

Champagne Wishes and Caviar Dreams
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Photo by Greg Olsen

As I watched the pink and orange streaks of the setting sun gently wash over the nearly cloudless sky above Peter Island, in the British Virgin Islands, I couldn't help thinking this was the kind of surreal moment when you almost expect to see Robin Leach smiling back at you over a half-finished glass of champagne.

From my comfortable perch inside the hot tub located near the stern of the Arabella yacht, I really felt like I had snuck onto a segment of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* – minus the uppity British accent. Although I had cruised several times before, this was the first time I had ever been on a luxury yacht for more than a few hours and at that moment I was feeling rich and spoiled. Well, spoiled at the very least.

Arabella is a 21-cabin three masted luxury schooner that plies the waters off the coast of New England during the summer months and sails the balmy Caribbean during the winter. As my husband and I were travelling in late March, we had the opportunity to experience Arabella's British Virgin Islands itinerary with about twenty other passengers. It wasn't hard to feel a twinge of excitement as we said goodbye to the Canadian snow and looked forward to enjoying aquamarine waters and sunny skies.

Our experience began in the Puerto Rico airport, when we discovered that our flight was overbooked, due to the Carnival celebration in St. Thomas. We were informed that we

were being bumped off the plane while most of the rest of the group sailing Arabella was going on. Let's just say, we were a little worried about missing the boat – literally.

After landing in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, we made a mad dash for the taxi area and requested a transfer to take us directly to Red Hook Harbour where Arabella was setting sail. As we arrived at the harbour, it was apparent that we had in fact missed the boat and there was nothing left to do but call the emergency number in the fine print. At this point, our trip seemed more a like a segment of *The Amazing Race* than *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.

It was getting dark as we made our way to a new dock and were picked up in one of Arabella's zodiac boats and transferred across Pillsbury Sound to Cruz Bay, St. John where the ship was anchored. When we finally set foot on Arabella, we were greeted with a warm round of applause from the other passengers whom we had last seen in the Puerto Rico airport.

Arabella is a breathtaking ship in any light, but under the stars of a cloudless Caribbean sky she was resplendent. Her teak decks gleamed in the moonlight and after the hectic day spent trying to get there, we were glad to have a few minutes just to relax and enjoy the stars and the lights of St. John and distant St. Thomas before enjoying a late supper.

As we unpacked and settled into our cabin after supper, we took a few moments to look around. Like most schooners, the cabins are tiny, but there are plenty of amenities. Each of the twenty staterooms has a porthole, a satellite television, a telephone, and a private bath with towels that passed the "Olsen fluff test."

It didn't take long for us to fall asleep and we woke the next morning with sunshine streaming through the porthole and a ship that was already underway. After a delicious onboard breakfast, we passed through customs on the west end of Tortilla and set sail for Norman Island. Sailing on open sea is half the fun of being on a ship like Arabella and we spent the morning relaxing and enjoying the ride. Our captain, Jeff, explained some of the history behind the ship. Once owned by actress Kelly McGillis, Arabella was sold and cut in half in 1997 to make room for a mid-body extension of about fifty-feet. This created more cabins, a larger galley, and additional deck space. There is also a nice dining and sitting area, a small bar and a serving area. Even with the renovation, it is still one of the smallest passenger sailing vessels in the Virgin Islands, allowing it to go places that larger vessels simply can't.

Our first stop in the British Virgin Islands was Norman Island. Tales of pirates and treasure caves abound in the Caribbean, but this island particularly stands out, because it is said to have been the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. We were also told that The Caves, the island's most famous snorkelling site, were used as a filming site for the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean*. From the ship, we kayaked into the each of the three caves of Norman Island and snorkelled around the area. There was an absolute abundance of fish and the waters were so crystal clear that we lingered long after

many of the other passengers had returned to the ship. The solitude of the caves of this uninhabited island made us feel like two shipwrecked comrades.

Once back on board we waited for a group to return from a short launch to The Indians, a nearby rock formation that resembles an Indian headdress, before we pulled anchor and set sail for Peter Island. No two sailings are ever the same on a ship like Arabella and that is part of the adventure of journey like this. Although there is a tentative itinerary, the captain uses weather conditions and many other factors to determine exactly where the boat will go on any given day. Mornings were almost always spent sailing to a sparsely populated island. In the afternoon, we would swim, snorkel, kayak, or catch a launch to the island to relax on the beach, visit a beach bar, or enjoy some hiking. Evenings were either spent enjoying delicious meals onboard or visiting another island where we experienced local cuisine at a Caribbean hotspot.

By the time we returned from our evening on Peter Island, we had completely adjusted to life aboard our luxury yacht. It only took one day for Arabella and her crew to turn our stressed-out feeling of *The Amazing Race* into *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. And while we were neither rich nor famous, at that moment we certainly felt like we were. We might have even fooled Robin Leach.

If You Go:

-A one-week British Virgin Islands cruise aboard Arabella starts at \$1295 USD per person based on double occupancy. For more information on schedules and rates, visit: www.cruisearabella.com.

-Arabella is offered by a Rhode Island company known as Classic Cruises and is also available for private charters. Rates vary according to the itinerary and number of passengers. For more information, call 1-800-395-1343.

-For more information on the British Virgin Islands visit: www.b-v-i.com.

Small Ship Cruising

Small ship cruising is a vastly different experience than that of cruising aboard a large ocean liner. Many of the amenities and services are absent: there is no spa, no pool, no casino, limited dining options, no boutiques, no shows, and cabins are much smaller. But there is an upside: the opportunity to experience unique itineraries, interact with fellow passengers, and enjoy personalized service.

There are hundreds of different types of small vessels for rent in various destinations around the world. Sailing opportunities range from luxury yachts, to expedition cruises, to river cruises and barges and prices vary too. A one-week sailing on a luxury yacht can cost about the same amount as a cruise aboard a large ocean liner, but the experience will be vastly different.

It's a good idea to do your research and read reviews before booking a berth aboard a small vessel. It's also important to realize that someone who suffers from motion sickness or sea sickness may be more likely to experience symptoms on a smaller vessel than a

larger one. A good website to visit for information on small ship cruises is:
www.smallshipcruises.com.