

Dining

British traditions infuse Bermuda

Four centuries after King James VI of Scotland and I of England authorised the founding of Virginia — and by extension, Bermuda — his descendant Queen Elizabeth II came to pay her respects. “Just as Admiral Somers would have struggled to predict the future in 1609, so it would be unwise to predict where Bermuda’s natural beauty, friendliness, courtesy and common sense will lead it next,” she said. “But one thing is certain: the United Kingdom will continue to follow and support Bermuda’s progress to the very best of her ability.”

Although closer to the Americas than to the UK, many cherished British traditions continue to infuse the culture here, from food to ceremony to language.

High tea. An iconic legacy of Britain observed between 3 and 5 p.m. at finer inns like Waterloo House and Elbow Beach, high tea is a high art at the petite-four-pink Fairmont Hamilton Princess. Served just off the lobby in the elegant Heritage Court are more than a dozen varieties of tea, including the private Princess Bermuda blend, plus the requisite finger sandwiches, rich pastries and classic scones with Devonshire cream.

Christmas. Seasonal foods inspired by Britain include Bakewell tarts flavoured with fruit jam, brandy butter made with lots of each, Christmas puddings filled with dried fruits, gingerbread (borrowed from Germany), mince pies made from fruit and meat suet, and sherry trifles. Princess Charlotte, wife of King George III, came from Germany and is reputed to have started England’s Christmas tradition of decorating small fir trees with tapers, almonds, raisins and wax dolls.

Pantomime productions performed at Christmastime feature jokes, political asides and costumes. Christmas crackers are festive British ornaments that pop open with a folded tissue hat, jokes or stories, twists of coloured paper, and maybe a little toy. On Boxing Day, December 26, aristocrats rewarded servants with boxes of game and goodies, as well as the day off. Today the holiday is a time to reward those who serve us and to help the less fortunate.

Peppercorn Ceremony. One of the islands' quaintest British traditions is the ancient Peppercorn Ceremony, complete with costumes, pomp and a parade through St. George's. Since 1816, it has marked the annual collection of the rent for the Old State House, one peppercorn, just enough to bind a contract under English common law. Each April, a 17-gun salute announces the governor, who inspects the honour guard while the Bermuda Regiment Band and Corps of Drums plays. The grand finale is the rendering of the symbolic peppercorn, presented on a velvet cushion and a silver platter.

Bagpipe music. When Scottish highland regiments first arrived in Bermuda, so did the bagpipes, and their rousing music can still be heard across the islands. The Bermuda Islands Pipe Band, wearing the Gordon tartan from northeastern Scotland, includes 20-or-so pipers and drummers who perform for events such as the Skirling ceremony, a free 30-minute show at noon each Monday in winter, at Fort Hamilton, and the Beating of the Retreat ceremony, performed at 9 p.m. twice each month in summer, in Royal Naval Dockyard, at Kings Square in St. George's or on Front Street in Hamilton.

Beating of the Retreat. From the days of King James VII of Scotland and II of England, the beating of the retreat, also called a tattoo, is a British Army tradition that signals troops to reduce operations for the night. A local custom since the 1700s, it is still performed by the Band of the Bermuda Regiment, wearing dress-blue-and-red uniforms with white pith helmets.

Bermuda fitted dinghies. Common in British coastal waters, these skiffs were used as transportation here before the age of ferries and busses. Under patronage

of British Army and Royal Navy officers, the first fitted-dinghy races were held during the St. George's Regatta in 1853. The ungainly little boats cannot exceed 14 feet 1 inch in length but can sport huge sails of more than 1,000 square feet. They reach very high speeds — until sunk or dismasted. Crews of six members demonstrate deft seamanship, including jumping or getting pushed off the stern to maximize speed and floatation. To the delight of spectators, they race on alternate Sundays each summer, in various parts of the islands. A good time is had by all.

Left-hand traffic. Bermuda drives on the left because Britain drives on the left, the side where people drove carts long before cars. In England, there is evidence that Romans drove on the left many centuries ago. Today, most visitors come to Bermuda from North America, where the reflex is to drive on the right — perhaps the best reason to bar them from renting cars here.

British English. When Virginia and Bermuda were founded, English spellings were not standardised. With the advent of published dictionaries, English split in two. Now British English follows Samuel Johnson's dictionary (1755), while U.S. English went the way of Noah Webster's (1828).

Most speakers recognise some differences (harbour vs. harbor), but there are hundreds, maybe thousands, including spellings from Latin (-our vs. -or, -re vs. -er, -ce vs. -se) and Greek (-ise vs. -ize, -yse vs. -yze, -ogue vs. -og). Some letters are doubled only in British, and others only in U.S. Some final e's are dropped, and others are preserved. Just to confuse us, there is a long list of miscellaneous spellings.

Other differences between the British and U.S. languages include use of specific words (lift vs. elevator), some tenses (burnt vs. burned) and dozens of other conventions. A few words have opposite meanings, like "to table": In British, it means to bring up for consideration; in U.S., to end consideration. Dates are reversed — April Fools' Day is written 01/04 in British, but 04/01 in U.S. — so don't be fooled.

Bermudians are British subjects, but most visitors are American, leading to a linguistic hodgepodge. For example, *Experience Bermuda* is written in a U.S. style, but with British spellings.