

**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Sailing the British Virgin Islands:  
Getting Started**

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## Sailing the British Virgin Islands Report 1: Getting Started

October 19, 2008

Hello from Your On the Water Reporter. Today Holly (Reporterette) and I boarded the boat Pleiades for twelve days of sailing in the Caribbean Sea around the British Virgin Islands. Figure 1 shows the area where we sailed (noted with the red circle.)<sup>1</sup>

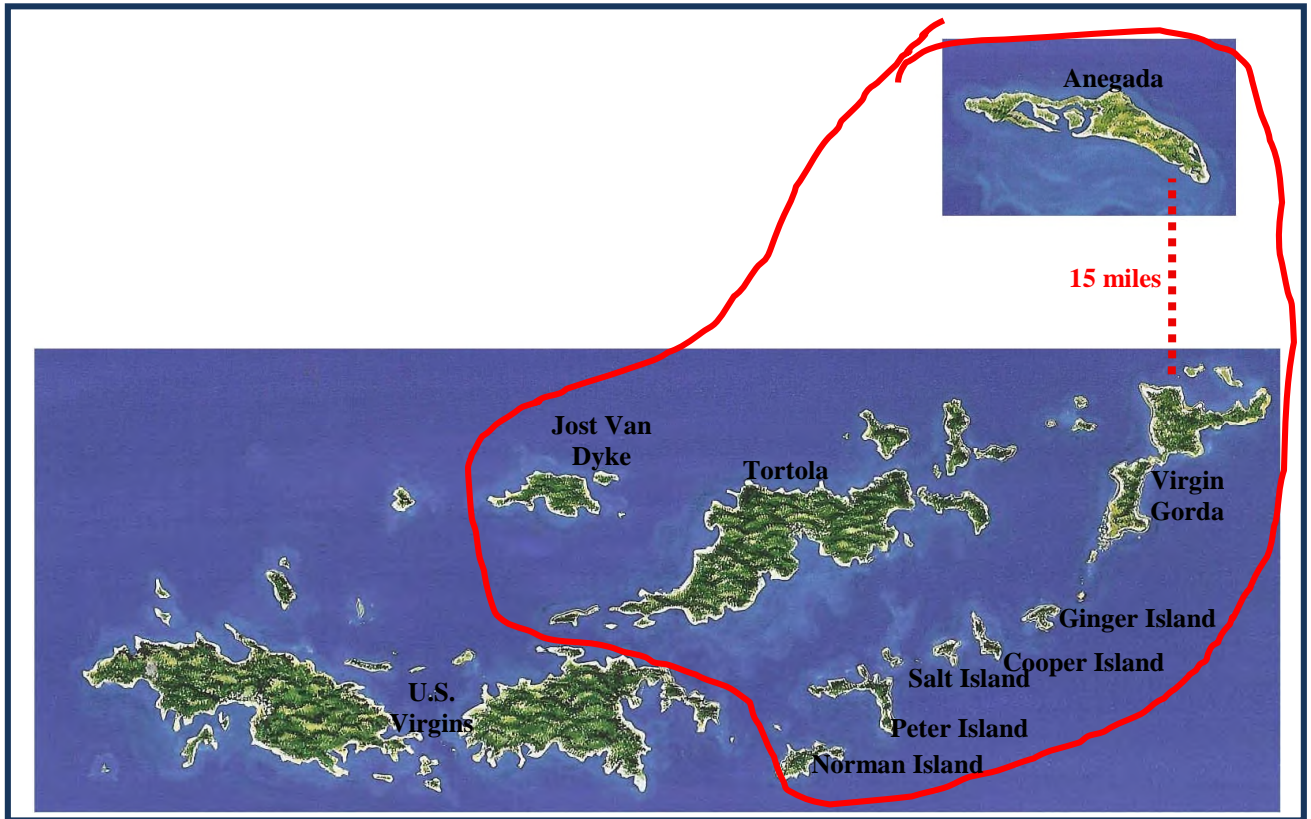


Figure 1. The Virgin Islands

Before this adventure, my sailing experience consisted of three or four hours in and around a sailboat located on the Potomac River near Washington, D.C. I say “in and around” because a few years ago, a friend took me sailing on his dingy. It was a hot summer day, and I spent most of the time in the water. He had cast out a line, and I trolled along behind the boat as we made our way toward Mount Vernon. During this brief adventure, I never tended a sail. I never manned the tiller. I never tied a knot. I never took in or threw out a line. I never really sailed.

I was also a “sailor” in the U.S. Navy, but not once did I “sail.” I served my hitch on huge vessels that were propelled by massive engines.

<sup>1</sup> Nancy and Simon Scott, *Virgin Anchorages*, Cruising Guide Publications, Dunedin, Florida, 2. Reproduced for non-commercial use, [www.cruisingguides.com](http://www.cruisingguides.com) or email [info@cruisingguides.com](mailto:info@cruisingguides.com). I’ve used this map, with alterations, in other “Sailing the British Virgin Islands” reports in this series.

Before leaving for the British Virgin Islands (BVIs), where Holly and I would join three other couples for a barefoot cruise, I looked-up the word *Pleiades* in Microsoft's Encarta encyclopedia:

Pleiades: In Greek mythology, seven daughters of Atlas and of Pleione, the daughter of Oceanus. According to some versions of the myth, they committed suicide from grief at the fate of their father, Atlas, or at the death of their sisters. Other versions made them the attendants of Artemis, goddess of wildlife and of hunting, who were pursued by the giant hunter Orion, but were rescued by the gods and changed into doves. After their death, or metamorphosis, they were transformed into stars, but are still pursued across the sky by the constellation Orion.

Why would anyone name a boat *Pleiades*? Not one happy event is associated with the name. Committing suicide, being pursued by a giant hunter, or consigned to a never-ending chase by a bunch of stars is not my idea of fun. Anyway, we begin these reports by offering a few pieces of advice for the non-sailing reader who might be thinking of becoming a sailor.

First, a "barefoot" cruise does not mean you must take the trip in your bare feet. I was unaware of this fact, and assumed I would have to stow my Johnson and Murphy wingtips for the duration of the excursion. A barefoot cruise is defined as one whose crew consists of the folks who rent the boat in which they themselves sail. That is, a barefoot cruise requires the crew to actually do something. Such as:

- Piloting the boat around submerged coral reefs.
- Making sure any collision is not with a ship, as a ship is big in comparison to a boat.
- Buying a lot of insurance in case the boat runs over a reef, or into another boat or a ship.
- Reading nautical charts.
- Hoisting and taking down sails.
- Not becoming entangled in a rope as the main sail is coming down---with the associated rope going up---and you along with it.
- Buying a lot of insurance in case you end up at the top of the mast.
- Avoiding storms.
- Avoiding vomiting on fellow crew members because you could not avoid storms. If this happens, trying to keep the results on their bare feet and not in their bare faces.
- Not getting lost or losing wind in the sail, and meeting the fate of The Ancient Mariner.
- Applying tons of SPF 70 sun block lotion to avoid getting any sun---which was one of the main reasons for going to the Caribbean in the first place.
- Knowing how to tie knots.
- Avoiding falling off the boat during times when the sea is rough, because it is almost impossible to spot a tiny head among the waves before the boat is turned-around to make the rescue.
- Buying a lot of insurance on yourself in case you fall off the boat.
- Buying even more insurance on your fellow crew members in case they fall off the boat.
- Making sure your fellow crew members have not bought a lot of insurance on you, especially if they are having money troubles.
- Having a good time while engaged in these fun-filled activities.

My advice? Have a drink and forget about the fact that you know absolutely nothing about sailing, or for that matter, knot-tying. But make sure to have members of the crew possess these skills. To that end, we were successful.

Upon arriving at the Pleiades, the first thing we did was walk down the wharf a few steps to a bar and ordered a Cuba Libre to fortify ourselves for this adventure. There, we got to know our fellow crew members and received our first sailing tutorial from our soon-to-be boat captain.

He explained how not to die if you fall off the boat, with a discussion of the “man overboard drill”: Tread water with your legs and wave like hell with your arms. In the meantime, the crew will simultaneously: (a) immediately focus on your tiny cork of a head alternately appearing and disappearing between the waves, (b) immediately throw out a life preserver (which is tied to the railing to keep it from going overboard, and therefore cannot be done immediately), (c) immediately lower the sails (which cannot be done immediately), (c) immediately turn the boat around (which cannot be done immediately), (d) in the meantime, you are to continue treading water and continue to wave to the boat, which is disappearing from your view...and not turning around, because everyone is looking for you, untying the life preserver, or trying to get the mucking sails down, so the skipper can start the engine and turn the boat around toward your now lost position.

I polished-off my Cuba Libre and ordered-up a Pina Colada. Arrgh! Hoist that glass, eh sail, matey!