

perienced divers. The Marriott is the only large chain hotel on St. Kitts. It's a whopper with >600 rooms. The service was a bit indifferent at times but otherwise it was a good choice. Don't miss the rainforest tour with Greg's Safaris. Fisherman's Wharf is a good choice for a casual seafood dinner.

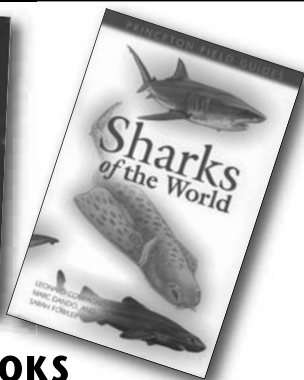
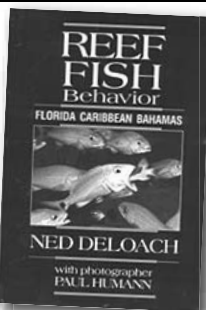
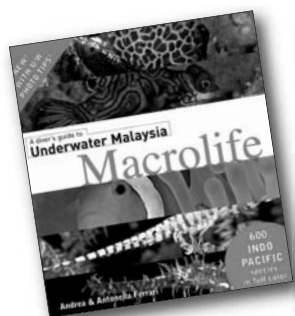
ST. LUCIA

St. Lucia lies in the hurricane belt west of Barbados. Diving on this beautiful, heavily-forested island is fine for beginners and vacationers, with pretty reefs and tiny fish. On the southwestern part of the island is the better diving but it's rigidly controlled. The year-round high is in the 80s days; night lows are in the 70s. Afternoon cloudbursts are common. Great spot for a nondiving vacation, however.

Anse Chastanet, November 2005, Gary

Kolb (robertkolb@sbcglobal.net), Carson City, NV. Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm, currents. Overall great experience, food and rooms were great. Most of the dive sites were fun dives, liked Pinnacles and Superman's Flight, good drift dives. Some dives after rain storms would only have 20-30 ft. vis. but it was the rainy season.

Anse Chastanet, April 2006, Mike Judd (michaevertjudd@copper.net), Oregon City, OR. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm. Hotel was great. Many buildings with 3 - 5 units on different levels, built into the hillside. One wall open to beautiful flowers and birds (and a few mosquitoes). Good views even from the cheaper units (higher prices had even better views up the hill). The signature "Piton" peaks look as good in person as in the photos. Staff uniformly helpful and pleasant. Food was a bit fancy for my taste, but my girlfriend loved it. Much of the island meets the "tropical



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paradise” description. Overall, the diving was good but not great. Most sites are similar, steep slope down from the shore. Few canyons, channels, etc. Good variety of coral, and the best selection of colors, types and sizes of sponges I’ve seen in one place. Lots of small fish, all less than two feet — they have a marine conservation area in place now, but should have done it a long time ago. Everyone had to stay with the dive-master. Most dives were 60’ or less, which was OK as there didn’t appear to be anything different deeper. At a lot of the sites there was a light current, which allowed easy drifting but no trouble to stop if you wanted to check something out. Divemasters and boat crew were friendly and fun. They were helpful if you asked them, but didn’t volunteer much. On most days they schedule only two dives, one tank in morning and one in afternoon, which makes it hard to get off and see other things on the island. Scuba shop is convenient on the beach at the resort, with hangers and lockers for equipment.

Anse Chastanet, June 2006, Tripp Jones, MD (Tjones@sc.rr.com), Columbia, SC. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 15 to 60 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm, currents, no currents. Our group, Wateree Dive Center of Columbia, SC, went on our “Mystery trip” and did not know destination until about a week before trip. Clues were given out over 3 months and this was a lot of fun. St. Lucia is beautiful; one of the prettiest places we have been. The resort is about an hour from the airport, and some roads, as they pass over peaks and gorges, can be breathtaking. The entire Anse Chastanet setup, from airport pickup to return, was done extremely well. The food and service were excellent. Be prepared for the steps, however; this will be a stress test (if you haven’t already had

one) since the boats are about 120 steps or so from the restaurants on a fairly steep hillside. The rooms are above that, so be sure you can physically stand stress. There is no air conditioning and no phone, TV, or Internet. Take plenty of reading material. Electricity is 220 volts, so a converter is needed. Frogs can be loud at night. Mosquitoes and “no-see-ums” can be a problem. This place is gorgeous, and security is evident, but not intrusive. Optional treks, biking, etc. for nondivers is available. The diving is all guided. The dive operation was extremely helpful. The boats are quite good, comfortable and front loading from the beach. Nitrox is available and not too expensive as others. The visibility was fair, since there is a lot of rain and the runoff from the mountains will always have some effect to decrease visibility. Most dives were drift dives and our 24 divers were grouped in 3 sets of 8 so we weren’t bumping into each other. There were a lot of critters and the macro is superb. We saw a few turtles, but no pelagics and no large fish. The coral is healthy for the most part, other than a rare area of bleaching. The wreck is nice (Lesleen M) and a small octopus was seen. There are lobsters, crabs, spotted, golden and chain morays also in relative abundance. We did 2 boat dives in the AM, and could do afternoon shore dive, although had to have this guided with a divemaster, and sometimes they were hard to find. Night dives (2) were nice with nice variety of critters. You have to trust your dive shop to come through to have a great trip and Wateree Dive Center did so.

Dive Fair Helen, JJ’s Paradise, December 2005, Name withheld. It is a lovely place, with friendly people and good diving sites. We booked 6 2-tank/day dive packages via Internet.

Their confirmation indicated the dates. We came to the dive shop at 9 am and found it locked. We phoned Michael St. Omer who said that he was not sure if we would be willing to dive Sunday, thus, he did not reserve a boat to go diving. We complained and he offered to provide the remaining 5 days with 3-tank dives to compensate for the "unfortunate misunderstanding." A boat left for diving at 11:30 am the next day, Monday. (though the dive shop sign said "departure at 9:30"). We had 2 dives, the first a for maximum depth of 50 feet and the second one for maximum depth of 75 feet, an interesting innovation in diving protocol! Both dives were in a hurry, 40 min. per dive, with less than 40 min. surface interval. When we asked about the third dive, the divemaster said that he has no instructions about it. Michael assured us that starting Tuesday we would have 3 dives per day, and we did. The owner charged us for the extra 2 dives (we booked 6 2 tank dives and we had 14 dives) though it was our understanding that we had been offered 3 dives per day for the rest of the stay as a compensation. JJ's Paradise is a lovely compound of several cottages with A/C, TV and fridge. The restaurant provided good food (fresh fish, etc.), but every evening between 10 pm and 4 am, extremely loud music disturbed our sleep. Moreover, on checkout, we were presented with a bill that listed one price for cash payment and another for credit card – an extra 8%. While we understand that the owner may have to pay 3% fee to a credit card company, it seems unfair to overcharge customers without having any sign stating that credit cards transactions will be charged with associated fees.

Dive Fair Helen, March 2006, Shelly and Howard Wilson, Southgate, MI.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 Feet. Water: 75 to 78 F, choppy. We joined family members on a cruise. Fair Helen's reservation process asks potential customers if they had any special request, and we asked that we dive the Pitons. On-line reservation service was responsive and thorough, but the professionalism stopped there. The order confirmation we received indicated that the return time would be between 1:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m., depending on the sites visited. We had to be back at our cruise ship by 4:15 p.m., so we were comfortable with that return time. We realize that the trip to the Pitons might have been farther than most other dive sites; however, at no time during the process of reserving our spot on their boat did anyone in the organization indicate that the day of diving would last longer than 2:30 p.m. When we were greeted by Ben at the dock, he indicated that Dive Fair Helen would be back in plenty of time to catch the ship. Ben escorted four of us to a crowded bus. After a lengthy ride, we reached the destination where we were fitted for BCs and given regulators. The equipment we rented looked to be in good shape. We walked to where the boat was to be waiting, but it was not there, nor had all the cylinders been loaded on the boat. That delay took well over 30 minutes. The dive boat should have only accommodated about 18 people, at maximum. We had 27+ divers and snorkelers, plus the crew of 5. As we were pulling out of Marigot Bay, everyone was getting their gear ready. The crew, however, could not have cared less about our preparations, and virtually ignored everyone while we got settled. One dive master, Marie, was more considerate and caring than the rest. She took time to explain to her dive group (of which we were a part) the plans for

the dives, her expectations of us, as well as telling us what she would provide to all of us. We found her to be refreshingly professional, unlike the other crew on the boat. Once we were headed for the Pitons, we were surprised when the boat took a detour and picked up four more snorkelers, resulting in horrifically overcrowded conditions. We arrived at the dive site and prepared for our first dive. Once suited up and ready to go, no crew member helped any of us out of our seats. We enjoyed ourselves despite fighting a strong current. When we were coming back onboard, we took off our fins to hand to a crew member, but no one was there to get them. Each of us had to throw our fins onto the dive platform. We came up the ladder and were not helped to a seat or to position our cylinders into their holders. The crew was too busy joking and teasing each other. Four of us from the cruise ship were continuously asking if we would get back to the ship in plenty of time, to which we heard "No problem!" "If we don't get you back in time, we'll hire a helicopter!" "You worry too much ... we'll take care of you!" Lunch was served and playfulness and tomfoolery reigned. The surface interval consisted of watching the crew horse around. We did our second dive at the base of the Piton and again, there was no help from the crew. On the way back to Marigot Bay there were three detours ... one to return the four extra snorkelers to their resort, and the other to stop and look into a crevice in the rock and see bats. We got to Marigot Bay at 4:00 p.m. Instead of dropping us off to get to the ship, they made another detour to drop off other divers across the bay. We headed to the bus as quickly as possible and the crew tried to hurry things along. The drive back was quick, but we had only a small chance to have

the ship still be at port. We jumped off the bus and all of the security personnel there were yelling 'Run!, Run!, Run!' We were 25 minutes late! The ship had waited for us, due to a hysterical wife pleading for them to wait for us. You can imagine our mortification at having made an entire cruise ship of over 2,000 people wait for us, especially after the lack of professionalism and consideration exhibited by the Dive Fair Helen employees. They scoffed at our anxiety about getting back to the ship on time.

Dive Fair Helen, September 2006, Marie Rose, Coraopolis, PA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 90 F, calm. Every day they provided lunch and it was home cooked or purchased local food — good and there was enough for everyone. They also would pick you up at your resort — getting around in St. Lucia isn't easy if you don't have a car. There's a "pretend" marine park officer who stops the dive boat every day and they have a little chat. Then you get under the water and there are fish traps everywhere and the divemaster is actively collecting his dinner. This went so far as to take a slipper lobster at night and stuff it into the BC of one other diver. There's nothing large to see at all — and given that we weren't allowed to take our time, we couldn't really see the small. The island is absolutely gorgeous — volcanic and dramatic. You can go for hikes with a guide (very informative) and there's everything from local barbecue being cooked in someone's back yard to the big hotel restaurants. Lots of shopping and there were some festivals going on while we were there. We were never hassled or felt threatened in any way, although we were told to take care when walking at night. beautiful with lots to offer — but not diving. There is no dive shop to speak of. They had

recently moved to a new small “room” 500 feet from the dock. There was also an irritating need for the group to stay close together. We were probably 40 feet behind and were constantly pretty much reprimanded for not keeping up.

Rendezvous, December 2005, Dmitry K. Pasikhov (dpasikhov@msn.com), **Fontana, WI.** If you are an experienced diver, go elsewhere. Divemasters did their best but accommodations for diving poor. No nitrox. Had to drag the gear and tanks through the waves and surge. No respect for your photo equipment. Reefs overfished and despite being “protected,” still being fished. Good for romance, bad for diving.

Sandals Grande St. Lucian, May 2006, Steve Giles (stevegiles@verizon.net), **Camarillo, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 84 F, calm, no currents. The Grande St. Lucian is beautiful with meandering pools and gardens. Food and service and condition of rooms are first-rate. Scuba is part of an all-inclusive package. Four of us (all well experienced divers) were steered to St. Lucia by a travel agent who touted the island as an “up and coming dive destination” — wrong! Before booking we contacted the resort dive operation by phone, spoke to the manager, and were told that as experienced divers we would not be required to dive with beginners. Our experience during our week at Sandals was that, although personable and pleasant, the dive operation personnel would tell you what they think you want to hear, and then do as they pleased. We were misled on several issues. Upon checking in at the dive operation at 8:00 AM, filling out several PADI release of liability, medical forms, etc., and having our certification cards scrutinized, we were told that to dive,

we must pass an in-water proficiency test to be held in a nearby pool at 11:30 AM. All four of us passed with flying colors (a couple of us have nearly 3000 dives under our weight belts and the other two have over 1000 dives), but we lost one day of diving. To placate our displeasure, they put the four of us on an afternoon snorkel boat with about two dozen snorkelers and allowed us to make a 20-foot dive (and burn nearly 1/3 of an air bottle). The following day (and each day thereafter), we made a “deep dive” (70 fsw max. for 30-35 minutes) and a shallow dive (20-40 fsw for 40 minutes). Coral growth on these deeper reefs is healthy and beautiful, not so on the shallow reefs where pollution has taken its toll. During the week, we saw virtually no pelagics of any kind! Reefs are dominated by small fish, crabs and eels. The largest reef fish we saw were 8-12 inches in length and these were few and far between. Fish traps are everywhere. Although we took our own gear, the gear at the Sandals dive operation appeared to be quality equipment, relatively new, and in good repair. There is no charge for the use of their equipment. We were encouraged to pay an additional \$100.00 (US) each for a side dive trip to Martinique that consisted of a “45 minute boat trip, 200 foot visibility, and an 80% chance of seeing whales or dolphins on the dive.” The boat trip to Martinique took 1.5 hours with a 2-hour return trip, visibility was about 50 feet, and guess what? Not only were there no whales or dolphins, but the largest critter that any of us saw on two dives was a respectably sized spotted drum in one swim-through. Level of experience is not considered when assigning dive groups aboard the boat. It appeared that experienced and inexperienced divers were intentionally mixed to

relieve the responsibility from each divemaster's shoulders. Stay on the boat and catch a suntan during the shallow dives. All in all, the hotel is wonderful, but their dive operation is in serious need of overhaul. If you plan on taking photos, plan on shooting either wide angle (divers, sponges, etc.) or macro (small reef creatures). There is nothing in between. People were allowed to rinse masks in this bucket (mask de-fog is not necessarily recommended for use on cameras) and people were allowed to rinse wet suits in this bucket — we all know what people do in wetsuits.

Ti Kaye Village, Fall 2005, Name withheld. Ti Kaye has 33 wooden cabins notched into a manicured rain forest hillside. About half share a common wall with a neighbor and the rest are stand-alone. Inside was a large single room, equipped with a fridge and a mosquito-netted poster king bed; a room to store our clothes; a room sink and toilet; and a beautifully landscaped outdoor shower fenced for privacy. Our shaded porch facing the ocean and was furnished with a hammock, two rocking chairs and a table. The cabin was beautiful. At night, with the AC and the ceiling fan running, the room was comfortable. Breakfasts and dinners are served in the open sided dining/bar. Gentlemen were asked to wear pants to dinner (to not offend the English guests, I was told by management). Evenings dined outside on the patio. The meals were ample and well prepared. The cabins and dining facilities were on a slope, which ended in a cliff about 150 feet above the beach, where a smaller restaurant and dive facility were. It was 164 steps top to bottom. Saturday we asked for a Sunday dive. They told us the boat "had problems." We scheduled a shore dive, but when we arrived I was told there were no dive

masters. The dive shop advertised 7 day a week diving on its web site. Eventually we were told to be ready for an 11:30 AM shore dive with Terri (not his real name), the manager of the dive shop. Terri told us he was not happy. He had set the day aside to play with his son. We followed the reef along the cliff, seeing mostly tired coral and sand. Then the reef improved and the creatures started to appear: burr worms, eels swimming free, urchins a frogfish, a cloud of small fish which enveloped. Upon surfacing, Terri proclaimed "What a great dive," and it was. 72 minutes, 40 feet at the deepest. Monday I watched the local fishermen expertly harvesting the fish from the reefs in front of the resort. We were introduced to our small dive boat resembling a lifeguard's boat equipped with an outboard motor. We had to wade into the surf and try to step over the sides. One technique was the lady-steps-into-a-gentleman's-cupped-hand method to boost her into the boat. There was the leap-for-life method, where the diver tried to get most of their torso into the boat and then drag his legs over the side while the boat was bobbing with the waves. The boat had a canopy, but it only covered the boat captain — not the divers. At the base of the Pitons we swam a reef with few fish and not interesting coral. To get back into the boat we had to swim into a group, the boat approached with a rickety ladder hooked over the side. No rails extended over the gunwale, so when you climbed the ladder there was nothing to use to pull yourself up so you could conveniently step into the boat. The next day we dove another site with OK coral and a few fish, then we were swept to sea by a stiff current. Calmly, Scuba Steve pointed into the blue and we saw a thin rope. He signaled us to grab it. Whip-

ping like clothes in a storm, we endured our safety stop. Then he motioned for us to grasp the hand of the person next to us and at his command, we released and rose to the surface together. The divers insisted on a dive from the resort's beach. Reluctantly, the dive shop agreed. Eels everywhere, lobsters, good sponges and coral, lots of smaller fish. Easy, relaxing diving. We then took a wonderful tour of Soufriere, the National Botanical Garden, a volcano and a relaxing soak in a hot spring — all arranged by Ti Kaye. For a night dive four experienced divers and three newer ones met at 7pm. The dive was to be led by Terri. After donning fins and mask in the surf, we were to swim to deeper water and assemble into a group then descend to the sand. After everyone checked their pressure and gear and signaled OK, we were to go 20 minutes, then the dive will be turned. If anyone has a problem, there will be a kayak on the surface. Ascent and the rest will continue with the dive. Once everyone was in, Terri descended without warning or announcement. As I descended I saw part of the group following the dive master on the tour, while other checked their gear and read pressure gages. Eventually a gaggle was formed and we settled in to enjoy the dive. We saw large crabs and squid, eels, lobsters, a large spotted fish. Terri was taking photos. At 48 minutes one of the newer divers ran out of air, scampered to the dive master and together they ascended. Terri signaled everyone to ascend. Mystified, we took a safety stop and surfaced to find no kayak, a current pulling us from shore and little semblance of a group. The newer, younger divers were swimming back to the beach. The older divers had plenty of air, so we asked to descend and swim underwater (where there was no current) back toward the

beach. Terri denied our request. We asked to swim face down, breathing our air so we could out-swim the current. Permission denied. We were instructed to swim on our backs. After 15 minutes one of the older divers was pooped. Terri yelled and signaled and eventually a kayak came out from the beach to tow the diver ashore. That left two of us swimming to shore and Terri ahead of us, where we could not see him. After another 15 minutes my dive partner was tired. Terri shouted encouragement, phrases like "Well, Madam, if you had worn a snorkel, I would have had a Kayak tow you ashore." And other comments suggesting it was our fault that we were so far from shore. Eventually, he grabbed her tank stem and began to tow — but he did not have enough swimming power to overcome the current by more than a little. We could see the lights of the resort. We could also see that we were not making headway. I began to think of the movie "Open Water" although I was sure the good St Lucian fishermen had eaten all the sharks. Eventually the Kayak returned. I decided to rely on my rescue training so I turned over, reg in mouth, and added my strength to my partner's tow. We were the last ashore and made it to dinner at 10:30. Our swim back to the beach must have taken well over an hour. We loaded our plates, ordered drinks and joined the other divers at a table. Over the next hour, as we got a bit tipsy, we vented our anger, dissected the dive and decided not to talk about it to other guests who had not been on the dive. I told everyone that tomorrow, before we leave the shore, Terri would call us over, tell us what a bad dive it was, how we could all learn from it, and then blame it on us. We laughed, but my guess was correct. We finished our diving with wonderful dives led by

Scuba Steve. One, a freighter sunk just outside our resort's cove and the other an interesting dive along the rocky shore. Both dives were full of life and close to the resort. Terri needs a refresher course on diving leadership and courtesy, but Scuba Steve and the rest of the dive shop staff were professional. As wonderful as the St Lucia experience was, it was also hard, but an adventure. Perhaps St Lucia is more suited to younger travelers than young-at-heart tourists.

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, January 2006, Marc (marc@streamsintl.com), Redondo Beach, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Water: 79 to 80 F, choppy, surge. It was windy and so the visibility and diving were on hold the first few days. Dive Adventures did a good job. They were helpful and attentive, but I would like to see a happier group. Their boats were comfortable and covered. Visibility was about 50 feet; there was a lot of turbidity in the water, but all in all, it was diveable. The fish life was sparse and the coral looked like it took a beating in the last hurricane (1999), but was recovering. St Maarten could really use some fish management. What fish we saw were all small. The captain, a local, said that fishing was here a lot longer than diving and that the fish life was fine. Obviously here lies the problem. We did see a nurse shark and I had a close encounter with a reef shark.

That saved the dive, but I couldn't help thinking about that boat captain's reaction.

Dive Safaris, Oyster Bay Beach Resort, June 2006, Jim Schoeneck, San Diego, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 83 F, choppy. Dive Safaris has 2 locations, so no matter where you are you are no more than about a 20 minute ride from 1 of their shops. Whitney, who runs the operation at Bobby's Marina in Phillipsburg, was wonderful to work with. She was responsive over phone and email and everything went according to plan. The shop itself was nicely decked out, with good rinse and gear storage facilities. Each morning, we dove a wreck at @ 50-70 feet, then a reef in the vicinity. Overall, conditions were good for experienced divers. During our trip, 3 days had some wind and swells of 3-6 ft. The boat was about a 35-footer that was stable enough and had nice configuration for gear storage and access to the dive deck. Camera facilities were basically a dedicated rinse bucket. The wrecks were each different and interesting, with coral growth, swim-throughs (each wreck has been sanitized and has overhead exits). Lots of typical tropical fish, eels and shrimp. The highlight of our small critter searches was a 10-inch seahorse along with a number of interesting blennies. The big fish highlight of the week was the Shark Awareness Dive in about 60 feet of water, led by Jefferson, the resident shark expert. After dropping to the bottom, forming a semicircle and hanging onto some cement blocks, Jefferson gets out a small amount of food and within 5 minutes we had 5 Caribbean reef sharks between 5 and 100 feet long. They swam around him (under his leg at one point) and just a few feet in front of us. The tail of one brushed my son's camera. We were