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A VIRGIN ISLAND LOVE STORY



JOURNAL

AN AFFAIR TO REMEMBER

A CRUZAN HOLIDAY ROMANCE THAT DIDN'T END AT THE AIRPORT

By *David LaHuta*

BELIEVE ME, THE LAST THING I WAS LOOKING FOR WAS A WIFE. AT THE TIME A 20-something bartender, I won a trip to St. Croix when a panel of five judges proclaimed me the Best Bartender on Fire Island, New York. The contest was sponsored by Cruzan rum, and I'm pretty sure it was the drink I'd invented, the Tooty Fruity Banana Booty, that clinched the title. The prize was two airline tickets and a week in a condo. That was great, of course — but like any self-respecting post-grad, I wanted more. I owed it to myself to seize this chance to live the Caribbean dream.

I postponed my return flight for eight months down the road, and by day four I had landed a job pouring drinks at Stixx, a waterfront bar in Christiansted, St. Croix's historic harbor town. For three carefree months I lived the life of the rum-soaked island bachelor, until one December day when a thirsty girl named Joy walked into my bar.

"Can I have a Carib?" she asked with a sun-kissed smile.

"My name's David!" I blurted out, groping blindly for a bottle of beer. In retrospect, it wasn't the best pickup line I ever spouted, but to my amazement it worked: Later that afternoon as my shift

was coming to a close, Joy found me at the bar and asked me out for dinner.

It didn't take long for us to fall in love amid the vibrant backdrop that was St. Croix. There were lazy days spent on golden south-shore beaches, moonlit nights cozing up on the Christiansted boardwalk and adventurous hikes to places like Annaly Bay, where the big payoff was a pair of giant tidal pools fed by ocean spray. We talked about everything: our families, our New York upbringings, our mutual desire to visit Maui. Joy's weeklong vacation became a string of tropical dates, and I knew I was in when she invited me to church on Sunday. When we had parted

late the night before, the thought of waking up at 7:30 a.m. for a two-hour service was daunting, but I made it to St. John's Episcopal outfitted in my Sunday best — a white guayabera and linen pants. That morning as we said our prayers, we both realized that we were indeed meant for each other.

Of course, every great vacation must come to an end, and Joy's was no different. The next three months were spent writing letters and trading phone calls until I eventually coaxed her back to the island for a week. We bought matching silver rings at a small island jeweler, and more than six years later at another

St. John's Episcopal (this one in Cold Spring Harbor, New York), I used mine as a wedding band.

We had always flirted with the idea of returning to St. Croix, but the desire to stick another pin on the map always got

the better of us. Six months after our first anniversary, however, Joy suggested we head to St. Croix on vacation. How could I say no?

Fresh off the plane, we were welcomed by a familiar Caribbean greeting — the

smack of thick tropical humidity hitting our faces on the tarmac. Perfect. Like typical islanders, we reserved a ragtop Jeep, took the top down and set off to explore. Right away, memories came rushing back: the parking lot where Joy taught me to drive a stick shift, the Payless shoe store where she had to buy sneakers before that long hike, and the rusted-out island cars with their "Positive Is How I Live" bumper stickers.

We knew we'd been gone too long when on our first night we ran into old friends who had somehow sprouted adolescent kids. But aside from a new building here and a fresh coat of paint there, St. Croix remained the place of our romantic beginnings. Our favorite beach, Sandy Point, was as pristine and azure as ever. And on a day trip to Buck Island Reef National Monument, we were thrilled to see its coral still thriving with life and schools of blue tang. When we walked into the Domino Club, St. Croix's rainforest rum shack, we were met with hugs and two whopping shots of *mamawana*, the owner's very own blend of honey-and-spice rum. Best of all, a hand slap and a fist bump were still the proper way to greet friends. It was as if we'd never left.

By the end of our trip we had successfully navigated the island like old pros, and we even uncovered hidden gems like the cactus-studded hike to Jack's Bay and the fish-filled snorkeling there. Naturally, we returned to St. John's church. By no fault of our own, we arrived 90 minutes late, but we still had to sit through an hour-long service. Just as we had so long ago, Joy and I sat in a breezy mahogany pew surrounded by well-dressed parishioners, celebrating the island where it all began. Hands clasped, we said our peace; she was visibly moved, as was I. But then again, a similar feeling comes over me every time I look at the golden bartending trophy that sits atop my dresser. It was the rum that brought us together, and my wife was the grandest prize of all.



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