

Caribbean flotilla thriller: You don't have to be a pro to sail in the British Virgin Islands

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Leaning over the side of the yacht, I watched helplessly as our precious boat hook floated away and then sank. Moments before, in fairly rough seas, I had lost my fight with a length of mooring rope, and massaging my bruised inner arm I wondered ruefully whether I was cut out for this sailing lark.

Two days earlier, we had settled in to our 36ft luxury yacht, our home for the next seven days, moored at Wickhams Cay in Tortola, the largest island of over 50 in the British Virgin Islands. As a novice sailor I'd had just a day's familiarisation in the Solent; my husband is a 'day skipper'.

We were part of a seven-boat Sunsail flotilla due to sail from island to island. In the lead boat were the skipper and engineer, who helped us if we had any problems. At a daily evening briefing with the other sailors, we were given our routes for the next day - according to our competence and interests - all arriving at the same place by 6pm where we'd enjoy a communal restaurant meal.



Sail power: The British Virgin Islands are a haven for yachties

Sailing here is some of the best in the world. It's 'line of sight sailing', which means you can see where you are supposed to be heading, but for greenhorns like us, it was still fairly challenging.

As we sailed into implausibly deep-blue sea, pale-blue sky with fluffs of cloud and nothing in view but the rounded horizon and a few white sails, it was impossible not to feel a frisson of freedom. With the wind in the right direction, we flicked off the motor and hoisted the jib sail. Soon we were scooting along at three knots. We sat back to enjoy our new watery world, the only sound coming from our dinghy following obediently behind us.

Using our chart, we plotted our course to Marina Cay, a tiny place, surrounded by sugar sand, too small to be an island, but with safe mooring and a restaurant. Keeping to the left of the red buoy, we tied up the boat, an old red telephone box on the jetty reminding us the islands are British.



On the water: The flotilla of yachts sails around some of the BVI's prettiest islands

We could now meet our fellow travellers at the briefing, several of whom had come with their children. At home they were industry bosses, entrepreneurs, doctors, stockbrokers: in cargo pants and boat shoes they were all just sailors. We downed rum cocktails with our new friends and, in between mouthfuls of fresh lobster, swordfish and tuna discussed the day's activities that had included getting lost and a chart going overboard.

Finding our boat in the dark without a torch might have been more successful with fewer drinks inside us. But we slept incredibly well, the muffled sound of live reggae music floating across the water.

Early the next morning we slipped out of the bay bound for Spanish Town harbour on Virgin Gorda. Nearby are The Baths, natural large rocks that form pools ideal for swimming in and snorkelling. In Top of The Baths, we enjoyed a quick dip in the freezing cold water, the bar's own fresh water pool, before being introduced to the Painkiller, a delicious rum-based cocktail.

The sea was rough for our passage to Saba Rock passing between Mosquito Island and Prickly Pear. With waves 6ft high and the yacht tipping alarmingly towards vertical, we abandoned the sails and stuck to the motor.

At the halfway point, there is beautiful coral reef and good snorkeling. The sea was very choppy and it was here I lost the boat hook, that vital piece of kit that persuades the anchor rope out of the water. We sailed on

morosely, not sure how we would tie up our boat once we'd arrived. In a flash of inspiration I used our kitchen broom to catch the mooring rope.

One of our fellow sailors arrived at the briefing with a dripping fresh yellowtail snapper he had bought from a vessel in the bay that we eyed enviously. 'I'll just rub it with olive oil and throw it on the charcoal barbeque at the rear of the yacht. You just can't get fish any fresher.'



Rocky reception: The water was choppy on the way to Virgin Gorda, but the island made the trip worth it

Our next sail was our longest, but the most enjoyable. With the wind behind us, we confidently hoisted both sails and scooted along at six knots heading for Cane Garden Bay, which turned out to be a picture postcard resort, with primary-coloured wooden houses forming a backdrop and pelicans diving for fish off the jetty. These ungainly looking beasts seemingly have a heart attack in mid-flight, drop like a stone into the water and then emerge with a fish tail sticking out of their ample beaks.

We bought a couple of souvenirs from the beach shacks, before heading off to Norman Island. Reputed to be the inspiration for Treasure Island, it is like a child's drawing of a perfect island, complete with palm tree. There's a restaurant on the shore and Willy T's, a floating one. We tied up our dinghy and climbed aboard Willy T's.

'Branson was here yesterday,' the barman told us and when a man stood up from a nearby table and dived into the water, swimming to a moored yacht, added: 'He's another millionaire.'

The point is you don't need to be anything like a millionaire - or even a brilliant sailor - to enjoy a holiday in the BVIs. I realised I liked the contradiction of being relatively active but doing nothing in particular, of being alone at sea but meeting up with everyone in the evening, of being on a state of the art modern yacht but relishing the simple things like swimming in the sea.

Perhaps I am a salty dog after all.

Travel Facts