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Treasure Hunting in the British Virgin Islands

Journey through the BVIs—aboard a private yacht

by [Maryam Siddiqi](#) [Trending](#) January 29, 2016



My first night in the BVIs was spent on a catamaran moored in Soldier Bay, just a short swim from Norman Island, the one said to be the inspiration behind Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island. After a long day of travel, I chose sleep over exploration (of either the literary or literal variety), but woke up the next morning shortly after sunrise to spot a fellow passenger through the porthole of my cabin. He had swum over to a nearby island in search of treasure—or at least to be able to say he'd poked around before coming back empty-handed. But in a way, we'd already found the treasure—we were on it. Alegria, a 59-foot yacht, stocked with a kayak, a paddleboard, snorkelling gear and fishing rods, bubbly and more gourmet food than could possibly be eaten over the course of our time at sea. Ours was one of more than 44 yachts in the TradeWinds fleet. Launched in 1999 after cofounder Magnus Lewin built a 45-foot catamaran near Durban, South Africa, and sailed it to St. Martin in the Caribbean, the TradeWinds charter sailing company is unique among yacht operators. The idea: the boats run like small boutique hotels. Guests can gather a group of friends and family, and rent an entire boat for a week, and individuals or couples can book individual cabins, opting to spend seven days with like-minded adventurers. In both cases, a captain and cook will accompany the boat to navigate the waters and prepare the week's meals. Turquoise Dreams, the catamaran built by Lewin, spent the company's first six months sailing guests around the islands dotting St. Martin, and the next half of the year navigating St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Jump forward to 2015, and the company's luxe yachts sail year-round in equally luxe locales, including the Caribbean, Greece, and Turkey. There's even one particular yacht, Wanderlust, that circumnavigates the globe. Turquoise Dreams though, the boat that started it all, still makes its way around the waters of St. Martin, and will sail its last season before retiring next year. The week I was on Alegria, a mix of travellers joined me. Some were scuba divers, others were snorkellers, and some, like me, were happy to take a dip every now and then, but enjoyed spending the rest of our time on board with the wind in our hair. The pristine waters of Sir Francis Drake Channel in the BVIs are, themselves, a turquoise dream. Between our start and end points on the island of Tortola, we explored water-filled caves in Norman Island's Privateer Bay. Our captain, Nathan Shedden, seemed to have two sets of arms, and managed to set course while gearing people up with their choice of water toys, mixing drinks for cocktail hour, and plotting our next destination. His first mate (and girlfriend), Penny Taylor, was equally busy in the galley, preparing a menu full of fresh fruit, vegetables, and fish dishes, all of which paired perfectly with the impressive wine selection on board. When I found myself struck by a craving for chocolate, Taylor disappeared into the pantry, re-emerging moments later with a bite-sized Snickers bars. The pair was prepared for anything. One afternoon, Captain Shedden steered us northeast towards Little Harbour, a marine park off Peter Island, a place where off-duty crews go to relax between weeks at work, and turtles and fish of all lengths and colours bobbed alongside our boat. We were one of only four boats there; at night it was nothing but us, the stars and the waves. The next day, the pace changed completely as we took off with the wind. We passed Fallen Jerusalem, an uninhabited island once owned by the Rockefellers and given to the BVIs for use as a national park, Dead Chest Island, where Blackbeard is said to have abandoned 15 men, leaving them with nothing but a cutlass and bottle of rum each, and Salt Island, where the wreck of the RMS Rhone lies—a ship sunk by a hurricane in 1867. An afternoon was spent exploring the Baths National Park, where giant granite boulders pile along the shoreline creating pools of water off the beach. It's the most popular tourist spot in the BVIs, and for good reason—despite being there with hundreds of people, finding a private pool and place of quiet solitude was a cinch. It's a certain kind of traveller who is drawn to these types of journeys: aside from the first and last port of calls, there was no itinerary—the norm for a typical TradeWinds escape. The captain will have an idea of the course he or she plans to chart, but guests are encouraged to request sites they'd like to see—if you're keen on beaches, for instance, the captain will make a point to seek out quiet islands with patches of pristine white sand. Much of the journey is up to the wind. Of course, when you're in these sparkling waters circling islands so rich with history and lore, any direction the wind may blow is bound to be a good one.

Photo by Karl Weatherly/Getty.