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3 USVI Beaches Receive Prestigious Blue Flag Certification

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Green Cay Beach at Tamarind Reef on St. Croix. By. ORBITZ

The USVI Hotel & Tourism Association (HTA) along with the VI Conservation Society (VICS) announced Thursday that after an extensive annual review process, three of the territory's beaches once again were awarded the Blue Flag status by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE).

Blue Flag is an exclusive eco-label promoting sustainable tourism and awarded to beaches and marinas worldwide who meet the established criteria of the program, according to the release. It started with 10 participating countries in 1987 and today the Blue Flag Program continues to grow and has been implemented in 45 countries at more 4,000 beaches and marinas across Europe,

South Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, New Zealand, Brazil, Canada and the Caribbean.

The three beaches receiving this coveted certification are: on St. Thomas-- Emerald Beach, Great Bay; Green Cay Beach at Tamarind Reef on St. Croix. The Blue Flag certification is based on compliance with 32 criteria including environmental education and information, water quality, environmental management, and safety and services. The program serves to encourage authorities and managers to provide beaches and marinas with a certain level of environmental quality, cleanliness, and safety standards for local populations and tourists, the organizations stated.

After the devastating 2017 hurricane season, the program was put on hold until the various sites were able to rebuild. The priority during the past two seasons was to consult with current sites to meet and exceed Blue Flag standards as they rebuild and to develop environmental education opportunities that align with the Eco Schools initiative (sister program to Blue Flag).

The Blue Flag Program aims at improving the environmental quality of beaches and marinas and the management of coastal areas in a holistic way, according to the release. It is a system that does not curtail recreation and tourism in the coastal area but rather helps manage it through a wide range of subjects, activities and users that have direct and indirect interactions with the coastal environment.

Most recently, Blue Flag USVI was awarded the 2nd place in the Best Practice Competition 2020 for the Southern Hemisphere by the Blue Flag International Jury for watershed related work. The Virgin Islands Conservation Society spearheaded a 2-year watershed assessment for the Smith Bay/Water Bay area in St Thomas. Upon completion of the analysis, Blue Flag USVI created an informational brochure and coordinated numerous coastal clean-ups (on land and in water), to educate participants on the impacts of pollution in watersheds and their possible contributions to help protect the health of those watersheds.

The process of acquiring Blue Flag certification involves both monetary and manpower investment. The Department of Tourism has been a key supporter and we thank them for their contribution to this effort. Key agencies including the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (CZM, EP), CORE, Department of Tourism, VI Waste Management Authority, Department of Education, St Croix Environmental Association, NOAA, University of the Virgin Islands - VIMAS, Virgin Islands Professional Charter Association (VIPCA), the Hotel and Tourism Association (HTA) and the EPA, provided the staffing to serve on the Blue Flag Jury who conducted inspections of the beaches.

"We strive to engage the public to protect and preserve the coastal environments of the Virgin Islands and the communities they live in through education and action," said Valerie Peters, Blue Flag USVI coordinator.

The flags will be raised on all three beaches on December 1, 2020. "We encourage residents and visitors to join us in recognizing these locations for their hard work and dedication to implement sound environmentally sustainable tourism practices," the organizations stated in their news release.

For additional information, contact blueflagusvi@gmail.com.