

# Virgin territory

In search of a little piece of paradise, **Jeremy Evans** enjoyed the sun and trade winds of the British Virgin Islands on a totally modern charter...

**T**he British Virgin Islands, at the top of the Caribbean island chain near Puerto Rico, have become established as one of the world's most popular locations for year-round yacht cruising holidays. A dozen or so islands and numerous islets are crammed into an area that's 32 miles long and half as wide, enjoying a wonderful climate that combines 24-31 degree Centigrade average temperatures with reliable trade winds.

I have sailed round these islands before, but so long ago that my only real memories were hot sun and warm winds with very few other yachts or



people. In the intervening years, popular yachting centres on both the South Coast of England and Mediterranean have been transformed by the huge growth of boating and recreational developments. Fearing the worst, I assumed similar must have happened to the BVIs, so I was

**Right** The BVIs are a perfect natural cruising ground, with line-of-sight navigation making life easy most days.





not inclined to return. But friends who had sailed there recently all said, 'It's great - you'll love it.' Only one way to find out...

### The longest journey

There are no direct flights from Europe to Tortola, which is the capital island of the BVI. You have the option of flying to neighbouring St John in the US Virgin Islands, or to one of the major Caribbean islands such as Antigua or St Kitts. We took the latter option, combined with island-hopping on the local flying bus service. These small planes are fun to ride, but be prepared for lost luggage, which is apparently typical. We lost bags in both directions, although they reappeared in time. Another hassle is the extraordinarily laboured immigration procedures on these Caribbean islands. The last thing you want at the end of a long, uncomfortable transatlantic flight is to stand in a queue for a very long time - but that's part of the price you pay.

With various delays, it took 20 hours from home to our Moorings 403 charter yacht in Tortola, and rather longer going home courtesy of Excel Airways who provided a decidedly unexcellent flying experience. Regular long-distance flyers may shrug that off, but from my perspective it seems nuts to travel to the BVI for a week and enjoy a mere six day's sailing. Go for a fortnight! It not only makes the travel more bearable, but you also need a minimum of 10 days afloat to get a



**Above and right**  
Picturesque bays and a little local flavour on Jost van Dyke island.



PHOTOS: JEREMY EVANS



**Above** The local bars and beachfront cafes each have their own unique style.

**Above inset** The low-lying Anegada island was a particular favourite.

**Below** Decent breezes and occasional swell made for some memorable sailing conditions.

## “Anegada could double as paradise with miles and miles of the most beautiful beaches”

good crack at the BVIs.

Yacht charter in the BVI has been driven by the Moorings, which has a large and rather smart marina on Tortola – purpose-built for the exclusive use of almost 300 Moorings yachts, divided between monohulls and cruising catamarans. Since all Caribbean islands have strict work permit laws, the workforce is mainly provided by local people who tend to be friendly, helpful and somewhat relaxed.

Apart from the frustrations of a late arrival and lost baggage, we had no delays setting out from the marina. Provisioning a yacht for five people can be onerous, but on this occasion proved delightfully hassle-free. A charming chap drove us to a very well stocked supermarket, waited while we shopped, packed huge amounts of food and drink into his van and delivered it all to the boat in the space of a couple of hours. His service was so good that the next time we felt in need of a big shop, we returned to the Moorings base for a repeat performance.

It's possible to pop back to Tortola, or in fact anywhere in the BVIs, because the sailing area is so small and yacht-friendly. Minimal tides and line of sight navigation make it straightforward to find

your way around the islands that cluster round Tortola, with the Sir Francis Drake Channel providing a wide passage up the middle protected from the prevailing easterly swell. The only island out of sight from Tortola is the one island without high hills – Anegada is known as the 'drowned island' because it rises no more than 28ft above sea level. It's at least 14 miles from the main group of islands, which means you can't see the island until quite close, with a necklace of submerged coral reefs waiting to wreck careless navigators.

### Climate control

We visited in February, providing a perfect escape from the British winter. Over two weeks the temperature was perfect T-shirt and shorts sailing: seldom too hot or too cold and much more comfortable than the excesses you can experience

in the Mediterranean. It also blew every single day – mostly around Force 4, occasionally Force 6 and more with torrential downpours, never less than Force 3 – with the breeze staying up through the nights, which is great for comfortable sleeping. With wind guaranteed, we could sail whenever we wanted. The engine was no more than an auxiliary which at most got run for an hour a day to power the anchor windlass, top up batteries and keep the fridge-freezer reasonably cool.

Incidentally, on the subject of food storage and mod-cons, the Moorings 403 (a 39ft Beneteau) was our best yacht to date in that department, plus it also had a terrific tender and sailed fairly well! We did, however, treat the onboard air conditioning with incredulity – what's the point of travelling to the Caribbean to sleep inside a cold boat? And we also found it curious that a yacht with air-con was equipped with parallel rules for chart work, which surely belong in a museum, and had no hand-bearing compass. It did have a Raymarine GPS Chartplot with fancy colour display – just push the buttons and go – which was quite useful when it worked but absolutely useless when its compact flash card suffered complete brain failure. The Moorings can provide an on the water repair service if you call them out – but with line of sight navigation, we didn't worry about a dead GPS.

February is high season in the BVIs, but it seemed much, much quieter than the Solent with a notably restrained pace of development on shore. When it comes to choosing places to stop, there is a huge choice of anchorages dotted around the islands, which in our experience never suffered from swell. The area also has a brilliant system of moorings. You can lie at anchor – taking care never to drop onto coral – but picking up a mooring is top choice for worry-free nights at a very reasonable charge of around US\$25 (US dollars are widely used in the BVI). These moorings are scattered throughout the islands and appear readily available for day and night time use. We only once failed to find a free





**Left The Moorings' base in Tortola is extremely impressive, with space for 300 yachts and full provisioning facilities.**

**Below Joining the throngs at Anegada – the BVIs are not overdeveloped, but do expect some company.**

mooring for a lunch-time stop: no-one had left Manchioneel Bay at Cooper Island because the wind was howling, and it was too deep to anchor comfortably, so we moved on.

## Favourite haunts

It took us around 10 days to cruise around the BVIs at a relaxed pace, leaving extra time to revisit some islands. The whole area seemed nice and the sailing was delightful. We particularly liked Norman Island which, despite being close to Tortola, is largely unspoilt and has its own mini cruising ground with neighbouring Peter Island. Further up the island chain, the Baths at Virgin Gorda are well worth a visit, though you need to arrive early to bag a mooring and swim/walk through the huge granite boulders which are nicknamed 'Stonehenge-by-Sea'. Gorda Sound, at the west end of Virgin Gorda, was memorable for the excellent Fat Virgin Cafe just round the corner from the anodyne marina development at Bitter End. This is also the perfect jumping off point for Anegada, 14 miles to the north. The Moorings has a small office at Bitter End, which provides an informal daily briefing on how to sail to Anegada without wrecking their boat. The problem is you can't see the extensive reefs, which are mostly deep enough under your keel, but have coral heads like houses just a few feet below the surface.

To ensure a safe passage to Anegada, the Moorings have developed a rather curious method of navigating by various trees, roofs and houses, but as Christine who ran the briefing explained, 'We've never lost a boat!' However, sailing there is well worth the effort. Anegada could double as paradise island with miles and miles of the most beautiful sandy beaches, no ghastly hotels and very few people around. The large anchorage appears to be completely open but is protected by hidden reefs, with a pleasing selection of simple cafes spread along the beach and the most charming and friendly people we encountered in all the islands.

Unfortunately even paradise is never perfect, particularly when you have noisy neighbours. We had no problem with the local band playing into the night on shore. But it's not so great to wake up to the sound of next door's yacht running its



PHOTOS: JEREMY EWANS

engine at 0700hrs, which was then joined by a huge catamaran on which a group of self-obsessed young men gave a public display of their keep-fit routines. We neither wanted to watch blokes pumping up their biceps or listen to their music, so we left Anegada and went sailing.

Sailing in the BVIs is so enjoyable that we were not particularly sad to leave Anegada, even though we'd considered staying there a couple of days. The next best trip was sailing down the north coast of Tortola, which is largely untouched and beautiful, with rolling surf in the bays and nowhere to stop along the way.

I had high hopes of another dose of paradise on Jost van Dyke but found it a little disappointing, likewise Cane Garden Bay on Tortola gets a wonderful write-up in the Virgin Islands Cruising Guide, but was really not so nice. Soper's Hole looked great from the water, but on closer inspection turned out full of touristy kitsch with prices to match. So it was back to Norman Island for our last two nights afloat, anchored in our favourite Benures Bay where you can watch the local pelicans do their dive bomb routines all day, then moored in Privateer Bay for a perfect view of the Caribbean sun going down at the end of another perfect sailing day.

Would I recommend a yacht holiday in the BVIs? Yes, it really is worth the trip. We've enjoyed family cruises across Britain and Europe, but the BVIs topped the bill for the best sailing conditions, most pleasant climate, least hassle (getting there excluded) and highest levels of extremely relaxed fun. ■



### Further information:

*A Moorings charter in Tortola during 2006 ranges from £958 per week in low season (July-November) on a Club Line Moorings 332 for up to 5 people, to £5,872 per week in high season (December-January) on a Moorings 4700 cat for up to 10 people. The Moorings also run BVI Flotillas throughout the year at a supplementary cost of £176 per yacht for 1 week, £300 per yacht for 2 weeks. For more information visit [www.moorings.co.uk](http://www.moorings.co.uk) or call 01227 776677.*