

of the underwater preserve. Soufriere is generally sleepy. The island was created by a large number of volcanoes, seven of which are still active. The waterfalls, hot springs, boiling lake, trails, mountains, and birds are legendary. Nature Island Dive has a fleet of bikes and kayaks and divemaster/boat captain, Selwyn, serves as a naturalist tour guide. Driving Dominica's narrow, winding, mountainous roads is a test of skill and nerves. We took two hours to drive our Suzuki rental SUV from the airport (on the northeast coast) across the World Heritage Site Rainforest through the Caribbean-urban streets of the capital Roseau down to Soufriere. A 4WD vehicle is a must for exploring. Driving can be fun if you allow plenty of time and keep your eyes open. Driving is done in the left lane, in the English tradition. The locals were quite friendly — speaking mostly Creole, but fluent English as well. We were approached by several folks begging or peddling mangoes, papayas, bananas or coconuts.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

While few Americans visit, it's a popular and well-developed tourist destination for Europeans, with plenty of all-inclusive hotels on nice beaches. Diving is subpar.

Dressel Divers, Iberostar Bavaro, September 2006, Frank Nelson (teach1@nb.net), N. Huntingdon, PA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 2 to 25 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm, choppy. Divemaster/Instructor Leo was professional in leading both experienced and newbie divers. Made sure everyone had all gear and was functioning and all were comfortable in water, took experienced divers into cave-like structure while making newbies stay at entrance,

The Atlantic side was terrible, with surge and poor viz. The beach was polluted with seaweed and rough waves. Iberostar Bavaro nice place to stay. It's all-inclusive. Specialty restaurants good, gourmet restaurant excellent — get the lobster salad. Wednesday night buffet is lobster (excellent) — it is all you can eat. What is left over is served on the beach Thursday for lunch. Room nice but had only one drawer. Rooms have a refrigerator and the maid stocks it daily. There are 3 Iberostars here and all share privileges with each other; however, only the Bavaro can book Bavaro specialty restaurant. I just wish I had known that the diving was going to be bad and that maybe we should have booked another Iberostar that is on the other side (Caribbean). From talking to others, it would seem to be a good idea. They charge \$88 to take you to the Caribbean side from the Atlantic side and this does not include the price of diving. It is about an hour and a half ride in both directions. Roads are not nice. Resort people and dive shop personnel were friendly. Nothing set up for UWP. Must carry everything but tank thru beach, jump into small outboard (gets hairy when ocean is rough) and then transfer to another boat (watch your step). Hold your camera for dear life when ocean is rolling — nothing stopping it from rolling or falling.

Pelicano Watersports and Dressel Divers, Ocean Blue and Iberostar Bayahibe, February 2006, Irwin Danto (irwindanto@aol.com), Detroit, MI. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 5 to 100 Feet. Water: 77 to 77 F, choppy, surge. Trying to make advance plans was difficult as most diver operators spoke poor English. There are 40+ mostly all-inclusive resorts on the east end of the Dominican Republic in Punta Cana. Transportation between resorts is diffi-

cult and risky as poverty grips the area. At night the resorts all “lock down” to prevent unauthorized entry. I saw and experienced no professional diving operators. There is no nitrox, limited access to advanced dive training, and a somewhat careless attitude. There is no controlled system to monitor for a missing diver. Most of the dive boats are mono hull 20’ with an outboard and a driver with a 5 watt warlike talkie for communication. I saw limited other safety equipment. No GPS or other navigation equipment. Boarding the small boats required getting out of your BC and sometimes pushing yourself over the boat gunnels. Some boats did not have a ladder. All the resorts had better, what I would call limited dive boats, but they could only be used with larger groups of 6 or more divers. I was never sure what real certification or training was owned by any of dive staff. In Punta Cana everyone was positive and had good attitudes. English went better. It took me 8 attempts to filter to the watersports desk at the Iberostar. I managed to get in 9 dives over 5 days. Seven of the dives were good to great. One was a waste with 5’ visibility and heavy surge. Another was supposed to be drift dives at 90’ that turned out to be a swimming experience and the underwater topology was dead with no fish. The dive staff was completely confused by PSI and Bars. I literally had to yank the dive guide’s hand off my wife as he wanted to continue the dive at 90’ with her having less than 500psi in her tank. She got back on the boat with 200psi. Another diver ran completely out of air and two others shortened their safety stop when surfacing. I had to follow that ascent experience up with a loud argument with the boat captain, who wanted to put the group back in the water on a shallow 30-40’ dive just

35 minutes later. I made them wait it out for 60 minutes as the previous dive was 34 minutes at 90’. As a PADI Master Diver, I probably had the most experience on the boat of 14 divers including the boat staff. In Punta Cana the standard seems to be one morning dive followed by a single afternoon dive. The Bayahibe area that is near Catalina and Catalinta Islands. The Bayahibe dive area was full of life and great dive sites. The Iberostar Bayahibe is a 5 star resort and would be my destination. My resort in Punta Cana was the Ocean Blue. It was huge with 710 suites, perhaps rating 4 ½ stars, all-inclusive with 8 restaurants and wonderful beach facilities. It is a 2-3 hour trip from Punta Cana to the south end of the island where the good diving is, and that translates to a tortuous bus ride which heads out before 7 in the morning and doesn’t return until after 7 at night. The weather was sunny, 85° every day, with a gentle breeze coming off the ocean. I asked the dive leader from Dressel Divers why they didn’t place mooring buoys as they had some first rate dive sites to visit. He advised that they did have everything marked earlier in the year but the Coast Guard cut all the buoy lines at the instruction of the government. He told me the government was punishing the resort, claiming that they owed some taxes. Our dive boat maintained position by using its motor. My dive guide said most boats drop anchor and, of course, damage the reef. All the resort and water sports staff I came in contact with had positive and helpful attitudes. The staff carry the gear to and from the small boats which were launched in front of their water sports areas. They always offered to rinse, store, and secure our gear. They tried often in vain to gather enough certified divers for trips to the better

dive sites. They were all sympathetic about their limitations which truthfully have become a burden to those operators who are trying to run a 1st class dive boat but must focus on servicing the greater world populated by “resort divers.” I wanted to emphasize that the diving in the Bayahibe area was nice. I unfortunately missed the manta ray with an 8-foot wing span that the rest of the dive group had the opportunity to briefly swim with. Even while diving in the Punta Cana area where much of the reef life is dead there is still plenty of interesting topology and always some good small stuff to see. The diving staff made a good effort struggling to converse in broken English and used it as the universal language for briefings or instructions. At least half the divers on any given trip were from Europe. A dive guide looking at an unfamiliar dive computer displaying 500 psi could interpret the numbers as 50.0 bars. Seeing 50 bars would translate to 725 psi — a low, but still healthy amount of air. On any given dive most of the European divers and some European dive staff were using bars to monitor their gas supply. In Punta Cana it was sad to witness so many dive staff personnel with good attitudes constrained by financial limitations on the services.

Scuba Caribe, April 2006, Tom Chase (trchase@msn.com), Prospect, KY.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 90 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, choppy. Punta Cana is a beautiful beach resort area. It is not a good diving area. Scuba Caribe caters to people taking resort courses. We could not go outside the reef because of high surf. The sites are limited and the coral is pretty beat up. Very little in terms of fish life. My 14-year-old daughter finished her Open Water referral at this location. Her course was SSI and Scuba Caribe is PADI. Though

we were told via email we could do a normal referral, they made her repeat the pool work and take the PADI exam (though she had already completed the SSI pool training and passed the SSI exam). They did a nice job working with her and provided good one on one instruction. We took a two-tank excursion to Catalina Island (also through Scuba Caribe) and that was much better. It takes a full day, but CI has healthy coral and a nice wall dive. There is not much in the way of fish. At the end of the dive, they had an excellent barbeque and beach party. The trip back to the mainland was a regular party boat. It was fun, but not a place for serious divers.

GRENADA

Hurricane Ivan wreaked havoc on Grenada in September 2004, but the infrastructure has been rebuilt. While diving is fine for beginners, some operators are trying to give more experienced divers a better ride.

Aquanauts Divers, True Blue Resort, November 2005, Bill Schlegel, Jefferson City, MO. Experience: 600+

dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 85 F. My Cochran computer said up to 87 F. Currents: mostly nothing except one planned drift dive where there was about a 2-knot current. Electric outlets are North American, but they frequently had these alongside European outlets. Only swatted a mosquito occasionally. Water is drinkable. We had rain showers for a few minutes almost daily, followed by rainbows. Then blue skies and sun. True Blue Resort is delightful. They have a series of accommodations ranging from nice and clean double rooms to apartments and condos. The