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Sailboats anchored on Sandy Spit
photo provided by Susan Fletcher



Pirate Lore and Parrotheads

By Susan Fletcher

AS CHILDREN, we've all fantasized about becoming a character from our favorite book. Whether it was joining the Darling family in *Peter Pan*, or playing host to an enormous talking cat who unexpectedly shows up on a rainy day...we've all been there.

Believe it or not, my favorite book growing up was *Look Out For Pirates!* by Iris Vinton. I would beg my mother to read it every night – scrutinizing each page to make sure she didn't skip anything. As if hearing it for the first time, I would hang on every word as Captain Jim and his men outsmarted the pirates and saved the day.

In 1493, en route to Puerto Rico and

Hispaniola in search of gold, Christopher Columbus “discovered” the Virgin Islands, a picturesque archipelago with a seemingly endless supply of hidden coves and safe anchorages. Inspired by their unspoiled beauty, he named these islands *Islas Virgines* after the legendary St. Ursula and her 11,000 virgins.

After being settled by the Dutch in 1648, the islands were later inhabited by the Danes and the British. In 1917, The Danish sold the islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John to the United States for \$25 million. Britain, however, held onto her Caribbean treasure, now known as the British Virgin Islands (BVI).

With a spirit of wonder and adventure,

I set out on a voyage I have longed for and planned for years... a week-long sailing journey through the BVI. Although I am celebrating my 40th birthday, my excitement more accurately reflects that of four 10-year-old wannabe pirates! All of the Jimmy Buffet songs I've ever known begin coursing through my mind and I am suddenly entrenched in parrothead dreams and pirate lore.

Arriving at the Beef Island Airport, we make the short drive across the bridge to the East End Marina on the island of Tortola (Spanish for turtle dove). Village Cay Marina, home to Jimmy Buffet's *Cheeseburger In Paradise*, is located on this very island.

We chose to ‘walk on the wild side’ and sail with Tradewinds Cruise Club, a shared-ownership luxury yacht company. As we board our 45' Royal Cape Catamaran *Turquoise Dreams*, we're greeted with fresh fruit cocktails, along with smoked salmon and cream cheese appetizers. There are a total of eight guests and four crewmembers (two in training), so we're in for some serious pampering. None of us have met prior to the trip, but it doesn't take long for us to regard one another as family.

After getting settled in our cabins, we enjoy a wonderful dinner prepared by the First Mate and gourmet chef, Ali. That evening, we gaze at the brilliant night sky and wonder what treasures are in store for us throughout the coming week.

The next morning, following a tasty breakfast, we set out across the Sir Frances Drake Channel toward Cooper Island. As we pass a multi-million dollar home perched atop one of Tortola's mountains, Chris, the captain, quips, “That home is owned by an American plastic surgeon and is currently for sale at \$16 million dollars. But you know what? He wakes up with the same view every day and we will be spoiled all week with scenes that are unmatched by comparison.”

Approaching Cistern Point, Chris hollers for a “hooker” on the bow. As we



all look dumfounded, we soon realize that he wants help hooking up to the mooring ball directly in front of us. Now it's time to don our scuba gear and take a giant stride into the huge expanse of coral gardens where we encounter several of the BVI's underwater natives, including a sea turtle, nurse shark and a kaleidoscope of fish.

The following morning, we set sail toward the island of Virgin Gorda (Spanish for "fat virgin" – named for her long figure with a belly-like protrusion). Just as the melodious sirens called out to Homer's Odysseus, Virgin Gorda beckons sailors to come discover her many charms. On the southern tip of the island we stand in awe as we behold The Baths. One of the most famous sites in the BVI, they are a natural formation of enormous granite boulders strewn about the beach and forming a maze of pools and grottoes. This is also a great place to snorkel with the boulders forming numerous nooks and crannies which host a myriad of marine critters. Swimming through the labyrinth, I get the eerie feeling that I'm about to come face-to-face with a frightening mythological creature.

After dinner, some of us decide to fish off the back of the yacht. It wasn't long before one of the guys got a bite and reeled in the top half of a yellowtail snapper. Unfortunately, the other half had become dinner for a resident barracuda. Now attempting to catch the barracuda,



*The Baths (left); Brian Fletcher in Blackbeard's Treasure Cave
photos provided by Susan Fletcher*

he casts the half-eaten fish back in the sea and was surprised with a shark on the line instead! After a few minutes of excitement watching the food chain unfold before our eyes, the line snapped and the shark was free.

The following day, we sailed toward the island of Great Dog where we explored another dive site called The Chimney. Not far from the boat mooring, a canyon winds through one of the spurs off Great Dog. Swimming past multi-colored sponges and orange cup corals, the canyon walls begin to narrow and form an archway, followed by an opening above (the chimney) and finally a crack just wide enough to swim through.

After our dive, we sailed to Marina Cay for the night. This picturesque 8-acre island is home to Pusser's Rum – the original rum of the British Royal Navy. For more than 300 years until 1970, British sailors were issued a daily ration or "tot" of rum by the ship's Purser (corrupted to become the word Pusser's). Then in 1979, a British entrepreneur sought permission to produce and sell the famed rum to the public for the first time. It was a hit, and today, Pusser's donates a generous amount of its profits to the Royal Navy Sailor's Fund (a.k.a. the "Tot Fund").

The next morning we stopped in Guana Island and Monkey Point where we snorkeled with sharks, turtles and thousands of small silversides. The schools

were so dense that at times, they obscure the surrounding coral and ocean floor.

After lunch, we headed to Diamond Cay on Jost Van Dyke to experience another of BVI's geological wonders, The Bubbly Pool. Just a short hike over the ridge was a natural ocean pool protected by large lava rocks on either side. Every few minutes during the high tide, a large wave washed over the rocks creating a Jacuzzi effect. The spa visit wouldn't have been complete without a pedicure from the pool's tiny juvenile Sergeant Major fish.

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One of the island's most famous residents, Foxy Callwood of the famed Foxy's Bar & Grill, recently opened a second location at Diamond Cay named Foxy's Taboo. Reportedly, if you don't know the way to The Bubbly Pool, his dog will take you. However, you must tip the dog by purchasing him a cheeseburger upon your return. As we were hiking to

the pool, we personally encounter this dog escorting several folks back from the pool. Simply amazing.

Still wanting to catch a fish of my own, I baited my hook with some fresh mahi mahi after dinner. As I reeled in to check the bait, I saw a shiny figure quickly moving in to snatch it. I began reeling furiously, knowing that my catch may soon become dinner to another barracuda. Chris jumped in the dinghy and motioned for me to join him in the chase. After about 20 minutes, I was exhausted and we had driven around the entire bay...but we were making progress. Reeling him in, I was informed that my estimate of 24" was an understatement. I had a 50 lb. Big-Eye Jack on the line! As he came to the surface, "SNAP!" The line broke loose and the jack escaped into the darkness. I have no regrets, as it is the most exciting fishing experience I've ever had.

Early the next morning, Chris promised that we would have the first footprints on Sandy Spit (a.k.a. the Microsoft Screensaver Island). We all suited up before breakfast and swam up to this perfect 360-degree white sand beach by 7:15 a.m.

We sailed on to Kelly's Cove on Norman Island. We moored just around the corner from The Bight, home to the infamous pirate Blackbeard. Permanently anchored in the Bight, this 98-foot schooner is a sailing landmark where

just about anything goes! Early the next morning, we explored the Treasure Caves of Norman Island, where the Creque family, natives of the island found some of Blackbeard's treasure. Reportedly descendents of former slaves, they are still one of the wealthiest families in the BVI.

As we sailed toward Salt Island, we passed Dead Chest, an island that resembles an old fashioned coffin. In Blackbeard's day, a coffin was referred to as a dead man's chest. Legend has it that after a failed mutiny attempt, he marooned fifteen men on Dead Chest Island along with a bottle of rum. Perhaps you'll recognize this refrain from Stevenson's classic novel *Treasure Island*:

Fifteen men on a dead man's chest; Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum; Drink and the devil had done for the rest; Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum.

After returning some time later, Blackbeard and his men discovered the bodies of fourteen men – and the fifteenth was found on Peter Island's sandy beach just a few hundred yards away. From that day forward, this beach has been known as Deadman's Bay and is rated among the world's ten most romantic beaches.

Continuing toward Salt Island, we suited up for our final dive. The RMS Rhone is one of the most famous wrecks in the Caribbean and quite possibly one of the saddest as well. Built in 1865, she was a 310' steam sailor with more than 300 passenger cabins, dually powered by sail and steam propeller. She was a favorite among passengers due to her speed and comfort.

On October 29, 1867, the RMS Conway and the RMS Rhone were alongside in Great Harbor, Peter Island. Due to an outbreak of yellow fever in St. Thomas, the coaling station had been moved there to help contain the spread. As the barometer fell, the two captains discussed

the conditions and concluded that it was too late in the season for a hurricane. They assumed that it was an early 'nor easter' and proceeded to transfer all passengers to the larger ship, the RMS Rhone. Once complete, they would head for the safety

between Salt and Dead Chest Islands, the wind direction changed violently and they were blown onto Black Rock. As the cold water spilled into the boiler room, the ship exploded and tore in half, taking most of the crew and passengers with her.

Of the 146 on board, only 23 survived, including one passenger. Ironically, the RMS Conway was blown up onto the sandy shore of Baughers Bay in Road Harbor and eventually restored. Had her passengers stayed aboard, they would have survived the ferocious hurricane.

Many of the residents on Salt Island perished as well, as they attempted to rescue the passengers and crew of the Rhone. In gratitude, Queen Victoria gave Salt Island to the residents and their descendents in return for one bag of salt per year. This tradition held until just a few years ago when no living heirs remained and Salt Island was given back to Queen Elizabeth II.

Divers worldwide come to the BVI to dive the Rhone, marveling at the new life that continues to embrace her fine lines. She lies in typically calm water at a depth of 30-80 feet making the dive easily accessible to recreational divers. In 1977, the Rhone became famous as the location for filming *The Deep*, starring Jacqueline Bisset and Nick Nolte.

Arriving back on Tortola, we all enjoyed a dinner out at The Secret Garden on Josiah's Bay. Throughout the meal, we all shared our favorite memories of the week and vowed to stay in touch with one another. It's hard to believe that our trip has come to an end as we bid farewell to our newfound family.



Barracuda! (top); RMS Rhone (below)

photos provided by Susan Fletcher

of Road Town Harbor on Tortola to ride out the storm.

As the eye of the hurricane passed overhead, they began to reposition when the stronger part of the storm hit with full force. At full steam, the Rhone began to lose ground and dragged across the harbor toward the rocky headland. As she attempted to weigh anchor, the shackle broke and dropped the 3,000 pound anchor to the ocean floor. Being left without an anchor, the Captain decided his best chance was to head to the open sea and fight the storm there. Just as the Rhone was about to clear Black Rock,

Susan Fletcher is a special contributor to Frisco STYLE Magazine with the contribution of her vacation travels. Submit your most interesting vacation to editor@friscostyle.com in a 150-word synopsis and if selected we will publish your story in a future issue.