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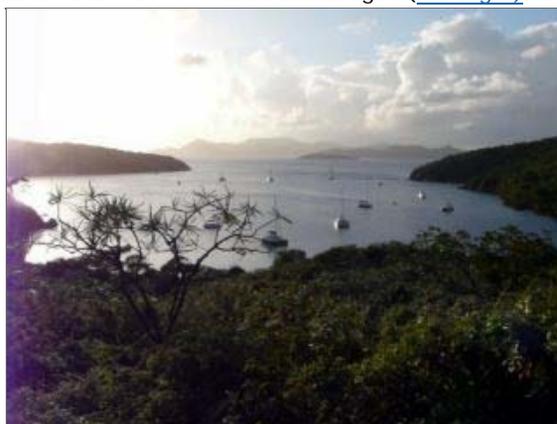
Norman Island: Hotspot in the BVIs

By *Steve Blakely* — January 5, 2009

Wintertime in the north is always high season in tropics -- which is why cold weather back home is a great excuse to go sailing the Caribbean. And in the [British Virgin Islands](#), one of the most popular cruising destinations is [Norman Island](#), just southwest of [Tortola](#) and the most southwestern island in the BVI archipelago.

[Norman Island](#) has so much going for it that it's *too* popular, sometimes:

- It has one of the safest and most sheltered anchorages ([the Bight](#)) in the entire BVIs, with more than a hundred moorings for cruising boats to tie up to. In high season, even that is not enough on some weekends. It's an easy sail from the charter boat bases near Road Town (the BVI capital) and a favorite first-night destination.



The Bight, Norman Island (all photos S. Blakely)

The Indians, just above the Bight



Norman Island, just around the corner from the Bight).

- It has dramatic history: Buried treasure was, in fact, once found on Norman Island (although not for a long time), and [Robert Louis Stevenson](#) used Norman as the model for his world-famous novel, [Treasure Island](#), the gripping tale of pirates and buried gold.

The William Thornton (Willie T) boat bar

- It has two of

The Author



Steve Blakely

Writer and Skipper

Steve Blakely has been exploring the Chesapeake Bay for 30 years. He docks *Bearboat*, an Island Packet 26, in Galesville, Maryland.

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the most legendary and infamous bars in the BVIs -- the William Thorton (aka the "[Willie T](#)"), a floating boat bar and restaurant, and, just a short way away on shore, the [Pirates Bight](#) bar. Late at night when the rum and



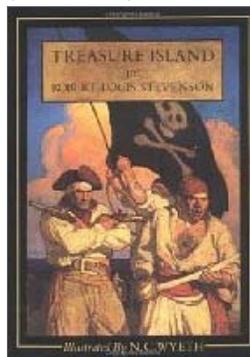
the rowdiness kick in, the Willie T is known (among other things) for its naked diving parties off the stern roof. On shore, with lively bands driving the beat, Pirates offers its own brand of beach-based hedonism. Given the allure of group nudity on Norman Island, pirate treasure no longer is the kind of booty that many visitors come here looking for.

Which is why, if you visit Norman Island on a busy weekend, and are old (or married) enough to want merely a decent night's sleep, it's a good idea to pick a mooring as far away from the noise of Willie T and Pirates Bight as you can possibly find. That's *if* you can even find a mooring: In high season, sometimes more boats arrive than can fit into the Bight, and the competition for a mooring ball can get ugly.

A Piratical Past

Piracy was a major part of Caribbean history in the 17th and 18th centuries, and Norman Island (said to be named for a pirate) does indeed have a piratical past. In the early 1700s, a mutinous crew from a Spanish treasure galleon called *Nuestra Senora de Guadelope* buried 55 chests of silver coins on Norman Island, most of which was later recovered by local residents from Tortola and British authorities. Inevitably, more buried pirate treasure is rumored to still exist on the island. Sir Francis Drake Channel -- the main maritime "highway" in the BVIs -- is named for the most successful [British privateer](#) (a government-sanctioned pirate), who preyed on Spanish ships in the Virgin Islands as they brought back gold and silver from South America.

(Amazon.com)



In writing *Treasure Island* (1833), Robert Louis Stevenson drew inspiration from many different sources, but chiefly from the true tale of buried treasure on Norman Island. Stevenson is said to have heard details of the island from a mariner uncle who knew the region.

The book's famous pirate sea-shanty has historical roots: "Fifteen men on a Dead Man's Chest -- yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum -- Drink and the devil had done for the rest!" The name and story come from a small uninhabited island called [Dead Chest](#) (just a few miles east of

Norman Island), where the infamous pirate Blackbeard once marooned a handful of mutinous crew, supplied only with a single bottle of rum. When the pirates attempted to swim off the

waterless island to nearby [Peter Island](#), they all drowned. All this, long before Capt. Jack

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Sparrow had been invented by the Disney marketing department!

Today, [Peter Island Resort](#) is one of the most luxurious places to stay anywhere in the BVIs. And the most beautiful crescent beach on Peter Island is located at [Deadman's Bay](#) -- named for the marooned pirates who died trying to escape Dead Chest.

Dead Chest, from Peter Island

The Island Today

Norman Island, at roughly 600 acres, is covered in low dense forest and scrub. Wild goats are its only permanent residents. It is privately owned by Dr. Henry Jarecki, who also owns [Guana Island](#), a deluxe private island resort on the north shore of Tortola (cheapest room: \$700 per night; the whole island goes for \$31,000 nightly).

Locals say that Jarecki has plans to turn Norman Island into another high-end resort like Guana, although the low-end decadence of the Willie T and Pirates Bight will be permitted to remain. Currently, Jarecki is having some dirt roads cut across Norman Island, which make for good hiking trails.

If you are boating in the U.S. Virgin Islands, be warned that BVI Marine Patrol keeps an eye out for boats entering their country illegally from nearby St. John in the USVI, which is seductively close to the playgrounds at Norman Island.

One such case involves a USVI party boat busted in December 2007 at Norman Island, where the six Americans entered illegally for drinks at the Willie T. By the end of the day, they'd definitely need a Painkiller: The boats collided during the arrest, a couple of the Americans were seriously injured, and those not hospitalized were thrown in the BVI jail. The entire crew was later convicted and fined.

BVI police had simply watched the boat (appropriately named *Guilt Trip*) leave St. John and head to Norman Island without first clearing BVI Customs.

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[Norman Island, BVIs](#)

[William Thorton](#) Floating Bar and Restaurant

[Pirates Bight](#)

[Norman Island Wikipedia](#)

[The Real "Treasure Island"](#) (The Islomaniac)

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[British Virgin Islands](#) tourist board

[Robert Louis Stevenson](#)

My favorite printing of [Treasure Island](#) is the one illustrated by N.C. Wyeth, but a [free version](#) is available online

Lyrics to the 1901 poem by Young Alison, "Fifteen Men on a Deadman's Chest ([the Derelict](#))"

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