



## What is Bezique?

Bezique is an ancient game originating in France. It was popular here in the UK in the early part of last century particularly the 30's and 40's but started to decline in popularity from the 60's onwards. It was not only James Herriot (Alf) and Helen (Joan)s favourite card game it was Winston Churchills too.



MEN PLAYING CARDS 1881 FRENCH PAINTING BY CAILLEBOTTE



CHURCHILLS BEZIQUE TABLE AT CHARTWELL

## Playing Bezique

A first look at the rules of Bezique is a bit scary. But don't chicken out - once you get the hang of it it's really not that hard to play and it is really quite an enthralling game. It involves some decision making, some strategy and is quite a quick moving game so you won't get bored. I guess that's why James and Helen liked playing it.

There are two 'stages' to each game, a stage centred on making 'melds' and a second stage based on winning tricks. Each game takes about 25 minutes or so.

More on how to play later but first some of the terminology seemed a bit scary to me at first so let's get that out the way:-

## Melds

What is a 'Meld'? A Meld is a particular 'set' of cards that scores you points. For example, four Aces is a 'meld' which earns 100 points. You can only 'declare' a meld in the first stage of the game and only after winning a trick. The various 'Melds' that can win points are listed later with their associated points. One special type of 'Meld' is the Queen of Spades and the Jack of Hearts. I'm not sure what these two have been getting up to but this special 'Meld' is called 'Bezique' – hence the name of the game. And if you can collect a double bezique (Two Queen of Spades and Two Jack of Diamonds) then you get the very highest score of all - 500 points. At one point in the Herriot books you may recall that Helen scores a double bezique to knock poor James out of the game!

## Tricks

Tricks are common in a lot of card games. To win a 'trick' you lay down a card along with your opponent and the highest score wins. But in Bezique you don't get points for winning the trick unless it is the very last trick. You do. However, get points for every 10 or ACE that you win in your tricks.

## Trumps

Also common with many card games Bezique uses the concept of trumps where a chosen suit (Hearts, Diamonds, Clubs, Spades) is decided by flipping up the bottom card in the pack. The Trump suit is deemed more valuable than any other suit i.e. any card of the 'trump' suit beats any other non-trump card.

## Some Weird Rules

There are a few weird rules in Bezique that you will need to get your head around – but persevere, they make the game more interesting!

1. You play with two decks of cards – but exclude any card valued under 7. I think this is just to keep the game shorter.
2. The Seven of trumps is seen as having a special value and when you play that card you get extra points (10).
3. If you hold the seven of trumps in your hand then you can swap this with the card showing at the bottom of the pack to indicate what suit is trumps. You get 10 points for doing this too.
4. The weirdest rule to get your head around – the ten of any suit is valued between a King and Ace – NOT below the jack. This took some getting used to and I am yet to work out who or why this rule was invented. But some things just 'are' and this is one of them.

## How to play

I started by just reading the rules and found that too complicated. So, I went straight to watching a video on how to play first – here is where I went for a video on how to play plus it details the rules for you as well.

<https://playingcarddecks.com/blogs/how-to-play/bezique-game-rules>

Once I had got the general idea I downloaded an app onto my phone and learned by actually playing. I found one on my iPhone called 'Bezique' that cost just 85p and before very long had got the hang of it.

What I did find really handy was to write out the various 'Melds' and their associated points. I've done this for you on the next sheet which you can refer to as you go along.

This all got me going with Bezique pretty quickly and once it has 'clicked' you can start playing with real decks of cards and work out winning strategies.

## What I learned from my first few games

The game has two distinct stages:-

### First stage:

After receiving your 8 cards each you take it in turns to pick a card from the remainder of the pack and then play a card against your opponent as a 'trick' which you either win or lose. You do not have to follow suit at this stage. Tricks have no value unless they contain an ACE or a 10 so the main reason you want to win a trick at this stage is when you have a meld to declare that can win points. Remember, you can only declare a Meld when you have just won a trick.

During this stage the goal seems to be to collect Melds that earn most points whilst keeping an eye out for the queen of spades and jack of diamonds for a 'bezique'. Then, as the pack of available cards starts to run down (there will be 24 'tricks' at this stage) you need to start collecting Trump cards if you can in readiness for the next stage.

### Second stage (The last 8 tricks):

When the pack has run down to the last card then the game changes and each trick DOES start earning points – 10 for each trick plus an extra 10 for winning the last trick. You must follow the suit of the first card played and you must try to win each trick.

At the end of both stages you add up all the points gained. That includes 10 points for every Ace and 10 each player holds in their tricks gained. The winner is the highest score at the end of the game that 1000 is breached.

You will soon find yourself getting competitive!

## Summary

I can see why James and Helen loved this game. Its slight complexity and odd rules keep it interesting. A simpler game would get boring after a while – but not Bezique where there is a constant striving for the best strategy, and you never know what is going to happen. It requires a bit of memory, a bit of strategy, a bit of skill and a bit of luck.

Be prepared to be scared by the weird rules to start with but then you will soon be drawn into it realise what a good game it is.

And finally, just imagine James and Helen sat upstairs in Skeldale house playing Bezique with Helen crying “Double Bezique” to dash James’ hopes of victory! They were simpler times with no computers or smart phones or TV. But I have a feeling they had just as much fun – maybe more.

Enjoy Bezique!

Roger



# QUICK GUIDE - BEZIQUE

<b>DEALING :</b>	8 Cards per Player (2 players only) Draw from remaining card stack, trick winner draws first. Bottom card indicates Trump suit and should be visible If the same card is played in a trick, the lead card wins.
<b>CARD RANKING:</b>	ACE, <b>10</b> , KING, QUEEN, JACK, 9, 8, 7
<b>FIRST STAGE:</b>	Melds only declared after winning trick
<b>SECOND STAGE (LAST 8 TRICKS)</b>	Must follow suit Must Play to win
<b>WINNER:</b>	First to 1000 Points

## POINT SCORING CHART

<u>MELD POINTS:</u>	<u>POINTS</u>
7 of Trumps	<b>10</b>
Trump Run (Ace, 10, King, Queen, Jack)	<b>20</b>
Trump Marriage	<b>40</b>
Non-Trump Marriage	<b>20</b>
4 Jacks	<b>40</b>
4 Queens	<b>60</b>
4 Kings	<b>80</b>
4 Aces	<b>100</b>
BEZIQUE (Queen Spades, Jack diamonds)	<b>40</b>
DOUBLE BEZIQUE (2 x Queen Spades, 2 x Jack Diamonds)	<b>500</b>

## PLAYING POINTS

ACE or 10 in hand at end of play	<b>10 each</b>
Winning last trick	<b>10</b>