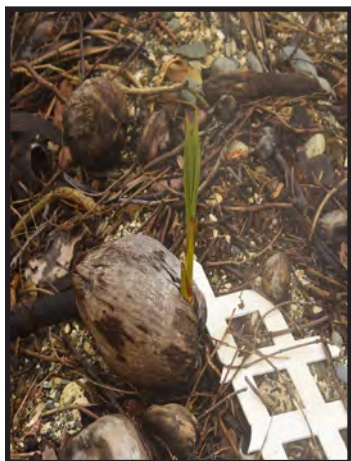


Tuesday October 31, 2017

Happy Halloween



Today is the beginning of my third full day on St John. I arrived Saturday afternoon, after a pretty smooth trip from Sacramento. I brought 2 suitcases and a backpack full of batteries, parts, miscellaneous solar gadgetry, freeze dried food and as many fresh apples as I could stuff in the crevices and stay under the 50 pound weight limit. Amazingly everything arrived intact, surviving the overnight flight, the long taxi ride across St Thomas and the ferry ride from St Thomas to St John, and then the long winding road from Cruz Bay to Josh & Sofi's house in Coral Bay.

The main airport for the Virgin Islands was functioning on duck tape, bailing wire and generators, but it was definitely functioning. The taxi driver who took me and a van load of other travelers across to the ferry terminal in Red Hook was amazing at dodging potholes, puddles, phone lines dangling across the roads, debris, trees, brush and utility vehicles. The further

we got from Charlotte Amelie the more apparent was the damage. There did not seem to be power anywhere except the limited juice produced by generators. It was fortunate that the road to Red Hook was passable.

The 3:00 ferry got me to Cruz Bay on St John around 3:30. It's only a passenger ferry; I don't think the car ferry is running yet. I'm not sure how the grocery stores and other stores are getting supplies at the moment. Saturday was a big day in Cruz Bay because they were expecting to have

power restored to some areas in the town. It's been 8 weeks.

The damage to the buildings, roads and infrastructure is still pretty overwhelming. Many buildings have blue tarps over the roofs, which is in part a signal to the power company not to restore power to that building because it is not safe- too many leaks and inside damage. Some houses are just skeletons. Others have slid off their foundations. Some are simply piles of rubble, untouched. One house is teetering on the brink of a mudslide 100 feet above the road to Coral Bay. It could come down any minute.

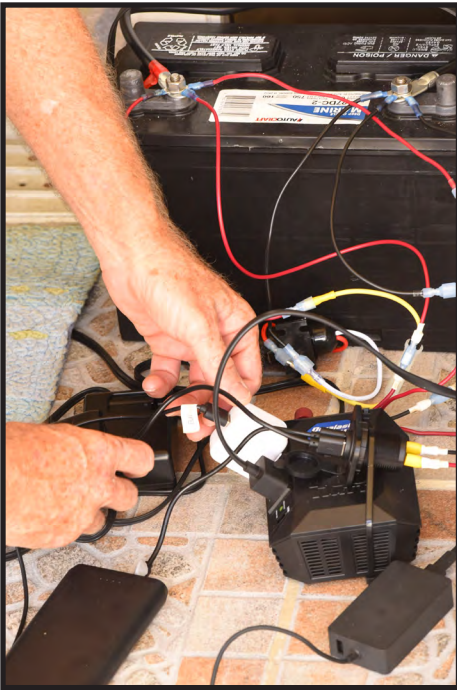


Sofi's house fared better than many in that the roof stayed on. Only one window was broken, and the shattered glass was spread all over the upstairs bedroom. On the porch the wind ripped off the ceiling fan and whorled it around, taking out a ceramic wall sculpture. The wind stripped all of the leaves off all of the vegetation on the island and shredded it into fine fibers which were plastered all over the inside of the house, and in all of the cracks and crevices. Sofi and Josh spent hours scrubbing the walls of mold, mildew, glass and pottery shards, and plant fiber. Cleaning out the refrigerator and freezer required masks and gloves. All this was carried out without running water or electrical power. The heat and humidity and biting insects added to the misery.

Since the first initial clean-up and inventory-taking Josh and Sofi had







gone up to the states and returned with a generator and a plethora of electronic equipment in order to make use of the solar panels on the roof, which amazingly were still intact and functional. They hooked up an inverter and the batteries from the boat which provided enough power to run a small refrigerator and charge up USB power packs. So by the time I arrived on October 28th we had fresh produce, cold drinks, fans, and lights. We could heat up water on the propane stove. We had fresh water in the cistern and when the generator was on we could pump it to the showers and sinks and we could flush the toilet. The only thing missing was internet and phone connections.

I felt like Santa Claus with my bags of goodies, both edible and electronic. Folks were happy to have a visitor from the states and everyone was cheerful. They felt lucky to have made as much progress towards “normalcy” as they had.

The next morning I had slept off most of my jet lag, but I was still relieved to hear Sofi announce that they were taking the day off from “work”: Sunday was Fun-day, she said. After a leisurely breakfast we decided the first priority of the day would be to get me into the water. The only question was which beach. It turns out that this was a harder question to answer than you might think. After the winds of Irma had ripped the island to shreds, Hurricane Maria had come and dumped vast quantities

of rain on the steep defoliated hillsides, and even more rain had fallen since, washing away huge amounts of mud and sediments plus effluvia from the wreckage of homes and businesses. Washing all of it down to the ocean. The water washed down the “guts” which is the local term for the gullies and ravines dividing the steep hillsides. At sea level the water might sit in a marsh or salt pond for a few days before reaching the bay. It would sit and stew in the warm tropical sun. Bacteria and miscellaneous microbes from animal wastes (St John has a large population of free-roaming donkeys, pigs and chickens, not to mention deer and other wildlife) would ferment and ooze into the bays. Some beaches were more likely to receive a load of contaminated runoff than others- it all depended on the topography and the population inhabiting the steep hillsides surrounding the bays. We decided to go further out towards the east end of the island, where there were less people, less houses and less animals. We chose Haulover Bay north. Haulover Bay is so named because it is a low spot on the backbone ridge of the island and it was easy to drag a small boat from one side of the island overland to the other side, thus escaping a pirate ship (or the navy if you were the pirate), or an adverse weather situation. It’s about 100 yards through the bush to get from the road to



North Haulover Bay. It used to be a quick and easy walk, but Irma had left a tangled mess of toppled trees and vines over the trail. It took us a half hour of hacking and sawing to get to the beach.

The water felt nothing less than divine. It seemed relatively clean; it was the classic shades of blues, blue-greens and turquoise you see in the travel brochures. The beach was rocky, but it wasn’t the same rock that was there a year ago. It was lighter, sandier and not as sharp as it used to be. The shoreline of the bay had been totally remodeled by the wind and waves. The mangroves had been ripped up and shredded. Sand had been excavated from some spots and redeposited in other spots.

There were reef fish and some corals in places where they used to be, but other places were bare, or covered in sediment. Grasses were coming up through the sand in places where there had been rock, and deep troughs had been excavated in places where you used to be able to stand in waist deep water.

I’m not an experienced diver and I’m only an occasional snorkeler. But even I could tell that something was different and wrong. Underwater visibility was poor because





of the thick streams of particulate matter flowing around in the currents. Bits of shell, coral, plant material and debris of unknown origin, perhaps a lot of plastic, I don't know. We saw roofing material, gutters, and random bits of twisted metal scattered about over the bottom of the bay. A quilter's cutting board with a peach fuzz growth of new algae lay draped across the rocks, 10 feet under. According to Sofi, this type of debris was never found on the reefs in the past. It's a new reality, she said. My swim fin got tangled in a drifting plastic bag and I jumped, thinking it was a jellyfish or a wad of irritating sargasso weed.

We saw several turtles. One appeared to be asleep in the newly sprouted grass- he didn't move as we drifted past overhead. I followed another little guy poking along the

bottom but lost him in the murk. A lone trunk fish puttered along, puffing little jets of water at the sediment, looking for tiny crustaceans. Josh found a lobster with only a single feeler lurking under a toppled coral. Everyone was quiet and sober as we headed back to the beach. We sat on the rocks and warmed up in the sunshine, munching on granola bars and Gatorade. I played with my camera while Josh and

Sofi took a walk down the beach to see what they could find- a big plastic gas can with a lid, still containing gas, and a big fender for the boat. Not quite treasure, but maybe useful someday.

When we got home Josh turned on the generator so that we could run the pump and hose off all of the gear with fresh

water, and then everyone took a shower. The water was cold of course because the roof-top solar water heater had been damaged, but that wasn't a big problem. I still felt sticky after my shower even though I was clean.

After a while we decided to walk down the hill to fetch the ruined solar water heater from where Irma had flung it in the neighbor's yard. The neighbor, Kate, was at home. She's a graphic artist and year round resident on the island. She had stayed on St John during both hurricanes, holed up with friends in the sturdiest house they could find. Her house had come through the storms mostly intact-lucky. If Irma's winds had continued for another half an hour she was sure her roof would have been gone, she

said. She still had her solar panels

and was getting along tolerably well, although she was having trouble keeping up with her graphics business which was mostly on-line. She had to go across the island to get internet service, and it wasn't very reliable. We talked about flowers and gutters and insurance, and then we stuffed the ruined water heater into Sofi's car and carted it up the hill and down to the end of the road where a clean up crew was supposed to be coming around soon to pick up piles of hurricane-related refuse. Josh made Mexican pizzas for dinner and we all went to bed early so that we could get up and work outside for awhile early in the morning when it was relatively cool.





Monday was a work day. This meant getting up at the crack of dawn as soon as it was light enough to see and going outside and clearing as much brush as I could before the sun rose over the crest of the hill, when suddenly it would be too hot to work.

I heard Josh's footsteps crunching around the gravel just as it was getting light enough to know that morning had arrived. I grabbed my water bottle and dumped in a packet of instant coffee, rubbed insect repellent around my ankles forearms, neck and ears, donned long pants, an old T shirt, socks, shoes and hat. Not your usual vacation attire. I was assigned the job of clearing the lower fence line so that we could put the fence back up and keep the donkeys out and the chickens in. The first day I cleared a path to the fence line and cleared about 60 feet of fence line,



vine is this stuff called 'Catch and Keep' which has grabby sticky thorns all over it. Once it grabs your clothing you have to stop and carefully pluck it away. Some of the thorns go right through my work gloves. Today I disturbed a nest of ants and they all crawled up my left leg, biting as they ascended. Like fire. Maybe the 80% Deet I was wearing slowed them down, I don't know. I pulled up my pant leg and brushed them away frantically, and next thing I knew they were crawling up my forearm. Nasty itchy little things. At least I didn't get stung by any Jack Spaniards. My reward for

almost to the spot where Irma had dropped the old chicken coop (it used to be up right behind the house!) Josh sawed the big branches and tree trunks that had been deposited on top of the coop. The next day I made it from the coop to the corner of the property. This morning I went the other direction and almost reached the far corner. I am literally hacking through a jungle. There are huge spiky succulents, false pineapple plants with long leaves with very sharp teeth, tamarind trees, and all kinds of vines. Vines with beautiful pink flowers and no thorns cover everything. They're really pretty but we have to pull them away to clear all of the fallen branches underneath. Other vines grow up the trees and climb all over the fence. The worst

all of this hard work is a cold shower when the sun came over the edge of the hill, and a big breakfast of oatmeal, eggs and pancakes!

On Monday we attended the noon meeting sponsored by the Coral Bay Community Center. These meetings are the only way local folks have to connect with each other and hear news. There are updates on efforts to restore power, bring in food, supplies and mail. Aide workers from FEMA, the Red Cross, Kenny Chesney's organization, the National Park Service were there. A spokesman from an NGO that goes around and checks water quality was there to announce that they were testing water quality at all of







the bays and beaches. Some of the more popular beaches have high coliform counts and are not safe for swimming. Yesterday I had a glimpse into why the water needed testing for coliforms. On the island the septic systems are a little different than what we are used to at home. The tanks are above ground, and are fitted with a pump with pipes that aerates and circulate the contents. Periodically the topmost portion of the brew, above the solids and sediments, is decanted into a second tank where it undergoes further settling and decanting. The resulting fluid, which is called gray water and is presumably fairly clean, flows out through a long hose to a remote corner of the property. Enter Hurricane Irma.

Irma ripped off the little house containing the little pump for the aeration pipes and took out the electrical power. She flipped over the lid of the main septic tank and threw tree trunks and brush down on the gray water hose, which was twisted and kinked. When I arrived, both tanks were nearly full, and fermentation was at a standstill. I was assigned the job of freeing up the gray water hose! Needless to

say this was a jolly little project to start the day, but in an hour or so I had the pleasure of laying the freed hose over the debris piles down the bottom corner of the fence line,

where it burst forth with a pent up gush of clear water. 20 minutes later I passed by and it was still gushing, but it was brown and stinky. I kept at my fence line project until I heard the generator start up at the house, which meant it was time to come in and take a cold shower. Boy did I need a cold shower. I passed by the gray water hose outlet and this time it was dribbling clear water again. Curious, I peeked into the secondary tank before jumping in the shower and found it was nearly empty. So that is a big reason why they are doing coliform counts at all of the bays and beaches around the island!



Thursday November 2

We were a little slow getting started this morning- we pretty much wore ourselves out yesterday working overtime. My workout with the septic tank was followed by an hour or so of jungle slashing. Then after clean-up and breakfast we decided to head down to do some work cleaning and assessing Sofi's 2 rental cottages, which are her source of income. They are located on a prominent southern tip of land, above Coral Bay. The cabins were designed and built to withstand storms and both had survived the hurricanes with their roofs intact, but there had been some damage to the decks, gutters, and some of the interiors. Both cabins have a fabulous view of the east end of St John and the British Virgin Islands. One reason we decided to go out there was because there is almost always a nice fresh sea breeze coming in to blow the bugs away and keep the temperatures cooler. The cottages are situated in the middle of a tall steep hillside which is held by thick jungle brush vegetation. The foundations are thick concrete footings with a central concrete cistern weighing several tons when full of water. Thick steel cables run over the roof and are embedded in the concrete foundation. Thick wooden doors braced with 2x4s are placed over the windows. The hur-





ricanes were able to tear off part of the back decking, the gutters and railings. One of the hurricane shutters failed and so one upstairs window was blown in, scattering glass to every corner of the upstairs. Wind and water wreaked havoc with much of the interior decor and fixtures, but much of the interior appeared to be intact or at least salvageable. At present there is no power to the cottages, and they are not fitted to run on generators, so only a limited amount of work can be done until the carpenters can get there with power tools. Also, because the rain gutters were demolished, rainwater is not being collected and sent down to the cistern, which is half empty. Fresh water for cleaning is limited. Fixing the gutters requires



enjoyed the view of the islands. A total of 2 boats cruised by- normally there would have been hundreds. Normally we might have been on one of them.

Later in the afternoon it was time for a swim, and we headed down to nearby Salt Pond Beach. Salt Pond Beach is far off the beaten path at the end of the road. The walk to the beach from the parking lot is about



power tools and some very tall sturdy ladders. Utility crews are making heroic efforts to replace the poles and wires and bring power back to the whole island, but the cottages are near the end of the line. It may take months. So in the meantime Sofi and Josh are working on plans to go off-grid with an all-solar energy power system- namely a “Tesla Wall”. It sounds interesting! We spent a few hours sweeping walls and floors, removing some of the debris. After awhile we just sat on the remnants of the deck and



a tenth of a mile down a deeply rutted track, which discourages the casual visitor. A few anchor buoys are available for boat visitors. Several rock formations in the middle of the bay and along the edges offer interesting coral communities for snorkeling, or at least they used to. Much of the bay has a sandy bottom, supporting thick marine grasslands favored by sea turtles. As you might suspect by now, the coral reefs were not the same rich delightful communities that they had

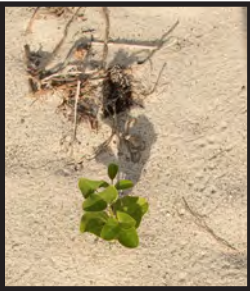




been. They looked like they'd been through a hurricane- "stressed out", Josh said. Strange green and purple algae seemed to be invading from the depths. The fish population was about 10% of what it had been. A spectacular pipe organ coral was partially knocked over, but seemed okay otherwise. During the long swim out to the rocks and back we saw one stingray, a jellyfish, large gathering of tiny marine snails paving the sand in an array of polka dots, and a convention of helmet conchs drag racing around in the sand making odd random wavy tracks like rogue off-road jeepers racing around the California deserts.

It was a quiet walk back up the rutted track to the car.

Josh found germinating seeds from the beach grape vines normally covering the sands and I took photos of them, along with an unusual disc-shaped exotic looking pale blue flower along the path. On the way home we talked about how long it might take the grasses to regrow and for the turtles to return, what role did the alga play in the reef ecosystem, and how long it might take for the coral reef to come back to health. We didn't talk about the question of whether it would even be able to come back- it wasn't just the hurricane- it was rising temperatures, changing levels of acidification, and the effect of all of the contaminants washing into the water. One thing was for sure- it was out of our hands to do much to change things. We were lucky to just go home and have a roof over our heads.



On Thursday morning Josh fired led the remaining sections of fence is a sailor and a wizard of yachts got the hang of the saw. I followed up logs and branches out of the remaining brush. Sofi would come attach it to the posts to keep the yard. A long time was spent dis- the chicken coop and putting the main isSofi was where to situate putting the hens with their new-rooster patron as far away from According to Josh there was only erty, and he was it!



up the new chain saw and we tack- line that needed to be cleared. Josh and catamarans, but he quickly along in his wake tossing the cut way of the fence, and clearing the along later and raise the fence and donkeys and iguanas out of the cussing the merits of re-erecting hens back in confinement. The the coop. Josh was all in favor of ly acquired and very unwelcome the bedroom window as possible. room for one rooster on the prop-

Friday November 3, 2017

This morning I played hooky from work and caught up on organizing the photos and writing my journal. It was my reward for all the hard labor of freeing the fence line. It was a treat not to get bitten, stung or covered with sweat. Josh & I had brunch at a local eatery- burritos, coffee, OJ and miraculously, for dessert, home-made ice cream. Genius. \$40 total including tip, but no complaints here. We chatted with the only other customers at the cafe, a local couple who had ridden out the storms hunkered down on the floor between two cisterns with their happy little fat terrier wedged between them. I asked them what it had been like. Noisy, they said. Lots of banging and scraping, and for several hours the whole house seemed to be vibrating. Only the dog seemed not to mind, cozied up with her two favorite people in



the world, no other place in the world she'd rather have been. What a comfort she must have been during that hellish afternoon.

At the cafe we met an officer from the Military Police, deployed to help maintain law and order on the Islands. After the hurricanes a few of the grocery stores had been looted, much to the horror of residents. Looting was unheard of on St John. It's a relatively small community- everywhere you go you meet people that you know. People are warm and welcoming. Many of the old-timers were people who first visited the island by sailboat and fell in love with it and decided to come back and set down roots. Other sailor friends came and joined them. Everyone was relaxed and easy-going. Property values are sky-high and the cost of living is higher than in the states because everything has to be shipped in- groceries, gasoline, building materials etc, but no one seems to be homeless or hungry. The crime rate was low. But there hadn't been a hurricane for 20 years. Josh welcomed the sight of the MP, and spent some time visiting with him and thanking him for being there, and invited him to come back with his family in a few years when things will (hopefully) be better.



While we were sitting out on the deck of the cafe we were entertained by the sight of a catamaran putting into the bay, towing two kayakers and a very beat up looking motor boat attached to one side. Salvage. The motorboat had been part of the small fleet that had been wrecked and sunken in hurricane hole, amongst the mangroves.

Hurricane Hole is actually a pretty special place, although for centuries it was known only as a place to hide your ship during a storm. It is, or was, the home of an unusual ecosystem community of mangrove roots, (or "props"), corals, sponges, and fish, plus an odd assortment of crustaceans, mollusks, worms and

algae. It was a rare and very colorful community of creatures. Last year Josh and Sofi took me snorkeling in the mangroves for the first time; it was like I had been transported to another planet, so strange and alien were the inhabitants. When the sun is at the right angle it lights up the underwater wonderland and brings out all of the vivid blues, yellows, purples and greens. Josh knew the natural history and habits of many of the creatures in the reef, and has a knack for spotting them lurking in their watery hiding places. He loves to point them out to tourists like me and share his delight in them. The mangrove reefs are

like nothing I had ever seen before

in my life, and possibly may never see again. It's so unique and special that in 2005 President Clinton gave it special protection as a designated underwater sanctuary. Unfortunately hurricanes do not respect decrees, even presidential ones. Irma wreaked havoc with the mangroves and threw several dozen yachts, motorboats, and other varieties of watercraft down into Hurricane hole. Josh toured the area on his paddle-board a few weeks ago and fell into a deep depression at the sight of all the chaos and ruin in his beloved snorkeling spot. This afternoon we drove by slowly, noting any sign of life among the man-





grove trees- a few green leaves sprouting here and there. I thought it might be like the forest fires I've seen in California, where often the blackened trees will re-sprout and regrow from charred remnants. Josh will be watching. In the meantime the salvage crews are pulling the boats out, one by one.



At noon it was time for the community meeting. There was plenty of news about what to do with all your storm damage debris- where to put it so that it could be collected and hauled away, updates on water quality isSofis and road closures. Landslides were being cleared, progress being made. Mail is starting to be delivered. A new batch of Red Cross Volunteers with expertise in mental health isSofis had arrived, and a utility worker who had been injured was doing well and wanted to come back and continue working on St John. We met up with friend Pam, a local lady known for her encyclopedic knowledge of the natural history of the island, both on land and below the surface of the sea. If we're lucky we'll go snorkeling with her tomorrow. If we're really lucky Josh's boat might get lifted back up on to its trailer and he will be able to begin getting it seaworthy.

After the meeting Josh took me out

to the east end of the island where the water was clear and the waves were calm and we went paddleboarding. I got to use the big Cadillac paddle-board because I had brought with me the special plug that goes in the bottom of the board to let water out but not in. The original plug had been lost in the chaos of the storm. It had required a bit of on-line sleuthing on my part to find the right plug and have it delivered in time, but what a treat to go gliding over those clear turquoise waters. A sea turtle raised a head to breath and we stopped to marvel at the



great horny head and beak. The cliffs along the shore are beautiful to me- dark limestone and basalt, and some other red and yellow-tan rocks that I'm not sure of, but all carved and beaten by the waves. Many rocks were freshly exposed by landslides and flash floods. There are only a handful of houses at the eastern tip of the island- some survived intact, others were not so lucky. There were a few signs of life. The east end of St John is the end of the line. I think someone said it is the easternmost point in the United States.



November 5, 2017 (Day 8)

Sunday is Fun-day again

Another beautiful day. It's hot and muggy after the usual dawn squall. Sometimes the squall passes over when the sun has risen to just the right angle to cast a rainbow prism across the hill next to us. I can see it from my little downstairs deck. Today there was no rainbow and no joy in mudville as Dad would have said. Josh has been closing in on a sailboat gig for awhile and today he appeared to have clinched the deal, which means he will be leaving the island for awhile. You might think "how could he leave when there is so much work to be done." But piloting and maintaining big yachts and catamarans is his bread and butter. Right now he is lucky to have found employment on one that is floating and seaworthy. He's good at fixing electronics and gadgets and boaty things, but he's really not an electrician. Or a carpenter or a plumber, or a roofer or landscaper or a contractor or any of the other skilled tradesperson jobs that are needed around here. He needs to get out to sea periodically to keep his head on straight. So he will be leaving soon on the ferry to Tortola and Sofi will be left alone to manage all that needs to be done. She is strong and resourceful as is the norm for all of the women on the island, but now she is facing ongoing lack of electrical power, no internet, semi-sporadic cell service, gasoline and grocery shortages, and continuing heat and humidity, and on and on. She'll have to maintain the generator and the solar electric system that Josh cobbled together to run the little refrigerator and some of the other gadgets.



She won't be able to easily contact him to talk things over or have him to share in tackling the ongoing challenges of simply living day-to-day under these conditions. Until the cell towers are repaired she can't easily contact anyone. She hasn't seen any photos of her new grandson or spoken with her brother who is starting treatments for cancer. Her leg hurts from moving furniture around at the cottages. It's hard to keep spirits up. Sometimes she sees all of the progress that has been made and all of the help that has come into the community from the outside world, but other times she only sees the devastation and ruin of the beautiful island that she loves. There are so many stories of people leaving to find work, leaving to find medical help or proper schools for their children, and families being split up or forced to live under tarps, with or without mosquito netting, or in moldy old boats that may or may not float. Stories of government corruption and inept leadership are constant topics of discussion. It's a roller-coaster and the prospect of Josh leaving for a week was sort of a final straw. Her burdens seemed unbearable.

On Sundays folks kind of kick back a little and gather for social events. Josh and Sofi had arrangements to meet friends at Trunk Bay for swimming and snorkeling. First they were going into Cruz Bay to see if they could make some phone calls and find an internet connection. I elected to spend the afternoon in Cruz Bay doing some shopping and walking around. I found an open bookstore and found a book of wonderful photographs of St John. Sofi had treasured her copy of the book; it had been ruined in the hurricane. I bought a copy for her and another for myself plus a couple of other books and lugged them all over town until I found a cafe with a working wifi connection. I spent two hours catching up on email and the news stories of the week. They weren't all that much different than before I left- 2 more mass shootings (8 people in New York and 24 in Texas) and more evidence that our current administration is rife with fraud and corruption. The world is a mess. I'm ready to go home and hug my dogs. Presently Josh and Sofi picked me up at the cafe and we stopped at the market before heading back across the island. We needed to pick up a few items for dinner with friend Pam, (the author of "St John, Feet, Fins and 4-Wheel Drive" which is a must-read for any visitor to St John.) We were happy to find a small assortment of acceptably fresh produce and we didn't look at the price tags. For dinner I was making a freeze-dried lasagna casserole I had brought with me from the States. Salad was a special treat.





Saturday was a roller-coaster day too. I got up early with Josh and worked on clearing more brush from the driveway so that Josh had room to park his car. After 2 hours I had cleared about 10 square feet and was done in. At 9 we rushed down to the boatyard in hopes of finding the truck with the hydraulic crane getting set to lift Josh's boat back onto its trailer. This was the third or fourth time the truck was supposed to come- the first couple of times it had been too muddy and the last time one of the hydraulic legs was broken, waiting on a part. Josh was hopeful that this time there would be some action. There wasn't. The manager of the boatyard was off somewhere fixing somebody's generator. The highlight of the

morning was meeting Elliot. Elliot salvages boats. He was pretty busy these days. Everyday he went out and raised a boat up from somewhere in the bay



or over in the mangrove reefs of Hurricane Hole, and brought it back to the dock. He had an impressive array of 4" diameter ropes, and some tough inflatable bladders that he used up to elevate the hulls of the boats off of whatever they had been flung upon or lodged up against by Irma. He jammed the empty bladders underneath a hull and inflated them with a compressor to raise the boat up enough to get the ropes under it. Sometimes he had to scuba dive to go underneath things. It was hard, dangerous work, but a vital step in restoring life to the reefs and order to the community. Since there was nothing more to be done towards resurrecting Josh's



boat we gathered up the snorkel gear and headed over to Pam's. The plan was to pick up Pam and then join up with Sofi, who was down at the cottages meeting with a contractor (hopefully), and then go out to one of the little snorkeling holes on the south side.

#### Pam's house

Some day I sincerely hope a worthy writer will write the story of Pam Gaffin. I've only been fortunate enough to hear bits and pieces, but they are enough to stop me in my tracks and ask for more. The first time I came to St John I was loaned a copy of the book *St John, Feet, Fins and 4-Wheel Drive*. Sofi told me it was the best source for getting quickly oriented to the Island and find out the best places for hiking, exploring and swimming. I devoured the book, appreciating the terse style and wealth of practical information balanced with fascinating cultural and natural history. The author had obviously explored every inch of trail, road, beach and bay on the island, including many roads and routes used by Dutch, Danish and Native American peoples which might only be a faint track in the jungle by now. Pam knew them and had explored them. Armed with Pam's book and an excellent waterproof map courtesy of the St John "Trail Bandit", I was able to make the most of my short time on the island to become closely acquainted with the 20 square miles of St John which pokes out above the surface of the Caribbean Sea. When I found out that Pam lived in Coral Bay and was an old friend of Sofi, I was eager to meet her. I offered to cook my (famous) eggplant Parmesan if we could invite her to dinner. By the time our dinner date rolled around I had heard a few Pam stories- enough to make me wonder what sort of evening we were in for. I knew she was outspoken, opinionated, knowledgeable about nearly everything, generous, hardworking, tough, resourceful, indepen-







dent and never wore shoes. She didn't suffer dishonesty, laziness, or braggarts. She had indeed hiked nearly every inch of the island and snorkeled every inch of every bay, and knew the names and hangouts of all of the interesting sea creatures inhabiting all of the reefs and bays. If you wanted to know the best places to find octopuses or lobsters, ask Pam. Pam documented the first mass migration of hermit crabs and is probably the only person alive to witness a whelk jumping to escape from a hungry octopus. Twice. She's been to Egypt, Belize, Argentina, Australia and canoed the Amazon Basin, (the canoe tipped over), and probably a hundred other places I haven't heard of.

Her feet are simply extraordinary. Pam's feet are in

no respect a slave to fashion. They are strong, tough, and absolutely functional assets perfectly suited to her fearless and active lifestyle. One reason she never wears shoes is because it's impossible for her to find anything that fits. The other reason is that she doesn't need to. She tromps barefoot over rocks and gravel, through brushy paths and forest trails, and up and down the steep rocky island guts and waterfalls.

Pam moved from New England to St John many years ago. For 15 years she lived in a bus while she worked and paid for her land and built a house (much of it by herself). It's on a steep hillside, naturally, tucked into a hairpin turn on the Centerline Road. You'll be happy to know that the house and the old bus parked up behind it survived the hurricanes mostly intact. A door blew out the backside but the roof and the hurricane shutters held fast. Her cistern, which holds 5,000 gallons and is made of fiberglass, now leaks from a hurricane-induced crack on the bottom side, which will be very challenging to repair. I have no doubt Pam will find a way, even if it involves scuba diving to the bottom of the tank. The driveway presented another challenge, as several tons of mud and rock in addition to a giant concrete buttress from the edge of Centerline Road had been deposited across it. Last year a utility pole had fallen down across it, but that had finally been dealt with. Pam was used to navigating an obstacle course to get to her house.



came through strongly, but not so strongly that I thought I was at risk of being dashed against the rocks. We saw a lot more corals and fish than we had seen elsewhere, and Pam explained that the depth of the trench and the layers of rock ledges on either side of the trench had provided a safe haven for living creatures during the hurricanes, much like the human residents who had survived by hunkering down in the bottoms of their houses protected by their cement cisterns and

On Saturday Josh and I picked up Pam at her house, where I got to meet the cats and tortoises, admire the orchids and other flowers. The home was lovely, standing in stark contrast to most of the other properties in Coral Bay, including some of Pam's neighbors who were in the process of totally gutting and tearing down the remnants of their dwelling. We spent the afternoon snorkeling at Kiddle Beach. We swam slowly out along the south-west reach of the bay to an area called the tunnels, where a deep trench 30 feet wide separated the cliffy shoreline from a rocky outcrop close to the surface. The wave surge





foundation walls. We stopped by several octopus burrows but found nobody home until our last stop on the way back to shore. I had seen lots of holes, but I had never seen an octopus. For one thing, you have to dive down deep enough to grab ahold of something and stick your face right up to the mouth of the burrow. I would always run out of breath before I could get a look, or my mask would fog up or leak, or my ear canals would hurt because of the depth of the water. I'm really an amateur when it comes to snorkeling. It's embarrassing. But this time I saw the bright red leg and white suction cups of the octopus. Exciting! I asked Pam whether the octopus knew we were there- I didn't want to alarm him or cause him stress. Pam said yes, there was no doubt he knew we were there and wasn't worried about us because he was very securely lodged in his excellent burrow. She went down and poked him; he didn't budge. If he was worried he'd turn green, Pam explained. I looked again. Bright red. Octopuses have 9 brains- one in each arm and a central one in their heads. They can turn any color they want and squeeze themselves through the narrowest of spaces. The only thing rigid on an octopus is the eyeball. They can live to be quite old, but die after they mate and give birth. The babies eat the mother's remains. Other than that last bit I'd be game to be an octopus next time around.

Josh led me over to a little grotto on the lee shore where there was a little sandy beach with large boulders strewn about. Little Turk's heads cacti sprouted from the cliff face. Floating face down in water barely over a foot deep we saw little bunches of baby sargent major fishes with their adorable little baby tough guy dorsal fins erect on their tops. Sunlight glittered and danced on the sandy bottom as the black and yellow striped babies darted about. Playing hide and seek,

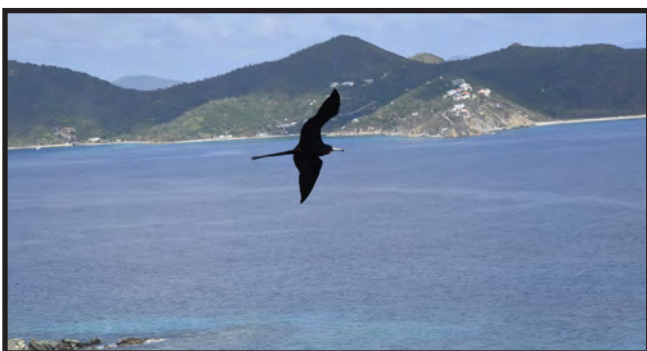
I'd guess.



After the swim we sat on the rocky beach and warmed up. I walked around looking at shells and corals washed up on the beach. Actually, it was just the bleach white skeletons of corals. Some look like branches and others are round, like softballs or melons. In the early structures built on the island the architects used corals as building blocks along with other kinds of stones- you can see them in all of the ruins. They are quite beautiful and striking features in the walls of the old buildings. At Kiddle Bay corals were all over the beach, part of the rocky shoreline.

By the time Sunday dinner with Pam rolled around we were all mostly back on top of the emotional roller-coaster. Everyone agreed that the freeze-dried lasagna was pretty darn tasty, and the salad was a hit. Pam brought some MREs ("Meals Ready to Eat") that the Rescue Workers had passed out to residents in the days following Hurricane Irma. They are truly a miracle of modern chemical engineering. We puzzled over the instructions and Sofi tried one just for fun. Wasn't bad, she said. I brought out cookies for dessert. Pam told stories until it was time to go home and go to bed and I realized that someone, (Barbara Kingsolver would be a good choice), needs to write them all down for posterity.

This morning (Monday) Sofi and I talked a little bit about how easy it is to underestimate the ongoing impact Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria are having on the people who live here. It's not just a bump in the road for them, not something to spend a few weeks doing recovery and then life is back to normal. It's like going through a divorce or a malignant cancer, or the death of a loved one. The hurricanes' impacts are far from over. If you've been through one, you have my sympathy and respect; if you haven't lived through one it's impossible to understand unless you come down here and spend a week or two. Come



down and help if you've a mind

to, but be prepared. It won't be a luxury tropical vacation experience. The people are tough and resourceful but many are deeply wounded- homes ruined, livelihoods swept away.



Today the rain returned with a constant string of squalls and torrential downpours blowing up from the southeast. I am spending the day sitting on the ruined deck of one of Sofi's rental cottages, watching the squalls blowing in off the sea, watching



the islands appear and disappear behind curtains of rain. Once a rainbow appeared, briefly. A frigate bird wheels and soars the updrafts. It's still beautiful. Tomorrow I'm going back to California, happy to be heading home. But I'll be back, someday. Paradise is not lost.





















