



THE
Modern
GUIDE TO
Marauding & Hooliganism

Festive flotilla sailing in the British Virgin Islands raises a question like a black flag: Why do we celebrate pirates?

By MATTHEW MILLER *Photos by* SHELLY STRAZIS

PLAYING PIRATE The author (opposite, with rum) taps his inner ruffian during the HIHO, a weeklong event that blends catamaran cruising and partying through the BVI in the guise of an (optional) windsurfing and paddle-boarding race.

A white sail appears against the pale-blue upwind horizon, a faster ship than ours — and probably a better crew since our crew includes me. Familiar colors fly top-most on the mast, but is this a friend?

“Coming about!” shouts Capt. John. “Raise the mainsail and jib.” We’ll need all the canvas to outrun them.

We scramble. I don’t know what to do. Thankfully we’re on a chartered catamaran. John and Colleen (First Sea Lady) could sail it alone. Of course, if that ship is a pirate corvette and marauders come vaulting over the gunwales, John and Colleen may be glad I’m here to meet the first wave.

“No quarter asked or given!” I cry into the wind. “Prepare to be boarded!” I might have this backward.

We’re offshore Anegada, 14 miles from the safe shelter of Virgin Gorda. But who’s chasing us? The ghost of Sam Bellamy? Henry Morgan?

“It’s Jim,” says John. “He’s crafty.”

Jim Hawkins, the crafty narrator of *Treasure Island*? No, Jim Wallace, the cheerful British Airways pilot we drank with last night.

This is the HIHO, a weeklong windsurfing and stand-up-

PADDLE OUT

While some HIHOers race each day, more come to island-hop and let loose.



GET TO WORK
HIHO participants can sail, paddle or simply sit back and enjoy exploring the BVI.

paddling race that crisscrosses the BVI. We’ve romped to steel-drum bands, swilled Pusser’s rum with ginger beer and hardly worried at all about getting hanged for treason.

The HIHO lets hardworking, usually law-abiding folk enjoy the softer side of a pirate’s life. We already speak the language, me hearties, and there’s a pirate party night after next. Yo ho.

Pirate Law:


SHARE WITH YOUR
crew — *the ship work,*
the fresh coconuts,
THE LAST DRY SAND.

But why do we celebrate pirates, even for make-believe? These were rough guys. How rough? Turns out pirates did not make people walk the plank — J.M. Barrie invented that to frighten children who refused to grow up — but they did whip people to death and burn people alive.

Gruesome stuff, and it gets worse. These were the terrorists of the early 1700s, and were hunted as such,

brought to account in chains and executed, their corpses displayed at the entrances to ports as warning to other would-be pirates. Yo ho, indeed.

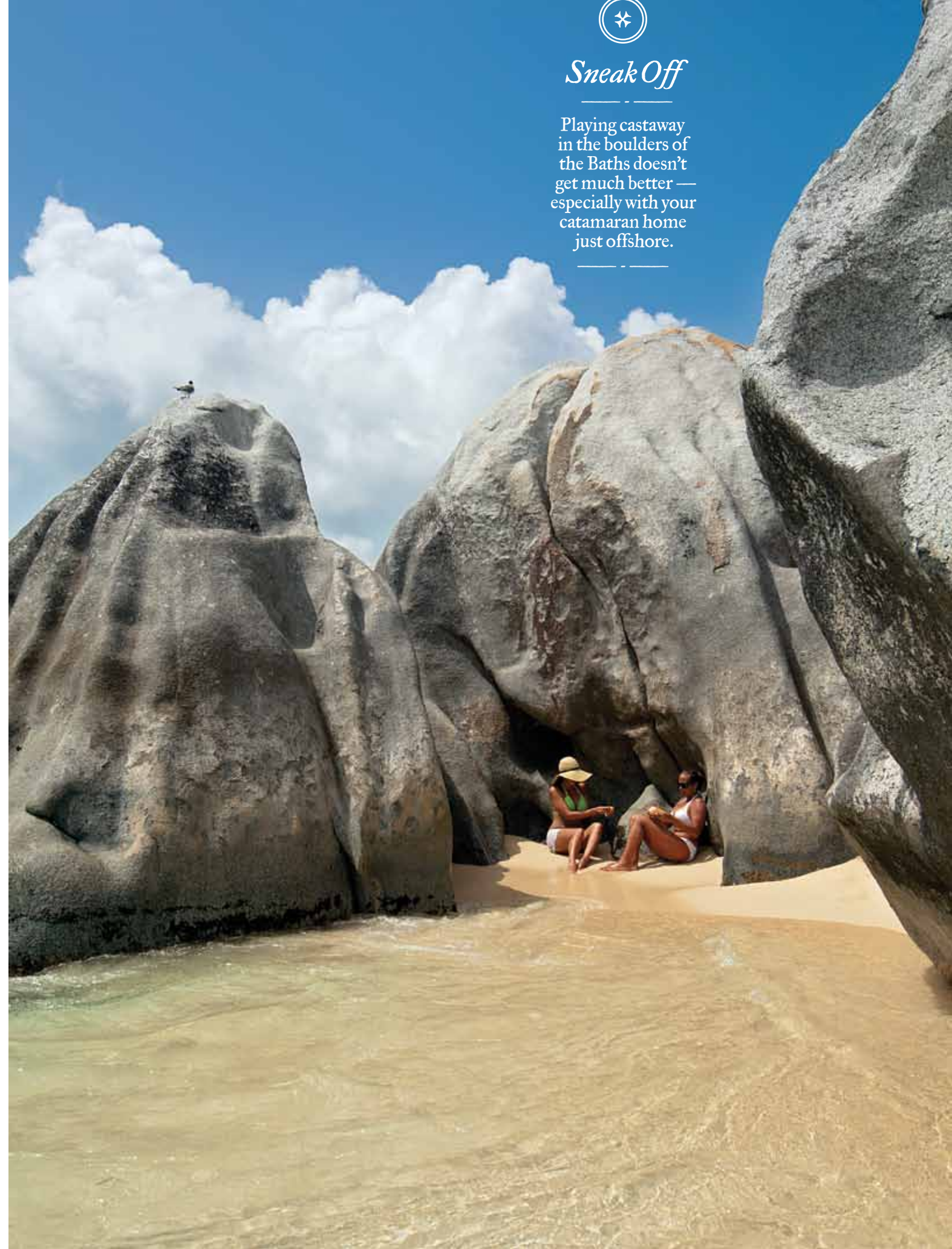
So are we promoting all that when we dress up and say “aargh”? Or are we simply celebrating the rummy lifestyle, the devil-may-care refusal to follow rules? It’s a bit of a paradox: How to do a little harmless gallivanting without promoting violence and crime?

Meanwhile, Jim is somehow gaining on us. “He’s got an extra two feet of beam, that’s how,” says Capt. John. Jim’s boat also has air conditioning. Curse him. As his luxurious yacht passes ours, he’s smiling and waving. Jim is a pretty nice guy for a pirate. “See you in hell,” I say. — NEXT 



Sneak Off

Playing castaway in the boulders of the Baths doesn’t get much better — especially with your catamaran home just offshore.



Once upon a time at the pirate museum gift shop in Nassau, Bahamas, I asked a 10-year-old girl why she admired pirates. She'd viewed the museum's dummies carousing belowdecks in the life-size model ship, marooned on a beach with a single bottle of rum, waiting at the gallows and, I imagine, defiant to the end — "I do repent! I repent I've not done more mischief!" Now the young tourist was selecting a souvenir. Perhaps the ever-popular skull-and-bones flag that says, "The beatings will continue until morale improves." Or the one that says, "Surrender the booty!" So what do 10-year-old girls like? In answer to my question about her affection for loathsome scoundrels, the young gift-shopper said, "I don't know; I just love them."

In the so-called "golden age of piracy," which peaked around 1720, naval and merchant sailing ships were themselves cruel workplaces. Men were beaten and hung from the shrouds as punishment for even minor offenses. Compensation was minimal, life expectancy brief. The merchant service was even worse. Piracy, even with its own yet more dire consequences, did offer an alternative.

The harshness of life in those times doesn't excuse pirate behavior but goes some way to explaining it. Consistent with the myth, pirates did live by a code — courage in battle, equitable division of wealth among pirate crews, interracial cooperation to a degree. Compared to the alternatives, these were vessels governed by honor — albeit compromised by all that larcenous murdering.

Pirate Law:

FIGHT WITH COURAGE.

Play with fire.

Drink with cute

GIRLS AND BOTH
eyes open.

Still, though, our pirate idolatry gets a little silly, remaking history to satisfy our thirst for high-seas romance. On my way to Tortola for the HIHO start, I spent a night at Bluebeard's Castle resort, on St. Thomas, USVI. Despite the name, the hotel has zero confirmed pirate history, though it does have a tower.

On the brick streets of Charlotte Amalie, I visited Blackbeard's Castle, built by the Danish government in 1679 to guard the harbor — against pirates, for example. Again, there's no concrete evidence linking Edward "Blackbeard" Teach to the castle. "It's just a lore," said our guide. That is, they made it all up to sell tickets to tourists, because everyone loves pirates. The site also had a T. rex jump out to scare you, a dinosaur at Blackbeard's. Historical accuracy may not be the priority. But you could imagine, if you squinted from the ramparts, pirate ships sweeping in below, cannons blasting at the fort.

In fact, two black pirate ships rested at anchor in port during my stay, both flying the Jolly Roger flag. OK, those weren't real pirate ships but tour boats used for booze cruises. As I waited one day for a kayak tour, a sport boat motored by sporting the name *Whydah*. The pirate Sam Bellamy captured the slave ship *Whydah* in the Caribbean and used it to raid ships off Virginia. A storm wrecked the boat off Cape Cod, Massachusetts, in 1717, killing Bellamy in the process. He died doing what he loved. Miraculously restored, *Whydah* is now this high-horsepower runabout with coolers full of American beer. It might actually make a good assault vehicle for modern-day pirates.

There was real pirate history in these parts — ships captured and burned in this harbor; governors tried for abetting pirates; treasure caves in the USVI, the BVI and the Bahamas. But 300 years on, we prefer our fantasy of piracy to the real thing. History is in many ways more intriguing than our fantasy, but it's not as good a party theme. — NEXT

LIFE AT SEA

Surly captains, catamaran races, pirate play — all part of the HIHO experience.



PIRATE BUSINESS

That "thing of beauty," a sailing ship around the turn of the 18th century, "could be turned into a torture chamber by a sadistic captain," writes David Cordingly in *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and the Reality of Life Among the Pirates*. Such captains became the targets of vengeful pirate crews, themselves largely comprised of former navy and merchant sailors. And captured seamen often faced a choice. Join the pirates on their quest for booty or return to a life of extreme hardship. Many found the benefits of outlaw status outweighed the risks. In *The Invisible Hook: The Hidden Economics of Pirates*, Peter T. Leeson describes how pirates' seemingly wild methods — flying skull flags and dressing like fire-breathing demons (a form of brand management used to scare the heck out of enemy crews), torturing victims and letting them live (so they could spread the word not to resist pirate attacks) — had sound economic bases. That is, these scholars found pirate behavior to be a rational, intentional, cooperative and often effective (if perilous) business strategy. That holds true with modern pirates, whose lifestyle choices are often driven by desperate circumstances. They're trying, in Leeson's words, "to achieve their self-interested goals in the best ways they know how." That doesn't justify what pirates did and do, but it does make it harder to dismiss them as mere mayhem-loving lunatics. It also reminds us to treat our employees well. Someday they may be in charge.



DRINK LIKE A GIRL
... if you dare.
Scant clothing
and ample rum
embody a pirate's
life. So does
forgetting about
tomorrow.



LandHo

Anegada is like the Baja of the BVI — an island separated by 14 miles of warm, open water. Perfect stomping grounds for pirate fun.



A PIRATE'S LIFE FOR ME

Ready to do some swashbuckling of your own? Here's how.

HIHO, BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

Island-hopping on easy-sailing catamarans — that's the best way to see the BVI. Throw in windsurfing and paddling races, plus stops at top resorts like Bitter End Yacht Club and Scrub Island, and you get a week fit for a pirate (on vacation). Sailing experience is not required. A costume is — for the annual pirate party and other festivities. July 1-8; go-hiho.com

ADVENTURE ANTIGUA, ANTIGUA

Experience cruising like the pirates did, but without the sword fighting and pistol duels. The Classic Yacht Tour, on a beach-built sloop from the Grenadian island of Carriacou, sails to reefs for snorkeling and beautiful beaches for lunch along Antigua's coastline. Private charters and day-sail options available. Cuss if you feel like it. Year-round; adventureantigua.com

WEST INDIES REGATTA, ST. BARTS

From the Grenadines, Nevis, St. Lucia, Anguilla and beyond, wooden boats constructed using traditional methods converge on St. Barts for four days of good-natured races, stories, celebration of traditional West Indies lifestyles and, yes, rum. Despite the similarities, this is much better than any pirate's life. First weekend in May; westindiesregatta.com



The assault starts innocently enough, “Permission to come aboard, Admiral!” calls Jim Wallace, motoring up to the party boat in a rubber dinghy. Our HIHO flotilla of catamarans is moored off the BVI’s Beef Island. Jim is dressed in a gold-edged black vest over his bare chest, a red belt and a wig of stringy black hair. We’re all dressed like pirates, but Jim knows better. He has experienced an actual pirate attack, no laughing matter. He knows firsthand what his costume symbolizes.

Off the coast of South America in a 60-foot monohull sailboat, Jim and his crew got a distress call from a Venezuelan fishing boat claiming to have steering problems but heading straight toward them. The story didn’t add up, and the crew realized these were pirates, much like those that menace the Gulf of Aden off Somalia. If they caught up, the pirates would board the boat, rob them, maybe worse.

“I remember the pirate chase,” Jim says. “We got a wrap in the headsail sheet, and my stomach fell. If we couldn’t free it and trim the sail for more speed, the pirates would catch us. I felt helpless at the helm as others tried to unsnag it. It seemed like an eternity.”

Jim’s crew escaped, a night he says he’ll never forget, but now he’s here dressed buccaneer style, celebrating pirates. I ask how he separates tonight from his harrowing experience.

“My brush with modern pirates hasn’t diminished the fun piracy image for me. I see that as unconnected.”

More inflatables overflowing with wenches and scalawags converge on the undefended party yacht. The defenders are busy tending bar. Wearing a red bandanna on my head, I fight a tumbling plastic-cutlass duel with a teenager on the bow trampoline — because he’s wearing a black bandanna. He cuts my throat like it’s not his first.

PARTY ON

The only thing serious about the HIHO is the pirate party — and its costumes.

Miraculously restored, I ask a reveler named Matt why we do this. “Why does a guy chained to an office desk buy a Harley and dress like a gang-banger?” he says. “Same thing.”

First Sea Lady Colleen agrees, telling me our attraction to pirates is simply, “Nice boats, nice people and nice parties.” Piracy is nice? Maybe so. Terror, bloodshed, death are the furthest things from our minds. Later, after several rum punches, Colleen announces, “I’m beyond sexy!” and almost falls overboard. It’s a good party.

For good *and* ill, Caribbean pirates from long ago did find a way to stop worrying — about consequences, about tomorrow. That touches something we don’t have to analyze to engage. And bad as things get in the office, it isn’t near as bad as what real pirates fled from and to. So maybe we don’t need quite as much release either. Maybe a taste of swashbuckling freedom doesn’t require shoving burning matches in people’s eyes. In fact, the less we analyze the appeal, the more fun it gets to dress in rags and growl.

“Pirates!” someone shouts, pointing out at the empty, dark sea. Here they come. We just love them. — ✱

Pirate Law:

DRESS THE PART,
play it well and tell a
good tale — even if

YOU HAVE TO
make one up.