

## VIRGINS IN THE VIRGINS

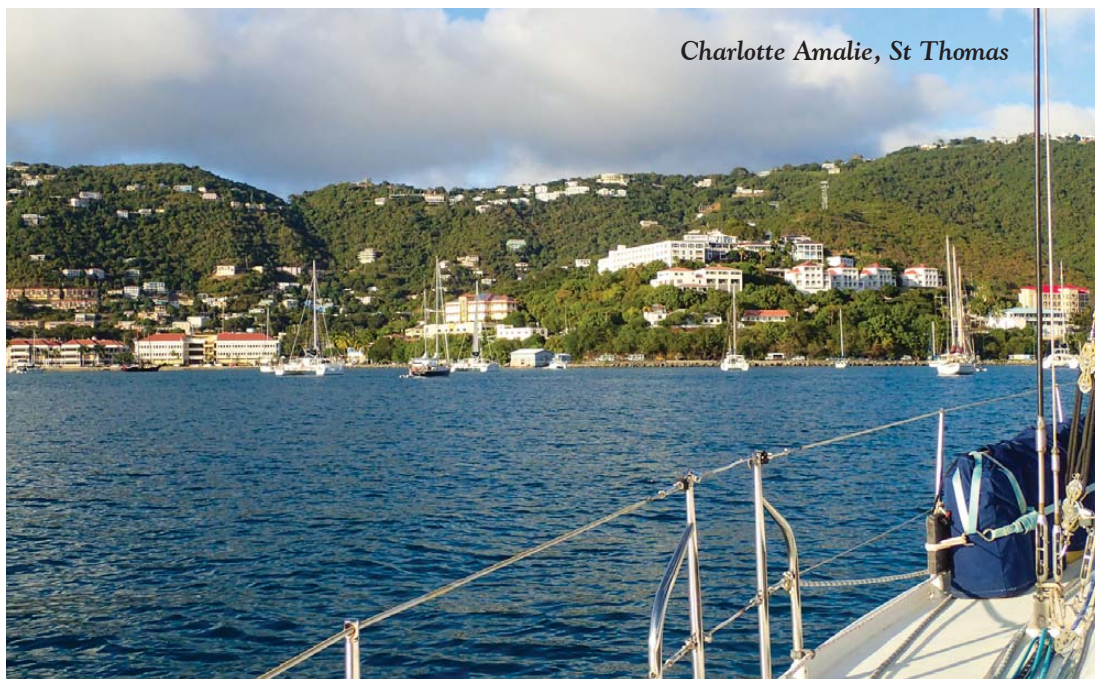
### Phil and Norma Heaton

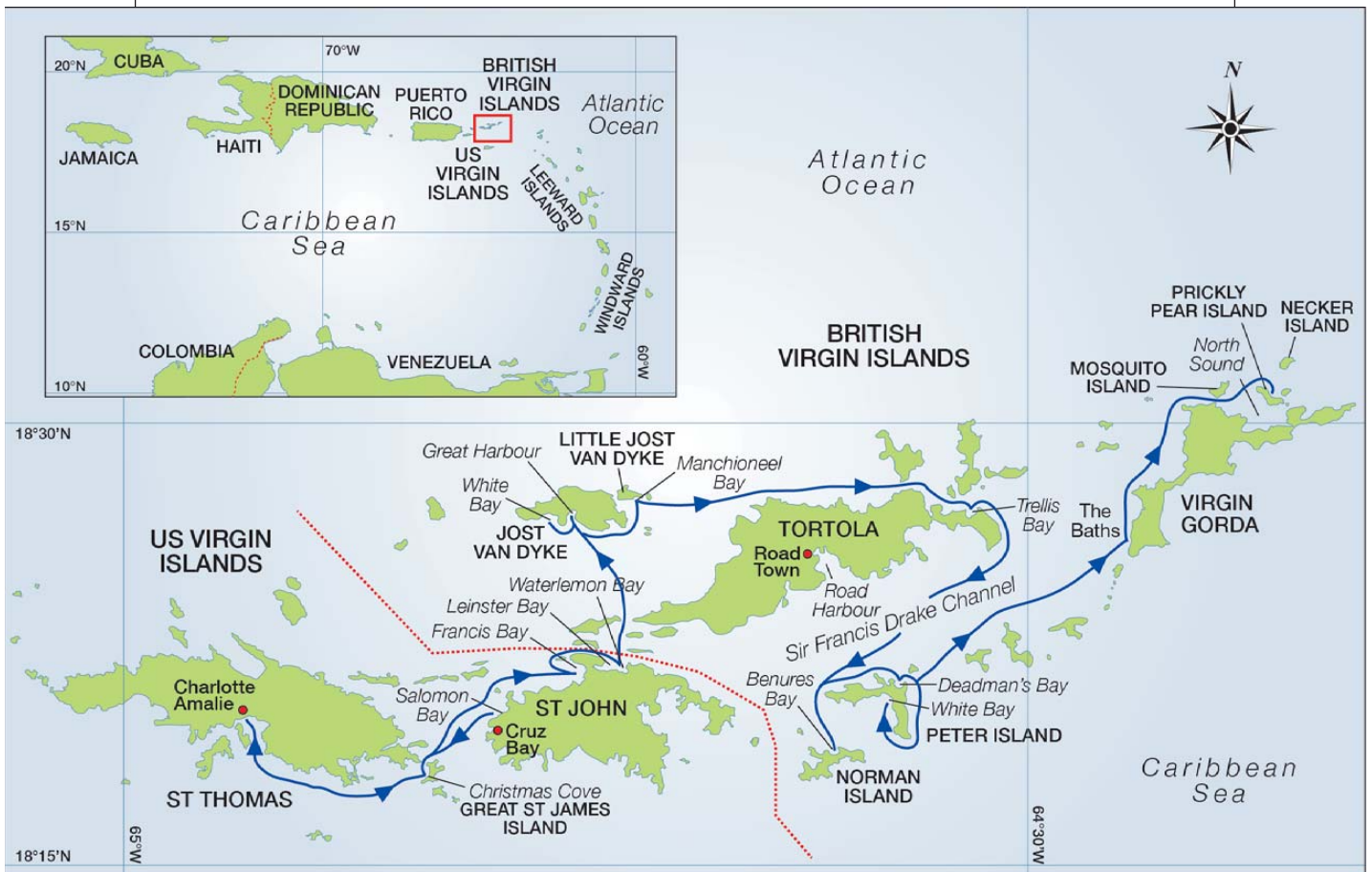
*(Phil and Norma left Northern Ireland at the end of May 2009 aboard their Ovní 395 Minnie B, and completed a circumnavigation in 2016. Follow their blog at [www.sailblogs.com/member/philandnorma](http://www.sailblogs.com/member/philandnorma).)*

The tale we relate here is of a visit to the Virgin Islands in early 2017, before Hurricane *Irma* brought devastation and the death of seven people in September 2017, and shows what the islands can again become.

‘Oh, everyone’s been to the BVIs’. These words from one of the stalwarts at our yacht club were still fresh in our ears some eight years after they were spoken in 2009, before we left Northern Ireland on our extended cruise – and we had still not joined the ranks of ‘everyone’. So, visiting the Virgin Islands was a top priority for our Caribbean cruising in 2017, as we had passed them by when heading for the USA in 2011.

We had taken advantage of some light winds to visit Montserrat, Nevis and St Kitts, then with a forecast for some decent wind on Thursday 26 January had departed the anchorage at Ballast Bay, St Kitts at 0905, leaving the islands of Statia and Saba for another occasion. The wind remained at a steady 15–18 knots and we had a fabulous overnight sail, beam reaching and broad reaching, to St John in the US Virgin Islands. We picked up a mooring at Salomon Bay at 0710, having taken 22 hours to cover the 143 miles at an average speed of 6.5 knots. Then a short dinghy ride to Cruz Bay to clear in – Customs and Border Protection were very friendly and helpful, so it was quite painless. What was not painless was finding wifi.





The tourism office said there was free wifi in the park near the ferry dock – not working. The lady in the yoghurt and coffee place offering free wifi said she only knew how to turn on the music – wifi not working. We tramped the streets looking for somewhere to buy a mini SIM card ... no, no, not open. Eventually we saw a sign for a café with wifi, so went in. It turned out the café had closed down and it was now an estate agency, but on explaining our predicament, the very kind lady showed us to a meeting room and signed us in to their wifi.

Our original plan had been to visit the BVIs before the USVIs, so, why were we here? Well, the watermaker had decided to spring a leak (temporarily fixed with epoxy putty) and we needed a replacement part which was available in Charlotte Amalie, St Thomas on Monday. So we spent the weekend in Christmas Cove on Great St James Island, doing boat maintenance and relaxing. Our first impression of the USVIs was that it is very busy – but it has compensations as, moored in our cove, was *Pizza Pi*, a boat fitted out as a pizza kitchen. You call ‘em up on VHF Ch16, order your pizzas, and dinghy over to collect them 20 minutes later. A great idea!

We got our watermaker parts from Reefco in Charlotte Amalie, the main town of St Thomas and a cruise ship destination. The Reefco people were very helpful with tips and advice, which saved us a lot of time and trouble with removal and replacement. There was plenty of space to anchor in the harbour, and we could watch the cruise ships and their ‘fun’ tug zooming around. We completed the repair on Tuesday 31 January,

then provisioned at the nearby and very reasonably-priced supermarket before heading back to Christmas Cove, where we had a very pleasant evening with fellow OCC members Alastair and Esther from *Cranstackie* who came aboard for sundowners.



*The ‘fun tug’ at Charlotte Amalie*

### **Virgin Intacta – in parts!**

Then it was back to St John and Francis Bay, where we met up with old friends and fellow OCC members Mike and Sue on *Infini* and Tom and Barbara on *GOSI*, enjoying walks through the woods and quite mighty craic. We were all heading in different directions, so after two nights on a mooring we moved to Waterlemon Bay in the east part of Leinster Bay (some pronunciation coaching was required to get North Americans to say ‘Len’ instead of ‘Line’). There was supposed to be good snorkelling on the reef around Waterlemon Cay, but if it had not been for a few rays gliding about the viewing was a bit thin. Reef damage was much in evidence, albeit we saw one sea cucumber which was a good sign ... maybe ...





*Minnie B in  
Francis Bay,  
St John*

We decided on a six mile round-trip hike via Brown Bay to Coral Harbour for lunch at the renowned Skinny Legs restaurant – good hamburgers. Going was great, but we were not anticipating the near-vertical road on the return leg over the ridge. It was a tad tougher than expected and the second beer at lunch was probably an error. Anyway we got back and all was well.

St John has very lovely bays with limited development. Much effort is made to protect the natural environment, as most of the island is a national park and offshore is declared a marine park – though as far as marine life is concerned it seems to be a bit late. Moorings are required to be used, and these have been installed with sensitivity to potential damage, although the price for non-US citizens is US \$26 per night. The



*Waterlemon Bay, St John*

### *An old sugar mill on St John*

islands' history is told in the ruins of the old sugar plantations, with derelict windmills and refining vats, along with ruins of schools where the children of plantation slaves were taught to be useful contributors – classes were strictly divided by gender.

### **Charter boat capital of the world**

OMG – just to be with the zeitgeist – so many boats, so many people.

On Monday 6 February we left the comparative tranquillity of St John for Jost Van Dyke and the British Virgin Islands. Clearing in was straightforward at Great Harbour and we picked up a mooring – now US \$30 per night – and we soon saw why. We visited the world-famous Foxy's Bar, and even had



a chat with Foxy himself, who recited some of his poetry about England for us and described his Buckingham Palace visit to receive the MBE from Princess Anne. An alleged must-do is to anchor in White Bay and swim ashore to the Soggy Dollar Bar for a drink (the name needs no explanation). However, we'd taken a look on the way to Great Harbour and did not fancy the idea of being anchored as if in a multi-storey car park, so we walked there instead. It was a bit of a revelation.

The BVIs' Premier and Minister for Tourism is proud to declaim that the islands are "the yacht chartering capital

*Foxy with Norma,  
Jost Van Dyke*



*The Bubbly  
Pool, Jost  
Van Dyke*

of the world and home of the world's largest yacht chartering fleet". White Bay was almost wall-to-wall charter boats. So it's party time ... all day ... every day ... and the Soggy Dollar Bar epitomises the holiday spirit,



engendered by copious amounts of their signature drink, the Painkiller. The holiday spirit is also one of generosity. So, as we walked back to Great Harbour, a young couple in a hire car stopped to give us a lift – very kind. Similarly, on arrival some charterers had dinghied over with all their surplus food and beer as their charter was ending that day. Nice.

After one night we moved east to Little Jost Van Dyke and anchored in Manchioneel Bay just off the B-Line Beach Bar, which had excellent wifi. We ate at Foxy's Taboo Bar and Restaurant (run by Foxy's daughter) and walked to the Bubbly Pool, where a break in the granite rock creates a sea water pool, and then the sea comes rushing through the gap in a torrent of white water ... bubbly then.



*Manchioneel Bay, Little  
Jost Van Dyke*

### Full Moon Party

Despite all our travels we had never been to a Full Moon Party, but our chance came on Friday 10 February with a visit to Trellis Bay on Tortola. We had a pleasant sail in 12–14 knots despite it being a beat, and arrived in good time to get a mooring (pay for three nights and get the fourth free – if you get a red mooring buoy). Early arrival is recommended, as Trellis Bay became jam-packed with boats as they squeezed in among the moorings.

The party strung out along the beach, and we were in company with more OCC members – Adrian and Clare of *Flyin' Low* and Ben and Glenys of *Binkertoo*. The beach had bars and restaurants, Moko Jumbi dancers atop very tall stilts, and 'Aragorn's fire sculptures' – fire balls, as well as an iron Moko Jumbi placed in the sea, filled with wood, and lit. With lots of music and dancing the atmosphere was of great fun and far less raucous than we'd anticipated.



### In with the In Crowd

Our next BVI stop, on Sunday 12 February, was Benures Bay on the north coast of Norman Island, which lies south of Tortola. We managed to sail for just 30 minutes of the 12 mile trip, but on arrival found a good anchoring spot close to the beach at the eastern end of the bay where we could snorkel. We'd chosen this bay as there were no moorings – and what does no moorings mean? It means fewer boats, particularly charter boats. Well it was delightful, and the snorkelling was good with rays, turtles and a barracuda, as well as the usual skittish reef fish.

Norman Island is very popular, though, for three features – the nearby Pelican Island and some rocks called The Indians; the caves near Treasure Point; and the





***A green turtle,  
Benures Bay,  
Norman Island***

Willy T in the Bight – a former topsail schooner converted into a bar and restaurant. All were within dinghy distance of Benures Bay, so we visited. A Park pass is required to use the yacht moorings at The Indians, but there is free dinghy mooring. The guide books describe

this place as providing some of the best snorkelling in the Virgin Islands ... not any more. There were quite a few reef fish about, but it is so busy that they have become habituated to humans snorkelling around and the coral is only average. We cut our losses and headed for the caves.

Bad timing eh? There were a couple of day-tripper boats there, with novice snorkellers who had not been advised to look ahead and around, resulting in a lot of handing off to prevent collisions. For a second time we cut our losses, and headed for the *Willy T* for a beer. Hmm, so this is where the raucous crowd hang out that we were expecting at the Full Moon Party. We had one beer and retreated to the tranquillity of Benures Bay, which seemed even better after our Norman foray.

***White Bay, Peter Island***





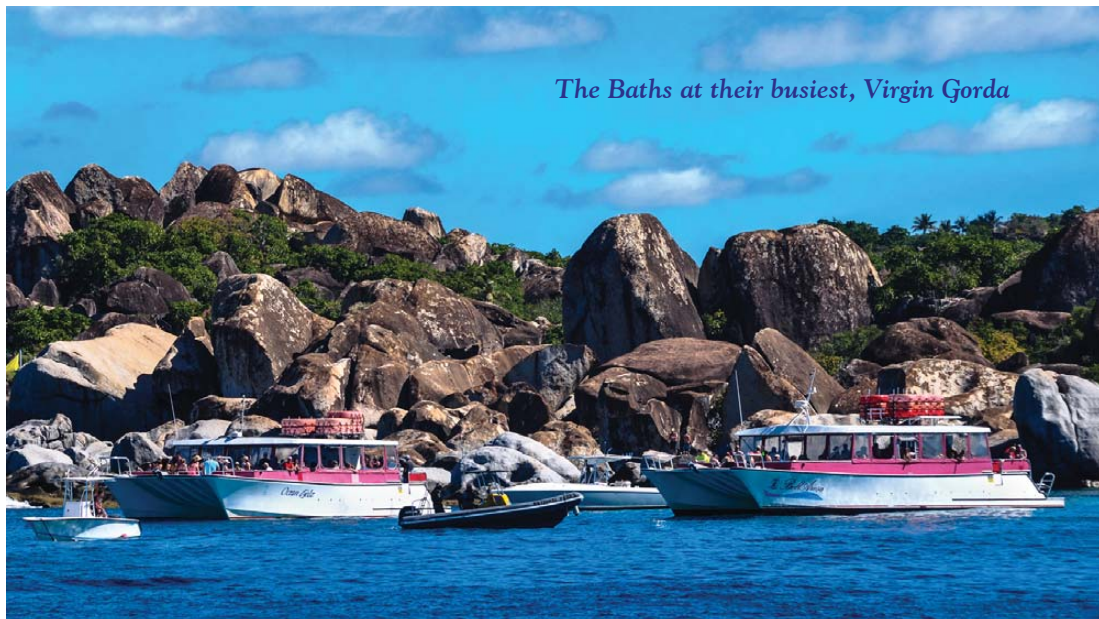
### Lion fish

Next day we headed for Deadman's Bay on the north coast of Peter Island, but when we got there the view was across to Road Harbour and three enormous cruise ships. So we went round to the south side and anchored at White Bay which is truly delightful, but it took us two attempts to get our Manson Supreme anchor to set in the sand and grass.

Carrot Rock at the south end of the island is also described as providing good snorkelling, so off we went in the dinghy. As there was no dinghy mooring and we seek to avoid damaging reefs, we just towed the dinghy as we snorkelled. Almost at once we saw a lion fish – natives of the Pacific which are spreading throughout the Caribbean and seeing off indigenous species. Not having a means to capture or kill it we reported our sighting to the environmental protection authorities at the first opportunity. The trip was worthwhile, and we enjoyed having the fish and the coral to ourselves.



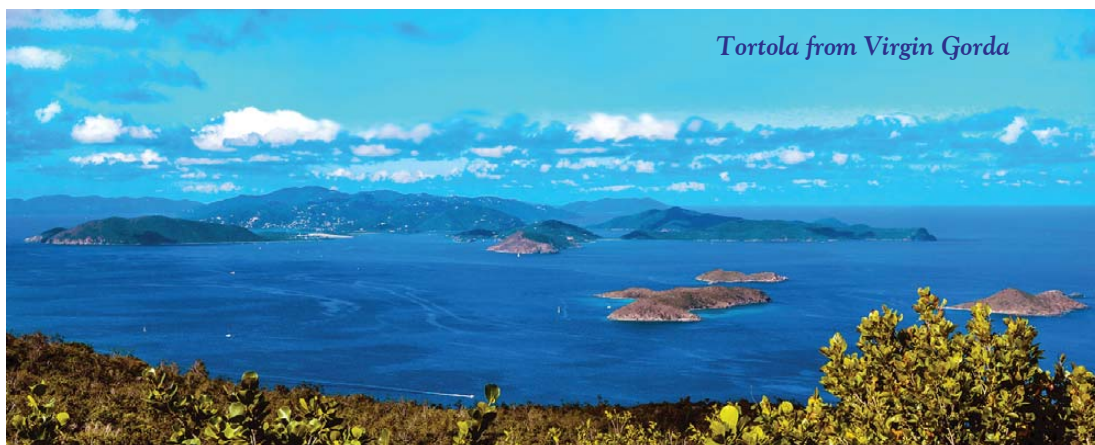
*A lion fish, with a blue tang beyond,  
at Carrot Rock, Peter Island*



*The Baths at their busiest, Virgin Gorda*

### **Big Day, Big Woman**

Wednesday 15 February was a big day for us as we were heading for the famous North Sound at Virgin Gorda (incidentally, it is true that from a certain angle the island has the profile of a reclining lady with generous proportions in her middle – hence the name ‘Fat Virgin’). On the way we would pass The Baths, probably the BVI’s most famous site. For some reason we were a bit sceptical about the hype, given the gushing descriptions of other places that turned out to be, well, a bit ordinary. So our plan was to motor through the mooring field for a close-up view and take some photos using the telephoto lens. We were not disappointed – it was a zoo. The yacht moorings were full, with large powerboats anchored behind and day-tripper boats as close in as possible. Buoys marked swimming areas everywhere, dinghies galore were tied up to dinghy moorings, and the population of a small city was spread out on the beaches and in the bays. Okay, we thought, we have some photos and we have been quite close, so on to the North Sound.



*Tortola from Virgin Gorda*

Again there was a whiff of cynicism in the air, but our expectations were confounded and it turned out to be delightful. We anchored in the lee of Prickly Pear Island, from where we could dinghy to all the hotspots – Bitter End Yacht Club, Saba Rock, Gun Creek and Leverick Bay. En route we had a close up of Richard Branson’s Necker Island and his new development at Mosquito Island – the latter is intended to be a showcase, environmentally sensitive development, but there was a lot of heavy-duty equipment moving large quantities of earth. We applauded the good intent.

### **A very good tour**

Our friends Bob and Elaine on *Pipistrelle* (also OCC) arrived, and we hired a car for a day. The walking trail to the top of Gorda Peak provided spectacular views around the island; the copper mine ruins evoked a time long past; and lunch over the water at a restaurant near Fort Point earned more plus points for the island; and finally we revisited our first impressions of The Baths.

Oh, hubris, hubris – they are truly amazing rock formations, which have been eroded or tumbled to create passageways and caves with pools and small bays accessing the





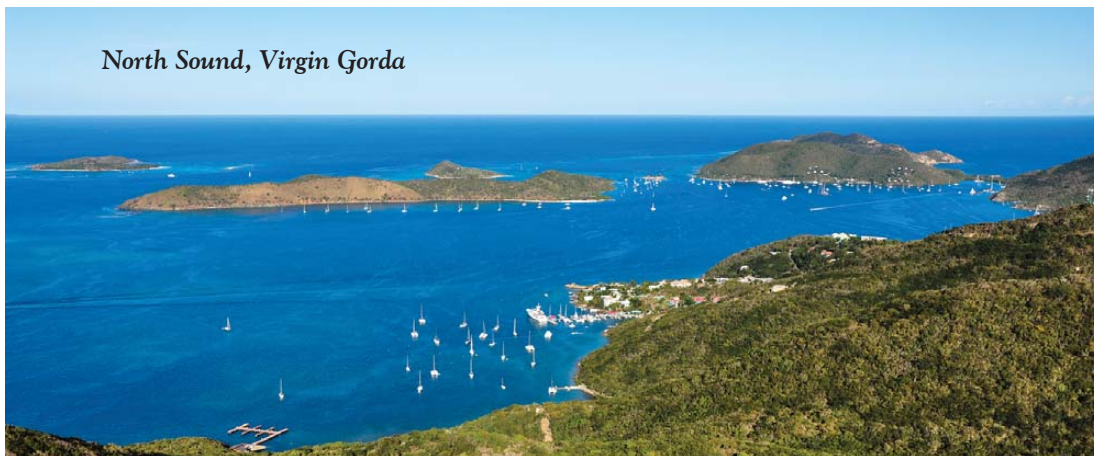
*An old copper mine, Virgin Gorda*

sea. The shoreside view is so different to that from the sea. We also benefited from an afternoon visit as the day tripper-boats were not there, and the sea was up so quite a lot of surf was reaching the shore keeping dinghy-borne visitors away. So, yes, The Baths are a must-visit site, and once again experience warned us against rushing to judgement based on first impressions. On our return to Leverick Bay we stopped at the Hog Heaven bar and restaurant for a drink, and with the sun behind us we looked down on a truly magnificent view of North Sound and Necker Island.

*The southern end of Virgin Gorda,  
with Ginger, Cooper, Salt and Peter islands beyond*



*North Sound, Virgin Gorda*



We had been keeping a close eye on the weather forecast as at some point we would have to start our trip back south. First, this meant heading 120° to St Martin/Sint Maarten. A quirk in the weather was coming up and the normal trade winds would be disrupted to give winds from between southwest and northwest – too good to miss as the 81 miles cannot be guaranteed to be completed in the 13 hours of daylight. Also, as neither Marigot Bay on the French side nor Simpson Bay on the Dutch side offer much protection from wind in the west, and there are a limited number of bridge opening times to enter the Lagoon, morning arrival was indicated.

We therefore departed Virgin Gorda at 1700 on Monday 20 February for an overnight sail. We felt we had given the Virgin Islands a reasonable go, albeit with many places unvisited. We left with an acknowledgement that they really do provide one of the best cruising grounds in the world – and we plan to be back in 2018 to explore some more.

Finally, we would like to thank OCC members Ken and Judith Brook of *Badgers Sett* for sharing with us information on some of their favourite places in the Virgin Islands.



*Not so busy at The Baths, Virgin Gorda*

