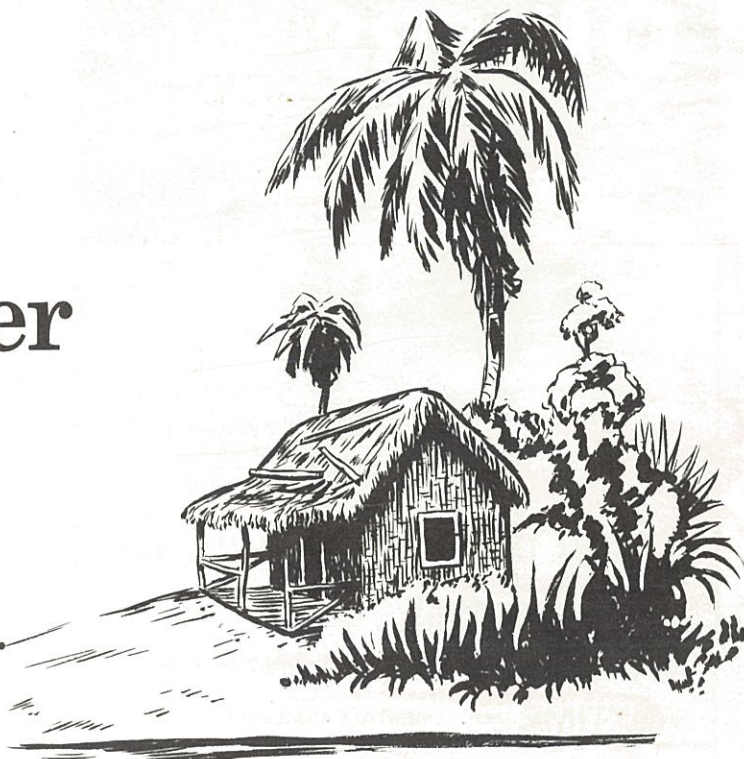


A Burnt-Out Charter Skipper

by FRITZ SEYFARTH

Sea gypsies and
seakindly vessels of character.



Caribbean chartering supported me for seven years. Not very well, but enough to keep beans and rum in my belly, paint and varnish on the boat. I was probably a borderline charter skipper; the knack of constant entertaining didn't come naturally, but it was my compromise with the economics of cruising. Five months of hard work and a bit of personal torture could provide seven months of my own projects and wandering. So it wasn't a bad trade-off.

Back in the mid-1960's when I first arrived in St. Thomas to start my apprenticeship, chartering was quite a bit different than it is today. These early boats were usually a husband-and-wife (or boy-and-girl) team that accepted a few paying guests from time to time as they roamed through the islands. They truly enjoyed the area and wanted to trade experiences with a few others. They owned their boats, so weren't trying to pay off expensive mortgages or amortize a business investment. Having made a break from the stress and frustrations of the complex big-business world, they had no desire to compete in paradise.

Most of the boats were fine old traditional designs —schooners, ketches, cutters from the boards of Alden and Herreshoff — *White Squall*, *Mandoo*, *Maverick*, *Barlevento*, *Bounty*, *Aries*. These were comfortable and seakindly vessels of character that offered a real cruising vacation. These sea gypsies took good care of their guests, but didn't pamper them with scented smoke or a boat-load of fun-and-games gimmicks. The competition was very relaxed with honest camaraderie, lots of laughing and sharing. You would never see them tied up to a charter boat show dock nervously awaiting meticulous inspection and approval by *grande dame* agents. They ran their own show and there was little profit motivation or thoughts of empire building; the only economic

incentive was to put a few dollars in the cruising kitty for a summer of down-island exploring.

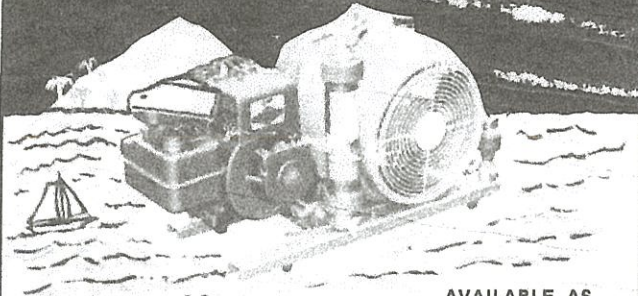
Ross Norgrove on *White Squall* helped me put together a charter brochure. He wisely suggested something simple but adequate, just a brief descriptive text with not too much copy, and a couple of black and white photographs. He also advised pricing myself about in the middle of my size range. If I was at the bottom end, I'd probably get the price-shopping bargain-hunters who were usually quite demanding and hard to please. On the upper end, I might get the top-of-the-line status-buyers who could also be very demanding and hard to please. Ross was right; just about all my guests were great people, Middle America.

Dyke and Inga Wilmerding on *Mandoo* showed me out-of-the-way secluded anchorages, gave secret tips on entertaining, tasty easy-to-fix boat menus, some tricks on handling problem guests. It turned out that I needed a lot more instruction on this last item; my very first charter was also almost my very last.

They were three middle-aged good-ole-boys from Alabama off on a toot. They arrived on boat well-juiced and stayed in that condition for seven days and seven nights. They had assumed that the normal everything-included charter package also provided dusky maidens on moonlit beaches every night. There was deep disappointment when I explained that they had to bring their own girls. So they made up for it by swilling down more whisky. And trying to claw their way up the sides of boats anchored nearby that had females on board. They spilled food and drink, screamed blood-curdling rebel yells through quiet coves, bellowed football fight songs at 3:00 A.M., ground out cigar butts on the deck, deposited

(continued)

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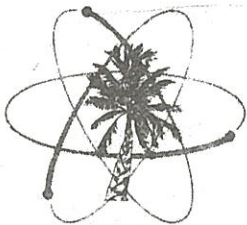


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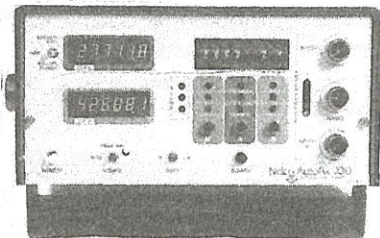


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It was a three stooges' nightmare. I just didn't know how to handle them.

endless piles of sand everywhere, plugged up the toilet six times a day, fell down, threw up, tossed glasses overboard, broke gear... but miraculously didn't hurt themselves. It was a three stooges' nightmare. I just didn't know how to handle them.

At the end of that fifteen-day week, the boat was a disaster area and I was a basket case. I turned in my license, tore off my epaulettes, burned my 5,000 brochures, stuck my head deeply in the sand and swore that there was absolutely no amount of money in the world that could ever induce me to repeat such an experience.

My friends nursed me back to health, explaining that I had the unfortunate luck of getting the very rare "100-percent bummer" charter the first time out. The veterans handled such a situation quite simply: they took the group back to the dock, cancelled the remaining part of the charter, and refunded their money. To continue a bummer charter was a bad deal for everyone.

So I carried on, and my friends were right. There were no more bad groups. A few problem weeks, but for the most part I entertained the nicest bunch of people you could imagine, many of whom became close friends, came back several times, wrote letters regularly, sent little personal gifts. I had honeymooners (first, second, and practicing), psychiatrists, the president of the Syracuse Whittling Club, a former Burma trail elephant driver, a French ambassador with his nudist girlfriend, an Air Force general, a Utah sheepherder, an ex-Foreign Legion water-boy, three window-dressers from New York City. And fine old Howard Cole, his body wracked with cancer, kept alive with a little battery-operated mechanism strapped to his chest pumping chemotherapy drugs into his liver. Howard said that rather than dying in a wheel chair, he'd rather have it happen out sailing with me.

It was a varied clientele, often quite challenging — especially the psychiatrists and the ambassador's girlfriend and the three window-dressers. They were good years.

But chartering still didn't come natural to me, and toward the end I found it more and more difficult to mentally prepare myself for a new season. It just wasn't that much fun any more and I seemed to be only going through the motions. One November, after a fine summer of down-island cruising, I found myself facing the first charter with morbid dread and fear and agony, sleepless nights, violent gut aches. Twenty-four hours before the guests were due to arrive, I called my charter agent and told her to get another boat, also to cancel out the rest of my season.

Sometimes a fighter pilot is just not able to fly his mission, a brain surgeon can't make the first incision, a lion tamer won't enter the roaring cage, a combat paratrooper refuses to jump, a pirate throws down his cutlass and surrenders.

I also had turned yellow and gone belly-up. I was a burnt-out charter skipper.