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Sailing Travel

Bermuda's 400th Birthday Party

By *Steve Blakely* — February 11, 2009

For a while this summer, [Bermuda](#) will turn into the sailing center of the planet: Almost two dozen tall ships from all over the world will converge on this tiny island territory in the highlight of Bermuda's [400th anniversary celebrations](#). As the historic tall ships leave, almost 200 modern racing yachts will arrive from the U.S. in the biannual [Marion-to-Bermuda sailing race](#). And numerous small-boat regattas are on tap, including the unique [Bermuda "fitted dinghy" series](#).



[USCG Ship Eagle Will Be in Bermuda] (photo: Thad Koza, tallshipsbermuda.com)

With these events, plus various festivals of art, music and film, the lure of miles of pristine pink beaches, countless diving sites in crystal-clear tropical water, and special 400th anniversary vacation packages, Bermuda is trying hard to entice more American visitors -- boaters and landlubbers alike -- to rediscover this prim and beautiful vacation land.

The Author



Steve Blakely

Writer and Skipper

Steve Blakely has been exploring the Chesapeake Bay for 30 years. He docks *Bearboat*, an Island Packet 26, in Galesville, Maryland.

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- Connecticut (1)
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- Dead Chest (1)
- Denmark (1)



[Pink sand at Warwick Long Bay] (photo: Bermuda Dept. of Tourism)

As it has to: Bermuda's shrinking international finance-based economy is also feeling the pain of the recession. To make this normally expensive vacation destination more affordable, Bermuda's tourism industry is more aggressively offering vacation packages and discounts. With planning, you're likely to find some good deals in Bermuda this season. It's an easy trip by air, less than two hours' flying time from the East Coast.

Many Shipwrecks, Much History

Although Spanish sailors were the first to be shipwrecked on the deadly coral reefs that surround Bermuda (they called it "Isle of Devils"), it was the 1609 wreck of an English merchant ship, the [Sea Venture](#), that brought permanent settlers. The Sea Venture was the flagship of a flotilla led by [Sir George Somers](#) to rescue the failing colony of [Jamestown, Virginia](#) -- a settlement he eventually reached almost a year later (and ultimately saved), after building two new and smaller ships on Bermuda to continue the voyage.

Somers left two men on Bermuda to claim what turned out to be a surprisingly hospitable and strategically located island. The rest is history -- four uninterrupted British and Bermudian centuries of it -- which is being celebrated this year.

Somers also left his heart in Bermuda, as the locals like to point out. Literally.

Returning to Bermuda in 1610 for more supplies, he became ill and died. Pursuant to his wishes, Somers' heart and entrails were removed and buried on Bermuda (the rest of his body was shipped back to England, pickled in a barrel). A memorial tablet in Somers Garden, in the charming little town of [St. George](#), marks the spot where Sir George's heart was planted, not far from where he and the other survivors of the Sea Venture first waded ashore.

Schooner Days Are Here Again

Bermuda's 400th Birthday Party

Norman Island: Hotspot in the BVIs

Portugese Skywatch: From Moonrise to Sunset

Washington on the Potomac: A River Cruise Through History

Dockside Dreams: From Annapolis to L.A., Fall Boat Shows Strut Their Expensive Stuff

Virgin Islands Redux: My Dream Trip Through British and U.S. Waters

Catching Up: New-Fangled Boats Using Waves and Sails Complete Their Maiden Journeys

Mystic Seaport: A 'Moby-Dick Marathon' in Connecticut's Museum of the Sea

Chicago-Mackinac Race: 'The Mac' Hits 100 with 5,000 Sailors Traversing Lake Michigan

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 Miami (1)
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 Roskilde (1)



[Fort St. Catherine, near St. George] (photo: Bermuda Dept. of Tourism)

Today, Bermuda is the oldest remaining British overseas territory (settled by England a century before the formation of the [United Kingdom of Great Britain](#)), and the island's first capital (St. George) is the oldest continuously inhabited English town in the Americas and now an official World Heritage site. Bermuda is small: Its total land surface amounts to only 21 square miles, about the size of Manhattan. It is also exceptionally affluent: With an economy based on the discrete business of offshore finance, Bermuda ranked No. 1 in the world in GDP per capita in 2005.

The island's tasteful architecture, lovely pastel-colored houses with white limed roofs (to collect rainwater), and manicured tropical gardens -- all surrounded by a dazzling cerulean sea -- create the postcard-perfect image of "vacation island." Its world-class golf courses and sailing, unspoiled beaches, historic forts and other attractions, and comfortable semi-tropical weather, provide lots to do for active singles and couples, as well as families with kids.

To mark its 400th anniversary, Bermuda is holding a wide range of festivals, concerts, races (foot, boat and bicycle), and other special events throughout 2009. The highlight will be the [Tall Ships Atlantic Challenge/Bermuda](#) -- two

dozen tall ships from all over the world will rendezvous in Bermuda from June 11-15 as part of a summer-long sailing race around the North Atlantic. The tall ships will continue on from Bermuda to [Charleston, SC](#), [Boston](#), and [Halifax](#), Nova Scotia, before ending their circuit in August at [Belfast, Ireland](#).



[Bermuda fitted dinghy] (photo: Bermuda Dept. of Tourism)

What to See and Do

Bermuda is situated roughly in an east-west configuration, and is composed of several counties (or "parishes") that divide into three sections:

December 2007
 November 2007
 October 2007

- Russia (2)
- San Diego (2)
- San Francisco (2)
- San Francisco Bay (1)
- Santa Cruz (1)
- Scandinavia (1)
- Scotland (1)
- Singapore (1)
- South Africa (1)
- South America (4)
- Southern Ocean (2)
- Spain (1)
- St. Croix (1)
- St. George's, Bermuda (1)
- St. John (1)
- St. John's (1)
- St. Petersburg, FL (1)
- St. Petersburg, Russia (1)
- St. Thomas (1)
- St. Vincent (1)
- Sweden (1)
- Terra del Fuego (2)
- Tortola (1)
- U.S. Virgin Islands (6)
- United States (1)
- Venezuela (2)
- Virgin Islands (3)
- Virginia (5)
- Washington (1)
- Washington, D.C. (4)

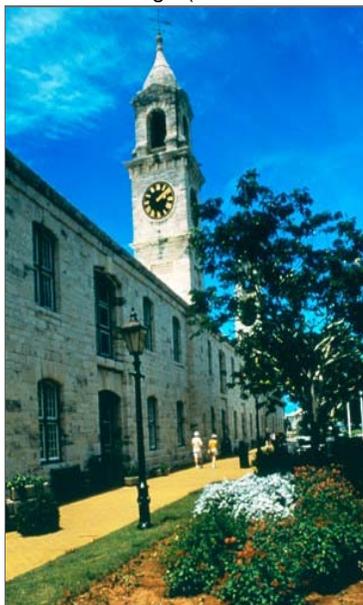
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A.J. Meerwald, adventure, adventure travel, aircraft carriers, American history, amusement parks, anthropology, aquarium, archeology, architecture, art, art museums, astronomy, B&Bs, bareboat, barque, bars, BayShore Discovery Project, beaches, blue crab, blue crabs, boardwalks, boat building, boat building museum, boat gear, boat racing, boat shows, boating, boatmaking, books, bridges, buried treasure, Capt. John Smith, carbon emissions, cargo ships, Caribbean, catamaran, charter, chartering, charts, Chesapeake Bay, cities, Coast Guard, coastal, conservation, coral reefs, creationism, crewed, cruises, cruising, cultures, disasters, East Point Lighthouse, eco-friendly, ecosystems, ecotourism, environment, estuaries, evolution, ferries, festivals, fireworks, First Thanksgiving, Florida Keys, forts, fuel prices, gardens, grand bahama island, Great

- **The east end**, starting with the historic town of St. George, is where the island's international airport is located, on St. David's Island (expanded greatly by the U.S. Air Force during World War II). The oldest of numerous [forts](#) on Bermuda (Fort St. Catherine) is just outside St. George, and nearby is a popular local swimming hole, Tobacco Bay. St. George's harbor is the port of entry for most boaters who reach Bermuda, and is home to the [White Horse Tavern](#) -- one of the oldest on the island and legendary among blue-water sailors, as it's the first bar that most of them visit upon making landfall. St. David's Lighthouse marks one end of the finish line in the biannual [Newport-to-Bermuda Race](#), the oldest amateur ocean yacht race in the world.

Also on the waterfront are a full-size replica of the Sea Venture and colonial punishment tools (stocks and a dunking chair), always popular with children. Farther west, in the little village of Flatts, are the [Crystal Caves and Fantasea Caves](#), their underground limestone formations accessible by floating pontoon walkways. Also at Flatts are the [Bermuda Aquarium, Museum and Zoo](#). South of Flatts is the private luxury enclave of [Tucker's Town](#), where various celebrities and other glitterati enjoy wealth, privacy, and perhaps the best golf course on Bermuda.

- **Central Bermuda** includes the bustling, modern, and noisy capital city, [Hamilton](#), at the head of Hamilton Harbor. Also the restaurant capital of the island, Hamilton has such attractions as the [Bermuda Underwater Exploration Institute](#) (popular with kids) and the [Goslings Rum store](#) (popular with adults). Not far east of Hamilton are such attractions as the [Bermuda Botanical Garden](#) and [Spittal Pond](#), the biggest bird sanctuary on the island. South of Hamilton, along the Atlantic shore, are some of the most popular and beautiful beaches: [Elbow Beach](#), [Warwick Long Bay](#) and [Horseshoe Bay](#).
- **The west end** includes Bermuda's other major navigational aid, [Gibbs Lighthouse](#) (the world's oldest cast-iron lighthouse), charming Somerset Village (with the world's smallest drawbridge), and the [Royal](#)



[Naval Dockyard](#) -- the island's most-visited tourist attraction. The Dockyard became Britain's "Gibraltar of the West" when the Royal Navy lost its American bases after the Revolution. Today, the decommissioned Dockyard is where most cruise ships to Bermuda tie up, and its original Commissioner's House houses the [Bermuda Maritime Museum](#). Inside the fort's "Keep" is [Dolphin Quest](#) (Bermuda is one of its three locations around the world), a popular marine educational group that lets people get in the water with trained dolphins.

[Royal Navy Dockyard] (photo: Bermuda Dept. of Tourism)

Bermuda on a Budget

Lakes, green commerce, guided tours, historic landmarks, historic reconstruction, history, hotels, hurricane noel, hurricanes, intelligent design, Intracoastal Waterway, islands, Jamestown, June, labor strife, lakes, lighthouses, luxury travel, marinas, marine archeology, Marine Corps, marine culture, marine ecosystems, maritime history, maritime museums, marsh harbor, massau, Maurice River, merchant marine, military history, monuments, motorboating, museums, national parks, natural history, navigation, Navy, nuclear power, oceans, oil spill, osprey, outrigger canoe, oyster schooners, oysters, paradise island, Pelican Island, Peter Island Resort, photography, pirate booty, pirates, pirates bight, pollution, ports, preservation, rally, rivers, Robert Louis Stevenson, Robotic sailing, sailboat design, sailboat racing, sailboats, sailing associations, sailing camps, sailing history, sailing records, sailing school, sails, Santa Ana, science, scuba diving, sea burials, Sept. 11, shipping, ships, shipwrecks, shipyards, shopping, skywatch, Smith Island, snorkeling, Special Olympics, sports, square-rigger, state parks, storms, surfing, tall ships, Tangier Island, technology, the Indians, Treasure Island, tropical storms, U.S. Navy, underwater archeology, Vikings, warships, watermen, waves, whaleships, wildlife, William Thornton, Willie T, wine, wine-tasting, winter, women sailing, writers, yacht, yacht clubs

With regular but limited air service, Bermuda can be an expensive place to fly to: The round-trip fare for one person from June 6-20 (covering the Tall Ship festivities) from Washington, DC, to Bermuda range from \$420 (US Airways) to \$1,134 (United). A seasonal discount carrier, USA3000, decided to drop its service to Bermuda this year.

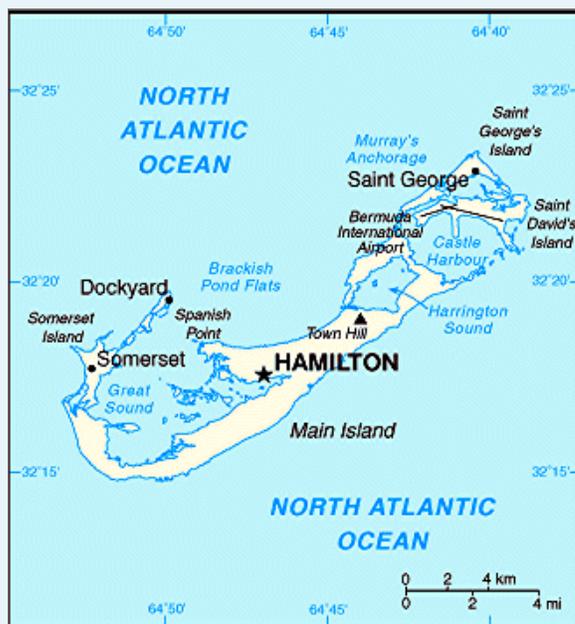
However, as part of Bermuda's efforts to attract more tourists, it has arranged with [JetBlue](#) (via Boston and New York's JFK) for \$200 roundtrip fares from Feb. 21 through May 21.

Also, the Bermuda hotel association is offering a range of credits (from \$200 to \$400 per booking) for 400th Anniversary visitors at nine of the island's top hotels, such as Elbow Beach, Grotto Bay, and Fairmont Princess. More special offers are likely to pop up as the season gets underway.

During our visit to Bermuda in January 2009 (for the Bermuda Triangle Challenge road race), we decided to bypass the big hotels' race-week offers and rent a small housekeeping cottage through [Bermuda Accommodations](#), a broker for privately owned villas, cottages, apartment or rooms throughout the island (prices start at \$55 for single occupancy), some of them quite luxurious. Since there are no taxes or extra charges on private rentals, this avoids a significant additional cost. Their Web site provides lots of information and photos of each property.

Food is expensive in Bermuda, and having your own kitchenette also is a great way to save on breakfasts and dinners. Our cottage was within easy walking distance of downtown Hamilton, and we provisioned at the two main supermarkets in town, MarketPlace (near City Hall) and Miles Market (near the Fairmont Princess hotel). Since Bermuda is not a big restaurant destination, we had wine and carry-out each evening, and ate quite well (and reasonably) at home.

Experience At-a-Glance



(image: Central Intelligence Agency)

If you go:

Logistics: Bermuda has a unique blend of British, American, and local customs, and is a very easy place to visit. The Bermudian dollar is tied to the U.S. dollar, so changing money is unnecessary.

The U.S. military rewired the island's entire electrical system during World War II, so your computer, hair dryer, and battery charger need no adapters. Still, the driving system is British: Traffic stays to the left, and there are more roundabouts than stoplights.

Transportation: Because the land mass is so limited, and traffic is bad enough as it is, tourists are not permitted to rent cars in Bermuda (those are reserved for natives). Instead, visitors [get around the island](#) by renting motorbikes or taking [buses](#) or [ferry boats](#).

Scooters: If you want to travel the island independently, renting a [motorbike](#) (known locally as a scooter) is the only cost-effective way to go. But fair warning: Many tourists don't know how to drive them well, the left-handed traffic can be a problem for many Americans, the roads are very narrow, and local drivers like to go fast. More than a few tourists get hurt (some seriously) on scooters. Helmets are mandatory (you will be stopped and fined if you don't wear one) and scooter theft is rampant in Bermuda.

Resources:

The most comprehensive online resource about the island is [Bermuda Online](#), funded by and linked to the island's main newspaper, the [Royal Gazette](#).

The [official Bermuda tourist Web site](#) includes links to the hotel industry's special offers. The island's unfortunate logo is a pair of Bermuda shorts, which looks more like a fey pair of boxer underwear than anything else.

Boaters will need to read [Sailing into Bermuda](#) (a government Web site loaded with information for vessels), and [Information for Yachts Sailing to Bermuda](#).

[Bermuda's 400th Anniversary](#)

[Tall Ships Bermuda](#)

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