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"Unsailboat"

Gustavia Harbor
St. Barths



Super



yachts of sail

When the world's biggest blowboats gather in St. Barths to race, the emphasis is on fun and fabulous—and a bucket of champagne

By **Dennis Caprio** Photography by **Tim Wright**

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Fifteen minutes before *Victoria of Strathearn's* official starting time, the wind blowing out of the southeast at 19 knots, we were on a port tack outside the harbor at Gustavia, St. Barthélemy, French West Indies, milling around under sail. For me, the experience was just like being on any other racing yacht—once I got past the fact of *Victoria's* 130-foot length, that is.

The afterguard—her designer, Bill Langan, helmsman Hank Halsted and owner Alistair—had just decided that holding station head to wind via the thrusters was not the best way to get a good start in this, the second day of the St. Barths Bucket Regatta. On the foredeck, the crew wrestled with what seemed like a square kilometer of spinnaker housed in a sock. The crew would hoist it like a limp sausage, peeling away the sock to let the wind fill the blood-red nylon. If they got it right, even the massive *Victoria* would spring forward. If they got it wrong...

At the one-minute mark, the foredeck crew hoisted the spinnaker and slid the sock to the head of the sail. Womp! The massive chute filled as the race radio counted down the seconds—"five, four, three, two, one, *Victoria.*" We were off.

A lovely venue for a yacht race early in April, St. Barthélemy juts out of the cobalt waters of the Caribbean. The island erupted thousands of years ago from the hell of a volcano; its hills seem impossibly steep and haven't taken kindly to the paved roads cast upon them as though they were a fistful of gnarled branches. Dusty and semiarid, St. Barths nevertheless has lovely beaches nestled into intimate coves, charming hotels—some with a rating of "Luxe"—and superb French cuisine.

A gentlemen's race for sailing yachts of 100 feet LOA and longer conceived about a quarter century ago by wealthy yachtsmen Tom Taylor and Abner Doubleday, the Bucket regattas have grown from an entry of a few yachts in the inaugural event at Nantucket, to the 26 in this year's edition. These regattas give the owners of superyachts a chance to gather among like-minded individuals, drive their yachts in friendly—but no less competitive—races, and tell good-natured lies at the parties that follow each



day on the water. For the rest of us, they create one heck of a spectacle.

The harbor greets entering yachts with a broad swath of deep water. Natural landmasses squeeze the channel into a very narrow waist, like that of an hourglass, and then let it broaden to a turning basin of sorts inside. Maneuvering a yacht of 150 feet LOA or thereabouts into a stern-to moor requires skill and patience. *Rebecca*, a 42.4-meter ketch designed in the spirit of the 1930s by German Frers, needed nearly 15 minutes to get away from the dock. Poor *Scheherazade*: After painstakingly backing, filling and thrusting, she headed out of the harbor and fouled *Infatuation's* anchor chain, dragging the yacht away from the dock. The crew of *Infatuation* quickly cut the mooring lines to save her stern cleats.

The conversations are hearty fun at St. Barths; nothing like a bunch of billionaires and multimillionaires letting their hair down. And the parties are BYOSY—bring your own superyacht—combining the fabulous and the casual in a way that would have delighted F. Scott Fitzgerald. By late Friday evening, after everyone had cooled off in the shower, most of the yachts had opened their transoms to entertain the crews, guests, and press. A Caribbean drum band beat island rhythms from the afterdeck of *Whisper*, accompanying a steady flow of guests traversing the passerelle. Churchill Yacht Partners played host for the *soirée*. Down the way toward the inner harbor, *Ranger* squatted at the stern as the boat-hopping crowd gathered on her afterdeck.

Meanwhile, back at our race: "You need to come right, Hank," the skipper called, urging the helmsman to avoid a coral shoal on our port side.

"Ease, ease!!" shouted Rex Herbert, headsail trimmer and yacht broker at Sparkman & Stephens Brokerage.

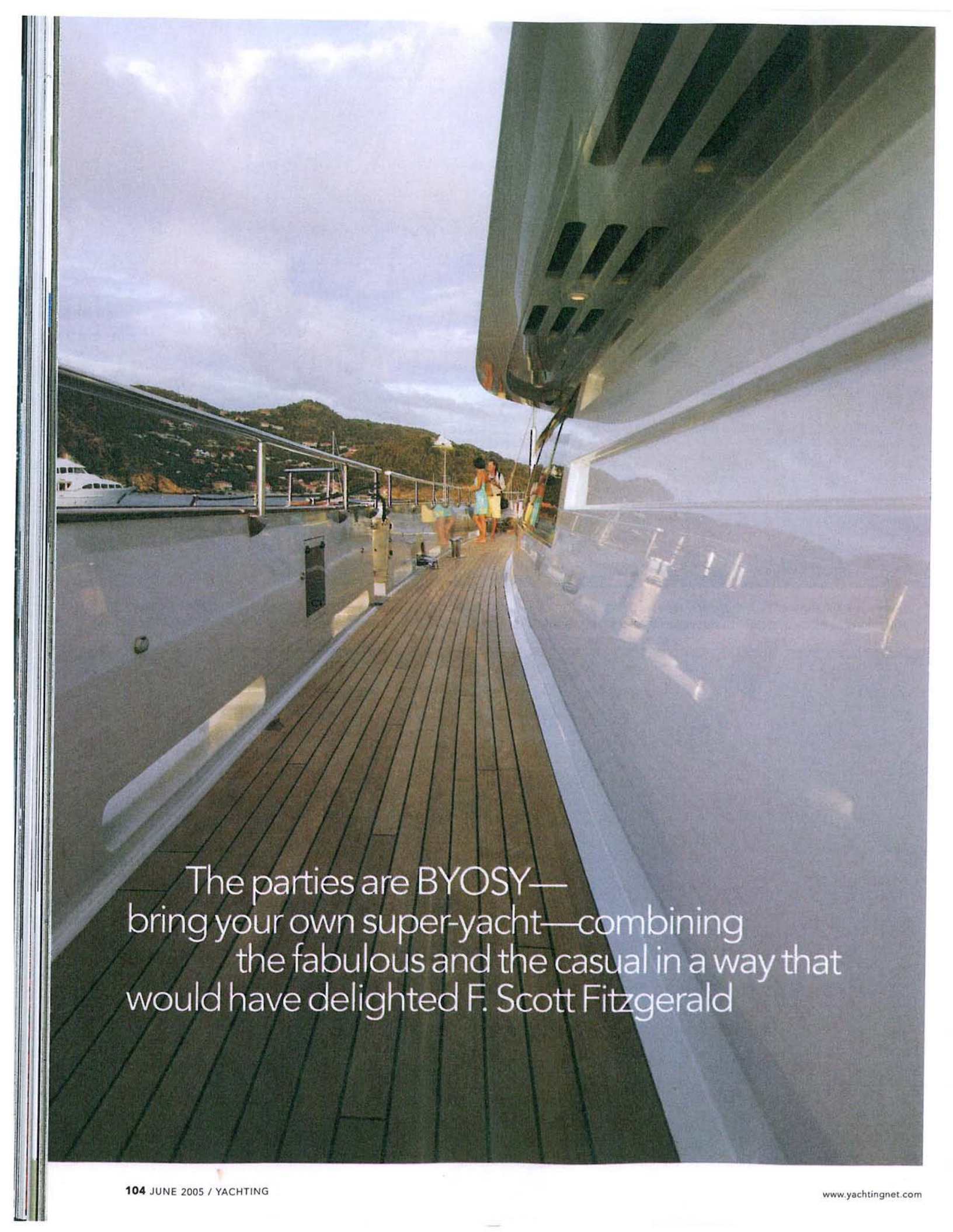
"You don't win the race if you're sittin' on the reef," Alistair said to the afterguard.

At the northwestern tip of St. Barths, we doused the spinnaker and hardened up to a close reach. Hank found the groove, the GPS showed 12 knots, and the boat grew very quiet. Rail down, we sped north toward



SEEING BIG LUXURY YACHTS LIKE *LADY LAUREN* (ABOVE) BATTLE IT OUT MAKES FOR A HEART-STOPPING EXPERIENCE. A YOUNG SAILOR CHECKS OUT THE MAST'S OPEN "ELEVATOR" ON *MIRABELLA V*, WHILE ANOTHER GAWKS AT THE BOOM OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST SLOOP (BELOW).





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THE HISTORIC J-CLASS RANGER WON OWNER JOHN WILLIAMS THE UBS TROPHY FOR THE ONE PERSON WHO BEST EXEMPLIFIES THE BUCKET; THE CHAMPAGNE POPPED FOR OVERALL WINNER FREEDOM (BELOW). IT'S NOT THE AMERICA'S CUP, BUT THE ST. BARTHS BUCKET IS PROBABLY MORE FUN.



Ile de Boulanger, at which point we'd head east for the first beat. Off our stern about a mile, *Rebecca* silently and relentlessly closed on us.

This raised the pulse a bit. Slippery as an eel, the powerful *Rebecca* had completed the first day's long course—an anticlockwise circumnavigation of St. Barths taking Ile Fourche off the northwest tip of the main island on the port side—in 2 hours, 51 minutes and 50 seconds. Her nearest competitor, the J Class *Ranger*, finished a minute and 40 seconds later. *Visione*, a 147-foot lift-keel sloop designed by Reichel/Pugh and built by Baltic, had the best start of the day—crossing the line at full song at exactly the right time—and finished third, three minutes and 27 seconds behind.

To have *Rebecca* in pursuit as we were closing on the line raised the stakes for Alistair, the owner, who was driving. But there was nothing he, or any of us, could do—*Rebecca* seemed to have her own private breeze as she crossed in front of us. *Victoria* would fin-

ish in two hours and 36 minutes—good for 19th. Break out the champagne!

Sunday's race proved that the race committee's handicapping works wonderfully well for this gentlemen's regatta. The Perini Navi *Gitana* needed five hours to complete Friday's race but won the final. Rumors stated that she started the race before any of the other yachts left the harbor. Be that as it may, *bravo Gitana*.

On this last day of the Bucket, I raced aboard *Zingaro* (Italian for gypsy). Sparkman & Stephens designed her, and Derecktor built her in Mamaroneck, N.Y. At 115 feet LOA and moderate displacement, she fits into the category of "handy," as superyachts go. Her Brazilian owner, Sergio, sails her aggressively, relishing the battle. He was also a gracious host. The crew comprised vintage Brazilian sailors and youthful Brits and Americans. Greg Matzat, chief designer at S&S, was our tactician.

Zingaro started at 1150 hours, a minute after Peter de Savary's *Rogue* and a minute before *Whisper*. The first run was only about a mile. In the give and take of the windward leg, *Whisper* had passed us and was dueling with *Hyperion*. *Rebecca* edged ever closer and by 1330 hours had sailed over the top of us. At the turning mark for the downwind leg, Matzat called "hoist," and sweated the halyard. Then... "Man overboard!" The spinnaker sheet had snagged the leg of one of the foredeck crew and tossed him into the sea. Even in a gentlemen's race, stuff happens. We had him back aboard in about three minutes, prone on the afterdeck while two of the female crew dressed his skinned leg and iced the sprained forefinger of his right hand.

So ended our race, but not without reward: At the awards party on the dock that evening, Churchill Yacht Partners bestowed the prize for seamanship upon *Zingaro*. With the collective spirit at the party hovering just below the stratosphere, everyone sipped champagne, cheered the presentations and glad-handed crews, owners and even the members of the race committee—Jim Teeters, chairman. No wonder the Bucket regattas grow every year. Few venues could be as much fun, more spectacular and yet more intimate. □