



PARADISE FOUND

Searching for a Caribbean idyll in the wake of the storms.

BY GINA DECAPRIO VERCESI



A catamaran at The Baths in the British Virgin Islands.

SQUINTING INTO THE SUNSHINE, I peered at the flat stretch of sand peeking above the surface of the turquoise sea. Gone was the junglelike oasis that once stood in its center. Most of the tiny islet had washed away, leaving only a glimmer of the Eden it had been. If our captain hadn't said this was Sandy Spit, I never would have recognized it.

Veteran charterers, my husband and I had long anticipated the day when our three daughters would be old enough for a jaunt through the British Virgin Islands, when they could all swim and snorkel with confidence. That day finally appeared on the horizon: spring

break 2018. Our April-born girls would have birthdays, and a week spent hopping around the idyllic chain of nearly 60 islands and islets would make for a memorable celebration.

Then, on September 6, 2017, Hurricane Irma arrived, delivering 185 mph winds that devastated the archipelago. Hurricane Maria swept through barely two weeks later, effectively battling cleanup. In the weeks that followed, images in the media revealed that the unprecedented category five storms had transformed the unspoiled islands from paradise to postapocalypse: pastel buildings reduced to splintered heaps, coconut palms lying in frondless mounds, jumbles of smashed boats bobbing in supposed hurricane holes.

But by December, the Moorings, the region's most established charter company, had launched enough new boats to fulfill holiday reservations. We decided to forge ahead.

On the last day of March, a plush catamaran appropriately christened *Three Ladies* awaited our arrival in Tortola. Floating accommodations allowed us to visit multiple anchorages, assessing how the islands had weathered the storms while supporting recovery efforts. It also meant that we'd have uninterrupted views of the sea and our own saltwater plunge pool; leaping from the yacht into the ultramarine water became our daughters' favorite pastime.

Days were spent cruising from island to island and swimming to crescents of alabaster beach or snorkeling swaths of reef teeming with technical or marine life. At night, we took the dinghy ashore for spicy roti and freshly caught snapper washed down with local beer. We approached each anchorage with apprehension, and while some places appeared unscathed, vestiges of the storm endured: Magical Marina Cay looked like a ghost town, while the rusted carcass of the *Willy T*, the BVI's infamous party barge, lay beached in a cove on Norman Island.

Still, the hopeful thwack of hammers and buzz of power tools comingled with strains of island reggae to create a soundtrack for our trip. Though fewer palm trees meant a bit

less shade, the water—as the locals kept reminding us—was just as blue, the sand was just as white and the rum was just as strong.

Everywhere we went, people shared Irma stories, describing the fearsome bansheelike wail of the wind, the tornadoes twisting at the edge of the hurricane's eye. Many lost everything. Yet despite the casualties, a spirit of optimism prevailed, and practically every story ended with "Thank god for life."

The British Virgin Islands have long epitomized travelers' fantasies of a tropical paradise, and before the 2017 hurricane season, paradise was how I'd describe them. But my concept was flawed, implying something syn-

onymous with visual perfection. This trip had revealed a variation on that theme—one more about supporting the people who call the islands home and less about whether the surrounding hillsides were lush and green.

Back at Sandy Spit, Captain Roy dropped anchor. We donned masks and snorkels and jumped into the water, floating through the octopus' garden of reef fringing the soft sand. In the center of the islet, someone had planted a small grove of baby coconut trees—paradise in the making. ▽

Recovery efforts in the British Virgin Islands continue. To donate, visit Unite BVI Foundation (unitebvi.com).

SPOTLIGHT



Close-up of a hawksbill sea turtle at Xcaret Park in Mexico.

In Danger: Hawksbill Sea Turtle

One of the fastest swimmers of the sea turtle species, the hawksbill can travel more than 1,000 miles in a single month. And while they've been around for more than 100 million years, in the past half-century their population has plummeted, landing them on the threshold of extinction. Why would such a graceful creature—one of the smaller sea turtles—be disappearing almost before our eyes? The answers are as clear as the bright tropical sun: plastic garbage in the sea that entangles them, hunting to make jewelry from their beautiful shells and loss of nesting habitat. How can you help? Say no to plastic straws and bottles, never buy turtle shell jewelry and stay at a beach resort that supports sea turtle conservation. — **COSTAS CHRIST**

For more information on the endangered species included in National Geographic's Photo Ark project, led by photographer Joel Sartore, visit natgeophotoark.org.

JULIAN LOVE

© PHOTO BY JOEL SARTORE/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTO ARK