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LIVING ON UNSPOILED ST. JOHN

Anyone planning to visit St. John will first behold its beauty from afar, or from the sea, since this unspoiled and underdeveloped island has no airstrip, or seaplane service. Its mountainous outline, extending eastward to the British Virgin Islands, can be seen from neighboring St. Thomas, intriguing from that vantage point since the island's north shore appears nearly uninhabited, carved with a sequence of tranquil aquamarine bays capped by white sandy beaches. Indeed, this portrait is what sets St. John apart, for over half of the island is protected as the Virgin Islands National Park, a generous gift from Laurance Rockefeller that took over half of St. John out of the real estate market.

The lure of owning property is particularly appealing since all real estate laws pertinent to the Virgin Islands reflect stateside standards. Ownership is fee simple, under U.S. flag. There are no restrictions against purchasing solely for investment, and no laws dictating when, if ever, you must build on undeveloped land. Taxation is figured at 1.25% of 60% of the market value, a favorable calculation that keeps this aspect of ownership affordable. Most of the zoning is low density residential; indeed there is very little commercially zoned property allotted on St. John. Plans and permits are issued in accordance with an enforceable building code. Neighborhoods usually have covenants to shape the development and maintain some semblance of order, but these tend to be logical and not terribly imposing. For instance, many areas prohibit hanging laundry in view, or keeping goats, donkeys, pigs and chickens as pets. As charming as these country elements may seem as you tour the island, goats and donkeys can ravage your garden in a day and it's doubtful that the 5 A.M. wake up call of a rooster will enhance your life.

Development has evolved as St. John has been discovered by more and more people looking for the ultimate Caribbean retreat: that place where you can soak your feet in 80 degree crystal clear water and enjoy your "Planters Punch" under a palm just hours after leaving the mainland. In the past fifteen years two new shopping centers graced the main town of Cruz Bay, and another, located on the outskirts of town, opened in late 1999. Two luxury hotels, Caneel Bay and The Westin, compete for the high end hotel market. A multitude of new homes have been built primarily as vacation villas, rented on a weekly basis to vacationers and occupied by their absentee owners for several weeks a year. The mainly affluent rental market has mandated an upgrading of construction quality, while the architectural theme holds strongly to the West Indian tradition of masonry construction, with arches, galleries, native stonework, tile floors and ceiling fans. Homes are designed for indoor/outdoor living; here you can appreciate having your dining table on a covered porch all year round, protected from the sun and rain, and cooled by the constant trade winds. Locals rarely use air conditioning; however upscale rental villas often install air conditioning, at least in the bedrooms.

If you decide to establish permanent ties to St. John, the scope of the real estate market ranges from modest to astonishing. Home sites start at about \$175,000 but that won't afford you an ocean view; for a view of the sea double that price to start. The more ocean you can see, the more you can expect

to pay, with the best hillside lots in the \$250K and up range. Since most of the central region of St. John belongs to the Park, residential areas are oriented along the south shore near Cruz Bay and at the eastern end of the island near the tiny village of Coral Bay. If you enjoy the quiet of the National Park surroundings, there are a few in-holdings that garner prices well above \$1,000,000, and for the prestigious north shore location at Peter Bay a half acre hillside lot will start at about \$1,500,000. Island wide, there are very few oceanfront home sites and even fewer with beach frontage. The higher price tags attached to waterfront sites do not appear to deter buyers; they are among the fastest selling and most in demand.

While the starting prices on homes are high, some properties remain within reason. The average price for a home during the last two years has been over \$1,000,000. It is still possible to find something under that amount, especially if you can live without an ocean view. The tendency in new homes is definitely geared more to the vacation market, which is more discriminating and demanding now than in the past. With insurance premiums very expensive, new construction of upscale homes is almost exclusively masonry or native stonework. A great ocean view is a must, as well as a pool, and equally appealing bedroom suites numbering from two to six, along with air conditioning in the bedrooms. Fully equipped kitchens, designer furnishings with a tropical flair, along with all the comforts of home have become necessities. Outdoor areas are an integral, year round, part of the home. Flowering landscapes complement patios, decks, and pool areas which are furnished with comfortable outdoor furniture. New vacation villas list for one million to \$3+ million, depending on location, construction and details.

Condominiums cropped up in the early eighties, primarily in or near Cruz Bay, where zoning permits denser development. The largest and only waterfront complex, Gallows Point, sits at the entrance to the harbor. Gallows consists of 60 one bedroom units, in 15 buildings, with manicured grounds and a restaurant on the premises. These units rarely come on the market, but when they do are listed in the \$700k range. The new upscale Grande Bay Resort, located on Cruz Bay Harbor, will have 48 units when completed. Other popular condo complexes are: Lavender Hill, Battery Hill, Cruz Views, Pastory Estate, and Serendip. Condos have proven to be a solid investment because most have vacation rental programs in place.

If you decide to live on St. John, be prepared for higher prices for all purchases, and more limited services than you may be accustomed to in the states. St. John is a small Caribbean island where everything is imported, primarily from the mainland. There are approximately 5,000 full time residents, so if you live here you have the chance to know most everyone and they'll know everything you do. Activities and groups to become involved in are: Yacht Clubs, Kids and the Sea, St. John Singers, Historical Society, Friends of the Park, Audubon Society, St. John Community Foundation, St. John School of the Arts, Rotary, Lions, BPW, and churches of various denominations. People are friendly and come from very diverse and interesting backgrounds.

The views are stunning, the beaches gorgeous, and thanks to our National Park, vast acres of St. John will be preserved for future generations — a St. John property owner's greatest asset.

We're sold on St. John!



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