



Postcards from the Caribbean #4
S/V Polyphonic
Jeff Grossman / Jean Levine
and the cats Sarge & Shadow
Dateline: Deshaies, Guadeloupe

Our last postcard left us in picturesque Boqueron, on the Southwest corner of Puerto Rico. From Boqueron we set off to make our way upwind along the Puerto Rican south coast, and then on to the “Holy Grail” ... the Virgin islands. Our friends, Mike and Jenny on their Pearson 36’ “Kamal”, sailed with us this portion (and on to Guadeloupe). We spent ten days making morning dashes along the Puerto Rican coast, leaving between 03:00 and 06:00 to reach our next destination before 09:00 when the wind kicks. This only allowed us to cover 10 – 20 miles a day. Even though the wind is down in the early morning, the seas are still up and we often are only making 4kn good, even under power (in flat water we’d be doing 7.5kn).

The Puerto Rican South coast is beautiful. Many beaches, islets and reefs, all back dropped by mountains covered in rainforests. After our morning powerboat rides, we would be anchoring at some place new, so we’d take a brief rest, and then go visit the local surroundings. The highlights of our Puerto Rico travels:

La Pagera ... a village on the western end of the south coast, very quaint and an excellent SCUBA center. We watched Kite Sailors sailing (and some flying) at speeds over 30kn just inside the reefs. We also had our first Chinese food meal since Florida! Did you know in Puerto Rico they serve Chinese food with rice ... and French fries?

Ponce (Pronounced “PonSay”) ... the second largest city in Puerto Rico, and half way along the South coast. We spent three days at the Ponce Yacht and Fishing Club marina (ah, blessed Air Conditioning). We teamed with two other boats to rent a car and do major provisioning and site seeing. Watching six sailors turned loose in a Super Walmart, and then trying to wedge themselves and six grocery carts full of stuff into a car, was probably worthy of Ringling’s clown school. For site seeing we visited the Castle that Rum built (DonQ’s founder’s mansion now museum), drove up to the mountains to see a waterfall, took a brief hike in the Bosque Toro Negro rainforest, and visited the Post Office four times looking for a watermaker part (which we didn’t get).

Palmas Del Mar ... town on the southern most part of the PR East coast. The entrance to the small anchorage is very narrow, and bordered by rocks and reefs, but it is actually quite easy in good visibility. However, we arrive at the same time as a thunder shower and have to stand off shore in the rain for an hour. Ah well, the boat needed a good rinsing after all the salt thrown on it from the previous week of motoring into seas. This town is a playground for the very rich with 100’ yachts in the harbor and mansions the size of castles built on the cliffs.

From Palmas Del Mar the Virgin Islands are in sight! The first are the Spanish Virgins, located 30nm East of Puerto Rico, about half way to St. Thomas, USVI. The center of the Spanish Virgins is Culebra, with a sprinkling of smaller islands scattered around it. Culebra is somewhat in the shape of a ring with a large, and very protected bay in the middle. The land around the bay is high rolling hills rising to about 1000’ and covered in lush green vegetation.

We did the crossing to Culebra in the daytime, since it is open water and “night lees” don’t exist. That’s the good news, the bad news is it was still blowing 20 - 25kn and the seas were short and steep. I developed a new term, instead of calling it motorsailing, I now call it motorslamming. So, we motorslam our way for about 8 hours and are very glad to glide into Culebra’s protected bay, Ensonada Honda. We are in the Virgins at last! The only town in Culebra is Dewey and it is an unspoiled, small village, with many little restaurants and curio shops. One of the local Artists has a kiosk mounted on a large cart and parked on a key corner. Painted in bold graphics on the side it says:

“Open some days ... Closed others.” She was closed the two days we were there.



With our friends from Kamal, we rented 24speed mountain bikes and took excursions around Culebra. We flatlanders from Florida needed every one of those 24 speeds to get over the hills (OK, so we even cheated on a couple and walked the bikes up). The best excursion was putting our snorkel gear in backpacks, biking a few miles to a beach where we parked the bikes, hiking about a mile over a hill to a secluded beach with a horseshoe shaped reef, donning snorkel gear and splash ... off chasing Parrot Fish. Mike even spotted an Octopus, but it was gone by the time the rest of us got there. Culebra has been one of our favorite stops of the trip and we hope to spend more time in there on our way back.

However, we had to keep pushing on since we had to make 16 deg. N Latitude (south tip of Guadeloupe) by July 1st to meet our insurance Hurricane requirements. After a morning motorslam we arrive at Water Island off St. Thomas, USVI. Water Island is a private island used to bring cruise ship guests and other groups to a “tropical get away”. Fortunately, cruisers are allowed to anchor there, and to land on the beach when there aren’t parties ashore.

Not long after we get anchored, we are below relaxing when we hear the sound of a live Calypso band very close at hand. We pop up on deck to see what must be the worlds largest party barge going past our stern. It is flat decked, covered with a thatched palm frond roof about 100’ long, 30’ wide and called the “KonTiki”, and it is filled with people ready to hit the beach (and a blasting band). The KonTiki runs her square bow straight up on to the beach and parks there for the afternoon. The partiers spill out and fill the beach and like magic, vendors appear selling T-shirts, beads, and other trinkets. Around 5:00 they all pile back on, the KonTiki does another pass through the anchorage, the vendors disappear, and we have a nice quiet palm tree lined beach again. What a show!

The next couple days have us; doing a short motorslam to St. James Island (where Jean got to use her Kayak for the first time), then through the narrow Current Cut (where a sailboat that misjudged the current was lying 90 degrees on its side high and dry on the big rock in the middle), over to St. Johns (to the Post Office to learn our mail and watermaker part still hadn’t caught up with us) and finally, a nice afternoon sail in smooth seas to Jost Van Dyke in British Virgin Islands (BVI). All of our sailing in the BVIs were in smooth seas and very pleasant.

One of the “things to do” in the BVI is a visit to Foxies Bar on Jost Van Dyke. Foxies is about all there is on Jost Van Dyke and he (Foxy) is famous for putting on a great party. Though the shore activity was fun, the best show by far was watching the charter boats try and anchor in the small harbor. The BVIs are one of the least demanding sailing areas, so it doesn’t take much sailing experience to get one of the Charter companies to give you a 40’–50’ boat. We were anchored early in a nice spot at the mouth of the harbor. Over the next few hours a small armada of charter boats came in and gave a nice, continuing demonstration of how not to anchor. Many took 2 to 3 tries, some 4 to 5, the record was 10 but we’re not sure they count since they gave up after the 10th try and left. It was the only time I can remember having fenders out at anchor. Amazingly no one bounced off us. Once all these boats were anchored they hopped in their dinghies and zoom, off to Foxies to get roaring drunk. Sometime well after dark they returned and had the fun of figuring which of the identical charter boats was theirs. We’ve heard stories of people waking up the next morning to find they were on the wrong boat. When we went to leave the next morning we had to gently push the boat ahead of us out of the way since they were over our anchor. They, having been to Foxies the night before, never woke up as we left.

Our next stop in the BVI was Treasure Island of Robert Louis Steven’s fame. It’s called Norman’s Island now. The only things at Norman’s are the Pirate’s restaurant, Willie T’s bar, a nice hiking path to the top hill, and some small caves for interesting snorkeling. Willie T’s is unique in that it is a ship floating in the harbor. Seems people like to get drunk at Willie T’s, strip naked and jump overboard. We skipped that part and opted for a hike to the top for the view.



Next, on to Road Town, the capital of the BVI's. A highlight of our visit here was the Prussar's Rum establishment. Prussars used to supply the rum to the British Navy, until the Royal Navy realized that high tech equipment and sailors equipped with pints of rum didn't mix well. So, Prussars now offers their rum to cruising sailors (and the general public) mixed in drinks called Pain Killers. They can be ordered in degrees of pain killing ranging from 1 to 5. Jean opted for a 3 and I opted out. Jean, indeed, felt no pain ... at least for a few hours.

Our final stop in the BVI's was Virgin Gorda, and this certainly was saving the best for last. At the southern end of Virgin Gorda are the Baths. These are a spectacular set of pools and snug beaches intertwined and partitioned with gigantic boulders. The Baths are usually very crowded, but we arrive late in the day and have them to ourselves. We return at noon the next day to have better light for the snorkeling and there are about 30 boats moored off the Baths. It was fun seeing all the activity and experiencing the Baths with and without people.

At the north end of Virgin Gorda is Gorda Sound, a very protected, two mile oval bay, surrounded by peaked islands and reefs. There are several spectacular resorts scattered about Gorda Sound, the most famous of which is the Bitter End Yacht Club. These resort/marinas are spectacular in beauty, location, facilities, and of course, price. We anchored out. We did hike to the top of Guys Hill behind Bitter End for a great view. I did the first bottom cleaning on Polyphonic of the trip. We had let it go too long and it took two tanks of air to complete. The local fish schooled under the boat during the cleaning to enjoy the bounty. Gorda Sound is another of our favorites, and we hope to spend more time here later this year.

From Virgin Gorda it is 70nm straight upwind to St. Martin across the Anegada Passage. St. Martin is the "corner" of the Eastern Caribbean, so this will be the last time we have to motorslam upwind. After 20 hours we fetch St. Martin and cheer, it is all down hill from here! St. Martin is the first of the French islands, so we try to set aside our Spanish and remember to say: Oui and Merci instead of Si and Gracias! This is also a major boat supply center where equipment is stocked for boats our size at prices ½ US. We buy a storm anchor and gear (to be ready for hurricane season) and other supplies. The rest of our time is spent doing chores and errands. Four days of no sightseeing, but we had been to St. Martin several times before. One interesting challenge ... we had to buy water to fill our water tanks (our watermaker was still down) and they quoted the price as 16 Euros per cubic meter. OK, here's your math quiz, how many gallons in a cubic meter? *

A reach at last! From St. Martin we have a glorious 25nm power reach at 8.5kn to St. Eustatia, aka Statia. Statia is a very small island dominated by a 2000' dormant volcano called Quill. We thread our way past the supertankers anchored off the refinery on the north end of Statia and pick up a mooring ball off the town at the south end. Donkeys grazing at the foot of the cliffs greet us. Our hike to the top of Quill, and then down into the jungle filled crater was exciting. The trail was fairly easy, but steep sided both up and down hill. Early in our hike we heard rustling just ahead and up hill of us, and suddenly a shell comes rolling down the hill into our path. We discover a hermit crab inhabited the shell. This soon becomes a regular occurrence, rustling up hill, then a shell rolling out into the path. These crabs and their shells ranged in size from grape to as big as an apple. We eventually divine that the crabs had been out of their shell ahead of us holding on to the hill side, upon feeling the vibration of our footsteps the crab quickly withdrew into its shell. Without the crab holding on to the hill, the shell went rolling down, stopping in the flat spot of the path. It was a hoot to watch, we nicknamed them Sisyphus crabs (check your Mythology for the reference).

After our hike we snorkel the over to the shore side. Here an old fort is partially submerged complete with crumbling walls and even some cannon. Large schools of fish hover over the under water ruins and we feel a bit like we've found Atlantis.



We had planned to only spend one night at St. Kitts leaving on the second afternoon. But as we hoisted our 25Hp (110lb) outboard off the dingy to its home on Polyphonic's stern, a shackle pin let loose and *splash*, there went the outboard. I was holding the outboard at the time, and as it pulled me out of the dingy into the water I remember having a brief thought of "It's OK I've got it", this thought was instantly replaced by "It's got me", where upon I let go and watched it sink to the bottom. Fortunately the water was crystal clear, only 16' deep, with a hard sand bottom. Within 10 minutes we had a cooler filled with fresh water, I had snorkeled down and attached a retrieving line, and we had the outboard hauled back aboard Polyphonic. We spent the rest of the afternoon stripping down the outboard, rinsing it liberally with fresh water, and rebuilding it. Would you believe it started on the first pull!

The next day finds us motorsailing to St. Kitts. We anchor for lunch, planning to spend the night before continuing on. But we hear our friends on several other boats on the radio talking about a beach party in Nevis. Since Nevis was only another 6 miles, we hauled the anchor and went to join them. By the time we get there the party is in full swing. Two 70' "beach" catamarans had unloaded a hoard of people, along with a youth group from a fleet of charter boats, and the crews from our half a dozen cruising boats. This beach is truly out of the "Joe and the Volcano" movie. A long stretch of ash colored sand lined with tall coconut palms, framing a perfect cone shaped, 3000' dormant volcano. We had been warned of the dangerous Killer Bees on the beach, but ignored the warnings, and paid the price the next morning. You see, Killer Bees are what they call the rum drink served out on the beach ... and they are quite aptly named.

We'll leave you here on the beaches of Nevis dealing with the Killer Bees, but don't miss the next post card ... it covers Montserrat and it's *not* dormant, but highly active volcano!

Pics: 2)126 Ponce view, 3) 6070026 Jean&Shadow, 3) 6100039 Culebra Bikes, 3) 6100046 Culebra Kiosk
4) 6130008 oops on current rock, 4) 6210041 SabaBVI, 4) 6300095 Nevis Beach

*Approx. 265gl per cubic meter. At the current Euro exchange rate this worked out to ~US\$0.07/gl