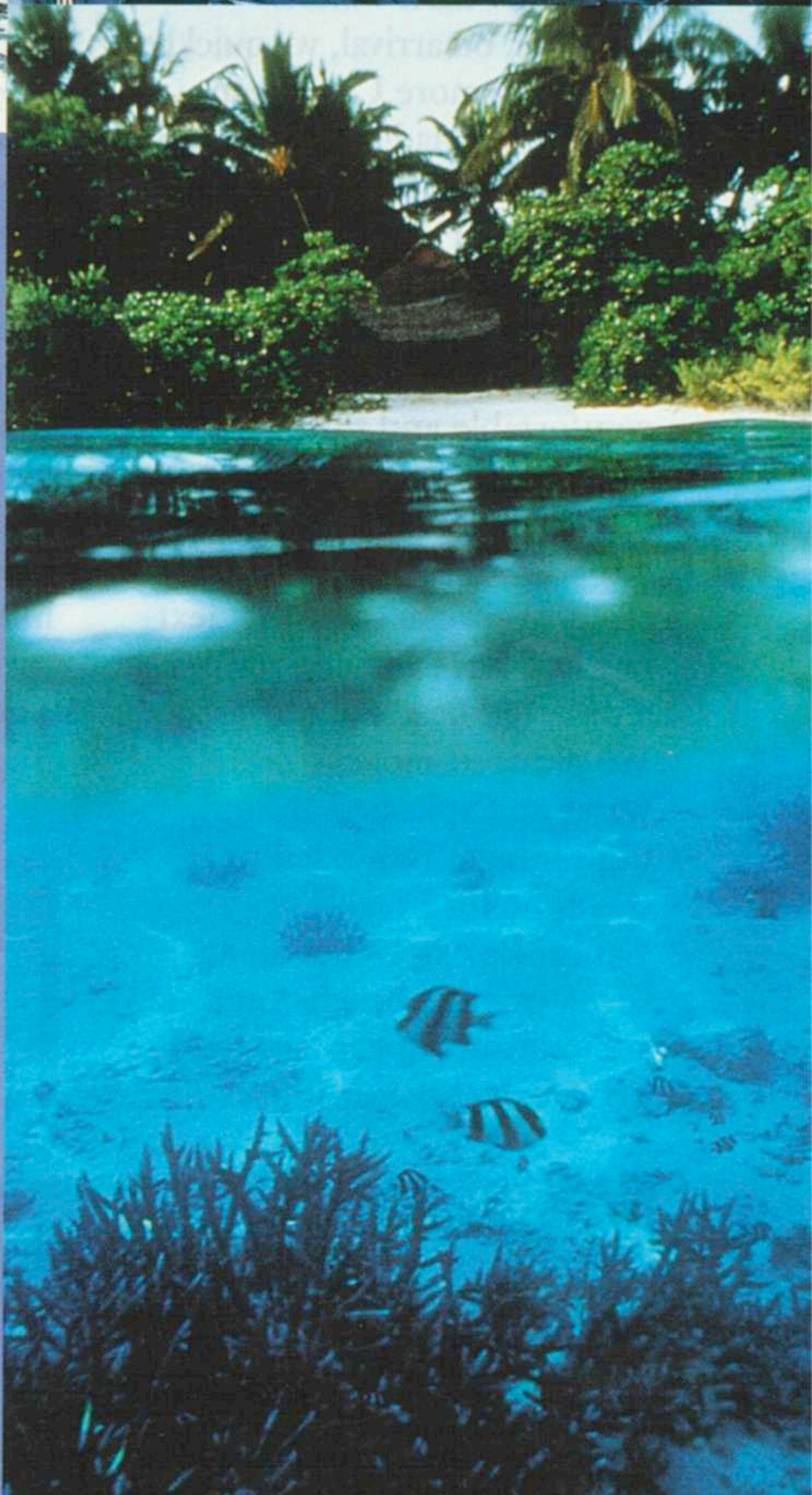




*Clockwise from top left, your first view of Soneva Fushi will be from the air; a private plunge pool at the Four Seasons; getting a good deal at Malé fish market; clear blue waters teeming with fish off Soneva Fushi; Banyan Tree's jetty where marriage blessings are performed; over-water villas at the Four Seasons offer maximum privacy; hauling in the anchor on a fishing boat; back-to-nature check-in at Soneva Fushi's outdoor reception area; seaplanes provide an easy way to flit between islands and are a great way of getting wonderful views; the Banyan Tree is famous for its personal touches – the beds are decorated with a welcoming message made out in petals and grasses*



**NEAR OR FAR:** 8 hours in the air and a short boat transfer **WHEN TO GO:** December to August **WHY GO:** two different takes on the Virgin Islands

## Virgin record

Arriving in St Thomas in the US Virgin Islands at night, we transferred our weary limbs onto a small ferry to take us to Caneel Bay, our hotel on the neighbouring island of St John. We quickly woke up due to an adrenaline rush caused both by pure oxygen and the excitement of speeding across the dark waters. However, on arrival, we quickly got into a more Caribbean pace as we made more sedate progress in a golf buggy to our room. There we found complimentary bottles of wine and rum, and a personal note. The bed was incredibly comfortable and this, combined with the sound of a calm sea lapping outside our window, soon lulled us to sleep. We woke early the next day and were thrilled to find a deserted beach at our feet. We plunged into the clear water and splashed around, until hunger reminded us it was time for breakfast. Caneel Bay stretches along seven pristine beaches and is set in beautiful gardens, with a 5,000 acre national park on

the surrounding hills. No other buildings or hotels are visible, adding to the feeling of space and remoteness. There are 171 rooms at the resort but you rarely see anyone else. When you do, they seem to be honeymoon couples happy to remain in their own love bubbles. Every morning at Caneel there is an excellent breakfast buffet, from mounds of fresh tropical fruit to cooked food in any style. We decided to skip tennis and "The Rhythm of Relationships for Couples" – a Yoga and breathing techniques class aimed at helping you become more in tune with your partner – and instead went on a guided snorkelling trip. In the capable hands of mermaid-like Kath, we saw amazing fish and sea life, and even had a close encounter with two huge barracuda. Kath told us

it was rare to see two together, and I thought it sweet that even they choose to honeymoon here. There are three restaurants, all serving delicious fresh food. However, for a truly romantic experience, nothing beats eating at the sugar ruins, set in the hotel's grounds. Lit only by burning torches and a canopy of stars, it was the perfect setting for our last night at Caneel Bay. Three days later, we caught the ferry to the British Virgin Islands (or the BVIs, to those in the know) and to Little Dix Bay on Virgin Gorda. This is the sister resort of Caneel and shares certain characteristics – excellent service and luxurious Lady Primrose mango and coconut beauty products – but there are differences in character. Little Dix Bay is smaller (only 98 rooms), is mainly

based along one large bay and is less back-to-basics – there are telephones in the rooms, for example. Its compactness somehow made it feel very British – albeit it a warmer version of home. Well worth visiting in the BVIs is the Sage Mountain National Park, full of cacti and exotic flowers. You also can't leave without visiting the famous Baths, which offer amazing snorkelling. Alternatively, for a *Robinson Crusoe* experience, ask to be marooned for the day on a nearby deserted beach, with a picnic to help stave off hunger until supper. The best bit for us, however, was just enjoying the beach in front of our room. It was nearly always empty and we lazed the time away ordering cocktails. Little Dix offers relaxed days and laid-back evenings and, by the end, we felt totally rejuvenated. It was just lucky that we didn't manage to see everything because it means we'll have to return to see the rest. **LUCIA PEARCEY**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LUCIA PEARCEY

**INFO** Classic Connection (01244 355538) offers 7 nights (3 at Caneel Bay and 4 at Little Dix Bay) from £2,129 per person including flights with American Airlines (0845 778 9789) to St Thomas, returning via Miami. A Caneel Bay representative will transfer you by boat. Both hotels are Rosewood Hotels & Resorts (020 7333 7013) ■ **CURRENCY:** US dollar ■ **WHAT TO BUY:** rum ■ **WHAT TO READ:** *The Caribbean & the Bahamas* (Cadoğan, £14.99)

Clockwise from left, Caneel Bay's crescent-shaped beach; Little Dix Bay is hidden under tropical vegetation; clear waters off Little Dix Bay; a colonial legacy on Virgin Gorda's jetty

