

The Forgotten Corner...

Article by Kenny Wooton, Power Cruising Magazine, May/June 2005



We stood mute on the foredeck, contemplating the indescribable vastness of the heavens. In the absence of man-made light, the stars and galaxies were the more visible against the inky sky. We mere mortals felt downright small. These are the moments yachtsmen live for. They reaffirm the notion that no matter where you've been and how much you've seen, there's a hell of a lot more to explore.

Magic on that scale is increasingly hard to come by, particularly in the world's more popular cruising grounds but we weren't anchored in a remote island chain in the Pacific or steaming a hundred miles offshore. We were barely 20 miles from St. Thomas in a cove on the Southside of Vieques. This much-overlooked corner of the eastern Caribbean, historically called the Passage Islands, is commonly referred to as the Spanish Virgins, and it was there that we found clarity each day and night in the form of deserted beaches, empty anchorages—and that big, black, ancient sky.



To me and my old friends Jim Wille and Bob Basche, the cruising scene in the BVI sounded a little too much like the world we go boating to escape. We were in search of peace, not parties, when we chartered a 44 foot cruising catamaran at Frenchtown Marina in St. Thomas last winter. It was my second time in the Passage Islands, Jim's first experience by boat in the Caribbean and the well traveled Bob's first time in the region.

The Advokat is owned by Terry and Jack Burgess of Clifton, Virginia who vacation on board frequently with family and friends. Managed by CYOA (a LetsGoCruising/BYA affiliate), it is available as a bareboat, but we chose to hire a captain to help keep our collective blood pressure in check.

I'll admit, the notion of finding peace and solitude in the boat banging, anchor dragging, steel drum clanginig bareboat beach party scene that characterizes the Virgin Islands in winter was a stretch. In the most popular anchorages, you share your neighbors taste in loud music until dawn, and nights are punctuated by rips topside to fend off drifting boats or the cheerful sounds of revelers climbing into your cockpit having mistaken it for their own,. Mornings are spent in a funk of low level stress over getting to the next anchorage ahead of the 40 other boats on their way there.

To some, that chaos is the fun of cruising the Virgins, but in the Spanish Virgins it's a different world. These islands are part of Puerto Rico and lie just off its east coast. They

comprise Vieques, Culebra, Culebrita and many smaller islands and cays. Some with anchorages, some with moorings and some just rocks. Their proximity to several large marinas on the Puerto Rican coast make them popular with the local boating crowd on weekends, but during the week we had them to ourselves. During our six days on board, we spent exactly one night in the company of another boat, and he was well out of earshot.

The Restricted Island



Our cruise took us first to the south shore of Vieques, then to Culebrita and on to Cayo Luis Pena, just west of Culebra,

with stops on that island for supplemental provisioning and the required visit to customs. Of all the Spanish Virgins, Vieques is an enigma. For 60 years, much of it was a Navy bombing range. Those planning to cruise its beautiful south shore bays and beaches were subject of the whims and needs of the service. The first time I curried the group, the range was live, and we restricted our activities to Culebra and its surrounding waters.

Under pressure and protests from the Viequesenses, the Puerto Ricans and international peace activists, the Navy ceased live fire activities on Vieques several years ago. In 2003, it officially handed over the three quarters of the island it owned to the U.S. Department of the

Interior. Most of the former bombing range, as well as parts of Culebra and surrounding cays, is now under the administration of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and has been designated a National Wildlife Refuge.

Even with the refuge designation, there is a chilling caveat to cruising there. While the Navy is gone, much of the land it occupied is off limits because of the threats that unexploded ordnance and other environmental concerns pose. In February of this year, the Navy lands were officially designated a Super fund site, which will begin the process of removing the ordnance and contaminants from the land and offshore waters. The Fish & Wildlife Service says ordnance is still lying on the bottom in various places. It goes without saying, dragging an anchor chain over one would make for a bad day in paradise. But plenty of choice spots farther west offer the same ambience—during the week any way—and an opportunity to go ashore and explore. The best of them are Red Beach, Blue Beach and the eerily spectacular Mosquito Bay.

Mosquito Bay is a shallow mangrove pond not particularly pretty by day, but as nightfall the bioluminescent organisms come out to play, and their performance truly is mind blowing. I've seen some wild stuff on boats, but few things rival the show these creatures put on the night we anchored there. We set the hook just off the opening to the pond late in the day and started cooking dinner. As dusk fell we began to see bright green half dollar size spots passing by the boat with the falling tide. They'd glow for a while, and then cool.



After dinner, we summoned the energy to get into the RIB. As soon as we began to motor into the pond, we noticed what looked like a stern light off the back of the RIB. The glow was literally bright enough to read by. As our eyes adjusted, we noticed our bow wave was scribing intense florescent green wings off to the sides. Then, as we moved into the darkness of the mangroves, our jaws went slack as an eerie underwater fireworks show exploded ahead of the boat. Apparently, the fish the RIB was disturbing as we moved through the water were stirring up the bioluminescent organisms leaving glowing contrails.

The underwater light show was rivaled only by the stunning night sky above. We spent some time on deck pondering the experience—again, in the absence of anchor lights—and declared our anchorage there, just outside the pond and astride a breathtaking white-sand pocket beach. It was the family anchorage of the trip, with the light show for the kids, the beaches for the wives and great fishing just offshore for the men.

Private Beaches

Our pursuit of the laid back life next took us to Culebra and Culebrita 8 miles to the north of Vieques. When I visited the Spanish Virgins eight years ago, I hiked to an abandoned lighthouse atop Culebrita, which is just off the eastern shore of Culebra. Below me to the north was an eye popping, windswept turquoise bay rimmed by a white sand horseshoe beach. The weather and the fact that we were on a deep draft sailboat kept us from visiting that time, but the image stuck with me, and I resolved to return someday and spend the night.



With the cat drawing just over 3 feet, entering the coral spotted bay was not a worry. The Fish & Wildlife Service has installed a half dozen moorings just off the beach. We grabbed one, dropped the anchor for insurance and chilled out as the leatherback and hawksbill turtles frolicked around the boat. The next morning we found ourselves ashore relaxing in a tide pool surrounded by 40 foot cliffs and boulders. We hiked to the lighthouse and found it still sporting a world class view of the bay, the reefs that surround the island and St. Thomas on the eastern horizon.



High seas and strong winds, courtesy of a series of cold fronts moving across the southeastern United States, (very unusual conditions for this time of year and part of the Caribbean) forced us to abandon our plans to visit Culebra's renowned Flamenco Beach on the north side of the island. Instead, we dropped the hook in another secluded anchorage on Cayo Luis Pena of the east side of Culebra.

The island, once abused by Navy bombs, was now placid and deserted, save a few goats. A saddle shape placed a leeward sunrise beach on one side and a windward sunset beach a short walk away. We used the evening to cook up the last of our fresh kingfish on a driftwood fire.

Cuisine on a bareboat is whatever you make it. Bareboat companies all offer some provisioning schemes, including options for beverages. In places like St Thomas and the BVI, high quality supermarkets and gourmet shops have sprung up to serve the charter market. Depending on your tastes—and your taste for spending an afternoon in the grocery store—you can do it all yourself. I'm loathe to leave the dock without my favorite spices and condiments, but hauling bags and boxes around in the tropical heat is not the right way to start a yachting vacation, no matter how much time you have on board.

We wisely chose to let CYOA provision the boat. We made a casual trip to the local stores for alcoholic beverages and incidentals and returned to the boat with little to stow. The \$195

per person fee for CYOA's deluxe package—seven days of breakfasts and lunches and four dinners—provided hearty eating with plenty left over. Their preference sheet allows considerable choices for dinner entrees, which we supplemented with fresh caught fish.



A Cruising Platform

Advokat is a Cumberland 44 trawler cat built by the French company Fountaine Pajot. We quickly took to calling it "the platform" for its versatility for whatever tasks we required of it. With a cruising speed of about 18 knots, we rarely faced more than an hour's steam to any of our destinations.

Cats are justly held in high regard for their sea keeping abilities. We slept in comfort in anchorages where monohull powerboats and sailboats would have rolled all night. Chine slap in the forward staterooms on the breezier nights was a bit of a distraction, but none of us had any trouble getting to sleep after long days of outdoor recreation. The boat is air-conditioned, but we never turned it on.

The French are not known for commodious lavatories, on land or at sea. The heads on the

boat added new meaning to the term “water closet,” but at least there was one in each stateroom. The staterooms were comfortable and, being positioned in each of the four corners of the boat, were private. I used about 20% of the available stowage space for my personal gear, which means had my wife come, it would have worked out just about right.

I’d never done a bareboat with a captain, and I’d think twice before I did another without. Our man, Jimmy Jones, proved an invaluable asset and a good shipmate. He brought fishing gear and showed us the way to dinner: he brought dive gear and produced lobster appetizers one night; he expertly filleted the fish we caught (I thought I was good, but he’s a pro); and he was the point guy on the RIB hoist and anchor muscling duties. As important as any of his many contributions to our peace of mind and expanding waistlines, he brought his own DVDs of *Master and Commander* and the *Hornblower saga*, which we enjoyed each night on the yacht’s flat-panel TV.

A Destination In the Making

If there is a downside to cruising the “Spanish Virgins, it is the scarcity of yacht services, but with the cat it wasn’t a serious issue. Without being careful, the four of us used up the last of our fresh water to hose down the deck after our fuel stop on the way back into the dock in St. Thomas. And we used only 120 gallons of the 420 gallons of fuel on board.

As Vieques comes out from under the Navy’s wing, fuel and water availability will doubtless improve. The Fish & Wildlife Service says dinghy docks are planned for Esperanza and possibly a fuel tank for the local fishermen. More moorings are planned for various places in the group to protect the coral and keep anchors away from those capricious metal things on the bottom. Dewey has fuel, but it can be obtained only by taking Jerry cans by dinghy into the

narrow canal that connects the large bay called Ensenada Honda (there is an Ensenada Honda on Vieques as well) with the ferry terminal on the west side of the island.

Jim, Bob and I caught up on the face time that scattered geography had robbed us of. We were happy to be out of sight and out of earshot of other cruisers most of the week, but we did make two stops for supplemental provisions (translation: beer, wine and ice), one in Esperanza on Vieques and another in Dewey on Culebra. Had the weather not been so rough, the town of Isabel Segunda on the north side of Vieques would have offered another alternative.

While we were happy with the solitude, others cruising the area might be inclined to have a night out. Isabel Segunda has some serious restaurants and nightclubs, and Dewey has a few waterfront cafes, but for the most part night life is sparse. With a fast cat, a run to mainland Puerto Rico and the sprawling Wyndham El



Conquistador resort with its spa would be an easy out.

The ferry traffic from the mainland appears to have put some juice into Esperanza, which has a few open, island style eateries along its waterfront. We made rumfall at one called Bananas, which has a clock on the bar wall that’s stuck on 5:04 doubtless a tribute to the Buffett/Alan Jackson hit “It’s Five O’Clock somewhere.” We did stop there a shade early,

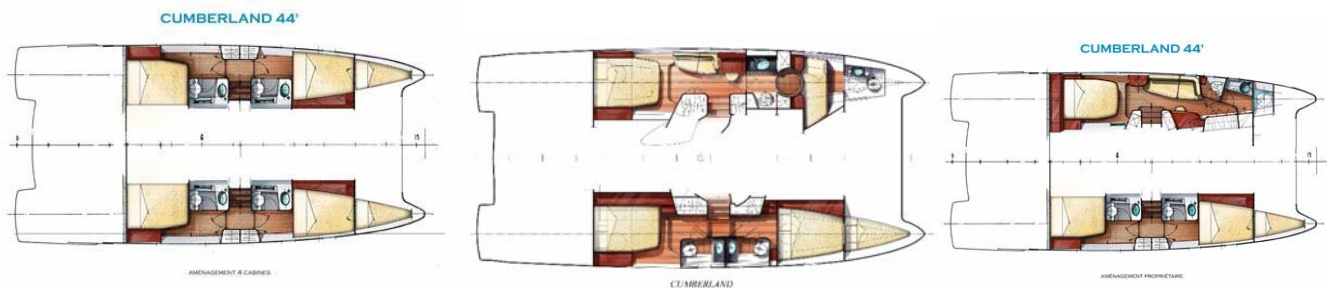
but suffice to say, it was well after 5—in the morning, anyway.

Any cruise that makes the clock stop and the blood pressure drop, even for a fleeting few days, should be counted a success. Gazing at the night sky back home, my mind drifted back to

those quiet, black nights on the foredeck with my mates. Like fishing, any cruise is better than a day in the office. Bujt it's the keepers that bring you back again and again, and that cruise in the Spanish Virgins will always have a favored place in our memories.



Supplementary information...



Advocat's layout, followed by Owner's version with crew cabin and owner's version. More info: Bay Yacht Agency 410-263-2311 info@bayacht.com Web page: <http://www.bayacht.com/aaa/fp/trawlers/F44/FP44.htm>