

ANTIGUA SAILING WEEK

Thunder from Down Under

The Caribbean is rightfully known for its successful cricketers. **Douglas McCarthy** says it's time for more Aussies and Kiwis to consider its majestic waters as the site for one of the most glamorous regattas in the world.

ANTIGUA AND AUSTRALIA are close companions in the alphabetical index of your world atlas. Unfortunately, you can't really get much further apart on the planet. To find Antigua on your world globe, first locate Perth W.A. Then simply spin the globe 180° and look along that longitude.

It takes 26 hours of flying time, not to mention the joy of sitting around airport lounges between flights, to physically do the same thing. Still, as they say in the Michelin Guide, it's well worth the detour.

The island itself is small, barely 15km across with a population of 80,000. It's famous for its cricketers (e.g Viv Richards), its beaches (all 365 of them) and its sailing week. It lies in a beautiful part of the Caribbean known as the Leeward Islands, about halfway between Florida and South America.

Sailing Week is held in the last seven days of April and is world renowned as an excellent regatta combining good sailing and after sailing activities. It forms a part of the Caribbean sailing circuit that includes the St Maarten Heineken and the St Thomas Rolex regattas preceding it. It attracts the world's best yachts and the people that race them.

Mari Cha IV is here racing, all 140ft of her along with the two supermaxis *Pyewacket* and *Morning Glory*. "Little" Volvo 60s make up the numbers in the premier racing class.

"My" boat is in the next division, "big buggers with furniture inside" known as Big Boat II. *Spirit of Mertice* is a Farr 65, recently built with full carbon rig and black sails to match. There are two other 65-footers in our division of 12 and we are the smallest boats.

Early favourite looked to be *Aspiration*, a Swan 86 we call *Swanzilla*, steered by Olympian Steve Benjamin and pointed in the right direction by Brad Butterworth. OK I

thought, second place wouldn't be a disgrace. Unfortunately second and third place also seemed remote when I noticed the other boats, such as *Chippewa*, famous on the Caribbean circuit for its consistent appearances at trophy presentations.

Too spacious

Oh yeah, and *Leopard of London* (90ft) and *Sojana* (115ft) are here, just so the start line won't feel too spacious.

So with four days practice ahead of us, a bunch of total amateurs who have never sailed together, under the guidance of four very patient professionals, were going to take on some of the best boats and sailors in the world. Piece of cake!

The first thing I noticed about my new teammates was an overabundance of attractive slim women. They were all intelligent and from professional backgrounds, mainly from the U.K. So who's going to do the grinding I thought as I started planning my fake shoulder injury.

Things worked out and we made do with our excess brain/brawn ratio. (To watch them attack those winches later in the heat of battle was truly inspirational) I was hoping for light winds for the first day of practice but it felt just like a Fremantle sea breeze at 20-knots and gusting. Things went surprisingly well, only four people got seasick.

After practice I turned my attention to my story on Aussies and Kiwis in Antigua. How was I going to find Aussie sailors at 7pm? Simple, head down to the crowded bar at the marina and listen for the accent. It didn't take long before I heard my first Aussie drawl.

Jason Beaver has a voice like gravel and a handshake to match. He turned me around and introduced me to his mate Brad. I think Brad Butterworth enjoyed not being instantly recognised by someone who should have known better. My cred' as a novice sailing writer was in tatters. I enjoyed the beer anyway.

RIGHT: Mighty *Mari Cha IV* is always hard to miss in a crowd. (Tim Wright pic).

LEFT: The author's boat was a baby of the fleet at 65-foot overall.



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It turned out there were quite a contingent of Aussies and Kiwis on *Aspiration* and they seem to have arrived from all corners of the planet.

Hugh Piggin plies his trade as a professional sailor out of Newport Rhode Island for most of the year. He wasn't alone. There were enough sailors here from Newport that they should have chartered their own jet.

Campbell Field on the other hand, has a successful business based in the U.K selling marine instruments. He has a sailing CV longer than both my arms and is here for his 10th sailing week. Jason was the boat captain and takes *Aspiration* anywhere in the world the boss wanted it.

Yes, they'd come from everywhere to sail *Aspiration* and I tried not to get too depressed when I realised the quality of the opposition I was up against. I needed to find an Aussie not in my class to ease the feelings of inadequacy. No such luck. I ran into Chris who was aboard the German *All Smoke*. He was built like a Wallaby prop and his boat was all power winches.

Crossed my mind

What a waste! The thought crossed my mind about getting him and his boss drunk and doing a little horse-trading but they already knew our rank amateur status so it would probably have been a waste of beer.

Eventually I ran into an Aussie, not at a bar. It was at an ATM on the way to the bar. Dave Martin is the classic laid back Aussie



ABOVE: The Formula1 crew get together ahead of race one.

BELOW LEFT: Ouch! The racing was hard and fast at all times and some of the crewmembers bore the scars to prove it.

that walked away from the ATM with his card still stuck in it.

He was sailing aboard the beautifully turned out classic W76 yacht *WhiteWings* in Division B Performance Cruiser I. Dave had been with the yacht for the entire Mediterranean season and jumped at the chance to continue into the Caribbean. *White Wings* had just completed the Antigua Classic Yacht Week against the likes of *Cambria* and *Endeavour*. She has a professional crew of five and on race day they press gang anybody they can off the dock to get her into racing mode with a crew of around 15.

So the four days of practice went pretty well with one particularly bad hangover (you have to practice everything) and I was confident we wouldn't stuff up too badly. The adrenaline rush when you hit that start line in race one with 11 other big boats is hard to describe. We had a good start but only 10 minutes into a 28nm race it happened. I managed to collide with the other Formula1 boat with the owner of both boats sitting right in front of me.

It was the classic port, starboard, you hunted, and no we didn't, with the professionals hurling abuse at each other. At the last second I crash

tacked to avoid the T-bone but still managed to do some damage to our boat.

At least we could still race but I felt like a nong. For the rest of the

race the crew work was magnificent considering the circumstances and the biggest stuff up occurred when our still wound-up American skipper forgot to navigate and we went the wrong way for a while.

The first race finishes on the other side of the island at the beautiful Dickenson Bay. I spent the evening of Anzac Day at the biggest beach party you can imagine (yes, bigger than Whitehaven) but I didn't run into another Aussie or Kiwi on the beach. No Turks either, come to think of it.

Started noticing

On day two there were two windward/leeward races and I started noticing a trend. The faster racing boats started 10 minutes after us and it seemed we always made it to the top mark at the same time as *Mari Cha IV*. With her thundering up behind you feeling like you are standing still at 9.5 knots, it's a truly exhilarating experience.

That two boat lengths couldn't come quick enough and calling "no water" on *Mari Cha IV* was the biggest buzz I got all week.

Mari Cha didn't manage to avoid every-

Five things you need to know about Sailing Week

1. With a bit of practice and lots of enthusiasm a bunch of amateurs can compete with the world's best.
2. Lots of the world's best sailors are Aussies and Kiwis and all the ones I met in Antigua were really nice people.
3. Everyone I spoke to gave Sailing Week the big thumbs up. Of Campbell Field's 10 Sailing Weeks', he rated this as the best mainly due to the quality of the competition.
4. It's a bit like an international version of Hamilton Island Race Week with the boats on steroids.
5. Serious racing is combined with relaxing, partying and a general sense of fun and camaraderie that makes you want to come back next year.



one that week as the lads on *Venom* a Volvo 60 can confirm. It was a start line barging incident where *Venom* was later disqualified after *Mari Cha IV* "graciously mounted them from behind" and they didn't even see her until after impact.

The runner came out of the deck and exploded forward, just missing several heads on its way through the headsail. With their sailing over, the *Venom* crew went on to become party champions for the rest of the week.

The second days racing ended at the aptly named Jolly Harbour with everyone feeling exhausted after two days racing and strong winds forecast for the rest of the week. On the third day we raced back to our original port of Falmouth Harbour.

The wheel was chiselled from my fingers so the owner could have a turn. Two thirds of the way through the race with the wind 22kts-plus, the seas steepening, a hundred Sunsail Beneteaus between us and the finish and being last, he gave me back the wheel. We survived some near misses and finished a pretty miserable race.

Next day was a lay day so it was easy to forget about racing and concentrate on partying instead. This is where my boat had the advantage. We were the "boat with the black sails, crewed by the dammed and captained

FACT BOX

A total of 211 boats competed in 10 divisions involving seven races over six days. Formula1Sailing is a U.K based charter company that offers individual crew berths for racing and/or cruising for the Caribbean sailing season from December to May. It all starts with the ARC in November. For more details visit www.formula1sailing.com
More information regarding Antigua Sailingweek including results is available on the event website at www.sailing-week.com

by a man so evil that hell itself spat him back." We quoted "Pirates of the Caribbean" all week and tried to drink rum like true buccaneers.

Even the aforementioned attractive intelligent women on the boat managed to destroy a million brain cells while dancing the night away at Abracadabras the local outdoor nightclub. It took all of lay day to recover.

There were two races the next day and the wind was getting stronger. Before the afternoon race our skipper explained, sur-

vival was the key. We need to finish with no injuries and no damage. We failed on all counts. Going across the start line one of our grinders dislocated his shoulder. Bloody inconsiderate.

Without us

Anyway, I managed to get it back in without us losing too much ground and we were back in the race. Unfortunately, we later snapped a halyard and shredded our heavy jib, so it was all to no avail.

At the top end of the fleet *Chippewa* and *Aspiration* were slugging it out with only one point separating them going into the last day's race.

Things came together for us on the last day and we got the opportunity to sail our big black masthead kite known as "Darth". It could be used as a tarpaulin for my entire apartment block. So we ended on a high and everyone was happy. *Aspiration* ended the week with five firsts, a second and a sixth but was beaten by *Chippewa* overall. The boys took it pretty well considering.

As for my class, I did what any Aussie would. I went and congratulated the American boys on *Chippewa* and then drank all their beer. The following night it all ended at the prize giving Lord Nelsons Ball, followed by Abras, of course. ☞

Roy Disney's *Pyewacket* made the long trip from her home port of Los Angeles.

