

Gunkholing the Greatest Grenadine

By Mark Stevens with photography
by Sharon Matthews-Stevens

A white sloop a few hundred yards off our port bow climbed and plummeted through a rollercoaster of white-capped waves with all the glee of a kid at a carnival. Her sheets were taut and she showed plenty of hull as she sliced through blue-green waters, sending up great arcs of white spray.

Our boat was a Bavaria 46 named *My Mistress*, chartered from Horizon Yacht Charters out of True Blue Bay. It was heeled over as much as the other boat. Wind line after

Challenging but rewarding sailing is a hallmark of the spice island that offers just as much adventure on land as it does at sea

wind line raced toward us like a pack of starving Dobermans. The water darkened with each succeeding line: aquamarine, teal, cobalt, then gunmetal gray.

The boat heeled even farther. We braced our legs against the cockpit seat on the low side

as our boat pranced through the water, racing north along Grenada's west coast.

Grenada might be challenging sailing for beginners, but it may be the best cruising ground in the Caribbean if you are an accomplished sailor.

The first time we chartered here we headed east from True Blue Bay along Grenada's south coast. We'd signed on two friends, Ted and his wife Gail, as crew. Gail had never sailed in anything over two-foot waves and 10 knots of wind. Twelve-foot waves crashed over the bow, plunging it into green water, crusting my



The Bavaria 46 *My Mistress* sails in the Caribbean sunshine.

beard with salt. Ten minutes off the dock Gail disappeared below and didn't reappear until we dropped anchor.

Having learned firsthand the challenges of sailing here, on this trip we opted for a skippered charter. And now, as we raced this other boat up Grenada's shores, Andell David, our skipper, scanned the waters ahead and to windward. A sudden gust crashed into our boat and we showed even more hull.

He studied our sails. He told me to harden the main. He glanced down at the knotmeter. And he laughed in sheer exhilaration.

"Double-reefed main. Tiny foresail. And we're doing better than 8 knots," he called out. "We're racing!"

It was no official race—merely the sailor's axiom in action. We gained. The other boat gained. We hardened sheets even more then feathered up into one really nasty gust. The sailing was so intense here you almost forgot to look at the scenery. Almost.

Towering palms danced and shimmered in the winds, some turned sideways like inside-out umbrellas. Mountains reared up above a rugged shoreline bedecked by cliffs

and precipitous slopes, emerald in the sunlight. Houses clung like goats to their sides. They splattered these ridges with splashes of color—a sort of real-life Jackson Pollock painting. Every once in a while a splash of neon orange—the blossoms of flamboyant trees—decorated the green mountains.

The highest peaks, marching out of the east, were first blue, then gray, then shrouded in great bands of clouds like bandages on the heads of punch-drunk prizefighters. Andell gestured toward the wheel and I took the helm, white-knuckled.



"I love to race," he said as he tweaked the main. I looked over at the other boat then dead ahead. I scanned the sails to check the trim.

The shoreline of Grenada bowed to the sea in the north. The sun came and went, burning down on you like a laser beam then disappearing behind great billowing clouds. Just past the last headland a blue, hump-backed beast rose up out of the sea. As we raced our unknown competitor another beast materialized from beneath the water, battleship gray under another bank of clouds, the first installments in a chain of islands stretching north to St. Vincent and Bequia. One island was called Ile de Ronde, another was called Diamond Head.

They beckoned with hidden lures, but they warned us too, for this is no place to learn bareboat charter sailing. I was grateful for Andell's presence on the boat.

"I am Grenadian by birth and by choice," he had said by way of introduction. It is an attitude many Grenadians share and an attitude that makes you hate to leave the island's environs.

When we went ashore people came up to us and chatted: outside the spice plantation, on the porch of a little wooden rum shop up in the hills overlooking St. George's, at Fishermen's Friday, a weekly celebration of the bounty of the sea held in Gouyave, where half the island

Rail-down sailing off Grenada, top, and cool waters run off a cliff on a gunkholing expedition, left.

came out to catch up on gossip, to sip a Carib and sample the variety of fish dishes from tuna kebobs to fish quiche to grilled lobster.

It is one of the reasons that gunkholing Grenada is every bit as rewarding as making the passage north. Cruise the Grenadines and you'll rack up the miles and you'll achieve your velocity made good. Gunkhole Grenada and you'll meet some of the nicest people in the West Indies, discovering one of the most beautiful islands in the Windwards in the process.

One day we left the boat anchored in the lagoon at St. George's and ventured into the interior. We were hiking Seven Sisters Falls, along a precipitous trail skirting the walls of a place called the "Valley of Decision," a lush and panoramic canyon of green. I was struck anew by the incredible beauty of this island. I wondered idly, as we descended into the valley, clamoring over boulders, marching through groaning stands of bamboo, toward a staircase of seven falls nestled in the bosom of an emerald cathedral, how I could ever describe this beauty with mere words.

"Are you a lover of the land or of the sea?" our driver had asked us as we negotiated mountain-top hairpin turns through the rainforest.

In my mind's eye I had a sudden recollection of a guy with his young son puttering around the lagoon at St. George's in an old wooden runabout painted the bright green yellow and red of Grenada's flag. He idled off our transom for a moment and waved. "That man sailed across the ocean in a workboat," Andell said. "But he didn't tell anyone he was going to do it."

I remembered, on our passage across the south of the island, seeing two men casting fishing lines while perched atop a cliff 40 feet above crashing waves. I remember gliding past two small boys bobbing in the seas in another boat—15 feet or less—as they waited for the catch of the day; two old men, grizzled and gray, spending the morning drifting across the aquamarine expanse in yet another weather-beaten craft.

I called to mind the big races held in January, the Grenada Sailing Festival offering four days of serious yacht racing combined with two-day workboat competitions off Grand Anse beach, parties at True Blue Bay Resort, live music, fashion shows and even fire-eating competitions. I considered

the summer Carriacou Regatta Festival, more than 40 years young, with its emphasis on the island tradition of boatbuilding, featuring classes of racing workboats from 15 to 35 feet long. It is a summer celebration of sail with donkey racing and a greasy pole competition thrown in for good measure.

And I decided that I, like the locals, was a lover of both land and sea. Of these lands and this sea in particular.

Grenada is a place that Doyle, in his **Cruising Guide to the Windwards**, called “a spectacularly beautiful island.” Here you can stroll down paths lined by nutmeg shells, or pass great wooden trays of drying cinnamon and inhale its spicy tang. Here you will discover an island with a story as diverse as her abundance of spices. A mere 12 degrees off the equator, Grenada is the most southerly of the Windwards. It is just 21 miles long and 12 miles wide. The place names you see on the charts as you pass attest to its history: Lance

aux Epines, Morne Rouge, Grand Mal Bay, Moliniere Point. And when you go ashore and listen to the island’s older residents, you get a fascinating and unique patois. Most Caribbean islands mix Pidgin English in with their dialect. Here the basic ingredient is French.

Then you see the fort at St. George’s, you cruise past Happy Hill and Halifax, and you realize this is an island with a past like the pepperpot they love so much. Grenada achieved some notoriety in 1983 with the United States invasion, and Hurricane Ivan’s onslaught caused extensive damage. But even this disaster proved the islanders’ mettle.

“The hurricane changed people,” said Grenada Board of Tourism representative Roger Augustin. “We have become more of a community.” A community of people who love both their land and the surrounding seas.

Which brought me back to our cab driver’s original question—and my own answer: Was I a lover of the land or of the sea? This was why

we’d chosen to gunkhole Grenada instead of making for islands north.

We tucked into a little bay sheltered by Hog Island and noticed, off our starboard beam, a delightful little beach 100 yards long, an admittedly ramshackle hut crouched beside it. “Jump-ups there every weekend,” said Pascall. “It’s popular with locals and cruisers.”

Then he gestured toward a fleet of boats swinging lazily at anchor in the lee of Hog Island. A woman in the cockpit of one boat read the afternoon away, a middle-aged fellow, naked as the day he was born, dove into the aquamarine bay from the transom of another. They were in no apparent hurry.

That night I sipped a Westerhall rum and watched the lights twinkling on shore from the cockpit of our boat, the tapestry of stars, the anchor lights from a fleet of boats swaying like Hawaiian dancers to a sound track laid down by the whisper of the winds, elegiac piano music from the cockpit speakers





and the serenade of a chorus of tree frogs. I concluded that Grenada was the perfect place to gunkhole—the perfect float plan is a brisk sail and an afternoon swim off the transom, maybe a hike through pristine rainforest or a dip in the pool at the foot of a waterfall surrounded by the downright lascivious bloom of pink ginger.

And I knew, based on the evidence of hundreds of yachts tucked into to a variety of new marinas dotting the south coast, of the fleet swinging off Pandy Beach outside the harbor at St. George's, of the island's one-time primacy as a yachting destination and of the people here who were committed to Grenada's reacquisition of that title, that I was not the only one who felt this way.

Ian Winsborrow, yachting and cruising officer for Grenada Board of Tourism echoed that sentiment. "Yachters are a prime tourist target for Grenada," he said. "And the government is committed to an infrastructure to support that growth."

He listed the new marina complex at St. George's, Port Louis Marina, the new marinas coming to life on the south coast, and the high quality of boating services offered by the likes of Grenada Marine Services, an excellent full-service facility tucked into a bucolic bay at St. David's hard by a little resort called Belair Plantation. Offering rustic but elegant cottages and an incredible waterside restaurant, Belair Plantation is worthy of a week-long stop in its own right.



Efficient sailing was one way to characterize our exhilarating romp up Grenada's west coast on our third day out, racing another boat for dear life. And right now we were winning. I glanced toward the shore and saw a white curtain descend Mount Qua Qua and race across the water. Rain dropped from these clouds, and lashed me in the face. "White squall," said Andell. "No winds." Then the winds hit and we were way over on our side. I was frightened but the adrenaline was roaring through me with the force of the squall line assailing our boat.



"Ease sheets and prepare to jibe," Andell said, and I admit that I was disappointed, even if I was relieved to be turning off the wind. For our race with our unknown competitor was over.

We were turning back—jibing and heading south past St. George's, a natural harbor ringed by towering green mountains dotted with houses climbing the steep slopes, houses with orange fish-scale roofs, buildings painted the colors of the rainbow, the fruits, the undersea fish, Georgian architectural gems climbing up from the crescent road that is the Carenage, dominated by a 200-year-old fort.

We let out the canvas and ran south toward the horizon, past pumpkin-colored hotels, past luxury resorts fronting onto the alabaster beaches of Grand Anse and Morne Rouge and Pink Gin.

The other boat was making for points north: for Carriacou, for Mayreau, for Union, for the other gems that sparkled on the necklace of the Grenadines. We, on the other hand, were happy to gunkhole Grenada—the greatest Grenadine. Very happy indeed. □

For more information on gunkholing the island, and complementing your float plan to the fullest, log on to www.grenadagrenadines.com.

And we added our own anecdotal evidence, dining on the deck of a restaurant at True Blue Resort as we watched our boat strain at her anchor lines just past the lavender and lime painted office of Horizon Yacht Charters. Dodgy Dock was one of the most yacht-friendly establishments in the Windwards, ably managed by Russ and Magdalena Fielding, themselves longtime sailors.

Here in Grenada we had discovered a sailors' paradise, albeit one that should be sailed with care and efficiency.

Grenada is nothing if not colorful, including its homes, previous page. With macheti in hand, a Grenadian carries a bag of coconuts, previous page. Little boats such as Lasers are a great way to take advantage of the fresh breezes on a gray Grenada day, right.

