

Virgin territory

The bewitching Caribbean playground of the British Virgin Islands is back to full strength with resurgent resorts and fresh experiences, finds **Nigel Tisdall**

Nature's Little Secrets', trumpet the vehicle licence plates in the BVIs – and as I look out from the panoramic Sunset Loop viewpoint on Peter Island, I can only agree. Ahead of me stretches a chain of green and hilly isles lined up like sleeping lizards, with an unspoiled beauty that easily justifies their name.

Only an hour's flight west of Antigua, this compact archipelago of 60 islands has been under British control since 1672 and has a prosperous and unhurried mood, with just 30,000 residents. Send clients here and they'll immediately feel at home, with driving on the left and a Union Jack adorning the territorial flag. Although there are public holidays

to mark both the King's birthday and the islands' emancipation from slavery in 1834 – another throwback to its British links – the currency is the US dollar and most visitors are moneyed North Americans who jet in to relax on its quiet beaches or to island-hop by ferry, catamaran and superyacht.

Winter 2024-25 was the first season when the BVIs felt fully up to speed after the double whammy of hurricane Irma in 2017, followed by the pandemic. Rebuilding has taken time but initiatives including the addition of daily flights from Miami to Tortola with American Airlines (launched in 2023) and the reopening of flagship resorts has brought an exciting buzz to the islands. ➤

PICTURE: Shutterstock/BlueOrange Studio

DESTINATIONS

CARIBBEAN | BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Bitter End Yacht Club has 10 new rooms; Rosewood Little Dix Bay, Virgin Gorda; Peter Island Resort reopened in December; Long Bay Beach Resort, Tortola PICTURES: William Torrillo/photo.vi; Ken Hayden Photography

Clients can expect to find lively marinas, close-to-full hotels and vibrant beach bars packed with travellers knocking back 'painkillers', the rum-laced pineapple-and-coconut signature cocktail that has become synonymous with the good times to be had here.

REBORN RESORTS

All-inclusive resorts may be all the rage in many parts of the Caribbean, but not here. Instead, the emphasis is on small, classy properties with high service standards – the largest, Rosewood Little Dix Bay on Virgin Gorda, has just 85 rooms. Here clients can relish complimentary treats such as afternoon tea, snorkelling trips and the chance to be dropped off on a castaway beach with a parasol and picnic.

On the same island, Bitter End Yacht Club unveiled the last of its 10 elegant new rooms in March. Dating from the 1960s, this chirpy,

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maritime-themed resort makes impressive use of upcycled hurricane debris such as ropes, lights, mooring balls and signs. A BVIs favourite, its return has been greeted with enthusiasm as yachties flock to its flag-festooned Buoy Room for stone-fired pizzas and partying.

Equally game-changing is the renaissance of the soaring privately owned Peter Island Resort, which reopened in December following a six-year rebuild. “We plan to be the

top luxury resort in the BVIs,” says general manager Edward Linsley. With five beaches, two pools, a superb steakhouse and palatial spa, plus 52 smartly appointed rooms, this is definitely one to watch.

Also of note is the revived Long Bay Beach Resort, set beside mile-long sands on Tortola with 37 joyful rooms, complimentary yoga and a new sushi restaurant.

OUT AND ABOUT

The BVIs are a premier sailing destination and many excursions are based around snorkelling, diving and dropping in on fun bars that range from the chic Cooper Island Beach Club, which has a microbrewery, to the anything-goes Willy T, a repurposed tanker off Norman Island.

“A smart way for couples or groups of friends to island-hop is on a shared by-the-cabin catamaran charter,” suggests Joyce Burnett, managing director of BVI ➤

ASK THE expert



Clive McCoy, director of tourism, British Virgin Islands Tourist Board

“Around 10% of visitors to the BVIs are from the UK and it's our third-most important market after the US and Caribbean region. We're a safe, laid-back destination that appeals to mature, well-travelled couples looking for new experiences as well as to families and sailing enthusiasts. Most guests stay seven to 10 days and visit at least two islands. Agents should note that nearly all of these are no more than a 25-minute boat ride from the gateway of Tortola, and we have one of the highest return rates in the Caribbean.

Looking ahead, we have exciting plans to open a new 150-room resort and to expand the airport at Beef Island.”

BVIS IN NUMBERS

Tourism arrivals in Q1 2025 compared with the same quarter last year:

+6.4%

Rise in overnight visitors, to 106,750

+60%

Rise in day-trippers, to 5,800

-2.5%

Drop in cruise visitor arrivals

Source: Government of the Virgin Islands Central Statistics Office

DESTINATIONS

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ABOVE: The BVI Spring Regatta & Sailing Festival PICTURE: William Torrillo/BVI Tourist Board

Holidays. "Clients can book an en suite cabin just like a hotel room, then sail around accompanied by a skipper and cook."

On land, activity provider Hike BVI offers guided walks on Tortola that range from easy to exhilarating, including a new taste-as-you-go farm visit in Carrot Bay that ends with a waterside meal of fresh juices, roasted breadfruit, saltfish and sweet potato.

NEED TO KNOW

British Airways has an interline agreement with regional carrier interCaribbean Airways that offers through tickets flying via Antigua to Beef Island (EIS), which is linked by road to Tortola on the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge. Connections are not daily and there is a layover of several hours each way, so plan accordingly. In January, immigration and customs forms were moved online and are available 72 hours before arrival (bviedcard.gov.vg).

Many resorts, except for Peter Island and Long Bay, close in

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the autumn. When visiting major attractions such as The Baths National Park, famous for massive granite boulders and seaside pools, advise clients to go early or pick a day where there are no visiting cruise ships (bviports.org/cruise-schedule).

With monthly visitor numbers at their highest since 2017, and having even featured in Susan Calman's *Cruise of a Lifetime* series in January, the BVIs are back in the spotlight for all the right reasons. **TW**

BOOK IT

Caribtours has three nights at Long Bay plus four at Rosewood Little Dix Bay from £4,315 per person on a bed-and-breakfast basis, including British Airways flights from Gatwick to Tortola via Antigua on June 30, with transfers and UK airport lounge access on departure. caribtours.co.uk

BVI Holidays, a specialist operator that works with UK agents, has a seven-night by-the-cabin sailing holiday from £2,659 full-board, including British Airways flights from Gatwick to Tortola via Antigua on July 12 and transfers. bviolidays.com

British Airways has flights from Gatwick to Antigua, with onward connections to Tortola with interCaribbean Airways, from £503 return. ba.com

Find out more at bvitourism.com

DATES
FOR YOUR
diary

DROWNED ISLAND CHALLENGE

June 7-8

A new multi-sport event on Anegada island, with running, swimming and paddleboarding contests, culminating in a beach party.

BVI WRECK WEEK

June 15-21

Discover well-preserved wrecks around the islands' seabed with dives suited to all levels of experience, from beginners to experts, plus beach parties, live music and seminars on marine conservation.

BVI RESTAURANT WEEK

June 28-July 5

Delve into the BVIs' culinary scene with discounts and exclusive menus at restaurants across Tortola, featuring local ingredients and outlandish chef creations.

FIRECRACKER REGATTA

July 5

This annual event sees yachting enthusiasts sail a figure-of-eight route around Great Thatch and Little Thatch islands to Sandy Cay, followed by a final sprint to Soper's Hole – ending with a chilli cook-off and after-party.

ANEGADA LOBSTER FESTIVAL

November 28-30

Seafood fans can indulge in their favourite flavours with 13 beachfront restaurants, each serving up their own take on fresh lobster – grilled, curried, in tacos or in a bisque.