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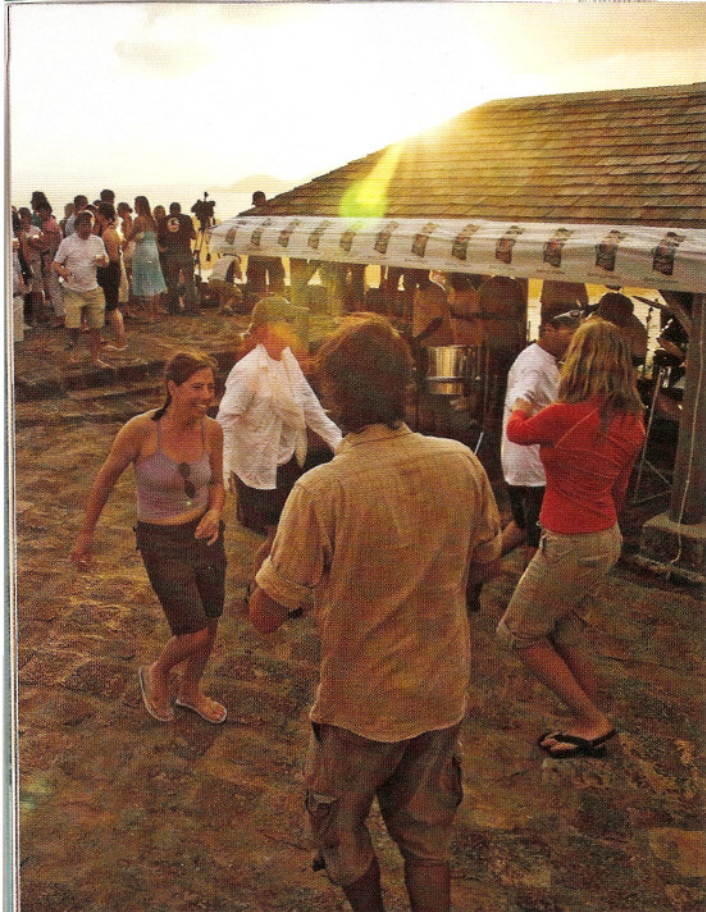
FOR salty dogs AND landlubbers ALIKE, REGATTAS IN THE CARIBBEAN ARE ONE PART FULL-SAIL RACING extravaganza AND ONE PART nonstop PARTY, AND ANTIGUA SAILING WEEK MAY BE THE BIGGEST bash OF THEM ALL.

STORY BY HERB MCCORMICK





Antigua Sailing Week attracts the world's top racing yachts, including the 57-foot *Charisma*, owned and skippered by Spanish banker Alejandro Pérez Calzada.



THERE'S NO OTHER WAY TO PUT IT: MARGARET GRYZELKO looked hot. Trim and blonde, wearing a light summer sundress, she'd left her everyday life as a mom back in Miami a long way away, literally and figuratively.

It was a Tuesday in April on the island of Antigua, atop the breezy peak known as Shirley Heights, at the midway point of the annual festival of offshore yachting and onshore mayhem called Sailing Week. The sunset party at Shirley, like so much of the scene at Sailing Week, is a highly anticipated ritual, and the sun had just done its part by vanishing behind a faraway ridge. Down below, the harbor lights at Falmouth started to flicker. On high, the steel band was beginning to simmer. Soon enough the dance floor began to sway and percolate.

And Gryzelko and her pals, all dressed to the nines, were right in the thick of it.

The springtime regatta in Antigua has been a fixture on the yacht-racing calendar for more than 40 years now. Its roots are modest: Looking to extend their bookings at least one more week, the local charter-boat skippers and hoteliers organized the late-April regatta as a wrap-up to the tourist season. The general idea was to race from one beach resort to another, anchor the boats, throw a huge bash and then do it all again

the next day. The inaugural edition of Sailing Week drew a handful of local boats, mostly charter craft, but word soon got out about champagne sailing through azure seas, propelled by steady easterly trade winds — as well as the raucous, non-stop parties — and Antigua's little regatta caught fire. Before long, Sailing Week was drawing the hottest boats and the best sailors from near and far, and its reputation as a carnival of epic proportions, both on the water and off, was sealed.

Today, Antigua Sailing Week continues to go strong. Though the fleet is somewhat diminished from the regatta's record-setting years, the 2009 running attracted an impressive field of 140 boats, including such grand vessels as British yachtsman Peter Harrison's stunning 115-foot ketch, *Sojana*. The trades still honk, and the racing remains spectacular.

As for the parties, they've mellowed somewhat, but they're cranking along too. The midweek break from racing, a dawn-to-dusk bacchanal once known as Lay Day, has gone by the wayside, and with it the infamous wet T-shirt contest and related shenanigans. It was fun while it lasted, but frankly the time had come. The Fort James Beach Bash, the Shirley Heights sunset party, Jolly Harbor Day, and the prize-giving ceremony in the rich, historic confines of Nelson's Dockyard, among many less-formal occasions, carry the celebration forward.

These days, the case can be made that going to sea is hardly a requisite to enjoy Sailing Week. Much of the racing is still conducted over point-to-point courses around the picturesque island and its myriad beaches. Thus, with a rented car, a suitable map, a copy of the sailing instructions and a sense of adventure, one could spend a most pleasurable holiday following the colorful action via coastal roads, stopping now and again for a swim and a rum punch — not for the driver, of course — and then catching up with the sailors for the post-race parties.

Two years ago, Bostonian Becky Wheatland set off for the event with a very similar plan. "My friend and I were sick and tired of the cold and decided to just head for Antigua," she says. "We stayed at a hotel, watched all the races, went to the parties and had a great time." But Wheatland, an accomplished small-boat sailor, also wanted to participate, and by week's end she secured a slot on a boat for a couple of days of racing.

This year, smitten with her first experience in Antigua, she decided to raise her game. The British-based company Ondeck Ocean Racing (ondeckoceanracing.com) offers berths aboard Caribbean race boats on a person-by-person basis, for all levels of experience, and when the gun fired to start the first race of Sailing Week, Wheatland found herself trimming the mainsail on a 65-foot offshore sloop. It was her first time competing aboard such a powerful, purposeful yacht.

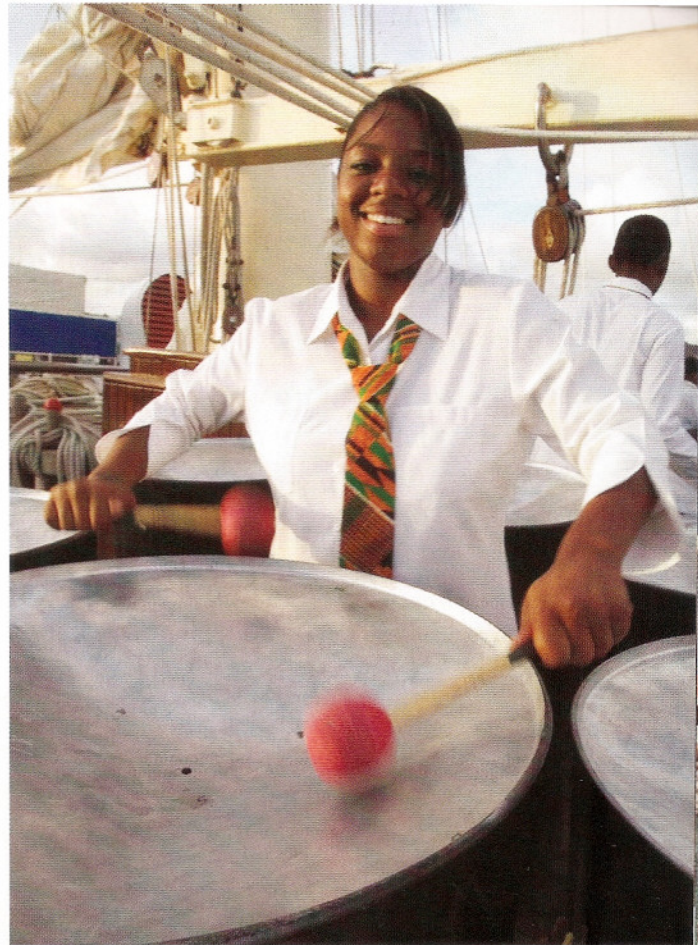
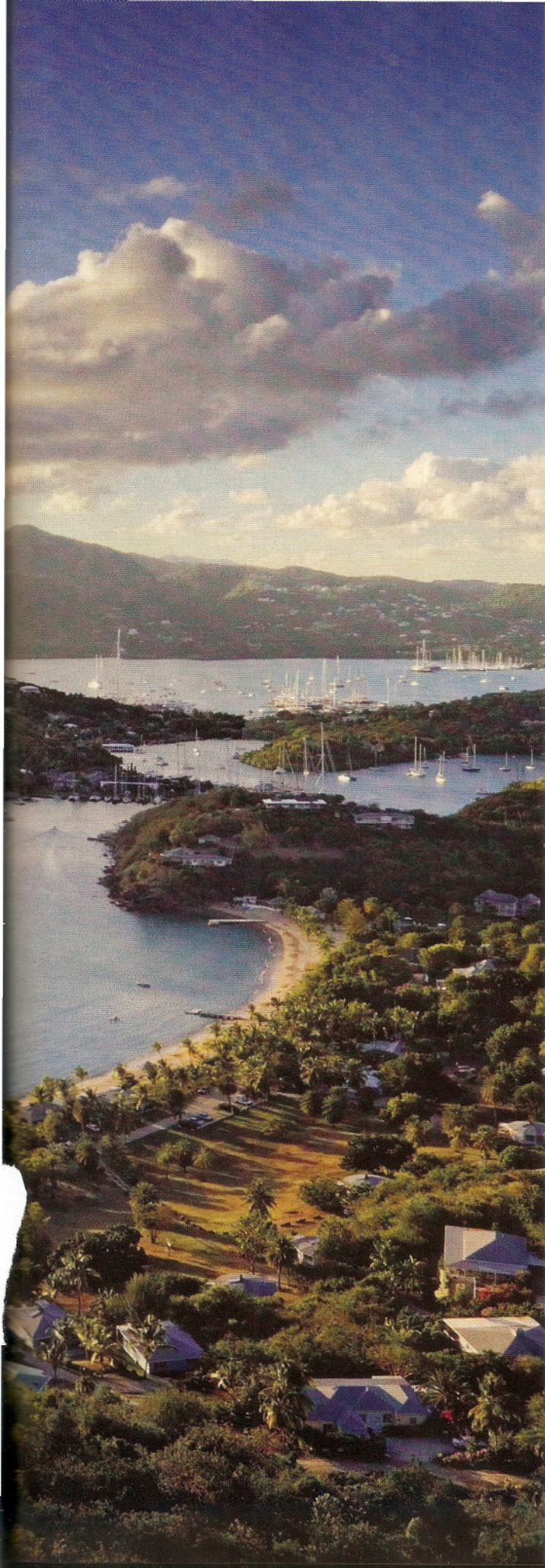
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With its crew of 28, owner Mike Slade's 100-foot *Leopard 3* handily won Sailing Week's Guadeloupe-to-Antigua sprint. Opposite: Sailors and spectators party at Shirley Heights.

Antigua's English Harbour spreads out below Sailing Week's party epicenter, Shirley Heights. Opposite: Onshore and on deck, steel-pan music fills the air.

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"I learned so much," she says. "I'd absolutely recommend it to anyone who wants to have a good week of racing, get a ton of sailing experience and party in Antigua."

Margaret Gryzelko and her friends would second that opinion. They've been returning to Sailing Week for several years now, and they have their routine down pat. Many participants from the United States and abroad charter bareboat yachts from companies such as Sunsail (sunsail.com), recruit some pals as crew and to share both the costs and the fun, and then compete in the bareboat divisions, living aboard the boats during the regatta. But Gryzelko's strategy is a tad more upscale.

Along with her regular group of mates — a mixture of guys and gals, some experienced sailors, others beginners — she charters a crewed yacht each year with a hired captain, who in turn gathers a few of his sailing buddies (it's not too tough to round up sailors eager to race with Gryzelko's mob) from Island Water World (islandwaterworld.com) in St. Martin. Last year, she and her friends raced hard each day, repaired to a sumptuous rented villa for showers and refreshments afterward, and then hit their favorite parties each evening.

"We never stay on the boat," she says. "Some nights we eat at home, and others we dine out. Our house was lovely."

For those thinking of launching their own visit to Sailing Week, Gryzelko has some hard-earned advice. "Go to the gym a lot and catch up on your sleep," she says. "Otherwise you will not survive. But by all means come and see it. I've been to other race weeks, but only Antigua is Antigua." » *The 43rd Antigua Sailing Week is set for April 24-30, 2010. For more information, including a list of suggested accommodations, visit sailingweek.com. SAIL ON »*