

Celebrity traveler: Tech expert Mario Armstrong recharges in St. Thomas

For vacations, Baltimore native enjoys being able to disconnect

By Stephanie Citron, Special to The Baltimore Sun



Mario Armstrong is all about making connections.

As a technology commentator on NBC's "Today" show, CNN and NPR, among others, the Baltimore native knows how to effortlessly translate high-tech topics for low-tech audiences. Early in his career, he was the first chief technology advocate in Baltimore City government for then-Mayor Martin O'Malley. Amid his national gigs, the Emmy Award-winner also hosts "The Digital Cafe" on WYPR.

Despite his expertise, when it comes to travel, Armstrong doesn't exactly have a teleport. He still relies on the usual trains, planes and hotels. In a brief break from his perpetual parade of gigs, the tech expert chatted with us about where he goes to recharge and the portable devices he relies on to keep him plugged into today's ever-evolving world.

So, even in today's world of telecommuting, you are on the road practically every week. You've seen so many places; what would you call your favorite?

I think that would be St. Thomas.

St. Thomas is beautiful. How did you happen to discover it?

I love beaches, and I love clear water [and] swimming. It's not too touristy and you can get a feel for the real culture there, [which is] very slow. As someone who is always on the go and constantly connected, to find that slowness ... just being able to disconnect and shut off.

What part of St. Thomas are you speaking of, because there are some very touristy spots, such as where the cruise ships dock.

The place I stay is actually a place where many people go — Frenchman's Reef, a beach resort. [It is] a property that's away from the main drag and far from the cruise ships. Also, [from St. Thomas] it's easy to get over to St. John's — take a little ferry, and you're there! You really can't get much more remote.

Whom do you bring with you when you visit?

Definitely bring the wife, and Christopher, our son. He was 5 when we were [last] there.

What are some must-do's, off the beaten track, around the Island?

You have to go to Mountain Top — it's a restaurant and a bar on St. Peter Mountain, overlooking Magen's Bay. One of the highest points there. Two things you go there for — gorgeous views of the beach and the island ... and then you get this insane banana daiquiri. That is what they are known for. The story is that the recipe has been there for over 50 years. Right now, I'm salivating just thinking about it.

What time of day do you suggest going?

Sunset is nice, but anytime is beautiful up there.

Anyplace else?

[Another] one that is a little more touristy but fun to do is to take the skyride to a place called Paradise Point. There are incredible views. When you get up there, they have a steel band playing, limbo dancers and Moko Jumbies — people on stilts dressed in costume. It's like they are trying to give you a little sample of what goes on during Carnival.

The day trip we do is St. John's [Island]. You hop on the ferry; it takes about 30 minutes to get there. It is much more remote, a beautiful beach. Some people spend the night; we just haven't.

What is there to do on St. John's?

It's a small island. There are markets and quite a bit of jungle. The towns have these winding streets with real colorful buildings and homes. Everything is yellow, peach or turquoise. There's lots of shopping. Also, there is a great island tour that takes you all over the island and through the neighborhoods. The most famous beach there is Caneel Bay — we go there.

So you're on an island; do you like water sports?

Absolutely Jet Ski. They're not expensive, they're fun. Jet-Skiing in the Caribbean is abovewater snorkeling, because you can see straight through.

Any favorite memories?

One is being able to buy drinks off a truck. You're walking around St. Thomas by the waterfront or Main Street, and there are these trucks that are minibars on wheels. It was one of the first things that caught my attention: "Whoa: Is that a bar on wheels?" They can make you food or shakes or drinks.

The second was that we were having some jewelry repaired and the jeweler was having Coronas while fixing my stuff. I was like, "OK, it's okay to drink at work here!"

Do you have a favorite travel bag?

Probably my solar backpack. 100 percent recycled. Solar-charging. It has two straps over each shoulder, a main compartment and a smaller compartment. In front of the smaller compartment are the two solar panels that pull in the sun. I can connect my phone. It has an internal battery, charged by solar power, and also a USB port to connect any USB device to it for charging. It's pretty cool for my hand-held electronics. ... It's called Voltaic [and retails for about \$230].

What is one item you will not travel without?

Aside from my Voltaic, I guess it's my Kodak waterproof camera because it can go up to about 10 feet underwater. It's a camera, and it also takes video and I can shoot in full HD. For me, it's an all-in-one must-have.

What are your favorite travel guides, websites or apps?

I am huge fan of the TripIt app. It does the itineraries and is really well thought out. For overseas, I like XE currency app. And [I also have] a free Wi-Fi finder.

Favorite travel reads?

Mostly the things that allow me to recharge my mental capacity and use other areas of the brain. I like to look at TED videos when I'm in a place where I can relax and concentrate. The other thing I like to read is inspirational stuff: personal development, motivation. I stay away from the newspaper; [except] I'll read local stuff to get a sense of what's going on and where the happenings are. I'll [also] do puzzles, checkers and chess.

Ever play Words With Friends?

Oh, my — it's totally addictive!

I can't even imagine all that's on the home screen of your smartphone.

It's definitely on overload!

If you go

Just 12 miles long and 3 miles wide, St. Thomas is one of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Its capital, Charlotte Amalie, has one of the most scenic harbors in the Caribbean. Often called the hub of the Caribbean, the island still possesses much of its raw tropical beauty. For more information, go to visitusvi.com.

Getting there

From BWI-Marshall Airport, USAir offers connecting flights to Cyril E. King Airport in St. Thomas starting at about \$600 round-trip. Or fly nonstop from Dulles International on United, from about \$540 round-trip.

Lodging

Mario Armstrong's beloved Frenchman's Reef Resort is perched on a bluff overlooking the Caribbean, just 3 miles east of Charlotte Amalie. Outdoor glass elevators transport guests to its secluded beach. Brand new renovations include posh guest rooms, infinity pools and a spa. Rates from \$199 per night. Call 340-776-8500 or go to frenchmansreefresort.com.

Activities

Floating above the island in a gondola (\$21) up to Paradise Point is half of the adventure. Musical entertainment, amid stunning island views, shops and a great bar, await you at the top. Call 340-774-9809 or go to stthomasskyride.com.

St. John's Island is 4 miles east of St. Thomas. Its beaches are considered some of the most picturesque in the Virgin Islands and most of its 19 square miles are protected parkland, but there are plenty of spots to wander in town. Take the ferry from St. Thomas' Red Hook pier to Cruz Bay. The ferry leaves hourly, 6:30 a.m. to 11 p.m., and costs about \$6 each way. Call 340-776-6282

Dining

On a clear day, the observation deck at Mario Armstrong's favorite scenic dining spot, Mountain Top, has telescopes enabling views of neighboring islands. Call 340-774-2400 or go to mountaintopvi.com.

For authentic local fare — salt fish and dumplings, red bean soup — try Gladys' Cafe, Royal Dane Mall. Call 340-774-6604 or go to gladyscafe.com.

—*Stephanie Citron*

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