

WORLD OF CHARTERING



The BVI Cruise That Made Believers Out of Chad & Jill

If you already own a cruising sailboat in California, why spend money to charter a boat someplace else — such as the Virgin Islands? This is something I'd never understood before, and it's why, until last year, I'd never chartered a boat in an exotic locale.

Well, last winter I decided to try a week of chartering in the British Virgin Islands to see what I'd been missing, if anything. We booked a boat with Footloose Sailing Charters, one of the BVI's larger companies, and saved a few bucks by going with their older boats (compared to Moorings or Sunsail.) When my wife Jill — a skeptical sailor — and I got to Tortola, we saw that even one of Footloose's older boats, a 3-year-old Beneteau, was still about 25 years newer than *Bella Dama*, the trusty old Islander 36 we sail at home.

Before setting sail, though, we first satisfied Jill's longing for a couple of poolside hotel days, by staying in St. Thomas at a hotel with a beautiful view

The Caribbean's most famous crooner, Foxy Callwood, may not be able to sing anymore, but he hasn't lost his irreverent wit.



JILL KOMINEK

of Charlotte Amalie Bay.

I was a little surprised when a charter company employee insisted that Jill sit in on all aspects of the boat briefing. He went through the procedures in case the boat was sinking, which I knew probably didn't make Jill feel any better. By the time he told us of all of the reefs we needed to avoid to prevent shipwreck, Jill was a wreck herself; scared, sick to her stomach, and didn't want to go anymore.

We were not off to a good start! After a little hand-holding and some time to relax after the briefings, we pulled out of Wickams Cay Marina and headed for Peter Island. The wind was blowing 20-25 knots, but was from just aft of the beam, so I unrolled the jib only — no main — to have a mellow, relaxing sail across the Sir Francis Drake Channel, to regain Jill's good mood and trust, and all the good things that come with that.

We grabbed a mooring ball just before sunset at Peter Island, and got some rest. Unlike our typically windless nights at home in Ventura, we had wind howling in the rigging at 20-30 knots all night, which took some getting used to. But we still managed a good night's sleep.

The next day the wind stayed up, and we were planning to go east (upwind), toward Marina Cay which lies near the east end of Tortola. I double-reefed the mainsail, and even so, found the rudder momentarily overpowered until I eased the sheets to reduce whether helm. We were sailing upwind in 20-25 knots of

83° breeze over 80° water. A little spray in the face feels a lot better in the BVI!

After a couple hours of beating toward Marina Cay, I was about to motorsail the last couple of miles when the engine alarm sounded. As instructed, I used the provided cell phone to call the base mechanics, and let them know.

My immediate problem was that we would have to sail into a mooring field or anchorage, in 20-25 knots of wind, with no engine, in still very unfamiliar waters!

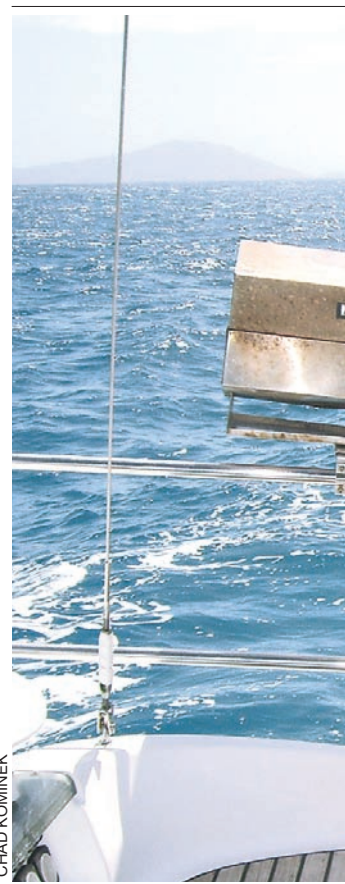
As I'd hoped, the mechanic said I could use the engine for 3 or 4 minutes to grab a mooring ball.

Upon our arrival, the available mooring balls were unsheltered from that day's strong winds. We'd have just one chance to start the engine, motor up and grab the ball. And the strong wind would make it very tough for Jill to run our line through the eye splice at the end of the mooring ball's pennant with the boat being blown backward.

As we approached the ball, after just a minute or two the engine alarm came on again, as we were approaching the mooring ball. "Dang! Missed that one!" So we went for the next one, and I knew I had to get the engine off within seconds. I powered hard toward the ball, made sure the boat would reach it, then shut off the engine, hoping that Jill had snagged the mooring pennant with our boat hook.

I ran forward to grab hold of the mooring loop in hopes of threading our 1-inch dockline through the eye before the boat was blown backward. Did I mention that a rocky lee shore lay 50 yards away?

Jill says I literally dove for it, hanging over the bow, and grabbed the loop just above water level with one hand. But the wind began to pull the boat backward, and it didn't seem like I'd be able to hold on to the loop. My grip was slipping — I was losing a finger at a time, like Wile Coyote hanging from a lone tree branch hundreds of feet above a box canyon. But just then, a wave pushed the boat forward a foot or two,



CHAD KOMINEK

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By her own accounting, Jill came "full circle" during their cruise. Although initially skeptical, she ended up loving it!

and I was able to get my other hand on the mooring loop and stabilize the situation.

Jill handed me our dockline, we threaded it through, cleated it off, and we were safe. Whew! Unfortunately, the incident gave me some nasty 'boat bites. Both my right forearm and right breast were black and blue for the next five days. I had the bruises of someone who just had a boob job; not a good look for a man.

Things got considerably better from that moment on. The charter company sent over a chase boat mechanic. Due to an initial mis-diagnosis, we ended up virtually engineless for a day and a half, but we quickly realized there were worse places to be stranded. Between Marina Cay and neighboring Trellis Bay, there were numerous fun bars and great beach restaurants, including the Last Resort, Pusser's Landing, De Loose Mongoose, and others. We had a great dinghy and money in our pockets, and the anchorage and our boat were fabulous, if temporarily immobile.

We met a nice couple who joined us

for a fabulous dinner at De Loose Mongoose, where a live band lent to the atmosphere. By the time our engine was repaired, we were happy to stay the night at Trellis Bay. We even found time for a jog up toward the airport before dinner.

With the boat fixed, the next day we sailed past the Dog Islands for Anegada. The wind was forecast to lighten to about 10-15 knots from the east, so Anegada was a beam reach of about 15 miles. I'd heard many warnings about the tricky entrance through the reef pass, but we had no problems.

We did meet some charterers who had bumped the bottom right in the mooring field, but our boat showed one whole foot of water below the keel while we were moored in front of Neptune's Treasure. (We drew 5.5 feet.)

Unlike the other mountainous, volcanic islands, Anegada is a low-lying coral reef, only a few feet high at its highest point. It can't easily be seen until you are quite close. It's less visited than the other British Virgin Islands. Restaurants throughout the BVI sell fresh Anegada lobster dinners, and they aren't cheap. As we watched many lobster fisherman unloading their catches

at the rickety wooden piers at Anegada, we decided we had to eat at one of the restaurants on the beach that barbeques lobster on open flames under the stars. We chose the Anegada Reef Hotel. What a fabulous dinner, and what a large lobster! Our candlelit table was so close to the water, some of the tiny waves lapping nearby just missed our toes in the sand.

I listened to NOAA weather after dinner and heard of a small craft warning for 20-25 knots from the east, which sounded just perfect since we were going to be sailing west toward Jost Van Dyke Island the next day. The morning started with a quick taxi ride for snorkeling at Cow Wreck Beach on the open ocean side of the Anegada. Then we set sail for what turned out to be a downwind romp. We had no spinnaker but the sailing was a perfect sleigh ride, surfing 4 to 6-foot waves.

With the autopilot on, Jill and I lay down at the bow to really enjoy the ride. I noticed she was really starting to have fun now. She doesn't like long sails, though, and from Anegada to Jost Van Dyke is the longest sail possible in the British Virgins — almost 30 miles. I decided to cut it shorter by 45 minutes or so by going straight to Tortola's Cane Garden Bay — right across from Jost.

What a beautiful, green tropical cove that is! Cane Garden has several lively bars, two ATM's, one of which worked, and the steepest paved road I've ever seen to connect it to the rest of the island. We climbed the road on foot, which made for a vigorous walk, to say the least. We learned that sidewalks don't exist around the islands, so you must be careful walking the narrow lanes with cars driving on the wrong side of the road!

In the morning, I let Jill sleep in, raised anchor and motorsailed one hour over to Jost Van Dyke and anchored in Great Harbour. After breakfast we dinged over to White Bay, the only place so far without a dinghy dock. We easily landed our hard-bottom dinghy in the small surf and secured it with the dingy anchor up on the sand. This is probably the most beautiful beach we saw the whole trip.

A highlight at Jost Van Dyke was meeting Foxy Callwood himself — the world-famous owner of Foxy's Bar. He spontaneously entertained us with a rhyming verse that managed to work in about 15 California cities. What a character. He doesn't sing anymore. He told

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me he had polyps on his vocal cords and was advised to knock it off after 30+ years.

From Jost we motorsailed through the Thatch Cay cut between St. John and Tortola, and on to Norman Island. There, after a sunset hike to the top of the ridge, we had a lively dinner with dancing to reggae at Pirate's on the beach, then stopped by the William Thorton floating restaurant (aka the *Willy T*) for a nightcap.

In the morning we took our dinghy from the Bight at Norman Island over to the caves around the corner, for the best snorkeling either of us had ever experienced. We had to have the boat back by noon, but we made time for some more snorkeling at The Indians (pinnacles) on the way back. As we got within about half an hour of the Road



LATITUDE / ANDY

A broad crescent lined by towering coco palms, Cane Garden Bay is a favorite BVI anchorage. Restaurants and lively bars line the beach.

Town harbor entrance, I noticed a dinghy out in the middle of the channel, and a small person who seemed to be waving. At first I started to veer toward the dinghy, thinking maybe it was someone needing help. The dinghy quickly zoomed over just in front of us, and then all around us. It was a cute young

gal from Yacht Shots BVI taking photos of our boat, heeled over nicely in 10-15 knots on a close reach — the photos came out great!

Readers may wonder if Jill ever began to enjoy the trip. Well, she grudgingly admitted mid-week that she had “come full circle” on this trip, meaning that after a horrible start,

she was having a blast. By the end of the week, she asked if we could add another day on the boat! (She never asks for another day on the boat at home!) I should also note that Footloose cheerfully gave us a coupon for our lost day and a half, which is good anywhere in the world that they have a base.

I've got a load of frequent flyer miles, so I'm already debating the options.

— chad kominek

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