

Island Discovery Series

U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico

While visiting one island can lend itself to a truly relaxing vacation, visiting neighboring islands, especially when they are as close as Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, can be an amazing experience. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, discover four larger islands, St. Thomas, St. Croix, Water Island and St. John, and some 50 smaller islands and cays. Puerto Rico is made up of three larger islands, Puerto Rico, Vieques and Culebra, and about 140 smaller islands, cays and islets. Ways to “island hop” include by air, ferry, boat charter or private water taxi. Carefully check out your options; some are available only seasonally and others operate only between certain destinations. Each island has its own character and far too many experiences for a single visit, so plan to return. Customize each visit with new discoveries.

Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas



Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico

3 days

The largest island is Puerto Rico. Stay in the island's capital and largest city, San Juan, and also head outside the city to find lively culture and natural wonders, including spectacular beaches and parks. In San Juan, explore iconic places like the 400-year-old El Morro Fort with its six levels of walls, towers and batteries that were built, rebuilt and added to over the centuries. As befits such a cosmopolitan city, San Juan's dining options are incredibly varied, from resort-style dining to tiny family-owned restaurants tucked along the narrow streets of Old San Juan to colorful food stands and food trucks selling authentic island treats. Shopping aficionados will find a similarly wide range of options. Shop for locally created ceramics, jewelry and handmade lace in Old San Juan's historic buildings or at high-end boutiques along Ashford Avenue in the Condado neighborhood. After dark, this Latin city really heats up as nightclubs, discos and bars overflow with music and enthusiastic dancers. Puerto Rico's second-largest city, Ponce, is known for its fanciful architecture, a mix of art nouveau and neoclassical styles. Visit the Museum of Ponce Architecture to learn about the city's architectural and cultural history, including links to Catalanian culture. The most striking building in the city is its black- and red-stripped Parque de Bombas, a former firehouse turned into a museum. Built in the architectural style of 1880s Spain, the museum resembles a Gothic castle or a Moorish-influenced Spaniard mansion of that era. Explore the nearby Museo de Arte de Ponce and Castillo Serrallés, a Spanish Colonial Revival mansion that's been turned into a museum highlighting the history of Puerto Rico's rum industry. Escape the city to El Yunque National Forest, a tropical rainforest and national reserve known for its biodiversity. Here, hike on lush trails to gorgeous views and waterfalls with natural pools for swimming. Head underground to visit the Rio Camuy Cave Park, a network of 200-plus caverns carved by the world's third-largest underground river. Discover stalagmites, stalactites and a giant sinkhole with overlooks that reveal the river 400 feet below. If beaches are what you are looking for, the island has some of the best in the Caribbean, from quiet secluded spots to the heart of the action at luxury hotels and resorts. Water sports include kayaking, snorkeling, paragliding and paddleboarding.

Accommodation: Puerto Rico

Vieques

3 days

An island off Puerto Rico's eastern end, Vieques is prized for its 40 gorgeous beaches and Bioluminescent Bay, where nighttime kayak tours reveal microorganisms that give the water a blue-green glow. On land, see wild horses roaming this 135-square-mile island, much of which is preserved as the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge. Visit the Fuerte de Vieques, also known as the El Fortin Conde de Mirasol, a partially restored mid-19th-century Spanish fort that houses the Vieques Museum of Art and History.

Accommodation: Vieques

Culebra

3 days

Most of this island is a natural refuge, and if you are looking for a retreat from everyday life, then you will find it in this tropical paradise. Home to some of the healthiest coral reefs in the Caribbean, snorkeling in Culebra is unparalleled. The entire island is the epitome of relaxation, lending itself to a casual, unhurried pace that will allow you to recharge and unwind. Kayak, hike, take in the pristine sand beaches and swim in the azure ocean of the Caribbean. *Accommodation: Culebra*

U.S. Virgin Islands



St. Thomas

5 days

St. Thomas is a tax-free shopping haven with options across the island. Renovated Danish warehouses in downtown Charlotte Amalie's narrow streets are filled with high-end jewelry and name-brand fashions. Eclectic boutiques and gift shops are tucked away in narrow alleyways that open onto flower-filled courtyards. Blackbeard's Castle on Government Hill in Charlotte Amalie is one of five National Historic Landmarks in the U.S. Virgin Islands; tour the structure built in the 1600s that locals say was used by the famous pirate as a lookout. Climb the 99 steps for views of St. Thomas Harbor. In Red Hook, on the eastern end, find works by local artists and casual holiday attire. At Mountain Top, enjoy jaw-dropping views of surrounding islands and shop for souvenirs. For a relaxing afternoon, escape to postcard-perfect Magens Bay, where you can swim or snorkel in the clean blue-green water or just relax on the white sand. At Coral World Ocean Park, observe tropical marine life from an underwater observatory, ride in a semi-submarine and see sharks, sea turtles and sea lions. The island's steep mountains and winding roads make for stunning views at every turn. Built in 1933, Drake's Seat is a popular lookout near the center of the island. Across from the cruise ship dock, board the Skyride to Paradise Point. At the top, enjoy panoramic views and toast the sunset with a tropical drink in hand. *Accommodation: St. Thomas*



Cruz Bay, St. John

St. John

2 days

From the pristine beaches to Virgin Islands National Park, which covers two-thirds of the island, St. John is the ultimate retreat. It's a 15-minute ride from St. Thomas, and nearly everyone begins their St. John adventure in Cruz Bay, which is where the ferries dock. Head to Mongoose Junction, a beautiful stone and wood complex filled with top-quality arts and crafts plus casual to fine dining options. Pink Papaya in the tiny Lemon Tree Mall specializes in original works by Caribbean artists. Climb aboard an open-air safari bus for the short ride along mountainous roads to Trunk Bay. If the ride doesn't take your breath away, the gorgeous beach will. Rent snorkel gear and follow underwater trails to see corals and tropical fish. In the quirky, quiet town of Coral Bay, relax with a burger at legendary Skinny Legs, the unofficial town hall. Watch for donkeys and goats in the middle of the road as you follow Centerline Road back to Cruz Bay; take a detour for views from Bordeaux Mountain, St. John's highest peak at 1,286 feet. *Accommodation: St. John*



Magens Bay, St. Thomas

St. Croix

2 days

The largest of the U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Croix, sits about 40 miles south of St. Thomas. Seaplanes deliver locals and visitors to downtown Christiansted, home of shaded walkways, stone arches and lemon-yellow Fort Christiansvaern, which houses an exhibit on local military history. In the island's other town, Frederiksted, visit several historic structures, including the Estate Whim Museum's 18th century plantation slave quarters, Great House and sugar mill. Snorkelers and divers will want to book a trip to pristine Buck Island Reef National Monument to snorkel the reef and see multicolored fish. Enjoy tours and tastings at the Cruzan Rum Distillery and the Captain Morgan Rum Distillery.

Accommodation: St. Croix



Water Island

2 days

Water Island is only 500 acres, but there is much to see and do, and it is only an eight-minute ferry ride from St. Thomas. There are restaurants, but the island has no cars, no supermarket and no gas station. Transportation is by rented golf cart. It's a perfect day trip or an escape for a few days; just remember to bring along anything you will need. One of the main attractions is Honeymoon Beach, set in a secluded cove with a beach bar and grill. Limestone Bay is also popular for its diving and snorkeling.

Accommodation: Water Island