

British Virgin Islands



The British Virgin Islands (BVI), officially simply "Virgin Islands", are a British Overseas Territory in the Caribbean, to the east of Puerto Rico. The islands are geographically part of the Virgin Islands archipelago and are located in the Leeward Islands of the Lesser Antilles. The British Virgin Islands consist of the main islands of Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Anegada, and Jost Van Dyke, along with over 50 other smaller islands and cays. About 15 of the islands are inhabited. The capital, Road Town, is on Tortola, the largest island, which is about 20 km (12 mi) long and 5 km (3 mi) wide. The islands had a population of about 28,000 at the 2010 Census, of whom approximately 23,500 lived on Tortola. For the islands, the latest United Nations estimate (2016) is 30,661. British Virgin Islanders are British Overseas Territories citizens and since 2002 are British citizens as well. Although the territory is not part of the European Union and not directly subject to EU law, British Virgin Islanders are deemed to be citizens of the EU by virtue of their British citizenship. Parts of the islands were damaged in September 2017 by Hurricane Irma. The most severe destruction was on Tortola. == Name == The official name of the territory is still simply the "Virgin Islands", but the prefix "British" is often used. This is commonly believed to distinguish it from the neighbouring American territory which changed its name from the "Danish West Indies" to "Virgin Islands of the United States" in 1917. However, local historians have disputed this, pointing to a variety of publications and public records dating from between 21 February 1857 and 12 September 1919 where the Territory is referred to as the British Virgin Islands. British Virgin Islands government publications continue to begin with the name "The territory of the Virgin Islands", and the territory's passports simply refer to the "Virgin Islands", and all laws begin with the words "Virgin Islands". Moreover, the territory's Constitutional Commission has expressed the view that "every effort should be made" to encourage the use of the name "Virgin Islands". But various public and quasi-public bodies continue to use the name "British Virgin Islands" or "BVI", including BVI Finance, BVI Electricity Corporation, BVI Tourist Board, BVI Athletic Association, BVI Bar Association and others. In 1968 the British Government issued a memorandum requiring that the postage stamps in the territory should say "British Virgin Islands" (whereas previously they had simply stated "Virgin Islands"),

a practice which is still followed today. This was likely to prevent confusion following on from the adoption of US currency in the Territory in 1959, and the references to US currency on the stamps of the Territory. == History == The Virgin Islands were first settled by the Arawak from South America around 100 BC (though there is some evidence of Amerindian presence on the islands as far back as 1500 BC). The Arawaks inhabited the islands until the 15th century when they were displaced by the more aggressive Caribs, a tribe from the Lesser Antilles islands, after whom the Caribbean Sea is named. The first European sighting of the Virgin Islands was by Christopher Columbus in 1493 on his second voyage to the Americas. Columbus gave them the fanciful name Santa Ursula y las Once Mil Vírgenes (Saint Ursula and her 11,000 Virgins), shortened to Las Vírgenes (The Virgins), after the legend of Saint Ursula. The Spanish Empire claimed the islands by discovery in the early 16th century, but never settled them, and subsequent years saw the English, Dutch, French, Spanish, and Danish all jostling for control of the region, which became a notorious haunt for pirates. There is no record of any native Amerindian population in the British Virgin Islands during this period, although most of the native population on nearby Saint Croix was killed or dispersed. The Dutch established a permanent settlement on the island of Tortola by 1648. In 1672, the English captured Tortola from the Dutch, and the English annexation of Anegada and Virgin Gorda followed in 1680. Meanwhile, over the period 1672–1733, the Danish gained control of the nearby islands of Saint Thomas, Saint John and Saint Croix. The British islands were considered principally a strategic possession, but were planted when economic conditions were particularly favourable. The British introduced sugar cane which was to become the main crop and source of foreign trade, and slaves were brought from Africa to work on the sugar cane plantations. The islands prospered economically until the middle of the nineteenth century, when a combination of the abolition of slavery in the territory, a series of disastrous hurricanes, and the growth in the sugar beet crop in Europe and the United States significantly reduced sugar cane production and led to a period of economic decline. In 1917, the United States purchased St. John, St. Thomas, and St. Croix from Denmark for US\$25 million, renaming them the United States Virgin Islands. The British Virgin Islands were administered variously as part of the British Leeward Islands or with St. Kitts and Nevis, with an administrator representing the British Government on the islands. The islands gained separate colony status in 1960 and became autonomous in 1967. Since the 1960s, the islands have diversified away from their traditionally agriculture-based economy towards tourism and financial services, becoming one of the wealthiest areas in the Caribbean. == Geography == The British Virgin Islands comprise around 60 tropical Caribbean islands, ranging in size from the largest, Tortola 20 km (12 mi) long and 5 km (3 mi) wide, to tiny uninhabited islets, altogether about 150 square kilometres (58 square miles) in extent. They are located in the Virgin Islands archipelago, a few miles east of the US Virgin Islands. The North Atlantic Ocean lies to the north of the islands, and the Caribbean Sea lies to the south. Most of the islands are volcanic in origin and have a hilly, rugged terrain. Anegada is geologically distinct from the rest of the group and is a flat island composed of limestone and coral. In addition to the four main islands of Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Anegada, and Jost Van Dyke, other islands include (see also Islands of the British Virgin Islands): == Climate == The British Virgin Islands have a tropical rainforest climate, moderated by trade winds. Temperatures vary little throughout the year. In the capital, Road Town, typical daily maxima are around 32 °C (89.6 °F) in the summer and 29 °C (84.2 °F) in the winter. Typical daily minima are around 24 °C (75.2 °F) in the summer and 21 °C (69.8 °F) in the winter. Rainfall averages about 1,150 mm (45.3 in) per year, higher in the hills and lower on the coast. Rainfall can be quite variable, but the wettest months on average are September to November and the driest months on average are February and March. Hurricanes occasionally hit the islands, with the hurricane season running from June to November. Hurricane Danny (2015) was the most recent until 7 September 2017 when Hurricane Irma caused extensive damage. == Politics == The territory operates as a parliamentary democracy. Ultimate executive authority in British Virgin Islands is vested in the Queen, and is exercised on her behalf by the Governor of the British Virgin Islands. The governor is appointed by the Queen on the advice of the British government. Defence and most foreign affairs remain the responsibility of the United Kingdom. The most recent constitution was adopted in 2007 (the Virgin Islands Constitution Order, 2007) and came into force when the Legislative Council was dissolved for the 2007 general election. The head of government under the constitution is the Premier (before the new constitution the office was referred to as Chief Minister), who is elected in a general election along with the other members of the ruling government as well as the members of the opposition. Elections are held roughly every four years. A cabinet is nominated by the Premier and appointed and chaired by the Governor. The Legislature consists of the Queen (represented by the Governor) and a unicameral House of Assembly made up of

13 elected members plus the Speaker and the Attorney General. The current Governor is Augustus Jaspert (since 22 August 2017). The current Premier is Orlando Smith (since 9 November 2011), who is leader of the ruling National Democratic Party. === Subdivisions === The British Virgin Islands is a unitary territory. The territory is divided into nine electoral districts, and each voter is registered in one of those districts. Eight of the nine districts are partly or wholly on Tortola, and encompass nearby neighbouring islands. Only the ninth district (Virgin Gorda and Anegada) does not include any part of Tortola. At elections, in addition to voting their local representative, voters also cast votes for four "at-large" candidates who are elected upon a territory-wide basis. The territory is also technically divided into five administrative districts (one for each of the four largest islands, and then a fifth for all other islands), and into six civil registry districts (three for Tortola, Jost Van Dyke, Virgin Gorda and Anegada) although these have little practical relevance today. === Law and criminal justice === Crime in the British Virgin Islands is comparatively low by Caribbean standards (and indeed compared to the neighbouring US Virgin Islands). Whilst statistics and hard data are relatively rare, and are not regularly published by governmental sources in the British Virgin Islands, the Premier did announce that in 2013 there has been a 14% decline in recorded crime as against 2012. Homicides are rare, with just one incident recorded in 2013. The British and US Virgin Islands sit at the axis of a major drugs transshipment point between Latin America and the continental United States. The American DEA regards the adjacent US territories of Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands as a "High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area". A co-operation agreement exists between the British Virgin Islands and the US Coast Guard allowing American forces to pursue suspected drug traffickers through the territorial waters of the British Virgin Islands. In August 2011 a joint raid between the American DEA and the Royal Virgin Islands Police Force arrested a number of British Virgin Islands residents who are accused of being involved in major drugs transshipments, although their extradition to the United States has become bogged down in protracted legal wrangling. === Military === == Economy == As a tax haven with an opaque banking system, the British Virgin Islands enjoys one of the more prosperous economies of the Caribbean region, with a per capita average income of around \$42,300 (2010 est.) The average monthly income earned by a worker in the territory was US\$2,452 as at the time of the 2010 Census. 29% of the population fell into the "low income" category. Although it is common to hear criticism in the British Virgin Islands' press about income inequality, no serious attempt has been made by economists to calculate a Gini coefficient or similar measure of income equality for the territory. A report from 2000 suggested that, despite the popular perception, income inequality was actually lower in the British Virgin Islands than in any other OECS state, although in global terms income equality is higher in the Caribbean than in many other regions. The "twin pillars" of the economy are tourism and financial services. Politically, tourism is the more important of the two, as it employs a greater number of people within the territory, and a larger proportion of the businesses in the tourist industry are locally owned, as are a number of the highly tourism-dependent sole traders (for example, taxi drivers and street vendors). Economically however, financial services associated with the territory's status as an offshore financial centre are by far the more important. 51.8% of the Government's revenue comes directly from licence fees for offshore companies, and considerable further sums are raised directly or indirectly from payroll taxes relating to salaries paid within the trust industry sector (which tend to be higher on average than those paid in the tourism sector). === Tourism === Tourism accounts for approximately 45% of national income. The islands are a popular destination for US citizens. In 2006 a total of 825,603 people visited the islands, of whom 443,987 were cruise ship passengers. Tourists frequent the numerous white sand beaches, visit The Baths on Virgin Gorda, snorkel the coral reefs near Anegada, or experience the well-known bars of Jost Van Dyke. The BVI are known as one of the world's greatest sailing destinations, and charter sailboats are a very popular way to visit less accessible islands. Every year since 1972 the BVI has hosted the Spring Regatta, which is a seven-day collection of sailing races throughout the islands. A substantial number of the tourists who visit the BVI are cruise ship passengers, and although they produce far lower revenue per head than charter boat tourists and hotel based tourists, they are nonetheless important to the substantial - and politically important - taxi driving community. Only Virgin Islanders are permitted to work as taxi drivers. === Financial services === Financial services account for over half of the income of the territory. The majority of this revenue is generated by the licensing of offshore companies and related services. The British Virgin Islands is a significant global player in the offshore financial services industry. In 2000 KPMG reported in its survey of offshore jurisdictions for the United Kingdom government that over 45% of the world's offshore companies were formed in the British Virgin Islands. Since 2001, financial services in the British Virgin Islands have been regulated by the independent Financial Services

Commission. At the end of 2012 the banking sector of the British Virgin Islands comprised six commercial banks and one restricted bank, 12 authorised custodians, two licensed money services businesses and one licensed financing service provider. As such the British Virgin Islands is frequently labelled as a "tax haven" by campaigners and NGOs, and has been expressly named in anti-tax haven legislation in other countries on various occasions. Successive governments in the British Virgin Islands have fought against the tax haven label, and made various commitments to tax exchange and recording beneficial ownership information of companies following the 2013 G8 summit. On 10 September 2013 British Prime Minister David Cameron said "I do not think it is fair any longer to refer to any of the Overseas Territories or Crown Dependencies as tax havens. They have taken action to make sure that they have fair and open tax systems. It is very important that our focus should now shift to those territories and countries that really are tax havens." In the April 2016 Panama Papers leak, the British Virgin Islands was the most commonly used tax haven by clients of Mossack Fonseca. ===== Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act ===== On June 30, 2014, The British Virgin Islands was deemed to have an Inter- Governmental Agreement (IGA) with the United States of America with respect to the "Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act" of the United States of America. The Model 1 Agreement (14 Pages) recognizes that: The Government of Great Britain and Northern Ireland provided a copy of the Letter of Entrustment which was sent to the Government of the British Virgin Islands, to the Government of the United States of America "via diplomatic note of May 28, 2014". The Letter of Entrustment dated July 14, 2010 was originally provided to the Government of the British Virgin Islands and authorized the Govt of the BVI "to negotiate and conclude Agreements relating to taxation that provide for exchange of information on tax matters to the OECD standard" (Paragraph 2 of the FATCA Agreement). Via an "Entrustment Letter" dated March 24, 2014, The Govt of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, authorized the Govt of the BVI to sign an agreement on information exchange to facilitate the Implementation of the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act. On March 27, 2017, the US Treasury site disclosed that the Model 1 agreement and related agreement were "In Force" on July 13, 2015. === Agriculture and industry === Agriculture and industry account for only a small proportion of the islands' GDP. Agricultural produce includes fruit, vegetables, sugar cane, livestock and poultry, and industries include rum distillation, construction and boat building. === Currency === The official currency of the British Virgin Islands has been the United States dollar (US\$) since 1959, the currency also used by the United States Virgin Islands. === Workforce === The British Virgin Islands is heavily dependent on migrant workers, and over 50% of all workers on the islands are of a foreign descent. Only 37% of the entire population were born in the territory. The national labour-force is estimated at 12,770, of whom approximately 59.4% work in the service sector but less than 0.6% are estimated to work in agriculture (the balance in industry). ===== CARICOM status & The CARICOM Single Market Economy ===== According to the membership section of the CARICOM Community site, as of July 2, 1991, The British Virgin Islands holds Associate Member status in CARICOM. In recognition of the CARICOM (Free Movement) Skilled Persons Act which came into effect in July 1997 in some of the CARICOM countries such as Jamaica and which has been adopted in other CARICOM countries, such as Trinidad and Tobago, it is possible that CARICOM nationals who hold the "A Certificate of Recognition of Caribbean Community Skilled Person" may be allowed to work in the BVI under normal working conditions. == Hurricane Irma == The islands were struck by Hurricane Irma on 6 September 2017, causing extensive damage, as well as four deaths in the BVI. A state of emergency was declared by the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency. The most significant damage was on Tortola. The UK's Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson visited Tortola on 13 September 2017 and said that he was reminded of photos of Hiroshima after it had been hit by the atom bomb. By 8 September, the UK government sent troops with medical supplies and other aid. More troops were expected to arrive a day or two later, but the ship HMS Ocean, carrying more extensive assistance, was not expected to reach the islands for another two weeks, however. Entrepreneur Richard Branson, a resident of Necker Island (British Virgin Islands), called on the UK government to develop a massive disaster recovery plan for British islands that were damaged. That should include "both through short-term aid and long-term infrastructure spending", he said. Premier Orlando Smith also called for a comprehensive aid package to rebuild the BVI. On 10 September, PM Theresa May pledged £32 million to the Caribbean for a Hurricane relief fund; the UK government would also match donations made by the public via the British Red Cross appeal. Specifics were not provided to the news media as to the amount that would be allocated to the Virgin Islands. Boris Johnson's visit to Tortola on 13 September 2017 during his Caribbean tour was intended to confirm the UK's commitment to helping restore British islands but he provided no additional comments on the aid package. He did confirm that HMS Ocean (L12) was on the way to the

BVI items like timber, buckets, bottled water, food, baby milk, bedding and clothing, as well as ten pickup trucks, building materials and hardware. == Transport == There are 113 kilometres (70 mi) of roads. The main airport, Terrance B. Lettsome International Airport, also known as Beef Island Airport, is located on Beef Island, which lies off the eastern tip of Tortola and is accessible by the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge. Cape Air, LIAT and Air Sunshine are amongst the airlines offering scheduled service. Virgin Gorda and Anegada have their own smaller airports. Private air charter services operated by Island Birds Air Charter fly directly to all three islands from any major airport in the Caribbean. Helicopters are used to get to islands with no runway facilities; Antilles Helicopter Services is the only helicopter service based in the country. The main harbour is in Road Town. There are also ferries that operate within the British Virgin Islands and to the neighbouring United States Virgin Islands. As in the UK and in the United States Virgin Islands, cars in the British Virgin Islands drive on the left, however they differ in that nearly all cars are left hand drive, being imported from the United States. The roads are often quite steep, narrow and winding, and ruts can be a problem when it rains. Cyril E. King Airport in the US Virgin Islands has flights to a wider range of destinations, so is also used for travelling to the British Virgin Islands. == Demographics == As of the 2010 Census, the population of the territory was 28,054. At the time of the 2003 census the population was around 21,730. The majority of the population (83%) are Afro-Caribbean, descended from slaves brought to the islands by the British. Other large ethnic groups include those of British and other European origin. The 2004 Census reports: 83.4% African 7% European/Caucasian 9.6% Others* * Includes Indian, Carib/Amerindian, Black/Carib mixed, and mixed-race Hispanic The 2010 Census reports the main places of origin of residents as follows: 37% local born (many locals go to St. Thomas or the United States for maternity services) 7.2% Guyana 7.0% St. Vincent and the Grenadines 6.0% Jamaica 5.5% United States 5.4% Dominican Republic 5.3% United States Virgin Islands * Includes Indian, Carib/Amerindian, Black/Carib mixed, and mixed-race Hispanic. About 4% of the population is of Hispanic origin, irrespective of race, primarily from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. The territory has also been recently relieving immigrants from many islands in Lesser Antilles. The islands are heavily dependent upon migrant labour. In 2004, migrant workers accounted for 50% of the total population. 32% of workers employed in the British Virgin Islands work for the government. Unusually, the territory has one of the highest drowning mortality rates in the world being higher than other high risk countries such as China and India. 20% of deaths in the British Virgin Islands during 2012 were recorded as drownings, all of them being tourists. Despite this, the territory's most popular beach still has no lifeguard presence. == Education == The British Virgin Islands operates several government schools as well as private schools. There is also a community college, H. Lavity Stoutt Community College, that is located on the eastern end of Tortola. This college was named after Lavity Stoutt, the first Chief Minister of the British Virgin Islands. It is extremely common for students from the British Virgin Islands to travel overseas for tertiary education, either to the University of the West Indies, or to colleges and universities in either the United Kingdom, United States, or Canada. The literacy rate in the British Virgin Islands is high at 98%. == Religion == Over 90% of the population who indicated a religious affiliation at the 2010 Census were Christian with the largest individual Christian denominations being Methodist (17.6%), Anglican (12%), Church of God (11%) and Roman Catholic (9%). The Constitution of the British Virgin Islands commences with a professed national belief in God. Hindus and Muslims constitute each approximately 1.2% of the population according to Word Religion Database 2005. == Culture == == Language == The primary language is British English, although there is a local dialect. Spanish is spoken by Puerto Rican, Dominican and other Spanish-speaking immigrants. == Music == The traditional music of the British Virgin Islands is called fungi after the local cornmeal dish with the same name, often made with okra. The special sound of fungi is due to a unique local fusion between African and European music. It functions as a medium of local history and folklore and is therefore a cherished cultural form of expression that is part of the curriculum in BVI schools. The fungi bands, also called "scratch bands", use instruments ranging from calabash, washboard, bongos and ukulele, to more traditional western instruments like keyboard, banjo, guitar, bass, triangle and saxophone. Apart from being a form of festive dance music, fungi often contains humorous social commentaries, as well as BVI oral history. == Literature == Among the noted names in Virgin Islands literature are Alphaeus Osario Norman (1885-1942), Verna Penn Moll, Jennie Wheatley, and Patricia G. Turnbull. Their poetry and that of 22 other writers, including the fastly emerging poet and literary critic Richard Georges, can be found in *Where I See the Sun – Contemporary Poetry in The Virgin Islands* (Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Anegada, Jost Van Dyke), an anthology edited by Lasana M. Sekou in 2016. == Sport == Because of its location and climate the

British Virgin Islands has long been a haven for sailing enthusiasts. Sailing is regarded as one of the foremost sports in all of the BVI. Calm waters and steady breezes provide some of the best sailing conditions in the Caribbean. Many sailing events are held in the waters of this country, the largest of which is a week-long series of races called the Spring Regatta, the premier sailing event of the Caribbean, with several races hosted each day. Boats include everything from full-size mono-hull yachts to dinghies. Captains and their crews come from all around the world to attend these races. The Spring Regatta is part race, part party, part festival. There are races, games, and music during the day, and some partying at night. The Spring Regatta is normally held during the first week of April. Since 2009, the BVI have made a name for themselves as a host of international basketball events. The BVI hosted three of the last four events of the Caribbean Basketball Championship (FIBA CBC Championship). == See also == Outline of the British Virgin Islands List of British Virgin Islanders ==

References == == External links == Directories British Virgin Islands from UCB Libraries GovPubs British Virgin Islands at Curlie (based on DMOZ) British Virgin Islands Guide from The Moorings NGO sources Official sites and overviews The Government of the British Virgin Islands (official government site) The Government of the BVI, London Office — Official government site HM Governor's Office in the British Virgin Islands Old Government House Museum, British Virgin Islands British Virgin Islands Tourist Board The British Virgin Islands Ports Authority — Official site National Parks Trust of the British Virgin Islands — Official site British Virgin Islands Financial Services Commission — Official site "British Virgin Islands". The World Factbook. Central Intelligence Agency. Wikimedia content Wikimedia Atlas of British Virgin Islands