

St. John's History as Memorable as its Beaches

At nineteen rugged square miles, St. John is the smallest and most exclusive of the US Virgin Islands. It is famous for its swimming, snorkeling, and diving, but there's also plenty to see on solid ground, including ruins of long abandoned sugar plantations, and the remains of a now extinct Taino Indian civilization.

St. John is the least developed of the three US Virgins (St. Thomas and St. Croix are the other two in the chain), and the National Park Service controls three-fifths of St. John, thanks to a gift of land from Laurence Rockefeller in 1956. As a consequence, much of the island's shoreline remains untouched. This has proved a boon not only to beach goers, but also to archaeologists, cultural historians, and anyone with an interest in St. John's storied past. Mill ruins, Taino Indian artifacts, and other evidence of previous generations of Native, African and European peoples have been left largely undisturbed.

St. John's first inhabitants were Indians who came from South America by canoe around 880 BCE. Centuries later, Taino Indians arrived, and in 1493 Christopher Columbus visited, applied the "Virgin Islands" moniker, and claimed the islands for Spain. The Spanish never settled the archipelago, although a number of other European countries, notably Holland, Denmark, England, and France have had a stake in the Virgin Islands at one time or another. The US did not come onto the scene until 1917, when it purchased the Virgins from Denmark for military purposes. By that time, St. John was virtually deserted and had a population of less than 1,000.

Sugar explains the Europeans' keen interest in the island, and the long shuttered sugar plantations, whose heyday was the 1700s under the Danes, used enslaved laborers to grow, harvest and process sugar cane. The mills were brutal places for those who fed the rollers with raw cane, manned the kettles, and boxed and barreled the finished product for export.

The best preserved of the abandoned plantations is the Annaberg Sugar Mill, overlooking Leinster Bay on St. John's north shore. I walked Annaberg at nine a.m. on a weekday morning, spending about 45 minutes poking about the remnants of the sugar cane boiling room, the base of the wind mill, and a circular space where a horse mill ground cane. The place was utterly silent, and a few finger length geckos excepted, I was the lone visitor. The warm morning sun shone, and a gentle breeze caressed what had at one time been a site of great industry, but also considerable misery.

The Annaberg Mill employed pre-industrial technology: In its early days, oxen, mules and horses walked in a circle to provide power. Later, animal power was supplemented by a windmill in which rotating sails turned a central shaft, moving rollers that crushed sugar cane stalks. The juice ran into wooden troughs and boiling kettles in the factory below. From there, enslaved laborers refined it into molasses and sugar, and distilled it into rum. National Park Service archaeologist Ken Wild says the mill's use of animal power was typical, but the addition of wind technology placed Annaberg among the more advanced of the island's sugar mills.

Refining the sugar cane was difficult, but growing it equally challenging. St. John is exceptionally mountainous, and there is little arable land. Before planting, tending and harvesting the sugar cane, enslaved laborers had to clear and terrace the slopes surrounding the mill. The workers, who had initially been brought to St. John by the Dutch, were far from pliant – they rebelled in 1733, and controlled the island for six months before their insurrection was put down. When slavery was abolished on the islands in 1848, the mills on St. John were abandoned.

Annaberg is perched on a hill with spectacular views of the ocean below, and the British Virgin Islands across the Narrows. For a closer look at the bright sailboats bobbing in the bay, I walked the easy .8 mile Leinster Bay Trail that runs next to the seashore. The more demanding Johnny Horn Trail is also nearby and ends at the Emmaus Moravian Church, which was built by German missionaries in the eighteenth century. Only 1.5 miles long, the trek is steep in parts and the Park Service recommends two hours for the walk.

Annaberg is really just the tip of the windmill in terms of mill ruins and other evidence of past civilizations on St. John. "They're everywhere," says Ken Wild of the estimated 100 former sugar, cotton and coffee mills that dot the island. Only a handful, including Annaberg and the Catherineberg Sugar Mill near Trunk Bay, have been preserved, and most of the ancient mills are in remote brush covered areas. These sites have not been stabilized and opened to visitors.

"Don't take anything," is Wild's admonition to intrepid hikers who come across a plantation structure in their travels. Few people, however, are likely to wander far from the beaten path as the established hiking trails are rigorous enough as it is. In addition to his work on the sugar mills, Wild has spearheaded archeological efforts aimed at uncovering and preserving Taino ruins and artifacts on St. John. The remains of a complex Taino civilization, comparable to that of the Mayans or the Aztecs, have been found on land, as well as submerged in Cinnamon and Trunk Bays (the latter is considered among the world's most beautiful beaches). Substantial Taino petroglyphs, or rock carvings, some more than a thousand years old, have also been found at the base of a waterfall in the Reef Bay Valley. Only very recently have Wild and others deciphered the meanings of these elaborate etchings. Visitors can take a guided Park Service walk on the Reef Bay Trail that takes in tropical rain forest, part of an abandoned sugar mill, and a 20-foot petroglyph panorama.

"Our biggest challenge is figuring out how to preserve them all," says Wild of the archeological finds that are still being made on St. John. The Park Service, the nonprofit Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park, and an array of interns and volunteers have been striving not just to find objects and ruins, but also to support education and awareness of the island's culture and history.

"It's a unique landscape," says Wild of St. John, noting how much of the past still remains on the island.

Details: Annaberg Sugar Mill Ruins. North shore of St. John, 35 minutes from Cruz Bay. Site takes 30- 60 minutes to tour. There are interpretive programs featuring basket weaving, bread baking and subsistence gardening on selected days. Consult the National Park Service website for schedules. The Leinster Bay Trail and Johnny Horn Trail are nearby