

DESTINATIONS

A Move to the Caribbean

A Virginia couple starts a new life on the small island of Bequia

BY JULIE LEA

MY HUSBAND, Doug, and I live on a tiny, remote island, Bequia, in the eastern Caribbean. It's like living in a screen saver, the perfect picture of paradise: palm-fringed beaches, turquoise waters, rugged tree-covered hills, flowers everywhere, dramatic sunsets, the sounds of nature surrounding us. All the tropical clichés.

But even paradise isn't for everyone. Let me explain.

Bequia, 7 miles square, is the largest of the Grenadine Islands that are part of the British Commonwealth country of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The island's population is about 4,000, with an additional 1,000 during high tourism season from mid-December to Easter. Temperatures range from the low 70s to the upper 80s. We're south of the usual paths of hurricanes.

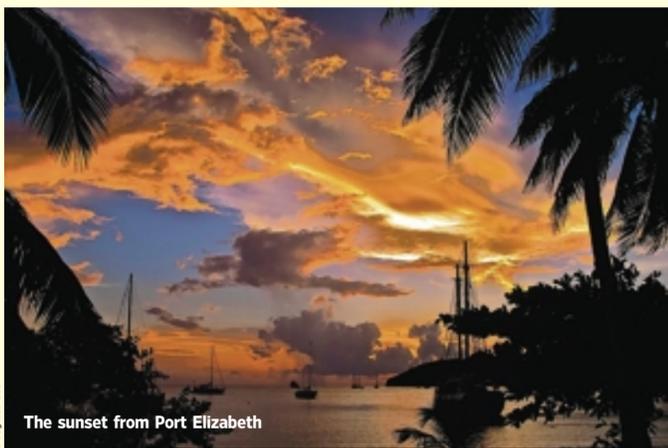
We came to settle here after increasingly lengthy visits over almost three decades. Our first glimpse of Bequia was from the deck of a 38-foot ketch. In January 1978, my husband and I, with our two boys, chartered a sailboat owned by friends. Even though we had previously sailed throughout the Virgin Islands, we were enchanted by the unspoiled beauty of Bequia, with its charming people and their simple, traditional lifestyles.

As an artist, I was drawn to the vibrant colors, the scenery and the adventurous, self-styled boat vagabonds, those world travelers living aboard their crafts full time and cruising the open seas. I felt we had sailed into a Herman Melville novel. I wanted to record it all in words and paint.

Making It Home

On a visit in 2004, a friend showed us a derelict house, a 1960s vacation retreat in a remote section of the island called Spring. The place had been neglected for years. Termites had invaded the original cedar-shake roof. Still, the structure had beautiful bones. The American architects who designed it and the handful of other vacation retreats in the area were influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright.

At first, I wasn't thinking about moving overseas. For two decades, we had lived in, and loved, the village of Waterford, Va., about 50 miles from Washington. I worked as an artist and author; Doug was a writer based in Washington. But traffic and development were encroaching upon our county. We had our children early in life. Our mortgage was paid off, and we



The sunset from Port Elizabeth

Sights to See | If you plan to visit Bequia and the town of Port Elizabeth, take time for:

Beach Getaways

Take a water taxi to Princess Margaret Beach or Lower Bay. Hike to remote beaches on the windward side of the island.

Belmont Walkway

The main shoreline path to cafes, bars and dive shops. Liston's Green Boley is a favorite restaurant for watching sunsets.

Frangipani Hotel

A true, old-time West Indian hotel. An island buffet, steel pan music, and dancing on the sand under palm trees by the bay.

The Friendship Rose

Take a daylong sail on this hand-built schooner. Visit the spectacular Tobago Cays or

other nearby islands. > friendshiprose.com

Front Street

Stroll through Port Elizabeth. Visit the shops. Grab a spicy ginger ale. Sit under the almond trees near the harbor and unwind.

St. Mary's Anglican Church

Rebuilt in 1829. On the beach

out front, watch young Bequians launch whaling boats as they learn island sailing skills. > bequiatourism.com/tours.htm

> To learn more, see the Bequia Tourism Association's website, bequiatourism.com, and Bequia This Week magazine, at begos.com.

The Wall Street Journal



were open for a new adventure.

In 2005, we decided to buy the house in Spring. We were both 63 years old.

Today, I drive a mile and a half from our perch above the Atlantic—along roads filled with pedestrians, goats, dogs and often vehicles that have stopped in the road so their occupants can chat with passersby—to my studio near the town of Port Elizabeth. There I paint, write and offer classes for budding artists. I've also been involved in community projects, coordinating the delivery of art supplies and books from friends in the U.S. for elementary-school students here.

At the end of the day, I'm back up in the quiet hills of Spring, gardening and watching the colorful drama in the clouds and sky at sunset.

Doug has embraced photography and now has a collection of more than 10,000 pictures of Bequia life. He has taught himself how to build stone walls and steps that terrace our leeward hillside for an orchard and vegetable garden. He and his beloved island dog,

Soda, hike every day along the vacant beaches and unpopulated "bush" to find dried seaweed and the manure from roaming cattle to build up the poor soil on our hilltop. When there is a need for "formal wear," he jokes, he just tucks his T-shirt into his cutoffs.

Patience and Humor

There are occasional nights out and lively meals with friends. Within a few minutes' drive are five picture-perfect beaches. There is a small community of expat homeowners living here year round. Americans are the smallest group. There are a few more British and Canadians and a smattering of Germans, French, Swedes, Italians and Spaniards. Many of us return to friends and family for a few weeks every summer, but we hurry back to enjoy the peace and empty beaches of low season.

Still, living here takes a special combination of self-reliance, tolerance, patience and humor. There is no stop light on the entire island, and no one seems to respond to the few tattered speed bumps and road signs. The roads

are narrow and steep, flanked by deep, open rain gutters. There is only one gas station, and it is usually closed on Sundays, along with most of the small businesses in Port Elizabeth.

There are no shopping malls or chain restaurants, although there are plenty of charming, family-owned establishments. The only "fast food" available is from local people who serve up home-cooked meals outdoors or in tiny booths.

Everyone swelters in the hot, still months of August and September (and sometimes October). Mosquitoes, lizards, bats and other critters are a fact of life here. And the sea, with its various creatures and mood swings, commands respect.

Reassuring, though, is the remarkable resilience and inventiveness of Bequians. Maintaining cars and equipment, repairing machinery, building houses and boats, installing plumbing, tackling masonry: These tasks and more are part of daily life. People here demonstrate both a determination to survive and an amiable acceptance of

visitors.

Always an Adventure

Few foreigners opt to stay year round. They spend only winters here, returning to other homes elsewhere. If you are planning to "come and go," as they say here, and are willing to accept the expense of maintaining a home in Bequia while you are away, I advise buying an existing villa and forgoing the twists and turns of building. Most household comforts Americans expect must be imported. (Bathtubs and unlimited hot water are rare.) Many long-time winter residents simply rent the same well-equipped villas for the season each year.

After securing a home here, most people find total monthly expenses to be low in comparison to the States. Frugal expats can live comfortably on less than \$2,500 a month. We visit the open-air vegetable markets to buy fresh produce, much of it grown in the fertile volcanic soil of St. Vincent. Many residents take one of the daily ferries to "the mainland" of St. Vincent (an hour each way) to shop at larger supermarkets and hardware stores.

As for health care, there's a new clinic and, opening soon, a small hospital in Port Elizabeth. Medical attention is free for minor treatments, but expats usually leave a donation.

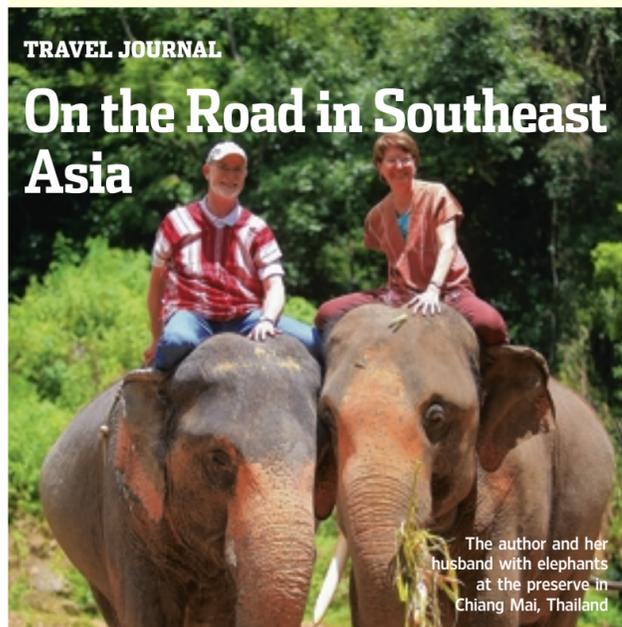
After seven years of living here, it still feels like we're just getting started. There's much to explore. There are 32 islands in the nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, most all of them easily reached by chartered or public transportation.

Doug and I will never be like those true adventurers we first encountered here, the boat vagabonds, dropping anchor in remote places throughout the world. Still, every day is an adventure for us. It's wonderful to wake up year round to sunshine, bird song and the sounds of the ever-changing ocean below. We fall asleep to the bell-like chiming of tree frogs. We've discovered that a simple, reflective lifestyle allows for an overflowing of creative expression.

We take special joy in watching the drama of the West Indian skies filled with rainbows, glorious sunsets and infinite stars. Living so close to nature, with our unscreened doors and windows open to the gentle trade winds almost every day, is an experience I've had only in Bequia.

It would be hard to give that up.

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TRAVEL JOURNAL

On the Road in Southeast Asia

The author and her husband with elephants at the preserve in Chiang Mai, Thailand

BY ROBBIE SHELL

This is part of a series in which readers tell us about their favorite trips and destinations. Send us your suggestions at encore@wsj.com.

THE TEMPLE OF Angkor Wat in Cambodia always ranked high on my list of places to see, and in July my husband and I finally got there during a 2½-week trip that also included Vietnam and Thailand. The time was exhilarating and eye-opening—both for the sites and the unpredictable glimpses into daily lives.

Our trip began in Hanoi, a city my generation associates with a turbulent time in our lives. And yet "the American War," as it is called here, is a memory that the Vietnamese government and business community are happy to shelve. The hulk of a downed B-52 bomber that we saw sticking out of a residential lake is viewed by young families in the neighborhood as a piece of sculpture rather than an iconic image from a war waged four decades ago by their parents.

Farther south, in the city of Hoi An, we took a cooking class, walked through historic homes, and explored exotic food markets and silk shops. Yet the most evocative image of life in this former trading town was waking up at 3 a.m. to a loud and mysterious clack-clacking sound outside our room. I later learned it came from

night fishermen on a nearby river banging sticks together to scare the fish into their nets.

In Cambodia, we climbed over the ruins of the Buddhist and Hindu temples of Angkor—all as magnificent as the guide books said. But I also remember the monkeys and their babies that lined up along the temple's entrance road, begging for food and posing for cameras, and nearby an orchestra—its musicians all victims of land mines—playing Cambodian folk songs. Later, during a visit to a children's hospital, we saw families camping out in a large room while they waited 24 to 48 hours to see a doctor—the only time, we were told, that many of them are assured of a sleeping mat and two meals a day.

In Chiang Mai, Thailand, we toured the mountain temple and famous night market, but also spent a glorious day at an elephant preserve getting to know its inhabitants as well as the men and boys who care for them. My husband and I were each assigned our own elephant to feed, wash and check for signs of poor health. My elephant, a male with huge tusks, showed Job-like patience as I climbed on his back and gripped his neck with my knees to avoid falling as he lumbered along roads and forest paths.

We left the next day for the return trip home, feeling fortunate to have seen, for brief moments, a world apart. It was time to start planning our next journey.

SECOND ACTS

Bookstore Opens a New Chapter

Bill Skees

AGE: 58
HOME: Glen Rock, N.J.
FIRST/PRIMARY CAREER: Computer engineer
CURRENT PATH: Bookstore owner
WHY THIS PATH: "I've always wanted to run a bookstore, and I decided to take the plunge before it was too late."



Mary Ann Solazzi-Skees

AFTER THREE DECADES of working with computers, Bill Skees jumped into a business that all but shouts low-tech. He opened a bookstore. With real books.

"Every day, I love going to work, meeting new people and helping them find the perfect book for themselves or as a gift," he says. "There is just nothing more satisfying."

His love of the written word, and paper pages, goes back as far as he can remember. On business trips—helping companies around the world with information-technology projects—he would search for a local bookstore. There, he could spend a few hours unwinding at the end of long workdays.

"I've haunted bookstores all my life," he says.

Long Road

By the time he reached his mid-50s, Mr. Skees found himself exhausted. During a 16-year career at Electronic Data Systems, he was transferred four times; constant travel meant time away from his wife, Mary Ann, and two sons. His trips continued when he joined a global company that helped set up technology infrastructure for state and national lottery systems. He ended up living, he says, "in hotels and airports."

"I imagined owning a bookstore in a small resort town in my retirement, but it was mostly a pipe dream," Mr. Skees says.

"Then, one day I asked myself, 'Why wait?'"

To start, Mr. Skees learned everything he could about the book business. He joined the American Booksellers Association and took classes on bookstore operations and management. And he began to scout for the perfect location—which proved the most challenging part of the process.

Then, one day, walking around the town of Hawthorne, in northern New Jersey, he spotted an old karate studio for rent. "It was a mess, but the street was well traveled, there was plenty of parking and the price was right," says Mr. Skees, who invested considerable time and money into remodeling the space.

In November 2010, **Well Read New & Used Books** opened its doors—and Mr. Skees has been perched behind the counter ever since.

"Every day, I walk to work with my dog, turn on the lights, make a pot of coffee and start my day surrounded by books. It's such a huge change from being constantly on the computer," says Mr. Skees, who gets a lot of help in the

store from his wife, as well as a couple of part-time employees.

A Sequel?

He plans to continue running Well Read Books for as long as possible, and hopes one day to open a second location in "the little resort town I'd always envisioned."

Many friends questioned his desire to open a bookstore in the digital age, but he believes the printed book isn't going away soon. "E-books have captured about 20% of the book market, and that percentage appears to be stabilizing," he says. "Many children's books and those with full-color images don't translate well to the screen."

Mr. Skees says he has "virtually zero free time," working eight to 12 hours a day seven days a week. He makes far less than he did in technology, but says he wouldn't go back to the corporate world for any price. "Working in a career you no longer have passion for is like forcing yourself to finish a book you're just not interested in," he says. "I used to finish books even if I didn't like them, but now I set them aside and move on, because life's too short to read books you don't enjoy."

—Kristi Essick
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