



PROJECT REPORT
Virgin Islands National Park Volunteer Trip
St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands
February 2 – 8, 2025



Executive Summary

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) successfully conducted its **fourteenth** volunteer trip to Virgin Islands National Park (VINP) on St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), from February 2–8, 2025. 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

- 8 volunteers and 2 volunteer leaders
- Volunteer hours including trails and cultural orientation: 267 hours
- Leadership trip planning/leading in addition to trail work: 166 hours
- Trail Maintenance: Cleared and restored 0.7 miles of difficult and overgrown trail, including:
 - Tamarind Trail: 0.4 miles
 - Tektite Trail: 0.3 miles
- Site Restoration: Cleared ~1.5 acres of vegetation at Lower Hermitage Ruins and Leinster Bay Ruins preserving their historical significance.
- Community Engagement: Participated in educational sessions on turtle conservation, birdwatching, local medicinal plants, arts, and 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 and aggressive growing coral vine, 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 (February 2)

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 early dinner and evening orientation by candlelight due to an unexpected power outage at camp. 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 and fresh salad, 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: Tamarind Trail and Turtle Talk (February 3)



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 departed to begin the volunteer trail project on the Tamarind Trail, located about 15 minutes from camp.

This 0.4-mile trail provides a steady uphill climb and is ideal for a brief but invigorating workout. The trail is shaded and offers a comfortable hike even in warmer conditions. The trailhead is marked along North Shore Road and eventually intersects with the Caneel Hill Trail.

Volunteers cleared 0.4 miles of trail to 6' wide and 8' high, using loppers, hand saws, and a weed eater to remove overgrown vegetation, small trees, and dead debris enhancing the trail's accessibility.



The project was completed as planned despite the steep and difficult terrain, and the group returned to camp by 2:00 PM for swimming and/or showers. In the evening, after a barbeque chicken and baked potato dinner, they attended an educational turtle conservation presentation by a marine biologist, hosted by FOVI.



Day 3: Tektite Trail, Lameshur Bay, local Medicinal Plants, Arts and Music (February 4)

The day began with a drive to the dryer south side of the island to the Tektite Trail, named after the Tektite Project, a 1969 underwater habitat experiment conducted in Lameshur Bay by NASA, the U.S. Navy, and the Department of the Interior. A 14 minute documentary called *SIXTY DAYS Beneath the Sea* can be found [here](#).

Volunteers cleared 0.3 miles of significantly overgrown trail, removing 20+ tan-tan trees heavily entangled in vines. The removal process required three times as much effort to extract the trees as to cut them down. Two volunteers operated weed eaters to clear the dense, one-



foot-high grasses, cutting a two-foot-wide section on each side of the trail over 0.15 miles.



Before and After Tektike Trail

After completing the project on this exposed section of the island, the group was invited to cool off and swim at Lameshur Bay, a secluded beach known for its clear waters.



After a hearty Chili dinner, the group attended a local Medicinal Plants and Traditional Art session led by Itai Delroy Anthony, followed by a visit to Johnny Lime in Coral Bay for open mic

night, featuring live music performed by local talent including some of the FOVI musicians.

Day 4: Rest Day at Maho Bay and Cruz Bay (February 5)

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 local excursions or 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 and other stores in town.

They returned to camp for a delicious fajita dinner and enjoyed each other's stories about snorkeling, shopping, and local excursions.

Day 5: Lower Hermitage Ruins Maintenance, local music (February 6)

On this day, the team focused their efforts on the Lower Hermitage Ruins in Coral Bay and off the Brown Bay Trail, where they cleared approximately one acre of very dense and thorny vegetation. This restoration effort was crucial in improving access to the historic site and supporting the park's ongoing preservation initiatives. The overgrown vegetation, including invasive species, had been encroaching on the ruins, obscuring key structures, and hindering safe exploration of the area. While there is a lot more work to be done, the group's effort significantly enhanced the site's visibility, accessibility, and historical integrity.





Before and After Hermitage Ruins Cistern

The worksite presented physical challenges due to the thickness of the vegetation and the presence of thorny plants. However, volunteers persevered under hot and humid conditions, using weed eaters, hand tools and saws to cut through the dense growth. By the end of the day, the cleared area provided a much clearer view of the ruins, allowing visitors to better appreciate the historical significance of the Lower Hermitage site. This was also the day for walk-up volunteers and the team enjoyed meeting and working with Sam and Doug. After completing the project for the day, the group had another opportunity to swim at a different beach, this time Francis Bay.



Before and After Hermitage Ruins Entrance from Trail

After an early dinner, the group visited another enchanting, local destination known as Miss Lucy's, a beloved restaurant in Coral Bay. 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.

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 provided another memorable cultural experience in an authentic setting.

It was another unforgettable experience set against the backdrop of crashing waves which 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 Bird walk (February 7)

The day started early, at 7:30 a.m., with educational birdwatching at Francis Bay, led by Laurel Brannick, retired Chief of Interpretation for the National Park Service. Volunteers spotted black-necked stilts, ruddy ducks, white-cheeked pintails, a merganser, a great blue heron, a spotted sandpiper, a yellow warbler, and a night heron.

The group then walked 0.5 miles to the Leinster Bay Ruins from the Annaberg Sugar Plantation parking lot, where they removed aggressive vegetation around the ruins.



They were joined by 14 local students and two teachers from the GIFFT Hill School. Everyone enjoyed meeting and talking with the impressive group of teenagers that worked around them.



After hiking back to the cars, the group visited the Annaberg Sugar Plantation up the hill and spent some time learning about history while enjoying lunch in the shade near the Sugar Mill.



Due to unexpected heavy rains, the planned catamaran sunset sail was canceled. Instead, the group enjoyed a barbecue chicken and rib dinner at camp, followed by a birthday celebration for Tera with locally prepared pineapple cake and a birthday card.



Trip leaders then facilitated a group session, thanked the volunteers for their extremely hard work in hot and often difficult circumstances, as well as for their flexibility during the week, handling challenges like no electricity at camp and the canceled sunset cruise.

The evening concluded with a trip closeout and feedback review. Participants highlighted positive group dynamics and leadership, including FOVI. The balance of work and rest periods was well received, along with the organization and in-camp dining, which was preferred over traveling to restaurants. FOVI t-shirts were suggested to be quick-dry and long-sleeved. The project arrangements across different ecosystems and varying difficulty levels were appreciated, as was the pre-trip information, including the gear list. The organization's focal point was noted for being very responsive. The rake was especially useful and there was interest in having more lightweight loppers. Participants also enjoyed working with walk-ups and the school group. They expressed a preference for sticking to a 4-day work schedule rather than extending it to 5 days.

Day 7: Departure Day (February 8)

Today, Saturday morning, the volunteers began their journeys, with some joining leaders on the early car ferry to the airport to return cars on time, while others traveled independently. The team cleaned tents, tidied facilities, and hauled out trash, leaving the camp in great condition.

Before departing, the group gathered in a circle, holding hands while the leaders shared a heartfelt poem. As they lowered their hands together and reached them to the sky, they reflected on their shared experience:

*"We began together, rooted like the earth...
We shared laughter, love, and moments of worth...
Though paths may part, our bond remains strong...
Like the wind and stars, we'll carry this song...
Until we meet again, near or far—
We are one, just as we are!"*



With a sense of fulfillment and connection, they shared farewells, proud of the work accomplished.

Summary

The trip was a remarkable success, with volunteers making significant contributions to the preservation and maintenance of Virgin Islands National Park. Through hard work and dedication, the team improved trail access, restored historic sites, and engaged in meaningful cultural experiences while ensuring safety and enjoyment throughout the week.

We extend sincere thanks to Virgin Islands National Park for their collaboration and special appreciation to the Friends of Virgin Islands, including Executive Director Tonia Lovejoy and Program Manager Mark Gestwicki for their leadership and support. A special acknowledgment goes to Frank Olivieri-Barton, our day-to-day trail leader, whose knowledge of the trails, thoughtful project planning, professionalism, and sense of humor made the projects both effective and enjoyable. His guidance ensured that volunteers could work efficiently and safely while learning about trail maintenance and the park's unique landscape.



Most importantly, we are deeply grateful to our volunteers, whose enthusiasm, teamwork, flexibility, and commitment made a lasting impact. It was inspiring to see how quickly they connected and worked together toward a common goal. The friendships and shared experiences from this trip will endure, and we look forward to welcoming them back on future ConservationVIP® trips, whether in the Virgin Islands or beyond.

