

ST Thomas, US Virgin Islands

U.S. Virgin Islands It's the combination of the familiar and the exotic found in St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John -- the United States Virgin Islands (USVI) -- that defines this "American paradise" and explains much of its appeal. The effort to be all things to all people -- while remaining true to the best of itself -- has created a sometimes paradoxical blend of island serenity and American practicality in this U.S. territory 1,000 miles (1,600 km) from the southern tip of the U.S. mainland.

The images you'd expect from a tropical paradise are here: stretches of beach arc into the distance, and white sails skim across water so blue and clear it stuns the senses. Red-roof houses color the green hillsides as do the orange of the flamboyant tree, the red of the hibiscus, the magenta of the bougainvillea, and the blue stone ruins of old sugar mills. Towns of pastel-tone villas, decorated with filigree wrought-iron terraces, line narrow streets that climb from the harbor. Amid all the images you can find moments -- sometimes whole days -- of exquisite tranquility: an egret standing in a pond at dawn, palm trees backlit by a full moon, sunrises and sunsets that send your spirits soaring with the frigate birds flying overhead.

Chances are that on one of the three islands you'll find your own idea of paradise. Check into a beachfront condo on the east end of St. Thomas, eat burgers, and watch football at a beachfront bar and grill. Or stay at an 18th-century plantation great house on St. Croix, dine on Danish delicacies, and go horseback riding at sunrise. Rent a tent or a cottage in the pristine national park on St. John, take a hike, kayak off the coast, read a book, or just listen to the sounds of the forest. Or dive deep into "island time" and learn the art of limin' (hanging out, Caribbean-style) on all three islands.

Arriving and Departing

By Air

St. Thomas's Cyril E. King Airport (STT) (PHONE: 340/774-5100) sits at the western end of the island.

Flying time is approximately 2 1/2 hours from Miami, 3 1/2 hours from New York, and 8 1/2 hours from Los Angeles.

Carriers

One advantage to visiting the USVI is the abundance of nonstop and connecting flights to St. Thomas and St. Croix that can have you at the beach in three to four hours from most eastern United States departures. Small island-hopper planes and a seaplane connect St. Thomas and St. Croix, and a ferry takes you from St. Thomas to St. John.

Major Carriers

American Airlines (PHONE: 340/774-6464 or 340/778-1140, www.aa.com) is the territory's major carrier with flights from Miami and New York.

Continental Airlines (PHONE: 800/231-0856, www.continental.com) flies from Newark.

Delta Airlines (PHONE: 340/777-4177, www.delta-airlines.com) flies from Atlanta.

United Air Lines (PHONE: 340/774-9190, www.united.com) flies from Chicago and Washington, D.C.

US Airways (PHONE: 340/774-7885, www.usairways.com) flies from Philadelphia.

Smaller Carriers

American Eagle (PHONE: 340/776-2560 or 340/778-2000, www.aa.com) has frequent flights throughout the day from San Juan.

Transfers Between the Airport and Town

Most hotels on St. Thomas do not have airport shuttles, but taxi vans at the airport are plentiful.

By Taxi

From the airport on St. Thomas, fees (set by the VI Taxi Commission) for two or more people sharing a cab are: \$12 to the Ritz-Carlton, \$9 to Renaissance Grand Beach Resort, \$7.50 to Marriott Frenchman's Reef, and \$5 to Bluebeard's Castle. Expect to be charged 50 cents per bag and to pay a higher fee if you're riding alone. During rush hour, the trip to east end resorts can take up to 40 minutes, but but a half hour is typical. Driving time from the airport to Charlotte Amalie is 15 minutes.

Contacts and Resources

When to Go

The Caribbean high season is traditionally winter -- from December 15 to April 14 -- when northern weather is at its worst. During this season you're guaranteed the most entertainment at resorts and the most people with whom to enjoy it. It's also the most fashionable, the most expensive, and the most popular time to visit -- and most hotels are heavily booked. You must make reservations at least two or three months in advance for the very best places (sometimes a year in advance for the most exclusive spots).

Hotel prices drop 20% -50% after April 15; cruise prices also fall. Saving money isn't the only reason to visit the Caribbean during the off-season. Temperatures are only a few degrees warmer than at other times of the year, and many islands now schedule their carnivals, music festivals, and other events during the off-season. Late August, September, October, and early November are least crowded.

The water is clearer for snorkeling and smoother for sailing in the Virgin Islands in May, June, and July.

The Caribbean climate is fairly constant. The average year-round temperatures for the region are 78 deg. F-88 deg. F. The temperature extremes are 65 deg. F low, 95 deg. F high; but, as everyone knows, it's the humidity, not the heat, that makes you suffer, especially when the two go hand in hand. As part of the fall rainy season, hurricanes occasionally sweep through the

Caribbean. Check the news daily and keep abreast of brewing tropical storms. The rainy season consists mostly of brief showers interspersed with sunshine. You can watch the clouds come over, feel the rain, and have the sun to dry you off, all while remaining on your lounge chair. A spell of overcast days is unusual, as everyone will tell you.

High altitudes can be cool, particularly when winter winds hit Caribbean peaks (late November through January). The mountains and hills of the Virgin Islands therefore can offer an escape from the heat.

Holidays

Although the government closes down for 26 days a year, most of these holidays have no effect on shopping hours. Unless there's a cruise ship arrival, expect most stores to close for Christmas and a few other holidays in the slower summer months.

The USVI celebrate the following holidays: New Year's Day (Jan. 1); Three Kings Day (Jan. 6); Martin Luther King, Jr., Day (3rd Mon. in Jan.); President's Day (3rd Mon. in Feb.); Transfer Day (commemorates Denmark's 1917 sale of the territory to the United States, Mar. 31); Easter holidays (April); Memorial Day (last Mon. in May); Organic Act Day (the 1936 date when the U.S. Congress granted home rule and suffrage to the islands, June 16); Emancipation Day (when slavery was abolished in the Danish West Indies in 1848, July 3); Independence Day (July 4); Supplication Day (third Mon. in July, a day for prayer and protection from storms); Labor Day (1st Mon. in Sept.); Columbus Day and USVI-Puerto Rico Friendship Day (Oct. 11); Hurricane Thanksgiving Day (third Mon. in Oct., for the end of storm season); Liberty Day (honoring Judge David Hamilton Jackson who secured freedom of the press and assembly from King Christian X of Denmark, Nov. 1); Thanksgiving Day (4th Thurs. in Nov.); Christmas Eve and Christmas Day (Dec. 24 and 25); and New Year's Eve (Dec. 31).

Visitor Information

Tourist Offices

In the U.S.

USVI Government Tourist Office (245 Peachtree St., Center Ave. Marquis One Tower MB-05, Atlanta, GA 30303, PHONE: 404/688-0906; 500 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 2030, Chicago, IL 60611, PHONE: 312/670-8784; 3460 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 412, Los Angeles, CA 90010, PHONE: 213/739-0138; 2655 Le Jeune Rd., Suite 907, Coral Gables, FL 33134, PHONE: 305/442-7200; 1270 Ave. of the Americas, Room 2108, New York, NY 10020, PHONE: 212/332-2222; Hall of Streets, #298, 444 N. Capital St. NW, Washington, DC 20006, PHONE: 202/624-3590; 60 Washington St., San Juan, Puerto Rico 00907, PHONE: 787/722-8023; www.usvi.net).

Telephones

The country code for the United States is 1.

If you have a cell phone, you can dial 6611 for information about how to use it locally.

All U.S. telephone numbers consist of 10 digits -- the three-digit area code, followed by a seven-digit local number. If you're calling a number from another area-code region, dial "1" then all 10 digits. If you're calling from a distance but within the same area code, dial "1" then the last seven

digits. For calls within the same local calling area, just dial the seven-digit number. A map of U.S. area codes is printed in the front of most local telephone directories.

Four special prefixes, "800," "888," "877," and "900," are not area codes but indicators of particular kinds of service. "800," "888," and "877" numbers can be dialed free from anywhere in the country. They are usually prepaid commercial lines that make it easier for consumers to obtain information, products, or services. The "900" numbers charge you for making the call and generally offer some kind of entertainment, such as horoscope readings, sports scores, or sexually suggestive conversations. These services can be very expensive, so know what you're getting into before you dial a "900" number.

On St. Thomas, AT&T (Across from Havensight Mall, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, PHONE: 340/777-9201) has a state-of-the-art telecommunications center (it's across from the Havensight Mall) with 15 desk booths, fax and copy services, video phone, and TDD equipment (for people with hearing impairments).

Safety

Vacationers tend to assume that normal precautions aren't necessary in paradise. They are. Though there isn't quite as much crime here as in large U.S. mainland cities, it does exist. To be safe, stick to well-lighted streets at night and use the same kind of street sense (don't wander the back alleys of Charlotte Amalie or Christiansted after five rum punches, for example) that you would in any unfamiliar territory.

Passports & Visas

Entering the U.S. Virgin Islands

If you're a U.S. or Canadian citizen, you can prove citizenship with a current or expired (but not by more than five years) passport or with a birth certificate (with a raised seal) along with a government-issued photo ID. A valid passport, however, is best.

Passport Offices

The best time to apply for a passport, or to renew your old one, is in fall or winter. Before any trip, check your passport's expiration date, and, if necessary, renew it as soon as possible.

U.S. Citizens

National Passport Information Center (PHONE: 900/225-5674; calls are 35 cents per minute for automated service, \$1.05 per minute for operator service; travel.state.gov/passport_services.html).

Money

Banks & ATMs

Debit cards aren't widely used in the islands, although bank cards and major credit cards are helpful for withdrawing cash (in local currency) at automatic teller machines (ATMs). Although ATM transaction fees may be higher abroad, the rates are excellent because they're based on wholesale rates offered only by major banks.

On St. Thomas, First Bank (PHONE: 340/776-9494) is near Market Square. There are waterfront locations for both Banco Popular (PHONE: 340/693-2777) and V.I. Community Bank.

Currency

The American dollar is used throughout the territory, as well as in the neighboring BVI.

The basic unit of U.S. currency is the dollar, which is subdivided into 100 cents. Coins are the copper penny (1 cent) and four silver coins: the nickel (5 cents), the dime (10 cents), the quarter (25 cents), and the half-dollar (50 cents). Silver \$1 coins are rarely seen in circulation; a "golden" dollar coin was introduced in 2000. Paper money comes in denominations of \$1, \$5, \$10, \$20, \$50, and \$100. All these bills are the same size and green in color; they are distinguishable only by the dollar amount indicated on them and by pictures of various famous American people and monuments.

For the most favorable rates, change money through banks. Although fees charged for ATM transactions may be higher abroad than at home, Cirrus and Plus exchange rates are excellent, because they are based on wholesale rates offered only by major banks. You won't do as well at exchange booths in airports or rail and bus stations, in hotels, in restaurants, or in stores, although you may find their hours more convenient. To avoid lines at airport exchange booths, get a bit of local currency before you leave home.

Exchanging Money

It is not as easy to find places to exchange currency in the United States as it is in European cities. Currency may be exchanged at currency-exchange booths in airports and at foreign-currency offices such as American Express Travel Service and Thomas Cook (check local directories for addresses and phone numbers). The best strategy is to buy traveler's checks in U.S. dollars before you come to the United States; although the rates may not be as good abroad, the time saved by not having to search constantly for exchange facilities far outweighs any financial loss.

Taxes

Departure taxes (\$10 for those leaving by air, \$5 for those leaving by sea) are generally written into your ticket.

There's no sales tax, but there is an 8% hotel-room tax in the USVI. The St. John Accommodations Council members ask that hotel and villa guests voluntarily pay a \$1-a-day surcharge to help fund school and community projects and other good works.

Tipping

Many hotels add a 10% to 15% service charge to cover the room maid and other staff. However, some hotels may use part of that money to fund their operations, passing on only a portion of it to the staff. Check with your maid or bellboy to determine the hotel's policy. If you discover you need to tip, give bellmen and porters 50 cents to \$1 per bag and maids \$1 or \$2 per day. Special errands or requests of hotel staff always require an additional tip.

At restaurants, bartenders and waiters expect a 10%-15% tip, but always check your tab to see whether service is included. Taxi drivers get a 15% tip.

Mail

The main U.S. Post Office on St. Thomas is near the hospital, with branches in Charlotte Amalie, Frenchtown, Havensight, and Tutu Mall; there are post offices at Christiansted, Frederiksted, Gallows Bay, and Sunny Isle, on St. Croix, and at Cruz Bay, on St. John.

Sending Mail Home

Letters to the United States are 33 cents and postcards are 21 cents.

On St. Thomas, Federal Express (Cyril E. King Airport, St. Thomas, PHONE: 340/777-4140) offers overnight service if you get your package to the office before 5 PM. Parcel Plus (across from Havensight Mall on Rte. 30, St. Thomas, PHONE: 340/776-9134) also has express mail service.

On St. Croix, Federal Express (Peter's Rest Commercial Center, Rte. 708, St. Croix)

Receiving Mail

If you wish to receive mail while traveling in the United States, have it sent c/o General Delivery at the city's main post office (be sure to use the right zip code). It will be held there for up to 30 days. You must pick it up in person, and bring identification with you. American Express offices in the United States do not hold mail.

Language

English is the official language, though island residents often speak it with a lilting Creole accent, so you might not recognize certain words at first. If you have trouble understanding someone, ask them to speak slowly.

Health

Diver's Alert

Don't fly within 24 hours after scuba diving.

Sunstroke

The major health risk is sunburn or sunstroke. A long-sleeve shirt, a hat, and long pants or a beach wrap are essential on a boat, for midday at the beach, and whenever you go out sightseeing. Use sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15 -- especially if your complexion is fair -- and apply it liberally on your nose, ears, and other sensitive and exposed areas. Make sure the sunscreen is waterproof if you're engaging in water sports, limit your sun time for the first few days, and drink plenty of liquids, monitoring intake of caffeine and alcohol, which hasten the dehydration process.

Guided Tours

Air Tours

Air Center Helicopters (Waterfront, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, PHONE: 340/775-7335), on the Charlotte Amalie waterfront (next to Tortola Wharf) on St. Thomas, has 30-minute island tours priced at \$375 (for up to 4 passengers) per trip. You can also arrange longer flights that loop over to the neighboring BVI, as well as photography tours.

Seaborne Airlines offers Seaborne Adventures (5305 Long Bay Rd., Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, PHONE: 340/773-5991), narrated flightseeing tours of the USVI and the BVI from its Havensight base on St. Thomas. The 30-minute "Round-the-Island" tour is \$89 per person.

Boat Tours

St. Thomas's party boat, Kon Tiki (Gregorie Channel East Dock, Frenchtown, St. Thomas, PHONE: 340/775-5055), is a kick. Put your sophistication aside, climb on this big palm-thatch raft, and dip into bottomless barrels of rum punch along with a couple hundred of your soon-to-be closest friends. Dance to the steel-drum band, sun on the roof (watch out: you'll fry), and join the limbo dancing on the way home from an afternoon of swimming and beachcombing at Honeymoon Beach on Water Island. This popular 3 1/2-hour afternoon excursion costs \$29 for adults, \$15 for children under 13 (although few come to this party).

Caribbean Pelican Rides (Coast Guard Dock, opposite Vendor's Plaza, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, PHONE: 340/774-7808) offers a unique land and sea tour of Charlotte Amalie aboard an amphibious British Alvis Stalward vessel. Tours depart from the Coast Guard dock opposite Vendor's Plaza. The 55-minute excursions costs \$55 for adults, \$15 for children ages 12 and under.

Bus and Taxi Tours

V.I. Taxi Association St. Thomas City-Island Tour (PHONE: 340/774-4550) gives a two-hour \$45 tour for two people in an open-air safari bus or enclosed van; aimed at cruise-ship passengers,

this tour includes stops at Drake's Seat and Mountain Top. For just a bit more money (about \$45-\$50 for two) you can hire a taxi and ask the driver to take the opposite route so you'll avoid the crowds. But do see Mountain Top: the view is wonderful.

Tropic Tours (PHONE: 340/774-1855 or 800/524-4334) offers half-day shopping and sightseeing tours of St. Thomas by bus six days a week (\$25 per person). The company also has a full-day ferry tour to St. John that includes snorkeling and lunch. The cost is \$70 per person.

Walking tours

The St. Thomas-St. John Vacation Handbook, available free at hotels and tourist centers, has an excellent self-guided walking tour of Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas.

The St. Thomas Historical Trust (PHONE: 340/776-2726) has published a self-guided tour of the historic district; it's available in book and souvenir shops for \$1.95. A two-hour guided historic walking tour is available by reservation. It begins (at 9 AM) at the Emancipation Garden, covers all the in-town sights, and can be narrated in Spanish, Danish, German, and Japanese as well as in English. The cost is \$35 per person; wear a hat and comfortable walking shoes.

Possible nature tours on St. Thomas include bird-watching, whale-watching, and waiting hidden on a beach while the magnificent hawksbill turtles come ashore to lay their eggs. Contact EAST (Environmental Association of St. Thomas-St. John; (Box 12379, St. Thomas 00801, PHONE: 340/776-1976); St. Croix Heritage Tours) (Box 7937, Sunny Isle, 00823, PHONE: 340/778-6997) leads walks through the historic towns of Christiansted and Frederiksted, detailing the history of the people and the buildings. Custom tours that cover the island are also available.

Along with providing trail maps and brochures about Virgin Islands National Park, the park service also gives a variety of guided tours on- and off-shore. Some are only offered during particular times of the year, and some require reservations. For more information, contact the V.I. National Park Visitors Center (At area known as the Creek; across from Cruz Bay bulkhead and adjacent to ball field, Cruz Bay, PHONE: 340/776-6201; Cinnamon Bay, PHONE: 340/776-6330; www.nps.gov/viis).

Etiquette & Behavior

A smile and a "good day" greeting will start any encounter off on the right foot. Dress is casual throughout the islands, but cover up when you're sightseeing or shopping in town; bare chests and bathing suit tops are frowned upon.

Emergencies

Ambulance, Fire, and Police (PHONE: 911).

Air Ambulance

The Air Ambulance Network (PHONE: 800/327-1966) serves the USVI area from Florida.

Medical Air Services (PHONE: 340/777-8580 or 800/643-9023) has its Caribbean headquarters in St. Thomas.

Hospitals

St. Thomas

Roy L. Schneider Hospital & Community Health Center (Sugar Estate, 1 mi (1 1/2 km) east of Charlotte Amalie, PHONE: 340/776-8311).

Pharmacies

St. Thomas

Havensight Pharmacy (Havensight Mall, PHONE: 340/776-1235).

Kmart Pharmacy (Tutu Park Mall, PHONE: 340/777-3854).

Sunrise Pharmacy (Red Hook, PHONE: 340/775-6600; Vitraco Park, PHONE: 340/776-7292).

Electricity

The USVI use the same current as the U.S. mainland -- 110 volts. Since power fluctuations occasionally occur, bring a heavy -duty surge protector (available at hardware stores) if you plan to use your computer.

Foreign visitors traveling with dual-voltage appliances will not need a converter, but they will need a plug adapter.

The standard U.S. electrical outlet takes a plug of two flat pins set parallel to one another.

Customs & Duties

Arriving in the U.S. Virgin Islands

Non-U.S. residents ages 21 and older may import into the United States 200 cigarettes or 50 cigars or 2 kilograms of tobacco, 1 liter of alcohol, and gifts worth \$100. Meat products, seeds, plants, and fruits are prohibited.

For additional information, contact the U.S. Customs Service (1300 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20229, PHONE: 202/354-1000 inquiries; 202/927-0540 registration of equipment; www.customs.gov; address complaints c/o Office of Regulations and Rulings).

Business Hours

Shops are generally closed Saturday afternoon and all day Sunday. Some shops close for an hour at lunchtime during the week, as well, although this practice is becoming increasingly rare.

Farmers' markets are often open daily, but Saturday morning is always the most colorful time to go.

Banks

Bank hours are generally Monday-Thursday 9-3 and Friday 9-5; a handful have Saturday hours (9-noon). Walk-up windows open at 8:30 on weekdays.

Post Offices

Hours may vary slightly from branch to branch and island to island, but they are generally 7:30 or 8 to 4 or 5:30 weekdays and 7:30 or 8 to noon or 2:30 Saturday.

Shops

On St. Thomas, stores on Main Street in Charlotte Amalie are open weekdays and Saturday 9-5. The hours of the shops in the Havensight Mall (next to the cruise-ships dock) are the same, though occasionally some stay open until 9 on Friday, depending on how many cruise ships are at the dock. You may also find some shops open on Sunday if a lot of cruise ships are in port. Hotel shops are usually open evenings, as well.

Getting Around

By Taxi

USVI taxis don't have meters, but you needn't worry about fare gouging if you check a list of standard rates to popular destinations (required by law to be carried by each driver and often posted in hotel and airport lobbies and printed in free tourist periodicals, such as St. Thomas This Week and St. Croix This Week) and settle on the fare before you start out. Fares are per person, not per destination, but drivers taking multiple fares (which often happens, especially from the airport) will charge you a lower rate than if you're in the cab alone.

On St. Thomas

On St. Thomas taxi vans line up along Havensight and Crown Bay docks when a cruise ship pulls in. If you booked a shore tour, the operator will lead you to a designated vehicle. Otherwise, there are plenty of air-conditioned vans and open-air safari buses to take you to Charlotte Amalie or the beach. The cab fare from Havensight to Charlotte Amalie is \$2.50 per person; you can, however, make the (1 1/2 mi-/2 1/2 km-) walk into town in about 30 minutes along the beautiful waterfront. From Crown Bay to town the taxi fare is \$2.50 per person whether you travel solo or you share; it's a 1-mi (1 1/2-km) walk, but the route passes along a busy highway. Transportation from Havensight to Magens Bay for swimming is \$6.50 per person (\$4 if you share).

Additionally, taxis of all shapes and sizes are available at various ferry, shopping, resort, and airport areas, and they also respond to phone calls. There are taxi stands in Charlotte Amalie across from Emancipation Garden (in front of Little Switzerland, behind the post office) and along the waterfront. But you probably won't have to look for a stand, as taxis are plentiful and routinely cruise the streets. Walking down Main Street, you'll be asked "Back to ship?" often enough to make you never want to carry another shopping bag.

East End Taxi (PHONE: 340/775-6974).

Islander Taxi (PHONE: 340/774-4077).

VI Taxi Association (PHONE: 340/774-4550).

By Ferry

Ferries are a great way to travel around the islands; there's service between St. Thomas and St. John and their neighbors, the BVI. There's something special about spending a day on St. John and then joining your fellow passengers -- a mix of tourists, local families, and restaurant staffers en route to work -- for a peaceful, sundown ride back to St. Thomas. Sometimes one of the St. John ferry services offers a special weekend trip to Fajardo, Puerto Rico. Such junkets depart from the waterfront in St. Thomas on a Friday evening and return to the same locale on Sunday afternoon.

Ferries to Cruz Bay, St. John, leave St. Thomas from either the Charlotte Amalie waterfront west of the U.S. Coast Guard dock or from Red Hook. From Charlotte Amalie ferries depart at 9, 11, 1, 3, 4, and 5:30. To Charlotte Amalie from Cruz Bay, they leave at 7:15, 9:15, 11:15, 1:15, 2:15, and 3:45. The one-way fare for the 45-minute ride is \$7 for adults, \$3 for children. From Red Hook, ferries to Cruz Bay leave at 6:30 AM and 7:30 AM. Starting at 8 AM, they leave hourly until midnight. Returning from Cruz Bay, they leave hourly starting at 6 AM until 11 PM. The 15- to 20-minute ferry ride is \$3 one-way for adults, \$1 for children under 12.

Car ferries, called barges, run every half hour between Red Hook, St. Thomas, and Cruz Bay, St. John. The ride is 20 minutes (one way) and costs \$25 (round-trip). Plan to check your vehicle in 15 minutes before departure.

Reefer (PHONE: 340/776-8500 ext. 6814) is the name of both of the brightly colored 26-passenger skiffs that run between the Charlotte Amalie waterfront and Marriott Frenchman's Reef hotel daily every hour from 9 to 4, returning from the Reef from 9:30 until 4:30. It's a good way to beat the traffic (and is about the same price as a taxi) to Morning Star Beach, which adjoins the Reef. And you get a great view of the harbor as you bob along in the shadow of the giant cruise ships anchored in the harbor. The captain of the Reefer may also be persuaded to drop you at Yacht Haven, but check first. The fare is \$4 one-way, and the trip takes about 15 minutes.

On Smiths Ferry (PHONE: 340/775-7292), there's daily service between either Charlotte Amalie or Red Hook, on St. Thomas, to Tortola and Virgin Gorda, BVI. The times and days the ferries run change, so it's best to call for schedules once you're in the islands. The fare is \$22 one-way or \$40 round-trip, and the trip from Charlotte Amalie takes 45 minutes to an hour to West End, up to 1 1/2 hours to Road Town; from Red Hook the trip is only half an hour. The twice-weekly 2 1/4-hour trip from Charlotte Amalie to Virgin Gorda costs \$28 one-way and \$40 round-trip.

There's daily service between either Charlotte Amalie or Red Hook, on St. Thomas, and West End or Road Town, Tortola, BVI, by Native Son, Inc. (PHONE: 340/774-8685). It's best to call for schedules once you're in the islands, as they change frequently. The fare is \$22 one-way or \$40 round-trip, and the trip from Charlotte Amalie takes 45 minutes to an hour to West End, up to 1 1/2 hours to Road Town; from Red Hook the trip is only half an hour.

There's daily service between Cruz Bay, St. John, and West End, Tortola, aboard the Sundance (PHONE: 340/776-6597). The half-hour one-way trip is \$21. You'll need to present proof of citizenship upon entering the BVI; a passport is best, but a birth certificate with a raised seal in addition to a government-issued photo ID will suffice.

By Car

Even at a sedate speed of 20 mph, driving can be an adventure -- for example, you may find yourself in a stick-shift Jeep slogging behind a slow tourist-packed safari bus at a steep hairpin turn. Give a little beep at blind turns. If you don't think you'll need to lock up your valuables, a Jeep or open-air Suzuki with four-wheel drive will make it easier to navigate potholed dirt side roads and to get up slick hills when it rains. All main roads are paved.

Car Rentals

It may be tough to find a car at the height of the winter season, and occasionally all rental companies run out of cars at once; reserve well in advance to ensure you get the vehicle of your choice.

In St. Thomas

ABC Rentals (PHONE: 340/776-1222 or 800/524-2080).

Anchorage E-Z Car (PHONE: 340/775-6255).

Avis (PHONE: 340/774-1468 or 800/331-1084).

Budget (PHONE: 340/776-5774 or 800/626-4516).

Hertz (PHONE: 340/774-1879 or 800/654-3131).

Requirements

Any U.S. driver's license is good for 90 days on the USVI, as are valid driver's licenses from other countries; the minimum age for drivers is 18, although many agencies won't rent to anyone under the age of 25.

Road Conditions

St. Thomas. Traffic can get pretty bad, especially in Charlotte Amalie at rush hour (7-9 and 4:30-6). Cars often line up bumper to bumper along the waterfront. If you need to get from an east end resort to the airport during these times, find the alternate route (starting from the east end, Route 38 to 42 to 40 to 33) that goes up the mountain and then drops you back onto Veterans Highway. If you plan to explore by car, be sure to pick up the "2002 Road Map St. Thomas-St. John" that includes the route numbers and the names of the roads that are used by locals. It's available anywhere you find maps and guidebooks.

Rules of the Road

Driving is on the left side of the road (although your steering wheel will be on the left side of the car). The law requires everyone in a car to wear seat belts: many of the roads are narrow, and the islands are dotted with hills, so there's ample reason to put safety first.

Note that the general speed limit on these islands is only 25-35 mph, which will seem fast enough for you on most roads.

By Bus

St. Thomas

On St. Thomas, the island's 20 deluxe mainland-size buses make public transportation a very comfortable -- though slow -- way to get from east and west to Charlotte Amalie and back (service to the north is limited). Buses run about every 30 minutes from stops that are clearly marked with Vitran signs. Fares are \$1 between outlying areas and town and 75 cents in town.