

CRUZ BAY, St. John — With no stoplights, airport or sense of urgency about much of anything, this sleepy hamlet (and only town on the entire island, population 4,000, give or take a few mon-goose) is where tourists arrive via ferry at the dock from neighboring big brother St. Thomas. Easy to spot are the honeymooners: they're the cargo shorts-wearing, apple-cheeked twentysomethings seen trudging up and down the slightly sloping, bougainvillea-framed streets, wiling under the tropical humidity and pulling oversized luggage, scanning the terrain of rickety coral-colored buildings like meercats for a car-rental joint. If the newbies ask for the lay of the land — and many do — I offer my well-rehearsed primer on this Norman Rockwell-esque canvas of small-town Caribbeana, crafted from countless visits to what has become a favorite outpost of quirkiness:

"First and foremost, driving is on the left-hand side of the road — a holdover from British culture. Forget this and you might die unless you're magically impervious to head-on collisions. There's only one gas station on the entire island and it's in Cruz Bay. Starfish and Dolphin markets carry grocery-store staples, but don't stroke out that milk costs \$7 a gallon — everything has to be imported and costs more than in the states. When locals stop their cars in the middle of the street to chat with friends, don't honk your horn — it's considered rude. Denver Dave is the go-to guy for..."

Here the island's only Catholic church safeguards the priest's reserved curb space with a posted street sign: "Thou Shalt Not Park Here." But that's the least of its troubles. Not long ago the padre discovered a beloved town character playing the church organ at two o'clock in the morning — buck naked and smoking a cigar. According to the well-circulated story, the cleric told the late-night musician, "Hey, you know smoking isn't allowed in church!"

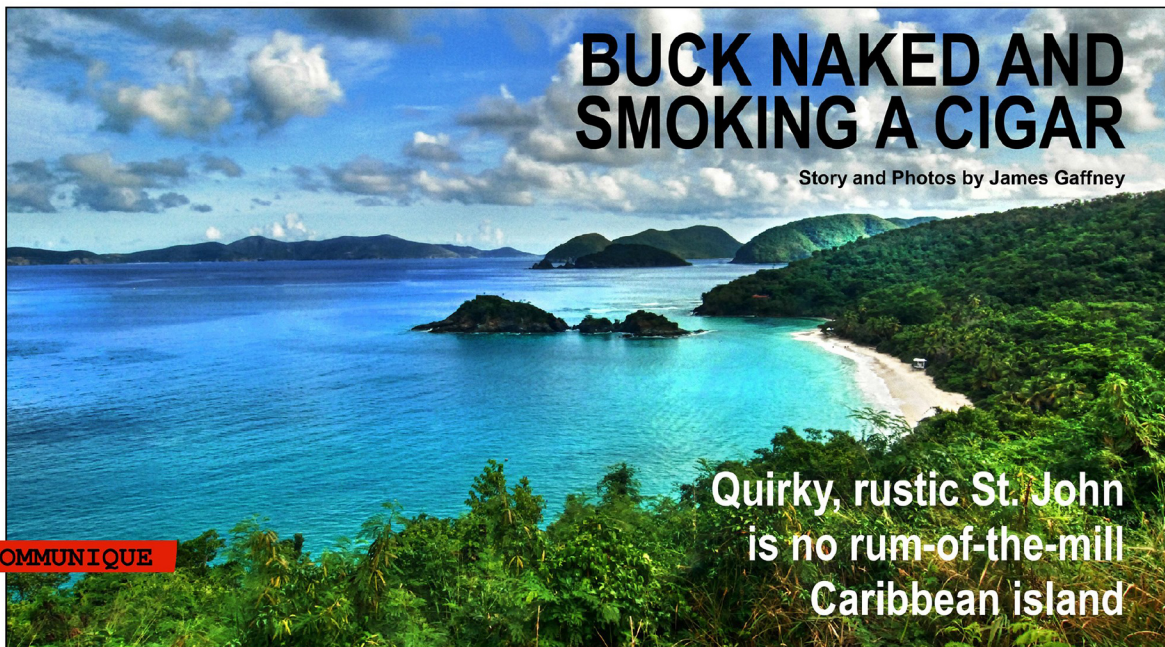
When the sun goes down, this easygoing village jumps to life as a jumble of savory aromas from street-side eateries limbos with the pulsing West Indies' music pouring forth from sidewalk bars. Tonight Woody's Tavern has cordoned off the street for a block-party fundraiser for breast-cancer awareness with live steel drums and dancing likely till the wee hours. Elsewhere, twice a week, the Virgin Islands' hottest reggae and calypso bands spice up the rhythms at Fred's Disco, barely more than a covered concrete patio that during the day doubles as a nursery selling potted plants.

Before long my traveling companion and I are flocking like homing pigeons to the Beach Bar, one of the two best spots on the island for serious tipplers. (The other is Skinny Leg's, where we watched four people fall off of five barstools in a single night — you do the math.) When Kenny Chesney is on-island, he occasionally drops by the Beach Bar for an impromptu concert. (He and actress

Renée Zellweger were married on the beach in front of his \$14 million Peter Bay estate villa not far from here.) As is typically the case, we're surrounded by a colorful after-hours mix of local artists and college-aged escape artists, dewy-eyed lovebirds and graying American expats, plus a few crusty sailor types who've tramped around the globe one too many times for their own good. We drink, laugh, mostly swap lies, the bobbing sailboats moored only yards away illuminated by tiki torches on the beach. By midnight our cup hath runneth over. Tomorrow we sleep in.

No matter our state of island alertness the morning after a late-night rum romp in town, the breakfast *du jour* is always Hercules for the hearty Caribbean staple called *pates*. Pronounced like the French word but bearing no resemblance to the goose-liver indulgence, West Indian pates are turnovers stuffed with a spicy mix of curried beef, chicken or vegetables. Take-out from Hercules is a ritual prior to heading east to wiggle our toes in the cool morning sand of St. John's shimmering pearl necklace of drop-dead beautiful beaches: Hawksnest, Cinnamon, Trunk, Caneel and Maho, discovered in that order as we drive along Northline Road. What also keeps this island on the GPS of snorkelers and sun-worshippers is that the lion's share (about 70 percent) of St. John is preserved as part of the U.S. Virgin Islands National Park. Unfortunately this is precisely why beaches are congested afternoons during peak tourist season (December-April) and when cruise-ship daytrippers from neighboring St. Thomas drop anchor and turn otherwise heavenly sandscapes into kaleidoscopes of nightmarish swimwear.

For this reason mid-morning finds us dashing off to my "tranquility base," remote and untouristed Leinster Bay (located near the old Annaburg sugar-mill ruins), which to reach requires a short walk along a dirt path once part of the Old Danish Road. From here we paddle the short distance to tiny Waterlemon Cay, savoring the best snorkeling on St. John, swimming over multi-colored reef



BUCK NAKED AND SMOKING A CIGAR

Story and Photos by James Gaffney

Quirky, rustic St. John is no rum-of-the-mill Caribbean island

COMMUNIQUE

and brain coral, green turtles and schools of starfish and parrotfish. Underwater, I hear only the sound of my own breathing. And it is bliss. While this stateside city slicker has never cottoned to trekking half a mile merely to see what brochures boast is "St. John's only bamboo grove!" — call me McLazy — my outdoorsy island friends quite like Reef Bay Trail and its ancient petroglyphs carved by St. John's pre-Columbian residents. Today, instead, our dance card calls for a short huff to Drunk Bay to see a different kind of archaeological "artifact": the whimsical, small-scale goats, human skeletons and other creations recent visitors have cobbled from rocks found along the beach. Go figure.

As a rule I don't visit the Caribbean to eat the same fare I can get back in the states. Unfortunately, the growing popularity of St. John has helped drive the demand for buffalo wings, jalapeno poppers and (gasp!) hamburgers. The good news is there is still a smattering of fine-dining and down-home joints if one knows where to look.

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The oldest, most consistently well-reviewed white-linen establishment is Asolare, an Asian-Caribbean fusion spot tucked on a hilltop overlooking Cruz Bay (the view is spectacular at night and, as might be expected, reservations are a must). During our visit Executive Chef Jonathan Balak was in the kitchen knocking out globally-inspired versions (and visions) of traditional Indian samosas, prepared with black beans, sautéed Honshimeji mushrooms and red-curry Spanish romesco sauce. But hands-down the newest kid on the cutting-edge dining block is Cruz Bay's La Plancha de Mar, a casual, airy den, located on the second "tier" of treehouse-like Moongoose Junction, where a trio of young chef-owners (Mike Prout, Jonathan Fritts and Jason Howard) cook everything on a traditional, Spanish-style flat-top grill and draw inspiration from the culinary traditions of both southern Spain and southern France. All of which helps explain the uncommon sighting of *moules fritte* on the same menu as a "deconstructed" paella, where local seafood and chorizo sausage are served kabyle style on skewers over a bed of saffron-infused risotto.



To enjoy bona-fide Caribbean flavors St. John inhabitants began cooking up at home more than a century ago, however, requires a stop at Windy Level Restaurant, where owner Glycerus Hernan oversees family recipes that include carried goat and stewed chicken, oxtail, and a hearty tour de force called Provisions, a mix of cassava, plantains, yuca and banana. The ubiquitous side dish of rice and peas — the Caribbean's progenitor of red beans and rice — is a flavorful reminder of the historic culinary connection New Orleans shares with the West Indies.

If there's a favorite far-flung outpost that never fails to flicker on our radar, it's the private spit of Hansen Bay Beach in East End owned by Violet "Vie" Mahabir, an 11th-generation St. Johnian. Just getting there is an adventure. From Cruz Bay, it's a 45-minute drive that winds through the island's most hilly, twisting and depth-defying jungle roads. (Tip: rent a Jeep Wrangler, not a Ford Fiesta.) Our afternoon junket under clear skies offers breathtaking vistas of the surrounding seas and nearby British Virgin Islands, as well as unexpected roadside encounters with St. John's wildest residents outside of Cruz Bay: herds of roaming goats, cows and donkeys, which occasionally block the road. Admission to Vie's private beach is a bargain: \$2.50 per person. As with every time we've visited, we're the only guests. Wading hip-deep into the Windex-colored waters, we feel free and unencumbered by the realities of life. A few hours in the sun finds us peckish and soon our noses are following the aromas of Caribbean soul food Vie is cooking across the street at her no-frills roadside kitchen, Vie's Snack Shack. Here it doesn't hurt to be an animal lover. Chickens and cats roam the grounds while a lazy mule nearby half-leans against a crooked fence post, the Caribbean surf lapping the shore a few yards away. Vie happily reports she has finally broken her mischievous goat of its habit of

jumping on tables and eating from her customers' plates. None of this seems to matter to the American ex-pat couple from Coral Bay, who have just arrived for lunch. "We've been coming to Vie's since we moved here from the states 25 years ago," says the 60s-ish woman. "Not



too many places left on the island to get genuine local cuisine." All the more reason we sit at our picnic table, under a shady Tamarind tree, savoring every forkful of the garlic-fried chicken and johnnycakes the septuagenarian and great-grandmother has been churning out since she first opened her place in 1979. Another

ritual is photographing our favorite island cook and long-time friend, who was crowned Miss St. John in 1963. "I just wish I knew you were coming," Vie says, smiling modestly, "so I could have done my hair."

Dusk finds us careening back to town along the island's off-times treacherous hairpin roads. By nightfall we see the twinkling lights of St. Thomas in the distance, just across Pillsbury Sound, the balmy tradewinds carrying the scent of frangipani and the sound of rumbling engines from the Bomba Charger ferry arriving at the dock a block away. We duck into Mooie's for a drink and watch through the open door as people make their way towards Fred's Disco, where the potted plants have been moved to make room for the evening's dance party. It isn't long before we vacate our barstools to join the pilgrimage, seduced by the irresistible rhythm of this off-the-beaten-path world.