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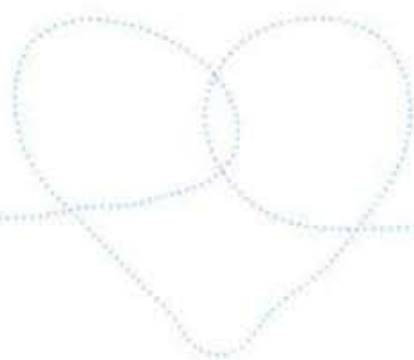
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by Katie McElveen

# Ultimate USVI

three sun-soaked isles provide endless possibilities for wedding-day bliss

Flight attendant Brenda Bower Lovend has special reasons for loving her career. For starters, she met her husband, Jay, when he was a passenger on one of her flights. "It really happened," she giggles. Once the couple decided to have a destination wedding, the free travel that comes with Brenda's job really came in handy. "I spent the months leading up to the wedding scouting islands," she says. "It was great to be able to see things in person."

After visiting a half-dozen destinations, Brenda found her dream locale on St. Croix, in the U.S. Virgin Islands. "It's still so laid-back, not commercial or too crowded," she says of her wedding spot. "It has an undiscovered feel, but you have lots of choices for bands, hotels and restaurants."





**B**each-minded brides flock to the USVI, and it's no wonder why. It's about as easy to fall in love with these sun-splashed American beauties as it is to marry there. Since the islands are a U.S. territory, there is no foreign currency to navigate, no passports or visas required. Paperwork is simple: Just send in your documentation so that it arrives eight days prior to the ceremony, then pick up your license at the Superior Court before the ceremony. "Brides choose the U.S. Virgin Islands because they're stress-free," says Cheryl Toner, owner of Wedding, Set, Go! on St. Thomas. And there's no question about legitimacy either. "A U.S. Virgin Islands wedding is as legal as a marriage in your home state in the continental U.S.," she says. "This is risk-free."

Beyond the unifying triumvirate of sea, sand and sun, the individual islands are uniquely enchanting. Whether it's lush St. John, glitzy St. Thomas or free-spirited St. Croix, the real fun is deciding which one is the right place for your I do's.

### *St. John: Elegant and Eco*

Visualize the quintessential Caribbean island, and chances are you picture something like St. John. This hilly atoll was attracting nature lovers to its idyllic beaches way back before "ecotourism" was even a word. Miles of hiking trails wind through shady tropical forests, leading to oceanfront bluffs with drop-dead gorgeous lookouts. Two-thirds of the island has been designated a national park, so the vistas are unmarred by develop-



From top: Snorkeling in St. Thomas; barefoot elegance is the hallmark of a USVI bride; the Annaberg ruins on St. John. Opposite: Trunk Bay, Virgin Islands National Park, St. John.





ment. Another plus: St. John is so safe that you can explore it in pairs instead of packs.

The social center of St. John is the wee hamlet of Cruz Bay. But if you're expecting to find those hippie staples of hemp bracelets and oddly shaped rainbow candles, you'll be disappointed. St. John regulars are equally keen on designers like Kate Spade and Lacoste, and shops here aim to please. You'll find locally made soaps and candles (in scents such as nutmeg, coconut and mimosa), only here they sit alongside expensive lotions and potions from Europe at quirky shopping malls called Wharfside Village and Mongoose Junction.

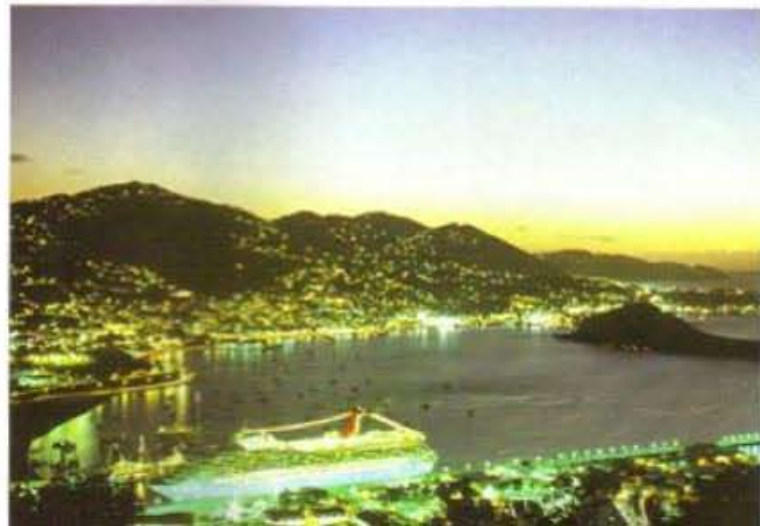
Come evening, the outdoor bars open their shutters and Cruz Bay fills with 20- and 30-somethings on break from the real world. Couples stroll outside after dinner, fully intending to return to their hotels — then they notice the night life, grin at each other and head back out toward the action.

Stacy Mulcare, owner of Ceremonies of St. John, plans about 200 weddings a year on the island. "Most of the beaches here are on parkland and surrounded by palm trees and sea grapes instead of high-rise hotels. It's one of the reasons brides love to marry on St. John," she says. "The key is finding the beach that will be at its best when you want to have your ceremony. Some are prettiest in the morning (Hawksnest Beach is one); others, like popular Trunk Bay, can be crowded during the day but clear out beautifully for sunset weddings."

For brides with a sense of history, the island's array of [CONTINUED ON PAGE 118](#)



**From top:** Relax — you did it! Mary Point on St. John is a great swimming spot; the twinkling lights of St. Thomas' Charlotte Amalie, one of the Caribbean's prettiest ports.







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sites. When you've had enough activity, revive at one of the handy beach bars, situated so close to the water that you're still dripping as the bartender hands you a rum punch.

It was this funky vibe that attracted flight attendant Brenda Bower for her October 28, 2005, wedding to Jay Lovend. Wanting to share the island's wiles, Brenda organized several expeditions for her 35 guests, including a catamaran trip to Buck Island (a nearby marine sanctuary), a horseback-riding adventure and group hikes to pristine coves glowing with golden sand. The group continued the bonding over meals at casual eateries such as Duggan's Reef (for local lobster drenched in butter) and Cheeseburgers in Paradise, where live music washes down the drippy and divine burgers. "Since we usually had at least 20 people, I called the restaurants ahead of time to make sure they could accommodate us," says Brenda. "By the time we got there, we felt like friends with the owners. Everybody was so accommodating."

Brenda and Jay held their seaside cere-

mony and ensuing indoor reception at The Buccaneer, a historic resort of traditional and beachfront hotel rooms spread out on a sweeping 340-acre rise that was once a sugar plantation. "We had originally considered a beach off property for the wedding, but decided in the end that it would be easier if our guests could walk instead of having to take taxis," says Brenda.

As a special touch, the couple had a note inserted in all the welcome baskets requesting each guest to find a shell somewhere along the beach and bring it to the late-afternoon wedding. After the vows, the guests were asked to scoop up a shellful of sand and put it, shell and all, into a tall glass vase that stood on a table next to the couple. "Since you can't separate one person's sand from another's after it's been combined, the unity ceremony symbolizes our marriage," explains Brenda, who got the idea from Buccaneer wedding coordinator Candy McGinley. "The vase is on display at our home. It's a reminder of a wonderful day." ■

FOR MORE INFO, SEE THE #11 ON PAGE 129.

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## USVI Essentials

### Location

The U.S. Virgin Islands are located about 1,100 miles southeast of Miami, near the confluence of the Atlantic and the Caribbean. They are on Eastern Standard Time but don't observe daylight savings.

### Marriage requirements

You don't need a blood test to marry on the U.S. Virgin Islands, but you do need to make sure that your paperwork — including proof of citizenship, payment and details about your trip — reaches the Superior Court at least eight working days prior to your wedding. (You'll find the necessary forms at [usvitourism.vi](http://usvitourism.vi).) You'll need to appear together before the court on St. Thomas or St. Croix to receive your marriage license. All weddings require two witnesses who are at least 18 years of age on St. Thomas and St. John and 21 on St. Croix.

### Beaches

All beaches are public; however, if you want to marry on a national park beach, your wedding planner needs a permit to work there. Privacy can't be guaranteed, but your planner can recommend a time when it's least likely to be crowded.

### Getting there

American, Continental, Delta, Spirit, United and US Airways all offer service to St. Thomas and/or St. Croix; daily nonstops are available from most major cities. Commuter flights are available between St. Thomas and St. Croix, including seaplane service from Charlotte Amalie to Christiansted. Both passenger and car ferries travel regularly between St. Thomas and St. John.

### Getting around

Shared open-air safari taxis, which charge a set fee per person depending on your destination, are available on St. Thomas and St. John. They can be reserved for group transportation for a fee. Private taxis, though expensive, are available on St. Thomas and St. Croix. On St. Croix, you can hire a car service for group transportation. Rental cars are plentiful and make it easy to explore on your own terms.

### Best time to go

With the exception of hurricane season in September, all three islands are sunny, temperate and reliably dry all year. December can be a bit windy, and summer temperatures can get into the 90s.



backdrop, but a rental stand for kayaks and snorkel equipment, a beach bar and a boutique selling one of the island's largest collections of swimwear. Snorkeling is a dream, particularly at Coki Beach, where bright masses of tropical fish zoom by in a colorful blur, then float quietly above the coral. There's even golf, most notably the Devil's Triangle, a trio of oceanfront holes carved into a rocky peninsula at the Fazio-designed Mahogany Run golf course.

Brides who want a bird's-eye view of the isle's striking tropical scenery should consider marrying in one of the many villas that dot the surprisingly hilly terrain. "Villas have a certain elegance," says Toner of Wedding, Set Go! Beach access tends to be limited at these hilltop homes — that's the price you pay for sweeping views that often encompass the neighboring British Virgin Islands — but dreamy pools, some of which rival resort setups, more than make up for the lack of sand. Most villas come with onsite staff and are perfect for receptions. "If you're staying at a villa and hold your wedding and reception there, everybody comes to you,"

says Toner. "It's totally private." Websites such as [wimco.com](http://wimco.com) and [caribbeanway.com](http://caribbeanway.com) have listings in every size and price range.

Larger groups may want to consider one of the island's resorts. Michal and Lionel Suarez wanted all 50 of their wedding guests to be able to stay together for their St. Thomas wedding, so Frenchman's Reef and Morningstar Resort Marriott was a natural choice. With 481 rooms, the resort could easily handle their party, and its central location made it easy for the wedding party to explore the island. "Many of our friends hadn't been to the island before," says Michal. "It was nice to be so close to so many things."

Michal had another reason for choosing the resort: On a previous trip to the USVI, she had spied a couple being wed on a cliff overlooking the ocean, and she wanted the same type of setting for her big day. So she turned to the resort's on-site wedding planner, Andrea Wing, for help. "We've got a beautiful gazebo, and of course there's the beach, but Michal wanted to get married overlooking the ocean," recalls Wing. With Wing's help,

Michal found her perfect paradise and married Lionel on April 30, 2005, on a grassy outcropping as waves crashed below. "It was the wedding I'd dreamed of since I saw that couple," says Michal. "The view, the breeze, the setting sun — and no sand in my shoes!"

### *St. Croix: Scenic and Sporty*

Surprisingly enough, the USVI's largest island is also the least-visited of the trio. Bohemian at heart, St. Croix is home to artisans of every ilk: Jewelry designers, painters and photographers live and work in the sherbet-colored buildings that line the streets of historic Christiansted. Cuisine is also considered art here, and restaurants like sultry Savant and funky Tutto Bene turn out some of the Caribbean's most creative plates.

Beyond town, St. Croix's windswept ridges and deserted beaches are quiet enough that shy green sea turtles nest in undisturbed sands. Surrounding coral reefs make for outstanding snorkeling — keep an eye out for seahorses — and scuba fans love the selection of shore-accessible dive

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