

The Virgin Islands Consortium

On A Trip To St. Croix, Room For Man And Nature

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As we celebrate Dine VI week, VI Consortium will feature articles from mainland publications examining the culture of St. Croix. The first, a New York Times piece, [published on October 8](#) and written by Murray Carpenter.

As we followed a trail through waist-high grass, the sun was hot and a ridge blocked the breeze, the steady trade wind that reliably ventilates the Caribbean. For this overheated hike, I'll credit the sea turtles: the elegant hawksbills, the lumbering greens, the improbably huge, jellyfish-slurping leatherbacks. The turtles caused conservationists to make a fuss when a housing development was proposed for this easternmost tip of St. Croix, so there is no road, and you have to walk in.

But rounding a corner and surmounting a low ridge, the breeze returned, and Isaac Bay came into view below, turquoise over the sand bottom, azure over the patches of sea grass and coral, and cupped by a narrow sandy fringe. The only thing missing from the view was houses. In fact, there was no hint of development at all. Just the Caribbean, the beach and the cactus-studded grassy slope rising steeply to the summit of Goat Hill above. Utterly magnificent, wild and unexpected.

Think of the U.S. Virgin Islands, and two spring quickly to mind: St. Thomas, where cruise ships berth by the dozens, and St. John, where Virgin Islands National Park is a natural attraction. While St. Thomas and St. John are clustered tightly with the British Virgin Islands, St. Croix sits alone, 40 miles south of its siblings. It's a place apart, less touristy, more relaxed and quite a bit bigger than those two islands combined. Best of all, St. Croix still has a variety of large, diverse natural areas to explore.

As we descended to the beach at Isaac Bay, a kestrel flew over the grass (they eat lizards here). My wife, who was born and raised on the island, pointed out the flora and fauna to our two college-age daughters and me, using the local names. "Glueberry," for example, is the Cruzan term for the small manjack trees near the beach.

Even on a Monday just before Christmas, there were just a few others at the bay. The beach is slender and everywhere pitted with old turtle nests. The turtle habitat, and the coral reef beyond, prompted the Nature Conservancy to buy this parcel, which also includes Jack Bay, a few hundred yards farther along the footpath. These beaches host the largest nesting populations of green and hawksbill turtles on the island. The lack of development means there is no artificial light to confuse the hatchling turtles, drawing them toward the light instead of the ocean. Programs to trap mongoose (an introduced species) have reduced predation, and volunteer patrols during the nesting season have limited egg poaching.

We snorkeled out to the coral shelf just offshore, as an osprey hovered nearby. Parrotfish browsed here and there, chewing on the coral, alongside reddish squirrelfish, yellow French grunts and large schools of blue tang. On the outer edge of the reef, two long antennas waved from beneath a ledge: a big lobster. This is not the lobster Maine is famous for, but the spiny lobster endemic to the Caribbean — claw-free, delicious and easy to harvest with a snare.

Since 2003, 60 square miles of marine habitat surrounding the east end of St. Croix have been protected as the East End Marine Park. This part of the park is a "no-take" zone, protecting lobsters and fish, resulting in more dramatic snorkeling.

After hiking out, we drove just a bit farther up the road to the monument marking Point Udall, the island's east end. Get here early enough and you earn bragging rights: It's the first place to see the sunrise on United States soil. From the point, you can see how the reef wraps this entire end of the island, fully 23 miles long. Off on the northern horizon, low gray humps mark the other Virgin Islands. And in the foreground sat Buck Island, an uninhabited, picture-book tropical island less than two miles offshore.

Another day, with 20-knot winds and a bit of a swell running, we visited Buck Island on a friend's boat. Obliging, turtle heads popped up here and there as we sailed out. It was a Sunday, when locals traditionally go out for a picnic, and a dozen boats were anchored

off the sandy beach. It's the only designated anchorage on this island, which has been protected since 1961 as Buck Island Reef National Monument.

President John F. Kennedy established the monument by proclamation in 1961. He had a special affection for St. Croix; in 1962 he had the artist Bernard Lamotte paint a mural of Christiansted Harbor, St. Croix's primary anchorage, on the walls of the White House swimming pool. Vice President Joseph Biden Jr. shares the passion, and visits St. Croix often.

Buck Island is more than a mile long, and a trail through the forest leads to an observation platform at the 300-foot summit. The island's beaches are beautiful, and attract nesting sea turtles, but the reef is the big attraction. President Kennedy stated it well in his proclamation: "Buck Island and its adjoining shoals, rocks, and undersea coral reef formations possess one of the finest marine gardens in the Caribbean Sea. ..."

The reef around the east end of the island even features a well-marked underwater trail for snorkelers, complete with interpretive signs anchored to the bottom. Like other Caribbean coral, it faces environmental threats like bleaching, and invasive lionfish, but it is still vibrant. The National Park Service licenses six concessionaires that sail visitors out to the island, then lead them on snorkeling trips along the underwater trail. (My late father-in-law, Ted Dale, was a pioneer of the Buck Island run in the 1950s, sailing tourists from Christiansted for \$5, including all the Cruzan Rum they could drink.

We opted to snorkel on the lee side, exploring the coral-encrusted rock ledges near the beach, where small gobys swam through the spines of black urchins. Cowfish and goatfish grazed here and there, as a small, curious barracuda patrolled in the distance. Gliding at a snail's pace along the sand bottom, in plain sight, was another indicator of the fishing restrictions in the island's protected waters — a conch. A local delicacy, prized as fritters, conch are overharvested in unprotected waters.

After Buck Island, we still had one more corner of the island to explore, at the extreme opposite tip from Point Udall. While the east end is dry and scrubby, the west end is lush. In fact, two roads to the west end wind through the hills of "the rain forest" (not quite wet enough to be a true rain forest, but close enough). The roads are lined with mahogany trees, massive kapok trees with buttressed trunks, and turpentine trees (called "tourist trees," in Cruzan, for their reddish, peeling bark that resembles a bad sunburn).

Down off the hills, past the sleepy, scenic town of Frederiksted, lies Sandy Point, a low peninsula encircling a salt pond. The entire point is preserved as the Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge. Parking at the end of an unpaved road, we walked a short trail through the scrub brush, and met a man coming the other way. He carried a .40- caliber Glock on one hip, and a Taser on the other. He also wore the khaki uniform of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It was Michael Evans, who manages the refuge.

The sidearms hint at the reason that, in perhaps a dozen visits to the island since 1987, it was my first trip to Sandy Point. As a remote area, it has a well-earned reputation for crime. Tourists were once easy prey for robbers, and smugglers found it a convenient place to transfer drugs. That's why the refuge is open to visitors only on Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., when armed officers like Mr. Evans are present.

And it is closed altogether from April through August to protect, you guessed it, nesting turtles. Standing in the shade of a sea grape tree, Mr. Evans pointed a few feet to his right at the large pit of a hawksbill turtle nest, strewn with bits of eggshell left behind by the recently departed nestlings. As yellow warblers and bananaquits (“sugar birds,” in Cruzan) flitted through the sea grapes overhead, Mr. Evans told us about the turtles.

Leatherbacks, especially, love Sandy Point. After hatching, they will spend years foraging as far north as the Gulf of Maine. When they return to nest, they could be six feet long and 1,000 pounds. Not as maneuverable as their smaller cousins, they prefer this wide-open beach, unobstructed by reefs. When the refuge was established in 1983, just 20 leatherbacks nested here, but the population has grown. In 2009, a banner year, Mr. Evans said, 203 females dug more than 1,000 nests.

Stepping from the shade onto the wide beach, the calm water over pure sand looked positively Bahamian. There’s not much to see with a snorkel, so we swam around for a while, then wound up standing chest-deep in water that was the absolute perfect temperature, neither bathtub warm nor the least bit cold. Looking toward shore, there was the beach in the foreground, wrapping a mile in each direction, with far more turtle nests than people. Off to the left was the town of Frederiksted, a lone cruise ship at its pier. Beyond, verdant hills rose to a clear sky, punctuated here and there with puffy cumuli.

A hundred yards behind us, a few terns and pelicans were working over a school of baitfish — “sprat,” to Cruzans. Then a frigate bird flew in — a large, primordial-looking pirate of the sky — and began chasing a tern. In a minute-long dogfight, they zigged and zagged in perfect synchronization just above us. The frigate was determined to steal the tern’s meal, the tern equally determined not to part with its hard-earned sprat. Finally, they parted ways. A truce. A stalemate.

In a way, it was like St. Croix itself, a place of contrasts and tension. Where the turtles are balanced against predators and poachers, the wild bays against developers, the two-mile beach against thieves and smugglers. An island still wild and natural in spots, against all odds. *Feature Image: A hawksbill sea turtle make its way to the ocean after nesting on the beach at Sandy Point.*

Image Credit: Danielle Villasana for The New York Times.