



The Affordable Superyacht Charter

Photos and word by Tom Isitt

in the BVI's

In these straitened times, it's reassuring to know that not all of life's little luxuries are beyond our means. Tom Isitt took a luxury Caribbean charter that didn't cost the earth.

Your house on Cap Ferrat lost \$3 million of its value in the last year, your Gazprom shares are down another 20 percent, your football team has lost its lustre, and the landing fees for your Gulfstream are, frankly, ridiculous. Yes, welcome to the world of wealth and privilege.

But it's not all gloom and despondency for those of us down to our last \$1 billion. Or for those of us with rather less than a billion. There are still little luxuries we can all afford and which might do something to lift the gloom that has descended on us... such as a big boat charter in the British Virgin Islands. No really,

it is actually possible to charter a big boat (a Horizon 74) with a crew of three, for rather less than a king's ransom.

The problem with chartering, particularly in the Caribbean, is that it's difficult to find the right sized boat. Most charter fleets tend to offer 40ft to 50ft boats, usually on a bare-boat basis. This limits the number of people you can have on board, and it often means doing your own cleaning, catering and skippering. And while this isn't a major problem for some, others prefer not to cook and clean while on holiday. But the problem is that most big charter yachts are 100ft+ and cost a small fortune to charter.



Viaggio and Saba Roack

The only thing you have to worry about is in which of the dozens of deserted bays of clear blue water you will take your first swim of the day

And there seems to be no middle ground.

Except there is some middle ground, because I've just come back from a week aboard *Viaggio*, a Horizon 74 that is part of the Virgin Traders fleet in the BVIs. This is a US\$3 million, three cabin yacht with heaps of communal space and a very high level of specification. While boats of this type may be relatively common in the US and European charter fleets, in the Caribbean they are few and far between. However, with *Viaggio* you can accommodate three couples in opulent splendour while the skipper, chef and hostess run the boat and make sure everyone's comfortable and happy.

And the good news is that it's affordable. Not inexpensive, exactly, but not as much as you might think. With prices starting at US\$4500 per person per week, that equates to the same sort of rates as a good hotel in London or New York or Moscow, or a large rented villa on the Cote d'Azur. When you consider that you get a level of exclusive luxury normally only found in the very best hotels and resorts, a week aboard *Viaggio* looks pretty good value.

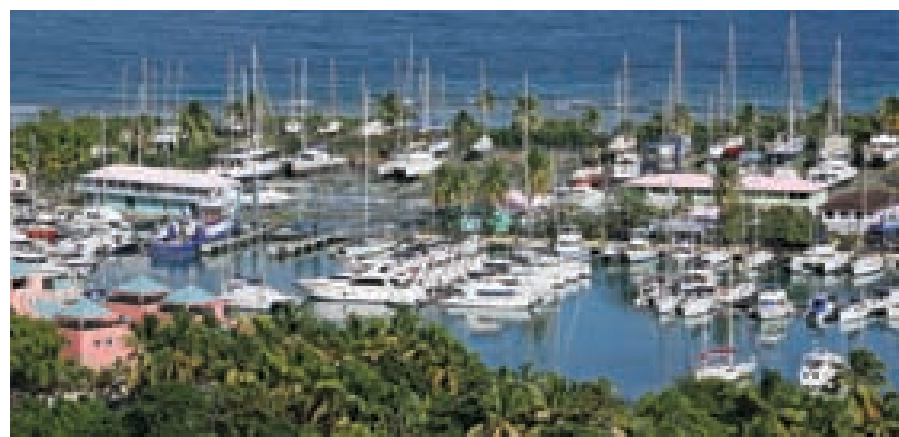
There is a curious charm to the British Virgin Islands. They look a bit like Scotland, except with sunshine and palm trees. And because the BVIs are relatively small and compact, you can meander at a very leisurely pace without worrying that you are going to miss something — the cruising grounds of the BVIs are barely more than 35 miles long by 10 miles across. But if you're worried that you might have seen it all in a couple of days, don't...there is more than enough to see and do to keep you amused for several weeks.

The BVIs can be roughly split into two island chains, separated by the Sir Francis Drake Channel, a three-mile wide expanse of water along (or across) which numerous pleasure craft ply. On the north side of the channel is Tortola (the main island of the BVIs), Beef Island, Guana Island, The Camanoes and The Dogs. On the south side is Norman and Peter Islands, Dead Chest, Salt,

Cooper and Ginger Islands and Virgin Gorda. To the northeast of the main group of islands are Jost van Dyke and the Tobago Islands, while 14 miles north of Virgin Gorda is Anegada.

With the exception of Anegada, which is a flat coral island, the BVIs are the mountainous peaks of extinct volcanoes, their slopes clad in lush vegetation and golden sands flanking their shorelines. They are strikingly beautiful and for some inexplicable reasons have been spared the sort of tourist development that has spoiled other parts of the Caribbean. Indeed, the thing that strikes you most about the BVIs is the relative lack of tourists. Yes, there are a large number of charter boats cruising around the islands, and there are one or two exclusive beach hotels, but there is a lack of development, which is rare. The only tourists you see in any numbers are the ones off the vast US cruise ships who descend on Road Town from time to time.

Out on the water, lounging on the sun deck of *Viaggio*, we make our way slowly out of Nanny Cay on the south coast of Tortola, where Virgin Traders are based, and head south across the Sir Francis Drake Channel to Norman Island. Here you will find the Willy T (the William Thornton), a 93ft schooner that has been turned into one of the more notorious bar/restaurants in the islands. Norman Island is alleged to be the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's book "Treasure Island", and >>



Marina at Nanny Cay a great place to tie up for the night



Viaggio, 74 foot Horizon cruising the BVI's

treasure has indeed been found here.

Heading west you pass Peter Island and then Dead Chest, of “Fifteen men on a dead man’s chest, yo ho ho and a bottle of rum” fame. According to local lore, Blackbeard marooned 15 men on this waterless cay with just a bottle of rum between them. Some tried to swim across to Peter Island but didn’t make it, and now the bay on Peter Island opposite Dead Chest is called Dead Man’s Bay, for obvious ghoulish reasons.

Next up is Salt Island, where keen divers can explore the wreck of the RMS Rhone, a Royal Mail steamer that sank in shallow water in 1867. Some of the wreck is barely 20ft below the surface, so it’s visible even to snorkelers.

Passing Cooper and Salt Islands, you come to Virgin Gorda, so called because Christopher Columbus thought it looked like a big fat virgin when he arrived there in the 15th century. The Baths, a curious rock formation on the beach of the southwestern tip of the island, are the main attraction here, and are well worth a visit, although getting ashore can be tricky in a swell.

Gorda Sound, on the northern side of the island, is a well-protected anchorage and there are also pontoon moorings at Leverick Bay and The Bitter End if you feel the need to tie-up to something solid. There are reefs a-plenty around Gorda Sound, but with an experienced skipper at the helm, this need not concern you one iota. Indeed, with Gerry at the helm, Crystal producing culinary miracles in the galley, and Susanna ensuring a cold drink is never more than an arm’s length away, life on board Viaggio is pretty sweet. The only thing you have to worry about is in which of the dozens of deserted bays of clear blue water you will take your first swim of the day. Hmmm... decisions, decisions!


Running back down the north side of the island chain takes you past Great Camanoe and Guana, and it’s worth stopping in at marina Cay and Trellis Bay, particularly the latter where



Moored outside Sydney's on Jost van Dyke

you’ll find The Last Resort on Bellamy Cay, a venerable and hugely entertaining BVI’s institution. The north side of Tortola is very beautiful, but secure anchorages (other than Cane Garden Bay) are scarce so most boats push on to Great Harbour on Jost van Dyke, and an evening at Foxes, another legendary BVI beach bar/restaurant. Or, if you prefer something a little less rowdy, Sydney’s in Little Harbour does excellent local cuisine and you can tie-up right outside.

The BVIs are one of the most popular charter destinations in the world, and with very good reason. The gentle trade winds make it great for sailing, but not too rough for motor cruising, and breezes ensure it’s rarely stiflingly hot. The infrastructure is also perfect for boating, with excellent facilities even for very big boats. While US\$30,000 a week for six of you isn’t exactly small-change, it is nonetheless a remarkably good price for what you get – a good sized boat for six people, the undivided attention of an excellent crew, and some of the most beautiful boating scenery in the world. What more could you ask for?

Virgin Traders are the Horizon distributors for the Caribbean and will be happy to sell you a boat for your own use, for chartering, or for both. Go to www.virgintraders.com for details and contact numbers. 

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