

dating and customer-friendly. St. Lucia Scuba appears to be run by zealous control freaks. We found unnecessarily strict rules and guidelines that were reluctantly enforced by dive masters. Dive crew was as customer friendly as their "masters" would allow them to be. If you answer "yes" to any medical question, be prepared to have the dive operator restrict you from diving. The only way they would consider allowing you to dive was with a letter from DAN. (This affected several people in our group.) Call ahead and talk to the dive operator about their dive restrictions.

**Anse Chastanet, July 2005, Joe Mihm (j.mihm@att.net), Borger, TX.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 120 Feet. Water: 84 to 88 F, calm, choppy, no currents. Beautiful resort. Great beach with cabanas and bar service, nice bar and a couple of places to eat. The view from our room was breathtaking view of the Pitons. I took a walking tour of the plantation and it was great! Our guide was extremely knowledgeable. No AC. Our room was comfortable due to location...we always had a breeze. Steps....a couple of hundred up to my room from the restaurant level and a couple of hundred down to the beach from the restaurant level. The steps going to the beach were hand made and it seemed that no two were the same. I left a sweat trail everywhere I went. We asked for things in the restaurant and never received them. The answer to every question was yes but getting action on anything was a different matter. I think the service was better if you were not on the meal plan. On the Anse Chastanet web site they claim to be in a marine park. To me that means no net-

ting, trapping or any other type of fishing. The beach at the resort is not in the park. Fishermen show up every evening and use a tree on the beach to anchor their net. We saw several active fish traps at dive sites that were inside the alleged marine park. We paid a fee to dive in the marine park and got a little token for it. I wonder where the rest of the money went. A park boat came and checked our boat a couple of times but he drove right by the fishermen. Marine park my butt! UW Photography Comments: Rinse tank was a small plastic tub with less than five gallons of water in it. There was no camera prep area or dry area for cameras. Tub has 5 small camera and my housed camera in it. We needed another tub. The response was "we'll take care of it". It never happened.

## ST. MAARTEN

French St. Martin and Dutch St. Maarten are two nations in one, with wonderful beaches, superb hotels, fine cuisine. A few diver operators are trying to find better diving for experienced divers, but the cruise ships dominate.

**Dive Adventures, Pelican Bay Resort, September 2005, Bruce Wallace (laos61@excite.com), Indianapolis, IN.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 84 to 88 F, calm, surge. The colors are as good as anywhere; there are well over 300 species of fish; Saba has lots of large pelagics and the famous pinnacles; St. Barths is alive with excellent corals; wrecks abound around St. Maarten and

St. Martin; deep coral valleys, swim throughs, tunnels and sandy flats are everywhere; all the folks speak English and take American dollars; food is excellent and low cost; casinos are all over the island and there is a good nightlife. Mike's Maze — narrow alleys through coral were filled with sponges, fans, rope and various typical Caribbean hard and soft corals. Barracuda and bait fish inside. Enough sunlight so you didn't think you were in a cave. Ledge hanging lobsters (both Spanish and Caribbean). Average bottom time was 61 minutes with an average depth of 57 feet. No dive deeper than 90 feet. DM with divers who wanted guided critter tours, otherwise buddies were on their own after checkout dive. Vinnie is shop manager and kick-butt operator with an outstanding staff of locals. Laid back operation with no pressures other than choosing the daily dive sites by group agreement in the morning. Aqua Mania, a booking agent at the Pelican Resort, had best discounts for tours, Saba/St. Barths dive trips and dinner cruise. Thrifty Car Rental had newer Toyota Corollas for \$115 per week. Lotrie Farm's "Fly Zone" has 22 transfer stations in the rain forest trees to test your zip line abilities UW Photography Comments: Small "cameras only" tub. Computer in shop for edit. Cyber cafes all over Simpson Bay and Phillipsburg.

**Dive Safari, November 2004, James Heimer (jmsjnk@earthlink.net), Houston, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 74 to 77 F, choppy, surge. The best of two experiences we have had diving with a group organized by a cruise ship. A

moderately challenging, two tank boat dive with a professional dive operation on a new, well laid out boat. The cost was \$90 for two dives, including all equipment, which was below the cost to walk up to the shop and do the same dives and rent all of the equipment. The group was met at the cruise ship gangplank by the dive staff, who warned us that 6 foot swells were running at the sites. My wife and I immediately downed bonine. The dive staff noted who needed what equipment, and we were then shuttled over to the dive shop to pick up BCs (everything else was on the boat, including weight belts set up with the weights we had specified) and board the boats for the 10 minute ride to the sites. We first dove Proselyte, the wreck of an 18th century sailing vessel. There are numerous cannon, anchors and bits of the ship scattered about the shallow reef. The swells were daunting, and there were several cases of mal de mer. The entry was a giant stride off the stern, each group of 6 divers met their dive master / guide on the tag line and descended for the 45 minute / 60 foot dive. Aside from the shipwreck, the area is carpeted by multicolored soft corals and sponges. There was surge all the way to the bottom. The exit was to surface after a safety stop, pull into the boat on the tag line, remove fins and hand them to the dive master in the water, and climb out. The dive staff in the water and on the boat were attentive to assist the divers. The second dive was at The Maze. There were the same soft corals and sponges and the most amazing assemblage of lobsters on a small vertical rock face that I have encountered, with 3 to five in each of the

dozen or so holes in the wall. The Dive Safari staff said that these conditions of large swells, underwater surge, and somewhat limited visibility were typical of St Maarten (we were diving on the Dutch side on the south), although in the afternoon as the cruise ship left and passed by the sites, the sea had turned to glass. There is more sheltered diving, and a one tank beginner dive was also offered in one of these bays. Boat had separate rinse tank for cameras, but this was also the only place to store them on boat to and from the nearby (10 min) site.

**Little Bay Watersports and Dive Center, Oyster Bay Beach Resort, October 2004, Sheri Ray, Dallas, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm, surge. Fourth time to dive in St. Maarten. Within the last 2 years, certain areas have been designated marine parks and permanent moorings have been installed. Their efforts are evident. Frenchman's reef is abundant with small soft coral; tiny purple barrel sponges; branching coral; and teeming with fish, some eels, shark, barracuda, rays, monster lobster. Carib Cargo wreck had several large (5 foot) rays hanging about, lots of tangs, French angels, cowfish, lizard fish, some eel, and coral. The Maze and the Bridge had lots of schooling fish and the usual Caribbean fish. Little Bay Watersports was a great dive operation! They took care of our gear and we enjoyed their helpfulness with every aspect of the divers' needs. They picked us up at Oyster Bay and provided free taxi service to their shop. During dives, the less experienced divers were assigned to one

DM, and the more experienced were assigned to another DM. Never more than 5 per DM. Bobby, the owner, has been on the island for years and runs a good operation.

**Ocean Explorers, September 2005, Kendall Erickson (erickson4@charter.net), Beaufort, SC.** Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 Feet. Water: 88 to 89 F, calm. Great guys to go diving with. September is probably not the best time to dive in St. Martin...water was warm and probably less fish than normal and vis was probably not as good as they are used to.

**Scuba Fun Caraibes, Oyster Bay Beach Resort, June 2004, Sheri Ray, Dallas, TX.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 Feet. Water: 84 F, choppy. Scuba Fun Caraibes was our worst dive operation experience. Fortunately, their only boat broke down after the third dive and they refunded our 4th pre-paid dive. Most unhelpful dive operation. You're strictly on your own with your gear and they don't even appear to be concerned with customer service, as if appearing concerned was beneath them. One diver had not been diving in 5 years, was having trouble equalizing, and the DM literally had him by his first stage and was pulling him down the line to the bottom. I would have ripped her mask off and flung it to the bottom if she had tried that with me. Apart from the dive operation, we saw abundant healthy soft coral, LOTS of barracuda; rays; angles; box fish; stone fish; lots of juvenile fish; LOTS of schooling fish. Some great photo ops. Provided NO tubs for cameras or masks