



U.S Virgin Islands

A Visit to St. Thomas & St. John

by [Albert Fried-Cassorla](#)

The Virgin Islands have been called "the American Paradise." After our recent visit, I'd have to say: Seems so!

We had a lovely 10-day journey to St. Thomas, with an excursion to St. John via ferry. The sights were splendid. Planned right, it can be as vigorous or relaxing as you'd like. Here's my story...

A brief history of the Islands

The land now called the U.S. Virgin Islands originally belonged to the Taino Indians. Christopher Columbus "discovered" it in 1493. He found it uninhabited and moved on. But he liked it enough to name it after Ursula and her 10,000 virgins. Slavery was important for sugar plantations here and elsewhere, and this was a huge center for slave trade.

Then the East India Company owned it and in 1733 the Danes conquered it. Finally, they were bought by the U.S. in 1917. In part, we bought it to ward off Germany's using it as a U-boat base.



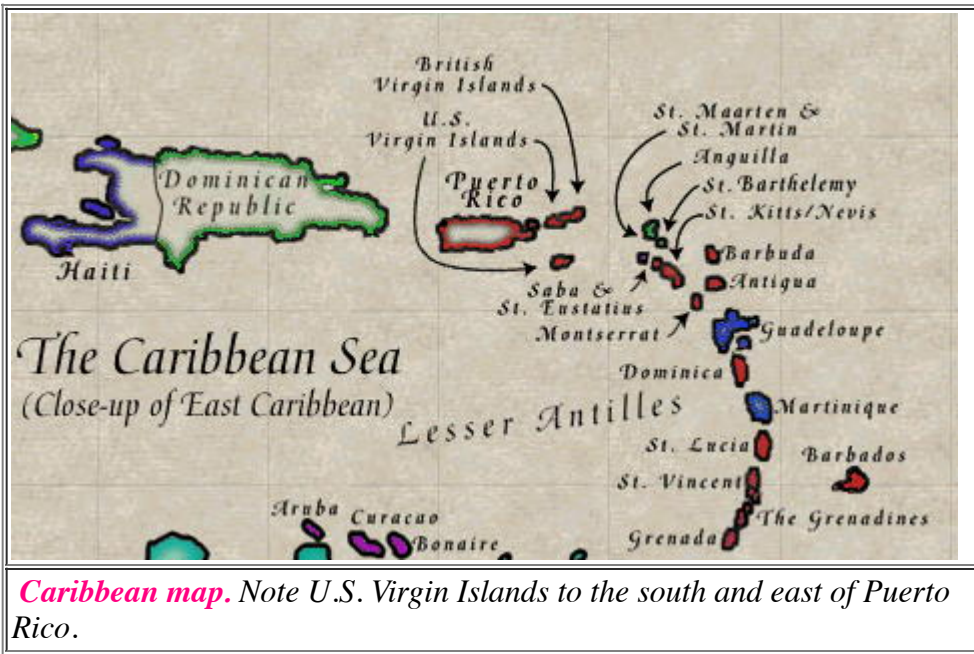
A room with a view... and relaxing sounds of small waves lapping

Our Flight

The flight from Philadelphia to St. Thomas took a scant 3 hours, 45 minutes. It was smooth sailing from 30 degree wintry dreck to balmy 75 degree sultry breezes. The warm tropical air and glorious sunshine brought joy to our poor, summer-deprived souls.

This was our fourth Caribbean journey, but our last visit was long ago -- about 11 years earlier to Barbados.

We didn't go exclusively to lob on beaches. Our style is more to explore, relax, and explore some more.



The island features many excellent hotels and resorts. We shopped for this vacation on web travel sites -- then once we had some packages in mind, we worked out a similar deal with our neighborhood travel agents at Globe Travel.

Stephanie and Candace always take good care of us. I appreciate their personal touch and their good advice.

We stayed at the Best Western Emerald Beach, near Cyril King Airport.

It's on Lindberg Bay, where Charles Lindberg landed in 1928. He thought it could be a good place for the post office to bring in the mail via seaplane.

I had wanted a hotel on the beach -- not just accessible to it. And this fit the bill.

We have a lovely bay with aquamarine water outside our balcony window.

This photo-essay is not *The Fodor's Guide to the U.S. & British Virgin Islands*, which I did buy and do recommend. That book gives great advice on hotels, restaurants and more -- what you'd expect.

I wish I'd immersed myself in the gold-covered tome long before the trip. Why? Just my style, in general -- to read up to make the most of the time.

But preparations are not really necessary. All you need is a will to get into an island mood, 'mon!



Megan's Bay Beach

Megan's Bay Beach

This strand on the north-central side of the island is often ranked among the world's 10 most beautiful beaches. I could see why. It's surrounded by green hills on three sides, with a lovely white beach and deep aquamarine waters.

Cormorants dive almost beside you as you swim. And iguanas come for handouts on the pizzeria roof.

I went for a sweet, 15 minute jog on the beach. I'm use to doing this at various beaches and have mastered the knack of avoiding collisions with strollers and children. Perhaps more importantly, I don't frighten them with my splashing and dashing. Mid-run and post-run dives into the brine felt so refreshing!



Snorkeling off Christmas beach, from our catamaran.

We rented chaises. Snorkel gear was available, but it didn't look like the coral warranted renting of snorkeling gear.

The ride to it over the hill was scarily vertiginous at time. But we made it intact. It was only about a 20 minute drive from our hotel on the south side. So as you can see the island is not that big -- about the size of Manhattan.

One dim spot for our first "being there" day in paradise was a dead battery in our rental car. But the Hertz man came, replaced our battery and guided us back to Charlotte Amalie, the main town on the island.

Earlier in the day we saw the tram ride up to Paradise Point above Charlotte Amalie. But we opted to drive to the summit instead. The views there are wonderful!

The cruise ships in port were immense. Since we don't cruise, we've never seen these behemoths up close. They're gigantic. Aside from the heavy traffic on the main drag, route 30, we were inconvenienced by the cruising hordes.



Scene aboard our catamaran at Christmas Cove.



***Lingbergh Bay.** This is wherte our hotel was located. It's also my favorite photo of the trip, and my current wallpaper.*

Charlotte Amalie and Lindbergh Bay - January 5, 2003

Lindberg Bay

Finally, we had a morning to enjoy at our own beach. It's so pretty!

Snorkeling sounded good, so we got some free gear from our hotel. But there was no coral and few fish. Plus the rocks near where the fish were hurt our feet. End of today's snorkeling experiment.

No matter! We lolled and relaxed in the surf. Very romantic. The Palms Restaurant, on the premises at the Emerald Beach, served up excellent surfside sandwiches.

Enhancing the experience were gorgeous bougainvillea and a pair of brazen iguanas.

Charlotte Amalie

This port town swarms by day with bargain-crazed cruise ship escapees.

Unfazed, we bopped in to see the sights.

At the shops and mini-malls, jewelry merchants looked depressed. Only two cruise ships were in today. I guess that doesn't help them meet their "nut." Having no interest in jewelry, we hustled past the downscale

barkers and upscale blasts of air conditioning into the sultry streets.



Sephardic Synagogue in St. Thomas, the second oldest in the New World

We saw the outside of the Sephardic Synagogue. It was closed on a Saturday, a curious fact which a fellow tourist attributed to security concerns.

Likewise, Fort Christian was closed. It houses a museum of Virgin Islands' history where we had hoped to get some of the historical thread untangled. Perhaps on another day we'll make it back.



Statue of Blackbeard.

The 99 Steps and Blackbeard's Castle

We climbed some of the 99 Steps to Blackbeard's castle. These are flower-lined flights of outdoor stairs. Later we drove to the top, where there's an elegant iguana Restaurant, with lovely flowers and a commanding view.

Within its patio is Blackbeard's castle. This belonged to the notorious Edward Teach, who often killed people for sport while idling about.

According to the plaque at the tower's base, he had his men bury his plunder before shooting the men, so no one but he would know where it lay.

Blackbeard lit tapers in his beard when attacking and boarding victims' vessels, and carried cutlasses and multiple pistols. He was a human arsenal!

He'd half terrify people to death before swinging a sword or firing a shot. He even had a female companion in piracy, a woman named Bonny who teased her male adversaries before shooting them.

So said the legends on the grotesque statues of this colorful and gruesome pair.

To kill Blackbeard, it finally took a squadron of sailors to corner him and a determined lieutenant, a shot in the face (after which Blackbeard just kept going) and then 29 more bullets.

The hotel 1829 is where Graham Greene is said to have written one of his novels. Nobody there knew which one, but it still looked historic and felt atmospheric. The base of the famed 99 Steps is hard to get to by car -- but we did. After getting lost in a nearby Rastafarian village, we found the place.

Earlier we'd been denied admission by a sour-voiced gatekeeper.

"Closed" she said, adding, "This is a private bread and breakfast."

But we would not be easily deterred. Where Graham Greene had gone, we would tread!

At the bar there, we had some rum and watched the behemoth cruisers exit port with incredible, if elephantine grace. They backed up slowly and precisely, first sounding their incredibly loud fog horns. They could probably waken the dead!

The ships do a sort of mile-long K-turn before steaming out of the harbor.

Next we hit a supermarket. We had to break the string of \$60 dinners to have some fun money left. So sandwiches and tangerines sufficed for dinner.



***Lindbergh Bay with Ship.** This schooner is part of the University of Pittsburgh's program of learning and sailing.*



Cruise ship docked in Charlotte Amalie.

Charlotte Amalie - Havensight Mall - January 7, 2003

So I lied. We do shop a bit. After awhile, anyway.

This mall is right across from the cruise ship docking area. Got some jewelry, cologne and other gifts, 20% less than on the mainland, they say.

The St. Thomas Synagogue

This is the second oldest synagogue in the new world,. The congregation was founded in 1796, and the particular building was built in 1833.

The floor of the synagogue is made of sand, symbolizing the sound-muffling qualities used by crypto-Jews during the Inquisition.

It's a lovely, quiet spot. Sephardic Jews formed a large active part of the local population until the mid 20th century. It waned and finally grew again. Today the congregation and building are supported in part from donations from people around the world.

Creeque Alley and the Mamas and the Papas

I was looking at a map of Charlotte Amalie and saw rue Alley. That rang a distant bell in my memory. Then I recalled that "Creeque Alley" is the name of a song by the Mamas and the Papas that I had adapted for a talent show when my kids were in 2nd grade.

Anyhow, John Philips, Michelle Phillips, Cass Elliott and the other fellow all sang and performed here in a bar owned by the Creeque family. This was told to me by a barkeep, who left his bar to show us the spot. A moment earlier, a friendly photographer lady had abandoned her wares to guide us this knowledgeable fellow. Everyone was so friendly!



Creeque Alley is hard to find. It appears on maps but not on street signs. I now remember seeing scenes of the band while they were living in St. Thomas in a documentary on the group. I love their music and Creeque Alley is one unique, clever song. (In fact, I'll show the lyrics here on a separate page. Note that Duffy's Love Shack is a restaurant bar on the northeast side of the island. Didn't know that 'til I visited. They should open a Mamas and Papas Museum here. I'd be happy to fly down a few times a year to sing some off their tunes!

Creeque Alley in Charlotte Amalie.

CREEQUE ALLEY by The Mamas The Papas (Phillips-Gilliam)

E
John and Mitchy were gettin' kind of itchy ,
Just to leave the folk music behind.

A
Zol and Denny, workin' for a penny,
E
tryin' to get a fish on the line.

B
In a coffee house Sebastian sat

A
And after every number they'd pass the hat

E
McGuinn and McGuire, just a-gettin' higher

A
In L.A., you know where that's at

B7 E
And no one's gettin' fat except Mama Cass!

E
Zolly said "Denny, you know there aren't many"

"Who can sing a song the way that you do, let's go south"

A
Denny said "Zolly, golly, don't you think

E
that I wish I could play guitar like you"

A
Zol, Denny and Sebastian sat (at the Night Owl) And after every number they'd pass the hat

E
McGuinn and McGuire, still a-gettin higher,
A
In L.A., you know where that's at!
B7 E
And no one's gettin' fat except Mama Cass!

When Cass was a sophomore, planned to go to Swarthmore But she changed her mind one day

A
Standin' on the turnpike, thumb out to hitchhike
E
"Take me to New York right away"
B7

When Denny met Cass, he gave her love bumps,
A
Called John and Zol and that was the Mugwumps E
McGuinn and McGuire, couldn't get no higher --But
A
that's what they were aimin' at!
B7 E

And no one's gettin' fat except Mama Cass!
Mugwumps, high jumps, low slumps, big bumps

Don't you work as hard as you play
A
Make up, break up, everything is shake-up
E
Guess it had to be that way!
B7

Sebastian and Zol formed the Spoonful
A
Michelle, John, and Denny, gettin' very tuneful
E
McGuinn and McGuire, just a-catchin' fire
A
In L.A., you know where that's at!
B7 E
And everyone's gettin' fat except Mama Cass!

Di-di-di-dit dit dit di-di-di-dit, who-o-oa

----- flute -----

E
Broke-busted, disgusted, agents can't be trusted
And Mitchy wants to go to the sea
A
Cass can't make it, she says we'll have to fake it, We
E
knew she'd come eventually
B7
Greasin' on American Express cards,
A
It's low rent, but keeping out the heat's hard
E

Duffy's good vibrations and our imaginations,
A
Can't go on indefinitely
B7 E
And California dreamin' is becomin' a reality!

Pointe at Villa Olga

This is a beautiful restaurant and beach with pretty flowers and a great salad bar. It's tucked away in a corner of the island on a little road. But it's worth the trouble of finding it.

Nearby is Craig & Sally's, a restaurant which has a great reputation. So find one, and you've found the other.



Caneel Bay scene

St. John - Caneel Bay

The ferry ride from the east end of the island at Red Hook to Cruz Bay in S. John. The Governor for the Virgin Islands apparently commandeered our 10 am ferry, so we had to take the next one.

We'd heard that St. John is nicer than St. Thomas. All, the beaches are prettier. But it has fewer creature comforts, and getting around is harder.

Caneel Bay - One of the most beautiful beaches in the world!

This place is extraordinary. It's a combination of the aquamarine water, seaside bougainvillea and sea grape plants, and the prettiness of a Rockefeller- built resort.

Perfect waters -- we waded and relaxed in it. Then we passed the buffet at the upstairs restaurant and chose sandwiches downstairs.

The signs tell you to use the chaises or water sports equipment. So we did, but no water. Being there was beautiful.

Caneel Bay is one the loveliest places on earth. We felt so privileged to be here. It was hard to say good-bye, but we had a certain number of hours and one more beach to hit.

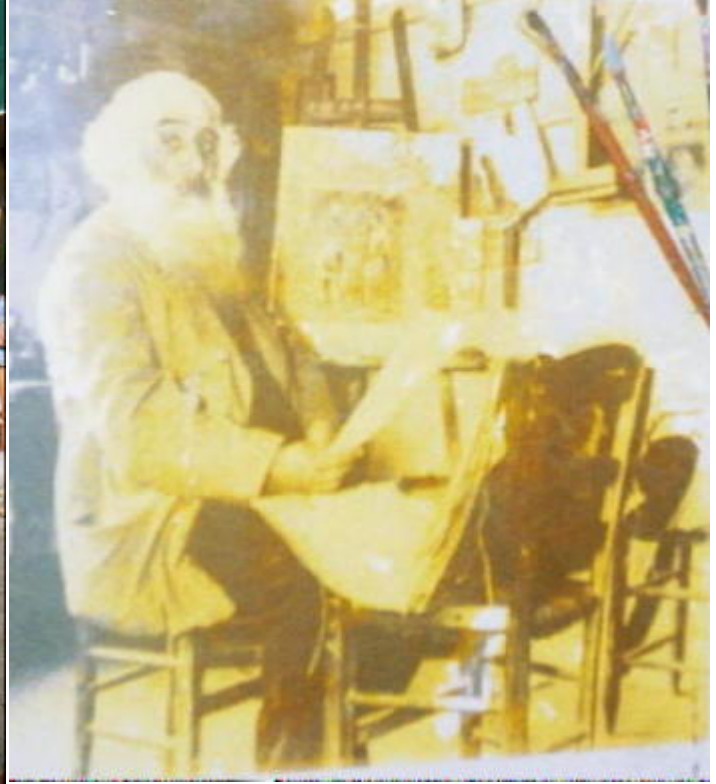
Then it would be back to the ferry in our rental car to catch the 5 PM trip.



Ferry ride to St. John.



I'm standing outside Pissarro's home in downtown Charlotte Amalie.



The great impresionist, Pissarro, who lived on the island.

Snorkeling at Trunk Bay

This beach was almost as pretty as Caneel Bay. It had the gorgeous water, beige sand, and more. It was busier than Caneel Bay, but no matter.

What made it truly special was the underwater marked snorkel trail. You rent a locker, fins, goggles and snorkeling vest. Then you head out on a trail that begins about 70' offshore. The colored ball buoys mark the general triangular path for you.

Along the way, in about 20' of water, cement markers give you info about fish and coral. That was fun, but the best part for me was the foot long Parrot fish. These cuties are aquamarine, green, blue, yellow and see-through. They probably would have come up for a handout.

My snorkel vest kept deflating, so I re-inflated it about 15 times while swimming. One lifeguard on shore and another on a surf-board farther out kept everybody safe.

On the ferry ride back, we met a lovely woman of about 30 who works in a Havensight jewelry store. She was on Holiday. We share an interest in Spanish, Argentina and Italy and hope to see her again.

On another note entirely, I keep thinking back about a waitress at a bar in Havensight.

I thought she was hilariously hard-nosed.

She turned off one great reggae song and put something else on.

I said: "That other tune has been pretty annoying."

She: "Ahh, it's all the same old sh__."

Later I said: "May I have some more popcorn?"

She: "Sure. You can have anything if you kiss my butt!"

Ahh! Local color! I laughed about her hard-boiled cracks many times.



Balcony and Bougainvillea at St. Peter's Estate and Great House.

Estate St. Peter Botanical Gardens and Greathouse

As the native gentleman sitting next to us at Lillian's Grill said of getting there, "If you can find that place, you can find *anything!*"

So we got lost coming and going, but it was worth it. The views and foliage are equally splendid. We could see Tortola, St. John and Magen's Bay. It felt like a spot of heaven on earth.

That's what I hope for from our garden visits, which we make wherever we go.

Unfortunately plant labeling by the Greathouse people is as bad as their directions, i.e. nearly non-existent. Also, you never step on earth, only on wooden, painted railings

But these are small complaints. All in all, heaven is worth it.

The Virgin Islands History Museum at Fort Christian

We finally got to Ft. Christian when it was open. This former fort and prison has good historical lore about the island. It covers Indians from 1000 BC to the colonization by the Danes, Brits and Americans.

Restaurant - Lillian's Caribbean grill

I loved her fried conch fritters. Crunchy and delicately flavored.

Probably the kalaloo was good there, too. I had it elsewhere. It's an island soupy stew made with spinach, okra, and fish, I believe. Very tasty.

We bought gifts at the tented stalls at Emancipation Park downtown. Lots of good bargains there. If you don't mind touristy merchandise.

What's in a name?

Almost everything. Our beach was Mosquito Bay before being renamed after Charles Lindberg.



Sunset on Lindbergh Bay, with toes.

The buzz about Mosquito Bay vs. Lindbergh Bay

We stayed at a hotel called the Best Western Emerald Beach, located in Lindbergh Bay. Fifty years ago or so, the body of water was called Mosquito Bay. Can you imagine a hotelier building on a place with that name? Hundreds of millions of dollars are at stake in such decisions. So they re-named the place for Lucky Lindy (Charles Lindbergh), who landed there in 1928.

Clearly, the name-change was a smart marketing move!

* * *

There you have it - eight days of fun in the sun, exploring, enjoying nature and each other's company. I wish you as good or better an experience!



Enjoy one of nation's great treasures!

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