

**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Sailing the British Virgin Islands:
Improbable Sailors and Norman Island**

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Sailing the British Virgin Islands Report 3: Improbable Sailors and Norman Island

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We left our base port of Sopers Hole on Tortola for a sail to the island in the British Virgin Islands (BVIs) known as Norman Island, also called Treasure Island. Figure 3 depicts our straight-line route---excluding tacks---first to Norman Island, then to other spots in the BVIs, where we spent our first week.

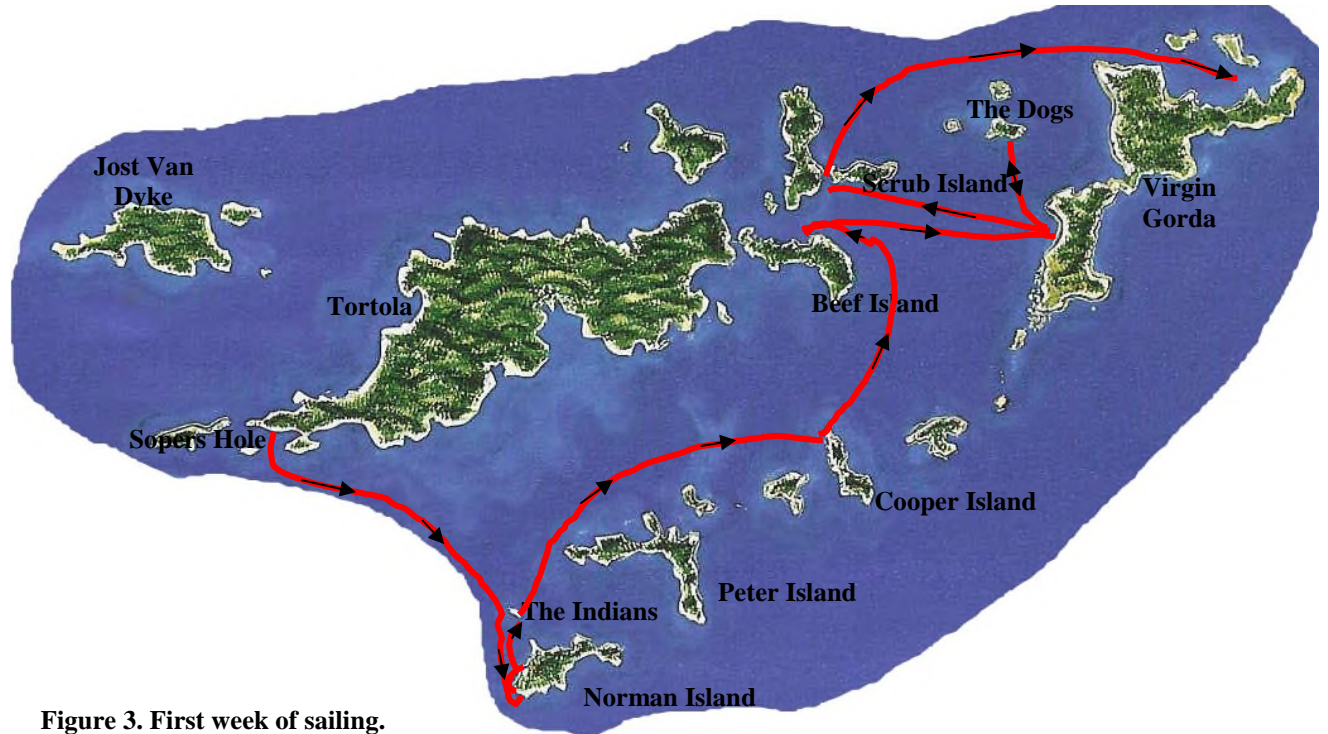


Figure 3. First week of sailing.

To gain a sense of the beauty of this part of the world, Figure 4 shows four of the twelve bays and harbors where we spent our evenings. Skipper and Skipperette had set up the schedule to make sure we were safe at a mooring or anchorage each night. They made sure we pulled into these places in time for taking swims around the boat or for just doing nothing.

On most nights, we took the dingy to a restaurant on shore, and feasted on fine seafood. After our meal, we returned to the *Pleiades*, where air-conditioned cabins awaited our sunburned bodies.



Figure 4. Ports of call.

Prior to this trip, I had never been on a sailboat larger than a few feet long, and only for an hour or so. I had no anticipation of how it might feel to be on a large boat not propelled by a motor; how it might feel to be moving without the aid of an engine and its propeller. I had become so accustomed to being ferried around with motors that I never gained a sense of petrol-free navigation.

Once we left the harbor, I was impressed by how much speed the two sails could produce. The boat was big, as seen in Figure 2 of Report 2. With not much wind, we could easily sail at eight knots. Bruce (the boat owner's right-hand man) told us he was able to sail this boat at over 20 knots. (One knot equals 1.15 mph).

Sailing as an Addiction

While living on the east coast, I came in contact with many avid sailors. Ample water was nearby, including the Chesapeake Bay. Some of my friends told me they were addicted to sailing. Time and again, they attempted to convert me. I declined their offers, as the sport---like golf---seemed too passive. I wanted my pastimes to include the burning of calories. After all these years, I still hold this view. I am one of the lucky ones who can get a mental high after a rigorous physical workout. Thus, I've kept my sports confined to those entailing the expenditure of sweat.

Nonetheless, there is something beguiling about sailing---at least in the Caribbean Sea. I recorded these thoughts the first few days at sea:

- ...clean air...no smog
- ...very blue water
- ...winds coming into the sails...total force must be huge
-silence, not like motorboats
- ...peaceful
- ...too much work! I'm on vacation here!

You want an active sport? You want to burn some calories? Try sailing. I'll explain later. Now, it is time to introduce the fifth couple to this episode.

Landlocked Sailors

As you may have noticed, I've titled this report "Improbable Sailors." This title describes the limited sailing abilities of this writer (and to a more limited extent, my wife, Holly), not the six mates who shared our two weeks aboard the sailboat *Pleiades*.

The title is also meant to describe two other people who are going to be part of our adventure. We call them Doug and Lanita, because other people call them Doug and Lanita. They have given me permission to use their real names, as long as I do not diss their grandchildren. That will be an easy task because I do not know their grandchildren.

Grandchildren aside, I know Doug and Lanita well. We go back to the 1960s, to our college days at the University of New Mexico (UNM). Doug was my fraternity brother and roommate. During this time, Lanita and Doug hooked-up and later became husband and wife.

To set the stage for these improbable sailors, consider their adventure: Doug and Lanita lived on a sailboat for six years, during which the two of them sailed thousands of miles in the Atlantic Ocean, Gulf of Mexico, the Bahamas, Canada, the Great Lakes, and the Mississippi River.

So what? Consider their background: Before their adventure, their total sailing experience was two hours (for Doug, at age 55) on a rented 16-foot Hobicat (a semi-dingy) in Long Beach harbor.

Landlocked for most of their lives. Take a look at a map (Figure 5) of West Texas and Southeast New Mexico (Lea County), where Doug and Lanita (and this writer) were born and reared. It is devoid of rivers and lakes. My hometown laid claim to the only "lake" in an area of hundreds of square miles. The lake was not much bigger than four or five football fields.

This part of America rests on the *Llano Estacado*, the Spanish name for *staked plain*. The Llano is known as the "largest level plain of its kind in the United States" and "one of the most perfect plains regions of the world."¹

¹ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, *Climate of Texas* (Ashville, NC: National Climatic Data Center, 1982).



Figure 5. Dry country.

As mentioned, Doug and Lanita had almost no experience with sailing. They knew nothing (except in books) about winds, sails, lines, navigation, coral reefs, mooring, red-right-returning buoys, luffs, leeches, halyards, sea sickness, and drowning.

Honey, I want to sell our home and live on a boat. A small boat, but you'll like the closets!

Doug retired from Ma Bell, where he had worked in the (bone dry) Midland, Texas, area for many years. After the in-depth training, he received from his two-hour outing on a toy boat, they decided to (a) sell their home in landlocked Midland, (b) buy a sailboat with money from the (former) home, (c) move into the sailboat, and (d) sail the boat into waters a bit more challenging than the Long Beach Harbor.

For my sailing readers, the boat was a Cat-Ketch. It was 40 feet in length, and had two separate cabins. It was equipped with GPS (Accurate to about 30 feet.... Doug was shopping for a sextant when he bought the boat). It had Loran, a compass, and a depth gauge.

Doug offered, "It also had an auto-pilot: Lanita, very important and very touchy."

On the job training. I like the Nike Company. I like how they began, and I use their products. I like their theme, "Just do it!" But there is only so much of this "just do it" stuff I can handle. I'll take to the Caribbean Seas on a sailboat, as long as the sailboat is populated with sailors. I was at sea enough while in the navy to know the ocean is a dangerous place. Storms come up without warning. They can sink large ships, not to mention sailboats. Coral reefs are sometimes not marked. Entering and leaving harbors requires caution and skill.

The best of boats require constant upkeep. They need care...almost every day. They resemble floating children. Feed me! Clean me! Swab my sides! Flush my bowels!

Doug and Lanita should be on the Nike ads, "Just Do It!" To gain a sense of the cool audacity of the couple, let's move to the story of their acquiring the boat. I have thought about this event many times, and it still amazes me.

After a two-hour sail earlier in his life, Doug found the boat he wanted. The trouble was the boat was not located in Midland. It was located in Florida. Undeterred that he knew nothing about

sailing a boat in open water, Doug hired a sailor in Ft. Lauderdale to (a) help Doug sail the boat to Houston, and (b) teach Doug to sail during the journey.

It so happens that the timing on the sale of the house did not bring in the money to pay for the boat. So, what can one do if one is short of funds? Go to a bank:

- Bank person, "What can I do for you sir?"
- Wannabe sailor, "I need a loan to buy a boat."
- "I think that could be arranged. But for a boat, we require, say, a second mortgage on your home." (An old bank rule: *A friend in deed is a friend indeed.*)
- "I won't have a home; I'm going to sell it to buy the boat."
- "Then why come here?"
"I haven't sold our home yet. It's on the market."
- "Hmm, well we do make loans to seasoned sailors for their boats. You will need to provide us information on your sailing experience."
- "Two hours."
- "Two hours of experience! ...How big is the boat? Where do you intend to sail?"
- "It's an ocean-going craft, and we are going sail it on the ocean."
- Well, how about your job? Your income?"
- "I don't have a job. I'm retired."
- "You don't have a loan either."

Actually, Doug called a friend and asked for a short-term loan of a paltry \$85,000 until the house was sold. Thus, the origin of the term "bridge loan," as in bridge over unknown waters.

His friend asked, "What the hell do you know about a boat?" Doug responded, "Nothing."

Doug got the loan. *A friend in need is a friend indeed.*

It gets better. Knowing *almost* nothing about sailing (Doug was too modest with his friend), his hired hand and he began their sailing from Ft. Lauderdale to Houston. Make that singular. Doug immediately became ill, and could not do much of anything for several days.

Doug tells me he was sick from diesel fumes! Ha, those guys from Midland, Texas, are macho dudes. You know, "Bring'um on!" and all. Being sick from diesel fumes is manly. Being seasick is not. However, I am not doing a Bob Woodward expose here, so I will accede that my friend was never seasick.

Had I been in Doug's shoes, regardless of the nature of my illness, and at this stage of the saga, I would have considered shucking the adventure. I would have sold the boat and moved back to Midland. (OK, maybe Fort Worth or Dallas.) For readers who have never been sick while on a rolling sea, trust me on this one. I was sick once during the riding out of a hurricane in the South China Sea. I was wishing for death.

Let's summarize the situation: Doug had just retired. He was on a Ma Bell retirement plan. He and Lanita had to borrow money for the boat until they sold their house. They had purchased a

very expensive boat they did not know how to use. Neither had ever been to sea. Suddenly, one of them finds he is prone to sea sickness. Why read Dave Barry?

You might be thinking Doug was not playing with a full deck of cards. Not so. He is well above average in intelligence, and had fine grades from the MIT of the southwest (UNM) to prove it. Doug is an adventuresome sort of person. As one example, he rode a unicycle during our college days. No one else on campus rode unicycles. But that's Doug: adventuresome.

More to the point, he believed he would love sailing. He had a sense that sailing was meant for him.

But how to convince his wife that sailing was meant her? I asked Doug how all this came about. He responded, "I thought I might be sailing with a one-armed woman. Her other arm would still be wrapped-around the porch post at our house in Midland."

I responded, "Lanita could not have an arm wrapped around the porch at your house in Midland, because you no longer had a house in Midland."

Doug, "She was afraid of it, but through her commitment to me and a step of faith, she agreed to it."

A Dose of Reality

Anon and Mark Twain tell us facts tend to get in the way of otherwise fine stories. I have wanted to hold-on to my rendition of Doug and Lanita's cool tale, as just recounted. With the best of intent, through the years, in hindsight, I have inadvertently embellished this fanciful story with my own fantasies. Nonetheless, while the previous section of this report is largely accurate, below are Lanita's edits to my imaginations.

But before setting the record straight, I stay by my main thesis of this report. My friends (excuse me, Lanita) had a lot of pelotas to embark on this adventure.

They are the antithesis of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufock." J. Alfred was consumed with: *Do I dare? Why am I paralyzed by indecision? Should I disturb the universe?*

Prufock became a prisoner of this own timidity, of his own ego-centrism. No one worried about the man, yet he worried about himself too much. Doug and Lanita broke the Prufock mold.

Lanita sent some corrections to my exposition. I add them to our saga, as facts are facts:

- Our improbable sailors checked-out the boat for over a year before they sold the house.
- They lived debt-free on a sailboat, courtesy of their home sale, and a loan from a demented friend.
- Lanita was not immune from Doug's Mosquito Coast Fantasies: Her Midland Oil and Gas compatriots looked askance upon a dry-lander migrating to...water. It took the company weeks to hire her replacement.

- Because their oldest daughter was due to give birth during these times, their scheduled Coast Guard lessons on boat handling and otherwise staying berthed fell by the wayside.

The Bottom Line

You've just read my Mark Twain rendition on these events. You've just read Lanita's corrections to my fanciful renditions. In the main, Lanita's thoughts capture this story:

"I had never shared Doug's dream of sailing. However, he had worked so long and faithfully for our family and had been such a good husband and father that I felt he deserved his dream if he could make it happen. If I could not fully join his dream, I would not stand in his way. As a Christian, I take my vows and commitments very seriously, and I love Doug and would follow him anywhere--even onto the water! I had every confidence in his ability. It was in his head even if not in his experience. A childhood friend of mine challenged my decision, and I assured her of all of Doug's reading and study about boats and boating, and she said, "Lanita, reading, a sailor DOES NOT MAKE!" Probably true in most cases, but Doug is an exception, being an exceptional man!"

There you have it. Both sides of the story. It is no wonder these two people have had a successful partnership. Plus, the story has a happy ending and will be continued in other segments of this report.

For now, we must leave our improbable sailors. For the next report, we take a look at Norman Island, the Indians Islands, Cooper Island, and local bars and cafes.