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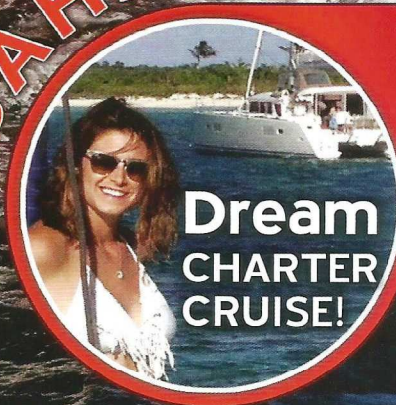
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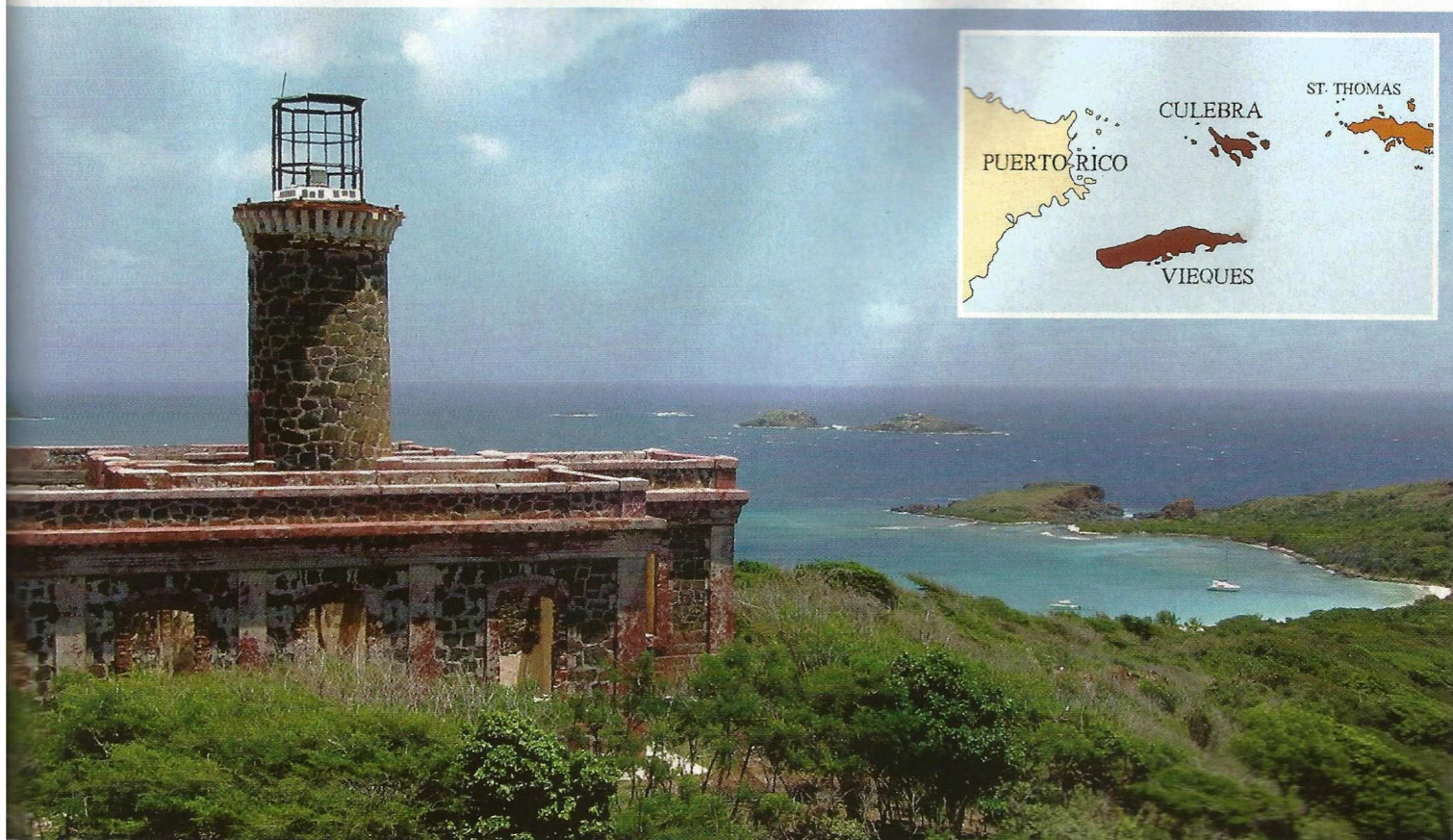
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# The Spanish Virgin Islands

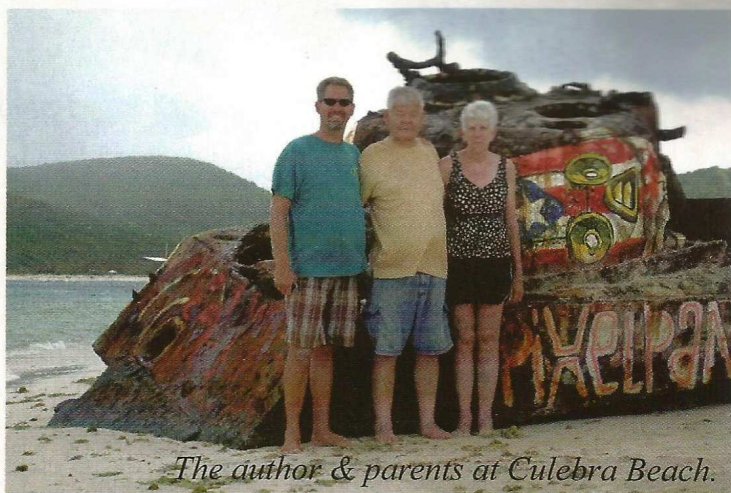
*By Shane McClellan*

I run a charter business in the US and British Virgin Islands aboard my Lagoon 410, the *Guiding Light*. Due to this I have left Charlotte Amalie harbor many, many times over the last couple of years, but I have always turned left and headed upwind to St John and the BVI. This time my parents came to visit and go cruising with me, so we turned to the right instead and sailed the same distance as the BVI in order to visit the Spanish Virgin Islands.



I am surprised how many people don't know there are islands to the west of St Thomas. In fact there are two main islands, Culebra and Vieques, along with many smaller islands before you get to Puerto Rico. I think this lack of knowledge is due to the US Navy restricting access in the past in order to use the islands for target practice and training. The islands are all part of Puerto Rico, where Spanish is the primary language, giving them the moniker of the Spanish VI in order to keep with the USVI and BVI naming practice.

When you get to Culebra and are entering Ensenada Honda, be careful of the shoal outside the harbor. We anchored behind Cayo Pirata, a small island at the western end of the harbor and right next to the town of Dewey. When you get here the first thing you need to do is check in by calling Customs and Immigration at 787-729-6840, even if coming from the USVI. There is a good chance you may have to walk the short distance to the airport to finish the check in process. Once you have cleared in you will want to check out Dewey, which is a blending of Caribbean shanty and Spanish culture. My favorite stopping spots were the Dinghy Dock (both a place to tie the tender and a restaurant), the lift bridge (which was raised one time, got stuck and was never raised again), Zaco Taco (a wonderfully relaxed backdoor patio restaurant), the post office (it looked like it was out of the old west), and the museum (note it is a long ways from town and is only open on certain days).



*The author & parents at Culebra Beach.*

After a day in town we moved the boat all of five miles by leaving the harbor and going to Bahia de Almodovar. The winds were 20 knots from the east and had been for several days, so it was a bit bumpy until we rounded the corner and got behind the reef where the water was flat calm. You will never find a cooler anchorage as the wind sweeps over the reef in this quiet, calm, and uncrowded place to pick up a free mooring.

From here we sailed to the north harbor of Culebrita, a wonderful island a couple miles from Culebra. This island has it all, from a fantastic beach on the north and west side (use this side during the north swell), to wonderful



*Palmintoes.*

hiking trails, an unbelievable lighthouse (typical Spanish design built in 1882), a “Jacuzzi” (a calm pool of water on the windward coast), eye popping snorkeling, and free moorings to boot. What a great way to spend a day.

Another great place to spend a day is at Flamenco Beach. I recommend walking, biking, or taking a cab from Dewey when you are safely anchored in Ensenada Honda, due to the exposure from the north. The beach is beautiful and crescent shaped with fantastic sand, but the coolest feature is two WW2 Sherman tanks on the beach. These tanks were used as target practice by the Navy and when they stopped using the island back in 1975 they left them to rust on the beach. Now it is super cool to have your photo taken on them, near them, and of them.

The last stop we made around Culebra was a small island on the west side. Luis Pena is part of the National Wildlife Refuge and affords a great place to pick up another free mooring. On this island you can enjoy the beach on the north side and you can take your dinghy to the islets strung off to the west. It is also a perfect place to spend a quite night before you sail 8-10 miles south to Vieques.

After a fun and fast beam sail we arrived at Isabel II, which sits about midway along the north shore. One of the best features of this town is the fort that sits on a hill over the town. This was the last fortification built by Spain in the new world. Apparently it cost so much to build, the Queen asked if they were using actual gold bricks for the construction material. We also found another Spanish lighthouse. All of the Spanish lighthouses I have seen follow the same architectural design. There is a rectangular building with several rooms forming the living quarters and then a round tower built on top of this about 20-30 feet high. Our final stop in town was at Mamasonga. This unassuming looking cafe turned out to have unbelievable food. Yummy!!!

After lunch we motored upwind along the north coast towards Bahia Icacos, which is considered to be one of the best in the Caribbean, only to find the anchorage closed. There were signs on the beach, buoys in the water, and all three entrances had orange floating booms across them. There was no question cruisers are not welcome at this time as the Navy cleans up the ordinance left after their years of bombing the island.



*Mom's snorkeling discovery.*

Since we did not have much of an option we took an hour or so and whipped around the eastern tip of the island and anchored in Bahia Salina del Sur on the south coast. This bay is only about half a mile overland from Bahia Icacos. The Navy has not completed cleaning up this anchorage, therefore not a lot of cruisers think of coming here, but as long as you don't go past the beach (and watch where you anchor ;) ) you should be fine. My mother and I snorkeled for over an hour looking at all the debris left behind. We found two shipwrecks and several pieces of ordinance. I found it fascinating, but I think my mom was a little disturbed.

Our next stop was the town of Esperanza where we anchored between Cayo Real and Cayo De Tierra. I usually do not have issues with holding, but I feel the holding in

this anchorage was very poor and I recommend anchoring west of Cayo Real or pick up a mooring ball instead. While walking around Esperanza you will notice a bit more of a touristy feel. This is due to it being the best



*Ordinance discovery.*

place in the entire world to see bioluminescent (microscopic creatures which light up when disturbed) and there are several companies offering two hour night tours for around \$40. Seeing the water light up when you move around in it was pretty amazing and quite captivating. After about an hour a small rainstorm came through and the entire bay lit up as the wind kicked up small waves. This was absolutely beautiful...and cold as we were standing on a bay, in the rain, with the wind blowing against us. One final stop in this town is the local "Stonehenge" which is a rock outcropping

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on a small hill. I am told the native Taino Indians moved some of them to form a religious site. If you seek this site out I guarantee you will see something few others visit. It was picturesque and I thought worth the walk to see it.

We spent our final night on Vieques on the west coast. Here you will find beaches all along the coast and all you have to do is pick the secluded spot you want to call your own private beach. Be careful though, you might end up wasting away several days as you enjoy the beaches, snorkeling, and solitude on this end of the island before you head towards the east coast of Puerto Rico.

We bid Vieques a fond farewell as we sailed away from the west coast one morning with just the jib up. It was a fast, dead downwind sail that caused me to gybe once or twice. We sailed 10 miles before rounding up behind the protection of Cayo Santiago, also known as Monkey Island. This island is home to a research facility established in 1938 with the importation of 409 rhesus monkeys from India. Now there are around 1000 monkeys roaming around the island. This is still an active research facility so you are prohibited from stepping on the island, but you are allowed to observe the monkeys by staying 30 feet from the shore. I found the best spot to be on the north coast toward the east end where the feeding pen is located (right at the end of the isthmus). My parents and I sat in



*Santiago monkey.*

the dinghy for over an hour watching 15-20 monkeys walk, sit, climb, and eat. It was fascinating as I kept thinking I had enough photos and videos, only to have one of them do something else that I had to get also.

The next morning we motored upwind about eight miles in order to round a point just past Roosevelt Roads, which is a recently closed naval base. Once around the point we anchored in the lee of Isla Pineros. This island is only a mile or so from Puerto Rico and causes a natural channel, but if you get to the middle of the west coast and go directly to the beach you will be able to anchor out of the way of boat traffic. Just head in until the depth is appropriate for



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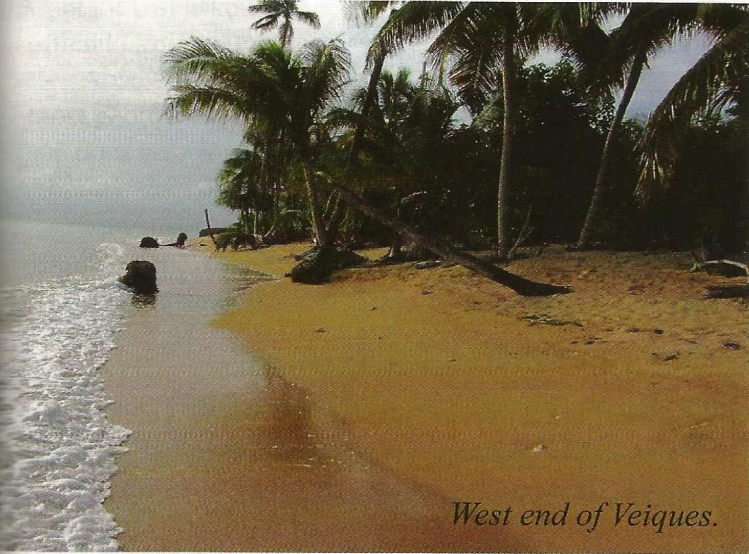






your draft. The anchorage is a good strategic location, but the beach and snorkeling off the boat are not worth the effort due to grass and mud. However, there is decent snorkeling at either point on the west coast and some rocks across the channel hold lots of promise.

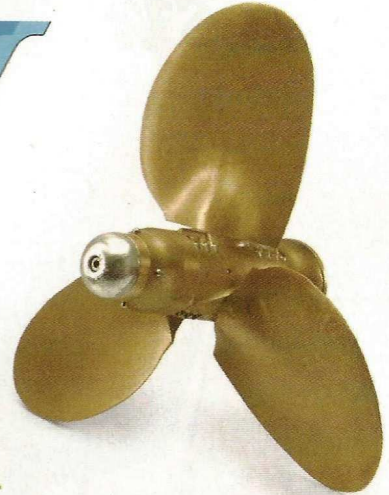
After another peaceful night we sailed to the north end of the east coast and explored Cayo Lobos (be careful since it seems there are at least three different islands called Lobo). This anchorage is not quite as protected and is against a private island with lots of guard dog signs. There was some very nice snorkeling right off the back of the boat. Cayo Icacos is half a mile away and has a wonderful beach that is very popular with day boats. Plus, between the two islands are lots of reefs and rocks to explore with the dinghy.



*West end of Vieques.*

We spent our final night at Isla Palominos, which is the best island on the east coast of Puerto Rico. Let me clarify this statement by saying the monkeys were amazing, but that is all there is to do on Cayo Santiago, while Palominos has free moorings, reefs to snorkel right in the middle of the mooring fields, a beach club, and a small islet right next to it called Palomintos. This islet was not much more than a sand bar with some brush on it, and walking around it took all of about two and half minutes, but it is so easy to relax and before you know it half the day is gone.

Our final destination this cruise was Puerto Del Rey, the largest marina in the Caribbean. In fact it is so popular the Pirates of the Caribbean leave their movie prop boat here. I was having the *Guiding Light* hauled out of the water and stored on land for the remainder of the hurricane season. On the way to the marina we sailed past Isleta Marina, the first marina on this side of Puerto Rico. It features two high rise condos, an extensive dock, some boatyard capabilities, and an anchorage in the cradle of this island. P



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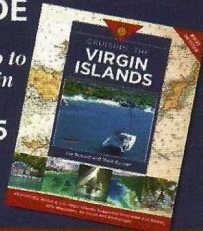
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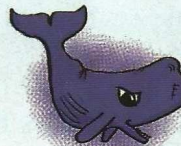
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