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Ben Davison's

In
Depth®

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Dominica, Nature's Last Island

Diving in an unspoiled Caribbean paradise

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Nestled between the islands of Guadeloupe to the north and Martinique to the south, lush, mountainous Dominica is one of the last Caribbean islands to feel the tread of tourists' feet. Castle Comfort Resort, a small, family-style resort with an intimate bed-and-breakfast ambiance, was one of the first on the island and has dominated the dive scene here. But as airline connections become easier and more divers discover the grand scale of Dominica's rain forest trails and the pristine reefs below, several new choices of accommodations and dive operations are becoming available.

Both Ben Davison and I have visited Dominica, and we concur wholeheartedly on the beauty of the diving and the hiking. I have no tales of big fish, but as soon as I get into the water, I know there's something I like about it, something that's indescribably different from other Caribbean locations.

On the following pages, one of our correspondents reports on his trip to one of the small, new luxury resorts, Petit Coulibri Cottages, and another longtime correspondent gives us a quick rundown on his recent stay at Castle Comfort.

J. Q.

Dear Fellow Diver,

Our guide from the hotel met us at Melville Hall Airport, loaded up the van, and set out to cross the island of Dominica -- a solid two-hour ride through the rain forest with a couple of shopping forays (pineapples and bread) and a social call thrown in for good measure. Then we began the final leg of our journey: an additional half-hour up a very rocky dirt road to reach Petit Coulibri Cottages, our 1,000-foot-high paradise. I found myself thinking, "No pain, no gain" -- but by week's end, the drive would become barely noticeable, and the effort of enduring

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Melatonin: A Cure for Jet Lag?

Dear Editor:

I had heard a lot about melatonin's ability to relieve jet lag but figured it was just another fad. Nonetheless, I gave it a try. After a flight from the U.S. to Singapore, I took two 2-mg tablets for the first four nights and noticed a significant difference in how quickly I adjusted to the

time shift. I've traveled across the Pacific many times and normally battle daytime sleepiness for at least four days, sometimes six. But this time, although I was tired on the first day, I was functional, and on the second day I was astonishingly alert. It did not make me sleep through the night, but despite less sleep, I felt fine during the day. I am surprised. I'll do it again.

C. B., Singapore

Dear C. B.:

Humans manufacture their own melatonin, a hormone produced by the pineal gland that signals the body when to sleep. For years, savvy travelers have taken an inexpensive synthetic melatonin (available in health-food stores) to reduce or eliminate jet lag. While some people poo-hoo it, Dr. Josephine Arendt, writing last year in the *British Medical Journal*, noted that "there is substantial published evidence that melatonin can improve both the subjective and objective symptoms of jet lag."

There are a few dosage theories, but because they've never been thoroughly tested, they remain theories. Dr. Arendt says, "Dose-response studies suggest that for clock-related problems, 5 mg is more efficient than lower doses." A customer-relations representative at Natrol, a manufacturer of melatonin, recommends up to 6 mg. Everyone seems to recommend taking it an hour before bedtime at the new destination, and on subsequent nights if traveling across a lot of time zones. Our editor John Q. takes up to 5 mg. When I travel across several time zones, I tend to be way out of sync for a couple of days, so I take up to 12 mg; however, I'm a believer in the theory that anything worth doing is worth doing to excess.

Dr. Arendt notes that evidence shows it can effectively induce sleep even if you're not flying. Dr. Terry Willard, a herbalist with Natrol, says that it helps insomnia in about half the people who try it. Peter Doskoch, writing in *Psychology Today*, says, "For a good night's sleep, take 0.3 to 9 mg about an hour before bedtime."

While no harmful side effects have yet been discovered (it's not well researched), melatonin interrupts the sleep of some people and makes others drowsy after waking. Russell J. Reiter, Ph.D., a professor of neuroendocrinology, says melatonin shouldn't be used by women who are pregnant, nursing, or trying to conceive; people with bad allergies, mental illness, autoimmune disorders (rheumatoid arthritis), or immune-system cancers (lymphoma or leukemia); and those taking steroids. People taking antidepressants should not take it either. Diving to 120 feet while loaded up on melatonin is a risk that's never been researched — and probably won't.

Further aids to minimizing jet lag include avoiding alcohol and caffeine and drinking plenty of water. If you're flying eastward at night, avoid meals and try to sleep through as much of the flight as possible. (You might want to take a mild sleeping pill or muscle relaxant, but make sure its effects don't last longer than the flight.) Whichever way you go, reset your watch upon arrival, start eating meals on the new time zone's schedule, and don't go to sleep until bedtime.

Ben Davison

the half-mile ride down to the dive site and back up to the cottages would mysteriously fade away.

As soon as we could tear ourselves away from the spectacular view from this onetime sugar-cane-and-cacao estate, proprietors Loye, Bernard, and Amy Barnard gave us a tour of the entire resort: three cottages. Ours was a stone duplex with a bath and a half and a kitchenette with refrigerator and oven.

One or two other couples, mainly Europeans, came and went during our week there, but it was never crowded. With only three cabins, how could it be? Here in tropical-shower paradise, water is collected from the skies and heated by the sun; the water pressure in my shower was as good as home. Each cabin has a collection of wall fixtures and lamps that provide dim illumination at night (enough to allow reading), and 110V electric outlets.

There were other pleasures: a fridge stocked with sodas (\$2) and other drinks; floor-to-ceiling slat windows facing Martinique (23 miles south) -- no screens, but bugs were not a problem; in fact, we enjoyed the company of the birds that sometimes flew into our cottage. There's a pool overlooking the ocean a thousand feet below, but it was being repaired.

From the Heights to the Depths

I opted to have breakfast brought to me most mornings, and although the only item that changed was the fruit, the day's first meal was always excellent, a beautifully prepared platter with

scrambled eggs, fresh fruit, banana fritters with passion-fruit syrup, coconut bread (outstanding), and coffee. At \$10 per person, it was fairly priced, even generous -- I kept leftovers in the fridge.

Around 8:30 a.m. it was time for the daily 15-minute ride (part of the package) down the mountain to Scott's Head Bay Marine Reserve in Soufriere, where the island's best diving is found. Nature Island Dive is owned and operated by three couples with diverse backgrounds, international diving experience, and great attitude.

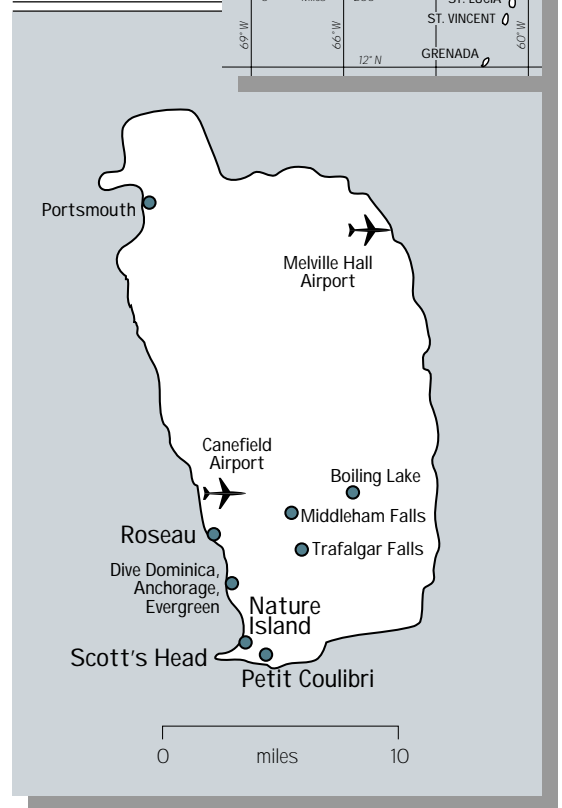
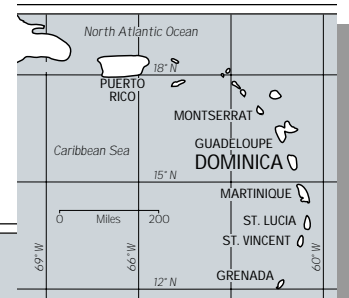
My dive buddy and I checked in at the dive shop and found that we were two of only five divers for the day. After completing the brief paperwork, I wandered around the shop inspecting their rental gear, which seemed abundant and in good condition. The staff got us our weights, brought our gear to the boat, set it up on the shop's aluminum 80s, and we were off.

We didn't bother with a checkout dive; instead, we went straight into a panic dive that stirred concern about the coming week with Nature Island. After entering the water, but before we could reach the dive site underwater, we found ourselves in a strong current. Despite our desperate attempts we couldn't make it work, and the dive had to be cut short.

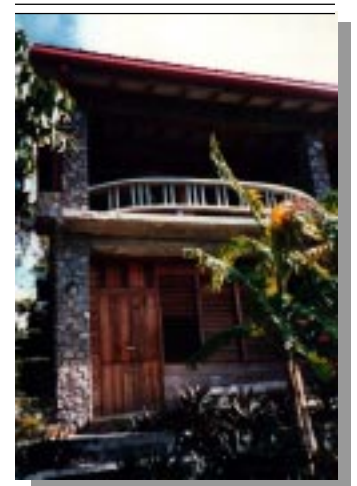
But my doubts soon faded. We moved immediately to a nearby site and found ourselves diving on a fine, healthy reef. I dallied along, poking through a variety of anemones, huge barrel sponges, azure sponges, crinoids, and bristle worms. Although I didn't see giant fish, I was often surrounded by schools of snappers, saw groupers in the foot-and-a-half range, and even spotted a turtle.

By week's end I was convinced that this group's service was matched only by Peter Hughes on Cayman Brac, and some live-aboards. Each day they asked us where we wanted to dive, and within a 10-minute boat ride, there we were. I was allowed to dive my computer; no depth or other requirements were ever mentioned, but most profiles were 60 to 80 feet for 50 minutes.

Nature Island Dive has two custom-built 21-foot aluminum dive boats with sunshades, twin outboards, and space that's ample for 10 divers but better with fewer. Entry was by backward roll, exits up a stern ladder. There's not enough camera space, but I didn't find this a problem because we returned to shore between dives. At first I thought returning between dives would be a hassle. I was wrong; it was wonderful. With most dives less than 10 minutes away, it gave us a clean, dry place to change film and a chance to use the bathroom. Because we were a small group, we often went together to get coffee at the Sea Bird Cafe, a short walk north of the shop, without



Dominica



Hiking in Dominica

Dominica is likely to be one of the hot ecotourism sites of the next decade. The island is mostly vertical, with more than 75 percent considered mountainous. The tallest mountain, Morne Diablotin, is nearly 5,000 feet high. Much of the island is rain forest; some places get more than

360 inches of rain a year. Locals say there are 365 rivers on the island — one for every day of the year. There are enough hikes here to skip diving altogether, but the diving too good for that.

I opted to walk to Middleham Falls, a three-hour hike through small streams and dense rain forest along a beaten grass path (with occasional well-placed logs), instead of to the more touristy Trafalgar Falls. In Laudat I hired an excellent, enthusiastic local guide, Benjamin Bruney (809-448-8575), who knew a lot about the local wildlife and plants. And the falls? Well, a rushing stream plummeting 1,000 feet into a 30-foot pool is a spectacular sight any day. I hiked back, beyond, up, and over yet another mountain to reach Papillote Retreat, where I soaked in the hot baths, changed clothes, and devoured a meal of various barbecued meats, fishes, and vegetables. I paid about \$60 for our guide's four hours, and an equal amount in taxis getting to Laudat (the starting point of the falls trail) and returning from Papillote to Petit Coulibri.

Boiling Lake is a unique hike. A slippery, muddy, seven-mile trail leads through the Valley of Desolation to end up at a steam-enshrouded lake of boiling water. Take along an egg; the lake will cook it in just three minutes. Along the way, be sure to stay on the trail so you won't break through the thin crust to the lava below. It's an arduous trip that takes a guide and some endurance.

C. M.

worrying about being late for the second dive; after all, it couldn't start until we returned.

Food on the Hill

When we were done with our morning dives, we had lunch at a nearby restaurant -- usually the Sea Bird Cafe, where we found a good menu, great views, and good company. Then it was back up the mountain to the resort by 2:30. Afternoons were left open. Amy was great at arranging guided tours and hikes, and everyone was available for a lift down the road to the dive shop.

After our first day's diving, we had dinner on the verandah of the main house, overlooking the ocean. I had a spicy fish chowder, fresh-baked bread, Carib-style moussaka, a grapefruit-arugula salad, and coconut sorbet.

Menus here were somewhat programmed, like those on a live-aboard, but I could either dine in the main house or be served in my cottage. Most meals were made of locally grown ingredients and were reasonably priced at \$25 per person -- a real bargain, considering how much they would cost if you cooked them yourself. There were a few restaurants that I had wanted to try, but travel times and taxi costs more often than not persuaded me to stay at the cottages and enjoy good food with a view. I also heard stories about great games of dominoes and even dancing in town, but I was content to look at the stars or read a book.

Champagne Diving

Simon was an enthusiastic divemaster, adept at finding marine life that didn't want to be found. On my first dive at Dangleben's Pinnacle and Inside Scott's Head, I asked to see a frogfish. Simon quickly found and pointed out a yellow frogfish perched on a sponge.

That night we dived Inside Scott's Head again for one of the most impressive night dives I've done in over 15 years, a dive packed with marine life and colors that rivaled the town pier in Bonaire before they scraped it clean. I saw nearly a half-dozen orange-ball corralimorphs, an immense number of



crustaceans including big crabs (the claws alone were eight inches wide) and six lobsters, and every kind of eel imaginable, including the rarely seen blue conga. I talked about this dive for the rest of the week. We didn't get home until almost 9:00 p.m., but when we arrived, we found waiting for us in our cottage a delicious pumpkin soup, an oversized chicken calzone, salad, and sorbet. What a day!

Over the next few days, we dived several sheer vertical walls packed with healthy corals, giant brown barrel sponges, schools of red snapper, and trunkfish. I saw more frogfish; a gray one that was barely visible, even in my well-framed close-up photos, and a yellow one perched on a small brown sponge.

My last dives were at equally impressive sites: Debby Flo, Soufriere Pinnacle, and Scott's Head Pinnacle. Simon reflected that he'd not dived this wreck site for more than six months, so he wasn't sure what to expect. Two wrecks rested on the sand bottom, one wooden, not much compared with large wrecks, but with decent marine life, including a truly photogenic azure sponge growing off its side and a mushroom scorpion fish perched nearby. Our safety stop was in the famous Champagne site, where tiny bubbles emanate from the beneath the rocks, giving you the feeling of swimming in an ocean of sparkling wine. Not much marine life here, but a terrific safety stop.

Out of Eden

I went down the mountain on Saturday afternoon to pick up my dive gear at the dive shop. They had washed and bagged it for me. The diving was most memorable for the pristine reefs, abundant healthy corals, and wide-ranging photo opportunities. I can't remember the last time I was so impressed with a dive operation.

I hope that in the future E-6 processing will be available on the island and that Nature Island Dive will have oxygen on the boats -- even if the ride back is short.

All good things have to come to an end, at least for a while. I give Petit Coulibri only four stars because of its cost; but the resort is spectacular, and I'm glad I stayed there. However, there's another place I will seriously consider next time: Nature Island, which has its own cottages over the water a short walk from the dive shop. It's less expensive and much more convenient.

C. M.

Waterhouse Tours in Florida (305-451-2228, fax 305-451-5147) is now the booking agent for the dive operation, but I booked directly with the hotel (809-446-3150) and with the dive shop (809-449-8181, fax 809-449-8182).

Official language is English. Departure tax is \$10. . . . Round-trip airfare from Miami on American Airlines, with a plane change in San Juan, was about \$700. . . . Petit Coulibri was \$180 per night, based on a weekly stay. Dive packages were \$315 for ten dives, with no surcharge for making one of the ten dives a night dive. . . . Daytime temperatures were about 80°F, although it was 10° cooler at Petit Coulibri (and sometimes damp). Water temperature was also about 80°F (in May) and visibility ran 60–80 feet in this, the beginning of the off season. . . . Nature Dives also rents bikes and kayaking trips, though I did neither. . . . If you'd like to explore the island after your morning dives, you can rent a car or jeep for about \$350 per week. There are no real beaches to speak of. . . . Required Reading: *Caribbean Sunseeker's Dominica* just came out and is full of color plates, vivid descriptions of sites, and key travel information (Passport Books, \$10.95). The June 1990 *National Geographic* has a beautiful description of the island, as do publications from Dominica's Division of Tourism (212-682-0435, fax 212-697-4258). . . . There are several web sites for Dominica. Start with <http://www.delphis.dm/home.htm>.

Petit Coulibri & Nature Island Dive, Dominica

Diving (advanced)	★★★★
Diving (beginners)	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Food	★★★★
Money's worth	★★★★

★ = poor

★★★★★ = excellent

Melville Hall is Dominica's largest air field. It's a two-hour taxi trip through the mountains to the resorts — an entertaining ride, but for convenience, the smaller Canefield is a short 15-minute ride from Roseau.

Ditty Bag