

US

Postcard from the US Virgin Islands: ‘The pandemic is propelling a mini boom in tourism’

America’s Caribbean territory has become a vaccine haven for New Yorkers, says resident Rob DeRocker



Cruz Bay, St John
ALAMY

Rob DeRocker | Sunday May 02 2021, 12:01am, The Sunday Times

Share    

Save 

Inbound planes full row to row, window to window. Hotels and villas running at 90 per cent capacity. Waiting lists for restaurants. Beaches where social distancing means the width of a towel. People who come for a week - and stay for three. First-time visitors putting in high six-figure property offers . . . and being outbid.

Covid-19 tossed a gargantuan grenade into the global economy, particularly the tourism industry. But one striking exception has been the United States Virgin Islands, handling the pandemic better than almost any US state, and in recent months even benefiting from it. Airlines have added flights from the US, so that 27 now come daily into St Thomas and six to St Croix, the largest of the three main islands.

What a difference a year makes. My wife, Melinda, and I live in New York State’s Hudson Valley most of the year, but we have a place in St Croix and work from here much of the winter. The appeal? Year-round temperatures in the high 20s; sea so clear you can walk in up to your neck, look down and count the hairs on your toes. A rich if complicated history that has seen seven flags (including that of Denmark, whose solid buildings have survived 300 years of hurricanes). Residents who greet you warmly and, when asked for directions, are more likely to lead you there than tell you the way.

I was here in March last year and Melinda, a singer, was due to join me after two engagements in New York City. When the wheels started coming off in New York — up to 800 Covid-related deaths a day; Melinda's gigs cancelled — we considered riding the pandemic out in the Virgin Islands.

Instead I hustled back to New York, concerned that the territory wouldn't be able to handle a big outbreak. Now we think we should have stayed.

This so-called "American Paradise" certainly has its fair share of problems. Electricity is criminally expensive and unreliable. Potholes can destroy a truck. Government finances are a mess. But when it comes to the pandemic, even the government's harshest critics acknowledge that the USVI set the gold standard. Strict masking and social distancing protocols were put in place early and compliance is high, with little of the politically toxic resistance that has prolonged and intensified the disease elsewhere in the US. Travellers who come here need a negative test no more than five days before arrival. (Violations are not treated lightly; last month six people, including a police officer, were arrested for submitting phony tests.)

Despite the upsurge in visitors, and widespread testing conducted with near-obsessive frequency, just 1.55 per cent of April's tests were positive, the lowest since the beginning of the pandemic. Last summer, when cases were soaring in warm states such as Arizona, Texas and Florida, predictions were that the USVI would ultimately see as many as 500 Covid-related deaths. As of Monday there have been 27 among a population of 106,000. At one point last week there were 57 active cases in the territory; Manhattan blocks have had more than that.



Colourful buildings on St Thomas
GETTY IMAGES

This may comfort the growing legion of tourists. But it's not why they have been coming. In February the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention introduced a requirement for US travellers returning from foreign jurisdictions to quarantine for a week, even those who tested negative for Covid-19.

But Puerto Rico and the USVI, the two American territories in the Caribbean, are exempt from those guidelines. Immediately after the CDC proclamation travellers began cancelling reservations elsewhere in the region and rebooking here, under permitted domestic travel.

And then there has been the almost shocking availability of the vaccine. Within days of my arrival back in St Croix in January I had my first Pfizer shot. Melinda arrived shortly after and was fully vaccinated weeks before she would even have got had a first shot in New York, where the vaccine scramble was likened to The Hunger Games. (Eligibility on the mainland is now open to all over-16s, but there remains a difference between eligibility and appointment availability.)

We were soon joined by friends from New Jersey in their late thirties. Just 17 hours after their arrival they were confronted with a decision: would they prefer Pfizer or Moderna? Back home the question would have been “May or June?”

The St Croix clinic emailed them later to report a problem. The clinic had 18 doses that were about to expire and wondered if our friends knew anyone else who could use the vaccine.

That abundant supply is explained in part by the reluctance of native Virgin Islanders to get the vaccine, though to overcome that the government has deployed print and broadcast adverts - even trucks with loudspeakers rolling through the neighbourhoods as if part of some Latin American political campaign.

Meanwhile, the tourists continue to pour in. While the USVI Department of Tourism isn't promoting the territory as a “vaccination destination”, it is doing nothing to discourage it. Since St Croix's oil refinery closed in 2012, and hurricanes Irma and Maria pulverised the islands in 2017, tourism has accounted for two thirds of GDP. So it's a welcome irony that the pandemic is propelling a mini boom in tourism. Joe Biden has vacationed on St Croix with his wife for years. Expectations are high that before long those new planes landing will include Air Force One.

Rob DeRocker is a writer currently based in the US Virgin Islands

Follow Times Travel on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and sign up for our [weekly Travel newsletter](#) for all the latest articles, expert advice and inspiration for your next trip