

*A
determined
crew treks
to the
Caribbean
to see what
it takes to
bring a herd
of cat owners
together.*

A
trio of rac-
ers beat their way
toward Anse Marcel
on the northern tip of
St. Maarten. A Carib-
bean barbecue and
libations await
them.

MISSION IMPROBABLE

**BY
MARK PILLSBURY
PHOTOS
BY
BOB GRIESER**

For a scientific expedition, this one was pretty straightforward: Fly due south from fall's already icy-cold New England and rendezvous with research colleagues in Charlotte, North Carolina, then continue directly to St. Maarten to begin a five-day in-country study to determine exactly how a particular species of French catamaran owner stimulates the production of endorphins.

To help document our findings, our team of five would be joined on site by California marine photographer Bob Grieser. He'd turn out to be a valuable source of information about local habitats and customs and the role they play in this phenomenon. After all, he visits the island annually to shoot the St. Maarten Heineken Regatta, which by all reports is the very definition of its motto: "Serious fun."

At first, all went according to plan. Grieser looked so at home waiting for us at the Princess Juliana International Airport that the rest of the team, Peter and Peggy Davis, Dave Robinson and Erin Miner, mistook him for our driver. He literally barked out a welcome as we strolled out of customs.

To blend in with the crowd, I'd secured *Merengue*, a Lipari 41, from Dream Yacht Charter. The idea was to look and feel right at home when we joined the fleet of 17 Fountaine Pajot catamarans scheduled to ren-

Marina in Simpson Bay. As the meter ticked upward toward \$60, we crawled our way around the lagoon in a bumper-to-bumper queue that was due only in part to construction of a new bridge scheduled to open by spring. We didn't know it then, but this span would factor heavily into our plans in the coming days; for now, though, it was just another delay that nearly kept us from reaching the boat before the Dream team had left for the night.

Once at the marina, paperwork was dispensed with efficiently, thanks in part to the fact that Erin, back home in Annapolis, Maryland, oversees Dream's charter-booking software system. Officially, though, her role on this trip was guest, and her only real assignment was to understand the complex relationship between the charter experience and relaxation. She proved to be a quick study.

Provisioning was a breeze. Longtime sailing pal Peter is a

THE ANCHORAGE FILLED WITH CATS OLD AND NEW, OWNED AND CHARTERED, RANGING IN SIZE ALL THE WAY DOWN TO THE MAHÉ 36.

dezvous on Wednesday, Nov. 20, 2013, at the beachfront anchorage in Grand Case Bay.

But first, we had to get through the traffic between the airport and the Dream Yacht base at Port Royal

chef by trade, so the shopping list was his to own; the rest of us simply followed him to the well-stocked nearby French market to help push the basket and carry supplies out to a waiting taxi. That evening,



our gear and goods stored, we walked around the harbor to Spinnaker's for outstanding thin-crust pizza. A tip of the hat, by the way, to whoever thought scalloped-potato pizza would be a delicious idea.

ing of the under-construction causeway bridge and the roadway bridge out of Simpson Bay just 15 minutes later. We needn't have worried; the first span was left open for workers and the second, it turned out, wasn't scheduled to lift until 10:30. By then, a parade of boats had amassed as we all jockeyed against wind and current.

Clear of the channel, we hoisted sail, bore off to port and close-reached our way north toward Pointe Basse Terre. The breeze was fresh, the sun had chased away the morning's clouds and the sail was delightful, until suddenly it wasn't. Turns out we'd snagged a lobster pot and line

with the port rudder and were stopped dead with our sails full. A knife quickly took care of our immediate problem, and when we reached Grand Case, we dropped sails well outside so I could dive down and be sure we had nothing wrapped around a prop.

Our arrival coincided with that of the flagship of the rendezvous, the new FP Victoria 67, owned by crewed charter company TradeWinds. As I delivered a pile of CW goodies ashore in advance of the skipper's meeting, the anchorage filled with cats old and new, owned and chartered, ranging in size all the way down to the Mahé 36, the smallest in the FP range. Crews included Frenchmen, Americans, Germans, Russians and more. Amid the babel of tongues at dinner each night, the rum punches and wine thankfully would make the events of the day universally understandable.

As the sun set and a steel band played on the beach, the crews gathered at the Ti Provençal restaurant to greet, collect swag and have the first in what would turn out to be a scrumptious string of feasts.

It was our good fortune to be seated with Claire Fountaine, wife of FP founder Jean-Francois Fountaine, who'd stayed behind in France to campaign (successfully it turned out) for mayor of La Rochelle. Claire is a former Olympic sailor and vice president of the French team preparing for the games in Rio. She was a delightful dinner companion, though I'd soon enough learn not to cross



After the opening races Thursday, a day of water sports at Tintamarre and Île Pinel provided a welcomed change of pace (left). The hilltop high above the Radisson Resort at Anse Marcel (above) gives photographer Bob Grieser a spectacular vantage point to take in the anchorage and a view of Anguilla off in the distance. As if there wasn't competition enough during the final race to St. Barts, a water polo contest on the beach (below, left) brought out the killer instinct in everyone, but more so in Team Fountaine Pajot. Over the course of five days, we circled St. Maarten (map, below), beginning and ending in Simpson Bay.

her in water polo, a sport the French approach with death-match determination.

In the morning we were greeted by gusty winds sweeping down over the hills, and rain-heavy clouds. At 7:30, the crew aboard *Mari's Leonardo* motored through the anchorage blaring "bonjour, bonjour" over their hailer. Soon anchors were up and 15 boats all jockeyed for a downwind

start. At the final horn several were over early, but as if to say "What of it?" the general recall was ignored and the race was on.

I'd like to say we led the pack on the run across the Anguilla Channel and around the corner to Sandy Island, but alas, that was not the case. As a squall line approached and we rounded up to greet it and reduce sail, we were reminded



of a basic lesson of bareboat chartering: Check the reefing lines and gear before you're in the thick of it. Let's just say this little experience gave us ample reason to congratulate ourselves later for the number of boats we caught. Eventually.

It was a wet ride around Blowing Rocks as squall after squall ripped through. Goosebumps and shivering in

chain chose to jump off the windlass and run free. On the one hand, we cursed the considerable scope that would need to be retrieved, but on the other hand, blessed the Dream dockhand who'd thought to secure the bitter end of the rode. Our dramatic rush backward came to an abrupt and much appreciated halt.

tempted to join the latter, we carried the CW burgee on our flag halyard, and so tacked (and tacked and tacked) onward. By the time we'd finally finished, anchored, showered and dinghied in, we were ready for the libations, Caribbean barbecue and dancing that awaited us at the Radisson resort.

The plans for Friday were as

eral dive and tourist boats. We spent the morning snorkeling, and after lunch hauled anchor and motored back toward St. Maarten and the anchorage at Île Pinel, a tropical paradise with a sandy beach and hills with hiking trails behind it. The harbor was a frenzy of paddle boarders, swimmers and kayakers. Peter, Erin and I took the inflatable and headed

St. Martin Nature Reserve. We dined at outdoor tables beside the beach and the party raged into the night. Among the folks we met were John and Hella Bickford and their family and friends from the Belize 43 *Yachtsman's Dream*. Since 2008, they'd strayed a good distance from their home waters in Seattle, and they seemed to be in no hurry

the start of our final race, the *Cruising World Cup*, from Pinel to Anse de Colombier on St. Barts. It was a close reach, and oh, what a sail. Erin took the helm this time and kept us in the hunt as we galloped between the islands. It would have been impolite to win, but we needn't have worried.

For lunch, we anchored off the beach, and then the entire

our spirits with nectar from green bottles.

A healthy swell was running when we reached the inner harbor at Gustavia, making the med mooring a tricky and humbling experience. Given the surge, we were told to lie well off the quay, so we used our anchor to hold us 10 feet out and the dinghy as a makeshift passerelle. I can't say we were graceful as we clambered ashore to clear in at customs, but no one got wet.

The closing dinner that night was at Do Brazil, a cozy little restaurant on Shell Beach. It was a short walk away through the bustling shops and bars downtown and then through neighborhoods stretching back from the harbor. What a sight to stroll past the 17 cats, all tied stern to. What fun had been had by this band of sailors who'd come together just four days earlier from the various corners of the Caribbean.

Festivities went well into the evening. Back at the boat, Erin, Dave and I lay out on the trampoline. Thumping music echoed across the harbor, and we watched Jupiter sparkle just above the ridge behind town and then the moon slowly started to spin open. In a jiffy we had the anchor up and fell in line, hoping the tug and barge intended to pass through and wouldn't stop abruptly in our path.

Our plan was to spend Sunday exploring the beaches along the west side of St. Barths on our own, but the morning forecast predicted a front with building winds. Instead, we cleared out and sailed for Île Fourchue, a small island with a spectacular cove surrounded by hills. We picked up a mooring and went snorkeling along the rocky shore before heading off at midday for the bustling town of Philipsburg back on St. Maarten.

Uncertain of what the weather had in store, we took a slip at Bobby's Marina for the night and refueled *Me-*

renque. In town, the shops were closed and the streets were all but deserted. We did manage to find one beachside restaurant still serving beers, so felt obliged to patronize it.

Monday, the wind still gusted as we raised sails one last time. With a single reef in the main, it was no time before we reached the Simpson Bay drawbridge. Back inside the lagoon, we put the pedal to the metal to make the afternoon opening of the new causeway bridge, only to discover a notice to mariners had been issued in our absence announcing the bridge would be closed indefinitely for equipment testing.

Hmm, now that isn't how this trip was supposed to end. All afternoon we sat anchored off the airport runway. Jets screamed overhead and a gusty wind kept *Merengue* tacking back and forth on the hook. I'd just about dozed off on the tramp when with a whoosh of water we started dragging toward the shore. That was a fire drill.

Finally, late in the day, with the sun headed for the hills, we spotted a construction barge bound for the bridge. A horn tooted and the span slowly started to spin open. In a jiffy we had the anchor up and fell in line, hoping the tug and barge intended to pass through and wouldn't stop abruptly in our path. And then we were through. As twilight settled over Simpson Bay, we turned and tied stern to at Port Royal Marina. What a time. We'd circumnavigated the island. Along the way, we saw some fine sailing, danced under a veil of tropical stars, met sailors with salty tales to tell and had a ball doing it all.

Research mission accomplished.

Mark Pillsbury is CW's editor.



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1. It was a wet lunch break as squalls rolled over the anchorage at Sandy Island between races on the first day of the rendezvous. 2. Our trip winding down, the crews from 17 Fountaine Pajot catamarans gathered on the beach at Anse de Colombier on St. Barts for a group photo. 3. Erin and Dave are all business as they grind home a sheet in the heat of racing Merengue, our Lipari 41, borrowed from Dream Yacht Charter. 4. The crew on Yachtsman's Dream works to get the kite flying on the run from Sandy Island to Blowing Rocks on the southern tip of Anguilla. 5. Thanks to TradeWinds, the crewed yacht charter company, we put a dent in the local lobster population one evening. 6. Local entertainers came each night to our various seaside parties and kept the dancing going well into the evening. 7. At the finish of each race, the committee boat, flag flying, signaled the party could begin. 8. Call it the multihull two step: Racing boats danced their way downwind. 9. Fountaine Pajot's Hélène de Fontainieu was the chief cat herder, keeping everyone on their toes and, more importantly, on schedule.

the Caribbean? Who'd have thought it! Arriving fashionably late for the midday break, we doused sail in the shallows south of Sandy Island and dropped the hook just as the windiest squall of the day swept through. Darned if that wasn't just when the anchor

The afternoon race to Anse Marcel, at the northern tip of the French side of St. Maarten (officially St. Martin), turned into a long beat. There are those who persevered to the finish and those who, under motor, won the race to the bar. Though

laid back as Thursday's racing had been energetic. Most of the cats chose to motor rather than sail the short upwind passage to Tintamarre. When we arrived at the beach-lined anchorage, all the moorings had been taken by early arrivals from our crowd, plus sev-

the other way, to the end of Cul de Sac Bay. We ran a gantlet of idle taxi drivers looking for business and instead hiked up the hill until we found a store to restock supplies.

That evening, FP and TradeWinds arranged a rock lobster dinner ashore at the

to call a halt to their nomadic life.

Another roaming pair of Americans we encountered were Ty Ebright and Judith Fabian, aboard *Fair Winds*. They'd just sailed across from Sardinia, and the plan was to continue on toward the western Caribbean. Clearly this cat crowd liked to stay on the prowl.

Saturday was a nearly perfect day for sailing. After breakfast and a swim we joined the other crews for

rendezvous headed to shore for a group photo on the deserted white sands. Alas, my mates and I lingered perhaps too long. As crews headed back to their catamarans and set off for Gustavia, we were left nearly alone on the beach to take on Team FP in the aforementioned water polo melee. With a few other stragglers on our side, we battled gallantly, but were nearly drowned by those eager Frenchmen. Trowned, we retreated to the good ship *Merengue* to bolster