

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Historic Hawaiian Canoe Departs BVI, Heads To Havana

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BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS -- Legendary traditional Hawaiian voyaging canoe Hokulea is back on the ocean to set sail for Havana, Cuba. The vessel departed Saba Rock on Friday at 9:00 a.m. after having spent seven days here. The crew most recently engaged with Ocean Elder and Virgin Group founder Sir Richard Branson, and discussed ocean conservation efforts. The British Virgin Islands is 6 hours ahead of Hawaii time.

Pwo (master) navigator Kalepa Baybayan is gearing up the crew to prepare for strong winds and brisk weather, the greatest challenges of this leg of the voyage. The trip is approximately 1,080 nautical miles from BVI to Havana, which could take the canoe about a week to reach Cuba.

"We are happy to be part of the pioneers as we begin to form this new partnership and relationship with Cuba," said Baybayan. "We are very excited to have that opportunity to participate; part of that journey is learning about the indigenous people and culture of Cuba, both modern and old."

From Cuba, Hokulea plans on routing her trip back to the US mainland, with an estimated arrival in Florida at the end of March. She is scheduled to arrive in New York City by June 8, 2016 to be part of the United Nations' World Oceans Day.

The decades-old performance-accurate full-scale replica of a waʻa kaulua, stopped in the territory by way of St. John late February. The arrival marked the canoe's first landing in a U.S. territory since Hokulea visited Pago Pago in American Samoa in October 2014.

"The U.S. Virgin Islands is similar to Hawaii, with its rich history and tropical climate," said Kalepa Baybayan, captain and Pwo navigator. "Also, much like our home, their economy is significantly driven by tourism and agriculture. We're looking to engage with the residents to exchange ideas of Mālama Honua, of preservation and cultivation of precious resources."

While in St. John, the crew engaged the local community by participating in outreach opportunities with the Virgin Islands National Park and the Coral Reef National Monument. Crew members also collaborated with other groups and organizations such as local schools like Sprauve, Giff Hill, and St. John Christian Academy.

The leg from Brazil to the U.S.V.I. was a homecoming for Polynesian Voyaging Society Chief Operating Officer and crewmember Heidi Guth, who was born on Maui but raised in the U.S.V.I.

"Being able to connect two of my homes and families by having Hokulea visit St. John during the Centennial of the National Park Service and the 60th Anniversary of the Virgin Islands National Park is an unbelievable dream," said Ms. Guth. "I'm also excited about the opportunity to share and exchange ideas on caring for each of coastal homes, our oceans and our Island Earth. We have a common interest in natural and cultural perpetuation," she added.