

# BURT WOLF TRAVELS & TRADITIONS THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS



During his second voyage in 1493, Columbus was sailing in the waters east of Puerto Rico when he saw a group of hills above the horizon. Based on his experience in the Bahamas, he thought that as he approached, the separate islands would pull together into one big island. But that was not the case. The closer he got, the more islands appeared. Columbus claimed that they reminded him of the 11,000 virgins of Saint Ursula, and he called them the Virgin Islands.



Today, they're known as the US Virgin Islands and there are only about 50. But that's okay, because Ursula only had eleven virgins not 11,000.

The original story tells of Ursula and her eleven virgins being martyred in Germany during the 4th century. When the manuscript was being recopied, the guy who was doing the copying misread the "11 M" for martyrs as "11 M" for thousands. And by the 1200s, when the story became popular again, she had become Saint Ursula, a princess, sailing to Rome with 11,000 virgins. As a result of this new nautical aspect, sailors of the time would pray to Saint Ursula and her 11,000 seagoing virgins.

The three largest islands in the US Virgin Islands are St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John. But before they belonged to the US, they were Danish. In 1671, the king of Denmark issued a charter to a company that wanted to do business on the island of Saint Thomas, which soon became the hot spot in the neighborhood. During the 16- and 1700s, when the wars in Europe were spilling over into the Caribbean, Denmark remained neutral. St. Thomas, with its deep, safe and neutral harbor turned into a major free port for international trade. It developed an urban class of businessmen, bankers and traders with a cosmopolitan view. The free port aspect is still very much in evidence. The main downtown streets are lined with duty-free shops.

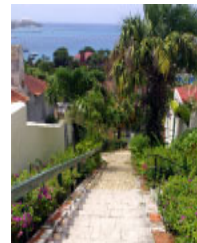
## Duty Free Shopping

After the Danish government abolished slavery in 1848, contract laborers were brought in from India and the Middle East and their descendants run many of the local shops. If you are a resident of the United States, St. Thomas is a particularly free port. Normally, US Customs allows you to return to the United States with a duty free allowance of \$400 per person. But from the US Virgin Islands, the allowance is \$1200 per person. As you may recall, St. Thomas was the doubting saint, so while I was on St. Thomas, I began to doubt some of the duty free pricing and thought I would call the United States to check things out. I found a 1.7 ounce bottle of Guerlain Chalamard *eau de toilette* spray was \$60 in New York, \$44 here. A liter of Tanqueray Gin, \$27 in Chicago, \$11 here. Not bad.



## Charlotte Amalie

St. Thomas' main town is Charlotte Amalie, which in 1691 was named after the Queen of Denmark. It's one of the few towns in the Caribbean with step streets—long pedestrian sidewalks built as short cuts through the hills.



Charlotte Amalie has 43 of them. The strip called "99 Steps" was built out of yellow ballast bricks that were taken off Danish ships in the 1700s. There are actually 103 steps on 99 Street, and two explanations for the situation.

The first claims that the four additional steps were added after the street sign went up and no additional funding was available to make a change. The second explanation tells of a brief period in which the new math was being taught.

## Haagensen House

At the top of the 103 steps on 99 Step Street, is Haagensen House. It gives you a good idea of what the home of a Danish colonist was like in the 1860s. Most

of the furniture was built out of mahogany. Not only was mahogany a local wood, but it was the only wood that would stand up, year after year, to the local weather.

The guys who owned the plantation would spend the day riding on horseback wearing high boots. When they got home, their legs were so swollen they couldn't get the boots off. They would sit down in a planter's chair, swing out the leg supports, put up their feet, and wait until the swelling went down when they could take their boots off.



### The St. Thomas Synagogue



Just down the street is the synagogue of St. Thomas. Jewish settlers from London and Amsterdam arrived here in the mid 1600s. In 1796, they built the second oldest synagogue in the Western Hemisphere. The floor is covered with sand in memory of the Jews who fled into the desert to escape enslavement by the Egyptians.

### The Beard Brothers

Because St. Thomas was a neutral harbor, it became the ideal home port for pirates. Pirates were not criminals the way we use that word today. They were independent contractors working on commission for a specific king or queen with instructions to pillage the enemies of that royal family. St. Thomas became home to two of the most famous, Bluebeard and Blackbeard. Blackbeard actually had a black beard. But Bluebeard's beard was white, just like mine, but he kept using his grandmother's rinse.

Blackbeard's castle is a medieval style stone tower, built in 1679. It's a good example of 17th century Danish military architecture. The walls are nearly five feet thick at the base and taper up to a height of over 30 feet. It was put up to protect the town from any attack that might come from the upper hills or from ships that could anchor outside the firing range of St. Thomas' guns. At the time, the spot where cruise ships dock today was the town's most vulnerable point.



### Zora's Sandal Shop

At the edge of town is Zora the sandal maker and for over 40 years she has been fitting the local feet, which is no mean feat. Recently, she's been cutting custom-made sandals for tourists. Here's how it works. You pick out the style you like, the leather you want, the



height of the heel, and buckle or no buckle, and Zora or one of her daughters traces an outline of your feet on a piece of paper. A master leather worker cuts out the leather and builds a heel. You come back for a fitting. Adjustments are made. The sandal is finished, a towering feat.

### The Sea Chateau

An alternative to a land based vacation is a yacht charter and St. Thomas is the place to find out what it's like. The US Virgin Islands has the largest charter fleet in the western hemisphere and you can get details from the Virgin Islands Charter Yacht League, a non-profit association that has helped the industry get organized. They put me in touch with Greg and Laura Lewis. Greg was an airline captain for a major US airline. Today he's a licensed sea captain and certified dive master. His dream was to go sea.

## THINGS TO DO IN ST. THOMAS

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TEL: (340) 775-1555  
[WWW.CORALWORLDVI.COM](http://WWW.CORALWORLDVI.COM)

### HAAGENSEN HOUSE

PO BOX 401567  
ST. THOMAS, VI 00804  
TEL: (340) 774-5541  
E-MAIL: HISTORICTRUST@VITELCOM.NET

### ST. THOMAS SYNAGOGUE

16 A & B CRYSTAL GADE  
ST. THOMAS, USVI 00804-0266  
TEL: (340) 774-4312  
[WWW.ONEPAPER.COM/SYNAGOGUE](http://WWW.ONEPAPER.COM/SYNAGOGUE)

### THE SEA CHATEAU

5100 LONG BAY ROAD; #169  
ST. THOMAS, USVI 00802  
TEL: (340) 771-6295 (BOAT)  
E-MAIL: SEACHATEAU@AOL.COM

### VIRGIN ISLANDS CHARTERYACHT LEAGUE (VICL)

5100 LONG BAY ROAD  
ST. THOMAS, USVI 00802  
TEL: (340) 774-3944

His wife Laura's dream was to own a little bed and breakfast. A 50-foot catamaran called *The Sea Chateau* became the perfect compromise. He sails and she cooks. Laura was born into a restaurant family and produces three meals a day for their guests. She's also the first mate, which is only fitting for the captain's wife. Cabins on the lower level are equipped with queen-sized beds, private bathrooms, and air conditioning. The main cabin upstairs holds the kitchen, the dining table, and an entertainment area with TV, VCR and a library of movies. Greg will help you design your ideal voyage.



### Coral World Marine Park

For me, the most interesting thing about Coral World is that in addition to viewing the creatures of the deep, Coral World will arrange for you to join them. It's called "sea trekking," a guided underwater tour around the coral banks of Cokie Bay. All you need is a bathing suit. They supply the foot and hand wear, as well as a helmet the supplies the oxygen.

The helmet weighs 70 pounds, but underwater it feels quite light. Weight is important because it provides stability. It's about 16 feet to the sea bottom and a Coral World diver and safety guide are there to show you what's going on.

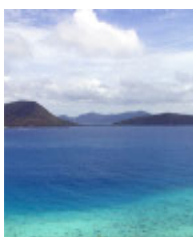


There's a chain fence that acts as a road guide and as you move along the chain a diver points out the sights.

### St. John

Historically, the commercial activities on the islands were divided between the main port and the plantations. They each developed a different culture, which has continued into the present.

In 1717, the Danish inhabitants of St. Thomas sailed across the two-mile wide Pillsbury Sound and occupied St. John, which at the time was a plantation island. These days you can take a 20 minute ferry ride from St. Thomas to St. John. Most people come over for a day and take a local taxi for a two-hour tour of the island, about two-thirds of which is a national park. Beach after beach covered with soft white sand, sailboats hiding out in small bays. Trunk Bay is famous for its underwater trail. There's a series of markers beneath the surface that tells you what you're looking at. Just put on your snorkel gear and head out on your self-guided tour.



## THINGS TO DO IN ST. JOHN

### VIRGIN ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK

ANNABERG SUGAR PLANTATION & TRUNK BAY

P.O. BOX 710

ST. JOHN, VI 00831

TEL: (340) 776-6201

[WWW.NPS.GOV/VIIS](http://WWW.NPS.GOV/VIIS)

### HERCULES' PATE DELIGHT

ST. JOHN, VI 00831

TEL: (340) 776-6352

Down the road from Trunk Bay are the remains of the Annaberg Sugar Plantation. African slaves worked the fields, but they were also allowed to work small plots of land so they could provide food for themselves and sell some to the plantation owner. They established an exchange economy among themselves and some managed to save enough money to buy their freedom.

Cruise Bay is the main port of Saint John, and home to Hercules' Pate stand. He opens at six in the morning, at which time he serves a typical West Indian breakfast of salt fish and Johnnycakes. Hercules was a cook at the Caneel Bay Resort, but he wanted to cook for his neighbors. So he took over this little shop and learned to make what is called "pate." It's really a dough pocket or a turnover filled with shrimp, fish, conch, chicken or beef.



### St. Croix

St. Croix is the biggest island in the chain. In 1733, the Danes purchased it from the French. In 1917, the United States purchased it along with the rest of the US Virgin Island from the Danes. The US wanted the islands because they were concerned that during the First World War the Germans might use them as a submarine base.

## TO LEARN MORE . . .

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM

TOLL-FREE: 1-800-372-USVI

[WWW.USVITOURISM.VI](http://WWW.USVITOURISM.VI)

## WHERE TO STAY

While I was on Saint Thomas, I stayed at Marriott's Frenchman's Reef, which was built on a point at the entrance to the Charlotte Amalie harbor. It's an excellent location with great views of the water and the surrounding islands, and all the facilities you would need for a traditional Caribbean vacation.

Right next door is Marriott's Morning Star Resort. The Resort's Tavern on the Beach has some of the best food on the island. Kevin Goodchild is the chef. Dean Simon is the pastry chef and an ice carver. You've got to admire a guy who carves ice outdoors in the Caribbean, a real chip off the old block. The Morning Star Resort is considered to be on the intimate side, which is very much in keeping with Frenchman's standing as a major location for weddings.



### MARRIOTT FRENCHMAN'S REEF & MORNING STAR BEACH RESORT

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TOLL-FREE: 1-800-223-6388  
TEL: (340) 776-8500  
[WWW.MARRIOTTHOTELS.COM](http://WWW.MARRIOTTHOTELS.COM)

The largest town on the island of St. Croix is Christiansted and it's one of the most unspoiled towns in the Caribbean. During the 1700s, it was a major port in the sugar trade, and many of the buildings that were constructed during the period are still standing. It's the kind of town that lends itself to an easy walking tour.



The Scale House, built in 1856 is the spot where Danish weighmasters would inspect the sugar and molasses that were the island's major source of income. Today it's the information center

for tourists, who are the present source of income.

The nearby fort at Christiansted was built in the 1740s as part of a defensive plan for the port. But it was never used to defend the town. Just as well, it has a long history of falling down during strong winds. Great views though.

## Bracelets by Sonya Hough

St. Croix is also famous for a piece of jewelry, a bracelet that was designed by Sonya Hough. Sonya moved from San Diego, California to St. Croix in 1964 and opened a shop on the corner called "The Corner Shop." She began hooking people into the shop with her hooked bracelet. It's one of the most sought-after pieces of jewelry in the Virgin Islands, and it comes with its own folklore. If you wear the hook with the open part facing down, you're looking for love. If you wear the hook with the open part up, you're not looking for love. If



you're not wearing the bracelet, you're looking for love in all the wrong places.

Nearly 40 years later, she's still selling them along with 30 other bracelet designs, necklaces and earrings. The shop is still here on the corner. But now it's called, "Sonya Limited." It's the oldest store on St. Croix with its original ownership.

## THINGS TO DO IN ST. CROIX

### SONYA LIMITED

1 COMPANY STREET  
CHRISTIANSTED, ST. CROIX, VI 00822  
TOLL-FREE: 1-877-766-9284  
TEL: (340) 778-8605  
E-MAIL: [SONYALTD@ATTGLOBAL.NET](mailto:SONYALTD@ATTGLOBAL.NET)  
WEBSITE: [WWW.SONYALTD.COM](http://WWW.SONYALTD.COM)



TRAVELS & TRADITIONS  
 RECIPES FROM  
 THE U. S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

FRESH MANGO COLADA  
*Makes 2 servings*

- 1 large ripe mango, peeled and sliced*
- ½ cup pineapple juice*
- 6 tablespoons Cruzan light rum, or other light rum, or other light rum*
- 2 tablespoons Coco Lopez (condensed coconut milk)*
- 2 cups crushed ice*
- 4 teaspoons Appleton's dark rum, or other dark rum*
- 2 maraschino cherries*
- 2 wedges fresh lime*

Blend the mango, pineapple juice, light rum, coconut milk, and ice in an electric blender until smooth.

Pour the drink into 2 tall glasses and pour 2 teaspoons of the dark rum into each glass. Garnish with the cherries and lime wedges.

GLADYS' HOT CHICKEN SALAD  
*Makes 4 servings*

- ½ pound skinless and boneless chicken breast meat, cut into ½-inch thick strips*
- Salt*
- Freshly ground black pepper*
- ½ cup all-purpose flour*
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil*
- 2 tablespoons toasted pine nuts*
- 2 small bell peppers, 1 green and 1 red, seeded and cut into ½-inch thick strips*
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh dill*
- 2 tablespoons fresh ground garlic*
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar*
- 8 leaves romaine lettuce (for garnish)*
- 1 tomato, cut into 8 wedges (for garnish)*
- 4 sprigs fresh curly leaf parsley (for garnish)*

Season the chicken pieces with the salt and pepper to taste. Lightly dredge the chicken in the flour, shaking off the excess. Heat the oil in a large skillet. Brown the chicken, over medium-high heat, about 5 minutes.

When the chicken is golden brown, scatter the pine nuts, peppers, dill, and garlic over the chicken, and add the vinegar. Shake the pan to distribute the peppers and herbs evenly. Continue cooking 5 minutes more or until the peppers are soft and chicken is cooked through. Adjust the seasoning with the salt and pepper.

To serve: Lay 2 leaves of romaine on each of the four salad plates. Divide the chicken, peppers, and pine nuts between the four plates and garnish each plate with 2 wedges of tomato. Top each plate with a sprig of the parsley.

**WHERE TO EAT**

**GLADYS' CAFÉ**  
 ROYAL DANE MALL  
 ST. THOMAS, USVI, 00802  
 TEL: (340) 774-6604

Gladys' was built into an old Danish warehouse just off the waterfront. It has a down home feeling and good local food. Most of the dishes are based on traditional Caribbean recipes like lobster fritters, chicken and rice and beans, and Gladys' favorite, hot chicken salad. Her signature drink is fresh mango colada.

