

Extended Cruising in the Caribbean

Installment 4 Cruising in the BVI

This is the fourth installment of a planned seven article series that chronicles an adventure of sailing Windward Passage, our Beneteau 445, from the Chesapeake Bay to the Caribbean and down the island chain as far south as St. Vincent. After spending two months in St. Vincent we will sail back up island to Tortola where provisioning will be done for the trip back to the Chesapeake Bay in May, 2008. Previous articles covered Planning the Voyage, Preparing the Boat, and The Outbound Ocean Crossing. This article covers our cruising in the British Virgin Islands (BVI) for the months of December and January.

The outbound crew who helped me sail Windward Passage from North Point Marina to the BVI all flew home on November 20. I stayed in the Village Cay Marina in Road Town harbor for a week while I had the torn mainsail repaired and made repairs to other equipment that had been damaged in the passage south. When all was repaired I began exploring the various anchorages as a single handed sailor. I have always said that I believe the difference between big sailboats and small sailboats is that big boats are easy to sail but hard to park. Small boats are hard to sail (they can turn over!) but they are easy to park. An auto pilot helped me with the tacking and I had no trouble sailing, though the winds for the first two weeks were almost always in the 20+ knot range. This was a new experience for me but I quickly learned to pick up a mooring in 20+ knots of wind or securely set the anchor so parking was easier than I had anticipated.

The BVI is composed of over 50 islands with the largest being Tortola which stretches north of the Sir Francis Drake Channel. South of the channel is a series of Islands whose names and order can be remembered from the mnemonic “Good Captains Sail Perfectly at Night” (Ginger, Cooper, Salt, Peter and Norman Islands). West of Tortola is Jost van Dyke and east is Virgin Gorda. These are the principal islands with the rest being mostly uninhabited.



**Photo 1 Anna Woodford
sails the channel**

Sailing in the BVI is quite easy as the wind blows mostly from the east varying only from NE to SE and there are lots of safe harbors spread throughout the many islands. Because of this, it has the largest charter boat population in the world. The government has recognized the value of this business and done many things to accommodate charters. This includes filling most of the harbors with mooring balls so that charters will not have to anchor and the mooring owners can generate a considerable income renting the moorings at prices from \$25 to \$30 per night.

The people are quite friendly and security is good with little theft and almost no violence. I tried to visit lots of potential anchorages to find where the charters do not go so that we could experience less crowded anchorages and avoid the loud party groups.

During the six weeks from December 12 to February 2 seventeen family and friends joined me for sailing in these waters. I will organize this installment by location rather than chronologically. As I relay stories of events at a location, remember that they may be from more than one visit and with different people involved. We visited some anchorages several times with different guests so it may seem that there were a lot of people on board but we never had more than a total of six at any one time. Several authors have made a good living writing 300 page guides to the BVI. In the space I have available I can only touch what we felt were the high spots of our time here.

Road Town, Tortola

Road Town is the place to do provisioning as there are several super markets that carry a variety of foods and wines. However, everything is expensive compared to prices in the US, and you should expect to pay from 150% to 300% of the price for items that you would purchase at home.

We found the staff at The Village Cay Marina to be helpful, friendly and competent. They do not have maintenance facilities but can arrange to have equipment repaired and seem to be given priority by the local vendors for serving their customers. They have a laundry service that only charges \$8.00 per load to wash, dry and fold the laundry. We would leave the two or three loads each Saturday morning and pick it up in the afternoon. It was cheaper than doing it ourselves and we did not have to hang around a Laundromat for several hours.



Photo 2 Julie Williamson and Carrie Bisantz at Village Cay

On Friday and Saturday nights there is a native food truck that does a Bar-B-Q of ribs and pulled pork. When we saw the locals lining up for nearly an hour we had a suspicion that the food would be worth the wait. We were not disappointed. The ribs were great but the pulled pork was the big seller. They put a sauce on it that could have been used to eliminate the grilling. It was hot but one could not stop eating it even when the throat was completely cauterized.

For more elegant dining we enjoyed The Dove, a wonderful, small restaurant on Main Street. Their menu is excellent and the chef takes great pride in preparation and presentation. A little pricey but well worth the cost. On Friday nights the place is packed so reservations are a must.

Norman Bight

The bight at Norman Island is quite large with over 100 mooring balls and still some room left in which to anchor. This island is reported to be the one that Robert Lewis

Stevenson visited when he wrote the book “Treasure Island”. The caves that he described in the book are favorite snorkeling areas and we saw many brightly colored fish and I found one medium sized lobster.

There is a fishing boat that has served as a restaurant for many years anchored in Norman Bight. In times past one could earn a free T shirt by stripping naked and jumping from the upper deck bar into the water and swimming back to the boat. It appears that this practice has been stopped due to liability issues – some of the jumpers may have been too intoxicated to find their way back to the boat unassisted! Another lively beach bar is across the bight from the anchored restaurant so it is difficult to find a mooring that is not within hearing range of the music that goes into the wee hours of the morning.

Pirate’s Bight is a smaller bight just at the entrance to Norman Bight. There are 5 mooring balls here and there is room to anchor just at the entrance to the bight in about 30 ft. of water. We found the snorkeling here to be excellent and we could do so from our boat when we were on one of the mooring balls. Several commercial boats bring snorkelers here during the days when there is a swell running at the normal snorkeling locations and they tend to stay on the mooring balls until about 5:00 pm. Consequently, one can sometimes luck into a vacant mooring if you arrive around that time.

Great Harbor on Peter Island

Our favorite snorkeling location is Great Harbor on Peter Island. There is a new beach bar restaurant named the Ocean 7 Beach Club on the western end of the harbor and they have 10 moorings from which one can swim to the coral along the rocky shore. We saw Tarpon over 3 ft. long, turtles, rays and the largest assortment of fish that we have seen other than on our scuba dives. The restaurant has an excellent menu and every meal we had was extremely well prepared. Jason, the bar tender likes to put on a show when he is mixing drinks and is quite accomplished at flipping bottles and glasses.

Across the harbor is the traditional anchoring area and we found it to always be over filled with boats anchored in the 30 – 60 ft. depth. Many of these boats do not have the ground tackle for these depths and we were reluctant to anchor among them even though we have 200 ft. of chain on our 45 lb. CQR anchor. Many of the mega yachts anchor here in the deeper water and they run their generators all night so we spent our nights at the moorings across the harbor for the security and quiet.



Photo 3 Judy Tatum cuts Captain Randy's four-month long hair

Trellis Bay

The terminal for Beef Island airport is only about 1000 yards from the dinghy dock at Trellis Bay. Like many others, we took advantage of this pick up and drop off friends arriving by plane. There are three restaurants, an island craft center and one small grocery store along the shore. Our favorite spot is De Loose Mongoose – a restaurant that offers a good menu, friendly service and free wifi internet connections. We used their internet service to upload files to our web page

(<http://mywebpages.comcast.net/windwardpassage/windward/index.htm>), do email communications and to use the Skype telephone system that allowed us to call numbers in the US for only \$0.021/minute compared with over \$4.00/minute with the local phone service.

The live aboard community includes a substantial number of Green Bay Packer fans who were all glued to the TV at De Loose Mongoose to watch the two playoff games that were played in Green Bay. They were in mourning the day after the final play off game but were glad that they had watched the game from the Caribbean instead of being in the stands with the below zero temperatures.



Photo 4 Susan does email at De Loose Mongoose

The most famous restaurant here is The Last Resort on a little island in the middle of the bay. They have entertainment most nights but the original owner and entertainer, Tony Snell is now retired and his daughter manages the resort. Entertainment is a bit different from Tony's act which we enjoyed 30 years ago.



Photo 5 Captain Randy Williamson removing grass from

Gorda Sound

The wind almost always blows from the east and this makes it a beat every time you sail to Gorda Sound. We visited 5 locations in Gorda Sound: Biras Creek, Leverick Bay, Drake's Anchorage, Prickley Pear Island anchorage and The Bitter End. If you are looking for restaurants and night life then Leverick

There was quite an accumulation of grass on the bottom of the dinghy from our stay in the harbor at Road Town. We pulled the dinghy ashore and attempted to remove the grass by scrubbing with abrasive pads and using various cleaners. Later we discovered that Clorox bleach completely eliminates the grass without the scrubbing.



Photo 6 Susan celebrates her first dive

Bay and The Bitter End are your destinations. If you want solitude choose Drake' Anchorage or Prickley Pear Island anchorage and if you want a wonderful native restaurant visit The Fat Virgin Café at Biras Creek.

I used the Dive BVI team at Leverick Bay to obtain my certification for open water diving so that I would be able to dive with my daughter, Julie and her friends when they arrived in December. My wife, Susan tried diving with the Dive BVI team in their one-day resort course and then enrolled in and completed the PADI certification course so that she would be able to do open water dives with us throughout the remainder of the trip. The dive locations were wonderful and we are now fully certified. When Julie and friends Kevin and Cary arrived we did two dives each morning for two days. The fish and coral were spectacular and we enjoyed seeing the airplane wreck that had been moved from the water at the end of the runway on Beef Island to the coast of Great Dog Island where it has become a fish haven. However, the most spectacular dives were the two that we did over the wreck of the steamship Rhone that sank in a hurricane between Peter Island and Salt Island.

The Leverick Bay Marina offers moorings for \$25/night. They have slips available but I prefer to be anchored or on a mooring to get the breeze at night. At their newly expanded fuel dock they have water from a reverse osmosis system and it is free – usually there is a charge for water in the Caribbean of \$0.10 - \$0.25/gallon. They also offer free wifi access. They have three eating establishments ranging from a beach bar to an upscale dining room. All serve excellent food and we sampled everything from the surprisingly excellent pizza to a full course meal in the more sophisticated upper dining room.



Photo 7 Susan Williamson, Keith McGowan, Anne Ledbetter, Mary McGowan and Anna Woodford on Windward Passage

Drake's Anchorage is across the sound from Leverick Bay and just off of Mosquito Island (named for the Indians who use to populate the area, not the insects). This island is now privately owned and it is reported that the owner is going to build an ecologically friendly resort community on it with solar and wind powered utilities and a strong emphasis on recycle utilization. Since there is no active community there now, the anchorage is usually empty though there is an excellent sand bottom and good holding in about 15 – 30 ft. of water. There is a nice reef for snorkeling that one can easily swim to or one can take the dinghy and anchor it just off the coral.



Photo 8 Owner rescues his dog. Note doghouse on boat.

Prickley Pear Island guards the east side of the

entrance to Gorda Sound and there is a good sandy bottom in 15 – 35 ft. for anchoring. Two live-aboard boats are anchored here but there is lots of room for visiting boats. One live aboard boat has a real dog house built on top of the cabin. One day a couple knocked on my boat from their dinghy and reported that the dog on the boat had jumped off the boat and was swimming around it with no way to get back on board. I used the VHF radio to call the Bitter End Resort to locate the owner and soon he was racing out to rescue the dog. After retrieving the exhausted pooch he came by my boat and said “The dog swims every night to Prickley Pear Island (about 50 yards away) and back. I do not know why he would not just go there and wait for me to get off work instead of swimming around the boat to exhaustion.”

The Bitter End Yacht Club occupies the eastern most end of Gorda Sound. They have a Pusser’s Restaurant and many shops where one can purchase the usual souvenirs. Many moorings are available and this is where the night life action is. Right next door is a new restaurant on Saba Rock that has an excellent menu and a good party crowd celebrating well into the evening.



Photo 9 John and Kathy Reager and Mary Jane and Bob Wenhold at The Bitter End

The exclusive Biras Creek Resort requires apparel that we do not have on board but just inside the creek is a café that I love to visit. It is named the Fat Virgin Café and is owned by a native woman who really knows how to make you feel welcome. She will sometimes ask you to order when you make your reservations so that she will be sure to have the ingredients on hand. The food is all

prepared “island style” and is delicious. She even has a new wifi system that is available to customers.

Eustatia Sound

Just to the north of Prickly Pear Island is a beautiful anchorage with excellent holding in 10 to 20 ft. of white sand. There is a coral reef in the middle of the sound that had some interesting fish and coral. One can anchor close enough to the reef to swim from the boat or can anchor closer to the shore and take the dinghy over to the reef. The beach is a long, beautiful stretch of sand but when we tried to walk along it we were assaulted by biting gnats that were impossible to abide. We beat a quick retreat back to the boat.

Jost van Dyke

This is the western most island in the BVI. Like most of the visitors to the BVI we made our pilgrimage to Foxy’s on Jost van Dyke island. Foxy has sent several children through expensive US colleges as he turned his restaurant/souvenir location into a gold mine. Foxy was in residence when we arrived and is quite interesting to talk with. However,

we chose to eat at a quieter, less crowded restaurant, Ali Baba's where we had an excellent dinner though the service was slow even by island time.

The Next Phase

It is difficult to describe eight weeks of sailing in these waters in a few pages. The sailing is excellent and the people are fun to get to know. There are activities to suit almost every taste. If you are just starting to explore Caribbean waters this is a great place to begin. The government seems intent on making a charter experience here safe and enjoyable. If you are bringing your own boat into the islands you may find the bureaucracy tiresome but eventually they will usually accommodate your needs.

In the next installment I will describe our trip south to St. Vincent and the Grenadines. We will sail for three days and two nights straight to Isle de Saints in Guadalupe. After spending a day and night there we will sail overnight to Bequia where we will clear customs into St. Vincent and the Grenadines to begin our two month stay.