

Snorkeling at Buck Island Reef in St Croix

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For visitors to St Croix in the US Virgin Islands, snorkeling at Buck Island Reef National Monument is a must. Buck Island is a small uninhabited island 1.5 miles off the northeast coast of St Croix. It's really not all that impressive to look at from afar. In fact, look at a picture, and you'll immediately wonder – that mound in the ocean covered with stubby trees is a National Monument?



Buck Island

Well, here's the reason. Most of the Monument is under water – almost 18,839 acres of underwater lands to be exact. One of the great coral reefs in the Caribbean surrounds Buck Island. Snorkeling along that reef should top any St Croix itinerary. Plus, on the island's western edge sits Turtle Beach – consistently rated as one of the top 10 beaches in the world due to its pristine white sand and turquoise blue waters.

So, snorkeling at Buck Island Reef was a necessary activity during our recent visit to St Croix. But...I can't swim! And I have only tried to snorkel once. An ill-fated attempt off the coast of Puerto Vallarta 30 years ago that left me

convinced snorkeling was not one of my gifts and something I best not try again.

But Buck Island beckoned. I couldn't ignore arguably St. Croix's top attraction. So as is often required when traveling, I put aside my anxiety, and went snorkeling at Buck Island Reef.

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First, A Quick History of Swimming Ineptness

I really am terrible in the water. Our junior high had a swimming pool. Swimming classes were a regular part of the PE curriculum. Every single year, I found myself in the beginning class – having mastered no skills the year before. I made several attempts to learn in the years that followed, to no avail. I'm just not coordinated enough in the water to put it all together in any sort of way that gets me more than 10 feet without sucking in uncomfortable amounts of water, and completely exhausting myself from flailing arms and legs. About 10 years ago, I asked my triathlete brother to teach me in one last attempt. That didn't go well. I still can't swim

So, snorkeling in water up to 12 feet deep? Assuredly not within my wheelhouse. I was going to need help in St Croix.

Snorkeling at Buck Island Reef with Big Beard's

The National Park Service – in an effort to preserve the endangered Reef – only allows specifically sanctioned tour operators to take visitors on guided reef tours. I checked out each operator online, and decided that **Big Beard's Adventure Tours** – the highest rated operator on TripAdvisor – was my choice for finding success snorkeling at Buck Island Reef. The FAQ section on their website promised effective snorkeling lessons on Turtle Beach. It also included an assurance that they were very successful in helping uncomfortable swimmers succeed. After reading this, I was all in. I decided to put my snorkeling fate in their hands.



A Catamaran to the Island

Our afternoon with Big Beard's Adventure Tours started on a mid May afternoon at the Pier in Christiansted, St Croix's largest town. Here, we boarded a 42 ft Catamaran along with about 40 other people. That number seems like a lot, but I never felt crowded on the boat. Captain Tito introduced himself and went through a long safety checklist, including COVID protocols. He then introduced us to Guillermo and Leah – the first and second mate. He reassured us that all the snorkeling masks and mouthpieces were sterilized with bleach after each trip (I saw Leah doing this when we were finished.)

Soon, we were motoring out of the Christiansted harbor and out to Buck Island – passing the 18th century Fort that guarded against pirates and other would-be invaders.



The ride out to Buck Island took about 30 minutes. While on our way, Guillermo and Leah outfitted us with our snorkeling equipment – fins, snorkel mask, and a flotation vest for those of us that wanted one (yes, please!) The ride was a pleasant one – following the length of St Croix’s northeast shore. Since Buck Island sits only 1.5 miles from St Croix, we could easily see the large estates that dot its eastern hills.



Snorkel Practice on Turtle Beach

Once we arrived at Buck Island, our first stop was Turtle Beach and it's pristine white sand. As I mentioned before, it is considered one of the finest beaches in the world. Day trippers bring their own boats out to enjoy a day at the beach. These boats were spaced along the shore.



Our catamaran backed up to the beach, and I descended the stairs into the turquoise water below, ready for my snorkel lessons.



Leah took those of us who needed a lesson up onto the beach. She showed us how to ensure a proper seal on our mask (most important and likely where I failed with snorkeling in the past), and gave us tips for using our snorkel and positioning our heads and legs in the water. It took all of 5 minutes. I wasn't sure it was enough lesson for me. But the those beautiful blue waters were calling me. I figured, if nothing else, I could stay close to shore.



So in I went, and.....it was so easy! I could see, and I could breath, and I could swim (albeit with flippers and a vest filled with air). And I saw a few scattered tropical fish underneath me. I followed a stingray for a while. And then I looked up and I was 50 feet from shore. And I was fine! I couldn't wait to get out to the reef!

Out to the Reef

After 45 minutes on Turtle Beach, we all loaded back onto the Catamaran, and headed over to the other side of the island. The Reef surrounds about two thirds of the Buck Island, but the National Park Service has created an underwater trail on its eastern side. The trail consists of plaques placed on the ocean floor explaining some of the sights and also marking the most scenic way through the coral. Captain Tito took the boat through a natural break in the coral and into the lagoon between island and reef, ultimately tying up near the underwater trail.



The Reef is the line between the dark blue and turquoise water. St Croix is in the distance.

At this point, everyone on board was given flotation vests. The NPS requires that these be worn at the reef. This is to prevent anyone who gets tired from standing on the fragile coral. The NPS also requires that visitors be guided initially through the underwater trail. So we were divided into three groups. Our group was led by Guillermo. Once we had followed him through the length of the marked trail, we were then allowed to explore on our own. We were at the reef for 1 hour.



Captain Tito overseeing the first group heading out to the Reef

Snorkeling Success!

Having never really successfully snorkeled, this was an amazing new world for me. Certainly something I'd seen on a TV screen before, but seeing it in person was awe-inspiring. Walls of coral, long branches of elkhorn coral rising from the ocean floor, mounds of coral that looked like big brains, and then all the different kinds of tropical fish. 250 species of fish live here. I didn't try to take a camera with me, so I didn't capture any images to share, but here's [a picture on the NPS website](#).

I did get tired towards the end of the hour. We were out on the open ocean and due to some wind, it wasn't entirely calm. The boat obviously can't park right on top of the reef, so we did have to cover some distance ourselves. But I never felt anxious, even though I sucked down ocean water three different times due to my own inattention. And a few times I thought "that boat sure seems a long way off – how did I get out this far." I simply just put my head down, kicked my legs, watched the fish, and slowly covered the distance.

And kudos to Leah and Guillermo who were out in the water with us the whole time. They were extremely attentive to everyone's skill level, very patient with those that needed extra help, and floated around with an extra life-preserver just

in case anyone needed it.

Thoughts and Tips

1. Our half day tour started at 12:30 and ended just before 4. Big Beard's also offers a morning tour that starts at 9. They also offer a full day tour starting at 9, which replicates the half day tour, but also includes a BBQ lunch at a private St Croix beach.
2. You can bring your own snacks and drinks. They do have a community cooler on the boat. The boat has drinking water, and the staff pours copious amounts of complimentary Vodka Punch during the boat ride back to Christiansted.
3. The boat doesn't have any sort of storage lockers for your personal belongings, but I never felt that I was in danger of losing anything. The Captain stays on the boat the entire time.
4. I thought my pale Utah spring skin might get fried, spending 3 straight hours in the hot Caribbean sun. But most of the boat's seating area is covered, so it was easy to stay shaded. Still....sunscreen!
5. The cost of the half day tour is a very reasonable \$75

Our day snorkeling at Buck Island Reef with Big Beard's was certainly one of the highlights of our trip to St Croix. Don't miss it! Even if you swim like me.

You can also click [here](#) to read about some of the other [great things to do in St Croix](#). Or [here](#) to learn more about [Frederiksted St Croix](#) – our base for exploring the island.

To read about another times I put anxiety aside for a great travel experience, check out my posts about taking [an air tour over Kauai Hawaii](#), fearfully standing on the glass bottom observation deck while [visiting the Space Needle](#), or [canyoneering through a Utah slot canyon](#).

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