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.
Our 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, DS Kirk 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 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 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’s 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 she 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, snap on a winch. Offie 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. He explains, explaining one of the coolest aspects of sailing one of the Ondeck boats.

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.

“WHAT WILL I DO FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE NOW THAT I’VE DONE THIS?” Neill 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 dancing to “One Love/People Get Ready” performed by the Reggae Sumfest All Stars, 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,” Thompson says. He explains, explaining one of the coolest aspects of sailing one of the Ondeck boats.

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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 teams opt for a compromise, and the complex choreography of hoisting the spinnaker first and then lowering down the forestay goes off without a hitch. We do our best to look nonchalant as Minerva slides by the red Swan.

The 18th-century British fortification with its view of Nelson’s Dockyard is a sign of Antigua’s past. Pretty soon, I’ll be elbow in elbow with everyone from racers to locals, all joyfully dancing to “One Love/People Get Ready” performed by the Reggae Sumfest All Stars. “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 Farrs 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.

“FINISH-LINE BIBLE HANNS 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.

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 the complex (raise the spinnaker while simultaneously dropping the foresail).”

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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; 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; 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

**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: http://www.safepassagesailing.com/index.html Randee Fowler 415/381-4773 415/381-4773 rfowler@safepassagesailing.com

Information on Ondeck: Simon Hedley www.ondeck.co.uk sh@ondeck.co.uk

Background information on Brian Thompson: 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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