

with it and not against it. A sandy spit of beach on the cay's southern tip offers a place to rest or warm up. Waterlemon is one of the only places on St. John that is home to the large orangish cushion sea stars. There's also a good chance to see a sea turtle or Peacock flounder. For most people, the quality of the resources and the remote beauty of the site is worth the walk.

10. Brown Bay. Accessible only by boat, or trail from Waterlemon Bay or East End Road, Brown Bay has a sandy though narrow and seaweed-strewn beach. In the middle is an extensive shallow seagrass bed, home to conch and other invertebrates. To the east are gorgonians that continue on around the bend. To the west, towards Waterlemon Bay, the fringing reef is thick with seemingly every conceivable kind of these flexible-skeletoned corals with some hard corals, including locally rare staghorn, and plenty of fish mixed in.

11. Haulover Bays are reached by a drive through the roller coaster hills of the East End. The Coral Bay side of the narrow isthmus has calm waters beyond a sand and rubble beach and was featured in the movie, "The Big Blue." Getting into the water is difficult, but from each side of the beach begins a smattering of small corals and a fair amount of fish, with a more structured reef towards Elk Bay to the north.

An informal trail leads from the opposite side of the road to the rocky shore facing Tortola. Extending from the shore to a depth of 20 to 30 feet, the reef is very dense but recently ravaged by disease. Still supports abundant and diverse fish populations. Often windy.

SOUTH SHORE :

12. Salt Pond Bay, on the southern tip of the island, is a 7-minute walk from the parking lot off Route 107. While not as sandy or shady as most North Shore beaches, the water is usually clear. A longish swim to the middle of the bay out beyond the boat moorings brings you to two sets of jagged rocks that break the surface, the first being more comprehensive. Coral covers the rocks to their bases in about 15 feet of water. Pillar coral is prevalent as is the good assortment of fish that swim through the underwater crags and crevasses. On the sides of the bays, the coral gets better the further from shore you swim, especially on the eastern side all the way around to the

blue cobblestone/coral rubble beach midway to Ram Head. Squid and sea turtles are commonly seen at Salt Pond.

13. Little Lameshur Bay. At the end of the road on the south shore from Coral Bay is a sheltered sand beach separated from a larger rocky beach (Great Lameshur Bay) by the Yawzi Point peninsula. A small cluster of rocks protruding from the shallow water just off the beach to the west is dense with snappers, grunts and other fish—a good beginner's spot. Otherwise, on more rare calm days, the western shoreline all the way to Europa Bay is a visual delight of deep cliff clefts and canyons with schools of fish in the deep water beneath you. Scattered coral heads line both sides of Yawzi Point, which supports a deeper and denser reef at its tip. A rocky beach on the left side of Yawzi, about 3/4 of the way out on the Yawzi Point Trail affords a shorter swim to the tip. Some recent mortality of star corals is apparent.

14. Great Lameshur Bay. While recent disease and other climate-induced environmental factors have rendered the left (east) shore of this bay a virtual dead zone, towering seacliffs, large underwater grottos (where snappers, glassy sweepers and other fish lurk) and the somewhat healthier conditions at the far point—and beyond to Cabrita Horn—may be worth the effort of this long distance snorkel. A rocky beach but easy access to the water.

15. Chocolate Hole, about 2 miles south of Cruz Bay on Route 104, is in a busy residential neighborhood outside the Park. Turn off Chocolate Hole East Road and find the the right hand turn down to the rock and sand beach where a new resort is under construction. A thick seagrass bed just offshore offers a close look at juvenile fish, occasional rays, conchs and other sea life specific to this habitat. A mostly dead reef with surprising amounts of fish lies fairly far out to the left of the beach. This beach, like other South Shore areas described above, are usually calm when north shore beaches are rough.

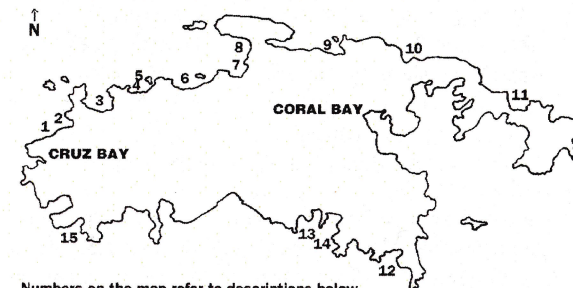
NOTE: In recent years the health of many reefs island-wide have decreased dramatically due to disease, climate variations and human factors. Unfortunately, overall recovery of a given reef is extremely slow. At all snorkeling areas around St. John one must be mindful of sea urchins and other potentially dangerous sea life. This guide updated September 2009.

National Park Service
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Virgin Islands National Park

Where's the Best Snorkeling ?



Over 40% of Virgin Islands National Park is underwater. Mangrove shorelines, seagrass beds, fringing and patch reefs offer an ample and diverse array of snorkeling opportunities. However, defining the "best" is highly subjective, based on factors such as individual snorkeling/swimming abilities, water and wind conditions and the marine life particular to a given site. This guide describes a variety of potential snorkeling areas so that you can determine what's best for your own interests and expertise. It highlights areas easily accessed by road or trail and is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to all St. John snorkeling spots.

NORTH SHORE:

1. Salomon/Honeymoon Bay. A rocky headland (and Nat'l Pk. Residence) separates the bays' two beautiful sand beaches. In the clear, 10 feet or less deep waters beneath are basketball-sized brain corals, lettuce leaf, elkhorn, knobby mustard hill and even some pillar corals. On the Honeymoon side the reef is somewhat thicker but more shallow. Look closely to observe locally rare black and white geometric encrusting tunicates. Abundant new finger corals add vibrancy to the fringing reef from the end of Saloman westward. A narrow but healthy and diverse reef grips the shoreline from the end of Honeymoon eastward to Caneel Bay. Plentiful fish in all three zones. A popular destination for charter boats from mid-morning to mid-

afternoon. Accessed by trail from the Cruz Bay Visitor Center or Caneel Bay Resort.

2. Caneel Bay. For some of the northshore's calmest and clearest conditions, head down to the right side of the resort's main beach, opposite end from the pier. Starting about 100 feet out and hugging the shore in 10 feet or less depth are plentiful, though diminutive hard corals as well as gorgonians that shelter diverse and quantitative fish populations—largely juveniles. Continuing east beyond the point to Scott's Beach, the reef eventually peters out. Only the main beach is open to the public from the land. All other beaches at Caneel are accessible by water only. Beach chairs are reserved for hotel guests.

3. Hawksnest Bay has long fingers of reef that extend perpendicularly from the sandy beach. Much of this area is too shallow to safely snorkel above and must be viewed from the sides. Fast growing elkhorn coral, hit hard by disease in the past three decades, seems to be making a comeback here. Scattered boulder corals are found in water depths of up to 20 feet off the eastern end of the beach. The rocky headland separating Hawksnest from Gibney's beach to the east is largely devoid of fish or coral. From the mostly dead reef in front of the yellow Oppenheimer's house, a few interesting clumps of live reef follow the shoreline below Easter Rock.

4. Jumbie Bay is accessed from Northshore Road by a wooden stairway some 200 feet east of a parking area on the opposite side of the road. Beware of traffic. From the right side of the beach a shallow reef extends, maze-like at first, all the way along the cliffs to Trunk Bay. The sandy bottom is eventually about 10 feet beneath you as you follow the reef. Seaward, the water becomes deeper with a few large brain corals. Look for hidden lobsters and perhaps a passing nurse shark. There's not much to see on the left side of Jumbie until you reach the point, a five minute swim. Here corals and other marine life extend down the underwater slope of the island to about 20 feet. Just seaward from the point to the east is a welcoming oasis of colorful reef that rises from the surrounding sand to a depth of about 10 feet. From here you can see around the bend to

Denis Bay and Perkins Cay. A splendid reef surrounds the cay but is a long swim from Jumbie. Denis Beach has "beware of dog" and "keep off" signs, but by law one can

go on the beach up to the tree line where private property begins. Paralleling the beach is a half alive reef. Wind chop can be a factor in the Jumbie/Denis area.

5. Trunk Bay's Underwater Trail is good for beginners, or anybody that wants to learn about marine life by reading the plaques that sit in the sand 5 to 15 feet beneath the surface. The coral is in surprisingly good shape despite abuse from winter storms and thousands of yearly visitors at this most crowded, though beautiful, St. John beach. Fish populations are fairly abundant, perhaps from illegal feeding and because Trunk (and Jumbie) is a no-take marine preserve.

The trail follows the west side of Trunk Bay Cay for about 300 feet before making a u-turn back to the beach. But the reef continues beyond to the cay's northern tip. Here the water is deeper and rougher with numerous crevasses, mostly devoid of corals, that often shelter schools of fish. The reef re-diversifies somewhat on the rough east side of the cay.

At the left (west) end of the beach begins a moderately complex reef that fringes the cliffs to Jumbie Bay, and is popular with tour boat snorkelers. At the right (east) end begins a very shallow reef that continues to Windswept, another "private" beach. The wind further out and the relatively beat up look of the coral here may dissuade you from going any further. The underwater trail is apt to be very busy from about 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Trunk Bay has the added attraction of lifeguards, flush toilets and showers (8-4 daily), a gift shop and snack bar.

6. Cinnamon Bay tends to be one of the windiest locations on the North Shore, which can make for slow going snorkeling. Visibility isn't usually affected, however. From the beach out to Cinnamon Bay Cay are patches of reefs that include a small but interesting ledge where close inspection may reveal a variety of invertebrates and juvenile fish. Shallow areas of sand can be used for resting before snorkeling around larger corals on either side of the cay, or to the 20-foot depth of the backside where a greater concentration of colorful sea fans and other gorgonians can be found. Off the west end of the beach is a shallow reef that may be silted over as well as the propeller of a small airplane that crashed there long ago. In the canyons of the mostly dead reef at the opposite (east) end of the beach are often plenty of fish.

7. Maho Bay. The seagrass beds in the middle stretches of this shallow bay provide habitat for green sea turtles that are seen more frequently in the early morning or late afternoon. There's limited coral and fish in the southern (left if facing water) waters of this long beach. To the north, beneath the "eco-tents," the reef is not especially thick or diverse but supports abundant fish populations, including angel fish. As with Francis Bay to the east, Maho is usually less affected by winter swells than elsewhere on the North Shore.

8. Francis Bay. For beginners, a very small area of coral and sponges shelters a good number of mostly juvenile fish at the southern end of the beach towards Maho. Water depth is about 8 feet. Small fish can also be seen off the sandy shoreline near the parking lot. For endurance swimmers, enter the water from the rocky section of the other end of the beach. A long swim out around the bend to Mary's Point is rewarding for the diversity of fish as well as the abundance of seafans, sea whips and other colorful gorgonians—despite recent death of many hard corals here. The reef generally fringes the shore, starting in about 10 feet of water and getting deeper further out. Use of a boat or kayak for the longer distances, including the adjacent Whistling Cay, is a good option. Francis is usually a good place to view sea turtles, pelicans and large predator fish chasing schools of smaller "fry."

9. Leinster/Waterlemon Bay is bordered by the Leinster Bay Trail. A 10-minute walk brings you to a narrow stretch of sand where entry is gained to a shallow reef of coral heads sitting on a sandy bottom that is habitat for parrotfish, tangs and grunts. Not far to seaward, is a steep drop off, where blue chromis, an occasional sea turtle and gorgonians are seen.

Ten minutes further down the trail at Waterlemon Bay, one can take a long swim out from the hard packed sand beach to Waterlemon Cay or swim along the eastern shore towards the cay. Walking along the rocky shore brings you to a point closer to the cay, but be careful not to damage coral or other marine life when entering from the rocks. The cay is ringed with a comprehensive variety of fish, corals and gorgonians. Seabirds are often perched on its shore. Although a strong current runs on the Tortola side of the cay, you should be OK if you go