

December 20, 2005

The Bight Bay  
Norman Island a.k.a. "Treasure Island"  
British Virgin Islands

"What?" I yelled. Steph's words were garbled and I had a hard time hearing her over the shrieking wind through the rigging and the crashing, rapidly building waves. Asking "what?" also bought me a little time. I could tell by her expression and the tone of her voice that this was not going to be a good message and in marital communications / bantering / bartering / balance-of-power tactical exchanges even a few milliseconds can make the difference between holding your own with a verbal parry and being skewered.

"I said if I had known this is what it would be like I never would have agreed to do this!" she yelled back. The "this" at the end of her sentence was punctuated with the bow of the boat punching into another wave and seawater blasting over the forward quarter of the deck. I knew I had to answer quickly, you can't let a statement like that stand on its own or it takes on irrefutable veracity. In the world of marriage politics, that could be a complete loss of face. You can't just concede a point like that, especially with as much at stake as we had. We were less than 24 hours into the trip and I couldn't afford to fall that far behind that early.

I looked out at the tumbling seas. The 34 knot (40 mph) gale force winds were tearing the tops off the waves and spewing them out across the surface in long white foamy streaks. The waves were big enough to rock our little world around and were building quickly here on the Atlantic side of the islands. The fetch, or distance the waves traveled under wind, was essentially infinite as there wasn't much between where we were and Europe a couple of thousand miles away. They were, as the scientists say, "fully mature wave forms." It was amazing that our boat, about the height (not including the mast), length, width and weight of a semi-tractor/trailer, could be tossed around like a toy boat in a boisterous child's bathwater, but the sea operates with physical forces of a scale that humans just can't comprehend.

In between the mist, sheets of rain and roiling low black clouds I caught a glimpse of land. "Ha!" I thought, "This is it, my one trump card! I will save this point!" With the gleeful delight of a sly card player, I slapped it on the table. "This is exactly what I told you, that we'd have short day sails in between islands and you'd always be able to see land." It was masterful; a classic rejoinder that allowed no wriggle room or escape. I could already envision my plaque in the Marital Verbal Wrestling Hall of Fame.

Steph didn't even bother to answer. Instead, she invoked the nuclear option. She shot me The Look. Fortunately her laser shot eyes were focused directly and exclusively on the spot between my eyes, otherwise the entire Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea would have frozen instantly.

Like a novice chess player who neglected to look several moves ahead in the game and charged blindly into a game-over death trap, I was toast. Checkmate. Chalk up another one for the girls.

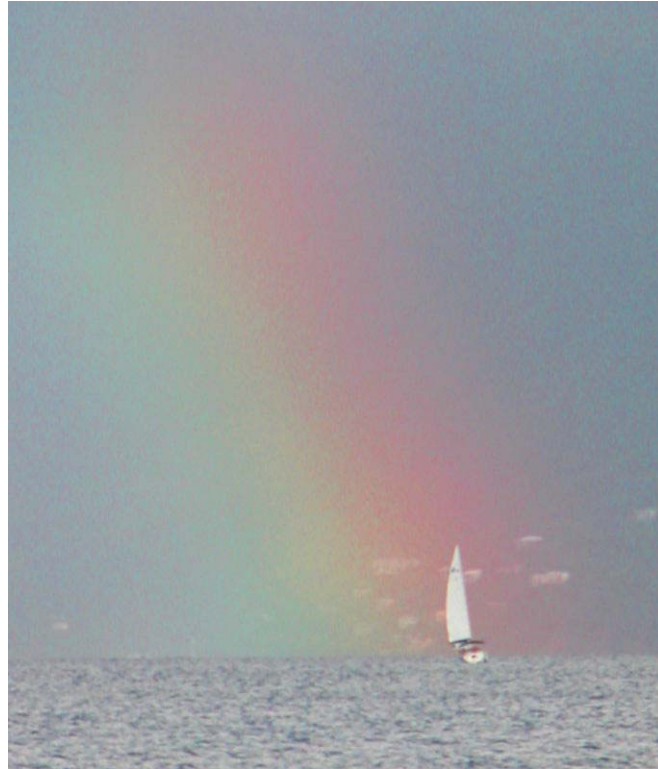
Our mission was to live on board a sailboat for 14 days and decide if we wanted to spend the next few years continuing our exploration of the world via this means of transportation. All of the friends, family, sailing veterans, Cape Horners, circumnavigators and live-aboards who had been in the Virgin Islands all told us this was the ideal place to try out the lifestyle. "The sailing is easy, you'll always see land, the trade winds blow a steady 15-20 knots and there are plenty of colorful local bars and restaurants at every anchorage" was the consensus opinion.

We were leery of the highly developed and popular nature of the area, having spent our last year of travel in developing areas, but thought the chance to bareboat charter one of the six boats on our short list was too good to pass up. I could never have imagined it wouldn't be flocks of inebriated Americans on holiday that would imperil this litmus test of our future but a Force 8 gale that threatened to blow away nine months of work that had taken us from zero sailing knowledge and experience to alone on the sea on a 51.5 foot (15.7 meter) boat.

Fortunately for me, after a couple of weeks of (mostly) calm anchorages, sunny skies, gentle breezes, fun people, snorkeling, sea turtles, Pirate treasure caves and a little local rum, Steph had come around to see the inherent romance, beauty and rewards of a life upon the sea. Well, OK, maybe she hadn't come that far, but at least she stopped spending all her free time in the galley sharpening the knives.

Will we cast off the lines and sail over the horizon into the rainbow?

I don't know yet, but we'll keep you posted.



**Beaufort Wind Scale**  
**Developed in 1805 by Sir Francis Beaufort of England**

Force	Wind (Knots)	WMO Classification	Appearance of Wind Effects	
			On the Water	On Land
0	Less than 1	Calm	Sea surface smooth and mirror-like	Calm, smoke rises vertically
1	1-3	Light Air	Scaly ripples, no foam crests	Smoke drift indicates wind direction, still wind vanes
2	4-6	Light Breeze	Small wavelets, crests glassy, no breaking	Wind felt on face, leaves rustle, vanes begin to move
3	7-10	Gentle Breeze	Large wavelets, crests begin to break, scattered whitecaps	Leaves and small twigs constantly moving, light flags extended
4	11-16	Moderate Breeze	Small waves 1-4 ft. becoming longer, numerous whitecaps	Dust, leaves, and loose paper lifted, small tree branches move
5	17-21	Fresh Breeze	Moderate waves 4-8 ft taking longer form, many whitecaps, some spray	Small trees in leaf begin to sway
6	22-27	Strong Breeze	Larger waves 8-13 ft, whitecaps common, more spray	Larger tree branches moving, whistling in wires
7	28-33	Near Gale	Sea heaps up, waves 13-20 ft, white foam streaks off breakers	Whole trees moving, resistance felt walking against wind
8	34-40	Gale	Moderately high (13-20 ft) waves of greater length, edges of crests begin to break into spindrift, foam blown in streaks	Whole trees in motion, resistance felt walking against wind
9	41-47	Strong Gale	High waves (20 ft), sea begins to roll, dense streaks of foam, spray may reduce visibility	Slight structural damage occurs, slate blows off roofs
10	48-55	Storm	Very high waves (20-30 ft) with overhanging crests, sea white with densely blown foam, heavy rolling, lowered visibility	Seldom experienced on land, trees broken or uprooted, "considerable structural damage"
11	56-63	Violent Storm	Exceptionally high (30-45 ft) waves, foam patches cover sea, visibility more reduced	
12	64+	Hurricane	Air filled with foam, waves over 45 ft, sea completely white with driving spray, visibility greatly reduced	