

British Virgin Islands Charter paradise

The BVI is the number one Caribbean sailing holiday destination that keeps crews returning again and again. Two new options to try are motorboat charter and Stay and Sail. Sarah Norbury visited the islands to find out more

A Moorings cat in North Sound photographed from our verandah at the Bitter End Yacht Club

The British Virgin Islands are paradise on a plate. Imagine the perfect Caribbean setting and the BVIs have it all. Deserted white beaches fringed by rustling palm trees.

Tropical fish, pelicans, flamingos, turtles, iguanas... Warm winds all day, every day. Rum cocktails in rickety beach bars. Lots of sheltered anchorages, plenty of charter companies offering bareboat and flotilla sailing. Easy eyeball navigation.

Some call them the 'nursery slopes' of Caribbean sailing as they are a safe environment in terms of the sailing grounds and in freedom from the petty crime that afflicts some other parts of the Caribbean. No need to padlock your tender to the dinghy dock here. Many people go on to charter in

other island groups, but others never venture further, returning year after year, discovering new places and revisiting old favourites.

The islands

The BVI group is a collection of 60 or so islands and cays, many of them uninhabited, that make a sailing area of around 30 miles east to west and 15 north to south, with Anegada out on a limb about 14 miles north of Virgin Gorda. The biggest and busiest, Tortola, is in the middle and the others sit in a circle around it. Most charters leave from the south side of Tortola. In a week you can island-hop your way round and complete the circle taking in the most popular spots. If you stay for a fortnight you can see pretty much everything. Most popular bays have a beach restaurant or

two and plenty of mooring buoys, or 'balls' as they're called locally. The charge for a night is around US\$25. You can anchor for free in many places, making sure you drop your hook on white sand not brown coral.

Something different

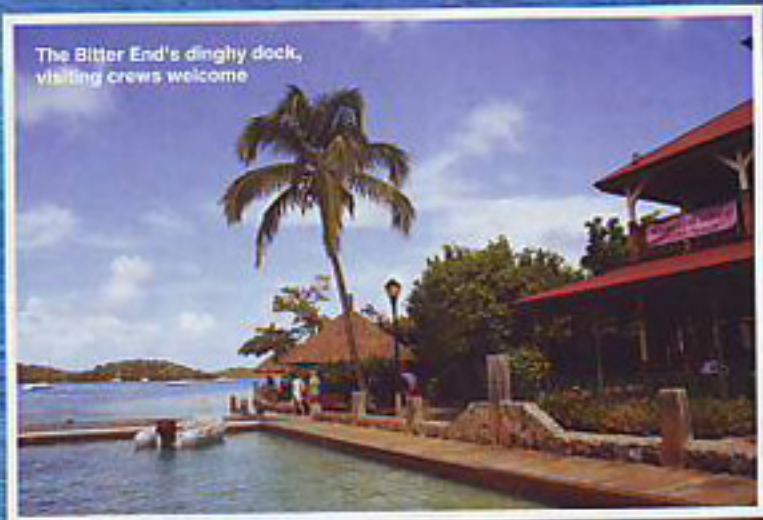
On this return visit we decided to do something completely different. Instead of sailing, we'd try a motorboat from The Moorings, and this time we'd do our first Stay and Sail, which is a few days on a boat and a few spent on land, an increasingly popular option offered by most charter companies. We started with a few days at the fabulous Bitter End Yacht Club resort, then cruised in a boat, followed by visits to some other BVI hotels to let you know what's on offer.

A new Moorings 474 PC just like ours, moored at gorgeous Diamond Cay



All photos Sarah Harbury

The Bitter End's dinghy dock, visiting crews welcome



By 4pm there was no one else at Sandy Spit as we approached in our 474 Power Cat



But let's begin with the charter, because most people opt for the Sail part first and the Stay part second. From Tortola's Beef Island airport it's about 15 minutes' taxi ride to the capital, Road Town, where many charter companies are based including The Moorings, Sunsail, Conch Charters, BVI Yacht Charters and Footloose.

After an excellent chart briefing at The Moorings' base we were taken to our boat. She was huge! The Moorings are keen to promote their motorboats to PBO readers and assured me that Jon and I would be able to handle the Moorings Power 474 PC. *Seconde Chance* by ourselves although it's designed for up to 10 people, with four completely private ensuite double cabins and a big convertible double in the saloon. We got her out of the marina more by luck

than skill, so once we were out in clear water we both practised using the twin levers till we got the hang of it. She turns on a sixpence with her two widely spaced engines. It was a guilty pleasure motoring straight to our next beach past a flotilla of sailing boats who're having to tack all the way. In open water we sometimes took her from our normal 8-10 knots to 14 or 15, but with a mind on a fuel bill shared between just two we soon settled back to a more leisurely pace.

Around the clock tour

The Moorings recommends an anti-clockwise tour of the island group. After a first night at Norman, they suggest moving on to Peter and Cooper islands, then a highlight, The Baths – strange giant

boulders on the coast of Virgin Gorda which is a day anchorage only. Then on to North Sound for the night and the next day if you have time to linger in this vast sheltered bay at the top of Virgin Gorda. It's home to the Saba Rock hotel and Moorings mini-base where you can fill up with water, ice and advice. But most famous among sailors is the Bitter End Yacht Club, a luxury sailing resort which welcomes charterers to use their moorings and go ashore for a drink, dinner or a swim from the beach. Read more about it later in this article.

While in North Sound, make a



BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

The BVI is a collection of 60 or so islands and cays, many of them uninhabited, perfect for island-hopping.



Actual position is 14 miles north of Virgin Gorda

BELOW As the sun goes down the palms light up on Nanny Cay beach



dinghy trip to the Fat Virgin cafe, and call in at Leverick Bay, a fun place with colourful waterfront eateries, a supermarket, mooring balls and 'slips' (pontoon berths), useful for provisioning. And why not sail past Richard Branson's two private islands, Necker and Mosquito, for a peek?

North Sound is also the jumping off point for Anegada 14 miles north and totally different from the other islands, being flat coral rather than mountainous. The thing to do is take a taxi to Loblolly Bay for snorkelling but we walked and saw a flock of flamingos. The other 'must' is Anegada lobster at the nightly beach barbecue.

Famous Foxy

If you leave Anegada just after breakfast you can be at Guana Island's Monkey Point for a lunchtime snorkel where we saw tarpon,

blue tangs, sergeant majors and lots more exotic fish.

From here it's not far to Jost Van Dyke for the night. Almost as famous in great-bars-of-the-world listings as White Bay's Soggy Dollar is Foxy's in next door Great Harbour.

As we drew near we saw first a band of pure white sand, then palm trees came into focus, then we heard the sounds of reggae drifting out from the beach. In the blazing heat we anchored the big boat. It's easy on clear sand. Then we motored ashore in the dinghy to Foxy's dinghy dock.

I didn't know what the fuss was about Foxy, but when the man himself appeared I was won over. He sat down with us as if we were the only people there and regaled us with a hilarious poem about England. Wherever you're from, Foxy has a poem just for you. Then he picked up his guitar and sang us a rude version of 'Yellow Bird'.

Party boat

We'd gone to Foxy's to meet some friends. The fractional sailing company SailTime had organised its own flotilla, chartering several yachts and using one as a lead boat. PBO is a member of SailTime's Poole base. You pay a set sum each year and get so many days on a boat. We use 'our' Bénéteau to test gear. The BVI flotilla is blue water sailing made easy, with SailTime instructors on the lead boat in case anyone needs them. MD Jonathan Duffy ensures everyone's happy, serving Painkiller cocktails – the islands' signature rum drink – at sundown.

Here was a ready-made crowd that would enable *Seconde Chance* to realise her true vocation as a party boat. Jon and I were rattling around in her so we invited the flotilla over for drinks. Ten turned up. Jon mixed the drinks in the galley-bar, and people mingled in the saloon and on the huge aft deck with its two sitting areas. The enormous freezer full of ice suddenly had a purpose. Then we all dinghied across to the SailTime lead boat for a barbecue.

Perfect day

The highlight of our trip was a perfect day in the little area at the north of Jost Van Dyke. In the morning we anchored at Sandy Cay, a tiny picture-postcard desert island. It's the place to pretend you're Robinson Crusoe for an hour or two, or walk hand in hand with your loved one, or circumnavigate by paddleboard.

People were doing all three when we were there, as we weren't the only ones to have had the same idea.

Then we motored into Diamond Cay bay to meet some new friends we'd made at the Bitter End, Rob and Gail Murdie. Our mission – to hike uphill and down to find the Bubbly Pool.



Foxy, at Foxy's bar, Jost Van Dyke



ABOVE This Mooring's 474 PC had four couples aboard
BELOW The Bubbly Pool



Cool pool

I hadn't heard of the Bubbly Pool till I spotted it in the pilot book. The thing to do is land at the dinghy dock at Taboo restaurant and pick up a map. A dusty path leads past mangroves, up a rocky track where we saw football-size dalek-like cacti, then back down to the sea. We soon found the pool – a lovely calm bath until a big wave hurtles in from the sea through a crevasse, gathering speed until it crashes into the pool, turning it into a foaming jacuzzi. Suddenly we four mature adults were shrieking and laughing like children.

After delicious burgers and chicken at Taboo, we took Rob and Gail for a ride in the 472. 'Wow you could do line dancing on this foredeck', said Rob. Gail loved the flybridge, being so high up – she's right you feel like the king of castle. When Rob took the controls he said, 'This is just fabulous' it's real boys toys stuff.

At around 4pm we anchored at Sandy Spit. This is like Sandy Cay but even smaller and even more perfect. And by late afternoon all the other boats had left so we had it to ourselves. We dinghied ashore and sunk our feet into the powder-soft sand. You can walk right round the island in about

two minutes posing by a perfectly placed palm tree for classic holiday snaps.

Treasure Island

We had a great evening moored in The Bight at Norman Island. Just one family lives on the island, Tom and Lena who look after Pirates Bight restaurant and their two children.

We wish we'd had time to snorkel at the nearby Indians rocks, and to swim into the caves near the mouth of the Bight where legend says lives the spirit of a pirate who

utters a ghostly moan.

Norman Island is said to be the inspiration for R L Stevenson's Treasure Island. In the 1740s explained Tom, pirates looted a Spanish ship and much of the silver was hidden on Norman Island.

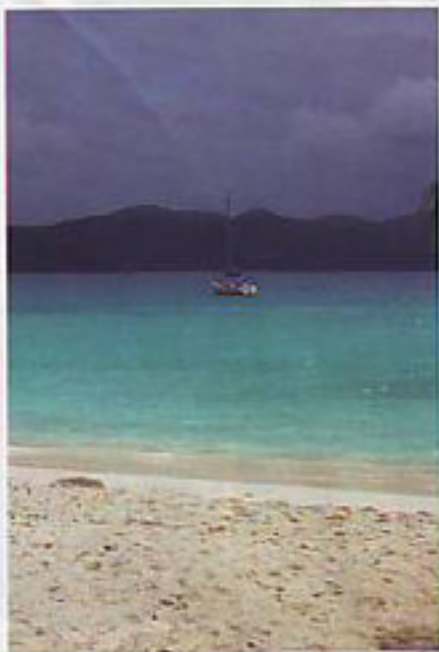
We had an excellent chicken roti (a local dish of chicken and potato curry in a wrap) and steak at Pirates' Bight then whizzed across to Willie T's, a restaurant and bar on a moored ship where every night's a party.

A night in a marina

The BVI isn't just about charter boats, it's also a magnet for blue-water sailors who keep their own boat in the islands. Many of these are kept at Tortola's Nanny Cay marina. The marina and boatyard were abuzz with refits and repairs to get boats ready for the new season.

I wanted to try the new-look Peg Leg restaurant, and I must confess, to challenge ourselves to drive the big cat safely in and out of a marina berth. We did it! Several days of low-speed manoeuvres picking up buoys and anchoring had been good practice.

The marina has everything the yachtsman could wish for after several days of living at



White Bay on exclusive Guana Island

anchor. There's the most luxurious showers and loos we found, supermarket, laundry, restaurant, pool, even its own beach.

Catamaran or monohull?

Last time we went to the BVI several years ago most charter boats were monohulls. Now, catamarans are in the majority. If you want to feel a boat heel in the trade winds for the classic sailing experience you'll choose a monohull. If you are a group wanting the privacy of cabins spaced away from each other, and lots of living space at deck level then a cat is for you.

The Mooring's 4000 sailing cats are set up with the main and jib sheets led back to the helm so the skipper can do all the work while the crew sunbathes.

Chartering a motorboat

The Mooring's are actively promoting their new motor catamarans and Virgin Traders offer upmarket motorboats from Nanny Cay. Virgin Traders' British owner James Burgess said 'with big twin diesels you can go to windward, stay flat, get where you want to with much less drama. If you want to try motorboating, the BVI is the place to do it, there's easy eyeball navigation, almost zero tide, plenty of places to practise anchoring and mooring, and fast-response back up if you need it.'

Stay and Sail

Options for hotels range from 'holiday of a lifetime' expensive to cheap and cheerful. Call the charter companies to find out more about hotels, villas and apartments. And the website www.onebvi.com has expert information on holiday accommodation and will arrange bookings and flights if you wish.

The Bitter End Yacht Club

This sailing holiday resort has been added to the Stay and Sail programmes of the Mooring's, Sunsail and Nautilus and thus come onto the 'radar' of British





So much to do at the Bitter End Yacht Club resort. Sail a Hobie Cat (above), race with the stars at the Pro-Am Regatta (right), even get married like British couple Ched and Maurs Hall-Hill who arrived with 30 friends in six charter boats

charter clients. The Bitter End, on Virgin Gorda's North Sound, is much more than a hotel. 'Barefoot elegance' is an apt description of the ambience of this resort with its mile-long waterfront including a fabulous beach with plenty of palm trees for shade. In the package price guests have free, unlimited use of their fleet of over 100 boats including keelboats, sailing dinghies, windsurfers, kayaks and small motorboats. And all meals are included - they do great steaks and freshly caught fish. We loved breakfasting on the beachfront terrace and dining under the stars.

Our time there was a dream come true for we two racing fanatics as it coincided with the Bitter End Pro Am Regatta when at no

extra cost we raced with the likes of Paul Cayard, Ken Read, Keith Musto and American Olympic medalists Anna Tunnicliffe and Zach Railey. Unforgettable.

It's a great place for families with its perfect learn-to-sail waters and a kids' camp in high season.

Rooms are individual 'cottages' set on a forested hillside, reached by wooden walkways with incredible views from your hammock on your own private verandah.

If ever there's a time to get a deal, it's this season. In its 30th anniversary year the



Bitter End is offering some special 30% off deals, and if you book via Moorings, Sunsail, Nautilus or other charter company you'll get a further discount.

Guana Island

I was intrigued by Guana Island. Anchored in gorgeous White Bay near Monkey Point you spy the occasional speedboat arriving with guests. Being a private island though, visiting yachtsmen aren't allowed to walk further inland than the high-water line. In the line of duty I thought I'd investigate this exclusive resort.

An atmosphere of understated elegance is the owner's aim, as is to preserve the native flora and fauna of the island and offer the chance to explore untouched tropical forest. Guests stay in luxury cottages on the ridge of a hill with panoramic views from your verandah or roof terrace.

The food is outstandingly good. We tried meltingly tender tuna tempura, a mouth-watering New York Strip steak, and the most divine thing I have ever tasted - sweet pea and white truffle soup. Guests dine by candlelight on discreet little terraces garlanded with bougainvillea. Most days are spent on the pristine White Beach, where lunch is served under the trees.

Charter stay & sail contacts

Bitter End Yacht Club www.beyc.com
 BVI Yacht Charters www.bviyc.com
 Conch Charters www.conchcharters.com
 Footloose www.footloosecharter.com
 Frenchman's BVI www.frenchmansbvi.com
 Guana Island www.guana.com
 Horizon Yacht Charters www.horizonyachtcharters.com
 Latesail www.latesail.com
 One BVI www.onebvi.com
 Nautilus Yachting www.nautilus-yachting.com
 Sunsail www.sunsail.com
 The Moorings www.moorings.com
 TMM Yacht Charters, Tortola www.sailtmm.com
 Top Yacht www.top-yacht.com
 Virgin Traders www.virgintraders.com





We hiked to a summit on Guana Island, then down again to a deserted beach

We hiked high up a hill through the hot, humid forest of cactus and palms till we could see the island laid out before us like a map, then hurried down to get our reward – a deserted beach at the end of the trail where we took a cooling dip, then swam to a jetty where a boatman came to collect us.

It's wonderfully relaxing and seriously expensive, the other guests were a mix of wealthy business people taking a break, and those on holidays of a lifetime whether it be for a special birthday, a marriage proposal or anniversary.

Other stay and sail favourites

Frenchmans is a collection of nine luxury villas in a quiet, idyllic spot on Frenchman's Cay, Tortola with stunning views, a pool, a



Sandy Spit, desert-island perfection

beach and a clubhouse. They are part self-catered which helps those who don't want to eat every meal out. Soper's Hole with its restaurants, including our favourite Jolly Roger, is only a few minutes away. Very helpful staff.

Peter Island is a beautiful 5-star resort popular for Stay and Sail. Dinghy sailing in Deadman's Bay is included in the price.

Summer Heights is a large villa on Tortola for a group of up to 10 people with sweeping sea views.

The Moorings base has a hotel that's handy for a couple of days ashore at the Road Town base with its own pool and restaurant.

Nanny Cay Hotel is reasonably priced and there's a pool, beach and restaurants. There's also the new and upmarket **Nanny Cay villas**.

When to go

It's well worth braving the long air journey and the high BVI prices to experience these gorgeous, safe and unspoilt tropical islands.

The economic downturn in the US is affecting hotels and charter companies – there are good deals to be done. If the pound is reasonably strong against the dollar, even better.

The best weather is from November to June. This year could be the one you take your Caribbean dream holiday.

Find out more

Start your BVI holiday search with the companies in our BVI advertising section starting on page 135. And see more photos and info on www.pbo.co.uk



Dylan Williams of Pirate's Blight with their signature rum cocktail

BVIs Fact File

RESCUE AND ASSISTANCE

■ The Moorings lend you a free mobile phone with emergency numbers programmed in, including Night Distress and Virgin Islands Search and Rescue.

PROVISIONING, EATING OUT

■ Food is pricey both in supermarkets and restaurants. Almost

everything is imported, even tropical fruits: we saw a pineapple that cost US\$12. Most waterside restaurants serve the same menu – American style ribs, steak, chicken, good local fish, pizza, pasta. Main courses tend to be US\$20-35. A delicious local dish – chicken roti (chicken and potato curry in a wrap) is often the cheapest option. There are a few less pricey places to eat including The Fat Virgin in North Sound. Popular bar drinks include Red Stripe and Carib beer, and Painkiller and Bushwhacker cocktails.

CURRENCY, INTERNET, MOBILE

■ Currency is \$US. Plugs and voltage are US. Mobile phone coverage is good. There's free Wi-Fi at marinas and some beach restaurants. You can hire a mobile internet connection for access everywhere from Renport at the Moorings base. www.renport.com

GETTING THERE

■ There are no direct flights from the UK to the BVIs. Most British charter guests fly BA or Virgin to Antigua then LIAT to Tortola. Our outward LIAT flight was three hours late. The return LIAT flight was five hours late, so we missed our BA flight and arrived home 24 hours late. LIAT flights are often late delayed so local charter airlines thrive. Charter-flights are offered by some yacht-charterers including Virgin Traders who operate their own aeroplane. ■ Flights are not cheap. Our BA and LIAT return flights cost £730 per person but we were last-minute. Moorings will search for the cheapest flights for you.

MOORINGS CHARTER PRICES

■ Moorings lent us the boat as they wanted to show the new 474 to PBO readers. The lowest price for a week on the 474 is £5,208, or £520.80pp for a week if 10 share.

■ The lowest price for a Moorings charter is £1,050 for an Oceanis 32.2, which is 262pp for a week if four share.