

Irmageddon

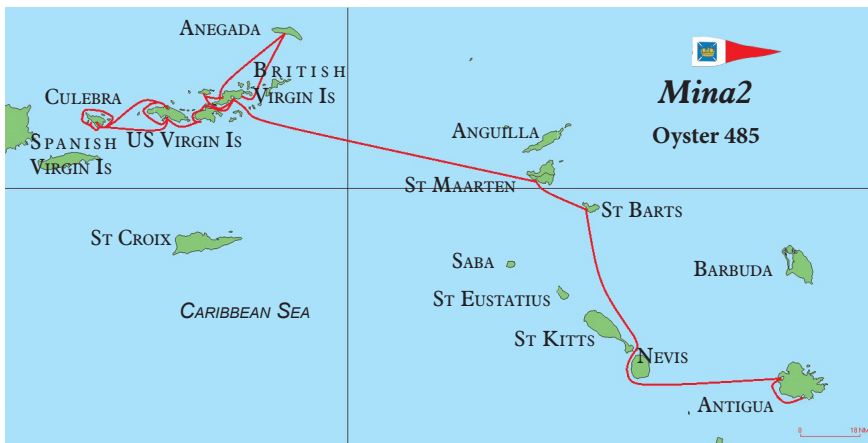
A Caribbean Cruise in the Aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria

Tim Barker

Mina2, our cutter-rigged Oyster 485, had been out of commission for a year, on the hard at Jolly Harbour in Antigua, due to a seized engine. In September 2017 Antigua had dodged the bullet of Category 5 hurricane, Irma, with sustained winds in excess of 160kts and, less than a week later, another Cat 5 hurricane, Maria, tore through the region, also missing Antigua. So, we are among the lucky ones. To so many others in the region, a seized engine on their yacht would have been the least of their problems. Before *Mina2* returned to the Mediterranean, Maria the Downstairs Skipper, and I determined to have one last cruise of the Virgin Islands to show our support for the desperate people who had had their homes and their livelihoods destroyed in a few short but terrifying hours. We were also keen to take in the Spanish Virgin Islands, part of Puerto Rico, which are visited by few yachts compared to the US and British Virgin Islands (USVI and BVI).

A couple of mates of mine, Richard and Patrick, joined me in Antigua in the middle of January 2018 to enjoy our passages up to the Virgin Islands where I was to be joined by the Downstairs Skipper in February.

Via Nevis, which had avoided significant hurricane damage, we made our way to St Barts, the French island much loved by the jet-set on their superyachts. The probability was that this would be quite a tough windward passage, but dodging through the Narrows between St Kitts and Nevis to get a better wind angle and benefitting from a veer in the wind, we enjoyed



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an exhilarating close reach all the way there. Gustavia, the capital of St Barts, has an outer harbour with numerous moorings for local yachts, and an inner harbour where the large gin-palaces moor stern to the café fringed harbourside. Notwithstanding the hurricanes that had torn through just four months before, almost all of the moorings remained occupied by local yachts, but we were stunned to see that hardly any had a mast standing, and many had tell-tale mud and small barnacles all over their hull, indicating that they had been sunk and subsequently re-floated. We anchored in the outer harbour and took the dinghy ashore. We had a walk around town before we visited the harbour-master's office. Everything looked fine. All the high-end shops on the high street, including Louis Vuitton, Chanel and Hermes, looked perfect and were open. We then went to the harbour-master's office to clear in. The office is located on the elevated harbourside and up a few steps, so well above sea level. Everything looked good, with no sign of any damage at all, but then we were told by the harbour-master that during Irma, the office had been waist-deep in water caused by the exceptional rise in the water level of 2 to 3 metres, caused by the low pressure; that was before the storm surge tore in like a tsunami creating further havoc. However, everything had since been repaired/replaced including all the wrecked computer equipment.

Whilst the money of France and the wealthy shop owners had ensured that there was a façade of normality after just a short time, behind that façade lay a different story. Many of the homes on the island still had no electricity and home-owners were still waiting for the materials with which to replace their roofs. We then listened, open-mouthed, as the harbour-master explained that it was not just the flooding, storm surge and the sustained 180+mph winds that were the problem. What inflicted even greater damage were the numerous mini-tornadoes within the hurricane. The super-strong winds within them caused much more damage, but the near vacuum also sucked the windows out of buildings and pulled the roofs off. The harbour-master also told us that we were only the 75th boat to clear in that year. By the same date, 18 February, the previous year 270 yachts had cleared in. There were very few charter yachts, as most had been destroyed, and most of the superyachts had chosen not to come to the Caribbean as none of their privileged owners and guests wanted to spend a fortune to see utter, depressing devastation. Although we could understand the cold, hard logic of this decision, we felt that to desert the islands which had been host to them during the good times, when they now so desperately needed the funds to rebuild themselves, was shameful.

Our next stop was Sint Maarten. At the time of the hurricane I had seen photos of the buildings at the international airport completely destroyed and spread all over the runway, so it was clear that the island had been hit particularly hard, but we were not prepared for the total devastation that greeted us when we entered the lagoon. Again the majority of the local boats on moorings had no masts, but a good proportion of them, including

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a medium-sized superyacht, were half-sunk in the shallow water, some with gaping holes in the hull. We understood that a lot of the damage was caused by vessels breaking free from their moorings and smashing through the fleet of moored boats, taking away stays and punching holes in the hulls. All round the shoreline, boats were on their sides or, in the case of catamarans, completely upside down. There was still wreckage under the water in the anchorage, but these had been identified by divers and had been buoyed to alert yachts not to anchor there.

Ashore, there was evidence of enormous destruction with roofless buildings, and telegraph poles, street lights and traffic lights all bent and twisted. And as if seeing your property and livelihood being destroyed along with 95% of the infrastructure of the island wasn't enough, looters wielding guns and machetes had come out of the post-storm twilight, raiding shops, but also



Incongruous boat name - hardly *Living the Dream*

hotel rooms, much to the terror of the tourists who were trapped on the island with no chance of getting off as the airport had been destroyed.

Whilst we were shocked by all the damage, it was heartening to see that the residents had picked themselves

up, brushed themselves down and were now working fantastically hard to put their lives back together and provide desperately needed tourists and yachtsmen with what they want. We had a truly exceptional meal and a completely memorable evening at the repaired Little Jerusalem Schwarma restaurant that now operates out of a converted shipping container, run by Lebanese Abraham, a resident of Sint Maarten for 40 years, and his charming daughter. The yacht club has been repaired; the bar and restaurant are fully open again and they were very busy organising their big sailing regatta. Hats off! The chandleries have now repaired the damage of the looters and are fully re-stocked, so that was where I spent the best part of a day and did my bit to kick-start the economy single-handed, much to the dismay of my bank manager.

After two days we left at first light and enjoyed a fabulous, fast, 90nm broad reach all the way to the British Virgin Islands. It was Richard's 71st birthday, but it was not until we were at anchor that he had the stomach, after the boisterous seas, to celebrate. We arrived in mid-afternoon to find that my brand new engine, with fewer than 10 hours on the clock, had packed

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up. So we sailed onto our anchor in Road Town, Tortola, near to customs and immigration, and I took the dinghy ashore to clear in. Maria and I had cruised the BVIs a couple of years before and we had been dismayed by the attitudes of the customs and immigration officials who welcome you to the islands. Nothing had changed. The aggressively rude customs officers seemed deliberately to string out a process that should have taken 15 minutes, to more than two hours. If the authorities have any desire to attract cruising yachtsmen to return to the BVIs then they really need to address the attitudes shown by their officials. With the enormous help of Richard's friend, Mike Hasted, who is a professional yacht skipper who lives in the BVIs, we found a berth in Nanny Cay Marina, and over about a week managed to get the new engine fixed, and the fuel tank emptied, cleaned out and refilled; gungy fuel two years in the tank had been the problem. Meanwhile, Mike was looking after us like royalty with conducted tours round the island of Tortola.

Mike, his wife and daughter live aboard their yacht. Ahead of Irma, he drove it into the mangroves and secured it as best he could. Which would have been fine had another yacht not slammed into his boat, sinking it and then getting blown on top of it. So after both hurricanes, they had to lift the other boat off his boat before his home could be lifted out from under the water and put ashore in the marina car park where Mike and his wife are very slowly and laboriously putting their home back together again. We learnt so much from



Mike and his friends about the hurricanes.

After Irma, there was not a leaf left on any tree or shrub; actually most trees had simply been blown over, nor was a blade of grass left – the entire landscape was brown. You could see great swathes going up the hills which were totally smooth, not a

shrub remained. These were the tracks of the tornadoes within the hurricane that snaked around destroying everything in their paths.

Sustained winds in excess of 160kts are capable of lifting a jumbo jet into the air. The underside of a catamaran between the two hulls has an aerofoil shape. When hit by these Cat 5 hurricane-force winds, they are like kites. One person told us that he lived in an apartment on the side of a very steep hill. His apartment was about the equivalent of six stories above the road below. At the height of hurricane Irma, he looked out the window and saw a 50' catamaran, upside-down, floating past his window. Others told us of

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gravel being picked up, hurled at near 200 mph into a breeze block wall like bullets, and destroying the wall. There was barely a car on the whole island that does not have smashed windows or badly dented roof and bonnet. All this damage was caused by flying debris. Even now, you look up at the hills,



Hurricane debris dump

which are regaining their foliage, and you see reflections from roofing that has been ripped off buildings and scattered all over the island. It was not as if everyone hasn't been extremely busy tidying up. In a valley at the west end of Tortola there was a pile of bent and twisted metal that has been taken off the hills and deposited there; it was two-stories high and covered the area of several football pitches. The fear was that they are only a few months away from the next hurricane season and, if they are hit again, these piles of debris will become lethal weapons ready to be picked up and hurled by the winds.

These Caribbean communities are not wealthy and many of the houses are flimsy in construction. Many of them were, of course, completely destroyed. But so too were most of Richard Branson's buildings on Necker Island and Mosquito Island which had been built to the highest hurricane-proof standards. This shows that when it comes to the immense power of a Cat 5 hurricane, there is simply no such thing as hurricane-proof. Of course it was not just people's homes that were destroyed. All the infrastructure, electricity, water supplies and communications were destroyed. Airports, hospitals, schools and other buildings critical to society were also damaged beyond use and, unless you were in the construction industry, your livelihood was probably destroyed as well.

Having got *Mina2*'s engine repaired we returned to the anchorage off Road Town to provision. Returning to *Mina2* by dinghy I noticed a ketch moored near us, flying an RCC burgee and a New Zealand ensign from its mizzen mast. Hold on a minute. I was getting strong feelings of déjà-vu. It was *Victoria*, owned by Jim Lott (RCC) and his wife Karin. The last time I saw them and *Victoria* was at the bottom of the world up a snow-swept fjord in the Beagle Channel in 2012. What were the chances? Jim, Karin, Maria and I were to see a lot of each other over the next few weeks. It is always humbling

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being in Jim's company. Having built *Victoria* himself, by hand, over a period of seven years some 40 years ago, you can't mention anywhere in the world that he hasn't been, probably twice.



Mina2 and *Victoria* reunited - previous Meet was in icy water. Other of these resorts, it was just piles of broken glass and twisted metal. Having been carefully nurtured over the preceding decades, the whole lot was destroyed in one fateful night in September 2017. I had a long list of jobs to do on the boat, so I stayed happily at anchor in this lovely spot for five days until the Downstairs Skipper flew in to join me. Trellis Bay just a short distance away would have been a more convenient spot to anchor but, with the shore absolutely littered with wrecked boats, it was altogether too depressing.

After Maria arrived in mid-March, we cleared out of the BVIs to head west to the US Virgin Islands. We went to the west end of Tortola to clear out of BVI at the customs post in Soper's Hole. The customs and immigration offices had been destroyed during the hurricanes, so the officers were valiantly fulfilling their responsibilities from under an open-sided gazebo seated around a trestle table with their paperwork held down under large stones; hats off to them. We sailed the short distance to Cruz Bay on the west end of St. John. The US customs and immigration officers were not made of such stern stuff as their BVI counterparts. Their offices had also been well 'mashed', in fact the entire building was a collapsed pile of twisted metal, but they had simply closed the facility to clear in and out there, which meant we had to sail almost the entire length of the USVIs to clear in at Charlotte Amalie on St Thomas.

The following day we took a tour round St Thomas. At street level there seemed to be substantially less hurricane damage than in the neighbouring islands of the BVIs. We put this down to there being more US money made available to repair the damage quickly. But when we were being driven around

Richard and I spent a few days living the good life before we made our way to Beef Island where the airport was. Having put Richard ashore to start his journey home, I anchored off a tiny island, Marina Cay. The pilot book says the island offers a 12-room inn, Pusser's beach-front restaurant, shops, showers and all sorts of other facilities. It didn't any more. As with many

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the island and looking down from a height, it became apparent that half the roofs of the houses were still covered with blue tarpaulins, so there was still much work to be done. The island of St John, which we visited later, is a very different island from St Thomas. In 1956 the Rockefeller family donated the 60% of the island which they owned, to the United States National Park Service on condition that it is not developed. As a result, St John is a lush wildlife reserve with many walking trails, but with a tiny population, at just over 4,000, less than 1/10th the size of St Thomas, mainly very laid-back, hippy-like individuals. St John was totally savaged by the hurricanes and when we anchored off Coral Harbor at the eastern end it was still a complete mess. We assumed that the local hippies may not have been as motivated as their more dynamic neighbours to get everything sorted, but we were put right. We spoke to an English woman who had been working there for about eight years. She happened to be off island when the hurricanes passed. She returned to a scene of total devastation.

The large mangrove swamps all around the harbour had been stripped of every leaf but, she said, there were wrecks of yachts scattered all over the mangroves, some of them hundreds of feet inland. 'It was surreal', she said. 'It was like a giant had just picked up the boats and randomly hurled them over the mangroves. Everyone has done a fantastic amount of work to tidy things up, but with all the



Marina Cay resort destroyed

water, power and communications down for so many months it has been an almost insuperable task. But we are determined to get there.' That has been the prevailing attitude in the whole region. The disaster also seems to have had a surprisingly beneficial effect on the attitude of the local population. When we cruised here a couple of years ago we were disappointed to note that on the whole the local population were distinctly unfriendly. With the glaring exception of the BVI customs and immigration officials, we didn't notice that this time. Everyone now has a shared purpose to rebuild their communities and the much-reduced cruising community is a part of that process, so we were warmly received this time and it has therefore been a much greater pleasure spending time talking to and getting to know the residents.

Everyone knows about the BVIs as a great cruising ground. Some people know about the USVIs, just to the west of the BVI's. But even many seasoned cruising sailors have not heard of the Spanish Virgin Islands or, at least, have

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not been there. They belong to Puerto Rico, which is part of the United States, and consist of two islands, Vieques and Culebra, between Puerto Rico and the USVIs. So few yachts cruise the Spanish VIs because, for some inexplicable reason given that they are only a three-hour sail away from the USVIs, they are not written about in the majority of the Pilot/Cruising Guide Books for the area, and they are out of bounds for most charter boats. It was these islands in particular that Maria and I wanted to explore. We had just one week available to cruise the Spanish VI's so rather than flying around scratching the surface of both islands, we decided to get to know Culebra and its tiny sister island of Culebrita and their anchorages. What a joy that was.

After a leisurely four-hour sail from the stunning Magan's Bay anchorage on St. Thomas, we arrived at midday in Culebra at Ensenada Honda and dropped anchor close to *Victoria*. The island of Culebra and its anchorages are wonderfully unspoilt. At least they are mid-week; at the weekends the local boats from Puerto Rico come over in droves. The beaches are amazing by the standards of the eastern Caribbean generally. There are many reefs to tuck behind in sheltered anchorages, either to sit and watch the numerous turtles in the crystal-clear waters, or to snorkel over. There are far fewer yachts around than in most other cruising areas in the region, so anchorages are secluded, and there are no charter boats. For the first time in some years we felt we were once again adventuring a bit, rather than being thrown together with a bunch of holiday-makers. It was fabulous. Any member of the Club who cruises to the Virgin Islands should definitely allocate some time for cruising these 'Spanish' islands.

Culebra is only six miles long and three miles wide, so over the next few days we were able to carry out a leisurely circumnavigation visiting a good number of the available anchorages. There are numerous anchorages around the Ensenada Honda, in which is the only township on Culebra (with a surprisingly good supermarket). Other highlights were Bahia de Almodovar on the south east of Culebra, Tortuga Bay on the north coast of Culebrita (bearing in mind it is susceptible to any swell from the north and it is a nightmare at weekends when all the Puerto Rican motor cruisers come in with their loud sound systems and blue underwater lights). Best of all was anchoring off the steep shoreline along the southwest coast of Culebrita in the Canal de Culebrita.

Whilst there, we also took the ferry from the little town of Culebra over to the mainland of Puerto Rico for a day. The 1½ hour ferry ride cost Maria and me just \$US1 each way. One third of Puerto Rico remained without electricity and they only re-opened the airport shortly before we were there, nearly six months after the hurricanes, but our brief trip was a most enjoyable insight into the completely different Latin culture of Puerto Rico. Our time in the Spanish VIs, though too short, was definitely the highlight of our entire Virgin Islands cruise.

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The Virgin Islands is arguably one of the best cruising grounds in the world: steady trade winds, protected flat water, dependable warm sunshine, crystal clear water, beautiful snorkelling over coral, many sandy, palm-fringed beaches, beach-side bars and restaurants in the numerous beautiful anchorages. As a cruising ground it has pretty much everything, which is why it has been so immensely popular. There were more charter yachts here than anywhere in the world. Before the hurricanes you almost had to queue mid-morning to get into some of the more popular anchorages. Not any more. The area has been largely abandoned by cruising tourists. Scare stories of beaches denuded



of shade with wrecked bars and no electricity in the marinas have kept people away.

The devastation of the Virgin Islands caused by hurricanes Irma and Maria has been truly shocking. Bays are full of half-sunk yachts. Those that remained afloat have been dismantled.

Shattered dreams - most yachts would not have been insured. Some marinas have been completely destroyed, with all the pontoons piled up at the far end of the bay. Ashore, few houses and buildings have remained unscathed. The majority have roof damage or no roofs at all, and too many buildings were completely destroyed. And on that one fateful day, the islanders lost not only their homes, but their livelihoods as well.

But the spirit of the islanders is indomitable. Everyone has a horror story of the day of the hurricane, but that is in the past. Now they are fully focused on restoring what they can as quickly as they can. Inevitably there are far fewer yachts sailing in the region. This is nice for the yachtsmen perhaps, but pretty devastating for the locals who depend on the spending for their income. Makeshift bars and restaurants are popping up on beaches almost daily to entice the yachtsmen back. Services are slowly being restored. We yachties that are lucky enough to be here are witnessing a Phoenix-like recovery. We, the cruising community, owe much to the people of the Caribbean who have shared their idyllic islands with us for so long. Now is not the time to desert them in their hour of need. We owe it to them to return to support them by spending freely to help them back on their road to recovery. It is the least we can do.