

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas Featured in Toronto Photographic Exhibit This Month

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ST. THOMAS – The U.S. Virgin Islands is sponsoring a photographic exhibit in Canada called “Jewish Treasures of the Caribbean” this month, according to the Canadian Jewish News.

The photos in the 40-picture exhibit – which were taken in St. Croix, St. Thomas, Barbados, Curaçao, Jamaica, Nevis, St. Maarten, St. Eustatius and Suriname – will be featured in a photography book that will be released next spring.

“When I was living in Trinidad in 2009, the New York Times was using me as a travel real estate photographer in the Caribbean,” photographer Wyatt Gallery told the Canadian

Jewish News. "They sent me to Curacao and Aruba, and while in Curacao, I stumbled upon a synagogue that I knew nothing about. I was really surprised, as an American Jew, to find out that the oldest synagogue in the Western Hemisphere was in Curacao, in the Caribbean."

Gallery's photographs will be on display at the Beth Tzedec Reuben and Helene Dennis Museum in Toronto until April 24.

When award-winning photographer Wyatt Gallery, stumbled on an 18th-century synagogue in Curacao in 2009, it opened his eyes to a part of Jewish history that few know about.

The exhibit, sponsored by the American Virgin Islands, features about 40 photographs of Jewish sites that date as far back as the 17th century and serve as the only complete body of professional documentary photographs of all the remaining Sephardi Jewish sites in the Caribbean.

Gallery, 39, who is based in New York but spends about eight months of the year travelling and photographing, said when he entered the Mikve Israel-Emmanuel Synagogue in Curacao, he was taken aback.

"I was really blown away by the beauty of the architecture and the sand-covered floors and old brass chandeliers," he said.

"Out of pure coincidence, the New York Times sent me to two other Caribbean locations that also had this Jewish history. They sent me to Barbados and Suriname to photograph travel stories that had nothing to do with Jewish history, but I would go and spend an extra day to photograph the synagogues."

He said following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and photographing the ruins of Haiti's Port-au-Prince Cathedral, he felt it was important to photographically document historical monuments.

"It made me realize that the five remaining historic synagogues in the Caribbean could also easily be ruined. It kind of inspired me to document all the historic Jewish sites so that there are records, and as well to raise awareness about this history and highlight the little-known history, but also inspire people to see the need to preserve these sites in order to preserve the history," he said.

In addition to the five remaining synagogues in the Caribbean, Gallery also photographed a number of Jewish cemeteries that are in disarray due to natural disasters, vandalism and erosion.

"If I could do anything, my goal would be to create some sort of a trust, something people could donate to – proceeds from people purchasing photographs could go toward a trust to help preserve some of these sites," Gallery said.

"The truth is, these Jewish communities in the Caribbean have dwindled substantially. Where there used to be maybe 2,500 people on an island, now there are only 200 or 150. It is difficult for them to maintain the cemeteries and the synagogues unless they have government support. It's really a challenge.

“It would be a coffee table-style photography book with detailed captions and some history, so that you can first get excited and intrigued by the photos and also get all the history and information you need about it.”

Feature Image: Jewish Synagogue in St. Thomas, US Virgin Islands

Image Credit: Catherine Couturier

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