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St. Thomas, USVI: Natural Beauty, Memorable Venues

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The Ritz-Carlton, St. Thomas

In recent years, a few Caribbean destinations have made a big splash in the group market with new resort offerings, some of them all-inclusive. On a recent familiarization tour of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, though, more than a dozen meeting planners saw the more low-key, but impactful, hospitality developments made in this destination to satisfy both small incentives and sizable events with significant educational components. What's more, the USVI Department of Tourism has taken a more active role in attracting meetings and incentives, offering value-added elements such as free airport transfers for groups as small as 15 rooms on peak.

One reason that less dramatic hospitality changes work just fine here is because the USVI has a more dramatic natural landscape than many other Caribbean spots. Essentially a small mountain bursting out of the aqua-tinged sea, St. Thomas has several group-focused resorts that occupy scenic vantage points. As a result, events outside the meeting rooms require little in the way of décor to make a lasting impression on attendees.

For instance, the 478-room Frenchman's Reef Marriott Resort offers a 14,000-square-foot ballroom, a breakfast buffet/evening fine-dining restaurant, and a large outdoor terrace bar that all provide views stretching across glittering Charlotte Amalie Harbor and to the 1,550-foot mountaintop beyond it. Then there's a the pool-level, open-air restaurant and adjacent bar offering 180-degree views in the opposite direction—across the Atlantic Ocean and clear to St. Croix, nearly 40 miles away.

On the east end of the island, near the Red Hook entertainment district and ferry terminal to nearby St. John, lies The Ritz-Carlton, St. Thomas. With 180 rooms set on a lush 30-acre parcel of land that sweeps down to a private bay cove, the property offers 10,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor event space, including a 2,500-square-foot ballroom and terrace with brochure-worthy vistas of St. John.

Between the Ritz's main building and the bay cove, a sizable poolside restaurant and bar is the spot for less-adventurous guests to watch friends or colleagues partake in windsailing and other water sports. Teambuilding events also take place at the cove—including "helicopter scrabble," where a chopper hovers above the water to drop hundreds of tennis balls with individual letters printed on them. Participants wade out to retrieve the balls, then return to shore to make words and earn points. Another teambuilding option: sailing to St. John for a half-day snorkeling session and lunch aboard the resort's own 53-foot luxury catamaran. A two-hour sunset cocktail cruise is also a popular activity.

Cuisine, Cocktails, and Panoramas Around the Island

The mountainous terrain plus the many beach coves on St. Thomas have allowed for a wide selection of memorable venues that groups can take over. In the historic harborside neighborhood of Frenchtown, Oceana restaurant offers fine dining for up to 100

guests on a covered patio with small, gentle waves lapping at its base, plus views of nearby yet nearly uninhabited Hassel and Water Islands. Directly above the cruise port—800 feet, to be exact—is the Paradise Point complex, offering adjacent casual restaurants with huge decks and frequent live music. The sunset view from this spot, which accommodates up to 200 people, is unparalleled.

On the western end of the island, looking way back at Paradise Point, the harbor, and the Marriott from atop a 1,000-foot perch, is Villa Botanica. Opened in spring 2015, the newly constructed facility has a high-ceilinged great room that can handle a presentation and sit-down dinner for 250 along with two large outdoor decks set above the property's well-preserved ruins of an 18th-century sugar plantation. On the northern side of the island, 20 minutes from the hotels, is the St. Peter Greathouse and Botanical Gardens. Lunches and evening receptions of up to 300 guests are set amid postcard views stretching far out to St. John and the British Virgin Islands. And for the largest groups that come to the island, there is Iggies Beach Bar & Grill. As many as 700 people can spread out over the entire Bolongo Bay beach cove; guests can partake in swimming, volleyball, basketball, horseshoes, and other games. And for those who simply want to chill, Iggies' centerpiece is a large wooden beach-hut bar and restaurant with ceiling fans plus a stage in a far corner for entertainment acts.

Another element that makes St. Thomas enticing for Caribbean-minded planners is that there's no passport requirement for U.S. residents. Lastly, there are a good number of direct flights from Atlanta, Charlotte, Chicago, New York, Miami, and San Juan, Puerto Rico.



Marriott Frenchman's Reef Resort