



During **Antigua's Sailing Week**, go hull to hull against the sport's all-stars in one of the world's top regattas. Hold on tight. Things get bumpy in the Caribbean.

# All Hands on Deck

BY DIANE SELKIRK PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL WYETH

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UR FIRST MATE, Ollie, calls the countdown, “4, 3, 2, 1!” With the

cannon echoing, we cross the starting line in *The Spirit of Minerva*, our Farr 65 ocean racing yacht. We thunder along the Caribbean race course just behind *Titan*, a Reichel/Pugh 75 with America’s Cup icon Peter Isler at the helm. The 56-foot Swan *King Sturge* slices across her stern.

As our boat heels over in the wind and picks up speed, I clamber up to the high side and sit with the rest of the crew on the edge of the deck. A glance back reveals we’re positioned strategically, exactly where our skipper, the legendary round-the-world yachtsman Brian Thompson, has pinpointed: The low green hills with ruined fortifications from Nelson’s Dockyard lay directly behind and most of our competition carves through the cobalt waves right beside us. Dangling my legs over the side, I turn to face the trade winds and catch the warm sea spray.

It is the final race of the 43rd edition of Antigua Sailing Week, the gravitational center of the competitive sailor’s racing galaxy. Thanks to an innovative program by Safe Passage Sailing, partnered with the chartering company Ondeck, we’re playing with the big boys: racing against the hottest boats on the international racing circuit — performance machines with professional crew like *Titan* and the 90-foot Swan, *DSK Pioneer Investments*. But we have Thompson, a sailor who has made a career out of smashing speed records.

The idea behind Safe Passage Sailing is to provide a “rock star” racing experience for sailors who don’t have time to dedicate their lives to the sport. And after just three days of training with Thompson and Ondeck’s professional sailors, *Minerva*’s crew of vacationing lawyers, CEOs, and



**SEA LEGS:** Clockwise from far left, a crew member mans the sail; coming together as a team; legendary yachtsman Brian Thompson skippers *The Spirit of Minerva*.

business owners enters the six-day, eight-race regatta that makes up Sailing Week. The goal is to have fun and gain skills, but as the week progresses the team becomes seriously competitive.

“I NEVER IMAGINED MYSELF SAILING a boat like this, with someone like Brian.” The words come from Frank Agovino, an attorney from Chesterfield, Mo., sitting beside me on the rail as he waits for the signal that our boat is going to tack and change direction. But the comment could have come from any one of us aboard *Minerva*. Being mentored by Thompson is fantasy material; it’s like carving down a ski hill with Bode Miller; shooting free throws with Michael Jordan; or taking batting practice with A-Rod.

“Watch. Brian won’t call the tack until we can see ants on the cliff face,” Agovino says. We both watch, poised to jump into position as our 60,000-pound, million-dollar yacht hurtles closer to the sheer wall. The aggressive move gains us seconds on our competition.

“I never expected the boat to be so huge, or require so much physical work,” Agovino says. He’s done a bit of sailing, but says he’s never been on a boat like *Minerva*. Learning to crank winches the size of beer kegs aside, Agovino also says he’s never had so much fun. “I’m 61, and here I am, racing against the top sailors in the world.”

Just then Thompson calls the tack. As smooth as pros, we leap into action. The Ondeck crew does the toughest work of grinding the big winches — moving the

foresail to the other side. But that job (and every other task onboard) has, at some point in the week, been done by everyone in turn. “There are no egos on this boat,” Dave Van Aalst, a Calgary, Alberta, event promoter, explains, once the maneuver is done and we’re back on the rail. “That’s been the most amazing part of this, watching how Brian’s taken 14 strangers and turned us into a team.

“This is a chance to learn from someone who’s broken 25 sailing records and sailed in the world’s toughest races,” he continues. Van Aalst and his wife, Sue, agree it was the opportunity to sail with Thompson that sold them on this trip.

“We call Brian the Sail Whisperer,” Sue jokes, as she explains that she and Dave had only seen racing like Antigua’s on TV. I tell her she

**We’re playing with the big boys: racing against the hottest boats on the international racing circuit.**

had me completely fooled. Jumping the main halyard, grinding winches, moving about the boisterous deck like a cat – I assumed she'd been racing big boats for years. Sue says she's not sure how he does it, but Thompson, who would otherwise be big enough to intimidate if his size weren't balanced by an easygoing personality, has a gentle way of coaching that makes you want to push yourself. "It was never a matter of, can I do this? But one of, how am I going to get this done?"

Moments later, a tack goes wrong. The foresail's ropes, loaded with thousands of pounds of destructive force, snag on a winch. Ollie and the rest of Ondeck's professional crew, which consists of top-notch racers and instructors, seem to be everywhere at once, cheerfully offering advice while we sort out the massive gear. When I ask about the low-key attitude, one of the Ondeck crew laughs, "Unless we're about to plow onto a reef, there's time to get it across nicely."

The next tack goes perfectly. We're still neck and neck with the red-hulled *King Sturge*, but have pulled ahead of Ondeck's three other Farr 65s. "Having four identical boats with the same boat speed means it's our tactics that make the difference," Thompson says, explaining one of the coolest aspects of sailing one of the Ondeck boats.

**"HOW ARE YOU GOING TO PREPARE for the next leg?"** Thompson asks. We're approaching the windward mark. This is where *Minerva* will turn and head back toward shore and the finish line. The wind will come from behind us and we'll need to change from the heavy Kevlar foresail to a big, airy wind-catching spinnaker. Before we started the race, Thompson went through various strategies for this pivotal moment: from the simple (leave up the slower foresail) to the complex (raise the spinnaker while simultaneously dropping the foresail).

"This is what makes mentoring an interesting challenge. It's about more than teaching sailing skills," Thompson says. He explains his job is to help sailors like Agovino gain confidence, while leading a couple like the Van Aalsts to discover an untapped passion for racing, "Everyone comes with a different goal."



**ROUGH WATERS:** From top, the race gets tight; cranking the winch.



The riskier spinnaker option either means we'll pull ahead of *King Sturge*, and finally beat that team after trying all week; or, if things go wrong (and they often do with spinnakers), we'll lose our respectable position and drop to the back of the fleet.

The team opts for a compromise, and the complex choreography of hoisting the spinnaker first and then wrestling down the foresail goes off without a hitch. We do our best to look nonchalant as *Minerva* slides by the red Swan.

Sitting with the rest of the team in the shade of the spinnaker, watching Antigua's coastline and a few of its 365 beaches grow closer while the red hull grows smaller, I catch my breath and reflect on the week.

**"SAILING WEEK'S** grown into a world-class event because of the sailing conditions," Neil Forrester, chairman of the Antigua regatta, said the night I arrived on the island. But, he added, sailing is only part of what makes the weeklong event a must-do regatta. "There's also the social aspect."

By social, I learn, Forrester was referring to a series of raucous parties – nightly celebrations spread around the island that are said to highlight Antigua's history and culture. Honestly, they just seem like a great excuse to sample English Harbour rum, eat jerk chicken, and hear a few reggae bands. I'm not sure how race crews can be up half the night dancing and drinking, and then be so competitive the next day. But the night before the final race, I decide to give the social side of Sailing Week a try and head to the sunset party up at Shirley Heights Lookout.



**Go Online**  
Headed to Antigua for Sailing Week? We guide you to some great places to unwind after a day spent on the water at [privateclubs.com](http://privateclubs.com).

The 18th-century British fortification with its view of Nelson's Dockyard is packed. Pretty soon, I'm elbow to elbow with everyone from racers to locals, all joyfully dancing to "One Love/People Get Ready" performed by Third World. "Where's your boat?" one man asks, after first inquiring how I like the music, the food, and the island.

From my vantage, I look down on a harbor that contains some of the fastest boats in the world. The four Farr 65s jump out at me, but not just because of their size or the way they gleam in the moonlight. Racing the Farris is like riding a magic carpet into a world I've always been intrigued by – they jump out at me because it's hard to sail a boat and not fall a bit in love with it.

I point out *Minerva*. "Sweet!" he says.

**T**HE FINISH-LINE HORN HONKS well before I want it to. The professionally crewed *Titan* crossed ahead of us, but the other Farr 65s and the Swan are far in our wake. "That was the pinnacle, my Everest." "That was a gold-medal finish!"

"What will I do for the rest of my life now that I've done this?"

Back at the dock, everyone's giddy as we clean up the boat. We talk over each maneuver, savoring each memory and trading quips about how good the race was.

Then we wrap up the week by toasting our success with a cold Carib beer. As I clink bottles with Thompson, while sitting in the cockpit of an amazing racing yacht, in the center of one of the world's most beautiful harbors, I work to memorize the moment and the race, hoping to always recall how it felt to surge over the finish line with my dream team. ■

## Ready to Race?

If you want to test your mettle and compete in Antigua's next **Sailing Week** ([sailingweek.com](http://sailingweek.com)), mark your calendar for April 24-29. Check with Ondeck, a specialist race-training company ([ondeck.co.uk](http://ondeck.co.uk); 843-971-0700), for positions, starting at \$2,295. With Ondeck, you can jump aboard a Grand Prix yacht and race against some of the world's most talented sailors.

Other rousing Caribbean race-training vacations to consider:

### Feb. 21-25

#### **RORC Caribbean 600, Antigua**

Organized by the Royal Ocean Racing Club and the Antigua Yacht Club, this 605-nautical-mile race takes a scenic route through the islands. Race past Barbuda, Nevis, St. Barths, and more. Positions with Ondeck start at \$1,995. [caribbean600.rorc.org](http://caribbean600.rorc.org)

### March 3-6

#### **St. Maarten Heineken Regatta**

Founded in 1980 with just 12 boats, the St. Maarten race has grown into the largest regatta on the Caribbean racing circuit with more than 240 boats crossing the start line in 2010. Positions with Ondeck start at \$1,995. [heinekenregatta.com](http://heinekenregatta.com)

### March 25-27

#### **International Rolex Regatta, U.S. Virgin Islands**

Known as the Caribbean racing circuit's "Crown Jewel," this regatta boasts reliable breezes, warm waters, and friendly island hospitality. Positions with Ondeck start at \$1,120; Safe Passage Sailing ([safepassagesailing.com](http://safepassagesailing.com); 415-381-4773), \$3,250. [rolexcupregatta.com](http://rolexcupregatta.com)

### March 28-April 3

#### **BVI Spring Regatta & Sailing Festival, Tortola**

Turning 40 this year, the BVI regatta will pull out all the stops for its ruby anniversary. Positions with Ondeck start at \$1,440. [bvispringregatta.org/bvi](http://bvispringregatta.org/bvi)

# Antigua Essentials

If you're headed to Antigua for Sailing Week (this year, it runs April 24-29), here are a few places to unwind after a day on the water:

## Checking In

**Carlisle Bay:** Sister hotel to the award-winning One Aldwych London, Carlisle Bay's 82 suites are situated on one of the island's most beautiful beaches. The hotel features a spa, two restaurants, and public areas. From \$920. [campbellgrayhotels.com](http://campbellgrayhotels.com); 866-502-2855

**Sugar Ridge hotel:** Set high on a hill overlooking Jolly Harbour and Antigua's sister islands of Nevis and St. Kitts. More than half of Sugar Ridge's 60 deluxe rooms feature private plunge pools and an endless view. From \$300, with breakfast. [sugarridgeantigua.com](http://sugarridgeantigua.com); 268-562-7700

## Dining

### Carmichael's at Sugar

**Ridge:** One of the hotel's two restaurants, Carmichael's sits at the top of the sugarcane ridge overlooking the resort and out to sea. The restaurant specializes

in Caribbean-fusion dishes created with local ingredients. [sugarridgeantigua.com/carmichaels](http://sugarridgeantigua.com/carmichaels)

### Dennis Cocktail Bar &

**Restaurant:** At his restaurant, nestled just below the peak of a hill with spectacular views of two of the island's most beautiful beaches – Ffryes and Jolly Beach – Chef Dennis Thomas hosts a regular pig roast. He draws visitors and locals from across the island for his specialty, as well as for the fresh lobster, fish, and chicken.

**Russell's Fort James:** History lovers know Fort James dates back to 1739. But Russell Hodge painstakingly rebuilt this historic site in 2005. Hodge (also responsible for the 1981 restoration of the now-famous Shirley Heights historic lookout) offers authentic Caribbean dining, with local seafood the specialty of the house.

Details on sailing week participants:  
<http://www.sailingweek.com/v2/news.php?id=140>

Information on Safe Passage Sailing:  
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<http://www.brianthompsonsailing.com/da/10199>

Details on sailing week:  
<http://www.sailingweek.com>

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Details on the Farr 65's":  
<http://www.ondeck.co.uk/fleet/farr65.htm>

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