

## HISTORY OF BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS



*British Virgin Islands, British West Indies.*

The British Virgin Islands consist of 60 islands and cays having a total land area of 150 square kilometres. They lie to the north west of the United States Virgin Islands and are separated by a channel only five kilometres wide. The neighbour with the largest land area is Puerto Rico 96 kilometres to the west. Except for Anegada, which is a flat, coral island with little soil, the Islands are hilly. Their greatest tourist attraction is their superb beaches, since much of the land is covered with superb timber and coarse grass and there are no forests or rivers.

### **Population**

The largest and most heavily populated Island is Tortola, which has about 9,000 inhabitants. The capital, Road Town, is on the southern shore near Sir Francis Drake Channel. Tortola is connected by a bridge to Beef Island. There are a further 3,000 inhabitants who reside on the other islands 1,000 of which are in Virgin Gorda which is noted primarily for its unusual and interesting scenery and rock formations.

### **Political Structure**

The British Virgin Islands were discovered by Columbus who is said to have been so impressed by their large number that he named them "Las Virgenes " in honour of St. Ursula and her 11,000 attendant virgins. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and part of the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the islands harboured Dutch and English Buccaneers. In 1672 British claimed Tortola. Simultaneously, Denmark asserted her sovereignty over St. Thomas and St. John; then in 1773 Denmark purchased St. Croix from France.

At present the British Virgin Islands is an internally self-governing colony with a ministerial system of Government operating under a Constitution adopted in 1967. The Governor, appointed by the crown, remains responsible for defence and internal security, external affairs, the civil service, the administration of the courts and finance. He continues to have reserved legislative powers necessary in the exercise of his special responsibility. However, on other matters he is normally bound to act in accordance with the advice of the Executive Council. This consists of Governor as Chairman; two ex-officio members (the Attorney-General and Financial Secretary); the Chief Minister, appointed by the Governor as the elected member who appears best able to command a majority in the Legislative council; the Deputy Minister; and two other ministers appointed by the Governor on the advice of the Chief Minister. The elections are held at intervals of not more than five years.