

Dagny Sellorin

Bahamian Sand Beads

Say you live on a tropical island where resources and transportation off-island are limited and difficult and you have an overwhelming urge to bead (don't we all?). What would you do? This was my situation in 2004 when I joined my husband on a scientific research island six miles off the northern tip of Exuma, in the "family islands" of the central Bahamas.



Villa Mae makes her beads in a variety of colors.

UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED, ALL PHOTOS BY DAGNEY SELLORIN.

I learned of the existence of sand beads from a flyer advertising a class in local crafts like basketweaving, hatmaking, and sand bead-making. The flyer proclaimed: “Don’t let our local craft skills die. Come learn to make beautiful sand beads.”

I had never heard of sand beads and I couldn’t take the course when it was offered, but I resolved to track down a source for sand beads. The quest took almost six months! I had to arrange for a boat ride to Barra Terre and a \$100 taxi ride from there to Georgetown, the only substantial town on Exuma. When I got to Georgetown, I went to the straw market and started talking to the women there who display their handmade items. I learned that a woman named Villa Mae McKenzie makes sand beads and she lives in Barra Terre. When I asked the taxi driver to take me to see Villa Mae, he replied, “Oh, she is my cousin. She lives right near our place.” This is how it goes in the Bahamas!

Villa Mae is one of only a handful of women in the Bahamas with the patience and skills to make these simple but time-consuming beads, so I was thrilled that she shared her instructions with me. Here I share them with you.

1: Collect some sand from your favorite beach, sift it through cheesecloth, and boil it in fresh water. Spread the sand out in the sun to dry, or dry it in an oven.

2: Pour about two cups of the dry sand and about two cups of papier-mâché or Celluclay on a nonstick surface, such as the lid of a plas-



The author learns beadmaking Bahamian-style.

PHOTO BY ED TEJA



One session takes about two cups of sand and two cups of papier-mâché.



Elmer's glue makes the mixture cohere.



Acrylic paint adds color.



Knead the mixture into malleable balls.



The top two necklaces were made by the author; the bottom necklace was made by Villa Mae.



Villa Mae at work.

tic five-gallon paint bucket. Slowly add Elmer's white glue and knead like bread dough until the mixture is a well-mixed, workable ball that does not crumble or fall apart. If you want to make colored beads, add a little acrylic paint to the sand ball before kneading it.

3: Pinch off a clump and roll it in your palms until you achieve the desired size and shape. If the sand ball gets too dry while you are making beads, knead in more Elmer's glue. *Note:* The sand gets very sticky, so keep a bucket of water and a bottle of olive oil nearby. Frequently rinse off your hands and rub a little oil in the palm of your hand. It keeps the rolling process going smoothly and helps produce a uniform, firm surface on the bead.

4: Allow the beads to dry overnight or until they are firm enough to resist deforming if you squeeze them between two fingers. Do not overdry the beads or they will become too hard to pierce.

5: Pierce the beads with a regular sewing needle (beading needles are too small). If desired, coat the beads with a clear, glossy paint. Allow to dry. ♦



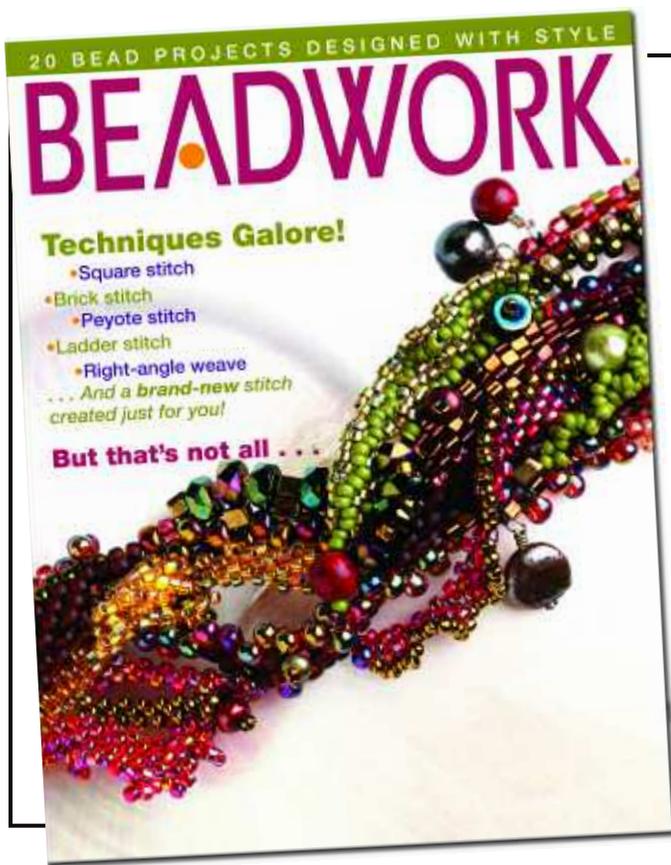
One beadmaking session produces enough beads (about one hundred 10–12mm beads) for several necklaces.

If you would like to get in touch with Villa Mae McKenzie, send a note to her at Barra Terre, Exuma, Bahamas. Or call her at (242) 355-5022. She'll answer if Bahama Tel is working!

Dagny Sellorin has been an artist since birth and a bead artist since moving to New Mexico in 2002. She lives and works in Silver City, New Mexico, but considers herself a citizen of the world.

RESOURCES

Don't have easy access to beach sand? Buy fine white or colored sand from an aquarium or pet store. This kind doesn't need boiling and drying.



RISK-FREE TRIAL OFFER

Discover the inner bead artist in you.

You don't have to be a designer or a beading pro to make beautiful jewelry, and you don't have to hunt all over for inspiring designs.

From cover to cover, *Beadwork* magazine gives you great projects, from the beginner to the advanced. Every issue is packed full of step-by-step instructions, easy-to-understand illustrations, plus well-written, lively articles sure to inspire. Each article brings you all the bead news to keep in the know and in fashion.

Take advantage of this special risk-free offer today!

www.interweave.com/go/bwkJPDT6