

# In Depth

August 1994  
Vol. 9, No. 8

Consumer Reviews for Sport Divers

## The Grenadines A Tale of Two Islands

A smooth landing at Bequia's new airport, a friendly wave through customs, and a wild pickup taxi ride along the coast brought us to the little town of Port Elizabeth on the quiet shores of Admiralty Bay. So began our 11 days on Bequia and St. Vincent — two islands 9 miles apart that seem more different than some countries separated by an entire ocean. The differences run the gamut from facilities, attitudes, and environment to the thing we were there for — diving.

### Bitten by the Bequia Bug

We'd heard that St. Vincent and the Grenadines, especially Bequia, were knee deep in friendly. We were not disappointed in Bequia. The evening of our arrival, Bob Sachs, owner of Dive Bequia, welcomed us with rum punch and briefed us on the diving. "My philosophy of diving is to make it a fun experience, not a work experience, so all our diving here is one way," he smiled. "If

you get my drift." We did. The currents are variable; sometimes they demand upstream or cross-stream work; at other times, they're weak to nonexistent. But since they can vary during any dive, Dive Bequia's standard practice is go with the flow and follow your bubbles.

Bob Sachs is an easygoing type. Everything about the atmosphere of his dive operation is, like Sachs, agreeable and unhurried. Underlying that is a total professionalism that pervades every aspect of Dive Bequia. Sachs' staff treat people as individuals and divers. They rely principally on watchfulness from the moment a new arrival steps on the boat. The attention continues from castoff to tie-up. If you dive a computer and it's clear you know your way around underwater, you can do pretty much as you please. In any case, staff will never be far away. There are rarely fewer than three divemasters

in the water, and that may be with as few as six divers.

Dive Bequia's staff may just be the best I've ever seen in land-based diving. Same for the boats. The operation runs a pair of crisp, clean, 30-foot inboards.

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They're roomy, sun-shaded, and set up as dive boats should be. The nearest diving is 3 minutes from the dock; the farthest, 18 minutes.

Sachs has a policy that will please any but the incurable groupie: no cattle boats. Any time the number of divers gets above eight, he figures it's time to take two boats to different places. If some divers want to revisit a particular site while others want to try someplace new, he'll use two boats and make everybody happy. Throughout a week of diving, eight divers was our max. Usually there were a lot fewer.

"Normal" on Bequia is one tank in the morning at 10, one in the afternoon at 2. "Normal" is also "on time." Since there's not a huge number of topside trips to make on Bequia, Sachs adopted this pattern because it's what most of his divers ask for. One day, a few of us really wanted a 2-tank morning dive. Hey, no problem, they worked it out for us. Dive Bequia's tanks, by the way, are steel 90s, equal to about 6 pounds on the weight belt. Fills were always at or a tad over 3,000 psi.

A dive package with Dive Bequia includes all the gear, if you choose. We used their BCs and shorties — all good stuff, well maintained. As this trip was our first in the Grenadines, we opted for a hotel package set up by Dive Bequia at Plantation House Hotel, where Dive Bequia's shop is located.

A Bequia–St. Vincent adventure is not what I'd call R&R for the budget. But the elegance of Plantation House, surrounded by 10 acres of tropical gardens, helps take the sting off the cost. The hotel itself houses several rooms and offers dining on a broad, open-air veranda. The 17 well-cared-

for bungalows scattered about the property are bright, airy, and roomy. Each has a queen-sized bed and refrigerator. Cooling is by overhead fan, which makes for comfortable sleeping under a bug canopy.

You feel Bequia's flying teeth less at the biting stage than the scratching stage, but they are there. The hotel management does a good job of bug control, providing not only spray but also bug coils to burn in your room throughout the night. Still, you might do well to take your own supply of industrial-strength Deet.

Other hotels and apartments are found along the quay side fronting Admiralty Bay on the short walk to Port Elizabeth. There are several restaurants, too. Nearly all do a good job with local West Indian dishes of chicken and seafood — and, of course, the ubiquitous pizza is a Grenadine staple. Daily walks to town are always interrupted by waterfront vendors who hawk their various island crafts, T-shirts, and fruits and vegetables with good-natured banter.

## **Tewes's Island**

Our introduction to St. Vincent was a complete about-face. Bequia was topside charm and quiet, a hand outstretched in friendship; St. Vincent was raucous, hands out and grabbing. We made a 1-hour crossing on one of the aging freighter ferries that ply the waters between the Grenadines. Debarking at the Kingstown pier on St. Vincent, we were physically accosted by teenagers and young adults all demanding to be paid whether they carried anything or not. These people wrenched money from my hand and reached for my shirt pocket as the cab driver blandly waited. Fortunately, this sce-

nario doesn't prevail outside the downtown area; our digs were a couple of miles away.

Our diving arrangements in St. Vincent were with Bill Tewes's Dive St. Vincent. We stayed at the Sunset Shores Beach Hotel, 200 yards or so from the dive pier.

Sunset Shores fits the Kingstown tempo — a motel-like, air-conditioned building curled around a kidney-shaped pool a few steps from the beach. It caters more to the business community than to divers, but it's clean, modern, well attended, and quite comfortable. The humidity seemed a little higher on St. Vincent, and the air conditioner and a closed slider kept out the biting night critters. Though the flavor of Sunset Beach is oriented to guests who stay inside more than out, each room does have a small balcony and a couple of chairs.

Dive St. Vincent would have gladly picked us up on the beach and dropped us off after diving, but we chose to walk the short distance to the dive shop. The drill here is a 10 a.m. 2-tank dive. Two-tank trips make more sense on St. Vincent because there are more topside excursions.

Although the two were former associates when they came from Papua New Guinea to the Grenadines some 10 years ago, diving with Bill Tewes is not a mirror image of diving with Bob Sachs. Still, there are similarities. Dive St. Vincent's staff is efficient, and like Dive Bequia, whatever they do, they do it when they say they will. Equipment from the dive shop is up to date and in good repair. Tanks are lightweight steel 72s, equal to about 4 pounds on the belt. However, a Dive St. Vincent package that

includes equipment isn't the all-inclusive one Dive Bequia offers. Some items are extra, so ask in advance.

Dive St. Vincent's staff, like Bequia's, are good at pointing out the underwater neat stuff. Their boats, although affording little or no protection from the sun, are quick and dependable. We were never crowded; we carried five divers at most, and on our last day, Bill Tewes and my buddy and I were the whole show. Tewes, by the way, is an outstanding dive guide.

Their most distant dive sites are further away than Bequia's, but the difference is of little consequence except when the wind kicks up. Unlike Bequia, there's not much current on most of the St. Vincent dives; the anchor line was home base for all our diving. This is a distinct advantage for camera toters, especially when shooting close-up or macro.

Dive St. Vincent runs a daylong diving trip to Baleine Falls. It's a fair run from the south to the north end of the island to reach the falls. The routine is to do the two regular dives of the day on the way up, visit the falls, and return. Along the way, you pass the scene where the lava flow from La Soufriere coursed its way to the sea when the volcano last erupted in 1979. Once you arrive, the brief walk and a swim in the freshwater pool beneath the falls takes 20 minutes. The source of the falls is a stream flowing from La Soufriere. It is a pleasant spot and the freshwater dip is refreshing after a salty trip, but it's hardly spectacular. I may be jaded, but forty bucks a head for the boat ride, of which roughly half the distance is to the dive sites anyway, seemed excessive for such a modest reward.

Which island, Bequia or St. Vincent, offers the better diving? It's a judgement call. We liked the actual diving in St. Vincent a fuzz better than Bequia's, but comparing prices and other factors, Dive Bequia seemed the better value — and Bob Sachs and his staff make you feel better about it. However, there are countless good

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reasons to dive with both, and with the two islands so close to one another, it's foolish not to, even if you have only a few days.

## **Beneath the Surface**

If you've heard that diving in the Grenadines is rich and unspoiled, you've heard right. Drift diving or moored diving, it's all lush. Unfortunately, pelagic cruisers are a rarity; mantas, eagles, reef sharks, turtles, and the like are seldom sighted, they say, and we certainly didn't see any. Otherwise, though, it's discovery city. Visibility wasn't great, but it wasn't bad, either — usually 40–60 feet. And above all there are fish. If the clouds of fish we experienced almost every dive weren't storms, then they have to go into the daily underwater report as very heavy showers.

There are distinct differences between Bequia and St. Vincent in underwater volcanic forma-

tions and reef habitat, but the differences are better experienced than described. You'll find boulder formations, virtual jungles of sponges and corals hard and soft, walls that are gradual drop-offs and walls that are sheer into a blue/black void. Black coral is common as shallow as 15 feet.

Macro opportunities are endless. I found myself spending entire dives with my nose a foot and a half away from the scenery. Vibrant coral gardens are home to a sponge smorgasbord of variety and color. A single barrel sponge may be populated by groups of banded coral shrimp, arrow crabs, and brittle stars. Hard corals harbor miniature Fourth of July displays of red, white, and blue spiral tube worms. These are interspersed with larger lacy varieties dominated by giant feather dusters nearly a foot in diameter in all colors of the rainbow. We found leopard nudibranchs and frogfish.

We diligently searched for and several times pinpointed the "froggies" in their usual state of color concealment, looking like part of the sponge they're resting on. But picture this: two large frogfish, one in a bright yellow mode, the other in red-spotted tan and white, holding hands on a cluster of large, iridescent blue vase sponges. As I fired off multiple close-ups then backed off for some 28-mm shots, I thought, "Man, *nobody* is going to believe this wasn't a setup."

Overgrown king crabs and 20-pound spiny lobsters 2½ feet long call for normal and wide-angle lenses. Smaller red rock lobster, a bit more shy and retiring, are also there. Spotted morays are beyond counting, and there are a good many big green morays and spotted snake eels — not to mention

the occasional telltale mound that marks the hidden snout of a sand eel; these guys are thick-bodied, sleek characters that make one think of a python with a head like an oversized snapping turtle. Watching one 5-foot specimen emerge from the sand was reminiscent of a scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Spotted drum, which in my experience are usually small, bashful, and hidden under ledges, are prolific in St. Vincent and Bequia. We saw no less than four drum, often more, on every dive. Foot-long examples were not uncommon, and they were approachable enough to allow a couple of shots as they hovered momentarily within the short range of a close-up lens.

Admittedly, describing it all later does sound like hyperbole. But one is tempted to speculate that if it lives on a Caribbean reef, it can be found around Bequia and St. Vincent. Beyond that, there's a lot more to dive in the Grenadines. The region comprises at least nine notable islands and island groups easily as unspoiled as Bequia and St. Vincent.

Meanwhile, Bequia and St. Vincent, very different from one another, are also a diving contradiction. They have the facilities to cater to your creature comforts; they have world class diving; but they haven't yet become big-time resorts. The selfish among us will want them to remain out of touch and out of mind as dive destinations, but we know better. For now they remain one of the Caribbean's few dive frontiers.

## Details at Glance

**Costs:** Pricey? Depends on your frame of reference. The answer is yes if your base of comparison is, say, the Bay Islands,

where you typically get three dives a day for 7 or 8 days, your room, and all you can eat for \$800. Our per-person cost for hotel and diving came to about \$135 a day — a little less if you average in non-dive overnights. Figure meals according to your own gourmet standards. For example, when lobsters are in season at the French Restaurant in St. Vincent, a medium bug costs about \$25. A ¾-liter bottle of budget French wine adds another \$12–\$15. On the other hand, 12 to 15 bucks at Mac's in Bequia will buy pizza and beer for two.

**Reservations:** Maduro Travel in Miami handled our trip (800-327-6709 or 305-373-3331); or try Landfall Productions (800-525-3833 or 415-651-6499). Mid- to late April marks the start of lower summer hotel rates and airline ticket costs to the Caribbean. Rates, up or down, don't change on a uniform date, so it's worth checking into.

**Getting There:** You can do it in a day from New York or Boston. Early morning flights on American go nonstop to Barbados; from inland U.S., it's a 2-day trip. Once on Barbados, LIAT or Mustique takes you the rest of the way. Happily, we chose Mustique. Most times, if your stateside plane is late, they wait. Ours was, and they did.

**Money Matters:** Local currency is the Eastern Caribbean dollar, or E.C. Exchange rate is currently about \$2.65 E.C. for \$1 U.S. at banks, \$2.60 at hotels that are set up to change money. Generally, merchants and cab drivers will gladly take your U.S. paper but the over-the-counter exchange rate may be somewhat less. On Bequia, hotels may or may not exchange money. However, there are three banks close by. Most hotels and restaurants accept

Visa, MasterCard, and others. However, commission rates have caused many merchants to impose a minimum charge-card purchase of \$100–\$125 (that's E.C., not U.S.). Others may add a surcharge. Using plastic to pay Dive St. Vincent, for example, draws a 5% surcharge; on the other hand, Dive St. Vincent will accept your personal check.

Pay attention in restaurants. As often as not, your check will already have tax and the standard 10% tip added in. The area is starting to take on a European flavor in that regard.

**Island Transportation:** You can taxi or rent. Bequia is small enough that rental doesn't make a lot of sense. On St. Vincent you might still opt for taxis, since driving is wild, crazy, and on the left-hand side of the road. Your hotel can provide the name and number of a dependable driver. Average trips are \$10–\$15, but sometimes they'll wait or pick you up and take you back for one price. Negotiate the tariff up front.

**Water Temperature:** Mostly mid- to upper 70s in winter, 80–83°F after April. Ours ranged from 79 to 81°F.

**Season:** We were there the last of April and early May of this year. Daytime temperatures then are typically low to mid-80s with a breeze off the ocean. Nights, the temp drops a few degrees for good sleeping. May usually marks the onset of the wet season, which tapers off in October. It rained heavily for hours one night but cleared by midmorning, just before diving. If that's typical, it's an ideal time to go; also keep in mind that low season rates begin the latter part of April.

