



CARIBBEAN HOT SPOTS

SARAH NORBURY picks six top Caribbean sailing experiences for racers, newbie cruisers and seasoned voyagers alike



Imagine broad reaching in the warm trade winds on a deep-blue sea, steering towards a palm tree on a white, sandy desert island... Caribbean sailing really does live up to the hype. You're likely to see dolphins, turtles, pelicans, humming birds and hibiscus flowers, drink rum punch or Red Stripe to the sound of reggae, and feast on papayas, mangoes, lobsters and flying fish. On a Caribbean charter holiday you can be as away from it all as Robinson Crusoe, or join the crowds in famous celebrity haunts. →

TOP TIP

There are so many fantastic islands and events that choosing just six is almost impossible. To broaden your search, the Southampton and London boat shows are great opportunities to chat to charter company staff, many of whom have first-hand knowledge of the islands and routes.



1

The ultimate Caribbean regatta

Antigua Sailing Week

The number one regatta on many sailors' bucket lists, Antigua Sailing Week has everything a race crew could dream of. Clear a week in your diary next April and you could be there too, sailing in hot sunshine and strong breeze on big white-capped waves. Yachting glitterati and ordinary club sailors – a high proportion from Britain – mix and chat at the famous après-race parties, all held in the balmy open air, mostly with great music, a beer tent and a barbecue.

It's far from exclusive and anyone can enter. At this year's Sailing Week there were 121 boats and over 1,000 sailors. I met Michael Wilson's crew from the Isle of Man who'd chartered the smallest boat in the regatta, a 1720. "We're having a great time," they said, "the racing is fantastic, and Antigua Yacht Club is so friendly and laid back."

Their boat was one of several chartered by Antigua's National Sailing Academy. "It's an economical way to do Sailing Week," said Michael, "we're hoping more people will race 1720s next year."

There are lots of opportunities for individuals to find a place on a boat,

both free and paid for – check out the crew forum on the regatta website. Many people charter standard bareboats from companies such as Sunsail, sleeping aboard to keep the cost down. Crews are incredibly varied, from groups of sailing club friends, to families and all-female teams; this year there was even a boat full of airline pilots!

A brilliant way to experience Antigua Sailing Week is to buy an individual berth aboard one of the big racing yachts run by companies such as Sailing Logic and Performance Yacht Charter. The latter offers berths on several boats including the Swan 51 Northern Child; I chatted to the crew after racing in Antigua this year, all looking tanned and fit after an exciting day on the water, and buzzing with enthusiasm and camaraderie. Some had taken the week off work, others were on gap years or sabbaticals. All were full of praise for the professional skipper and mate who got the team working like a well-oiled machine while having the time of their lives.

Or how about persuading your club to enter a team in the Royal Southern

Inter Yacht Club Challenge, perhaps hiring something racier than a normal bareboat? This year's challenge was won by Scarlet Oyster chartered by Guernsey Yacht Club, and the Royal Southern YC itself came fourth in a Beneteau 47.7 chartered from Global Yacht Racing.

Hurry and get organised if you want to go; lots of those who chartered boats this year have already re-booked for 2016.

Above
Antigua Sailing Week offers action on the water and many UK sailors participate

Below
Raceboats can be chartered for similar regattas across the region



PHOTOS THIS PAGE: PAUL WYER/ANTIGUA SAILING WEEK

2

Flotilla holiday chart-topper

British Virgin Islands

Island-hopping doesn't get better than in the British Virgin Islands. One of the most popular yacht charter destinations on the planet, and perfect for first-time cruisers, the BVI (as they're usually called) are a group of more than 50 beautiful islands. Most of the sailing area is sheltered from the might of the trade winds by the big island of Virgin Gorda, making sailing easy for novice yacht crews. Navigation is undemanding too: the islands are so close together that you need never sail for more than a couple of hours a day.

Flotillas are popular here, the lead crew taking the strain out of your first attempts at navigation and anchoring, and recommending the best bar or restaurant for the night ahead. Having been sworn bareboaters for years, we decided to try a flotilla in the BVI and realised what we'd been missing – fun, friendly people to chat with over drinks or a barbecue, comparing notes on the day's adventures, making the experience more of a party. We could still enjoy peaceful times on pristine beaches during the day before meeting up with the group in the evening.

Highlights include the Soggy Dollar Bar on the island of Jost Van Dyke. Sip their signature Painkiller cocktail (Pusser's rum, fruit juice and coconut) lying in a hammock slung between two palm trees gazing out on a turquoise sea.

There's fantastic diving around The Indians rocks; even just snorkelling you'll see lots of brightly coloured tropical fish and other-worldly coral formations.

If you cruise slowly past Richard Branson's Necker Island you might see the man himself. By this time it might be several days since you stocked up at the supermarket at the charter base on the main island of Tortola. The BVIs are still – just – free from major building development so marinas and waterside shops are few and far between. However, past Necker inside Virgin Gorda's North Sound you can get provisions in Leverick Bay: anchor off the upmarket Bitter End Yacht Club – maybe going ashore for a drink if you're feeling bold – and have dinner at Fat Virgin's Cafe in Biras Creek, a fun, laid-back place that's only accessible by water.

The annual BVI Spring Regatta and Sailing Festival is fiercely fought as well

Right
BVI Spring Regatta offers plenty of action

Below
Sheltered bays make for a relaxed overall experience

Bottom
The idyllic White Bay, Jost Van Dyke, in the BVIs



INGRID LABERY



THE MORNINGS

as being lots of fun. It's hosted by one of the BVI's most enticing harbours, Nanny Cay, a marina and boatyard that's expanding to meet demand for berths without losing its Caribbean charm. It's a great place to stop over if you're feeling the need for comforts like showers, launderette and shops, including a big new chandlery. We ended up staying for two nights, tempted by

the bar and restaurant and lovely beach.

The BVI thrive on their reputation as the Caribbean's 'nursery slopes' but experienced sailors can stretch their sealegs by making the 13-mile open-water passage from Virgin Gorda to outlying Anegada, a low coral island famous for its snorkelling. In the full force of the trade winds and big Atlantic rollers, it's an exhilarating ride. →



INGRID LABERY



REIN/ETELANS

CREATIVE COMMONS/MARTIN BARDOCH

3

Jewel of the Caribbean

The Tobago Cays

These five, tiny uninhabited islands are dotted in a tranquil lagoon, protected from the Atlantic swell by an enormous coral reef. Don't be confused by the name, this spectacular and unforgettable place is not part of Tobago; it's in the Grenadines chain, reached from charter bases in either Grenada to the south or St Vincent to the north.

You'll sail here in northeasterly trade winds of 15-25 knots in rolling seas – classic Caribbean conditions and Champagne sailing for more experienced crews.

Once inside the entrance to the lagoon, all is calm. Drop your anchor or pick up a mooring buoy and watch the surf crashing on the reef while your boat floats in undisturbed crystal clear water. Then swim or take the tender to explore, and don't miss the chance to swim with turtles off Baradel Island. I still have a huge pink conch shell I found on a Tobago Cays beach, and if you venture inland on the islands you might spot tame tortoises and iguanas.

There are no shops or restaurants here, but 'boat boys' in high speed

launches visit from other islands in the chain selling bread and fish. At night we barbecued tuna steaks on board then lay on deck gazing at the stars not just above us but right down to the horizon. Many miles from the nearest civilisation, there's no light pollution – it felt like being in a planetarium.

At some stage you need to tear yourself away and explore at least a couple of other islands in the Grenadines chain, like gorgeous, swanky Mustique, tiny Petit St Vincent and vibrant Bequia.

Above
Explore by tender (left); boat boys

Below
Saint Jean is a popular St Barths' beach; J-Class yacht Ranger sails in the St Barths Bucket

4

Best for celeb-spotting

St Barths

This chic French island, which hosts races like the St Barths Bucket regatta for the world's biggest sailing superyachts is best known as a favourite destination for celebrities. The likes of Beyoncé, Harrison Ford, Leonardo di Caprio and Rihanna fly into the tiny airport on even tinier planes. Prime time for celeb spotting is New Year's Eve when Roman Abramovich and other billionaires rock up to host star-studded parties. While some stay at eye-wateringly expensive hotels, most seclude themselves in private villas slipping out at night to reservation-only restaurants.

But any sailor can arrive in a boat chartered from nearby St Martin and anchor for free. One yacht agent told me, "Americans charter huge catamarans and don't even unfurl the sails, they motor to St Barths, drop anchor, and use the boat as a floating apartment for the week."

We stayed for two days in beautiful Gustavia harbour, going ashore in the dinghy to the town where one minute you are walking on a dirt track, the next you are standing in a tropical Bond Street, bursting with designer shops providing the super-rich with essential jewels, watches, clothes and handbags by Hermes, Bulgari, Cartier and Louis Vuitton.

It's a gorgeous island, small enough to explore on foot. Sipping a beer in a barefoot-chic beach bar that probably cost a fortune in interior design fees, you never know who might walk in.

Our two-week bareboat charter took us from St Barths on to St Kitts and Nevis, then back to the St Martin charter base via Anguilla, a round trip of about 150 miles and another unforgettable Caribbean experience.



INGRID/ASERY

INGRID/ASERY



5

Summer beach-hopping

The Bahamas

There are around 700 islands in the Bahamas, best known for their seemingly limitless sandy beaches and incredible wrecks and reefs for snorkelling and diving. Luckily you won't need to puzzle over which islands to choose in your week or two, as the charter companies will advise on the best places to see, with just a few hours' sailing between them.

Unlike our other hot picks, summer is the best time to visit the Bahamas if you want balmy temperatures. Winds are lighter than in the rest of the Caribbean making this an ideal place for first-time cruisers, though you need to keep an eye on where you are as the waters are shallow – which is one reason

why most charter boats are catamarans.

Even though the Abaco islands, where most charters begin, are only an hour's flight from Miami, there are still uncrowded places where you can swim and snorkel in the lagoon-like shallows. The advantage of their proximity to the USA is that the Bahamas offer easy living with plenty of convenient harbours where you can moor up and walk ashore to bars, restaurants and shops, great for those who are not so keen on remote places like the Grenadines where it's simply you, your anchor, a lonely beach and the stars.

You can dive with sharks in the Tongue of the Ocean 20-mile undersea



THE WORKINGS

trench, and see several species of turtle in Great Guana Cay. Other highlights include Treasure Cay with its immense, almost deserted white sand beaches, and the olde-worlde villages of Man-O-War Cay and Hopetown.

6

If you're feeling adventurous

Cuba

When Christopher Columbus discovered Cuba in 1492, he said, "This is the most beautiful land one has ever seen."

Cuba is definitely on my bucket list. Howard Richardson of Nautilus Yachting, one of the few major charter companies to offer Cuban holidays, says it's a wonderful place for sailing, but not the easiest, and only experienced skippers with navigation and night sailing experience are encouraged to try it.

This is because the charter areas are two groups of offshore islands and itineraries either start or finish with a 60-70 mile overnight passage between the base at Cienfuegos on the south side of Cuba to your chosen cruising area. (The other leg, either there or back, is a mere 15 miles.) Constant 15-25 knot northeasterly tradewinds should ensure that the journey is at a reasonable speed.

A week's trip to the Canarreos Archipelago offers hundreds of anchorages, and stopovers varying from deserted tiny islands to tourist resorts. There are exquisite beaches, coral reefs for snorkelling, a nature reserve famous for its monkeys, and the occasional restaurant. Don't miss the turtle and crocodile farms.

Alternatively head for Jardines de la



NAUTILUS YACHTING LTD

Reina ('Queen's Gardens'), a stunningly beautiful nature reserve that's home to flamingoes, iguanas and turtles. When snorkelling you might even find the reputed long-lost pirates' treasure.

Before or after your trip to the islands, make sure to add time in Havana to see the historic buildings, listen to intoxicating Cuban music

and soak up the atmosphere.

Cienfuegos, too, is a lively city with plenty of restaurants and nightlife.

With the USA re-establishing relations with Cuba, it's likely that tourism will grow rapidly over the next few years. The advice is, if you want to experience sailing in Cuba as it is now – an off the beaten track adventure – do it soon. ■