

Walking tour of Charlotte Amalie, St Thomas

Start: King's Wharf.

Finish: Waterfront.

Even with the crowds and shops, it is easy to see how the natural colors and charm of the Caribbean come to life in the waterfront town of Charlotte Amalie. The capital of St. Thomas once attracted seafarers from all over the globe. At one time, St. Thomas was the biggest slave market in the world. Today, the old warehouses, once used for storing stolen pirate goods, have been converted to shops. In fact, the main streets, called "gade" (a reflection of their Danish heritage), now coalesce into a virtual shopping mall, one that is often packed with cruise-ship hordes. Sandwiched among these shops are a few historic buildings, most of which can be seen on foot in about 2 hours. Start your walking tour along the eastern harbor front at King's Wharf.

1 King's Wharf

This is the site of the Virgin Islands Legislature. The apple-green two-story structure was first built in 1824 as a military barracks for the Danish Police. The current building dates from 1874. It was in a ceremony on this site in 1917 that ownership of the Virgin Islands was officially transferred from the Danish West Indies to the U.S. - bought for a then pretty price of \$25 million.

From here, walk away from the harbor up Fort Pladsen to:

2 Fort Christian

Dating from 1680 and named after the Danish king Christian V, this handsome (if crumbling) salmon-red structure is the oldest standing building in the entire U.S. Virgin Islands. It has been a fort (with 3- to 6-ft.-thick walls), a governor's residence, a prison (with a downstairs dungeon), a police station, and a court until it was named a National Historic Landmark in 1977. Unfortunately, restoration efforts of both the fort and its museum have dragged on since 2005, when it was closed to the public for renovations.

Continue walking up Fort Pladsen to:

3 Emancipation Park

This is where a proclamation freeing African slaves and indentured European servants was read on July 3, 1848. The park is now mostly a picnic area for local workers and visitors.

Near the park is the:

4 Grand Galleria

From here, a visitor center dispenses valuable travel information about the island. When it opened as a hotel in 1837, it was a grand address, but it later fell into decay, and finally closed in 1975. The former guest rooms upstairs have been turned into offices and a restaurant.

Northwest of the park, at Main Street and Tolbod Gade, stands the:

5 Central Post Office

On display here are floor-to-ceiling murals by Stephen Dohanos, who became famous as an artist for "The Saturday Evening Post."

From the post office, walk east along Norre Gade to the:

6 Frederik Lutheran Church

This, the island's oldest church building, was built between 1780 and 1793. The original Georgian-style building, financed by a free black parishioner, Jean Reeneaus, was refurbished in 1826 and again in 1870 with Gothic and gabled flourishes. It has a "welcoming arms" entrance stairway, and is recognizable by its distinctive yellow-gold hue.

Exiting the church, walk east along Norre Gade to Lille Taarne Gade. Turn left (north) and climb to Kongens Gade (King St.), passing through a neighborhood of law firms, to:

7 Government House

This handsome neoclassical building is the administrative headquarters for the U.S. Virgin Islands. It's been the center of political life in the islands since it was built, around the time of the American Civil War, in 1867, for the Danish Colonial Council. The first two floors are open to the public and contain vintage West Indian furniture and works of art by native son (and vaunted Impressionist) Camille Pissarro.

After leaving Government House, turn immediately to your left and look for the sign for:

8 Seven Arches Museum

Browsers and gapers love checking out this museum at Government Hill (tel **340/774-9295**; <http://sevenarchesmuseum.com>), the private home of longtime residents Philibert Fluck and Barbara Demaras. This 2-centuries-old Danish house has been completely restored and furnished with antiques. Walk through the yellow ballast arches into the Great Room, which has a wonderful view of the Caribbean's busiest harbor. It's open by appointment only.

After visiting the museum, return to Government House. Next to the building is:

9 Frederik Church Parsonage

This building dates from 1725. It's one of the oldest houses on the island, and the only structure in the Government Hill district to retain its simple 18th-century lines.

Continue west along Kongens Gade until you reach:

10 Hotel 1829

Formerly known as the Lavalette House, this place was designed in 1829 by one of the leading merchants of Charlotte Amalie. This landmark building has views over Charlotte Amalie and the harbor.

This is also a great place to take a break. If the bar is open, Hotel 1829 provides the perfect veranda, with a spectacular view, for a midday drink or a sundowner. You may just fall in love with the place, abandon this tour, and stick around for dinner. The bar is open Monday to Saturday 4 to 11pm.

Next door (still on the same side of the street), observe the:

11 Yellow-Brick Building

This structure was built in 1854 in what local architects called "the style of Copenhagen" - it's square and squat, with colorful wooden shutters and a roof tiled of marble. It was built of ballast brick (brought over as ballast in the ship). You can go inside and browse the many shops within.

At this point, you might want to double back slightly on Kongens Gade to climb the famous:

12 99 Steps

These steps (actually 103 in total) were erected in the early 1700s, and take you to the summit of Government Hill, from where you'll see the 18th-century:

13 Crown House

This stately private house is immediately to your right, on the south side of the street. This was the home of von Scholten, the Danish ruler who issued the famous proclamation of emancipation in 1848.

Continue up this street to another set of steps which will take you to Blackbeard's Castle. Sometimes you can enter the bar (up its own set of steps) and sometimes you have to go around to the Castle entrance and pay the ten bucks to enter. In any case it's well worth the money for the view and the Special Cruzan Rum Drinks.

Walk back down the steps and continue right (west) along Kongens Gade, then down a pair of old brick steps until you reach Garden Street. Go right (north) on Garden Street and take a left onto Crystal Gade. On your left, at the corner of Nye Gade and Crystal Gade, you'll see:

14 St. Thomas Reformed Church

This building is from 1844, but it holds one of the oldest congregations in the Virgin Islands, established by Dutch traders around 1660. The church has been buffeted by fire and natural disasters: Fire destroyed two early-19th-century iterations (and a 1995 hurricane, Marilyn, damaged the sanctuary), but much of the 1844 structure, designed like a Greek temple, has been beautifully restored.

Continue up Crystal Gade. On your right (north side), you'll come to:

15 St. Thomas Synagogue

This is the oldest synagogue in continuous use under the American flag, and the second oldest in the Western Hemisphere. Nine Sephardic Jewish families founded the congregation in 1796, and the current building was erected in 1833. It still maintains the tradition of having sand on the floor, said to have muffled the sounds of worshippers' footsteps during the persecution of Jews during the Spanish Inquisition (many communities of Sephardic Jews flourished in the Caribbean after being expelled from Spain in 1492). The structure is made of local stone, ballast brick from Denmark, and mortar made of molasses and sand. It's open to visitors Monday to Thursday 9am to 4pm, Friday 9am to 3pm and Saturday during services. Next door, the **Weibel Museum** showcases 300 years of Jewish history. It keeps the same hours.

Retrace your steps (east) to Raadets Gade and turn south toward the water, crossing the famous Vimmelskaft Gade or "Back Street" (it can get a bit seedy at night, so be aware if you are walking after dark). Continue along Raadets Gade until you reach:

16 Main Street

This is Charlotte Amalie's major artery and most famous shopping street. Turn right (west) and walk along Main Street until you come to the mid-19th-century:

17 Camille Pissarro Building

This structure will be on your right, at the Amsterdam Sauer Jewelry Store. Pissarro, a Spanish Jew who became one of the founders of French Impressionism, was born in this building as Jacob Pizarro in 1830. Before moving to Paris, he worked for his father in a store on Main Street. Also housed in the building is **Gallery Camille Pissarro**, with a few Pissarro paintings on display and prints by local artists for sale.

Continuing west along Main Street, you will pass on your right the:

18 Enid M. Baa Public Library

This building, formerly the von Bretton House, dates from 1818.

Keep heading west until you reach:

19 Market Square

This was the center of a large slave-trading market before the 1848 emancipation and is officially called Rothschild Francis Square. Today it's an open-air fruit and vegetable market, selling, among other items, *genips* (grape-type fruit; to eat one, break open the skin and suck the pulp off the pit). The wrought-iron roof covered a railway station at the turn of the 20th century. The market is open Monday to Saturday, but Saturday is its busiest day; hours vary, but generally 9am to 3pm.

If the *genip* doesn't satisfy you, take Strand Gade down (south) to:

20 The Waterfront

Also known as Kyst Vejen, this is where you can purchase a fresh coconut. One of the vendors here will whack off the top with a machete so that you can drink the sweet milk from its hull. You'll have an up-close view of one of the most scenic harbors in the West Indies, even when it's filled with cruise ships.

21 Bumpa's Restaurant

I always stop here at this second floor restaurant for my fill of Empanadas and Beer. (Unfortunately, there is no local beer in the USVI)

22 Back to the Ship

From here you can hail a taxi back to the dock

Maps below:

Walking Tour Map



Shopping Map

Information ⓘ
Post Office ✉

St. Thomas Harbor

Havensight Mall 1
 A.H. Riise Gift & Liquor Stores
 Al Cohen's Discount Liquors
 Azura Jewels
 Caribbean Marketplace
 Diamond's International
 Dockside Bookshop
 Dynasty Jewelers
 H. Stern Jewelers
 Little Switzerland
 Royal Caribbean
 Scandinavia Center

A. H. Riise Gift and Liquor Store 18	Fabric in Motion 33	Native Arts and Crafts Cooperative 27
Artistic Jewelers 20	Gallery Camille Pissarro 7	Pierre's 31
Bernard K. Passman 15	Gallery St. Thomas 21	Royal Caribbean 4, 13
Boolchand's 10	H. Stern Jewelers 5, 11	S.O.S Antiques 32
Cardow Jewelers 17	Little Switzerland 12, 23	Tillett Gardens Center for the Arts 22
Carson Company Antiques 34	Local Color 31	Tommy Hilfiger Boutique 30
The Crystal Shoppe 6	Longchamp Boutique 8	Tropicana Perfume Shoppe 16
Davante 29	Mango Tango Art Gallery 25	Vendors Plaza 26
Diamond's International 14, 9	Mr. Tablecloth 19	Zora of St. Thomas 24
Down Island Traders 28	Modern Music 2	
Dynasty Jewelers 3		