

St. John travel feature

By Jeff Louderback

Steep forested hills brightened with wildflowers meet white-sand beaches. Decorative coral reefs fringe bays and cays. Bustling villages are too small for cruise ships. There are spots where goats and donkeys outnumber people.

Roughly the size of Manhattan, St. John is a sharp contrast to its sister U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Croix and St. Thomas. Proud locals claim the true virgin places are found on this island, where in 1956 Laurance Rockefeller purchased and deeded large portions of land and sea to the National Park Service, ensuring that "this thing of beauty will be a joy forever."

The U.S. Virgin Islands National Park covers two-thirds of St. John, There are two villages -- Cruz Bay and Coral Bay -- and no airport. The only cruise ship crowds arrive in small groups by ferry, like the one I boarded in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas. Longing for a Caribbean escape, I took the 45-minute voyage to the Westin Resort's private hideaway at Great Cruz Bay, St. John.

Swaying palms and flowering bougainvillea decorate the Westin's 47-acre grounds. Guest rooms dot the hillside and border the long, crescent-shaped beach. Sailboats and yachts float in the harbor, and an open-air restaurant looks out at the Caribbean Sea and the setting sun. @subHed:Visitors Center trailhead @ColText:

Eager to discover what awaits me on St. John, I head to the Virgin Islands National Park Visitors Center in Cruz Bay, a five-minute drive from the Westin. The visitors center provides information on more than 20 self-guided nature trails and 40 beaches within the national park boundaries. Snorkeling trips, history programs, nature talks and adventure hikes are regularly scheduled.

Originating at the visitors center, the 3-mile Reef Bay Hike takes outdoor enthusiasts downhill through moist forests strewn with cacti and passes sugar mill ruins and ancient Arawak Indian carvings called petroglyphs. The hike ends at the shore, where a boat will return you to Cruz Bay if a 3-mile stroll up the steep hill is not appealing.

St. John's most popular attractions are its beaches, where snorkeling and diving match swimming and sunning in popularity.

At Trunk Bay, calm waves roll toward the beach, where coconut palms lean over the sand against a backdrop of forested hills. Snorkelers follow the popular underwater trail, marked by buoys along the edge of a rocky islet. Flat stone plaques identify the coral and tropical fish that inhabit the waters.

Cinnamon Bay -- home to a national park campground and a concessionaire that rents windsurfing equipment, kayaks and mountain bikes -- is another favorite snorkeling spot.

Across the road, the Cinnamon Bay Self-Guided Nature Trail is bordered by giant kapok trees and passes through an old sugar mill site.

To escape the onslaught of snorkelers and divers, the beaches at Leinster Bay, Maho Bay and Francis Bay on the north shore are hidden gems. A hike down the Leinster Bay Trail leads to Waterlemon Cay, where turtles navigate colorful coral reefs and the footprints in the sand will likely be your own. @subHed:Open-air taxi tour @ColText:

Before traversing St. John in my rented car, I decide to explore the island in an open-air taxi driven by James Penn, who entertains and informs guests with stories of St. John's heritage and points out hidden gems

Born and reared here, Mr. Penn is one of many taxi drivers who take visitors on guided tours along the island's winding and sloping roads, stopping at scenic overlooks with postcard views.

Wearing an untucked shirt adorned with images of tropical fish, Mr. Penn drives out of Cruz Bay, admiring the picturesque harbor that faces St. Thomas, 3 miles away. Caneel Bay, where Mr. Rockefeller's vacation home is accompanied by a cozy beachfront resort, Trunk Bay and Cinnamon Bay are among Mr. Penn's stops.

So is Oppenheimer Beach, the former home of atomic bomb scientist Robert Oppenheimer, who donated his modest and tranquil estate to the people of St. John. The gated entrance is accessible to the public. Just park your car, pull open the gate and walk through, said Mr. Penn, who fished these waters as a child and often visited with Mr. Oppenheimer.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, sugar plantations flourished on St. John, producing rum and molasses for the island. Ruins are modern reminders of those days. Some line the roadside while others require an adventurous hike.

The best-preserved ruins are found at the Annaberg Sugar Plantation on the north shore. Slave cabins, stone factory buildings and a windmill that overlooks the Atlantic Ocean evoke visions of an era when the plantation stirred with activity.

At 1,277 feet, Bordeaux Mountain is St. John's highest point. The romantic ambience of Chateau Bordeaux is ideal for a savory steak. During the day from its covered deck, the restaurant serves burgers, soothing ocean breezes and perfect views of the distant British Virgin Islands, St. John's rolling hills and several of the island's protected bays, like Hurricane Hole, where yachts and sailboats seek refuge from inclement weather. @subHed:Water-sports haven @ColText: After three days of exploring mountain trails and sugar mill ruins, swimming and snorkeling in coral-rich bays and wandering down bumpy back roads that lead to hidden natural treasures, I favor a change of pace and spend time on the Westin Resort grounds. Six tennis courts are staffed by a pro who will sharpen your skills with group and one-on-one lessons. The resort spa offers a full range of treatments, including massage therapy and exotic facials and skin treatments.

Kayaks, sailboats, windsurfers and paddle boats are among the water sports equipment available for rent from Caribbean WaterSports & Tours. The outfit also can arrange a parasailing adventure, where you float 150 feet above the Caribbean and gaze down at St. Thomas, St. John and the distant British Virgin Islands.

The Adventurer, a spacious catamaran based at the Westin, embarks on sunset sails and day trips to the British Virgin Islands.

Westin's sparkling gem is its 13,000-square-foot, quarter-acre freshwater swimming pool, which includes a pair of 225-square-foot island planters with towering palm trees and a decorative waterfall. The 450,000 gallon pool cost \$2 million to build and is the largest in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Two adjacent spa tubs and the spirits and sandwiches at Snorkels Bar & BBQ, make the pool area even more inviting.

Perched atop a hill overlooking the pool and Great Cruz Bay, the Chloe and Bernard restaurant features romantic atmosphere and eclectic dishes from around the globe. The open-air restaurant is named for two fictional characters that travel the world in search of more delectable dishes for the menu. I opted for the traditional salmon, which was satisfying, but the highlight of dinner was dessert -- Key lime pie.

The Westin is only one of three resorts on St. John, where the unspoiled beauty leaves you yearning for a longer stay. As I sit on the ferry en route to St. Thomas and a return flight home, I watch as Great Cruz Bay slowly fades from sight.

The locals are right: The true virgin places in the U.S. Virgin Islands are found on St. John.