

Charter Cruising

Virgin Island Interlude

By BARBARA CROCKETT

I can't talk right, I'm counting my money," came the reply when we hailed the small cabin cruiser. We had been told that Sydney, proprietor of Sydney's Love and Peace Restaurant, could be found aboard this unlikely craft.

His comment seemed quite improbable though, especially when you studied the establishment that supposedly generated his income—a sizable lean-to perched 50 yards from the shore in Little Harbor, Jost Van Dyke, in the British Virgin Islands. Sydney's restaurant consisted of a rickety roof held up by three walls, one small bar, an enclosed room (presumably the kitchen), a jukebox adjacent to a generous dance floor, and several picnic tables.

My husband Wiley and I and our companions Rose and Glen, had come ashore after dinner aboard the charter yacht *Stampede*, a Swan 57 ketch that we had boarded that morning for a six-day odyssey. Crews from several boats at anchor in the harbor and a few islanders joined us in some fast-paced dancing and drinking at Sydney's. A spiral notebook lay on the bar. Each group entered their yacht's name as they arrived and listed the number and type of drinks they helped themselves to. A young woman appeared occasionally to tote up these handmade bills and accept payment from departing revelers. This was the money which eventually found its way to Sydney, aboard his floating office/home.

People like Sydney, and places like his Love and Peace Restaurant, symbolize the casual attitude of this area and the reasons why

Sailing aboard a fully-crewed Swan 57 is a sojourn in luxury.

yachtsmen continue to vacation in this boating paradise.

But we had come to the islands to find out why yachtsmen might want to charter one of the fully crewed yachts available in the easily navigable islands. After just

five hours aboard *Stampede* we thought we had the answer.

Maintained in Bristol fashion by her Rhodesian skipper and cook, Andy and Wendy Smith, and their mate David Smith of Rhode Island, *Stampede* is a two-year-old Swan 57 ketch in her first full season of charter operation. She had been selected, with the help of broker Missy Harvey at Yacht Charters Unltd. of Rowayton, Conn., as an example of the fine combination of high-performance

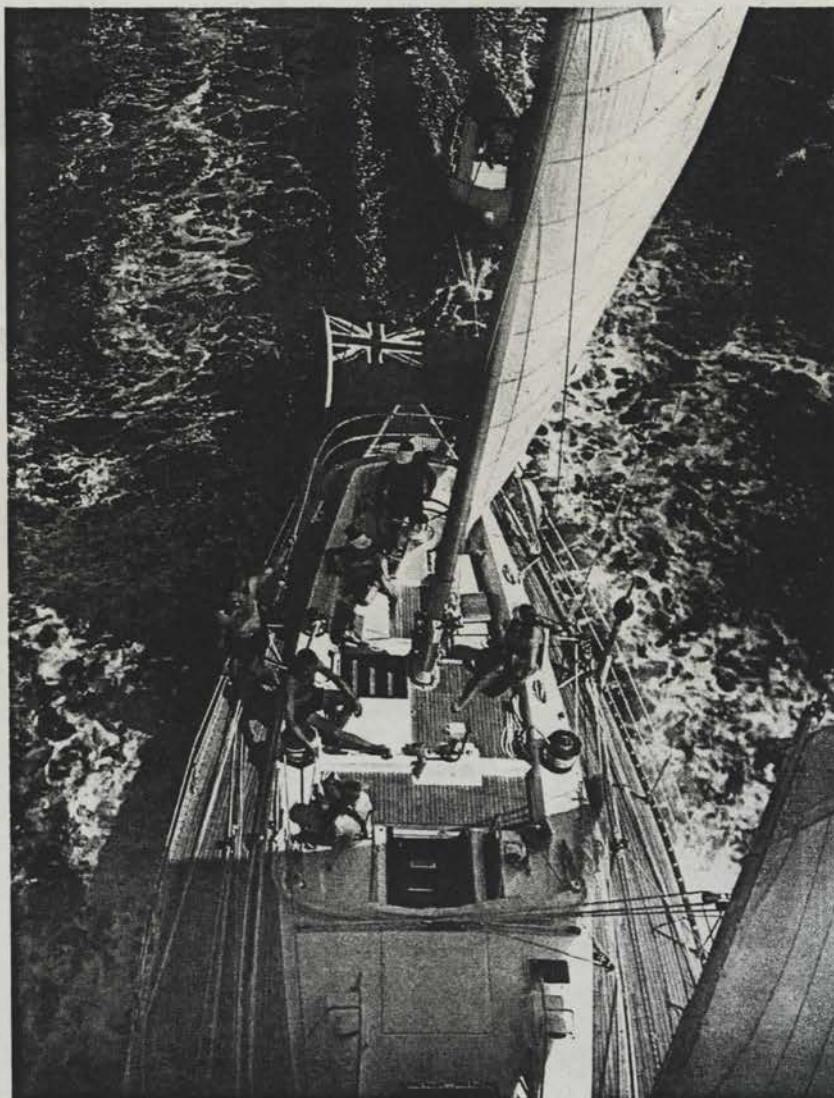


Photo by Andy Smith

Stampede's size and power were never overwhelming, even though she was put through her paces at every opportunity.

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Photo by Wiley Crockett

and luxury in a charter yacht. She was proving to be a perfect choice.

Even before boarding we sensed a certain luxury in the graceful lines of her S&S design and the well-equipped spotless deck and cockpit. Her teak interior, oiled to a satiny finish, boasts a four-cabin layout which sleeps eight privately and comfortably. *Stampede's* salon is elegant—the settee upholstered in rich burgundy velour, with a coordinating Oriental rug on the teak floor and original oil seascapes on the bulkheads. The navigator's station is a maze of electronics, a source of amazement and education to Wiley and Glen. Wendy's galley, equipped with an oversized refrigerator/freezer, a two-burner stove, and an 18" oven was the manufacturing plant for three meals each day.

The Swan's performance capabilities became evident immediately. After discussing our itinerary and getting acquainted with the crew, we cast off from the St. Thomas Marina dock and headed for our first anchorage at Jost Van Dyke. The charter yacht *Kestrel*, a Bowman 57, immediately hailed us. Yes, we were heading east. A race? Of course! With the advan-

tage of having full sail already up, *Kestrel* pulled ahead as we worked to hoist *Stampede's* double-head-sail rig. It wasn't long, though, before we were well to weather of the Bowman, and after one brilliant tack, left her in our wake. Not only had we won our first race, we had become part of the working crew aboard a yacht that we'd never had an opportunity to sail in our home waters.

When Captain Andy heard that we were interested in learning how to scuba dive, he was enthusiastic. He and Wendy had recently learned to dive and were all for sharing the experience. Since many charterers hope to dive in the reef-and-wreck dotted V.I. waters, several companies have begun rendezvous dive programs. A fully-equipped dive boat will meet a party almost anywhere in the islands. Andy recommended Underwater Safari in Tortola for our lessons. He arranged, via ship-to-shore radio, to meet them at Cooper Island.

Glen and I began our instruction on the deck of Underwater

Safari's 30' cruiser, tied to the Cooper Island dock. First, a briefing on each piece of gear we'd be using and a description of what our physical reaction would be to descending 35 feet later in the day. Then we suited up and stepped off into five feet of water.

A short session in the shallow water generated confidence and allowed us to become comfortable with our gear and new environment. Then we were off to the famous wreck of the *Rhone* in Lee Bay near Salt Island for our first real dive. A combination of awe, fear and concentration enhanced the experience of diving 35 feet into a world of silence and marine life. Only three hours had passed and already our lives were changed. We were hooked on scuba diving.

Unfortunately, there wouldn't be time for a second dive. We had decided to enter the Piña Colada Regatta in Tortola.

Open only to crewed charterboats, the Regatta is an annual event held to celebrate the end of the Charterboat Show and the be-

Chef Wendy, at work above trimming *Stampede's* headsail, performed miracles in the galley. Cocktail hour each evening was followed by delectable and diversified repasts. Below, we begin dinner in the main salon with escargot appetizers.



Photo by Andy Smith

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ginning of the "Season," which extends from December through May. At the show, held in early November, crewed charterboats are displayed for inspection by charter brokers.

The 40 entrants gathered in Road Harbor, Tortola, for the start of the race.

"There will be only one rule," race chairman/charter skipper Don Nicholson announced. "Overtaking boat must keep clear. All other rules are there to be broken and I'll break the first one. We're starting an hour early, and that means now."

As we made our way back to *Stampede*, we discovered that the real intent of this event was to douse as many people as possible with water. We were soaking wet and the air was thick with water balloons as we boarded *Stampede*. The water assaults continued on the race course as several Royal Air Force helicopters buzzed the fleet for a look at the many topless crewmembers aboard the competing yachts. The wind died as we vied for second place with another Swan 57, and we used our motors to propel us all to Great Harbor, Jost Van Dyke, and the awards party.

The weather gods frowned the next morning, delivering a cloudy, rainy day, which forced the cancellation of our plans to sail to Anegada. All was not lost, however, as we experienced a remarkable 25-mile close reach along the north side of Tortola. In 30 knots of breeze, with *Stampede's* rail kissing the water, we sliced through the 3' to 4' seas. *Stampede* was in her element and we were in ours. Wiley and Glen relished their turns at the helm, and Glen set a new goal—he would someday own a Swan 57.

Dinner ashore that night at the Bitter End, at the tip of Virgin Gorda, gave Wendy a night off from galley duty. The lobsters were so large that we enjoyed a salad made of leftovers aboard *Stampede* the next day at anchor



Photo by Reg Bragonier, Jr.

Diving on the wreck of the *Rhone*, 35' down off Salt Island provided a unique introduction to the marine world.

in Deadman's Bay at Peter Island.

Dead Chest Cay, a tiny island near Deadman's Bay, looked like a promising snorkeling ground. Andy helped us choose fins and masks from *Stampede's* inventory of snorkeling gear. We piled into the Zodiac and anchored in the lee of the island for an afternoon of "goggling", as our Rhodesian friends called it.

Another afternoon was spent under full sail. With the MPS, a light, poleless headsail similar to a spinnaker, and a staysail rigged in addition to the standard ketch rig sails, *Stampede* fairly flew under the bluest of sunny skies.

At anchor later in Benure's Bay at Norman Island we enjoyed a long swim in water so clear the bottom could be seen 30' below us. Relaxing afterwards in the cockpit we reflected on the chartering experience. Already we were a group of friends on a holiday, no longer charterers and crew. As Rose commented later, "The crew's attitude helped me be comfortable with my own laziness." We had all

become very efficient at relaxing. It was a joy to watch Andy maneuver through crowded moorings, choose a spot to anchor and signal Dave to drop the hook, all without lifting a finger ourselves. And at night we slept peacefully as the three crewmembers took turns checking the anchor and closing hatches against the frequent rainshowers.

We sailed through 'til twilight the last evening of our stay aboard *Stampede*. None of us was ready to drop anchor for the last time. Christmas Cove on St. James Island offered a friendly mooring place, however, and we reluctantly came to rest.

We toasted *Stampede* and each other with champagne, a gift from our host and crew, and I had learned why experienced sailors choose a crewed charter yacht. Andy summed it up when he said "There are nice worries, bad worries and no worries. I chose a job with nice worries that allows my charterers to have no worries."

Practical Information:

Travel: Direct flights from major U.S. cities to San Juan or St. Croix. Connect with shuttles to St. Thomas, Tortola or Virgin Gorda. Valid passports are requested for entry into the British Virgin Islands.

Weather: 85° to 90° temperatures year round; sunny. Predominant easterly trade winds from 12 to 25 knots.

References:

Street's Cruising Guide to the Eastern Caribbean, Vol. II by Donald M. Street, Jr. W. W. Norton & Company, 550 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10036.

Yachtsman's Guide to the Greater Antilles. Tropic Isles Publishers, Inc., Box 611141, N. Miami, Fla. 33444.

Fodor's Caribbean and the Bahamas. Fodor's Modern Guides, Two Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10016.

Chartering: Crewed yachts are chartered through brokers. Advertisements may be found in most marine publications.