



Limin' on Tortola

A New York travel writer finds a plentiful supply of hammocks and the good life at Frenchman's Lookout
 Story by Sharon McDonnell • Photos by

When I read that supermodel Kate Moss called Frenchman's Lookout on Tortola in the British Virgin Islands "the most beautiful place I have stayed in the Caribbean," it immediately piqued my curiosity. "We start off by having a big breakfast. Then we lie by the pool before going down to the dock. We'll have a late lunch on the boat or on another island somewhere," I read with fascination in the magazine *Caribbean Travel & Life*. Of course, the second thing that piqued my attention: what exactly constitutes a big breakfast for the ultra-slender Moss – two pieces of fruit? Perched atop a steep hill on Tortola's West End, Frenchman's Lookout is a luxury villa designed Carolina-style, which means it has a wraparound veranda on each floor to catch sea breezes (as is often seen in Charleston, South Carolina) strategically positioned for views of the Caribbean Sea and the verdant island of St. John in the distance. The views are, in a word,

sublime, and a hammock tucked into each corner of the powder blue-trimmed veranda offers a delightful twist on that breathtaking view. Seen from the hammock outside the master bedroom is a serene panorama of pristine nature - the St. Francis Drake Channel, St. John directly across from us, a mile away, and a tiny green islet. There is nothing created by the hand of man, unless you count a small boat or two silently scudding that infinite blueness far below. From another hammock, the view consists of magenta-colored bougainvillea, a tall coconut palm, and a blue BBQ gazebo next to the villa's private pool. Yet another hammock offers a view of the marina of Soper's Hole, scarlet and magenta bougainvillea, and houses dotting the hillside: the most glittery view at night. You can rotate among hammocks during your stay, engaging in that favorite pastime of the British Virgins: limin', or relaxing. (A local newspaper is even named *The Limin' Times*.) At night, those hammocks exert a magnetic sway, as you admire the sky spangled with thousands of stars, easily picking out the Big Dipper and the Milky Way. You'll feel your cares drift

away with the eternal trade wind breeze. The British Virgin Islands are called the "Sailing Capital of the World" for good reason: the over 60 islands, most uninhabited, offer many tempting coves and empty white-sand beaches to dock and savor the solitude. The islands are largely pristine and undeveloped, utterly unlike the U.S. Virgin Islands nearby. There are no big hotels or high-rises of any kind, villas are some of the most preferred lodgings, and Frenchman's Lookout was called one of the Caribbean's best by *Travel & Leisure* in June 2006. The biggest resort has only 120 rooms, and that the islands boast some of the world's most famous beach bars for mingling and sipping a "painkiller," the islands' signature blend of pineapple juice, orange juice and coconut cream, topped with nutmeg. Since a rental of Frenchman's Lookout comes with a sail of the British Virgins on a 35-foot power yacht, plus lunch on a secluded island or on the yacht (your choice), I did this one Sunday, making sure my companions and I took snorkel gear. Our captain, Don Wood, a British expatriate who owns a

snorkeling tour company, Caribbean Images Tours, with his son, Simon, first sailed the calm waters northeast to Virgin Gorda. Here we saw *The Baths*, a dramatic pile of large boulders strewn on the beach that protects small coves and grottoes for swimming and snorkeling. But as soon as we approached Sandy Spit - straight out of a South Pacific calendar, a tiny islet of white sand encircling palms so swaying they resembled the Caribbean version of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, utterly uninhabited - I knew this was the snorkeling "sweet spot" I had traveled from New York to find. So, near this patch of sand, off the coast of the island of Jost Van Dyke, I blissfully snorkeled past fish that looked like mosaics in yellow and black, iridescent fish in greenish-turquoise, and the aptly named brain coral. Pirates sailed the British Virgins starting in the 16th century, and their legacy remains in many island names. As we sailed past *Deadmen's Chest*, Don told us this is where "Blackbeard" abandoned 15 of his men, alluded to in the song, "Yo-ho-ho on a dead man's chest, 15 men and a bottle of rum." "Blackbeard" was the nickname for the English pirate, Edward Teach,



who actually lived in Soper's Hole below our villa during 1715-18. Now, centuries later, his piratical presence has been replaced by the lavender-coloured Harbour Market, a specialty food and wine market where we shopped for groceries, and the Serenity Spa, a highly visible green house with purple doors.

The Sir Francis Drake Channel was named after the English pirate (or privateer, since he was authorized to plunder Spanish ships for the British crown) Francis Drake. Jost Van Dyke Island was named after a Dutch pirate, and Norman Island is believed to have inspired Robert Louis Stevenson's book *Treasure Island*, according to local legend.

Frenchman's Lookout, itself, is so-called because its location, with a commanding view of the channel, offered a superb lookout point for pirates. (I wondered, though, about the identity of that nameless Frenchman.)

Docking on Jost Van Dyke involves climbing over several yachts to reach the dock at Great Harbour, even though the high season may be over. Don took us to lunch at Foxy's, a legendary beach restaurant and bar with a hammock in front. Regarded by the yachting set as one of the world's top spots to spend New Year's Eve, Foxy's bohemian decor of license plates, T-shirts, bras and business cards tacked to the ceiling is reminiscent of Captain Tony's Saloon, the Key West bar where Ernest Hemingway hung out.

Our next stop was the Soggy Dollar Bar in White Bay, also on Jost Van Dyke. Here, we swam, then waded, to the beach bar for our painkillers - there was no dock - past customers who stood holding their drinks in the shallow water, and others limin' in hammocks that are as ubiquitous in the British Virgins as high-rises in Manhattan. You pay with, of course, soggy bills, unless you have the foresight to walk a half-hour down the beach from Foxy's.

As we sailed past water that shaded from jade green, to turquoise, to cobalt and variants thereof, I remember the story I once heard about the woman who wanted to bottle the Caribbean. She asked a hotel owner for eight bottles, explaining she and her husband had identified eight distinct colors of the Caribbean Sea, and wanted to bring them home to show her

friends. She was crushed to hear that the water was clear, the hotelier told me - but I often look to find the eight colors she so clearly saw.

The next day: time for our spa treatments, conducted outdoors on the deck of Frenchman's Lookout by Appu and Monali, the Indian-born owners of the Serenity Spa in Soper's Hole, who are trained in Ayurveda and homeopathic medicine. As gentle breezes wafted around me, as birds sang, and as I peered at that mesmerizing sea view while lying prone on the table, I experienced probably the most relaxing massage of my life.

The outdoors is omnipresent at Frenchman's Lookout. The villa's 50-foot pool offers the same mesmerizing view of pure nature as one of the hammocks - the sea and several sloping green islands. Each morning, we enjoyed a breakfast cooked by Gloria, the housekeeper, on the first-floor veranda overlooking the sea. Our welcome dinner of fish and Cornish hen, with roasted red pepper bruschetta, was served on the veranda as well, but began with appetizers by the pool.

Every morning, Gloria opened all the mahogany French doors on the first floor - the villa has 64 - to admit breezes into the living room, with its plush white sofas and terra cotta floors, dining room with mirrored armoire doors that reflect the sea, and hallways lined with bird paintings. And each night, before settling under the snowy white duvet on my king-sized bed, I padded over mats woven from sea-grass to open the French doors in my bedroom to welcome the sounds of the Tortola night.

For more information:

A one-week villa rental includes a cooked breakfast every morning, a welcome dinner, a yacht sail, airport transfers, and 10 hours of spa treatments. Four-night rentals, and fitness and romance packages, are also available.

www.frenchmanslookout.com, 1-866-940-0020.