

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Puerto Rico's Offshore 'Spanish Virgin Islands' Expand Charter Itineraries, Offer New Cruising Grounds to Explore

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Visiting Puerto Rico's eastern islands of Culebra, Culebrita, Vieques and more, often nicknamed the 'Spanish Virgin Islands', is now easier. Members of the Virgin Islands Professional Charter Association (VIPCA) have received a ruling from U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) in Washington, D.C., clarifying entrance and departure requirements specifically for VIPCA-member yachts, according to a release issued Wednesday.

For those who've already been to the British Virgin Islands, this development offers an alternative. For charter guests, the development provides the chance to see, explore and

enjoy lesser traveled cruising grounds, and is a great travel opportunity for U.S. Citizens who may not hold a U.S. passport to visit the islands of both the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) as well as Puerto Rico, according to the release.

"I am ecstatic that our yacht Starfish is now able to offer the 'Spanish Virgin Islands' to our guests," says Jennifer Augspurger, chef/first mate aboard the 46-foot Leopard catamaran, Starfish, and VIPCA president. "The Spanish Virgins do not receive a lot of crewed charter yachts, so this is truly virgin charter grounds for those who are looking for a new destination filled with turquoise waters, pristine white sand beaches, quaint villages, great snorkeling and diving, and a wonderful Hispanic vibe reflected in the local food, music and conversation. We can't wait to share this 'secret' gem of a destination with our guests."

According to the release, in an effort to offer guests new, exciting and nearby itineraries, the VIPCA board has worked with U.S. CBP legal staff in Washington, D.C. over the past 15 months and in August received an official CPB ruling that now makes it easier for VIPCA-member vessels to charter with guests between the USVI and PR. VIPCA has approximately 120 member vessels which are both crewed multi-day 'term' charter yachts and day charter yachts.

"With another recent increase in fees in neighboring islands this is the perfect opportunity for day charter boats to market and explore both Culebra and Vieques. This will open up many new avenues for our industry," says Garth Hudson, owner of Over The Line Charters, a powerboat rental and charter company based in St. Thomas.

Culebra, a 10-square-mile island located 25 nautical miles downwind and west of Charlotte Amalie, the main harbor on St. Thomas, is notable for its lively town of Ensenada Honda, the National Wildlife Refuge where endangered sea turtles and seabirds live, and beautiful Flamenco Beach. Culebrita, right off Culebra's eastern coast, is uninhabited, boasts six beautiful white sand beaches, spa-like tidal pools and one of the Caribbean's oldest lighthouses. Fifteen miles to the south, the 52-square-mile island of Vieques is famous for its bioluminescent Mosquito Bay and seaside town of Esperanza with its many restaurants, according to the release.

"Opening up charter cruising from the U.S. Virgin Islands to the Spanish Virgin Islands will be a huge benefit to both U.S. territories," said Captain Brian Saupe who owns and operates the Lagoon 440 sailing yacht, Altitude Adjustment.

Indeed, Vieques and Culebra have long been a favorite of cruising sailors and USVI residents with private boat access, but a bit of a mystery to the passing visitor. No longer.

"We love to grab a golf cart, buy a 'pincho' or 'mofongo' from a street vendor and explore the beaches," said Captain Cory Crouner, owner/operator of Phoenix Island Charters, which day charts its 30-foot mainship 30 Pilot Phoenix. "We let our imaginations wander as we explore lighthouses, forgotten military tanks and relics from another time. At sunset, we crack open a cold Medalla and soak in the culture while the locals keep their traditions alive with percussion performances and locally hand-crafted folk art, shirts and jewelry. This is truly a magical place and an authentic slice of unspoiled Caribbean."

Term charter Captain André Stroebel, who, with wife Alison, operates the Voyage 500 catamaran, Turquoise Turtle, is also excited to be able to offer this new destination. "We love the Spanish Virgin Islands. The people are wonderful, warm and friendly. The islands are gorgeous, and the sea life offers a variety of critters not commonly seen elsewhere. Our guests asking for 'something new' on their return are going to love exploring this destination with us."

Charter brokers too, such as Lynne Campbell, who with husband Joe are yacht charter brokers and owners of Carefree Yacht Charters, in Fort Lauderdale, FL, are also looking forward to the new Virgin Islands' itineraries.

"The ability to add the Spanish Virgin Islands to our destination options for new and repeat clients is truly exciting news," says Campbell. "Many of our clients return to the USVI and BVI repeatedly due to the easy sailing, abundance of islands and anchorages, world class snorkeling and diving, stunning beaches and unique beach bars. Being able to now offer the Spanish Virgins as an alternative to or in addition to our typical USVI and BVI itineraries will only add to the reasons our clients will continue to return to the area. Plus, with easy and affordable flights in and out of St. Thomas or Puerto Rico along with a new and unique set of islands to explore, this will keep many clients with interest in 'the next destination' from exploring options beyond the VI."

Vessels, crews and brokers can learn more about chartering in Puerto Rico's offshore Spanish Virgin Islands during the always-anticipated 'State of the Industry' address presented at the USVI Charter Yacht Show, November 11 to 14, at IGY's Marina at Yacht Haven Grande. Listen to details about this unique destination and celebrate the exciting new ruling that was driven by the consistent and professional efforts of VIPCA.

For more information and to learn how to become a VIPCA member, please Email: info@vipca.org or visit: vipca.org

Image courtesy Charter World