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The Philadelphia Inquirer

## Water world

You go to the sea in Virgin Gorda not just for recreation, but for transportation. Boats are the only way to get to many choice spots on this quiet British island.

By John J. Hilferty  
For The Inquirer

**VIRGIN GORDA, British Virgin Islands** - We had snorkeled for close to an hour when my wife and I managed to get temporarily lost in the Baths, a celebrated pile of volcanic monoliths lying at the southern tip of this small island.

We traced a path through the giant rocks, into cathedral-like caves - "rooms" - encountering dead ends in narrow tunnels, with shafts of Caribbean light stabbing from above. It took close to an hour to find our way back to the little beach where our snorkeling adventure had begun.

The exertion continued with our climb uphill from the beach, leaving us hot and sweating, a miserable condition that vanished with a plunge into an exotic swimming pool, attached conveniently to the Top of the Baths Restaurant. With our appetites roaring, we dined on a veranda, its walls and ceiling painted a soothing pastel green. A cool and welcome breeze flowed from the sea.

From this cliff-top perch we beheld the largest British Virgin Island, Tortola, seemingly afloat on the western horizon, and, far beyond the Sir Francis Drake Channel, speckled here and there with sailboats, lay St. John and St. Thomas of the U.S. Virgins.

Except for the tinier island of Anegada 16 miles to the north, Virgin Gorda is the easternmost of the jagged clusters of land masses that are the Virgin chain. They are islands with both exotic and dangerous histories, of slavery, piracy and colonialism, set in a tropical splendor so heavenly and seductive it can make you swoon.

For a relaxing, stretched-out week, we savored the breezes and the sun, the water and the flora, in a private villa located mid-island. Our villa, obtained through the Internet from CaribbeanWay.com ([www.caribbeanway.com](http://www.caribbeanway.com); phone toll-free 1-877-953-7400), was called Satori II and consisted of two sand-colored buildings terraced on two levels against the sharply rising hill above Mahoe Bay. It had a pool, two air-conditioned bedrooms, two baths, a modern kitchen-sitting room, and a long, sheltered porch that caught the sea breezes.

The sea was about 150 paces away, with warm water lapping gently on a crescent beach. Though there were about 15 landscaped villas in the neighborhood, with green lawns, colorful plants and swaying palms, our beachfront seemed private.

About 200 yards offshore was a small reef that we claimed as our own. Barely 10 yards across and only a few blocks long, the reef nonetheless showcased plenty of parrotfish, sergeant majors, blue tangs and yellow jacks, amid some very attractive barrels and fans.

Though we could have spent our entire week sunbathing and swimming at Mahoe Bay, islands are made for exploring. Less than 10 miles of rugged road connects the Baths at the southern tip to Gun Bay, near the northern part of the island, a trip custom-made for four-wheel drives and attentive drivers. (British rules apply: Driving is on the left.)

You quickly learn that the ultimate in travel ease is on the water. There are plentiful and well-

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maintained harbors and anchorages, and for every rental car available, there are multiple sailboats, dinghies, kayaks and yachts for rent, at prices ranging from \$20 an hour to thousands of dollars a week. Whenever we dined in a seaside restaurant, we noticed that probably half of the diners arrived by boat.

Gorda's major attraction is its ragged western coastline, pocked with rocky points and sandy crescent coves. I found the island's mountainous interior - dry, stony soil with scrubby cacti - to be less attractive than St. John or St. Thomas, which I had also explored at length.

The west coast is also where the resorts of Gorda abound in landscaped beauty. The Little Dix Bay Resort ([www.littledixbay.com](http://www.littledixbay.com), 1-800-905-0962), which is upscale and laid back, is on the northern flank of Spanish Town, the most densely populated part of the island, where the Virgin Gorda Yacht Harbor, shops and restaurants, plus the ferry to Tortola, can be found. Opened by Laurance Rockefeller in the 1960s and now owned by Rosewood Hotels & Resorts, Little Dix's 400 acres set the style for other island resorts to follow.

In the northern part of the island are the Leverick Bay Resort & Marina ([www.leverickbay.com](http://www.leverickbay.com), 1-800-848-7081), the Bitter End Yacht Club ([www.beyc.com](http://www.beyc.com), 1-800-872-2392), and Biras Creek ([www.biras.com](http://www.biras.com), 1-800-223-1108) resorts. Like Little Dix, all hug the shore, and all but Leverick are reached by boat rather than by land.

Leverick's brilliantly painted red roofs seem to catch fire in the sunlight, and the water at the resort reaches depths of 70 feet just a few feet offshore. A reminder of the once-strong British connection with the island is the bright-red filigreed phone booth gracing the end of a pier.

At Leverick Bay Water Sports, we found we could rent sailboats, dinghies, sea kayaks and snorkeling gear and could go parasailing or water skiing at prices ranging from \$8 (snorkeling gear for the day) to \$325 (28-foot sailboat, day).

A couple of days during our week on Virgin Gorda, we visited the Bitter End Yacht Club and Marina, reached by a boat from a sheltered cove called Gun Creek.

A 15-minute ride in the free resort launch takes you to a pier backed with plentiful amenities of luxury-style survival - beachfront villas and hillside suites, several restaurants and an English pub, sailing school and rentals, 25 yacht slips and 70 moorings. Besides enjoying the water sports and pool, we boarded a launch to Saba Rock (<http://www.sabarock.com>, 284-495-7711), 200 yards from the Bitter End beach. Saba's acreage - less than one - barely affords space for a restaurant and a few motel rooms.

While dining that evening in Saba's airy restaurant, we were entertained by two young boys on sailboards, darting across the water back and forth between the beach and our tiny island. They stayed at it until the sun set and dots of lights began appearing from the villas and dockside across the water.

Diners began arriving in dinghies from nearby yachts. One man who had been slumped at the bar for a long time took the trip the other way. He wore the boozy grin of a vacationing yachtsman, with lobster-red face and puffy eyelids. Squinting, I could see him 300 years before, knee breeches, deep-cuffed velvet coat, silk stockings, sword slung from his hip, four pistols in his blood-red cummerbund, dirty hair tied back in a knot, patch upon his eye, oozing malice.

But there was little malice in this gent; his uncertain gait simply betrayed too much drink. After dropping into his bouncing rubber dinghy, which had been drawn up dockside, the sailor in him went on automatic pilot. Tiller firmly in hand, he appeared adept and facile, gently steering the craft toward a nearby catamaran. And so to sleep!

The scenario prompted reflections on how Virgin Gorda has changed from the distant past of cutthroats and colonialism. Long gone are the Quaker and Methodist missionaries and their crusade to eliminate voodoo. Long gone, too, is the slavery that marked the ancestry of present-day islanders.

Now, even the ritual dance the islanders call *Camson*, used to communicate with dead ancestors, is performed only for show. The two-week annual festival celebrating the abolition of slavery (1834) in the BVI is held, unfortunately, in July and August, the hottest months, when tourism is lowest.

The best time to visit Virgin Gorda? Any time! But the absolute best is winter and early spring, when the trade winds soothe, and the sun and water are as one - warm and enveloping, constantly the same.



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