

About British Virgin Islands

Introduction to the BVI

The British Virgin Islands are made up of some 50 islands, rocks and cays, of which only 16 are inhabited. The main Island is Tortola (Turtle Dove) and the capital of Road Town is nestled into the mountains on the south side of the island. While most of the residents of the BVI are located on Tortola, Virgin Gorda (the fat virgin), Anegada (drowned land) and Jost Van Dyke are the next most populated islands. Known as "Nature's Little Secret", the British Virgin Islands are remarkably less developed than the rest of the Caribbean islands. The atmosphere is quiet and colonial, a reminder of the way the West Indies used to be. This is the place to go if you are looking to get away from it all and it is still possible, quite literally, to have a white, sandy beach to yourself. The scenery is mountainous, fringed by perfect sandy beaches and azure seas. The sub-tropical climate brings balmy weather year round and ensures the vegetation remains lush, with fruit trees and flowers growing in abundance. Useful information for travellers to the BVI:

Entry Requirements A valid passport is the principal requirement for entry into the British Virgin Islands. However, Canadian and US citizens may also enter using an authenticated birth or citizenship certificate along with current photographic identification. However, recent US regulations mean that US citizens require a passport to travel back to the US therefore a passport is now a necessity for US residents.

Currency The British Virgin Islands currency is the US Dollar. Most establishments take travellers cheques and credit cards although it is useful to have some cash as there are minimum charges (usually \$25) in most stores and restaurants. It is not possible to use debit cards in the BVI. The most widely accepted credit cards are Visa and MasterCard.

Driving on Tortola There are numerous car hire companies in the BVI. Cars are driven on the left hand side of the road. Most rental agencies supply US left hand drive cars.

Voltage The electricity system is the same as the US, with 110V appliances and two pin plugs.

Time The BVI is Atlantic Standard Time and there are no clock changes throughout the year.

Language English is the official language of the BVI although the local community does have a distinct Caribbean lilt to their accents.

Health and Security

The BVI is considered one of the safest destinations in world, with a very low crime rate. Of course, it is always wise to ensure that your villa and rental car are locked when not in use. Also, ensure you keep valuables with you or in sight at all times when exploring the BVI. There are a number of doctor surgeries in Road Town. There is also a basic hospital and a private clinic specializing in plastic surgery. The BVI is only 90 miles from Puerto Rico, which has modern medical care in dire emergencies.

Telecommunications

The majority of villas are equipped with modern communication systems. There will always be a facility to make local calls for dinner reservations or to arrange any activities. You may also make international calls but any charges will be taken from your damage deposit. If the villa telephone bars international call there is also a facility to use credit cards to make international calls direct on the land line. Most villas also have internet facilities, either ADSL or dialup. There are also many places around the islands that have an internet service including restaurants and internet cafes. Cable TV is in most homes and there are channels from the US and beyond, making it is easy to keep in touch with the world, if you so wish.

Shopping

The BVI is atypical of the Caribbean. There are no duty free shops or shopping malls. However, there are some unique stores to discover. Most of the clothing stores stock light summer clothing and beachwear. The famous Pussers Rum Store and Sunny Caribbee (which sells herbs and spices as well as Caribbean art) are a must see. The historic Main Street in Road Town has jewellery stores and gift shops. Soper's Hole Marina, at the West End of the Island also has some fantastic stores. You will find local arts and craft shops all over the islands. The centre of Virgin Gorda is Spanish Town where you will find a few small shops, which are great for gifts and beachwear.

Restaurants and Food

There are many cultures in the BVI and this is definitely evident in the cuisine. Tortola has a huge variety of restaurants, to suit any taste and budget. There are also a number of large supermarkets which are well stocked with fresh produce, meat and consumables. The majority of food is imported so you are guaranteed to find recognizable brands. A comprehensive guide to BVI restaurants is available at www.bvirestaurantguide.com. Visitors may bring food into the British Virgin Islands. For the time being, however, because of the worldwide threat of Hoof and Mouth and Mad Cow Disease, a law is in effect which bans the importation of any meat products unless an application is submitted to the Department of Agriculture for approval. Approved permits cost \$25.00. For more information, please call the Department of Agriculture at (284) 495-2532. Good quality, fresh foods are available in the British Virgin Islands from several grocery stores and provisionary on a year-round basis. BVI import duties charged on food products range between 5% and 15% of the invoice value. BVI Customs Department Phone: (284) 494-3475 Open from 8:30am to 6:30pm

Transportation

The recent addition of a stunning new airport and extended runway on Beef Island (attached to Tortola by bridge) has made the BVI increasingly accessible. Although the runway is not able to accommodate large planes there is easy access via Puerto Rico, if flying from the US, and Antigua, if flying in from Europe. The main attraction is the unofficial 'departure lounge', Trellis Bay. You can check in and then take a 2 minute stroll to the sandy beach and local eating establishments and maybe take a final dip in the Caribbean Sea. There are small airports in Virgin Gorda and Anegada which facilitate local small planes or helicopters. There are many flights to St Thomas in the US Virgin Islands from the US and Europe, which is a short ferry ride away (40 minutes). The ferry services are reliable and reasonably frequent. If you fly into St Thomas there are regular ferries from the US Virgin Islands. There are also operators of ferries to Virgin Gorda, Jost Van Dyke and Peter Island which are all fantastic venues for daytrips. There is limited public transport in the British Virgin Islands. There are however many taxis, which are regulated by the Government, so rates are consistent island wide although it is advisable to check on the fare before setting off. It is definitely worth hiring a car during your stay as there are many places to explore, from rainforest to secluded beach. It is best to go for a 4WD Jeep as the terrain can be steep but the views are amazing!

Virgin Gorda

Virgin Gorda is the second largest island in the BVI Chain, although with far less inhabitants making this island the 'jewel in the crown' of the BVI. It is possible to fly directly from Puerto Rico to Virgin Gorda, although there are numerous ferries running between Tortola and Virgin Gorda, which often proves to be the easier option. Only 10 miles long and 2 miles wide Virgin Gorda offers a diverse landscape from green mountainous areas in the North to flat land covered in large, smooth boulders attributed to a volcanic geographical phenomenon known as The Baths. The boulders are intricately connected by a trail running adjacent to the ocean which one can follow. The trail connects two idyllic beaches. There are grottos, caves and small pools to explore as well as fantastic snorkelling. This beauty of this area is protected as one of the most famous National Parks in the BVI. The island of Virgin Gorda offers numerous white, sandy beaches. There is always a new place to find and explore. The main town in Virgin Gorda is Spanish Town. There is a full service marina, which has many shops, an ATM and a supermarket. Nearby is the lavish Little Dix Bay resort, founded by Rockefeller in the mid 1960s which features an out of this world spa, a perfect treat during your stay. There are plenty of restaurants and bars offering entertainment on Virgin Gorda. The mountainous area of Virgin Gorda in the North has naturally created a large, protected expanse of water known as North Sound which is home to a couple of exclusive resorts and is a big hangout of the yachting crowd. There are a couple of renowned restaurants in this area as well as plenty of exploring to be done. This is a popular area for hiking and you can glimpse views of the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean simultaneously on the ridges, as well as panoramic views of the islands. You can also hire watersports equipment at The Bitter End Yacht Club.

Island History

South American Tribesmen, known as the Taino (Arawak) Indians, were the first inhabitants of the BVI making their way North in dugout canoes and taking advantage of the protected coves and mountainous land that the islands offered. They were closely followed by the Carib Indians who took over the islands until they were discovered by the Western World. Christopher Columbus

arrived in 1493 and on first sight named the islands "Las Once Mil Virgines", after the legend of St Ursula and her 11,000 martyred virgins. The islands remained undeveloped until the 17th Century when the land was taken over by the Dutch. The British took control of the BVI in the 1660s, establishing plantations. With the abolition of slavery in the mid 1800s, the British slowly left the BVI and the country was run by the immigrant population, although still a British Colony. Today, there is a ministerial form of Government, headed by a Premier, Ralph O'Neal. Although the territory is self governing, the Governor (appointed by Her Majesty's Government) has direct responsibility for external affairs, defense and internal security (including the police), the public service and administration of the courts.

Activities

Most people visit the BVI to refine the art of doing nothing. Even the more popular beaches are quiet but if you spend some time exploring you will certainly find a beach to yourself. For many, simply the underwater life is a reason to visit the BVI, with numerous coral reefs and tropical fish to admire. There are many dive companies around who are able to take you to reefs and wrecks alike. A famed BVI dive is the Wreck of the Rhone, a Royal Mail Steamer that sank off Salt Island in 1867 during a hurricane. It was also featured in the film 'The Deep' in 1977. There are also plenty of places to snorkel on Tortola and surrounding islands and take your time enjoying the underwater tropical wildlife. Windsurfing, surfing and sailing are popular sports in the BVI and there are opportunities to hire windsurfing gear, surf boards and small boats. You can also take lessons, if you fancy learning a new sport. There are also companies from which you can hire a yacht for the day if you have the correct qualifications, otherwise take a yacht with a Captain to explore some of the nearby islands, go for a snorkel and enjoy what nature has to offer. There are a few companies which hire small powerboats. If you have some experience you can go exploring for the day and discover the secluded coves and beaches amongst the uninhabited islands. Otherwise you can hire a Captain for a small extra fee. At present there are no golf courses in the BVI, although there is a 'Caribbean style' driving range. St Thomas is only a short hop by ferry so if golf is on your agenda take a day trip and spend it at the challenging Mahogany Run Golf Course. Deep Sea fishing is a must if you enjoy the thrill of the catch. Several companies offer deep sea fishing trips. You can expect to catch wahoo, tuna, grouper and, if you are lucky, a blue marlin, one of the fastest fish in the ocean. You can also enjoy parasailing, cycling and kayaking. Please contact us if you would like any details on any of the activities mentioned above.

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