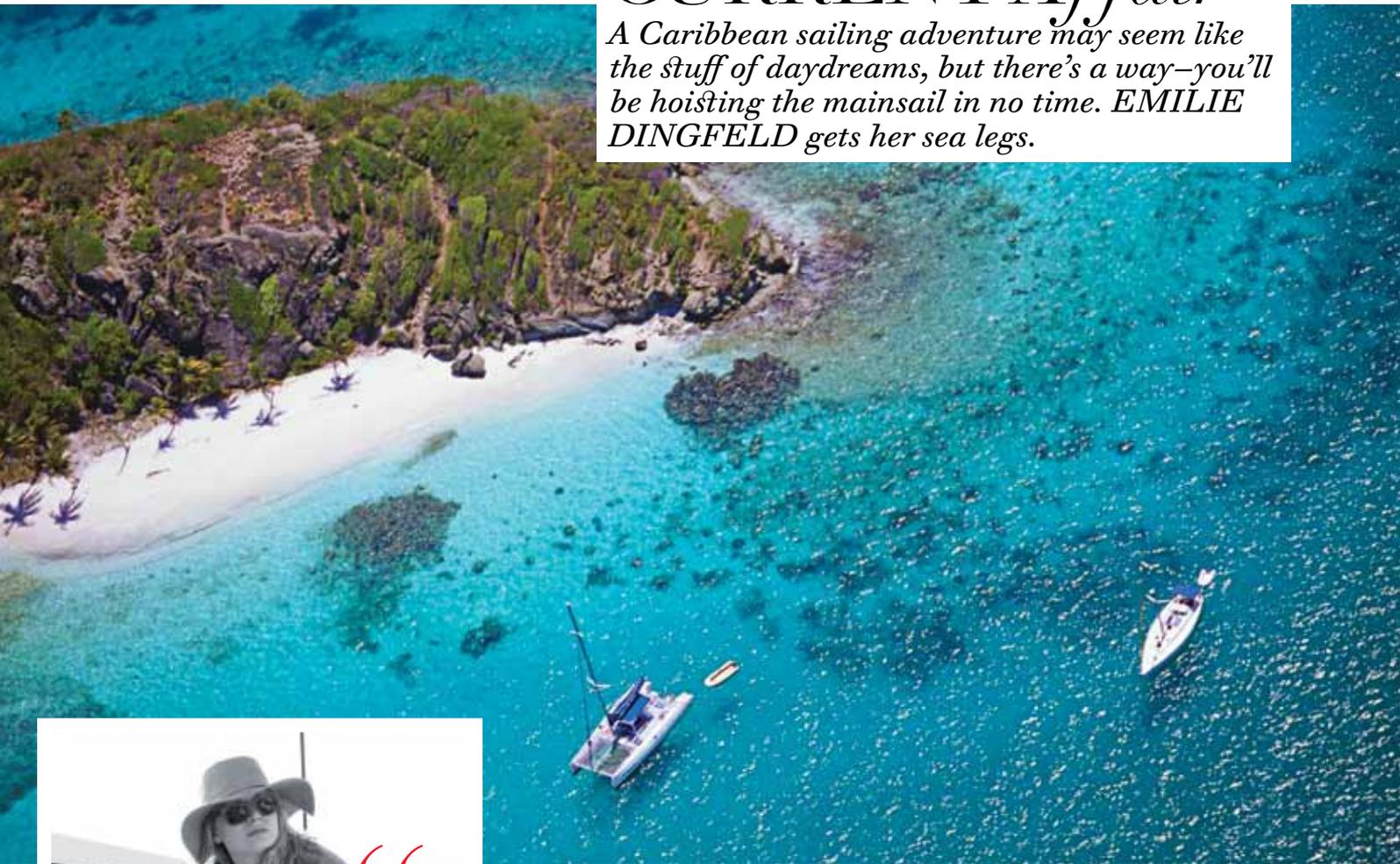


CURRENT *Affair*

A Caribbean sailing adventure may seem like the stuff of daydreams, but there's a way—you'll be hoisting the mainsail in no time. EMILIE DINGFELD gets her sea legs.



ABOVE: THE AUTHOR, A NEWLY MINTED SAILOR



“Lug out of the grid,” advises TradeWinds co-founder Carina Ludvigson in charming Swedish-accented English when I arrive at the sailing company’s base on St. Maarten. BlackBerry’s and iPhones are stowed away, and all connection to city life is left where it belongs: on the plane. A golf cart drives me and my four sea mates along the narrow dock at Port de Plaisance, on the Dutch side of the 96-square-kilometre island, to the 56-foot catamaran we’ll be calling home for the next five days. First-time-sailor anxieties float away as our beaming Dutch captain, Ewout Franse, and Austrian first mate, Simone Embacher, welcome us aboard. The frown line in my forehead relaxes at the sight of bird of paradise flowers and bowls of tropical fruit strewn on deck, and I take the first sip of a fruity turquoise cocktail while treading water in the Caribbean Sea.

While a chartered sailing vacation is but a remote bucket-list item for many, TradeWinds (tradewinds-experience.com) makes it accessible by offering all-inclusive luxury catamaran sailing on its 25 yachts throughout the world (including Belize, Greece and Turkey). Rent an entire catamaran with family or friends, or just one room (with private bathroom) for a fraction of the cost of boat purchase or rental, moorings and sailing lessons.

“I haven’t quite got my sea feet yet,” I say as I stumble onto the deck. A more seasoned guest from Toronto corrects me: “It’s ‘sea legs.’” Embacher calls me to attention for sailing lesson number one: winching to draw in the jib. “Make sure you keep your pinky finger towards the winch rather than your thumb,” she counsels. “If your finger gets stuck, it’s much easier to live without your pinky than your thumb.” As the rope slides gently through my fingers—and I make a silent prayer to the sea gods to keep my digits intact—the jib flaps like a proud flag. I smile »

PHOTOGRAPHY: DINGFELD BY LORNE BRIDGMAN



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triumphantly at having successfully changed the course of a 28-ton boat (OK, with a little help from the crew), and thank myself for all those hours spent lifting dumbbells at the gym.

We sail on to our first destination, Crocus Bay, on the lush, sparsely populated island of Anguilla. While part of the group sets off in a dinghy to go diving, I stay back to swim leisurely through the coral reefs just 10 flipper kicks from the boat. I spy rainbow-coloured parrotfish and, later, longfin squids and glowing violet anemone. The crackling sounds of marine life below the surface pull me into the fishes' world, far from everything.

St. Martin (the French part of the island) is often called the culinary capital of the Caribbean. Gourmands flock here to *mmm* over the fresher-than-fresh seafood and Paris-perfect *pain au chocolat* and croissants. Our meals take place on board: Embacher spent time in the Austrian Alps learning to cook and is also a proficient sommelier. As the sun sets, Franse, a mechanical engineer by trade, mans the barbeque with his mining light strapped to his head. On the first evening, we're served a *mélange* of cauliflower and orange-carrot soups, which somehow manage to stay separated neatly on their respective sides of the bowl, despite the gentle rocking of the boat. Later in the week, I learn that tangy, sweet banana salsa tastes downright delightful with beef.

On the third evening, we dock for a surprise aperitif picnic on Isle Pinel, a hot spot for French holidaymakers in vibrant Vilebrequin shorts. I feel like

Gilligan wading ashore and scouting around the island—the difference being the presence of beachfront bars and restaurants hatted with straw roofs. Later, after dinner on the “cat,” we pile into the dinghy and head for Grand Case, where we dig our toes into the sand at Calmos Café and sip tropical cocktails under the stars. A stroll through town, passing charmingly dilapidated buildings, bustling discos and street stalls, satiates the desire to see what life off the water is like.

After a few more sailing lessons, I can hardly believe I'm allowed to take the helm. It all comes together—the power of the boat, the trust of the captain and the need to *feel* the wind. I watch the telltales flap as I attempt to chart my bumpy course—when the short strips of string do their erratic dance, it means it's time to crank the wheel. We hit rain, so our team of sailors quickly furls the jib as I spin the wheel and steer around the downpour; once the little rainstorm is left in our wake, I sigh with relief and loosen my white-knuckle grip.

In the quiet moments, I stare at the water rolling under the boat in shades of azure, emerald, turquoise, teal and black, as the sun glimmers off of the sea like molten gold. I begin plotting ways to stay longer: passport overboard? Lost at sea? “I really want to be a first mate,” I half-joke to the TradeWinds team before being whisked away to the airport. They laugh, and present my challenge: “Sure, you just have to find your captain.” I smile and bask in my turquoise dream. □