

shark, none of which came too close. On our second tank we went down on the Mizpah and spent time down in the open holds of the ship. We found them to be full of all kinds of fish and a few turtles. One of our group spotted a large Goliath grouper. Strong currents had resumed by today, so it was a short drift over to the Amaryllis. We found it to basically be just a gutted hull, but it was large and full of coral, sponges and fish. Our last day of boat diving took us to Governor's Reef Riverwalk, Dive-A-Rama and Rockpiles. Governor's Reef Riverwalk is a group of four wrecks sunk about two years ago at the order of Gov. Jeb Bush. These boats were confiscated and sunk after being caught as rug runners. They are in much better use now, providing lots of opportunities to see new corals and lots of fish. Large Angels (grays and queens) butterfly fish, trunkfish and spiny puffers were abundant, as were large spiny lobsters and stingrays. Don't miss out on making a night dive under the Blue Heron Bridge. You won't be able to get out unless it is slack tide. Marine life in miniature was abundant. Quarter size flounder, sergeant majors, scorpionfish and other tropicals hung close to and in between the bridge pilings. I have also never seen so many octopus in such a small area. Most allowed us to handle them. Be careful of the stingrays, not always easy to see at night, guitarfish were also plentiful. On the way back to the beach we also swam with a foot long Spanish dancer! WPB is good for drift diving (very strong currents may not be good for new divers, some in our group had problems), wrecks and healthy reefs. We saw turtles on every

dive, both under and on the surface. Bring seasickness medication if you get queasy, seas on a calm day are 2-3', we had them at 6-8' on the roughest day. The boat did not have a rinse tank for cameras, but did have a fresh water hose to wash equipment off between and after dives. ([www.scuba-adventures.com](http://www.scuba-adventures.com))

## North Carolina

**Atlantis IV Charters, 2004, Harry Whiter ([harrywhite@rcn.com](mailto:harrywhite@rcn.com)) New York, NY.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 29 to 100 Feet. Water: 70 to 80 F, calm. First rate boat, Captain and crew. Would not go out when conditions were bad unless divers insisted; some boats would take you to a rotten but safe dive to collect a fee — not this boat. A truly straight operation. Dives were on wrecks, although at some point, wrecks begin to resemble reefs. Great dives. 6th time back (twice this year). Boat comfortable but not elegant. Most charters are reserved for returning groups so that newcomers catch as catch can. Very high level of renewals, for understandable reasons. As season wears on, likelihood of storms seems to increase but policy of no dive, no pay mitigates the weather risk. Stayed in beach house recommended by captain. Excellent; great value. ([www.atlantischarters.net](http://www.atlantischarters.net))

## VIRGIN ISLANDS - BRITISH

Patch reef diving on these closely grouped islands is easy, pleasant, and fairly similar regardless of which island you choose,

although the quiet British Virgins and St. John are far less crowded and more pleasant than the cruise ship havens of St. Thomas and St. Croix, where hurricanes and fishing have taken a toll. . . . BVI is a yachter's paradise with crewed or bareboat sailboats galore, and it's also served by several land-based dive operations. . . . BVI has nice little hotels, good restaurants, congenial surroundings, and British style.

## Cooper Island

**Sail Carribean, Cooper Island Beach Club, November 2003, Mark Thorne ([thorne@mindspring.com](mailto:thorne@mindspring.com)) Raleigh, NC.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. My gypsy dive buddies and myself have been all over the Caribbean for more than 10 years and we all agreed that this was one of our top dive destinations. The resort, the resort staff, the food, the dive operation, the dive boat, the dive staff, and the dives were as close to perfect as anyone could ask for in the Caribbean. The place is lined with graceful palm trees and a few sail boats moored in the protected bay. There were no jet skis or tourist-type activities on or around the island which created a true 'your-in ' paradise' atmosphere. Cooper Island Beach Club is a quiet, small operation, about 10 to 12 cottages, that takes pride in keeping the place neat and functional. Customer service was a high priority. The cottages run off of generators with no A/C but we all found the ceiling fans and the island breezes made the place com-

fortable. Sail Caribbean has a large 36-foot, new dive boat that was very roomy with lots of goodies like showers, a head, tank holders, easy water entry/exit, and plenty of shade. The divemaster was very accommodating to plan for dives that met our goals. The BVI dive sites are numerous and varied from reef to wreck dives. Most of the dives had minimal current. Rhone, this 130-year-old plus wreck, made for wonderful day and night dives. We saw a monster turtle sleeping under this wreck. The dives included a wide assortment of soft corals and tropical fish. The dives were mostly relaxing and interesting. Topside activities include eating fantastic food, sitting on the beach, swimming, sailing, kayaking, snorkeling, and taking out their 19' inflatable powerboats around the numerous islands. The restaurant serves up home cooked food that was varied and delicious. If you wish to cook for yourself, the cottages are fully furnished with a fridge, stove, and all the pots and pans you could ask for. Boat with large camera table and dedicated large rinse bucket. ([www.cooper-island.com](http://www.cooper-island.com))

## Tortola

**Dive Tortola, January 2004, Catherine Gankofskie, Kennesaw, GA.** Experience: 200+ dives. Vis: 90 to 100 feet. Water 79 F. Decided to try Dive Tortola after having a great experience at their other operation, Dive Provo in Turks & Caicos. Excellent level of service at both locations. As a single traveler, I felt like I was at home. ([www.divetortola.com](http://www.divetortola.com))

**Underwater Boat Services, Island Hideaways Villa Rental, June 2004, Robin A. Masson (ram@wigginsandmasson.com) Ithaca, NY.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm, choppy. UBS is a great operation. Their boat is fast, and comfortably holds 4 divers and captain/DM. You hire the boat for your party. With three divers you pay the same as you'd pay for three to go on a cattle boat; with 4 divers, it's cheaper for 2-tank dives. You set your schedule and decide with the DM/captain where you'll go for the day. DMs are very enthusiastic and knowledgeable about sites, critters, fish, behavior, etc. Equipment is in good shape and there are 60cf tanks for short people who don't suck the air. you can stay down as long as you like. We started diving at 10 am, do one dive before lunch, go over to one of the neighboring islands for lunch, and then another dive in the afternoon. A couple of days, we did a late afternoon dive, had a surface interval while watching the sun go down, and then a night dive. Late dinner at Fat Hog Bob's, down the road where we had awesome BBQ overlooking the water, watching the full moon shimmer on the surface. The Wreck of the Rhone is a fabulous site — bow and stern are two separate dives, throbbing with fish life and encrusted with corals and sponges. Other good sites at other islands in the BVI chain are all within 20 minutes. Diving is generally 80 feet or less, with little current. Viz was only so-so, due to daily storms; July starts the stormy season. Safe, clean, friendly people, varied terrain [need 4-wheel drive for most roads — consider it an adventure]!, and

beautiful uncrowded beaches. Cruise ships come in once or twice a week, but with little impact on the island outside of “downtown” — spend those days diving and you won't even know they're there! On the Internet we used Island Hideaways and they arranged airport pickup and jeep rental for us too. Good supermarkets allow you to cook at home and save \$. Lots of very good restaurants of all kinds and prices. Our small boat had a big bucket for cameras, large enough for a housed Nikon and a Nikonos V with strobes — that's all we needed. A dry area for changing film. The island has 24 hour print processing and e-6 processing available for those who want them. ([www.scubabvi.com](http://www.scubabvi.com))

### Virgin Gorda

**March 2004, Mary Temple, NY, NY.** Vis: 60-80 ft. Water: 77-80 F. Dive restrictions enforced: depth, time and safety stops. I made six dives with the same dive company, which will remain nameless for purposes of this report. My story is meant only to draw the attention of my fellow divers to a very important lesson: when you dive, you are 100% responsible for your own safety. We were off the very rocky coast of one of the smaller islands surrounding Virgin Gorda. There were eight divers and two divemasters on the boat, with one of the divemasters doubling as captain. Four of the divers were getting certified. These four divers were grouped with the non-captain divemaster. The other three (all strangers to me) and myself were grouped with the divemaster/captain. The five of us were to act as a buddy

group. Because of the large swells, my group quickly donned our gear and dropped into the water. After about 40 minutes, the other members of my group were close to 500 psi and ready to surface. I indicated to my divemaster that I still had 1000 plus psi. He signaled back to me that I could look around under the boat. I spent about the next 5 minutes or so at 20 feet exploring. When the other group returned, I completed a three minute safety stop at 15 feet. Because the water was rough, I let the novice divers get on the boats first. Then I quickly hauled myself onto the wooden entry/exit ledge. My divemaster was nowhere in sight, and the other divemaster took my equipment. The boat had two decks, with the helm up top. As I pulled off my wetsuit, we took off. During the 20 minute ride back to Virgin Gorda, the non-captain divemaster entertained us with stories of diving in Thailand. Part way through the ride, the boat abruptly slowed and he scooted up top. When he came down he said the captain had something to ask him. “He [my divemaster] wanted to know if Mary was on board?” He couldn't remember helping me with my equipment! At first I laughed, but the more I thought about it the queasier I felt. We were about ten minutes from the dive site when the captain expressed his concern about my whereabouts. The dive site was extremely choppy and the shore not conducive to exit due to large, jagged boulders and pounding waves. Currents are common in that area. I had not brought my safety sausage and was not using my BC, which is equipped with a horn. You

hear about divers being left behind and wonder how it can happen.

## VIRGIN ISLANDS – U.S.

### St. Croix

**SCUBA, Rental Villa-View Galore, July 2004, Rob Schmitt (rschmitt13@comcast.net) Long Valley, NJ.**

Experience: 25 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, calm, no currents. St. Croix Ultimate Bluewater Adventures (SCUBA) was a friendly operation with a 38 foot well maintained boat leaving right off the boardwalk in Christiansted. On our first 2 dives my sons and I had the boat to ourselves. Staff was very helpful & as we are pretty new divers we stayed with the divemasters who showed us turtles, southern sting rays, spotted eagle rays, cleaner shrimp, giant barrel sponges, and schools of angelfish. Other more experienced divers went their own way with no problems. They also had a videographer along who made a great DVD of our dives to show my nondiving wife what we do underwater for only \$40. The beaches are rocky & have many urchins. The best beach is on Buck Island — a 45 minute boat ride. Best place to eat — Bacchus, with fine wines, great food, and where else can you have your desserts brought to you in the billiards room (a purple and black table with posters of Marilyn Monroe) whole place is air conditioned too. City— There are poor people/beggars around, but no one bothered us. Plenty of places to shop. Worthwhile trip to Cruzan Rum factory. Costs \$4 and you can taste/drink all the rum and rum

mixed drinks you want (bring a Desig. driver if you do — they drive on the left in St. Croix). ([www.stcroixscuba.com](http://www.stcroixscuba.com))

## St. Thomas

**Blue Island Divers, Frenchmans Reef, February 2004, John Jackson (jacksnr@yahoo.com) Laguna Niguel, CA.** Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 75 to 78 F, choppy. Small boat with capacity for only six divers. Stern ramp for entry and good ladder for reboarding. Boat captain efficient in setting up for both dives. Dive trip limited to shallow, protected location by daughter taking “resort” course and making her first 2 dives. The divemaster was thorough in his instruction, and encouraging in his demeanor. My daughter thoroughly enjoyed the experienced. The divemaster was very good about taking her where she could see lots of fish, including groupers, a large barracuda, and several turtles. Separate buckets for masks and cameras. ([www.blueislanddivers.com](http://www.blueislanddivers.com))

**Blue Island Divers, Marriott, June 2004, Sheryl O'Connor (johnconnor2@cox.net) South Windsor, CT.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 Feet. Water: 76 to 81 F, choppy. Smaller operation with personalized service. There were never more than 10 divers on a boat and for most of the trips, there were only 5 or 6. We saw many other dive operations' boats with what looked like 20 or more divers on them. Blue Island picked us up at the dock at the Marriott at Frenchman's Bay and were extremely accommodating, as well as respectful

and mindful of the various levels of experience in the boat. The wreck sites were the most interesting and there are plenty of them. Easy trip and no-hassle “American” experience.

**Blue Water Divers, Wyndham Sugar Bay, May 2004, David Reubush (davereubush@cox.net), Toano, VA.** Experience: 251-500 dives Vis: 50 to 60 Feet. Water: 82 to 83 Fahrenheit, calm. Blue Water Divers are easy to work with and friendly. They have a new boat that has a head, an important criteria for an over 55 diver. The dive-master this year was not the same as those last year. While he was a friendly kid he was just doing a job and putting in time. Most dives were out and back from the boat with virtually no effort expended to point out items of interest. The typical clientele were cruise ship divers with little or no experience so they did not know what good diving is. I was always the last into the boat and I still always came up with over 1100 psi. The Wyndham is sorely in need of renovation. The beds were uncomfortable, the carpets threadbare, the pool and hot tub missing tiles. The food was of the quantity over quality variety. ([www.bwdivers.com](http://www.bwdivers.com))

**Chris Sawyer Diving Center, Marriott Morning Star Beach, February 2004, Eric Frick (pande296@sbcglobal.net) Elmhurst, IL.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 35 to 50 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, surge. The reservation process via e-mail through their website was easy. I was contacted via phone message a few days before the trip to advise that the 1st 2-tank would depart

at 9:30 instead of 8:30. The Sea Biscuit is 42' long and a nice boat from which to dive. Capacity is 18 divers with bench seating running the length of the deck on both sides of the boat leaving the center of the deck open. My first 2-tank trip was lead by Chris himself. We had 10 divers plus a crew of 3. The onboard ice chest was full with jugs of water. Towels were provided. Fruit slices were passed around between dives. The briefings were complete and professionally done. O2 and first aid kits are aboard. Visibility was fine but not up to the 80 to 120 feet featured in their brochure. Divers were divided into 2 groups and each group was lead by a DM. My second 2-tank trip was lead by members of Chris' staff. We had 4 divers plus a crew of 2. No ice, water, towels or fruit this time but a fine trip anyway. St. Thomas and the surrounding waters might not merit a trip for just diving but there is plenty to do once you are done diving. It was worth the trouble of bringing along my scuba equipment. One thing that should not be missed is a chartered day sailing trip with Chris' wife Maxine aboard her 41' sailboat the “Lou” ([www.sail-withcaptainmax.com](http://www.sail-withcaptainmax.com)). The Marriott is a very nice hotel but, not cheap. Consider staying at the Morning Star Beach area vs. the Frenchman's Reef part of the hotel. Morning Star is down on the beach and features nicer rooms. The ride from the hotel to Chris' dive dock is at least 20 minutes. ([www.sawyerdiver.vi](http://www.sawyerdiver.vi))

**Coki Beach Dive Club, Cruise, January 2004, Bruce Thompson**

([thompsv@Sherbtel.net](mailto:thompsv@Sherbtel.net)) **Cambridge, MN.** Experience: 25 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 80 F, calm. My daughters did the Discover Program and I joined them on the open water dive. Saw a hawksbill turtle, coral sponges and reef fish. Not very challenging but good to get reacquainted with the water. Being from Minnesota our lakes are frozen in January. ([www.cokidive.com](http://www.cokidive.com))

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## The Wider Caribbean Live-Aboards

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### THE BAHAMAS

**AquaCat, November 2003, Dean K. Knudson (deanknudson@yahoo.com) Golden Valley, MN.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 84 F, choppy. Relatively new boat, built in 2001. There are 100 cu.ft. tanks however two of our group didn't pay attention while using the higher capacity tanks and were given deco warnings by their computers. The Exumas and the Eluthera features excellent unspoiled diving, with walls available on all days. Coral seems to be in excellent health. Bunking three to a cabin lowers the combined price to around \$1200. Divemasters, chef, captain and boat support staff are all excellent. Difficult night diving. “sea worms” that can be so thick as to obstruct diving vision almost completely. We found ourselves diving at night in teams of three divers, each alternately turning on and off his light to confuse these worms which migrate