



Magens Bay as viewed from Mountain Top

A Vacation on St. Thomas: Reflections, Discoveries, and Observations

Steve Soreff, MD

Beginning on Saturday, January 21, 2023, I spent a week on the United States Virgin Island of St. Thomas. This article reflects on and covers the lessons learned from that experience. I went there with my partner Peggy and our two neat friends, Cynthia and Michael, staying at my sister's unit at Flamboyant on the Bay overlooking Magens Bay. In the spirit of the computer 's voice, "here is what I found".

For lesson one, I challenge the notion 'getting there is half the fun'. We flew JetBlue, which did a great job. However, to get a really significant low price, the trip involved three flight changes: Boston to JFK, JFK to San Juan, and San Juan to St. Thomas. Getting there took all day. And if you add in the venture our house to Michael's, Michael's to CJ Bus Terminal in Portsmouth, and CJ to Logan in Boston, it was a really long day. What made connecting to the next flight at JFK difficult was the winter flight delays in taking off due to de-icing in Boston. This meant literally almost running through JFK airport to catch the next flight like we were OJ Simpson. Also, at the San Juan airport, we had a 5-hour delay on the return trip. The lesson learned -if possible take a direct flight.

Still keeping with the flight thoughts, here are four observations. First, there is the recognition of how huge the travel industry is!! Being mostly traveling locally, I do not see the vast number of people traveling, the lines for car rentals, and the large array of hotels and restaurants. Second, I found TSA personnel friendly, helpful, and accommodating. Third, it is very useful to have your boarding passes printed ahead of time. It saves time and stress at the airport. And, fourth back to no fun earlier noted, with airlines charging for checked baggage. It meant everyone had 2 carry-on pieces of luggage. That made the already uncomfortable plane seating and passages way even more cramped.



Brian, Martha, and their daughters are one of the many families we met.

The next lesson falls under the category of the locals. It has several facets. One is simply the joy of talking and listening to people living there. I have a great curiosity as to what it was like living on St. Thomas. I heard many stories of how they loved the island and how they came back to it after time spent in America. So many of them are committed to living on the island and island life. They told many horrifying tales of surviving two major hurricanes 5 years ago. They talked about family and community. In keeping with the times, one of our ecotour guides loves the Kansas City Chiefs. Another part of the locals was asking them for information. We got great ideas about which beaches to go to, where to shop for groceries and gifts, and the best restaurants to eat at.



Captain Bryan of the vessel *Poseidon*, part of Seas the Day St. John tour.

Our encounters with the service people (I hate that term)-those who took care of us- were outstanding. They were upbeat, attentive, and very helpful, and they wanted us to have a good time. They seemed quite pleasantly genuine, and sincere in their wish to ensure our satisfaction. This was very refreshing and welcomed. For example, there was Captain Bryan of the vessel *Poseidon*, part of Seas the Day Charters St. John tour. Let me repeat that group's name, [Seas the Day Charters](#). I just love it. He did a terrific job of getting us to the best beaches and snorkel sites off of St. John Island. He got us to superb locations, provided drinks, and fascinating local history like where a scene from the movie [Four Seasons](#) was filmed. Incidentally, he was a Chicago attorney before this job. However, although they really did want us to be pleased, they also had two other motivations. One was gratuities aka tips. Captain Bryan made that quite clear to us, he wanted to earn big tips. The other was that they all wanted us to write favorable TripAdvisor reviews. Good reviews were critically important all these services industries.



Here are several other observations. One, if I thought folks in New Hampshire were very attached to their cell phones than people on the island their use was on steroids. Its appearance was ubiquitous. They make reservations, read reviews, call and text home and friends, and take pictures. Furthermore, one of the hottest items on the island was waterproof cases for cell phones. This allowed them to be used in and under the water. Two, one of the neat joys of island life was a refreshing freshwater shower after swimming or snorkeling in the ocean that day. It reminded me of the summer swimming in Long Island Sound as a child and then later taking a shower in the cottage's garage. Third, I also noticed the popularity of sailing catamarans. When I was in the sail set at the Portland Yacht Club, there were few of these twin hull crafts. Here, they were all over. As Michael pointed out, their appeal was that they offered more stability. And, fourth, I use hiking poles to walk along the beaches on St. Thomas. They got me my smiles and cheers.



Left to right around the table Steve (me), Peggy, Claudette (our fabulous, informative waitress) Cynthia, and Michael

Remember I said we went as a group. Well, that proved to be one of the high points of the adventure. I love the term synergy which applied to our four-people group. Yes, 1+1+1+1= a perfect 10. Each offered unique contributions. Michael driving there heroic. The roads there are steep, narrow, and windy. But that's not all. On St. Thomas, you drive British style on the left side of the road. Cynthia brought music and a love of water to the party. Peggy is my wonderful partner and helped to keep me on an "even keel" plus "schlepped" all our luggage since I walk with a cane or poles. I sprained my left ankle, so I added to my findings an appreciation of airport wheelchairs. My group contribution was my focus and interest in local history. We all loved to hear the local stories, as well as those of other tourists, offered we encountered. Another lesson is to travel with a compatible group whenever possible. As Francis Bacon, "Friends can double your joys & halve your grief". Our travel gang proved that statement.

I made a number of discoveries on my trip to St. Thomas. The first is that it was difficult for me to master to use of swimming flippers. In the movies, they make it look easy. I even needed a Flipper 101 lesson in the resort pool before I could almost snorkel correctly. The second was finding the abundance of red Bougainvillea flowers throughout the island.



The Bougainvillea flowers where we stayed.

Another discovery was that the island of St. Thomas is surrounded by many small named and unnamed uninhabited islands, How neat is that? Maybe there are treasures buried on them?



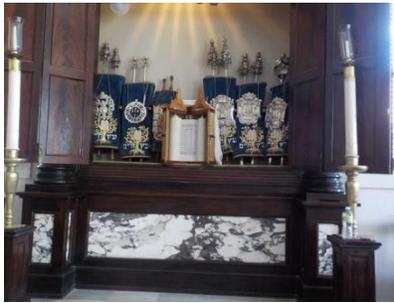
Some of the many islands off St. Thomas.

Here are two quick island history discoveries First, is that many residents and even tour guides had little or even wrong history about the Virgin Islands, in general, and St. Thomas, in particular. However, this was more than made -up for by my visit to the [St Thomas Historical Trust Museum](#) in downtown Charlotte Amalie. There I met Vincent "Doc" Palancia who offered me a comprehensive and splendid history of the Islands. Spoiler alert, the United States bought the three Virgin Islands (Saints Thomas, John, and Croix) in 1917 from Denmark for 25 million dollars in gold.



Vincent “Doc” Palancia at St. Thomas Historical Trust Museum telling the Island’s history.

I have four more things to note. One, it rains on St. Thomas. The rain is brief and can be intense. Two, I also revisited the synagogue in St. Thomas, called the [Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas](#). It is the oldest synagogue building in continuous use under the American flag and the second oldest in the Western Hemisphere. I saw their Torahs. The ones with blue coverings and silver breastplates are Ashkenazi coming from an Eastern Europe background and the one in the center is Sephardic from the Spanish and Portuguese tradition.



Seven Torahs in St Thomas synagogue.

Three, there are many feral cats living all over the island. At our resort, they had a Cat Sanctuary with about 50 cats. They had been neutered and roamed about the place. And, four, there are chickens and roasters running wild throughout the island. Ironically, a dozen eggs cost \$13.00 in the supermarkets. The roasters’ calls filled the day-morning, afternoon, and night. Finally, five the trip had one last surprise discovery for me. The young woman seated across the aisle from me on the final part of the flight to Boston had a dog in her bag. I did not notice it until we landed. Who knew?



A dog as carry-on luggage.

Home now, thanks for joining me on my discovery trip/vacation to St. Thomas. In the classic newspaper sign off- a good time was had by all.