

St. Croix, Getting Hooked on Island Style

Written by Story and Photography Elyse Glickman

Thursday, 16 April 2009 14:17 - Last Updated Thursday, 16 April 2009 15:01

St. Croix is a “Treasure Island” of a different kind, thanks to its artsy vibe, superb cuisine and laid-back elegance.



En route to The U.S. Virgin Islands, you will probably come across numerous ads touting state-of-the-art resorts and a pirate's bounty of duty-free shopping in your in-flight magazine. On closer inspection, the fine print indicates these hotspots are either located on St. Thomas or St. John. However, isn't the point of an island getaway to get away from the familiar? If you're picking St. Croix, you're headed to the right place.



While the occasional KFC spotting aside, what makes St. Croix special is its intimate community feel, as opposed to the built-up, corporate vibe of other tropical destinations. Even The Buccaneer Hotel, one of the island's highest-end and most established resorts feels as warm, welcoming and unpretentious as your best friend's condo—but with million dollar beachfront views and plush designer bedding. Better still, even with upgrades and modernizations, The Buccaneer (not far from Alexander Hamilton's childhood home) is punctuated with historical points of interest and architecture.

The towns of Christiansted and Frederiksted encompass the best of many worlds: small town American life, the Caribbean's natural beauty and several cultural reminders of the many European flags that once flew over it, particularly Denmark. While life here, like other islands of the Caribbean, revolves around snorkeling, hiking and the great outdoors (and a visit to Buck Island Reef National Monument is a must for those with sea legs), St. Croix's boutique and culinary scenes are remarkably cosmopolitan.



While the cultural offerings are small in number, they offer a rich immersion into island life beyond the beach as well as corners of U.S. and European history rarely explored. The Christiansted National Historic Site, with Fort Christiansvaern, the Steeple Building and nearby Apothecary Hall, is a great place to start a visit, providing a historical point of reference. The roads between the towns are not paved with gold, but with reminders of the era when sugar was the island's cash crop. These include such “great houses” (restored homes turned historic landmarks) as the Whim Plantation Museum, Lawaetz Family Museum and Estate Little Princess, as well as lively hiking trails through the rainforest and along the coastline.

Because mixology culture is still going strong in most parts of the world, a trek to the still-family-owned Cruzan Rum Factory is a must, with elements that will satisfy both serious history buffs and rum connoisseurs. Anchored by Master Distiller Gary Nelthropp, Plant Operations Vice President Donnie Nelthropp and Karen Nelthropp-Low (who handles the distillery's P.R. and hospitality pavilion), this experience, like the rest of the island, is decidedly un-corporate and rich in local flavor. Though the range of products is in keeping with contemporary cocktail trends, the machines, practices and work ethic used in the making of the Cruzan rum line is focused on maintaining a standard of quality, which has been in place for eight generations.

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Not surprisingly, the Nelthropp's rums have a presence in most of St. Croix's top bars and restaurants, not just in cocktails but also food recipes. Speaking of recipes, what makes dining out in St. Croix memorable is that most of the restaurants don't fall into easy categories such as "Caribbean," "fusion" or "steakhouse." There are casual spots like the Paradise Café in Christiansted, where large portions, fresh ingredients and chats with a mostly local clientele provide the flavor. However, most restaurants at all price points offer dishes that are not just unique to the island, but specific to that restaurant and the minds of its owners.

The Blue Moon Café in Frederiksted not only has scenic views of the ocean and funky décor by local artists, but heaping sandwiches and salads with kicky sauces and sides. Vegetarians and hikers, meanwhile, should keep their eyes peeled for the Abyssynya lunch truck, a local institution famous for its spirited, home-style African and Caribbean snacks made to order. Savant and Bacchus are fine-dining restaurants designed for hours of lingering and grazing. From a décor standpoint, both offer the cozy ambiance of a private dinner party inside an artist's home. Savant, a hideaway outside Christiansted, features a menu spiked with Caribbean and Asian references that are as bold and eclectic as the setting and some of the waitstaff. Their desserts, especially those using Cruzan rum, are the high point. Bacchus is particularly exceptional but not weighed down by a "five star" restaurant attitude. While owners Tim and Natalie Collins have a keen sense of humor (based on their zany rock-and-roll themed menu and jovial interactions with the guests), they and their kitchen staff take food seriously and constantly exercise their culinary chops. Every appetizer, main course and dessert our group sampled was flawless, from the assemblage of ingredients to the fun-yet-still-edible presentations.



In many ways, boutiques in Christiansted—the jewelry stores especially—march to a similar beat, where originality rules the day. The quintessential Virgin Islands souvenir is the "hook bracelet," which transforms a symbol of slavery into a statement of style and resilience. The original design of the hook bracelet is credited to Sonya Ltd., and her boutique is an essential stop. However, jewelry fans will notice that like potato chips and Oreo cookies, you cannot have just one. If (and when) you become hooked on building a collection of bracelets, it is essential to visit Sonya's contemporaries. These neighboring jewelers, many with workshops on premise, have their own twist on the hook as well as "chaney" jewelry (developed in the 1950s by local artist Monroe Clendenin) where bits of 18th and 19th century ceramic found around the island are refined and polished into "gemstones" that capture a bit of St. Croix history.

Some exquisite higher-end variations of chaney and the hook bracelet can not only be found on Cruzan Rum's Karen Nelthropp-Low, but at Nelthropp & Low, headed by her husband, Rob Low. Their one-of-a-kind pieces are investments, but like a great Cruzan cocktail, are intoxicating. Up the road, Crucian Gold (still run by the Bishop family), offers beautiful pieces that are slightly more affordable and perfect for everyday, even if everyday for most of is (alas) not on the island. They have an Obama version of the hook bracelet that continues to be one of their hottest sellers. The shoebox-sized Ib Designs has a mix of stunning one-of-a-kind chaney pieces and more affordable styles. Around the corner from Sonya, sharp men's pieces and contemporary sterling silver earrings can be reeled in at J. Cove. Though there are some duty free places offering familiar lines, Royal Jewelers does have a nice, folksy, low-pressure charms as well as excellent deals on basic hook bracelets to get the collection started...or completed.



Though St. Croix's fashion boutique options are more limited, Karen Nelthropp-Low recommends Hot Heads, a stone's throw from her husband's boutique. Next door to the Paradise Café, meanwhile, two enterprising women share a space at 2209 Queen Cross Street. The La

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Italia Shoes side of the space features hard-to-find shoe brands from Brazil, while the clothing side mixes quirky mainland and local labels and accessories.

For more information, visit www.stcroixtourism.com.