

op in Tortola would have been. The boat was a 6-pack and with 4 divers and a DM/Captain, we had plenty of room. The trip to the Rhone was a fairly quick ride, and we quickly moored to a ball to dive the bow first. Our captain would show us the highlights of the Rhone. We descended to the wreck at 80 feet. The bow is in amazing condition and basically intact, and it was fabulous to look around inside and see the structure of the ship as well as coal that was sitting on the ground waiting to be shoveled into the boilers. The couple who joined us hadn't dove in about 4 years. The gentleman was a major air hog and within 25 min. had sucked his tank down and they needed to surface. The DM told my husband and I that we could stay and explore for a few minutes. We enjoyed another 10 min. of bottom time before heading to our safety stops. Our DM/Captain provided us with drinks and ginger snap cookies during our SI. The second dive was at 50 feet (max) at the rear of the Rhone. The stern is totally broken up, but you can still clearly see the propeller, the mast, a couple of boilers, and an anchor. Again our charter-mates sucked their air quickly, so headed back to the boat early. We looked around some more, but realized that we had only an hour to get back to the ship before sailing and surfaced with over 1100 psi in our tanks, and felt disappointment that both dives couldn't have been a little longer. We all enjoyed a few Heinekens on our way back to the dive shop, and they provided us with transportation back to the ship. Tony and Kate (the owners) were amazing to deal with in planning our charter and Kate was a

hoot when we got back to the shop after our dives.

VIRGIN ISLANDS, U.S.

St. Croix is getting more attention from divers, thanks to its underwater topography and improved dive services. Once unfriendly to visitors, the Virgins are now a good tourist destination with decent Caribbean diving on St. Thomas and St. John.

St. Croix

Anchor Dive Center, December 2004, Gabriel I. Peñagaricano (guigo34@hotmail.com), San Juan, PR. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 75 Feet. Water: 77 to 78 F., choppy, surge. I wish I had been forewarned of Anchor's significant limitations, both in its approach to dive safety and the handling of its finances. It is nothing short of insane to deduct \$10 from my bill for the cancelled dive and refuse to do likewise to my son. It is, of course, not the \$10 that rankles, but the absurdity of the situation. The shortsightedness of failing to grasp what those 10 would do to its standing, at least as far as I am concerned, is hard to understand. I guess that is why Undercurrent is such a valuable tool. My fellow divers will benefit from my untoward experience with Anchor. I contracted for a two-day, six-dive package and was quoted \$215.00. On the second day they took the boat out with 8-10 foot swells, 10 foot visibility and with a resort diver on board. The dive was a complete disaster and there was a minor injury to a lady while boarding. The second

dive of the day was scrubbed (as should have been the first) and when I went to pay the bill they deducted \$10 for the scrubbed dive but charged my son the full \$215.00. Divers going to St. Croix are well advised to choose from one of several competent operators there and give Anchor a wide berth.

Anchor Dive, Carambola Beach Resort, January 2005, Bill Choppe (billchoppe@aol.com), Modesto, CA.

Experience: 944 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 ft. Water: 79 to 81 F, choppy, no currents. Carambola Beach Resort a nice resort. 100+ units made up of 4-plex bungalows spread over several acres of beachfront. Each unit has bedroom, bath, living room and screened lanai — and phones. There was a large swimming pool, bar, restaurant. The food was excellent (mainland prices). The menu was somewhat limited. My AT&T/Cingular cell phone worked well at Williamsted and occasionally at Christiansted (circuits always busy). One of my companions had a prepaid phone card which worked well. Anchor Dive an excellent operation. The dives were guided with two dive guides. The 42-ft. boat was clean, well equipped. Most dives were just beyond the reef breakwater so the boat came back to the dock after each dive. We were on a multiple day package, so we could leave our gear on the boat after the last dive and it would be rinsed and ready to go when we arrived the next morning. Most time was spent on the north shore with only a couple of trips to town. Good places to eat were Cane Bay, Off the Wall, and Lobster Reef. They say “no shirt, no shoes — no problems.” Don’t be put off by appearances. The people

at Anchor Dive were helpful on local matters. Cruzan Rum is made locally, is excellent, and costs \$7./half gallon. Be sure to go to the Domino Club and watch the beer drinking pigs. It helps to have your passport in St. Croix. Important — they drive on the left side of the street. Butterflies, tangs, barracuda, some large green morays, lots of turtles, flamingo tongues, sea fans, colorful sponges and corals, and bat rays.

Cane Bay Dive Shop, Cane Bay Reef Club, March 2005, Karen Becker (ktdiveloco@msn.com), Oxnard, CA.

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 85 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 78 F, calm, choppy. Chose St. Croix because we were taking along an inexperienced traveler/diver, looking for something tropical, yet convenient. Going to the North end of the island took us away from it all, yet had all the ease of being in the US. The Cane Bay Reef Club is as it advertises itself. Most room photos are of their Penthouse Suite, so it’s not what you expect when you get there. The cost led us to believe that the place was a lot more upscale. Lots of age and wear. However, the manager did get in right away and got the things fixed that needed fixing. Each room has a kitchen, living room with futon and bedroom. Air conditioning worked well. Balcony great for drying stuff. I would stay there again if the price was reasonable. Diving with the Cane Bay Dive Shop was great. I chose them because of their boats. I had major abdominal surgery two months earlier and wasn’t going to do much lifting or carrying. They have unique inflatable dive boats that were designed for navy seals with extremely easy entrances and exits through the

hull of the boat. They just unzip the front of the boat, you sit on the floor, feet dangling in the water, and they bring you your gear, put it on and lean forward. To get back on, take off gear, they lift it up, you hoist yourself in. Couldn't have been easier, especially for someone who may have some limitations. My niece took her advanced course and they were thorough. There is an excellent pier in Fredriksted; night dives amazing there. As good as the pier in Bonaire. Had hoped to do similar shore diving (rental vehicle necessary here) as in Bonaire. Not as possible. There is an excellent entry/exit point in front of dive shop (where they put boats in). Anywhere else you are dealing with Urchins in the 1 - 3 foot deep water, makes it real tough to get in and out.

Cane Bay Dive Center, Cane Bay Reef Club, September 2005, Gary Welna (bluewingghw@hotmail.com), Omaha, NE. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 85 F, calm, choppy. There are two types of dive operators on St. Croix, your typical "Cattle Boat" diving or is 4-6 diver inflatable rafts. We opted for the small rafts. We figured less divers, less chance of getting stuck with beginners, and more personalized service. Almost all diving is within a few minutes of shore. Believe me, these "pangas" are not comfortable. But a 15 minute boat trip to the sites was bearable. These "pangas" had a zippered floor in the bow (front). You sat on the floor in the middle of the boat, the dive guide helped you suit up. You slipped into the water and started diving. On exit, you surface inside the boat, the boat captain takes your BC/tank. You

scoot onto the boat and take off your fins. Water temp was 85 deg., little current, and 1-3' waves. Visibility from 30-50', probably due to tropical storms this year. You go down the mooring line and follow the guides over the wall, go east or west until down to 1500 psi, then turn back toward the mooring line on top of the reef. The walls start between 40-60'. Back at the mooring line, you were free to look around until you were down to 500-600 psi, to do your safety stop. The coral and sponges were the healthiest I've seen in 15 years. Large fish life were practically nonexistent. Juvenile fish was plentiful with more species than I've seen anywhere. There are three main dive areas. The West end (Fredricksted, North Center (Cane Bay), and West of Christiansted (Salt River). Cane Bay and Salt River are similar. Cane Bay is the easiest to dive from the pangas. It also has the easiest shore diving. The reefs are about 100 yards from shore. (Cane Bay also has one of the nicest sand beaches. There are a dive operator and restaurant within walking distance. Cane Bay has 20 or more moored dive sites. However, between three choices, they are essentially ALL the same! First, straight out from Cane Bay beach, is a sand flat, with lots of small to med. coral bommies. That's where the dive guides will show you sea horses. This is always a shore dive; and the night dive. West of Cane Bay beach is a wall with lots of canyons; and is deeper than to the east. East of Cane Bay beach are several dive sites, which are essentially the same, with the exception of pinnacles and a couple of trenches. Cane Bay Dive Center is across the street from Cane Bay beach.

My experience with them was great! Cane Bay Dive Center will dive all three dive areas on St. Croix. On the west end, and Salt River, they take the pangas to the dive area, and take the divers to meet them in a van. Easy, and comfortable. Dive sites are 5-15 minutes from shore. We stored our dive gear in their class room/locker room every night. Gear prices and T-shirt prices were reasonable. Service was excellent. We had a good time every evening, at the Dive shop, and at Cane Bay Reef Club, where we were staying, a popular night spot. Food was excellent, and reasonable. (\$20 lobster dinners). The condo units were large and comfortable. Each had satellite/cable TV, with lots of channels. The units could use some renovation. Ants were in the bathroom and kitchen. The air conditioners were good in one unit, but not adequate in the end units, which are larger than the inside units. Cane Bay Reef Club is the most convenient to Cane Bay diving, and central to Fredericksted, Christiansted, the airport, and the Cruzan Rum factory, Botanical gardens, and Plantation museums. For luxury accommodations with similar location convenience, stay at Carambola Golf and Tennis resort, (at twice the price). We were disappointed in the "run down" condition of most of the island, and the crime warnings about theft and assaults. Prices were more comparable to the states, than any other island I've visited.

Dive Experience, Hotel on the Cay, January 2005, Sue Taylor (staylor@courier.com), Hayward, CA. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 78 F., choppy, no

currents. You can arrange shore diving with Dive Experience. I love this hotel because if you're bringing the family, it has a great beach (and pool) and is right near town so lots to offer everyone in your group. It also has awesome lounge chairs just to kick back and have a drink with an umbrella! Restaurant is good for breakfast and lunch. The hotel was accommodating to give me a room that had a balcony toward the back of the hotel where I could dry my gear and no one could see or get to it! Dive Experience is a great operation and I would recommend them for any type of certification. Diving is great with lots of sites within a short boat ride. Crews were great to dive with. Night dive was well worth it. Our dive groups were small, which I love. Diving is pretty calm so you can concentrate on your photos if you need to. Night dive was awesome for life.

SCUBA, Divi Carina Bay, October 2004, Kevin Robertson (kelseyfox2@cs.com), Knoxville, TN. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, choppy, surge. Our room at Divi was clean and had a nice wet bar with fridge and microwave. We did encounter tiny ants on the desk and wet bar. Our sliding door to the balcony was filthy with a film from the sea air. It took them three days to clean it. You will need a car regardless of where you stay. Still, good place for the money. Good restaurants we enjoyed were "Just-Case-Deli" for excellent sandwiches, big enough to split with my wife. "Duggans Reef" for surf and turf. We ate dinner there twice. "Hamburgers in Paradise" I promise the best ham-

burger you have eaten. "Tutto Bene" good Italian. All reasonable priced. Wear long pants when dining outside. The mosquitoes are relentless. Duggans Reef keeps a can of OFF spray if guests feel the need. S.C.U.B.A (St Croix Ultimate Bluewater Adventures) is in Christiansted a twenty minute drive from Divi. Wonderful dive operation, professional, well staffed, experienced, friendly and helpful. Their dive boat is approx 40ft. and roomy with lots of storage under the bench seating or in the bow. Half the deck has a roof. Rinse tank for cameras. The boat is clean and orderly. I did five days of diving with no more than six divers. One day I thought I was going to be the only one and they were still going to take me by myself. Others did show up at the last minute. I was pleasantly surprised by the decent diving. Visibility most days was around 60 ft. The reefs seem to be slightly above average in health. Some dive sites included walls and some nice swim throughs. Lots of large tube sponges and nice soft and hard corals. I saw lots of species of fish but not a large quantity of them. I was told that the locals spear fish with no regulations. They especially like angelfish and lobsters. Also there is a lot of commercial fishing near by. I did see turtles, queen angels, French angels, barracuda, spotted and purplemouth morays, giant lobsters, yellow headed jawfishes, spotted drums, peacock flounder, puffers, trunkfishes. Schools of small tropicals. We encountered a school of squid. On my last day diving we had a giant manta swim within 30ft of us. Don't plan on any last minute shopping at the airport departure terminal. You will only find a hotdog stand.

SCUBA (St. Croix Ultimate Blue-water Adventures), Villa Margarita, June 2005, Nancy Olah (nancyolah@parkerpoe.com), Fort Mill, SC. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 90 Feet. Water: 82 to 83 F, calm, no currents. SCUBA (St. Croix's Ultimate Blue Water Adventures) and Ed Buckley answered all my questions by e-mail, whereas several other dive shops I contacted Croix sent me the same "canned" answer multiple times and ignored specific questions about their dive operation. Staff is friendly and competent. We dove with Jonny, Dawn, Tom and Pete. Our son, Nick (12) took Discover Scuba with Dawn (a patient, petite Brit from London with blonde dread locks) and then upgraded to a Junior Open Water PADI Class taught by Jonny. Both were fantastic with kids and good teachers. Nick became a certified diver in three days and learned his skills well. My husband and I each did 12 dives and especially enjoyed the diving at Salt River (the West Wall rivals walls at Little Cayman and Cayman Brac and the outer East Wall was also great), Pavilions at Cane Bay, Eagle Ray Bank, Sugar Beach and Sleeping Shark Hole. We saw hawksbill turtles on almost every dive (including two mating at the surface), lots of fish and critters, occasional rays, and nice coral formations (the swim throughs are particularly beautiful on the west wall at Salt River). The Reliance has a marine head, fresh water showers, double ladders and separate rinse buckets for cameras. SCUBA staff are accomplished at giving "valet" service. Our gear was set up for us every morning, our tanks changed between dives, fresh water was brought

to us when we got back on board after a dive, and they rinsed and stored our gear each night. No one mentioned tips (which I appreciated), so I tipped well for their exceptional service. SCUBA was a great dive operation and St. Croix has surprisingly good diving. We stayed at a magnificent little guest house called Villa Margarita, which was ocean side at Salt River, where Columbus landed in 1493. This lovely guest house recently purchased by John and Adele Burkhardt a delightful couple from Maryland has three spacious units in addition to the downstairs owner's quarters. We rented the two bedroom apartment with spacious living room, kitchenette, 2 bedrooms and 2 balconies facing the ocean for \$165/night. (Two other units, a one bedroom apartment and a one bedroom suite also available.) A beautiful pool overlooks the white sand beach and a gorgeous reef was 200 yards offshore. Adele and John met us at the airport, had us follow them in our rented car to the grocery store so we could stock up with provisions. They have a happy hour from 4:00 — 5:00 in which Adele mixes any island rum drink you can imagine along with complimentary beer, wine and soft drinks. While relaxing on their beautiful deck by the pool, our host quickly filled us in on the best places to eat, pointing out those that were having specials on particular weekdays to stretch our travel dollars. Bacchus had the best food on the island.

SCUBA, N2O and Cane Bay Divers, Villa Margarita Guest House, July 2005, Paul Brown (pbrown@fedex.com), Cordova, TN. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 35 to 55 Feet. Water: 78

to 82 F, no currents. SCUBA is an excellent operator. N2O was good on a night dive at the pier in Freidricksted. Not being a macro guy, I didn't see much. Yet one diver, "macro man," was ecstatic. Dived with Cane Bay Divers at the wall and was disappointed with only going to 53 ft. And not seeing the "famed" wall. Stayed with John and Adell at their guest house "Villa Margarita." Great place, great people. Will do anything for you except cook. Restaurants are plentiful and nearby. Will pick you up and drop you off at the airport. www.villamargarita.com. Everything you see on their website is exactly as it is. No digital enhancements. The rooms are good size and well appointed. Fantastic views. Free happy hour every night.

St. John

Cruz Bay Watersports Co., Westin, August 2005, Gary (phvrlfrufkqk@spammotel.com), Pennsauken, NJ. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. The dive boat Sea Quest was well laid out for up to twenty divers. It has all the safety gear on board. A warm fresh water shower is in the stern and a 3-tier table is for weights, flippers, masks in that order from the floor up. There is no photo station. Inside the boat are dry shelves to store gear during the dive. Working head and a fresh water dunk tank for the gear. The crew provides cold water for the guests. Captain Charlie and Dive Master Trevor were competent and knew the dive sites including what fish, creatures, and landmarks would be of interest. Trevor reviewed the basic hand signs and gave a detailed description of the

dive site and things to look for. Before diving at night you first have to dive at least once during the day allowing the dive master to assess your skills. I was surprised that the PADI 5-Star dive shop had this restriction in light of my 71 logged dives including night dives and recent PADI Rescue certification. I attempted to negotiate a better price for the 1-tank afternoon trip with snorkels, divers, and swimmers, to include the night dive but was unsuccessful. The 1-tank afternoon trip is \$74 and the night dive was around the same price. I reasoned that a 2-tank morning trip was \$86 and I only wanted the night dive. I missed the night dive since the afternoon trip already left and instead booked a 2-tank morning dive later in the week. Dives ranged from about 60 ft to 100 ft for the first dive and about 40 ft to 60 ft for the second dive. The reefs were abundant with small tropical fish, blue tangs, French grunts, Lettuce Sea Slugs, octopus, spiny lobster, small fans and barrel sponges. There were also brain corals from several inches to several feet in diameter. I didn't stay at the Westin where the dive shop and dock are, but the snack bar and pool were nice to come back to. The staff was professional and safety minded. Cruz Bay Water Sports operated US Coast Guard approved vessels and performed several head counts before leaving the dive site and moving to the next. Diving was much better than my recent dives in Florida due to poor visibility. Beach diving is possible at many locations around St. John and tank rentals are \$6.

Cruz Bay Water Sports, Lavender Hill Condos, December 2004, Ken (kenkatz13@hotmail.com), Livings-

ton, NJ. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Water: 78 F, calm. Diving easy, varied. Water was extremely clear with visibility around 80-100 feet. The dive boat was clean, the crew helpful. I had to fight to set up my own gear. The briefings gave insight on what to look for as well as max time (45-50 min) and depth (45-65 feet). The corals were bleach free though schools of fish were a little scarce. Saw turtles on most dives. Most dives took place on the northern keys (Grass, Mingo, Lovango and Congo). One day did a run south to a sight called Maple Leaf which was pristine. My MO was two tanks in the AM then drive out to the north shore beaches with my wife. These beaches are beautiful, yet not crowded. Finished up the day at one of the fine local restaurants which are expensive but good. I especially liked Lime Inn. Great food and especially good desserts.

St. Thomas

Blue Island Divers, Marriott Frenchmen's Reef, November 2004, David Ellis (davidel57@juno.com), Baytown, TX. Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. We did a Sunday morning lobster dive. The ride out and back was a bit bumpy. The first site was a terrific dive site just off an island west of St. Thomas. The terrain was a hump or piles of rocks just out from Savanna Island. It was a beautiful dive site. Depth was 75' and less. Vis was 80 or more. There was a slight current. The divemaster knew just where the lobsters would be. They provided what we needed to lasso the bugs from behind. The DM experience helped us cull and release the female

and bag the keepers. It wasn't easy! The DM, myself, and another diver brought back 6 from the 1st dive. Saw a shark, turtle, and a large variety of Caribbean fish, large and small, while looking for lobsters. We surfaced, did our surface interval and moved to the other side of the island. Vis was half the 1st dive and not nearly as interesting but we did get another large lobster. Long bumpy ride back to Frenchmen's Reef dock where we stayed. They gave me a container to carry my lobsters back to the room where we iced them down in the bathtub until dinner. The chef at the Blue Havana (there at the Marriott Morningstar Resort) had agreed to prepare them if we brought some back. The newly opened restaurant had never done that before and the waitstaff was buzzing about it. The chef seemed truly excited when we told him to "do his own thing" with the lobsters. Our 25th anniversary dinner couldn't have been more excellent or memorable. Rinse tank for cameras.

WIDER CARIBBEAN LIVE-BOARDS

THE BAHAMAS

AquaCat, February 2005, Anne Efron, Baltimore, MD. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 76 F., calm. This was our first liveboard and it couldn't have been better (except for the water temperature). 4-5 dives a day offered, depths from 30 - >100 feet, drifts were great, small blue hole okay, some wonderful 'aquarium' type dive

sites and some mediocre. Out of water options included deserted beaches, fishing, kayaking and a snorkel lobster hunt. Food was great, plentiful, and always with several options.

AquaCat, May 2005, Ronald Johnson (GrtDay@msn.com), Katy, TX. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, calm, no currents. We've never been on a live-aboard where the crew anticipated our needs as well as this group did. One crew member for every two guests. They were all spectacular. Unfortunately the lettuce algae is taking over the Exumas. It is smothering the coral and needs to be pulled up or more sea urchins need to be introduced. The Aquacat group is to do just that. Several were disappointed in the visibility and lack of fish. I was busy with my eye to my camera and it was great for me! Cabin 11 is small, cramped, and should come with a significant price discount. We were on the Aquacat in September of '03 and the fish were much more plentiful! The Captain asked to see my log book and made sure to take us places that we had not visited in 2003. We made it to Little San Salvador. Ask to dive "The Washing Machine." What a spectacular adventure! 8-10 foot sharks who know their place in the food chain. Well orchestrated and safe dive. Aquascapes were beautiful, fish OK, macro stuff was sparse.

AquaCat, May 2005, Terry R. Garland, Naples, FL. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 72 to 76 F, choppy. I wish that I had of known that the water was as cold as it was. From the time we arrived 18 of us were catered