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Crossroads

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CARIBBEAN CURRENTS

Settling in to Island Time

Old hands arriving in St. John's Cruz Bay know it's best to leave their hurries behind.

By Poupette Smith

Leo and I wake to the rustle of a gentle breeze and the splashing of diving pelicans. Dazed, we wrench ourselves from our cozy bunk and stagger up the stairs to the cockpit. This is *Firefly's* first morning at rest, after a ten-day offshore passage from Chesapeake Bay. We are anchored off St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands, having made landfall a few hours ago, under cover of darkness.

As we look around in awed silence at our new green surroundings, I am pleased to note that with the exception of Maho Bay's nearly invisible campground, the hills still appear to be devoid of human habitation.

"Swim?" I suggest, mesmerized by the clear turquoise water.

But Leo is the captain, and he likes to abide by the rules. "Better get to Cruz Bay and clear customs first," he says. "There'll be plenty of time to swim later."

"OK," I say, consenting reluctantly, "but can we just check in and do our stuff quickly, without wasting time, then come back here for the night?"

Leo nods: "Sure."

So we up-anchor and sail the remaining five miles west.

Firefly glides along smoothly in these protected waters, which contrast sharply with the large Atlantic seas of the past week. We bypass one pristine beach after another - Cinnamon, Trunk, Hawksnest, Turtle, Caneel, and Honeymoon. There is scarcely a building in sight, just the odd camouflaged house tucked in among the trees, and a few ruins - the abandoned customhouse on tiny Whistling Cay, an overgrown sugar mill, and an old roofless schoolhouse.

The *Bomba Charger* speeds past. One of the older, more attractive ferries in the area, and a vital link plowing regularly between the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, it looks somewhat like a blue seagoing version of the French TGV train. A white-bellied brown booby hovers a mere foot above the boat's wheelhouse, catching a free ride to Tortola.

"There's Lovango Cay," I say, as we sail close to the barely inhabited islet. "Wonder if that guy Herbert still lives there. He was quite a character. I used to see him hanging around Cruz Bay, back in the '70s."



Cruz Bay's little harbor is bustling with activity. There are barges carrying water and supplies, ferries maneuvering to and fro, charter boats coming and going. There is also a large contingent of live-aboard, never-go-anywhere vessels of various descriptions.

We drop the hook at a spot just outside the protecting reef, then hop in the dinghy and row in past Government House - a gleaming white building with a crimson roof. The promontory on which it sits divides the harbor in two; Leo rows to the right side, toward the dinghy dock and the center of town.

A ferry has just pulled in from St. Thomas, and hordes of people disembark after the twenty-minute trip across three-mile-wide Pillsbury Sound. While the locals quickly disperse, the cruise-ship day-trippers - instantly recognizable by their pale complexions - mill about, greeted eagerly by smiling locals who tantalize them with offers: "Taxi to Trunk Bay?" I hear more than one say.

But with our little clinker-built dinghy, which is clearly not part of any charter fleet, and our tans acquired during the passage, Leo and I look like "belongers" - a term sometimes used to describe people who were born in or are actually living in the islands. Thus, we pass unheeded, to find ourselves mingling with maroon-clad schoolchildren.

Despite its busy waterfront, Cruz Bay retains the atmosphere of a small town. The little central square, with its gazebo and trees, is still a favorite meeting place, and a logical place to practice on the steel drums. Chickens and goats run free, and everything useful - post office, customhouse, clinic, bank, police station, fire station, food store, fruit stand, laundromat, school, hardware store, and bar - is well within walking distance.

We make our way toward customs but get sidetracked by a tree.

"Does you know what you's doing?" asks a man with dreadlocks, who comes upon Leo and me crawling around on all fours, collecting bright red seeds, some still half-encased in their clover-shaped pod.

"Yes," I say, "looking for lignum vitae seeds."

"What for, mon?"

Leo looks up and answers, "Because ever since I pulled off an old propeller shaft bearing made from this incredibly hard wood, I've been fascinated by its density. And you never know when we might want to plant some."

That seems to satisfy the man, whom I'm sure I've seen before. He introduces himself as Herbert (no wonder he looked familiar), and starts to tell us about the lignum vitae trees on his property. Then he pulls out a little wooden figurine and places it in the glass of rum he's holding. As we watch it sink, he says, "Ya, mon, it has a density of 1.25."

Pleased with our pockets full of seeds, Leo and I continue on our route to clear our foreign-flagged vessel through customs.

But it is no longer housed in the charming little green shack I remember so well. It has moved,

gotten a concrete face-lift, and acquired several new federal employees. Yet I am pleased to note that Miss V - adored or feared, depending on how she's feeling on a given day - is still there. Her position as sole authority, however, has clearly been altered.

"Good morning, Miss V," says Leo. "You look well."

She's always had a soft spot for Leo's Swedish smile, and she beams at him now, looking as stately and elegant as ever in her crisp, tight-fitting blue uniform. She is tall, voluptuous, and womanly, and as I admire her Renoir-like figure, I can't help remembering an old favorite song: "Auuuudrey, I love your fat behind, Sugar Boom, Sugar Boom Boom..."

Fat-free is nonexistent as a fad here, and the rounder and more curvaceous a woman, the sexier and healthier she is deemed.

"How long you staying?" Miss V asks, puffed up momentarily with the pride of officialdom.

"Oh, I don't know, six weeks maybe," Leo answers.

And she stamps us in for six months.

That done, I am eager to accomplish our remaining chores quickly and return to our quiet anchorage. I call my father to let him know we have arrived safely; then we cross over to the post office on the other side of the road and stand in line. It is slow going, but finally it's our turn.

"Any General Delivery for Lindstrand, please?" I ask eagerly.

The postmistress sets to rummaging through an overflowing cubbyhole, dropping some of the mail behind boxes stacked on the floor. She knocks over a few cassettes, which mingle with more mail before landing on a boom box. Eventually, she hands over three stuffed envelopes.

"Thank you," I say, wishing I could hop over the counter to have a more thorough look.

By now, Leo's making noise about the banana split he had earned by being the first to spot land on our ocean passage. But as we walk past a fruit-stand-cum-bar, someone taps me on the shoulder.

"Yo name Platypus, rite?" It is Herbert again. He is leaning against the counter, sipping his rum. "Don' you find the music a bit loud?" he asks.

Flattered by his interpretation of my name, I find no reason to correct him, and answer, "Yes, Herbert, I do." Indeed, the volume makes conversation difficult.

"Well, Platypus, I got dis radio, an' ever since de las' hurricane, he only play one station, one volume, so I sometimes puts he in a plastic bag to keep he quiet."

We all laugh, and Leo suggests, "How about under the mattress?"

"Dat too."

When Leo and I make signs of leaving, Herbert stops us. "Dat ain't de end of de story," he says, suddenly turning serious.

"Oh?" I ask, newly intrigued with the turn of conversation.

"No. Dey's dis man. He aks me to collect bugs for he."

"What for?"

"I don' know. He one of dem people dey call etimo sometit."

"Entomologist?" I ask.

"Das' it, ya, mon. So I goes an' catches dis one big beautiful bug, he with beautiful speckled wings 'n' all," he gestures, "an de man, he says, 'Herbert, keep it in de freezer'. Well, I has no freezer. So I puts de bug in de bag an makes some holes to keep he live till I gets to me friend's freezer. But de bug he makes sooooo much noise, like this - 'Vroooooom' and den 'Broooooommm' - all night long, so's I can't sleep no more.

"At this point, Leo and I are all ears. "That bad, huh?"

"So loud, I just gots to set he free before I gets deaf."

Down Under on St. John

The waters and abundant – and protected – sea life around St. John make for excellent snorkeling and diving. Here are a few places to take the plunge:



Trunk Bay Part of the extensive Virgin Islands National Park, this lush bay on the northwest coast is a good place for beginners: The water is shallow (entry is from a beautiful beach), the park service holds snorkeling tours, and a signposted underwater trail makes it easy to I.D. the locals.

Tekite Located near the southeastern corner of the island, this cove is named for an underwater research station NASA used to run here. Fish and corals abound in the clear 30-foot-deep water.

Hurricane Hole Try snorkeling along the mangrove trees of this big storm-protected bay on the island's eastern end. You'll find a multicolor nursery where, among the safety of tangled tree roots, a wide variety of juvenile fish and shellfish thrive. But please: Don't touch.

Waterlemon Cay This low wedge of rock and scrub (often mislabeled as Watermelon Cay) on the northern side of St. John is exactly the right size for fin-propelled circumnavigation. The route features some first-rate coral gardens along with schools of fish attracted to the nutrient-rich spot where the Caribbean and Atlantic merge.

We are still waiting to hear the end of the story, when we notice Herbert's toothless grin and realize he's already delivered the punch line. The thought suddenly dawns on me that Herbert has staked us out as the new ears in town, and that at this rate, if we keep bumping into him and his stories, we'll be lucky ever to get out of Cruz Bay.

Finally managing to bid Herbert good-bye, we make a beeline for the ice-cream parlor. But by now it's way past lunchtime, so after our treat, we go looking for Hercules's truck, hoping he hasn't moved after all these years.

Though originally mobile, Hercules's lunch truck now sits rooted to a noisy, central corner. The informal restaurant has gradually grown to encompass a veranda with tables and chairs, plus a television where customers sit transfixed over the latest soap opera installment. The menu offers local fare, and the delicious food is still a bargain. We choose mutton curry with plantains, green sweet potatoes, beans and rice, but as the servings are quite generous, I drop tidbits to the family of chickens milling about under the table.

Two more items on the "to do" list, and then we'll be out of town. Off we go to check out the new cyber café - a true sign that it's Y2K here, too. The café is upstairs in a corner of the Quiet Mon Pub. Patrons await their turn while lounging on church pews salvaged from Coral Bay's Moravian church, and sipping beer beneath a Celtic harp that hangs from the wall.

"Where do the church parishioners sit now?" I ask the pub's owner.

"They kneel in the sand," he laughs.

I order a Carib beer, as it's quickly becoming obvious that Leo's having trouble getting online. The island's long-distance telephone exchange is often busy, and dialing 800 numbers can involve considerable delays. Our computer doesn't like this one bit.

By the time Leo finally gets our E-mail, the Caribbean sun is setting; it's too late to make Maho Bay before nightfall.

And I remember that we still haven't picked up fresh stores.

"Well," says Leo, "there's always tomorrow. We can anchor around the corner, where it's calmer and the view's prettier, come back to Cruz Bay for an hour or so in the morning, then carry on to Maho."

"Sure," I say. "There's no use fighting it. I can see clearly that we are already settling in to island time."

A licensed captain, Poupette Smith has contributed to Sail and Sailing, and has lived aboard Firefly for 13 years.

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