

St. Croix Day Charter Operator and Ferry Builder GO GREEN with New Boats

By Carol Bareuther

The surrounding seas – including beautiful beaches, calm coves and historic harbors – are one of the main attractions for visitors to the Caribbean. Soon, sightseers and travelers alike will be able to enjoy this wondrous water world in an eco-friendly way aboard both a ‘green’ power day sail catamaran on the U.S. Virgin Island of St. Croix and a ‘green’ ferryboat that runs between St. Croix and St. Thomas.

Big Beard Adventure Tours’ owner, Captain John ‘Big Beard’ Macy, an Oregon native who transplanted to the island nearly thirty years ago, says, “We’ve always been a sailboat company. However, we wanted to offer our customers the option of a catamaran that moved more quickly. In these times of environmental concern and rising fuel prices, we felt a power catamaran that was a hybrid vessel was the best way to go.”

Macy explains just what ‘hybrid’ means, as designed and built by St. Croix-based Gold Coast Yachts. “The vessel is powered by two diesel engines and two electric engines. We will use the diesels to power us out to Buck Island and at the same time they will be charging a bank of batteries that energize the electric engines. When we come into a pristine lagoon, or harbor, we will shut down the diesels and come in under the electric engines silently and pollution free.”

As for fuel, says Roger Hatfield who, with Rich Difede, owns Gold Coast Yachts, “This vessel uses about half the fuel that a contemporary design would use, even though it’s not been specifically designed for maximum fuel efficiency.”

While not a hybrid vessel, some of Gold Coast’s previous builds have also been extremely fuel-efficient.

“How about an 83-foot wave-piercing cat that burns a gallon a mile at 21 knots with 80 passengers aboard in rough conditions?” says Hatfield. “FASTCAT II, the 83-footer that we built back in May of 1999, has been running the 80 miles from Key West out to the Dry Tortugas. Short of running on hydrofoils, it is the most fuel-efficient cat we know of.”

Forty-two feet in length, the longest size vessel allowed in the Virgin Islands’ National Park waters surrounding Buck Island, Big Beard’s new power catamaran will carry 49 guests aboard. Another of the new cat’s cool features is the opportunity for glass bottom viewing. Big Beard’s current 42-foot sailing catamaran, the popular Renegade, claims the fame of being the only sailboat on St. Croix with an underwater viewing window. What takes the power cat’s view port one step further is the ability to lower and raise its glass bottom box. This prevents a natural green mossy growth from building up and blocking the undersea view.

Big Beard's Adventure Tour's most popular day sail is a full- or half-day to Buck Island Reef National Monument. Located less than two miles off the northeast coast of the island, the unspoiled destination is one of only two Underwater National Monuments in the United States.

Joining Big Beard's new boat on the 'green scene', Gold Coast Yachts is nearing the completion of a 65-foot fuel-efficient power catamaran.

"The new vessel will be ready by the end of the year for inter-island ferry service between St. Croix and St. Thomas," says Hatfield. "We figure that the vessel will use only a tenth of the fuel the current cat uses per crossing." The distance between St. Croix and St. Thomas is approximately 40 miles.

Going 'green' is not just the wave of the future for power cats—it's a challenge Caribbean boat builders are meeting now.

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