

Come Away With Me

A Virgin Islands Charter Cruise, the Natural Way



Photos by Eric Hayes except where noted

BREAKFAST ON *Flamboyance* is always a treat. Shown are (from left) author Mary Dixon, photographer Eric Hayes, Josh Hayes and girlfriend Cindy, and Sam Hayes with partner Donna.

Mary Dixon

AS I WRITE THIS piece, singer Norah Jones has just picked up five Grammy Awards for her album, which seems entirely fitting to me. Back in early January, her sensuous jazz renditions of original tunes wafting up from the CD player below deck had capped yet another perfect day of our nude cruise of the Virgin Islands aboard the *Flamboyance*.

Our appetites were sated after another gourmet meal preceded by cocktails, hors d'oeuvres and then wine, and all were pleasantly weary from snorkeling, swimming, sailing and sunning our bare bodies in the tropical heat. Captain Jim Fritz and his crew-chef Cindy Traywick, as well as my stepson Sam and his partner Donna, toddled off to their bunks below.

In the cockpit my other stepson Josh and his girlfriend Cindy stretched out, legs entwined, heads at opposite ends on one of the cushioned seats, while I sat on the other side, my

husband Eric's legs across my lap as he lay down, all but me being lulled to sleep by the gentle rocking of the boat and the warm breezes, while I was transported to another dimension as Norah Jones whispered, "Come away with me in the night...come away with me and I'll write you a song..." And now each time I hear her album I am back on the *Flamboyance* reliving one of our most memorable vacations ever.

Our adventure on the *Flamboyance* began with reading a letter to the editor in *N* last summer. We had been scanning the ads trying to plan a family vacation somewhere warm where we could spend some stress-free time



Donna Jurick

JOSH PREPARES to hoist the “Nude & Natural” flag that Captain Jim Fritz has on board.



SAM AND JIM raising the mainsail.



AUTHOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER Mary Dixon on deck with her camera.

with Eric’s sons, when we stumbled upon a letter in *N* recommending Captain Jim Fritz and the *Flamboyance* for a relaxing clothes-free vacation. Having also seen his ad in the back of the magazine we checked out his Web site and e-mailed a query as to possible dates.

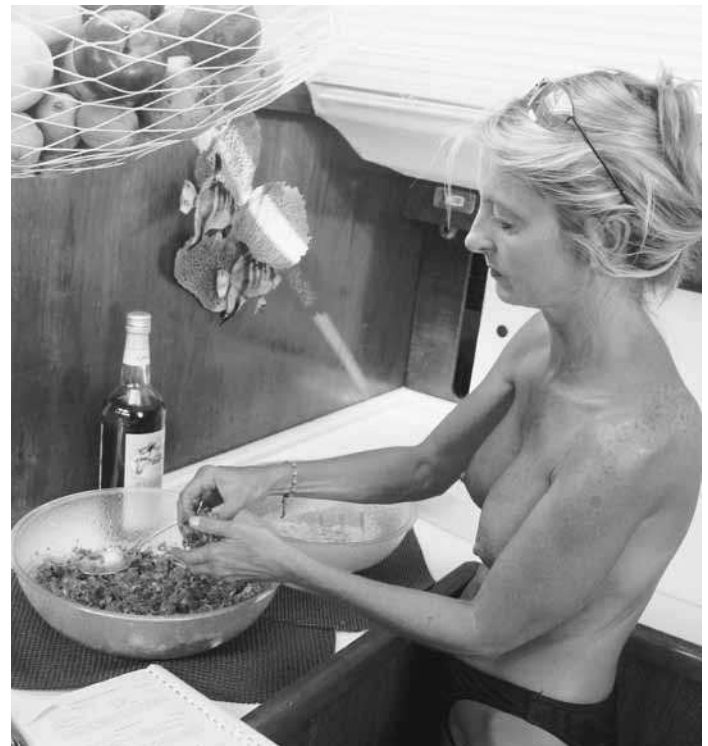
It met all our requirements: a tropical destination none of us had visited before, lots of opportunities for sunning and water sports, local color, good food and drink, and flexibility as to the naturist aspect. While Eric and I are relatively experienced social nudists and his adult sons have participated

in a couple such vacations with us before, as well as at our summer cottage at home in Nova Scotia, their significant others were more reluctant to participate in the experience, although kindly tolerant of the rest of us and our desire to enjoy the sun and water unencumbered.

Knowing that they could be as clothed or unclothed as they wished while still accommodating the rest of us put “the girls” at ease and made the choice of the *Flamboyance* more obvious. Adding to the incentive was the fact that, unlike some resorts which charge a premium for the privilege of going nude, Jim Fritz actually offers a five percent discount for naturists because he and crewmate Cindy share that mindset, making a naturist group more enjoyable for them to host.

There is considerable flexibility when planning the agenda for a week on the *Flamboyance* and Jim goes to great lengths to try to accommodate everyone’s wishes, particularly when the whole boat is booked as was the case for us. When he sells the cruise stateroom by stateroom, he tends to stick to a particular itinerary that covers as many of the highlights of the region as possible, with modifications for weather.

If you don’t book as a group Jim will try to book naturists with naturists—or textiles with textiles, as the case may be.



JIM HAULS out the jib (left), while crewmate Cindy Traywick prepares a snack in the galley.

The cruise originates on the island of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, although our itinerary took us mainly among the British Virgin Islands. While the USVI, an unincorporated territory of the United States, comprises 53 small volcanic islands, the majority of the population lives on just three—St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix. And although there has been some industrialization on St. Croix in terms of oil refining, the principal industry is tourism, particularly on St. Thomas where a multitude of duty-free shops make it a major port of call for huge cruise ships.

We had failed to research the attractions of St. Thomas prior to our trip, and when we stayed on the island for a couple days preceding and following the cruise we were astonished at the shopping frenzy in downtown Charlotte Amalie. Where once pirates roamed to sell their ill-gotten gains, hordes of cruise ship passengers now periodically flood the area, filling the narrow streets and the seemingly endless shops to find duty-free bargains. Everything from designer gold jewelry and precious gems to liquor to electronic equipment to beach pareos to souvenirs is on offer, sometimes all in the same shop.

Lining the narrow alleyways reaching inland from the harbor, the architecture in this district is appealing, with huge arched wooden storm doors at each storefront, the pastel colors typical of the Caribbean, and wrought iron railings and balconies on some buildings reminiscent of the French influence in New Orleans. In fact St. Thomas was first colonized by the Danish, and Charlotte Amalie is named after a Danish queen, although the French, English, Dutch and Spanish have all had their connections with the islands.

The streets are eerily quiet at night, after the cruise ships leave in the early evening—a pretty sight in the sunset, which can be viewed from several restaurants and viewpoints. One such place is Paradise Point, a somewhat pricey (and hot) 15-minute gondola ride above the cruise ship docks at Havensight, a few minutes' drive to the east of downtown Charlotte Amalie.

Havensight is also the location of the Yacht Haven Marina, where we met Jim for our charter. It was with joyful relief and anticipation that we loaded ourselves and our bags into the Zodiac inflatable boat and boarded the

Flamboyance at anchor, two massive cruise ships looming above us. “Those poor souls,” we thought, “3,000 people trapped in that giant moving hotel and bussed here and there to shop and swim—in clothes—while we embark on our exclusive adventure.”

Cindy greeted us with a smile and a “how y’all doin’?” kind of welcome in her Georgia accent. She served drinks and a cooling shrimp pasta salad for a quick lunch at anchor before embarking. Gear was stowed in our cabins (I recommend bringing soft-sided luggage, and not much of it at that), and we were given some fundamental safety information and instructions on using the essentials (like the head and water taps). Jim asked us to go barefoot on board so as to leave shore dirt behind, and to leave Cindy in control of her domain, the galley. Then we weighed anchor.

The yacht itself is an Ocean 60-foot fiberglass schooner, custom-built in England for charter with four guest cabins, each with double bunk and single upper bunk that folds out if needed. Each cabin has a hatch to let the cooling breeze in, which we discovered is really only effective if you leave your cabin door open. There are two shared



PREPARING FOR A MORNING SWIM at The Bight, Norman Island, in the British Virgin Islands.

“heads,” or washrooms, with toilet, sink and hand-held shower, plus a separate accommodation and head for the crew. There is also a showerhead on the back deck for rinsing off the salt after swimming, although fresh water is a precious commodity on a boat and must be used sparingly. A canopied cockpit for shade and cushions on the foredeck for sunning, and a hammock for use while moored, provided just enough comfort for this kind of holiday.

As soon as we were a reasonable distance from the other boats, the textile encumbrances were off (for most of us) and we set sail for our first mooring: Caneel Bay at the island of St. John. The day was gloriously sunny and hot as we enjoyed a “rock and roll” ride through some considerable swells and stiff breezes in the open Caribbean, until we made it to the shelter of St. John.

For Eric and me, with a fair amount of sailing experience in the rivers and bays of Nova Scotia, it was

a great sail—a lot of fun, and I managed to hang onto my cushion on the top deck to maximize my first nude day in the sun. Some of the others eventually gave up and migrated to the security of the cockpit. (The key is to lie crosswise and not lengthwise so you don’t roll off!) It took all of us a day to get our sea legs for navigating safely back and forth across the deck and remembering “one hand for you and one hand for the boat.” Conversely, after a week aboard it seemed to take many days ashore to stop swaying and compensating for the waves that were no longer there.

A little over three hours later we arrived in calm waters at Caneel Bay. Just north and around the point from St. John’s main town, Cruz Bay, Caneel Bay is known for its self-named and very expensive resort, formerly part of the Rockefeller estate, and is ringed by a series of idyllic and unpopulated beaches. A considerable number of other sailboats had already moored there when we arrived at

nearly 5 p.m. We tied up quickly so we could motor over to one of the small beaches that Jim said was unofficially nudist-friendly.

The sun set early, but we managed to squeeze in a wonderful swim in the most crystalline water imaginable. It was like a natural swimming pool, aquamarine with a weedless, white sandy bottom—absolutely glorious to be there naked and calm after a busy morning and a rigorous sail. Unfortunately it was in the shadow of a point of land. When we lost the sun we returned to the boat for an evening of delicious snacks, beverages, and the first of six gourmet dinners.

More than a month before the cruise we had been asked to fill in an information sheet to customize our trip. It asked for our ages, citizenship, air arrival and departure dates, sailing and charter experience, and questions about what “types” we were: “on the go,” “interested in relaxing” or “ready to take each day as it develops.”

The information sheet also gave an opportunity to list preferences for specific activities such as sailing, swimming, scuba, water-skiing, snorkeling, beachcombing, island tours, fishing, or music and dancing. For divers, Jim provides all scuba gear, but asks certified divers to bring their own regulators and buoyancy controls. He will also conduct an introductory dive course for those willing to learn, but all dives and courses are at an additional charge. Snorkeling gear is included.

Otherwise, all activities, food and drink are included in the price for the week, and the food preference sheet lets you customize both the food and bar menu by denoting your specific likes and dislikes. However, a look at Cindy's sample menu on the Flamboyance Web site assuaged any worries that we might be dissatisfied. A graduate of the French Culinary Institute in Manhattan, Cindy brought creative cuisine to a most challenging kitchen.

Food was a big part of each day and every meal was enjoyed alfresco in the canopied cockpit. The standard table was set up to accommodate the six of us, with Jim and Cindy dining below. In the event the boat has all four guest cabins booked, the table could be extended for eight, but not without removing the wheel! While we were quite comfortable on board, having an extra couple would have been a little crowded, both at table and navigating from below to above deck.

Examples of the fine meals we enjoyed include the following: For breakfast, omelets made to order and fresh coconut muffins, ham and cheese croissants, fresh fruit, bagels with cream cheese and smoked salmon, pancakes, and sausages. For lunch, chicken fajitas, Waldorf salad with shrimp, burgers on the barbeque, homemade customized pizzas and, by special advance request, slow-baked ribs in a delicious sauce.

For dinner we were treated to grilled mahi mahi with mango salsa, filet mignon, coconut shrimp with a vanilla champagne sauce, salmon, grilled chicken with angel hair pasta and tomato concassé (Cindy actually peeled, seeded and squeezed the tomatoes herself), and a pork tenderloin with a red wine reduction. Topped off with equally decadent desserts like chocolate mousse, cheesecake with port wine reduction, or rum-glazed bananas on angel food cake, it took all the swimming and snorkeling we



SWIMMING AT Sandy Spit near the east end of Jost van Dyck, also in the BVI.

could stand to try to avoid putting on a few pounds. Working in a tiny galley with a menu devised as the stashed food became accessible in the stuffed coolers, Cindy deserves a great deal of credit.

Day Two took us into the more sheltered waters of the Sir Francis Drake Channel and into the British Virgin Islands. After a quick stop in Soper's Hole on Tortola to clear customs and a

look at the famous Pusser's Rum store (now a trendy clothier for the yachting set and rum outlet for a distillery that is no longer located there), we moved on to the Bight at Norman Island. This mooring is noted for its proximity to caves once used by pirates to hide their booty, and is now a popular snorkeling spot. Indeed, the island is reputed to be the setting of Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.

The evening provided an opportunity for the rest of the gang to go ashore for a quick visit to the Pirate Bar and then to the floating bar known as Willy T's, notorious for its raucous parties and the practice of body shots, which our party observed but maintain they abstained from.

The next morning our new practice of diving off the deck to swim wake-up laps around the boat preceded an excursion to the Caves, where Jim dropped us off to snorkel our way back to the boat. There were great numbers of fish and interesting grottoes to swim into, and we hardly minded the clothed snorkelers we encountered along the way.

The afternoon allowed time to stop at the nearby "Indians," four large rock pinnacles jutting from the water with 50-foot-deep walls below the surface. This afforded a good scuba opportunity for Eric, Josh and Sam, all certified divers, guided by Jim, and more snorkeling for Donna and me.

Night Three was spent in White Bay at Peter Island, a short motor away. Unlike the Bight at Norman Island, which had a good assortment of sailing charters as well as a couple of amazingly expensive-looking luxury yachts, we were all alone at White Bay.

The whole island is a resort property but the buildings and marina were over a large hill on the opposite side, and the lovely beach in White Bay, which had chairs "reserved" for resort guests only, was ours to enjoy. As it was, we mainly snorkeled off the boat toward some great rocky shoals, although the two younger couples decided a hot hike uphill in the midmorning sun had to be accomplished first, if only to see what was on the other side. I enjoyed two amazing snorkeling experiences, the second one with Eric to try to take some photos of me diving under by the purple fan and other corals.

The rest of the day featured a steady motor northeast up the channel on windless waters to the island of Virgin Gorda, famed for its "Baths." These are amazing rock formations on the southwest shore of the island that in calm weather afford idyllic photo



ENJOYING A COOL beverage and a chat on the foredeck.

opportunities, along with pleasant snorkeling among the mammoth boulders forming the tidal pools for which the area is named. We moored at Big Trunk Bay, a short Zodiac ride away, looking forward to an early morning visit and hike through the marked trails before other tour groups arrived.

After the sun set on flat waters and we had savored another great meal, Jim suggested a unique excursion which he had enjoyed before, namely a camp-out on the golden sand beach near where we were anchored. Eric and I preferred the coziness of our dry and sand-free bunk, so we declined, thinking actually that we might sleep on deck in the warm air. The rest prepared for a night ashore and left around nine or 10 o'clock.

By the time we turned in close to midnight, we found the foredeck too damp in the dew to sleep on, so we dozed in the cockpit. We were awakened by our candle being rocked off the table and the boat beginning to lurch. A strong and unexpected swell had come up. It was our only sleepless night as we waited to see if Jim would come back and keep us from pulling anchor and crashing on the rocks (what did we know?). He and Cindy returned around three in the morning although the others had opted to stay on the beach. By morning light they were flagging us down, their campsite in the sand forced into dense bushes by the waves. With great skill and calmness Jim took the Zodiac on his own to retrieve them, although they had to meet him chest deep in water to get off the beach. It was a night to remember.

It didn't quite end there, either. After the others returned we still thought we could try a landing at the Baths, although the day dawned too cloudy for pictures and the swells too high for snorkeling. Somehow Jim managed to land us and pick us up, although we had to swim ashore and then out to the boat in tricky conditions. With our Cindy a new swimmer and me not a strong one (although good at treading water) I am somewhat amazed at what we managed to do, and I think our unspoken trust in Jim and his ability to assess the conditions and us, made this adventure possible. It was, however, a little scary for



THE TOWN OF CHARLOTTE AMALIE, St. Thomas, offers many interesting sites for visitors, including Port Christian, the oldest standing structure in the Virgin Islands.

a while. I would still like to see the Baths on a calm sunny day...they truly are spectacular.

Later we enjoyed a relaxed swim in sheltered waters at deserted Prickly Pear Beach at the north end of Virgin Gorda and a (thankfully) uneventful night at Leverick Bay, a marina near the famed Bitter End Yacht Club, putting us back on an even keel, so to speak. A quick visit to the shop on shore and restocking some ice gave us a chance to stretch our legs.

Our last full day dawned sunny and bright as we set out for the long but

extremely enjoyable sail down to our last island stop, Jost van Dyck. It was a beautiful ride as all but I took a turn at the wheel, this time leaving the Sir Francis Drake Channel and heading back towards St. Thomas along the north shore of Tortola.

Jost van Dyck sits just to the northwest of Tortola and has two particularly lovely spots for swimming to its northeast—Sandy Cay and Sandy Spit. We opted for a lunch stop and swim at the smaller Sandy Spit, basically a large sand bar protected by reefs and topped with about three or

four small palm trees and some dense brush in the middle. Surrounded by the turquoise water, it was the kind of idealized tropical scene you'd find in ads or postcards.

We made Great Harbor on Jost van Dyck just after four o'clock, and Jim hustled us ashore in an attempt to accommodate my pressing desire to walk around and get some pictures of local color in a village setting. I had been searching for interesting architecture or local fishing communities with some of the colors I have begun to associate with Caribbean life. While the BVI had some of the loveliest beaches and snorkeling we'd encountered, many of our stops had been in small harbors where the community was geared entirely toward servicing the huge charter sailboat industry.

Great Harbor was a quaint little beachside village with a pretty church, some funky bars and a herd of goats being led down the road. The highlight, as the tourist literature tells you, is the famous Foxy's Tamarind Bar. Around four or five o'clock Foxy himself brings out his guitar to entertain the customers of his open-air brew pub, and he has an amazing and amusing ability to create instant songs out of cues from the visitors or the latest political issues in the world.

He is also not averse to picking on the odd customer, as Eric discovered when he wandered in unaware, neglecting to put a shirt on to enter the establishment. (It is recommended in the BVI to not wear swimwear off the beach). Foxy singled him out and challenged him to go further and reveal all—a funny thing to do to a naturist! Lo and behold a cheer went up as Eric mooned the audience and received a beer as a reward. Can't take that guy anywhere!

Dinner on our final night was a special occasion, the elegant pork tenderloin served by Jim in his "formal wear," namely a tuxedo-style thong, and the table graced by a real crystal chandelier hung overhead. We wore our most sparkly jewelry, befitting the occasion. Jim and Cindy do offer the option of more elaborate theme nights, with a cubbyhole of costumes for the more playful guests.

Later that night we returned to Foxy's for a fun evening of shoulder-to-shoulder dancing on the sandy floor to the music of a local band. There's a considerable crowd on a Friday night as Great Harbor is a good anchorage



A STATUE in a courtyard outside a shop in Charlotte Amalie.

for the yachtie set. The place is notorious for its New Year's Eve bash which, I understood, hosts up to 2,000 people, some of whom arrive on those multi-million-dollar charter yachts mentioned earlier.

On the way back to St. Thomas the next day we had yet another beautiful

sail, stopping briefly at Cruz Bay, St. John, to clear American customs as we re-entered the USVI. It would have been fun to have had some time to wander the streets of Cruz Bay, which seemed a pretty town with numerous shops and eateries. But we felt a bit rushed as we had to return by noon to give Jim and Cindy 24 hours to clean the *Flamboyance*, do laundry, and restock fuel, water and provisions for the next day's charter. What a lot of work!

Jim and Cindy worked non-stop to cater to our every need, from the great meals and bar service, to running us ashore, finding great snorkeling sites, and navigating us calmly and confidently through rolling swells and reef-bounded areas. Jim even donned his scuba gear to attend to a plugged head when working from the inside failed to fix it. He's quite a guy, handling all our needs and stupid questions with equanimity, all the while naked or in his stars-and-stripes thong. Maybe it comes from having been a naturist himself for a long time.

In all it was one of the most relaxing vacations ever, and while not luxurious except in its exclusivity, we returned well-fed, our appetites for naked fun in the sun and water well-sated, tanned all over and with a bet-

ter understanding of each other as adult family members. Even Josh's Cindy thought she might have tried at least some topfree sunbathing if the trip had lasted a few more days, seeing how comfortable we all were in our skins. We're doing what we can to educate!

We disembarked with hugs all around, a twinge of sadness and a hope to return to explore more of the BVI...so many beaches, so little time.

Contacts

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St. Thomas information
www.st-thomas.com (don't forget the hyphen)

The BVI Welcome Guide Online
www.bviwelcome.com

To Know if You Go

Extra charges:

The Flamboyance Web site posts all the rates for the cruise according to how many passengers book, and notes that all food and standard bar is included. Special requests (for vintage wines or other unusual liquors) may be charged additionally.

The rate page also notes that scuba dives cost extra as does the short course in scuba, and that if you don't bring your own regulator and buoyancy control those may be rented for an extra charge.

What is *not* mentioned is that tipping is expected for both captain and crew at the end of the trip, at 10-15 percent of the cost of your week. This came as a bit of a shock to us as we had not noticed on the contract we signed in advance that it said "tip not included" after stating the deposit and balance to be paid. Be prepared. Ideally we think this should really be accounted for in the posted rates.

Staying in St. Thomas:

After we had surfed the 'net for accommodations, Jim e-mailed and recommended the family-run Island Beachcomber Hotel, literally a 15-minute walk from the airport and a 10-minute drive from downtown Charlotte Amalie. While modest in appointments it is clean, convenient, and affordable, and has the attraction of being right on a terrific, sparsely populated beach with its own beach bar and casual restaurant. It may not be the spot for a long, quiet stay, as planes take off nearby throughout the day, but they stop at night and you can almost enjoy seeing them come and go.

Getting Around St. Thomas:

A multitude of clean, new taxis and vans is available to serve you in St. Thomas. The thing to beware of, however, if you are with a group, is that they charge per person, not per cab, based on posted rates: \$6 per person for one, \$5 per person for more than one. It seemed a bit stiff to pay \$30 each way for our family of six to drive

the 10 minutes from the airport or the hotel to downtown, effectively adding \$60 to each dinner out in Charlotte Amalie. A few taxi drivers will negotiate for a group fare, but others get quite offended.

Another option is to flag down the so-called "dollar buses," which for a dollar will take you in an open-backed truck with bench seats, as will the regular city buses. You just have to catch them when you can and many "taxis" look just like dollar buses. One taxi driver chastised us for using the dollar buses, saying they were for locals, not tourists.

What to Bring:

Just enough light casual clothing for going ashore in marinas and towns, small, soft-sided luggage that is easy to stow, no deck shoes (Jim prefers you be barefoot on board or not wear your land shoes on deck), and most importantly, a flexible attitude and willingness to take each day as it comes.

—Mary Dixon