

Powering through PARADISE

A Guide to Exploring the Virgin Islands Without Hoisting a Sail

By Mark Bunzel

Day moorage for snorkeling in front of The Caves at Treasure Point, on Norman Island.

THE WATERS OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS ENCOMPASS one of the world's favorite cruising and sailing grounds.

The region offers an ideal combination of warm, steady trade winds, clear waters, and a collection of emerald islands replete with secure anchorages and charming coves. Navigation is easy — mostly by eyeball and compass, with an occasional reference to the charts — and distances between islands are short and frequently protected from the full force of ocean swells.



Small wonder that the bareboat-charter industry got its start in these waters and that the British and U.S. Virgin Islands are now the most popular destination in the world for those who want to sample the cruising lifestyle. At first, bareboat-charter options were largely limited to sailboats, but in recent years the self-drive fleets have grown to include a number of power options, ranging from displacement and semidisplacement trawlers to traditional yachts and power catamarans.

With an impressive fleet to choose from, finding a charter boat suited to your tastes and needs is easier than ever. Slightly more involved will be deciding where you want to go once you are aboard.

There are many possible itineraries for exploring the Virgin Islands. All charter companies provide sample itineraries to the typical favorite spots. These

must-see destinations include The Caves at Norman Island, which evoke fantasies of the islands' pirate era, and The Baths on Virgin Gorda, where you can hike and roam among beautiful three-story granite boulders to discover hidden pools of sparkling water. Gorda Sound on the north end of Virgin Gorda offers a protected harbor with resorts whose amenities and activities are open to visiting charter boats. Or you can snorkel by day at Sandy Cay near Jost Van Dyke and then anchor in Great Harbour for an evening at the world-famous Foxy's Tamarind Bar for dinner, Caribbean dancing and a good time with other cruisers.

Of course, these and other well-known anchorages in the Virgin Islands can get quite crowded during winter and spring because this cruising ground is so popular.

Fortunately, there are alternatives, and with a little creativity and a good cruising guide you can find your own hideaway anchorages. Some may not have room for more than one to two boats, so it's best to get there early to stake out your patch of solitude or a romantic beach for yourself.

In this regard, power cruisers actually have an advantage: Higher running speeds allow you to leave one anchorage later in the day and still overtake your sailing counterparts to arrive at prime anchorages first. In addition, your powerboat's relatively shallow draft may allow access to corners of the coves not accessible to deep-keeled sailing craft.

Setting a cruise itinerary is part of the fun of planning for the charter. But most of the classic scenarios mentioned in guidebooks and suggested by the charter companies were designed with sailors in mind. Routes take advantage of the trade winds, which in the winter and spring months are typically out of the northeast. In the summer and through the fall, the winds clock around and are out of the southeast.

With a powerboat, the direction of the wind generally is not as significant a factor (though it never hurts to be aware of the general wind and wave direction, as it may help you create a more comfortable float plan). Keep in mind that the greater speed typical of most power craft allow longer legs on any given day, and since the skipper is not dependent on the wind, he can take advantage of protected lees that sailboats would typically shun.

Though the crew is usually anxious to get out of the harbor and put some miles under the keel, it's usually best to plan a shorter itinerary on the first day of your charter. Because the morning may be spent checking out the boat and provisioning, you will often have only a few hours to get to your first location on a short afternoon passage.

One popular route originating from Tortola involves a clockwise rotation of the islands, with the first night spent at Marina Cay on the north side of Beef Island. The anchorage has mooring balls for about 20 boats in front of Pusser's Marina Cay resort and restaurant. Visit the Rob White Bar on the top of the island for happy-hour drinks, entertainment, and a beautiful 360-degree view of the islands and the setting sun. You can then stroll down for dinner at Pusser's restaurant on the beach (reservations highly recommended), or for elegant dining try Donovan's Reef on Scrub Island. Call for reservations on VHF 16, and the restaurant will even send its launch to pick up you and your friends on your boat.

If you would like a quiet anchorage away from the crowd, try Lee Bay, an easy anchorage in a dramatic rock-faced bay on the west side of Great Camanoe island.

On the east side of the island, experienced captains can thread their way through the coral reef into Cam Bay, where there is room for only two boats behind the reef. Cam Bay is a private island paradise with a cool breeze in the evening and a walking trail to Lee Bay across the isthmus on Great Camanoe island. It is just a half-mile north of Marina Cay.

From Marina Cay, it is a pleasant ride across Sir Francis Drake Channel to Gorda Sound on the island of Virgin Gorda. The sound offers a number of tantalizing choices for anchorage. The most popular option is to grab a mooring ball in front of The Bitter End Yacht Club. This resort offers all its amenities to visiting boats. In addition to having a selection of restaurants and pubs, you can choose between sailing, diving and kite boarding, or just lounge by the pool or on a chaise lounge on its beach.

Desire a gourmet dining experience? Take the dinghy or water taxi over to the Biras Creek resort for an incredible meal while looking out over Eustacia and Gorda sounds. Want something more casual? Saba Rock, just across from



A walk through the giant round boulders at The Baths on Virgin Gorda is an unforgettable experience (above). Anchor off one of the many islands, and watch the fish swim by below (opposite).

MARK BUNZEL; OPPOSITE: MAURICIO HANDLER/HANDLERPHOTO.COM

In the Virgin Islands you can choose between popular anchorages or remote secluded coves.





Sopers Hole on the west end of Tortola offers restaurants, shopping, provisioning, fuel and water in a colorful setting (above). Or continue on to Jost Van Dyke (below) to see the world-famous Foxy perform at Foxy's Tamarind Bar (opposite top). This Grand Banks found a quiet anchorage off the sandy beaches of St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands (opposite bottom).

The Bitter End, has been serving visiting guests since it was a small beach bar. Dinner is casual, open-air and just a few steps up from the water. Moor at the dock at Saba Rock resort or on their buoys and they provide free water, ice and wireless computer connections. There is enough to do at Gorda Sound to make it a multiple-day stay.

Gorda Sound is also the best place from which to stage a visit to Anegada. Pick a good weather window and follow your GPS toward the harbor behind the reef at Setting Point on Anegada. It is a 12-mile run crossing the open Atlantic Ocean and can be subject to the northeast swell. Anegada is only 26 feet high and will not be visible until the second half of the passage.



MARK BUNZEL (2)

Make reservations that day or in advance at one of several restaurants that serve roasted Anegada lobster for the evening dinner on the beach, for example, the Anegada Reef Hotel. The next day, take the local shuttle to one of the white-sand beaches on the north side of Anegada — Cow Wreck, Big Bamboo or Flash of Beauty. Each has its own bar and restaurant with chairs on the beach and spectacular snorkeling. Truly a relaxing paradise.

If the passage east is beyond your comfort level, there are plenty of additional options on Virgin Gorda. You could visit beautiful Savannah Bay, just north of the well-known Little Dix Bay Resort. Enter the shallow bay carefully through a reef opening, and work your way up to the anchorage behind the reef in Pond Bay using a paint mark on a rock to the stern as a guide and maintaining a bow watch to avoid the coral reefs. The half-mile-long beach at Pond Bay is secluded and a beautiful place to stop for lunch or, in settled weather, a quiet overnight anchorage.

Continuing down Virgin Gorda past Spanish Town lies one of the cruising wonders of the world, The Baths, where an array of huge boulders line the shore. In addition to spectacular beaches, the Baths offers a unique hiking trail, which winds through the stacked boulders and fords hidden grottos en route to the crescent-shaped beach at Devils Bay.

Get to The Baths early in the morning or later in the day as the 10 to 12 mooring balls fill up early and anchorage is not allowed. If you arrive midday, you may have to circle and wait for a mooring ball to clear. Late in the day is a special time to

arrive, as the afternoon sun bathes the boulders and the trails in a golden light and many boats have left.

Just less than a mile south of The Baths is another quiet jewel of an anchorage known as Fallen Jerusalem, with room for only two boats. It is tucked into a scattering of boulders that break above the surface. If the seas are calm, and one of the mooring balls is available, grab it. You can cross over to The Baths in your dinghy and enjoy a swim in the beautiful Devils Bay, then enjoy a secluded overnight stay in Fallen Jerusalem under the stars.

By now, you have probably fallen into the laid-back pace of cruising in the Virgin Islands. You can continue down the island chain and moor in front of the Cooper Island Beach Club, or go a bit farther to Salt Island and moor in either Salt Island Bay or Lee Bay from where you can either snorkel or scuba dive on the RMS *Rhone*, a 310-foot British mail ship that foundered in a hurricane. Snorkeling on the surface you can see the hull of the wreck and its large propeller below.

You may also want to explore Peter Island. Most of it is a luxury resort with a marina in Sprat Bay. You can day anchor in Deadman's Bay and visit the sandy beach or have lunch at the Deadman's Beach Bar & Grill. On the other side of Peter Island, you can anchor for an overnight stay in a quiet, secluded cove such as Little Harbour, where you can barbecue on the boat and enjoy the sunset.

Or, if you are cruising at the height of the season and want to be alone, sail around to the other side of Peter Island and anchor in Key Bay, where you might find just one or two other boats, if any. The snorkeling on the reef at Key Point is fantastic.

The next destination to the southwest is Norman Island. The Bight at Norman Island is one of the most popular anchorages



BOB FRIEL

in the BVI. The mooring field inside can be a bit crowded, with mooring balls for more than 40 boats set side by side in rows.

A quiet alternative, away from the crowds, is found in the little cove just inside Water Point at the eastern mouth of The Bight, commonly called Kelly's Cove. Or just to the south of Treasure Point is a small anchorage with about five mooring balls in Privateer Bay. From any of these locations you are out of earshot but within a dinghy ride of the raucous William Thornton, nicknamed the "Willie T." The floating tavern serves casual dinners but is best-known for the nightly celebrations in the adjacent bar.

If you want to get away from it all on Norman Island, go around the eastern tip to the southern side of the island to Money Bay. Sometimes a swell runs through the passage



MARK BUNZEL

BEYOND THE BOAT

The prospect of taking command of a sleek powerboat in an ideal tropical setting may be all that's necessary to lure you to the Virgin Islands, but what about the rest of your crew? If you want to be a hero on your next charter to the islands, schedule a few activities off the boat. Most types of shore leave can be scheduled on short notice, and some you can just take off and do.

Kayak Ecotours

Several locations in the Virgin Islands offer kayak rentals, and some will even stage guided tours. See Jeremy Wright at Boardsailing BVI on Tortola for a morning or an afternoon kayak tour leaving from Trellis Bay and visiting Guana or Great Camanoe Islands. Or Arawak Expeditions organizes one-day kayak trips to explore the north coast of St. John leaving from Cruz Bay.

Mountain Biking

Last Stop Sports Bicycle Rentals rents mountain bikes, and can set you up with a map of the many trails that cross the island of Tortola. A number

of roads offer challenging grades for a good workout, and once up top you'll have breathtaking views of the islands on either side of Tortola. If you are a hard-core mountain biker, you can also rent a bike and take it with you on board for mountain biking on Virgin Gorda up to Gorda Peak, across Anegada to the north side, or around the salt ponds where the island's flock of pink flamingos flourish.

Hiking

Norman Island has the Caves at Treasure Point to explore by dinghy, but it also offers a great hiking trail with a fantastic view across Sir Francis Drake Channel. Keep a lookout for the mountain goats that are native to the island. Enjoy Norman Island. Today it is uninhabited, but it is slated for resort development; the next time you visit it may not be quite the same.

Gorda Mountain Peak offers another great hike. During a recent trip, part of our crew decided they wanted to spend the day there. We put them ashore at Savannah Bay and they hiked up into the ecological preserve at Gorda Peak Park, part of the BVI

National Parks Trust, where rare species of plants, including six species of orchids, can be seen. They continued down Gorda Peak and joined up with the boat again in Leverick Bay.

Some of the best walks are on the island of St. John. Many of the routes go back to the days of the sugar plantations and were used to get to Cruz Bay. The trails are well-marked and maintained by the National Park Service.

If you would like a refreshing treat after a short hike on Jost Van Dyke, hike to Bubbling Pool, a natural whirlpool on the north coast powered by ocean swells. To find it, go to Foxy's Taboo Restaurant and take the short trail to the north. Continue past the salt pond and go right, then follow the trail through the brush.

Art Classes

Some of your crew may also enjoy working with the artisans of the islands. Art classes are available at Aragorns Studio in Trellis Bay or at the Maho Bay Campground and Resort on St. John. Classes in native art, basket making, pottery or glass blowing are scheduled at various times or by arrangement.

between Peter and Norman islands, but the bay is well-protected. There is room for only one to two boats, but you will have a quiet cove with a small sandy beach all to your self.

From Norman Island, it is a pleasant and relatively short cruise across the channel to West End, Tortola and Sopers Hole. Here you can provision, get ice, refill the water tanks and, important to many today, connect to the Internet on a high-speed wi-fi connection at Pisces Café.

From West End, most cruisers continue through Thatch Island Cut to make the short (2.5-mile) passage) to Jost Van Dyke, where they anchor in Great Harbour for an evening at the world famous Foxy's Tamarind Bar. If this popular site is too crowded or if you find it difficult to set the hook in Great Harbour, head east to Manchioneel Bay, where you can find more secluded anchoring spots and a solitary beach bar and restaurant, the recently built Foxy's Taboo. If you get there early enough, take the short hike to the Bubbling Pool, a natural Jacuzzi powered by the waves and chiseled into the rocky coast on the north side of Jost.

If any time is left on your itinerary, check out of the BVI in Great Harbour on Jost or at the customs dock at West End, Tortola, and check in through U.S. Customs and Immigration to the U.S. Virgin Islands in Cruz Bay on St. John. You can pick up supplies and ice in either harbor and explore the north coast of the Island of St. John, then take your choice of Hawksnest, Trunk, Francis or Leinster bays and moor on a National Park buoy for the night. Take your dinghy and tour the old Annaberg Sugar

Mill ruins at Leinster Bay, or hike the many historical trails on the north shore of St. John and the Virgin Islands National Park.

In the Virgin Islands there are probably more anchorages than you have time for, and with the mobility and flexibility a powerboat provides you can choose between the popular anchorages or the remote secluded coves where it might be only you and the stars. Rather than try to cram everything into a single trip, it's best to relax and enjoy a select number of destinations — because you can always come back for more. Indeed, the Virgin Islands remain one of the world's favorite cruising grounds not only because of the favorable conditions, but also because you can return again and again to this destination and continue to explore and enjoy. 🌀

RESOURCES

The following charter companies offering bareboat power charters in the U.S. and British Virgin Islands:

Bareboats BVI 284-495-4168; www.bareboatsbvi.com

CYOA Yacht Charters 800-944-2962; www.cyoacharters.com

Nautic Blue 888-788-0456; www.nauticblue.com

TMM 800-633-0155; www.sailtmm.com

The Catamaran Company 954-727-0016; www.catamarans.com

Trawlers in Paradise 800-458-0675; www.trawlersinparadise.com

VIP Yachts 866-847-9224; www.vipyachts.com

Virgin Traders 888-684-6486; www.virgintraders.com