

or full day trips with two-tank day dives or afternoon and night dives . . . Prices are per person and include your own private dive boat, Captain/Instructor, all equipment and drinks. . . 2 Persons Full Day (9:30 - 4:00) \$150.00; 3 Persons Full Day (9:30 - 4:00) \$100.00." In fact UBS offered to have one of the owners (husband and wife Tony and Kathryn Brunn) take me out one-on-one on their small boat for half their usual fee. I expected three dives/day for days 1&2, 2 dives the morning of my third day in anticipation of flying home next day. Conditions were choppy, viz was 50-75 feet, water was a cool 80F. 3mm wetsuit with hooded vest was comfortable... just. Fish were typical Caribbean fare. A few southern rays but nothing large and little small. Coral had some bleaching but otherwise was in decent shape. Dove the RMS Rhone twice, Wreck Alley once, Thumb Rock too, and had lunch both days at Cooper Island where we highly recommend the calamari. I was put on a boat with two gentlemen from Omaha who had also expected to have their own private dive boat, dive 4-5 times/day, and were equally stunned to find that Tony/UBS only does 2 dives per day...period. As it was, we three enjoyed ourselves but since diving finished at 1400, I was unwilling to dive that late on the day before my flight home, and canceled my third day of diving, choosing to explore Tortola topside instead. This decision was greeted by an incredibly obnoxious email message from the owner upon my return to the States. There are many other dive operators in the BVI. I'd like to return to the BVI but will be looking at other *Undercurrent* recommendations.

Virgin Gorda

Dive BVI, Biras Creek, November 2005, Mickey Rosenberg

(mickeyrosenberg@cox.net), Providence, RI. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 85 to 88 F, choppy. I have been here many times over the last twenty years. It's usually just decent, fun diving, with good small fish life, corals and fans; some interesting underwater terrain and one of the more interesting wreck dives: the Rhone. Bleaching has affected 50%-70% of the hard corals, even at depth. This was a sad shocker: an apparent consequence of the warmest waters that had been seen in the region (same warm waters that spawned those nasty hurricanes). It is unknown if those coral will survive or the long term effect on the entire reef ecology. Dive BVI is a great operation, and Biras Creek is pricey, but delivers fabulous food, dwellings, and we love the Boston whalers you can take out to remote snorkeling sites.

Kilbride's Sunchaser Scuba, Bitter End, June 2006, Gabriel I. Peñagaricano (guigo34@hotmail.com), Guaynabo, Puerto Rico. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 60 Feet. Water: 84 to 85 F, choppy. This is a dive operation geared to recreational divers. There is little to see other than the Chikuzen wreck, and that only if the sea conditions are optimal. The reefs are unremarkable and there is a lot of finger wagging from the guides if one strays more than 50 feet from the herd. Nothing to write home to mother about.

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

Cane Bay Dive Shop, Villa Dawn, March 2006, Michael J. Millet (michael.millet@comcast.net), Dublin, CA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm. In 2 words: no fish! The marine life about St. Croix is noticeably diminished from 3 years when I was diving there last. It is pretty sorry when it is a big deal to see an angel fish. The locals use gill nets and bring up anything and everything caught in their nets. The effect is devastating. Saw no turtles or nurse sharks; both creatures were fairly common 3 years ago. The wrecks on the West side offered the best diving for smaller critters like trunkfish and filefish. The night dive at the Fredericksted pier was decent except for the exit. We had to climb up the bumpers for the cruise ships then someone topside pulled us the rest of the way. It was a real challenge for some of the heavier divers. A portable panga ladder would have helped. The Villa Dawn is a private home for rental (can be Googled) overlooking Cane Bay. Very nice accommodations with its own pool and nice grounds. Close to Off the Wall Bar and Cane Bay Dive Ship. Can comfortably handle 8. Diving from small inflatables so no rinse tank on board; photo gear always at risk of being stepped on or crushed by dive gear. Need to always be vigilant.

Dive Experience, Sugar Beach Condos, February 2006, Tracey (trasea@gmail.com), Gaithersburg, MD. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 70 to 90 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F. The water is often choppy and the vis isn't as clear as in the summer. The shore diving at Cane Bay is phenomenal. A short swim out to the buoy, then drop down. Follow

the wall to your left, turn around and come back. The hardest part is, you need to return through the break in the shallow reef, and it is easy to come up down current. Then it is a hard swim back. The boat dives are also nice; Salt River east and west walls are completely different and offer you a nice change. Dive Experience will lead you on all dives, catering for the experience level. If there are advanced and beginner divers, they will have DMs for each group. The corals in the area have a lot of bleaching, but this seems to be true at many other Caribbean locations. The fish here are a bit smaller than, say, Cozumel, but there are plenty of good variety. Lots of spotted and green moray eels. Some southern sting rays and nurse sharks. Dive Experience also offers an afternoon fish feed at a sunken sand barge — using chain mail gloves, the DMs feed yellowtail snapper, triggerfish, Creole wrasse, chromis, and a few large green morays. This is also a great site at night, where we saw dozens of large Caribbean lobster and some sizable crabs too! Sugar Beach Condos are fully furnished — 2 bedrooms, 2 baths, kitchen, family room, and a nice porch overlooking the beach. There is a swimming pool on site for those with non-diving families. The beach is weedy, but some swim there.

Dive Experience, Hotel-on-the-Cay, May 2006, Bernie Urbanik (bernie.urbanik@verizon.net), Plano, TX. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 80 F, choppy, surge, no currents. I am a 55 yo male (PADI Master Scuba Diver) and I took my 19 yo son (PADI Advanced Open Water Diver). We used the Chapbook to book the trip. This is a valuable resource so I wanted to give back a little with this report. This was our first trip to the Virgin Islands. It's important

to have specific objectives in mind when making a dive location decision. I always seek a combination of diving and non-diving recreation. I also hate having to rent a car. There were a sufficient number of Chapbook entries to plan the trip. The Dive Experience is owned and operated by Michelle Pugh, recently installed in the Women Divers Hall of Fame. Her operation is first rate with a good seaworthy boat captained by Sam Halvarson. Being based in Christiansted means north shore diving from moorings similar to the north shore of Grand Cayman. All sites are marked with buoys and it is open sea. We ranged from five to ten divers and made ten boat dives. It is a great deal of fun to dive with a diver as experienced as Michelle. She knows what to look for, knows instinctively what each diver's situation. We even did a little reef maintenance by replacing a buoy. I used Nitrox on all my dives while my son was on air. The Nitrox tanks were in excellent condition. There was an on-board oxygen mixture meter that plugged into your BC. You could either work your own equipment or they would do it for you. When we had rookie divers, we had two divemasters for each skill level. There are enough sites on the north shore so that we did not have to repeat a site. There is a surge and wave action at the surface. You have to exit one at a time due to the rollers. The marine life was highly varied with the black durgeons the most numerous. The purple sponges were fairly dramatic. We saw a little of everything. The Hotel-on-the-Cay (HOTC) was a great choice. They have a dive package with Dive Experience. HOTC is the only hotel in Christiansted with a beach. The hotel is on Protestant Island, in the harbor 200 yards offshore, and is reached by a launch that is com-

plimentary for guests. We snorkeled one entire afternoon. There are no large vessels operating in the harbor. At night, the hotel is far enough away from the wharf to keep the nightlife sound to a minimum. The Dive Experience dock is a hundred yards down the boardwalk. Dive Experience has a locked storage facility on the dock for your equipment during your stay. Your equipment was stored on hangers. We had plenty of choices for food and drink along the boardwalk. There is even a micro-brewery. Fort Christiansted, also on the boardwalk, is a great museum run by the US Park Service. We took one day off to see the sights from an open air jitney. It included a stop at the Cruzan Rum Distillery and at the Whim Sugar Cane Plantation Museum. Whim is a fascinating place.

N2Blue, Carambola, December 2005, Larry Polster (larrypolster@sbcglobal.net), Martinsville, IN. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 79 to 79 F, calm, choppy. This was our 3rd trip to St. Croix and 2nd one with N2Blue. Derrick and Anna were both dive masters and boat captains so would alternate every few days with our group. The six pack boat is never crowded, Coast Guard only allows 6 divers, the captain and the dive master, so always relaxed and no cattle car divers falling all over you. They always had fruit and bottled water for surface interval, could reach most dive sites in 5 to 15 minutes, and catered to their guests. While the West end dive sites are protected from the winter winds, the North Shore has some of the best walls on the island. Cain Bay Wall is a favorite and both walls of the Salt River, but on this trip the seas were stirred up, so vis was really bad. . . . best time to dive North Shore is Feb. to Aug. UW Photography Comments: Typical

Caribbean fish, corals, and sponges... but five wrecks on the West end with plenty of growth and photo ops. The Frederiksted pier was stunning both day or night, two seahorses made the whole trip worthwhile.

SCUBA, Villa Margarita, January 2006,

JoAn Ferguson, Herndon, VA. Experience: 51-100 dives. Water: 79 to 79 F, choppy, surge. Jim, my husband, and I took our first “empty nester” vacation to St. Croix. The diving was good – and would have been better if we had more cooperative weather. Diving was cancelled one day due to high winds and surf, the next day was rough, and a few other days were cloudy and rainy. Despite that, the wall dives were awesome. Lots of small to medium size tropical fish – lots of butterflyfish, tangs, surgeonfish, grunts, etc. We saw small-to-medium sized turtles which were surprisingly comfortable around the divers. Saw one large stingray, but no eagle rays, sharks, or other big guys. The coral was in good shape – lots of barrel sponges, but also some areas of bleaching. We selected SCUBA. (St. Croix Ultimate Bluewater Adventures) as a dive op because they seem to have one of the larger operations on the island with good safety equipment and a “real” boat. (Several ops use various kinds of inflatable boats.) They boast of having the “The Friendliest Dive Shop on Earth” and everyone in the shop and on the boat was friendly. However, I did have some concerns with the dive op. On one dive I was missing 4 pounds of weight so I struggled with my buoyancy through most of my dive; I should have checked my set up after the divemaster put everything together. The trouble began when we started slowly ascending on the second half of the dive. I had been fighting to stay down, so my breathing was increased – making the

problem worse. I tried to get some extra weight, but wasn’t successful. I ended up doing a rapid ascent from about 45 feet with no safety stop. I surfaced a good 100 yards from the boat, so had a lengthy surface swim. I used my Air Alert to notify the captain. I was pretty pooped when I got to the boat. I asked for oxygen, but their oxygen tank was emptied. They kept me on the 33% Nitrox that I had used during the dive then took me to a nearby Dive Op that they had called that had oxygen. Just to be safe, SCUBA suggested that I go to the St. Croix hospital to be checked out. The hospital did a good job of handling this dive incident – a quick triage, a comprehensive neurological exam, and some chest X-rays. No diving for a few days, but many lessons learned. We stayed at Villa Margarita, located near Salt River and a 20 minute drive from Christiansted. Villa Margarita has a beautiful setting - views from suites look onto gorgeous Caribbean waters, a steady breeze onto the pool area and into the suites, and a quick walk down to the beach. Our suite was immaculate and well equipped. The kitchen had a medium sized refrigerator, small microwave, coffee maker, toaster, 2 burner hot plate, and electric skillet. Dishes, utensils, glasses, etc. were provided - along with soap for hand washing. Friendly environment. John and Adelle (owners) make everyone feel like they are at home. The evening happy hours give everyone a chance to share their day’s experiences and relax with new friends. We shared meals with the other couples several times. Because of the weather and my diving incident, we spent less time diving than expected on St. Croix. The island has a rich history that is presented effectively at several museums and less developed sites, such as the sugar plantation ruins

scattered across the island. We drove to Point Udall, the most eastern part of the United States, visited the island's smallish casino, drove through the rain forest, and toured the Cruzan Rum Factory.

Scuba West Divers, Frederiksted Hotel, February 2005, David D. Dori, Pasadena, MD. Experience: 700 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 feet. The hotel room was acceptable with a thru the wall A/C, a couple of channels TV, a phone, (ours didn't work) a clock radio, small refrigerator and a small balcony convenient (only upper floors) for drying gear. It is on the waterfront and has ocean view rooms. Breakfast is 7AM thru 10:30 am daily. Lunch is occasional with dinners served nightly. The hotel is a short walk to a well-stocked market supplying all types of foods including alcohol. Many eating establishments are a short walk away including the Turtle Deli. There are no bell boys to carry bags so be prepared to hoist your own up to a maximum of four stories. A reasonably priced hotel. Scuba West is owned by Chris and Laura. They captain the boat and dive with the group. The dive shop and the pier are short walks from the hotel. Bring your equipment to the shop the first day and it's transported to the pier and you set up for the first dive. They change tanks, return equipment to the shop for rinsing and drying and have it on the boat ready to go each day. The boat is a 24' deep V open run-about with a center console carrying a maximum of 6 divers along with the 2 person crew. Entries are backrolls from the stern area and exits are accomplished with a ladder. All equipment is recovered by the captain while you're in the water. The dive sites are short rides from the pier. Chris and Laura are hospitable and competent professionals. Fills were 3,000 PSI and after returning

to the boat you were free to stay down as long as your air and bottom time allowed. A 25-foot rope was off the stern for safety stops. A typical two tank dive would have everyone at the pier by 8:45 with a 9:00 AM departure and generally a 12:00 to 12:30 return. Rates are presently \$80 for a 2-tank dive, packages are available and the rate drops to the mid-60s for 5 days. All equipment, if necessary, is included in the price. Water temps were in the high 70's, shortsies required to be comfortable. Vis. was about 50 feet, worse on dives closer to shore where surge stirred the pot. Frederiksted is on the lee side of the island and the local sites were relatively calm. A few attempts were made to the north side for the Cane Bay Wall sites but it was too rough. There's a deep wreck at 100' and a tug boat at 50'. Another shallower site had 3 wrecks with a maximum depth of 75'. The coral in areas was healthy looking but they have the typical brown algae growth on many sites destroying the reefs. Most fish life was small, no grouper or bigger species. We did observe several large stingrays, several at a cleaning station. Many spotted morays; at Chubs Hole, an area full of ledges, did have a nurse shark. We encountered two turtles during the week. The first one was on a deep dive (105') to Armageddon, where the locals dumped the remnants of the town pier destroyed by hurricane Hugo and it was rather eerie. Huge steel beams and long cement tubes that one could swim through were jutting out everywhere. A good dive. Second dives were tolerable with several shallow coral heads available in the area. The dive that we saw the most life on was under the Town Pier. The largest schools of fish with many small critters spotted in several small piles of debris, including an octopus, many morays and spotted

drum. We rented a van for the week to local attractions such as the Cruzan Rum factory. Christiansted, an 18-mile trip took 45 minutes to an hour. It had a beautiful boardwalk featuring dining and drinking establishments along Gallops Bay.

Scuba West, Scuba Shack, Cane Bay Divers, September 2006, Gabriel I. Peñagaricano (guigo34@hotmail.com), Guaynabo, PR. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, choppy, no currents. I had made prior arrangements with Scuba West to dive from Fredericksted on two days. I specified that my son and I wanted to dive Northstar and Vertigo, and was assured that, weather permitting, this could be done. When we arrived the divemaster and part owner of Scuba West, Chris, painted a doomsday scenario about conditions on the northwest shore, where Vertigo and Northstar are located. He even said that the following day we might not be able to dive because of hurricane Florence, then about 800 miles away and heading for Bermuda. We sensed that he had something more important than his clients to tend to on the following morning and that he was setting the stage for a disappearing act. After two dives on wrecks and an unremarkable patch coral reef, we changed into dry clothing and drove to Cane Bay. There were shore divers galore going out to the Cane Bay Wall and the conditions were nowhere near what our weatherman/divemaster had divined. Suspicions confirmed. On the following morning were met dockside by Chris, who palmed us off to Scuba Shack, who had some guests they were taking out. The two dives were again nothing to write home to mother about but the operators of Scuba Shack, as well as their boat, were a welcome improvement

over Chris, his attitude and his boat. He had used a 28-foot all-aluminum boat which was designed and intended for many uses, but diving was certainly not one of them. During the afternoon we went to Cane Bay and dove Cane Bay Wall with Cane Bay divers on their unique inflatable with a zippered bow floor. It is perhaps the easiest vessel, all 18 feet of it, for entering and exiting the ocean. Visibility was not great but the area is alive with healthy corals and plentiful reef denizens. Cane Bay Divers is rudimentary but the only game in town when diving that area. What they lack in amenities they more than make up for in enthusiasm.

St. Thomas

Admiralty Dive Center, Marriott Frenchman's Reef, May 2006, Al Fleig (scuba@fleig.us), Bethesda, MD.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 80 to 120 Feet. Water: 82 F, calm. Went to Marriott's Frenchman's Reef for 4 days. Admiralty Dive Center said they had 1 other person for my first day, 2 for the second and none for the third. When asked if they would cancel any of the days, they replied that if I made a reservation they would go even if no one else signed up! In the end, we went with 2, 4 and 3 divers total. The owner, Duane Hausch, and Ryan Schopp alternated between being boat captain and dive master, and both were friendly, informative, attentive and helpful; they picked me up on time at the Marriott dock each day and provided well-filled Nitrox tanks. Lots of angelfish (French, gray, queen), a goliath grouper, distant black tip sharks, small rays, beautiful spotted drum, lobster. Dove two wrecks, a pinnacle, and several other nice sites. Boat can take 12; they prefer 8 or fewer. St. Thomas has good if

not have outstanding diving and is a great combination of shore activities. Admiralty was a topnotch outfit. The Marriott was a complete resort (pools, spa, restaurants) clean, nicely furnished, comfortable and in a quiet location close to the main town. They have a ferry that runs every half hour to downtown during the day.

Chris Sawyer Dive Ctr, Fairfield @ Elysian Beach, January 2006/01, Gino Dubay (ADub@aol.com), Pigeon Forge, TN. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 65 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy, surge, currents. St. Thomas is not the tropical beach paradise of Cayman, etc. It is a rock w/small sand coves surrounded by a private resort. The East-End (Redhook) is where to stay, as you can jump off to St John and the Rhone. It is not cheap to stay or eat here as all supplies are shipped from Miami (except rum, which is less than bottled water!) Ice cream: \$10.00/QT — US, which is the currency. Forget walking, rental cars are dangerous, motorbikes suicide. Cabs to shop — \$5, Town — \$10, airport — \$20 — all one-way. A burger is \$10 (sometimes w/ fries, a bargain). Chris Sawyer Dive Ctr. is in Redhook, where all food, restaurants, bars, charters, gift/clothing stores are located. CSDC is full service to include a great photo pro, Stacy (treat her good for special pics). Gear package prices are good too. Chris will rent you everything; you need bring nothing but a suit (& plastic). All the DMs make every customer feel special. They are all characters. CSDC boats are first rate w/O2, radios, nav, etc., and lots of room for up to 16 divers. My wife is snorkel-only and was watched over well by the topside crew. Diving is beginner-class due to the heavy pressure. RMS Rhone is a Friday only \$150.00, 2-tank trip and a great beginning wreck dive. Expect

many divers to be with you. Looking down from my safety stop was a flashback to scenes in Thunderball! The Rhone's prop is the signature, so make sure to get Stacy to make your pic there. Chris's wife, Max, skips a wonderful 6-pac, 41' sloop, named the "Lou." Take a day sail w/her. Max is a lively conversationalist ... especially about politics.

WIDER CARIBBEAN LIVEBOARDS

Carnival Cruise Line, Dive Dominica, Dive Barbados, November 2005, Bruce Wallace (laos61@excite.com), Indianapolis, IN. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 83 to 85 F, calm, choppy. Planned to dive all ports on the southern Caribbean itinerary. St. Thomas/St. John was first stop with excellent scuba at the NPS Reef areas on St. John. Water conditions excellent, shore services outstanding. Lots of fish life for either scuba or snorkeling. On to Dominica ... Dove with Dive Dominica — arranged by Carnival. This was nearly a "cattle boat" with loads of cruise divers (14 in all). Besides the total lack of courtesy in the water, the sites dived were excellent. The weather was poor with a driving rain that forced us into Scott's Head Bay where the wall was great. This is a critter heaven site. 2nd dive was just offshore with wind, waves and poor vis - still outstanding coral and fish presence. On to Barbados ... John Moore arranged by internet. Pick up on time and boat offshore anchor due to waves. Had to swim to boat geared up with 2nd tank in tow - this should be practiced once or twice before attempting for real. Sites were excellent with wide variety of coral and fish. First photo ops with Flying Gurnard - pics excellent.