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WINTERVACATIONS

WHAT'S INSIDE:

P.56 Caribbean for newbies
by Fred Bagley

P.61 BVI Redux
by Amy Ullrich

P.64 Why not a month?
by Lou and Dale Deutsch

Love to charter or want to learn more about it? At www.sailmagazine.com/charter, you'll find full listings of charter companies operating in the Caribbean and beyond. You can read up on chartering adventures and participate in our newest feature, "Charter Chat"

The glorious Tobago
Cays are a highlight of
any Grenadines charter

here.

It's love at first sight when Great
Lakes sailors discover the Caribbean



BY FRED BAGLEY



The question came up every year: “Whadya think about chartering in the Caribbean?” And every year the answer was the same: “Nah.”

My wife, Jennifer, and I sail our Caliber 38, *Catamount*, in the northern latitudes, on the fresh waters of Georgian Bay on Lake Huron. The idea of chartering in the Caribbean raised many different questions: Isn't everything so close you don't really sail much? Isn't it too hot? How big are the sharks?

When the issue came up again this year, Jennifer had been rereading C.S. Forester's classic *Hornblower* series. She read aloud from the final book, *Admiral Hornblower in the West Indies*: “Here where the trade winds blew at their freshest, just within the tropics, in the wide unbroken Atlantic, was, as *Hornblower* decided at that moment, the finest stretch of water for a yachting excursion to be found anywhere on the globe.”

So with *Hornblower's* endorsement, the decision was made. But where to go? A friend walked us through the choices, and we settled on the Grenadines, part of the nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines (known as SVG), in the Windward Islands. She described it as “more than other island groups, like the way the Caribbean used to be.” St. Vincent itself, at just 12°N, is the northernmost, and the 30-some islands and islets of SVG stretch over 45 miles southwest toward Grenada, offering an excellent chance of doing some serious sailing.

The same friend recommended TMM Charters, which has a base at Blue Lagoon, at the southern end of St. Vincent, and a reputation for offering good boats, good advice, and excellent service. A few e-mails exchanged with John West, the base man-

ager, convinced us.

On a cold, gray April day, we got in a few last runs at our local ski area, drove to Boston, and flew south to learn if *Hornblower* was right. The first of many surprises was seeing St. Vincent from the air. The island rises over 4,000 feet in steep, serrated ridges and cloud-shrouded summits, capped at its north end by the La Soufriere volcano. The next surprise was landing on a short runway backed by a hill. The nearby cricket stadium looked bigger. Not to worry. We were soon sitting in the cockpit of *Dolphin Dance II*, a brand-new Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 45DS, at TMM's base. We thought her a bit big for just two people,

but John told us she is easily handled by two; plus, she's fast, maneuverable, and fun to sail. He was right on all counts.

John and his wife, Renelle, invited Yvonne Armour-Shillingford, head of SVG's Tourism Authority, to join us for dinner at the French Verandah restaurant at nearby Mariners Hotel. With their help we ordered from a menu that included local specialties like callaloo soup, conch, and mahi-mahi; you definitely don't find these at any restaurant on Lake Superior. The country's goal, they told us, is to improve health care and provide universal secondary-school access for all its children. One source of the economic growth needed to pay for this will be a new airport on the

Jennifer in a chart briefing at TMM headquarters (top left); *Dolphin Dance II* and inter-island ferry (top right); *Wingsong II* shows off for *Maltese Falcon* (below)





Another view of Tobago Cay Marine Park (left); Dinner anyone? Fresh lobster in Tobago Cay (bottom left); Easter Sunday finery in Clifton, Union Island (bottom right)

other side of the island, big enough to handle jumbo jets. Seeing a smidge of concern on my face, John and Yvonne assured me that SVG planned to maintain its character by learning from the mistakes made by some of its Caribbean neighbors.

The next day we had our boat checkout and chart review, featuring British Admiralty charts. VHF coverage is spotty because of the mountainous terrain, so TMM provides cell phones to its customers for contacting the base. No radio weather forecasts are available, but we could call John if necessary. He'd look out his window at the sky, then tell us what he tells charterers every day: 20 knots of east wind with a slight chance of a shower.

We set off for Bequia, the first island to the south, reaching in 20 knots of wind in the biggest swells we'd ever seen. Boats home-ported in the Caribbean and around the world had gathered in Admiralty Bay for the annual Easter Regatta. We were astonished by their size. Back on Lake Huron our 38-footer is usually the largest boat in any harbor. Here our 45-footer was the smallest, dwarfed by, among others, two 150-foot superyachts. What an eye-opener.

We didn't hang around; there were too many places to go and too much to see. We were tempted to visit the private island of Mustique to the east, but none of its rich-and-famous visitors are on our Christmas card list, so we headed southwest to Mayreau instead. *Dolphin Dance II* rolled sweetly in the swells as she rose and dove, rose and dove again and again on the five-hour romp to well-protected Saline Bay.

From the anchorage, Mayreau's little village looked like a featureless collection of shacks strung up a hillside, but as we strolled its narrow streets it became clear

that each house, store and restaurant has a distinct color scheme and character. Flowering trees cover the tiny patios. Water is precious here; every building has a cistern marked with the name of the international aid group that donated it. A small Catholic church stands on the hilltop with sweeping views of the Tobago Cays to the east and Union Island to the south. Make no mistake: poverty is pervasive in these islands, but the locals proudly try to maintain their culture and way of life in today's complex world.

Then it was off to Tobago Cays Marine Park, a few miles to the east. This was our first opportunity to navigate through reefs in shoal water, and we tried our best to distinguish this blue from that blue. There aren't enough blue-greens in a box of Crayola crayons to illustrate the palette of colors in the waters of the Cays. Azure is close, cerulean closer, with maybe a touch of cobalt. We followed a local charterboat into the passage, admiring its neat gybe off the stern of an anchored megayacht.

The Tobago Cays comprise five uninhabited islands with powdery white-sand beaches and steep cactus-covered hillsides,



all protected from the Atlantic by 3-mile-long Horseshoe Reef. The waves were minimal even with the wind blowing its usual 20 knots. In the protection of Baradel Island we snorkeled for hours watching loggerhead turtles lazily nibble sea grass off the bottom. Out on the reef itself we watched bright-blue somethings chase smaller bright-yellow somethings that were feeding on tiny bright-silver somethings. Sea fans waved lazily off coral heads, their purple and mauve lattice configuration highlighted by the brilliant white sand. We felt like we were swimming in an aquarium theme park.

When the ubiquitous vendors came by in their gaily painted boats, offering fresh fish and fresh bread throughout the day, we succumbed to their offer to deliver fresh-grilled lobster to our boat that evening. We felt we could get used to cruising like this: warm lobster, locally baked baguettes and white wine served under a starry sky on a warm evening miles from anywhere.

The row of bobbing masthead lights from other visiting boats echoed the arc of Ursa Major overhead as it pointed to Arcturus low in the east. To the south we saw the Southern Cross for the first time in our lives. Then a gibbous moon rose from over the Atlantic and spread enough light throughout the anchorage to illuminate beaches and highlight still-swaying coconut palms. We loved the vistas in the daytime, but we didn't want the nights to ever end.

Even on the hottest day the trade winds kept us cool, blowing 18 to 20 knots day and night. That is quite different from the Great





Lakes, where surrounding landmasses heat up during the day, bringing an afternoon sea-breeze that dies in the cool of the night. The trades are so persistent that eating in the cockpit was occasionally awkward. I learned to pour milk onto my morning cereal on the leeward side of the bowl lest the milk wind up somewhere downwind near the transom.

On Easter morning we exited the Cays and, once again dodging coral heads, ran down to Clifton Harbor on the south side of Union Island. Union is the most dramatic of all of SVG's islands, thanks to its steep volcanic summits, sharp ridges and ever-changing shadows. We caught the end of an Easter service at St. Joseph's Church, surrounded by flowering trees on a breeze-swept hilltop overlooking the harbor.

We chatted on the rectory's verandah with Father Andrew, a soft-spoken, amiable pastor who was born on tiny Mayreau but studied in the United States. He had served as a substitute priest in my home town of Duluth, Minnesota, a place about as culturally, geographically and meteorologically different from where we now sat as we could imagine. As much as we marveled at the beauty and sweep of the vista from Father Andrew's rectory, he recalled marveling at the size of Lake Superior with its incomprehensible quantity of freshwater.

Father Andrew saves more than souls, though; he also heads the board of the Tobago Cays Marine Park and works ceaselessly to protect this national treasure. As he brought us up to date on stateside news from CNN that morning, we were reminded by our conversation with this erudite man that it can take less than six degrees of separation to keep our world connected.

Back in the harbor the sky had blackened and a mile-long squall was rolling in from the east. We had been told that the darker the squall, the less wind it carries, unlike what we normally expect at home. We watched it warily from the boat, but it brought only rain. We worked our way back north around the rugged, uninhabited west shore of Union Island and spent another night in a secluded cove north of the main anchorage on the west side of Canouan.

Then came a big surprise. The wind stopped. Totally. We sat in the lee of a huge cliff without so much as a whisper of breeze.

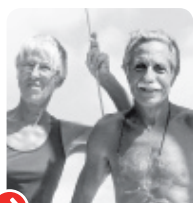
A sailboat motored by in the sunset a mile offshore. Its wake worked slowly toward us, catching the setting sun's rays in each wavelet until it ran out of energy and the Caribbean once more became a millpond. Another surprise: This far south there is no dusk, and sunsets are almost green-flash quick. But quick doesn't preclude spectacular.

By the next day the trades had returned and we beat our way north toward home. *Dolphin Dance II* plunged and pounded into the swells until we gained the lee of Bequia's dramatic west shore, settling once again into the protection of the harbor. The Easter Regatta was over, the boats had thinned out, and several cruisers were headed out into the falling darkness. Our final beat took us through 10-foot rollers back to TMM's base.

John checked us back in, then arranged for a trip to a rainforest preserve on St. Vincent's western shore. We hung on in the back of an open Jeep driven by a graduate of the Hallelujah Driving School, careening through the narrow, serpentine streets of Kingstown, SVG's capital city, then up a pre-



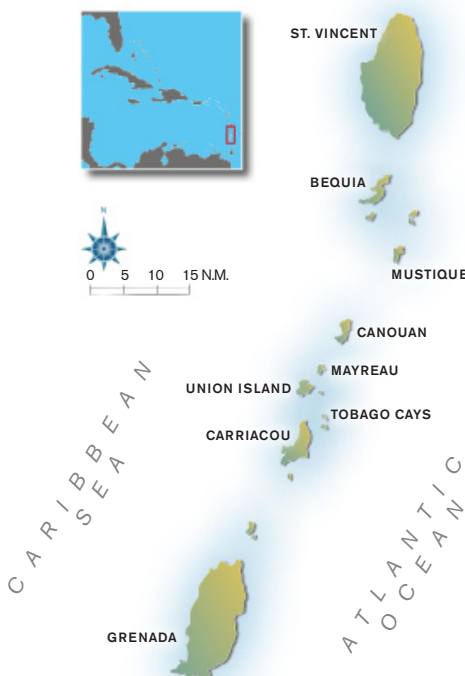
A squall approaches Clifton Harbor, Union Island



Fred Bagley and his wife Jennifer live in Vermont but sail the Great Lakes from June to September

cipitous one-lane road (no guardrails here) to the reserve. With the help of a guide from HazEco Tours we caught glimpses of the rare St. Vincent parrot, found nowhere else in the world, and marveled at gigantic and exotic tropical trees. Finally, it was back to the airport for our flight home.

As we took off we could see the entire island chain, dividing the Atlantic from the Caribbean, its reefs and mountains providing protection and sustenance to people and parrots, turtles and tourists. It was a magical sight. Hornblower was right; this may well be "the finest stretch of water for a yachting excursion to be found anywhere." Chartering in the Caribbean is a not-to-be-missed experience. Sailors owe it to themselves to go. And if they choose the Grenadines, they just might want to do it before the jumbo jets arrive. *AIL*



CRUISE NOTES

→ WHY GO: Enjoy open-water sailing with a plethora of interesting islands, numerous secure anchorages, and great snorkeling/diving. If you're a hiker or a climber, you'll find much to do in the Windwards.

→ WHEN TO GO: Winter winds can be brisk, though not overpowering. For milder conditions, choose the spring months.

→ CRUISING INFORMATION: Chris Doyle's *Sailors Guide to the Windward Islands* contains just about everything you need to know.

→ CONTACT: TMM Charters, www.sailtmm.com, 800-633-0155.