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FRUGAL TRAVELER

Jost Van Dyke, a 'Somewhere' Barely on the Map Island in the British Virgin Islands

By MATT GROSS

THERE are thousands of islands, reefs, spits, cayes, rocks and sandbars in the [Caribbean](#), so don't feel bad if you've never heard of the one called Jost Van Dyke. After all, these six square miles of palm trees, white-sand beaches and steep hills in the British Virgin Islands didn't even have electricity or paved roads 10 years ago. And not everyone's a fan of Kenny Chesney, the country star who yearned for Jost (pronounced yost) in his song "Somewhere in the Sun."

Jost Van Dyke, you might be forgiven for believing, could be Dutch for "obscure little island."

Actually, Joost Van Dijk was a 17th-century pirate whose feats of buccaneering are lost to history. The island is as obscure as its namesake — and obscurity is a magnet for the Frugal Traveler. The undiscovered tends to offer the delights of the well known, only cheaper and rawer, especially when it lies just off the beaten track. Such is the case with Jost Van Dyke, a quick sailboat ride from Tortola and St. Thomas.

Well, it's a quick sailboat ride if you have a sailboat. I don't. But at the end of September, I did have a free weekend, \$500 to spend on food, lodging and entertainment, and a friend, Michael, with nothing better to do. So we flew to Tortola on a Friday morning, caught the 30-minute ferry to Jost Van Dyke's Great Harbor (\$20 a person, round trip; the British Virgin Islands use the [United States](#) dollar) and carried our bags from the ferry dock to what passes for downtown on an island with 200 inhabitants.

At first glance, Jost looked like the perfect, placid little paradise. The calm waters of the harbor gently lapped the shore and the pilings of a few modest docks, where a few small boats were moored. Along the sandy road through town, palms and bushes shrouded the low open-air restaurants and bars (whose total capacity might be 100 revelers). Two guys were fixing a boat near the cream stucco church.

Beyond were thousand-foot hills swathed in greenery untouched by the roads that were cut here in the late 1990's. To the east and west, we knew, were two more bays, each a slightly

smaller version of this tiny world that, without a doubt, lived life at its own particular pace.

It was the off-season, and Jost Van Dyke was in hibernation. We could see no other tourists on the sandy road, and most of the food and drink stalls that lined the beach were shuttered. The only visible activity was at Ali Baba's, an open-air bar-restaurant where a half-dozen locals were nursing bottles of beer at the blue tables. As we approached, one stepped up to the bar, poured himself a plastic cup full of Brugal rum and departed, murmuring, "One for the road."

We knew how he felt. It was 4:30 p.m., and we'd been in transit for 12 hours, so we plunked ourselves down at a table and ordered bottles of Carib beer and our own shots of Brugal (\$9). Just what we needed to recharge before catching a taxi (three minutes, \$10) to Ivan's Campground.

I'd selected Ivan's for two reasons: It was on White Bay, which various Web sites had assured me was the island's best beach; and at \$50 a night for a cabin, it was the cheapest place I could find. Not that there were many options — White Bay Villas and the Sandcastle Hotel were the only alternatives on White Bay, and each would've gobbled up half my budget in even the deadest of seasons.

Ivan's was, well, bare-bones: The cabins were relatively mosquito-proof, with a single electric fan to keep us cool; the toilets and showers, outside amid coconut palms and tamarind trees, didn't clog until Saturday. Better was Ivan's Stress-Free Bar, which runs on the honor system, meaning you keep a log of your beers and cocktails, then wonder where Ivan is when it comes time to settle up.

But the best was the bay itself, a crescent of spotless white sand and gentle turquoise water. Michael and I were the only guests, but a sailboat was anchored in the bay, so as soon as I'd changed into swim trunks, I breast stroked out to say hello to our "neighbors" — who generously invited us aboard for sunset cocktails.

Over gin and tonics, we got to know Kevin, a JetBlue pilot from Florida, his wife, Sloane, and their young daughters, Elise and Whitney. They were spending a week or so sailing the Virgin Islands on a rented boat, and Jost Van Dyke was their favorite stop so far, they said. This was partly because of this very bay, but also because of the Soggy Dollar Bar farther down the beach, which Elise, a precocious third grader, assured us had the best drinks on the island. (She ordered them "virgin.")

Promising to try the Soggy Dollar tomorrow, we returned to shore, dressed and hiked back up a seriously steep hill to Great Harbor. Twenty minutes later, we sweatily arrived at a nearly

empty Ali Baba's. A trio of customers had ordered dinner, but the waitress was reluctant to serve us — we hadn't booked ahead (recommended in the low season).

She eventually relented and offered us a choice: ribs or shrimp. The ribs turned out to be meaty slabs slathered with rich barbecue sauce; we punched them up with intense pepper sauce, made from Scotch bonnet chilies and packaged in a jar that warned, "Real hot hot hot." (With a few beers, the bill came to \$72; we could have used a warning for that.)

The next morning, after a wake-up swim and breakfast of bacon and johnnycakes (\$10) at A & B, the only other restaurant at Great Harbor that was open, we met Taboo, a big black dog whose exploits on the island are almost as famous as those of his owner, a restaurateur named Foxy. Taboo was wandering the road in front of the harbor, and as we set out to circumnavigate the island on foot, he decided to follow us.

We walked east along the main road, which curved around the island's edge, swooping up and down as the mountains demanded. The sun beat on us with a vengeance, overwhelming the SPF 15 sunscreen that cost us \$7.29 at the only shop in town.

But the consistently impressive views kept our spirits up — beyond the glittering sea, Tortola and the other islands stretched out in sinuous humps, while the vegetation we passed was a mix of palms, cactuses and trees smothered by the love vine, a plant that looked like orange spaghetti.

An hour later, we stopped at Little Harbor for beer and water at Sidney's Peace and Love (\$10), the only restaurant open, and continued our eastward slog, trudging up the longest hill so far, then descending the steepest. At last, we hit a flat spot, which took us through smelly marshes to Foxy's Taboo.

Foxy's Taboo — owned by Foxy and named for his dog — is Jost Van Dyke's coolest hangout. Alone on a spit of land facing a small harbor, it's the kind of sophisticated restaurant you expect to find on St. Barts, with grilled wild boar and lobster-stuffed tilapia on the menu and a Foxy's microbrew on tap. A well-maintained dock led into the harbor, and I imagined a dozen yachts moored there, twinkling and swaying during the tourist season.

Foxy's Taboo was, however, closed for the low season. Michael and I went for a swim, then relaxed on the open-air deck of the restaurant and played endless hands of gin, wondering if we should press on down the road to the Bubbly Pool, a small cove that froths into champagne when the waves of the Atlantic hit the calm Caribbean. But since we didn't know how much farther it was, we decided to head for home.

Taboo chose to part ways with us at Little Harbor, but back at Great Harbor, we ran into his dreadlocked owner, Foxy, sitting outside his other restaurant (also closed). We then headed back over the hump to White Bay and the Soggy Dollar.

No one was behind its bar, but Wendell's World, next door, was hopping — it had three customers, and poppy reggae warbled from the stereo speakers. We ordered painkillers (rum, piña colada mix, orange juice; \$4 each) and watched the sun set over the rippling water.

By then, we were quite hungry, so we walked over to Ivan's, intending to change clothes and head off to dinner. Instead, we found people drinking at the Stress-Free Bar: Woody, who splits his time between [Connecticut](#), [Colorado](#) and the Caribbean; Cathy, a physical therapist who had moved from Colorado to St. Thomas 18 months earlier; Dean, Foxy's baby-faced 41-year-old son, who entertained us all with his card tricks and the dirty pictures on his cellphone; and white-haired Ivan himself, who lamented all the progress of recent years.

Several Red Stripes later (\$2 each), Cathy, Michael and I hopped into Dean's car for a ride over the hump to the open-air A & B, where we discovered more people gathered in one place than we'd seen all weekend. There must have been 10, and they were all engaged in a heated debate over who was more evil, [Saddam Hussein](#) or Idi Amin. When they put the question to me, I looked up from my platter of stewed conch, took a sip of tart red guavaberry liquor, and said, "Idi Amin ate children."

True or not, that seemed to clinch it, and as we ate dessert — slices of guavaberry tart made by the waitress's mother — the conversation turned more serious: Why had God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden?

I pounced, suggesting the couple had been punished not for their willfulness but for their dangerous innocence, then watched as passionate voices were raised, arguments played out and metaphors explored as if they were matters of life and death. And for a couple of hours, Cathy, Michael and I got to feel like any other islander spending a Saturday night at the bar.

When at last it came time to pay, Cathy insisted on picking up the tab (\$25 apiece, not including tip), and Dean drove us back to Ivan's, where we cracked open a \$9 bottle of rum and waited for morning.

Sunday would come soon enough — at breakfast, a local resident arrived with shocking news: nobody had seen Taboo since we'd left him in Little Harbor; then Michael and I, covered in mosquito bites, would attempt to spend our remaining budget in Tortola, where everything was also closed — but I was in no rush. I was living Kenny Chesney's low-cost dream, kicking back

with all my friends down in the islands, somewhere in the sun.

TOTAL \$379.09 (including a disappointing \$64 lunch on Tortola, at a Pusser's).

VISITOR INFORMATION

WHERE TO STAY

Ivan's Campground, White Bay; (284) 495-9358; www.caribbeancruisingclub.com/ivan.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Ali Baba's, Great Harbor; (284) 495-9280.

A & B Snack Bar, Great Harbor.

Sidney's Peace and Love, Little Harbor; (284) 495-9271.

Soggy Dollar Bar, White Bay; (284) 495-9888.

Foxy's Taboo; (284) 495-0218; www.foxysbar.com.

Pusser's, on Tortola (pussers.com), is a small chain of British-pub-style restaurants serving West Indian cuisine.

WHAT TO DO

Jost Van Dyke Scuba and BVI Eco-Tours; (284) 495-0271; www.jvdwatersports.com. Sailboat tours of Jost Van Dyke are \$95.

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