

# 180 degrees

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BEQUIA

# SMALL CRAFT, BIG PASSION

Bequia's model boat builders are inspired by the island's vast seafaring legacy. BY RICHARD VARR



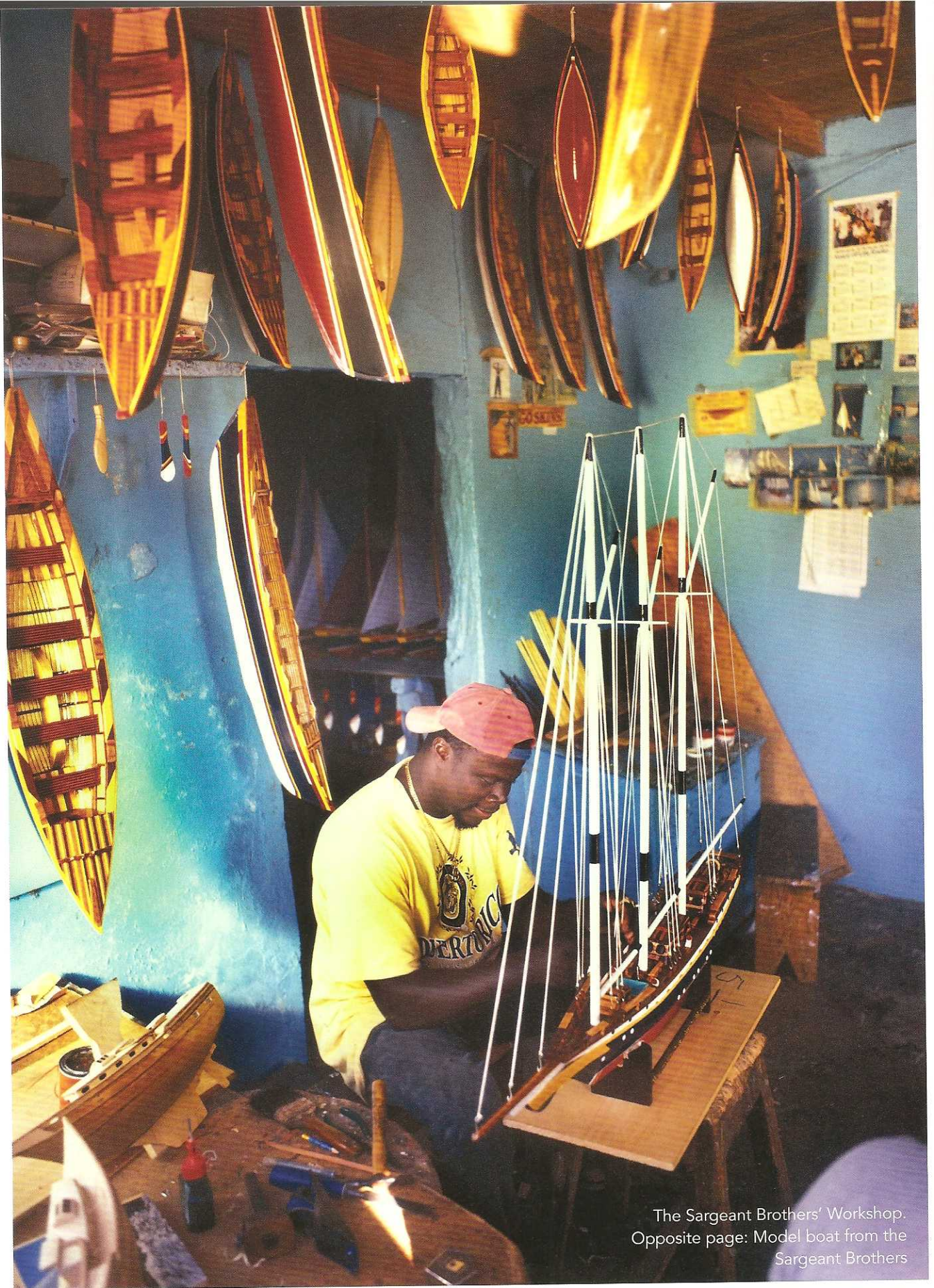
# M

MINIATURE BOATS with cherry-red and marine-blue hulls line the shelves, all with bright white sails seemingly starched like a crisp, freshly ironed shirt. Rope ladders reminiscent of briny pirate ships ascend to crows nests perched atop sturdy masts. And a closer look reveals whittled oars, harpoons and on-deck wide wooden steering wheels — all part of the schooners, sailing vessels and whaling boats that have lured seafarers to a life of traversing the world's oceans.

With just a quick visit to a model boat shop or two, it doesn't take long to realize that these replicas — so accurate in detail and crafted with such precision skill — have given the Grenadines' island of Bequia the reputation of producing some of the best model boats in the Caribbean.

"These are all handcrafted — we don't use electrical tools," insists Timothy Sargeant, one of four brothers of Sargeant Brothers Model Boat Shop in Port Elizabeth, Bequia's main town along scenic Admiralty Bay. "We shape and sand them and put on four or five coats of paint. Details on the boats include the propeller, wheel and lifebelts. Everything is cut from wood and we use real glass for windows."

Inside Sargeant Brothers' workshop, finished boats cram shelves while unfinished miniature hulls line benches and hang from ceiling racks. On any given day, several boat makers chip away on wood pieces — carving, sanding and then gluing them together.



The Sargeant Brothers' Workshop.  
Opposite page: Model boat from the  
Sargeant Brothers



Cruises to Bequia include: *Antilles Island Hopping*, *Jewels of the Windward Islands*, *Star Collector: Caribbean Collection*, *Saints of the Caribbean*, *The Caribbean's Perfect Ten*, *Sweet Southern Caribbean*

“Each does his own boat from start to finish,” notes Sargeant, adding that the whole shop might craft up to 120 boats a year. Boats for sale range from 13 inches to 4 feet long, with costs from \$280 to \$7,000 USD.

“Mainly we build boats that traditionally have been used on the islands called ‘double-enders,’ used for whaling, fishing and racing,” says Mauvin Hutchins, another of Bequia’s noted builders and owner of Mauvin’s Model Boat Shop.

“We sometimes build schooners from our own imagination, or I might see a boat in the harbor and I’ll try to make a replica of it.”

“We build copies of other people’s boats as well,” adds Hutchins. “If you have the plan and you bring it in, we can make a replica.”

With its hilly terrain blanketed with lush green forests, Bequia is the second largest of the 32 islands and cays of St. Vincent & the Grenadines. Cooled by breezy trade winds, many of the nation’s islands boast a more traditional and less touristy Caribbean character, while some are home to upscale resorts with sparkling white-sand beaches. For its rather small 7 square miles, Bequia holds a vast seafaring history, even earning a reputation as a major boatbuilding hub in the West Indies.



While Bequia’s celebrated boatbuilding era has since passed, its legacy lives on today through the precision crafting techniques of its miniature model builders.

#### ISLAND SHIPWRIGHTS

A thriving whaleboat industry helped catapult Bequia to that status in the late 19th century, and business thrived well into the 20th century. Craftsmen planed wooden beams and hammered them together on island beaches to build vessels ranging from smaller boats to large schooners. “Traditionally we were famous for building schooners that would take different cargos to Barbados and Trinidad,” notes Hutchins.

Schooners built by Bequia shipwrights included legendary songwriter Bob Dylan’s 70-foot *Water Pearl* and the 100-foot, two-masted *Friendship Rose*, which launched in 1969 and once hauled cargo and mail, but now whisks tourists to the Grenadines’ smaller islands and cays.

While Bequia’s celebrated boatbuilding era has since passed, its legacy lives on today through the precision crafting techniques of its miniature model builders. With so many private pleasure boats streaked in bright Caribbean colors within Bequia’s harbors – with sleek yachts nestled in coves and bobbing on gentle surf just off shore – it’s easy to see what inspired today’s model boat enthusiasts to pick up their carving knives.

“There was nothing much to do on the island, so we started making little boats from coconut shells,” explains Hutchins. Soon, he started crafting so-called “gum boats” from local gumwood. “Tourists would come and ask me to sell them a boat,” he says. “Then I discovered I could make a living from that, so I would bring the boats to the tourist center and they would sell.”

Similarly inspired, Timothy Sargeant says his two older brothers started the



A model of *HMY Britannia*, made on the island of Bequia, was a gift from St. Vincent & the Grenadines to the queen in 1985.

family's model-boat business in 1966. "We would always go to the sea," he recalls. "As little boys, my brothers made coconut sailboats and raced them in the water just for fun. And soon we saw yachts come into the bay. They saw the big boats and said, 'We can make something like that.'"

In addition to gumwood, builders also whittle down white pine from Canada and mahogany from Honduras and South America. They use cotton cloth and canvas for sails. The island's craftsmen are perhaps most proud of the model they built of the 412-foot *HMY Britannia*, Queen Elizabeth II's three-masted royal yacht. Decommissioned in 1997, *Britannia* is now a tourist attraction berthed at Edinburgh, Scotland. The model was made to present to Her Majesty during her visit to Bequia in 1985.

"Unknown to her, the prime minister had ordered the boat, so we made a model," says Sargeant. "When she came here, she was really amazed when she saw it. She said the only difference between the model and her boat was the size of it."

#### BOUNTIFUL BOATS

For boating and history buffs, further details of the queen's visit and the island's extensive boatbuilding and whaling history come to life at the Bequia Maritime Museum in Port Elizabeth, through its photo

exhibitions and model boats. The collection of watercraft at the Bequia Boat Museum on Friendship Bay includes an Amerindian canoe and locally built whaleboats. And boating competitions reach a peak during Bequia's Easter Regatta, where traditional local boats, yachts and model boats compete in separate races. Even kids have a chance to race their coconut shell boats, possibly igniting a lifelong passion of their own.

"When someone gives me an order to build their boat, it takes patience and I take my time doing it," explains Sargeant. "I built one more than 10 years ago for a husband and wife, and when I showed it to them, they were crying because they couldn't believe I could make it look so much like their boat. It was really amazing to them.

"So that really touched me to feel that way because of the work I do," he continues. "It made me really feel very happy."

Hutchins is equally proud of the hundreds of boats he's made since sharpening his crafting tools as a teenager. "After you've been doing this for 40-something years, you can close your eyes and just do it. I pay attention to details to make sure the boat comes out right including the carving and shape of the hull," he says. "Although I'm getting older, I'm getting better." ○

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