



Liveaboard sailing school in the Grenadines teaches a sailor's daughter how much she knows—and doesn't

Barefoot and

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ALLISON KORNET

Smiling

IT USED TO BE THAT WHEN SOMEONE asked if I knew how to sail, I'd dodge the question: "My mother does..."

Did I know how to sail? "Of course!" my mother would say. I met the pre-teen requirements for membership in our family—white and then red flag at our local yacht club. This meant I properly knew sheepshanks from bowlines and could navigate my training boat through the moorings in our little harbor.

Two decades later the question came up again, but my childhood experience gave me only one confidence: In the world of sailing, I would never know enough. Fortunately, Barefoot Yacht Charters offered a cruise that was also a course.

When I arrived at Barefoot's bright-yellow perch over Blue Lagoon, a sparkling little anchorage on St. Vincent's southeast coast, I saw the sunny side of insecurity. Never had ignorance promised so much bliss.

The cruise became an adventure before we even left the dock. Three others who were to spend the week learning to sail aboard *The Three C's*, Barefoot's Beneteau 39, dropped out at the last minute, leaving me, the skipper, and a fully provisioned boat. Since our itinerary and the instruction depended on having several hands on deck, Barefoot filled out the crew with Steve and Suzanne, 50-something companions who appeared out of semi-

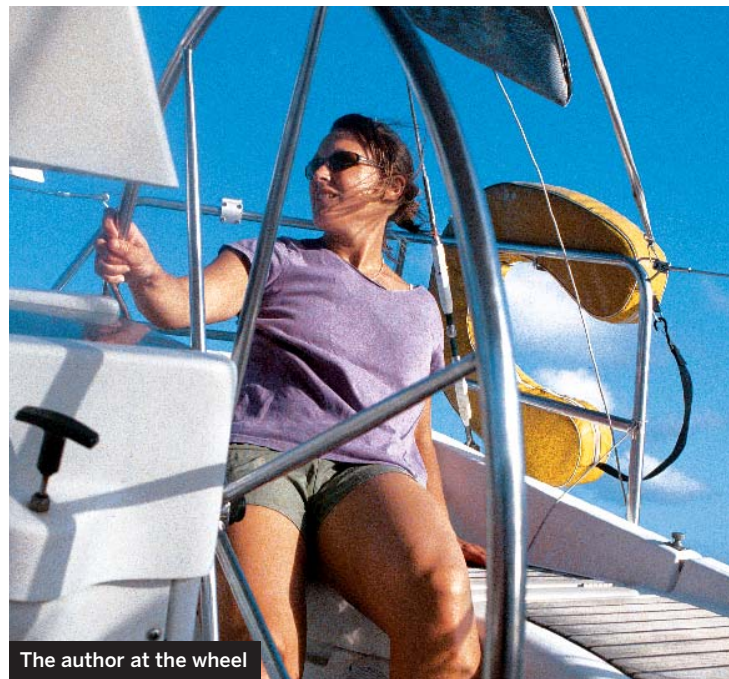
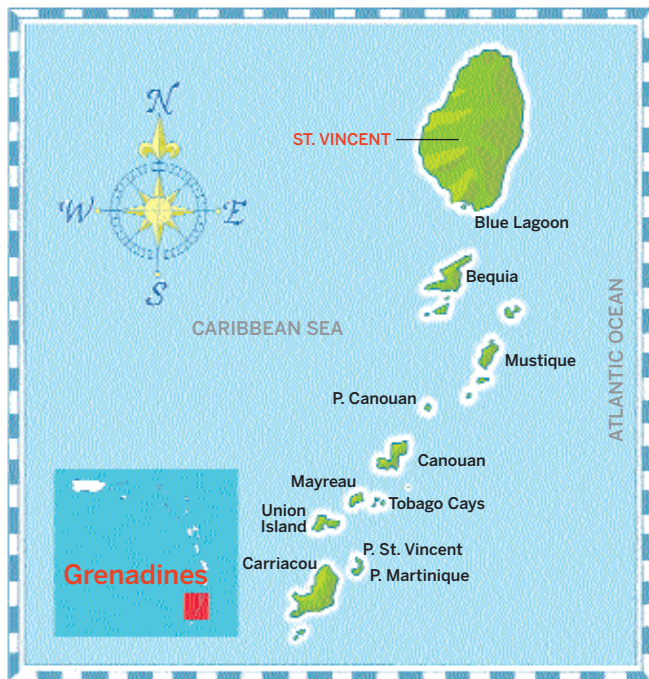
retirement from the nearby island of Bequia. "We're open to whatever," they said. Both had been guests on other people's boats, but neither had paid much attention to how those boats were operated.

"I prefer the lounging around and drinking part," Steve said, "but I do what I'm told."

We bought our ASA books that day (Steve and Suzanne Level 1, me Levels 1 through 3, just in case), carted soft drinks down to *The Three C's*, ran an onboard equipment check, and met Frank, our skipper—a math teacher from Maine in a former, colder life. Then the four of us motored out of Blue Lagoon, negotiated the color-coded halyard and sheets, raised a reefed main and the genny, and set off on



(Above) Our classroom, Barefoot Yacht Charters's *The Three C's*. (Left) The rest of the class, Suzanne and Steve



The author at the wheel

“THIS IS A SCHOOL BUS, NOT A SPORTSCAR,” FRANK TOLD SUZANNE

a beam reach for Mustique's Britannia Bay.

"This is a school bus, not a sportscar," Frank told Suzanne as she oversteered the rollers. We were crossing the Bequia Channel, and the currents pushing through it were strong and lurchy. Steve went below for the Dramamine after Frank explained our first navigational challenge: getting past Bequia's "bullet," a jagged thumb of land where converging currents can suck unsuspecting vessels off course. We did just fine. Frank had us undo the reef, got us on a healthy run, and by dusk had put us in calmer waters.

When we motored into Britannia Bay, Suzanne was so intent on her orders to head up, she entirely missed Steve's and my first coordinated efforts to tame and catch the cloth. "When did you guys take the sails down?" she asked.

In the morning Frank and I ventured ashore for ice at Basil's Bar and chocolate croissants at Sweetie Pie's, two lively spots just steps from the dinghy dock. After our excursion it was easy to take the Zodiac back

and hunker down for our first class. Suzanne and Steve were having coffee in the cockpit, already reviewing what we'd need to do to depart the harbor. Frank took the opportunity to introduce us to our ASA logbooks and the material for each course level. Basic sailing vocabulary came back to me quickly, like the names of gone-but-not-forgotten grade-school teachers. For Steve and Suzanne, though, it was unnecessary code. Suzanne sensibly preferred to call luffing "fluffing," and when *The Three C's* gybed, Suzanne herself "jived."

In fact we did a lot of jiving on day 2, since our goal was to shoot down to the Tobago Cays with the wind at our stern. During that first full day under way, we watched the Windex at the top of the mast, craning our necks to read and report our points of sail and jockey the lines to get the telltales streaming. Huge rollers rose up against our stern on the broad reach toward Canouan, and, at the helm for much of the stretch, I grew accustomed to posting on the back of the sea.

We finished the last leg to the Cays in time

to safely navigate a slow approach to our anchorage, an exquisite spot accessed from the back side of a litter of islets inside the arc of a horseshoe reef. It was a challenging place to drop our anchor. The popularity of the Cays made for tight conditions, and though the reef calmed the currents, wind still whipped in from Africa over 2,400 miles of open ocean. Just when we'd picked a spot, judged how much rode to let out, and decided our boat would not swing too close to the neighbors (a topless couple whose bath we'd already disturbed), the windlass went haywire, stuck in a mechanical spin. Native vendors came over in their skiffs to hang onto our lifelines and offer advice—in exchange for E.C. dollars, of course—but Frank instead showed us how to unscrew the plate and disconnect the wiring by hand.

Of course, nothing is a nuisance for long when you're diving into an ocean you can see your toes through. We closed out that second day like 8-year-olds in a backyard pool, only the water was fresher, the beauty more boundless, and the feeling—after a day out "working" in the elements—much more rewarding.

At dawn on day 3, I watched two

windsurfers rocket around the anchorage until Frank came up to review navigation rules, hypothermia stages and treatment, and precautions in reduced visibility. Steve and Suzanne joined us for more keelboat discussion, and then we celebrated with a splash into a fantastic snorkeling spot. The water was warm enough to explore at length, shallow enough to skim along the reefs without losing sight of the ocean floor, and clear enough to see tropical fish in every Crayola hue—teal-and-pink parrotfish, plaid-and-brown pencil-like coronets, yellow-tailed black angels, and schools of electric-blue neons.

Connecting with the rainbow below animated our surface experience that much more when we set out west for the tip of Mayreau and then swung south between Palm and Union islands, scanning the horizon for the beacons that would keep us off Newlands Reef. Our goal was to reach an anchorage at Petit St. Vincent by sailing down the Martinique Channel and “shooting the gap” between Mopion and Pinese, two tiny islands whose white-sand tips form a 200-yard gateway to PSV and neighboring Petit Martinique.

Two hundred yards may seem like a lot, but it’s not when you’re driving a keelboat over a reef for which you have renewed appreciation. “Shooting the gap” meant pass-



Model boats for sale in Bequia



Mustique's best-known bar

ing through the sweet spot where the water was deep enough, but the trick was finding it on a good point of sail. With Frank at my side, I ran this obstacle course from the helm, steadying *The Three C's* on a beam reach. More than the man-overboard and heaving-to maneuvers we practiced later that afternoon, charging through that gate made me a sailor again. That evening, over drinks in PSV's one hillside bar, I gazed across the water at Grenada and tried to remember what I'd miss if I pulled a Frank and ditched New England for the tropics.

On the morning of day 4 I answered 135 Basic Keelboat questions in 30 minutes and wanted to tackle the next batch for Level

2 as soon as I was finished. But there was more sailing to do, and Steve and Suzanne were losing interest in class time. During dinner on Petit Martinique, where extremely cheap liquor flowed freely, they had told Frank and me, “We just want you to know that whatever happens, we’ve had a really good time, and we’ve learned so much.” Whatever happens? I thought. Were they going to jump ship?

It turned out the notion of a test was beginning to stress out my fellow crewmembers. While I was secretly annoyed that I'd missed 4 percent of the Level 1 questions, Steve and Suzanne were becoming resistant to letting their impromptu sailing adventure turn needlessly educational. After all, neither was in a hurry to do a bareboat charter independently; certainly neither had anything to prove. Why study for Level 1 if the only purpose would be qualifying for a new round of tests?

“I feel forced into a box when I could be learning as I go, with experience,” Steve said.

“We call that school,” the skipper replied dryly.

“He sounds nervous, doesn't he?” Suzanne ribbed Steve, diffusing the tension.

To everyone's credit—and to the credit of Barefoot Yacht Charters, which designs these cruises to accommodate individual learning agendas—the conversation proved helpful in setting our game plan for the final days. Steve and Suzanne would practice vocabulary, knots, and crew maneuvers at the winches while Frank would help me refine my experience as a skipper.

That meant I was on my own with

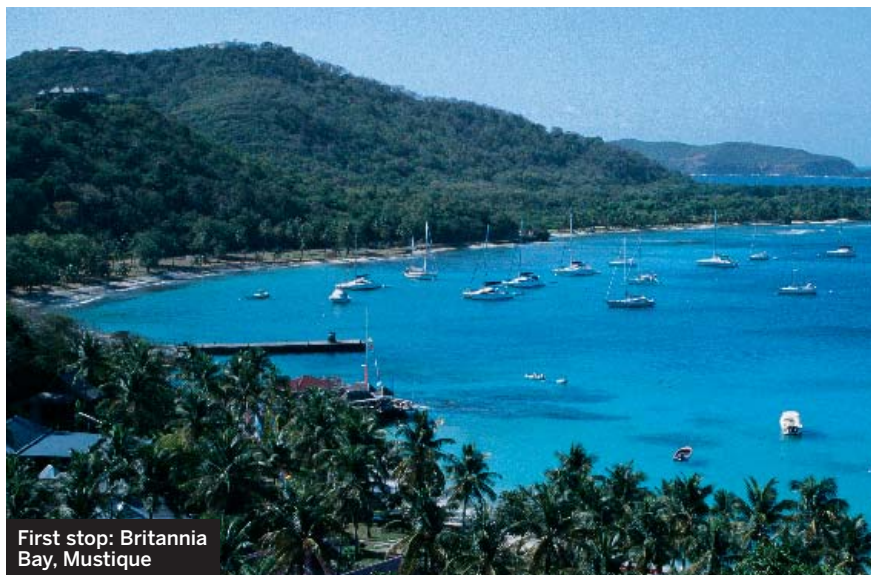


Study group: Suzanne, Allison, and Steve

Frank for a tricky stern-to docking in the shallow waters inside the horseshoe of Union Island's Clifton Harbour, as well as for exiting the harbor and getting under way again. I picked up the point off Mayreau's tip, kept an eye out for Catholic Rock to port, and aimed us close-hauled for Canouan, almost dead to windward.

When the sun tucked under the clouds over Glossy Point, we were only just tossing our anchor over the bow and more than ready to dinghy ashore for a leisurely meal.

Every trip has its low points, and I hit mine in our penultimate stretch. Eager to squeeze in the third ASA level before we ran out of days, I took my eyes off the horizon and began the Coastal Cruising test while the others sailed to Bequia. I was concentrating well until I was asked to navigate into the harbor. We were moving toward land steadily, and my head was in another place. Everyone onboard but I



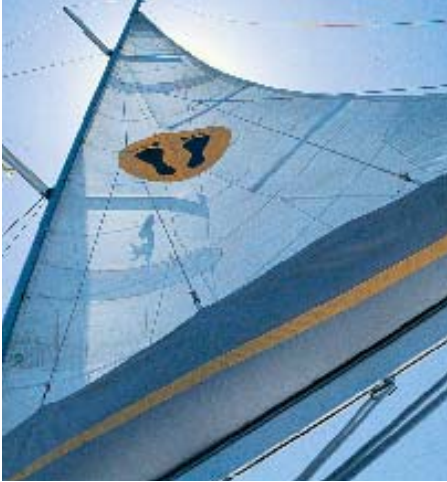
First stop: Britannia Bay, Mustique

knew where to go. I stared at the chart, and all the symbols merged like cuneiform.

"Why didn't we plot this before we set out?" I asked Frank.

"You tell me," he said.

Sailing instructors always are a tough-love lot. Somebody got us into Admiralty Bay, and I found myself dazed before an-



AT A GLANCE

DESTINATION: THE GRENADINES

WHY GO: If there is a “real” Caribbean, it’s probably here. Time ashore is rewarding; time on, in, or under the water even more so.

WHEN TO GO: Sailing season is year-round; winter winds can be brisk (20 to 25 knots), and sailing the open passages between islands can be challenging. Come in spring or summer for lighter conditions.

LANGUAGE: English

CURRENCY: E.C. dollar

ACCESS: Via San Juan or Barbados.

CHARTER COMPANY: Barefoot Yacht Charters, St. Vincent, W.I.; www.barefootyachts.com; phone 784-456-9526

other supposedly simple task: tying off the end of the anchor with a clove hitch. A clove hitch! I’d been doing them on piers and pillars since third grade. But not from line with two fixed ends. I could not visualize the knot, and no amount of trial and error could make me weave it prop-

erly. I stayed on the bow staring at the line only to keep from turning around in tears.

When Frank finally came forward to take over, I walked wordlessly to the cockpit and returned to the test. Steve and Suzanne crept below, as if retreating from a storm front, and I began realizing that

I would not pass Level 3. I’d dreamed of leading my siblings back into our sailing past as a certified bareboat charterer, but in fact there was no time to fulfill the course requirements. Frank took off in the dinghy for a cigarette someplace else while I stayed in the cockpit finishing my final lesson: humility. Whatever a certificate says, there is nothing like plain old time on the water.

Steve and Suzanne grasped this without studying half so much. And yet they were still in the game, practicing even after they emerged in Speedos from belowdecks.

“Prepare to swim!” Steve called, playing skipper. “Ready?”

“Ready!” replied his mate.

“Swim-ho!” the pair hollered, and plunged parallel into the bay.

In one week, everyone had learned something. Our cruise ended with smooth sailing all the way back to St. Vincent. ▲

Allison Kornet is an ex-SAILer.