



St Thomas

POP 52,200

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Best Places to Eat

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- » Pie Hole (p65)
- » Craig & Sally's (p66)
- » Toad & Tart (p77)

Best Places to Stay

- » Green Iguana (p62)
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- » Miller Manor (p62)
- » Crystal Palace B&B (p62)
- » Bolongo Bay Beach Resort (p71)

Why Go?

Most visitors arrive in the US Virgin Islands via St Thomas, and the place sure knows how to strike a positive first impression. Jungly cliffs poke high in the sky, red-hipped roofs blossom over the hills, and all around the turquoise, yacht-dotted sea laps. Dizzying cruise-ship traffic and big resorts nibbling its edges make St Thomas the most commercialized of the Virgins, but this is also a fine island to sharpen your knife and fork. Curried meats and hot-spiced callaloo soup fill local tables. Bars pour tropical drinks high and low, from coconut-cake martinis in a mountaintop bistro to cold beers in a parking lot tiki hut. Visitors who make the effort to move deeper into the island will find opportunities for surfing, kayaking through mangrove swamps and getting face-to-face with sea turtles.

When to Go

Mid-December through April is the dry and sunny high season, when prices and crowds max out. Late March sees extra action courtesy of the Rolex Cup Regatta during the fourth weekend. The whopping, party-hearty St Thomas Carnival fills the streets from mid-April through early May. Stormy weather starts in August, though this month also hosts two notable shindigs: the Texas Society Chili Cook-off and the USVI Atlantic Blue Marlin Tournament, a mega-lure for sportfishers. May and early December are good shoulder season months for bargains and decent (if wet) weather.

History

Christopher Columbus sailed by St Thomas in 1493. While he did not stop, the Spanish adventurers and colonists who followed shortly thereafter did, and by 1555 they had totally depopulated the island by kidnapping, murdering and driving off the indigenous Taíno and Caribs.

After 1625 the nations of Europe became hell-bent on acquiring colonies in the New World, yet while the English, Dutch and French fought over plums such as St Croix, the Danes staked a claim on a forgotten piece of fruit, St Thomas.

In the 1700s, St Thomas became a community of merchants and traders that included several nationalities and religions, with English, Dutch, Danes, Germans and Jews among the mix.

On July 4, 1848, the schooner *Vigilant* arrived at St Thomas from St Croix with the news that the Virgin Islands' Danish governor had proclaimed the emancipation of all slaves on Danish territory. In the decades

that followed, the island's economy evolved to meet modern shipping needs, establishing itself as a major coaling station for steamships.

Maritime commerce was still bringing sailors to the shores when the US bought the Virgin Islands from the Danes in 1917. The Navy set up camp on St Thomas, and when it left in the 1950s, the naval port facilities and former air base became the crucial infrastructure for facilitating the flow of tourists to and from the island.

In 1989 Hurricane Hugo wreaked havoc on the island. Then, in 1995, Hurricanes Luis and Marilyn dealt a back-to-back blow.

i Getting There & Around

AIR

St Thomas' **Cyril E King Airport** (STT; www.viport.com) is the main hub for the Virgin Islands. Major operators from the US mainland include **American Airlines** (www.aa.com), **Continental** (www.continental.com), **Delta** (www.delta.com), **Spirit** (www.spiritair.com), **United** (www.united.com) and **US Airways** (www.usairways.com).



St Thomas Highlights

- 1** Kayak past twisted mangroves to a coral rubble beach with **Virgin Islands Ecotours** (p75)
- 2** Shop for rum, pirate gear and fiery hot sauces in historic **Charlotte Amalie** (p67)
- 3** Wine and dine in **Frenchtown** (p65)
- 4** Slow to a leisurely pace on **Water Island** (p72)
- 5** Pet sharks and feed stingrays at **Coral World Ocean Park** (p73)
- 6** Quaff flaming drinks in funky bars in **Red Hook** (p78)
- 7** Join the breezy fun and games at **Sapphire Beach** (p74)