

NATURE'S LITTLE SECRETS

FRANCES and MICHAEL HOWORTH visit isolated anchorages, cruising hotspots and top resort hotels in the British Virgin Islands. They find fun in the sun aboard the sailing yacht *Tenacious* — one of the best crewed charter yachts sailing in the area.

Text and photographs by Frances and Michael Howorth

Sailing Destination/**British Virgin Islands**

The cruising grounds of the British Virgin Islands or, as sailors the world over like to call them, the BVI, are often referred to as Nature's Little Secrets and it is easy to understand why. The islands are a yachtsman's paradise offering short sheltered passages between islands, quiet anchorages, blue skies, tropical sunshine and warm Caribbean seas in which to swim and dive. It's a great place to sail and a terrific spot in which to charter a yacht.

Tenacity in paradise

The islands become even more enjoyable from the comfort of a superyacht and we were lucky enough to be guests aboard *Tenacious*, a beautiful sloop built to the designs of Ted Hood and Andrew Winch — talk about pedigree!

We have awoken to find *Tenacious* at anchor off Jost Van Dyke, one of a string of fabulous islands that make up the island chain. We sailed here last evening from Sopers Hole in the Western end of Tortola where we boarded this beautiful 35-metre sailing yacht. Captain Duncan Hipkin and his attentive crew are a young and enthusiastic team and greet us as we rise from the master stateroom

and come on deck for breakfast. They clearly enjoy their work and set about pampering us by providing a breakfast of fresh fruit and fabulous pastries.

Trek to Taboo

"I have a plan," says Duncan. "Let's start today with a walk before it gets



Sip a real Caribbean rum punch at Pirates Bight

too hot. Ashore not far from here is a natural phenomenon called the bubbly pools and when the swell is up they make a great picture." We set off shortly after that in the yacht's robust tender. We begin our trek at Foxy's Taboo, a bar right down on the shoreline in Diamond Cay. Duncan leads the way as

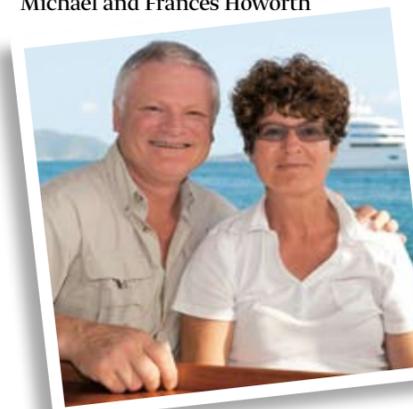
we walk along a beach, past mangrove trees, up over a hill and through a copse of Machineel. "Don't touch those!" warns Duncan pointing to the Machineel, "The sap is poisonous and when it rains standing under them can make your skin itch badly!" We need no second warning as we head towards

our destination, a U-shaped rock pool on the island's north coast. Here, when the conditions are right, the Atlantic swell crashes through the small rock gap bubbling and frothing into a creamy lather of frenzied seawater. Pictures taken, we wind our way back to the tender, jump in and speed across the

water to *Tenacious* where she waits patiently for us. The crew are serving lunch inside the spacious cockpit and our walk has given us the hunger to devour it. However, after lunch, the blue clear waters of the Caribbean beckon and so we ask to be taken to Sandy Cay, a beautiful spit of land surrounded by reefs and water that promises great snorkelling.

Tiny Clown Fish flitted in and out of coral, Blue Chromis added neon colour while Parrot Fish came and went playing bit parts in the production. Moray Eels added menace while Angel Fish flirted with us mistaking us for the movies director, sea-life underwater hereabouts is truly an Oscar winning performance.

Michael and Frances Howorth



The group of picturesque islands are also known as Nature's Little Secrets

New world wonder

One of the greatest joys of sailing in the BVI is the ability to jump over the side in most anchorages, sink below the surface, with nothing more than a snorkel, mask and a pair of fins and watch in awe as a whole new world unfolds. We were not disappointed. Fish were in abundance and it was as if we had entered an underwater movie set.

Dripping wet and covered in salty seawater we emerged from the depths and climbed into the tender manned by our always-attentive crew who had been watching over us while we swam. One of the most enjoyable delights of sailing aboard a yacht like *Tenacious*, is being handed fluffy bath towels the moment we step out of the water — talk about service with a smile!

A pirate's bite

After a late and leisurely lunch we set off with all sails set, for our short inter-island crossing at speeds just shy of nine knots. Behind us, our wake carved a white slash across the blue coloured sea. We have decided to anchor tonight at Norman Island at an anchorage called the Bight. It is very popular with those sailing the islands aboard



The simple setting of paradise



Tenacious' crew were happy to help

bareboat charter yachts. They come to enjoy the delights of the Willy T a 28-metre replica of a topsail schooner and now a floating bar and restaurant at anchor in the bay. Others wander ashore to the top of the sandy bay and sip a real Caribbean rum punch at a beach bar called Pirates Bight.

We chose neither, preferring an energetic walk across the island, on the newly formed tracks laid out for just this purpose. There are no cars and, save for the bar on the beach, no buildings yet on the island. Norman Island is often referred to as being the true Treasure Island. It was mentioned in a letter written in 1750 as being the location of treasure buried after being taken from the Spanish Galleon *Nuestra Señora* but despite having a pirate map which we picked up at the bar we did



The afternoon ritual of lighting the cannon

not find any buried treasure on our walk. That night, while we listened to revellers enjoying *Willy T*, we dined on the foredeck sitting on casually-cushioned seating under a generous awning.

Dawn waits for no man

The next morning after breakfast we used the tender for a short trip across to the Indians. This small outcrop of rocks is an excellent beginners'

dive site and a wonderful spot for snorkelling. Equally fun are the caves on Norman Island where it is easy to swim inside and admire the myriad of fish making their home here. We sampled both locations before returning to the yacht for a wonderful lunch.

A date with the deep

The next day we sailed to Peter Island where Frances had a date

with an old friend lying underwater off the neighbouring island of Salt Island. The wreck is that of the Royal Mail Steamer (*RMS Rhone*). Used as the backdrop to the movie *The Deep*, starring Nick Nolte and Jacqueline Bissett, it lies in two parts having been destroyed in a hurricane that swept through the islands in October of 1887. The deeper part lies at 25 metres and is a splendid dive for the moderately experienced diver.

With diving done and an unusual westerly wind behind us we left Peter

Island and sailed quickly downwind to Long Bay off Virgin Gorda. There we anchored overnight, the only boat in an otherwise deserted anchorage. The next day we motored down to the Baths, a really scenic, if somewhat touristy spot. The crew took us ashore leading us through cave-like trails that wind their way through, under and between massive fallen boulders. To enjoy the beauty of this natural phenomenon in peace and quiet you need to arrive early and snorkel amongst the rocks offshore when it gets busy on land.

That evening we sailed towards Trellis Bay on the eastern end of Tortola and anchored off Marina Cay, where we went diving again just as night fell. Dinner afterwards on deck is lobster, which luckily the chef had had the foresight to buy earlier as there were none to be seen below.

Basking turtles

Before leaving the tiny Marina Cay, an island made famous by the author Robb White in *Our Virgin Island*, we go snorkelling. The water is calm, the wind slight and on the surface turtles bask in the sunshine while on the beach tourists from colder climes roast to a golden tan. We sailed northeast towards Gorda Sound on Virgin Gorda home to the Bitter End Yacht Club. It is a vibrant resort that is the perfect venue for any family keen to enjoy themselves on the water. Water sport activities are well catered for with sailboards, optimists, hobbie-cats, lasers and even a fleet of keel sailing boats.

Greeting us on the dock as we disembark is Mary Jo Ryan, Resort Manager at the Bitter End Yacht Club Resort, who shows us to our beachfront villa in one of the resorts newly refurbished properties. We have a couple of days to enjoy the facilities before we have to sadly return to reality and a British winter. **IB**



Delightful evenings spent aboard Tenacious



Sumptuous food to match the surroundings

Frances and Michael Howorth sailed aboard *Tenacious* with the kind permission of the owner and his Central Charter Agent, Fraser Yachts, who list the yacht for charter at US \$60,000 per week. For more information visit the website: www.fraseryachts.com