



Courtesy Of: Charlotte Hicks
Company: Hicks Travel
Address: 301 Travel Lane
Winston-Salem NC 27101
Phone: 866-566-8136
E-Mail: charlotte@hicks.com
Website: www.hickstravel.com



VIRTUOSO

ST. THOMAS

St Thomas, US Virgin Islands

OVERVIEW

Introduction

Lively St. Thomas is the duty-free mall of the Caribbean—take along your credit cards and an oversized shopping bag. Aside from nearly 400 duty-free shops and boutiques that sell everything you could possibly want to buy, you'll find spirited nightspots, good restaurants and luxury resorts around St. Thomas' main city and port, Charlotte Amalie (pronounced *ah-MAHL-yeh*).

St. Thomas is the most developed of the U.S. Virgin Islands—in fact, it's one of the most developed in the entire Caribbean. Steep green hills run across the middle of the island, and beautiful beaches ring its shores. Hotels, villas, resorts, small inns and private residences, each on their own piece of paradise, mix with public and commercial structures. Consequently, traffic has become a major problem on St. Thomas.



Must See or Do

Sights—Multicolored fish along the reefs while scuba diving; the view from one of the mountains; seeing the island from the water on a sailing tour.

Museums—Antique furnishings at the Seven Arches Museum on Government Hill; the Fort Christian Museum

Memorable Meals—West Indian fare at Cuzzin's; fine French dining at Herve; Indigo Bar & Restaurant for its innovative seafood creations.

Late Night—Singing your heart out at Iggies karaoke bar; dancing to reggae music at Fungi's on the Beach; hanging out with the locals at Duffy's Love Shack.

Walks—A stroll along Magen's Bay Beach; through Main and Back streets of Charlotte Amalie for the Dutch architecture; a walk through Frenchtown for the culture.

Especially for Kids—Underwater life at Coral World Marine Park.

Geography

At 13 mi/21 km long by 4 mi/6 km wide, St. Thomas' volcanic origins make it quite hilly. Its highest point is Crown Mountain at 1,556 ft/482 m above sea level. The island has an east-to-west ridge of hills running through its center with smaller ridges surrounding the crest. Its capital city and main port is the protected bay of Charlotte Amalie on the south coast. St. Thomas is rimmed with picturesque bays.

History

Archaeological evidence shows that some of the earliest inhabitants on St. Thomas were of the Taino tribe. The first European to discover the island was Christopher Columbus in 1493.

St. Thomas remained largely barren with the exception of stopover pirates and a few small settlements until 1671, when the Danish took possession of the island. Not long after the occupation, the island's harborfront town (present-day Charlotte Amalie) became known for its taverns and was named Taphus, which means "beer halls." It became a den for seafarers and pirates in the decades that followed, which gave life to the pirate lore about infamous characters such as Blackbeard and Bluebeard.

St. Thomas' capital was later renamed in honor of the wife of Danish King Christian V, and Charlotte Amalie became a major port in the slave trade. The English twice briefly seized the island in the early 1800s, but it remained under Danish rule until the U.S. purchased the Virgin Islands in 1917. Since then, St. Thomas has established itself as one of the Caribbean's top tourist destinations and the top cruise-ship port of call.

Port Information

Location

Pretty Charlotte Amalie is the busiest port of call in the Caribbean. Cruise ships can tie up at either the West Indian Company Dock at Havensight (2 mi/3 km across the harbor, east of town) or at Crown Bay (1.5 mi/2.4 km west of town). Some of the larger ships anchor in St. Thomas Harbor and tender their passengers in smaller boats to downtown Charlotte Amalie.

There's a tourist information center in Havensight (open for ships in port) and another office across from Vendor's Plaza in Charlotte Amalie (open Monday-Saturday 8:30 am-4:30 pm). There are plenty of restaurants within walking distance of all port facilities, as well as access to public phones and the Internet.

Shore Excursions

Consider signing up for the excursions offered by your ship. They may not be the least-expensive way to see the island, but you won't have to waste your limited time making arrangements yourself—and you won't have to worry about missing the ship.

Shore excursions—and their prices—vary from cruise line to cruise line. They may include sightseeing in Charlotte Amalie or more active adventures such as biking on the island, scuba tours or helicopter rides over the islands. Check with your ship's shore-excursion staff or your travel agent for additional information.

Potpourri

The big green building you see along the Charlotte Amalie waterfront, located across the road from Fort Christian, is home to the territory's Legislature. It has 15 members who meet on a full-time basis.

Columbus named the Virgin Islands after St. Ursula, a Christian martyr, and her 11,000 virgins. The 10th-century legend states that Ursula, a daughter of a Christian king, sailed across the North Sea with 10 ladies in waiting, each attended by 1,000 maidens. On the voyage home, they were all massacred by pagans in Cologne, Germany, when Ursula refused to marry a chieftain.

Coral World Marine Park on St. Thomas has the world's only underwater post-office box.

Charlotte Amalie's red roofs are a tradition left over from Danish colonial days.

Former U.S. President Bill Clinton and his family visited the territory twice in the late 1990s, staying at the Sand Dollar vacation villa near Magens Bay. He played golf at Mahogany Run golf course.

Peter Holmberg of St. Thomas is the only Virgin Islands resident to win an Olympic medal. He won a silver in the Finn sailing class at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, Korea.

A tsunami emptied Charlotte Amalie Harbor in 1867.

SEE & DO

Sightseeing

The hills that cover St. Thomas offer some lovely lookouts. The scenery is spectacular from the top of St. Peter Mountain, the highest viewing point on the island and former location of the popular tourist attraction, Mountain Top. You can see almost 20 islands and cays, including St. John, as well as Tortola and Jost Van Dyke in the British Virgin Islands.

Sadly, Mountain Top burned to the ground in May 2009. The mostly wooden structure was ravaged by an intense fire. At 1,547 ft/480 m, Mountain Top was the highest point on St. Peter Mountain above the capital of Charlotte Amalie. It was a regular stop on island sightseeing tours and also served as a popular venue for weddings and receptions. The site also called itself the home of the banana daiquiri. Bartenders claimed that the recipe dated back more than 60 years, and millions of the frozen drinks had been served there. Facilities included souvenir shops, a restaurant, bar and observation deck.

Skyline Drive cuts across the middle of the island, often allowing lofty views of the northern coast. Off Skyline Drive is Drake's Seat, from which Sir Francis Drake reportedly kept an eye on his fleet and approaching Spanish galleons. Drake's Seat is often packed with T-shirt vendors and tour buses (not to mention a decorated donkey for photo ops), but if you go around sunset, you will practically have the place to yourself. Take a seat on a bench or on the rock wall above the road and watch the moon rise over Drake's Channel.

Museums

Fort Christian Museum

Fort Christian is the oldest building on the island, erected in 1672. Painted red with a clock tower on top, it now houses a small museum in what once were dungeon cells. Open Monday-Friday. Waterfront, Charlotte Amalie. Phone 340-776-4566.

Seven Arches Museum

The impeccably restored 18th-century residence of a Danish artisan is filled with antique furnishings. Allow plenty of time for this museum—owner and restorer Philbert Fluck is as fascinating as the museum itself. (The fruit punch he serves isn't half bad, either.) Open Monday-Saturday 10 am-4 pm or by appointment. US\$5. Government Hill, Charlotte Amalie. Phone 340-774-9295. <http://www.sevenarchesmuseum.com>.

Zoos & Wildlife

Coral World Ocean Park

If you don't have a chance to see the island's underwater life firsthand, consider a visit to the park, which includes an underwater observation tower, tropical nature trail, marine gardens aquarium, several touch displays and an 80,000-gallon coral reef tank. The Predator Tank is stocked with sharks, barracudas and rays. Try one of the park's most popular attractions, Sea Trek': Don a large helmet with air hose attached, descend a ladder to the ocean floor, and walk through coral and curious fish. Open Saturday-Wednesday 9 am-4 pm. US\$21 adults, US\$12 children ages 3-12, US\$60 families (2 adults and up to 4 children). Sea Trekkin' costs an additional US\$79 adults, US\$70 children older than age 8 who weigh at least 80 lb/36 kg. 6450 Estate Smith Bay, Coki Point (a 20-minute drive from Charlotte Amalie), St. Thomas. Phone 340-775-1555. <http://www.coralworldvi.com>.

Recreation

St. Thomas offers visitors a lot to do. The sea is the focus, with day sail, dive and fishing trips departing daily from hotels and other locations around the island.

The golf course at Mahogany Run poses challenges even for experienced golfers, and tennis courts at large hotels provide plenty of exercise for guests.

Beaches

The most beautiful attractions on St. Thomas are the beaches. All are open to the public, even those in front of hotels. Most hotels welcome visitors, but please be courteous: Park in less-congested areas and don't walk through hotel lobbies with your beach gear. Many hotels rent beach chairs and sports equipment to nonguests.

We like Brewer's Bay Beach for its shade trees and the view of the jets from the airport. Hull Bay, on the Atlantic Ocean side, is great for surfing the giant winter waves. Great Bay Beach is the spot for windsurfing, and the action at Limetree Beach is limited to the iguanas darting out from under the bougainvilleas. Adventurers gather at Vessup Beach to tackle

the latest craze, kiteboarding. **Coki Beach**

Located at the entrance to Coral World Ocean Park, Coki Beach has a Coney-Island feeling with its boom boxes, hair braiders, picnic tables and food huts. Coki Beach Dive Club instructors ignore the action and calmly instruct groups of learners in the shallow water. It's fun to watch when you're not snorkeling yourself.

Magen's Bay Beach

Located 3 mi/5 km north of the capital, Magen's Bay Beach was deeded to St. Thomas as a public park. The long and lovely beach is scenic with green-hilled peninsulas framing azure waters. Although it can be busy by island standards, we think it's definitely not to be missed if you are a beach person. Look for a spot on the quieter, shadier western part (on the left as you face the water). If you're there on a weekend and value peace and quiet, try to stay away from the sheds behind the beach, where islanders party to very loud music. There are showers, changing facilities, a gift shop and a snack bar. You can also rent sailboats, paddleboats and kayaks. Admission is US\$2 per car plus US\$4 adults, free for children younger than 12.

Morningstar Beach

At this beach you can swim, windsurf, rent a lounge chair and umbrella, and dine in one of the nearby hotel's excellent restaurants. During the week, Morningstar is peaceful, but on weekends competitive volleyball teams battle it out on the sand. Marriott's Frenchman's Reef Beach Resort, St. Thomas.

Sapphire Beach

The powdery stretch at Sapphire Beach Resort is about 5 mi/8 km from town on the eastern end of the island. It's a good snorkeling and windsurfing beach, with a marina, restaurants and a dive shop (fantastic views of St. John and Tortola, too). On Sunday it's a party beach, with volleyball and live music.

Boating & Sailing

As you would expect, all kinds of boating trips are available—from group charters to your own private day sail. **Caribbean Watersports & Tours**

Parasailing is becoming more and more popular on St. Thomas. Caribbean Watersports & Tours will take you for the ride of your life—soar about 400 ft/125 m above the sea. A launching platform on the boat keeps you from getting wet, but the captain might dip your toes in the water when you land. The boat picks up at several locations, including beach hotels and cruise-ship docks. US\$75. If there's room on the boat, you can go along for the ride for US\$20. Phone 340-775-9360. <http://www.viwatersports.com>.

Fishing

The waters just north of the Virgin Islands are the source of many world records for bill- and game fish, and St. Thomas is the scene of several prestigious tournaments. Blue marlin abound during the summer, and the rest of the year there are plenty of opportunities to reel in sailfish, yellowfin tuna, blackfin tuna, wahoo, tarpon, barracuda, kingfish, mahimahi and king mackerel, among others. Boats and crews are available for charter at many marinas, including American Yacht Harbor in Red Hook and Crown Bay Marina in Sub Base.

Red Hook, on the eastern end of the island next to the St. John ferry dock, is the headquarters for deep-sea fishing arrangements. Check with Charter Boat Center, a clearinghouse for fishing trips (phone 340-775-7990). You don't pay a fee for its services (the boat owners do), so it's a good deal. Expect to pay around US\$600 for a half-day trip for four or five people in search of wahoo, blue marlin or sailfish. <http://www.charterboat.vi>.

Golf

Mahogany Run Golf Course

The only golf course on the island, Mahogany Run is spectacular and very hilly. The par-70 course, designed by George and Tom Fazio, boasts the famous "Devil's Triangle" that stretches along precipitous cliffs overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Club rentals are available. Daily from sunrise to sunset. Greens fees run around US\$160 for 18 holes; lower twilight and off-season rates are available. On the north side of the island, east of Magen's Bay, St. Thomas. Phone 340-777-6006. Toll-free 800-253-7103. <http://www.mahoganyrungolf.com>.

Scuba & Snorkeling

The water around St. Thomas offers good snorkeling off most beaches, where you'll find plenty of sea life. Secret Harbor has incredible snorkeling opportunities with its two teeming reefs and a calm tranquil surf, perfect for lolling in the warm waters. Rent fins, masks and snorkels for US\$10 a day at a number of beaches, including Coki, Magens, Morningstar and Sapphire.

Divers in St. Thomas can enjoy an abundance of healthy reefs and an added bonus of a shipwreck trail. You must be a certified diver and present your C card to rent equipment and go diving, although some shops offer a supervised introductory dive. Check locally. **Chris Sawyer Dive Center**

This center makes dive trips to the wreck of the RMS *Rhone* in the British Virgin Islands. American Yacht Harbor, Red Hook. Phone 340-776-6111, ext. 7290. <http://www.sawyerdive.vi>.

Coki Beach Dive Club

This place offers excursions and equipment rental. Coki Beach, St. Thomas. Phone 340-775-4220. Toll-free 800-471-2654. <http://www.cokidive.com>.

St. Thomas Diving Club

Contact this club for a schedule of diving excursions. Bolongo Bay Beach Resort, 7147 Bolongo Bay, St. Thomas. Phone 340-776-2381. Toll-free 877-538-8734. <http://www.stthomasdivingclub.com>.

Tennis & Racquet Sports

Most hotels have tennis courts that are open to the public for a fee. Check with Marriott's Frenchman's Reef, Mahogany Run Tennis Club, Wyndham Sugar Bay Beach Resort, Bolongo Beach Resort and Secret Harbor Beach Resort. Sub Base, about 2 mi/3 km west of Charlotte Amalie, has two free public courts.

Nightlife

Whether it's calypso, reggae, steel bands, jazz or disco, live music fills the night air of St. Thomas. Many of the larger hotels and restaurants—Marriott's Frenchman's Reef, Bolongo Bay Beach Resort and the Ritz-Carlton St. Thomas—showcase musical entertainment several nights a week. Check the schedules in *St. Thomas-St. John This Week*.

Bars, Taverns & Pubs

Duffy's Love Shack

At Red Hook, you'll find the original Duffy's Love Shack, serving its famous dynamite drinks. Happy hour is 4-7 pm, but by the time it starts, everyone's already happy. Dancing is scheduled on Friday nights, but spontaneous dance combustion is known to occur at the slightest provocation. No credit cards. 6500 Red Hook Plaza, St. Thomas. Phone 340-779-2080. <http://www.duffysloveshack.com>.

Iggies

This spot at Bolongo Bay Beach Resort is a karaoke hub. Part beach club, part sports bar, it rocks with live music on weekends. 7150 Bolongo Bay, St. Thomas. Phone 340-693-2600. <http://www.iggiesbeachbar.com>.

Dance & Nightclubs

Fungi's on the Beach

This place bills itself as the "reggae always bar" and has dancing nightly. Bolstered by a pig roast, fun is the ultimate aim. Daily 11:30 am-10 pm. Point Pleasant Beach Resort (East End), St. Thomas. Phone 340-775-4142. <http://www.agaveterrace.com/fg1.html>.

Performing Arts

Theater

Pistarckle Theater

The island's thespians hold forth in productions staged by the decade-old Pistarckle Theater group. (*Pistarckle* is the local word for "noise.") Comedy is the group's forte at shows presented in the lovely Tillett Gardens theater, but it also does favorites such as Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*—with a West Indian twist. Shows are staged October-April. Tillett Gardens, 4126 Anna's Retreat, St. Thomas. Phone 340-775-7877. <http://www.pistarckletheater.vi>.

Venues

Reichhold Center for the Arts

The center presents a full program of theater, dance, music and the arts year-round. This modern theater is located on the campus of the University of the Virgin Islands at Brewer's Bay. Shows generally begin at 8 pm. 2 John Brewer's Bay, St. Thomas. Phone 340-693-1559. <http://www.reichholdcenter.com>.

Tillett Gardens

This theater hosts the popular Arts Alive series, which consists of arts-and-crafts festivals, classical-music concerts and the like. 4126 Anna's Retreat, St. Thomas. Phone 340-775-1929. <http://www.tillettgardens.com>.

Shopping

St. Thomas is one of the premier shopping spots in the Caribbean. The Danes declared it a free port in 1724, and it's been a magnet for bargain hunters ever since. You'll find good deals on designer clothes, gold jewelry, gemstones (set or unset), china and glassware, cameras, watches, leather goods, perfume, porcelain and liquor. But don't assume everything is a bargain—check sale prices at home beforehand so you'll know a deal when you see one. The best prices are on electronics, cameras and watches—if you know what you are looking for (down to the exact model). If the price seems too high at one store, try bargaining. If it still seems too high, leave and visit another store.

Be aware that the local shops recommended by tour operators, taxi drivers and cruise-ship lecturers generally pay for the privilege. Prices at these shops may be somewhat higher than others, but you'll usually get a money-back guarantee, valid for 30 days.

Shopping Hours: Monday-Saturday 9 am-5 pm. Some stops stay open till 8 pm. Very few are open on Sunday unless cruise ships are in port.

Galleries

Gallery St. Thomas

This gallery sells islander artwork and crafts. Open Monday-Saturday 9 am-5 pm, Sunday by appointment. 1 Main Street (upstairs above the Crystal Shoppe), St. Thomas. Phone 340-777-6363. Toll-free 877-797-6363. <http://www.gallerystthomas.com>.

Kilnworks Pottery and Art Gallery

Pick up bowls and vases with distinctive iguana and lizard designs at Kilnworks Pottery and Art Gallery. 6029 Estate Smith Bay 4H (near Coral World), St. Thomas. Phone 340-775-3979. <http://www.kilnworkspotteryvi.com>.

Markets

Stroll around Vendor's Plaza on the Charlotte Amalie waterfront to enjoy the flea-market atmosphere. You'll find T-shirts and souvenirs for sale, and you can't beat the trinket selection.

Shopping Areas

Downtown Charlotte Amalie

The island's original shopping district. Shops are located in old plantation-era warehouses, along the waterfront, on Main Street and on Back Street, with others in the alleyways that connect the main arteries. Many have branches in the Havensight area. When shopping downtown, be prepared to encounter hawkers outside Main Street stores. Sometimes their handouts do contain a usable discount.

Havensight

This busy shopping area stretches from the Havensight cruise-ship docks to the Port of Sale Mall westward to the Yacht Haven Grande Marina. In addition to more than 100 stores lined along the main road, more shops sit across the street. Havensight, St. Thomas. Phone 340-777-5313. <http://www.havensightmall.com>.

Specialty Stores

A.H. Riise

This is the "official Rolex retailer" on St. Thomas. You'll also find everything from duty-free liquor and jewelry to fine china and crystal (its prices on perfume and cosmetics are unbeatable). The store also sells quality Caribbean prints, maps and postcards. 37 Main St., Charlotte Amalie. Phone 340-776-2303. Toll-free 800-315-1600. <http://www.ahriise.com>.

Phil's Paradise

This is a great place to find women's swimsuits, casual clothing and formal wear in large sizes. Havensight Mall, Main Street, St. Thomas. Phone 340-774-5549.

Royal Caribbean

This store (not affiliated with the cruise line of the same name) has the best selection of cameras, electronics and leather accessories. It's also a good place to shop for watches. 33 & 35 Main St., Charlotte Amalie. Phone 340-776-4110. <http://www.royalcaribbean.vi>.

Itinerary

Local Tours

Virgin Islands Eco Tours

This company offers guided tours by kayak or on foot. The mountain and beach hikes include naturalist-led guided tours of Mangrove Lagoon Marine Reserve and Wildlife Sanctuary. Holmberg's Marina (East End), St. Thomas. Phone 340-779-2155. Toll-free 877-845-2925. <http://www.viecotours.com>.

Day Plans

To help you get the most out of your time in St. Thomas, we've prepared three different itineraries. *PLAN A*

Plenty of Scenery

Pack your camera and take the tramway to Paradise Point. You can have coffee at the top while snapping photos of the stunning views of Charlotte Amalie and the harbor.

After observing the eye-popping panorama, take the tramway back down and hire a taxi for a morning tour of the island. Tell the driver you want to be driven along Skyline Drive to Drake's Seat and Mountain Top, the highest viewing points on the island. Don't rush through this tour—the views are truly spectacular.

Back in Charlotte Amalie, have lunch at the Greenhouse, followed by a walking tour of the city. Begin at the Waterfront. There will be plenty of photo ops—especially the old churches and the still-active Jewish Synagogue, founded in 1796. When your film runs out or your memory card is full, you can spend the balance of your time shopping.

PLAN B

First Sail, Then Shop

One of the best ways to appreciate the beauty of the Virgin Islands is from the water. Sign up for a half-day sail or cruise. Pack your swim gear and camera and head for the sea. The tourist offices have a list of boats offering excursions. Some make beach stops, and others offer snorkeling.

After a morning in the sun, find some shade in Charlotte Amalie and grab a bite to eat at an outdoor cafe—perhaps some local food at Glady's Cafe in Royal Dane Mall. Spend the afternoon shopping when there will be fewer people in the boutiques along Waterfront, Main Street and Back Street. You'll find everything from designer togs to island T-shirts. When your credit card overheats or your feet give out, stop at an outdoor umbrella table for a cool drink.

DINING

Dining Overview

St. Thomas offers some of the most sophisticated dining in the Caribbean. Whether you are after a formal dinner or a light lunch, the choices are outstanding. If you know where to go, you can also find wonderful West Indian dishes. Favorites include pate (pronounced like the French version but made with ground beef, chicken or salted cod and onions wrapped in dough and deep fried—very tasty), *fungi* (the Caribbean version of polenta) or "rice and pigeon peas" (not really peas, but tiny beans and yellow rice).

Stewed or curried goat is a top local dish. It's tasty—similar to beef stew. A favorite lunch staple on St. Thomas is callaloo stew with ground peppers and okra in a pork or fish stock. The Virgin Islands are also known for tender conch—the meat from that beautiful shell is tenderized with a small mallet before being steamed and buttered or cooked Creole-style with tomatoes, onions and garlic.

Prices are comparable to or a little higher than those stateside. Expect to pay within these guidelines per person for a meal (drinks, tax or tip not included): \$ = less than US\$15; \$\$ = US\$15-\$25; \$\$\$ = US\$26-\$50; and \$\$\$\$ = more than US\$50.

Local & Regional

Cuzzin's

Once a livery stable and cookhouse, this historic building now serves wonderful West Indian food in an air-conditioned dining room, with local art on the walls. Dine on conch, lobster, curries and stews. Open Monday for lunch only, Tuesday-Saturday for lunch and dinner. \$\$\$. Most major credit cards. 7 Back St., Charlotte Amalie. Phone 340-777-4711.

Glady's Cafe

This eatery is known for its Caribbean fish and stews. Open Monday-Saturday for breakfast and lunch, Friday for dinner (also Sunday when cruise ships are in port). \$\$\$. Most major credit cards. In the Royal Dane Mall off Main Street, Charlotte Amalie. Phone 340-774-6604.

Texas Pit Barbecue

With four locations around St. Thomas, Texas Pit Barbecue is the best place to go for spicy ribs, brisket and chicken. It's takeout only, but the perfect meal when you don't want to break the bank. \$. No credit cards. Other locations at Wheatley Center, Sub Base and Red Hook. Open Monday-Saturday for dinner (call for hours at other locations). \$. No credit cards. Waterfront, Charlotte Amalie. Phone 340-776-9579.

Cuisines

American

Agave Terrace

One of the most popular fine restaurants, this place is perched on a cliff, surrounded by spectacular views and lush gardens. (No wonder the alcoves with romantic tables for two are always taken.) Fish, steak and pasta are mainstays, augmented by more sophisticated daily specials. Daily for dinner only. Reservations recommended. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Point Pleasant Resort, 4 Smith Bay St. (near Coki Point), St. Thomas. Phone 340-775-4142. <http://www.agaveterrace.com>.

Craig & Sally's

The menu changes daily, but you are certain to find something that pleases your palate. The cozy and comfy eatery with a boisterous bar is adorned with the work of local artists and has probably the most extensive wine list around, with more than 400 bottles to choose from. Open Wednesday-Friday for lunch and dinner, Saturday and Sunday for dinner only. Reservations recommended. \$\$\$\$. Accepts Visa and MasterCard. 3525 Honduras, Frenchtown. Phone 340-779-9949. <http://www.craigandsallys.com>.

French

Herve

For a refined dining experience with a lovely view, walk up the steps to Herve on Government Hill and enjoy tempting French cuisine that incorporates local ingredients. The bouillabaisse is perfect, and the quiche is classic. Open Monday-Friday for lunch, nightly for dinner. Reservations recommended. \$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Government Hill, Charlotte Amalie. Phone 340-777-9703. <http://www.herverestaurant.com>.

Irish

Molly Molone's Irish Yacht Pub

This is a great place to take the family for traditional Irish pub fare. The casual eatery has a great selection of local seafood, steaks and simple finger foods and sandwiches. Open Monday-Friday for breakfast, daily for lunch and dinner, Saturday and Sunday for brunch. \$\$-\$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Dockside, Red Hook. Phone 340-775-1270.

Italian

Cafe Amici

This is the place to go for a pungent pasta fix. The tasty salads are excellent. Tables are outside, shaded by a big umbrella on a little terrace. Daily for lunch. \$\$\$. MasterCard and Visa accepted. A.H. Riise Mall, 6501 Red Hook Plaza Suite 201, Charlotte Amalie. Phone 340-714-7704. <http://www.cafeamicivi.com>.

Latin American

Havana Blue

This culinary hot spot serves up lively Latin dishes such as fresh coconut chipotle sevice and seabass glazed with a miso lemongrass sauce in one of the island's most stunning dining rooms—lit by blue candlelight and overlooking the Caribbean Sea. Nightly for dinner. Reservations recommended. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Morningstar Beach Resort, St. Thomas. Phone 340-715-2583. <http://www.havanabluerestaurant.com>.

Spanish

Amalia Cafe

Relax on a quiet veranda in the heart of the downtown shopping district and sample a bountiful array of tapas. Then try the excellent paella Valencia, accompanied by Spanish wine or a pitcher of sangria. Open Monday-Saturday for lunch and dinner. \$-\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. 24 Palm Passage, Charlotte Amalie. Phone 340-714-7373. <http://www.amaliacafe.com>.

Continental

Banana Tree Grille

For fine dining with a fabulous view, head up the hill to this pavilion restaurant overlooking the harbor. Dinner creations range from sesame-seared tuna to grilled New York strip steak and lobster tail. The house specialty is coconut tempora shrimp. Open daily except Monday for dinner only. Reservations required. \$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Bluebeard's Castle Hotel, Charlotte Amalie. Phone 340-776-4050. <http://www.bananatreegrille.com>.

Old Stone Farmhouse

Old-world charm oozes from the stone walls, archways and courtyards of this 200-year-old plantation house on the grounds of the island's only golf course. Continental cuisine comes with an island flair, complemented by desserts and bread made daily. Open daily for dinner only. \$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Mahogany Run Golf Course (east of Magens Bay, on the north side), St. Thomas. Phone 340-777-6277. <http://www.oldstonefarmhouse.com>.

Seafood

Hook, Line & Sinker

If the name doesn't put you in the mood for seafood, the view—dockside at Frenchtown—surely will. Choose from triple-decker sandwiches and salads at lunch. For dinner try the house specialty—almond-crusting yellowtail snapper: It's so fresh that you'll swear it just leaped out of the water and onto your plate. Open Monday-Saturday for lunch and dinner, Sunday for brunch (10 am-2:30 pm) and dinner. \$\$-\$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. On the dock at 2 Honduras St., Frenchtown. Phone 340-776-9708. <http://www.hooklineandsinkervi.com>.

Indigo Bar & Restaurant

This offbeat seafood eatery has some innovative seafood dishes such as shrimp and crab-crusting mahimahi, and tuna spring rolls, as well as other creative choices including Doritos-encrusted chicken. The casual poolside has become a hot spot with locals and is a great place to take in the beauty of Magens Bay. Daily for lunch and dinner. \$\$\$\$. Most major credit cards. Magens Point Resort, Magens Bay, St. Thomas. Phone 340-776-0474.

Other Options

Food Vans

At several locations along the main roads, you'll find a van or cart serving heaping plates of food or individual helpings of chicken legs, ribs or pates for just a few dollars. Most vans are mobile but frequent the same locations daily—just look for a crowd of people and cars. Ask a resident which van to patronize for your favorite dish.

SECURITY

Personal Safety

Visitors to St. Thomas should be aware that the island has had its problems with crime. Take the same precautions you would in any major tourist destination: Beware of pickpockets, don't walk alone or on the beach at night (unless you are at your hotel and in sight of a hired patrol) and stay away from unlit and deserted areas, especially after dark. Don't leave valuables on the beach when you go swimming or in your car where they can be seen (even if you lock it).

Parts of Charlotte Amalie should be considered off-limits at night, so ask a reliable source if a neighborhood is safe before venturing there.

In an emergency, dial 911.

Health

Mosquitoes can be pesky after a spate of rain, but insect repellent helps to keep them at bay. There are no dangerous animals on the island. The food and water are safe on St. Thomas.

Many large hotels have their own physicians on call. The Roy L. Schneider Hospital is just outside Charlotte Amalie. Phone 340-776-8311. <http://www.rlshospital.org>.

To contact the police, ambulance or fire department, dial 911.

Disabled Advisory

Although most buildings are accessible to the disabled, there are several public and private buildings that have not upgraded their facilities.

The public-transportation system (VITRAN) has some buses that are wheelchair accessible, and there are reserved handicapped places in parking lots and near shopping districts. Contact Virgin Islands Association for Independent Living for information and assistance at 340-779-4978.

Dos & Don'ts

Do conserve water—it is a precious resource on the islands.

Do greet islanders before getting down to business. The local people say "Good morning" or "Good afternoon" to everyone, strangers included, when they enter a public room.

Don't leave your valuables unattended on the beach or exposed in the car. You might also opt for lockers if they are available at a beach, as even locked cars that appear empty can be burglarized.

Don't take shells, coral or other marine life from the water—they are part of a fragile, threatened ecosystem. Only pick up shells from the beach.

HOTELS

Hotel Overview

Accommodations range from deluxe resorts to small hotels, bed-and-breakfasts, condominiums, villas, inns, and mind and body retreats. The deluxe hotels are generally beautifully landscaped and have excellent service and amenities. Large resorts and some smaller properties are on the beach, but you'll sleep just as well at a small inland hotel.

The vacation villa market has boomed, with several hundred villas around the island available for rent. Most have on-island managers to sort out details and make sure your home-away-from-home meets your needs.

Bluebeard's Castle, named for the infamous pirate, is now a hotel and a stop on most island tours. Its faux-sugar mill is a popular spot for weddings.

FACTS

Geostats

Passport/Visa Requirements: All U.S. citizens must have a passport when traveling by air to or from Bermuda, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America and Mexico. Citizens of Canada, Mexico and the British Overseas Territory of Bermuda also must have a passport or other designated secure document to enter the U.S.

Passports are required for land crossings at the Canadian and Mexican borders with the U.S. and for cruise passengers returning to the U.S. from Mexico, the Caribbean, Canada or Bermuda. Reconfirm travel-document requirements with your carrier prior to departure.

Population: 51,822.

Languages: English.

Predominant Religions: Christian.

Time Zone: 4 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (-4 GMT). Daylight Saving Time is not observed.

Voltage Requirements: 110 volts.

Telephone Codes: 340, area code;

Money

Currency Exchange

Since the U.S. Virgin Islands is a U.S. territory, the unit of currency is the U.S. dollar.

ATMs are located around the island, except in Frenchtown. You'll find them at FirstBank, Banco Popular, Scotiabank and Citibank, as well as at Pueblo and Plaza Extra supermarkets. Visa and MasterCard are represented by Chase Manhattan Bank, Banco Popular and Citibank. Banks are usually open Monday-Thursday 9 am-2:30 pm and Friday 9 am-4 pm.

Taxes

Hotel occupancy tax is 8%.

Tipping

It is customary to leave a 15%-20% tip in restaurants. Tip porters US\$1-\$2 per bag.

Weather

The weather on St. Thomas is marked by lots of sun and warm Caribbean breezes. The temperature varies little between seasons, keeping winter months hot and sunny, though summer is more humid. Trade winds blowing off the sea can break the heat of the day on the beach. The weather is a little cooler inland, where higher altitudes bring chillier days and nights, especially in the winter season. Hurricane season runs June-November.

What to Wear

Lightweight tropical clothing is preferable, with a shawl or light jacket for cool evenings. Beachwear is appropriate only at the beach—you should wear a cover-up when strolling in town (men, too). Even the most casual restaurants expect shoes and a shirt, except those on the beach, where button-down and barefoot is the rule. Formal resort restaurants require men to wear a collared shirt. Be sure to take comfortable walking shoes for sightseeing.

If you're there on business, pants and shirts suffice for men, but if you're heading to court or government offices, a suit is best. For women, a dress, skirt or pants and a neat blouse work unless you're on legal or government business. In that case, a suit is fine.

Communication

Telephone

Direct-dial pay phones are located on downtown street corners (some of them don't work properly) and in some hotel lobbies. All pay phones accept major calling cards, though some are programmed to charge an additional US\$0.25. (You can just hang up and walk down the block to a competitor's phone.) You do not have to dial the area code for local calls.

Cell phone coverage is good, but there are pockets where there is no coverage because the mountains get in the way. AT&T and Sprint work best.

Internet Access

Internet cafes are located at several places around St. Thomas. Cyber Zone, at Port of Sale Mall, has phones, phone cards, fax machines and computers with DSL connections.

Probably the most relaxing spot in Charlotte Amalie for checking your e-mail is Little Switzerland's Net Cafe. Upstairs in its Main Street store, you'll find a cozy lounge with a few complimentary computers, a television and a bar with cool drinks. Beans, Bytes and Websites in the Royal Dane Mall is another popular place to stop for a snack as you check your e-mail.

Mail & Package Services

The main post office in Charlotte Amalie is across from the Grand Hotel, just up the street from the visitors center. Other post offices are located around the island, and FedExKinkos and other express-mail services are available. The mail is sent out daily, and U.S. postal rates apply.

Newspapers & Magazines

The local daily newspaper is the *VI Daily News*, and another widely read local daily is the *St. Croix Avis*. *The Island Trader* is a free weekly that is a good source of entertainment news, and *St. Thomas-St. John This Week* has lots of useful information for visitors.

Major U.S. newspapers are available if you don't mind paying extra for them. Look for stateside papers at the Gourmet Gallery, Havensight and Crown Bay.

Transportation

Air

Cyril E. King International Airport (STT), 4 mi/6 km west of downtown Charlotte Amalie, handles international flights, as well as regularly scheduled flights departing to St. Croix and other nearby islands. <http://www.saint-thomas-airport.com>.

The taxi fare between the airport and downtown is about US\$6 per passenger for two or more people.

You can also take a seaplane to St. Croix or the city of Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, from downtown Charlotte Amalie. Contact Seaborne Airlines at 340-773-6442, toll-free 888-359-8687. <http://www.seaborneairlines.com>.

Car

Most major rental car agencies have offices at the airport or at hotels. Daily rates range from US\$40 off-season to around US\$50 or more in-season. Many will only rent to drivers age 25 or older. Scooter rentals are also available, but that is not an advisable means of transportation in and around town. Parking downtown is a challenge: Your best bet is the public parking lot east of Fort Christian, open 6 am-6 pm. Nighttime and weekend parking is free.

Driving is on the left side of the road, but be aware that the car steering wheels are also on the left. Most accidents occur when tourists forget which side to drive on, especially when leaving a parking lot. Although roads are generally well paved, they are extremely steep in places. It's also easy to get lost, as few houses and buildings have addresses posted out front.

Ferry

Ferries to Cruz Bay on St. John leave daily from Charlotte Amalie 9 am-5:30 pm. A one-way trip costs US\$10. Ferries to St. John from Red Hook leave daily at 6:30 and 7:30 am and then hourly 8 am-midnight. The fare is US\$5. Ferries also run from St. Thomas to the British Virgin Islands. Check *St. Thomas-St. John This Week* for the ferry schedule.

Public Transportation

Air-conditioned public VITRAN buses travel between Charlotte Amalie and Red Hook every hour 5:30 am-8:30 pm. Additional runs are made to Bordeaux in the west and to the University of the Virgin Islands. The fare is US\$1. A bus between the airport and downtown runs every 45 minutes, 6 am-9:30 pm; the fare is US\$0.75. The bus is not a reliable way to get around, so only wait for one if you have plenty of time to spare and a grand sense of adventure.

Ship

Cruise ships use the West Indian Company Dock at Havensight or the Crown Bay (1.5 mi/2.4 km west of Charlotte Amalie). Some of the larger ships anchor in St. Thomas Harbor and tender passengers to downtown Charlotte Amalie, but with ongoing improvements at the docks, this is becoming less frequent.

Taxi

Taxis offer the most efficient transportation. When traveling outside of Charlotte Amalie, agree on a fee beforehand. Drivers are required to carry a printed list of the fares, and the list is published in *St. Thomas-St. John This Week*. You'll have to wait at the airport until the driver gets enough passengers heading in your direction to fill the vehicle. The amount you pay depends on how many people are in your party, not how many people are in the vehicle. The charge for a couple should be less than the price for one person traveling alone. While this may not make sense, it's the way it is. You can argue, but you won't win and you'll start or end your vacation on a bad note. You can also hire a taxi specifically for your group—expect to pay about US\$40 for a two-hour island tour for two. Rates increase considerably after dark.

For More Information

Tourist Offices

U.S. Virgin Islands Tourism Office

This office provides general tourism information. There is also a welcome center in the Havensight Mall at the cruise-ship dock. Phone 340-774-8784. <http://www.usvitourism.vi>.

EVENTS

Calendar

The U.S. Virgin Islands' government officially observes more than 20 legal holidays, which means government offices might be closed for the day. Most tourism businesses are open every day, including Christmas. Island residents are always looking for a reason to celebrate, and local events are held year-round.

The International Rolex Cup Regatta featuring world-class racing boats takes place in St. Thomas in late March or early April (<http://www.rolexcupregatta.com>).

St. Thomas' biggest event is Carnival in late April, when residents and visitors celebrate for a month with costume parades featuring stilt-walking dancers, calypso contests, beauty pageants and food fairs. <http://www.vicarnival.com>.

For further events and activities on St. Thomas, visit the Virgin Islands Department of Tourism Web site at <http://www.usvitourism.vi>.

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