



PROJECT REPORT
Virgin Islands National Park Volunteer Trip
St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands
December 8 – 14, 2024



Executive Summary

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) successfully conducted its thirteenth volunteer trip to Virgin Islands National Park (VINP) on St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), from December 8–14, 2024. Volunteers worked alongside the National Park Service (NPS) and Friends of the Virgin Islands (FOVI) staff to restore trails, remove invasive vegetation, and preserve historical ruins. The trip builds upon prior efforts in the park following the devastation caused by hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

Key Achievements

- 10 volunteers and 2 volunteer leaders
- Volunteer hours including trails and cultural orientation: 314 hours
- Leadership pre/post trip planning: 166 hours
- Trail Maintenance: Cleared and restored 1.72 miles of trail, including:
 - L'Esperance Trail 1.12 miles of vegetation and debris.
 - Johnny Horn Trail 0.3 miles of overgrown vegetation.
 - Brown Bay Trail 0.3 miles, including over 40 tan-tan and catch-and-keep trees.
- Site Restoration: Cleared 0.3 miles of trail and removed dense overgrowth from the lower estate Leinster Bay Ruins, preserving their historical significance.
- Community Engagement: Participated in educational sessions on turtle conservation, birdwatching, medicinal plants, and Caribbean music.

Detailed Trip Report

The environment in St. John and VINP is tropical, ranging from arid conditions along the south coast resembling a desert to lush tropical forests slightly inland. Despite ongoing maintenance efforts by volunteer groups and weekly walk-up volunteers, the growth of vegetation is relentless. Volunteer projects are typically conducted in hot weather, often on challenging and steep slopes with limited shade. The removal of various types of vegetation such as encroaching grasses, invasive vines, thorny plants like catch & keep, Tan Tan, Sensiveria (also known as mother-in-law tongue), wild pineapple, Christmas bush, cacti, and brush is a challenging task. Volunteers must also be cautious about the aggressive Jack Spaniard wasp. Removing this vegetation is crucial for preserving historic structures, enhancing visibility, and ensuring safety for hikers. If left unattended, the growth rate is rapid. However, the rewarding aspect for volunteers stems from their accomplishments in this work. Local hikers and visitors frequently express gratitude to the volunteers for their dedication to maintaining the trails.

Day 1: Arrival and Orientation (December 8)

The team arrived at Cinnamon Bay Campground, settling into raised-platform tents nestled among tropical foliage. After some time to relax and explore the nearby beach, the volunteers gathered for an evening orientation. Trip leaders reviewed the park's history, hurricane recovery efforts, and safety protocols, as well as the volunteer project plan for the week.

Dinner was a satisfying spaghetti meal, followed by a short evening walk to Cinnamon Bay Beach and the outdoor restaurant area where the educational sessions for the week take place.



Picture shows the remains of the oldest house on St. John at Cinnamon Bay (converted into a Heritage Center & Archeology Lab and destroyed during the 2017 hurricanes)

Day 2: L'Esperance Trail Maintenance and Turtle Talk (December 9)

After breakfast, the group began their day with a visit to the **VINP Native Plant Nursery**, where Frank, the trail coordinator and manager, introduced volunteers to the importance of native plants in erosion control and habitat restoration. Frank highlighted key species like sea grape, explaining their role in stabilizing soil and supporting local wildlife.



Following the nursery visit, the group gathered for a **Safety Tool Talk** to review proper handling and usage of tools such as weed trimmers, loppers, and saws. Emphasis was placed on posture, safety precautions, and staying hydrated while working in the park's humid conditions.



The group then departed to begin clearing the **L'Esperance Trail**, a 3.4-mile historic route that winds through tropical forests and past remnants of sugar plantation ruins. Historically, the trail connected different plantation estates, and today it serves as a popular hiking route offering glimpses into the island's colonial past.

Volunteers cleared vegetation and debris to a width of 6 feet and a height of 8 feet along **1.12 miles** of trail, using weed trimmers, loppers, and saws to tackle the overgrowth caused by recent rains. Despite the humid conditions, the team completed their work as planned, returning to camp by 2:30 PM for swimming and/or showers.



That evening, a marine biologist hosted a turtle conservation presentation, educating volunteers on the local sea turtle population and efforts to protect their habitats.

Day 3: Johnny Horn Trail Maintenance, Annaberg, and Medicinal Plants (December 10)

The day began at the Annaberg Sugar Plantation parking lot, hiking the **0.8-mile Leinster Bay Trail** to reach the **Johnny Horn Trail**. The 1.8-mile Johnny Horn Trail was historically used as a route between plantation estates, offering panoramic views and access to the Hermitage plantation ruins.



The group spent several hours clearing dense overgrowth caused by rapid vegetation growth. Two volunteers operated weed trimmers to cut back thick brush along the trail, while the remaining team lopped and cut vegetation to restore **0.3 miles** of trail. Multiple passes were required to address the heavy growth, but the effort was rewarding, as hikers passing by thanked the volunteers for their work.

The day concluded with an educational overview at the Annaberg Sugar Plantation, where volunteers learned about the plantation's history and cultural significance. They also enjoyed freshly baked Johnny Cakes, a beloved local treat.

After dinner, the group attended an engaging session on Medicinal Plants and Traditional Art, led by Ital Delroy and hosted by the FOVI. Volunteers gained insights into the traditional use of local flora and cultural heritage.



Day 4: Rest Day at Maho Bay and Cruz Bay, Traditional Drumming (December 11)

The fourth day of the trip was a designated rest day. Some volunteers chose to spend their morning at **Maho Bay**, snorkeling in the calm waters and spotting turtles, rays, and colorful fish. Others opted to relax at Cinnamon Beach, enjoying the serene surroundings.

In the afternoon, trip leaders shuttled the group to the **National Park Visitor**

Center in Cruz Bay, where volunteers explored a small exhibit section where they learned more about the park's natural and cultural history followed by local shopping at the FOVI store.

The day concluded with an interactive *Music of the Caribbean* drumming session led by a local artist. Volunteers participated in lively rhythms and learned about the cultural roots of the island's music traditions.



Day 5: Brown Bay Trail Restoration (December 12)

After breakfast, the team departed to the **Brown Bay Trail**, a scenic but challenging 0.3-mile route that had been overtaken by tan-tan and catch-and-keep trees following heavy rains.

Using weed trimmers, saws and loppers, volunteers cleared over **40 tan-tan and catch-and-keep trees**, significantly improving the trail's accessibility. The hot and humid conditions made the work physically demanding, but the visible progress was gratifying. Local hikers passing by expressed their gratitude for the volunteers' efforts.



Preparing the tools with Frank, trail leader





Before and After - entrance of Brown Bay Trail

The group departed around 4:45 p.m. for an enchanting destination known as Miss Lucy's. Located overlooking the emerald waters of Friss Bay and the Caribbean Sea, Miss Lucy's is renowned for showcasing the work of talented local artists and hosting open mic singalongs. The panoramic views include Leduck, Flanagan, Pelican, Peter, Norman Island, and British Tortola.

Miss Lucy's has a rich history dating back to the 1960s when Lucy A. Matthias-Smith-Prince, lovingly called "Mama Lucy," began serving delicious dishes by the bay. Her menu featured Fish, Soupe, Sugar Cakes, and baked goods from a brick oven. With her family's support, Mama Lucy turned the spot into a welcoming family compound, sharing its charm with locals and visitors alike. Today, Miss Lucy's remains family-owned, honoring her traditions. Mama Lucy, also known as a beloved island taxi driver, passed away in October 2007 at 91, leaving a lasting legacy on St. John.

The evening at Miss Lucy's featured incredible performances by local talent, showcasing their singing skills and instrumental prowess. One of our volunteers, Dave, performed the song *Country Road* and introduced the group of volunteers, earning applause and heartfelt thank-yous. This unforgettable experience, set against the backdrop of crashing waves, enhanced the atmosphere, and created a truly magical ambiance. It was a perfect conclusion to the day, offering a genuine local experience and a valuable opportunity for cultural enrichment that should not be missed.



A local St. John destination - Miss Lucy's in Coral Bay

Day 6: Leinster Bay Ruins Maintenance and Sunset Cruise (December 13)

The day began with an early morning birdwatching tour at **Francis Bay**, led by Laurel Brannick, retired Chief of Interpretation for the NPS. The group learned about the devastating impact of hurricanes on bird populations and spotted notable species, including the **White-cheeked Pintail, Blue-winged Teal, Yellow Warbler, Eastern Kingbird, Frigatebird**, and the rarely seen **Osprey** and **Ruddy Duck**.



Following the tour, the team hiked the 0.5-mile Leinster Bay trail along the shore to the lower **Leinster Bay Ruins**, where dense vegetation had overtaken the historic structures since being last cleared in February 2024. Volunteers spent several hours clearing about **0.3 miles** of trail around structures, removing aggressive overgrowth to restore the site's visibility and preserve its historical significance.



Before



After

The day ended with a two-hour sunset cruise aboard the **Mahiya**, captained by Karl. Volunteers enjoyed breathtaking views of the Caribbean and celebrated their accomplishments with a relaxing and memorable evening on the water.



Volunteers enjoying the sunset cruise aboard the Mahiya with Captain Karl

Day 7: Departure Day (December 14)

On the final morning, volunteers enjoyed a light breakfast of coffee, oatmeal, and snacks before preparing to depart. The group worked together to leave the camp spotless, cleaning tents, bathrooms, and the kitchen, and hauling out trash.

Before saying their goodbyes, the group gathered in a circle, where one volunteer shared a [heartfelt poem](#). Mark Hardgrove thanked the team on behalf of ConservationVIP®, and the group reflected on a week of hard work, camaraderie, and meaningful contributions to the park.

Summary

The trip yielded a successful outcome including safety, enjoyment, and significant volunteer help which preserves and sustains the park. We extend sincere thanks to Virgin Islands National Park for their collaboration and special appreciation to the Friends Of Virgin Islands



and their dedicated team, including Tonia Lovejoy, the Executive Director, Mark Gestwicki, and Trails Manager Frank Olivieri-Barton, who continued to be a terrific trail leader ensuring safety of tools and trail, while sharing his knowledge about maintenance and local trails. Additionally, we thank Laurel Brannick, Mr. Ital Delroy Anthony, and Captain Karl for their continual support of ConservationVIP®. Their unwavering dedication has played a significant role in our mission's ongoing success.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the volunteers who joined us. Their enthusiasm and dedication to each event and activity made a meaningful impact. It was wonderful to see how quickly they connected and collaborated. ConservationVIP® deeply appreciates their hard work and contributions. The friendships formed during the trip were heartwarming, and we look forward to welcoming them back

as return volunteers to the US Virgin Islands or on other ConservationVIP® trips in the future.

***See the world as a traveler, not a tourist
Volunteer travelers help the destination
Volunteering opens doors not available to others
Experience immersive travel with a nonprofit
Arrive as a stranger, leave as a friend
Travel with Purpose! Travel with ConservationVIP®***



A gathering - in the Islands of the Saints

But 1st a crass little poetic detour:
 The Red Hook car ferry dude was a tad bit rude
 His partner was in sort of a mood
 While they could have had our group in stitches
 They'll forever be known as the car ferry bitches

We came to labor in the islands of the saints
 To build community, amongst the beautiful colors de paints
 We fought the catch & keep
 On roads the utmost in steep
 Non see-um attackers
 & PM weed-whackers
 & Dave

They came from the US
 and borders beyond,
 From...
 Logistics & teaching
 Postal & engineering
 Leadership & business
 Tech & science

Dark & stormy's a plenty
 The sensibilities a wenty
 Alter egos emerged
 Lax sensibilities converged
 We mingled with the rum &
 A beer of the root
 We all, but especially Rob, had a hell of a hoot

Our sweat dripped on the trails of this magnificent park
 With gifted & spirited leaders in Susan and Mark

Roses are red & violets are blue
 It was a delight meeting all of you!!!

Hiker #7

