

Last one in buys the first round of Cruzan rum punch!

TRIPLE PLAY

Crushing the world's hottest half-Ironman

BY LISA JHUNG

IT'S A STICKY SUNDAY MORNING IN MAY, just minutes before the start of the St. Croix Ironman 70.3 Triathlon, and I'm standing half naked on the beach, surrounded by 850 sweating sinewy, hardbodies in a similar state of undress. The crowd is perfect for an amped tropical rave, except for one thing: We're all here to kick each other's scantily clad butts.

After setting up our transition areas on the main island, we swam a couple hundred yards to an island across the harbor for this immodest kickoff to the beachfront race. And if cottony-white sand and swaying cocoa palms sound like too chill a setting for a half-Ironman—that's 70.3 miles of swimming, cycling, and running—none of my competitors seem to have noticed. The scattering of lounge chairs are empty as athletes take one last stretch, adjust their goggles, and size one another up like

pirates about to duel. I have a minor bout of pre-race ambivalence—all this just so I can hang out on the beach with a fruity rum drink?—then the starting gun fires and I'm clawing my way through taut skin and bright-blue seas, fantasizing about a cocktail and my waiting flip-flops.

Now in its 18th year, the St. Croix Triathlon has gained a reputation as one of the hardest half-Ironman courses in the world. The 1.24-mile open-ocean swim often serves up currents and swells. The 56-mile bike course slaps you with headwinds and rolling hills, including a 14-percent-grade climb known as the Beast. And the 13.1-mile run isn't exactly flat. That makes the St. Croix event, which mirrors Kona with its saunalike heat, a good early-season tune-up for pros heading to the Ironman World Championship, in October. St. Croix is also a Hawaii qualifier, so many competitive amateurs come to vie for the 30 Kona slots up for grabs. There are plenty of recreational triathletes, too. After all, if you're going to race 70 miles, why not do it somewhere you can get a suntan in the process and recuperate on the beach when it's all finished?

When it comes to seaside R&R, St. Croix, roughly 60 miles east of

ISLAND TIME:

MAY 4-13

St. Lucia Jazz

ST. LUCIA

What began 15 years ago as an effort to beef up off-season revenues has morphed into the "Best Party in the Caribbean." It's a

self-proclaimed title, but how can you argue with so many free festivities and big names? Past headliners have included Al Green, Taj Mahal, and Lauryn Hill. Tickets cost \$15-\$56; 758-452-4094, www.stlucijazz.org

JULY 2-22

Bermuda Triple Crown
HAMILTON, BERMUDA

"Bermuda has the most consistent fishery for large blue marlin in the world," says tournament producer Dan Jacobs, and that's no fish

story. The country's record marlin catch, a 1,352-pound beast pulled out on August 1, 1995, isn't far off the Atlantic record of 1,402 pounds. For three consecutive weekends in July, anglers from around the world head for these

access and resources

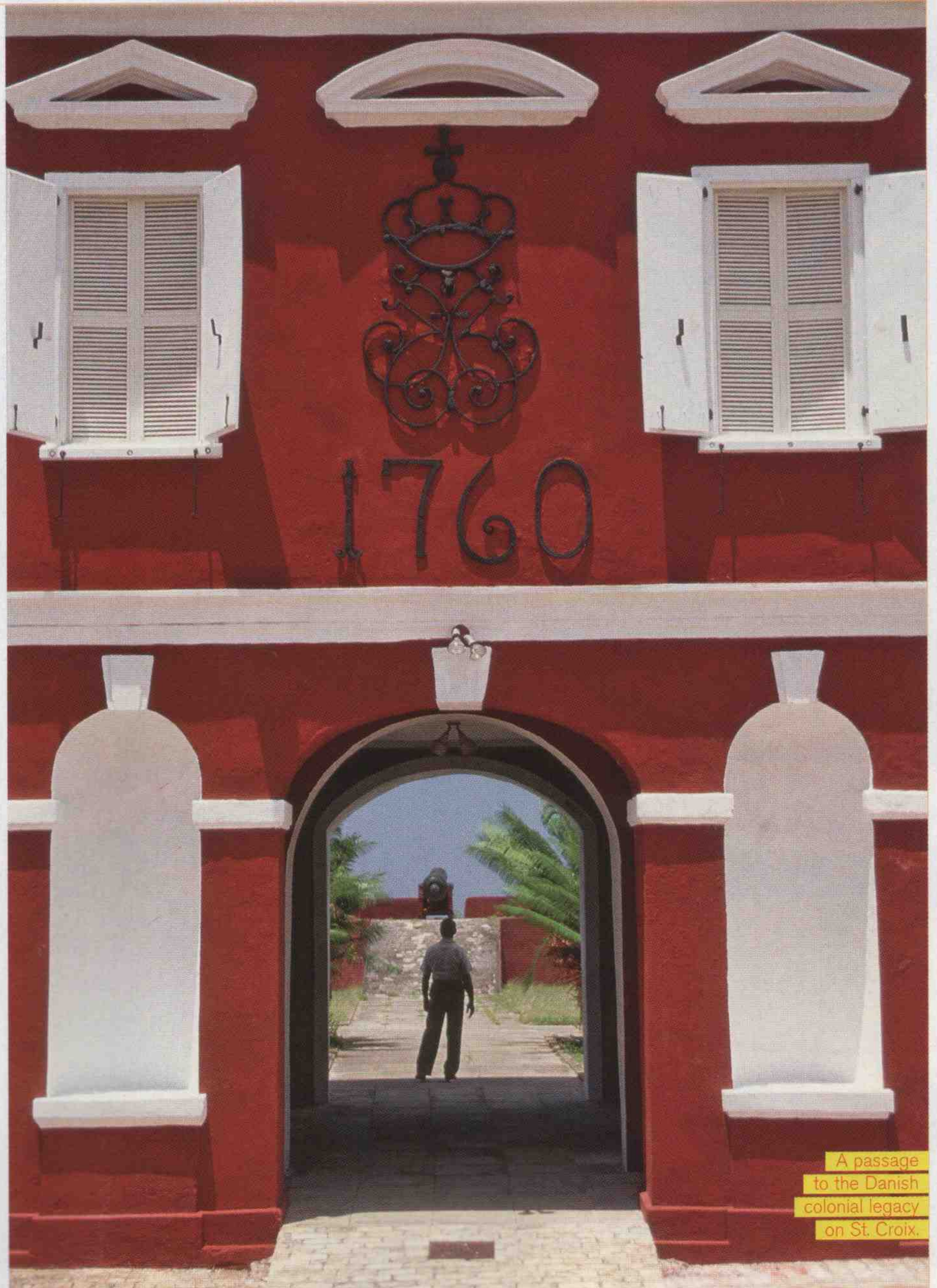
IF YOU'RE HOPING TO RACE THE TRIATHLON, scheduled for May 5, 2007, register in advance to secure your spot (entry fee, \$235; www.stcroixtriathlon.com). Three major airlines (Delta, American, and US Airways) and four regional carriers fly into St. Croix. During race week, the elegant and expansive Buccaneer Hotel (doubles from \$265; 800-255-3881, www.the-buccaneer.com) buzzes with triathletes, and the on-site Hideaway Spa brings in a backup team of massage therapists. For a little post-race relaxation, book a boat tour with Caribbean Sea Adventures (snorkeling, \$40; scuba, \$60; 340-773-2628, www.caribbeanseaadventures.com) to Salt River National Park, where you'll explore an underwater trail among coral, barracuda, and trumpetfish before limin' (local speak for chillin') on the empty beach. Or see where Christopher Columbus landed on a sea-kayaking tour through the mangroves at Salt River National Park (\$45; 800-532-3483, www.stcroixkayak.com).

—L.H.

Puerto Rico, stands apart from the other U.S. Virgins. While 2.5 million people throng neighboring St. Thomas each year, the big cruise ships skip St. Croix, meaning that less than a tenth as many come here, mainly for the uncrowded scuba diving, snorkeling, and sailing. The island's colorful past—six different nations (Spain, France, Holland, England, Denmark, and finally the U.S.) as well as the Knights of Malta have governed over the past 500 years—has created a cultural stew. Cars hug the left-hand side of the road next to pastel-splashed structures built by Danish settlers in the early 1700s. Dilapidated sugar mills and sprawling multi-million-dollar estates sit side by side in the arid hills, while mini-malls are cropping up on the outskirts of towns. It's still a mellow vibe, though, with groups of West Indian men congregating on the porches of places like La Reine Chicken Shack every afternoon to play backgammon in the shade.

Fifty-some miles into the race, I whiz past just such an idling group and find myself, muscles aching and heart rate pegged, slightly envious. From my saddle-sore vantage, those laughing old men in comfy chairs seem to have the right idea. A few miles later, after I ditch the bike, a group of cheering schoolchildren give me my third wind. Bolstered by their enthusiasm, I charge through the final miles, edging out another woman to take tenth in my category. It may not be fast compared with some—the overall winner crossed the finish line and headed for a beer on the beach nearly two hours before me—but I feel the satisfaction you can get only from finishing a race this hard.

Back at the hotel, I slide my weary feet into a waiting pair of thongs and slip into a poolside lounge. After the day I've had, rum sounds absolutely nauseating, so I kick back and nurse a giant bottle of water. [OT]



A passage to the Danish colonial legacy on St. Croix.

waters to fish for more than \$750,000 in cash and prizes. The only eye candy as spectacular as the thousand-pound fish are the \$10 million yachts captained by some anglers. 407-571-4680, www.bermudatriplecrown.com

JULY 15-21

Red Stripe Reggae Sumfest MONTEGO BAY, JAMAICA

With July temperatures averaging around 90 degrees in Montego Bay, the tourist town gets even hotter during the Reggae Sumfest,

Jamaica's premier music festival. Ten thousand people show up each night to bump, sway, and swill Red Stripe during a five-day lineup of reggae, dancehall, and hip-hop shows. Though this is the heart of the hurricane

season, with recent standout performers like Damian Marley and Kanye West, the fiercest storm always kicks up on stage. Multi-day passes from \$84-\$131; 876-953-2933, www.reggaesumfest.com