

December 19, 2025

To the Honorable Albert Bryan, Jr., Governor of the Virgin Islands of the United States, and the Honorable Senators of the 36<sup>th</sup> Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the United States:

The U.S. Virgin Islands' marine industry and broader blue economy stand at a pivotal crossroads: invest and thrive, or wither away. The recently concluded 2025 USVI Charter Yacht Show saw the lowest vessel attendance in its history outside of the pandemic years. Of the vessels that did attend, roughly two-thirds will operate out of the British Virgin Islands (BVI). By contrast, the British Virgin Islands celebrated their largest show ever—undeniably driven by companies shifting operations from the USVI to the BVI—taking with them more than \$90 million in lost economic activity that otherwise would have remained in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The BVI continues to accelerate its advantage. A \$30–\$40 million expansion of Nanny Cay Marina is underway to accommodate mega yachts and large catamarans that currently rely on Yacht Haven Grande in St. Thomas. Moreover, approvals for the long-awaited Terrance B. Lettsome (EIS) airport expansion continue to progress. Once completed, this will inevitably pull airlift capacity from Cyril E. King Airport (CEK), reducing incoming flights for residents and visitors and decreasing outbound travel choices for Virgin Islanders if airlines reposition routes to the BVI.

According to the Virgin Islands Bureau of Economic Research, the marine industry in 2024 generated approximately \$93 million in spending, \$43 million in wages, and a territorial economic output between \$69 million and \$133 million. Without corrective action, these numbers will decline.

Where do we go from here?

The Government of the U.S. Virgin Islands must seek fair treatment and reasonable fees from the BVI Government for USVI-based charter operators. Concurrently, the U.S. Virgin Islands must position itself as a destination of its own, rather than a gateway to the British Virgin Islands. We must grow local marine tourism by investing in infrastructure, workforce development, and business-friendly regulatory reform. The organizations represented in this letter reflect every corner of the blue economy: sport fishing, ferry services, dive operators, day charters, bareboat charters, and term charter operators. Collectively, we propose the following actions to revitalize the marine industry and secure the future of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

## **1. Invest and Build Locally**

Current DPNR and CZM permitting processes are prohibitive to growth. LimeOut St. Thomas required three full years to secure approvals and navigate red tape to expand to a second location. How can we hope to compete with the BVI's diverse tourism offerings when even our most iconic marine attractions face such avoidable delays?

Beyond new attractions, the USVI urgently needs basic dinghy and small-craft access docks so that guests aboard charter vessels can easily reach shoreside businesses. When visitors step off their vessels and access restaurants, shops, and services, they spend money locally. That local spend and economic activity stays in the Territory rather than flowing to the BVI.

Areas of particular importance include:

- Downtown Charlotte Amalie
- Red Hook
- Cruz Bay and Coral Bay, St. John
- St. Croix's Boardwalk and the Frederiksted Cruise Pier Area

One of the most impactful improvements with minimal environmental impact would be establishing managed access and moorings at Magens Bay. A simple dinghy tie-off line on floats near shore, similar to the successful system used in the St. John National Park, paired with properly installed moorings would create a world-class stop for charter guests. The shoreside amenities already exist: a restaurant, bar, restrooms, and supporting infrastructure. A management agreement allowing for reasonable user fees and mooring fees could fully fund installation, maintenance, and ongoing operations.

Under Title 12, Section 910 of the Virgin Islands Code, the Legislature may act in place of the CZM Committee to expedite permit approvals in the public interest. We strongly encourage using this authority to rapidly develop this essential marine infrastructure.

## **2. Invest in Infrastructure and Skills Training**

Over the past eight years, VIPCA has delivered marine apprenticeship training to nearly 100 Virgin Islanders seeking long-term careers in the marine trades. A strong marine industry produces strong local jobs.

The single most transformative investment the USVI can make is the development of a world-class shipyard in St. Thomas, ideally at the former Adelita Cancryn School property or another suitable location in St. Thomas. Such a facility could host the Caribbean's largest vessel-lifting and repair capacity and serve as a training hub for technical trades, apprenticeships, and long-term, high-wage careers.

Without a functioning shipyard, we cannot expect to expand the marine trades or even maintain them. With the impending closure and relocation of Subbase Dry Dock, the USVI will lose the ability to service and inspect its own ferry fleet.

## **3. Implement Business-Friendly Regulations**

The dollar thresholds for Major CZM Permits have not been updated since 1979. As a result, any project exceeding \$55,000—even a modest beach bar or public dock—triggers the same

permitting requirements as constructing a cruise pier. This stifles small and medium-scale development. Additionally, operating a charter business in the USVI is more expensive than in the BVI. The USVI can narrow this gap by:

- Reducing the Gross Receipts Tax for charter operators
- Eliminating duplicative DLCA licensing requirements

A vessel's commercial registration with DPNR, along with mandatory safety inspections, should serve as sufficient licensing to operate legally.

A one-stop shop for commercial vessel registration should be established. Bureaucracy is poison to innovation and growth. A simple DLCA-managed portal that enables vessels to be registered for commercial work in a single streamlined process would eliminate the current multi-department overlap, which slows business, increases costs, and discourages investment.

#### **4. Revive the Sport Fishing Industry and the Boy Scout Open**

From 1972 to 2017, St. Thomas hosted the world-renowned Virgin Islands Open/Atlantic Blue Marlin Tournament, known as the “Boy Scout”—once called “The Super Bowl of Big-Game Fishing.” New licensing restrictions imposed by the BVI ultimately ended the tournament, along with the millions of dollars in economic activity it generated.

We urge the Government of the U.S. Virgin Islands to work with the Government of the British Virgin Islands to establish reciprocal licensing, customs, and fishing agreements that would relaunch the tournament to the benefit of both territories. With fleets based at American Yacht Harbor and Scrub Island Marina, proceeds could again support Scouting organizations in both the USVI and BVI.

#### **5. Prioritize Environmental Stewardship and Derelict Vessel Removal**

The Territory must fully utilize federal and local resources to remove the many abandoned and derelict vessels that continue to pollute our waters and pose navigational hazards. These vessels can be reprocessed locally, with crushed fiberglass repurposed as aggregate material for concrete and asphalt—reducing the long-term costs of road and infrastructure repairs.

Importantly, federal grants for environmental cleanup, resiliency, and coastal restoration projects typically require matching funds. To ensure the USVI can fully capitalize on these opportunities, the Government should establish a dedicated matching fund specifically reserved for environmental and marine infrastructure grants.

A portion of each vessel's DPNR registration fee should be directed into this dedicated matching fund, ensuring a reliable and sustainable revenue stream that unlocks federal dollars and enables



5304 Yacht Haven Grande, Building R,  
Suite 105, St. Thomas, VI 00802  
Phone: 340.642.0656  
Email: [info@VIPCA.org](mailto:info@VIPCA.org)  
Website: [www.VIPCA.org](http://www.VIPCA.org)

timely removal of abandoned and derelict vessels. This approach guarantees that the Territory is never forced to forgo federal support simply due to a lack of matching dollars.

The opportunity is here, and the time is now, to make bold investments and forward-thinking decisions that will secure the future of the U.S. Virgin Islands' blue economy. We stand ready to support and assist in implementing these recommendations and respectfully request your feedback and engagement.

Sincerely submitted,

Kennon Jones, Executive Director  
Virgin Islands Professional Charter Association

Along with:

Guy Collins  
&Beyond Yacht Charters  
Owner

Leslie Lipert  
&Beyond Yacht Charters  
Yacht Chef / Owner Operator

Zachary Zook  
81C  
Business Owner

Lela Joannidis  
A Sailboat Vacation Ltd. d.b.a  
Boatsatsea.com  
Head of Operations

Jake Lockwood  
Above Deck Ltd  
Broker

Alexandra Fields  
&Beyond Yacht Charters  
Believen Crew

Belinda Richardson  
&Beyond Yacht Charters  
Crew

Szilvia Gango  
A Sailboat Vacation Ltd. d.b.a  
Boatsatsea.com  
Assistant Broker

Sherry Moore  
A Sailboat Vacation Ltd. d.b.a  
Boatsatsea.com  
Caribbean Charter Specialist

Daphne Nelson  
Above-Board Accounting  
Owner



5304 Yacht Haven Grande, Building R,  
Suite 105, St. Thomas, VI 00802  
Phone: 340.642.0656  
Email: [info@VIPCA.org](mailto:info@VIPCA.org)  
Website: [www.VIPCA.org](http://www.VIPCA.org)

**Josef Buxton**  
ACY Yachts Fountaine Pajot  
Partner & Florida Manager

**Kyle Osmun**  
Adventure Scuba  
Owner

**Aleksandra Holowienko**  
All Inclusive Charters LLC  
Charter Yacht Broker

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Antillean yacht charter  
Owner

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Avanta Yacht Charters  
Owner

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BamaBreeze Charters  
Owner

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Benham & Hodge PC  
Office Manager

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Best of BVI  
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Blue Canyon Charters

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Boatbookings  
Charter Consultant

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Yacht Consultant

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Owner/operator

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An hour late and Dive bar  
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**Arletta Robbins**  
Arlee AI  
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Avanta Yacht Charters  
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Between Lands LLC

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Blue Horizon Yacht Charters LTD  
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Ben Sutton  
Boatbookings

Lampros Tsolakis  
Boatbookings  
Charter Director

Tara Sheen  
Boating Citizen

Pamela Coffee  
Boats at Sea  
Broker

Sara Hajdu  
Boats at Sea

Jim Shrove  
Boats at Sea  
Caribbean Charter Specialist

Captain Daniel Conashevick  
BoatTingVI  
President

Laura Bloem  
Bonus Time Boat Charters  
Assistant

Andrew Bloem  
Bonus Time Charters  
Owner & Operator

Bryan Leary  
Bonus Time Charters  
Captain

Riley Boyd  
Box Bar  
Bartender

Cory Busichio  
C and E on Water LLC

Emily Busichio  
C and E on Water LLC

Arthur Scarr  
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Calo Waves LLC  
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Shawna Scarr  
Calo Waves LLC  
Captain/Chef

Robert Alport  
Captain School USVI  
President

Lynne Campbell  
Carefree Yacht Charters  
Owner

Jared Buckstein  
Caribbean Alibi & Freelance Captain  
Captain

Melissa Nelson  
Caribbean Life Properties, LLC  
Owner



5304 Yacht Haven Grande, Building R,  
Suite 105, St. Thomas, VI 00802  
Phone: 340.642.0656  
Email: [info@VIPCA.org](mailto:info@VIPCA.org)  
Website: [www.VIPCA.org](http://www.VIPCA.org)

Eric Chaney  
Chaney Industries  
Owner

Tyler Dunn  
Charter Caribe  
Broker

Casey Strickland  
Charter Caribe  
Chef

Kristi Marquart  
Charter Smarter  
Yacht Charter Specialist

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CHEF REIS  
Chef

William Bailey  
Christie's International Real Estate  
Broker

Chris Patrick  
CKIM Group Inc  
CEO

Dennis Pemberton  
Cool Breeze Marine Svcs  
Manager

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Corcoran Millwork and design

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Cruz Bay Watersports

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Charter Caribe  
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Charterworld  
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Chillaxin Charters, LLC  
Charter Yacht Broker

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Christie's International Real Estate US Virgin  
Islands

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Concierge Yachting  
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Owner

Kevin McCartney  
CrewZen VI Charters  
Owner

Mark Turner  
Cruises Yachts and Villas  
Owner

Brian Saupe  
CSalt Charters  
Captain



5304 Yacht Haven Grande, Building R,  
Suite 105, St. Thomas, VI 00802  
Phone: 340.642.0656  
Email: [info@VIPCA.org](mailto:info@VIPCA.org)  
Website: [www.VIPCA.org](http://www.VIPCA.org)

Lauren Hodgins  
CYI Charters  
Owner

Rusty Day  
DayDream  
Owner/Captain

RJ Portmann  
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Captain

Jason Mackay  
Dock Holiday  
Captain

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Drift Charters  
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Dulce Vita Sailing Excursions, LLC  
Member

Trevon Baker  
Dulce Vita Sails, LLC  
Owner/Operator

Gerald Remick  
Elite Excursions USVI  
Crew

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Empire Boat Charters  
Owner

Cheilinett Espinosa  
Espinosa  
CEO

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Dawe Yachts  
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DayDream  
Chef/Retail store owner

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President

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Drift Charters  
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Dulce Vita Sails LLC  
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Scott Koster  
Elite Excursions

Norma Livie  
Empire Boat Charters  
Owner

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Enkai Sushi Bar, Yacht Haven Grande

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Freelance  
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Island Yacht Charters Inc.  
President

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Fun Water Tours  
Crew

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Fun Water Tours  
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Gemini Productionz  
Owner

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Director

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Inconceivable Marine Services  
Captain/Owner

Charlotte Smith  
Interior Cleaner  
Owner

Andrea Woelfel  
Irie Feelin  
Owner

Christine Duamond  
Island Hopper Boat Charters, llc  
CFO

Jim Jackson  
Jamann Sailing Adventures/Captain School  
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Owner

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Luxe VI Services  
Owner

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Lyric Sails  
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Owner

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Crew

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Lyric Sails LLC  
Owner

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Mad Max Signs  
Member

Ameda Smith  
Maids of Amalie  
Owner

Jean Lynn  
Marine Draft Diesel  
Partner

Istvan Jakab  
Midnight Sun Charters  
Owner



5304 Yacht Haven Grande, Building R,  
Suite 105, St. Thomas, VI 00802  
Phone: 340.642.0656  
Email: [info@VIPCA.org](mailto:info@VIPCA.org)  
Website: [www.VIPCA.org](http://www.VIPCA.org)

John Schafer  
Ministry of Sailing  
CEO

Stephanie Reynolds  
Myst Yacht Charters  
Broker

Mason Randall  
Northside Charter  
Director of Operations

Jeremy Prudhomme  
Ocean Runner Powerboat Rentals and Low  
Key Watersports  
General Manager

Christopher Cilliers  
Offshore Marine  
General Manager

Theodore Danet  
Offshore Marine  
Parts Manager

Steve Richards  
Offshore Marine  
Controller

Daniel Flynn  
Okeana / Yacht Collective  
Captain

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Captain

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Over The Line  
Captain

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Ocean Posse  
Ambassador

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Oceans by Moving Mountains  
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Offshore Marine  
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Harald Tapp  
Offshore Marine  
Sales Manager.

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On the Sea Charters  
Owner

Scott Sawyer  
Out of the Blue Yacht Charters LLC  
Broker

Garth Hudson  
Over The Line Charters  
Owner



5304 Yacht Haven Grande, Building R,  
Suite 105, St. Thomas, VI 00802  
Phone: 340.642.0656  
Email: [info@VIPCA.org](mailto:info@VIPCA.org)  
Website: [www.VIPCA.org](http://www.VIPCA.org)

Christopher Metting  
Palm Tree Charters  
Captain

Dan Cole  
Paradise Yacht Management  
CFO

Rachael Denning  
Paradise Yacht Management  
Captain / chef

Bradley Marquart  
Paradise Yacht Management

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Paradise Yacht Management  
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Risk Strategies  
Business Development

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S/V Knot 5280  
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Owner

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S/V Paradigm Shift  
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Red Hook Dive Center  
Manager

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Owner

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owner

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Ripcat LLC  
owner/master

Nicole Caulfield  
RJC Yacht Sales & Charter  
Charter Manager

Holly Sigdestad  
S/V Knot 5280  
Owner / Operator

Kari White  
S/V Paradigm Shift  
Chef

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S/Y Ohana  
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Sail to Sea ILC  
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Sailing Asante  
Owner/Captain

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Sailing the Cosmos Charters  
Owner

christian rosenberg  
Saint Thomas Yacht Club  
Commodore

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Sand and Sea Yacht Charters  
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Self

Laura Martin  
Self

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Self employed  
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Shades of Blue Charters, LLC  
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Sailing Barefoot Cowboy  
Owner/Captain

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Saint John Boat Charters  
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SAVE  
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Sea Green Charters, LLC  
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Serena Yacht Charters LLC  
Owner/Operator

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Shades of Blue Charters, LLC  
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Owner/Operator

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Sonic Charters  
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St. Rose Fishing Company

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Sonic Charters  
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Spear It Animal LLC  
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Carey Guilbeau  
St. Croix Yacht Club

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St. Rose Fishing Company

Elizabeth Reilly  
St. Thomas Leisure Boat Charters, LLC  
Co-owner

Thomas McCoy  
St. Thomas Sail & Power Boat Squadron  
Captain

Jonathan Alba  
STX By Sea



5304 Yacht Haven Grande, Building R,  
Suite 105, St. Thomas, VI 00802  
Phone: 340.642.0656  
Email: [info@VIPCA.org](mailto:info@VIPCA.org)  
Website: [www.VIPCA.org](http://www.VIPCA.org)

Christopher Sublett  
Sublett Appliance Service LLC  
Owner

Kevin Simmons  
Sun Goddess Adventures LLC  
Captain

Roger Lipert  
SV BelieveN  
Owner / Captain

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Swift Yacht Charters & Villas LLC  
Owner and President

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The Box Bar

Stephanie Carballo  
The Pink Palm Hotel  
GM

Chaliese Summers  
The Summers End Group, LLC  
Member Manager

Erika Boruff  
The Yachting Professionals  
Former VIPCA BOD Member

Javan Douglas  
Transportation Services of St. John  
Crew/Union Shop Steward

Nicholas Hoyt  
TROPLESS Healthy Cocktail Mixers  
Founder

Stephanie Johnson  
Sublime sailing  
President

Cheryl Simmons  
Sun Goddess Adventures LLC  
Owner/Operator, Captain & Chef

James Fitch  
Swift Yacht Charters  
Charter Broker

Iyad Abhary  
Taxi and Limousine

Chip Engelhard  
The Fred  
GM

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The Summers End Group, LLC  
Member

Chris Watson  
The Tropical Adventure Group  
CEO

Michael Morales  
Three Sheets Regatta  
Founding Member

Michael Sullivan  
Tropical Pearl Charters  
President

Caitie Rosko  
Uncharted Collection, LLC  
Founder



5304 Yacht Haven Grande, Building R,  
Suite 105, St. Thomas, VI 00802  
Phone: 340.642.0656  
Email: [info@VIPCA.org](mailto:info@VIPCA.org)  
Website: [www.VIPCA.org](http://www.VIPCA.org)

Robert Low  
Under the Sun VI  
Owner

William Van Rensselaer  
VI Ferments

Justin Tyrrell  
VI Power Boat Rentals LLC  
Owner

Bernie Lacy  
Villa Blue Rock  
Owner

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VIPCA  
Executive Director

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VIPCA  
Board Member, Founder

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VIPCA  
President

Chris Shoupe  
Voodoo Charters  
CEO

Robin Block-Taylor  
Wave Consulting  
VP, Business Development

David Whidden  
Waypoints Yacht Charters  
Consultant/Affiliate

Jay Pennington  
Waypoints Yacht Charters  
Director of US Operations

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VI Boat Charters LLC  
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VI Orthopaedics and Medical Specialists  
Owner

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Jonica Aubain  
VIPCA  
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VIPCA  
Director of Events

Kelly Storch  
VIPCA  
Member

Melody Delgado  
Virgin Island Sailing®  
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Jacquie Exton  
Water Island resident  
Captain

Christian Bent  
Waypoints Yacht Charters  
Managing Partner

Els Kraakman  
Waypoints Yacht Charters  
Crewed Charter Specialist

Susan Restauri  
Waypoints Yacht Charters  
Owner Care Liasion



5304 Yacht Haven Grande, Building R,  
Suite 105, St. Thomas, VI 00802  
Phone: 340.642.0656  
Email: [info@VIPCA.org](mailto:info@VIPCA.org)  
Website: [www.VIPCA.org](http://www.VIPCA.org)

JP Dunaway  
Whereabouts Unknown Charters LLC  
Owner

Casey Grimes  
Yacht Collective LLC  
Owner

Timothy Clark  
Yacht Indulgence  
Captain

Laura B Duncan  
Yacht Serena

Capt. Mike Johnson  
Yachts Worldwide  
Charter Broker, VIPCA Board Member

Shauna Hochreiter  
Zen Waves

Elizabeth DiDomenico  
American Yacht Harbor  
General Manager

Bret Van Roden  
Yacht Collective  
Owner

Charles Irons  
Yacht Haven Grande  
General Manager - Real Estate & Marina

Michael D'Amico  
Yacht INDULGENCE

Matthew Weidert  
Yacht Warriors  
Founder

Sherry Yates  
Yates Yachts  
Owner

Chad Blake  
Nautical Trips and Consulting  
Owner