

Crossroads

Voices & views of island life

CARIBBEAN CURRENTS

The Start of the Journey

Five years after leaving the Caribbean, a sailing couple hears the call to return.

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We were on our way to the Caribbean, it seemed, even as we sailed north toward Maine. Leo and I were aboard *Firefly*, the 39-foot cutter-rigged sloop that is our home and that we have sailed all over the world, when I heard a familiar voice emanating from *Firefly*'s radio below decks.



"Kilo Golf Six Mike Tango from Eight Papa Six Quebec Mike."

It was our friend Trudy, speaking to Leo from her home on Barbados. We had met 18 years ago, as Leo and I made landfall on Barbados after an Atlantic crossing. Trudy had paddled her surfboard out to welcome us with fresh fruit and Barbadian dollars. Now, sailing far up the Atlantic, I was picking up snippets of her conversation with Leo.

"So, you haven't forgotten the Caribbean is still down here!" Trudy said.

"Nope," said Leo. "If all goes well, we'll be heading back in a few months."

Heading back in a few months? We would? The news surprised me a little - mostly because we hadn't yet discussed the idea. We had spent many years in the eastern Caribbean, cruising on *Firefly* or running someone else's yacht. But when we left in 1994, we were keen to go. Canada and the northeastern United States beckoned. We longed for changing seasons and deciduous vegetation; we fantasized about cozy fires, supermarkets, movies, bookstores, and mainland efficiency. And as we settled into our first cold winter aboard, we felt no envy watching one snowbird after another heading south.

So why was Leo announcing our return? And why did I feel myself going along with the plan so readily? How had the seed to return been planted?

I thought back as I picked up another bit of the radio conversation: "Yes, thank you," said Leo. "The sailboat delivery went well - 15 days from Tortola to Annapolis."

Just before heading up to cool northern waters for the summer, we had returned from the brief Caribbean trip Leo and Trudy were discussing, one of dozens of boat deliveries we have made in 23 years of sailing. Friends in Maryland had asked us to sail their boat from the Virgin Islands to Annapolis, so we had caught a plane down to the Caribbean, stopped in St. Thomas long enough to visit my father at his home, then ferried over to Tortola.

The week we spent there making preparations had flown by, and when I suggested we spend the final night anchored off tiny Marina Cay, Leo readily agreed. He knew I had been smitten with the cay since my first visit some 20 years ago, after reading Robb White's absorbing book, *Two on the Isle*.

The book tells the story of White and his then wife, who in the 1930s purchased Marina Cay and painstakingly transformed the isolated mound of rock and scrub into their very own utopia. They transported every nail, every bag of cement, every seed, every bit of food - everything - by sailboat from Road Town, on Tortola, arduously clearing the land to make room for their house and a garden to sustain them. They built their home on the highest point, which commanded exquisite views of the surrounding reef and nearby islands.

But then, during World War II, the Whites discovered that their property ownership had been revoked. The couple's dream was lost. The island is now a resort, and the Whites' former home is now the hotel bar, where a faded black-and-white photo of the couple hangs on the wall. It shows them from behind, as they walk hand-in-hand up a path on their idyllic island.

Marina Cay is still a lovely anchorage, though, and a convenient one for boats heading north. So we sailed there for our last Caribbean night. The next morning, as we watched Tortola disappear astern, Leo said, wistfully but in an offhand way, something like, "It makes me wish we were arriving instead of leaving."

At the time neither of us paid much attention, but Leo's words seemed to take root. And so, a few weeks later - without discussion, without seriously weighing the pros and cons, without any kind of epiphany - it was simply decided that, come fall, we would return to the Caribbean.

"Kilo Golf Six Mike Tango from Eight Papa Six Quebec Mike..." I strained my ears to eavesdrop again. "The Caribbean is more crowded now," said Trudy. "But other than that not a whole lot has changed."

I knew she was right about the crowds. Because the West Indies offer such ideal sailing conditions - predictable easterlies, clear water, and minimal tides make navigation relatively easy - bareboat chartering has boomed. That and the proliferation of cruise ships have resulted in fewer deserted anchorages and, in some places, jaded locals.

Well, that will be the challenge, I thought. Neither Leo nor I likes crowds; we'll discover new spots. We'll look at the charts, study the guides, and then avoid places we expect might be crowded. We'll revisit favorite haunts and old friends. We'll go to Bequia and Carriacou - Leo has had a soft spot for those isles ever since the early '70s, when he and his parents visited them after sailing over from Sweden on their classic wooden sailboat. And we'll want to see how dear Tobago has fared during the past ten years. We've always loved its East Indian flavor and treasured its low-key tourism.

Caribbean Classics Caribbean cruising grounds have something for every kind of sailor. Here are a few favorite places to voyage.

British Virgin Islands. A sailor's fantasyland featuring favorable trade winds, protection from high seas, and terrific straight-line interisland sailing over deep water. Swim in The Baths on Virgin Gorda, imbibe at Foxy's bar on Jost Van Dyke, dive the wreck of the *Rhone*, where scenes from the movie *The Deep* were filmed.

The lee side of Martinique. Terrific for those who want their oceangoing escape to include shore-side options. This French island has a museum, world-class dining, rain forest hiking trails, distillery tours, and more.

The Grenadines. Secluded, packed tightly together (making for quick island-hopping), and home to some great diving. For the ultimate marine spectacle, head underwater around Bequia and the Tobago Cays.

"So," I said to Leo as he reappeared in the cockpit after signing off from Trudy. "Christmas in the Virgins? Is that what I heard?"

"Why not?" he answered with a smile. "They make a good landfall, and besides, your father would kill us if we got that close and didn't stop to visit."

We really were going, and again I found myself wondering what exactly had seduced us. Was it the flamboyant bougainvillea or the transparent turquoise water? Was it the scurrying red-throated lizards? The mournful bleating of goats perched on vertical cliffs? Was it the caressing trade winds? The lambent coves shared with diving pelicans? Or was it the sheer quantity of islands dotting the horizon?

Perhaps it was the lilt of island English - so foreign-sounding to the uninitiated - or the lure of the local Spanish, the challenge of French Creole.

How did those wonderful island expressions go? Stretching my memory, I recalled some: "*Crab pas mache, li pa gras; li mache touop, et li tombe dans chodier,*" which translates as "If a crab don't walk, he don't get fat; if he walks too much, he gets in a pot." And then another favorite came to me: "Them thick like bushes," *them* referring to French yachtsmen.

As the idea of returning to the Caribbean settled in, I couldn't stop my mind from leaping ahead. There would be a fair amount of preparation and stocking up. We know from experience that most essentials, when available, cost considerably more in the islands.

We would have to re-sort our belongings, too. Weight is a constant concern on a live-aboard boat, and though neither of us collects souvenirs or clothes, we do seem to accumulate equipment, books, papers, and photographs. This can cause problems when we are sailing far from shore: *Firefly* was built to be a fast cruiser, and if she gets too heavy she behaves like a submarine. (Leo and I have occasionally thought of having a pied-à-terre - a house somewhere for our possessions - but the question has always been *where?* Leo is Swedish; I am half French and half American, and together we have seen too many beautiful places to settle on just one... so far, at least.)

Over the next several days Leo and I talked in a general way about which islands we might explore. We would probably start out from Chesapeake Bay and make landfall two weeks later, somewhere in the Virgins. After spending Christmas with my father, we would cruise south, choosing from any number of gems in the Lesser Antilles.

We might revisit Dutch Sint Eustatius, to snorkel again over the sunken Lower Town or beachcomb for shards of old pottery. Maybe we would check out the remote French island Marie-Galante. It was near there that our friend Steve Callahan was scooped up by locals after his sailboat sank in the middle of the Atlantic - and he drifted in a life raft for 76 days.

Perhaps we would finally climb Saba's renowned steps, to "The Bottom." The steps, which rise 800 feet, were the way early settlers' belongings - including pianos - were transported from the harbor to the misleadingly named settlement.

And we might well visit Martinique's famous city of St.-Pierre, where in 1902, 26,000 people - everyone but the lone man in the jail that day - perished within minutes of Mont Pelée's eruption. Then, next year, we might slowly make our way back toward the States, catching the Dominican Republic en passant, as they say, and lingering a while in our favorite island chain, the Bahamas.

While always considering major elements - the strength of the trade winds and the six-month gap between hurricane seasons - we would, to the extent possible, play it by ear. Like most cruisers, we are flexible. It is not our style to rush, and, always expecting the unexpected, we tend to shun schedules. Weather notwithstanding, our seafaring lifestyle grants us the freedom to make spur-of-the-moment decisions. On a whim, we may opt for a change of scenery and leave the next day; or we may stay put for several weeks gathering the essence of a place. There is so much to look forward to, and though it's still a ways off, in my mind I'm already sailing for the Caribbean.

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

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