

**DOUBLE ISSUE: VALUE-ADDED BAREBOATING**

# CHARTER '92

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# SAIL

MARCH 1992

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# “YOU’RE BLOCKING MY SUN”—CRUISING WITH THE IN-LAWS

On an off-season bareboat charter to *magnifique* Martinique and neighboring St. Lucia, two sets of parents successfully debunk the in-law myth

Story and photographs by S. Scott Coe

I’ve found Quasimodo, I thought. I stuck my head through the deck hatch and peered at the silhouette of the fishing village of Petit Anse d’Arlet, Martinique, gradually taking shape in the predawn light. Near the shore, standing reverent guard over a mosaic of pastel storefronts and garishly painted fishing boats, was a small Roman Catholic church. And inside was an all-too-ambitious bellringer, who’d been at it for what seemed like the better part of the morning. I pulled myself up through the hatch and watched the sun cut a swath through the twisted palm trees along the beach. Not long after, a rooster joined in the fracas, and after that, a few local dogs—a rural symphony, island style.

We were two days out of Trois Islets and Fort de France, Martinique, where we’d picked up our cutter-rigged Gib’ Sea 522, *Hermes*, from Kiriacoulis Charters. Jo Russell of Russell Yacht Charters arranged the boat for us and whetted our appetites with stories of glorious gardens, exquisite food, and rich local color.

A popular start-off point for chartering, Martinique is nonetheless frequently missed as a cruising ground, as charterers speed south toward the Grenadines and less crowded sailing. With my wife, Kellie, and me were both sets of our parents. We had sailors and nonsailors

aboard and our plan was to take it easy and not do the seven-islands-in-seven-days marathon that is easy to get caught up in. We purposely chose a cruising area that encourages shore activities—exploring, shopping, eating—to calm hard-earned sealegs.

Martinique is part tropical hideaway and part Paris. The fragrance of freshly baked bread drifts all the way to the beach on the morning breeze. Quaint streets are washed clean by frequent showers. The people, influenced by both French style and manner, live in

At anchor beneath the Pitons (left) and the whole crew, on foot in the rain forest on Martinique (below)





well-kept villages dwarfed by the towering green spires of dormant, and not-so-dormant, volcanoes. It is paradise with class, casual chic.

Now we sat at anchor, alone, off a picturesque little fishing village, the only noise around us the raspy sputter of an old outboard on a dugout fishing boat full of local men. This is a busy island, yet we rarely passed another charterboat. We started to get the idea that we were on to something. Pre-season sailing has its advantages.

**I**NITIALY, THE THOUGHT OF HEADING TO the Caribbean before the first snow even hit New England seemed to me like opening Christmas presents in October. After all, wasn't chartering invented to relieve the frustrated pangs of an overdue spring? It was when we checked into flights, charter prices, and the Caribbean calendar of events that the prospect of an off-season charter became attractive. Besides, when it comes right down to it, you can think of some mildly sensible justification for heading to the islands at any time of year—not just when you're stuck up to your kneecaps in slush—especially when you hang good sailing, bathwater-clear snorkeling, and some dandy French pastries in the balance.

With the bells still going strong, I rowed to the beach in the tender and followed my nose through the village to a *patisserie*, searching for pastries. In keeping with French tradition, we'd decided our staple diet for the week should be fresh baguettes and tarts, assorted cheeses, and a wide variety of wines. Life, after all, is tough for the charterer. Not only did our menu taste great, but it limited galley time with easy prep and cleanup.

After an unhurried morning of exploring, we hauled anchor and slipped out of the harbor heading

south. A warm breeze, rich with the smell of wet forest, pushed *Hermes* out toward open water. A few other boats dotted the horizon, but for the most part, we were, again, alone. We reached off to the southwest, away from the island and a cloud bank that hung around the in-

land peaks, and unfurled the genoa. Soon we were speeding along at close to 9 knots as flying fish skidded across the water out of our way. My father, Dean, and I took turns driving and tweaking sails, competing for high mark on the speedo. Kellie and her dad, Rich, dangled legs off the bow and scanned the horizon for dolphins. Moms Connie and Ley spread towels and were soon doing the "waltz of the deck potato."

By lunch Diamond Rock loomed ahead to port. We hardened up and went in for a closer look. I tried to imagine sailing past this 600-foot Caribbean Gibraltar 200 years ago, when Napoleon-led French forces battled the English sailors who had declared the rock a British sloop-of-war and manned its outcrops with blazing cannons. With the easterly still building, we tacked toward shore and slipped into the harbor at Marin a few hours later.

**S**HORTLY BEFORE SUNSET, KELLIE AND I took the dinghy ashore to explore the town. We picked through a pile of broken conch shells discarded next to a row of orange-and-blue fishing boats, searching for a keeper. In the distance I could hear what sounded like the steady syncopation of a snare drum. It grew louder as we headed across the street into a cemetery of whitewashed mausoleums adorned with island flowers and burning candles.

From around the bend ahead of us, several lines of old men, dressed in crisp, if weathered, French military regalia, marched in front of a small brass band. Behind us townspeople grouped along the edges of the main boulevard to watch the parade. We were soon drawn into a swarm of children running along next to the band. We clapped and cheered for we knew not what, but enjoyed ourselves

**Martinique is known for its French influence and spotless appearance**

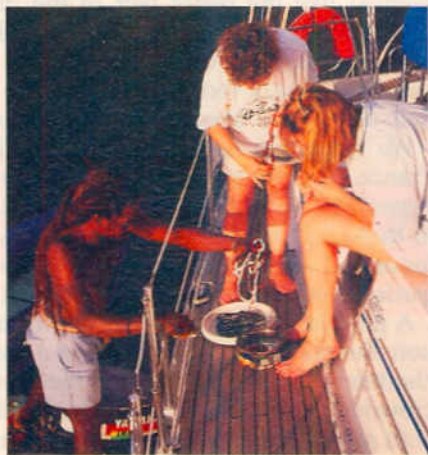
just the same. It was not until a week later that I found our impromptu celebration was, in fact, Armistice Day, and the masses we cheered on, though thousands of miles from mainland France, were doing their part for *la patrie*.

The "language barrier" only adds to the romance of the island—and to the adventure if you don't speak it. On one shopping excursion we perused the market for fresh fruit and bargain mementos. I'm sure the prices were great for the practiced barterer, but without French we were limited to hand gestures and frowns. In the end I think we paid roughly US\$17 for one small green coconut. We promptly bought a French phrasebook. The best buys were not in the crowded markets (though they shouldn't be missed for color and excitement), but in side-street shops and from boats that came alongside when we were at anchor.

From Marin, we continued south, reaching Marigot Bay, at English-speaking St. Lucia, at midday. After clearing customs we motorsailed a few miles down the coast to Anse Cochon for some snorkeling on the largest continuous finger coral reef I've ever seen. A selection of hand-carved coconut sculptures, fresh avocados, and shiny seashells soon dotted *Hermes's* rail, offered for sale by bright-eyed boys. When asked if they'd come back later, most simply replied, "No, mon. I'm just passin' tru." To where, we wondered.

One brightly colored boat, aptly named *Brilliant*, pulled alongside; its driver, Desmond, clad in tattered

**Ley and Kellie inspect island jewelry with a waterborne salesman**



shorts and Ray Bans, asked where we were headed for the night. We told him we planned to drop the hook in Soufrière. He beamed and said he would be there to guide us in and deliver our stern line to shore for a good price.

**A** FEW HOURS LATER WE ROUNDED the point off Soufrière and made for the northern end of the harbor, off the Hummingbird Yacht Club. A blob of orange and blue streaked toward us from the beach. It was Desmond. We anchored stern-to in the deep water along shore, and Desmond tied us off to a coconut tree for a previously agreed upon EC\$5 (Eastern Caribbean currency, EC\$2.6 equals US\$1.).

The beach was alive with a pack of lean youths playing a bastardized version of soccer, which consisted of much splashing, yelling, kicking, and an occasional back flip by the bored goalies. We admired the athletic talent of the young men. Desmond, who insisted we were there to "be niceen it up," filled us in on the attractions around Soufrière, including a waterfall warmed by the heat of a dormant volcano and the baths at Diamond Falls, where for a few dollars you can soak in bubbling mineral water, surrounded by tropical gardens.

Soon two boys on a battered Sunfish approached, paddling with broken palm fronds. One of the boys, Vernon, presented me with a business card that stated that he was available for "Information and Sightseeing. Ask for me by name." I admired his resolve, and, for the next two days, Vernon and his partner, Joseph, proved invaluable. One late afternoon, Vernon took my dad into town after supplies. The stores were closed, but Vernon led him through a maze of side streets, collecting fresh fruit, beer, and even ice, and then helped cart everything back to the boat.

Content, we stayed at Soufrière for a few days, spending time anchored off the village and then by ourselves, nestled in under the Pitons. We explored ashore, hiking into the rain forest, walking the beaches, and searching out new stretches of reef.

The underwater ledges along the west coast of St. Lucia follow an angle of descent similar to the towering cliffs above, which is one of the reasons some anchorages require the use of a shoreline as well as a stern anchor. The reef on the northern rim

of the harbor has an outflow of hot volcanic water that keeps the coral and sponge growth in competition with the rain forests for abundance. The color and form of this underwater jungle easily make up for the slight lack of fish caused by near-constant subsistence fishing from the villages.

Heading back north, we were close on the 25-knot breeze. Seas built in the open water between St. Lucia and Martinique, and we were soon pounding through 6-to-8-footers, screaming like banshees and taking warm salt spray in the face—much to the dismay of the three women, who had as much trouble keeping their books dry as they did their towels under them.

**T**HAT NIGHT WE DINED IN A TINY BEACHSIDE restaurant with more lizards on hand than people and enjoyed the undivided attention of the owner and cook.

*"Plus de poulet, s'il vous plaît."*

*"Oui, monsieur."*

And I thought only celebrities got to pick their tables in French restaurants. We feasted, family-style, on grilled chicken and onions, Creole rice, hot bread, and plenty of wine until we were pleasantly bulbous—and all for under US\$10 a head. Afterward, the owner brought out a bottle of his finest local rum and poured us

each a generous shot. Glasses were raised and toasts made. And five minutes later I was asleep, just another tourist drop-kicked by a rum about as close to Captain Morgan's as diesel fuel.

As we approached Trois Islet, on our last day, I watched a group of men on shore methodically hauling in a large fishing net with the guidance of a man in a boat shouting a variety of unintelligible French-patois slurs. I realized that all week I hadn't once hoped it was snowing back home. In fact, I hadn't even thought about back home. It wasn't the dead of winter. But we were probably more relaxed now than if we'd come in the busy season. The Caribbean, after all, is as much an attitude as it is warm trade winds and multicolored sunsets. It's that unhurried nonchalance that makes the islands perfect for the rest-hungry vacationer, no matter what the season.

The next morning, as we slopped salty clothes back into our seabags for the trip north, a tropical depression common to the region rolled in. Not the kind that brings with it foul weather, though—it was simply a reluctance on our part to leave that state of mind that is the Caribbean.



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