

Chasing Victory in Paradise

By Andrea Milam

*Test your mettle in
a tropical setting*

If you're like most people who visit the Virgin Islands, you've come here to enjoy the sun, sand, and sea, and ultimately, to relax. But for those who simply can't quell their competitive spirit, the island of St. John offers several ways for visitors to challenge themselves while enjoying the island's natural beauty.

The newest competition on the scene, the St. John Trail Race, welcomes serious trail runners to immerse themselves in the Virgin Islands National Park's verdant greenery as they snake through 14 miles of park trails, experiencing historic ruins and sweeping ocean views along the way. The inaugural race took place on February 29, 2016, when 32 runners sweated it out in the island's most physically challenging competition. Organized by part-time resident and longtime trail runner Kyle Hart and supported by St. John Rescue volunteers, V.I. Police Department officers, VINP personnel, and volunteers who counted and timed runners, served up water at various checkpoints, and cheered on the competitors. The race went off without a hitch. The winner, Evan Quirk-Garvan, finished with an impressive time of 2:22!

"I asked myself: 'What's the best experience I could create on St. John for trail runners?'" Kyle says of the race's inception. "How could I incorporate the most beautiful places along the way?"

The result of Kyle's careful consideration is a course that both challenges and delights. Steep ascents are rewarded with incredible ocean views, 19th-century Danish ruins offer thought-provoking wonder, and the vigorous cheers from volunteers stationed along the course propel runners forward. The intense course starts with a climb from Cruz Bay to Caneel Hill before following the ridge line to Margaret Hill



and dropping down to the Water Catchment Trail head. The longest road portion of the course then begins, with a 1.3-mile stretch on Centerline Road to L'Esperance, where runners then descend alongside the Fish Bay Gut to Reef Bay. The course then quickly gains elevation up the Reef Bay Trail before crossing Centerline and descending to Maho via the Maria Hope Trail. From there, runners head to Leinster Bay Trail where they connect to the Johnny Horn Trail and finally descend to the Coral Bay finish line. That's quite a trek.

"Kyle made it fun and enjoyable by having us pick up bracelets at specific points along the run, most of which forced you to stop and take in the beauty of that location," says Rebecca Reinbold, who finished 11th overall in the 2016 race. "It was definitely a tough race. I loved the race and the whole experience because it combined the natural beauty of St. John's trails with a fun, athletic competition."

A less grueling but still formidable challenge, the 8 Tuff Miles road race recently celebrated its 20th year. The race has grown considerably from its inaugural event in February 1997, when 21 runners completed the 8.38-mile route. 8 Tuff Miles has evolved from its early years, when some runners competed in flip-flops and some water stations served alcohol-based refreshments, to a serious and well-known race that draws hundreds of stateside visitors. In 2016, 1,155 runners completed the 8 Tuff Miles road race. Best of all, 8 Tuff Miles and the St. John Trail Race are scheduled just a few days apart so you can compete in both on the same trip.

Another well-established and acclaimed competition is the Friends of the VINP's Beach to Beach Power Swim. Testing your mettle in this open-water swimming race doubles as a good deed, as the event is a major Friends fundraiser. Several hundred competitors young and old take to St. John's north shore each May for this race, whose varied courses and categories welcome everyone from the



The St. John Trail Race is a challenging course through the Virgin Islands National Park.

casual snorkeler to the Olympic contender. Swimmers who wish to use fins and a snorkel can enter the assisted category, while those competing without the added gear swim in the unassisted category.

All Beach to Beach Power Swim courses start at Maho, with a one-mile short course, a two-and-a-quarter-mile intermediate course and a three-and-a-half-mile long course finishing at Hawksnest. Solo swimmers and relay teams swim in the race, which is supported by countless volunteers who man each starting and finish line and ensure the safety of swimmers in the water from aboard paddleboards, kayaks, and boats.

Now in its 17th year, the Love City Triathlon consists of a half-mile swim at Maho Bay, a 14-mile bicycle race and a four-mile run to Annaberg, returning to Maho Bay. Both individuals and relay teams can participate. The event also includes an aquathlon that does not include the cycling portion of the race. There's also a "SUPathlon" which combines the swimming and running portions of the race with two trips around Whistling Cay on a stand-up paddleboard.

Some of these competitions have a cap on entries, so be sure to register early. Whether you opt for a simple and beautiful snorkel along the Beach to Beach Power Swim's short course or you choose to conquer 14 miles of trails in the St. John Trail Race, the island offers up the perfect reward for those who exercise their competitive spirit here. A picturesque beach invites you to soak your sore muscles and a smiling St. John bartender is ready to serve you up a sweet painkiller once you've pushed yourself to the limit in paradise.



Katrina Crumpler took first place in the Women's Division of the 2016 St. John Trail Race.

St. John Trail Race: <https://stjohntrailrace.com/>
 8 Tuff Miles: <http://8tuffmiles.com/>
 Beach to Beach Power Swim: <http://friendsvinp.org>