



sailing/ Pleasure islands

Cruising the British Virgin Islands, the days sail by and the nights are just swell

“WHAT’S THE NAME OF YOUR BOAT?” ASKS KC, THE BARMAN AT THE SOGGY DOLLAR.

We’ve swum to the beachside bar on the tiny Caribbean island of **Jost Van Dyke** from our yacht (hence we’ll be paying with “soggy dollars”), we’ve hit the shack’s legendary “Painkiller” rum cocktails and we’re beginning to run up a significant tab. KC wants to know which name to put it under.

“Bikini Man,” I reply, thinking nothing of it. The 41-foot monohull has been home to me and some friends for the past three days, and we’ve got used to the moniker.

“Holy shit! Where is it?” he smiles. “Cos that sure sounds like fun, man.”

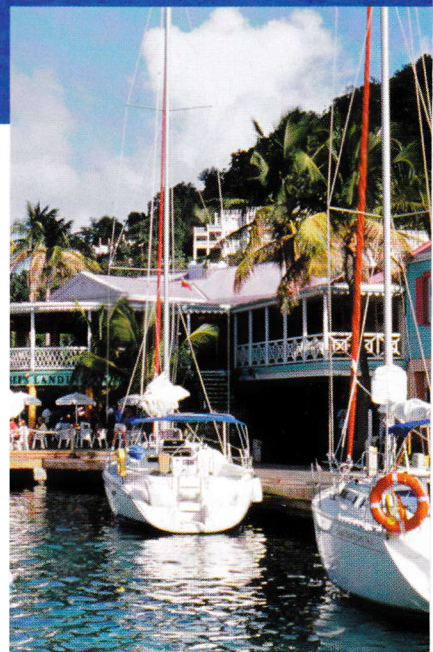
Though Sunday afternoon at the Soggy is pretty close to perfection – the delicious yet deceptively strong cocktails are flowing, guitarist Ruben is strumming breezy calypso tunes and beautiful ex-pat English girls are slinking around in bikinis – KC is about as right as right can be. Beach-bar-crawling around the British Virgin Islands with a group of mates in a sleek and stylish yacht is about the most fun you can have with very few clothes on.

It’s the allure of this seagoing lifestyle, partly fostered by Ellen MacArthur’s heroics and Britain’s three sailing golds at the last Olympics, that has led to a mini boom in sailing holidays, and there are plenty of places around the world

to mess about in boats. Few, though, can match the warm waters and relaxed lifestyle of the BVI.

Renowned as the sailing capital of the Caribbean, the seas around the British dependency’s 50 or so closely knit islands are calm and inviting, and the trade winds that gust across them gentle and consistent. Add the many sheltered bays, islets and cays that are ideal for overnight mooring, all-year-round good conditions (although winter and spring are best) and an appealingly piratic past (it’s said that Norman Island inspired *Treasure Island*) and it’s no wonder the BVI are attracting both nautical novices and old sea dogs in their thousands.

“The BVI are great for sailing because they offer such incredible variety,” says our not entirely



Sail of the century: above, Sopers Hole, Tortola. Top, Sandy Cay, Jost Van Dyke, home of the legendary Soggy Dollar bar



Virgin territory: clockwise from below, Long Bay, Tortola; shore leave, over the yardarm; Virgin Gorda



impartial skipper, Alden. "You can find reefs and wrecks for snorkelling and diving, islands with a real party vibe, bays with perfect beaches and uninhabited coves where you can drop anchor and just hang out – often all in one day."

As sybaritic beginners, we've chosen to hire a yacht with an experienced local helmsman aboard rather than go straight for the unaccompanied "bareboat" option. Alden is perfect for us, a local Rasta who proves to be a cool yet commanding presence. He's an experienced yachtsman who has sailed these waters, often with his lobster-catching father, since he was nine, and is safe and serious about his craft while appreciative of a good time. Plus, as he can't sail a yacht of

our size unaided, we still get to be hands-on, pulling on ropes, winding down sails, learning the basic principles of tacking and sailing and having a go behind the wheel.

There are plenty of different sailboats for hire in the BVI, but Alden has one important tip: go large. "The bigger the boat, the easier it is to handle," he tells us. "Small boats are less stable; they'll get knocked around a lot."

Our 41-footer certainly comes into its own when the wind picks up to 20 knots on the way to the almost deserted island of **Anegada**; tacking close to the wind, it rolls and leans way over on its side, the sea spray providing a cooling light shower in the heat of the midday sun. As my friend Richie calls out: "Amazing to

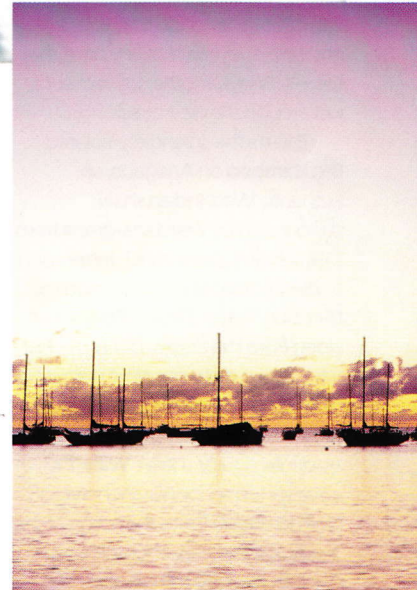


be moving eight tons of yacht so quickly for nothing." Nothing, that is, but the force of the wind.

There are other highs as well. On one afternoon, we drop anchor and swim to a tiny fleck in the sea called **Sandy Spit**, an uninhabited island so archetypally palm-treed and golden-sanded that we half expect to bump into Ursula Andress. By the fourth day, even the creaks and scrapes of the guide ropes and the eddying flutters of the wind in the mainsail have taken on a certain appeal.

Sure, things can go wrong. Those with sensitive stomachs may find the peaks and troughs of rougher sailing conditions challenging, though you soon learn to focus on the horizon and drink lashings of Jamaican ginger beer. It's also worth bearing in mind an old seafaring saying: a yacht gets a foot shorter for every day you spend on it. You need to pull together and pull your weight if you all want to remain friends.

Furthermore, if you're sailing bareboat, it's best to keep an eye on the colour of the water: if it's that lovely turquoise hue, you're well clear; if it looks sandy or brown, then there's a danger of running aground on a sandbar. "I was always told that if you can see seagulls walking on water, then it's a fair bet you're in trouble," says Richie.



You may have to watch the expense, too. While party provisions such as rum and cigarettes are dirt cheap in the BVI, such essentials as fruit, vegetables, meat and wine can seriously damage your budget. As can eating out in even the most modest of lunchtime cafés, where grilled-fish sandwiches and beers for two can set you back almost £30. Meals in the smarter restaurants – **Chez Bamboo** on Virgin Gorda or the **Sugar Mill Restaurant** on Tortola – may be £40 a head. And if you hire a skipper, don't forget you'll also be meeting the cost of his meals, too.

But for all this, there's nothing to match the freedom that hiring a yacht >



Like a virgin? Above, ladies' man Bomba poses by his pad, venue of his full-moon all-nighters. Top, the tiny Sandy Spit, near Jost Van Dyke

can offer – the notion that you can go anywhere you want at any time, that there's always another perfect spot just around the next headland.

There's the splendidly isolated **Big Bamboo** on Anegada, an authentic West Indian shack surrounded by weird sea-grape trees that serves superb conch fritters and a splendid house cocktail called the Bamboo Teaser. There's **Foxy's**, just along from the Soggy Dollar on Jost Van Dyke, a real night-time party spot that's great for lobster dinners, home-brewed rum and calypso bands. And, infamously, there's **Willy T's**, a converted schooner anchored off Norman Island that's the home of the "body shot" – a ceremony in which revellers lie along the bar and have shots of tequila sipped from the pit of their stomachs – and naked plunges into the sea from the top deck.

Most famous and unmissable, however, is **Bomba's** on the island of Tortola. Curiously for a country that's largely God-fearing and law-abiding, Bomba's is the epicentre of licentious loose-living. Once a month, Bomba, a ragamuffin Barry White who drives around in a navy-blue Cadillac, hosts a full-moon party in his driftwood shack by the sea. It's a construction largely held together, it would seem, by the hundreds of women's panties that hang down from the roof and that stand as testament to Bomba's legendary status as an extravagantly

endowed ladies' man. On full-moon party nights, bands and DJs pump out dub, ragga and reggae, and people dance on the sand and out on the street; it's like a block party, a rave, a sound clash and a night out at Stringfellows all rolled into one.

And it's all fuelled by one very special ingredient: Bomba's punch. Mixed with the owner's scarily potent magic-mushroom tea, grown – it's said – in cow dung, this concoction has a curiously unsteady effect over a long evening, making you feel hazy and unbalanced yet much more awake than you should feel at five in the morning.

"No, I really don't want another," says Jo, one of our party, when I ask her if she'd like one for the road/sea. The sun's coming up and we've decided that we probably should be heading back to Bikini Man. "In fact, could you take back some of the ones I've already drunk?" ☹

WAY TO GO

Getting there

● *Esquire* travelled to the BVI with **BRITISH AIRWAYS** (0845 773 3377) via Antigua. The onward flight with LIAT takes around two hours.

Hiring a boat

● We hired Bikini Man through British-owned **SUNSAIL** (023 9222 2222; www.sunsail.com). Other sailboat companies in the BVI include **VOYAGE CHARTERS** (00 1 410 956 1880; www.voyagecharters.com) and **THE MOORINGS** (01277 776 677; www.moorings.com). The best period for sailing is between 15 November and 15 April.

Where to stay

● It's worth hiring a villa both before and after your sailing charter. We stayed in a five-bedroom villa at the **LEVERICK BAY RESORT & MARINA** (www.leverickbay.com) on Virgin Gorda, from where our skipper picked us up. After we relaxed at **KATITCHE POINT GREATHOUSE** (www.katitchepoint.com; sleeps 13; from £11,000 for a week), with its spectacular views of the Sir Francis Drake Channel (the meeting point of Atlantic and Caribbean), infinity pool and subtly masculine teak and sandstone decor. If you fancy a break from self-catering, check into the **SUGAR MILL** (www.sugarmillhotel.com; doubles from £125 per night) on Tortola, a small yet well-run seaside hotel set among the ruins of a 17th-century sugar plantation. It's a short walk along the beach from Bomba's, which could be handy.

Cost

● A two-week trip, inclusive of flights with BA and LIAT, seven days at sea in a 37-foot Bavaria yacht with three double cabins and a skipper, and seven nights in a villa at Leverick Bay, starts at £1,385 per person through **BVI HOLIDAYS** (01279 871 188; www.bviholidays.com). The same trip in a fully crewed, 70-foot monohull yacht with full board and drinks, and with a week at Katitche Point, starts at £2,855 per person.

Further information

BVI TOURIST BOARD: 020 7355 9585; www.bvitouristboard.com
CARIBBEAN TOURIST BOARD: www.doitcaribbean.com