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WE TRAVEL

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BVI Kite Jam participants jockey for starting positions before racing around Necker Island.

I, Kiter

Riders convene in the British Virgin Islands for the second annual BVI Kite Jam. Amidst steady wind, world-class waves and boundless flat water, jammers rediscover the kindred bonds that give our sport its soul. BY MICHAEL BEHAR

HORSESHOE REEF, THE FOURTH

largest on Earth, meanders for 18 miles around Anegada, an atoll perched at the northern frontier of the British Virgin Islands. The reef encloses an electric-blue lagoon fringed with frothy ribbons of surf. Its thriving coral heads have trashed hundreds of laden vessels, spilling their cargoes onto Anegada's pearly beaches. Scavenging these shipwrecks provided islanders with their primary income source

for several centuries. Now tourism fuels Anegada's economy. The atoll has long been a far-flung hideout for sailors, who believe the island exudes a quiet energy that lulls visitors into a rhapsodic bliss. Perhaps that is why on a very windy day at Anegada's Cow Wreck Beach there are at least 50 kiteboarders in varying states of repose, loafing in the sand. "It was really weird to see," Charlie Smith says. "There was a lot of chatting going on and

not much kiteboarding."

Smith, 28, co-founded the BVI Kite Jam in 2010 with billionaire entrepreneur and serial adventurer Sir Richard Branson. The weeklong island-hopping bacchanalia combines relaxed free-riding and formal competition with beachside feasts and barefoot dance-a-thons into the wee hours. We're halfway into the tour, traveling aboard a peripatetic armada that includes a dozen chartered catamarans, several

PHOTOS: ERIN CALMES, (OPPOSITE) CHRIS HAER (3)



BVI Kite Jam co-founder Charlie Smith sneaks in a quick session. Below: Kite Jam host Sir Richard Branson. Left: Beach bliss on Branson's Necker Island.

speed boats and a seaplane. There have been plenty of glorious sessions so far — on Anegada, Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Necker and Eustatia Islands. Even so, Smith has noticed a strange daily ritual: kites left flapping in the sand while kiteboarders, who hail from more than 18 countries, swarm together like honeybees at a tulip farm. At the moment, kites have commandeered Cow Wreck Beach (so named because a 19th-century frigate loaded with bovine bones — once used to make buttons and fish hooks, among other sundries — ran afoul on the reef, and its freight washed ashore). The wind clocks in at 18 knots and rarely wavers. Yet by mid-afternoon, I'm one of only three riders on the water. Everyone else is huddled around an airy cabana bar, engrossed in conversation. Anegada might have a reputation for inducing an island coma, but I suspect something else is going on.

Not having kited in six very long months, I'm determined to milk every minute of wind. But it's impossible to resist the Kite Jam's schmoozing clutches. Shannon Best wants to hash out the

intricacies of unified field theory. (Isaac Newton's laws of motion are tattooed on his left forearm.) When I finally engage him, he thanks me by plopping a kiss on my cheek. Pete Cabrinha ponders Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* and admits to listening to the entire album every night for a full year during high school. Nine-time kiteboarding world champion Kristin Boese says: "This is a nice change for me. I get to talk with people who have really interesting backgrounds and jobs. It's not all about kiting and training." Youri Zoon, a 21-year-old pro rider from Holland, relishes the relaxed downtime between PKRA events. "I can chill and just have fun," he says.

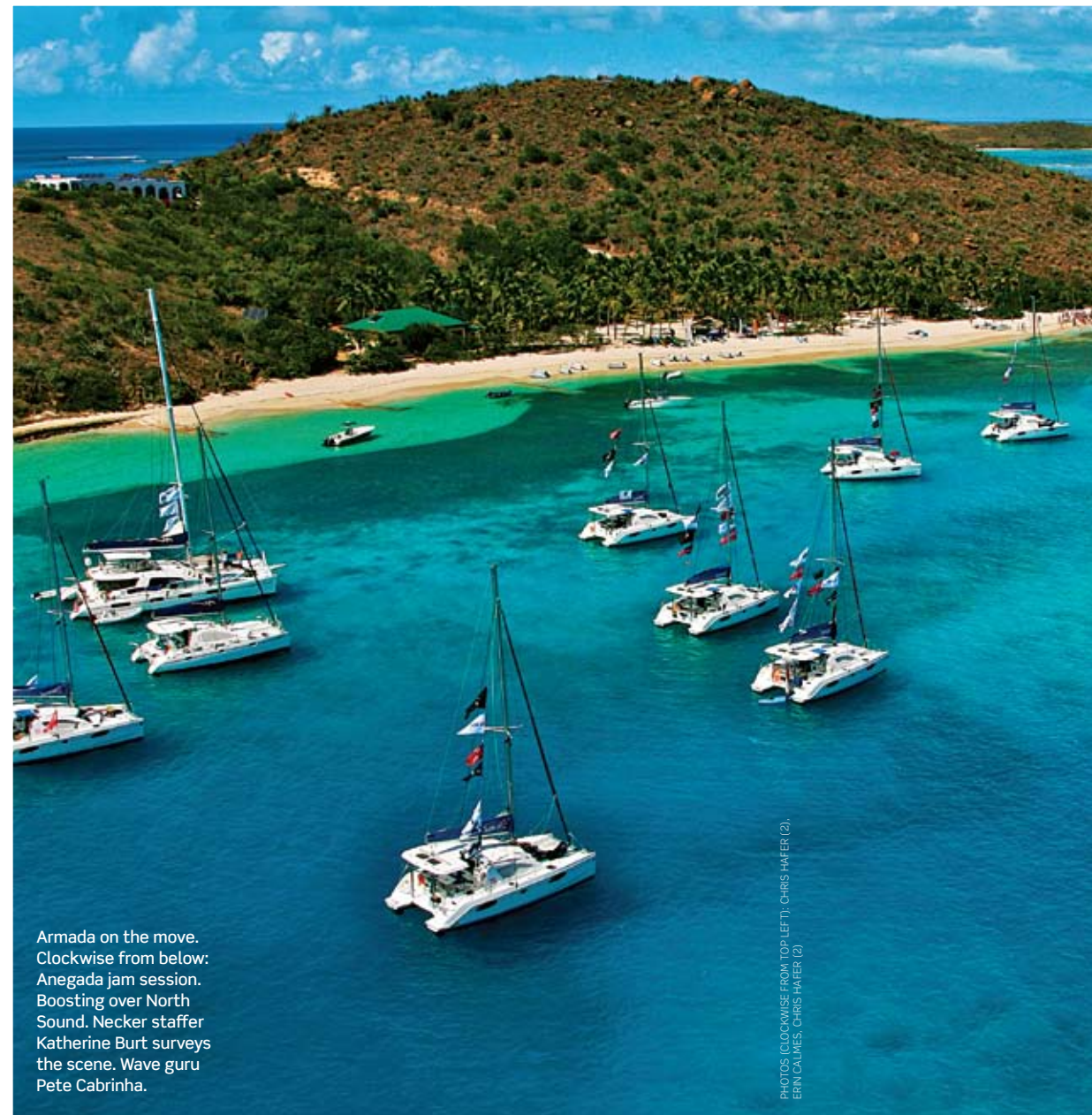
Suddenly, I've been indoctrinated; I'm yapping more and kiting less. Have I gone crazy? Not at all, explains Cabrinha, who turns 50 this year. "Kiteboarding has a huge social aspect, and I think there is a big space in the sport for these types of events compared to competitions," he says. The amateur riders are here to kite, but they also take every opportunity to hobnob with the pros — and each other. A gaggle of Internet entrepreneurs wastes no time trading dot-com war stories. The



Kite Jam "gives us a closer connection to the sport [and] solidifies our participation in it," continues Cabrinha. "It's also a pay-it-forward kind of thing. [Jammers], if they are having as much fun as I am, will go home and get their buddies into kiting."

It's finally beginning to make sense why those who attended last year's Jam still rave about it, even after scoring just a single day of wind. While the Kite Jam is rooted in riding, off-the-water face time is

THE KITE JAM IS A TRIBAL GATHERING, AND THE JAMMERS ARE ITS CHIEFTAINS.



Armada on the move. Clockwise from below: Anegada jam session. Boosting over North Sound. Necker staffer Katherine Burt surveys the scene. Wave guru Pete Cabrinha.

PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): CHRIS HAERER (2), ERN CAUMES, CHRIS HAERER (2)



an essential component. It's what elevates the event to something greater. You might say the Kite Jam is a tribal gathering — a synergistic congress of the addicted — and the jammers are its chieftains.

Anegada is a scant two and a half miles across at its girth and measures 10 miles end-to-end. Its high point — a barely discernible bulge rising just 28 feet — is an anomaly amid mangrove scrub and brackish ponds. From the air, it resembles the feeding claw of a lobster pincer (apropos, since the tasty crustaceans are a prized local delicacy). From the sea, the low-lying atoll is invisible, even on a clear day, until you are practically on top of it. Detached from the main archipelago, Anegada is often struck first when hurricanes barrel off the North Atlantic Ocean. Its name loosely translates to “drowned island,” a title bestowed by 15th-century Spanish mariners, who probably wondered how it survived countless cyclones. Indeed, its substratum is little more than a gritty amalgam of sand and coral that storm surges heaved inland. Anegada should have vanished last year when it took a direct hit from mighty Hurricane Earl. But the island emerged miraculously intact.

Its precarious geography repeatedly puts Anegada in harm's way, but it's also what makes the atoll a kiteboarding wonderland. It's blessed with easterly trades that blow stronger than elsewhere in the BVI. And the winter swells tumble onto Horseshoe Reef like derailed freight trains. On day four, Smith and his Kite Jam partners Scotty Wilson and Abby O'Neal arranged to drop jammers at Windlass Bight, a deserted bay at Anegada's midpoint and the start of a four-mile downwinder to Cow Wreck. With pasty faces slathered in sunscreen, jammers pile onto bench seats in a rusty shuttle bus that has no windows or doors (and questionable shocks and brakes). I'm sitting in the front beside Best as we bounce over a rutted dirt road to the launch. Boese is trying to snap photos while being flung about in the back row. Jostling shoulder-to-shoulder, we look like bobble-head schoolchildren on a field trip.

At Windlass Bight, Smith goes straight to work helping rig and launch kites. “I

counted 48 people off the beach, and the last one was me,” he says. It's a lot of riders, but there is a spacious flat-water lagoon — spanning a mile from shore to reef and extending the entire length of the island — that easily accommodates everyone. Beginners stick to the inside, while more experienced riders head toward the surf. The water is clearer than Evian. While cruising the spellbinding shallows and wishing my board were made of Plexiglas, I glimpse a spotted eagle ray, a school of barracudas, two lemon sharks, a sea turtle and a pair of sinewy trumpetfish. Nearby is a 64-year-old jammer from Colorado named Chaffe McIlhenny, who took his first lesson at last year's Kite Jam. He's a bit unsteady, so Antigua pro rider Andre Phillip trails closely, coaching McIlhenny all the way to Cow Wreck. Similarly, I notice Boese helping Nicole Lee, an intermediate kiter who traveled from Hong Kong to attend.

One out of every three jammers is a pro rider. Very few kiteboarding events — or, for that matter, sporting events of any kind — offer amateurs that kind of intimate ratio with the experts. Getting a pro's advice is almost too easy. One afternoon I offhandedly ask Best how to increase my hang time. A couple other pros overhear us and join the discussion, which soon ignites into a spirited debate on big boosts versus distance jumps. “There are not many opportunities like this,” says Smith. “The whole event is about people mixing day and night, sharing boats with the pros, partying with them and riding with them day after day.”

The close encounters with pros are undeniably thrilling. At one point during the downwinder, while tacking through the reef break, I watch Best drop in on a gorgeous double overhead wave. I hustle to the outside and then carve around to follow him. Cabrinha, who broke a world record in 2004 for surfing the largest wave ever (70 feet high), is about 100 yards downwind in the same set, which is the biggest of the day. As kitesurf sessions go, it will almost surely be the only time in my life I share a lineup with Cabrinha and Best. Later, back on the beach, Best gives me a fist bump. “Dude, I am so stoked you saw that,” he



Pro rider Yuri Zoon kites Cow Wreck Beach. Bottom: Jammers gather for a final salute.

declares. Even the wave guru is happy. “People think I’m hyping it up, but that was the most fun I’ve had in a long time,” says Cabrinha. “I was out there for four hours, the wind was side-shore and that wave in front of Cow Wreck was pretty darn fun. I could ride it all day long.”

In 2009, Smith was in Cape Town, South Africa, with Branson to celebrate New Year’s Eve. “Richard was talking to some other kites about Necker Island and invited them to come there and ride with us,” recalls Smith, who grew up in Cyprus, where he windsurfed professionally until, at 18, he switched to kiting. “Over lunch, the idea snowballed into running an actual event.” Back at Necker, the concept evolved further. Branson tells me he had just kited from Anegada to Necker — a 14-mile open-ocean crossing (not bad for a 60-year-old guy). “I was at the bar having drinks with Charlie and Scotty, and they said they were willing to put [the event] together,” he recalls. The Kite Jam was conceived, in part, to create an exclusive

gathering of pros and amateurs predicated on a handful of competitive events. “But it wasn’t only about that,” notes Smith. “It was about getting people on the water, exposing the BVI and just having a lot of fun.”

Currently on Necker, Branson is lounging in the sand, his back propped against a plush beach chair. His left knee is bandaged. In January, while in Zermatt, Switzerland, he collided with another skier on the slopes. The accident tore Branson’s ACL, requiring surgery to repair. “Everybody who throws themselves into sports has injuries occasionally, and I’m just having mine,” he says.

Branson tries to convince me that being sidelined isn’t a downer. “It’s great to just sit here and watch this,” he says. But while we talk, he remains acutely focused on the water, where amateur riders are rounding an offshore course buoy during a Kite Jam race around his island. You can sense that he desperately wants to be out there. “I learned to kite when I was 55,” Branson says. “I think I can carry on until I’m 80 or 90 years old. I am very lucky because I live on

this island. Every morning I kite around it before breakfast. I’m spoiled here.”

Soon the pro heat gets under way, and Branson goes on: “They are enjoying the best sport there is in the world, in my opinion. I’m battling to get it into the Olympics. It should be. It’s beautiful, exciting and skillful.” Branson is the poster child for jammers — his love for kiteboarding embodies their ethos. Think about it: Here is a guy worth \$4.4 billion with private jets and helicopters at his disposal who, on a whim, could travel anywhere on the planet to play, and he chooses to hang out with a bunch of strangers in his backyard confabulating about kiteboarding when he can’t even enjoy a session.

Kite Jam organizers have tried to cultivate an event with a vibe that transcends the sport. Have they succeeded? Jeff Bartkowski, an amateur rider from New York, thinks so. At the finale party on Necker, Bartkowski, a sales manager for a company that sells sophisticated marine navigation equipment to the military, sees me taking notes and offers to share his thoughts. He competed in the race around Necker Island. Having to contend with high winds and 7-foot swells was nerve-racking, he admits. “But it was a defining moment in my life,” he says. “I realized that if I could handle that, I could handle anything.” When I inform him that we were unusually fortunate with the wind this year, he quips back: “We were really lucky. But it wouldn’t have mattered if we had wind. For me, it is really about the opportunity to interact with the other kites and pros. Just being here is what it’s all about.”

PHOTOS: ERIN CALMES (2)

