its special flavor. Bermuda is, in fact, made up almost entirely of limestone, a porous rock that soaks in water particularly well. As a result Bermuda has over 100 caves, many of which are filled with the turquoise water that is also found on its beaches.

As we passed onto our next destination on our Hidden Gems tour, I couldn't help but feel as though I'm in a special place. This remote island in the Atlantic, which is made up of only 21 square miles of land and extends only 1 mile at its widest point, feels like something out of the story books I used to read as a kid. The tales of Robinson Crusoe and the HMS Bounty, of pirates and pirate hunters, of royal galleons and expeditions in the name of Kings and Queens. While those tales became fiction as I grew older, they're increasingly etching back into my mind as we explore this island.

The Governor of Privateer Island

This feeling of a forgotten past that's still alive permeates the island. We arrive at our next destination, the Banyon Grove. Ashley, our Hidden Gems tour guide, brings us through a narrow path of Banyon trees. As we snake between these smoothly sculpted forest giants Ashley asks, "so

how many trees do you think are in this section of the grove?"

I look around, do a little tabulation, and guess, "45?"

Ashley smiles with a little twinkle, "Nope, just two."

While I stand looking up at an entire canopy forest, Ashley explains that these trees grow in an entirely unconventional way, growing tall from a single stump and then draping their roots down from their branches afterwards. What we're walking among are the roots of two enormous trees.

While all these facts are nice and interesting, we're here for an entirely different reason. We step between two roots into a small clearing on a hill. Ashley grabs a root dangling from the canopy and hands it to me.



After a brief lesson on Banyon swinging we're flying through the forest like Tarzan and Jane screaming our lungs out. Gripping tightly onto the rubbery root of the Banyon tree, I glide gracefully past the trees and vines in the small clearing. Feeling comfortable with my innate ability of course, I swing my feet out and hang my head back to see the forest floor upside. A few

seconds later my thighs skid off the knot in the vine and I come crashing down onto the damp foliage of the ground.

Its times like these that you feel like a kid again, free to play and fall and get back up again. It's these little moments when you don't have a concern for failure that allow you to freely express those emotions that tend to get buried deep under your self-consciousness. I could tell that little by little Bermuda was etching me down into my kid-self again.



Ego wounded but spirit still soaring, I brush myself off and we begin heading back to the van. As we walked back through the grove we came upon an encounter that you could only have in Bermuda. Seek out your finest British accent and say it with me, "Hello Governor!"

Yes, on a tight path in a Banyon Grove we bumped into the one-eyed Governor of Bermuda. He was pleased to meet our scrappy team who had flown across the U.S. to visit his special island and, despite us being dirtied up and sweaty, he shook our hands and walked with us.

On the way, he regaled us with the history of the island. As we found out Bermuda is in fact the most remote island in the world. It remained uninhabited for millennia. Not even Native Americans had settled it when George Sommers, in 1609, brought his ship onto the island after being struck by a storm in the Atlantic. On his way to the colony of Jamestown in Virginia, Sommers' ship, the *Sea Venture*, was pierced and had to be driven onto the reefs of Bermuda.

After spending 10 months on the island repairing their ship with Bermuda cedar wood, most of the crew sailed away continuing to Jamestown, leaving behind two men to claim the island on behalf of the Virginia Company. After leaving Bermuda, only 60 of the 500 men aboard the *Sea Venture* actually made it to Jamestown. Once they returned to England the following year, they chartered a new expedition to permanently settle Bermuda in 1612.

The Governor continued to explain how Bermuda wasn't of much interest to England because it was so small. However, because of its location in the Atlantic, between the Caribbean, the Americas, and Europe, it was the perfect place for Privateering. Privateering was when a country hired pirates to attack other countries' ships. Bermudians naturally became masters of the seas, and the Bermudian Sloop became known as one of the fastest ships in the area. During the late 1700's Bermudians were frequently hired for pirating and as a result their wealth grew dramatically.

Bermuda's intricate network of reefs, which today provide some of the

most spectacular and easily-accessibly scuba diving in the world, made it very difficult to attack. In fact, even today there is only one channel which ships can pass through to enter the island without striking onto the reefs. This natural inaccessibility could be what gives Bermuda its modern-day appeal.



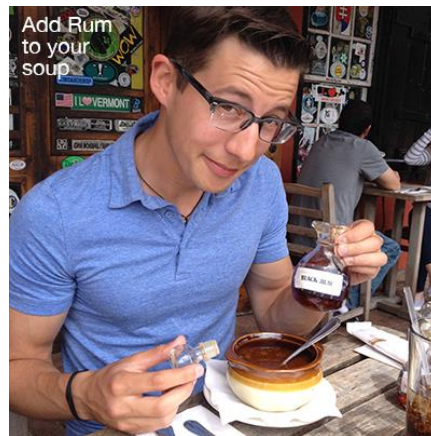
Uniquely Bermudian

It's easy to see how being relatively less touched by modern-day than some other islands has made Bermuda such a special place. Bermuda isn't like most comparable islands. You won't find synthetically grown all-inclusive resorts, hordes of balding unshapely tourists, or even much of a high-street here. You will find, however, incredibly helpful locals who will stop you, not to sell you kitschy souvenirs, but rather to help you with directions and recommendations. On more than one occasion we were greeted by a local who, simply seeing the confused lost look on our faces, offered to help direct us toward the best eateries in town.

This is the sort of stuff that you don't really find anymore and there's nothing Bermuda does better than genuine hospitality. Coming from San

Francisco, where people solicit you daily, I found myself frequently pulling back when a Bermudian approached me. I had developed a natural inclination to shy away when strangers approached, thinking they were going to ask me for cash, cigarettes, or "a good time." When we talked to the

locals they explained that this reaction is common when visitors come to Bermuda and that Bermudians love nothing more than to inject a little bit of that old world charm back into their visitors.



Old world charm was an understatement when it came to the next destination on our adventure. Walking through the capital city of Hamilton, we saw beautiful 16th

century buildings glowing under the bright sub-tropical sun. The mopeds buzzed through the nearby streets as we walked through the mosaics of flower gardens. Every few minutes a rouge-colored rooster (which there are plenty of on this island) let out its signature cock-a-doodle-doo. We took in the history of this pirating town, learning about the first inhabitants, their relationship to the UK (which they were not very fond of) and their involvement in the U.S. revolution. We then walked up to Fort Hamilton where we watched a Skirling ceremony.



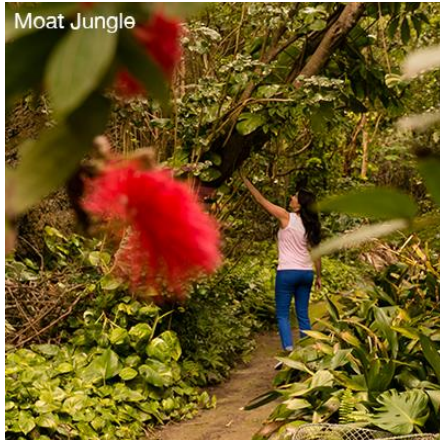
The ceremony is an impressive show involving kilted bagpipers, drummers and dancers and takes place on top of a fort overlooking the ocean waters of the Atlantic and the colonial city.

Just as we started feeling a bit touristy, Ashley came by and pointed us toward a dimly lit passageway carved into the limestone wall. We passed through an iron gate covered in the patina of rust from centuries of disuse. Could this be the entrance to another magical cave?

Connecting to History

It wasn't, it was even more spectacular. As we carefully descended into a darkened tunnel of stone-laden

walls my eyes began to widen. The deeper we went the more the scene grew in my mind, as though I was slowly teleporting into a snapshot straight from Pirates of the Caribbean. Small rectangular holes in the walls let some sunlight poke through. I could see green leaves scattering across the iron bars of the windows.



There was no tour group with us, no tour guide, not even Ashley had followed us down. As I ventured down a stone hallway that seemed to stretch infinitely into the distance I could hear some birds tweeting in the distance. I paced slowly toward the sound, admiring the fort's heavy structure above my head. The lights glowed less and fewer between the further I went.

Then, as if tossed straight into the opening sequence of a movie scene, I walked through a craggy doorway into the bright Bermudian sunshine trickling down through a jungle of ancient palms and ferns. The scene was unreal. My mind lapsed into thinking I must be on the sound stage of Jurassic Park, but I wasn't. Surrounded by 50ft limestone walls was this hidden jungle, hidden away from the hearing tours with their ipads and other new-world distractions. Walking through I gazed

up at the palms lacing the sky, the occasional fern gently tapping my shoulder. This place echoed with history and magic, sparking your inner child's imagination. This was the kind of place that you would only see in movies or read about in travel magazines, the kind of place that Disneyland could only dream of imitating. But this place is real, this is Bermuda.