

There's no
problem
finding a
spot to drop
the hook off
Barbuda

Chartering the Big Briny

BY
ADAM
CORT

A MINI-BLUEWATER
ADVENTURE OFF ANTIGUA



Chart briefings are like snowflakes in

that no two are the same. This was especially true of the one Al Ashford of Horizon Yachts Charters gave before my family and I set sail on a recent weeklong getaway in Antigua—if for no other reason than the amount of time Al spent talking about the seas.

The reason for this is that Antigua is one of those cruising grounds where you can find yourself out in the big stuff within moments of

leaving the harbor. This is no Sea of Abaco or Virgin Islands, where you can spend days shuttling about with only a mile or two of fetch to windward. Weigh the hook, stick your bow out from behind that headland, and the next thing you know, you're contending with the trades and six-foot swells on the nose.

Then there's Barbuda, a nearly empty island paradise 25 miles due north. No big deal,

except that my wife, Shelly, and our 9-year-old daughter, Bridget, have both made it clear that big swells and big wind are something to be avoided at all costs.

Fortunately, Al said that after a week of inclement weather it appeared the trades had settled back down, and both seas and winds were forecast to be moderate and steady out of the east-southeast. In a few days time, swells were predicted out of the north again—presumably spawned by some weather system off in the North Atlantic—but for now we couldn't ask for better weather.

On the down side, the forecast was also calling for winds from south of east, which would mean a pretty serious beat if we wanted to go directly from Barbuda to Nonsuch Bay on Antigua's east coast. This, in turn, would mean having to return to the Horizon Yachts base in Jolly Harbour Marina on the island's western side to pick up my sister Sara, who was joining us midway through the trip. But then again, Jolly Harbour ain't a half bad place itself, and we'd also have an opportunity to top up our water and provisions while we were there.

Back aboard our Bavaria 33 *Vixen*, I relayed all Al had said, and the crew decided to give it a try. It would call for a couple of longer days of sailing than we were used to, but Barbuda really did sound like too good a place to miss.

SETTING SAIL

The next morning, after spending the night aboard, we set out for Deep Bay, located on the northwest corner of Antigua and a perfect jumping-off point for Barbuda. Better still, Deep Bay proved to be a great little anchorage in and of itself: well protected, with a nice little beach, the ruins of an old British fort on a scrubby bluff and only a smattering of buildings ashore, despite its proximity to Antigua's capital city of St. John's.

Shortly after dropping the hook we lowered the Bavaria's broad transom platform, and from then on life pretty much consisted of switching back and forth between swimming off the transom and swimming at the beach. Every now and then we would also nag Bridget to get out of the water for a while so she could do things like eat and sleep. Otherwise, it was a pattern that continued for the rest of the week. Not a bad way to get our sea legs back in preparation for our "passage" the next day.

As for the passage itself, it was shorter than



Clockwise from top: the intrepid crew on passage; visiting the Frigate Bird colony; exploring Barbuda's gorgeous Palm Beach

expected, with *Vixen* clicking off the 27 miles in a little over four hours, but also a little more challenging, thanks to the larger-than-expected seas and stronger winds, with gusts in the low 20s. Fortunately, as is so often the case, everyone's spirits rose quickly as their stomachs settled down once we were sailing in flat water again.

Originally the site of an extensive series of plantations established by England's Sir Christopher Codrington in the 1600s, the island remains largely unspoiled, thanks to the efforts of its 1,200 inhabitants, who clearly know a good thing when they see it. Indeed, the entire time we were there we never saw more than a dozen or so boats ranged along the entire 16-mile beach gracing the island's western shore.

As for the anchoring, it couldn't have been easier: simply nose up toward the beach until the depthsounder reads around 15 feet and then drop the hook into the clear sand below. If you can't get a good bite on the bottom here,

you've got no business running a boat. Be warned though: the anchorage is more an open roadstead than a harbor, and you may experience a bit of a roll. It may also be untenable if big swells start coming in out of the north.

Interestingly, the anchorage is separated from Barbuda's main population center, Codrington, by the 10-mile-long Codrington Lagoon, which means taking a water taxi over if you want to provision or go exploring. To make the most of our water taxi dollars, we added on a side trip to the Frigate Bird colony at the north end of the lagoon, an absolute must-see if your visit coincides with nesting season. I've always loved the way Frigate Birds soar so effortlessly far overhead, and it was neat to see thousands of them up close, scattered among the maze of mangroves clustered to the west of the creek that connects the lagoon to the sea. Alas, baby Frigate Birds are—how do I put this?—not quite so graceful as their parents.

Thanks in large part to the efforts of the local population, the lagoon remains in fairly



Top to bottom: The crew takes in the sunset from Shirley Heights; Carlisle Bay; part of the Antigua Race Week fleet in English Harbour; Nelson's Dockyard

pristine condition and is home to a variety of fish and spiny lobsters—a local specialty. On the down side, a bizarre spiky-looking species of jellyfish has recently taken up residence, and you can now see tens of thousands of them pulsating along the bottom. However, our launch driver, a waterman named Clifford, said they don't seem to do any harm, and they're also a delicacy in Japan, making them a source of some local income. Go figure.

Codrington itself isn't much, just a small, quiet, dusty community of tidy cinderblock houses, with a small commercial dock and dozens of kids in school uniforms of various colors shouting out answers from their open-air classroom. In other words, it's the perfect place to wander around aimlessly while enjoying the fact that you're someplace very far from home.

For lunch we stopped at a roadside stand and had a combination plate of rice, beans, some amazing macaroni and cheese, jerk chicken and venison—the latter two fresh off the grill and chopped into bite-size pieces with a wicked-looking meat cleaver. I for one will take a roadside picnic table in the Caribbean over a fancy restaurant every time!

The venison came as a surprise—Bambi on island time?—until I learned it was a descendant of the herds of fallow deer once brought to Barbuda by the Codringtons so they would have something to hunt. A pair of them graces the Antiguan coat of arms.

Wandering back to the commercial dock, we saw school kids everywhere, laughing, teasing one another and doing all the fun, silly stuff kids do the world over. In the center of town, adults gathered in the shade of the awnings in front of the handful of restaurants and small grocery stores. Apparently, despite spending their entire lives on an island, the people there still love going to the beach on weekends. There are far worse ways to go through life than as a resident of Barbuda.

BACK TO ANTIGUA

Although I was a little concerned about the seas and the fact that the wind was more southerly than I liked—which meant sailing on a close reach if we were to avoid being blown west of our destination—the trip back proved much easier than the trip over. Along the way we also ran into the Round Antigua Race fleet, which was fun as we sailed back down Antigua's west-

ern coast to Jolly Harbour where we grabbed a mooring just around the corner from the marina and dinghied ashore to meet my sister Sara. Full disclosure: there was a time when something like this would have driven me absolutely nuts. I always felt compelled to get the "most" out of every charter by spending as much time under sail as possible and by staying someplace new every night. Fortunately, I've mellowed with age—and have been told in no uncertain terms by the rest of my regular crew that those days are over!

I've also discovered that it often pays to linger, because it allows you to fully appreciate many spots you might otherwise take for granted—like Jolly Harbour. In fact, this may very well be one of the best charter bases I've ever seen, and is well worth exploring, with a beach, restaurants and a great place to provision literally across the street. Even the fuel dock is conveniently located right across the channel from the marina.

Because the inner harbor is completely landlocked, I was concerned it would be hot. But so long as the breeze holds it is quite comfortable. Although there's an anchorage just outside, it is susceptible to a slight swell. More importantly, there's an old merchant ship moored there that has been converted to a nightclub, complete with inflatable water slide and a booming sound system. Not good. It's also a pretty long dinghy ride back to the amenities of Jolly Harbour.

ONE TOUGH CORNER

The next morning we were up bright and early for what proved to be the toughest stretch of the entire trip. Even when the easterlies are well established, things can get squirrely to the west of Antigua due to all the twisting and turning the wind has to do as it negotiates the island's hilly interior. As a result, even after heading a couple of miles offshore, the wind was well forward as it came out of the south-southeast after bending around Johnsons Point at the southwest corner of the island. It was same with the seas.

Of course, as we doubled said point, the wind backed into the southeast and then east-southeast, so that we had both it and the seas on the nose the whole way around. Fortunately, *Vixen* did a great job, keeping up a comfortable 4.5-5.0 knots even as the winds built into the low 20s and the swells started topping six feet. We not only made it to Falmouth Harbour fairly comfortably, but were plenty early to grab

one of the few remaining mooring balls just off Falmouth Harbour Marina.

As is the case with Jolly Harbour, there's also plenty of room to anchor. However, with race week going on and a fair bit of residual swell sneaking in, we opted for the comfort, security and short dinghy ride made possible by a mooring.

Falmouth and English Harbours are one of the great yachting destinations of the world. Back in the 18th and early 19th centuries, English Harbour served as the British navy's base of operations in the Caribbean. More recently, the two harbors were arguably the birthplace of the modern charter industry. Today, there are scores of restaurants, and all the repair and maintenance services you could ever ask for: book stores, gelato, megayachts, you name it and they pretty much got it.

Once *Vixen* was secure, we wandered over to English Harbour to visit Nelson's Dockyard and then took a taxi up to Shirley Heights. I have to confess, we were all a little disappointed by Shirley Heights: think crowds of people, having to buy tickets to get dinner and a huge line. However, I suspect this was largely due to the regatta. Presumably things are a bit quieter the rest of the time. The view was certainly great, especially with mountainous Montserrat looming on the horizon.

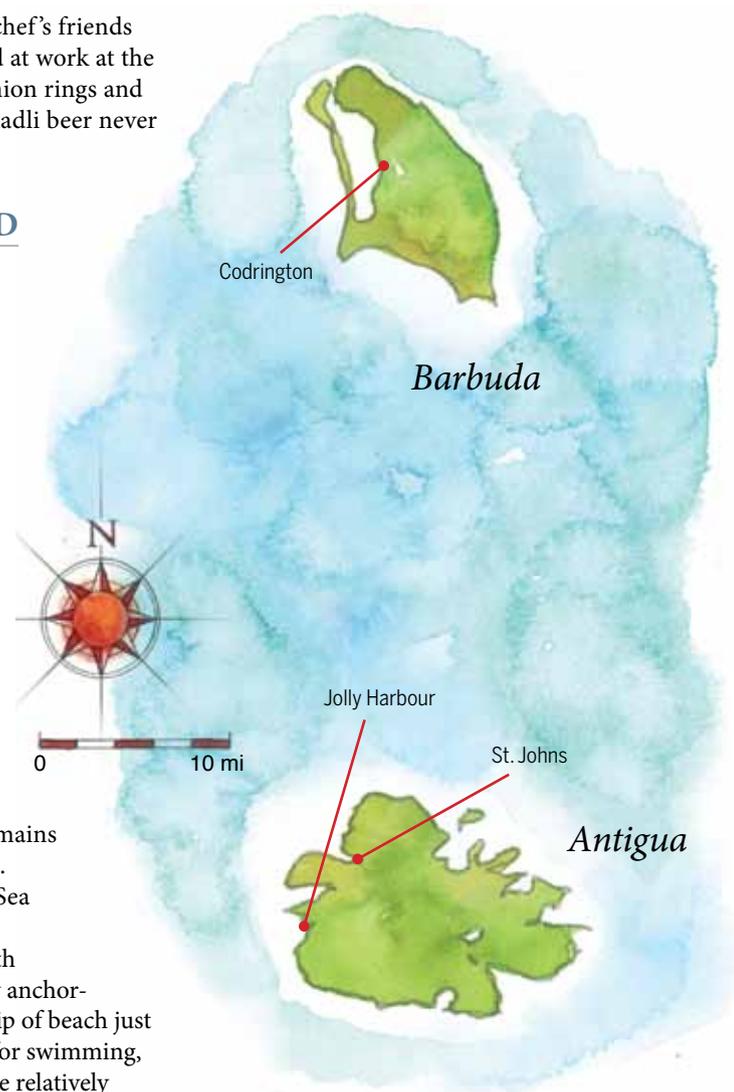
For dinner we went to a place called Skippa's, on Dockyard Drive—the main drag between the two harbors. Again, when I'm in the islands, I have little use for fine dining—we got plenty of that back home in Boston. At Skippa's you sit out front under the trees

on plastic chairs watching the chef's friends stop by to say hi while he's hard at work at the grill. Hotdogs, spiny lobster, onion rings and a couple of rounds of cold Wadadli beer never tasted so good.

HOMeward BOUND

The next morning we cast off lines along with the rest of the Antigua Sailing Week fleet and took a quick sail around Old Road Bluff to Carlisle Bay, a gem of an anchorage if ever there was one. We'd been warned about jet skis, but saw only one the entire time. The beach here is truly one of the best in the world, and we anchored in 10 feet, picking our spot carefully to keep the hook away from the large untrammied patches of sea grass. Occasionally the wind came whipping out of the hills, and every now and then the remains of an offshore roller sneaked in. But it was more than worth it. Sea turtles abound here.

In addition to the silky smooth beach at the head of the shallow anchorage, there's also a rocky little strip of beach just beyond the point. It's not ideal for swimming, but is a great place to explore the relatively untouched scrubby land. I love hiking back



CRUISE NOTES

Charter company: Horizon Yacht Charters; horizonyachtcharters.com; 866-439-1089

One of the cruising centers of the world, Antigua likely has a **better sailing infrastructure** than your home town! No matter what services you may need, Falmouth Harbour will almost surely have them, albeit at a higher price than you may be used to at home

In addition to being a snug harbor with easy access to fuel and water, Jolly Harbour Marina boasts a **fantastic grocery store** directly across the street from Horizon Yacht Charters

Anchorage **abound** in Antigua, and spots like Falmouth and Jolly Harbors also have moorings for \$20 a night. Be aware, though, that many anchorages are wide open in at least one direction, so check the weather before settling in for the night, especially off Barbuda

There's plenty of deep water off Antigua and Barbuda, but also **some nasty reefs** that uncover at low water. Among the more treacherous are **Cades Reef** to the south of Antigua and **Salt Fish Tail** between Antigua and Barbuda. If you visit Deep Bay, keep an eye out for wreck in the middle of the entrance!

into the bush a little bit and getting a feel for what these islands were like before they were discovered by the wider world.

Of course, all good things must come to an end. But there is also nothing half so satisfying as having things turn out as planned—and as I had hoped, what had once been a problematic headwind was now a gem of a tailwind as we made our way back around Johnsons Point to Jolly Harbour. There's nothing like walkin' along at 6 knots plus in the Caribbean.

Checkout was simplicity itself: if there's a better laid-out charter base anywhere, I have yet to see it. Same thing for the staff of Horizon Yacht Charters: it would be hard to imagine a nicer bunch of folks, or a better way of ending our visit to such a beautiful and satisfying cruising ground. **S**