

St. Thomas, USVI

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I will never forget my first view of St. Thomas. First, there was the excitement of arriving after a long ferry flight on a Grumman Goose from Long Beach, California. Second, was the breathtaking view of the busy harbor, colorful buildings along the waterfront, many with bright red roofs, and steep green hillsides surrounding the town. It was love at first sight!

We had landed in St. Thomas to unload our cargo: hard to find parts for the WWII seaplanes operated by Antilles Air Boats (AAB). The casual, open-air "Goose Grill" right next to the water was the perfect place to enjoy a cold drink and a sandwich and take in the exciting activity at the seaplane ramp. Then we continued for our final hop across the water to the island of St. Croix where the plane would be based.

I made another brief visit to St. Thomas a few days later and spent a few hours wandering through the narrow streets of Charlotte Amalie, the capital and seat of government. It was a wonderful walk along the wide waterfront where island sloops were tied up as the crew unloaded everything from fresh produce to a very rusty automobile.

Carefully crossing the road (remembering they drive on the left-hand side), I walked along an amazing array of colorful shops that had once been brick and stonework warehouses. The arched doorways and heavy wood shutters built for protection from storms added to the beauty of the stonework. The narrow streets between the buildings were now walkways with names like Palm Passage, Royal Dane Mall, and Drake's Passage. The shops were full of tourists from the nearby cruise ship dock looking for duty free jewelry, cameras, fine china, etc. Especially popular were the cardboard "suitcases" filled with bottles of low-cost Virgin Islands rum.

I stopped to photograph the "99" steps, which were constructed from bricks brought over from Europe as ballast on the old sailing ships, the yellow ones from Denmark and the red ones from Norway, England, France, Italy, or Spain.

These bricks had also been used on the ground floor of the nearby Hotel 1829, once the home of a French sea captain. I decided to have lunch there on the open, Spanish-style courtyard.

St. Thomas is the middle-sized one of the American Virgin Islands. It covers 32 square miles and is 14 miles long and only three mountainous miles across. Charlotte Amalie was founded as Taphus, Danish for “beer hall.” Denmark controlled the USVI until 1917 when the United States purchased the islands for \$25 million. St. Thomas is the most cosmopolitan of the islands, partly because of the huge cruise ships that arrive daily with thousands of tourists.

AAB pilots Dave Howard and John Pendley were both based on St. Thomas and had both attended the U. S. Coast Guard Academy. Dave had later transferred to the Air Force where he could do more flying. John stayed and flew the Coast Guards huge Grumman Albatross built by the Navy for air and sea rescue work. While we had breakfast together at the Goose Grill, they told me (tongue-in-cheek) that they were sharing a spacious studio apartment with a view of the harbor that was within walking distance of the seaplane ramp. I learned later that it was the attic in an old home that had a dormer window looking out over the harbor.

Dave had the day off and offered to take me on a tour away from the cruise ship crowds.

When I got into Dave’s “island car” he told me to be careful where I put my feet on the floorboard. It had rusted out in places and I could see the pavement as we drove away.

In addition to driving on the left side, I soon learned another peculiarity about life in the Virgin Islands. I asked about an exceptionally large paved patch on the hillside and was told it was a rainwater catchment. Rainwater is the primary source of fresh water on the island. All buildings are required to have underground cisterns to store rainwater from the roofs. If the cistern runs dry, it’s necessary to purchase water brought in by barge from Puerto Rico. That explained the odd sign above the toilet in Hotel 1829 that said, “In this isle of Sun and Fun We Never Flush for Number One.”

Driving up Crown Mountain Road, Dave turned in at Shibui, an attractive looking Japanese complex. We went into a restaurant on a terrace where Dave showed me his “favorite view” on the island. We looked down on Harry S. Truman Airport with its infamous 4,600-foot runway. The large terminal was once a WWII hangar. There were many small islands, or cays, and in the distance, we could see the Puerto Rican island of Culebra with the outline of the main island beyond. We stopped at other places with beautiful views, but I could see why this was Dave’s favorite.

I wanted to know more about the beautiful trees and plants I saw everywhere on the island, so Dave stopped at the Agricultural Station at Estate Dorothea. The man working there seemed pleased to have a diversion from his tasks and took delight in identifying the many tropical trees and plants he took care of. I asked about the vine with beautiful, small pink flowers that covered the fences at the seaplane ramp. He laughed and told me it was called “coralita” and was a weed. He pointed out a beautiful small yellow bird perched in a tree with bright yellow blossoms. He said it was a bananaquit in a Ginger Thomas tree, the official bird and tree of the Virgin Islands. It’s the “Yellow Bird” in the Calypso ballad.

After returning and parking the car at the seaplane ramp, we took a free ferry that ran continuously from the Windward Hotel waterfront to the Royal Mail Hotel on nearby Hassel Island. While we had lunch on their waterfront patio, Dave told me Herman Wouk wrote his book *DON’T STOP THE CARNIVAL* when he was living on St. Thomas, and the hotel he described was the Royal Mail. I had recently read the book when I decided to make the trip to the Virgin Islands and could see it matched the description perfectly.

After lunch we visited the small community of Frenchtown, located on the other side of the seaplane base past the Frenchtown Post Office. At the waterfront where the narrow channel separates Hassel Island from St. Thomas was a concrete pad lined with small (16 to 19 foot) home built, wooden boats.

The people who lived here were descendants of immigrants from the French Caribbean island of St. Barthelemy. A man constructing a fishpot greeted us and said we were too late to buy any of the catch they had brought in early that morning. He suggested we try one of the restaurants nearby (the Quarter Deck, Leslie’s Deli, or the Café Normandie) if we wanted a good meal with fish right off

the boat. He was very funny and said, “we are all cousins here.” The many years of intermarriage over the past 100 years showed. They were nice, but odd. He told us that we should come for their big Bastille Day celebration.

We followed the narrow road along Haulover Cut to the bitter end. The Villa Olga, once the Russian Consulate in the 1800’s, had been restored and was now a charming hotel and restaurant. Vodka bottles lined the bottom of a small pond, a sign of its history. The huge terrace facing the sea was now a West Indian bar and dining room. We sat at the bar to enjoy the cool sea breeze and ice cold pina colodas made with rum, coconut milk, and fresh pineapple juice. It was so cold, in fact, that it felt like my throat was frozen!

During WWII, the Navy had a Submarine Base in nearby Crown Bay. The Navy cut the channel between St. Thomas and Hassel Island to improve access to Charlotte Amalie Harbor.

This was the ideal spot to watch the seaplanes descending over West Gregorie Channel to land in Haulover Cut, dodging large island ferries and sailboats in the narrow channel. The sailboat crews wouldn’t be aware of the seaplanes until they heard the engines, and then they would change course to get out of the way, spoiling the carefully planned landing of the seaplane pilots.

We regretfully left the Villa Olga to walk back to the seaplane base so I could catch the last flight to St. Croix.

Dave asked the pilot to be sure and put me in the copilot’s seat. After his customary briefing to fasten seatbelts and check under the seat for the life vests, he told us that conditions were optimal to see the green flash. A man asked him “What is a green flash?” Something all of us wondered.

The pilot explained that we should see it as the sun slipped out of sight into the ocean.

We all watched eagerly as the sun set into the sea, and just as it sank out of view, we saw the green flash. Conditions were so perfect that we saw a second green flash. Even the pilot was thrilled, as he said he had never seen a double flash and we should all expect double good luck.

It was the perfect ending to a perfect day.

