

TRAVEL

A charter for relaxation

Sarah Richards was a little wary of hiring a boat for a holiday with some friends but soon found her sea legs

It sounded like the perfect idea for a reunion. A group of us from high school would charter a yacht in the Caribbean and sail on azure seas.

But when my friend set a date and asked for a deposit, I panicked. What were we going to do for 10 long days? Sure, there would be a lot of snorkelling and reminiscing about old teachers and old loves. But there would also be a lot of looking at each other in a small bobbing boat in the same blue water. And we'd have to sail the thing ourselves.

Then I heard some reassuring words – a promise that I would have to do minimal cranking and jibing. Normally, charters include a captain and skipper but my friend is a seasoned captain, so we chose the cheaper option of going "bareboat" – meaning that the rest of us would do the manual labour. In any case, I was convinced I could carve out a job description making rum punch cocktails.

I sent in my share of the cost – split among eight – which was about \$1,400 for a sunbaked-sized bed on a 32ft sloop in the Grenadines. (We rented from the charter company Moorings, which has

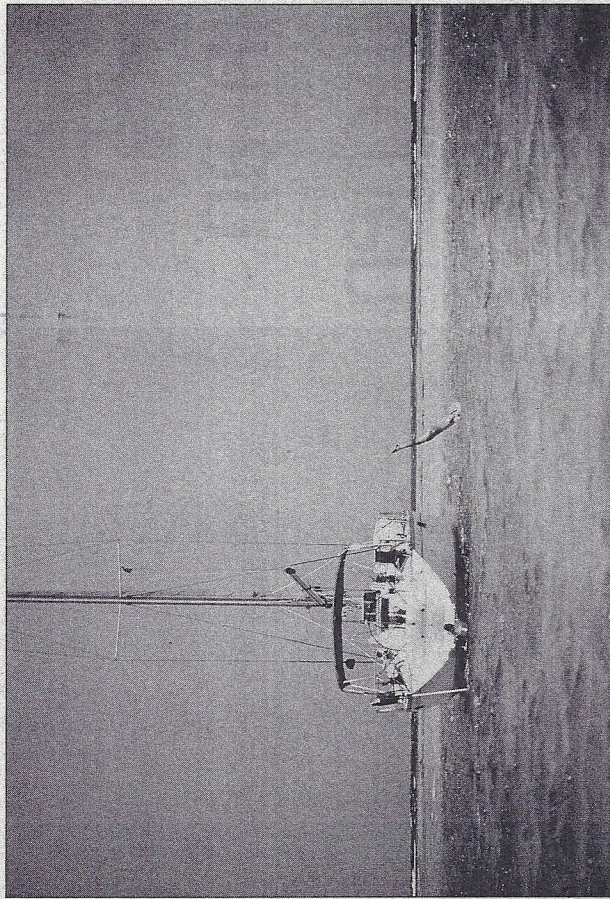
a base in Canouan.) So far, it was the best decision of my life.

The two biggest charter companies, Moorings and Sunsail, which rent out monohulls and catamarans at bases around the world including the Caribbean, Mediterranean, south Pacific and Indian oceans, report rising sales in the past five years. Despite the recent hurricanes, the Caribbean remains one of the most visited destinations.

Prices range widely, depending on the season and the size of the yacht. For example, a 41ft "bareboat" monohull with three cabins costs from \$2,080 to \$4,080 for a week in the Caribbean with Sunsail. You can add a skipper for \$160 a day and a cook for \$140 a day. A similar yacht runs from \$2,600 to \$4,200 a week at Athens, Greece, with Moorings.

At the higher end, a fully crewed 57ft Sunsail catamaran, which includes everything from meals and alcohol to water toys, goes for \$16,400 to \$20,800 for eight people for a week in Tahiti. Moorings offers a comparable package on a 62ft catamaran for \$21,100 to \$28,500 in the British Virgin Islands.

If we weren't sailing to nearby islands, we spent our day doing abso-



Blue horizon: it's remarkably easy to make small activities take up a whole afternoon

lutely nothing. At first, all that unstructured time seemed somewhat oppressive but it didn't take long before I relished the chance to organise an entire afternoon around the cocktail hour. In fact, I was so blissed out I didn't even mind raising the occasional sail.

Otherwise, we gossiped, read, swam and gazed at the water, which was so shockingly, obscenely blue, it looked artificial, like a menthol-flavoured cough drop or something made by Willy Wonka.

The sailing pace depends largely on

distances between islands. We chose the Grenadines, an archipelago comprising 32 islands about 80 miles (145km) west of Barbados, which was the setting for the film *Pirates of the Caribbean*. The tourist board of the government seat, St Vincent, which seems to have just discovered the concept of marketing, calls them the "best sailing waters in the world". Superlatives aside, they are pretty spectacular and only a few hours apart.

Even if you have only a week, you can fit in quite a few stops – from quiet

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Mayreux, which, with its palm trees, looked like Gilligan's Island, to tiny Mustique, a haunt of Mick Jagger (yes, we saw him.) The photo favourite was the deserted island of Mopian. It was more of a sandbar, really, where the only sign of human presence was a single thatched umbrella sheltering a single bottle opener. (Yes, we used it.)

The undeniable highlight was the Tobago Cays, a group of small uninhabited islands protected by a horseshoe reef. There, yachts clustered in a picturesque fleet – bobbing in concert

with yellow lanterns swaying. Although everyone talked about getting away from it all, when the wind came at night, it was oddly reassuring that we were just a shout away from borrowing our neighbour's corkscrew.

I thought we might need one – because I had anticipated boozey nights of poker and witty banter. But we were so sleepy most days by 9pm that we could barely summon the energy to reflect on our day – let alone revive the hilarity of our youth. So we dragged ourselves to the belly of the boat and listened to the wind carry away the smell of barbecued dolphin fish and coconut oil from the laundry whipping off the back.

By 10pm, the boat was rocking hard. As I clung to my tiny bed and tried to fall asleep, I was comforted that we were all there together – with our serene faces and shared history.

SAIL AWAY

■ The high season for sailing in the Caribbean is December to April. Popular destinations include: the British Virgin Islands, the Bahamas, St Martin and Martinique.

■ Sunsail, (tel: +1 888-350 3568, www.sunsail.com) and Moorings (tel: +1 888-952 8420, www.moorings.com) are the biggest charter companies. Other include:

■ Catamaran Co. www.catamarans.com
Conch. Tel: +1 800-521 8939,
www.concharters.com,

■ CVOA. Tel: +1 800-944-2962

www.cvoacharters.com

■ Tortola Marine Management Ltd.

Tel: +1 800-633 0155, www.saltmin.com

■ VIP. Tel: +1 866-847 9224

www.vipyachts.com

■ Voyage. Tel: +1 888 869-2436

www.voyagecharters.com