

The place to be on a Friday night is around a bonfire, on a beach with no name.



GIVE & TAKE

ADJUSTING TO EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE USVI BECOMES A BALANCING ACT BY DAVID LAHUTA

THE GIVE ▶ There were no college buddies or post-work happy hours to help me transition into island life in St. Croix. It was like joining a tribe — a tanned clan of rum-fueled expats. I had to greet the tribe's leaders (restaurant kings like the whimsically named Dreads and Chewy) and learn new customs ("Ahh-right" is both a question and a statement of how you're doing).

I also had to forget about anything to do with speed. Internet access can still be relegated to a spotty connection at the public library. And mail service? I've learned not to expect paychecks or products that promise to "be there in seven to 10 days."

The phrase "shopping around" is a misnomer in American terminology. I make do with the basics — a hardware store and an apparel store — and never think about eating out after dark. If the fridge is empty, go find a fruit tree.

Over time, island essentials fall in line. In my case, I pounced on a breezy hilltop apartment and bought a car that helped me fit into the island culture: a 1988 Subaru for \$400. I learned to say hello with a fist bump. I slowed down. And I became a trusted member of the tribe.



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THE TAKE ▶ Eventually I learned not only to tolerate scarcity on St. Croix, but to enjoy it as a reminder that I was living the island life. If I had a slow week in tips at the bar, I'd dive for dinner, which usually meant fresh lobster. Whenever my affectionately nicknamed Su-Jah-Ru blew out yet another balding tire, I'd wait for a member of the tribe to drive by with a can of Fix-a-Flat. Patience is such a great trait to learn — and in the Caribbean you really have no choice.

Being a local also meant I was able to unlock the island's secrets and step in. I became a regular at hideaways like the Montpelier Domino Club, a rainforest rum shack where I'd sip shots of potent spiced rum. To get away without leaving the island, I'd go to Sandy Point, a National Wildlife Refuge on St. Croix's western tip, one of the most secluded slices of sand in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Before long the absence of creature comforts didn't faze me. I don't miss \$5 footlongs. I'll take the Roach Coach — a food truck with the best chicken roti and johnnycakes on St. Croix. And I'll order extra, in case I get hungry after dark.

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