

BARBADOS

Barbados is busy and crowded with lots of fast traffic, splashy resorts and restaurants. There's ordinary Caribbean diving with tropical fish and it's fine for beginners or for a dive or two on a golf holiday. You still can find century old bottles in the harbor and the wreck of the Stavronikita is interesting, but jammed with tourist divers. Keep hurricane season in mind.

Carib Ocean Divers, Coral Mist Beach Hotel, February 2005, Ben Blair (bfbclair@comcast.net), Cherry Hill, NJ. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: to Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F., calm. S.S. Stavronikita is 365-foot freighter sunk as an artificial reef in 1978, bottoming out at 130+ feet. It would be a good first dive, allowing me to dive one of the reefs as a second dive, most of which are considerably shallower. Many dive operators' web sites indicated that they do this as a 100 foot maximum dive. There was going to be less cruise ship activity in Barbados on Sunday, so I schedule the dive. All but one of the dive operators indicated by email that I could dive the Stavronikita as a 130-foot dive. I booked the dive with Lorenzo Garraway of Carib Ocean Divers; they take a maximum of six divers, and Lorenzo was quick and enthusiastic in his replies to my emails. I was the only paying diver that morning. We got away from shore at or a little before 9:00 a.m., did a giant stride entry from the rear platform, swam to the bow of the boat, and started our decent at 9:17 a.m. The divemaster, Dave, and I had the entire

wreck to ourselves. It's a beautiful ship, sitting fully upright and intact, with easy and safe penetrations at every level. The marine life was pretty sparse, but the ship was so magnificent, and there was so much of it to see, that this didn't seem important. Visibility was excellent, even on a partly cloudy morning at a depth of 130 feet. When we finally worked our way up the wreck and then the anchor line, made a three minute safety stop, swam back at 15 feet to the rear platform, and climbed back on board, a second (and much larger) boat was tied on to another mooring buoy, going through a pre-dive briefing. Our second dive was on Dottin's Reef. In Best Dives of the Western Hemisphere, the authors say "It is considered the prettiest reef in Barbados," and rate it as the only five star dive site on the island. Although they describe coral canyons and walls averaging 65 feet, with drop-offs to 130 feet, after the deep first dive we stayed on top of the reef, with an average depth of 42 feet and a maximum depth of 50 feet. The reef was populated with the usual smaller Caribbean reef fish, and only a few moderately sized schools of brown chromis and Creole wrasse. The corals and sponges on top of the reef were healthy, and I did find a beautiful golden tail moray swimming about. But the highlight of the dive was a shy hamlet. In Although I've seen a shy hamlet once before, on Carriacou in 1995, this was a great opportunity to observe this beautiful fish that Paul Humann classifies as "rare to absent" in the Caribbean. Dave was an unobtrusive divemaster, and Tommy, who stayed on board, was helpful with the gear.