



THE
WINTER SUN
SPECIAL

escapism

TORONTO

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ISSUE
08



[ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES]

YACHT MORE DO YOU WANT?

Katie Bridges attempts to gain her seaclegs and disconnect from modern life on a truly off-the-grid excursion around the islands of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

77KM

Distance from
Saint Lucia,
the nearest
country

30 C

Average
temperature
in December

32

Islands and
cays make up
the Caribbean
nation

Words by
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Larwin

LEFT: The Tobago Cays, an archipelago in the Southern Grenadines, are comprised of five small islands and extensive coral reefs

I'M NOT SURE what's going to be more of a challenge. A traveller prone to seasickness spending three days and three nights on a boat, or packing for a week away with only carry-on luggage.

However, when I see the tiny six-seater plane that's about to take us from Barbados to the island of Canouan in the Caribbean archipelago of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, I'm suddenly relieved that I packed light. When we were told we would be meeting the CEO of TradeWinds, I pictured a serious looking man in a suit who would arrive with pamphlets about his luxury yacht chartering service.

Instead, we are greeted by Magnus Lewin, a sun-kissed and floppy-haired gentleman wearing shorts, flip flops and a linen shirt. >

► To layer the surprise factor, after a warm introduction, Lewin proceeds to remove his Hawaiians and hop into the pilot's seat – leaving us to climb the wing into our private plane and put on headphones in case we need to communicate during that short but noisy flight.

I've never been a fan of flying – not least inside a tiny aircraft that seems to feel every bump in the clouds – but 40 minutes later, when we've finished soaring over the turquoise water and coral reefs of the Tobago Cays, it's with a heavy heart that I step onto the tarmac at Canouan Airport.

The disappointment doesn't last long. After whisking through "security" we exit the thatched roof building, jump into a golf cart, and hurtle five minutes down the road to the Canouan Marina, where our luxury catamarans are waiting. The vessels – around 60 feet in length – consist of three bedrooms, a kitchen and living room, an

largely untouched part of the world is restrictive for the average traveller because of the high cost involved with chartering an entire boat – and if you're not a sailor, once you add on the fee for staff to sail you around, you're looking at a price point that would make everyone except Leonardo DiCaprio and Elon Musk wince. Which is where TradeWinds comes in.

Though Magnus Lewin – our handsome pirate and co-founder of TradeWinds – has been on boats since he was a boy, he knew that sailing wasn't accessible for everyone. After a series of hospitality jobs and a move to Bequia, in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Swedish-born Lewin launched TradeWinds in 1999, hoping to forge a middle ground between a sailing excursion and luxury hotel. Since then, they've welcomed more than 50,000 guests onto catamarans in some of the world's most exotic places, from the Seychelles to Greece to French

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outdoor dining space and a front deck where guests can hang out and sunbathe.

Before we've even finished our sundowners (Caribbean code for sunset drinks), my phone's camera roll begins to look like a mosaic of the same sunset picture over and over again. But no matter how many times I try to put my phone away, I am compelled to snap just one more picture until eventually the sun disappears below the horizon.

Unlike the boats I've been on board before – like a sailboat to Australia's Whitsundays, which piled 20 backpackers below deck – this vessel in no way feels like I'm travelling on the Titanic in third-class. The cabins on TradeWinds' luxury yachts are seven feet high, meaning there's very little ducking involved, plus all suites are equipped with a queen-size bed and ensuite shower.

Barring a lottery win, this yacht excursion around the Caribbean was not a trip I thought I would ever take. Visiting this

Polynesia. The week-long vacations allow novice yachtmen and women to hop aboard and drop anchor in secluded spots that a cruise liner could only dream of reaching.

One such hidden gem is the Tobago Cays, where we find ourselves on day two of our trip. This other-worldly collection of islands surrounded by coral reefs offers some of the best diving and snorkelling in the Caribbean. At first it seems recognizable as some generic embodiment of "paradise" but there is in fact a more concrete familiarity. Petit Tabac, located in the Cays, is the site of Jack Sparrow's desert island maroon in the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie. Given the character's legend of escaping from a similar misadventure on the back of sea turtles, I have high hopes for spotting some of my own.

With snorkel gear and flippers on, I do an awkward penguin-walk towards the back of the boat (or the "stern" in nautical lingo)



LEFT: TradeWinds takes guests to exotic destinations and secluded spots, like the Tobago Cays, on their luxury fleet of catamarans

and try to stop fogging the mask up with my breath as I impatiently wait for my turn. When it's time to go, I half-step, half-jump with outstretched fins, wrestling with buoyancy until the Caribbean sea and I can agree upon a state of being. Head submerged, I float easily through the warm water.

My track record for snorkelling could best be categorized as always the bridesmaid, never the bride, seeming to have a knack for arriving the day after a school of rainbow fish and dolphins put on a synchronized swimming display just below the surface. Long have I envied PADI-certified scuba divers who vanish into the depths of the ocean on trips like this, getting up close and personal with Sebastian and the gang while I can count the amount of exotic fish and dead coral I've spotted on one hand.

At first, it seems like I will be thwarted by the same bad luck. But just as I am beginning to feel disheartened, I spot a square of sand twitching on the seafloor. A stingray shuffles to the right, ruining his camouflage and notching up my first spot of the day. Delighted, I start to move away, only to find I am hovering over a leatherback sea turtle, munching on seagrass. I watch the reptile for several minutes, levitating over the seabed, until he rises to the surface to catch his breath. While this isn't the first turtle I see on my trip (we spot several of the creatures pecking out of the water as we sail), it's the most special. The archipelago in the Southern Grenadines has such an abundance of coral reefs that there's really no bad day to get within touching distance of the marine life. It also helps that none of the five small islands comprising the Tobago Cays are inhabited and the marine park

is protected by a barrier called Horseshoe Reef.

The leatherback sea turtle is the largest of all living turtles and the fourth-heaviest modern reptile. Unlike other marine turtles, it does not have a bony shell.

Despite my early fears, my seasickness only catches up with me once on the trip, aided by the copious amounts of wine ►



ABOVE: The yacht chartering service recently built two private beach-front villas on the island of Mayreau, as part of its Aqua-Terra program

► Lewin generously shares from his personal collection. No amount of sea air can revive me, nor can the instant but fleeting relief I experience after jumping off the end of the yacht into the warm, but bracing water, be sustained. Following a stunning breakfast of eggs and exotic fruit (which I don't touch) and black coffee (gimme gimme), we quickly get up to 50 knots on our way to Petit St. Vincent. While half of our group – those sensible enough to head to their cabins after the first bottle – reenact Lonely Island's 'I'm On A Boat' music video, my fellow drinking crew hit the deck as the waves slap the boat.

Green around the gills, we finally reach our next stop, gratefully accepting a hangover remedy in the form of a Piña Colada once we're on dry land. Petit St. Vincent, or PSV as it's known locally, operates as an eco-friendly boutique resort, so unencumbered by the usual conveniences that guests must raise their flag up a flagpole

to summon staff. With no swim-up bars, loungers or watersports on site, you could be excused for mistaking this for a deserted island. But this, I think as my toes sink into the sand and my breathing recalibrates, is the ultimate luxury – solitude.

After travelling to a number of islands like Union Island and [Petite Martinique](#), we reach Mayreau for the finale of our trip. The smallest inhabited island of the Grenadines, with a population of about 271 and only a handful of vehicles, is the site of TradeWinds' newest project.

For travellers like me, who love to be on the water but haven't quite got their sealegs, the Aqua-Terra program offers the perfect compromise. TradeWinds recently built two private beach-front villas on the island of Mayreau, offering sailors the chance to bed down in a luxury suite for part of their trip.

Petite Martinique is one of the islands of Carriacou and Petite Martinique, a dependency of Grenada. The founder was a French fisherman called Mr. Pierre from Martinique.

The accommodation comes with the same five-star service (with staff on-hand to

cook dinner for guests), only this time you can watch those sapphire waters from the opposite perspective as you laze around the infinity pool.

At the time of my visit, Tribu Villas Mayreau was already in the process of expanding with more villas and a beach club on the way. But even once their neighbours arrive, guests staying at the private beach locale will be about as close to serenity as its possible to be.

After just a couple of days out of WiFi range I have a bizarre epiphany – I don't have to do anything I don't want to. Out of the reaches of social media, with a schedule that bobs in and out of focus as gently as the catamaran we are sailing on, there is zero fear of missing out. Every activity here is a reward in and of itself, whether that's swimming, reading, sipping a beer or simply napping on deck.

On our last morning in paradise, I set to work on another arduous to-do list. With al fresco breakfast and gazing out at the horizon checked off, I turn to the final item on my to-do list; one last swim back to the boat and, if I'm very lucky, one more turtle encounter. ♦