

The New York Times

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52 PLACES TO GO IN 2020



2 BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

*An island chain devastated by hurricanes
rebounds with an environmental bent*

Hit by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, the British Virgin Islands have been slow to recover. But this year, a number of resorts will reopen, including Rosewood Little Dix Bay, the iconic resort originally developed by the conservation-minded Laurance Rockefeller in 1964, which was under renovation when the storms hit; it reopened this month. On Norman Island, planned developments for 2020 include three hotels, a marina and an observatory. Offshore, the ship William Thornton, which once housed the floating bar known as Willy T, was damaged and is now part of an artificial reef, but a new vessel has replaced it. Many properties have a new environmental focus. Necker Island, the

private island owned by Richard Branson, will finish rebuilding by April, and introduce uniforms made from recycled plastic found in the ocean; in 2019, the resort installed wind turbines that have enabled it to run on up to 90 percent renewable energy. In summer 2020, the Bitter End Yacht Club will open a new marina using recycled materials and a market to provision boat crews; accommodations are scheduled to follow in the fall. Cooper Island Beach Club on Cooper Island, a 15-minute water taxi ride from Tortola, plans to offer packages combining island stays with emissions-free sailing trips aboard a new electric-powered yacht from Voyage Charters.

—ELAINE GLUSAC



FURTHER READING

Storm-Damaged Caribbean Resorts Make a Comeback for High Season
Nov. 22, 2018





3 LODGING Exotic spots for sleep? Try bubbles, trees or the sea.



4 FRUGAL TRAVELER Seeing the British Virgin Islands via ferry.



6 ISRAEL Tel Aviv's thriving tech scene opens up to visitors.

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Travel

The New York Times

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2020



FRUGAL TRAVELER

Right, Speedy's ferry, part of the British Virgin Islands' extensive ferry system.

For Island-Hopping, Forget the Yacht. Take a Ferry Instead.

In the British Virgin Islands, get cheap maritime thrills and rub shoulders with locals on one of the Caribbean's most convenient route systems.

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By ELAINE GLUSAC

Orion was shining brightly in the dark sky above Anegada in the British Virgin Islands. But the constellation had some electric competition in the band of bright mast lights bobbing offshore — “like a bejeweled Orion's belt,” observed a new acquaintance who introduced himself as Spoons, the pilot of one of those yachts. He and his crew of five friends from the Boston area had paid \$10,900 for eight days on a 45-foot catamaran to sail from island to island.

Chartering a boat is one way to get around the islands — and a popular one. According to the tourism board, slightly more than half of all visitors to the British overseas territory's 60 islands and cays stay on yachts.

I, on the other hand, chose a far cheaper way to travel between islands. Using the British Virgin Islands' ferry system, I spent \$140 — not including accommodations, which added about \$700 to my expenses — over a five-day trip, reaching four ports in bargain, connect-the-dots style.

In the Caribbean, several ferry companies offer opportunities for multi-island vacations, such as the L'Espresso des Îles

At Cane Garden Bay, lounge chairs and umbrellas colonized the sand in front of a series of restaurant terraces and beach bars, welcoming travelers from the cruise ships, arriving in open-air buses. On an overcast day, I walked the beach between sporadic downpours to the more-than-400-year-old Callwood Rum Distillery where Matthew Callwood, a distiller, bartender, tour guide and member of the family that has owned the distillery since the 1800s, led me and two cruise passengers on a tour (\$5) of the mostly outdoor distillery works, including a 19th-century sugar cane crusher originally powered by harnessed donkeys.

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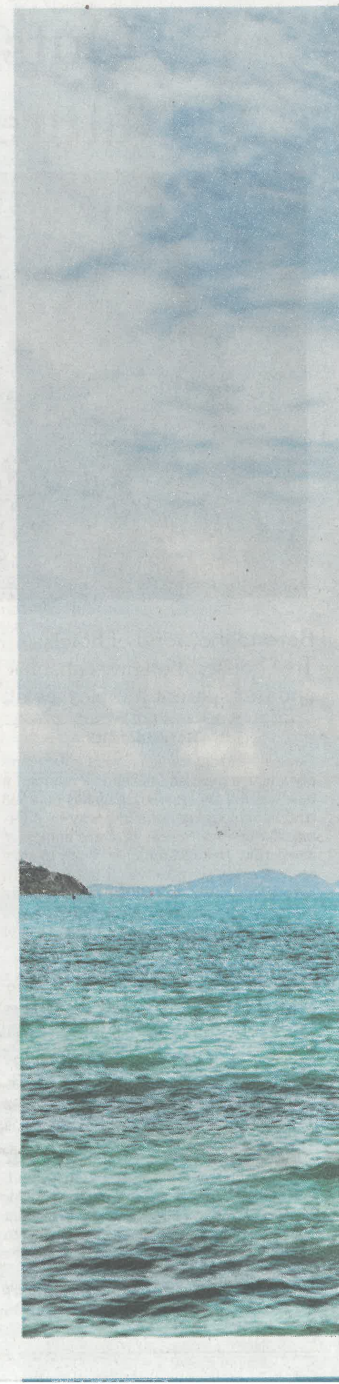
I stashed a pint (\$12) in my pack and moved on down the beach, watching dive-bombing pelicans on the water and free-ranging chickens on land. Beachfront restaurants teemed with day drinkers, but I followed Dodgy's advice for lunch and went to Banana's Bar & Grill, a polished bistro

ally rebuilding after the hurricanes.

Tropical foliage has sprung back on much of the mountainous island, home to a series of national parks, including Gorda Peak National Park, with its panoramic trail to an elevation of 1,370 feet. Staying overnight on Virgin Gorda offers a rare opportunity to visit its best-loved beauty spot — the Baths National Park, protecting a dramatic stretch of shore where massive granite boulders as big as 40 feet in diameter cluster in the shallows — before the cruise ship crowds arrive.

At 7 a.m., when the first blush of light began pinkening the clouds, I started down the park path past cactuses and the occasional orchid to Devil's Bay, where a septuagenarian foursome were quietly skinny dipping. I waited out a 10-minute rain shower in a shorefront cave weathered by the action of the waves. The path continued over and between the Baths' boulders, sometimes with the assistance of steps or rope holds bolted into the rocks, walling off calm, shallow, swim-inviting pools.

I saw evidence of other early birds at the Baths — “M + M 2020” seemed freshly written in the sand — but I never saw them until I completed the roughly mile-long circuit



Center row from left: the ferry arriving in Road Town, on Tortola, the capital of the British Virgin Islands; a Kelly's Land & Sea Tours boat off Anegada; and Fischer's Cove Beach Hotel in Virgin Gorda.

Bottom row from left: islands off Anegada, made up of conch shells that harvesters, dating back to the region's indigenous Arawak, have discarded; and the ferry dock in Road Town.

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But few Caribbean destinations offer a ferry system as extensive and convenient as the British Virgin Islands. The tourism board details schedules and links to seven islands on an interactive web page devoted to island-hopping.

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Yes, cruise ships can actually be a rock-bottom ticket to the Caribbean — on my trip, I met a couple from South Carolina who spent only \$600 each on an 11-day Norwegian cruise — but as an independent traveler, I find those affordable ships too big, and small charters too expensive. The ferry system seemed just right to this backpacking Goldilocks.

Seeking a winter warm-up and a budget tropical vacation, I went to the British Virgin Islands in January to test the convenience and cost of the ferry system, hitting the cruise hub of Tortola, the mountainous beauty of Virgin Gorda, and remote Anegada.

OFTEN, THE CHEAPEST FLIGHTS from the United States that arrive nearest the British Virgin Islands land in St. Thomas (in the United States Virgin Islands), which is where I caught the 8:30 a.m. Road Town Fast Ferry from downtown Charlotte Amalie to Road Town, the British Virgin Islands capital, 50 minutes away on the island of Tortola (\$60 round trip; the United States dollar is the British territory's official currency).

A mix of day trippers, business commuters, yacht renters and one friendly couple from Tortola who helped me with my immigration form joined me on the windy trip aboard the 82-foot passenger ferry BVI Patriot. With four-foot waves and occasional sprinkles, I sat on the upper deck inside the cabin, which was both strangely ordinary — two flat-screens tuned to CNN delivered news of the Democratic presidential debates and a snowstorm in New York — and wildly exotic, as we passed leggy cactuses growing out of rock islets, forested hillsides of undeveloped islands and a few stands of barren mangroves, evidence of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, which struck in 2017. (The damage inflicted by those hurricanes brought the hotel room inventory to about 1,500, down from 2,700.)

Two cruise ships in the harbor dwarfed the 149-passenger BVI Patriot when we arrived. After clearing immigration, I hired a taxi driver, Conrad "Dodgy" Lewis — "Dodgy doesn't describe my driving," he insisted — to take me from the congested capital over the island's mountain spine to Cane Garden Bay, one of Tortola's most popular beaches, and back several hours later, in time for my late-afternoon ferry to Virgin Gorda for \$50.

with root vegetables, spinach and large tender pieces of chicken, bones and all.

If I had had time, I would have enjoyed outlasting the cruise passengers and staying on Cane Garden Bay at a place like Myett's Garden Inn on the Beach, running \$250 a night on Airbnb. But I had a ferry to catch.



RACING TO MAKE the late afternoon Speedy's ferry to Virgin Gorda (\$30 round trip), I was joined by a day-tripping set of cruise passengers, another American couple bound for a week at a luxury resort, uniformed schoolchildren and several returning islanders clutching bunches of stuffed shopping bags. One visitor leaned over the port railing, welcoming the warm wind in his face for the entire 30-minute passage toward Virgin Gorda, said to have been named Fat Virgin by Christopher Columbus for its pregnant profile.

You can tell a lot about an island by its ferry cargo. There were pallets of bottled water on the boat to Tortola. On Virgin Gorda, Speedy's deckhands unloaded cases of Veuve Clicquot and Cakebread Cellars wines.

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Consequently, a solitary backpacker seemed an usual sight in Spanish Town, the main settlement on Virgin Gorda. I declined taxi offers in favor of a 15-minute walk to Fischer's Cove Beach Hotel, where blossoms were tucked in conch shells and towels in my tidy and spacious room (\$175 a night). Only when I stepped onto the flamingo-pink patio and looked up did I realize there used to be a second story above, where rebar now pierced the blue sky. The Flax family, owners of the hotel, are gradu-

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A day later, I ran into her at the ferry terminal on Tortola, returning home after a banking run. It was an unintended stop, but when the Wednesday departure from Virgin Gorda to Anegada was canceled, I was forced to catch Road Town Fast Ferry's 300-passenger Lady Caroline from Tortola to Anegada (\$50 round trip).

Of the six of us scattered among 30 seats on the outside upper deck, five were returning islanders, quizzing two with roll-aboard luggage about their vacation abroad. Children scrambled up and down the stairs for vending machine snacks, and teenage couples leaned into each other, sharing earbuds. But the high seas soon quelled conversation, abandoned to the rush of the wind, the rhythmic rise and fall of passing boats under sail and the shifting view of outlying islands.

Sandy and flat where its sibling islands are steep and rugged, Anegada — the most northeastern island in the British Virgin Islands and the only coral island in the volcanic chain — resolved into view like an overgrown sandbar during the one-hour crossing.

From the concrete ferry pier, I got the vaguest of directions to my hotel — walk down the pier and take your first left — which turned out to be accurate. By late afternoon, the outdoor oceanfront bar at the Anegada Reef Hotel was packed, not solely with guests of the 10-room hotel (from \$155 a night), but also with sailors from the many yachts moored in front of it.

Other than the pre-sunset rush for rum-based Painkiller cocktails, the nightly hotel barbecue featuring the island's renowned spiny lobster, and a D.J. blaring "Love Shack" from a bar at Potter's by the Sea down the beach, Anegada is quiet.

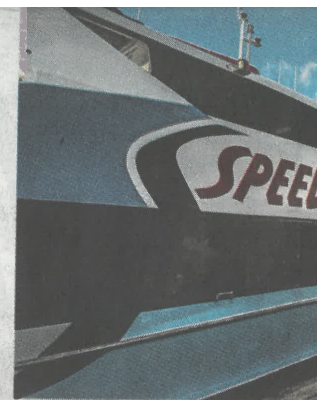
"You come to Anegada to swim and sleep under the sea grapes in the shade and wake up and swim and eat and drink and sleep again," explained an islander at the bar. "No one will bother you."

I hoped not, especially when I rented a scooter the next morning for \$50 a day from Michael Hastick, the co-owner of L&M rentals. He gave me, a scooter novice, a quick lesson in operating the vehicle and when I asked the speed limit, he smiled.

"There's only one cop on the island," he said, pointing to the empty street. "It's Anegada, and this is rush hour."

Technically, the speed limit is 30 miles per hour. And the occasional traffic obstacles were goats. Michael marked up a small map indicating where I would see the island's flamingos (distantly, in an interior pond), its endangered Anegada iguanas (in conservation cages next to the police station) and its best beaches, especially Loblobay Bay on the north shore, home to beach bars for castaways (Flash of Beauty) and party people (Big Bamboo).

Despite an open sign, Flash of Beauty was deserted at 10 a.m. Conch shells lined sand paths through the dunes to the beach,

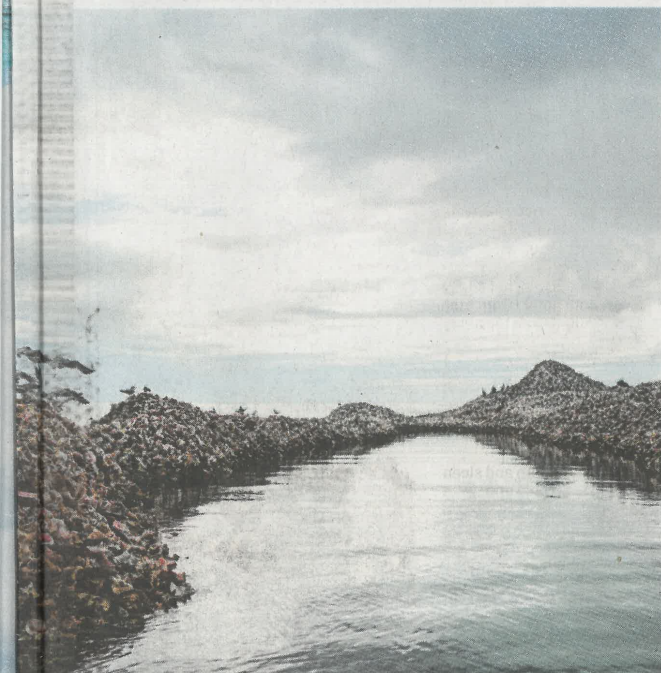


strafed by surf despite the barrier of distant Horseshoe Reef, visible in a line of frothy waves. I plunged in and immediately saw conch shells and rainbow-colored fish schooling around coral heads, but with the strong current I decided that as much as I love solitude, it wasn't safe to swim alone. It was, however, completely safe to leave my cellphone, wallet and scooter keys, and walk for miles down the deserted beach, returning to find everything as I left it, Flash of Beauty still closed and no other visitors.

Chased by another downpour, I stopped at nearby Anegada Beach Club, home to in-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNE BEQUETTE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



triguing palapa-roofed beachfront tents, a kite-surfing school and a poolside restaurant where I met Paula and Michelle Mau, a couple from Omaha who regularly visit the island. "Anegada is the end of the world," Michelle said. "There's no one here. It's magic."

THE MAUS SPREAD some of that magic by inviting me, after just a five-minute chat, to join them on a private boat they had chartered to snorkel around the uninhabited east end of the island. We saw four-foot barracuda, green sea turtles and shy puffer

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Before leaving on the next day's 8:30 a.m. ferry to Tortola and onward to St. Thomas, I walked the beach to Neptune's Treasure resort, where the aroma of cinnamon rolls from Pam's Kitchen served as an olfactory

siren to sailors aboard the 50-some yachts tied up offshore.

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But the compensation of taking the ferries went beyond financial. I traveled with commuting islanders of all ages, passed the

time in terminal waiting rooms with women doing word search puzzles and joined them in bringing my own lunch aboard. These regular sailors knew to sit starboard to avoid the sun on the afternoon Anegada run and to move to the exit before docking to beat the disembarking crowds at Tortola.

Still, no one seemed to take this special means of transportation for granted. Like me, they tugged on sweaters, sat in the shade and watched the successive hues of blue streaming in and out of sight between water and sky.

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FRUGAL TRAVELER

Who Needs a Caribbean Yacht When You Can Take the Ferry?

In the British Virgin Islands, get cheap maritime thrills and rub shoulders with locals on one of the region's most convenient ferry systems.

By Elaine Glusac

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In the Caribbean, several ferry companies offer opportunities for multi-island vacations, such as the [L'Express des Iles](#), which cruises from Guadeloupe to Dominica, Martinique and St. Lucia. Others offer domestic service, including ferries from [St. Vincent](#) to some of the outlying Grenadines, and those that link the [United States Virgin Islands](#).

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Speedy's ferry, part of the British Virgin Island's ferry system, departs Tortola. Anne Bequette for The New York Times

Have passport, will ferry

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Speedy's ferry arriving in Road Town, Tortola. Anne Bequette for The New York Times

Of bubbles and baths

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Fischer's Cove Beach Hotel, where the author stayed in Virgin Gorda. Like many lodgings in the British Virgin Islands, it sustained hurricane damage in 2017. Anne Bequette for The New York Times

Consequently, a solitary backpacker seemed an usual sight in Spanish Town, the main settlement on Virgin Gorda. I declined taxi offers in favor of a 15-minute walk to [Fischer's Cove Beach Hotel](#), where blossoms were tucked in conch shells and towels in my tidy and spacious room (\$175 a night). Only when I stepped onto the flamingo-pink patio and looked up did I realize there used to be a second story above, where rebar now pierced the blue sky. The Flax family, owners of the hotel, are gradually rebuilding after the hurricanes.

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Lobster, yachts and empty beaches

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The Anegada Reef Hotel, another hotel where the author stayed, this one on Anegada, a coral island in the British Virgin Islands. Anne Bequette for The New York Times

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A Kelly's Land and Sea Tours boat off Anegada. Anne Bequette for The New York Times

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Heading to Anegada from Tortola on the local ferry. Anne Bequette for The New York Times

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