

# Caribbean connecting

Story and Photos:  
IRIS SANDERSON JONES

Aboard the sailing yacht Vela, the rope burns our hands as we hoist the huge sails under the hot Caribbean sun. We have been under motor power for at least half an hour now, cutting a white swatch through the turquoise sea, but the 1,800-square-foot main sail and the 800-square-foot fore sail will pull us faster through the banks here in the Bahamas.

It may sound like we are working very hard, but the truth is that we have just eaten sausage, bacon, omelets and fresh hot bread for breakfast, and we are about to bake slowly in the morning sun until lunchtime.

After that we will take the dinghy to some uninhabited sand beach, and scuba dive or swim for the rest of the afternoon until we are sunburned medium rare.

The outline of our ship against the cloud-puffed sky may be reminiscent of 19th-century sailing days, but a sailor's life was never like this.

What we are doing here in the Berry Islands of the Bahamas is what the owners of this ship call "Vacations Under Sail." The 36 passengers and crew spend the morning under sail in waters that are generally too shallow for big ships, and the afternoon on the beach of lonely islands while the cook creates a great dinner and chills the wine.

It is the wrong kind of vacation for people who like dining and dancing or shopping amid colorful markets, and it probably isn't adventurous enough for the kind of sailor who likes to lean over into the wind with a pulling wheel in his hand.

It is the right kind of vacation for

people who like to spend a week in a bathing suit and an old hat, wrapped in a gold-and-blue environment of sun, sand and sea.

**SAILING SHIPS** have made familiar high-masted skylines on these waters ever since Columbus sailed here in 1492. Ponce de Leon was here, followed by pirate ships and slave ships and trading ships of many nations.

On a navigational chart, there are two major colors marking the 700 islands of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. One color marks the deep waters of the passages, channels and sounds that carried sailing ships and modern cruise ships into these palm-fringed islands.

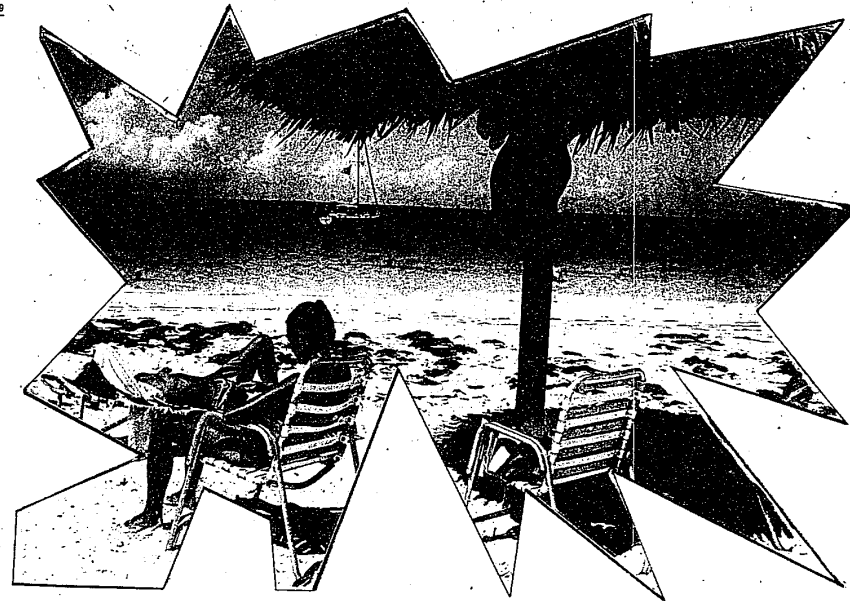
A second color marks the bays that cradle the 2,000 cays (pronounced keys), tiny shale and coral islands in shallow waters where only smaller boats are comfortable. Private yachts anchor within 100 yards of the shore but the 110-foot-long Vela must anchor as much as a mile out to sea.

There usually are a few two-masted sailing boats on every day's horizon, but it is unusual to see a junk-rigged sailing ship like this one.

Cruise sailing is the kind of travel pioneered by the famous Windjammer Cruises, but the Caribbean Schooner Cruise Yachts make a different shape against the sea. The Vela, and her soon-to-be-delivered sister ship, Lyra, have metal hulls with a main deck and a sun deck dominated by two huge brown sails designed after those worn by a Chinese junk.

These sails provide maximum power while leaving the deck clear of traditional rigging.

Nobody but the captain knew where



we were going when we sailed out of Nassau early Sunday. Captain Bill Curry, a Seattle sailor with a lot of slanted wooden decks and rigging in his background, plans the week's cruise day by day, according to weather.

The itinerary is always geared towards the out islands and the deserted beaches that you don't see from the settlements or even from a regular cruise ship.

We have covered about 150 miles in our six-day run. Each morning, at sunrise, the Vela rocks lightly at anchor as the sun makes a pale golden corridor across the sea. Two women finish their morning yoga exercises, and a man is on his last pushup as the sun begins to burn the rails white, sending golden rays down to where the fish swim under the green water.

The chef, John Goddard, starts sending breakfast smells up from the galley. As we eat, the crew silently starts the engine and gets us under way, with the captain maneuvering his electronic steering gear from the sundeck.

Later, a white wake follows the dinghy across the turquoise sea to some golden sand beach. Seaman Seville Piere stands tall and black and proud like a living figurehead at the front of the boat and Seaman Rupert Archibald makes a fringe of black beard against the cloud-puffed blue sky at the back.

The crew members wear the dignity

of people at work but the rest of us look a little silly in our crooked sunhats and dripping shirts, with the gleam of sun oil everywhere. This is a hot-sun world. The most populated stop has only a few thatched tables on the beaches. Most have nothing but seagulls.

**THESE ARE EXCELLENT** waters for scuba diving and fishing if you arranged your gear in advance, but most of us are content to snorkel around the easy shallow waters or the more difficult reefs nearby.

When I saw the world this was for

the first time, I entered a new world of sand and coral and underwater grass. The outline of a sting ray made its shape known against the sand bottom and another swim by on ghostly wings only 20 feet away.

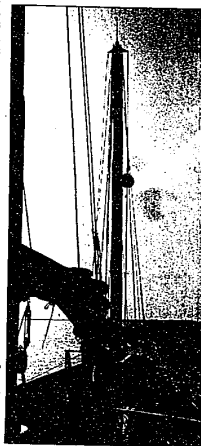
Nobody who swims here is afraid of them, or of the little barracuda that sometimes make black shapes against the water. Most of the time, in the shallow waters suitable to greenhorns, translucent fish with purple heads race across an ocean bottom scattered with shells.

There is no night life aboard the Vela. After a dinner washed down with water glasses full of good wine, the passengers gather around the card tables or on deck to talk or sing or party or muse in their own way. Nobody sees a shirt and tie or a skirt until the Vela nudges the dock at Nassau again Friday night at dinnertime.

A week of this sailing life costs roughly \$460, including a meals, wine and a tiny air-conditioned room with upper and lower bunks.

The bar, which operates casually out of two coolers and a stand-up bar in the dining room is extra, as is the tip. You can't spend money on anything else until you get back to Nassau and walk 20 feet to the Native Straw Market. Nobody but you is responsible for your pocketbook after that.

For further information contact your travel agent or Caribbean Schooner Cruises Inc. at 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.



## TRAVEL LOG of Iris Jones



*Don't bother me,  
I'm working on a tan*

**GREAT HARBOR CAY, Bahamas** — It is hard for me to take this island seriously. I know people live here, and that they live real lives, but I feel as if I am on a movie set.

Errol Flynn should come over the horizon any minute in a pirate ship. From the plankboard circular bar set under the palm trees, a fine golden sand beach circles out with arms of blinding white to points of land on either side.

Thatched-cooled tables dot the beach, where a few people look out across a clear green sea masted with sailboats against a blue and white cloud-puffed sky.

A small dinghy carries a group of people past the few bathers to a white yacht near the shore. A three-master comes in, a splendor of sails around the tip of the island. Far out on the emerald sea our sailing cruiser is anchored with its sails down, a 19th-century shape against the sky.

All of this is rippled by warm water, a ruffling breeze and a sun that will blister us all by sunset.

This is the most populated place we have seen this week. Obviously there is a small air strip out of sight beyond the trees, because a small plane just landed. We can see a few telephone wires in the distance; apparently there is a settlement two miles away.

**AT FIRST GLANCE** this shoreline looked like a resort area, but the hotel has been closed and the condominiums are almost empty. Several times during our cruise we have heard of investors who started and abandoned projects on these cays.

The tiny circular bar above the beach apparently serves some population, however, because the people sitting around it look like characters out of an Ernest Hemingway short story.

There is a man in a white-panama hat; a girl in a skimpy bikini; a very fat woman drinking gin; a young teen-ager painting her finger nails; and an assorted collection of sunburned, sand-dusted passengers from the sailing yacht Vela.

Our conversation is about the boat load of people we saw on the beach yesterday. They were on a day trip from Club Med in Nassau. Many of the women were bare-breasted.

**IF ALL OF THIS** sounds slow and slightly out-of-focus, it is because we are all slow and slightly out-of-focus after several days of sun. By now we have learned to wear shirts when we swim, and keep our hats on in the water. All of us are sunburned.

When Jackie Lains, the Girl Friday of the ship's crew, delivers a picnic lunch to the beach, we eat as if we have never eaten before.

When the afternoon sun has cooked our brains, and we have all hoisted ourselves heavily over the sides into the dinghy, first mate Bob Lehmann and scaman Rick Piemo and David Marchant will haul us back aboard the big yacht like a crop of sunstruck hyacinths, and we will swear never to sun again. Until tomorrow.

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