



Development Planning Unit

Government of the British Virgin Islands

The British Virgin Islands Geographical Setting

By Quincy F. Lettsome, Ph.D

The cluster of islands that comprises the Virgin Islands is located approximately 60 miles to the east of Puerto Rico. These islands in effect form a connecting link between the Greater Antilles and the Lesser Antilles.

The British Virgin Islands are located 140 miles north-west of St. Kitts, and the community of islands straddle latitude 18 25'N and longitude 64 30W. They rest on the submarine ridge of the Greater Antilles, occupying its eastern extremity, and are separated from the Lesser Antilles by the deeper water that constitutes the Anegada passage.

The British Virgin Islands has a total surface of 59 square miles. The island group consists of some 40 islands, cays, islets and rocks. The largest Islands are Tortola (21 square miles), Anegada (16 square miles), Virgin Gorda (9 square miles) and Jost Van Dyke (4 square miles). The largest and most populated island is Tortola, where the capital, Road Town, is located.

With the exception of Anegada, the islands are hilly, being of volcanic origin. Anegada is of coral and limestone formation.

Tortola is composed of an extensive range of hills with the highest peak, Sage Mountain, 1780 feet in height. Jost Van Dyke could be viewed as being a geological and topographical replica of Tortola, while Virgin Gorda, though more varied, rises to a central peak of 1,370 feet. All the remaining islands, apart from Anegada rise precipitously from the sea. In comparison with the other islands, Anegada is entirely different, being extremely flat; the highest point merely 30 feet above sea level.

The island community is located within the trade winds belt and features a pleasant tropical climate which is not unduly hot or humid. Maximum temperatures are in the order of 97 F and in many places tempered by the regular sea breeze.

Rainfall records of the archipelago territory have been kept since 1901. Sage Mountain being 1,780 feet in height, and in the paths of the trade winds, receives as much as 80 inches of rain annually. The average rainfall throughout the remainder of the community of islands varies from approximately 35 to 55 inches annually. Hurricanes tend to occur infrequently, though there was a severe visitation by Hurricane Hugo in 1989.

The numerous, closely spaced islands and cays result in fine island scenery, therefore producing an islands oceanic setting, probably among the world's most spectacular. Many of the islands of the archipelago speck the crystalline waters which surround the historic sea highway, which is known as Sir Francis Drake's Channel, part of the more extensive Virgin's Gang Way.