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Op-Ed: Passport-Free, Culture-Rich: How the USVI Bridges America and the Caribbean

New partnerships, long-stay visitor trends, and multideestination travel initiatives are positioning the USVI as more than a destination—it's becoming a cultural ambassador and a convenor for broader Caribbean-American collaboration, says Joesph Boschulte.

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St. Thomas, USVI. By. GETTY IMAGES

As global travel continues its robust rebound, the Caribbean stands at a pivotal moment. In 2024, the region welcomed over 34 million visitors, a 14% increase over the previous year, according to the Caribbean Tourism Organization. The U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), for its part, experienced a record-breaking 2.6 million visitor arrivals in the post hurricane era, fueled in part by increased

connectivity and the rising demand for culturally rich, easily accessible destinations.

But the USVI is more than just a popular port of call. We are uniquely positioned, American by law, Caribbean by heart, to serve as a diplomatic and economic bridge between the mainland United States and our regional neighbors. In an era of increasing global competition for travelers, this dual identity is a strategic asset.

There is a growing urgency to build more resilient, cooperative Caribbean travel frameworks. From hurricane preparedness to sustainable tourism practices, the challenges we face are regional in nature. The USVI is committed to being part of the solution. That's why we've begun expanding partnerships with regional tourism boards, including St. Kitts, Nevis, and Anguilla, to support cross-island promotions and multideestination travel initiatives. Projection research shows relationships and interconnectivity between islands can increase visitor spending by up to 30% per trip.

Equally important is our role in introducing American travelers to Caribbean culture. With roughly 84% of our visitors coming from the U.S. mainland, the USVI often serves as the first Caribbean experience for many. No passport is needed, but what visitors discover is a full immersion into genuine Caribbean heritage, music, cuisine, and natural beauty. In a time when travelers are seeking authenticity, the USVI is not just a destination; it's an experience

The rise in remote work has also opened new doors, and the territory has experienced a significant uptick in long-stay visitors. This trend benefits not only our local economy but also has the potential to stimulate intra-regional travel, particularly among digital nomads eager to explore beyond a single island.

The numbers tell a compelling story. But our vision is broader than tourism metrics. We see the USVI as a connector and convenor, bringing together policymakers, business leaders, and cultural ambassadors to strengthen Caribbean-American ties. We're exploring ideas like cultural immersions, integrated marketing platforms, and regional tourism development projects.

To our Caribbean partners, we say collaboration, not competition, is our path forward. To our American allies, we say the USVI is more than a vacation; it's your front-row seat to the Caribbean's past, present, and future.

We invite all stakeholders to see the USVI not just as a stopover, but as a springboard for a more connected, resilient, and prosperous Caribbean.

Submitted on Friday, June 13 by: *Joseph Boschulte, Commissioner of the V.I. Department of Tourism.*