

A Gathering of Swells



Far from yachting's biggest prize, the St. Barth's Bucket is still a high time on the high seas.

By Bernadette Bernon

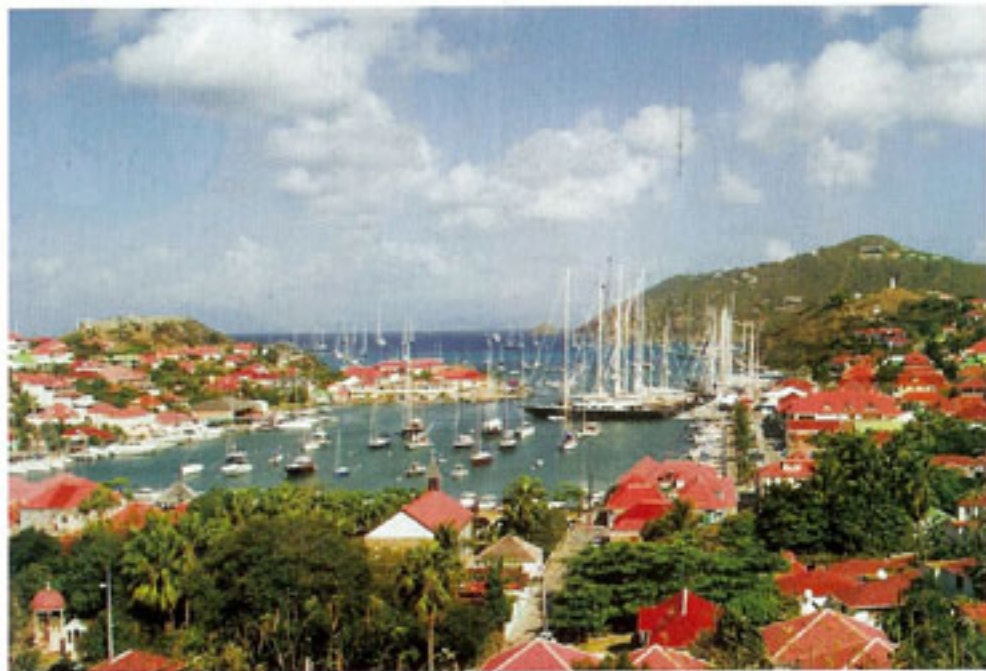
The realm of megayacht sailboats is a small and exclusive one: Paparazzi are shunned, privacy is paramount and owners rarely come together to race. But every April, against the backdrop of the red-tiled rooftops and lavish villas of Saint-Barthélemy—the Saint-Tropez of the Caribbean—those same megayachts gather, the Champagne flows and the steroidal sailing known as the St. Barth's Bucket commences. ● The race started as a gentlemanly match for bragging rights in 1986, in Nantucket, Massachusetts—now it's an invitation-only regatta run by owners, for owners. The rules are simple: safety first, and anyone handling their yacht in "less than a gentlemanly fashion" will be excused. The Bucket itself is a perpetual trophy (its winner doesn't actually get to take it home) that, according to lore, was bought by one of the race's major supporters in Marseilles, France, where it started life as a spittoon. ● Twenty years on, a few aspects of the race have gotten, well, serious. Some owners now import professional sailboat racers, such as Kenny Read and Robbie Doyle, to enhance the skill set of their crew. And the race committee has developed an ever-changing

Sea legs: the crew of the *Ranger* hangs out.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRAIG DAVIS

The Bucket

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Clockwise from top left: the harbor at Gustavia; Bucket winner *Freedom of Flight*; *Sojana* slices through the surf; *Victoria of Strathearn* at full sail; a dog day afternoon.

handicapping system of staggered starting-line times—a diplomatic choreography that would have challenged Metternich—so all these pricey behemoths don't T-bone one another when the gun goes off. (Regatta organizer Hank Halsted, president of Northrop and Johnson in Newport, Rhode Island, reckoned the value of this year's fleet of 28 boats to be about \$450 million.)

Yet many of the cozy, casual traditions remain. For instance, a vessel can garner a more advantageous rating from the handicappers—informally, of course—if its owner throws one of the daily après-race windings. These are not your normal chip-and-dip affairs: Last year, Ron Joyce, owner of the 138-foot

Destination Fox Harb'r, flew in fresh lobster and oysters from Prince Edward Island, Canada. And Joe Vittoria's 247-foot *Mirabella V*, the largest sloop in the world, provided a humble but adequate location for the skippers' meeting.

The race itself comprised three days of competition, 600 sailors, and yachts from 78 to 247 feet vying for awards such as the 20-kilo UBS Swiss Cow Bell (basically a congeniality award) and the coveted Escargot Trophy (for last place). Day One features a 24-mile get-acquainted sail around the island in which captains familiarize themselves with big crews and tight-quarters maneuvering. Day Two is the real deal, a tacking duel where everyone slices back and forth in front of one another, then sprints toward the finish. The final day concludes with a clockwise dash around the island. The overall winner in 2005: Sam Byrne's 124-foot ketch

Freedom of Flight. Second place went to David Leuschen's 84-foot *Metolius*, and third to the 130-foot *Sariyab*, chartered by Cortright Wetherill, Jr., then on the block for \$8.5 million.

Halsted had a few anxious moments. "There simply cannot be a collision of any kind," he said. "These are huge boats, harnessing massive power, and this is a high-testosterone fleet." One boat temporarily lost a crewman while setting their spinnaker—he was launched overboard by the mere flick of a flailing line—while another went "briefly" aground. Fortunately, the only injuries were ones of pride, and no one was late for cocktails. •

Many boats in the St. Barth's Bucket are available for charter; see page 97 for details on the 116-foot *Whisper*. The Newport Bucket, a sister race, is held every July.