

## Bad Boat and Beastly Beans

Memories of a short cruise in the B.V.I.

Gillie Green



Gillie in 2007 and now (below)

One should plan a cruise well in advance. We didn't. My first plan, eight people, a 46 foot Swan, two beautiful weeks in the British Virgin Islands, came to nothing. By January 2007, everyone but my younger brother, Johnny Gardner, had dropped out for reasons as drastic as chemotherapy and a son's arrest.

Since I had to visit the secondary school I had set up on Tortola five years before and unable to cancel cheap air tickets, we arrived on 12 January with a vague promise of an old Beneteau 32 for six days at a knockdown price. We came via Taos, New Mexico where Johnny, a bon viveur who lives in France, enjoyed the local foods. We had provisioned with cowboy fare; a sack of pinto beans, jalapeño peppers, chilli. We added rum and punch in Road Town and headed down to The Pub our charter firm. One of many small, laid-back charter companies, they had no interest in our sailing experience provided our credit card was good for a big deposit. A quick explanation of the engine on *Eftihia* and a promise not to put loo paper in the heads, and we were off.

30 kts of wind ENE, gave us an exciting reach to Peter Island and we realised that *Eftihia* had at least a year's growth of weed on her bottom and the log was totally inaccurate. All her instruments were as vague as our briefing. They couldn't tell us where the transponder was, nor the draught of the boat. Our depth was calibrated in feet, the only chart we were given was in metres with the detailed sections in fathoms! The auto helm also had a laid back Caribbean approach and only accepted orders reluctantly. Nothing else worked. The only life saving gear was missing the essential buckle. As bad below decks – no fridge but we made the pump for water from the icebox, pump out the shower. Just as well as the WC valve was faulty, it backfilled, sloshing about when we listed.

That night we anchored in Little Harbour, St Peter Island and took a line to the shore. Johnny dived down and lifted our anchor away from the long anchor chain, laid L-shape across the bay by some unpleasant neighbours. But Rudi, an agile German in his



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eighties helped us and brought his all-female crew aboard for Rum Punch and Bavarian oompah-oompah from his accordion. Exhausted, we undercooked our pinto beans and burnt them on the vicious cooker. How did cowboys manage to cook beans on a camp fire for the necessary three hours, after a day in the saddle?

Next day we braved the big swell and picked up a buoy by The Indians, four great pillars of rock west of Norman Island. Magnificent snorkelling, a small school of blue fish followed Johnny; he saw a big barracuda follow me, luckily I didn't. We headed west on a brisk NE, two reefs down in a considerable swell. To make contact with home on our mobiles we had to connect to the US Virgin Islands networks. So we sailed to America. In spite of visible radio masts we had no luck, so we sailed back to British waters and headed north for Jost Van Dyke, making seven knots in spite of our dirty bottom. We made the well-buoyed channel through the reef at White Sand Bay, anchoring in perfect shelter.

Johnny went ashore to find the nightlife, I was still bent double by last night's beans. He found Ivan's famous shack, home of the Painkiller cocktail, totally deserted. People eventually wandered in and helped themselves to drinks (no food sadly) and the evening was international, animated and very, very witty. But the swell increased, *Eftihia* dragged her anchor. I should have lifted it, but the winch was hopeless. To avoid hitting the reef, I motored around, dragging the anchor until it caught. It worked, Johnny returned before midnight, wolfed bean stew, we had a peaceful night.

Next morning the wind had veered sufficiently for another rollicking sail eastwards to Sandy Cay, the archetypical desert island, tiny with one lone palm tree, some white lilies, surrounded by a reef. Bliss. But we couldn't snorkel the reef, as the breakers were still too fierce. We had a hard beat along the north coast of Tortola, missing the beautiful bays, as the swell from the north had not abated. We scraped through the channel south of Monkey Island as the sun set and headed for Trellis Bay longing for a good dinner at The Last Resort. The Pilot book said that the main runway of the international airport on Beef Island had been lengthened over the sea and was marked by a pair of buoys. We avoided them but as we brought the mainsail down it jammed, a torn baton pocket tangled in the lazy jacks as the wind reached 50 kts and a heavy squall darkened the sky and soaked us. To cap it all a plane was coming in to land and we suddenly realised that we were technically on the runway as there were four more pairs of buoys. Drenched, I was climbing up to untangle the main, from my perch on the boom, I saw the plane heading straight for us, headlights full on me.

We survived and even found the only remaining free mooring buoy in the bay in the dark. We had a strong rum or two but felt too shattered to go ashore, so we dined on those damn beans and farted off to bed. We could hear the chef singing in the Last Resort, accompanied by his howling dogs, but the donkey, which used to Bray with them, had drowned the previous year.

The morning dawned grey and windy. We were enchanted to discover that we were on the only free mooring in the bay – the others all say 'pay \$25 to de Loose

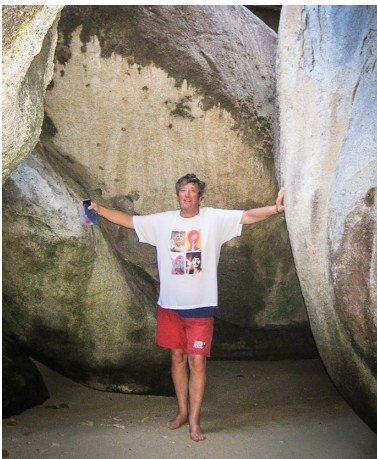
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Mongoose'. A stroll ashore to watch the little 30ft ferries load up on the rickety pier. They carry all the materials to Scrub Island for a new 64-berth marina.

The Baths at the SW tip of Virgin Gorda were a further two hour reach on the NE trades. Anchoring is not permitted and as we arrived, a yacht left a buoy and we nipped through the crowd and picked it up. Apparently other yachts had been patiently queuing for it. Finders keepers we decided and waved merrily. The Baths are a natural wonder, a geological quirk. Huge granite rounded pebbles, up to 80 feet, are piled higgledy-piggledy on the beach. One can crawl under some, over others. With the sea to one's knees one stands under cathedral arches, in echoing caves, the green light bouncing off the water. Astonishing and spiritual, in a tropical jungle. Magic. Overnight anchoring was impossible so we headed for Gorda Sound. Wind on the nose, we motor sailed through the shallow gap south of Mosquito Island. The sun was overhead so we could see the reefs in the channel, leading to Sir Francis Drake's Anchorage. Risky, not knowing *Eftihia's* draught nor trusting our 1984 chart, marked in fathoms, but we didn't touch the bottom.

Sir Francis must have visited when no breakers surged over the reef, so we left his anchorage for calmer waters south of Pear Island as there was an inviting café ashore. But it only did lunches, so beastly beans for dinner again and more rum. To sleep listening to the sad howling of a kid answered by a nanny goat. We had a long walk ashore and a hugely delicious, expensive cocktail at The Bitter End, an upmarket resort. We then called upon *Chantal* (RCC), Nigel and Elizabeth Pattison spend the winter months on board and were wonderfully hospitable, plying us with food and drink and allowing us to use their Internet as they were cunningly anchored in WiFi range of Saba rock. They pretended to enjoy an evening of rum and spicey beans with us.

Saturday was hot, sunny and calm so we goose-winged on the gentler winds 12 miles down Sir Francis's Channel to a Beatles CD (finally a working gadget), and I found the controls for a fridge, so we could have had decent food after all!



Great Harbour, Peter Island, was recommended for its French restaurant. We anchored at the end of the bay, wonderful snorkelling and drinking the remains of the rum as the sun went down. We spruced up, raced over the large bay in the dinghy. The restaurant, the only building in the harbour, was dark, dead, deserted. Foul beans again.

Our final day; a last snorkel, a ritual ditching of all beans, scrubbed *Eftihia*, made a list of her dangerous faults, sailed back to Road Town. She was due to be chartered at noon, and she was, warts and all.

**In memory of Johnny Gardner, 1946 - 2011**