



Understand the US & British Virgin Islands

US & BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS TODAY 202

Developers and conservationists vie for land, economies look for life beyond tourism, and authors muse on island life.

HISTORY 204

From Columbus' landing in 1493 to pirates, slave revolts and colonial power-brokering, browse through the Virgins' defining moments.

ISLAND LIFE 211

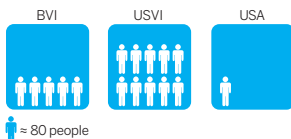
Don't know your conch from callaloo or fungi from quelbe? We've got the local food, music and arts scenes covered.

ISLAND LANDSCAPES 219

Learn more about the islands' sea creatures, national parks and environmental issues.



population per sq mile



US & British Virgin Islands Today

Economic Perils

Both the US and British Virgin Islands use the US dollar as their currency, and both import most of their goods – cars, clothes, food – from America. They also get most of their tourists from America, so when the economy there melted down in 2008, the islands felt the fallout. In the USVI especially, where tourism accounts for 80% of GDP and employment, hoteliers, restaurant owners, taxi drivers and shopkeepers have struggled. And though the BVI depends on tourism for only about 45% of its income, the other pillar of its economy – offshore company registration – nosedived in the economic downturn, too. Accountants, lawyers and other tax-haven professionals have seen far fewer wealthy clients. Both territories strive to diversify with new, tax-incented business, such as the Captain Morgan distillery on St Croix, but such opportunities are few, so it's back to courting cruise ships and honeymooners.

Green Tension

Everyone wants a piece of paradise, and in the 1980s, developers provided it. St Thomas and Tortola, in particular, saw resort and villa construction boom with reckless abandon. The pace had slowed by the time the new millennium rolled around, when islanders realized the environmental impact, but the tension between development and sustainability remains a major issue.

Take the situation on St John with Maho Bay Camps. The ecofriendly tent resort has drawn visitors to its forested, beachfront hillside for more than 30 years. Alas, it sits on leased land, and as the lease ends, the owners are wrestling with temptation to sell to developers. The Trust for Public Land has rallied to acquire the property. So far though, the green hills' fate remains undecided. Resort developments on St Thomas' West

- » Population USVI: 109,700
- » Population BVI: 25,400
- » GDP per capita USVI: \$14,500
- » GDP per capita BVI: \$38,500
- » Life expectancy USVI: 79.3 years
- » Life expectancy BVI: 77.6 years

Dos and Don'ts

- » Greet locals with a 'good day' or 'good evening' before asking questions or discussing business. Good manners are prized.
- » Men without shirts and women in bathing suits or other skimpy attire are frowned upon anywhere besides the beach.

- » The Virgins are on 'island time.'
- » Don't expect things to run like clockwork. Whether catching a ferry or having a meal, allow more time than you would back home.
- » Topless and nude sunbathing are illegal, though it is overlooked at a few discreet beaches.

Top Books

- » **Treasure Island** (Robert Louis Stevenson) Norman Island supposedly inspired the 1883 yarn about buried treasure and the pirate Long John Silver.
- » **Musings of an Island Girl** (Henrita Barber) Essays by a *VI Daily News* columnist.