

also went out with We Be Diving who had a shop right in Cane Garden Bay. \$105 for a two-tank boat dive. They picked me up at Myett's Hotel for the 20-minute ride across island to their main shop at Road Town marina. Their boat was small, never had more than 4 people, including the DM, but there were also no O2, radio, head or drinks on board. DM Kate bought "Skittles" with her own money to share. We were allowed to dive our own profiles. The only limitation was to be back at the boat with at least 500 psi. We dove the HMS Rhone, known for its part in the movie *The Deep*. Between dives, the small boat had starter problems. Kate called the shop and they promised to send another boat. They didn't. After about an hour of fiddling with it, it finally started and we returned to the marina. We could use the ferry service to see the Baths on Virgin Gorda or cross over to Jost Van Dyke to have an "original" Painkiller at the Soggy Dollar Bar on White Bay. UW Photography Comments: Pretty much non-existent with Blue Water Divers or We Be Diving. We were on our own. We did find a fresh water hose at the BWD dock that we could use to rinse cameras, gear, etc., at the end of the day.

**Blue Water Divers, April 2007, Brant Cheikes (brant.cheikes@comcast.net), Acton, MA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Blue Water Divers (BWD) was an ok operation. There were 6-8 divers per trip. Boat was adequate, but barely. Some reasonable shade. No head. Drinking water provided, no snacks. Cheap, watery beer was also available post-dive (but at least it was cold). All of the other divers were relatively new and inexperienced. Divemasters were capable, and I was more or less allowed to dive on my own (I was alone on

each trip) and on my own profile. No emphasis on diving in buddy teams. Dive masters focused on needs of the inexperienced. Fish life was rather dull. Dove the RMS Rhone; that was moderately enjoyable, but fish life seemed sparse compared to other islands. Corals appeared washed out. On first day of diving, BWD made special trips to nearby islands to pick up additional divers, which lengthened the dive day (two-tank dive lasted from 9 am departure to 3:30 pm return). On second day of diving, BWD spent 90 minutes between dives, at anchor, doing basic new diver training while other divers waited on the boat. Stayed at Sebastian's Seaside Villas. Accommodations were nice, but office staff wasn't friendly or helpful. Found plenty of nice places to eat on the island; most but not all of the restaurant staffs were friendly. Lots of nice beaches, but you really need a 4wd rental car. Really calm waters, nice swimming.

## 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, Carambola Beach Resort, September 2006, Maria Smith (mesmith101@earthlink.net), Owensboro, KY.** Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 86 to 88 F, calm. The divemasters were very knowledgeable and on the lookout for everything under the water. They were

quick to point out objects and animals of interest and identify them with a slate. The dive sites are numerous and close enough so the boat can return to the shop for surface intervals. There is a restaurant/bar on the premises and restrooms as well. The dive boats have fresh water for cameras and a freshwater shower for divers. The groups were small, with 6 divers per divemaster. My gear was set up for me when I arrived each morning, and then rinsed and stored each evening. When a dive package is purchased, a complimentary kayak tour is offered. The evening tour is spectacular! Carambola resort is a nice place to stay. The beach is incredible, as are the views. The rooms are in the process of being updated, but comfortable as they are. The screened-in porches for each room are awesome. The restaurant has a limited menu, but it is good. The bar is full service. Service was excellent. The island is easy and fun to explore with a car. Judy of Croix Car Rentals is a dream to rent from. The drive from Carambola to Anchor dive shop is about 15 minutes of spectacular oceanfront view!

**N2 the Blue, November 2006, Bill Edgin (robnbill@mac.com), Chantilly, VA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy. Excellent dive boat. Small 6 pack. Dive master was extremely knowledgeable on the sites and the conditions. Gave a thorough pre-dive briefing. Derek and Diane were always extremely helpful. Provided dive computer for all divers. They provide shore dives off of Cane Bay — the wall, and boat dives off the west end. Great deep wreck dive. Clear conditions. They went out of their way to make sure the divers all had a great experience. Highly recommended.

**N2 the Blue, Carambola, December 2006, Larry Polster (larrypolster@sbcglobal.net), Martinsville, IN.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, choppy. This is third year in a row to return to N2Blue. Derrick/Anne Marie are a husband/wife team. Both are DMs and boat captains that trade off so you get to stay under as long as you surface with 500 psi. One pier dive with Anne was 1 hr. 45 min, got great shots of 3 seahorses and a yellow frog fish. Most other dives depending on depth were 1 hour plus. Fresh cut fruit and bottled water on board. They take your BC, reg, and fins back to the shop and rinse on board when you return in the morning. Five wrecks and debris pile form the old pier on the West end, but prefer the North Shore for eagle rays and sharks with great walls. December brings the Christmas winds, so better to go February through June to get great wall diving.

**St. Croix Ultimate Bluewater Adventures, The Palms at Pelican Cove, August 2007, Tammy and Randy Hauk (tlhauk@kc.rr.com), Grandview, MO.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 84 to 85 F, calm. Their entire operation is friendly and helpful, and their motto seems to be "Have Fun!" Once you set up your gear the first day, they take over including swapping tanks between dives, rinsing at the end of the day and hanging to dry in a secure area, and loading it on the boat the next day. We wanted to do shore dives each afternoon, and after a leisurely lunch we could go back and gather our rinsed gear, grab some tanks and head out, returning the tanks the next morning. Tanks were sometimes a bit short of 3000 psi, but were usually a bit over that mark. Hurricane Dean had passed south of St. Croix the week before, so vis was probably not as good as

it should have been. The boat crew was always willing to chat, a pleasant bunch of people to dive with. The dive leaders were there if you needed them, but allowed us to dive our computer limits. We were on a dusk dive during the full moon and literally ran into a field of coral spawning. Creatures were small in size, but there were massive numbers on every dive. One nurse shark, turtles of various sizes, spotted eagle rays, roughtail rays, and more lobster, arrow crab, banded shrimp and various eels than we have seen elsewhere. The corals looked great, with plenty of color and lots of variety. The wall diving on the north side was surprisingly good. The Palms at Pelican Cove is right on the beach, about 10-minute drive west of Christiansted. Quiet and right on the beach, you can snorkel the close-to-shore reef. Good room for the price, but the sliding glass door to the lanai only opened about 12 inches. Restaurant on site, but it closed for a month right after we arrived. UW Photography Comments: They allows divers all the time they require with a subject. The dive leaders are quick to find and point out sea life of interest, then move away to make room for the photographers. They have designated rinse tank onboard for cameras only, although a little small, and don't mind handing down your equipment after you get in the water. No one got harangued if you fell behind the group waiting for that special photo op.

## St. John

**Cruz Bay Watersports, Westin St. John, August 2006, Andrew Kalman, Minnetonka, MN.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 120 Feet. Water: 86 to 88 F, calm. A great location, and the folks at Cruz Bay Watersports are

exceptional! You are free to find critters to photograph, and are trusted to "be alone" as long as you don't stray.

**Down Under Watersports, June 2007, Greg Harnish (g\_harnish@yahoo.com), Sparta, NJ.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 82 to 82 Fahrenheit, calm. My wife (who is a non-diver) and I chose St. John to enjoy a relaxing, off-the-beaten-path vacation that allowed me to dive in the morning and both of us to snorkel in the afternoon. Unfortunately, the week we arrived, the dive operator I had contacted before our trip was not running. I was referred to Down Under Watersports, an excellent 6-pack dive operation run by Bill Cunningham and Cindy Adams, both of whom are USCG-licensed captains and PADI instructors. Bill and Cindy have experience as captains and divemasters throughout the Caribbean. Bill has been diving on St. John since the age of 10. Bill and Cindy have great personalities, which translate into a fun and safe experience for their divers. Their operation is based near Cruz Bay, close to the Westin resort. They take no more than six divers in a 28-foot Ellis lobster boat that has been renovated with a dive platform, benches, tank racks, spray curtains, ladder, and a fresh water shower. Safety features include a GPS, VHF radio, cell phones, first aid kit, DAN 02 oxygen unit, flares, personal floatation devices, and fire extinguishers. They visit at least 16 sites around St. John. Bill and Cindy held thorough dive and eco briefings before each dive, including a sketch of the dive site and points of interest along the route. The divemaster leads the dive, but flexibility is given for different levels of experience. Divers ascend the anchor line as air is depleted, with remaining divers continuing their dive near the boat. On the days I dove,

Cindy was holding checkout dives for a new cert and had no problem allowing me flexibility in terms of profile and pace of the dive. I was happy to go slow, relax, and get good use from my new camera. Cindy was relaxing and encouraging in her manner, but made sure all requirements were thoroughly covered in her instruction. Other PADI classes are offered up to the level of divemaster. St. John diving tends to be relatively shallow, anchor line dives, although some sites can be done as drift dives. A combination of schedule and sea conditions kept me to the northwest side of the island. Depths were generally 60 feet or less. My favorite site was Carvel Rock. St. John has health coral, particularly soft corals, which can be enjoyed by diving and snorkeling. In terms of fish life while diving, I was treated to the expected array of tropical reef fish, plus schools of Atlantic spadefish, several great barracuda, adult and juvenile spotted drums, large southern stingrays, a honeycomb cowfish, and a longlure frogfish. You are a moderate boat ride away from dive sites in the British Virgin Islands, including the RMS Rhone. After a morning of diving, my wife and I hit the beaches for snorkeling. The sites were close to shore, accessible from beautiful beaches, relatively shallow, and the underwater action was superb. She was mesmerized by the coral reefs and abundant sea life. We saw nurse sharks, an octopus, hawksbill turtles, stingrays, and even swam with a spotted eagle ray. We spent so much time snorkeling and diving that we didn't have an opportunity to trek the numerous hiking trails around the island. The water in St. John, at least on the north coast, tends to have a relatively high salt content, so I needed a couple extra pounds in the weight pouches. Visibility was good, but

not exceptional (I experienced 50 to 70 feet), likely owing to the shallow dive sites and lack of ocean current. Nitrox is not available on St. John, but its benefits would have been limited given the relatively shallow dive profiles. St. John is known for its villas. Many are secluded, with amenities such as open air showers and sometimes a swimming pool. We hooked up with Windspreet Vacation Homes. Bill and Cindy are happy to make referrals of other reputable villa companies. Air conditioning is not always standard, particularly on the Coral Bay side of the island, where trade winds can be refreshing for much of the year. We opted for an air conditioned villa and, in mid-June with a lull in the trades, were quite happy with our choice. We stayed on the Coral Bay side of the island and loved this laid back side of St. John.

**Low Key Watersports, Estate Lindholm, March 2007, George T Felt (gfelt@verizon.net), Moultonborough, NH.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 30 to 70 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, choppy. Estate Lindholm is a small colony of nice little efficiency rooms — not on the water, but has good views and quite comfortable — a good value with breakfast included. It is fairly convenient to the Lowkey dive shop in Cruz Bay (5-minute drive — you will need to rent a small 4WD vehicle to enjoy St John fully.) and well located for access to anything else you want to do (shop, hike, eat great food, etc.). Click [estatelindholm.com](http://estatelindholm.com) for more info. “Lowkey Watersports” has a good boat with a fine crew. Briefings were short and safety oriented; roll call was done with diligence after each dive. You will walk through shallow water with your dive bag on your shoulders to board the dive boat (no dock) at 8:45 AM; back by 11:30 AM. Enter by giant stride off

the stern. Windy conditions limited choice of dive sites; none more than 30 minutes from home. Some sites had good but typical reef fish and macro stuff. One site (Mingo) was in bad shape (dead coral dominates). Current can be an issue, but only sometimes. I went on four 2-tank trips and was treated well. Crew was flexible and accommodating to more experienced divers, but supervised and supported novice divers with due care and diligence. The dive operation was excellent, the dive sites were fair to good, and St John is a lovely place to pass the time if you're looking for a quiet scene with great food. (Try "The Balcony" in town, and "Asolare" (reservations a must) by Estate Lindholm — great "atmosphere" at both places).

## St. Thomas

**Underwater Safaris, September 2007, Don Winchester (DonWinchester@alltel.net), Mooresville, NC.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 60 to 75 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, no currents. Dove as a shore excursion from Disney Wonder cruise ship. Visited the Supermarket, with rows of coral-covered lava banks extending up from a sandy bottom. Vis was apparently down after currents pulled in the murk stirred up by a hurricane that crossed the southern Caribbean the previous week. Dive master explained the dive plan and rules and expectations in a humorous, effective manner. Fish count seemed a little disappointing. Second tank was on some collapsing WW II barges with interesting sea life and swim-throughs. The dive master led the group through the maze of the fire coral-covered superstructure and around the outside as small fish schools and critters alternately ducked out and then hid themselves

in the dark cavities. A small sea turtle let most of the divers cruise by before launching himself out of the depths of a cavity. A large blowfish came in to hide in the caverns and hung, motionless, watching through a rusty hole in the sheet steel. Small bucket for cameras. No camera table.

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## WIDER CARIBBEAN LIVE-BOARDS

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### THE BAHAMAS

**AquaCat, March 2007, Henry C. Campbell, Tacoma, WA.** Experience: 2065 dives. What a rip-off these people had. Dive trip for dive professionals, \$1,095.00. \$80.00 tax, boat charter, \$10.00 park fee + tip. Never say how much tip is. I have no problem giving a tip. Been on lots of trips; these people e-mailed back and said I had to pay \$300 tip because I canceled trip. Do they want tip before a Blackbeard Cruise too? Why dont they just say the trip is \$1,485? Said crew makes no money on these trips — really?

**AquaCat, May 2007, David Steinberg (djsteinb@easystreet.com), Portland, OR.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 200 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm, currents. The AquaCat is a 102-foot catamaran with a 35-foot beam and 6-foot draft. Commissioned in May 2001, it was built in Australia. There are 11 cabins for up to 30 passengers, each cabin having its own shower and head, A/C-climate controls and mini-refrigerator. No rust or mold was present anywhere and the entire boat had a feeling of daily polishing. With helpful assistance from Jesse, the house mouse, linens were changed as requested and