

**Title:** Finding Nirvana in the US Virgin Islands

**Subheading:** St. John and St. Croix, US Virgin Islands

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**Words:** 1,002 (1226 including the sidebar)

White-sand beaches; sun-drenched days; warm, crystal-clear azure waters—this is what we often hear about the US Virgin Islands. A two-week journey to the islands of St. Croix and St. John confirmed these word pictures to be valid.

Located 1,100 miles southeast of Miami, sandwiched between the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea, the three emerald isles of St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix make up the United States Virgin Islands. South of the Tropic of Cancer but enveloped with the security and efficiency of the American government (Denmark sold the Virgin Islands to the U.S. in 1917 for \$25 million), the USVI combines the comforts of home with the look of a foreign island paradise. The gentle Caribbean people smile often, answer kindly to questions, and take great pride in their country and heritage.

Since St. Thomas is the primary destination of tourist cruise ships, this journey was concentrated on the two outer islands, St. John and St. Croix. And although the USVI, in total, is the Caribbean's most popular tourist destination these two islands didn't have the feel of places besieged by vacationers.

## **ST. CROIX**

Since the day Columbus landed on St. Croix's north shore more than 500 years ago, sugar and rum have played a role in the daily life and culture of this 82-square-mile island—the chain's largest. But with the bustling port towns of Christiansted and Frederiksted, a newly built casino on the island's southeast coast and the Western Hemisphere's largest oil refinery at its southern edge, St. Croix also reflects modern day realities. Then spend time in rainforests dotting the mountains to the west, deserts overlooking the eastern shores, or secluded beaches encircling the entire island, and you'll realize, in addition, that St. Croix dazzles her visitors with colorful, and very natural, scenery.

Over time, St. Croix has been ruled by seven countries, a fact noticeable in town architecture and the seven flags—Spanish, Dutch, British, French, Knights of Malta, Danish, and American—displayed throughout the island. Slight downsides of the island are infrequent neglected neighborhoods and unemployed locals, the result of St. Croix losing its cruise ships contracts a few years back. The upsides are numerous island locations that exude the “untouched island” feel. No packed beaches here; no tourist traps for buying St. Croix frig magnets with matching hot pink key chains.

Although poking around colonial cities and lounging on the sand are perfectly logical ways to spend time, truly memorable moments can be gained on an eco-hike. After winding up an unnamed dirt road, I came to a roadside pullout where

Ras Lumumba awaited. Overlooking a rainforest and easily spotted among the westerners, this smiling Rastafarian greeted vacationers as they loaded their daypacks and anticipated an adventuresome trek. Ras owns and operates Ay-Ay Eco Hike & Tours, sharing his knowledge of island history and local wildlife, all with his own Caribbean flare. Ras led the group along trails from the mountaintops down through the jungles and out to the shores of Annaly Bay where tide pools and rocky shores afforded a welcome lunch break. The daylong hike provided stunning scenery as well as humorous and informative commentary from our seriously-dreadlocked leader, it was truly an experience to savor before I departed the island.

To reach St. John from St. Croix, entails boarding a seaplane back to St. Thomas, a 20 minute cab ride to the eastside, then a state-of-the-art, high-speed catamaran cruise to Cruz Bay, St. John. Not a bad way to travel, when you think of it.

## **ST. JOHN**

At 28-square-miles, the mountainous island of St. John is the smallest of the three jewels, but in many eyes the loveliest. With its secluded coves and stunning beaches, its no wonder that Laurence Rockefeller, who experienced the island in 1956, wound up buying, then donating, a major portion of St. John that eventually became Virgin Islands National Park. Current park offerings include hiking trails, protected bays for kayaking and snorkeling, white sand beaches to

reach your nirvana, and all of it is protected from industry and overdevelopment.

As the ferry docks in Cruz Bay you will soon understand why the natives call the small town “Love City.” As the center of activity on St. John, Cruz Bay contains all the feeling of tropical island life packed into an area no larger than a few square miles. Local craftsmen are selling island art, gift shops display colorful curios, lively bars send out intoxicating rhythms, and palm-roofed restaurants fill the air with appetizing smells. As if that’s not enough, well-stocked grocery stores bring visitors and locals together at this island hot spot. Small wonder it’s called “Love City.” Yet fair warning: Too much of a good thing can be taxing. Now’s the time to explore the island’s many, shall we say, more natural offerings.

My drive along the north shore road presented panoramic views of rocky coves and white beaches; emerald cays and turquoise waters. Trunk Bay, Hawksnest Bay, Cinnamon Bay, and Maho Bay are just four of the dozens of highly rated beaches to visit. At the end of the road, I toured the 19<sup>th</sup> century ruins of the Annaberg Sugar Mill. It rests atop a small bluff and, while serving to educate me on the island’s intriguing history; I enjoyed captivating vistas of Sir Francis Drake Passage and the British Virgin Island of Tortola.

Another sensual scenario involved my packing a picnic and hiking the Lind Point Trail to Honeymoon Beach. This brief woodland path climbs half a mile out of Cruz Bay to Lind Point, taking me through semi-dry forests and cactus scrubs.

At trail's end, a picture-perfect beach awaited, reminding me of a Corona beer commercial with its "miles away from the ordinary" feeling.

Spending a week on both St. Croix and St. John islands is no guarantee of experiencing all that is to see and do there. Possibly, it's because, as one local put it, "Island life brings no urgency in one's actions." Such is the way of the Virgin Islands.

**SIDE BAR:** Inter-island travel of planes, ferries, and automobiles

**By Plane:** Numerous Airline companies fly into St. Thomas, but to hop down to St. Croix, flights on twin-engine seaplanes are available through two small airlines:

Cape Air: Scheduled flights to St Thomas, San Juan PR, Tortola BVI and St. Croix. Tel: (800) 352 0714

Seaborne Air Line: Sea Plane, Scheduled flights connecting St. Thomas, St. Croix, Puerto Rico and the British Virgin Islands. Tel: (340) 773-6442

**By Ferry:** Charlotte Amalie and Red Hook on St. Thomas are the launching points for ferries to and from Cruz Bay, St. John.

**By Car:** Many rental companies offer vehicles on the islands including Budget Rent-a-Car, Discount Car Rental, or Dependable Car Rental. A valid driver's license is needed, but no local permit or international driver's license is required. However, they do drive on the left side of the road opposite of the states. Also be aware when requesting a specific sized vehicle, ask for the name and make of

the car; requesting an SUV and render Jeep Wrangler. Safari Buses and taxis are also available to get around the islands.

**CONTACTS:**

Tourism information: [www.usvitourism.vi](http://www.usvitourism.vi)

Virgin Islands National Park at [www.nps.gov/viis/](http://www.nps.gov/viis/)

Ras Lumumba's Ay-Ay Eco Hike & Tours 340-772-4079, email [eco@viaccess.net](mailto:eco@viaccess.net).

St. Croix Scuba Diving: Cane Bay Dive Shop: 340-338-9913, or Dive Experience: 340-773-3307

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