

CARIBBEAN CHRISTMAS

PHOTOGRAPHER JIM RAYCROFT WASN'T PLANNING TO SPEND THE HOLIDAYS CRUISING IN THE BVI. BUT HERE HE WAS, ON THIS WATER, ABOARD THIS YACHT, WITH EIGHT FAMILY MEMBERS AS HIS CREW.



HOW WE GOT HERE

The refrain has always been true for our family: "There's no place like home for the holidays." We don't want to sleep in an airport or sit in a traffic jam on an interstate. But our sentiment about home changed last Christmas. A friend mentioned a charter yacht at the Marine

Max base in the British Virgin Islands.

"It's available," he said, "the week around Christmas." I told him we were planning to have a house full of nine family members that week. "The boat accommodates nine," he said. Maybe we needed to test this old idea of "no place like home for the holidays."

AWAY FROM HOME

THE WATER IS AS colorful and clear as mouthwash. Ten knots gently nudge at our backs. The nine of us on deck include sons, daughters, brothers, spouses, all of us having left various cold regions in the U.S. to meet in the BVI for the most unique Christmas vacation in our family's most recent history. A 48-foot Marine Max Power Cat on the Frances Drake Channel is about as distant from rush-and-slush hours as we can get. We cruise past a necklace of islands and bays. Salt Island. Frenchman's. Little Thatch.

"We need some presents," I announce.

And so, just as we often do at home, we make an 11th-hour run on the stores. Only this year we'll be shopping on the island of Tortola, in stores that are colorful, sunlit, and sporting handmade signs. We negotiate a crowded anchorage until my son, McKenzie, spots a vacant mooring ball, the BVI's version of finding a parking spot at the mall.

After taking the dinghy ashore, we load up on stocking stuffers (bottles of rum, seashell jewelry and T-shirts) before returning to the boat. Cold beverages magically appear from the galley. Not far from our mooring, the rusted wreck of a tugboat lay washed up on the beach.

Here, in the salon, we set up a six-foot silver Christmas tree and hang the stockings we'd hauled down from the States. The boat, like Tortola's shoreline, starts to glow with cheer. The air is warm and, with windows open in the cabins, we enjoy a silent Caribbean night.



TROPICAL GREETING

Low-rise shops, restaurants and galleries share the seawall at Soper's Hole on Tortola, providing a glimpse into the character of the island archipelago. The mom-and-pop businesses cater to yachtsmen coming ashore for local flavor or, in our case, in need of Caribbean-inspired Christmas presents at Pussers Rum Company Store (top). Even when the bays around the BVI are busy, they're typically quiet by sunset.



AROUND THE BVI

Of the BVI's 60 islands, only 15 are inhabited (population is about 30,000). The U.S. dollar is the currency.



WINTER WONDERS

THE AROMA wafting through the yacht on Christmas morning is a familiar one: bacon, eggs and French toast. The scene outside, however, is a Christmas first for us: White Bay on Jost Van Dyke, one of the world's most beautiful beaches. When a brief rain shower passes, it only adds to the awe because along with it comes a rainbow arcing over the stretch of sand. It's a gift that cannot be topped.

The thrill does not wane. Not here.

After emptying the rum, cigars and trinkets from the stockings, it's time to play with our toys. A paddleboard. Snorkels. A kayak. All are part of the 484 Power Cat charter package. On the swim platform, a few of us share a pitcher of bloody Marys and soak up winter in paradise.

Later, we'll enjoy barbecued chicken and a mandatory viewing of *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* on the big hideaway flat-screen television. There will be no post-Christmas letdown, either, because in the days to follow we'll swim in caves and dance at The Willy T on Norman Island, we'll climb wooden stairs and wade between boulders at The Baths, we'll laugh at odd-looking fish and watch a moonrise during dinner at Peter Island. We'll lose interest in our cell phones and be totally lost in the moments.

When we return to the Marine Max dock, shuttle to the airport and ascend over the islands, my eyes catch the yachts below. My thoughts drift all over the sea. But there's one place they do not wander: to the idea of staying home for Christmas.



PORTABLE PARTY
Smells from the BBQ sent a message through the boat and to the stand-up paddleboarder that a meal was ready.



HOLIDAY COLORS
Christmas on Jost Van Dyke were rewarded with snorkeling and toasts at places like Foxy's and Soggy Dollar.



BEST WAY TO ARRIVE
Flying into San Juan, Puerto Rico, on a major airline carrier is an easy first step. From there, the most comfortable way into Tortola is with a private charter airplane company like Air America Inc. (airamericacaribbean.com). It's a 45-minute flight with spectacular views islands and fleeting glimpses of the Marine Max base at Hodges Creek.



BEST WAY TO CRUISE
Marine Max Vacations was recently named the best BVI yacht charter company in the 2015 Virgin Islands Property and Yacht Reader's Choice Awards. Simplicity is a big reason. The Marine Max team provides ground transportation from the airport to the dock. There, a technician briefs you on the systems the islands. With its 23'6" beam, the 484 Power Cat has four double cabins, each with private head and shower. See more at marinemaxvacations.com