

## ST. MARTIN ODYSSEY

By Pam Shannon

My Valentine's Day present this year? Sleep – over 12 hours worth - sorely needed after a relatively uneventful night crossing of the Anegada Passage from Leverick Bay, Virgin Gorda. Relatively uneventful in this case means we waited two weeks for this weather window during which we saw at first 8 hours of 13-knot easterlies and 5 to 6 foot waves. Around midnight the wind whipped up to 20 knots from the southeast and 6 to 8 foot seas. Is there ever a really GOOD time to cross the Anegada (going east that is)? Now you realize why I appreciated my Valentine's present.

We arrived in St. Martin the morning of February 14, anchored in Marigot Bay and checked into the French side. No piles of forms and no fees – you have to hand it to the French, they really know how to attract cruisers – one form and no fees. We moved into Marina Fort Louis, the new marina in Marigot Bay, checked in, and explored as much of Marigot as our weary feet would let us before retiring early.

St. Martin is an island divided in half: French (St. Martin) and Dutch (St. Maarten) with Simpson Bay Lagoon comprising a large portion of both sectors. The Lagoon can be quite rough at this time of year; we saw up to 1 1/2 foot waves in there.

Two years ago we stopped in St. Martin to have one of our transmissions repaired and some other work done. Since we were on a schedule at the time, we didn't have much time for exploring and only made it to Philipsburg, the Dutch capital, once. This time we had ample time for an in-depth exploration not only of both French and Dutch St. Martin but also of neighboring St. Barts, Saba and Anguilla. With the impending arrival of our guests, Dave and Judy, a couple from the cold country, namely, New York State, we spent the first few days of this visit fixing up the boat to make it hospitable for them.

Our guests arrived February 20 and we all retired fairly early after enjoying a fresh fish feast at a local restaurant on the tourist route. Then came Hell Night. We had been warned that Marina Fort Louis was not the place to be when northerly swells arrive. We had been so busy preparing the boat for our friends that we had neglected to monitor the weather. The seas had been choppy but so far the marina had been manageable. We were backed into a slip and tied on all four corners with one line going to a mooring ball. Spring lines were in place and we had added snubbers in the lines to take up the shock and hopefully keep our lines from breaking.

By midnight we were bouncing around so much that sleep was impossible due to the constant banging, grinding and scraping. Dave and Judy's cabin was on the port side where the noise was the loudest since the dock was on that side. However, Dave, who we figure is possibly from another planet, slept right through it. A couple of times we heard exceedingly loud bangs. When we assessed the damage at first light, we found the boat

was pushed against the dock due to two broken lines. That must have been the extra loud bangs we heard. A small (80 ft) mega yacht tied across the dock from us had broken a couple of its huge (1-inch) lines also. We moved into the Marigot Bay anchorage so everyone could get some rest. As long as we weren't bouncing off a dock, the swells didn't bother us, a true advantage of catamarans which normally rock from back to front not side to side.

The swells did produce very wet dinghy rides, though, as we discovered on a trip to Budget Marine located on the far side of Simpson Bay Lagoon. Our dinghy would not plane with the four of us in it so the rough water spraying over the sides thoroughly soaked us all. We literally surfed into Sandy Ground on a huge wave. Sandy Ground is the entrance to the Lagoon from Marigot Bay. By the time we reached Budget Marine water was dripping off our shorts. Judy and I especially appreciated this. Showers were in order for all of us upon our return to the boat. Thank Heaven for the 40-gallon an hour watermaker as this scenario would be repeated in the coming days.

The following day we walked up to Fort Louis, located on a hill overlooking Marigot Bay and the town of Marigot, to admire the view and then took a taxi tour of the island – lots of beautiful harbor and Lagoon views from the hills. One town in particular caught our eye – Grand Case. Judy had heard that the street paralleling the waterfront was lined with many great restaurants so we decided we would take the boat over there the next day.

On February 23 we checked out of St. Martin at Marigot Bay and sailed 5 miles to Grand Case Bay where there was plenty of room to anchor. We toured the town and did, indeed, find a charming place full of small shops and many restaurants. After perusing the menus of most of them we stopped at a place called Le Fish Pot where we had an excellent, if pricey, dinner on the waterfront.

The next day we sailed 22 miles to Gustavia, St. Barts and, after determining there was no way we were going to put our 43-foot cat on one of the town moorings because the lanes between the rows of boats in the mooring field were too narrow to accommodate our 24-foot beam, we went into the anchorage a short distance away and put down the hook.

We tried to check in but the office was closed for Carnival so we watched the local Carnival Parade, the highlight of which was a float containing a band of all male Abba impersonators. After the parade we checked out some of the huge mega yachts in the harbor. Some of these babies were almost 200 feet long and five decks high. Most were powerboats but there were some huge sailboats as well. The marinas on the Dutch side of the Lagoon on St. Martin are also filled with mega yachts both power and sail, including the world's second largest sloop, the 159-foot Georgia.

The next day we toured the island, again by taxi, and saw several lovely anchorages. We also did an in-depth walking tour of Gustavia, which had been mostly closed down the previous day by Carnival. Dave and Judy expressed a desire for a quiet beach with snorkeling possibilities so the following day we motored 3 miles over to Anse de

Colombier and picked up one of the free mooring balls on the east end of the bay where it's more protected. Charlie ferried Dave, Judy and me in the dinghy over to the beach where Dave and I went on an extensive snorkeling trip around the bay while Judy worked on her suntan and Charlie napped aboard Blue Star. The plan was for Charlie to pick us up in three hours; he was looking forward to a nice, long nap. But the snorkeling wasn't that good, only a few fish and a bit of coral, and Dave and I ended up nearer the boat than the beach so we swam over to it surprising Charlie who didn't expect to be disturbed for another hour. While he and Dave retrieved Judy from the beach with the dinghy, I noticed that several of the people around us both on the beach and on other boats were either semi or totally nude. Yes, ladies, there was something for you too and impressive it was!

We continued to notice the lack of clothing on our fellow cruisers the next morning as we hiked up a trail that led from the beach into a nearby town where we stopped for pastries and drinks. Upon returning to the boat we motored back to Simpson Bay, St. Martin, and since the water in the Bay was quite rough, we went into the Lagoon and dropped anchor off the airport where a number of boats were anchored. We had a wonderful dinner at a nearby restaurant, Hot Tomatoes, specializing in Caribbean cuisine.

We wanted to show Dave and Judy as many of the places in and around St. Martin as possible during their twelve-day stay with us. The Dutch island of Saba, 28 miles away, was a must see but the weather wasn't cooperating for anything more than a one-day trip over there so we decided to compromise by doing a three and a half hour round trip on the fast ferry, The Edge II. We had anchored at Saba overnight on our trip from Connecticut to Curacao three years ago but had done no touring due to time constraints. There are 8 mooring balls on the west side of the island but the long dinghy trip to customs is into the waves and can be wet depending on how rough the seas are.

Saba is unique in that it is basically a five square mile mountain rising from the sea making for an extremely dramatic approach by boat. From the dock at Fort Bay we commandeered a minibus taxi for a tour of the island. As we climbed the "road that could not be built" we were reminded how resourceful the Saban people are. Although engineers from various countries had maintained that a road from the towns to the harbor could never be built, Saban Josephus Lambert Hassell (1906-1983) took a correspondence course in road building and, with that knowledge, built the first road on the island. As we traveled up Hassell's road, the alpine beauty of the island became immediately apparent. We came first to the capital, The Bottom, a stunning town containing red roofed houses surrounded by high hills. This is the capital of Saba where the government buildings are located.

From there we drove to Windward, another lovely red roofed town with spectacular views. Here we stopped at Jobean Designs, a hot glass studio, where a class in glass blowing was in progress. The designs were fantastic and included everything from intricate small animals to jewelry.

Unquestionably the highlight of our day in Saba was the hike up Mt. Scenery, all 1,064 steps of it. The trail goes through a magnificent rain forest and ends 3,000 feet above sea level where, once the clouds parted, we were treated to one of the best views in the Caribbean. The descent was also a bit challenging but we were rewarded with a tasty lunch at the Ecolodge Rainforest Restaurant located in the lower portion of the rain forest. The Ecolodge also has cottages for those wishing to stay longer on the island. We wished we could have spent more time here but we needed to meet the bus to take us back to the ferry and so had to cut lunch a bit short. Back in Simpson Bay our only thought was “how soon can we return to Saba?”

The next day we took Dave and Judy to the airport in the dinghy so they could confirm their tickets back to the U.S. While we were there it started to rain. Since it looked like this was going to be a major storm and not just a shower, we decided to hightail it back to the boat despite the increasing wind and waves in the Lagoon. By the time we reached the boat, everyone was completely soaked. Once again everyone headed for the showers. From then on we never went in the dinghy without taking rain gear along.

We toured Philipsburg the following day. Located on the Dutch side, this town is where the cruise ships dock. It has two main shopping streets, Front and Back. Front Street is filled with the usual tourist shops. Only one block over, Back Street has all local shops and the atmosphere here is very different from Front Street. So are the prices.

Speaking of shopping, a don't-miss item in St. Martin is the supermarkets on the Dutch side. We shopped at Ram and Le Grande Marche. Both had the widest variety I've ever seen in a supermarket. In addition to the normal grocery selection, they had an amazing selection of international foods, including East Indian, Lebanese and Spanish canned goods. Being a confirmed foodie, I could have spent hours in these stores.

After we toured Philipsburg and had dinner, we returned to the boat for a good night's rest. However, the weather decided otherwise. The squally conditions, which had been prevalent ever since we returned from Saba, continued to plague us and caused another boat to run into us in the middle of the night. There was no major damage but none of us, not even Dave, slept well that night as, after re-anchoring, we each went up on deck at various times to make sure we were well clear of other boats. In the morning we moved to a better spot in back of Explorer Island well away from the air traffic.

Two days after this incident, Dave and Judy left for the airport via boat taxi since we thought they would be drier that way. We stayed on for a few more weeks while we had an arch built to hold our solar panel array by Terry Cawood (business name Eurl T.M.T.T.) a South African expat located on the French side at Sandy Ground. He does quality work at a fair price – highly recommended. Then we continued our journey south to Grenada and Trinidad for hurricane season having thoroughly enjoyed our St. Martin Odyssey.