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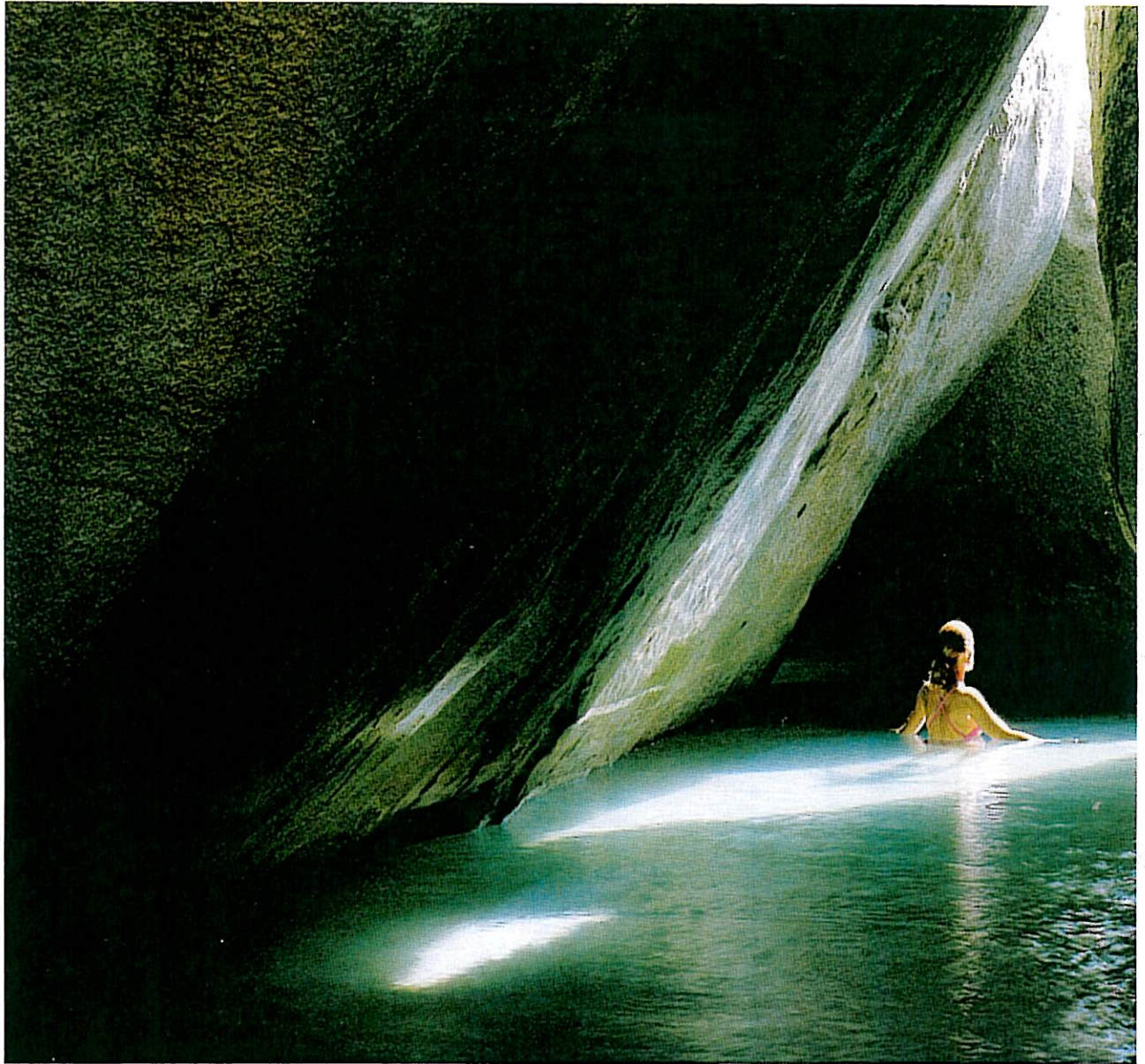
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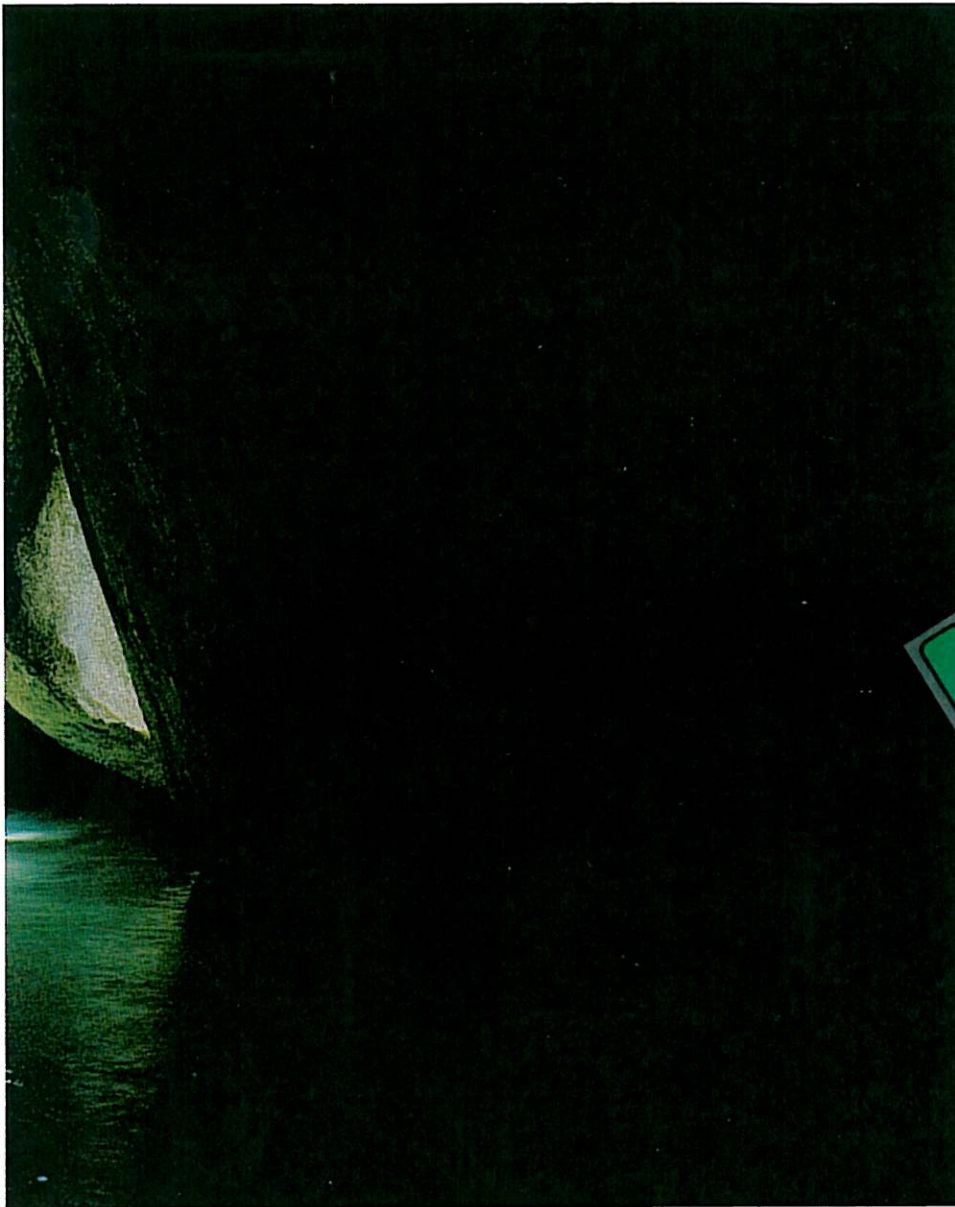


# HIDDEN TREASURE

True escapism doesn't get much better than in the Virgin Islands, where clients who want to drop out of the rat race will thank you for the recommendation. *Mark O'Flaherty* reports

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in the shoreline of the Baths of Virgin Gorda (pictured), or Trunk Bay off St John, with its submerged signs identifying the various coral species.

Then there's Norman Island, with its secret caves dotted around the coast – where folklore says gold doubloons may still be hidden: the island is believed to be the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.

As Paul Cleary, managing director of Caribtours, says: "The sheer natural beauty of the Virgin Islands is breathtaking – my favourite memories include exploring the uninhabited coves and glorious beaches in a little Boston Whaler dinghy."

### Understated is the new bling

The impact of the economic downturn in the Virgin Islands has been noticeable, but the resorts here claim they are better placed to weather the financial storm.

"We're not overly glitzy, we're understated elegance," says Martein van Wagenberg, managing director of Little Dix on Virgin Gorda. "That's seen as a good thing right now in terms of how people want to spend – or be seen to spend. Last year was our best on record, but still we all have to be realistic about the way things are going to be."

The Virgin Islands certainly aren't as "glitzy" as many resorts in, say, St Barths or Barbados. Most of them – with the exception of sophisticated Biras Creek, a Relais & Chateaux resort with 31 rooms, no toddler policy and contemporary decor on par with many a Maldivian island resort – are of the high end family variety.

At the same time, the island resorts in this neck of the woods are exactly the kind of place you could be recommending for those clients who are still planning that perfect blow-the-budget 50th birthday or special occasion. At ballpark figures of upwards of £600 a night, we're not talking no-frills flights to 'fun in the sun', but around 60% of visitors do take 'American Plan' packages (including all meals but excluding alcohol) to keep a rein on costs.

## When it

comes to white-sand seclusion and acting out *Lost*-like fantasies in the most luxe way possible, Richard Branson's hideaway is not the only option in the Virgin Islands, even though Necker remains one of the world's most exclusive retreats.

The US and British Virgin Islands are each made up of small islands and resorts whose collective aim seems to be to promote an ambience of absolute privacy.

Sure, there are a few beach bars and jewellery shops around Cruz Bay on St John, and dinner at Asolore overlooking them is a buzzy experience. But the main pursuits in this part of the world seem to be laying back to watch pelicans swoop into the sea as donkeys frolic on their backs in the sand behind you, or getting engrossed in some serious snorkeling or diving, some of the best in the world.

Both above and below-water aficionados know that when it comes to sailing or diving, this is the place to come, whether diving around the volcanic rocks

Wait for the launch of *Necker Belle* later this year: telling clients they can sail on Branson's yacht could prove a real sales wow factor

### The spoils of war

The Virgin Islands as we know them today were discovered by Columbus and were subsequently split politically – after much canonfire back in 1671 – between the British and the Danish West Indies. The Danish islands of St Thomas, St John and St Croix later became US territory in the early 20th century, while the BVIs, consisting of an archipelago of more than 50 islands, remain a British protectorate, and on the whole have the better deal in terms of attractions. And I'm not just saying that out of British bias.

Apart from the cruise ship hubs of St Thomas (USVI) and Tortola (BVI), most of the islands are small dots with secluded beaches and wonderfully marked by little attempt to foster accessibility other than boat jetties and transfers.

This is serious yachting territory, and visitors who don't own their own can either make use of the network of inter-island ferries or take to the sea through the likes of Moorings, which has luxury yacht charter jump off points at St Thomas and



**HOW TO BOOK IT**

Caribtours offers 10 nights in the British Virgin Islands combining Rosewood Little Dix Bay and Peter Island from £2,742pp including flights with Virgin Atlantic and transfers. Upgrade one-way to Upper Class from £826pp. Tel: 020 7751 0660 caribtours.co.uk



Tortola. For those looking for the cream of the crop, wait for the 32m Necker Belle which joins the Virgin Limited Edition portfolio at the end of the year. Telling clients they can sail on Branson's yacht could prove a real sales wow factor.

Many resorts gear a good proportion of their food and beverage business towards these well-heeled sailors looking to drop anchor and kick back.

The Bitter End resort on Virgin Gorda is a popular yachtie HQ. Peter Island offers slips for docking and refueling services in addition to its 54 residences, so sailors can take advantage of its restaurants, its vast spa and truly incredible, otherwise private beaches. In January of this year, which was unusually slow for the resort in terms of package bookings, Peter Island's manager, Wilbert Mason, reports that "the yacht business really was a great help".

Because the law states there's no such thing as a private beach, even the more discouragingly 'private' islands can't deny access to passing sailors. Indeed, many resorts offer guests small crafts so they can hop around and enjoy the quintessential Virgin Islands yachting experience.

### Beyond Mills & Boon wicker

Perhaps because of the yachting story, the Virgin Islands tend to have that reputation for being the cosier, more traditional Caribbean. Younger people who came to Caneel Bay, the Rosewood hotel on St John (USVI) 20 years ago are now bringing their children back. Many people come back here year on year, or even twice a year.

While 'the look' has, across the board in the Virgin Islands, been more attuned with 1970s Mills & Boon-tropical-and-wicker than 21st-century design, things are

moving rapidly with the times.

Caneel Bay is to close for two months later this year for an upgrade

that will bring its rooms up to the same world-class standard as its restaurants. At Rosewood sibling Little Dix Bay, a recent \$30 million refurbishment has given it a historically sympathetic yet strikingly 21st-century look.

Peter Island begun rolling out smarter, fresher interiors in February, and Bitter End commissioned Biba's Barbara Hulanicki for its last refurb. There's also hope that the ambitious Scrub Island project, which hit a financial hiatus in late 2008, may yet get off the ground this year.

The USP of the Virgin Islands is peace, quiet and jaw-droppingly pristine beaches and resorts which aim to make you feel like you're the only person on your private island – even when you're not. Even the larger hotels are so blessed with space they can spread themselves out.

At Caneel guests can choose from seven beaches, including several child-free zones. Many resorts position their swankiest villas in prime 'king of the hill' positions.

The \$25,000 a night (very much negotiable, of course) Falcon's Nest Villa at Peter Island is incredible, with loft-like contemporary interiors, an infinity pool and faux rock landscaping outside courtesy of SFX experts from Disney.

Then there are off-resort villas. Among the finest are Katitche Point Greathouse on St John, in the Small Luxury Hotels group, and the very flash nearby Villa Carlotta, bookable via Wimco.

As is often the way in the region, less is more. Travellers may arrive via plane in St Thomas, but few will spend too much time there (even if President Obama recently stayed at the refurbished Ritz-Carlton). Most will want to flee the cruise crowds and get out to one of the smaller islands, some protected with national park status, and gloriously undeveloped.

These may be trickier to get to than many a UK Caribbean favourite, but the pay-off in terms of idyll and eco-pristine scenery is worth the hop.

Clockwise from left: Biras Creek Resort; Caneel Bay on St John; Little Dix Bay, Virgin Gorda; Sunsail yacht



## Virgin Islands

### When to go

The islands are a year-round attraction in terms of weather, though prices fall in the spring and summer months, and September is hurricane season in the region. Jellyfish can be a risk in July and August.

### Getting there

There are no direct flights from the UK. Virgin Atlantic flies to San Juan in Puerto Rico – a hub for connections to St Thomas (USVI), then boats or planes onwards. Or suggest a 'shop-and-surf': a city break to New York, then to San Juan with JetBlue (jetblue.com) and plugging into Cape Air's (flycapeair.com) short-hop routes onto to Tortola, St Thomas or St Croix. Cape Air and JetBlue work together so passengers and luggage can be checked through from New York.

### Wow factor

Take over a whole island. There's Necker (neckerisland.com) or book the whole Guana Island resort (guana.com) for 46 guests from \$22,150 per night.

For couples, book Seagrape Cottage (seagrapecottage.net) on Little Thatch – the only

holiday residence on the island. The couple are stocked with food (and a chef if required) and left alone for the most romantic week possible (from \$5,775 per week).

**Useful contacts**  
bvtourism.com  
usvitourism.vi

**Time**  
GMT -4

**In touch**  
Internet is commonplace and roaming should be available for most UK mobile customers. Telephone charges via hotel landline are extortionate, and warn that most hotels charge even if a call isn't connected.

**Cashflow**  
Stock up on US dollars. ATMs are commonplace on larger islands.

**Culture**  
Americanised Caribbean (though you drive on the left) – the islands are supremely safe and the attitude friendly. A few West Indian slants to the cooking, but on the whole it feels like an extension of Miami with more audible patois. It is relaxed, but wandering around town in swimwear is frowned upon.