

SAILING SURFARI

ARMED WITH SURFBOARDS AND A SOUNDTRACK, A CHARTER CAT FULL OF 30-SOMETHINGS SEEKS ADVENTURE IN TORTOLA'S WIND AND WAVES | BY JOSH ADAMS

>> **"LIFE IS SHORT," SAYS**

Will, supporting his remark with the kind of factoid you'd expect from a high-school physics teacher. "We live for about 4,000 weeks. I tell my students they have 3,000 Fridays left. Make them count."

Which raises a question: If a life spans 4,000 weeks, what difference does one

week make? Even before we depart on our week-long charter in the British Virgin Islands out of Sunsail's Maya Cove base on Tortola, we eight sailors—30-somethings busy with careers and families and in need of a winter sailing adventure—figure we have the answer to this question pegged. If it's a week spent in the BVI with close friends

on a catamaran full of water toys—without children, deadlines, responsibility, and worry—one week could make all the difference in the world.

We'll make it count, all right. We've added a twist to our cruise and are planning a few days of surfing on the north side of Tortola, waves permitting. Just in case, we've planned enough other activities to fill two weeks. The icebox on *Alexander the Great*, our Lagoon 410, is jammed with delicious goodies, and we've loaded enough water, rum, and beer aboard to affect hull trim. The lockers are stuffed with sailboards, snorkeling gear, a selection of surfboards from Island Surf and Sail, and an extra thing or two (such as snatch blocks) to enhance sailing performance. I catch some flak for packing a pair of removable turning blocks, but this is a cat and cats are fast even when loaded for bear. The competitive sailors among us are enthused.

In the nav station, alongside the BVI cruising guide and chart, is a stack of papers containing information that is critical to our adventure: the surf report. We have no info on predicted winds. Why bother when in February you can expect stiff easterly trade winds every day. Waves aren't as dependable, but according to our several pages of storm and surf analysis for the North Atlantic and Caribbean, we could be riding waves in the middle of the week. Will, Jay, Nick, and I are used to surfing the frigid waves of Boston's North Shore, and the idea of surfing under sunny skies in warm water has us as giddy as children on Christmas morning. Time to cast off.

The other half of the crew—our beautiful brides, Kim, Margaret, Abi, and Sarah—all approve of our plan. After watching us study charts and weather patterns and network with area surfers, they are eager to see us realize our ambition. And they know that to get to the surf breaks in Apple, Josiah's, or Cane Garden bays, we'll have to sail, swim, snorkel, celebrate, and relax our way counterclockwise around Tortola, with multiple stops en route. We all agree on two important guidelines: There will be something for everyone, and flexibility rules the day.



>> Picking up the pace north of Tortola



>> The author rides the beach break in Josiah's Bay, a short paddle from the charter cat *Alexander the Great*

We begin with a series of firsts. Kim, born and raised in Colorado, is sailing for the first time. Everything is new to her—the gear and terminology, the little galley and the marine toilets, the movement of the boat (minus the heeling, of course, which is one advantage of sailing a cat), and all the random little things that are second nature to a lifelong sailor, like having to remove drying swimsuits from the lifelines before getting under way and feeling safe and secure while hanging 16,000 pounds of boat on a 25-pound anchor. Sailing along at 7 to 8 knots, we can see right down to the bottom, and the miraculous backdrop of tall, green islands never fails to amaze. Kim's excitement with the novelty of it all—picture a smile fixed firmly from ear to ear—is infectious.

After a short sail down Sir Francis Drake Channel, we all go for a snorkel session (some of us for the first time) at the Indians. Then, for Sarah, it's her first time windsurfing. Nick, a walking wind-and-wave report at home, gives her a lesson in Key Bay, on the south side of Peter Island. She gets the hang of it, picks up speed, and heads away from our cozy anchorage. She's getting smaller and smaller on the horizon. "But can she tack?" we wonder. Eventually she returns and an-

nounces she has a new favorite watersport.

Happily, we are vacationing with a custom soundtrack. Jay, whose company places music in movies and in television and radio advertisements, spent months creating three playlists on his iPod specifically for the trip. "Morning," "Sun," and "Stars" feature more than 400 songs and a tune for just about every mood, time of day, or activity. You want a theme song for a beam reach under full sail? Jay cues up "The Israelites." Or, when the sun is setting over Guana Island, and we're snugly anchored and have embarked on a round of tasty sun-downers, it's the perfect moment for any tune on "Exile on Main Street."

Sailing away from Peter Island, *Alexander the Great* is making her own music. We're heading straight into the teeth of a 20-knot easterly, making our way to Salt Island Channel and, eventually, the wreck of the *Rhone*. We're out of the lee of the islands, and the cat is taking it square on the bows. Music by the band My Morning Jacket is blaring from the cockpit speakers, and Nick, a speed freak and former 505 world champion, is at the helm pushing the speedo—7, 8, come on 9 knots!

The cat twists, surges, and leaps over the waves. Kim is in a new world, loving it. She

>> The brides crafting beach art



dares to experience her first heavy-wind sail from the tramp. Lying face down and gripping the forward edge of the tramp, she is sent skyward every time the bows crest a wave. Having introduced people to sailing before, I'm thinking this is highly unusual. First-timers normally—take your pick—shy away from such challenging conditions, get scared, throw up, or, worst case, hate it. But for Kim it's a revelatory moment. When she returns to the cockpit, she informs us, "I'm over this land thing."

After a night at Cooper Island and a snorkel at Great Dog among the sparkling fish and grazing turtles, we sail for North Sound. Grabbing a mooring off the Bitter End Yacht Club, we prepare for another day of watersports. Nick and Sarah take to the windsurfers. Margaret, Abi, and I go ashore, returning from the BEYC boat beach with a 16-foot Hobie cat. Jay hooks on to the trapeze wire (another first), Kim hops aboard, and soon I am imitating a U-boat commander, stuffing our leeward bow deep under water at speed. Our sterns pitch skyward, and after we land our near-cartwheel, Kim chuckles, clearly less scared than I.

That night, before dinner and dancing ashore, we evaluate the latest surf report and plan the rest of our adventure. Surf's up! We're pulling out first thing in the morning and heading for Josiah's Bay.

In Trellis Bay, on Beef Island, we meet up with Owen Waters of Island Surf and Sail.

PHOTOS BY JOSH ADAMS

Waters owns the business and thus can take time off to join his wave-riding clients when the surf is in town. Thanks to an Atlantic storm several hundred miles away, waist-to head-high waves are breaking off the beach at Josiah's. Combine this with 80-degree water and abundant sunshine, and you have a fine recipe for a day at the beach.

Will, Nick, Jay, and I follow our laid-back guide into the water. The north-northeast swell bends around Guana Island and breaks square on the beach. Farther to the west are Cane Garden Bay, a renowned break that fires in a big swell, and Apple Bay, now crowded with fellow wave-riders. We share the surf with a few locals and enjoy the warm waves, which peak off the middle of the beach and break right and left. Hours later, our arms cooked from paddling, we're on the beach enjoying a round of cold beers from Naomi's beachside restaurant and replaying every ride. We share a fine feeling of satisfaction. Our plan has succeeded, and tomorrow will bring more surf.

While paddling off Josiah's, we can see the anchorage and sparkling white-sand beach at Guana's White Bay. The cove offers protection from the north swell and is just a short hop from Trellis Bay. On this night it has attracted only a few boats. Too bad for them; this is the night we raucously celebrate our surfing day and our presence in the BVI. Yes, we were *that* boat.

In the morning we sail back to Josiah's. The swell has dropped off, so we anchor inside the bay. We keep a few people on the boat while the surfers, including Abi, paddle into the break. (Note: The only north-facing anchorage in which Sunsail and other companies allow overnighting is Garden Bay. Even for a day stop you need to have an anchor watch at all times. In our case, the weather was pretty tame and the holding was excellent.) The waves are small (knee to waist high) but frequent. It's easy surfing—light paddling in the right spot (mid-beach) yields quality rides.

We're in a pack of local surfers, trying to keep pace with a teenager the locals call Superfly. He can't weigh more than 115 pounds, and his arms spin in circles like

PHOTO BY MIGUEL NICHOLS



>> Heads first into White Bay

propeller blades. He shifts left, darts right, drops in, and moves up and down the face of the wave like a bee in a flower bed. By midafternoon Nick and I are the last ones from our boat in the water and it's time to leave. We paddle back and prepare to sail to Jost Van Dyke.

What difference does a week make? We leave Tortola more engaged in sailing. Bringing lifelong sailors (and newbies) back into it is something chartering does very well. Fast forward four months. Will and Kim are hooked and are now the proud owners of a speedy Hobie 20. Nick

and Abi chartered a Cosair trimaran for sailing their home waters in August. Jay and Margaret, who are expecting their second child during peak charter season next year, are still willing and able. "Just let me know where we're going," says Jay. "We'll rent something on the island. We'll be there."

Leaving Tortola, we're already thinking about our next charter. We made this week count, and we're counting on more. Sarah starts the countdown: "We have 51 weeks until next year's vacation." ▲

Sunsail, www.sunsail.com, 800-327-2276



>> Will, left, and Nick rig up a sailboard