



The BVI: arguably the finest charter grounds in the world

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Two novice skippers, one big catamaran, a water ballet and a week in the BVI

BY DAWN DUPREE

Conventional wisdom has it there can be only one captain on a boat, and that skippering by consensus never works. When it comes down to the wire, one voice must be heard above all others, or chaos will ensue. Well, that's obviously a male viewpoint. My friend Pip and I share a passion for

sailing and adventure, and we've done some offshore racing and family cruising, but neither of us had ever taken charge of a sailboat. Our confidence had been bolstered by a rigorous sailing course that qualified us to skipper a charter boat. It also revealed that we have different but complementary skill sets, so we decided a collaborative skippering experience might work best for us. With no male egos to get in the way, the omens were good.

We approached our charter in the British Virgin Islands with a heady mix of excitement and nervous anticipation, reasoning that our combined sailing knowledge would see us through the week. We had no reason to doubt our individual abilities, and felt comforted by the fact that we had each other to rely on, confer with and learn from.



The skippers confer on charter tactics

Two skippers need a strong crew. We assembled a dynamic bunch of women from New England and old England to accompany us. Bird provided crucial sailing assistance, as well as psychotherapeutic advice. Aviva re-

corded our daily exploits with beautiful watercolors, while Jen created exquisite meals with fresh local ingredients. The week's entertainment culminated with a truly memorable water ballet performance directed by Pam and featuring The Water Sisters.

The Footloose charter base on Tortola is wedged behind pontoons bulging with Moorings and Sunsail boats; we wondered if we'd have to grease the sides of *Sail Mate*, our 43ft catamaran, in order to get out. A terrified Pip took the wheel for departure and set off rather faster than anticipated, blaming the throttle controls. After a rather hairy snorkel stop at the Indians that involved 18-20 knots of wind, a large swell and pushy bareboat skippers ready to play chicken for the nearest mooring, we made the Bight on Norman Island with plenty of daylight to spare. It was a pleasure to see everyone so excited, especially those who had never been in the Caribbean before. We swam, enjoyed the sunset, and then shared a superb dinner followed by—ahem—pole dancing.

Pip had been to the BVI enough times to know the importance of arriving early at the Baths. But when we arrived still bleary-eyed the next morning, we were met by red dan-

ger flags on shore snapping in the 20-knot northeasterly breeze. No problem, we'd just pick up a mooring so Aviva could do some painting. You can guess what happened next. Somehow we ended up wrapping the dinghy painter around our prop. Yes, I admit it, panic ensued: cursing, engines refusing to start, big swell, rocks—yikes! Then we realized we were drifting away from rocks and other boats, and that we were in no real danger.

We bent on a new painter for the dinghy so we could cut free the wrapped line. Thankfully, Bird is always up for a physical challenge. Topless, fearless, knife clenched between her teeth, she was soon over the side doing battle like a Bond girl. Not to be left out, Aviva and Pip joined the struggle and managed to pull the last piece of yellow line from the prop. The only casualty was a lost boathook—amazing! We dusted ourselves down, breathed a huge sigh of relief, and then had a cracking sail up to the Bitter End.

Trouble always comes in threes, and as we prepared to depart the Bitter End, the port engine refused to start. Fortunately Lionel, a roving mechanic from Footloose, came to our rescue, fixing the engine and replacing the boathook and painter. Moored at Leverick Bay that night, we went ashore to see a really corny pirate show. Inspired, we returned to the boat and had our own limbo dancing competition.

The next morning we decided to confront our demons and return to the site of the by-now legendary prop wrap. This time there



was much less wind and swell at the Baths, and we arrived early enough to have our pick of the moorings. We went ashore in the dinghy and had a lovely few hours exploring the caves and swimming in the crystal clear water. By lunchtime all the tourist buses were gone and we had the place to ourselves. The disaster du jour was losing the kill-switch clip from the dinghy, but Aviva's hairclip made a wonderful MacGyver-style substitute.

There followed a frustrating motorsail in light and fluky winds to Trellis Bay, where we enjoyed great rotis and bushwhackers at the Loose Mongoose. We two skippers were exhausted and snuck back to the boat early while the rest of the crew went in search of more rum and dancing. We were thus bright-eyed and alert next morning for the short motorsail to Monkey Point. Here we found by far the best snorkeling of the whole trip; the huge walls of fish and great visibility made it well worth braving the swell. After that we had a good sail to Little Harbor on Jost Van Dyke, where we spent a peaceful

Aviva, Pip and Bird display prop wrap trophies; Above: snorkelling, by Aviva



PHOTO BY ROBERTO RINALDI/BLUEGREENPICTURES (TOP); BY PIP HURN (LOWER LEFT AND RIGHT); PAINTING BY AVIVA HALTER

evening with the goats and pelicans. There was not a cloud in the sky, and the lack of light pollution on shore made for perfect stargazing. It was a fine end to a great day.

The next morning we spent a lazy few hours exploring in the dinghy while Aviva and Pam began to put the finishing touches on their water ballet. We then set off for White Bay via the Bubbling Pool and Sandy Spit.

Didn't I say disasters come in threes? Shortly after we set out for White Bay somebody noticed our dinghy was missing, a realization that was almost immediately followed by the sighting of a white blob on the horizon. The recovery was drama-free, and was followed by a tutorial on proper cleating techniques.

The tricky entrance to White Bay, which consists of two very small channels leading behind a long reef, really put our skills to the test. But it was well worth the anxiety; White Bay is one of the most picturesque places in the BVI. We went ashore for cocktails and some fun people-watching. After a couple of bushwhackers we became the en-



Left: Dawn enjoys one of many terrific sails. Right: Feeling the love in White Bay. Below: Aviva's take on the Baths

tainment as we tried to launch the dinghy off the beach. Then it was back to the boat for another of Jen's delicious meals.

After a lazy morning wandering up and down the pristine white beach, checking out the funky souvenirs and beach bars, it was time to head back to the base. As we departed, we experienced what we hoped would be our final disaster when the mooring got wrapped around the starboard rudder.

Fortunately, some fancy boathook work set us free and we were off on our bitter-sweet sail back to base.

Alas, our troubles were not yet behind us. Footloose had promised to send someone out to bring the boat in, but it soon became apparent that the promised help would not materialize. The skippers drew straws to see who would dock the boat and with the loving support of a fantastic crew, Pip managed to creep back into the slip without damaging the boat's topsides.

That night, we reflected on our joint skippering adventure. We had climbed a steep learning curve as we encountered daily challenges and several unexpected hazards. At times it felt as though we were being tested. We gained new insight into how important it is to be vigilant and constantly aware of safety issues and potential difficulties as soon as they arise. Teamwork and problem-solving skills proved as valuable as any yacht charter manual. There is no doubt that the heightened sense of responsibility that skippering entails might have spoiled a week in the BVI for some, but for us it felt empowering and we were inspired to go again. It was an incredibly affirming experience.

My lasting memory is one of a relaxed group of friends laughing relentlessly.

We ended our week with the wildly anticipated water ballet from Aviva and Pam. Let's just say we were not disappointed! *AL*



CRUISE NOTES

→ **WHERE TO SAIL:** Basically, you can't go wrong in the British Virgin Islands. It's all good! You won't want to miss the Baths, White Bay, Monkey Point or Jost van Dyke, but it's impossible to single out any one place.

→ **WHEN TO SAIL:** High season in the BVI is between December and April, when temperatures average in the high 70s and trade winds blow consistently from the east and northeast. But you can sail here year-round; it's just slightly hotter in the summer months.

→ **CONTACT:** Footloose Sailing Charters
footloosecharters.com



Dawn Dupree is a textile artist who has sailed extensively in the Mediterranean, Caribbean and northern Europe