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Pleasure Spots in the Caribbean

by Margaret Zellers Lenci

Pirate legends and plantation ruins give personality to the sea and soil of the Virgin Islands. The tales weave around even the smallest beach-fringed islets and cays while, on the big islands, history speckles the hillsides with greathouse ruins and the towers of sugar mills. The sea has carved coves in the Virgin Islands and spread them with a welcoming mat of silky sand. Each one of the almost one hundred Virgin Islands is carpeted with tropical growth (made greener moments after one of the occasional showers) and brilliant bougainvillea and other riotous blossoms spill over all. It's the arrangement of all these ingredients — not the fact that they are there — that gives each of the American and British Virgin Islands its own personality.

Tickertapes and telephone lines tie the main islands to the world's commerce but a few minutes away from the heart of bustling towns, peaceful pleasure can be found. Thousands have headed south to enjoy the islands' second era of prosperity — and the always glorious climate.

Cruise ships, following the lead of the caravelles of bygone days, nestle into Virgin Island ports on a new version of "Triangle Trade." Jets pierce the sky from the mainland United States and, via Puerto Rico, from European cities, to pour sunseekers on the sandy stretches. Many are thankful that, even in the era of superjets, there will always be the undisturbed bliss of St. John's National Park — and of the many small islands whose entire landmass could not *hold* an airplane. These will be the escape hatches of the future . . . hopefully forever.

These islands with the pirate-and-plantation past parade in the Caribbean Sea, 1630 miles south southeast of New York and about 1000 miles from Miami. They lie a mere 40 miles east of Puerto Rico and form an inverted triangle over 190 square miles of sea—with the British Virgins providing a dash off the upper right.

That the early history of the three main American islands—St. Croix, St. John and St. Thomas—should differ from island to island will be no surprise when you look at the map. St. Thomas, St. John and the British Virgin Islands (Tortola and Virgin Gorda are the largest of the forty-or-more) are part of one mountainous chain. St. Croix, 40 miles to the south of St. Thomas and separated by the St. Croix Deep which sinks to more than two miles, is another ridge of the ice-age isthmus that might have stretched from the United States mainland to the coast of South America.

Lying in the mainstream of the tradewind route from Europe made the Virgin Islands likely landfalls for that first tourist — Columbus. When he landed at Salt River on St. Croix on November 14, 1493, that island was called *AyAy* by the Carib Indians. He named it *Santa Cruz* and some historians give him credit for naming the rest of the group *Las Virgenes* in honor of St. Ursula and her 11,000 martyred Virgins. Others hold to the theory that, although Columbus may have named most of the individual islands (for men saints), it was Sir Francis Drake who named the group — in honor of his Queen Elizabeth.

It was the Danes who settled St. Thomas. The ill-fated first settlement, by Erik Nielsen Schmidt under the aegis of Denmark's King Frederik III, resulted in a Lutheran mission and the building of a fortified tower — thought by some to be the tower now standing at Blackbeard's Hill. King Christian V, successor to Frederik in 1670, focused firmly on the islands as sources for plantation trade and a likely place to prove the prominence of Denmark. He chartered the Danish West India and Guiana Company to occupy St. Thomas.

This second attempt at colonization resulted in the first permanent settlement on St. Thomas. The *Fero* arrived in late May, 1672, after several months at sea and the surviving group of about 100 Danes set to work to build Fort Christian — still standing at Charlotte Amalie and used as the Police headquarters. St. Thomas was soon to become Denmark's third largest city — after Copenhagen and Flensburg.

New York had a population of about a thousand people when St. Croix was being settled by the Dutch and English in 1625. The pursuers and the pursued from many nations joined the Dutch and English, usually by way of settlements on the neighboring islands, as was the case with Alexander Hamilton and his mother. The rich heritage that gives grace and tradition to the Virgin Islands began.

It was the French settlers in the mid-1600's that renamed the island St. Croix. During the years, the seesaw of history tossed several nationalities onto the island. Even the Knights of Malta reigned for a short time between two French eras — long enough for one knight (who later turned pirate) to build a home on Estate Shoys Point, site now of the Buccaneer Hotel. Following the Knights' reign, the island suffered from Louis XIV's interest in other things and, when purchased by the Danes for plantation land in 1733, it had been virtually uninhabited for several years. The Danes immediately set to planning Christiansted and to building Fort Christiansvaern which stands at the harbor today.

St. Thomas, all this while, was a thriving pirate port with a natural harbor that gave the island prominence even though its hilly terrain was quickly recognized as unsuitable for agriculture. The town of Tappus was renamed Charlotte Amalie in 1691, in honor of King Christian V's queen. Soon thereafter, it became a hayen for countless roving buccaneers driven from Jamaica's waters by that island's ruthless governor, Henry Morgan.

Even today the pirates' legends weave through the island life. Bluebeard has his castle and Blackbeard has his hill. Near the easternmost point of U. S. territory, on the island of St. Croix, there's a "Smuggler's Cove." Even Sir Francis Drake, although not always considered a pirate, left his name to the channel he sailed in 1580 from Tortola to Santo Domingo.

Waterfront warehouses that once held pirate treasure are now filled with imports from around the world, displayed for sale in shops. Doubloons are still currency — when they're sold after discovery in galleon wrecks like those found during the recent dredging in Road Town, Tortola. So inextricably entwined is pirate life with the Virgin Islands that snorkelers, searching underwater areas, are lured by hopes of another pirate wreck and legends of hidden trunks of gold still hover

over some of the remote beaches.

While commerce and agriculture thrived on St. Thomas and St. Croix respectively, small settlements were started on St. John and the neighboring British Virgins. The first settlement came to St. John in 1716, lured from St. Thomas by "tax incentives" granted for pioneering that island and for attempting to turn it into the thriving plantation island that St. Thomas could never become. Coral Bay was laid out by the town planners, but the prosperity of St. John was cut short by constant harassment from British Tortola (its Sage Mountain overlooks Coral Bay) and by the slave revolt of 1733 that left the island in ashes and the plantation houses in ruins. Today the National Park Service, which received a grant of two-thirds of the island from Laurance Rockefeller in 1956, works to restore portions of Estate Anna Berg, one of the largest plantations of that area.

Spaniards worked a copper mine on Virgin Gorda as early as 1504, but left the island when the copper did not lead to gold, and settlement of the British Virgin Islands took no organized form until the 1600s. The Dutch are reported to have built a fort on Tortola in 1648 — and Colonel Stapleton sailed up from British Antigua to turn it to rubble. Thus began a rally between the Dutch and the English over the several dots that are now the British Virgin Islands. Quakers came from Barbados in 1727, bringing with them an interest in learning that sent many future generations to England to study and, ultimately, sent William Thornton, who was born on Jost Van Dyke, to Philadelphia and on to design the capital at Washington, D.C. The Quaker names persist today with the Penns, the Lettsoms and the Gordons all prominent island families.

This was the first era of great prosperity for the islands. St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix were all firmly in Danish hands following the purchase of St. Croix in 1733 and Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Jost Van Dyke and the countless cays in that area were — and still are — in the British domain.

In the mid-1700's sugar was King in the Virgin Islands. With St. Croix as the plantation island (and the seat of the Danish Government) and St. Thomas as the commercial port, the islands reached a pinnacle of prominence that they were not to see again until the 1960's. White convicts brought to till the fields proved unsuitable. The wreck of a Portuguese slave ship off St. Thomas introduced the first Africans to what was to become the center of the West Indian slave trade.

Today's visitor will meet the descendants of the Danish, Dutch, English, French and Spanish settlers and of the Africans who came as slaves and became freemen in the mid-1800s. Traces of the multi-hued past mingle in the people and places of the Virgin Islands. Danish names are common designations and Dutch doors fit in Danish arches. The pitched roof familiar in Denmark, Holland and England blends with the swung gable of Dutch Reformed architecture. French grillwork decorates balconies and floors are covered with Italian tile and Spanish marble. English is the language — it has always been so in deference to the islands' position in world commerce — even though you may not always understand the musical island dialect.

Although few man-made tokens of time remain on St. John and in the British Virgins (buildings made of wood were quickly demolished by fire and hurricanes), areas of St. Thomas and St. Croix were the subject of a Danish architectural study in the early 1960s.

Pirates are generally considered to have provided the impetus for the stone buildings that still stand today. In the 18th century, soon after they began to stash their treasure in the wooden warehouses of St. Thomas, the buildings were destroyed by a series of massive fires. When the heady pirates threatened to take their lucrative trade elsewhere, local merchants began building more substantial warehouses. They used the balast brick that returned from Europe in the sugar ships and laced the bricks with a "permanent" cement made from molasses and local roots.

Warehouses stretched from the St. Thomas waterfront inland and are now honeycombed with attractive shops selling "duty free" merchandise. The wall-to-wall buildings have pushed each other up the hillsides (and now hold each other there), following the narrow winding roads and the street steps that section the town. The suburban sprawl that has sent Charlotte Amalie scampering up the hillsides in recent years has failed, however, to mask the peaks still known to sailors as "Foretop," "Maintop," and "Mizzentop." These three hills, Government Hill, Berg Hill and Frenchman's Hill, have been capped with wealthy residents' homes since the first settlers realized the advantages of view and tradewinds. Subsequent development sent the army of smaller homes up the hills to meet them.

The towns of St. Croix were not forced by topography to begin climbing at the waterfront and the city planning of that island's Danish fathers results in the totally different aspect of the two Cruzan towns. Danish architectural experts claim that Christiansted is typical of a Danish medieval town and is of an "architectural quality [that] bears comparison to the European Court towns of the 18th century." Much of the town is now designated as a National Historic Site, maintained by the Park Service to be enjoyed in its refurbished state. The six buildings that comprise the site (Fort Christiansvaern, the Danish Customs House, the Scale House, the West India and Guiana Company offices, the Steeple Building and Government House) have been restored to look as they did in 1830. Government House presides over all and is still used today, as it has been for decades, for administrative offices. Its public rooms are decorated with replicas of the original furnishings, a gift from the Danish government in 1952.

An interested group of citizens worked with the Virgin Islands Government to recreate a representative sugar estate at John's Rest. The Estate, now called Whim, is maintained by the St. Croix Landmarks Society as an example of what home life might have been like in the opulent era of the 18th century. The Greathouse, as the main plantation mansion was called, evokes images of comfortable living with furnishings imported from Europe or made from local mahogany by island craftsmen.

Behind the Greathouse, the Old Stone Museum lets the tools of the past tell their own story of the sugar-to-rum years. Teams of twelve worked on the milling process with two men handling the perilous job of feeding the cane into the cylinders to be crushed by wooden rollers. It was the residue of the juice that was distilled to make rum — the important link in the New England "Triangle Trade" that led the Virgin Islands into the history of Jamestown, Virgina.

Frederiksted was born by decree in 1751. It grew slowly and steadily as a seaport for the west end of the

island. The town lies along the water's edge, presenting its historic facade to ships that now tie up to its deep-water pier. Much of the original Danish architecture — that made of wood and from shingles brought from America — went up in the flames of labor riots in October, 1878. Rebuilding took time and was typically Victorian. The brick arcades were capped with elaborate wooden fretwork, creating the fanciful "gingerbread" town we see today.

The sugar and shipping years of the Virgin Islands are the years of the limbo — and the quadrilles and jigs remembered by the old island families. Incorporated into the Christmas Festival on St. Croix and the annual April Carnival on St. Thomas, the rhythmical dances that gave the islands' African descendants spirit through the slave years make Caribbean slaves of all who enjoy the pulsating tunes and tempos today.

Perhaps the limbo got its start in Haiti when slaves crept into their hillside hideaways through narrow openings, or perhaps it is refined from punishments, but today the limbo delights those who watch the supple islanders weave under — but not touch — a bar a mere six inches from the floor.

Although the steel band as we know it began only after World War II (Trinidadians adapted discarded oil drums), music has been the "food of life" for the Africans ever since they first reached island shores. Drums, steel bands and scratchy bands give voice to African rhythms, emerging in today's tunes that range from calypsos to concertos.

Agitation for freedom for the slaves began in earnest following emancipation of English slaves in 1834. The Lutherans, who had been in the islands since the first Danish settlement, took active part in the education of islanders—slaves and freemen. They, and the Moravians who had come to the islands from Germany in 1732, freed their slaves in 1844—four years before the formal granting of freedom to all island slaves in 1848.

The discovery of the sugar beet hastened the decline of the sugar plantation and the advent of steamships decreased the necessity for a replenishing stop at St. Thomas. The era of prominent overlords and lowly slaves was officially at an end. The days of gracious living for the privileged few were numbered. Thus began a bleak period in the island's history. Perhaps this was a factor in Denmark's ultimate agreement, after years of negotiation, to sell the islands to the United States government for $25,000,000 in 1917.

The islands had become part of the United States—to be administered for several years under the Department of the Navy and then under the Department of Interior before taking the final step to home rule with an elected Governor in 1970. It was during the early United States years that President Hoover was to refer to the islands as "the nation's poorhouse."

Until the end of World War II, island commercial activities were at a low ebb. But the second era of island prosperity was dawning. Military personnel who had sampled the tropics in the line of duty returned for more. Island life became a religion for many and, the trickle-that-became-a-flood of visitors brought the need for hotels and other tourist facilities. The simple systems of using water catchments for fresh water supply and bringing fresh produce to non-agricultural islands by sloop would no longer suffice. Roads and resources were to be strained to the breaking point.

Salt water distillation and supermarkets have now come to the larger islands, followed by a building surge that sees hotels, private homes and condominiums sprouting from canefields and rocky promontories. Sometimes they are awesome structures of wall-to-wall cement; sometimes they nestle into the terrain to share the view without spoiling it.

The islands had been in the hotel business since 1841 when the Grand Hotel opened for business. That hotel still stands, at Emancipation Park on St. Thomas below Government House. It has been joined by more than 150 other island hotels, apartments and guest houses providing rooms for the more than one million visitors that come to the Virgin Islands annually.

In the old days, the only structures on the beaches were the jails where slaves were "tortured" by sandflies and humidity. Today beachfront property is at a premium. In the late 1950's, the first new beachfront hotel opened on St. Thomas at the Bay named for Charles Lindbergh who had landed nearby on a pioneer flight. Now all but the most remote coves — and the few beaches that are owned by the government — are frosted with modern resorts.

One provision of the transfer agreement — an ad valorem six per cent duty charged on imports and the adherence to the basic Danish customs laws which allowed free shipment from all parts of the world to the Virgin Islands — put the American islands in the forefront again as a shoppers' paradise.

Since items can come to the Virgin Islands almost duty free, United States citizens must pass through customs before returning to the mainland — even though they have never actually left American soil. Store owners cull the world's markets for alluring imports and everything from antiques to zithers awaits the inveterate shopper.

But the "duty-free" shopping visitors expect to find in the American Virgin Islands, particularly on St. Thomas and St. Croix, is not the only reason for heading south. Weather in the islands is so steady it has been insured with Lloyd's of London. The temperature seldom goes below 70 degrees or above 90 and the sun that has bleached the brightly painted rooftops to pastel promises to tan all travelers.

The mountain peaks of St. Thomas, strung with a tramway and capped with homes or hotels, are unique to the Virgin Islands. The curly route up Crown Mountain, pausing at Drake's Seat where he might have watched his fleet pass through the channel, leads to Mountain Top — and the spectacular view of Magens Bay. Traveling to the east end of St. Thomas, to overlook St. John, one passes what has become a ribbon of marinas supplementing the island's first marina still operating at Yacht Haven. From here one can leave the commerce of St. Thomas behind and head for a remote east-end resort — or out to sea.

Charter fleets tie the inaccessible islands to the better known meccas, sailing the route of the buccaneers and the inter-island sloops.

The American islands' cultural pursuits received a boost a few years ago from the establishment of the College of the Virgin Islands, with its main campus near the St. Thomas jetport. The Caribbean Research Institute, a department of the college, devotes its energies to conservation throughout the Caribbean.

Although building and progress may have made St. Thomas into "suburbs in the sun," St. Thomian satelites, too small for much development and some privately owned, stand offshore to watch the development

from a safe distance. Hassel Island, for example, in the mouth of Charlotte Amalie harbor, is laced with footpaths, but is without real roads.

The undulating hills of St. Croix, with a rugged north shore, a rain forest and a Robert Trent Jones golf course, are still reminiscent of the plantation days — although the last of the cane fields went to seed a few years ago when the island turned to small industries for its future.

The sentinel palms that lined the roads during the plantation days now look down their fronds at housing developments and what have always been good roads are faced with traffic problems. That the route between Frederiksted and Christiansted can begin with a lighthouse and end with a radar tracking station is significant indication of the island's role in the present and future. Sleek jets land at Alexander Hamilton airport (where passengers can clear customs to avoid the throngs in New York) and vacationers go happily to one of several luxury hotels or to a beachside apartment.

Ecology is the main subject at a branch of Fairleigh Dickinson College on the island's east end and, at its Research Station near Christiansted, a branch of the Caribbean Research Institute is studying light reflections in earth particles to find out why the moon shines. The Island Center in the middle of St. Croix presents cultural events — long missing on the island scene — for residents and visitors.

The beaches are still there — and so are the shops. For those who want little of either, Buck Island lies a few miles offshore and its underwater trail, opened in a precedent setting underwater tape cutting by former Secretary Udall, can introduce snorkelers to the fishes.

Island hopping is no longer any kind of a chore. The link once made only by island sloops is now forged several times daily by sea planes and hydrofoils. Getting to St. John from St. Croix, is a matter of minutes, and not the time consuming full days' outing that used to take travelers by way of St. Thomas.

Since 1956, St. John has enjoyed the stature — and protection — of being a National Park, the 29th in the network of parks administered by the United States Department of Interior. Campsites are available (and in great demand) and footpaths have been carefully marked to view the Arawak petroglyphs etched into the rocks and to learn about native flora and fauna.

Prosperity is just dawning for Tortola, the British Island just across the tumultuous channel from St. John. A new waterfront road in Road Town presages increased commerce and Wickham's Cay is becoming a "city" within the town. Small resorts crop up in various parts of the island and even on smaller Marina Cay and Mosquito Island.

The first luxury resort for the British Virgin Islands was Rockefeller sponsored Little Dix Bay, opened in 1964, on Virgin Gorda. Massive boulders have tumbled dramatically to the sea on the southwest shore of the island forming the grottoes known as "The Baths."

Beef island, connected to Tortola by the Queen Elizabeth II bridge, is the airport island and plans are underway on Anegada, the only flat island in the entire Virgin group, for a total development program with roads, electricity, hotels and shoppings centers.

Amid all this, Jost Van Dyke welcomes mostly sailors and those in search of peace and quiet and other islands — Peter, Cooper, Norman and Salt among them — have as yet no real facilities for guests, except for sandy shores to sacrifice to footprints.

Popular beliefs make Norman Island Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and Dead Man's Chest the island where Edward Teach marooned 15 of his men and both are still there — unencumbered by improvements. A spate of tiny islets with names like Guana, West Dog, Great Dog, George Dog, and Cockroach scatter from Tortola's northeast point to Virgin Gorda — perfect for a day's outing and exploring. Snorkelers who tire of the carefully charted trails on St. John and off Buck Island can hover around the wreck of the side-wheeler *Rhone,* submerged in the crystal clear seas off Salt Island.

The tropics — with palms, powdery sands, fathomless seas and constant trade winds — are sending their siren calls to work-weary people around the world. Anyone who has been there knows — and goes again. Island pleasures can be chosen these days — and need not all be rustic. Luxury is possible, with good service and good food, but so is the life of a camper in the National Park on St. John or an "unkown" island in the British Virgins. Here in the American and British Virgin Islands one can find his own pleasure island.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bruce G. Lynn has traveled extensively in the Caribbean for the past fourteen years, most of the time with a camera in his hand. He has been taking photographs for three times that long, always doing his own darkroom work.

A graduate of Ohio State University and Harvard Law School, Mr. Lynn is a practicing attorney in Columbus, Ohio.

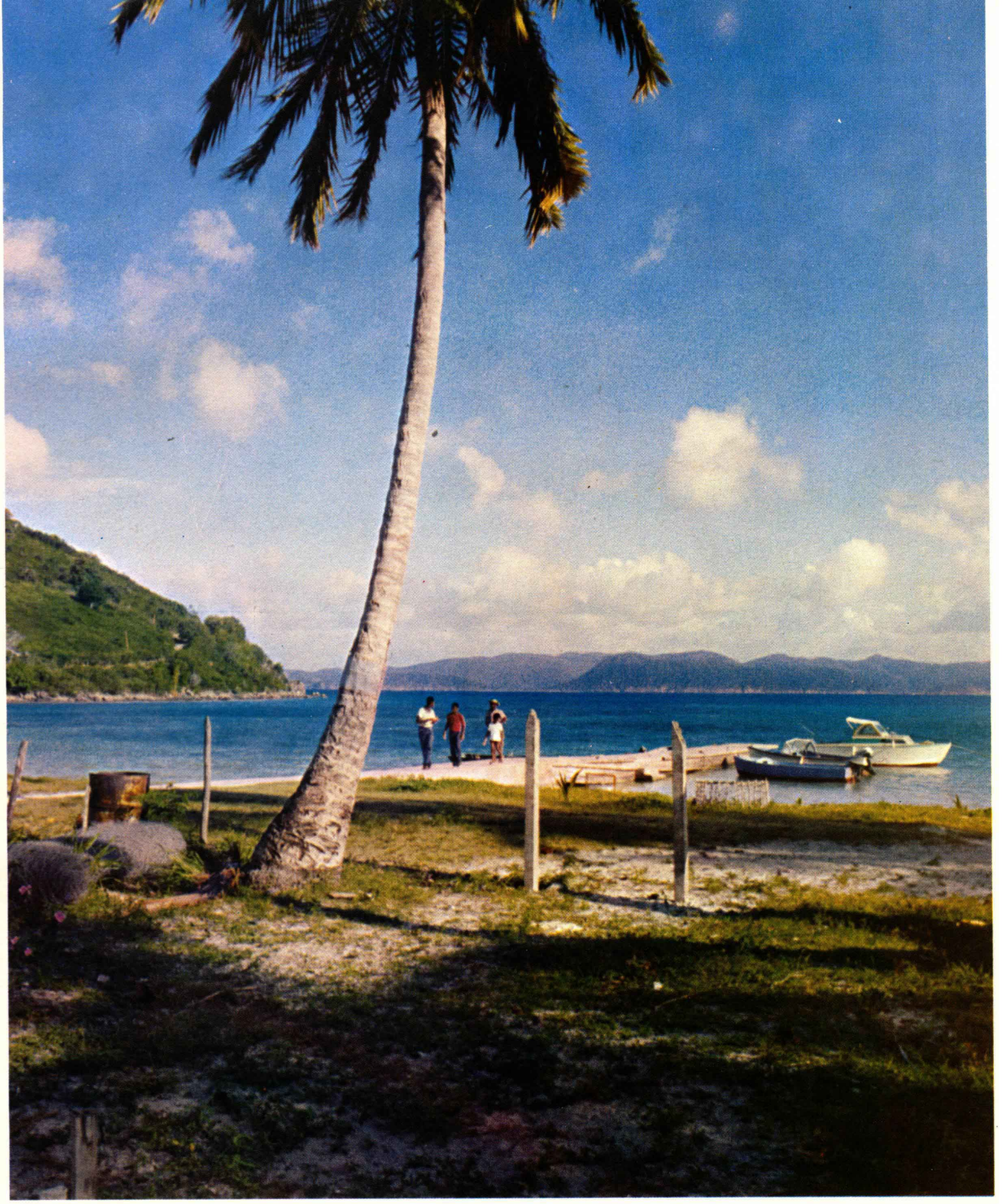
All of the photographs in this book were taken with a 500 C Hasselblad Camera using the following lenses: f.4 50 mm Distagon, f.2.8 80 mm Planar and f.4 150 mm Sonnar. Filters used were Hasselblad H2 (Haze) and Pola (Polarizing). The film was Eastman CPS Ektacolor Professional and Eastman Ektachrome X, 120 and 70 mm.

Mr. Lynn's other photographic books on the Caribbean are "The Grenadines, Undiscovered Islands of the Caribbean" and "Barbados, A Smiling Island".

Margaret Zellers Lenci has been involved with the Caribbean since 1956 when she began working with tourism development programs for several of the islands. She has traveled extensively throughout the area on countless business and vacation trips, making special note of the "out-of-the-way" quiet coves that become the mecca for work-weary vacationers.

Particular concern with the Virgin Islands began first as an employee of the Department of Tourism and Trade and then with its successor, the Virgin Islands Department of Commerce, concentrating on tourism development.

During recent years, Margaret Zellers Lenci has devoted her time to writing for newspapers, magazines and guide books about the areas she knows so well.



The pier at Jost Van Dyke, in the British Virgin islands, reaches out to welcome visitors who must arrive by sea.

On a quiet island in the British Virgins, a luxury resort awaits and the pelicans — real and not-so-real — watch over all.

Estate Anna Berg is being restored as part of the 29th National Park that makes up about two-thirds of the island of St. John.

Pools as blue as the Caribbean, but without the fathomless depths and fascinating underwater world, dot the hotels in town. St. Croix.

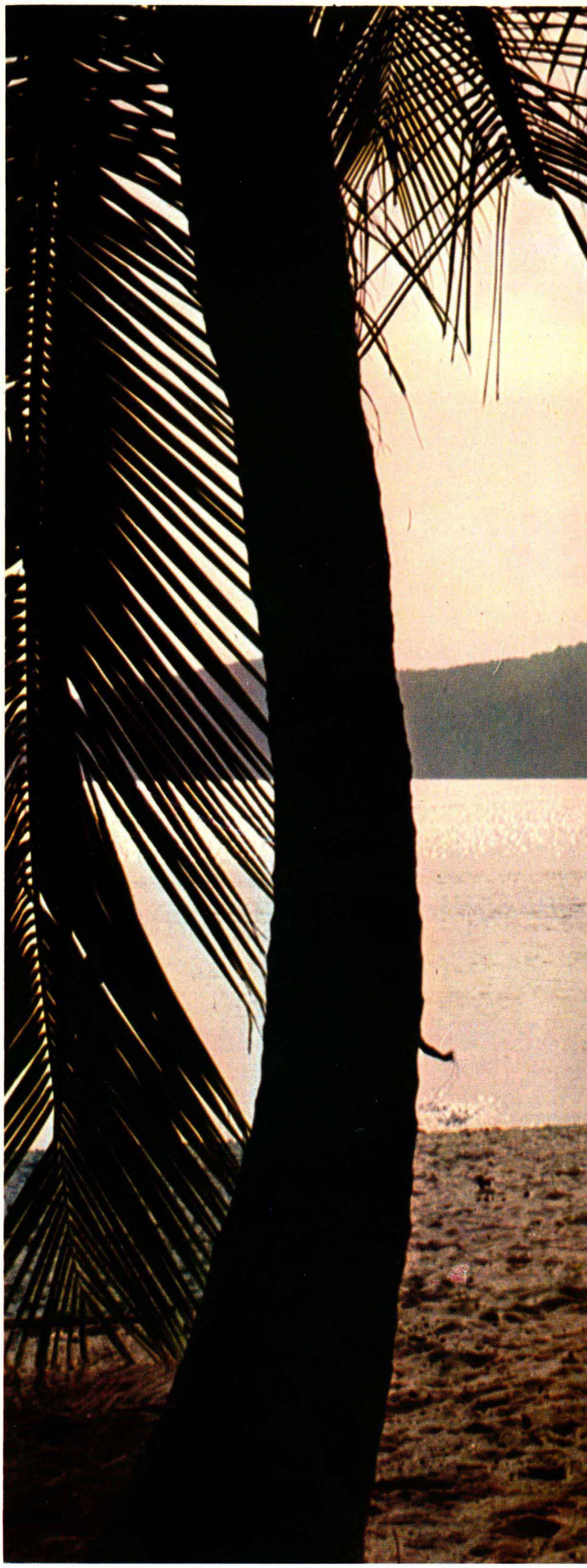
Following the paths of slower craft, the hydrofoil speeds between the islands for those who must make their trip in a hurry.

For many years, "St. Joan" was the only craft to provide regular service between Jost Van Dyke and the neighboring islands.

Good beaches are near Christiansted, St. Croix.

Taking the cue from nature, modern arcades cultivate tropical growth — as well as shops. St. Croix.

Quiet roads on the lush north shore of St. Thomas are bowered with the tropical growth of centuries.



Red sails in the sunset — any Caribbean sunset — are part of island life.

Small hotels, restaurants and "free-port" shops make a labyrinth of Christiansted's streets. St. Croix.