

## BACK TO ANOTHER CENTURY ON ST. CROIX

By RICHARD PLANT

**CHRISTIANSTED, St. Croix.**—Although St. Croix is only thirty-five minutes by air from its sister islands, St. Thomas and St. John, the largest of the American Virgin Islands will surprise the visitor arriving from bustling St. Thomas. It has the tropical scenery, the unspoiled beaches of most West Indian vacation spots, but in addition it has miraculously preserved the classic simplicity of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century architecture. And the remnants of an even earlier period are to be found all over the island: the ruins of once majestic estates, particularly the tall sugar mills, which add a certain graceful melancholy to the overall picture.

It is the living, unspoiled architecture that gives the island its special character. The main square in Christiansted, its larger town, is almost too pretty—a perfect set for an opera, with the Government Palace, its arches of stone and its pavilions, all late eighteenth century. Nothing has been added. No modernistic building disturbs the impression that the visitor has gone back in time to a sort of Virgin Island "Berkeley Square." The few new houses erected by people who have settled here have adopted the same pure style.

**To Create a Style**

Because St. Croix has kept its architectural integrity over so many centuries, the Island Government and the Department of Parks in Washington started working a few weeks ago on a law that will declare Christiansted a national shrine, will prohibit road signs, neon lights and garish hotels. And, to tie the island even closer to its past, Governor Meets de Castro in February inaugurated, in a few weeks in Christiansted's seventeenth-century castle, a museum of relics of the West Indian aborigines, the Carib and Arawak Indians. At the same time, the Danish Government agreed to return to Christiansted's enormous Government Palace the original Biedermeier furniture removed in 1917 when the United States bought the Virgin Islands.

Up to now St. Croix and its slow-talking, friendly natives have



The waterfront at Christiansted, St. Croix.

escaped the commercialization which has transformed many a vacation spot into precisely the sort of place from which the visitor wants to escape. This does not mean that hotels are poor. Accommodations, although not ultra-modern, will satisfy people with a hankering for relaxation, and every guest house is equipped with a bar serving all sorts of drinks for surprisingly low prices. Cuisine, naturally, is made right on the island and serves as a base for most excursions.

Both in Christiansted and in the smaller Frederiksted, the great houses usually stand off a little by themselves, either on the beach or not too far from it on a hill that affords a wide view. Latest addition is Clover Crest on Hares Bay, near Frederiksted. Atop a hill, it consists of an old plantation house, plus a few guest cabins, some of

which can house large families. Prices are \$3-\$15 a day per person, American plan. Like most other hotels in St. Croix, all former mansions, it is furnished with more Danish-West Indian mahogany antiques that fit the Old World atmosphere so well that many guests have tried in vain to buy them.

For those interested in mahogany a newly opened shop in Christiansted makes excellent reproductions of indigenous plantation chairs, tables and benches of the native mahogany and ships them to the States. The islands are free ports, which means the shops can import merchandise without paying heavy United States duties. Tourists theoretically can buy Danish silver, Scottish materials, Caribbean handicraft, French perfumes and all brands of American and imported liquors and liquors and tobacco for extremely reasonable

prices. The best buys are tobacco and liquor.

The prices in the shops as well as those in the hotels go down in the less crowded months, from April to July. West Indian old timers insist that there are as pleasant as the so-called seasonal months from December to April. The mean temperature on these islands is around 78 degrees and even in July it seldom rises more than six or seven degrees. Since the trade winds cool the island all year, the summer months in St. Croix might very well become as popular as on the French Riviera.

A trip popular all year round is the one from Christiansted Harbor to Dock Island on the *Camaracho*, a 77-foot yacht. The *Camaracho*, with not more than fifteen passengers, sails twice a week to this uninhabited island that has about the wildest sand to be found in these parts. After a swim guests are served lunch right on the beach, a custom many beaches in the Virgin Islands have adopted.

**Fishing Expeditions**

For \$2 or \$3 one of the natives will take the visitor out in a fishing expedition near the reefs, where the surf catches against the rocks. Both the Christiansted and Frederiksted beaches are safe for swimming, which is excellent all year round. However, visitors should not use any of St. Croix's many "wild" beaches without making sure first that they are all safe for bathers.

Even the visitor who does not care for sight-seeing, swimming, shopping or other typical activities will find St. Croix a uniquely pleasing place. It is odd to realize that this is America's only. There is little of even southern Florida about the islands. The Spanish, the Knights of Malta, the English and the French have left their traces. The Danes, during their 200 years of administration, appear to have superimposed a kind of cool restraint on the island's exuberance. Only a few sounds, a few exclamations disturb the tranquility of an old plantation house in the Eighteen Forties, when it was a little ricey garden and much more secure.