

British Virgin Islands

What happens when steady trade winds meet an island-flecked channel with tame currents and hundreds of protected, salt-rimmed bays? Every mariner worth his sea salt sails there – which is how the British Virgin Islands (BVI) became a sailing fantasyland. More than 40 islands bob in the group, welcoming visitors with an absurd amount of beach.

Tortola is the archipelago's father. It holds most of the population and commerce, and its demeanor is a little bit stern as a result. That doesn't mean it won't let its hair down at a full-moon party or out on the bay windsurfing. Virgin Gorda is the BVI's beauty, beloved by movie stars, millionaires and yachties. Somehow she's maintained her innocence, with a clutch of exceptional national parks. Jost Van Dyke is the jovial island, where a man named Foxy is king and 'time flies when you ain't doin' shit,' as the T-shirts proclaim. Not-like-the-others Anegada floats in a remote reef; if you're looking to get away from it all, this atoll has a hammock waiting. Then there are the sprinkling of out islands – some uninhabited, some with just a beach bar, some with shipwrecks to dive on. You'll need your own boat to reach them, but since the BVI are the world's charter-boat capital, you're in luck.

While the islands are British territories, there's little that's overtly British. The BVI are quite close to, and intermingled with, the US Virgin Islands, though the BVI are more virginal as far as development goes.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 59 sq miles
- **Capital** Road Town, Tortola
- **Country code** ☎ 284
- **Departure tax** US\$5 by sea (cruise ship passengers pay US\$7); US\$15 by air (plus US\$5 security tax)
- **Famous for** Yacht charters, the Baths, Pusser's Rum, local resident Richard Branson
- **Language** English
- **Money** US dollar (US\$); US\$1 = €0.65 = UK£0.51
- **Official name** Virgin Islands, but it's referred to as 'British Virgin Islands' to distinguish it from the neighboring US Virgin Islands
- **People** British Virgin Islanders
- **Phrase** Limin' (pronounced 'lime-in'; means 'relaxing')
- **Population** 23,500
- **Visa** Unnecessary for citizens of most Western countries; see p415



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Devil's Bay** (p405) Climb up, over and around sea boulders and grottoes to this sheltered sand crescent
- **White Bay** (p409) Drink at the jovial beach that birthed the rum-soaked Painkiller
- **Anegada** (p410) Leave the world behind on this remote island of hammocks and lobster dinners
- **RMS Rhone** (p398) Scuba dive on this famous shipwreck off Salt Island
- **Set Sail** (p416) Charter a boat and sail to out islands like Norman and Cooper

ITINERARIES

- **One Day** Take one of the quick and frequent ferries to Virgin Gorda, splash around the Baths and Devil's Bay, grab a meal and drink before calling it a day.
- **One Week** Spend a day or two beaching in Tortola's Cane Garden Bay area, then ferry to Virgin Gorda to hike, snorkel and swim for a couple more. Spend two days slowing waaay down on either Jost or Anegada. Take a day-sail tour to the out islands.
- **Two Weeks** Island hop: hit the four main islands, plus nearby St Thomas and St John in the US Virgin Islands, by ferry. Or get adventurous and charter a boat to explore them all (including the out islands).
- **On a Budget** Yes, it can be done. Camp at Brewers Bay on Tortola, White Bay on Jost or Anegada Reef Hotel on Anegada. Buy low-cost take-away foods at Road Town Bakery on Tortola, Christine's Bakery on Jost and Dotsy's Bakery on Anegada. Spend your days on beaches (free) or at national parks (admission US\$3). Use ferries for transportation.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Reliably balmy with gentle trade winds, the BVIs' temperature averages 77°F (25°C) in winter (December through March) and 83°F (28°C) in summer (June through August). Though the islands get less than 50 inches of rain each year, count on brief tropical showers between July and November. Hurricane season peaks in August and September (mostly the latter).

The BVIs' high travel season is from December 15 to April 15. November, early December and May are good times to visit

too, as hotel prices are lower and the cruise ships are fewer.

HISTORY

Columbus & the Pirates

On Christopher Columbus' second trip to the Caribbean in 1493, Caribs led him to an archipelago of pristine islands that he dubbed Santa Ursula y Las Once Mil Virgenes (St Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins), in honor of a 4th-century princess raped and murdered, along with 11,000 maidens, in Cologne by marauding Huns.

By 1595, the famous English privateers Sir Francis Drake and Jack Hawkins were using the Virgin Islands as a staging ground for attacks on Spanish shipping. In the wake of Drake and Hawkins came French corsairs and Dutch freebooters. All knew that the Virgin Islands had some of the most secure and unattended harbors in the West Indies. Places like Sopers Hole (p399) at Tortola's West End and the Bight at Norman Island (p404) are legendary pirates' dens.

While the Danes settled on what is now the US Virgin Islands (USVIs), the English had a firm hold on today's BVIs. The middle island of St John remained disputed territory until 1717, when the Danish side claimed it for good. The Narrows between St John and Tortola has divided the eastern Virgins (BVIs) from the western Virgins (USVIs) for more than 250 years.

Queen Elizabeth & the Offshore Companies

Following WWII, British citizens in the islands clamored for more independence. In 1949 BVIs citizens demonstrated for a representative government and got a so-called presidential legislature the next year. By 1967 the BVIs had become an independent colony of Britain, with its own political parties, a Legislative Council and an elected Premier (with elections every four years). Queen Elizabeth II also made her first royal visit to the BVIs in 1967, casting a glow of celebrity on the islands that they enjoy to this day. Royal family members still cruise through every few years.

In the mid-1980s the government had the shrewd idea of offering offshore registration to companies wishing to incorporate in the islands. Incorporation fees – along with tourism – now prop up the economy, with