

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 10 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

joined by a group from Shark Diver Magazine. Andy and Eli, along with a couple of cameramen, accompanied us on the dive, were shooting both stills for the magazine and video for their first shark movie. Cool for us having cameras and lights in the water getting filmed during our first shark dive!

**Ocean Explorers, Royal Islander Club, June 2006, Gary W Brown (gkbrown@vci.net), Benton, KY.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 70 Feet. Water: 82 to 86 F, choppy, no currents. Beautiful and friendly island. Great beaches and wonderful places to eat. Try Lee's in Simpson Bay for a great and reasonable lunch. Walk out to the waters edge and see the school of tarpon waiting to be fed chicken scraps. Rent a car to see the entire island. We were not expecting great diving here based on reader reports. We dove with LeRoy French of Ocean Explorers in Simpson Bay. LeRoy is a nice fellow with an interesting dive shop. Their boat is somewhat small and a little awkward to maneuver about when filled with gear. Although they list several interesting dive sites we were taken to some closer ones partly due to rough seas. I would certainly not go to St. Martin just for the diving. They made a special effort to make my wife's 100th dive a memorable one. Stay some distance from the airport as the planes and the late night music from a couple of beach bars can get a little old.

**Ocean Explorers, Divi Resort, September 2006, Michael Drumstas (griswald8@aol.com), South Grafton, MA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 85 to 87 F, calm. Ocean Explorers is owned and operated by Leroy French, NAUI #50 — that should tell you something. He has been on St Maarten for 25+ years and knows

a good portion of the U/W sites and critters. The dive boat is on the small side but that means good service and attention paid to each diver. We had a mix of fairly new, to us, at the 500+ dive mark. Lots of healthy coral and an abundance of fish life on all sites. Also spotted large Caribbean lobster. Diving was conducted in a group setting, but Leroy let us wander and take photos away from the pack. We also had our bottom time extended as our air consumption is fairly good. Fish life seen: scorpionfish, lots of southern rays, grunts, squirrel fish, morays — green and spotted, jackknife-fish, barracuda, angels and butterflyfish. The usual host of Caribbean fish, but lots of them. Divi resort has improvement in the condition of the rooms and resort amenities. St Maarten is a great place to vacation as the island is reasonably priced when it comes to food and goods. The diving, though not spectacular, was fun. Leroy French is a great person to dive with as his demeanor is laid-back, but he makes sure that all onboard have a safe dive. The surface intervals short as the dives were relatively shallow — 40-70 fsw.

## ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

Heavily forested St. Vincent lies in a beautiful chain of islands, with pretty reefs and a good range of fish species. Daytime temperatures are in the high 80s year-round, the low 70s at night; afternoon cloud bursts are common; St. Vincent is in the hurricane belt. The Grenadines — Bequia, Palm, Union, and Carriacou — are a sailor's dream; they're islands with small hotels, little dive operations, decent Caribbean diving. St. Vincent has become