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CARIBBEAN

SAILING SCHOOL

British Virgin Islands is an idyllic place to sail, even for beginners

CAROLINE EUBANKS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

From behind the wheel, I felt the boat keel to the point where I thought we would capsize into the teal blue waters of the British Virgin Islands, my stomach lurching along with it. My instructor remained calm. Just barely move the wheel, he told me. The position was righted and my heartbeat steadied.

As part of a weeklong trip exploring the British overseas territory of more than 50 islands, I signed up for a lesson with Offshore Sailing School, which has locations on Scrub Island and in Florida. Thanks in part to the relatively calm waters and abundant marinas here, the boat culture in the BVIs has a world-famous reputation, appealing to yacht-owning millionaires, sailors competing at the annual BVI Spring Regatta, and the young party crowd attending the Yacht Week.

I, on the other hand, had never learned to tie a knot apart from my shoelaces. I couldn't differentiate a keelboat from a dinghy. I soon learned that the company, opened in 1964, is the gold standard in sailing instruction — co-founder Steve Colgate is an Olympian, and an inductee in the National Sailing Hall of Fame. I was in good hands.

I boarded the sailboat and met our instructor, a laid-back Dutch man nicknamed, appropriately, "Dutch." As I found a spot on deck,

he went over the basics, pointing out the numerous ropes, colour-coded to avoid confusion, along with their various functions and boat parts. Main sail. Mast. Winch. I tried to take in all the vocabulary, though my brain felt at capacity.

On the open water, he assigned tasks to us students. I helped raise the sails, feeling the rough texture of the rope between my fingers as the heavy fabric expanded. The motions of tying and untying the ropes helped me temporarily set aside my anxieties. That is, until it was my time to steer. I took my spot at the stern, gripping the cold metal wheel.

Dutch then taught us about "tacking," the process of switching the sails from one side to the other to capture the wind and propel the boat forward. It took the entire group of students to pull it off, as we quickly released ropes and cranked the winches on the other side to tighten as the wind pushed the ship into the desired direction.

"Tack on!" I yelled shakily to the rest of the crew, the term I'd been told to shout when the moment was right. My nerves had settled into a ball in my stomach.

"Pick a spot on the horizon," Dutch said. "That's where you should be moving toward." I followed his advice and felt the boat shift toward my chosen point, with Dutch looking over my shoulder like Jiminy Cricket to guide me. I took in a deep breath and focused



CAROLINE EUBANKS PHOTOS

Nanny Cay, part of the British Virgin Islands, is where many of the charter boats dock.

my attention.

By the afternoon's end, I was confidently tying cleats with figure-eight knots and hoisting sails. I found myself contemplating a fuller immersion in the sport, perhaps coming back to the BVIs for the school's weeklong sailing course, which caters to beginners and provides basic certification.

Back on land, I celebrated with a well-deserved Painkiller, the unofficial cocktail of the British Virgin Islands, soaking in the events of the day. While I may not be ready to chart a course on my own, the sailing lesson pushed me out of my comfort zone, letting me dip my toes into a sport that once seemed so intimidating.

CAROLINE EUBANKS TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS TOURIST BOARD, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.



Writer Caroline Eubanks behind the wheel during her sailing lesson.