

## Chasing Twenty-first Century smokestacks: tourism research in the British Virgin Islands

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**Abstract:** “Chasing Smokestacks” has become well-known if not complimentary terminology to describe the actions of villages, towns, regions, and countries wanting instant economic development, often at almost any cost. In the past the smokestack referred to was a conventional industry – such as Maple Leaf Pork or J.R. Simplot (fertilizer production) in Brandon, or oil refineries and alumina smelters in St. Thomas (U.S. Virgin Islands). The contemporary smokestack for many places, such as the British Virgin Islands, is tourism — ironically stereotyped by the large smoke-stacked cruise ships of the Holland America Line or Cunard ships such as the Queen Mary 2. Although mass tourism cruise ships are only one part of the BVI tourist puzzle, they are seen to be important both financially and symbolically and are accepted at almost any cost. But tourism in the BVI is much more than what many feel are ‘down-market’ cruise ships and short-stay beach tourists. The BVI are also aiming for ‘up-market visitors’ such as those who own or rent yachts, dive and/or snorkel, as well as snowbirds who stay for greater lengths of time and expats who settle-in for several years and contribute significantly both to the economy and society of the Islands. Many of the former stay on their (or rented) yachts, buy from local businesses, and frequent locals restaurants and bars. The snowbirds and expats typically live in large, expensive homes or villas that are keeping the construction industry at full stretch. This paper (a) briefly discusses the geography of the British Virgin Islands and (b) outlines a preliminary investigation of tourism in the BVI. It is suggested in this paper that the late start for tourism in the BVI (compared to for instance the US Virgin Islands, or Jamaica) has allowed the territory critical breathing space within which to evaluate exactly what it wants from the industry.

*Key Words:* British Virgin Islands, Tourism Demand, Tourism Supply, Place, Landscape

## Introduction

Tourism can be a blessing or a curse, and it is easy to cite examples of each possibility. For example, in his book entitled the “Rape of the American Virgins”, Edward O’Neill (1972) argued that it has been the latter for the US Virgin Islands, where for him tourism has become just another bad example of the practice of buying economic growth (with financial incentives and/or tax incentives) known as ‘smokestack chasing’ (Black and Chandra, 1996).

The purpose of this paper is to describe the background to and the current state of tourism in the British Virgin Islands (BVI), using data from archival and bibliographic sources, fieldwork and key informant interviews, collected during parts of 2004–2006. This topic is important for two reasons. First, on a larger scale, tourism is the largest industry in the contemporary world (Hall and Page, 2002), and a better understanding of how it has developed and how it operates today will enable us to better understand this industry. This in turn may help us to help the industry grow in a more sustainable manner in the future. Second, on a more local scale, tourism is one of the two major contemporary sources of income (along with international finance) for the BVI. As Wilkinson indicates, further research on detailed case studies, such as this of the BVI, is warranted in order to examine the way tourism operates in a microstate context (Wilkinson, 1989: 172), and a better comprehension of this industry is necessary in order to give an insight in to the potential future success of this microstate within the contemporary globalising world.

The paper will first of all ‘set the scene’ for understanding tourism in the BVI by discussing some of the major facets of the historical geography of the Islands, and thus by laying the basis for tourism potential within this territory. Second, the development of the economy will be briefly discussed so that the basis for the present policies regarding the perceived economic value of tourism can be understood in context. Third the contemporary economy of the BVI will be discussed, and in particular the current status of tourism as part of that economy will be outlined. It is suggested that the late start for tourism in the BVI (compared to for instance the USVI, or Jamaica) has allowed the territory critical breathing space within which to evaluate exactly what it wants from the industry. In the conclusion, the future of tourism in the British Virgin Islands as a blessing or as a curse will be mooted.

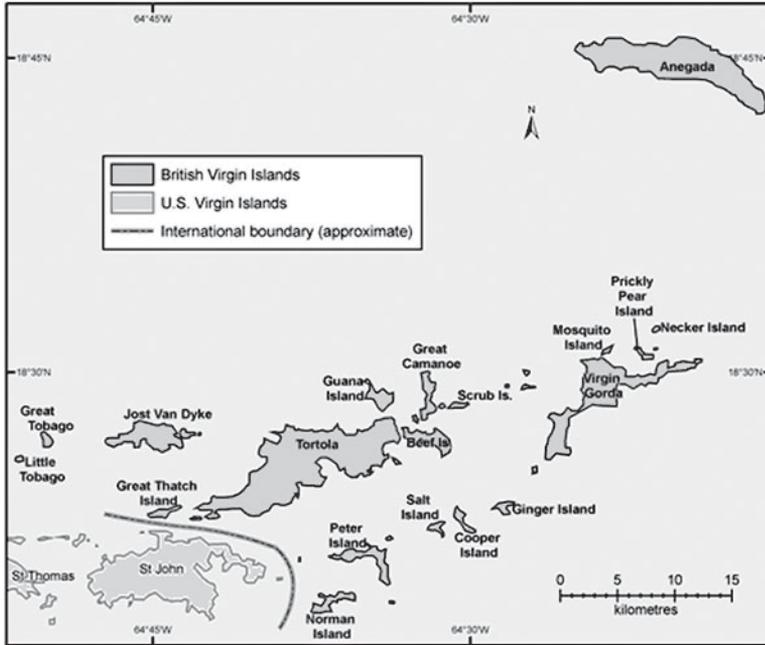


Figure 1: Location of the British Virgin Islands.

## Background to the BVI

The Virgin Islands are an archipelago in the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean Sea (Figure 1). The islands are politically divided into two major parts, one of which, the British Virgin Islands to the east and north, is a British overseas territory under the sovereignty of the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> The major islands are Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Anegada and Jost Van Dyke. The other part, the Territory of the Virgin Islands of the United States (commonly known as the U.S. Virgin Islands - USVI) to the west and south, is an unincorporated and organized United States territory (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup> The major islands are St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John.

The USVI (then known as the Danish West Indies) were purchased by the USA for \$25 million during the First World War (1917) from the Danish government (which bought them from France in 1773). While the USA government sought to purchase these islands in the late nineteenth century, it was not until the war years that their potential use as a base for protecting U.S. shipping from German submarines finally led to their acquisition. The US Virgin Islands have more than double the land area of



*Figure 2: The British Virgin Islands.*

the BVI but more than four times the population. The BVI have a total population of some 23,000 (2006 est.; it was 7,600 as recently as 1958), although fewer than half of this total are BVI Islanders, the balance being “down islanders” - or “black expatriates” - and “white expatriates” (“expats”), who are either working in the Islands or who have retired there from elsewhere. The make up of the BVI population is comparable to that of the USVI where just over 40% of the population is “native-born” (Johnston, 1990).

The USVI have long been culturally and economically connected with the British territory, and consequently their present day geographic situations are also interrelated (Bowen, 1976). As with most countries, an understanding of such aspects of the history of the BVI is essential to a comprehension of the present, as well as its future, potential within the tourism industry. The Virgin Islands, like other parts of the Caribbean, were originally settled by the Arawak, and later by Carib Indians, before the arrival of the Europeans. The Virgin Islands were sighted by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage (in 1493) and named by him after Saint Ursula who by legend had a following of 11,000 virgin maids (Santa Ursula y las Once Mil Virgines).<sup>3</sup> The Dutch established a small but permanent

settlement on Tortola in 1648. In 1672, the English arrived in the region and annexed the Islands, removing the Dutch populations from Tortola in the same year and from Anegada and Virgin Gorda in 1680. However, Dutch influence, particularly in toponyms and family names, can still be found.

The various struggles with Spain, France, Denmark and other European powers have also left their mark on BVI history – and to some extent its present. As with many other parts of the Caribbean, there have been a series of disputes over the ownership of the Virgin Islands. The British Government essentially gave up its claim upon what are now the USVI in the early eighteenth century (although they were occupied by Britain for a time during the “French Wars” of the early nineteenth century), and British claims to the BVI were not “definitively settled” until 1735 (Dookhan, 1975: 13).

The struggle over sovereignty lasted so long in large part because the Virgin Islands were (correctly) not regarded as valuable plantation colonies. While they were prized by the Danes for their trading possibilities, and by pirates and buccaneers for their harbours and hiding places, there was little other perceived economic significance. Arguably the British claimed them at least in part in order to keep other powers out of the region. To some extent the lack of British interest became a self-fulfilling prophecy and hindered economic development (and this continued to be the case until quite recently). Interestingly it is the potential for trade (in particular now international finance) and the physical geography (for sailing, diving etc.) of the Islands that is now once again working in their favour. The relative insignificance of the BVI compared to other West Indian nations did, however, influence most of the Islands’ history. In the definitive work on the West Indies by Maingot, Parry and Sherlock (1987) the BVI are only mentioned once, and even then it is only as an adjunct to a comment on the USVI.

Piracy and buccaneering was characteristic but not regionally significant within the BVI in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Botting, 1978; see <<http://www.b-v-i.com/Culture/Pirates/pirates.htm>>), but nonetheless this lifestyle has been used to create a sense of place for tourists (“The Treasure Isle Hotel”, “The Jolly Roger Inn”, “Pirates’ Bight”, etc.). Although never major pirate strongholds (like Tortuga, or Port Royal in Jamaica), several of the Islands, including Jost Van Dyke, Norman, Peter, Thatch [from Teach = “Blackbeard”] and Dead Chest [“yo ho ho and a bottle of rum”] have piracy-derived toponyms. The Sir Francis Drake Channel, once called “Freebooters Gangway” (Pickering, n.d.), is a major waterway through the BVI connecting with the USVI, and Norman Island, south of Tortola, is said to have been the setting for Robert Louis Stevenson’s “Treasure Island”.

In total the BVI consist of about fifty islands, mostly of volcanic origin (Figure 2). Sixteen of these islands are inhabited, but only four are of major significance.<sup>4</sup> These include Tortola (62 sq. km.), Virgin Gorda (22 sq. km.), Jost Van Dyke (9 sq. km.), and Anegada (34 sq. km.), which is a coral atoll. Many of the other islands are quite small (such as Dead Chest, which is close to Peter Island) and others are essentially just rocky promontories that are a hazard to navigation but a boon to water tourism (such as Fallen Jerusalem and The Indians which are close to Norman Island). At 153 sq. km. the BVI is a true microstate, with an area just smaller than Washington D.C.

Tortola (the name might derive from “turtledoves” in Spanish) is the largest and most important island with the largest population (19,282).<sup>5</sup> It has many tourist attractions and Beef Island (connected by a causeway) is the location of the only international airport in the BVI, although much of the travel to and between the BVI is via ferries or private boats. Tortola was at one time an important local-region plantation island, although it never rivalled the major sugar islands of the British Caribbean. Consequently, it still has some remnants of a sugar landscape, although only a few sites have been preserved to the extent of being tourist sites. Roadtown, the BVI capital and most significant settlement is located on the south coast of Tortola. It is the home to a variety of governmental and tourist services as well as the Cruise Ship Dock and a number of major yachting facilities.

The islands were administered variously as part of the Leeward Islands Colony, or with St. Kitts and Nevis, with a Commissioner representing the British Government on the Islands. The Federation of the Leeward Islands was dissolved in 1956 and the Islands became autonomous with a new constitution in 1967. This changing state of affairs reflected both the disinterest of the British Government in the territory and the desire of the Islanders to be separate from other authorities within the Caribbean (Dookhan, 1975). They refused to be part of the short-lived Federation of the West Indies (1958-1962), not wishing to give up their recently acquired powers, and this desire for independence has helped to shape the national identity of the BVI. Thus although there have been unofficial suggestions that a union with the USVI might be advantageous, such an option has been resisted, and with the recent economic development of the BVI has been seen as both less necessary and less advantageous (Dookhan, 1975).

In addition to political change, there has been a considerable amount of variation in agricultural practices, which has been important in building the ‘sense of place’ within, or ‘personality’ of, the Islands. The English introduced sugar cane to the Islands in the early 1700s, which was to become, along with cotton and indigo (indigo dye is an important dyestuff

with a distinctive blue colour), the major plantation crop and the source of foreign trade. Slaves were brought from Africa to work on the sugar cane plantations, as well as being used to produce the other crops. Although many plantations were established, only a few ever became wealthy, and those not for very long. Sea Island cotton production was important at some time periods but finally disappeared as the result of competition from cheaper cotton from the U.S. South. Natural indigo was the only source of the dye until about 1900, but after this date synthetic indigo almost completely superseded natural indigo. Indigo production suffered from the introduction of synthetic dyes.

The sugar plantation system in the BVI collapsed after emancipation, and most of the white population soon left for pastures anew – in the late 1950s there were only “some thirty white persons resident in the Colony” (British Virgin Islands, 1960: 8). Other than one working rum distillery (at Cane Garden Bay on Tortola), which now imports much of its sugar, evidence of the sugar plantations is almost completely missing today, and evidence of cotton and indigo cultivation is even sparser. However, this agricultural history has left its imprint on the contemporary population, which is now 82% black (mostly descendents of plantation slaves), 6.8% white, 5.9% “mixed”, 3.0% East Indian, and 0.3% “Indigenous People”.

After the fall of cotton, agriculture deteriorated into subsistence peasant cultivation as the islands became even more isolated from the ‘home country’ as well as much of the rest of the Caribbean. In addition to the small size and the scattered distribution of the islands, poor land quality, a poor climate, and rugged topography, made agriculture a difficult proposition. As a result, economic backwardness was characteristic of the Islands for over a century, and was reflected in many aspects of their geography. For instance, until recently there were poor communications systems both within the colony and with the outside world, poor housing and poor services such as water supply, sewage disposal, and electricity. Industry was more-or-less non-existent and out-migration (to the Danish West Indies and elsewhere) was a survival tactic.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, however, contacts with the Danish West Indies (now the USVI) continued and strengthened, and this connection has continued to the present day. Up until recently there was an important trade in cattle (the principal export for many years) from the BVI to the USVI – referred to by the British government as “the backbone of the economy” (British Virgin Islands, 1960: 4). In addition, the sale of charcoal from the BVI to the USVI helped the balance of trade in the BVI, and there are numerous familial bonds between the two jurisdictions. Today both of these trading commodities have declined, and have been replaced by more lucrative endeavours such as tourism. As a side benefit, the environment is now recovering from some overgrazing,

and the vegetation is recovering from the tree cutting necessitated by charcoal production. Both changes are making the islands visually more attractive to tourists.

The BVI society is one where religion and churches have always played an important role (Bowen, 1976), and have helped to give the BVI a distinctive character. Before tourism arrived, the church was the main link to the outside world, and a major influence within the educational system, particularly for the rural areas and the outer islands. The BVI is 86% Protestant, with Methodists having 22.7% and Anglicans 11.6% of adherents; only 9.5% are Roman Catholic. After an early but short-lived Quaker influence (Pickering, 2000), the Methodists were the first missionaries in the BVI, with the Church of England entering in response to their presence. As an indicator of recent change in the Islands, less-mainstream groups such as the Church of God (11.4%) are gaining ground, in addition to a variety of other numerically smaller groups (BVI Census 2001). The strong religious influence within the islands is reflected in a number of behaviours that include what one source calls “mannerly behaviour” such as standardised greetings, and a right to privacy (<http://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/British-Virgin-Islands.html>). In addition, it is suggested that “down islanders” (people from other Caribbean islands working in the BVI) can often be distinguished from locals as they smoke cigarettes much more commonly. Also an unofficial dress code exists and it is pointed out to tourists that too-scantily-clad dress is frowned upon.

The BVI remained of some strategic importance to the British after the plantation era, but as noted earlier little was done to develop them economically. This remained true well into the twentieth century and in the late 1960s one of the major (and few) sources of outside income consisted of postage stamps – for collectors rather than postal use. Although the relative importance of postage stamps as an income source for the economy has dropped, it still produces a useful supplement to the budget of the BVI.

Since the early 1950s many BVI residents have migrated to St. Thomas to work in the tourist industry, which grew there at an earlier date than in the BVI, and much of the money earned was returned to the Colony (British Virgin Islands, 1960: 4). This made the BVI aware of its possibilities as a tourist site, and the Beef Island Airport was constructed in the late 1950s to enhance this potential. Regular ferry service began about the same time (British Virgin Islands, 1960: 5). Significantly at this time there were only two hotels in Roadtown, the capital of the colony.

Since the 1960s, the Islands have diversified away from their traditional subsistence agriculture-based economy towards tourism and financial services, becoming one of the richest areas in the Caribbean with a per

capita GDP PPP (Gross Domestic Product at Purchasing Power Parity) of US\$38,500.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, this income is unevenly distributed and this is reportedly the source of some unrest.

## The Economy

The Earl of Cumberland sailed through the BVI in 1596 and described them as “a knot of little islands, wholly uninhabited, sandy, barren, craggy” (HMSO, 1960: 43). Although this description was extreme even for the sixteenth century, it did characterise the British opinion of the economic potential of the BVI for much of their history. Except for a few time periods of plantation prosperity – usually during wars - the BVI up until the last few decades have been characterised by a subsistence economy. Although good data sources are few and far between, there is a benchmark study for 1957 and 1958 that describes the situation very well (HMSO, 1960). It should be noted that in the late 1950s the colony was “conscious of its tourist potential” (HMSO, 1960: 42), perhaps because the USVI was beginning to experience rapid changes, in part associated with the growth of tourism. However, virtually nothing had been done to exploit this potential. A Hotels Aid Ordinance was passed in 1953 to try to encourage hotel construction, but by the end of the decade there were still only four hotels in the BVI. Significantly for the future of the tourist trade, and because of traditionally close links with the US Virgin Islands, the British Virgin Islands have used the US dollar as its currency since 1959. One US ‘popular’ publication suggests that the stability of “U.S. dollar economy is the biggest selling point in the British Virgin Islands” (*The 2005-2006 Cruising Guide*).

In 1946, 72% of the male working population was involved with agriculture, forestry, fisheries and hunting. By 1960, this proportion had declined to 45%, but the economy was clearly still centred on these occupations (HMSO, 1960; Bowen, 1976). As mentioned earlier, agriculture had virtually always been marginal in the BVI. Distance from island to island coupled with overall distance from external markets, coupled with a challenging physical environment (rugged topography, poor soils, low and variable rainfall), were the major drawbacks – and they were, for the most part, insurmountable. The situation was exacerbated at this time by the tendency of many BV Islanders to give up attempting to survive on agriculture, and to urbanise within the BVI, or to spend lengthy amounts of time working in the USVI where there were more and better paid jobs. Many of these people eventually settled in the USVI. As the British government acknowledged, in a typically understated fashion (HMSO,

1960: 19), “The Colony.... is at a disadvantage when it comes to agricultural development.”

Cultivation was almost exclusively for home consumption, with any surplus being exported to St. Thomas. Subsistence ‘shifting cultivation’ was typical of crop production: it was noteworthy that the first two tractors were brought to the islands in 1956 by the Department of Agriculture. In 1958, less than US\$19,000 was raised through the export of vegetables, fruits and fish. Livestock production had become more important due to a steady market in the USVI, with nearly US\$121,000 being made in 1958 from the export of livestock, three quarters of which went to St. Thomas. In recent years, agriculture has continued to decline, as it is unable to compete with overseas employment or the tourist industry, a similar situation to that of the USVI two decades earlier (Dookhan, 1971). Contemporary agriculture (consisting of only food crops and pasture) now accounts for less than 10% of the national income (<<http://www.everyculture.com/BoCo/British-Virgin-Islands.html>>).

While economically, the colony was largely ignored by the British Government in the 1950s, as it had been even during much of its history, the colonial power often had to help offset the adverse trade balance of the BVI (for instance, during the 1950s (HMSO, 1960: 15) with (albeit small) infusions of money). Manufacturing by any definition was still almost non-existent in the late 1950s, and what there was operated on a small scale. There was some rum distillation, boat building, concrete block manufacture (for construction), soft drink production, and limited craft making. Forestry was similarly lacking, in part because of the cumulative effects of agriculture, and partly because of ongoing charcoal production (the fifth leading export of the BVI with about US\$5,000 worth exported to St. Thomas in 1958). Only a small fragment of xerophytic rain forest remained on Sage Mountain, which is now protected by a national park.

The lack of development of the BVI in 1960 was further typified by the virtual lack of electricity (only to Government House, the Hospital and the Administration Building in Roadtown), the limited telephone service, and the lack of banking. As Bowen puts it, “People sent their money to St. Thomas and put their trust in God” (1976: 71). In addition there were poor communications within and between the islands. There were twelve miles (under 20 km) of “motorable road” on Tortola to serve the 86 registered motor vehicles and 261 bicycles at the end of 1958. There were also 60 miles (under 100 km) of unsurfaced roads and tracks on the islands, some of which were passable by Land Rover or Jeep (HMSO, 1960). There are still justifiable complaints about the roads in the BVI, but considerable progress has been made since 1960 (Dookhan, 1975), and arguably

communications is the area most beneficially affected by the economic resurgence of recent years.

Thus in the late 1950s the BVI was a poor, economically backward, remote and largely ignored colony of the United Kingdom that was trying to divest itself of such responsibilities. The situation of the BVI did not look promising, but there was change on the horizon, and much of this was the result of luck rather than judgement. The first piece of luck was a rise in disposable income (the “affluent society”), particularly after the Second World War, but more so in the 1960s and succeeding decades. Coupled with this was the second fortuitous circumstance, which was a rise in demand for recreation and more to the point tourism, by the people with this surplus income. Third, there was the rise of long distance air travel. In time this was going to make many new tourist destinations reachable by air, but in the short term, as argued by O’Neill (1972), it hurt passenger liner traffic and led to these ships (such as the famous trans-Atlantic steamers *United States*, the *Bremen*, and the *France*) being transferred to the Caribbean cruise trade.

The fourth circumstance was the assumption of power by Fidel Castro in Cuba, which led (after US-Cuban diplomatic relations were broken in 1961) to several hundred thousand Americans searching for another place in the sun. Many chose a path of less resistance and began travelling to the USVI (in 1955 there were some 91,000 visitors in this jurisdiction and by 1962 nearly 300,000). In time, some of these spilled over to the BVI, which then started to become a destination in its own right (Dookhan, 1975: 231). By at least the late 1950s, the BVI had become a mecca for the sailing fraternity, although facilities were still somewhat limited (Eggleston, 1959). In 1962, the promotion of tourism became a ‘firm policy’ of the Islands’ administration (Cohen, 1995), and has become a mainstay of the economy since that time.

In 1964, the first ‘resort’ was opened, Little Dix Bay on Virgin Gorda, by the (Laurance) Rockefeller interests – which were already firmly entrenched on the USVI. This resort is credited with being the springboard for modern tourism in the BVI (Bowen, 1976). Virgin Gorda (“fat virgin” in Spanish) is the third largest island in the BVI with the second largest population (3,203). Its largest settlement is known as The Valley or Spanish Town, and this was the first capital of the territory. Other than Little Dix, there are several important tourist sites on Virgin Gorda, including The Baths (now a National Park), a Copper Mine (also a National Park) that once employed Cornish miners and claims to be unique to the Caribbean, and a number of other beach-oriented resorts in addition to Little Dix, such as Biras Creek, and Leverick Bay.

A fifth piece of good fortune is the fact that the BVI got into the tourism industry at a later date than other countries such as the USVI and Jamaica which are often held up as negative models for the industry (O'Neill, 1972). There is evidence that this late start for tourism in the BVI – and other places such as Belize (Ramsey and Everitt, 2005; 2007) – has allowed the territory critical breathing space within which to evaluate exactly what it wants from the industry.

By 1960, “it was generally agreed that the development of the islands would depend upon tourism”.... but it “was also quite evident that the Colonial Administration had little intention of initiating development” (Bowen, 1976: 73-74). However, in 1966 a BVI government-commissioned report targeted tourism as the most viable development option. Since the early 1970s, the government of the BVI have been concentrating on the “controlled growth” of the economy (Cohen, 1995), and this policy is clearly tied closely to tourism. If we fast-forward to the present day we find that the contemporary economy is reputedly one of the most stable and prosperous in the Caribbean. The list of industries is similar to that of the late 1950s, with two important additions, tourism and financial services. The significance of these additions cannot be overstated, as together they reportedly generate about 90% of the Islands’ income (<[www.everywhereculture.com/Bo-Co/British-Virgin-Islands.html](http://www.everywhereculture.com/Bo-Co/British-Virgin-Islands.html)>).

The BVI are now highly dependent on tourism, which generates an estimated 45% of the national income. An estimated 350,000 tourists, mainly from the US, visited the islands in 1998. In 2003, the number of ‘visitor arrivals’ was 599,102 and in 2004 it was 806,120 (*The BVI Standpoint*, 2005). This was more than 35 times the total BVI population – in 1989 the figure had been ten times (Cohen, 1995). One danger of this dominance showed when tourism suffered in 2002 because of the lacklustre US economy following ‘September 11<sup>th</sup>’ (Dawson, 2005).

Tourism in the BVI is multi-faceted. It includes water tourism (yachting, diving and fishing), land tourism (for tourists, snowbirds and retired expats), and cruise ships (which entail the use of both water and land). Efforts are being made to diversify sources of tourists, with Europe being a particular target (Dawson, 2005).

In the mid-1980s, the government began offering offshore registration to companies wishing to incorporate in the islands, and incorporation fees now generate substantial revenues. The recent (2004) Hurricane (Ivan) that hit the Cayman Islands has boosted this sector of the BVI economy. While roughly 400,000 companies were on the offshore registry by the end of 2000, the number by 2006 had surpassed 500,000. The adoption of a comprehensive insurance law in late 1994, which provides a blanket of confidentiality with regulated statutory gateways for investigation of

criminal offences, made the British Virgin Islands even more attractive to international business.

This economic boom has led to challenges in part because many BV Islanders, particularly young adults and especially males lacking opportunities for full-time employment, habitually work in the USVI and elsewhere (Dookhan, 1975; Lowenthal, 1972). This has at times limited economic development, while relieving population pressure, but at the present time the BVI economy is quite dependent upon “down islanders” – people who are from other islands in the Caribbean (or Guyana) and who come to work in the BVI because it offers better prospects than their homelands. Despite this influx from elsewhere, there is only a 1.9% unemployment rate in the BVI,<sup>8</sup> which gives little flexibility to the economy. The down islanders thus constitute “guest workers” as part of a typical international labour movement – similar to that of the USVI.

In total, over half of the BVI residents are “expatriates” (expats). Some of these are “white expats”, who can be divided into those who are employed as senior executives in businesses such as banks, hotels and trust companies as well as those who are retired – termed by one author “up-islanders” (Bowen, 1976). Most though are “black expats” – down islanders, who work principally in construction, trades or the service industries (and particularly tourism) and are mostly on relatively short-term renewable work permits. Their presence is critical for both the construction and tourism industries. They earn relatively low wages, and rebate much of this money to their families ‘back home’. There are a number of contentious issues related to the black expatriates – who as “non-belongers” are not allowed to vote, are probably less affluent (they have been accused in the past of “living in slums” (Bowen, 1976: 80)), and have cultural and sub-cultural differences from “belongers” – BVI islanders. In addition, down islanders are sometimes accused (along with some visitors from St. Thomas) of being responsible for an increase in crime rates (Bowen 1976: 80). These circumstances have led to a “strong sense of disaffection” (Cohen, 1995: 413) for many of the non-citizen down islander residents, and at the same time a sense of superiority on the part of belongers (Cohen, 1995). The white expatriates (the “up-islanders”) are socially and economically different, and their smaller numbers makes them less of a political issue.

## **Contemporary Tourism**

At the end of the 1960s, the tourist industry was “still remarkably undeveloped” (Bowen, 1976: 77), with few hotels and few hotel rooms. But

change was coming as hotels began to be built, and since 1976, tourism has been the leading sector of the economy (Cohen, 1995: 5). The Islands' current Premier (as of August 2007) is also Minister of Tourism.<sup>9</sup> As his predecessor who also held both positions pointed out, tourism "generates tens of millions of dollars every single year" which "allows us to fund our schools, build our hospital, pave our roads and provide all the other social services that our people depend upon" (*The BVI Standpoint*, 2006c). The tourism industry is related to, directly or indirectly, much of the previous discussion, but in addition there are several key aspects to the present-day BVI tourism industry that need further elucidation. First, tourism is clearly part of the political economy of the BVI, with the government being the major agent of tourist development, and as such the industry is very much tied to government intervention. One aim is to provide benefits for the tourists and the Islanders, and develop a sustainable tourist industry. Another is to address the challenges presented by the industry that have caused problems elsewhere in the Caribbean. Thus the past Chief Minister was recently quoted as saying "My government made a clear commitment, early in our term of office, to managing this important sector so that it can continue to grow and benefit all the people of our territory. And that is what we have done" (*The BVI Beacon*, 2006b). The new VIP government has echoed this statement in its election manifesto (Virgin Islands Party, 2007: 8-9).

In a speech focusing on tourism and commending the BVI Tourist Board, the past Chief Minister promoted tourism as "one of the pillars of our Territory's economy" which is "the largest source of revenue" and "the source of jobs for many of our local people" (*The BVI Standpoint*, 2006c). The BVI Tourist Board, the face of tourism promotion in the Islands and overseas (it has offices in a number of foreign locations such as New York and Mayfair, in London) is an arm's length organ of the government with a mandate to promote tourism of all varieties for the BVI.<sup>10</sup> In addition, and in spite of the enormous increase in the number of "visitors" in recent years, and the increase in facilities constructed for these visitors, the BVI tourist industry still tries to sell the islands as pristine and unspoiled with its slogan "Nature's Little Secrets", and claims to be trying to protect the islands from environmental threats (Trotman: 2006). The government says it is attempting to strike "the right balance between development and environmental protection", and "rejecting the kind of out-of-control development that has turned other places into environmental disaster areas" (*The BVI Standpoint*, 2006c). Once again it is clear that the BVI have gained breathing space and an ability to learn from the mistakes of others, because of their late start in the tourist industry.

In general tourism in the BVI can be divided into three kinds of tourism, land-based, water-based, and cruise ships. All, of course, are closely tied to the climate, and all are, to a greater or lesser extent seasonal. Land-based tourism is characterised by expatriates in privately-owned or rented housing, many of whom are permanent residents<sup>11</sup> but a considerable number of whom are snowbirds – coming for up to six months a year to escape the more severe winters to the north. The major source countries for these ‘expats’ are the USA and Canada, but there are also some from the UK and other parts of Europe. High land prices and high building costs mean that this part of the industry is necessarily ‘upscale’ in its nature. In addition to expat housing there are a few resorts and other hotels for short-term visitors – although there are surprisingly few of these in the BVI relative to the tourist population as a whole. The ones that do exist, however, “by fiat of the BVI government” have been designed to blend into and complement the landscape” (Lett, 1983: 37). These resorts also tend to be expensive, are often listed in ‘top ten’ lists, and mean that tourists that frequent these resorts are also generally affluent.

Land-based tourism has a number of different facets, in addition to the housing of snowbirds and expats in long-term rental or owned accommodation. Housing is not cheap, with prices ranging from a low of US\$500,000 up into the millions of dollars, and while the purchase process is straightforward in theory,<sup>12</sup> in practice it is not quick and simple and for a non-belonger can take months or even years.

Guest house/villa capacity has more than doubled in the past decade, although the total (rising from 237 to 497 units) is still quite a small number when overall arrivals are considered. Hotel room capacity has also grown in the last ten years, but only by about 15% (by 165 to 1331, from 1994 to 2004), with hotel visitors only contributing 29% of the total of ‘Overnight Visitors’.<sup>13</sup>

Recently there have been a series of proposals for major capital investments that may help to swing the balance of the tourism industry back towards land-based activities. These include a major resort, marina and (the BVI’s first) golf course development on Beef Island, a resort and marina on Scrub Island, and a resort at Smugglers’ Cove. Although all are still in the planning stages, and still the subject of some controversy (Abuhaydar, 2006), if constructed they will help to strengthen the tourist product of the BVI, boost the number of upscale visitors, boost the economy, and to quote past Chief Minister Orlando Smith “make the BVI more attractive as an upscale destination” (Boring, 2005). It is interesting that a major segment of the opposition to these developments is centred around environmental concerns (water, sewage etc.), indicating a new maturity with respect to this ‘smokestack industry’ that was lacking in

earlier years in the USVI, and arguably in the BVI as well. In the short term, however, the construction of these resorts is likely to exacerbate the shortage of labour and increase the pressure on the in-migration of 'down islanders'.

With the BVI often characterised as the premier Caribbean location for both sailing and powerboats (<<http://www.bareboatsbvi.com/>>), water-based tourism has been more important than land-based tourism in recent years – although employing fewer Islanders than land-based tourism. As an index of this, Charter Boat visitors made up 54% of overnight visitors in 2004 (with an average of over 50% since 1998). Water-based tourism has four major aspects. First are private and rental ("bareboat") yachts – Charter Boats with the first yacht chartering company, "The Moorings" opening on Tortola in 1969 (Cohen, 1995; *The Charter Connection*, 2006). The BVI has long been a centre for "bareboat" yachting where experienced sailors rent a yacht without a captain and cruise independently.<sup>14</sup> Although yachting is important throughout the BVI, Jost Van Dyke (population 244 and named after a Dutch planter/pirate) is particularly important in this context, and it is reputedly one of the top ten New Year's Eve destinations for the water tourism fraternity. The Soggy Dollar Bar on White Bay, the site of a major New Year's Eve celebration, won an award as the Best Caribbean Waterfront Bar in 2006, from *All At Sea*' - "Britain's Waterfront Newspaper" (*Limin' Times*, 2006).

Second is diving/snorkelling. There are many interesting dive sites around the BVI, largely related to shipwrecks such as the famous "Rhone" site, just offshore from Salt Island. Many of these shipwrecks are 'natural' but many arouse visions of pirate activity. As Scheiner and Scheiner suggest:

"Wherever there is water there are shipwrecks. Human incompetence, war and the tempestuous nature of the sea have taken their toll for millennia. Mention Caribbean shipwrecks to most people and fantasies of Spanish doubloons and pirate treasure fill their minds - gold bars piled high and strings of jewels overflowing wooden treasure chests" (Scheiner and Scheiner, 1966).

The dive/snorkeling industry has become one of the major players within BVI tourism, and its success is likely to increase.

Third there is fishing, with BVI being acknowledged as having some of the finest sports-fishing opportunities in the world, particularly around Anegada,<sup>15</sup> which is the second largest island in the BVI although it only has a population of 250. It is a low-lying coral atoll (the name derives from 'drowned' in Spanish), its highest elevation being about nine metres above

sea level. It is very popular for water vacations, in part because of the large number of shipwrecks that have taken place in its waters (Scheiner and Scheiner, 1996), and in part because of its potential for fishing (Bronstein, 2006).

Fourth there are cruise ships. The latter are assuming increasing importance and are were heavily boosted by the previous administration (defeated in August 2007). The 'big three' cruise companies, Carnival, Royal Caribbean International, and Princess all dock in Roadtown, as do Holland America, Norwegian, Cunard and others. All of these are, of course, non-Caribbean; they tend to employ non-Caribbean crews, and use non-Caribbean foods, drinks, and services.

Cruise shipping is, however, increasing in importance in the BVI at a much faster rate than other forms of tourism. Although nowhere near as important as in the US Virgin Islands (which is second only to the Bahamas in total cruise ship passenger arrivals, and commonly hosts three or four cruise ships a day, six or seven days a week 'in season'), an increasing dependence upon these ships can be seen.<sup>16</sup> From 2003-2004, cruise ship tourism posted a 56% increase in numbers, compared to a 21% growth of overnight visitors (*The BVI Standpoint*, 2005). In 2004 57% of the total number of visitors to the BVI were cruise ship tourists (*BVI Tourist Board*, 2005). Although there was a slight dip in numbers in 2005 (due to a regional drop in bookings) 449,152 passengers arrived in the BVI. North America still accounts for most of the cruise shippers, but this is likely to change as other markets mature, and this aspect of the industry becomes more globalised. Cruise ships are, however, more than other types of tourism, becoming increasingly controversial. Data on these issues can be hard to find, although information concerned with economic factors is easier to obtain than that concerned with social and ecological impacts (City of St. John's, 2004).<sup>17</sup> However, these problems have been recognised, and the current Virgin Islands Party (VIP) government (elected in August 2007) made it clear in its election manifesto that impact studies will be a priority for the new administration (Virgin Islands Party, 2007). This party has also made it clear, however, that the economic benefits of tourism need to be more widely spread (to 'trickle down' more) than it perceives to have been the case in the past (Virgin Islands Party, 2007: 9).

There are a number of 'generally agreed' areas of contention, as the infrastructure and the environment of the BVI are being increasingly stretched by tourism in general and the cruise ships in particular. First the cruise ships mean an increased number of people in a relatively confined area (mostly the land in Roadtown), and a greatly increased amount of traffic (on roads and on beaches). Roads can be severely congested on cruise ship days and the Cruise Ship Dock in Road Town is unsuitable for

the largest ships (such as the Queen Mary 2) when passengers are anchored offshore and 'lightered' in to the shore. The economies of scale of the industry suggest that these larger ships will become more common, perhaps leading to a call for new facilities (National Democratic Party, 2007). For instance, Cane Garden Bay has traditionally been the "cruise ship beach", but as the number of cruise ship passengers has increased, Brewer's Bay has been opened up to them, and Brandywine Bay is now being prepared as a cruise ship passenger destination with new washrooms, bohios (for shade) and a restaurant, as well as a semi-artificial beach (made of dredged sand).

In an attempt to maintain its 'character' and its sightlines, building heights in Roadtown are restricted to a six-storey limit. As elsewhere on Tortola, level land is at a premium, and a significant part of the newer development in Roadtown, including the Cruise Ship Dock, is on the 'reclaimed land' of Wickham's Cay 1 and 2, which was the "first comprehensive urban development to take place in the islands" (Bowen, 1976: 76). However, parking has become an increasing problem, as has traffic generation and congestion. Although these can be cited as illustrations of economic development, they lead to challenges for both the local populace and the tourists, and if solutions cannot be found might limit the growth of some sectors of the tourist industry. In theory, the number of cruise ships per day (which generate a lot of vehicular traffic (taxis, safari buses and rental vehicles) in Roadtown as well as elsewhere on Tortola) is limited, but in practice this has not always worked out – although the situation is nowhere near as bad as on St. Thomas (USVI) (O'Neill, 1972).

Second, there is debate over the amount of income generated by cruise ships, and its disposition. For instance there is a lot of 'leakage' of spending (out of the Islands) by cruise ship passengers, especially on 'foreign' duty free goods; there is considerable debate about who benefits from government spending on port and shopping facilities, and security expenses; and there is a suggestion that more crime and other social problems are generated by the influx of passengers (*Lighthouse Foundation*, 2006). In addition the number of local jobs created by cruise tourism might be quite low (Hall and Page, 2002: 298), and although cruise day visitors make an economic contribution to the economy, they spend substantially less than stopover tourists (*Lighthouse Foundation*, 2006).

Third, there are also ecological questions related to environmental pollution, centred on the dumping of unregulated or inadequately regulated cruise ship waste – which has traditionally been the focus of most concern (*Lighthouse Foundation*, 2006). The newly elected VIP government made much of environmental issues in its election campaign and its manifesto

emphasises the importance of “environmental sustainability”, “carrying capacity”, and “eco-tourism” (Virgin Islands Party, 2007: 8).

Fourth, there has been an issue about island services for the cruise tourists keeping up with the demand. Where attempts have been made to keep up with the demands of these visitors, with “Safari Buses” and “Cyber Cafes” becoming increasingly common, further negative impacts on the Islands’ infrastructure are cited. In part to counter these criticisms, various solutions to traffic congestion are being “actively” sought, such as peripheral parking lots (coupled with shuttles) and new by-pass roads (*The BVI Standpoint*, 2006a). Infrastructure development was stressed by the successful VIP party in its election manifesto (Virgin Islands Party, 2007: 8).

For the most part, cruise ships are recent enough in the BVI that data cited in response to these contentions is based upon external experiences, such as the USVI. These are not necessarily applicable to the BVI, and the negative views are not shared by everyone. The outgoing National Democratic Party (NDP) Chief Minister/Minister of Tourism Orlando Smith has been quoted as saying that:

“This government is of the view that cruise tourism is an important sector which contributes to the territory’s economy. That is why this government, through the BVI Tourist Board, is working to ensure that this sector is properly managed” (*The BVI Beacon*, 2006a).

However the incoming VIP government in its election manifesto was more skeptical, and stated that in the future “levels of cruise activity (will be) based upon environmental carrying capacity and corresponding levels of infrastructure development” (Virgin Islands Party, 2007: 8). The obvious implication was that the VIP did not believe that this was presently the *status quo*.

## Conclusion

As Hall and Page (2002: 29) suggest, tourism in general is a complex phenomenon with substantial economic, sociocultural, environmental, and political impacts. As has been demonstrated in this paper this is certainly the case for the BVI where physical and historical geographies of the territory have been taken advantage of by the tourist industry, and where the impacts of tourist development are debated and discussed on a daily basis. Chasing smokestacks has become common terminology for the actions of towns, villages, regions, and countries wanting instant

development (Black and Chandra, 1996). The contemporary smokestack for many is tourism - ironically stereo typified by the large smoke-stacked cruise ships often visiting places such as Tortola. However, although mass tourist cruise ships are only one part of the BVI tourist puzzle, they are important both financially and symbolically. However, as the new VIP government states, “a sensible balance” between the cruise ship and other tourism sectors needs to be ensured (Virgin Islands Party, 2007: 7).

The BVI are also aiming for ‘upscale tourists’ (yachts, diving) as well as ‘snowbirds’ and ‘expats’.<sup>17</sup> The recently ousted National Democratic (NDP) government termed this “Platinum Plus” tourism (National Democratic Party 2007: 14). Many of the former stay on yachts both owned and rented. The latter typically live in large, expensive homes that are helping to keep the construction industry at full stretch. The increasing importance of the other major contemporary “earner”, the financial sector, is not directly related to this research, but is indirectly connected. It will bring more money to the BVI as well as enhance the territory’s ‘up market’ image, which will inevitably help to boost tourism. It is also argued that the upscale tourism will boost the image of the islands and thus boost the financial services sector. A nice symbiosis if it works. It is argued in this paper that the late start for tourism in the BVI (compared to for instance the USVI, or Jamaica) has allowed the territory critical breathing space within which to evaluate exactly what it wants from the industry. The data currently available indicate that this time has been put to good use, and that the BVI has tried to carve its own tourism niche as an unspoiled tourist paradise, as articulated in the BVI media:

“The British Virgin Islands remains an undeveloped haven for natural treasures. The BVI boasts no high-rise hotels, no casinos and no crowds, rather the purity of the land – from pristine beaches with powdery sand and crystal clear waters home to an aquarium of the world’s most diverse sea life, to extensive coral reefs responsible for claiming renowned shipwrecks and vast outbacks sheltering endangered species” (*The BVI Standpoint*, 2006b).

Although debate continues on the value of the cruise ship industry to the island, the orientation of BVI tourism toward the more ‘upscale niche market’ end of the industry augurs well for both the economy and the environment. If some of the associated social challenges can be alleviated, there is every chance that the tourist industry in the BVI will prove successful, by any measure. In its election manifesto, the VIP party boosted tourism, as mentioned above, but also stressed the importance of “increasing the economic yield per visitor and spreading its economic

benefits to a wider segment of the community” (Virgin Islands Party, 2007: 9). Although it is unclear how the now-ruling VIP will achieve these aims, the recognition of these challenges has to be seen as a good first step.

In concluding his study of the USVI, O’Neill (1972: 213) stated that “(t)he world beyond the encircling reefs has always threatened the Virgins. Today what happens to the Virgins threatens, by implication and in fact, the world.” It is hoped that the lessons of the USVI have been learned, and that tourism and the BVI will be united in a happier union.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The other UK Overseas Territories are: Anguilla, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, St Helena and Dependencies, British Antarctic Territory, British Indian Ocean Territory, Pitcairn Islands, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

<sup>2</sup>A third group of islands is located just east of the main island of Puerto Rico and they are part of the Puerto Rican territory ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto\\_Rico](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puerto_Rico)) They are politically and culturally distinct from the Territory of the Virgin Islands of the United States, and are often not labeled as part of Virgin Islands archipelago. However, the term "Spanish Virgin Islands" is common in Puerto Rican tourist literature (e.g. <http://www.spanishvirginislands.com/>).

<sup>3</sup>Some believe that the Virgin Islands were named by Sir Francis Drake after Queen Elizabeth I of England, the "Virgin Queen" (Dookhan, I.1975: x-xi).

<sup>4</sup>The other islands have a combined population of 86, with 96 people living on their boats, not allocated to an island (Development Planning Unit, 2006).

<sup>5</sup>Population data were supplied to the author by the Development Planning Unit of the BVI government in 2006.

- <sup>6</sup>Interestingly, out-migration of USVI islanders was and is common for similar reasons, and the BVI migrants are often seen as necessary replacements for a lack of local workers in (particularly) St. Thomas.
- <sup>7</sup>Unfortunately sources of comparable 'wealth' data for all nations are hard to find. The estimate used in this paper comes from the 2004 CIA World Factbook (<https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>). This source shows the GDP at Purchasing Power Parity Per Capita (GDP PPP) for the USVI as \$14,500, for Belize as \$6,800, and for Trinidad and Tobago as \$16,700. Bermuda has the highest GDP PPP in the world at \$69,900 (2004 est.) according to this Factbook. The GDP PPP per capita for Canada is \$34,000 and for the USA is \$42,000.
- <sup>8</sup>By comparison the UK (one of the "healthiest" economies in Europe) has a rate of 5.4%, the USA, 4.4% and France, 8.8% (Grose, 2006).
- <sup>9</sup>An election in 2007 led to a change in government. At the same time a constitutional change came into effect which led to the title of the Chief Minister being 'upgraded' to Premier.
- <sup>11</sup>In many cases these residents do regard the BVI as their permanent residence – their permanent resting place as it were, but a considerable number see it as a place that might be home for only a few years, and thus as one part of a more comprehensive retirement plan.
- <sup>12</sup>The importance of the housing market to the BVI can be seen in part by the existence of the BVI Property Guide, a free magazine that lists properties and contains articles clarifying property buying issues, that is produced within the BVI
- <sup>13</sup>Most overnight visitors stay on charter boats (53.7%) with some in rented accommodation (9.3%), some staying with friends (7.8%) and a few in their own or in friends' accommodation (about .08%).
- <sup>14</sup>The importance of yachting to the BVI can be seen in part by the existence of the BVI Yacht Guide, a free magazine promoting yachting that is produced within the BVI (by the same publisher as the BVI Property Guide).
- <sup>15</sup>In addition there are opportunities for kayaking, parasailing, windsurfing, kiteboarding and surfing.
- <sup>16</sup>The importance of the cruise ship industry to the BVI can be seen in part by the existence of the BVI Welcome Cruise Ship Visitor Guide, a free magazine aimed at 'cruise shippers' that is produced within the BVI (by the same publisher as the BVI Welcome Tourist Guide).
- <sup>17</sup>Other criticisms of cruising as a recreational activity, that it is a largely 'placeless' experience on 'pleasure prisons' that are 'cruising to nowhere', will not be discussed in this paper as it does not directly concern the BVI.
- <sup>18</sup>The 'old' NDP government had this upscale orientation, and the new VIP government has the same policy (Virgin Islands Party, 2007).