

South Carolina

May River, Island Scuba Hilton Head Island, Comfort Inn Hilton Head S.C., June 2000, Joe and Mary Maxwell, Erie, PA. Vis: 1-2 ft.

Water: 78-80 degrees. Dive restrictions: permits, tubes and flags. Search for Megalodon and whale artifacts. Nice dive operation on island. The only one! 9 foot tidal change made for exciting currents! Very low vis. Max 3-4 ft. But, for the experiences diver, the thrill of finding a 4-inch megalodon tooth at the anchor was worth it!

Imagine anything on the bottom, not sand or shale bottom, should be examined! Shore diving is doable but boat diving is better and allows more sites to dive. You must buy permit before diving or face severe fines! Rental tanks should be arranged for on arrival or sooner. Filling only occurs once a day, in late afternoon. For safety, buddy ropes, tubes and flags, a must! A dive guide, a real plus, food, entertainment, accommodations, excellent!

VIRGIN ISLANDS, BRITISH

Patch reef diving on these closely-grouped islands is easy, pleasant, and fairly similar regardless of which island you choose, although the quiet British Virgins and St. John are far less crowded and more pleasant than the cruise ship havens of St. Thomas and St. Croix, where hurricanes and fishing have taken a toll. (St. Thomas was trashed by hurricanes in 1995, St. Croix a few

years earlier.) . . . BVI is a yachter's paradise with crewed or bareboat sailboats galore, and it's also served by several land-based dive operations. . . . BVI has nice little hotels, good restaurants, congenial surroundings, and British style, but readers report that residents of St. Thomas and St. Croix are often surly. . . . There's warm, pleasant weather year-round. . . .

Tortola

Baskin In The Sun, Prospect Reef Hotel, December 1999, David Steinberg and Chatten Hayes, Portland, OR. Mostly sunny and dry with 2-3 days of wind and rain. Water; Mostly calm and flat without current; choppy and current after rain storms. Arrived just four days after Lenny had closed everything. Wetsuit: 3 mm mini wetsuit and 3 mm long diveskins. Visibility 30-40 feet and improved during our stay to 80-90 feet. Dive profile: they always offered us the option of touring with the divemasters or diving our own profile. The divemasters were delightful for experienced divers, because they gave divers credit for having brains. Baskin instructors reviewed our qualifications and observed our skills on the first dive before deciding we were capable of choosing our own profile. They requested surfacing with 500 psi., but very long dives were possible within computer limits because of the shallow waters. There are just not enough good things to say about Rainbow Visions and Jim and Odile

Scheiner. They are both excellent teachers, gentle and positive, and very knowledgeable. They have had careers in and around the water throughout their lives, and Jim is the highest-certified diver on the whole island. Jim and Odile (her name is Irish) were infinitely patient with me. Despite following every guideline and obsessively greasing and inspecting my Nikonos, my film got damp on the 5th dive. Jim was late for Thanksgiving dinner, but he stripped my camera and took it home to spend the night in his dry room, and returned it to me a day or so later, declaring the mishap to be "the most benign flood I've ever seen." Earned my PADI certificate for photography. Our camera lesson, with a 35 mm and a 20 mm, was at the Rhone wreck, and Jim is the only person I've ever known who can speak clearly through his regulator, giving instructions and praise. Rainbow Visions does underwater video on trips to the Rhone and wedding photography, and Odile processes E-6 film a couple of times each week. The shop also rents cameras and sells books and photos. Baskin's boats have camera tables and big freshwater dip tanks, and they make non-photographers aware of the delicacy of equipment and how to avoid harming it in all boat briefings. We did a lot of research, and decided on Baskin and Prospect after reviewing previous *Undercurrent* and *Rodale's Scuba Diving* articles. Hurricane Lenny delayed the trip. Baskin personnel called twice to keep us informed of the storm's affect on the British Virgin Islands, and advised

us to postpone our arrival for four days. We purchased two weeks of unlimited diving plus a hotel/breakfast package. Baskin provided airport pickup and drop-off. The renovation on the Prospect Reef Hotel was nearly complete with only one room block and the pool still under construction. The grounds were well kept. The room we had was air conditioned, had a coffee maker, fridge, and microwave, and was well maintained daily by Prospect personnel. There were two restaurants at Prospect, the upscale Callaloo, and the very informal Scuttlebutt. The breakfast plan was a value at \$9.35/person/day, starting at 7:00 am before the first dive boat at 8:30 am. Dinner at the Callaloo was pricey, though excellent food. We avoided the Scuttlebutt after one meal; lunch between dives was better from the hotel room microwave. The Baskin dive operation, was truly first rate. Two of four dive boats were in operation during our stay, the 36 foot *Virgin Sun* and the 42-foot *Annie H.*, both powered by dual turbo diesel engines. The *Virgin Sun* and *Annie H.* had ample room for 20 to 25 divers plus equipment and tanks for two dives. Both boats had camera tables and rinse buckets plus fresh water showers and head. Divers easily entered the water from the stern platform by giant stride and exited by a stern ladder. Baskin managed all equipment including tank changes, fresh water rinse and nightly storage. Additionally, all boats carried DAN oxygen and first aid equipment; safety is the top priority, according to Baskin manager Gary Fisher. Baskin policy

included a full name roll call before departure from dock and from all dive sites. Baskin had every conceivable piece of equipment available for rent or purchase. The tanks were aluminum 72s which were quite sufficient for the relatively shallow diving in the BVI. Most of the diving was done in the Sir Francis Drake Channel with boat rides averaging 20-30 minutes. All dive sites are equipped with mooring balls and ascent lines. Dive guides were extremely conscious of reef ecology and very knowledgeable in marine biology, especially, Randy Keil, Chris Trafford, and Sue Thompson. All provided valuable information on habitat and wildlife in dive briefings and on underwater slates. Suspended particles and silt reduced visibility to 30-40 feet because of Hurricane Lenny, though it increased to 90+ feet after the first week. The resident 4-1/2 foot barracuda, "Fang," was present at the Rhone on all six of the dives we made there, including one night dive, which we highly recommend. All together we logged 32 dives more than 14 days for about 30 hours' bottom time. The BVI does not feature many large creatures, mostly healthy coral and smaller fishes with an occasional stingray or spotted eagle ray, besides the usual moray eels, turtles, and lobsters. Baskin allows smoking on board at the stern which still didn't prevent second hand smoke from penetrating all areas of the boat, and every nonsmoker hates it, including, of course, the divemasters. They provide no food or drinks, only drinking water and an ice chest; they sell soft drinks dockside for \$1. A

small grocery store is within a five minute walk so using the hotel fridge and microwave is easy. Baskin does a daily two-tank morning dive with the boat leaving at 8:30 sharp and returning between noon and 1 pm; they also schedule a one tank afternoon dive for 2:30 pm. All dives go as scheduled even if there is only one diver on the manifest, except night dives which require a minimum of four divers. (888-451-2275; 284-494-2858; Fax 284-494-4304)

Baskin in the Sun, Prospect Reef Hotel, January 2000, Bill Rath (BillRScuba@aol.com) Bronx, N.Y.

Vis: 80 to 100 feet. Water: 78 to 80 degrees, calm and flat no currents. Restrictions: depth, psi. Prospect Reef clean and efficiently run. Baskin the Sun on property. They run a professional and friendly operation. Their boats are fast and in top shape. The instructors are excellent doing their job in a professional friendly manner. Diving in is tops.

Baskin In The Sun, Ole Works Inn, July 2000, Cindy and Alex Rasi, Northwood, OH. Viz : 40 - 60 ft.

Water: 80 degrees. Beautiful beaches and fun beach bars. Easy to island hop here with ferries, day sails, or yacht charters. Baskin's divemasters were friendly, safety conscious, and helpful with gear. They set up and broke down gear and rinsed and stored it for diving the next day. They allowed no divers to explore in buddy teams. Follow the leader dives at a moderate to fast pace. We missed a lot of macro life. The divemasters frequently checked

everyone's air supply during the dives. We couldn't extend our bottom time with our computers and frequently surfaced with more than 1250 psi. Maximum possible depth in the BVIs is generally only 80 ft. with the norm between 50-65 ft. No Nitrox. The most restrictive of any dive operation we've used in 12 years of Caribbean diving. The reefs had healthy coral growth and a good variety of small to medium sized tropicals, turtles, and a barracuda, grouper, and eagle rays. The currents varied according to tidal flow and dive site. The RMS Rhone was sunk in a hurricane in 1867, so it is now nicely encrusted and attracts fish life. The bow is still intact, which allows for penetration. The midship and stern sections are less intact; however, many features are identifiable. Because of Baskin's schedule, we dove the wreck of the Rhone on 4 out of 6 dives. We had no choice to dive the reef instead, because they ran only one boat at a time and the Rhone is always done as a 2-tank dive. The 42 ft. Newton had showers, marine head, camera table, oxygen, ship to shore radio, and twin stern ladders. The smaller boat with a "fin exit" type ladder without handrails was difficult for many divers and some got bruised reboarding. Their 2 tank dive trip wasted too much time each day before arriving at the dive sites. The boat departed at 8:30. Then we stopped to pick up and drop off divers on sailboats. We also stopped twice daily at Peter Island to pick up and unload divers, tanks, and weights. They never had time to dive distant sites. The dives were always in sight of Road

Town Harbor. It was 2:00 before we returned to the dock each day. We had to rush to catch lunch before the restaurants closed. Greatly reduced time available for other afternoon activities. A 4-wheel drive is needed to negotiate Tortola's steep hills and curves, especially when it rains. Ole Works Inn on Cane Garden Bay is a nice, quiet, and scenic location overlooking Jost Van Dyke. The accommodations were adequate, clean, and had powerful AC. Quito Rhymer is an excellent musician who plays several nights a week at Rhymer's Beach Bar. There are several other nice restaurants and beach bars with live music. Don't miss the monthly Full Moon Party at Bomba's Shack. It's a beach bar with BBQ dinners, live music, and jam-packed with people dancing to pulsating rhythms on a sand floor. It's wild and fun! Purser's Landing in Soper's Hole Marina has a nice restaurant, store, and steel drum band. The original Purser's in Road Town is also good. For excellent 360 degree views of the other BVIs and USVIs, have dinner at Skyworld Restaurant and enjoy the sunset.

Baskin In The Sun, Long Bay Resort, August 2000, Juli Tracy and Dick Gamble (jwtracy@scubadiving.com) San Diego, CA. Vis: 30 to 70 Feet. Water: 81 to 85. Excellent bargain during the summer, and a fine resort. Quiet but clean, air-conditioned, good food, and the best beach on the island. For singles, too, there are good bargains in the summer — \$90 for an Oceanview Studio/night. Had some

unique dives, including one “muck” (they call it a “snuffle”) dive, at Peter Island, in 12 feet of water, through the sand and eel grass, looking for macro photos. The divemaster Sue is amazing at finding and pointing out little creatures. Boat had a rinse bucket and only two dive photographers, so it was kind on the gear, but no photo table, so all film changing, etc. had to be done in the room (which was okay, since the rooms are nice and large).

Virgin Gorda

Dive BVI, Little Dix Bay, February 2000, Jeremy Butler, Friday Harbor, WA. Vis: 50 to 110 feet. Water: 75 to 77 F, choppy. Stayed at Little Dix Bay: very expensive; very good! Dive BVI has shop on site. Dive boats pick up at several locations including Little Dix. They have two dive boats one slow and the other fast. Neither has a head. Longest boat trip to get to dive site was two hours (picking up other divers from other locations); shortest trip to a dive site was 10 minutes. No Nitrox, although “they may get it next year.” Dived ten dives over two week period. Dive staff sets up your equipment and brings it to you at the swim step. All you have to do is flop overboard. Divemasters are well qualified, have pleasant personalities, give good briefings, do an excellent job of pointing out and naming critters. They use erasable magnetic slates to communicate with divers and each other. Always two DMs in water, one lead and one sweep. Tried to take me to sites I had not seen, although rough weather limited the selection.

Had fresh water on the boat, but not the “drinks and snacks” that the Dive BVI brochure advertises. Corals and sponges are in good shape. Lots of small and medium reef fish, large queen and French angelfish. Heard some whales, but didn’t see them. No pelagics. Dived the Rhone once, with a gang of resort divers that reduced the amount we could cover. **(800-848-7078, 284-495-5513; Fax 284-495-5347)**

Kilbride’s, Biras Creek, April 2000, Dee Hope, Atlanta, GA. Vis: 60 to 80 ft. Water: 78 to 80 degrees, calm and flat. Dive restrictions: none. Kilbrides operates out of the Bitter End Yacht Club. Serves Biras Creek via boat; will pick up and drop off. Dove wreck at the Rhone; good briefing about history of wreck and things to look for. Eels, barracuda and rays; few fish. Dive schedule either Dog Islands or Wreck — let experienced divers dive own profile; good judge of experienced vs. novices; would split into groups so divers would get the most based on experience, without strict restrictions. Would setup gear, very friendly service. Resort itself does not cater to divers; great food, average rooms, no locks on doors. Above average service but more expected for the high price. **(800-932-4286, 284-495-9638; Fax 284-495-7549)**

Kilbride’s, Bitter End Yacht Club, May 2000, Jim Urquhart (fr8dog@futureone.com) Prescott, AZ. Vis: 60 to 100 ft. Water: 81 degrees, calm and flat. Kilbrides Sunchaser dive operation at BEYC

\$175 for 3 days, 2 tanks each day. RMSRHONE, Chikuzen, diving numerous areas. Decent boat never more than 3 divers on boat all week. Good vis. and warm water. Pretty crowded at Rhone but still a nice dive. B.E.Y.C. all inclusive and use of sailboats, wind surfers and small power boats. Gives 30% discount to airline employees.

Kilbride's and Dive BVI, Bitter End Yacht Club, July 2000, Stanley Holz, Whitefield, NH. Did eight dives, six with Kilbride's and two with Dive BVI. The resort was really nice, with bungalows by the water and in the hills. We had a room on the water...screened in deck, hammock, walk-in shower and two overhead fans, but no air conditioning. The evening breezes cooled the room to a comfortable level. Meals were always excellent, drinks were strong...a couple of their rum grogs will give you the origin of the term "groggy." Our room was across the way from Saba Rock, which is an all night bar. The sound from their bands was very loud and kept us up after midnight. Get a room away from Saba Rock. Kilbride's three divemasters were friendly and helpful on and off the boat. They set up all the gear on the boat, but each diver was responsible for removing his gear from the boat and washing it. Dive parties ran from 7 to 13 during our stay. Joe's Cave...you swim into a large opening in the rock face of the island. Inside, it's bright enough to reveal the red coloration of the walls. Looking back, you see the large triangular opening

framing the brilliant turquoise of the open sea. 2 squid, a golden moray and schools of bait fish. Rhone great! Tons of tropicals and a couple of big barracuda. The bow sits upright on the bottom and is an easy swim through. Inside, the entire hull structure is intact. The stern section is crushed. However, there is a short swim through that takes you right to the large, intact propeller. Dive BVI: Jim, their divemaster, showed up with an empty boat for us. The other boats were crowded with student divers, so they thought we'd be more comfortable diving by ourselves. Only three in our group! Jim took us to Shark's Point where we got within inches of a 10' nurse shark, laid next to sea turtle sleeping under a ledge, saw 5 juvenile spotted drums, and a small octopus hiding in the rocks. Chimney, a nice swim through, was topped off by a reef shark that swam about 25' away, and a school of Tarpon. Water was a consistent 87 degrees. Visibility 60 to 75' and currents ran from moderate to dead calm. My wife, a snorkeler, was always welcome on the dive boat.

VIRGIN ISLANDS, US

St. Croix

Anchor Dive, July 2000, Alan Laites, Newington, CT. Vis: 60-80 ft. Water: 82 degrees. Dive restrictions enforced: depth. Boat rides to sites 10-25 minutes. Small group — 5. Great walls. Excellent dive operation. (800-532-3483, 340-773-3434; 809-778-8544)

Cane Bay Dive Shop, Cane Bay Reef Club, June 2000, John Bowman (J-