

THE LURE OF GUAVABERRY SPRING BAY

by Claudia Colli/BVI Welcome Guide 2010

On Virgin Gorda, an island of spectacular beaches and unparalleled beauty, Spring Bay is one of the crown jewels.

A breathtaking stretch of powdery sand peppered with sculpted granite boulders, Spring Bay is a perfect companion to The Baths, the geological wonder that lies to the south. For generations, Spring Bay has been a special place where Virgin Gorda's children played amongst the boulders and families picnicked on holiday Mondays. In the early decades of the 20th century, Spring Bay was a slice of paradise, little known beyond Virgin Gorda.

One who discovered the charms of Spring Bay early on was William Campbell Roy. A Scotsman with a taste for adventure, Roy had sailed to the Caribbean in 1919 enroute to a job in Houston, Texas. While aboard ship, William met Major H. W. Peebles, the Commissioner of the British Virgin Islands, who invited the young man to visit him at Government House in Road Town.

The invitation changed Roy's life. Cancelling the rest of his journey, William telegraphed his wife, Christine, to sail to Tortola along with the couple's two young sons, Charles and Bill. A third son, Rowan, was born on Tortola soon after.

Purchasing a verdant patch of land, a former plantation called Pasea Estate on the south shore of Road Harbour, Roy set out on a new and uncharted course, raising Sea Island cotton and tobacco, and assisting the government with its Agricultural Station.

But for Roy, the romance of the Virgin Islands never diminished. In 1937, he and Christine bought Spring Bay as a 25th anniversary present. Interspersed by pure white sand and bordered by crystalline blue waters, Spring Bay was breathtaking and irresistible. Christine and William never made Virgin Gorda their home, but their love for Spring Bay was undiminished. They spent time here, planted trees and thought of the future, but it would take another generation of Roys to turn Virgin Gorda and Spring Bay into their home.

William's son Charles, who had left Tortola as a child to be educated in the UK, and later joined the Royal Air Force, was the next Roy to be beckoned to Spring Bay. Like his father, the lure of the Virgin Islands was too strong to resist for long. He returned to Tortola with his family in 1958 to build, along with his brother Rowan, Treasure Isle Hotel on Pasea Estate, a charming hotel that catered to business people, government officials and the occasional tourist. In 1964, Charles bought ten acres of land adjacent to Spring Bay known as Guavaberry Ghut for the fruit trees that speckled its grounds. Selling their share of Treasure Isle, Charles and his wife Betty embarked on a fresh adventure--this time with the idea of building a cottage hotel on their new Virgin Gorda property.

Their timing couldn't have been better. By 1969, when the Roys completed Guavaberry Spring Bay, as their new cottage hotel was called, Virgin Gorda was no longer an isolated outpost. Laurence Rockefeller, the American millionaire and conservationist, had completed his luxury hotel, Little Dix Bay, a few years before, along with a yacht harbor, airport and ferry dock. Tourism had taken off, and the Roys' concept of a group of self-contained rental cottages built of wood and nestling into the area's magnificent boulders attracted travelers looking for a true Virgin Islands experience beyond bland high rise hotels, casinos and nightlife.

A tightly knit enterprise that appealed to families and nature lovers, Guavaberry Spring Bay soon grew into a popular retreat.

Circular wooden cottages dot the property, offering seclusion and rustic charm. There are one and two bedroom units and one three bedroom unit, none of which are numbered, instead each are named after local plants and flowers. But of course the main attraction is Spring Bay which is just a short walk away through meandering gardens and the spectacular boulders that have made Virgin Gorda's Valley so famous.

Today Guavaberry Spring Bay remains a family institution, now run by Charles and Betty's daughter, Tina, who returned to Virgin Gorda in 1979 after going to school in Canada. Like her grandparents before her, Tina also discovered the romance of Virgin Gorda; soon after returning to the island, she married Ludwig Goschler, a Virgin Gorda charter operator, who later became the hotel's maintenance manager.

A woman of many hats, Tina is a bustling presence that keeps all the plates in the air, ably juggling guest services, managing housekeeping and maintenance and any other emergency that might crop up in a day.

"There is nowhere I would rather be," says Tina, who considers every day she spends on Virgin Gorda a privilege. "I love the work, the guests, and the daily challenge. But my favorite thing is when I get out of bed in the morning and see that view. It's home."

Helping Tina as she puts it, "is a fabulous staff" that includes a host of house keepers, gardeners and maintenance workers. Added into the mix is Tina's daughter Michelle who runs the hotel's front desk services. She too responded to Virgin Gorda's siren call, returning to the island three years ago after living and working in Canada. Another daughter, Christine, remains in Canada although a nephew, Ian Roy, has recently joined the team as maintenance manager, replacing Ludwig, who passed away in 2010.

Although still a "cottage hotel" with a total of 20 units, Guavaberry Spring Bay's scope has grown to now include 15 deluxe rental villas that are privately owned, but are under the hotel's management. Like the cottages dotted throughout the property, the nearby deluxe villas offer intriguing views of the sea as well as the pervasive granite boulders and tropical gardens landscaped with bougainvillea, frangipani and palms.

Guavaberry's operations center is the reception area and entertainment room. Tucked in amongst sea grapes and palm trees, it is just a short walk to Spring Bay which will always remain the centerpiece of the property. The laid back environment in reception is deceptive. Tina, Valerie and staff quell fires, answer questions and meet guest needs with brisk efficiency. Since there are no telephones or televisions in the cottages (although most of the rental villas have them) the entertainment room, open 24/7, is where guests can access Wifi, make phone calls, watch TV or DVDs, play board games, find paperbacks and pick up supplies. Beach chairs and snorkel equipment can also be found here.

With Michelle and Ian now part of the team, Guavaberry Spring Bay is on its third generation of Roys who have found this corner of Virgin Gorda such a special place. For the Roy family, William and Christine's anniversary present almost 75 years ago has become a multi-generational way of life.