

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

FEBRUARY 18-26, 2023



DAY 1 - ST. THOMAS ARRIVAL

With a goal to eventually visit all national parks and having had a blast in Florida last winter, we put the USVI on our list for 2023, setting our sights on visiting St. Thomas and St. John. We left home on a chilly February day for our mid-morning flight from Philadelphia to St. Thomas. All travel was extremely smooth and we touched down on the island in the late afternoon, having “lost” an hour during travel as the islands are on Atlantic time, one hour ahead of the East coast. Our rental car wasn’t quite ready (we were on island time now!) but after a 15-minute wait or so we headed out into the warm and humid air, car keys in hand. Our ride for the week was a Nissan Kicks, which got the job done for two people. We booked the trip late (at least for us) in October last year, so no Jeeps were available to rent. I read stories saying you needed a 4WD for the steep roads on the islands, but luckily we encountered minimal issues during our trip.



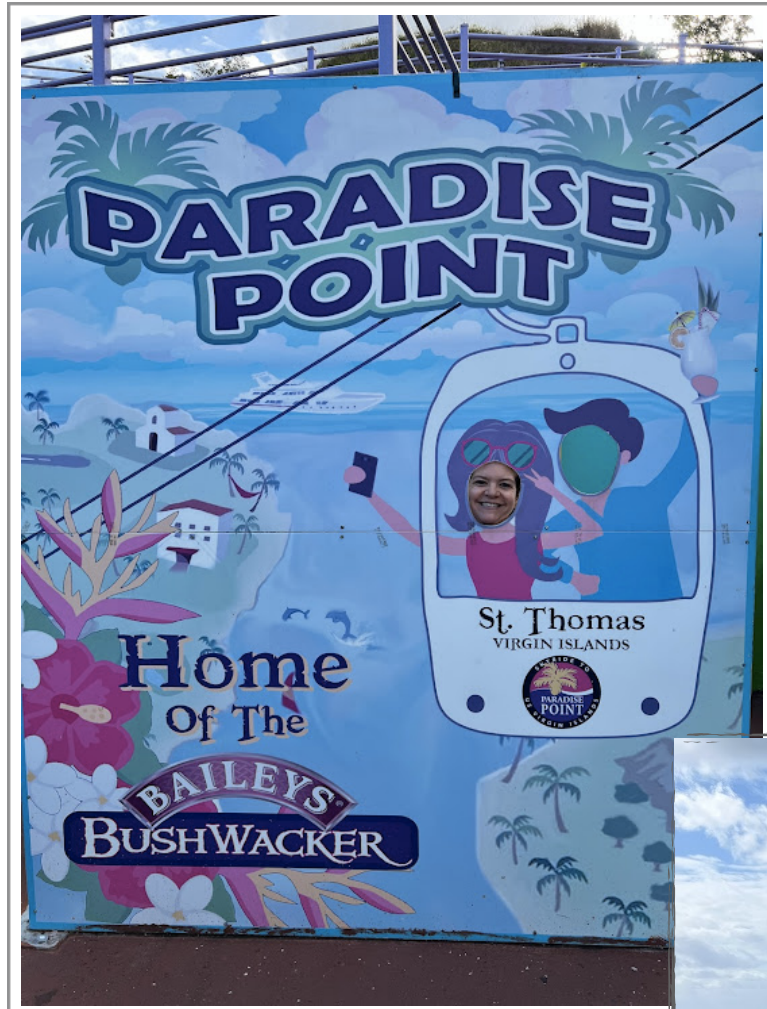
Our hotel, Flamboyant on the Bay Resort & Villas, was just a short 20-minute drive from the airport. They drive on the left hand side of the road in the USVI, but because the cars are set up the same as at home (i.e. driver on the left too) it was much easier to adjust to than when I’ve driven on the

left in Scotland or New Zealand. Our room was a one-bedroom suite with a kitchenette and balcony overlooking Magens Bay. There was a restaurant and bar onsite, as well as a coffee shop. What more could we want? We enjoyed a beer on the patio as we watched the sunset, and then drove back into the main part of town called Charlotte Amalie to eat dinner at the Stone House Cafe where we split delicious fish sandwiches with fries.



DAY 2 - ST. THOMAS VIEWPOINTS & MAGENS BAY BEACH

To get better acquainted with the island and to ease into our vacation, I had planned a morning touring the best viewpoints. The island is only 13 miles long and 4 miles wide, so nearly everything was only a 20-minute drive from each other, maximum. We fueled up with our first breakfast from the onsite coffee shop, Northside Grind, which became our go-to spot the next two days. We then drove to the viewpoint at Paradise Point. There are two ways to get to the top - drive up a very steep unmarked road, or take the Skyride Gondola. At \$25/pp and only running when cruise ships were in port, we opted to make the drive. It was the first true test of our car but it did just fine and I didn't find the drive up scary at all. The views were stunning and we had it all to ourselves!



Next we headed back towards our hotel to a ridgeline with several viewpoints. The first of which was the Charlotte Amalie Overlook. Here we were still overlooking the southern side of the island, but from a different vantage point.



Drake's Seat overlooks the northern side of St. Thomas and has views of Magens Bay, the same body of water we can see from our hotel, but from a higher vantage point.



Just up the road we stopped at Phantasea Tropical Botanical Garden most notable for its blooming orchids. We spent nearly an hour wandering around the small space, marveling not only at the orchids but beautiful air plants, red-footed tortoise, and colorful tropical birds such as the yellow bananaquit, the Virgin Islands state bird.





Our last stop was at Mountain Top, the tallest point on St. Thomas and home of the most famous banana daiquiri. Of course we had to get one to share! We soaked in another view of Magens Bay and explored the huge gift shop before heading back to our hotel.



Our afternoon was spent at Magens Bay Beach. Just a short drive from our hotel, we had to pay \$5/pp to enter and were able to easily find parking. After setting up under the semi-shade of a palm tree, our first order of business was eating lunch. We had stopped by a grocery store earlier in the day to provision ourselves, so PB&J was lunch. Although we brought our snorkel gear, this was more of a swimming beach and with its clear water, white sand beach, and palm trees it was a great place to spend a few hours. Finally we couldn't take the sun anymore so we headed back to the hotel for happy hour on our balcony!



Dinner was at Prime, a steakhouse located on Paradise Point! In addition to the fabulous food, the restaurant is known for its sunset views. I booked a reservation for 6pm with the sunset due to occur around 6:20pm. We had great fun taking pic-



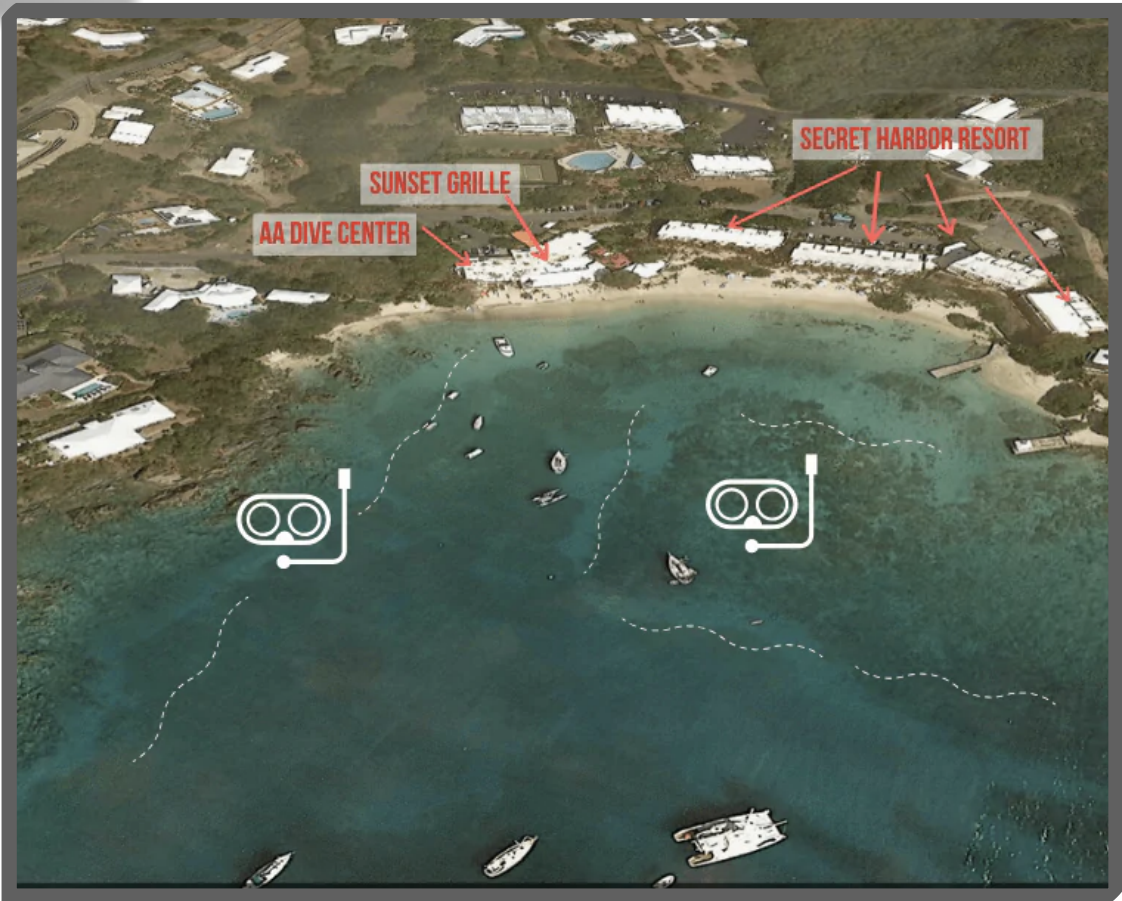
tures on the balcony watching the sunset. The food did not disappoint either - a lobster taco appetizer, great wine, and steaks with jalapeño creamed spinach and cheesy scalloped potatoes as sides. Driving down the super steep road at night in the dark was a wee bit stressful, but I was glad to have done it once earlier in the daylight. What a great first day!



DAY 3 - SECRET HARBOR BEACH & BUCK ISLAND



After starting our day at Northside Grind again, we headed by car to Secret Harbor Beach on the east side of the island near Red Hook. This was our favorite snorkeling spot on St. Thomas. There was a reef just offshore and rocky side walls created a small, protected harbor that was free from the throngs of cruise ship passengers. We set-up camp and after consulting with an employee at the onsite dive shop, we did two separate snorkels exploring both sides of the harbor. We saw a ton of beautiful tropical fish and colorful coral. It was cloudy though and we just couldn't warm up after our second snorkel so we called it a morning and ate our lunch before heading over to our afternoon excursion.



As we made our way to our next destination, we went up a really steep hill on the island we had never encountered before. I had the gas pedal pressed all the way down and by the end the car was just crawling up the hill. I thought we weren't going to make it but we did. Phew!

We parked at the Marriott Frenchman's Cove hotel to board the VI Cat for an adventure out to Turtle Cove at Buck Island. Two miles south of St. Thomas, Buck Island is a wildlife refuge, particularly for migratory birds. The Buck Island Light Station, erected in 1913, is still visible high atop a hill. We motored out to the island and did about an hour-long snorkel. The tour's highlight was reputedly seeing sea turtles, and once in the water we were directed towards our guide who was near a turtle. The mass of people indiscriminately kicking was incredibly annoying, however, so we quickly found ourselves leaving the group behind to explore on our own. We saw more turtles and as we rounded the cove, a vibrant reef full of fish. Once again, with the cloudy skies we quickly grew cold and were ready to return to the boat when called. The final hour of the tour was spent heading back to St. Thomas under sail power. We enjoyed bits of sunshine and several painkillers from the open bar on the boat!



We were pretty tired from the day's activities, so we opted to eat dinner at our hotel's onsite restaurant called RooT 42 Bar And Grill. We snagged a table on their outdoor patio and enjoyed a beer and split wings and sandwiches with fries for dinner. Yum yum!



DAY 5 - WATER ISLAND



On our last day in St. Thomas, we decided to take a day trip to nearby Water Island. Clocking in at just under 500 acres, this tiny island was a great getaway. We took a 15-minute water taxi ride from the Crown Bay Marina. Unfortunately we experienced a downpour of driving rain on the way there and got a bit wet, even with the boat cover, but the sun quickly came out once we arrived. Thank goodness! We rented a golf cart for the day to explore the island and Mike was our designated driver. Our first stop was Fort Segarra, an underground fort part of US defense strategies during WWII. An observation deck on the roof of the fort provided great views and we did a bit of exploring in the tunnels, underground rooms, and gun emplacements (not too much though as the entire structure is dark and relatively unstable).

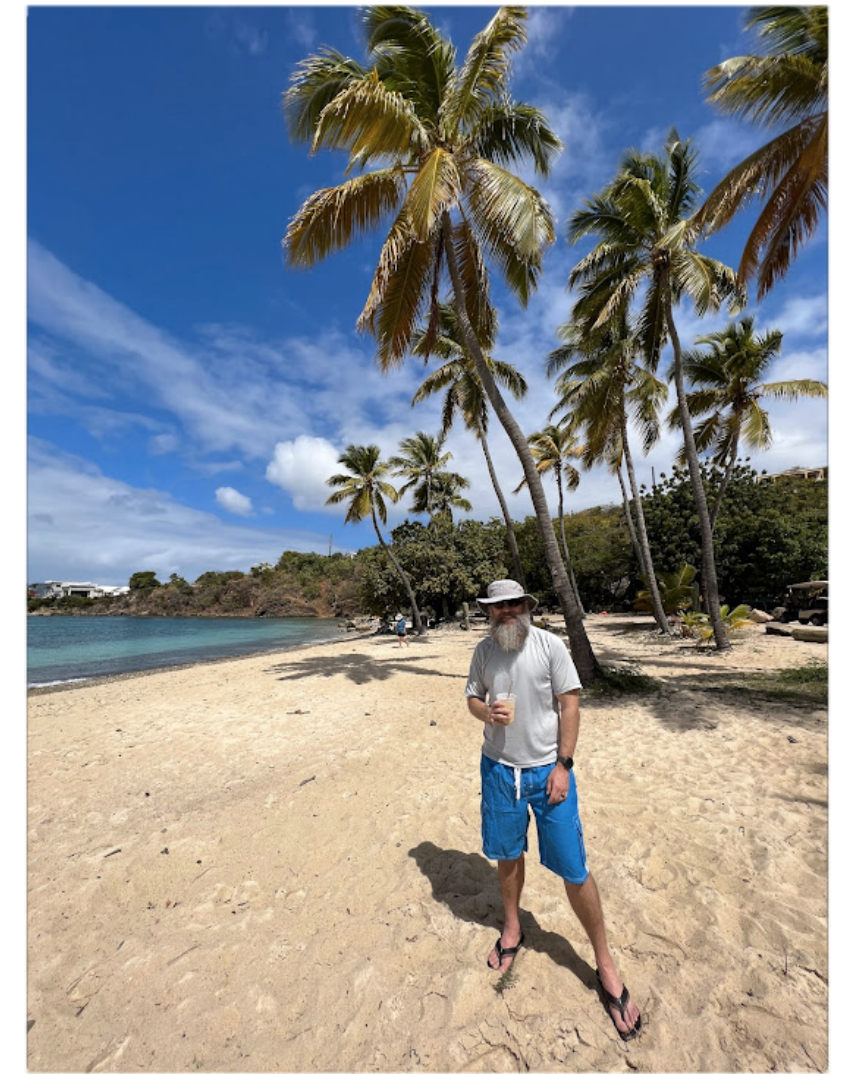




Heading down a steep hill from the fort, we parked the golf cart across from a campsite to check out Limestone Beach. We needed to navigate an uneven and overgrown trail to reach this long, shallow, rocky beach. It wasn't a good spot to hang out, but we enjoyed picking our way through all the coral remnants on the beach. To our surprise, we even saw spotted eagle rays in the water right offshore!



Our last stop was a beautiful white sand beach lined with palm trees - Honeymoon Beach. We rented lounge chairs, ordered two painkillers from Dinghy's Beach Bar, and proceeded to relax, hoping the sun would come out soon. We enjoyed snorkeling on the reef, shared mahi tacos, and another painkiller before returning our rental golf cart and catching the 3pm water taxi back to St. Thomas. Once back on the island we drove over to Frenchtown Brewing, a small brewery only open weekdays from 11am-5pm. We enjoyed a very light, drinkable IPA in their "Octopus Lounge" before heading back to our hotel and relaxing before dinner.

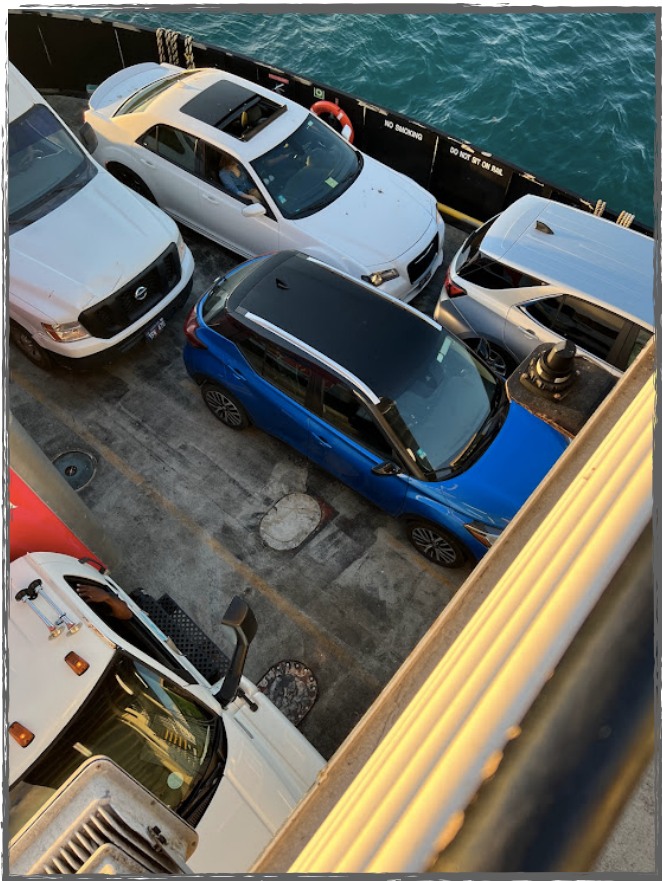


Dinner was at the seafood restaurant, Oceana, set in a beautiful waterside location with an open-air dining room. We shared a tuna tartare appetizer and both got their fish special of the day which was grouper with an amazing garlic puree and sautéed broccolini. My stomach was bothering me and I couldn't indulge like I typically could which was disappointing, but we still had a great last day on St. Thomas and were ready to move on!

DAY 6 - ST. JOHN TRAVEL, WATERLEMON BAY & TRUNK BAY

★ St. John beaches we visited

I had an ambitious day planned that involved us taking the 7am car ferry from Red Hook in St. Thomas over to St. John. We were up before dawn and driving to the car ferry terminal where we paid our port fee and then lined up for our ferry. Fun fact - you have to back your car onto the ferry!! It was slightly stressful to back up on the middle of the ramp and then navigate to one of four lanes. I got through it just fine though and watched in awe as huge delivery trucks and even a concrete mixer backed on! We were one of only two cars of people that actually got out for the crossing. The views and the wind were refreshing and it was exciting to approach the new island.



Our car was the blue one packed in like a sardine! Thank goodness for backup cameras!





Our first stop was to check out a new coffee place called St. John Provisions. A favorite of locals and visitors alike, they had breakfast sandwiches, bagels, coffee, and donuts. This became our go-to breakfast spot the rest of the week. They had dulce de leche donuts that were out of this world!! We briefly stopped at a grocery store for another loaf of bread and some snacks and then headed over to the place we'd be staying on St. John - Coconut Coast Villas. We were told we could leave our bags in their office until check-in time but to our delight when we arrived around 8am we were told our room was ready so we were able to check-in then and



there. This was also a one-bedroom suite with a kitchenette and a balcony overlooking the water. They had everything their guests could want for day use including coolers, beach blankets, and beach chairs. There was an "honor bar" of soft drinks and beer along with snacks and best of all, the main part of town near Cruz Bay was just a short 10-minute walk away.





St. John is the smallest of the Virgin Islands at just 9 miles long and 5 miles wide. It is home to Virgin Islands National Park which covers 60% of the island along with the coral reefs in the surrounding waters. After getting changed in the hotel room, we headed to the north shore of the island where a string of beautiful beaches awaited. Our original plan was to start the day at Trunk Bay, but by just after 9am the small parking lot was already full. So we instead continued along the main road until we got to the parking area outside the Annaberg Sugar Plantation. We hiked the flat but stony Leinster Bay Trail for one mile until we reached Waterlemon Bay. We put on our snorkel gear and headed out into the water which was known for fantastic snorkeling. Within minutes of getting into the water we saw a huge sea turtle, and then another and another. Overall we saw 15+ sea turtles grazing in the grass and at one point I saw three surrounding me. It was very impressive! The coral on the west side of the bay and the variety of tropical fish was great. Already this beat any place we had gone snorkeling on St. Thomas. On the way back to the beach I also spotted a large starfish and a long-spined sea urchin “walking” across the ocean floor. So cool! We got a taste for how remote and wild St. John is when we got back to our towel and learned that a mongoose had gotten into our bag!! It stole and ate our trail mix and took a bite out of one of our PB&J sandwiches. So disappointing! We gathered up our belongings and hiked up to the ruins of the Murphy Great House for a view of the surrounding waters and then set-up shop on the east side of the bay taking turns to do short snorkels while the other watched over our belongings. On the east side of the bay we saw more amazing fish but the currents were strong and we were chilly so we didn't stay out long.





We dropped our snorkel and beach gear at the car and turned onto the boardwalk stairs that led up to the Annaberg Sugar Plantation. The ruins consisted of various buildings and an old windmill and also provided another great view of Waterlemon Bay. We explored for a bit before getting back into the car and heading west.



This time we had much better luck accessing Trunk Bay as several parking spaces were open. Trunk Bay is the only beach on St. John that charges a fee, so we paid our \$5/pp and set-up our beach chairs on the water. Since the mongoose ate half of our lunch, we were famished and so we shared a plentiful order of nachos with cheese and pulled pork. Yum!! Trunk Bay has an underwater snorkel trail set up along the reef with placards, but they were really boring and in an area with low visibility, so we quickly ditched those and just snorkeled the reef hugging the large rock. We also walked the length of the beach and relaxed before packing up and heading back to the hotel.



After a brief sun shower enjoyed from the comfort of our balcony, we got dressed and headed into town for dinner. Along the way, we saw one of the peacocks strutting around town!



We watched the sun dip below the horizon from The Beach Bar. We devoured cheeseburgers and I had my first Bushwacker (think adult milkshake). A great day!



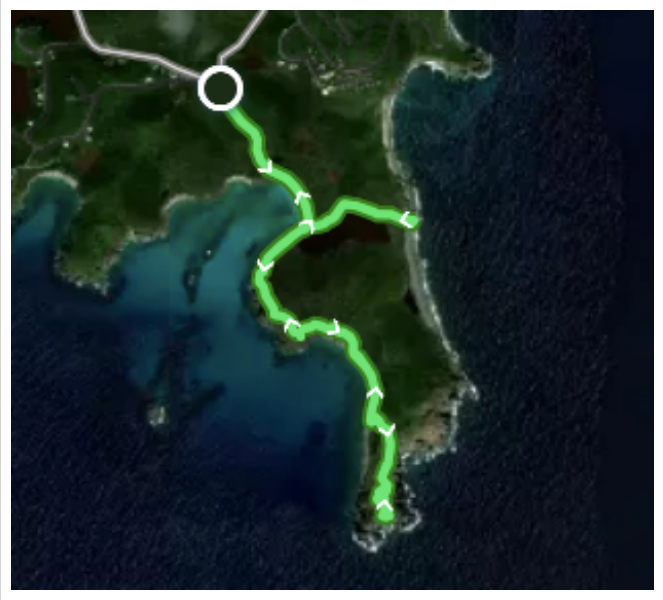
DAY 7 - CIRCUMNAVIGATION OF ST. JOHN

For our second day on St. John we wanted to get a different perspective of the island, from the water. We booked a seven-hour charter on the boat Voodoo. The boat did not leave the dock in town until 10:30am, so we had a relaxing morning getting breakfast from St. John Provisions and eating and reading on our patio. Once we boarded the boat, we met the other passengers of which there were only 14. The boat can technically hold 40, so we were well under capacity and it was a true luxury experience. The boat was well-maintained and an open bar was available the whole trip, complete with insulated tumblers for each of us. Eco-friendly and they kept our drinks cold! In addition to circumnavigating the island, we had four stops throughout the day. First we dropped anchor off Maho Bay, a place known for turtle sightings. After our time the day before in Waterlemon Bay, this was SO disappointing - we saw NOTHING. The next few stops were much better though - we stopped at a reef near Hansen Bay, and our favorite stop of the day was the last, at a place called the Tektites, in Lameshur Bay. The topography of the reef here was very diverse and we saw so many interesting fish. Coolest yet? Mike spotted an octopus hiding near a rock! It looked like a sea monster. An odd fact about this area - the Tektites were home to underwater capsules in which scientists conducted 10-20 day missions, simulating what it would be like to work together in close quarters, similar to that of a spacecraft (NASA was a project sponsor). In between all our snorkeling, we had lunch from the floating taco bar, Lime Out. The staff of Lime Out delivered us amazing ceviche, shrimp, and short rib tacos which we ate aboard the boat. They also have floating lily pads you can swim over to, but we opted to keep dry. This was one of the best days of our trip and we loved every minute, enjoying music and a few beers on the way back to the dock. We decided to keep dinner simple and split two pizzas from Lovango Rum Bar on our patio.



DAY 8 - RAM HEAD POINT & SALT POND BAY

After picking up breakfast from our favorite spot, we drove about 35 minutes east to park at the trail-head for Ram Head Point. We were one of the first cars in the small parking lot, and headed off in the early morning sun. The first part of the trail went down to the beach at Salt Pond Bay, and then curved around to walk along the beach before climbing to Ram Head Point. There were so many cool cacti lining the trail - it was a strange juxtaposition against the blue sea. We had the summit to ourselves and snapped a bunch of photos before we saw a group heading up towards the top.



On the way back, we detoured onto the adjacent trail that would take us to Drunk Bay. We passed by Salt Pond and to our surprise, there was a flock of flamingos in the water. While I had read there might be a flamingo present, apparently it was a rare sighting to see even just one. We met a woman who said that in her nine years of living nearby she's never seen a flamingo, let alone the nine that were here that day. How lucky! We continued on to the coast and Drunk Bay where people had lots of fun setting up rock art. There were turtles, crabs, even a mermaid!



Salt Pond Bay was supposed to have good snorkeling, so we passed by the beach to go back to the car and get our bathing suits, snorkel, and beach gear. It was only a quarter-mile trail, but it was straight up and hot by this point! We trudged back down from the car, set-up camp on the beach (with a hard-sided cooler so there were no mongoose incidents!) and jumped into the water. We began by snorkeling the west side of the bay and it was like an aquarium. Stunning fish and all kinds of coral. We had originally planned to move to another beach in the afternoon but we were enjoying ourselves so much we ended up staying at Salt Pond all day and doing two more snorkels.



Having had our fill, we got back into the car and drove back towards the hotel, stopping at the Windmill Bar famed for its amazing views. Prior to our trip, I came across several USVI webcams, one of which was at the Windmill Bar. After procuring two painkillers, we sat down on the deck and I realized we were right in front of the live webcam. This was such a fun stop!



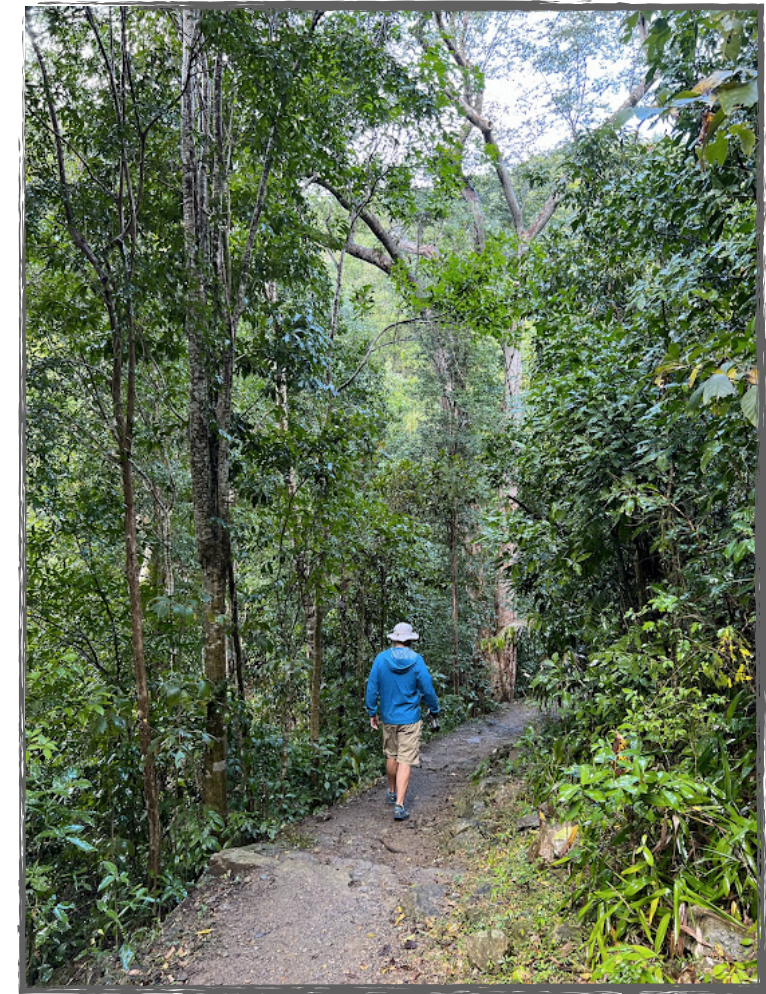
Kiss cam on the web cam! As censored by Mike's co-worker back at home. :)

After getting cleaned up, we walked into town just as the sun was setting. We both ordered a beer and fish tacos from a Mexican cantina and then walked a bit up the road to an ice cream parlor. We had to wait in a bit of a line, but it was worth it! A waffle cone with spiced chai latte and mango for me, and guava and strawberry for Mike.



DAY 9 - REEF BAY TRAIL & HANSEN BAY BEACH

For our last full day on the island, we had a hiking and snorkeling combo planned. Our favorite breakfast spot was closed on the weekends, so we went to a deli in town to stock up on breakfast sandwiches and coffee and drive towards the trail-head. What was supposed to be a 20-minute drive turned into an hour+ as we got stuck behind a running race! The USVI police decided to close the entire road and so we were crawling behind the last walkers in the race for over four miles. It was torture! We did eventually get there though and honestly it worked out for the best because this was the only time it rained steadily, downpouring at times, our whole trip. By the time we parked on the shoulder of the road and headed to the trail, there was just a light drizzle. The trail was largely tree-covered too so that helped and went sharply down from the road all the way to the shoreline. At the bottom of the trail, we explored the remains of a sugar mill with the equipment still there which was really neat. We also saw another unexpected animal - deer! We saw a group of about four just hanging out. Mike researched it and apparently they often swim between the islands!



We then checked out the beach and along the way passed several large hermit crabs! We didn't bring our swimming gear so we just rested a few minutes before heading back up trail. We made a quick detour to see the petroglyphs, dating back to AD 700-900, by archeological estimates. Amazing! From there, it was a steep climb back up to the car but we were done and ready for some beach time!



The rain was supposed to have been done mid-morning but as we drove towards our destination, the skies opened up again. We were headed to Hansen Bay, a beach near some of our favorite snorkeling we experienced by boat the other day. This beach was at the end of the road, literally. Along the way, we encountered the one hill our car nearly did not make it up. It seemed to go on



forever and I had my foot jammed against the accelerator. I was truly worried we were going to start sliding backwards at one point, but thankfully no one was behind us and we eventually made it. The location was on private land and the owner runs on donations, so we gave our donation and a few minutes later the rain finally stopped for good. Knowing this would be our last snorkel, we geared up and spent an hour snorkeling to a far out reef. We saw fish, sea turtles, a ray, and so much more. Our time on Hansen Bay was so memorable and worth the drive!



Driving back to our hotel was much faster without a race! We stopped for our photo at the national park sign. Along the way we encountered TONS of wild goats roaming across the road - they were everywhere! We then relaxed at the hotel before enjoying our final dinner at The Lime Inn. We shared a bottle of white wine and worked our way through a four-course tasting menu where we each got to choose our dishes. We shared every plate of tartare, prosciutto-wrapped mozzarella, crab tempura, ribs, seared tuna, and key lime pie and brownie ala mode to top things off!



DAY 10 - TRAVEL HOME

Our flight from St. Thomas did not depart until 4:30pm, so we tried to make the day as fun as possible. We had a light breakfast and savored our room in St. John until 9:30am when we had to drive over to the ferry terminal. Once back on St. Thomas we headed to the Sunset Grille at Secret Harbor Bay to sit with an ocean view and enjoy cocktails - so much fun! We then drove to nearby Duffy's Love Shack, a quirky restaurant located in a hut in the middle of a parking lot. We chowed down on mahi tacos and a painkiller. Continuing on our tour of island favorites, we drove up to Northside Grind to pick up sandwiches for dinner on our flight home. We had to arrive at the airport three hours early, per the custom officials' directions, so by this time we made our way to the airport for the journey home. The airport involved a lot of steps including tagging our bags, then waiting in a customs line (even though we were still in the US...not sure why). The main purpose seemed to be to make sure we were not bringing any pork products to the mainland which can carry disease. Then we had to drop our checked luggage to go through an xray - luckily they didn't find my stowaway sand! And finally, we went through regular TSA security screening. Thankfully

they had a pre-check line so we completed the final step fairly easily. The wait in the airport lounge wasn't too bad, nor was the four-hour flight back to Philly and the hour drive home. Nine days was the perfect amount of time for our trip and we agreed if we ever made it back, we would spend all our time on St. John as that was the perfect island for us!

