

"Hawk" - 47' Samoa - 7' draft
August, 1999
Subject/Area: Antigua

We have spent the winter season taking a quite leisurely cruise around the Leeward Islands, using Antigua as our home base. We would like to offer a simple suggestion to other cruisers coming to Antigua - take some time to go to the North coast of Antigua and to Barbuda.

Most cruisers seem to get trapped in English/Falmouth harbors, with perhaps a weekend or two in Nonsuch Bay. They spend weeks taking advantage of the marine services located there, then suddenly they have to move on and never end up cruising Antigua. This is a shame as they are missing some of the prettiest and most unspoiled anchorages in the West Indies. In Barbuda we have usually had a 3 mile perfect beach entirely to ourselves - at most we've shared it with one other boat. Similarly, the Bird Island area on the North Coast is reminiscent of Tobago Cays as it was 20 years ago.

One reason for this dearth of cruisers is that Doyle's guide makes both areas sound like reef infested death traps. In fact both areas are quite easily navigated. We approach the SW corner of Barbuda (the Nine Feet Bank just north of Palmetto Point at 17 degrees 36 minutes North, 61 degrees 54 minutes West) which is clear of reefs. From here you can sail up the west coast safely by staying about 100 yards off the beach (in ~15 feet of water). This will lead you up into a snug anchorage inside the barrier reef. We have both approached and left this anchorage in complete safety at night. If you turn East from the Palmetto Point you can eyeball your way into any of several anchorages with quite good snorkeling.

You can approach the Bird island area in three ways. (1) From the East is the easiest and most convenient if you are coming from Jolly harbour or Deep Bay. Doyle describes this approach in great detail. (2) From English Harbour or Nonsuch Bay you can go in through Bird Island Passage. This looks very tricky on the Imray chart and Doyle suggests only using it with local knowledge. However, we have entered and exited this passage and found it quite manageable. Its entrance is right as charted at 17 degrees 10.0 minutes North, 61 degrees 43.6 minutes West. The northern edge has quite a sharp and clear reef, the outer tip of which breaks even in calm weather. You just need to follow quite closely (say 50-100') along this reef. You will see a least depth of 15' with this approach, or 10' if you don't stay close to the Northern reef and clip the corner of the Southern Reef. Although the local boats seem to use this passage all the time, I would not recommend it in strong Easterly winds. (3) A bit further North from Bird Island is Kettle Bottom Shoals, where there is a big gap in the reef and you can eyeball your way around the few coral patches.

Many of us have gone cruising to 'have a little adventure, get away from it all and enjoy pristine anchorages'. It would be a shame to stay in crowded and dirty English/Falmouth Harbours, when some of the best Caribbean cruising is only 10-30 miles away.

We are now preparing Hawk to sail over to Ireland and Scotland in May.