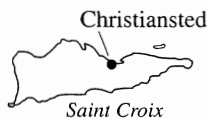
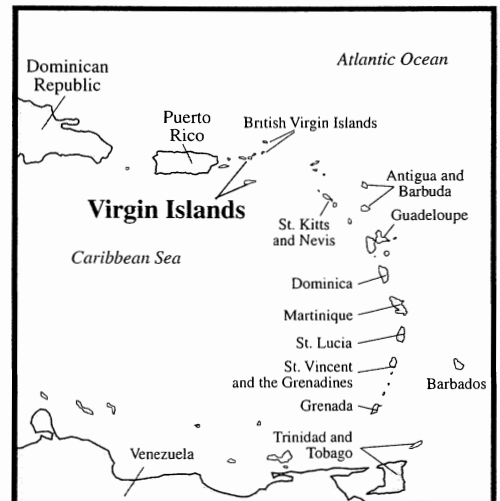


U.S. Virgin Islands



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.



BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. The United States Virgin Islands (USVI) comprise 68 islands in the Greater Antilles. The three largest islands are St. Croix (83 square miles), St. Thomas (31 square miles), and St. John (20 square miles). St. Thomas is about 40 miles from Puerto Rico. The remaining islands are small and mostly uninhabited.

USVI's highest point is Crown Mountain (1,550 feet or 368 meters), located on rugged St. Thomas. This island is also home to Charlotte Amalie, a natural port and the territorial capital. St. John is characterized by moderately sloping mountains that meet the shorelines. St. Croix is dry and windswept in the east and lushly tropical in the west. Central high pastures are favorable to agriculture.

The subtropical climate is moderated by constant trade winds; the temperature averages 79°F (16°C). About 43 inches of rain fall each year, although droughts are possible. Hurricanes occur periodically and can inflict serious damage. The last major hurricane was Georges in September 1998.

History. The Virgin Islands have a long and active history. Artifacts show the Igneri or "Ancient Ones" (A.D. 50–650) preceded the peace-loving Arawak tribes who were eventually dominated by the fierce Caribs. It was the Caribs who greeted Christopher Columbus with arrows at the Salt River on St. Croix. Columbus named this island *Santa Cruz* (Holy Cross). Sailing north, he compared the other islands to St. Ursula's 11,000 virgins (hence, the name Virgin Islands).

Spain made little effort to colonize the Virgin Islands, and for the next two hundred years, the French, Dutch, and

English traded them back and forth. By the 1700s, Denmark had planted its flag on St. Thomas, adopted St. John, and purchased the now-designated St. Croix from the French. Britain secured the islands from the Dutch that are the British Virgin Islands today.

Denmark went on to promote the islands as thriving sugarcane and trading centers. By the late 18th century, St. Croix had 264 sugar mills (many of which remain as ruins) and more than 24,000 African slaves. The sugar-based economic system began to decline when the European sugar beet was introduced and when the Danes proclaimed slave trading (but not slave labor) illegal in 1803. In 1848, Governor Peter von Scholten promised emancipation for all "unfree" persons after an organized slave protest. The Danish government then enacted harsh labor laws that provoked eventual conflict. This climaxed with the "Great Fire Burn" of 1878. Laborers destroyed or burned more than 40 estates and miles of plantations, ultimately putting an end to the sugarcane industry.

The United States decided to buy the Danish Virgin Islands in 1917 to block any enemy approach to the Panama Canal during World War I. In 1927, the territory's residents were granted U.S. citizenship. The U.S. Navy administered the islands until 1931 when the Department of the Interior assumed jurisdiction. The first 11-member legislature was locally elected in 1954, but it was not until 1970 that a governor was popularly elected. In 1972, the U.S. Virgin Islands received a non-voting seat in the U.S. Congress. Charles Turnbull was elected governor in the November 1998 elections.

Turnbull wants to reduce the public debt and secure more rights for his territory.

THE PEOPLE

Population. The estimated population of the U.S. Virgin Islands is 114,000, with 60,000 residing on St. Croix, 50,000 on St. Thomas, and 3,000 on St. John. The annual growth rate is about 1 percent. Charlotte Amalie is the largest city on St. Thomas. Cruz Bay is home to most of St. John's population, and St. Croix's residents are spread across the island. Approximately two-thirds of the population is of African descent, one-fourth is from Puerto Rico, and one-tenth is from the continental United States and Europe.

When new industries were created in the 1960s, a severe labor shortage brought thousands of workers from surrounding islands—nearly tripling the population. In 1985, Congress passed legislation that offered legal status to these individuals. As a result, the Virgin Islands's strong inherent culture is influenced by a number of other Caribbean cultures.

Language. English is the official language, but Virgin Islanders converse with one another in a local dialect (English Creole) that incorporates many languages. For example, *Man, yoh overtake meh* (Friend, you surprised me) has its roots in English, but *What a pistarkel* (What a spectacle) stems from the Dutch Creole *Spektakel* or the Danish *Spetakel* meaning "noise" or "din." St. Thomians, St. Johnians, and Cruzians speak the same dialect but have slightly different accents. A St. Thomian would say *Com hare* (Come here) and a Cruzian would say *Com yah* or *Com heh*.

On St. Croix, 45 percent of the population speaks Spanish. French Creole (patois), Dutch Creole (Papiamentu), East Indian, and Arabic also are spoken in smaller communities.

Religion. Religion is important to Virgin Islanders. Most people are Christians. Of the 35 different Christian denominations active in the Virgin Islands, the Baptist (42 percent), Catholic (34 percent), and Episcopalian (17 percent) faiths are the largest. One Jewish synagogue serves the small Jewish population. Most people attend church services. To be honest and considered a good Christian is highly regarded. Many native islanders often carry scriptures with them and read them in spare moments or while waiting for buses and taxis. Non-Christian communities (including Rastafarians, Muslims, and Hindus) also have a presence on the islands.

General Attitudes. U.S. Virgin Islanders have a tradition of being gracious and somewhat conservative. They enjoy their privacy and strive to be morally respectable. Many social values were adopted from other West Indian islands, but current ones are coming more from the United States. For example, women are now less tolerant of the classic West Indian male-dominant relationship. Also, events that begin on time rather than on "island time" or "Cruzian time" (i.e., late) are viewed as more professional than other events.

Islanders vote regularly and show great interest in current affairs as reported in the local media. Whether heated or lighthearted, daily discussions about politics and the economy are prevalent. It is acknowledged that an educated person will have more opportunity to progress in today's society. Therefore, children are encouraged to go to school and parents do their best to provide the means.

Each island prides itself on something different. St. Thomas accommodates tourism, St. Croix highlights private industry, and St. John values its natural beauty. The sister islands engage in a sense of good-natured competition.

Personal Appearance. Islanders wear conservative clothing that is pressed and clean. Children wear cotton school uniforms with shoes or sneakers. Men wear shirts and long pants with shoes or sandals. Traditional men often wear *guayabera* shirts. These short-sleeved, cotton shirts are square cut, pleated, and lightly embroidered with four pockets on the front. Women dress in stylish skirts, dresses, or pantsuits with sandals or high heels. Hats or umbrellas are donned by those walking or sitting in the sun. The youth prefer U.S.-mainland styles such as jeans, shorts, or T-shirts. Gold jewelry is popular, especially with younger people. Islanders wear formal or even elegant clothing to church services, graduations, funerals, and weddings.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. Courtesy is essential to greetings in the Virgin Islands. People say *Good morning*, *Good afternoon*, and *Good night* when greeting a stranger or a group. These formal greetings also precede daily conversations. It is considered rude, for example, to not say *Good morning* before asking a store clerk a question or upon entering a waiting room containing several people. Islanders shake hands, particularly when being formally introduced. Formal titles are used more often in professional situations rather than for social introductions.

Greetings between friends are more casual, with *Hi*, *Hello*, *Ya alright?* or *Hey, how's it going?* being typical. Male friends shake hands or may say the other's nickname while tapping fists. Women commonly refer to each other as "dear" or "sweetheart." A casual *pssst* will get another person's attention. The older generation usually addresses strangers or acquaintances as Miss or Mister. Traditionally, but now less often, children are also taught to use Miss and Mister plus the person's first name.

Gestures. Gestures of courtesy—such as holding a door open for someone or covering one's mouth when yawning or coughing—are important to Virgin Islanders. It is considered improper for a woman to drink directly from a bottle or can; she usually asks for a cup or straw.

Hand gestures and facial expressions are used often during conversation. Men, especially those of Spanish descent, tend to be the most animated in their discussions. To widen the eyes and raise the eyebrows with a slight nod of the head indicates surprise or disbelief. This is often accompanied by *Whaaa?* The act of sucking one's teeth to make a mild noise, called *chuups*, is used to express annoyance (e.g., as when waiting in a long line). Patting the air several times with a flat hand is the symbol for "stop." Islanders use this to hail taxis or to tell traffic behind them to slow down or stop, usually to avoid a collision.

Visiting. People usually visit one another at home on weekends and holidays. The visits typically are prearranged, and guests will *carry* something to give to the host, such as fruit or pastries. When arriving, guests knock on the front door and wait to be invited in. Guests rarely wander through a

home unless invited to do so by the hosts. Children formally greet the adults and then go off to play. Guests are offered something cool to drink. If a meal is to be served, the hostess usually serves each seated guest after offering to *fix a plate* for them. Departure courtesies are drawn out and it can take up to an hour to actually leave: Guests get up to leave, talk with the hosts, walk together over to the door and talk some more, then walk out to the car and chat some more before finally leaving.

Unannounced visits normally involve close neighbors or family and usually have a purpose, such as to borrow something or to discuss a bit of news. Friends commonly drop in just to *check on* each other and see how each is doing. In the summer, friends and families often spend the day picnicking at the beach. Many of the young people socialize in the evenings at clubs or music events. *Hey de mon, leh we go limin* is a typical invitation between male friends to go out on the town.

Eating. A typical workday begins with an early breakfast consisting of foods like eggs, cereal, and toast. Many people drink a cup of hot *bush tea* in the morning. This is an infusion of basil leaves, mint, lemon grass, or a combination. *Bush tea* is also said to have medicinal value when blended in certain ways. Lunch is traditionally the main meal and people try to go home to eat lunch if their work schedules allow. Otherwise, people meet friends for lunch at local restaurants and eat their main meal in the evening. For the rural worker, privately owned food vans or women carrying baskets come around at lunchtime selling meat, fish *pates* (similar to turnovers), or other hot entrees.

Evening meals usually are eaten at home, since this is the time the family can sit at the table and eat together. The atmosphere is casual. It is generally acceptable to eat certain foods with the fingers, although utensils are used for most dishes. Special occasions, holidays, or Sunday afternoons call for roasted goat or pig with all the trimmings. Such meals are served in buffet style, although the hostess may *fix a plate* for special guests.

LIFESTYLE

Family. Families are large and play an important role in the lives of Virgin Islanders. In a two-parent family, the woman is expected to raise the children and handle household responsibilities. The father is expected to support the family, although more women are now earning an income. Grandmothers often take care of their grandchildren while parents are working or living off-island (usually in the United States) for economic reasons. Elderly people often live with a daughter's family rather than in a retirement home.

It is not unusual for a woman to be the head of household. Young single mothers are also not uncommon and they rely on their families for support. Half-siblings live together with their mother. Children tend to maintain friendships and socialize with their cousins and other family members close to their age. It is common for close friends to participate within a family as godparents.

Dating and Marriage. Young people meet and socialize at school, church, beach outings, music events, movies, and holiday affairs. Dating habits are about the same as those in

the United States. Weddings are formal and elegant. One tradition unique to the Virgin Islands is the *black cake*. This is prepared by soaking a heavy cake, consisting mostly of raisins and currants, in brandy for several days until it turns dark. The cake is then cut into small pieces, each of which is nicely wrapped and placed in a small box as a gift for each wedding guest.

Diet. The Virgin Islands import a wide variety of food from the mainland United States. However, many locally produced foods and drinks are also available. Traditional dishes include chicken, conch, goat, fish, and pork. These are served with seasoned rice, rice and pigeon peas, sweet potatoes, or plantains. Okra, eggplant, pumpkin, or dumplings are often added to a stew or sauce. Nutmeg, thyme, and cloves are standard seasonings. Johnnycakes (deep-fried, dumpling-like bread) are popular; they are sold regularly on the street or at festivals and are prepared for any gathering or special occasion.

Kallaloo, a special dish of African origin, traditionally is made with pig tail, conch, blue fish, land crab, salt beef, or ox tail. It gets its name from the *kallaloo* bush, which seasons this elaborate stew. Today, some of the ingredients are hard to find, so canned crab may be substituted for land crab and spinach often is used instead of the *kallaloo* greens. It is not uncommon to find a modern version of *kallaloo* on the menu in local restaurants. *Fungi*, cooked cornmeal with okra, is usually served with *kallaloo*. Other favorite foods include red kidney bean soup, curried goat or chicken, and salt fish. Local fruits like mangoes, guavas, papayas, soursops, bananas, and smooth-skinned avocados (called *pears*) are seasonally abundant.

Recreation. Fishing is a passion among Virgin Islanders. USVI waters are considered some of the best for sportfishing (tuna, sailfish, marlin, wahoo) and they host annual fishing tournaments. Most fishermen stay offshore trolling in small motorboats.

Friends and relatives like to gather on the many public beaches to relax and socialize. Large sound systems are set up right on the beach and the music is played quite loudly. Islanders picnic in this festive atmosphere, but they do not usually go swimming. West Indians, including Virgin Islanders, generally do not know how to swim. If they go in the water at all, it is to stand shoulder deep and chat in a group; this is called *coolin' out*. Hanging out with friends is called *limin* or *out on a lime*.

Islanders like all types of music, but *soca*, which has a Latin reggae beat, is especially popular at parties and on festive occasions. Older people still enjoy *quadrille* dancing, which is similar to square dancing only with an island beat.

Holidays. The Virgin Islands celebrate all U.S. federal holidays and a few of their own. These include Transfer Day (31 Mar.), which celebrates the transfer from Danish rule to U.S. rule; Organic Act Day (21 June), the day when the Virgin Islands was granted local rule; Emancipation Day (3 July), honoring freedom from slavery; Hurricane Supplication Day (29 July) at the beginning of the hurricane season; Hurricane Thanksgiving Day (21 Oct.) at the end of the hurricane season; and Boxing Day (26 Dec.), or *Christmas Second Day* as it is sometimes called. In July, St. Thomians

celebrate French heritage week in conjunction with Bastille Day (14 July). Columbus Day (second Monday in October) is also called Virgin Island/Puerto Rico Friendship Day.

Carnival holidays are the happiest of times in the Virgin Islands. The days are filled with crowded food fairs and parades that feature costumed dancers, music, and elaborate floats. At night, people enjoy calypso contests and more food and music at the Carnival Village. St. Thomas holds its Carnival at the end of April; St. John's is on 4 July. Three Kings Day or the Cruzian Christmas Festival (6 Jan.), marks the climax of St. Croix's Carnival.

Commerce. Downtown shops have normal business hours, but these stores attract mostly tourists. Virgin Islanders do most of their shopping at *plazas* (large parking areas that have supermarkets, banks, department stores, post offices, fast-food restaurants, and so on). At Saturday-morning markets, local farmers sell fresh vegetables and fruits. Many well-trafficked corners have roadside stands where vendors sell fresh local fish, fruits, and vegetables, as well as charcoal, sweets, and cold drinks.

SOCIETY

Government. The U.S. Virgin Islands are governed by the Revised Organic Act of 1954. This document allows for executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government that function similarly to state governments on the U.S. mainland. Ultimate jurisdiction resides with the U.S. Congress. The governor and lieutenant governor are elected to serve four-year terms and are limited to two terms.

The territory is grouped into two legislative districts: St. Thomas/St. John and St. Croix. Each district elects seven senators and all three islands elect a senator-at-large from St. John. Senators serve two-year terms with no term limit. Islanders also elect a delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives. Although they are U.S. citizens, Virgin Islanders have no vote in national elections and the delegate to Congress votes in committees only (not on the floor). In the judiciary branch, the Territorial Court tries most local cases and a federal judge handles all matters involving violations of federal law.

Economy. Tourism is the largest sector of the economy and employs more than half of the labor force. Cruise ship arrivals are increasing steadily, offsetting a decline in air arrivals. The government employs one-third of the population. The unemployment rate is between 4 and 6 percent. The rate is low because many of the unemployed leave the islands. Public debt is high (nearly \$1 billion).

Industry is dominated by the Hess Oil Refinery, the largest in the Western hemisphere, which employs 10 percent of St. Croix's workers. Hurricane reconstruction has become a significant component of the economy because of major destruction from hurricanes Hugo (1989), Marilyn (1995), and Georges (1998). The currency is the U.S. dollar (US\$).

Transportation and Communication. The Virgin Islands have more than 530 miles of roads, many of which are paved and in good condition. All vehicles (except public buses) are

Human Dev. Index* rank	NA
Adjusted for women	NA
Real GDP per capita	NA
Adult literacy rate	NA
Infant mortality rate	10 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	75 (male); 82 (female)

designed for right-hand driving; however, traffic moves on the left. Under these circumstances, it becomes faster and safer for drivers on the straightaway to yield to side-street traffic.

The public bus system services St. Thomas. Private taxi vans stop and pick up passengers on the side of the road and run unscheduled service between main towns. The seaplane and a handful of commuter airlines offer regular flights between St. Thomas and St. Croix. St. John can only be reached by sea; it is linked to St. Thomas by a comprehensive ferry system.

There are two local newspapers, one of which (*The Virgin Islands Daily News*) won a Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for public service journalism. There are twelve radio stations, two television stations, and two cable companies. The phone company offers good service; a call between islands is considered a local call. USVI is part of the U.S. domestic postal system.

Education. Education is mandatory and free for all children between the ages of five and sixteen. The 35 public schools (elementary to high school) are joined by numerous private schools. Public schools require uniforms; private school students wear street clothes. Many St. John students take a daily ferry to attend high school on St. Thomas. The University of the Virgin Islands has campuses on St. Thomas and St. Croix. Many of its 3,200 students come from other Caribbean islands.

Health. Local hospital boards, together with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, operate the territory's hospitals. St. Croix's hospital was destroyed by Hurricane Hugo in 1989 but reopened in 1994. St. Johnians needing hospitalization are ferried to the hospital on St. Thomas. All three islands have ample outpatient facilities. The Department of Health administers home care, diagnostic clinics, specialized programs, and free immunizations.†

FOR THE TRAVELER

U.S. citizens need either a passport or an original birth certificate and picture ID to enter the Virgin Islands. Visitors to St. Thomas enjoy shopping and the beaches, while travelers to St. John can explore the national parkland that covers two-thirds of the island. St. Croix attracts vacationers interested in diving, golfing, relaxing, or snorkeling; the underwater national park at Buck Island is a favorite destination. For more information, contact an office of the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Tourism at (800) 372-8784 at either PO Box 6400, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, USVI 00804; PO Box 200, Cruz Bay, St. John, USVI 00831; or PO Box 4538 Christiansted, St. Croix, USVI 00822.

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