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Virgin Gorda, British Virgin Islands: the superyachts arrive on the island that tourism forgot

The North Sound of Gorda, in the British Virgin Islands, is heading upmarket, says James Henderson

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View of Biras Creek in the British Virgin Islands

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 Comment

It's the views that are so wonderful in the British Virgin Islands – a scattering of 60 islands, cays and sandspits that almost disappear at high tide. As you sail among them, small islands slide by close at hand, while behind them lumbering colossi do not budge. Some islands appear to be crouching, like cats ready to pounce; others wallow, like turtles breaking the surface.

Virgin Gorda – the “fat Virgin”, the third-largest island in the archipelago – is supposed to have reminded early Spanish sailors of a pregnant woman reclining, all mountain curves and luxurious repose. It carries this air well even today, with a handful of hotels and truly magnificent beaches – hidden coves, undeveloped strands and the famous Baths, massive rocks unknown elsewhere in the Caribbean, buried to their necks in sand. The island is still pretty much as dozy as it ever was.

But in the North Sound, a stretch of water near the northern tip of Virgin Gorda, new things are afoot. I arrive by boat, scooting over jade and turquoise sea. Ahead, a host of white masts spikes the hillside greenery. We weave among huge three and four-masted sailing yachts. And a handful of superyachts. And finally past a megayacht. Blimey, it's nearly 100yd long, as big as a self-respecting battleship. It's Larry Page's, apparently.

Biras Creek, my hotel, has been proffering low-key luxury for decades. It is dark when I reach the dining room, and moonlight glances off the inky water. I sleep to the susurrant of lightly breaking waves. It's extremely easy to slow down here – I spend a pleasant morning around the hotel, part bicycle-borne, part prone – but there's no time for inactivity.

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The North Sound is almost enclosed by islands whose flanks sweep from the water, steep as a theatre curtain. Protected from the Atlantic winds, it is a superb anchorage – and perfect for exploration by Boston Whaler, an incy-wincy motorboat.



Sunset at the North Sound

I set off for Prickly Pear Island, which has little more than a bar on a superb stretch of sand. Sitting in a rickety wooden beach bar watching the sea is a time-honoured Caribbean pastime. And with customary Caribbean ease, the barman chats about the islands around the Sound. That's Mosquito Island, Richard Branson's latest venture (his Necker Island lies behind us, just outside the North Sound). Apparently, just seven or eight villas will be built on the hillside above a central area with a tennis pavilion and court.

Across the way is YCCS, the first venture outside Europe for Yacht Club Costa Smeralda from Sardinia. It feels slightly untypical of the Caribbean, with its clubhouse of marble and huge glass windows, but it is a nice day stopover if you are on a yacht, with a pool, gym, spa, restaurant and bar. Evidently they expect boats rather larger than mine, though. The attached dock calls itself a superyacht marina and recently 30 monsters were docked stern-to-jetty.

Last stop is Saba Rock, another bar on a tiny island, where scores of yachties are in attendance for the end-of-day tarpon feeding. Like silver torpedoes with underslung jaws, these fish gather for scraps in the floodlit shallows off the jetty.

The North Sound always felt as though it was at the northern limits of Virgin Gorda – poke your nose around the corner and there is nothing but Atlantic winds and blue swell for 4,000 miles. Next stop Portugal. But in fact there is another stretch of land out there, now the location of the area's newest development, Oil Nut Bay.

Eventually, Oil Nut Bay will be a community of villas. As the recession recedes, they are sprouting steadily, custom-built to an extremely high spec on the hillsides and around the beach and central beach club. Backed by David Johnson of Victor International, a developer from the United States, it feels quite American in style, but interested buyers have come from all over.



The Fendi suite at the Oil Nut Bay resort

I move up to its spectacular Fendi Suite, which hosts potential buyers, but equally travelling guests. It is all white leather, Fendi fittings and light marble. Also, full-length glass that pulls completely aside, giving on to one of the finest views in the islands – wave-beaten cliffs stretching for miles, with barely a human imprint.

Over the years I have seen quite a few developments in the Caribbean. Plenty foundered after 2008, but the good ones survived and Oil Nut Bay now has critical mass, with 11 villas completed for last Christmas and others on the way. It is cleverly secluded and, judging by its beach club, children's club and David Johnson's infrastructure – he is said to have invested \$100 million (£66 million) and even created a concrete-making company so he could guarantee quality – it will be extremely stylish and exclusive. "We believe it will be the new Mustique," says Johnson.

The superyacht marina in the North Sound was part of his plan – similarly YCCS, which was brought in for its experience in managing glitzy regattas – to attract suitable yacht owners who might want to build a villa. There are some smart meets now, most particularly the Loro Piana Caribbean superyacht regatta, which sees serious head-to-head competition between 80ft yachts and a "rendezvous" for motoryachts.

I, on the other hand, got to experience the Anegada Lobster Festival – a much more West Indian affair, which this year is scheduled to take place on November 28-29. It's just possible to see Anegada from Virgin Gorda, if you climb one of the hills. It lies low in the water (in Spanish, Anegada actually means "inundated") and it is traditional, dozy Caribbean. People often say a day sail to the island is the favourite moment of their holiday.

I travel by ferry, on a day out with a lively West Indian crowd. The party has started by 10 o'clock, so they're carrying on at the bar, though when the sea gets a bit rough, the drinkers go rather quiet. Eventually, jelly-legged, we land on the main pier at Anegada, where a small tent is set up near a huge stack of breeze blocks.

The idea of the Lobster Festival is to catch buses around the island, from one seaside bar to the next (all set on sparkingly white sand), pausing for a swim and taster plates of lobster three ways. Normally lobster fritters bounce, but at the Flash of Beauty they emit a tiny crunch before you plunge into a pillowy interior. Superb. And the curried lobster isn't bad either.

Each of the 10 or so venues has its own style – at Driftwood, a more sophisticated kitchen, lobster comes first as gazpacho, then à la Rockefeller (with garlic, Parmesan and herbs) and finally with bitter chocolate. They suggest pinot grigio rather than beer.

By five o'clock at the Cow Wreck Bar (lobster salad and fritters "Anegada style", with pepper, onion and tomato, simple but excellent), there is a rambunctious, rum-fuelled crowd. Lobsters may have kudos nowadays, but it's not long since they were considered fit only for pigs and prisoners. The redoubtable Belle Creque, owner of Cow Wreck, tells me that within living memory, islanders had to eat lobster in Anegada because there was little else. They didn't like them much, actually. Too rich.

Two hours later, most of the festival-goers are asleep on the ferry home, and the Dogs are silhouetted against the sunset. I weave my way back to the customary quiet of Virgin Gorda and the Fendi Suite with its superb view.