



Getting Personal in the British Virgin Islands

Charter Yacht Society breeds the best of the best

By Lisa Codianne Fowler

“There’s a spirit among yacht crews – a can-do attitude. If I were stranded in the Sahara desert and could choose 12 people to help get me out, I would pick 12 ‘yachties.’ I don’t know how they would do it, but they would.” ~ Tim Schaaf, Charter Yacht Society



Aptly dubbed the “Sailing Capital of the World”, The British Virgin Islands boast the most beautiful bays on earth; the trade winds are steady, and, of course, the islands are gorgeous.

But so are the owner-operated boats that comprise the majority of members of the Charter Yacht Society (CYS) of the BVI. Unlike cookie-cutter yachts that make up the fleets of better known corporate companies, this non-profit organization represents the cream of the crop - both in vessels and crew. From 42-foot mono hulls to 105-foot multi hulls (floating five-star hotels), each is custom designed with luxury in mind. All charters are all-inclusive: fine food to your liking, alcoholic and non-alcoholic

beverages, water sports equipment... once you book, you are showered with the best of the best.

At first glance, these crewed charters may appear more expensive than bareboating. But hidden costs associated with the latter disguise the bottom line. Not the caliber of CYS boats, they don't have water makers; you must pay for water as you go. You also shell out for provisions – food, beverages, even ice, and recreational equipment. With CYS, everything is included. Even crewed charters with corporate companies don't compare to the level of service CYS presents, nor do they allow you to select your crew. Through CYS you can actually peruse bios of the owners and/or of their carefully selected crew.

We spent two nights each with Nutmeg Charters, Blue Bayou Charters and finally on land at the Sugar Mill Hotel – an upscale boutique resort at once in the hills and on the shores of Tortola. The very best part? The people. First class in every way. We made some lifelong friends from all over the world. Laughter is a common language... and we were all incredibly verbose.

The Spice of Life

Sandy and Elinor were our hosts aboard Nutmeg, a sleek St. Francis 50 with four guestrooms that include AC, flat screen TVs and ensuite heads and showers. With spacious salon, corner bar, both sunny and shaded areas on its sprawling deck and onboard water toys, guest are privileged to the perks of a world-class resort.

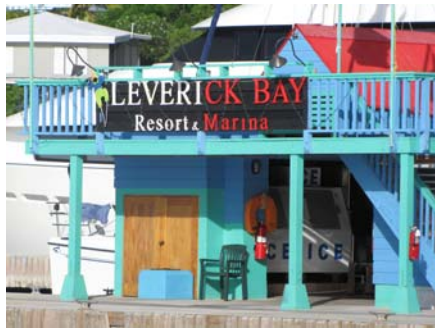
Veteran global sailors, Sandy and Elinor were handpicked to crew this state-of-the-art 50' cat. Each season they leave their home in South Africa to entertain visitors here. Why? "It's the people, really," Sandy explains. "Even if you're as tired as can be, and you have a 24-hour turnaround to clean and provision the boat, when people come they are enthusiastic and we draw our energy from them. People that come aboard like to have fun."



Have fun, we did, sharing experiences and laughing into each starry night. They regaled us with stories about charterer Charlie and his five Vietnamese brides. He was wed to them for two days each, yet, never consummated any of his marriages?! Then there was the Peruvian wedding that Sandy and Elinor went to great lengths to arrange. It turned out not to be legal because the groom neglected to mention he was married to

someone else. The stories continued, and we created our own with this lovely couple, though not nearly as bizarre. Just plain fun.

Our itinerary was planned for optimum sightseeing including a sail to North Sound, where en route we passed a cluster of secluded islands called The Dogs: West Dog, Great Dog, George Dog and Seal Dogs. Great for snorkeling and diving. North Sound is home to popular Leverick Bay,



The Bitter End Yacht Club, Biras Creek resort and picturesque Saba Rock. We could have anchored close to shore and joined in the revelry of boat-hopping and partying. But we chose to stay further out and

enjoy Elinor's savory gourmet cuisine, the dramatic sunset and each other's company.



Next day, we had the rare opportunity of visiting remote Anegada, a windswept island known for its fresh two-pound lobsters. Rare, because it's off the beaten path and only experienced sailors are permitted to venture there. A long but beautiful sail by mono hull, on this fast cat we arrived in no time at all. Wild donkeys and cows meandered about on this treasure of an island. Snorkeling yielded colorful sea life, and our moonlit lobster dinner on shore at Whispering Pines was pure perfection.

Our final morning with Elinor and Sandy was spent exploring The Baths at Virgin Gorda. Huge boulders shelter cool pools of water perfect for refreshing swims and adventurous rock climbs. It's kind of like Disney.



We saw plenty of kids with wide-eyed stares and giggles as they discovered nature, not animated, but real.

We shared one final Painkiller (an elixir of rum, coconut, pineapple and orange juice), Sandy's specialty and a BVI tradition, before departing Nutmeg and boarding Blue Bayou. Hugs and kisses – we invited them to our house in Florida, they invited us to theirs in South Africa. Or maybe we'll

meet somewhere in between? Paris perhaps. Sandy says, "You never know which way the grape will squirt."

Let's Rock 'n Roll

Blue Bayou is also a catamaran but this one, owner-operated. A Dean 441 awash in rich American walnut, it was designed for maximum interior space. It features a master suite and three large guestrooms, with of course, all the comforts of home. That's because it is.



Turns out that captain and hostess Wally and Ruthie June were our Sarasota, Florida neighbors, minutes from our house, just last year. After an invitation from AC/DC friend and rock star, Brian Johnson and his notable wife, Brenda to sail these cerulean seas, Wally and Ruth sold everything, commissioned this luxe, custom 44' catamaran and flat out moved here.

"I wanted to move somewhere that was 30 years behind the US," Wally says. "But I missed the time machine and landed in a place that is 50 years behind. It's a beautiful place to live."

Wally grew up sailing in New Jersey and mid-western-born Ruth is an accomplished first-mate and culinary queen. Once again we were in the best of hands. First stop, The Bight at Norman Island and home of the legendary Willy T's, a ship-turned-restaurant and bar. Good food, drinks, laughs, new friends; we even met a real life mermaid.



It was the perfect beginning to a new adventure. One which included snorkeling at The Caves, where we witnessed blue



tang parrot fish, neon yellow spotted fish and other marine life wonders. At Jost Van Dyke we hopped the quirky beach bars:

Foxy's, One Love and The Soggy Dollar – all favorite haunts of locals and jumping with music into the night.



In contrast, Sandy Cay was desolate. Rockefeller owned and donated this uninhabited islet to the government stipulating it become and remain a national park. We trekked to a chorus of turtle doves and backdrop of brilliant flora and fauna in rainbow colors.

We bid our new friends adieu at Soper's Hole, home of Pusser's Rum restaurant and gifts, where we purchased some liquid gold for our old friends at home. A last laugh, a last drink, but hopefully not the last of seeing Wally and Ruthie June.

Sweet as Sugar

Our final nights in paradise were spent at The Sugar Mill Hotel, an historic sugar mill converted to "a boutique hotel for a few special people", and Fodor's choice of resorts on Tortola.



Accommodations range from studios to cottages, and dining here is consistently voted the most romantic in the Caribbean.

Besides candlelit dining at the 370-year-old stone sugar mill, there's a casual beachside bistro.



Tour the islands to learn about – and dive – the famous wreck of the Rhone; the artist colony,

Crafts Alive and The Callwood Distillery at Cane Garden Bay, where the Callwood family has been producing rum for more than 200 years. Or, just lounge on a hammock at the pool or beach at The Sugar Mill, where life is truly sweet.

If you go:

CYS was founded in 1982 by independent owners of crewed yachts in the BVI. It is the only BVI government recognized body within the crewed charter industry. The society represents the organized voice of individual yachts and their crew. Learn more at www.bvicrewedyachts.com, including booking info through brokers. Yacht brokers are experts at matching guests with the right yacht and crew. There is no additional cost for their services. For more information about The Sugar Mill Hotel, visit www.sugarmillhotel.com. For information about the British Virgin Islands, visit www.bvitourism.com



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