

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Circumnavigating St. John *Philadelphia Inquirer*

Bright sunshine, azure skies, a balmy 80 degrees and wave swells of five or six feet. Whoa! Not a bad forecast, except for that last part. But my husband and I had limited time left on St. John and we were going to rent a powerboat for the day, come hell or high water.

At about nine miles by four miles, St. John is the smallest of the three U.S. Virgin Islands. It's also the most pristine, with nearly two-thirds of its land protected as a National Park. Its size allows one to circumnavigate it comfortably in a day, and its unspoiled nature permits solitude and sights of unparalleled beauty.



Brenda Lange, Philadelphia Inquirer

Although I can barely remember which side is port and which starboard, my husband Phil has had some experience piloting boats from years spent along the Florida coast. When he said he could manage the wind and waves that day, I was a little skeptical, but accepting. We had checked out two commercial providers of powerboats: one in the main town of Cruz Bay in the western side of the island and the other on the extreme opposite end in the sleepy village of Coral Bay.

Ocean Runner, owned and operated for ten years by Delbert Parsons, and comprised of a fleet of 10 Mako and Power Play powerboats, seems to have an island advantage. His stand is almost the first thing tourists see when they step off the ferry from St. Thomas; his moored boats bob in the waters lining the Cruz Bay beachfront.

On an earlier trip, Phil and I had rented a boat from Parsons, a native of Tortola, in the British Virgin Islands. The 22-foot Mako allowed us to successfully make our way around the island. We stopped at every deserted cove and bay along the southern end, much of which has no road access, and skirted past the more populated North Shore beaches. As a popular local guidebook says, "The coastline goes all the way around the island, but no road does!" The sailboats and powerboats have southern St. John to themselves. From Lameshur Bay to the frontage of Reef Bay, no sign of human habitation spoils the uninterrupted green of the forested mountainsides.

On a tip from our rental car agent, we drove one day to Coral Bay and met with Brian Walden, owner of Odyssey Boat Rentals. He will rent his Wellcraft 210, 22-foot center-console boats by the day or half day, with or without a guide. Since we had gone with Ocean Runner in the past, we decided to give Walden our business this time around and made our reservation for later that week.



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Walden, an avid sailor, Dallas, Texas, transplant and St. Johnian of a dozen years, enthusiastically shares his knowledge of the coastline and the best spots to moor the boat to swim, snorkel and soak up the beauty of the island from the water. Spreading out a map on his desk, he points out his favorites.

"Snorkel in the mangroves in Hurricane Hole," says Walden moving his finger. "If you shield your eyes, you see little fish and lobsters and crabs. And best of all, nobody goes there!"

"You can see different things in different places," he adds. "In the shallows, you'll see turtles and starfish, rays and maybe baby blacktip sharks."

The British Virgin Island of Jost Van Dyke, with the waterfront bar, Foxy's, famous for the Caribbean rum drink known as a "painkiller" and Norman Island are brief jaunts from St. John. Walden explains how to register with British officials when docking.

We sign some consent forms and pay – slightly more than \$300 for the day including tax, insurance and gas – and follow Walden and his father Wayne, down to the dock. Walden's parents moved from Texas two years ago to be closer to him and his family. Wayne is now Walden's business partner and mechanic.

After we stow our lunch, camera, snorkel gear and plenty of sunscreen and water, Walden gives us a short orientation.

"Keep the radio tuned to channel 6 unless there's an emergency, then switch to channel 72 and call in 'sea watch'." OK, that I can remember, I think.

"Here's the ignition, here's the swim ladder, and the cooler and the life jackets," he said, moving quickly around the boat.

"Yellow buoys mark reefs, if you see the waves breaking, move away from them ... keep your distance out through Johnson Bay and around Lagoon Point and around Ram Head," he finishes.

Then he hops from the boat onto the floating dock and we set off, tentatively at first until Phil gets familiar with the controls. The waves grow as we make our way out of the protection of the bay around the reefs at Lagoon Point and Johns Folly Bay and toward the open Caribbean Sea. With the wind at our back, we move quickly around the southernmost point of the island, the rocky promontory of Ram Head.

As the wind picks up out here in the open, the waves are pretty rough, and I tighten the strap of my life jacket. Gratefully, we soon pull into calm Salt Pond Bay and tie up to a mooring buoy.

The colors of the water around St. John flow from deep cerulean to aquamarine to an almost indescribably lovely teal. In shallower water, the white sand shimmers and adds luster. Schools of tan fish swim by, nearly invisible as they blend in with the sand below. They're oblivious to the pelicans flying overhead, scouting for their lunch.

We pull on swim fins and mask, and slip into the clear pool. Although a park service trail leads to the beach here, relatively few tourists take advantage of it, as it's about a 30-minute drive from Cruz Bay. The snorkeling here is best on the bay's east side, with a large variety of coral and fish. We spotted a large sea turtle and perfectly formed, pink conch shell lying on the sand.

After nearly an hour, we take a break from snorkeling and lounge in the boat where we admire the half dozen sailboats bobbing lazily in their moorings nearby, and the cluster of cottages, part of the eco-village, Concordia, perched high on the hillside overlooking the bay.

Cruise-ship travelers who anchor in St. Thomas and ferry over to St. John, are guided directly onto open-air island buses - sort of oversized pickup trucks with bench seats, canvas awnings and colorful paintings of birds and sea life on their sides. They are driven along the North Shore, where they visit the beach at Hawksnest Bay or to Cinnamon Bay where they can explore sugar mill ruins and hike the trails. Others may choose to visit Trunk Bay, where the park service provides an underwater marked trail, mainly for snorkeling beginners. While these beaches and trails are beautiful, Phil and I prefer more isolation than these often crowded locales can provide.

Finally, we untie our mooring and continue westward toward Little Lameshur and Great Lameshur bays. Accessible by land only by a dirt road requiring a four-wheel drive vehicle, the beach is nearly empty and we tie up near three large sailboats.

The first-time visitor to St. John would be wise to get his bearings by making a first stop at the National Park Service office located on its own pier to the left of the ferry dock. The rangers are always willing to share their knowledge of St. John and will point out areas of interest and offer maps and guidebooks to help the day visitor as well as someone who plans to stay a little longer.

The island's Tourist Information Center is located in a pink building just to the left of the bandstand in the park. Brochures of every description are available free, and someone is usually on duty to answer questions and give advice.

Two books for sale at the park service office are "Off the Beaten Path" by Gerald Singer and "Foot, Fins, and Four-Wheel Drive," by Pam Griffin, both of which offer tips and wealth of information for those exploring the island on their own.

Sailboat charters, rentals of powerboats, inflatables and kayaks are available at a number of places in Cruz Bay and Coral Bay. Prices range from \$75 per day to rent a sea kayak and \$120 for a 12-foot inflatable with a 15-horsepower motor. Either boat can take you along the North Shore beaches, but are not allowed along the southern shoreline. With a powerboat, either guided, or on your own, you can explore every nook and cranny of the island and even shoot over to one of the nearby British Virgin Islands. Powerboats, starting at about 22 feet with 150 h.p. start at \$275 per day plus tax, insurance and gas.

While the commercial boating companies will rent to anyone over age 25 with a driver's license and a credit card, don't take out one of these boats alone unless you have some experience under your life jacket.

Had we been scuba diving rather than snorkeling, we would have been able to explore the foundation remains of Tektite, an underwater living habitat for aquanauts during the late 1960s. Instead, we again pull on our snorkeling gear and descend the swim ladder.

In the shallows along the rocky coastline, soft fingers of tan staghorn coral reach toward the surface; large, round balls of brain coral sit nearby and purple sea fans wave beckoningly. Look and admire but don't touch the sensitive living coral we've been told, and give the long-spined black urchins a wide berth. Their sting is quite painful.

Striped angelfish, bright orange and tan parrotfish, and one of my favorite, the four-eye butterflyfish with his large, round black markings on his tail simulating eyes, swim among the coral and rocks, floating along with the current just like us. They look up, then away, as if to say they know we're not there to harm them.

We float along, warm sun on our backs, the only sound the soft whoosh of our breathing. Excitedly, we point out particularly beautiful fish or coral, and nod at each other in appreciation. On the swim back to the boat, we stop in awe to gaze at a perfectly shaped starfish, large, and clear nearly 12 feet below us.

Later, after lunch and a nap in the sun, we try to continue our exploration westward, but head back when the sea proves too rough for me. On our earlier trip, the soft breeze kept the sea calm. Not so today. Heading back – into the wind this time – is a little unnerving. Waves lift the bow, then drop it with a teeth-grinding thud; I tighten the strap of my bright orange life jacket again. With his face in a grimace-like smile and hands gripping the wheel, Phil steers us through the waves.

After a short time that feels like forever, we return safely to Coral Bay and recount the day's adventures at laidback Skinny Leg's bar over the world's coldest beer and juiciest cheeseburgers.