



Exploring the Spanish  
Virgin Islands

By Nancy Birnbaum

**W**here can you still find undeveloped pristine Virgin anchorages? Just 15 to 20 nautical miles from the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, between Puerto Rico and St. Thomas are the Spanish Virgin Islands, also known as the “Passage Islands.”

Isla Culebra and Vieques, with their surrounding islets and cays are still relatively untouched by developers and cruisers alike. The fact that the Marines and U.S. Navy used Vieques for bombing practice until 2003 also kept the

inevitable land developers, rampant commercialism, and an abundance of sailing charters away. As a result, these Spanish jewels are still pristine and unspoiled, with mile-long white sand beaches, crystal clear turquoise water, and healthy intact reefs teeming with fish, coral and crustaceans. There are hills to climb and explore, nearly empty anchorages and the

natural allure of bygone days in the B.V.I. Both Culebra and Vieques offer the full-time cruiser as well as the intrepid charter sailor a unique landfall.

Island Yachts in Red Hook, St. Thomas, invited us to a bareboat charter onboard one of their lovely Island Packets yachts. We chose the IP 445 since we always wanted to

# Unspoiled anchorages and laid-back landfalls

sail a center cockpit model.

Island Yachts has been in business for over three decades and is owned and operated by Skip and Andrea King. They take pride in their family-run business and will cater to your every desire. They offer the full range of Island Packet yachts, both bareboat and captained charters.

Sure, there are plenty of charter companies sprinkled throughout the Virgin Islands, but the one thing that clearly separates Island Yachts from the rest of the herd, besides the fact that they are a “Mom and Pop” operation, is the simple fact that they are the only charter company that allows you to visit the Spanish V.I. Reason enough, we think, to book your charter now!

## ISLA CULEBRA

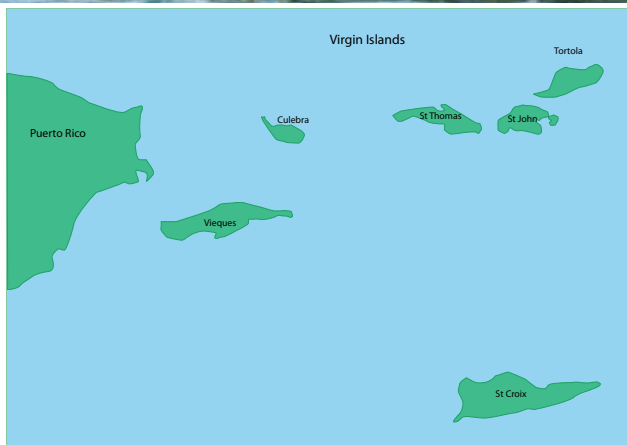
Only 15 miles from St. Thomas, Isla de Culebra is an 11-square-mile island of unspoiled beauty. Along with miles and miles of stunning beaches, is the quaint town of Dewey, and the snorkeling and dive sites are possibly some of the Caribbean’s best.

This is a perfect destination to spend a few days on your sailing charter vacation. You will have no choice but to enjoy the natural beauty of this island.

Although there are plenty of lovely anchorages to explore, the tiny offshore cay of Culebrita is a must-see. As the Pavlidis guide notes, “...a wildlife refuge, Isla Culebrita is one of the most beautiful islands surrounding Culebra. There are six beaches ringing the island including Tortuga at the northeastern tip of the island. Tortuga is home to the baths (sometimes called the Jacuzzis), similar to the Baths at Virgin Gorda, it is an area of dark boulders and natural pools.” The lighthouse dates from 1889 and it is worth the trek up 305 feet for the view. The snorkeling here is excellent and the beaches are



Leaving Red Hook, St. Thomas, aboard an Island Packet 445 chartered from Island Yachts. The Dinghy Dock restaurant, above, is a popular hangout in Culebra



fabulous, especially the 400-foot long sand crescent on the northern shore.

The anchorages on Culebrita are fairly deserted during the week, but the weekends are a different story. Everyone from Puerto Rico with a fast powerboat (known affectionately as the “Puerto Rican Navy”) makes Culebrita the weekend party destination of choice. Both islands are a haven for families from Puerto Rico, making the atmosphere friendly and safe.

Another favorite anchorage lies just outside the entrance at Ensenada Honda. It’s usually referred to as Dakity Reef and as with Culebrita, it attracts plenty of boats on the weekends. With views of wide-open ocean, this anchorage is quite special. The reef is easy to get around with line-of-sight navigation, but don’t attempt it at night for your first time!

Inside Ensenada Honda you’ll find the quaint town of Dewey, which offers most of what you might want

except a fuel dock, but there is fuel available by dinghy along the canal. Anchor just to the right near the mooring balls off Cayo Pirata; you’ll see some of the local sailboats anchored here as well. There are plenty of spots to take your dinghy in, from the Dinghy Dock Restaurant to the little fishermen’s pier. Or dinghy through the canal that takes you clear across the island to the ferry boat harbor on the other side. You’ll pass many restaurants with their own walls or docks to tie-up.

## VIEQUES

Vieques conveys a strong sense of remoteness. Once there, you feel *más afuera*—far out. Since it is the most popular with Puerto Rican visitors it offers more restaurants and local businesses than Culebra. Twenty-one miles long and three to four miles wide, many cruisers consider the bays, coves and beaches of this



The wild ponies of Vieques grazing by the beach, left, and a view of Red Hook bay, St. Thomas, above

island the best of all Virgin Island anchorages.

With a population of approximately 9,000 residents living in the center part, the island is also home to a large herd of roaming goats, a few scrawny cattle and a large herd of wild paso fino ponies, the prancing descendants of conquistador mounts. They are small horses known for their prominent high-stepping gait; they have free run of the island and one must drive carefully to avoid running into them on the roads.

Due to its recent history as a U.S. bombing practice site, the island has been untouched by developers. Word has it among the restaurateurs and other local business owners, in the not-to-distant future, there most likely will be development on the west end of the island. The eastern third

of the island, formerly owned by the Navy (and now administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) will remain wild. It will probably take 20 years to clear all the unexploded ordnance. If the winds are right on Thursday and Friday afternoons, you can hear the explosions of all the shells collected over the week.

In the meantime, plans are in the works for a new yacht club on the island. The Club owners, Stuart Hankin and Natalya Kaydash, are live-aboard cruisers who returned from a year-long cruise of the Eastern Caribbean to settle on this lovely island, and as a result are sensitive to the needs of boaters. They are long time residents of the area and can provide excellent advice and assistance for any boaters who need it.

Current plans are to provide ser-

vices that will persuade cruisers and charter yachts alike to stay longer. They will most likely add to the existing moorings and will maintain them. Cruisers and charter boats will be able to take advantage of many new services including wireless Internet in the bay, hot showers and laundry machines.

The Yacht Club will be situated on the Malecon Esperanza on the southern coast of Vieques. Plans call for the construction of a small shopping center with retail and restaurant facilities. The cruiser facilities will be located in this center.

Yacht membership can be tailored for individual needs, ranging from one day to one year. A club membership includes the use of a mooring, Wi-Fi onboard, shower facilities and the use of the laundry.

And the really good news is that they will be providing fuel deliveries for members that might need it (for an additional fee).

### CRUISING LOG Day 1 - The Boat

We met our boat *Marali* at the Island Yachts docks at Red Hook on the far eastern end of St. Thomas. Our flight delay meant an after 5 p.m. arrival. No problem; a message was waiting on our voicemail directing us to the dockside office where a note was left with our names on the chalkboard telling us which boat we should board.

The IP445 is as spacious a yacht as you could imagine. With a beam of over 14 feet, the *Marali* is certainly comfortable. The saloon is well fitted out with numerous handholds and opening hatches and ports, allowing for secure and airy conditions below. Making ourselves at home, we unpacked and then headed up the dock and found the Caribbean Steakhouse and Saloon two flights up and grabbed a table overlooking the boat.

The author and her first mate, Jann, right, at the Bananas Beach Bar & Grill, Vieques. The final night anchorage of Christmas Cove, below



## Day 2 – Charter Check Out

The next morning we headed up to the charter office to officially check in and complete the very thorough check-out with Skip. This process takes almost an hour but afterward you will have all your questions about the yacht answered and you will most likely feel as secure as we did to handle anything. After Skip was done with us, we met with Andrea who went over all the paperwork with us including all the customs paperwork (Because we were staying in U.S. waters we didn't need to use these), coral reef and Caribbean ecology protection information, mooring information and boat care. With all the necessities handled, we were free to provision and got underway just after noon.

Our first stop was Hawksnest Bay on St. John, a stone's throw from Red Hook. This lovely anchorage, almost empty this time of year (late July) is next to Caneel Bay. We took a mooring close in to the left side of the bay. The beach across this anchorage is part of the huge Caneel Bay Resort, encompassing the entire point at Hawksnest. First things first—we grabbed our snorkel gear and took the dinghy to nearby Perkins Cay and found an abundance of corals, fans and reef fish.

## Day 3 – St. John

We took our dinghy in to the resort beach the following morning so that we could catch a ride on the resort shuttle to the taxi stand. We had a reservation with Sail Safari Snorkel Tours over in Cruz Bay. Pulling the dinghy ashore, we were greeted by a maintenance worker who helped us pull the dink up so that we could lock it to a tree. As we walked out toward the road, we passed wild deer and donkeys lazing in the shade on the perfectly manicured grounds. When the shuttle came by, we hitched a ride to the taxi and took it into Cruz Bay.

We arrived early enough to have a bite of breakfast and found Mojo's, just down the beach. There, we enjoyed a breakfast burrito, a blueberry muffin and some coffee. Together with a bottle of water the cost came to \$12.

Capt. Han Winogron, Sail Safari's proprietor, was waiting by the Hobie Cats on the beach. The snorkel tour was great and getting to the best spots like Lovango Cay and the Durloe Cays including Henley Cay, was the most fun we've had on a boat in some time! Han took us out on a 19.7-foot Hobie Getaway and it flew across the waves! After our wet and wild tour, Han sailed us right into Hawksnest Bay and back to our dinghy.

After lunch back aboard, we headed for Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, putting us in a good position to sail the next morning for Culebra. We anchored off Water Island in Honey-moon Bay in good sand in 15 feet.

## Day 4 – Culebra

With a dead-downwind heading, we motorsailed with just the full jib and headed to Sail Rock, our midway point. Although we brought along our portable GPS, it really wasn't needed. Line-of-sight navigation works just fine in clear weather since all the islands are close together. Winds were light, about 10 knots with seas two to three feet. It took us under four hours to get to Ensenada Honda and the little town of Dewey. The guidebooks clearly show the reefs that lie just offshore of the east end of the island. We went to the south and stayed clear of it all and had an easy entrance. There's a little dogleg between reefs at the entrance to Ensenada Honda, but it's very easy to see.

The anchorage behind Cayo Pirata is in sand. We tied the dinghy up at the small pier just to the right of the drawbridge and walked around the waterfront. It was hot, so we wandered into Mamacita's for a beer. This local favorite is located



The scenic waterfront of Esperanza, Vieques

just along the canal that goes right through the island to the bay where the ferry docks. We found the bartender, Harrison, very helpful as he answered all our questions.

We had contacted the folks at Juanita Bananas via e-mail prior to our trip to arrange dinner at this unique island restaurant. If you want a nice break from dining onboard, then you'll want to dine here. Just grab a publico (taxi) or if you can't locate one, (they usually hang out by the ferry dock), give Migalito a call: (787) 473-2594.

### Day 5 – Vieques

Sailing from Culebra to Vieques is usually an easy reach. We had heard that it would take anywhere from three to four hours, but our burly Island Packet likes a reach, so under jib and main, we were there in a couple of hours. We left Ensenada Honda on Culebra at about 8 a.m. and got to Vieques by 11 a.m. If you want to you can stop for the afternoon on the north shore at the reef-strewn island

of Bahia Icacos. Don't rely solely on charts to get in here; use the entry waypoint from the guidebook as a rough guide. Head in somewhat right of the little island, cut in front of it behind the line of breakers, then angle in toward shore, and above all, use your eyeballs. Bahia Icacos offers good protection as well as great snorkeling.

Heading eastward you will round Punta Este staying at least one-quarter mile off. The anchorages on the southern shore of Vieques offer great spots to get out of the wind and waves. The first bay you'll see is Bahia Salinas del Sur, which is just off the Navy airstrip. Check the guidebooks for details. Ensenada Honda is next and is the better of the two bays as it offers better protection. The guidebook gives the waypoint as 18 degrees, six minutes north, 65 degrees, 21 minutes west and will place you approximately one mile south of the entrance to this large bay. From here head generally north-northwest keeping the large shoal shown well

to starboard. Once clear of the shoal, head toward Punta Carenero and keep to starboard the shoal north of Los Galafatos. Once clear, then head southeastward and anchor where your draft allows. This anchorage is well protected in all but west winds.

The next couple of bays to the west are the bioluminescent bays of Puerto Ferro and Puerto Mosquito. Entrances are very narrow and depth is sometimes less than five feet at mean low water. But if your draft allows, it's possibly the coolest nature-filled anchorage around, especially at night.

We anchored at Cayo Afuera, just behind the small island. There's a sand bar that runs almost to the beach. You can dinghy to the other side and you'll see people occasionally swimming this area.

During the second part of the 19th century, thousands of immigrants came to Vieques to work on the sugar cane plantations. Until the 1940s when the Navy took over, there was little else here. Isla de Vieques is par-

ticularly unspoiled by development because of the Navy presence until the early 1970s. Until as recent as 2003, Playa Flamenco, named after flocks of flamingos that used to stop over, was a U.S. Navy gunnery and bombing practice area, but local protests and an errant bomb that killed a civilian guard, put an end to it. Remnants of two U.S. Marine tanks once used for this purpose decorate the beach as silent memorials of the island's past.

According to a Navy press release issued earlier this year, "The U.S. Navy has set aside \$200 million for the removal of military waste. The money will be used in the next seven years to remove explosives in the island's eastern region, the site of most previous military training exercises"

More than 9,000 acres of the almost 23,000 acres that the Navy occupied for several decades will be scanned for contaminants. One local told us that the Navy estimates it will take approximately 20 years to complete the clean up. In the meantime you can hear the booms of exploding ordnance on Thursdays and Fridays when the Navy blows up the week's worth of collected shells.

Keep in mind that if you throw the hook down at any of the anchorages on the eastern end of the island and go ashore, don't do any shell collecting! The guidebooks warn against wandering beyond the beach, but one must also consider what may lie on the bottom of the bay.

## A RELAXING RESPITE

We had also arranged an overnight at the Hix Island House, an "eco-hip" bed and breakfast designed

Along the canal that winds through Culebra, right. A view of the Caneel Bay Resort on St. John, below right. Early to mid summer is a good time to visit the Virgin Islands as there are fewer crowds and a lesser chance of a tropical storm or hurricane. The high season is during the winter and spring



by world-renown architect John Hix. As their website describes it, "It's an eclectic mix of 'Wabi-Sabi' and Modernism architecture—minimalistic and utilitarian—meant to blend into the natural surroundings."

It was the perfect escape from our escape! The room comes complete with a kitchenette stocked with fresh eggs, bread, fruit, coffee beans, a grinder and French press, juice and milk—all the makings for some great French toast. Relax on the balcony overlooking the wilderness and the ocean off in the distance. Their pool was voted best on the island. With no TVs or phones, you'll find this a perfect retreat for a break from the boat.

To give the galley crew a night off,

we found the Island Steakhouse and enjoyed their Sunday night prime rib special. Co-owner Eli Belevidez also offer rooms at the Crows Nest Guesthouse—studios with kitchenettes and TVs for those of you who need a fix. Eli describes his location as "accessible seclusion."

## Day 6 – Island Sightseeing

We toured the island in our rented Jeep, careful to avoid the wandering ponies. There are secluded beaches around every turn and thick jungle on the western edge under Mt. Pirata. Although we tried to get up the mountain, the road is blocked off for the time being. Driving to the north side of the island, we visited the islands' capital of Isabel Segunda.

IslandYachts • St. Thomas, U.S.V.I.  
(800) 524-2019 • [www.iyc.vi](http://www.iyc.vi)

In business for more than 30 years, IslandYachts offers bareboat and crewed charters on their fleet of beautiful and well-maintained Island Packet yachts.

Recommended Cruising Guides

*A Cruising Guide to Puerto Rico including the Spanish Virgin Islands* by Steven Pavlidis, 2003.

*A Gentlemen's Guide to Passage South—The Thornless Path to Windward* Bruce Van Sant, Eighth Edition, 2003.



Jann, top, enjoying the Bioluminescent Bay in Vieques. The minimalist design of the Hix Island House, above

Back at the Malecon in Esperanza, we had a bite to eat at Bananas Beach Bar and Grill before joining our kayak tour of the bioluminescent Mosquito Bay. Bananas is owned by long-time resident ex-pats Glenn and Wynne Curry. They also run the adjacent Guesthouse.

Locals told us that someone has put up the money to build a new mall on the Malecon and will open the Vieques Yacht Club next year. The Club will offer a few additional amenities to cruisers and boaters including moorings for \$10/night, dinghy dock, showers and Internet hot spot. Some services will also be available such as outboard repair and bottom cleaning. The island seems to be preparing for the inevitable growing tide of yachting visitors and will welcome them with open arms as they do now.

The Bioluminescent Bay (Puerto

the fishermen's dock). They provide transportation to the bay and all the gear. With two guides leading the group, we paddled into the middle of the wide Bay at dusk. The first stars were just visible in the clear night sky and our timing was perfect as it was close to the new moon.

It was like jumping into the starry sky. Most seawater has some bioluminescent organisms, but this bay is dense with them, and they glowed like neon signs moving through the water. With every paddle of the kayak, the water lit up like a shine of tiny winking stars. Running your hand through it created a network of sparkling points across your skin. Each kayak was surrounded with a glowing border, each leaving a luminous cloud in his wake. Every so often we'd see the sinuous trail of a fish swimming by. The tour lasts two hours, enough time to get your fill of

Mosquito) is a must-see when you are in Vieques. The bioluminescence in the bay is caused by a microscopic, one-celled organism called a dinoflagellate (Pyrodinium bahamense). They emit a bright glow whenever they are agitated. As a single cell organism, this built-in defense mechanism can make them seem larger than they actually are to predators.

We took the kayak tour with Blue Caribe Kayaks (located on the Malecon just across from

this amazing natural phenomenon.

### Day 7 – Back to reality

To take advantage of the early morning calm, we got underway at 6 a.m. and motorsailed along the long stretch of the south shore. Once we cleared Punta Este, we began our slog back to St. Thomas, tacking back and forth into a 15 to 20-knot breeze. It took a bit longer than we had anticipated and we were thankful that we had made an early departure. Almost 11 hours later, we dropped the hook at Christmas Cove, Great St. James island, just around the corner from Red Hook.

Once we had everything put away, we broke out the snorkel gear and dove into the clear water for a swim. The rocks in the middle of this anchorage provide excellent homes for all kinds of fish, gorgonians, like the sea fan and large brain corals and branch corals. Under the boat on the sandy bottom we spotted many small rays. Then it was time to pack up and fix our last meal onboard. We slept in a little the following morning, making sure to enjoy our last morning at anchor before we motored around the point and back to the slip.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

Although we squeezed what should have been a 10-day charter into seven, we would advise leaving more time to explore these “Spanish Jewels.”

Of course there is an abundance of things to do on land, but there is also much to see underwater. The waters around the S.V.I. are home to an abundance of corals, fish, sharks, dolphins, turtles, crustaceans and a multitude of other marine life. We saw many green and loggerhead turtles swimming in the quiet bays and dolphins herding fish just off Punta Este.

If you are looking for a great cruising destination that's a little off the beaten path, check out the Spanish Virgin Islands—before everyone else does!

## RESTAURANTS

Red Hook, St. Thomas

- Caribbean Steakhouse and Saloon serves a nice selection similar to what you'd find anywhere on the eastern seaboard. (We really enjoyed the Maryland-style crab cakes and the almost authentic Painkillers! Do try their version called "Soggy Sunshine").

Cruz Bay, St. John

- Mojo's Café just off the beach  
Really just a small stand, but serves up good inexpensive eats.

Town of Dewey, Isla Culebra

- Juanita Bananas Restaurant (787) 742-3171  
[www.juanitabananas.com](http://www.juanitabananas.com)

This little jewel looked as if it had been plucked out of Bolinas in Northern California! A charming find located on a hilltop overlooking the sea. Chef Jennifer Daubon and Javier Cabrera, the young couple who run this gem are committed to offering the freshest organic foods and local-caught seafood. They grow some of the herbs and veggies hydroponically, right next door. Monday is Sushi Night. Quite possibly the best restaurant on the island.

Esperanza, Vieques

- Island Steakhouse: Your hosts Eli and Scott offer up Angus beef with all the trimmings, fish and pasta dishes. Fortunately we arrived on a Monday night just in time for prime rib night. It was excellent. They also run the adjacent Crows Nest Inn Guesthouse.
- Bananas on the Malecon: A nice selection of burgers, salads, sandwiches and more. Open seven days a week for lunch and dinner.
- Duffy's on the Malecon: Great selection of mouth-watering fish, steak, chicken and veggie wraps as well as Mexican fare. Try their homemade hot sauce if you can handle numbed lips!

## ACCOMMODATIONS

Vieques

- Hix Island House: (787) 741-2302, [www.hixislandhouse.com](http://www.hixislandhouse.com)  
Beautiful, relaxing, eco-friendly environment. Yoga classes offered three times a week. Rates range from just under \$200 to \$310 depending on season.
- The Crows Nest Guesthouse: (787) 744-0033, [www.crowsnestvieques.com](http://www.crowsnestvieques.com)  
\$100/night special includes continental breakfast
- Bananas Guest House: (787) 741-8700, [www.bananasguesthouse.com](http://www.bananasguesthouse.com)  
Rates range from \$80-100 (plus tax) per night.

## PROVISIONING

Red Hook, St. Thomas

- Marina Market: (340) 779-2411, [www.marinamarketusvi.com](http://www.marinamarketusvi.com)  
Across the street from Island Yachts. Fully stocked with all the goodies you'll want. New Marina Market Wine & Cheese Shop just opened featuring wines and some mighty fine cheeses, bulk nuts, chocolates and of course, champagnes. They can pre-provision your boat or deliver to any marina. Vacuum packing of meats and fish also available. Contact Leslie Questel – Charter Provisioner, and be sure to ask for the charter discount.

## TOURS/EXCURSIONS

St. John

- Sail Safari Hobie Snorkel Tour: (866) 820 6906, (340) 626 8181, [www.SailSafaris.net](http://www.SailSafaris.net)  
Proprietor Capt. Han Winogrand will take you to the best snorkeling spots on St. John. You'll get there super fast on his terrific Hobie Getaway. The snorkeling was great too! Book a half-day or full-day tour (includes a beach picnic lunch and cold drinks). Half-day trips including drinks run \$70 pp.

Vieques

- Blue Caribe Bio Bay Kayak Tour: (787) 741-2522, [www.bluecaribekayaks.com](http://www.bluecaribekayaks.com)  
Located just across from the Fishermen's Pier/dinghy dock in Esperanza on the Malecon. Stop by the office/shop early and book the tour, which runs from 7 to 9 p.m. (try to get there on a waxing moon or close to the new moon for best viewing). Wear your bathing suits and maybe a light long-sleeve shirt to guard against mosquitoes. Swim with the dinoflagellates and watch them do their thing.



The dinghy dock at Mamacita's in Culebra, a local favorite watering hole