



A MAGICAL KAYAK RIDE

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Mangroves are the glue between terra firma and Poseidon's domain. They stand stoically at their shoreline posts, their downward arching roots and canopy of rounded green leaves giving little hint as to just how many species of both land and sea depend on these unusual trees.

Just below the water line, the tangled mangrove roots offer a haven to those most vulnerable of sea creatures: juvenile fish, who rely on the fringe forests both for shelter from predators and for nourishment, which they find in the form of byproducts of decaying mangrove leaves and twigs.

Vibrant corals and sponges flourish beneath the mangroves, bolstered by the protection of the plant's roots, which trap debris and reduce turbidity during periods of heavy rain and runoff. Countless other species spend their young lives here, including baby lobsters, shrimp, crabs and conchs; this menagerie of sea life could not be more artfully arranged among mangrove roots if it was part of a pet store display.



TOP Wildlife among the mangroves captivates kayakers.

ABOVE A guide and his kayak slice through Hurricane Hole waters.

RIGHT The crystal clear waters off St. John offer excellent visibility.





It's one of the richest, most concentrated areas of wild-life a snorkeler could hope to come across, and the best example of diverse, thriving mangrove forests on St. John can be found at the island's peaceful East End in the placid, protected waters of Hurricane Hole.

Hurricane Hole, part of the V.I. Coral Reef National Monument, is the island's great protector. In addition to sheltering various species of marine life as they grow toward maturity, she opens her arms to marine vessels during hurricanes, which tie up to a storm chain that can accommodate more than 100 vessels, installed by the Virgin Islands National Park (VINP).

In turn, the National Park protects the bay by prohibiting anchoring, fishing, waterskiing and jet-skiing within its waters. Few tour companies have been given permission by the VINP to ply this sheltered bay on the island's southern shore. One of those lucky companies is Arawak Expeditions, owned and operated by longtime resident Arthur Jones, who's been kayaking around St. John for more than two decades.

Arawak's Hurricane Hole kayaking excursion begins at Princess Bay, located on the eastern side of Hurricane Hole, where Centerline Road runs directly adjacent to the shore and there's a convenient opening in the mangroves for the launch of the kayaks.

The tour group, which never numbers more than 10 and is generally led by two guides, first paddles to a small peninsula that juts out in Otter Creek, just east of Princess Bay. A mix between a tiny sandy beach and mangrove-fringed shoreline offers ideal snorkeling.

"In the mangroves, you see pretty much everything you'd see out on a reef, but miniature; you see barracudas only this big," says Arthur, holding his fingers barely an inch apart. "There's really great snorkeling there."

Above the water, myriad species of birds like the mangrove cuckoo, and various herons and egrets, only add to the mangroves' beauty. Like the fish and corals that find shelter and food within mangrove roots below, the mangrove cuckoo builds its nest among the plant's branches, while herons and egrets roost and hunt here as well.



TOP RIGHT A rocky shoreline offers a brief respite from paddling during Arawak’s kayak excursion.

MIDDLE Kayakers launch from a sandy shoreline on the island’s East End.

MIDDLE RIGHT A variety of colors and textures are found among underwater mangrove roots.

BOTTOM RIGHT Kayakers make their way through azure waters.

CENTER ABOVE Kayaks hover mere inches from the colorful abundance of wildlife that calls the mangroves home.

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP LEFT Healthy, vibrant corals thrive thanks to protection from the mangroves.

BOTTOM LEFT Kayakers converse with their guide during a lunch break from paddling.

The allure of Hurricane Hole extends beyond its mangroves, and Arawak’s kayak excursion aims to explore it all. Following the snorkeling stop at Otter Creek, kayakers paddle past a Danish cannon circa the late 17th Century that’s partially buried on the shoreline, to a rocky peninsula called Turner Point, which frames the eastern edge of Hurricane Hole. After refueling there with a bit of lunch, the group typically kayaks west across the bay to Mardenboro Point at Borck Creek, where a sandy beach and a beautiful reef—home to sergeant majors, parrotfish, damselfish, angelfish and more—makes for spectacular snorkeling. This stop is the last on the all-day Hurricane Hole tour before kayakers return to Princess Bay, and the safety of the mangroves.

“It’s the most unique trip we offer,” says Arthur of the Hurricane Hole excursion. “It’s a side of the island a lot of people wouldn’t otherwise get to see.”

It’s this seclusion, coupled with the VINP’s protective regulations, that’s helped keep the entire bay a healthy, thriving haven, and it’s Hurricane Hole’s menagerie of sea life that makes it so alluring, even to kayaking veterans like Arthur.

“Hurricane Hole is one of my favorite places,” he says.

All it takes is one trip below the surface. Peer into the window of underwater ecology at work among Hurricane Hole’s mangrove roots, and the colors, activity and beauty will be forever lodged in your memory, returning to you again and again, for years to come. **SJM**