

# THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS

A wide-angle photograph of a tropical coastline. In the foreground, there's a dense thicket of green foliage, including large banana leaves and some red flowers. Beyond this, a pristine white sand beach curves along the edge of a vibrant turquoise lagoon. The water transitions from a shallow, bright blue near the shore to a deeper blue further out. In the background, several green islands are visible across the water, and the sky is a clear, deep blue with a few fluffy white clouds. A few birds are seen flying in the upper left corner.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
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**A**sk 10 different people what they think is special about the U.S. Virgin Islands, and you'll likely get 10 different answers. There is much to love about this overwhelmingly beautiful collection of islands.

Perhaps you cherish the whimsical beauty of the cays, simple picturesque rises of sand peeking just high enough above the brilliant blue sea to support a few adorably quintessential coconut palms. Maybe the majestic, looming presence of the three main islands, St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John, is what pulls at your heart strings, with their dominant rolling emerald hills sloping ever so gently to the sea.

Is it the beaches that you drum up in your memory during flights of daydreaming? There's certainly no shortage of those in the USVI, from the finest white powdery sand to curious blue cobblestone fringes, from action-packed stretches lined with vendors and beach bars to elusive, secluded strips accessible only by long hikes whose brilliance is well worth the trek.

Perhaps it's the sea that tickles your fancy. Viewing our waters from the air is a study in blues, as practically luminescent turquoises fringe the islands, gradually deepening along with the sea floor to a deep cobalt. Beneath the surface, sea turtles, stingrays, vibrant coral reefs and a menagerie of sea life are a delight to observe, via an easy snorkel just off the shore, or by plunging many feet below with trained diving instructors.

It may be hard to believe that these placid waters were once plied by pirates and swam through by slaves seeking one last desperate escape. Many of the islands' different eras have left their mark here and can still be seen today, like the petroglyphs at Reef Bay on St. John, carved hundreds of years ago by the Tainos, who inhabited the islands when they were discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1493. Perhaps the

most well-known piece of the Virgins' history is the Danish plantation era, the evidence of which is scattered across our landscape in the form of plantation ruins. These ruins are most prolific on St. Croix, where this rich history is evident in majestic sugar mills and the island's two main towns, Frederiksted and Christiansted. One of the more curious aspects of the Virgin Islands' past today lives on in the fact that we drive on the left: Before cars arrived, donkeys were the main mode of transportation, and they happened to prefer traveling the left side of the (then-dirt) roads. As cars became more and more popular, they fell in line with the donkeys.

For all the natural beauty and wondrous history the U.S. Virgin Islands have to offer, the islands' people play their part in keeping visitors coming back. U.S. Virgin Islanders are fiercely proud of their heritage, and can initially come across as being somewhat stoic. But much like those wonderful secluded beaches accessible only by long hike, putting in a bit of effort – starting off with a friendly greeting of “good morning,” or “good afternoon” is a good start – is well worth it. Once you experience the genuine kindness, warmth and unmatched robust hugs doled out by a native Virgin Islander, you'll want to come back again and again.

The true spirit and what makes the USVI so special is difficult to quantify, but renowned island photographer Steve Simonsen captures that which is intangible and shares it for all to experience in the pages of this book. When you're longing for whatever it is that you find special about the islands, flip through these pages and soar, in your mind's eye, across St. John's breathtaking north shore, through the streets at St. Thomas Carnival, and amongst the remarkable historic ruins on St. Croix, and you will be home.

**America's Paradise.** The Stars and Stripes stand proud over Trunk Bay, one of the world's most beautiful beaches and arguably the most alluring place in the United States.









(above) **North Shore Sunset.** Mother Nature's paint brush swipes fiery oranges across the sky at twilight on St. John's north shore.

(opposite) **Moon Rising Over Trunk.** The crowds have gone home and peace envelops Trunk Bay as the moon rises high above.











(opposite) **Rushing Waters.** After heavy rains, the Cinnamon Bay gut comes alive with rushing water, signifying island-wide contentment: thirsty lush tropical plants are being sated, and islanders' cisterns are filling to the brim.

(above) **Romantic Beach Stroll.** Humans aren't the only ones who enjoy romantic strolls on the beach. Donkeys, used many decades ago as the island's main mode of transportation, now roam freely through island hills and along its shorelines.





(top left) **Sea Fan.** Perhaps Festival costume designers draw their inspiration from nature, like this deep water sea fan, whose brilliance could be mistaken for a costume detail.

(bottom left) **Desert Rose.** The desert rose's vivid hue is popular among Festival adornments.

(right) **Festival Happiness.** Smiles are part of the scenery at the Festival parade.

(opposite) **Festival Troupe.** Costumes of bright colors and intricate designs swish and swirl in a fantastical feast for the eyes.





