



Kekoa delivers her guests to serene waters rich in marine life.

Silver Liming

After a harrowing maiden voyage, a wooden cat finds her niche guiding **Virgin Islands** day sailors.

TWIN HULLS SLICE EXPERTLY THROUGH THE WATER TOWARD ME, silvery streaks underpinning a gleaming white deck crowned by black sails billowing in the trade winds. A perfectly splendid day envelops us: The horizon is crisp, and the sky is reflected in the deep turquoise of the sea, waves glinting playfully in the bright sunlight. From my perch on the dock of Virgin Islands National Park, in St. John, USVI's Cruz Bay, the sight of the 50-foot catamaran *Kekoa* heaving into view only heightens my anticipation of the day at sea that awaits.

Captains Ryan and Jamison Witbeck welcome our group of 25 aboard, and we soon discover just a few of the many things that make this boat stand out above the hordes of day charters that ply the waters off the Virgin Islands: Not only are these

two brothers *Kekoa*'s owners and builders, but they also spin a riveting story of her ill-fated passage to the Caribbean.

Vermont born and bred, the Witbecks got their start building wooden boats in South Carolina with a Crucian they affectionately call "the pirate." After assisting him with several crafts, they branched out on their own, building *Allura*, a 50-foot catamaran they operated as a charter business out of St. John beginning in 2000. Five years later — thinking it was somehow time to start leading more conventional lives — they sold *Allura* and returned to the States.

It was a mere matter of months, however, before the call of the sea lured them back to the boatyard.

"Being without a boat just created this massive void in our lives," says Ryan. So in the autumn of 2006, the Witbecks set to work building a dream ship.

They succeeded. *Kekoa*'s distinctive silver hulls and black sails set her apart, and the brothers' adventuresome, can-do spirit informs every aspect of their operation. For instance, the boat's list of potential stops is more than twice as long as that of many similar operations.

"We go places that would have most captains jumping in their skin," says Jamison as we motor toward Mary Creek, in Leinster Bay, on St. John's north shore.

No other charters make a snorkeling stop at Mary Creek — most drop anchor at the more popular Waterlemon Cay, in the bay's eastern half. Yet the shallows here turn out to be teeming with sea life. I'm overcome with awe at the octopuses, sea turtles, brain coral and undulating sea fans. When the conch-shell horn signals us back to the boat a too-quick hour later, we clamber aboard to find a delectable spread on deck: pineapples, local papaya and carambola, as well as pumpkin-banana bread and mango chutney made by the Witbeck wives.

While we munch on the goodies and sprawl in the warming sun, *Kekoa* heads toward Tortola, in the British Virgin Islands. We dutifully check in with customs at Soper's Hole, then the crew hoists the sails, which catch a breeze that guides us along the island's north shore. As we glide east, I settle in to the beat of Bob Marley,

and the Witbecks regale me with the spellbinding tale of *Kekoa's* maiden voyage, which was very nearly her last.

After construction was finished in December 2008, *Kekoa* attracted a buyer in the U.S. Virgin Islands who arranged for her delivery from South Carolina. A winter storm was moving in, but the captain in charge of the delivery decided he could get out ahead of it, so he set sail.

Three days later, the brothers received a 6:30 a.m. phone call. "The captain told me that pieces of the boat were floating away," recalls Jamison. The catamaran was breaking up in the storm.

The U.S. Coast Guard rescued the crew but could do nothing for *Kekoa*. She was abandoned to the churning, frigid Atlantic some 275 miles off North Carolina.

"The guys were saved; hallelujah," Ryan says. "But the boat was gone."

Or so it seemed. Unwilling to give up hope or *Kekoa*, the brothers called one salvage company after another, finally finding one willing to brave 30-foot seas

and high winds for a recovery that was deemed a long shot at best. Miraculously, the ship was sighted within a week, battered but intact, having traveled 168 miles toward shore under her own power.

Four months' worth of repairs later, the Witbecks personally delivered *Kekoa* to the Virgin Islands only to have the sale fall through. Finding themselves once again in the Virgins with a ship they'd built on their hands, they embraced fate and jumped back into the charter business.

Ryan and Jamison wind up their story just before we conclude the hour-long jaunt to our next stop. The sail has been so smooth and the brothers' saga so enthralling that I've lost all track of time. Indeed, I could easily spend forever here, beguiled by *Kekoa* as I bask in the warmth of the late morning sun. That is, until I spy Sandy Spit, BVI, on the horizon.

It's not every day I find myself on a deserted isle, so I swim, snorkel and poke around onshore until the conch sounds once again. I couldn't ask for more from this day. Happily, it isn't done just yet. *Kekoa* takes us to Jost Van Dyke's pristine White Bay, where we swim ashore to dig our toes into powdery sand, sip dark-rum-infused Painkillers from the Soggy Dollar Bar (a JVD tradition I'm not inclined to break) and laze away the afternoon in beachfront hammocks.

All too soon it's time to leave Soggy's charms for the run back to St. John. I settle into one of the beanbag chairs, praising the brilliance of whoever put them here. The wind picks up, the black sails unfurl overhead, and *Kekoa* flashes silver in the water once more. — ANDREA MILAM

Kekoa offers full- and half-day sails in the U.S. and British Virgin Islands from \$80 per person. 340-244-7245; blacksailsvi.com

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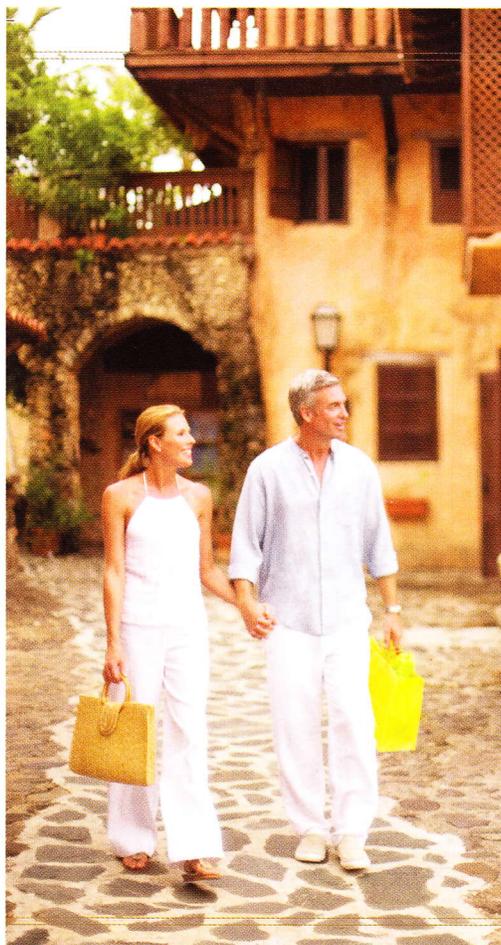
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