



BETH PARKS PHOTO

View of some islands from the bow of the Yankee Clipper cruising in the Grenadines, a sprinkling of tiny West Indian islands in the deep southeastern Caribbean.

Running with the Wind

BY BETH PARKS
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Call it running away, if you like. Running from the Maine winter that didn't want to end. Running from the damp chill I couldn't seem to shake from my bones. Running from the insidious pressures of work, commitments and imminent war.

I prefer to call it running to. Running to a seemingly endless summer down near the equator. Running to shallow turquoise waters, white coral sands and islets lined with coconut palms.

The question was how to do the running. Fly and stay at a cottage somewhere? Take a cruise on one of those huge liners with a couple of thousand other snowbirds? Or sail on a schooner that looked as if it had just emerged from a thick fog shrouding another century?

I chose the latter. Windjammer Barefoot Cruises, they called it, and the name says it all.

The ships of the Windjammer fleet ply the islands of the Caribbean. Five are tall sailing vessels, all rescued and lovingly restored. The sixth is a freighter that delivers supplies to

the other five and also carries passengers. Each ship has its own itinerary, personality, loyal following and fascinating history.

The Yankee Clipper appealed to me because it cruises St. Vincent and the Grenadines, a sprinkling of tiny West Indian islands in the deep southeastern Caribbean. By no means the territory of garish ocean liners, raucous resorts and glitzy boutiques, these so-called Windward Islands are the ultimate place to get away from it all.

The Clipper generally sails to a different island every day. Her home port, Grenada (pronounced Gra-nay-da), lies just north of Trinidad and Venezuela. Grenada covers 120 square miles and ranges from beaches and coastal mangroves to a mountainous rain forest festooned with cascading waterfalls and crater lakes. Often billed as the Spice Isle, Grenada grows more spices per square mile than just about any other place on Earth. It produces cocoa, ginger, cinnamon, cloves, turmeric, mace and one-third of the world's nutmeg.

The first Clipper destination is Carriacou (pronounced Carry-a-koo). The name probably comes from the Caribbean term for "land of reefs," and those reefs are wonderful if you like to snorkel or scuba dive. If you're looking

for high life, though, look somewhere else. The population of this 13-square-mile island is only about 5,000, and you may encounter more goats and cows than people on the road.

If it's whaling or boatbuilding you fancy, then the 7-square-mile island of Becquia will likely be your choice. You may be surprised to learn that the International Whaling Commission allows Becquians to harpoon two whales each year, and the chosen family of hunters does it the old-fashioned way from wooden boats they row with oars. Everyone on the island celebrates and joins in the feast if a whale is killed. At one beachside bar you can pass beneath the arch of a whale's jawbone and sip a fruity rum drink while sitting on a bar stool fashioned from leviathan vertebrae.

While some Becquians hunt whales, others catch endangered hawksbill turtles to eat or sell as meat. Remarkably, a lone former fisherman has established a sanctuary on the island where he struggles to raise and release young hawksbills. You'll find no body parts exploited for profit at his haven. Instead, you may choose to purchase a T-shirt with the image of a hawksbill turtle crying a blood-red tear.

If images of slain whales and endangered turtles get you down, then take a bone-jarring
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ride up to the top of Becquia's highest hill. From an elevation of 881 feet you'll get a magnificent view of the coastline and appealing offshore islands. Later, you can wander the streets of Port Elizabeth with its quaint shops and pastel-colored gingerbread homes, or dangle your feet in the placid waters of lovely Admiralty Bay.

When the Clipper drops anchor off the coast of St. Vincent, consider taking a speedboat ride along the rugged windward coastline. The semi-active volcano La Soufrière looms above the lower hills, its peak hidden in mist and clouds. You'll pass by a cliff-top women's prison where executions by hanging were common not so long ago. Nearby, a steep path serves as a grim reminder of a time when lepers struggled down to the water's edge to cleanse their decaying flesh in the sparkling blue sea.

Farther up St. Vincent's coast, a narrow, slippery trail leads up through the forest to the Falls of Baleine, a spectacular waterfall that tumbles down through lush greenery and spills over smooth boulders into a pool deep enough for diving. Later, soak up some sun on one of the impressive volcanic beaches.

Another adventure awaits if you explore St. Vincent's coastline this spring. The island serves as a production site for the Disney movie "Pirates of the Caribbean." Don't be surprised if you discover an ominous sailing ship fit for buccaners moored in a secluded harbor, or "corpses" dangling from a rocky arch above the furiously rolling waves.

Sailing south on the way back toward Grenada, you'll reach Mayreau (pronounced My-roo), the smallest of the inhabited Grenadine Islands. This 1½-square-mile patch of land supports a population of about 300. With just a single unnamed village, one road, one church and one school, you won't need to worry about getting lost.

Mayreau's sugary-white beaches are punctuated by Salt-whistle Bay to the north and Saline Bay to the south. In the middle of the island, on the side of a sun-drenched hill, a small cemetery lies partially visible in the brush. The grave of a 108-year-old woman may catch your eye, but off to one side lies the grave of another who died at age 113. There's something to be said for living off the land, eating lots of fish, and farming goats (tails up) and sheep (tails down).

Not far from Mayreau stretch the Tobago Cays (pronounced keys), perhaps the very definition of a pristine paradise. Protected by the vast Horseshoe Reef, these five uninhabited palm-fringed isles feature dazzling white sand beaches that meet crystalline waters of every imaginable shade of blue and green.

Diving or snorkeling around Tobago Cays, you'll encounter schools of tropical fish, huge starfish and maybe even a lobster or two. If you prefer to hike, then climb to the summit of a hill that affords views in all directions. You'll find it extremely tempting, but exceedingly unwise, to grab hold of a convenient cactus to haul yourself up or gain balance on the way back down the steep trail.

While a sailing trip to the less-traveled Grenadines may not be something you considered in the past, you may wish to rethink your options. It's definitely different, and it's a great respite from a bleak Maine winter or the slop and slosh of spring.

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