A few years ago, my wife, son, daughter, and I went on vacation for a week to St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Having lived in the West Indies for several years when I was younger, I can attest that St. John is one of the most beautiful islands, with much of it being a national park. The people are friendly, the scenery is spectacular, the beaches are some of the most beautiful in the world, and the climate is wonderful. We stayed at Maho Bay, one of the world’s first eco-tourism sites, which is built into the rain forest in such a way as to impact it the least. The resort recycles nearly everything. Leftover food is composted and used in their vegetable garden, wastewater is recycled to irrigate the garden, and there is a set of shelves near the front desk for departing guests to leave unused items such as books, sun screen, food, etc. The restaurant uses a solar oven and a solar icemaker, among other ingenious innovations.

I’ve been accused of sometimes enjoying my work too much. More than once I’ve been referred to as not just a soil scientist but a “dirt geek” who can never pass up a chance to examine a soil profile. On this trip, I couldn’t help but stop and examine a few road cuts, much to my family’s chagrin. One day, near the end of our trip, we visited Cinnamon Bay, a beautiful beach on the north side of the island. While my wife relaxed in the shade and the children played in the water, I took a short walk up the beach. There I encountered an archaeological dig in progress. As my original bachelor’s degree is in archeology, I was intrigued. I approached the excavation and introduced myself. As the dig had no soil scientist, I was made most welcome and in short order I found myself working alongside the head archaeologist.

One of the reasons the site was being excavated was because it was threatened by beach erosion. The pit that I was working in was within 10 feet of the high tide line and was in danger of inundation in any serious storm. One problem faced by the crew was blowing sand, which continually backfilled the pit, one sand grain at a time. Returning from a half hour lunch break they would find a layer of fresh aeolian sand about 1/4 to 1/2 inch deep covering the bottom of the pit, making stratigraphic control difficult. At my suggestion, we took some tarpaulins, cut some stakes in the rainforest with a machete, and rigged a makeshift “silt fence” (technically, sand fence), which minimized the problem.

By the time I rejoined my wife and children later for dinner, I had spent an enjoyable day excavating a rich cultural site, which yielded a number of significant artifacts from the time period before and up to European contact. At the archaeologist’s request, I returned home with a number of soil samples for particle size analysis. Helping at this dig was one of the high points of the vacation, not just because I revisited my younger days and a profession that had I trained for then abandoned for another story to be covered in another article. It seems that the dig was offering free room and board at Cinnamon Bay, in accommodations comparable to the ones for which I was paying our room and board have been provided, but I might have been able to pay for part of the trip as a business expense and claimed part as a charitable contribution.

Since then, I have never looked at vacation planning the same way. I still plan my vacations for relaxation, but always try to research if anything of professional interest is going on in the area that I am visiting. My vacation activities have included visiting glaciers in Alaska and visiting volcanoes and examining Oxisols in Costa Rica, but that is another story to be covered in another article.

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