

Set adrift on memory bliss

*Heady days spent aboard a vintage yacht, as flying-fish leap above the azure waters of the Grenadines, stir up ghosts of the exotic past of this Caribbean idyll, says Sally Maton.
Photographs by BRUCE HEMMING*



*THE FRIENDSHIP ROSE,
ANCHORED IN
THE GRENADINES.
OPPOSITE: A MEMBER
OF THE BOAT'S CREW*



Sailing has always been part of island culture in the Grenadines, an archipelago of 32 islands and cays, stretching from St Vincent in the north to Grenada in the south. We are on *The Friendship Rose*, a 96-foot, traditional two-masted schooner, the last of her kind in the Caribbean. As we sail out of Port Elizabeth, Bequia's tiny harbour, under a sky that is robin's-egg blue, the cockerels are crowing and there's a heady aroma of coffee brewing. Lounging on deck cushions, we breakfast on croissants, fresh mango and little sweet bananas, which the locals call 'figs'.

Once we're in open water, we admire the island of St Vincent as it looms out of the morning haze on our starboard side, its volcanic head lost in the clouds. I try to imagine what *The Friendship Rose* must have been like in the old days. Her curvaceous hull was built in 1967 by her captain, Calvin Lewis, now 76, and brothers Henry and Eric Adams, using white cedar from trees that had been bent by the winds on Bequia's windward side. An inter-island trader, she carried daily essentials such as ice, water, groceries, cloth and cement. She also saw service as a ferry and post boat, and once even brought over a Land Rover, lashed to a couple of planks, and transported nine cows from St Vincent to Bequia, where they were made to swim ashore because it was safer than trying to unload them.

The ship's top cruising speed is about 10 knots; today we're doing nine. Off the port side, a dozen flying-fish glide up out of the water, gleaming like dragonflies. We pass islands with pointed witch's-hat peaks, until, on the horizon, we spot palm-trees, turquoise water and a sliver of shimmering white sand: we're nearing the Tobago Cays.

As we creep slowly into the channel that marks the entrance to the lagoon, the colours of opals flood my vision. We're surrounded

by a semi-circular reef about five miles long, with surf breaking over the rim. This is Horseshoe Reef, a snorkeller's paradise, offering a sheltered expanse of water rich in marine life. After an exhilarating swim, during which we see hawksbill turtles, parrot fish, rays and snappers, we clamber back on board. A small red launch motors alongside, bearing a man in a tam (a circular woollen hat), who chops the tops off fresh coconuts with a huge knife and hands them up to us on the boat. Sea birds hover overhead, their white bellies and wings turned a luminous green by the reflections from the waters below.

There are four deserted islands to explore in the Tobago Cays: on one of them, Jamesby Island, the climb is steep and you'll need stout shoes, but it's worth it for the breathtaking views over the lagoon and its yachts.

Back on deck, it's time for a gourmet lunch of Caribbean-style spicy chicken, with caramelised plantain, roasted vegetables and rice, supplied by our on-board chef. Then it's time to find a shady spot on deck where you can sit and dream or doze in a hammock as the ship heads homewards. Before long, yet another gourmet treat arrives from the galley – this time it's afternoon tea, which is served with banana cake and gingery fudge.

Time seems to pass very slowly. There's something soothing and hypnotic about the gentle sound of the waves, the clanking of metal pulleys, and the creaking of the rigging as the sails are hoisted. A sense of unreality descends, a sun-drugged state of bliss that's utterly beguiling. It leaves me wishing I could spend the rest of my time here exploring the other islands in the Grenadines chain (many of them uninhabited) by boat. Sailing forces you to relax (if you're not part of the hard-working crew, that is) in a way a land-based holiday never can. On deck, you forget about

everyday things like timekeeping, traffic and wearing shoes and, instead, you live according to the dictates of the tides and winds, the moon and the stars.

Cruising on *The Friendship Rose*, even just for a day, I find myself becoming more at one with my surroundings, as I adapt to the relaxed rhythms of life at sea.

The Friendship Rose (+1 784 495 0886; www.friendshiprose.com) sails to Mustique, St Vincent or the Tobago Cays. Cruises cost from about £53 a person a day, full board, including snorkelling (children are half-price; under-fours, free). Scuba diving, inter-island connections, accommodation and on-board weddings can be arranged. The boat can be hired for private use from about £1,385 a day, including full board.

HOW TO SPEND YOUR SHORE LEAVE...

The best beaches and dive sites, plus bars and parties not to miss

1 THE BEST BARS

The New York Bar, Port Elizabeth, Bequia, opposite the T-shirt market on Front Street, is a small, 'early doors' hangout, popular with yachties, locals and expats. Once they get to know you, your bottle of beer will come from the bottom of the chest freezer. And, you can't come all this way and not sample a champagne cocktail at Basil's Bar, Mustique (+1 784 488 8350; www.basilsmustique.com), a favourite of the jet set. If you decide to stay overnight, try the banana pancakes and fresh juice for breakfast.

2 WHERE TO EAT

Order afternoon tea for two in the luxurious surroundings of Cotton House Hotel, Mustique (+1 784 456 4777; www.cottonhouse.net). Visit Fernando's Hideaway, above Lovver Bay, Bequia (+1 784 458 3758): named after its owner, it's popular with the locals, who call it Nando's. The atmosphere is relaxed here and the place is lit by candles set in sand-filled flour bags. Nando catches fish fresh every day and cooks it himself; booking is a must. Alternatively, you could try the house special – lobster pizza – at Mac's Pizzeria, Admiralty Bay, Bequia (+1 784 458 3474; or, for takeaways, call VHF68 and pick up at the dock).

3 MUST-VISIT BEACHES

Beautiful Saltwhistle Bay, Mayreau, is a popular anchorage, with gin-clear water. The Saltwhistle Bay Club (+1 784 458 8444; www.saltwhistlebay.com) has a well-stocked bar and great restaurant, with circular stone tables and seating (think 'The Flintstones') under thatched gazebos, nestling in a grove of seagrape trees. There's a casual dress code in the evening (remember to take shoes). Experience a Robinson Crusoe moment in secluded Chatham Bay, Union Island, which is accessible only by boat. There's a coral reef just off the beach that's great for snorkelling and, with very little light pollution at night, it's ideal for star-gazing. For a pleasant Sunday morning swim, try Lovver



LUNCH ABOARD THE FRIENDSHIP ROSE.
ABOVE: SAILING BETWEEN THE ISLANDS

Bay, Bequia, which is also good for snorkelling. The beach here is shaded by manchineel trees, which look very attractive, but don't be tempted to shelter under them, as the fruits are poisonous and the sap causes severe skin irritation. Casuarina Beach, Palm Island, offers fine white sand, palm groves, nature trails, bird life and indigenous iguanas. You can eat at Sunset Grill, which is situated right on the beach, and sample hearty West Indian dishes. Or take a picnic to Macaroni Beach, on the breezy Atlantic side of Mustique, where there's a covered area to keep the sun off. Only swim here if you like to surf.

4 SIGHTS NOT TO MISS
The spectacular Falls of Baleine, on St Vincent – a 70-foot cascade that can only be reached by boat. Or hike to the rim of St Vincent's slumbering volcano, La Soufrière, which last erupted in 1979, and is still active and steaming... On Mustique, you can rent a 'mule' (which is actually a heavy-duty golf cart) from Mustique Mechanical Services (+1 784 488 8555). It's the lazy way to see the island, but it's great fun.

5 THE BEST PARTY ISLANDS
Wednesday night is party night on Mustique, with a barbecue followed by a 'jump up' at Basil's Bar (see 'The best bars', previous page), where you can also indulge in a bit of celeb-spotting. On Saturday nights there's a jump up, with steel band and sunset cocktails, on the privately owned Young Island (+1 784 458 4826; www.youngisland.com), a tropical paradise that's just five minutes by boat from St Vincent (booking essential). And the Gingerbread restaurant (+1 784 458 3800; www.gingerbreadhotel.com) on Bequia has a live band on Sundays, and offers a varied menu, including Caribbean and International dishes, with specialities such as curries (booking recommended).

6 WHERE TO DIVE
St Vincent is known for its stunning black sand beaches, as well as the 100ft-deep Layou Wall, which is completely encrusted in black, fan-shaped corals. Look up as you dive and you'll see shoals of brightly coloured blennies and angelfish, back-lit by the sun. One of St Vincent's more testing sites is Bat Cave, which should only be attempted under the supervision of a local dive expert (see below). As you enter the cave, you'll hear the shrill squeaks of the inhabitants above, and see the silver flashes of tiny fish in the shallow water by the entrance. The cave opens into an underwater fissure at around 45ft, and provides what one local described as 'a great starburst photo opportunity'. Book your dives with Dive St Vincent (+1 784 457 4928; www.divestvincent.com), located near the Young Island dock, which is owned by diving veteran Bill Tewes.

7 TREAT YOURSELF...
...to hand-painted silk kaftans and sarongs by Lotty B, from Treasure Boutique, Mustique (+1 784 488 8552); or exquisite hand-painted silk fabrics from French artist Claude Victorine in Bequia (+1 784 458 3150, by appointment); and pottery, paintings and jewellery from Spring Studios Pottery & Art Gallery, the Old Sugar Mill Spring, Bequia (+1 784 457 3757); you can arrange to have items shipped home, if they're too heavy to carry.

8 GETTING THERE
Virgin Atlantic (0870 574 7747; www.virgin-atlantic.co.uk) flies regularly from Gatwick or Manchester to Barbados – the nearest large airport to the Grenadines (see 'Island hopping' for connections). Prices of flights during November 2006 start from £532 for adults, £425 for children, including taxes.

9 ISLAND HOPPING
SVG Air (01895 450710; www.svgair.com) offers scheduled daily flights between Barbados and Bequia, St Vincent, Canouan, Union Island and Mustique. Prices start from about £137 return. Private charters can also be arranged.

10 WHERE TO STAY
Grenadine Escape (01993 850285; www.grenadine-escape.com) has luxury villas to rent on islands throughout the Grenadines, and the company also arranges yacht charters.

11 FIND OUT MORE
For more information about the islands, including background history and events, visit www.svgtourism.com. □