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Ben Davison's **In  
Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

## Tranquillity in St. Vincent

*Good diving and great Caribbean scenery*

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On many Caribbean islands a generation ago, tropical forests thrived, beaches remained undeveloped, and you could mingle with the people of the "old" Caribbean. Today, a few magical isles remain, but only two with good diving: Dominica and St. Vincent. St. Lucia is a runner-up, though the easy diving is for the most part a one-trick pony.

Verdant St. Vincent, the crown of the Grenadines, is a rough-and-tumble isle of tall peaks and deep valleys, cooled by sea breezes that keep the temperature between 65°F and 90°F -- and the water around 80°, plus or minus. The airstrip is too short to handle commercial jets, so St. Vincent is hard enough to reach to keep most tourists at bay. Hotels are small, restaurants even smaller, and there's one main dive operation, serving several hotels but not part of any one of them.

About a dozen years ago, American Bill Tewes left his dive operation in Papua New Guinea to open Dive St. Vincent. I reviewed him positively in 1987. In fact, he was the first person I ever saw with a computer, the ORCA Edge. This time around, one of our experienced correspondents is our anonymous reviewer.

B. D.

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Dear Fellow Diver,

After overnighting in Barbados, then taking a 6:30 a.m. LIAT flight, my partner and I were met at the St. Vincent airport by Bill Tewes, who drove us to our room at the Tranquillity Apartments. He offered to wait for us to unpack and take us to the dive shop for the 10 a.m. dive, but we opted for a leisurely day of touring.

I picked up a driver's license at the police station, but all rental cars had been taken by British sailors in port for

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the week. So my partner and I strolled the cobblestone sidewalks, admiring the architecture and staying cool in the shade of the arcades. Kingstown is a busy place, with three main streets running parallel to a large bay. The market is the center of activity. Near town are the oldest botanical gardens in the Western Hemisphere; we hired a guide for an excellent two-hour tour, and discovered that a sucker from the original breadfruit tree brought in by Captain Bligh still grows here. A small flock of endangered St. Vincent parrots roost in the Gardens.

### **Days of Diving**

Next day, we signed in at the dive shop -- it's two blocks from my hotel and ten minutes from downtown on a shallow, sheltered lagoon -- where the staff loaded our gear (unloading it later, then rinsing and storing it). We left at 10 a.m. sharp, motoring a minute or two to the ritzy Young Island Resort to pick up two other divers.

As I had dived St. Vincent before, divemaster Callie Richards asked me to choose a site. I selected the Wall, past Kingstown Harbor and beneath Fort Charlotte (and the recently used gallows!). As I sat on the gunwale, my gear was handed to me and preassembled tanks carried over and held for buckling up. I backrolled over the side, then took a short, slow swim to the sheer wall that drops from 25 feet to 130. It's thickly covered with life, including stands of bushy black coral from 60 feet down. Large sponges hang off the wall, and holes in the wall are often filled with big lobster. And eels -- they're everywhere: brown-spotted, golden-speckled, viper, golden-chain, and conger eels.

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### ***Hurricane Country***

Last year, 19 tropical storms churned through the Caribbean and Atlantic between June and November. Eleven became hurricanes, five of them killers. William Gray of Colorado State University, known for his accurate forecasts of hurricanes, predicts 11 tropical storms this year, of which he expects seven to develop into hurricanes. Two will be intense hurricanes with sustained winds of at least 111 mph, he said. He will update that prediction in June.

For divers headed anywhere in the wider Caribbean during hurricane season, Bonaire, Aruba, Curaçao, Honduras, and Belize are your safest bets.

Mexican officials say that their eastern coasts, principally in the Gulf of Mexico, could be hit by as many as 11 hurricanes — more than Gray predicts — while 16 may hit the Pacific Coast, including the Sea of Cortez, mainly in August and September.

St. Vincent regales you with soft and hard corals. As in most of the Caribbean, you won't spy big fish, mantas, or sharks, though critter hunting is better than most places, thanks to sharp-eyed guides. Frogfish? What color? Cherub angels? Which day? Crabs? What kind? Seahorses? Shown several on each dive, I got so picky I wouldn't photograph one unless the background was perfect.

Bill Tewes (the more I think about it, a Willie Nelson lookalike) took us to Orca Pointe, accompanied by his 12-year-old student

Meagan, logging her 109th dive. They pointed out one unique critter after another, including a fingerprint snail (similar to a flamingo tongue, but rare), a sponge crab with a long, peach-colored finger sponge on its head, a herd of flying gurnard in the seagrass, juvenile jackknife fish, pea crabs on



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**Last month two British women on holiday in St. Vincent were sitting on the rocks below Trinity Falls, posing for photographs, when a 20-foot-high wall of water came over the waterfall and swept them to their deaths. A flash flood higher up the mountain is suspected as the cause.**

**J. Q.**

eels lay in the open, mouths agape, looking dead. Orange ball anemones were everywhere. I saw a "bristleworm from hell," a three-foot red bugger that immediately scooted under a rock. Half a dozen parrotfish slept in their cocoons, a measled cowrie and pipefish crawled about. At the dock, in a foot of water, I found yellow *tubastraea* cup corals, decorator crabs, and a golden-chain moray in his home hole.

## **Out of the Water and Around the Island**

Young Island is a splendid, albeit pricey, place to stay (I stayed there last trip). My room was so surrounded by gardens I couldn't see another cottage. I had a private outdoor shower, refrigerator, ceiling fans to cool the bedroom and sitting room, and fresh flowers every day. Meals were exceptional, from a flaming breakfast (French toast coated with coconut and rum and torched with a match) to the Friday-night gourmet buffet, which begins with a band, bar, and gas lights up the winding stairs for a cocktail party at Fort Durvenette, a lump of a rock just east of Young Island. Guests are ferried over from the Young Island dock (nonguests can attend for a fee). Cocktails are followed by the buffet back on the island. If you don't stay on Young Island, you can still arrange to dive off their dock. DSV will take over tanks; hop the Young Island shuttle boat that leaves on demand, 24 hours a day.

This time, to save a buck, I stayed at Tranquillity Apartments. Up a steep hill, but DSV picks up divers off the beach below the apartments. Friendly Ceford Providence and his wife run the complex. My room had no air conditioning, but it was comfortable and included a small kitchen with enough utensils to prepare meals. Shopping in the market and learning how to prepare the unusual island vegetable can be quite an experience. Don't miss the sunset and knockout view from the rooftop patio: you look across Indian Bay and Coconut Beach, past Young Island and Fort Duvernette to Bequia and Mustique.

St. Vincent restaurants mainly serve simple and good food, but remember: this is the old Caribbean. The Lagoon Hotel -- five minutes away -- has a restaurant that opens at 6 p.m., so we stopped in

before our night dive. We were told they had everything on the menu but shrimp, so we ordered quickly. Ten minutes later the waitress returned: they were out of everything we had ordered, but she suggested we try the coconut shrimp! It was frustrating, but experiences like these become memorable once home. Lime 'n Pub serves until midnight, and the Dolphin (good pizza) also stays open late. The Surfside Restaurant on Indian

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## ***Ditty Bag***

Tewes has put together 7-night, 10-dive packages at all the hotels, including transfers and all diving equipment. Two nearby hotels are the Sunset Shores (\$758/person, double occupancy), the Tranquillity (\$600/person), and the very classy Young Island (from \$1,334 to \$1,808 per person, meals included). Add 17 percent for government tax and service charge. . . . Without a package, two tanks are \$90, a ten-tank package \$400. Airfare from Dallas to Barbados (AA) to St. Vincent is \$549; connect through Barbados, St. Lucia, Martinique, Trinidad, or Grenada. . . . English is the major language. Electricity is 220/240 volt, 50 cycle. Any time of the year is good to visit; coolest months are November–February. Rainy season is June–November. . . . Dive St. Vincent Office: 809-457-4928; shop: 809-457-4714; fax: 809-457-4948; <http://www.topher.net/~divestvincent>; [bill2s@caribsurf.com](mailto:bill2s@caribsurf.com).

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Bay has excellent vegetable curry, roti, burger, grilled fish, and pizza. The Umbrella is next door to the dive shop in a busy area of taxis and small restaurants. Of course, busy is relative: compared to most other islands, it is quiet, with few tourists. Most of our fellow divers, when there were any, were missionaries or British sailors.

For 40 cents, you can ride in Popeye, Mouse, or any van to any place on the island, usually to the accompaniment of reggae music. Sunburned, salty, and tired, we hopped on one, only to discover that its normal route didn't take us to our destination. Nonetheless, the driver took us right to our door. When I thanked him, explaining that we had just arrived and didn't know which bus to take, he smiled and told us that's why he had taken us home. He explained which bus to catch next time. People are like that here.

St. Vincent is for people who seek natural wonders in addition to diving. Narrow roads, sharp dropoffs, hairpin curves, left-hand driving, and huge banana trucks coming in the opposite direction make driving an adventure. Views are fantastic: beautiful black sand beaches dotted with giant boulders; the photogenic church at Biabou; small towns; steep, rugged mountains covered with crops of banana, coconut palm, or on the steeper slopes, callaloo, dasheen, and other vegetables; and on the Atlantic side, waves that break and roll across the rocks and dash themselves against the cliff, shooting up as high as 40 feet. I occasionally picked up someone who needed a lift and usually got a tour in the bargain, or at least learned something interesting about the island.

La Soufrière, the volcano, is a terrific climb; drive up the windward coast and hire a guide. Or try the Vermont Nature Trails. I hired Elroy Browne from Vermont as my guide. We passed through gardens and headed into the rain forest, where Elroy showed me flowers and plants I would never have noticed. I got lucky and glimpsed the endangered St. Vincent parrot.

DSV has a 23-foot speed boat, a 27-footer with a semi cabin, and a 32-foot closed-cabin inboard. They use their fast boat for trips to the Falls of Baleine, at the northern end of the island. Until recently, you could climb to the top of the falls for a jump into the freshwater pool, but the northern edge of the crevasse has slipped into the pool, partially filling it, and it's a dangerous climb until the vegetation grows back.

Dive St. Vincent offers scuba instruction (NAUI and PADI), including certification courses and resort courses, and happily takes referrals. While many who dived with us had just completed resort courses -- often sailors cruising the Grenadines -- Dive St. Vincent ensures that certified divers are not restricted by the limits of tyros.

For a good, old-fashioned, low-priced vacation with a couple of good Caribbean dives a day and plenty of verdant landscape, it's hard to beat St. Vincent.

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