



DAY TRIP ST. CROIX

Joy Riding

I'm no horse lover — my childhood included too many riding lessons gone awry — but the idea of trotting through a tropical forest and galloping down the beach sounds like an irresistible way to experience St. Croix. So I gather my courage and make a reservation with Paul and Jill's Equestrian Stables on the west coast near Frederiksted. When Jill Hurd greets me and asks if I've ridden before, I fib and tell her I'm as green as they come — it never hurts to err on the side of caution.

Jill saddles a quarter horse named Lazy Blaze — I'm hoping for more laze than blaze — and leads us through an orchard of star fruit, mango and avocado trees and then into the woods. Although St. Croix's lush expanses don't receive enough precipitation to qualify as true rainforest, the dense canopy suggests that's a mere technicality. Mahogany, turpentine and kapok trees mingle overhead, creating a green canvas daubed with vibrant yellow orchids and purple passion fruit flowers.

So familiar is Jill with the plants along the path that she's even nick-

named some of them. We pass the Swiss Family Robinson Tree, whose sprawling branches look like they could accommodate even the extended family Robinson. Farther along, she tells me a ghost story: In a particularly dense spot where sunlight is scarce, a young upstart seedling moved in and began choking one of its elders as it grew. When the wind blows just right, the trees emit an eerie whine that sounds like an attic door creaking shut. That's the Haunted Tree, of course.

As we saunter along, Lazy Blaze's leisurely pace makes for effortless sightseeing from a commanding vantage point, and plenty of photo opportunities. Around dusk, we enter a field where I'm surprised to see horses roaming freely. I ask Jill where they came from, and she laughs. The horses aren't wild, she says — they're hers — she brings

them here to nibble from the waist-high grasses. The warm glow of the setting sun and the unfettered horses wandering contentedly all around me create an enchanting scene.

For a finale, we run the horses on the beach, and I realize that my fears have vanished. I feel liberated and powerful, even though my horse is more comfy sofa than fireball.

I say goodbye to Jill and Lazy Blaze,

and head down the sand in search of a saddle at the Sunset Grill. After my second Painkiller, it occurs to me: Maybe I'm a horse lover after all. — Brooke Morton

Paul and Jill's Equestrian Stables (340-772-2880; pws.prserv.net/paul-and-jills) operates two rides daily in high season (one ride in low). Each guided rainforest or nature tour lasts two hours. Cost: \$75 per person. The Sunset Grill (340-772-5855) is open daily for lunch (11 a.m. – 3 p.m.) and dinner (5 p.m. – 9 p.m.).



Happy trails through St. Croix's jungle and down one of its beaches.