

OF CHARTERING



Squint your eyes and you'll see that these lovely ladies are spelling out "B-V-I." Whether we're sailing alone or with a bevy of college coeds, we never tire of cruising the familiar waters of the Eastern Caribbean.

than two thirds of St. John is a minimally developed national park which, travel writers agree, contains some of the most spectacular beaches in the entire Caribbean. (Note also that several charter fleets are based in the U.S. Virgins, whose boats may be taken into BVI waters.)

The Northern Leewards — Roughly 90 miles south of the BVI's Virgin Gorda lie the northernmost isles of the Leeward Antilles. Here, the French/Dutch island of St. Martin/St. Maarten is home to large charter bases, making it an ideal jumping off point for a loop tour that includes French, Dutch and formerly British islands.

We should clarify here that, like other French Caribbean islands, both St. Martin and St. Barth are still very much a part of Mother France. Their citizens carry French passports, and a trip from a French Caribbean island to Paris is a

'domestic' flight. Similarly, the Dutch half of Sint Maarten, as well as nearby Saba and St. Eustatius (Statia), is still affiliated with The Netherlands. However, most of the formerly British islands of the Caribbean are now independent nations.

This distinction manifests itself in substantially different levels of development and government infrastructure throughout the Antilles. St. Martin/St. Maarten, for example, has loads of swank hotels, modern supermarkets, casinos, fine restaurants and tourist-oriented shops offering fine jewelry and electronics. By comparison, walking the downtown streets of nearby St. Kitts and Nevis — formerly British islands which, together, now form one nation — you'll feel as though you've stepped back in time. Shopping opportunities are extremely limited and the pace of living is slow, slow, slow.

We like it that way, of course, as these lush, volcano-formed isles

seem to give us a window on the 'old Caribbean' so often depicted in classic works of literature.

Taken as a whole, a loop from St. Martin to St. Barth, Nevis, St. Kitts and perhaps Saba and Anguilla create a nice balance, both culturally and in terms of shore-side attractions.

For us, some of the highlights here are going clubbing on St. Maarten; hanging out on St. Barth's gorgeous (topless) beaches and chillin' at the world-famous Le Select bar in downtown Gustavia; hiking the nature trail on Nevis while trying to spot elusive green monkeys and visiting the island's restored plantation-hotels; looking out across the Leewards from the massive stone battlements of Fort Brimstone, dubbed the Gibraltar of the West Indies during the 1700s; and diving the amazing dropoffs of Saba. All in all, such a cruise is a delightful balance between the luxuri-

ous and the laid-back, the sleepy and the super-charged, where you'll anchor stern-to a busy cay one night and alone

At Pinney's beach on Nevis you'll find a funky palm-roofed beach bar called Sunshine's where you're guaranteed to have a good time.



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