

American island paradise

By Melanie Reffes



Lose yourself at Frenchman's Reef on St. Thomas

Authentically American and uniquely Caribbean, the US Virgin Islands offer a tropical playground of soft sands and disappearing waves. Radio stations play American oldies and Caribbean calypso, holidays are toasted with a shot of guava berry rum and a chili cook off is as coveted as a Caribbean food fair.

On the south shore of St. Thomas, one of the islands that make up the US Virgin Islands (the other two are St. Croix and St. John), Marriott Frenchman's Reef and adjacent Morning Star Beach Resort ooze vacation pleasure around every turn. With 302 rooms and suites, Frenchman's Reef is a stunning showpiece of architectural splendor, with sweeping vistas of Charlotte Amalie, one of the Caribbean's most majestic yacht harbors. Next door, Morning Star tempts with 96 rooms and beautiful sea views. "For the last 40 years, the resort has been the place to be and the place to go for a meal, a meeting or a vacation," says Rob Steigerwald, chief operating officer, southern regional Americas, Marriott International.

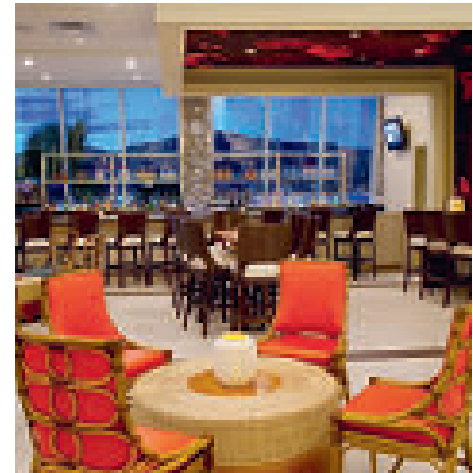
Size matters

Brand-reliable and fresh from a US\$48 million facelift, Frenchman's Reef is the largest resort on St. Thomas and its shining star. Sitting pretty on a hilltop overlooking sandy strands and aquamarine waters, the iconic resort is making quite a splash with gracious Caribbean décor



in sultry sand beige, sunset sage and ocean blue, gourmet eateries, funky bars, expansive spa and the Marriott trademarked and oh-so-comfy Revive brand bedding and fluffer pillows. "For eco-minded guests," says Jose Gonzalez, general manager, "the air conditioning system now uses sea water, which is not only good for the environment, but provides fresher air."

A splash pool is favored by the younger set, while infinity pools and sun loungers on the sand are relaxation *par excellence* for grown-ups. "My recommendation for the most romantic room is No. 5124 with a nighttime lullaby sung by the waves below," adds Gonzalez. "For the best view, check into room No. 4324, which faces the harbor with the twinkling lights of the cruise ships. For singles, a room near the Rum Bar is the hippest place to be."



Medley of massages

From manicures and massages to pedicures and paraffin wax treatments, Lazule Sea Spa is a guilty pleasure that delivers. With 11 treatment rooms, a sauna and a pool with cabanas, relaxation never had it so good.

For those preferring the privacy of in-room massages, showstoppers include a Sea Mud massage for tired muscles, Caribbean Sea Scrub for silky smooth skin and an Island Detox Body Wrap that fixes everything else that needs fixing.

Whet your appetite

Wake up with the sun at the Aqua Terra Oceanfront Grill and an all-American breakfast buffet with an omelette station, creamy grits and delectable waffles, along with healthful choices like fresh fruit and platters of smoked salmon. For a quick bite, grab one of three open-air tables and enjoy a freshly brewed espresso at the Presto Market, where the high-back chairs are the perfect perch to watch the boats gracefully glide through the harbor.

The culinary *pièce de résistance*, Havana Blue is a divine medley of upscale Latin-fusion creations and

stellar service delivered in an open-air restaurant with billowy blue curtains. Described by the owners Nicole and Eric Horstmeyer as “experiential dining,” the menu aims to please, starting with creative cocktails like the Dirty Chica, which mixes vodka with jalapeño-soaked onions and hot pepper-infused olives. Appetizers like the owner’s favorite, Cuban sliders with pulled pork and blueberry-flavored mustard, set the stage for fabulous main courses from chili-blackened tuna to a perfectly grilled steak with cilantro mash. Sexy sides like spinach with hot peppers or an artisanal salad with a coconut drizzle add an island zing to the scrumptious main dishes.

Saying “I do”

Five thousand couples over four decades have tied the knot at the resort, including more than 500 in 2011. “We can do eight weddings a day but only two at sunset,” says Jessica Klein, wedding coordinator. “All couples have to do is sign their registration papers and say ‘I do’ on the beach.”

For more info, visit www.frenchmansreefmarriott.com and www.havanabluerestaurant.com