

Best Day Sail Ever (with or without wind)

by MATTHEW MILLER

→ The wooden-hulled schooner glides into Gustavia harbor, on the French island of St. Barthelemy, most famous for attracting celebrities. The man at the wheel, wisps of gray hair fluttering, smiles broadly. Standing amid a cargo of green coconuts, the schooner's barefoot crew waves back to folks on the quay, including me, gathered to watch our ship come in. Against the little white church and a blue sky, the dark-green schooner makes a pretty picture. This is *Scaramouche*, de facto flagship of the West Indies Regatta, one of a growing number of chances to experience traditionally built sailboats like this firsthand. The captain, Martin Jennett, a Scotsman gone nearly Caribbean native after 40-plus years here, has run day trips on the boat for decades. He just sailed from the Grenadines nonstop with a crew of only three, hence the sleepy eyes. He could certainly use a few more hands on deck. No sailing experience necessary, but willingness to sleep in a hammock under the stars a plus.

Before the hawsers get looped over the cleats, the shore crowd draws close. I reach for the schooner's elegant curved flank, compelled to touch it. The late sun turns the water French blue as sloops sail in — *Tradition* from Anguilla, *Genesis* from Antigua, *Savvy* all the way from Grenada — each of them built by hand with hatchets and hammers. The crews secure their vessels and join us on *Scaramouche*. "Permission to come aboard?" a guitar player from town asks. Granted! A cauldron of beef burgundy, local recipe, simmers amidships. Grenadines rum is poured on the poop deck. Just like that, this survivor of reefs and hurricanes becomes a party host, the spiritual center of St. Barts.

Down the wharf, a custard-colored 180-foot luxury yacht backs up to a mooring, with fore, side and aft thrusters roaring. The island earns its reputation for glamour and money. Ten euros for a cocktail — that's St. Barts slang for "bargain." Beyonce and Mick Jagger visit here often. Still, if the stars are on that megayacht, they're not inviting anyone aboard. But they'd be welcome on *Scaramouche*, adulation replaced with fresh coconut water, a fair trade. Someone would hand Mick a guitar and ask if he knows any Bob Marley songs.

A last sloop comes down the channel under sail. "*Summer Cloud*," someone announces. The swelled schooner crew observes in silence as the boat with no engine maneuvers into a slip between two other boats. The crowd, with many skilled sailors, cheers the feat. Now the fleet is whole, our white-winged flotilla ready for the wind-swept sea.





➔ “No wind!” curses Alexis Andrews, captain of the *Genesis* and master of the regatta. But “no wind” is a nautical term that means “not enough wind to have much fun.” In fact, there is a little wind, and the fleet sails out of the harbor — slowly. As the *Scaramouche* crew prepares to raise the main sail, Capt. Martin yells, “Now!” Three grown men dangle from the sheets against the weight of canvas, hand power alone hoisting sails on a 56-ton ship. Then Martin shuts the big engine down, and everything goes quiet.

“Is this all the sail we have?” I ask, trying to sound nonchalant. It feels like we’re sitting still. More buoy than boat. “I’m afraid it is,” says Martin. “No more cards to play.” But he’s clearly tickled to be aboard this ship even after all these years. A child draws the scene in pencil, sloops against the rocky coast. There are worse things to be than becalmed alee of St. Barts.

Martin almost lost his ship in 2004 when Hurricane Ivan blew it onto a reef. He put his heart into his schooner again, repairing the hull, replacing the swamped bus engine. “She’s my wife, *Scaramouche*,” Martin says when I ask why he went to such lengths and expense, “my success story. We’ve been through ups and downs. I had no choice.”

The schooner’s timbers creak. Lines snap. The light breeze whistles in the blocks. This may not feel like luxury cruising on a 3,000-passenger megaship — because it feels like sailing. And with the boat anchored off Shell Beach, adults and kids climb the rigging to leap down into the sea. “Cannonball!” cries one lad tumbling off the gunwale more like cannon fodder. I climb the ship ladder to an impossible height (the third rung), say a prayer and dive. Big commercial ships rarely call for courage, and there’s nothing to fear here that hitting the cool salt water doesn’t cure.

After the so-called race, Alexis insists we go meet a particular shopkeeper “to understand what sailing means to the islanders.” So Martin, his French first mate Remy Pipard and I drive into the hills to the rum shop of Jean Magras, open in the same spot since the ‘50s. But it’s election day, Jean tells us when Remy translates our request for libations. “Everything has to be quiet on election day.” Then he serves us anyway because we can’t vote, so it won’t matter if we’re drunk. In World War II, Jean sailed “*un petit bateau*,” a wooden dinghy, through the blockade of German U-boats to procure vegetables and supplies from Guadeloupe. In then-poor St. Barts, boats were tools not toys, and risk a necessity rather than a game. Was it better once the tourists came? “Oh, yes,” Jean says without hesitation. Celebrities have visited his shop, but he can’t remember names. “The guy with the hair.” He served them what he serves us, strong ti punch — warm rum agricole, cane syrup and lime. “We don’t want no problems for anyone,” he says in English. And after a sip, a regatta with no wind doesn’t seem like much of a problem at all.



357
NAUTICAL
MILES

DISTANCE SAVVY SAILED FROM GRENADA TO ST. BARTS TO JOIN THE REGATTA

OPTIONS

Traditional Sailing in the West Indies

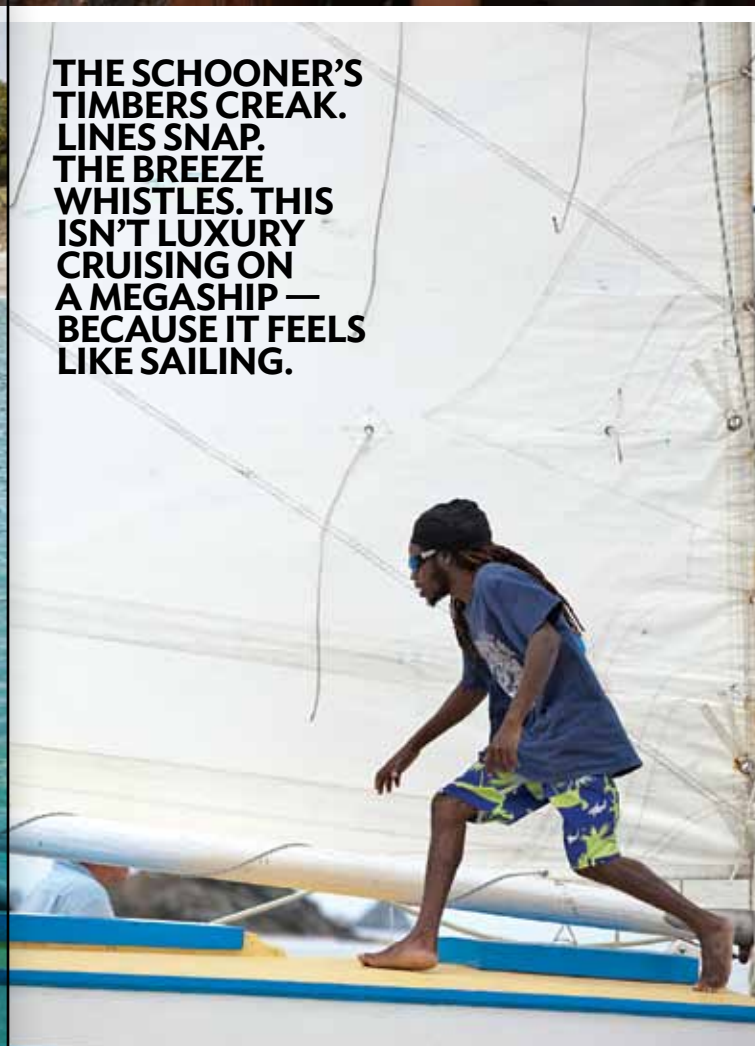
Grenada • Day-sail on the sloop *Savvy* out of Port Louis Marina. The crew serves local Grenadian fish broth and, if you dare, pours Carriacou-brewed Jack Iron rum (sip slowly and away from open flame). Port Louis Marina, St. George’s; danny.donelan@cnportlouismarina.com; 473-435-7432

St. Lucia • The island looks different from the other side of the beach. (That’s where the photographer went to make those postcards.) Another lovingly restored Carriacou sloop, Jus’ Sail’s *Good Expectation* offers two hours or all day. jussail.com

Anguilla • The sloop *Tradition* provides an authentic Caribbean sailing experience. Haul sail, try your hand at the tiller, or just observe. This is not an excursion. It’s the life. lauriegumbs@gmail.com; tradition-sailing.com

Union Island, St. Vincent and the Grenadines • On *Scaramouche*, uncork a bottle of French wine imported from St. Barts on this very schooner. Stretch out on the spacious deck, and watch the horizon sway. From Union Island, the heart of the Grenadines, to Mayreau and the Tobago Cays. Call Martin. 784-455-1362





**THE SCHOONER'S
TIMBERS CREAK.
LINES SNAP.
THE BREEZE
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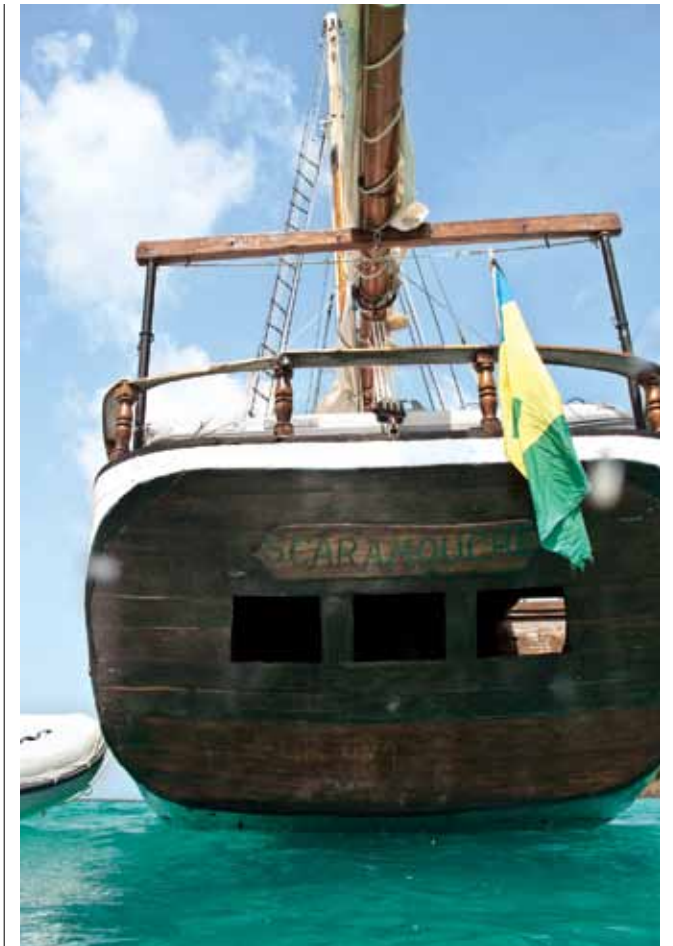


HE TRIES TO EXPRESS WHAT THE BOAT MEANS TO HIM — BUILT ON HIS ISLAND, SAILED FOR DECADES, HALF DESTROYED, REBUILT OUT OF LOCAL TREES, ROCKS AND LOVE.

→ Before another day on the water, I stop at Choisy *boulangerie*. Far from inflated rock-star prices, the croissants and steaming cappuccinos cost less here than in Paris. Locals come in to buy loaves of bread. Open since 1912, Choisy might well have served Jean Magras and others who sailed for work the kind of boats we're sailing for fun.

Today I ship out on the sloop *Tradition*, restored by owners Laurie Gumbs and Deborah Vos. As we cruise in slow motion again, Deborah tells how they took local captain Roman Biel sailing the night before the regatta. "He's 92, with canes to walk," she says, "but he came aboard, and in five minutes, it took 20 years off his age." Capt. Roman sailed a schooner like *Scaramouche* in the 1950s, running cattle from the British Virgins, along with other cargo. Boats like these were once workhorses of West Indies commerce, loaded in St. Barts with goods — rum, beer, cigarettes, fresh meat, anything high value — for sale anywhere from St. Martin to Trinidad. The old captain declined to take *Tradition's* tiller. But as Laurie steered, Roman's hand had risen. With the slightest movements, he directed Laurie a little this way and a little that. "He's been sailing these islands for 90 years," Laurie says. "What are you going to do, not follow his course?"

We anchor at Colombier Beach, accessible only under sail or on foot — no bar here, no beach chairs for rent. I swim ashore and walk up the hill. From above, the water is so clear it's nearly invisible, like the boats are suspended in the blue sky. I'm swimming back as the raft of boats breaks up. The sailors want to race, wind or no. I ride back on *Savvy* with Danny Donelan from



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JACK IRON RUM, MADE ON CARRIACOU ISLAND, WHERE MOST OF THE BOATS ARE BUILT NOW

Grenada. Walter steers, holding a dead-steady line. He's from a boatbuilding family on Carriacou Island, in the Grenadines, where most of these boats are now built. Scottish shipwrights pooled knowledge with Caribbean craftspeople to revive the tradition there.

Genesis's crew unfurls a genoa off the bowsprit, which might be cheating if there were any rules. The scene is of comical slowness — white sails stationary against white clouds. We finally get a gust of wind, 10 knots for 10 seconds, which fills *Savvy's* mainsail and heels us over a few degrees. The boat jumps, waking to do the thing it was made for. Suddenly it's a race, and almost won. Three sloops stay even, dropping to the harbor buoy that marks the finish. *Summer Cloud*, light in the water without an engine, cuts first across the line.

At the awards ceremony, Parker, crewman on *Scaramouche* — he'd caught a mahimahi on a hand line sailing up — accepts the schooner's prize as queen of the regatta. Weathered French-speaking Vincy, a man worth his salt, tries to express what the big boat means to him — built in his island country, sailed for decades, half destroyed, rebuilt out of local trees, rocks and love — but he's overcome with emotion. A boat like that means more than one man's words can say.

