

Devil's Bay marks the south end  
of the famous beaches on Virgin  
Gorda known as The Baths.

article by Bret Gilliam

# BVI: Tranquil virgins

photography by Bret Gilliam, Ethan Gordon and Maurício Handler



BVI: Tranquil virgins

Back in 1971, I cruised into the British Virgin Islands and dropped anchor at Norman Island, just off the famous caves that inspired Robert Lewis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. I never dreamed at the time, that over the next two decades, these islands would become a second home for me in the charter and dive industry.

My initial foray into diving exploration at the nearby pinnacles known as The Indians, left me profoundly impressed with the diversity of

the scenery of a time long past, while at the same time, chafing to see what splendors lurked just beyond the next harbor.

For me, the next harbor turned out to be the tiny four-acre resort island called Marina Cay. In those days, the hotel consisted of scattered A-frame cottages, each with its own deck and a devastatingly beautiful vista. The generator shut down right after dinner and it was strictly candles and oil lamps for the late

There was also an unequalled serenity to this island chain of mostly uninhabited islets, cays, and spectacular beaches that was at once breathtaking and tranquil.

marine life and radiant water. There was an unequalled serenity to this island chain of mostly uninhabited islets, cays, and spectacular beaches that was at once breathtaking and tranquil. Sort of a mixed high that left you exhausted from the singular pleasure of doing nothing but soaking in



Captain Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard, roamed the BVI in times past

night crowd. The resident manager, Joe Giacinto and I had met at a dive instructor program and we forged an enduring friendship that had me returning time and again.

For many, the British Virgins were an enigma. Hard to get to in those days by any conventional transportation and not a high rise hotel resort to be found when you finally did. Air service was spotty and something of an adventure in itself. I remember The Last Resort owner Tony Snell once commenting that the local airline had recently acquired some new aircraft. He then clarified that the planes were "new" only to them. But the circa 1940s DC-3s did yeoman's duty hauling the curious and clued-in visitors who immediately fell in love with the islands' charm and beauty. A burgeoning charter fleet prospered and eventually there were more boat bunks available than hotel beds by the early 1980s.

While the adjacent U.S. Virgin Islands staked their future on free port shopping, multiple cruise ship dockings per day, and towering columns of hotel and condo accommodations; their British counterparts watched from a discreet distance and made a conscious decision to stay "special." Yeah, nowadays you can actually make a phone call or send a fax and the cars turn on their headlights at night (well... most of the time). But you can still leave your hotel room or car unlocked and your camera unattended at the beach and know your stuff will be there when you eventually wander back.

Cows, goats and horses share the dirt roads with cars that could never pass inspection anywhere else but Mississippi. And everyone knows each other and always says hello or stops

Mauricio Handler



The 90-foot schooner *Ocean Star* under sail in Drake's Channel

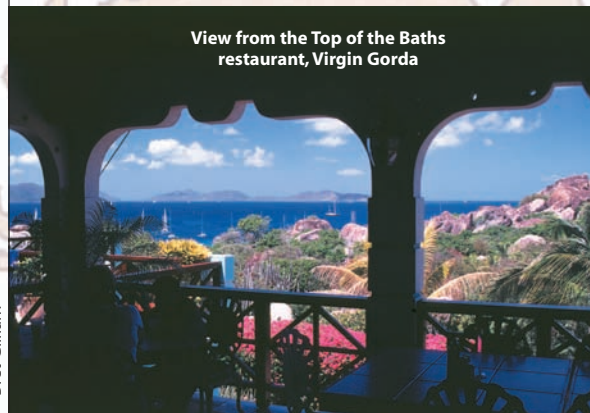


Lynn Hendrickson framed with silverside school in the Dog Islands



Bret Gilliam

View from the Top of the Baths restaurant, Virgin Gorda



for a chat. Visitors are welcome and the locals take a somewhat bemused interest in making you feel at home. Coupled with some of the most gorgeous secluded beaches as well as tasteful hotels and guest houses to fit any budget, the BVI has prospered in its own way, in its own time.

That's my kind of place. Throw in some excellent diving and it's a formula sure to please. I still go back and love every minute of my time

there. Recently this March 2003, I was back there preparing this article. My old buddy Joe Giacinto whisked me around in his 40-foot custom catamaran capable of cruising at 30 knots. It was a quantum leap, by comparison, from the 20 years I spent there previously moseying around at a snail's pace of 10 knots.

## The Old Days

In 1971 when I was first visiting, even the main island of Tortola was largely undeveloped. Things pretty well shut down by the time it was dark. The center of the BVI universe was a handful of buildings "downtown" a lively new center of commerce that was emerging on the west side of the harbor, nestled around a couple of docks that housed the sailing fleet of a startup bareboat company called The Moorings. They had a score of Out Island 41 sailboats that tourists could charter and sail themselves. At the time, it was pretty much considered a far-fetched business premise. Equally dubious was the motivation of a Texan named George Marler. He moved in next door and opened a little dive operations center to service the bareboat customers, as well as the occasional hotel guest that might want a look under the water after the novelty of sitting by the island's only pool, wore off.

There was already one dive operator in the BVI, the legendary Bert Kilbride, who based

himself up in North Sound in a house perched precariously on a tiny spire of coral and leftover glacier droppings called Saba Rock. Bert was the acknowledged king of diving and the local wisdom pretty much figured that there wasn't enough business for the two operations to survive. (Over the years, both went on to prosper and witness another dozen or so operators come and go.)

Across from Kilbride's tiny abode was another new business aptly named The Bitter End. It was pretty much the last place of civilization in the BVI before jumping off east to Africa. They also had a bareboat or two and some daysailers, but their claim to fame was a great restaurant and a jolly bar located in the middle of absolutely nowhere for cruising yachts to visit while enjoying the protected harbor. A few bungalows for guests were hung on the side of the hill. There was even a huge dockside fish pen built around a floating dock with a few reef sharks inside to thrill the yachties when they tied up their dinghies. A bigger thrill was achieved more often than not when one or two inebriated souls were pushed into the "shark tank" on their way back from the bar. The mad scrambles to escape certain death from the three-foot docile predators was a spectacle of great occasion for onlookers who then had a lifetime of war stories to relate. Of course, the poor reef sharks were equally terrified and were regularly liberated by sympathizers.

By the mid-1970s progress began to creep into the BVI. More hotel properties went up and a landfill project reclaimed a lot of Roadtown Harbor for new government offices, businesses and two new marinas. The Moorings abandoned their old haunts and moved to the east side of the landfill-created harbor at the foot of the







Cooper Island beach scene



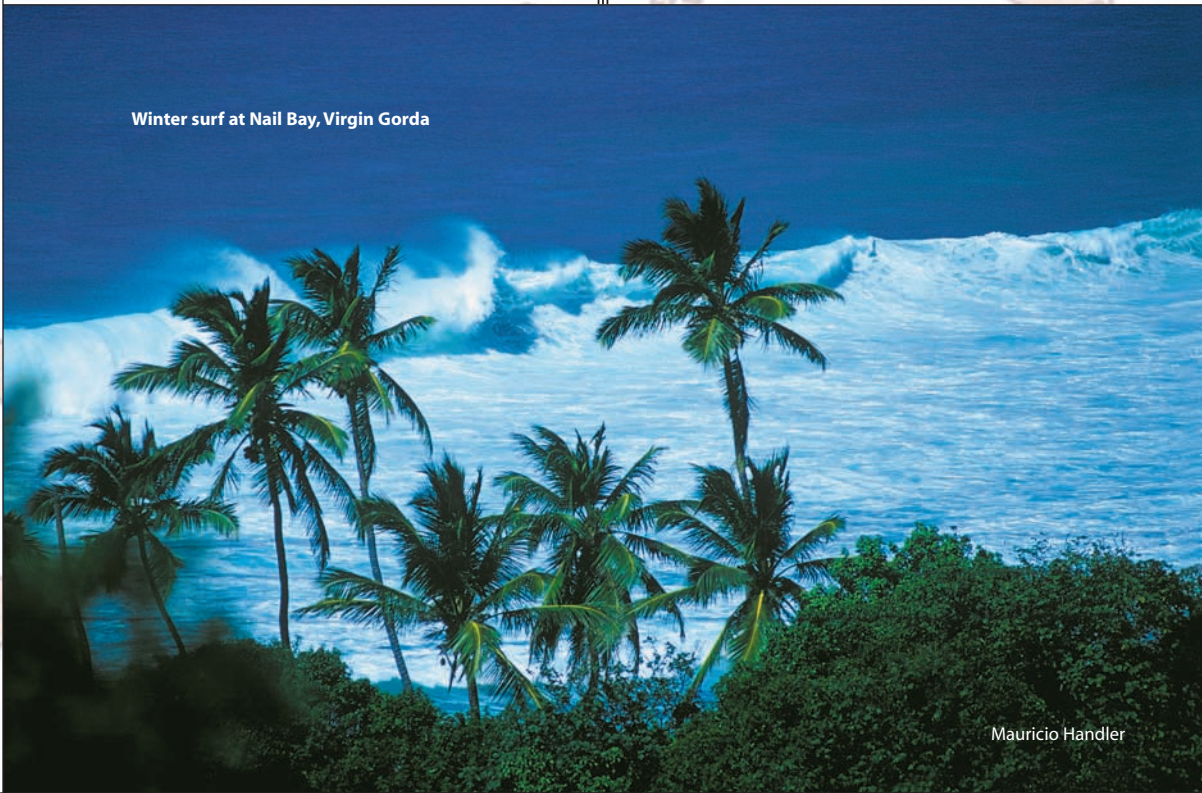
Bret Gilliam



mountains while a slightly more upscale operation appeared on the west side called Village Cay Marina. I made arrangements to keep one of my 90-foot motor yachts there, as it offered fresh water (a commodity worth more than gold it seemed then) and shore power along with easy access to new

provisioning services. One Saturday in 1975 we were celebrating the end of a three-week charter by blasting some new music from a recently discovered, obscure artist while we washed down the vessel. A friend from the US had brought down a home-made tape and described the singer as "sort of country/folk/rock with an island flavor." The name scrawled on the tape jacket looked like "buffet." We weren't sure if that was the artist's name or where our friend had just had lunch. But the music was good and it went well with the work at hand. Truth be told, not all the ladies in my crew were fully dressed as they labored under the noonday sun sudsing down the decks and windows, and within a short time quite an impromptu party

was raging on the end of A Dock. A few other charter crews joined in the merriment and by late afternoon things began to resemble a full-on dance fest of wild abandon fueled by rum and a certain herb donated by some mysterious characters just back from Jamaica. All the while, the chorus of "Mother, mother ocean, I heard your call!" jammed from the speakers and beckoned more partiers to join us in our revelry. The most popular line, of course, was, "Yes, I am a pirate, two hundred years too late!" and every time that came around nearly four dozen semi-clad partiers lustily sang out in loud unison. Joe Giacinto's brother, Mike, arrived about then with a keg of British Double Diamond beer, having heard about the party all the way over on Marina Cay. The 275-pound ex-Notre Dame football lineman hoisted the keg on one shoulder and stepped aboard to appreciative cheers. The sudden infusion of a fresh beer supply effectively killed any remaining hope of sanity or restraint. When two guys arrived via hang gliders and crash-landed on the upper deck next to the hot tub, I knew the guest list was wide open. By dusk, we were gearing up for the long haul as the crowd continued to grow and the level of debauchery ratcheted up considerably. Finally the marina manager, a German who had his sense of humor surgically removed at birth,



Winter surf at Nail Bay, Virgin Gorda

Mauricio Handler

Brewer's Bay Point, north shore Tortola



Mauricio Handler









Yachts at anchor off the Treasure Caves on Norman Island

Mauricio Handler

arrived to announce that we were all being evicted for being way too loud and in violation of whatever local laws governing nudity and controlled substances were then in existence. And he wasn't too happy about the two hang gliders now draped across the afterdeck of another yacht tied up adjacent to us. He was probably right... but his edict was not greeted favorably by the Jamaicans, who promptly picked him up and tossed him in the harbor while the boisterous onlookers sang *Lili Marlene* in bad Rhineland accents.

Two local policemen who were partying with us and were stripped down to not much more than their formal cocked hats and red-striped uniform pants counseled a discreet departure. So we loaded up the entire party and got underway for the isolation of Great Harbor (off Peter Island) where the celebration eventually ended with the sunrise and more than a dozen other yachts rafted up. It was like that back then, a good party attracted other boats like sharks to a blood trail.

One weary guest came around and pressed a handful of cassette tapes into my hand as he was leaving. He said since we enjoyed this music so much we should have some more of his work. I looked down at the stained tape cover and peered intently at the slight blond guy in front of me with a bushy mustache and Corona Beer T-shirt. Yeah, it was the same guy on the album cover. Jimmy Buffett had infiltrated us at a time when none of us even knew who he was.

Buffett was to become a regular figure in the BVI for years to come aboard his Cheoy Lee sailing vessel *Euphoria*. He made a practice of dropping in on local bars and parties with his guitar to raise the level of professionalism and general level of chaos. Any Buffett fan will recognize the BVI's influence on him during that era. The song *Please Don't Say Manana If You Don't Mean It* is a veritable BVI name-dropper, working in popular anchorages and even the local rum maker (Callwood's Rum) in Cane Garden Bay as parts of his lyrics. Look for the chorus that begins:

*Women and water are in short supply,  
There's not enough dope for us all to get high...*

Yeah, those were the days. Buffett went on to immortality a few years later with Margaritaville, but still kept his unpretentious persona as he drifted between the islands... just another sailor looking for a good time with friendly folks who adopted him as the poet laureate of the boating

life. As he warned in one line, "Don't ever forget that you just might end up in one of my songs!"

Enter Maturity, Sort Of

Over the years, the unbridled partying attributed to the yacht charter crews of the 70s and early 80s subsided as the decorum levels elevated. The spirit of my era however, has been kept alive by a local known only as Bomba who tends bar within a faceplant of the ocean on Tortola's north shore. The full moon parties at the Bomba Shack are indeed the stuff of legends. Initially spawned as a watering hole for surfers and for the occasional innocent who might stumble in, the Shack has grown to landmark status. It now attracts all ages and, I suspect, more than few who were featured in the original *Star Wars* bar scene. It's not for the faint of heart or for the easily offended. But to paraphrase what the wise man once said, "A fool and his money are some party!" Similarly, the New Year's Eve celebrations at Foxy's on Jost Van Dyke have served to kill more than a few brain cells over the years.

And let's not forget that at The Last Resort, until just recently, owner Tony Snell allowed his pet donkey, Chocolate, to drink beer with the



The infamous Bomba Shack on Virgin Gorda

Mauricio Handler





Ethan Gordon

Alex Dressler on the wreck of the *Chikuzen*, a 246-foot refrigeration ship sunk north of the Dog Islands in 1981





Alex Dressler with the massive propeller of the *Chikuzen* wreck

Ethan Gordon

guests... in the dining room! I've always viewed that indulgence as the ultimate social equalizer. Tony, another relocated Brit, rose to fame as sort of an infamously schnockered cabaret lounge singer specializing in fractured song lyrics of popular tunes re-worked for the yachting audience. Stop by and be treated to such standards as *You Picked A Fine Time To Heave Up, Lucille* or *Puff, the Tragic Faggot*. It's an evening of entertainment served up to scores of cheering boaters who know a diva when they see one... or at least a suitable substitute for *Mr. Ed*.

But Back to the Diving

It's not often that you hear the BVI mentioned in the world's top ten destinations. The sites are varied and uncrowded. The island offers everything from fantastic wrecks, sea mounts and steep pinnacles, to coral gardens and the labyrinth cave/cavern formations at Virgin Gorda's famous southwest shore.

My guess is that the BVI diving reputation ended up taking a back seat through no fault of its own. It's a simple case of having a buffet plate too full. While other Caribbean destinations lack the myriad unspoiled islands with soaring mountain peaks and pristine beaches, the BVI are almost blessed with too much of a good thing. In other places, diving is the only reason to be there. In the BVI, you have a more varied list of options.

When Hollywood went shopping for a real wreck to be the star of *The Deep* in 1976, the producers



A resident Nassau Grouper on the *Rhone* wreck

Bret Gilliam





Jo Robinson and Charles Caston enjoy the diving near The Baths at Virgin Gorda





The popular Soper's Hole yacht facilities on Tortola's west end.

Mauricio Handler

immediately chose the wreck of the *Rhone* off Salt Island. Sunk in a savage hurricane in 1867, the wreckage is scattered in three sections with depths ranging from 20 to 90 feet. The intact bow section, nearly 150-feet long, rests on its starboard side in the sand and is the deepest portion of the dive. Swimming through the jagged opening where the ship broke apart near midships allows the diver to explore the interior safely with easy access to exits along its length and excellent penetrating ambient light.

The midsection showcases upright columns of framing, a massive boiler, and even a row of large wrenches now frozen in time with the coral. Clouds of fish swim freely throughout the scene while friendly grouper and yellowtail hover nearby begging for handouts.

The stern lies against the gradual slope and nearly breaks the water next to the rocks. The 18-foot bronze propeller dwarfs divers that swim through the rudder bay to explore the caverns beneath the hulk. If you close your eyes and concentrate, you'll have little trouble conjuring up the exotic image of Jackie Bissett in her infamous T-shirt right here in the same spot over 20 years ago. You also might still find one of Robert Shaw's empty Scotch bottles stashed away in a nook. (The cantankerous actor who bedeviled the movie staff with his notorious drinking habits.)

In the early 1980s the *Chikuzen*, a huge refrigeration ship, sank about 10 miles north of the Dog Islands. She now lies upright in about 80-feet of water and has become home to immense schools of both pelagic and bottom fish that cruise her expansive remains. Since the *Chikuzen* is exposed to the north swell, access to

her can be limited in the rougher winter months.

While the wrecks have earned raves from a host of reviewers, a variety of great sites are to be found just about anywhere you cruise. There's wonderful snorkeling throughout the islands as well. At Norman Island, thought to be the inspiration for Robert Lewis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, you can swim through shimmering schools of silversides that cloak the entrance to three major caverns. Here it's purported that a repository of pirate's loot existed back in the days when Capt. Edward Teach, alias Blackbeard, roamed the islands. Only a mile or so away in the open ocean lies a submerged pinnacle known as Santa Monica Rock, so named for the 17th century sailing vessel that foundered on her. The site abounds in reef life and pelagics and could easily take several days of diving to cover.

For the more leisurely paced, another set of pinnacles known as The Indians beckon in depths of less than 60 feet in the protected lee of Peter Island. Hop-scotching a few more miles brings us to a shoal between Peter Island and Salt Island called Blonde Rock that harbors superb fish schools and legions of lobster. Even a jewfish or two have been spotted at this popular site near the *Rhone*.

The Dog Islands lying to the west of Virgin Gorda offer a plethora of caves, caverns and reefs in isolated cays with no inhabitants except nature's own. Another great deepwater site called Tow Rock boasts one of the largest resident schools of barracuda you'll see anywhere in the Caribbean along with scores of big grouper and snapper. All this in less than 110-feet of water.

Every visitor to the BVI has to make a



Emerson Mulford on the magnificent Aneгада reef

Bret Gilliam





Cathryn Castle at Tow Rock  
in the Dog Islands

Bret Gilliam

pilgrimage to The Baths, a mysterious phenomena of granite boulders supposedly dropped at the end of the Ice Age when the big melt kicked in. While there are endless theories as to the geological evolution that produced these magnificent structures surrounded by stunning beaches and transparent water, there's no argument that the south end of Virgin Gorda is one of the loveliest spots on this earth, above and below the water.

Diving can be accommodated by liveaboard vessel (the venerable *Cuan Law*, a massive sailing trimaran that is the largest of its kind in service in the world – [cuanlaw@surfbvi.com](mailto:cuanlaw@surfbvi.com)) or by the many dive operators that are happy to take you from their docks or rendezvous with your chartered yacht anywhere you're anchored. Most charter operations can set you up with scuba gear and a detailed chart series that will let you dive on your own if you like. The popular Virgin Trader Yacht Charters have even added a special fleet of diesel powered catamarans designed specifically for diving that can accommodate up to four couples in splendor... available for bareboat charter or with a captain. I've chartered their more upscale Horizon 56 motor yachts two successive years now and found these well-appointed yachts one of the best ways to get around.

The diving is good, the sites varied (except for drop-offs), and the marine life abundant. Combined with the above water beauty of the scores of private coves found in the surrounding cays and outer islands, the BVI offer the best of both worlds to divers and cruisers.

Yes, there are now plenty of hotels catering to every taste and budget, but for me, the only way to truly fully appreciate these islands is by boat. There simply is no finer or more accessible cruising to be found in the western hemisphere. Every day brings a new anchorage with a new vista and if you don't like your neighbors, the next harbor is only a few miles away.

Taking Leave Reluctantly

Completing my nostalgic tour, I had the chance to stay again at my old favorite, Marina Cay, now operated by the Pusser's Rum group. This delightful island has benefited from enhanced landscaping, a large open-air dining room located right at beachside, an on-site Dive BVI facility, and newly constructed hotel suites with the same great views... only now with king beds, refrigerators, and (gasp!) hot water in the spacious bathrooms.



Rainbow over Anegada

Mauricio Handler

Traveling back to Virgin Gorda in excess of 30 knots, I reflected on the modern conveniences that had come to my old cruising grounds. But when we climbed into Giacinto's van at the marina and had to chase three chickens and a goat from the interior, I knew that things were still the same. Sunset viewed from a high vantage point above the granite boulders of The Baths confirmed that all was right in the BVI cosmos again.

Progress had stuck its head in the tent, but thankfully the rest of the camel remained securely tied up outside. 🐪

The BVI's Top Ten, Don't Miss List!

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|--|---|
| 1) New Year's Eve at Foxy's on Jost Van Dyke                             | 6) The beaches & snorkeling at The Baths & Devil's Bay, Virgin Gorda        |
| 2) The Bomba Shack's full moon party on Tortola's north shore            | 7) Anything with local mushrooms in it                                      |
| 3) Chez Bamboo Restaurant, Spanish Town, Virgin Gorda (best food in BVI) | 8) Arriving via one of the local passenger ferries                          |
| 4) Frozen rum drinks at any of the Pusser's Rum bars                     | 9) Bottle of Callwood's rum, Cane Garden Bay, Tortola                       |
| 5) Diving the wreck of the <i>Rhone</i>                                  | 10) Tony Snell's cabaret act at The Last Resort in Trellis Bay, Beef Island |

*Bret Gilliam is Publisher of Fathoms. He owned a diving operation and large motor yacht charter business in the Virgin Islands from 1971 to 1988. He returns annually in search of Buffett's lost shaker of salt.*