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Baby, it's getting cold out there. So how does escaping to a luxe island retreat with plenty of sun, sand, and sipping of mai tais sound? We thought so.



Island Exclusive

Aquamare combines the small villa and the deluxe hotel—and transcends both.

Sometimes you're lucky and your expectations are met. Sometimes you're beyond lucky and they are surpassed. Odds are really good that Aquamare, a spectacular beachfront resort on the tiny British Virgin Island of Virgin Gorda, will fall under the "beyond your wildest dreams" heading. This four-year-old mini-retreat, consisting of three palatial glass-enclosed villas, is pretty much guaranteed to dazzle, awe, astound, enchant, and delight. And make you feel good, real good.

It did me and my husband—once, that is, we arrived. From JFK to San Juan to the island of Tortola, we made our way to a rickety, sandy dock to catch the only ferry that brings visitors to Virgin Gorda. (Bereft of a big airport and busloads of tourists, the eight-and-a-half-square-mile mountainous island is able to provide a level of exclusivity that most other islands simply cannot.) But the ferry wasn't going anywhere. "You're the only passen-

gers, and we need at least six to go," the captain declared. Uh oh. A bit of diplomatic negotiations and a bit of money exchange later, my husband and I were on our way.

Thirty minutes later, we found ourselves lounging by our villa's own infinity pool, enjoying the refreshing sea breeze, and sipping cool Champagne. Meanwhile, Chet, our private chef, was putting the finishing touches on our five-course dinner. Not bad, eh? Is it any wonder that Harrison Ford and Calista Flockhart were the resort's first visitors, or that Governor Deval Patrick of Massachusetts had stayed at Aquamare the week before we arrived? Who wouldn't want to stay here? Aquamare combines the best aspects of a villa rental with the services of a deluxe hotel.

The trio of Aquamare's identical villas are nearly impossible to make out—they are so well tucked into the island's lush landscape, heavily dotted with tall coconut palms, mature mahogany trees, and a host of brilliantly



(Above left): Aquamare combines the privacy of a villa with the services of a luxury hotel. (Above right): Swim in your villa's private pool, the Caribbean, or simply kick back and relax on the beach.

colored native flora. Yet, from just about anywhere inside our stunningly appointed villa, our views were unimpeded—we could easily see the vast turquoise sea and shimmering white-sand beach. Each five-bedroom villa is an immodest 8,000 square feet, enough to accommodate 12 guests. Heck, rent all three villas, and you and 25 of your nearest and dearest can vacation together.

And, when there, spend your days lolling on the beach, lying in a hammock, dipping into your villa's infinity pool, sipping cocktails on the terrace, reading books, or listening to music in the sumptuous living room with its 30-foot vaulted ceiling. Or, if you're more adventurous, take one of the resort's kayaks for a spin (avoid hitting seagulls), climb 1,370-foot-tall Gorda Peak (tough but satisfying), or visit the island's most famous

tourist destination, The Baths, where you can wind your way through mystifying grottoes and rock pools created by giant granite boulders. Our visit to The Baths had my husband dumbfounded. "I thought that nothing more could surprise me in this world," he said.

Hungry? You can cook your own meals in your villa's professional-grade kitchen (you can buy your groceries on the island or have the resort pre-stock your fridge and pantry for you); dine out in nearby Spanish Town (warning: if you decide to walk, be aware that most likely one of the island's incredibly friendly natives will give you a ride); or hire a private chef. Oh yes, and you needn't lift a finger to arrange any of this. Aquamare's on-site concierge will coordinate everything for you. Your job is to enjoy. You won't fail.

—Esther Davidowitz

DETAILS Rates per villa range from \$17,000 to \$23,500 per week.

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