

LEARNING THE ROPE S

Keen for her holiday to be nautical but nice, sailing novice Jenni Doggett embarks on a yachting adventure around the blissful British Virgin Islands Photography: Sergio Villalba







BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

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at virgin!' the man opposite me bellows. I know I have a little post-yule padding but still that seems unduly rude. We are strapped into a plane the size of a skinny minibus and the engines are deafening. Maybe I misheard.

'Faanaat virgin,' my neighbour roars again. 'That's the translation of "Virgin Gorda". Christopher Columbus thought

the island looked like a fat virgin, apparently.' Turns out he's pointing to one of the dark scattered outcrops below our plane, not the fact that I have tripled in circumference over Christmas.

We'd transferred from hot chaotic Antigua less than an hour ago and below dusky cloud-banks an alarmingly short runway comes up fast. A few bumps and we're down, ushered through the lazy evening warmth into the bungalow airport of Tortola, biggest of the British Virgin Islands, that tiny cluster of islands and islets on the northern fringe of the West Indies.

I'm here to sail. Or at least to learn to sail. I live on an old Dutch barge in London, but am shamefully ignorant of all things nautical (my marina neighbours roundly mock me for securing my ropes with a double bow). For years, since long before I bought the barge, a sailing holiday has seemed to me to be the ultimate trip, true travelling, complete with wind in hair and the thrill of constant movement, of going somewhere.

Somehow, though, the Solent didn't appeal: I wanted a learn-to-sail holiday, not a learn-to-sail ordeal, lurching about on a surly English sea through the squally English weather. What I wanted, it transpired, was the British Virgin Islands — perfect for British sailing virgins. Tucked neatly in between Puerto Rico and Anguilla, their dreamy little slice of the Caribbean Sea has conveniently consistent trade winds, forgivingly calm sheltered waters, and more than 60 islands to explore — ideal territory for nascent yachtsmen, the world's nursery slopes for sailing.

So I wait on Trellis Bay's splintery unlit pontoon to meet my captain and teacher for the next 10 days. Exotic hens peck lackadaisically nearby. Handmade blandishments urge me to buy 'Many splendid tings' from a few brightly



Course requirements: clockwise from far left, nautical chart of the BVIs; stand-up paddle-boarders off Virgin Gorda; snorkelling in the Caribbean Sea; skipper Sam shows the crew the ropes;

views north over Peter Island towards Tortola; jetty at the Bitter End Yacht Club on Virgin Gorda; making waves on the open sea; hanging out with the locals at Foxy's bar on Jost Van Dyke





For an hour after lunch, we are starfish — glued to the deck, snoozing in the mast's shadow...

ramshackle shops. Sam Bartlett is a tiny 5ft 2in with a face made for mischief, all biscuit-brown and outdoors-blonde. She drops my bag into a dinghy and we putter off into the dark water, torch aloft. Reggae and laughter drop in and out on the warm evening breeze, and in two minutes we're clambering onto Ibis V, Sam's 14.6m white fibre-glass sloop. We happily inhale a couple of beers with the few other guests — mostly beginners, mostly single, all Brits, from the Scots nurse to the City businesswoman — before Sam introduces me to my cosy little cabin. The bunk bed is a bit snug but it offers a welcome cradling effect as we roll gently with the waves.

**WRITER'S INSIDE TRACK**  
Cabins with double beds are available, but the (less popular) bunk beds are more comfortable if things get rocky — people actually fall out of the doubles, while the bunks keep you in

Waking at first light I jump off the back deck into the deep teal sea. A few languid laps of the boat and my face nearly breaks with the smugger of knowing I'd normally now be on a gloomy urban Tube train. I bob around on my back taking in the ting-tinging of wire against mast and the occasional low buzz of outboard motors.

In the 10 minutes it takes to sun-dry from my swim Sam has safety-briefed and set us on our course. Her teaching ethos is to learn while doing, so she directs us on the move, forgoing too much naval argot in favour of us getting a feel for the boat. Sailing is a complex enterprise but quickly we begin to feel we could play our part as crew — trimming sails and steering for all the world as if we knew what we were doing.

Our first port of call is a pretty little deserted beach on scrubby green Salt Island. The BVIs are full of these empty coves and bays, only accessible by sea. We moor up to snorkel around the remains of the Rhone, a Royal Mail ship wrecked here in 1867. Mooring sounds like a simple task but I haven't yet found my sea feet, and stagger around like a drunk. Catching the buoy resembles

a fiendish fairground game that involves snaring a fist-sized rope loop four-and-a-half metres down in the water with a boathook, while Ibis bucks and rolls to stop me tying her down. On my third attempt I catch the rope and secure us with one of my newly learned knots. We tie Ibis up to a buoy and leave her pivoting gently with the current, as if she's wagging her tail. It is deeply satisfying and, surprisingly, within days becomes second nature.

Sam balances brilliantly the slightly more stressful aspects of sailing with plenty of time to snorkel and explore. There's a lot to learn, and things can happen fast at sea. Most of the crew are beginners, so the concentration involved can be quite intense, too. Our captain carefully gauges our progress, and when we need a break she schedules swimming stops at increasingly Edenic islands.

The Baths on the north side of Virgin Gorda are my favourite: giant granite boulders form a sheltered sea basin busy with outlandish marine life. Skirting around a sullen triggerfish, I glide past lavender coral filigree and hover over an elegant eagle ray. Transfixed, I lose a good half-hour following a pair of four-eye butterfly fish racing through the rocks in a surreal animation. They sport big cartoon eyes on their backs to confuse predators and I can barely keep up as they play high-speed hide-and-seek. Blue tang and surgeonfish kiss the surface of the sea then zip down to audibly chew off chunks of coral, causing an inverted avalanche of particles to explode.

Emerging onto the icing-sugar sand, I collapse for a while before exploring Devil's Bay. It's straight out of Neverland, a jumble of huge smooth rocks falling in on each other, protecting a series of perfect warm turquoise pools. The refracted sunlight describes a rippling helix on the stone; I float peacefully around in a dream. But soon it

becomes very busy — at least by BVI standards. A cruise ship has stopped, and the beach is filling up with what I overhear a local skipper call 'the newly wed, the nearly dead and the overfed'.

Back on Ibis, Sam serves up a feast of mahi-mahi and salad (breakfast and lunch are provided daily on board). And all the fresh air and activity has restored our appetites to factory default: we eat when hungry, sleep when tired. For an hour after lunch, we are starfish — glued to the deck, snoozing in the mast's shadow. A fat bee bounces drunkenly in the breeze. A stately sea turtle rises for air, bows to our stern and disappears. Slowly, the crew come to, one by one. Dopey and blithe, nobody is ready to move for a while, but Sam is alert and set to go. 'Jenni, can you check the hatches please, and everyone stow their stuff. We're leaving in 10 minutes.'

My petulant limbs refuse to obey, I feel like a sulky teenager. 'But whyyyyyyyyy do we have to go?' my mind privately whines. But we rally, the hatches go down, the sails go up, the sheets are trimmed and there it is — that sublime moment when the boat's engine cuts out and she see-saws magically on forward, powered only by raw natural forces. We hear only wind and waves and flick-flicking sails. I silently thank Sam for pushing us, and send my inner adolescent to her room. We race along with the white horses at 45 degrees, spellbound and serene.

For 10 days we slowly ricochet between the islands, each day some new configuration of the same routine — eat, sail, snorkel, sleep — rinse and repeat. We learn to gybe, goosewing and tack. Soon we know the difference between beam reach and close haul. We watch Sam expertly manipulate the ropes on Ibis like the strings on a marionette, making her dance. ➤

**LANDLUBBER'S LIFELINE**  
Eating regularly is one of the most effective ways to avoid seasickness. Want more good news? Lying down helps, too!

Snooze cruise: opposite, downtime on deck. Above, from left, sunset off Norman Island, in the south of the BVIs; Deadman's Bay on Peter Island







Each night, we stop at a new home, showering off the day's salt on deck, with sun-warmed water from the tank



Bay watch: sailing by Jost Van Dyke; left, from top, Jenni checks the view at sunrise; Valley Trunk Bay on Virgin Gorda; chef Jean, at Peter Island resort — try her coconut French toast; below, typical local architecture on Tortola



## Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

### Go independent

Virgin Atlantic ([virgin-atlantic.com](http://virgin-atlantic.com)) flies from Gatwick to Antigua, from £524 return. From there, VI Airlink ([viairlink.com](http://viairlink.com)) flies on to Tortola, in the BVIs, from £282 return (connects with Virgin Atlantic flights on Fridays and Saturdays).

doubles from £288, B&B) makes a good base, with simple timber cottages and an array of excursions and water-based activities. For more glamour, try Peter Island (00 1 800 346 4451, [peterislandresort.co.uk](http://peterislandresort.co.uk); doubles £317, room only).

### Go sailing

Sam's 'Beginners Sailing in the BVIs' trip, with Yacht Ibis (00 590 690 251914, [yachtibis.com](http://yachtibis.com)), costs from £1,120pp, including nine nights aboard, daily breakfast and lunch, but no flights. Sam offers various other sailing itineraries in the Caribbean, for all levels of expertise. Or Sunsail (020 3773 7836, [sunsail.co.uk](http://sunsail.co.uk)) has options including courses for formal qualifications and bareboat charter for the more experienced. For landlubbers, most resorts offer day-boat excursions and basic tuition.

### Where to eat and drink

Avoid the Americanised restaurants and bars with giant sports screens — you'll find more stylish places away from the commercial beach areas. The Dove (00 1 284 494 0313, [dove1864.com](http://dove1864.com); mains about £22), in Road Town, Tortola, serves fantastic food to a cool local crowd. Perched atop an ancient Kapot tree on Virgin Gorda, the Tree House (00 1 284 495 5482, [thetreehousevi.com](http://thetreehousevi.com); mains about £30) has 360° island views and tasty lobster ravioli. Nearby, Coco Maya ([cocomayarestaurant.com](http://cocomayarestaurant.com)) is a trendy open-fronted bar. Local legend Foxy has two bars: try Foxy's ([foxysbar.com](http://foxysbar.com)), on Jost Van Dyke, if you want to party — Keith Richards comes here. Its quieter cousin, Foxy's Taboo ([foxysbar.com/foxys-taboo](http://foxysbar.com/foxys-taboo)), is at the other end of the island.

### Where to stay

On Virgin Gorda, the Bitter End Yacht Club (00 1 800 872 2392, [beyc.com](http://beyc.com);

And each night, we stop at a new home, for more mooring practice and dinner ashore, showering off the day's salt on the diving platform with sun-warmed water from the tank. (Mal de mer was my main concern before I came, but mal de terre was more of a problem. Most evenings on land, my brain would swing around in my skull on gimbals, and my vision swam until I realised the trick was to take seasickness pills 30 minutes before going ashore.) Once the crew finds its land legs, we drink spicy rum sundowners at the beach bars, merrily comparing a litany of minor injuries. We feast on buttery lobster, golden knots of saffron pasta and lemony conch fritters.

Despite the piles of food I consume, the extra pounds seem to shift. Swimming, winching sails, even steering — they all help exercise away the excess baggage. By the end of the trip, I'm exhilarated but exhausted, so I head to Peter Island for a little post-sail pampering. I'm greeted at the luxury resort with fragrant icy towels and a rum cocktail by Collin, our host. He whisks me away in a golf cart, naming the plants we pass. Mother-in-law's tongue (sharp pointed leaves), the tourist tree (goes red and peels in the sun) and — he points with worrying vagueness into

the near distance — the manchineel tree, one of the world's most dangerous bits of flora. Not only are its small green fruits toxic, but if you shelter under the leaves when it rains, the plant's caustic resin will burn you like acid — a stark contrast to the fragile scent of frangipani that fills the air.

Peter Island is privately owned with very limited development, so the heavenly beaches are mostly empty. The elegant A-frame cottages are simple but luxurious, the baths are pool-sized and the balconies private. I take a few hours in my suite to wrestle the crazy out of my hair before ambling along to the grandmother of all spas. After 10 days of sea salt and sun, my skin is something like suede. An expert beautician applies layer after layer of creamy unguents until I resemble a human being again.

There are plenty of activities on offer, but after so long at sea, it's lovely just to loll in my hammock, minty cocktails on tap, concocting elaborate plans to miss my flight home. After a few days of sloth, though, I start to miss the sailing, the satisfaction of working in a crew, exploring a new port every night. I now know three things. One: how to tie my ropes properly. Two: how to avoid villainous trees. And three: where I'll be spending all my future Januaries. ■

