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Montserrat
Waterworld Woes
Navy reg tests
Red Sea: Poseidon's Quest
Lammer Law Feedback
Truk Aggressor Problems
Shark Attack
Shark Smart
Flotsam & Jetsam

Ben Davison's **In Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

Montserrat Holiday

Touring — and a little diving — in the British West Indies

*Word drifted in last fall
that there was a new dive
operation on Montserrat.
What was the diving like? I
didn't know. Publisher Ben
Davison agreed to go
check it out while I looked
at a new boat in the
Solomons. I think my next
trip better be to the
Caribbean.*

*John Q. Trigger
Editor*

Dear Fellow Diver,

"I call this 'Secret Spot,'" said our captain, Aquatic Discoveries owner Greg Bennett. "The fishermen don't know about it -- and we don't tell them. There are lots of conch. Big ones. And seahorses. Not the little ones, but four inches long. And in the flats are sting rays. I've seen as many as 20 in the sand. And off there," he motioned, "watch for eagle rays. And don't be surprised if a big remora comes up to you. Everything you want to see is, well, right here."

Sitting in the shade beneath the flying bridge of Greg's 24-foot *Another Blessing*, geared up and ready to go, I liked the way this sounded. Nothing high voltage, but this is Montserrat, Mon, one of the cluster of leeward Caribbean islands that includes St. Kitts and Nevis, Antigua, and St. Maarten. None of these is renowned for its diving, but Saba is in this archipelago, and it's got great pinnacle diving. Perhaps, just perhaps. . . . But then, yesterday, at Montserrat's Pinnacle, not far from Secret Spot, Greg said it was here he saw the biggest turtles he'd ever seen -- and to keep an eye out for amberjack. Neither showed.

Lush Caribbean Isles with American Noise

I can say from the outset that Montserrat gets high marks for lush rain-forest hiking, great sea vistas, and courteous residents, about 9,000 of them. There are but two resort hotels -- the Vue Point, where I stayed, and the Montserrat Springs Hotel -- with 74 rooms between them. PR flacks like to call Montserrat "undiscovered." Not only is tourism limited because the airport handles only commuter planes from Antigua, but also many Caribbean guide books, I discovered, don't discuss it (I found one that left it off its map).

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... I doubted that fishermen could have missed Secret Spot, a 10-minute boat ride north from the hotel, past bobbing floats tied to submerged fish traps.

Nonetheless, it's not undiscovered by those English, Canadians, and Americans who have bucks enough to buy one of the hundreds of white villas that speckle the leeward hillsides. Since most don't live here year round, their vacant digs offer plenty of bargains for weekly or monthly rentals.

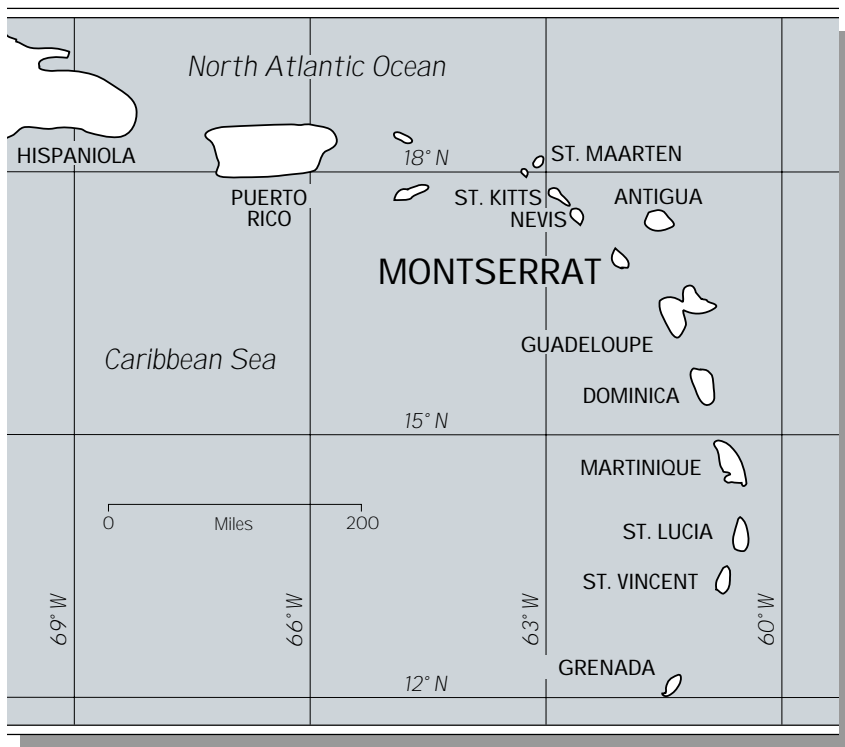
Writers also like to talk about Montserrat, a 40-square-mile British Crown Colony, as what the Caribbean was like 30 years ago. Yes, the residents are hospitable, the roads uncluttered, the town filled with buildings constructed by slaves (those buildings withstood the 1989 hurricane that blew the roof off many newer structures), and the hillsides covered with foraging goats and sheep. But the scourge of American video and TV has arrived, the airport is about to expand to handle American Eagle flights, and sugar is imported. Still, the reefs remain as they were in 1965 -- fished out, mainly, by people who have lived here 350 years and eat what they trap, net, and spear.

Going to Meet the Sea Creatures

So I doubted that fishermen could have missed Secret Spot, a 10-minute boat ride north from the hotel, past bobbing floats tied to submerged fish traps. Greg helped me with my

tank and I stepped off the transom, dropping to a patch reef the size of half a city block. Mandrill-faced black durgons fluttered just out of reach. I stuffed a small, empty queen conch shell into my BC pocket, then tweaked the tail of a nearby spotted moray. A pair of juvenile angels scurried from the reef. I went eye to eye with a free-floating balloon fish, watched a couple of lobsters watching me, and tried to spook small barracuda hovering nearby. But in the 40- to 65-foot depths, it was mainly a range of common tropicals, a limited range at that. The coral was mostly knobby fingers, with an occasional sea whip and gorgonia.

I began the second dive at Carrs Bay by checking my impulse to free the dazed fish I found in a trap, and ended up watching a spearfisherman dragging a line of foot-long fish. But a thriving juvenile population of grunts, snappers, groupers, parrotfish, and angels, guaranteed never to make it to adulthood, made the dive interesting. Even the brown chromis were juveniles; one in ten sported an isopod, a small parasite that drains the fish dead, attached to its chin.



Montserrat, British West Indies

Many fish, no matter the species, had a patch of white somewhere on their bodies; the nose of one, the tail of another, behind the dorsal of another. Depth 30 feet maximum, water 83 degrees, as it was every dive.

Another day at the Pinnacles (never did see a pinnacle), on the deeper side (up to 80 feet) I found nicer corals, including fine specimens of brain coral, a couple of barracuda, a couple of grunts, black durgons galore, Creole wrasse, and a puffer. A second dive ("exploratory") to a spot Greg hadn't tried (15 minutes north of the hotel) was mainly dead coral, but I got my nose into the reef when my buddy pointed out a brilliant little crab, purple and yellow, with a solid yellow band across its face; nearby were black moray the size of my index finger.

Searching for the Unique, the Camouflaged, and the Tiny

Before you cross Montserrat off your "to go" list, stick with me. New divers will see plenty, and besides, Greg is a super fellow -- accommodating and helpful, as cheerful and positive as one can get. He arrived a year ago with his wife and newborn daughter (the "first blessing") after walking from his captain's bars in the U.S. Army. He brought a compressor and cut a deal with the Vue Point. A one-man show, he loads the boat in the morning and takes gear to his house to wash. He captains the boat, lugs the tanks, helps people in the water, and hangs with novices. One diver tactfully suggested that he consider getting help. The next day he showed up with an able fellow named Elliot to assist.

If you're an experienced diver, by now you've learned how to enjoy any dive by looking for the unique, the camouflaged, the tiny. In the 40- to 70-foot visibility, I worked on my fish identification, differentiating between spotted drums, jackknife fish, and high hats. I toyed with a scorpion fish my buddy found, studied pillar coral, and hovered 10 minutes with a hunting trumpet fish, wanting him to strike something, anything. He didn't. I wriggled my fingers at a large lobster, coaxing him from his hole. I watched a pair of guaguanche, a

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When in the Caribbean, I usually fly LIAT airlines to get between islands, suffering the indignities of late arrivals and departures, unavailable seats, lost luggage, and inconvenient flight times. Too often I've had to overnight between flights because small airports allow only daylight arrivals and schedules just don't jibe.

This time, LIAT was jammed; to get to Montserrat, a 20-minute flight, I would have had to spend two nights in Antigua after arriving from Miami. I called the Vue Point Hotel and their desk clerk speedily arranged a charter flight on Montserrat Airways. Their British pilot met our flight from the U.S. and whisked us to Montserrat. The price: \$230, less than double the price of a LIAT flight for two. Furthermore, LIAT charges for excess baggage, which we divers always have. I figure we just about broke even. (With excess baggage charges, three people will find the cost of a charter comparable to LIAT; four will save money.)

Our next destination (but not to dive) was Nevis, reachable by flying LIAT back to Antigua, then to Nevis, and again those baggage charges. We opted to charter directly to Nevis from Montserrat.

How do you find a charter? If you don't have a travel agent to figure it out, call the hotel at your destination and ask them to either arrange it or put you in touch with the charter company. In the Caribbean, St. Vincent, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Dominica are all candidates for chartering to save time and maybe money. I've chartered successfully in Belize. Chartering can make sense in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Solomons — you name it. It can help you make connections, get you to destinations you otherwise might not reach, and even save you money.

B. D.

barracuda relative that I don't recall seeing before, work the grassy flats. Greg gave experienced divers the freedom to do as they wished, which isn't a lot when the first dive bottom is 65 to 80 feet and the second seldom deeper than 30. While he asked divers to return in 40 minutes, he made no effort to enforce it for divers with computers. Still, I often returned with nearly half the 3,000 psi I started with.

Daily Diving Supplement

I came to Montserrat expecting diving to be a minor activity, which it is, and to supplement it with hiking, touring, and good meals. While one can get around easily by cab or rental car, I hired Vue Point bartender Denzil Riley to lead the way. A government-trained guide, well versed in flora and fauna, he picked mangos, soursop, and raspberries for us along trails, led us to the top of 3,000-foot Chance's Peak (2,000 steps carved straight up at a 45° angle), meandered us to the Bamboo Forest, and traipsed us up a riverbed to the Great Alps waterfall. Though hit by a hurricane in 1989, Montserrat's rain forest has returned with vigor; above 1,000 feet, it's lush and green and splendid.

It's customary to honk at anyone you know, and Denzil, a 26-year-old who has never left the island, waved and honked at everyone he passed. At one point he stopped at a lady's house to ask if she still made herpudding. Yes, indeed, and for \$2 we had a large hunk. He stopped for another friend who gave us a bucket of mangoes and guavas to take back to our hotel. Three half-day hikes with Denzil, several side trips, and a car tour around the island ran \$230 for two, much less than the main tour operator, Emerald Tours, charges.

Digging In at the Digs

The Vue Point sits above a dark-sand public beach (which on one holiday was packed with well-mannered locals enjoying reggae, cold beer, and family picnics). At the head of the beach is the hotel beach bar, usually filled with locals, and the pier from which the dive boat leaves. Each of the 28 pleasantly appointed hexagonal cottages has beamed ceilings, a private bathroom, a sitting area with a couch, louvered windows, single beds combined as a king, and a porch with chairs and chaise

... Well versed in flora and fauna, our guide picked mangos, soursop, and raspberries for us along trails to the top of 3,000-foot Chance's Peak.

One Had Gills, the Others Got Bent

society. Some, like Costner's character, have adapted to the waterworld by developing gills.

Filmed at Kawaihae Bay on Hawaii's Kona Coast, the movie has been a nightmare to make. It seems that while the inhabitants of the fictional waterworld adapted to life on the water, the film makers did not. Rumors are that the crew and cast wore scopolamine patches behind their ears (I guess Hollywood has good drug connections, since patches are unavailable commercially), and so many of the divers working on the set got bent that they had to bring in a chamber and hire a hyperbaric doctor to run it full time. Two of the star's underwater doubles were treated for air embolism.

We almost got a new dive site out of it. There was discussion of sinking one of the huge floating sets (they used every piece of steel in Hawaii to build them, then imported more from the mainland) as a tourist attraction for divers, to defray the cost of dismantling it. The only problem was that it was covered from top to bottom with toxic paint that would have killed everything in the bay.

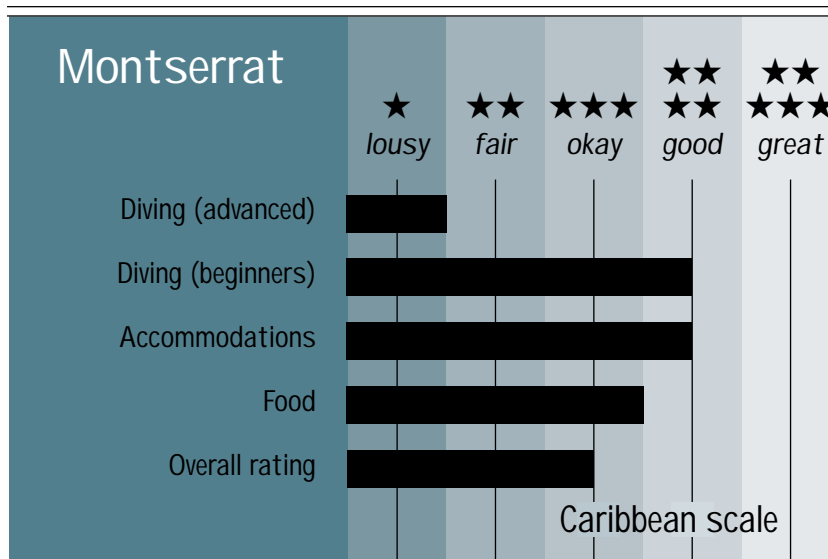
Keep all of this in mind if you decide to help Universal Studios recoup some of its \$200 million by buying a ticket. Cut them some slack, knowing that the crew are drowsy with blurred vision from wearing patches and the divers are taking turns in the chamber.

J. Q.

longues. The hotel has the grace of a Caribbean hotel 30 years ago, but its pleasant and friendly staff are trained to answer questions promptly, serve tables with dispatch, and bring fresh towels to rooms twice a day. Although I rise early, the chatter of a few fishermen readying their nets on the beach woke me earlier than I preferred -- like 5:15 a.m.

The ambiance of the open-air dining area overlooking the pool and the sea was hampered only by the vapid, repetitious American background music. (I don't care to hear "Beauty and the Beast" once, let alone twice a meal, three meals a day; whatever happened to island music?) The cuisine ranged from fair to good. While full breakfasts were available, I opted for a plate of mangoes, grapefruit, bananas, papayas, and oranges, a bagel, and a cup of good, strong coffee. Lunches: sandwiches, chicken salad, shrimp salad, and a couple of full meals. Dinners: fish, chicken, or meat and a papaya or mango sauce with modest Caribbean spunk, overcooked vegetables (broccoli, carrots, green beans), potatoes or rice and peas. Friday's special was goat water, a savory goat soup; one Friday Denzil brought in a spinach-like vegetable, fresh callaloo, from which the chef made a soup with shrimp. The Wednesday barbecue with the Montserrat All-Star Steel Band was the culinary highlight, with an exceptional steak (chicken and fish, too) and a wide range of tasty vegetables, potatoes, and rice, and lots of sweets.

Because I enjoy food (and music) less Americanized than the Vue Point offered, my partner and I tried several restaurants, the most distant an \$8 cab ride. At Ida's, it's two steps from the sidewalk to the kitchen, where the choice was chicken or crab; then a waltz through a doorway to the pier -- first stop, the bar. No bartender present, but



I fantasize about owning a Caribbean villa, standing on my private beach to prepare for a dive, then returning to lunch on my patio overlooking the blue sea. I doubt I will ever own a villa, but that doesn't stop me from subscribing to *Island Properties Report*, a monthly newsletter that reports on the economics, social climate, and real estate opportunities of individual islands, then offers pictures and descriptions of villas for sale to fuel my fantasy.

Discount Living

Subscribers who book directly get discounts at a range of hotels. On my trip to Montserrat, I got 10 percent off my \$110 room rate, then saved 20 percent on Nevis. I would ask for the rate quote, then for my discount based on my *IPR* "membership." Both hoteliers were happy to oblige. Among the 100 or so properties that give discounts are Captain Morgan's and Rum Point in Belize, Pirate's Point on Little Cayman, the Caribbean Club and Christopher Columbus condos on Grand Cayman, and Le Deck Hotel and Beach Club on Providenciales, along with a range of villas and condos on most Caribbean islands and the Bahamas. In addition, they offer a special villa-rental program, which you can use by dialing 800-800-5576 (914-937-6944) or writing Villa Holidays, 1 Berkeley Lane, Rye Brook, NY 10573.

Island Properties Report, 1100 Sixth Avenue South, Naples, FL 33904 (813-263-1222). A subscription is \$44/year; I saved \$150 on this trip.

B. D.

In Depth reader Homer Hickam visited Sea Wolf Diving School on Montserrat and talked with its owners, Wolf and Ingeborg Krebs, who have contributed to a number of diving publications. Wolf was enthusiastic about the diving on Montserrat's reefs, stating that many spots (especially a wall on the windward side) were as good as anywhere in the eastern Caribbean. Homer was impressed with their shop and dive boats, which included a 19-footer, hand-made by local craftsmen. Sea Wolf also offers kayak diving and a donkey to carry equipment to a nearby bay. Might be worth a try.
Sea Wolf, 809-491-7807/6859
or fax 809-491-3599.

J. Q.

a local drinking alone stepped behind the bar to pour me a stiff rum ("Tell the waitress to put it on your check"). We sat at a picnic table; in 20 minutes appeared a plate of delectable crab claws and shrimp, with garlic butter for dipping, sautéed vegetables, and French fries: about \$30 for the two of us, drinks included. The Belham Valley, a 10-minute walk, has a little elegance and fine food -- and when a rainstorm broke, the proprietor drove us to the hotel when she learned we had walked. In the off season, restaurant business is slow, but reservations a day ahead are still essential, not to guarantee a seat but to keep the restaurant open.

The Best I Could Find

If you've read this far, you may still be interested in Montserrat, so I'll tell you that the best dive I had was south of the hotel, where a school of horse-eye jacks were joined by a lone crevalle. Schools of Creole wrasse fluttered about and an occasional arm's-length barracuda got curious. In 60 to 80 feet of water, this was a nicer reef: more soft corals, plenty of large arrow crabs, large lobsters the fishermen had missed. A flying gurnard crept across the bottom, looking like a wounded bird. The bottom was planted with gardens of eels that let me creep within a couple of feet before slipping back into their holes. This was the only dive where I saw parrotfish and yellowtails as large as the ones in the fish traps.

A second shallow dive on a downed ferry featured a school of bait fish that broke into formations that would intrigue software programmers; I have no doubt that mathematical formulas could be used to replicate the spiraling, conical vortices. Greg said a turtle resided there, but the best critter I saw was an adolescent French angel, its bright yellow stripes dulled by the murky water.

Ditty Bag

Ditty Bag: Vue Point cottages run from \$110 in the summer to \$150 in the winter; meals are additional (800-235-0709, 809-491-5210, fax 809-491-4813)... Villa rental, 809-491-8668, 809-491-6229. ... Two-tank boat dives were \$65;

Greg charged \$60 because we had our own gear, then volunteered a 10 percent reduction for multiple dives; Greg's a PADI instructor (809-491-3474)... A dive shop is being constructed on hotel property. ... Days were above 90°F, frequently with clouds, occasionally with brief, strong rain, typical summer in the Caribbean. ... We were a half-hour late for a dive once because the front desk failed to give us a message from Greg; he waited patiently. ... Another time he told us of the previous night's dive he had failed to tell us we could join. ... No diving Sunday, but the small golf course next to the hotel is open. ... Montserrat once had a state-of-the-art recording studio and played host to the Stones, Stevie Wonder, and others; it went with the 1989 hurricane that caused \$260 million damage.

If you're still unimpressed, cross Montserrat off your "to-go" list. You're probably an experienced diver who wants more out of his diving than the Leewards have to offer. Me too.

Ben Davison