

BY TERENCE SMITH

One-Way Is My Way

Guadeloupe to Antigua with no return leaves this charterer with no regrets



Traditional *santoise* sailboats decorate the beach at Bourges-Saintes, a charming town on Terre-de-Haut, in Guadeloupe's Les Saintes (see map, opposite page). The merry gang of Washingtonians (opposite page) headed to the Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta included Alexis Simendinger (left), Lynn Gibbons, the author, and Bob Gallagher (standing). Doing the shutter work was Gene Gibbons.

TOM ZYDLER

To the list of life's luxuries—champagne with your caviar, heated car seats, two-ply cashmere—add another: the one-way yacht charter.

Gentlemen, the old saying goes, don't sail to windward. Why should the rest of us?

I've done it the other way. Once, chartering out of Marmaris, on the Turquoise Coast of Turkey, we spent the first half of a two-week charter cruising mostly downwind. We spent the second battling back upwind to return the boat to the departure dock. Too much like work, I concluded.

On this cruise, we did it right. Five Washingtonians flew straight from the District of Columbia to Guadeloupe to pick up a chartered Dufour 50 in Pointe-à-Pitre. Our crew included Gene and Lynn Gibbons, Alexis Simendinger, and Bob Gallagher. We had only one week, and we had a list of

things we wanted to see and do along the way.

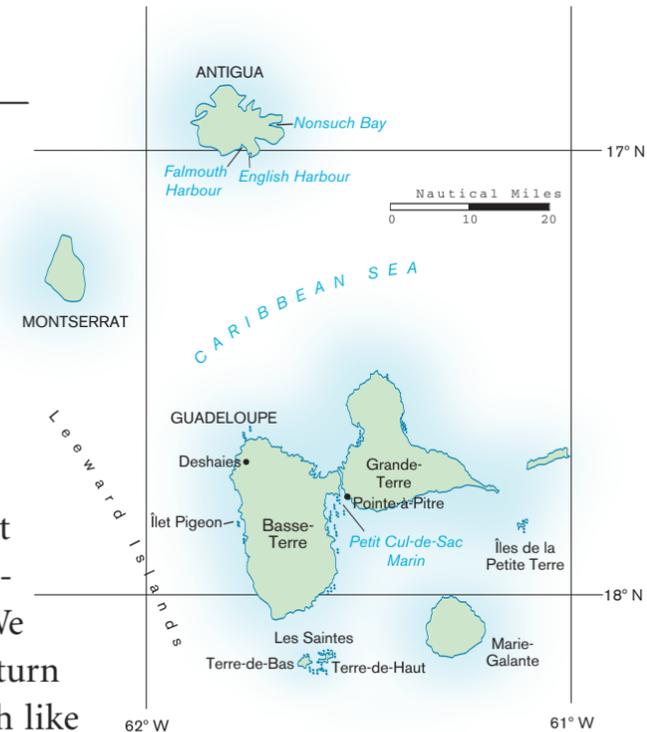
Our ultimate destination was the 2004 running of Antigua's Classic Yacht Regatta, a chance to see a magnificent fleet of lovingly preserved vintage craft from yachting's glory days. It was something I'd wanted to do for years.

To take advantage of the easterly trade winds—but mainly to indulge ourselves—we arranged to charter the boat for a one-way sail: We'd pick it up in the laid-back, sensuous French Antilles and drop it off in handsome, manicured English Harbour in Antigua, to the north.

In between, the trades carried us on mostly beam reaches through the lovely islands of Les Saintes; up the mountainous, rugged western shore of Guadeloupe's Basse-Terre; across the open strait to Antigua; and along its gorgeous eastern coast. When it was over, we dropped off the boat at the Sunsail facility in English Harbour and let them take it back to its starting point. Such a practice is one of those indulgences, like well-aged rum, that, once sampled, becomes essential.

Just to keep it interesting, the trade winds didn't cooperate all the time. As we headed south out of the Petit Cul-de-Sac Marin on our first leg, the breeze clocked to the south-southeast. Our itinerary had called for a 20-mile reach to Marie-Galante, Guadeloupe's southwesternmost outlying island, but that would've been a slog into the teeth of the 20-knot breeze, with the wind squarely on the nose.

Not for this sybaritic crew! Being firmly flexible, we promptly switched course for our next planned destination, Les Saintes, the charming cluster of steep, tiny islands some 20 miles to the southwest. We were still sailing closehauled but moving smartly. A few tacks, but no heavy lifting. Well before sunset, we had the anchor



COURTESY OF TERENCE SMITH, MAP BY SHANNON CAIN



The Sunsail Dufour 50 proved to be both a comfortable home for five during their week's charter and a good passagemaker as they ticked off the miles en route to Antigua. Lynn Gibbons (below) has a choice seat to survey her Caribbean surroundings.

down in the half-moon harbor of Bourdes-Saintes, the red-roofed town nestled into the hillside of Terre-de-Haut, the largest of the islands. One look around convinced us that the Saintes were well worth a couple of days. Marie-Galante is doubtless charming in its own right—Christopher Columbus spoke well of it when he landed in 1493—but it would have to wait for another time.

We had fresh fish for dinner and an Easter Sunday brunch the next day at two of the several casual restaurants that line the harbor. Scooters and bikes are the preferred way to get around the island, but the rentals were all in use, so we took a minibus taxi up the hill to Fort Napoléon, the 1867 fortress that commands a stunning view of the harbor and the surrounding islands.

The walk around the parapets is spectacular from every angle. Beneath the scrub bushes, three-foot-long iguanas drowse in the sunlight. Even they seem mesmerized by the view of the harbor and neighboring islands.

The fort itself is a charming museum that depicts island life gone by, with photos of old-timers heading out to fish wearing coats and ties, plus a tabletop recreation of the Battle of Les Saintes, which constituted big news when the English sent the French fleet packing in 1782.

Perhaps the most relaxing view on the island is from the pool and deck at Auberge Les Petits Saints, a small hotel and restaurant that's filled to overflowing with art and antiques—all of it for sale. The feel at the Auberge, and throughout the Saintes, is funky and very French, similar to that of St. Barts, say, 25 years ago, before it became the favorite of the Beautiful People.

We spent a second night at anchor in



Anse Fideling, a protected bay on Terre-de-Bas, the westernmost of Les Saintes, where we found first-rate snorkeling along the submerged cliffs. That evening we took the dinghy ashore and clambered over a small hill to the village of Grande-Anse. It was the eve of Easter Monday, a French national holiday, and that meant only one thing: party!

The villagers were all turned out along the beach to eat, gossip, play dominos in the cafés, and dance in the sand to reggae pumping out of the loudspeakers of the town's open-sided pavilion. We tarried awhile, and I can seriously recommend the planters' punch served at a modest little beachfront café called La Belle Etoile.

The next morning, the trades were behaving perfectly, piping out of the east to send us across the strait and up the western coast of Basse-Terre at a steady eight

knots on a boisterous beam reach. We anchored inside Îlet Pigeon, a small, uninhabited hump of rock and scrub that's the site of the Cousteau Underwater Park. The diving here is exceptional: thousands of brilliantly colored fish in crystal-clear blue water, and all of it set aside and protected for recreational use.

That evening, we had arguably the best dinner of the cruise: fresh Caribbean lobster beautifully prepared at Le Rocher de Malendure, an open-air restaurant atop a small headland just opposite Îlet Pigeon. Everything about this place was a delight, from the setting to the smiling service to the wine list. Dining here is a must.

Heading north, pursuing our one-way course, we put in for another night at Deshaies, the last protected anchorage on the northwestern coast of Basse-Terre.

Shortly after dawn the next day, we set

As we walked around Nelson's Dockyard, the contrast with Guadeloupe was as sharp as the difference between Paris and London. The French island projected a laissez-faire approach to life. In Antigua, everything was clipped and manicured

out for the 48-mile run to Antigua. Again the trades cooperated, blowing 15 to 18 knots out of the east beneath a cloudless sky. To the west, the still-active Soufriere Hills volcano on Montserrat sent two huge plumes of white smoke skyward. In 1995, the volcano erupted, leaving a white gash down the face of the otherwise lush, green island. A much larger eruption occurred in 1996. The charts still warn sailors to keep their distance.

On a course of 13 degrees magnetic, it was a comfortable run to Antigua, with the breeze just forward of the beam, the Dufour feeling solid and sure under the wheel, and me thinking, "It doesn't get

much better than this."

When you approach Antigua from the south, it's immediately obvious what's made this a favored winter anchorage for so many years. The entrances to two open-mouthed and safe refuges, Falmouth Harbour and English Harbour, rise up in front of you, separated only by a rocky headland.

We chose the S-shaped English Harbour as our first port of call, anchoring in Freeman Bay off a perfect sandy beach and clearing customs at Nelson's Dockyard, the handsomely restored complex established in the mid-1700s as England's main naval station in the Lesser Antilles.

As we walked around, the contrast with Guadeloupe was as sharp as the difference between Paris and London. The French island projected a laissez-faire approach to life: The paint might be peeling here and there, the trash might not get picked up every day, but the food and ambiance made up for it. In Antigua, especially on the grounds of Nelson's Dockyard, everything was clipped and manicured, picked up and straight, like Hyde Park on a Sunday morning.

Eventually, we found a restaurant with some Gallic flair just opposite Nelson's. Catherine's Café, at the Antigua Slipway, is as open and inviting as Catherine her-

ONE-WAY WILL COST YA (SOMETIMES)



Most yacht-charter companies are happy to arrange one-way charters. These companies charge varying fees based on the time it takes to get the boat back to the original base, but frequently these can be negotiated. For instance, Sunsail waived the fee in our case because it wanted the boat in Antigua for its next scheduled charter.

"Anytime we need a boat moved from one location to another," says Steve McCrea, the U.S. sales manager for Sunsail, "we can usually make a deal. People should just call and discuss it."

Van Perry, director of marketing for The Moorings, echoes

the thought. "Fees can be waived or dramatically reduced," he says, "if we can work it out."

Some sample Sunsail one-way fees: St. Vincent to Grenada: \$1,065; Antigua to St. Martin: \$945; St. Martin to Tortola: \$785.

Some Moorings one-way fees: Tortola to St. Martin: \$450; St. Lucia to Canouan: \$200; Athens, Greece, to Skiathos: \$425.

In all, Sunsail has six Caribbean bases among its 30 worldwide locations. Of its 42 worldwide bases, The Moorings has seven in the Caribbean.

COURTESY OF TERENCE SMITH

ALISON LANGLEY

We spent a languid day swimming and snorkeling followed by a cool, quiet evening at anchor. The lights from half a dozen other boats twinkled against the darkening sky

self. She found her way here from Avignon and hasn't forgotten her Provençal roots. When a visitor sits at one of the café's outdoor tables beneath the broad, white awning and sips white wine and nibbles on Catherine's lobster salad while watching the yachts come and go in English Harbour, the world seems a pretty wonderful place.

We began to appreciate Antigua's eccentricities at 0900 the next day when a local character, Jol Byerley, who is only slightly less associated with the island than Nelson himself, began his daily broadcast on VHF Channel 6 with his customary "All stations, all stations." He gave a brisk rundown of the weather, so-

dozen other boats twinkled against the darkening sky. Then the moon rose dramatically over the hidden reef. Not half bad, thought I.

The next day was Friday, the eve of the Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta, so it was time to run back down to Falmouth Harbour, where competitors and spectators had been gathering for days. We anchored and took the dinghy on the first of several yacht-ogling cruises around the harbor.

For the sheer display of unlimited waterborne wealth and unrestrained extravagance, I've never seen the likes of it. One magnificent yacht after another was wedged, Mediterranean-style, stern to the docks of the sprawling Antigua Yacht

modeled after the transatlantic greats of 100 years ago? Even at the dock, *Windrose* was striking, with her long bowsprit, elegant sheer line, low-aspect deckhouse, and trim stern.

And how did the crews prepare for the upcoming bone-in-the-teeth competition? By partying late into the night, of course, and by swilling the owners' beer and cruising the crowded docks in search of companionship.

Nonetheless, they were at the starting line the next morning, as were we, bobbing next to the spectator fleet in a short chop under intermittently gray skies.

The start was spectacular, with perhaps upward of \$100 million worth of yachting elegance crashing across the line. And there was *Velsheda* sailing away to an early lead in the J class. Just to the east, four tall ships, including the elegant *Sea Cloud*, were locked in a competition of their own. With magnificent boats on all sides of you, rounding this mark, rounding that, all that beauty, all that tradition, it was hard to keep track. Who says this isn't the golden age of sail? When has it ever been better than this?

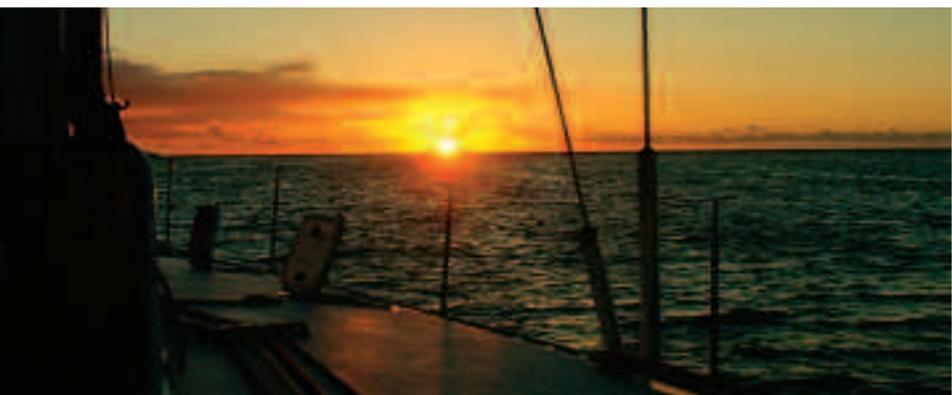
Velsheda won that first day, then the second, and despite hitting a mark on the third day, she took the overall honors. *Ranger* was second overall, *Windrose* third. Back at the dock, the crew of *Ranger* said they'd learned a lot from their older rival and fully intended to even the score in the future. The self-appointed experts in the yacht-club bar pronounced it some of the best J-class racing since the 1930s.

We pronounced it fun—a classic example of what taste, the competitive spirit, and an open checkbook can produce when sailors with an appreciation of the past and a lively regard for the present put their minds to it.

We also pronounced it fun at the end of our charter when we simply delivered the boat to the Sunsail dock in English Harbour, said thanks and goodbye, and caught a taxi to the airport. No slogging back to Guadeloupe for us. Someone else would worry about that.

Terence Smith, former media correspondent for *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, sails his own CS 40 on Chesapeake Bay and escapes to the Caribbean whenever he can.

COURTESY OF TERENCE SMITH



cial notes from the yachty crowd gathering for the classic regatta, and scattered reports from outlying islands, concluding dryly, "No report today from Guadeloupe. Perhaps they've cut loose and drifted out to sea."

After breakfast, we downwind sailors took our one real beat to windward, heading east some 10 miles around the headlands and past Green Island into Nonsuch Bay, named after the first non-native boat that dropped anchor on its sandy bottom in 1647. For my money, this is one of the truly drop-dead gorgeous gunkholes in the islands.

Two miles across by one-and-a-half wide, it's protected from the east by a barrier reef that breaks the sea without interrupting the view. The result is a vast expanse of flat, turquoise water cooled by a gentle breeze and ringed by perfect, white-sand beaches. It's nature's version of an infinity pool, and it's exquisite.

We spent a languid day swimming and snorkeling followed by a cool, quiet evening at anchor. The lights from half a

Club Marina and at the other marinas that line the north end of the harbor. It was a guilty pleasure just to look. Each of these jewels was being polished to a high shine in preparation for the beauty contest that initiates the regatta.

The classics, both original and reproduced, take your breath away. My personal favorite was *Cambria*, a gleaming, white-hulled, 23-Meter-class cutter that was built in 1928 and recently refurbished to qualify for the exclusive J-class association. Just down the dock was *Velsheda*, the 1933 J-class sloop that was brought back from the scrapheap to its current state of varnished perfection. Next door was *Ranger*, a recently commissioned 136-foot, steel-hulled recreation of the so-called "super Js" that raced in the 1930s. At 200 tons, with a mast reaching 178 feet above the deck, she's a lavish, teak-decked combination of power and grace.

But is she fast? Could she best *Velsheda* in the days of racing that lay ahead? And what of *Windrose*, the 152-foot schooner



The J-class sloops *Ranger* (foreground) and *Velsheda* flank the schooner *Windrose* as these beauties dash to a windward mark during the 2004 running of the Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta. After three days of racing, the 1933 *Velsheda* took home the hardware.

ONNE VAN DER WAL