

travel

# Braving the Devil's Triangle

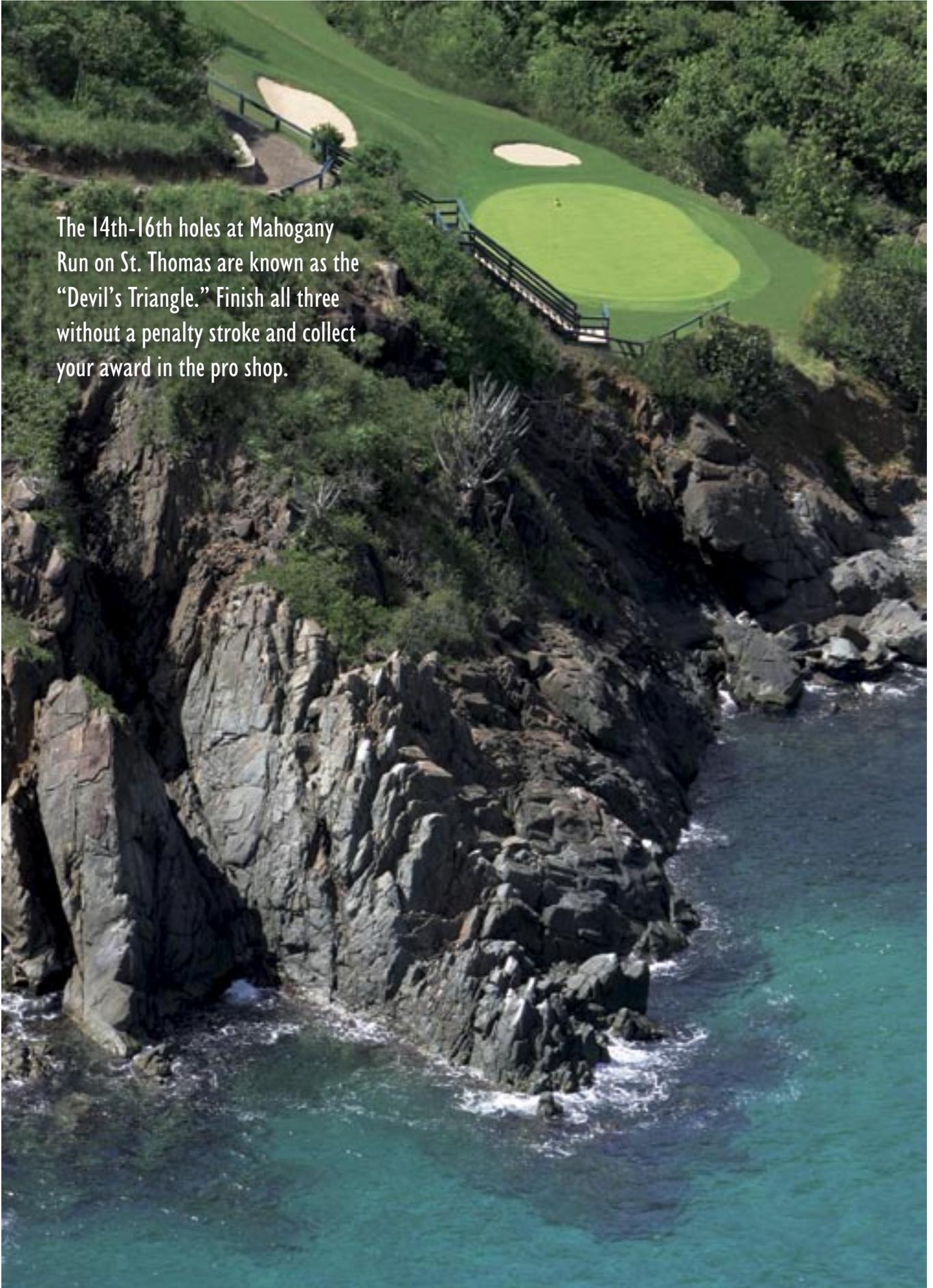
**Sure, there are more exotic destinations. But the U.S. Virgin Islands offer a slice of paradise right at our doorstep.**

By Rebecca MacDonald



Iguanas roam the grounds at the Marriott Frenchman's Reef on St. Thomas.

While today's world-wise travelers search for ever more exotic destinations to visit, it's tough to beat the U.S. Virgin Islands for a good old-fashioned, hassle-free vacation. Located just east of San Juan, Puerto Rico, the trio of St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John is easily accessible, no visas required. The official language is English – all you need to know is that rather than “hello,” locals say “good morning” – and the currency is the U.S. dollar, so no translation is necessary. Yet the musical island accent of the locals and the mountainous jungle terrain will make you feel as if you've truly escaped – and found paradise.



The 14th-16th holes at Mahogany Run on St. Thomas are known as the “Devil’s Triangle.” Finish all three without a penalty stroke and collect your award in the pro shop.

## travel

Spend the week floating in emerald-green waters on St. John's legendary beaches, shop till you drop in downtown Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas, then dine and dance the night away in the local restaurants and night clubs.

Speaking of clubs, be sure to bring your sticks; the islands of St. Thomas and St. Croix offer golfers some of the world's most spectacular oceanside golf.

### Getting there

Most major airlines offer flights into St. Thomas and St. Croix (There is no airport on St. John.) from Dallas/Fort Worth and Houston airports, there is often a connecting flight through Miami or San Juan. As you disembark from your flight, an army of taxi drivers awaits to whisk you into shuttle vans

with other tourists for the 20-minute drive into downtown. If you're destination is St. John, you'll take the ferry from downtown Charlotte Amalie across the harbor – about a 45 minute ride.

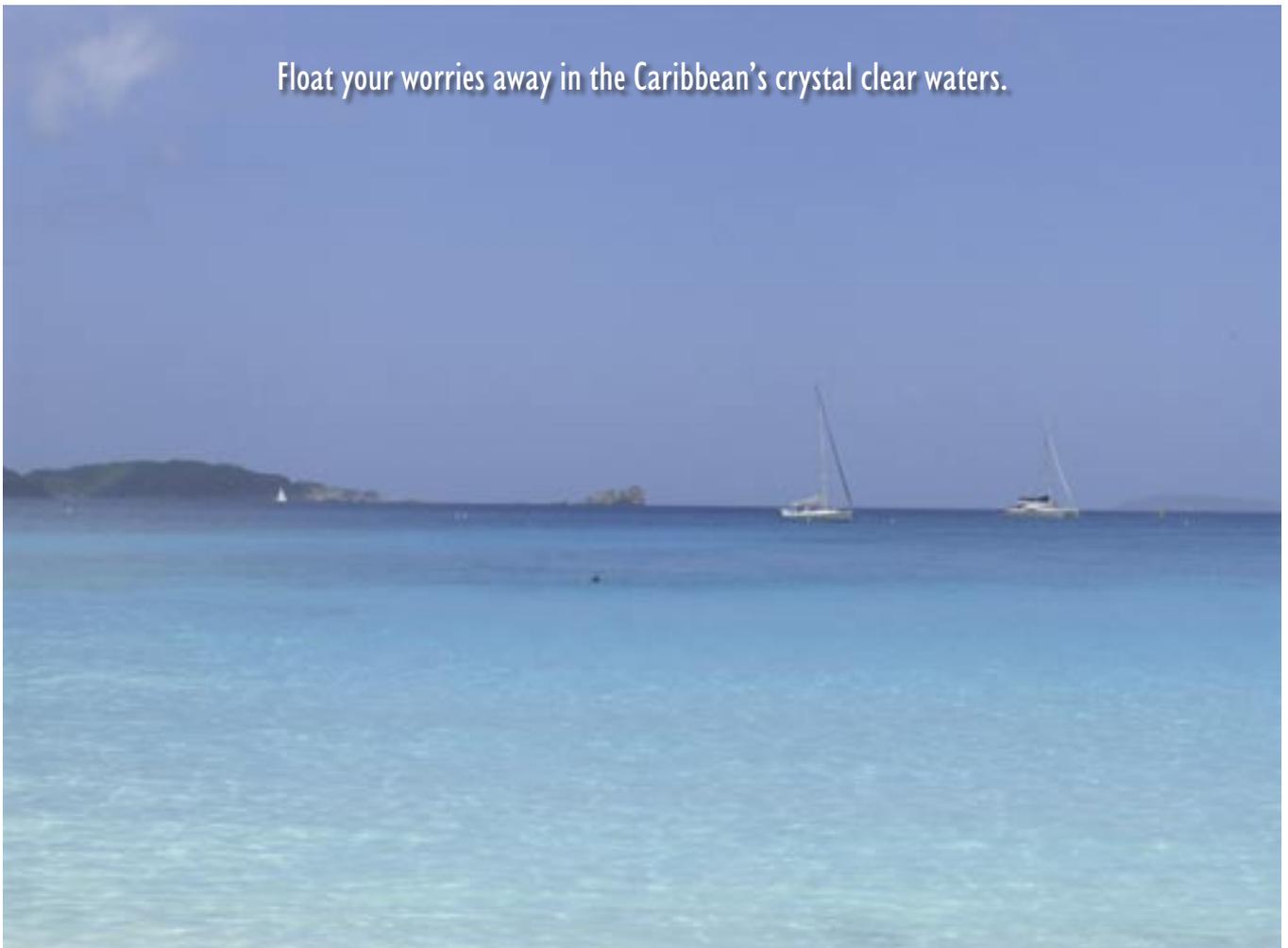
### The islands of St. Thomas and St. Croix offer golfers some of the world's most spectacular oceanside golf.

St. Thomas is the busiest of the islands, and offers more shopping and nightlife, while St. John is home to some of the world's best beaches. St. Croix is the largest of the three and the farthest away. The architectural quality

and historic interest of the one-time Danish West Indies capital has made part of Christiansted (founded in 1734) on St. Croix a National Historic Site.

All have a range of lodging options available, from budget inns to high-end hotels. Crowning St. Thomas on a promontory that juts out into the harbor is the Marriott Frenchman's Reef and Morningstar Resort. Frenchman's Reef is the main hotel, while Morningstar offers individual buildings strung along the private beach. Bolongo Bay Beach Club, on the east end of the island, offers all-inclusive packages, while the Ritz-Carlton, built like an Italian villa overlooking the sea, is absolutely palatial. On St. John, the Wyndham Sugar Bay Resort and Spa, and the Westin Resort, offer luxurious accommodations.

Float your worries away in the Caribbean's crystal clear waters.



### When to go

The high season in the Caribbean is December through March, when the warm weather entices visitors seeking to escape the winter cold. It's also more crowded and more expensive during this peak season. If you go during the off season, from April through November, you'll find rates are much more reasonable. However, many of the island restaurants and nightclubs close early during this season. Even the downtown shops in Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas close by 4:00 p.m., unless there is a cruise ship in town. Be wary of shopping when one of the big ships is in the harbor; the merchants know the cruise ship schedules and many raise their prices on those days.

In addition to better hotel rates, off-season visitors get another advantage – this is the season when the native green and hawksbill turtles come ashore to nest. It's a journey the prehistoric-looking creatures make every two to seven years to return to the beach where they were born. Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge, Buck Island and the East End all host the turtles' nesting grounds. The giant leatherback turtle, named for its layers of leather-like plates in place of the typical hard shell, also inhabits the island waters, but is nearly extinct. The leatherback can grow to as much as eight feet in length and weigh more than 1,000 pounds. The international organization Earthwatch runs a program that helps protect the turtles from predators while they lay their eggs, and tags the babies so they can be identified when they return.

### Oceanside dining

For authentic West Indian fare, many of the locals recommend Cuzzins in downtown Charlotte Amalie. For romantic dining, head to the ocean front, open-air restaurant overlooking Morn-

ing Star Beach on the Marriott property. The borders of the upstairs restaurant are draped with white curtains that blow in the evening ocean breeze while candlelight flickers at the tables. The upscale Latin-Fusion cuisine matches the atmosphere, while the large square bar in the center of the restaurant serves up creative martinis to the hip crowd. For lunch or a more casual dinner, the open-air Coco Joe's, also on Morningstar Beach, offers nightly themed buffets just steps from the ocean. If you're looking for a spectacular view to go with your food, Mafolie is a popular hillside destination for sunset dining.

**Paradise Point is a great place to relax and enjoy the panoramic view with a frozen drink on the large observation deck.**

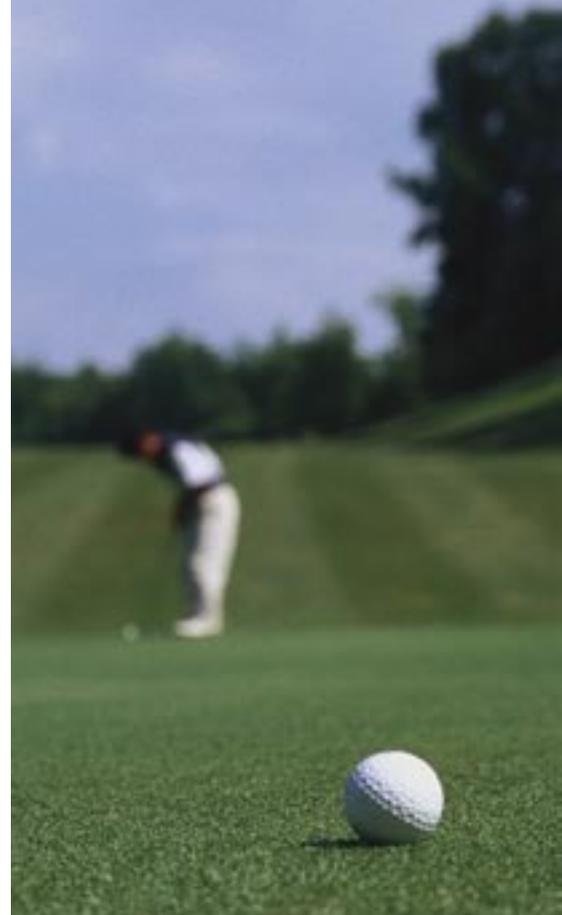
### Take in the view

The St. Thomas Sky Ride takes you up the mountainside in a cable car, similar to a ski lift, to 700 feet above sea level, and offers views of the harbor and neighboring islands. At the top, from its west-facing vantage point, Paradise Point is a great place to relax and enjoy the panoramic view with a frozen drink on the large observation deck. Be sure you bring your camera! If water sports are on your agenda, book a snorkel cruise to Buck Island to find the best underwater marine life. And if you simply want to relax on the beach, take the ferry to St. John and hop in one of the many taxi buses – mostly pickup trucks converted with seats in the back – to Trunk Bay. The beach has restrooms, a

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The U.S. Virgin Islands are home to some of the world's best beaches.



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snack bar and a shop that rents snorkel gear, beach chairs and the all-important sunscreen, in case you forget to bring your own.

### **Daring the Devil's Triangle**

Although it's the only golf course on St. Thomas, Mahogany Run offers enough challenge and stunning scenery that you'll want to play it more than once. Golf Digest proclaimed the course, designed by George and Tom Fazio, to be more of an engineering marvel than an architectural one, as the course had to be carved and blasted into an area of land just less than 110 acres. With only 77,000 square feet of greens and tight, winding fairways, this is true target golf.

If you're tired of lugging your clubs along on vacation, Mahogany Run has more than 80 sets of left- and right-handed rentals for men and women. On a recent visit, they even had a set in men's A flex, ideal for taller women.

The tight design is immediately apparent on the first hole, a dogleg right that makes an abrupt turn and then crosses a water hazard before reaching the green. The course plays 4,873 yards from the forward tees, and 5,609 from the middle tees. The challenge culminates in the spectacular "Devil's Triangle," the course's signature 13th, 14th and 15th holes, which run along a steep cliff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. All golfers who play The Devil's Triangle without a penalty stroke (e.g. out of bounds, lateral hazard, water hazard, lost ball) receive a "Certificate of Successful Completion" in the Pro Shop.

It starts with number 13, a dogleg-left par 4 that measures 314 yards from the middle tees and 281 yards from the forward tees. If you trust your aim and hit it long, you'll leave yourself with a short wedge at the turn, where the

fairway takes another dive down toward the tiny green perched on the edge of a hillside overlooking the ocean. If you didn't hit your tee shot solidly, you'll want to lay up at the edge of the ravine that separates the fairway from the tiny 25-foot-wide green below. Hitting the green requires a precise approach shot, and stairs lead down to the green from the cart path. Behind the green, the ground gives way to rocks that tumble downhill to the ocean below.

Number 14 is a stunning par-3 that requires a 120-yard shot from the forward tees. From here there is a bit of a carry. From the middle tees, it's a long iron out straight out over the Atlantic Ocean, with a steady wind blowing and the waves crashing far below, to find the crescent-shaped green tucked against the line of the cliff. The breathtaking scenery makes it difficult to find your focus, while the swirling ocean breeze tests your nerve. The combination of scenery and challenge makes it all that more sweet when you do find the green.

If you've made it this far without a penalty stroke, don't let your guard down just yet. The 15th hole is a par 5 and the number one handicap hole on the course. Measuring 452 yards from the forward tees and 520 yards from the

middle, it requires both accuracy and distance off the tee. A pond guards the front of the hole, but an overly aggressive approach will only find trouble out-of-bounds behind the dramatically sloped green.

The rest of the course winds through dense jungle terrain, where the island mountains offer elevation changes and native wildlife. Where else can you hole out a putt while wild iguanas graze nearby?

There are several more golf courses on nearby St. Croix. Carambola is an 18-hole Robert Trent Jones design full of water hazards, rolling fairways and nearly 100 bunkers, making it an exceptional course for the serious golfer. However, because of the four sets of tee markers and wide fairways, Carambola can be enjoyed by players of all skill levels. The beautiful 18-hole course at the Buccaneer Resort is built on the grounds of a former sugar plantation. The hilly terrain of this course offers stunning views and leads you right to the edge of the Caribbean sea. If a full 18 seems too much to tackle when you're main goal is relaxation, you can try the 9-hole Reef course. When you return from your trip, you can tell your friends that you played the easternmost golf course in the United States. 