

number written on them — permanent mark. Well, we did get them back. The hotel was nice, clean comfortable, food was good usually buffet at night. Some nights are loud with live music but not late.

Dive St. Vincent, Sunset Shores, July 2000, Lannie Smith, Pasco, WA.

Water: 79 degrees. We went to St. Vincent in June 1999 too, we enjoyed it too much to not return. We enjoy seeing many unusual critters compared with other Caribbean diving. Weather was mild with occasional showers, but none while we were diving, vis is good. Bill Tewes and his crew take divers for a two-tank dive at 10:00 each morning, returning about 2:00. Bill is great at finding all sorts of small critters and fish. He's also very appreciative of being shown anything new or unusual. There are no discouraging restrictions, other than being careful with the reef. This isn't a site for sharks, turtles and rays. It's got tons of small, unusual fare, sea horses are not unusual, frog fish are returning. Sunset Shores Hotel just up the beach from Dive St. Vincent (arranged by Bill's shop). Snorkeling in front of the hotels was surprisingly great! There are lots of very good restaurants within walking distance, and a bus that will take you to town for a dollar. We found people very friendly, proud of their island and glad to share it. We took the ferry (\$5) from St. Vincent to Bequia and spent a week.

Bequia

Dive Bequia, Frangipani, June 2000, Lannie Smith, Pasco, WA. Dove with Bob Sach's operation. Primarily drift

dives. They get lots of one-time divers off the sail boats, so sometimes the boat was crowded, other times just 6 of us. Reefs are in good shape. No big fish, but lots of smaller ones and little critters. No restrictions — they let us dive as slowly as we wanted and for as long as we wanted. Frangipani — and loved it. Lots of places to eat. A low key, friendly island, but they advised us to keep things locked up. **(784-458-3504; Fax 784-458-3886)**

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Trinidad, the southernmost island in the Caribbean chain (it's actually south of Caracas) isn't for divers, but its smaller sister to the north is. . . . Diving from resort hotels along the southwest coast of Tobago is inferior to the diving to the north, where you'll find huge coral heads and good fish life, with mantas common in the spring. Strong currents and choppy water make this a place for experienced divers. (The owner of the Man Friday dive operation disappeared while diving in 1994, and his body was never recovered; his shop is now operated by his son. In 1997 a woman lost contact with her dive boat and spent 27 hours in the water before washing ashore.). . . . Blue Waters Inn is the main dive hotel; it's situated on a nice beach about 15 minutes from all sites. . . . Tobago is covered with rainforest and has good hiking, friendly people, and serene and beautiful beaches. Birding there is excellent (visit Bird Island offshore

with a guide), but Trinidad's Asa Wright Nature Center (a small hotel with a view that's almost guaranteed to be filled with scores of tropical species) is unparalleled, as is the lagoon trip to see 2000 scarlet ibis fly in from Venezuela each night. . . .

Tobago

Aquamarine, Speyside Inn, February 2000, Shirley LaMear, Pacific, MO. Our trip began with three days in Trinidad, eco-touring via bicycle. Don't miss Asa Wright National Park! Tobago's Speyside Inn: daily rate included breakfast cooked to order. Our dinners there, and we ate there 80% of the time, were imaginative and very good — especially those darn Flying Fish sandwiches — with the chef writing the special for the night on a chalk board by the side of the road. Inn is charming, quaint, breezy and accommodating. No AC, but a breeze from the ocean, about 50 yards away. Add the perfume of the Frangipani tree in the front yard and it was close to heaven. Our hostess, Cynthia, was wonderfully helpful. Downside: don't let anyone tell you can walk from Speyside Inn to Aquamarine Divers at Blue Water. Tobago is very hilly; took us almost 2 hours to get from the airport to Speyside. Hilly terrain is another reason we didn't dine in other restaurants as much as we would have on another island; the drive was too much of a deterrent. We dove with Aquamarine all week. Alice, one owner, was usually in the shop and dove with us often. Alice

was a wonderful dive buddy besides running the shop. Our group of 8 and a group of about 20 diving at the same time put some serious shuffling of boats and divemasters into effect each day. On two days, our divemaster, Kiki, had to scrounge around the town for more divemasters; consequently, our boat was at least an hour late in leaving on those days. We found the diving and the currents to be all we had expected. Actually by the end of the week, several of us wanted morebigger... faster! The worst part was getting into the water as one unit if the seas were rough (they were our first two days) where you bob and roll on the side of the boat waiting to drop into the water — no dive deck here. Abundant species present but not a lot of different species as compared with Belize or Little Cayman. Neither Kiki nor Alice could help me identify or look for, certain fish. First time that's ever happened. Oh, well, back to Paul Humann's book. The weather was great, sunny, no rain, and if you like hiking and birding this is a great place. **(800-639-8729, 868-660-5445)**

Aquamarine, Blue Water Inn, April 2000, Dan Kiley, Brownsburg, IN. Vis: 60 to 100 ft. Water: 78 to 80 degrees, choppy, strong currents. Dive your own profile: no. Dive restrictions: time and approx. depth. Beautiful hotel (which I found because of your article). One of the best views I've ever seen from the bar and I have 1200+ dives around the world. Strong currents and small boats, but lots of stuff down below. We saw sharks, mantas and eels on

almost every dive. Biggest problem was getting home via American Airlines. They booked us back on May 5th but stopped service on May 1st.

Aquamarine Divers, Man Friday Diving, Tobago Dive Experience, Blue Waters Inn, June 2000, Barry Lipman (b_lipman@hotmail.com), Brookfield, CT. Vis: 20 to 85 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy surge currents. Dive your own profile: no. Dive restrictions: Most diving was guided group diving due to currents. The only way around this is to secure your own dive guide to tow a dive float for you and maybe carry an extra camera or two. The diving, particularly on the North side (Speyside/Charlottesville area) is very good Caribbean diving, mostly drift diving. Because of the swift and unpredictable current conditions, they always guide dives. All the diver operators are small owner-operated affairs and can handle special requests with advance warning. It is possible to earring for a private dive guide for photography purposes. Some good ones to try on the North side are Man Friday Diving, Tobago Dive Experience, and Aquamarine Diving. To the South, World of Watersports, Wild Turtle Divers, and Pro Scuba all do a very good job, but WOW has the best boats by far 2 of all of them. Bring your own rinse bag, and be prepared to haul it some distance when full! World of Watersports is the only dive operator I found with a camera rinse tank and fresh running water on board. They have two of the newest and most comfortable boats for diving. Ricky,

one owner, takes a few photos himself, and so is concerned with photographer's needs. Most other operators have uncovered wooden boats with no shelter for cameras or film changing. Many have no jetty so the gear, including cameras, must be loaded via sand and surf. Besides a rinse bag, bring an extra towel to shade your cameras, as even the boats with Bimini tops have few places out of the sun. Many operators have no jetty so the gear, including cameras, must be loaded via sand and surf. Some of the best dives are drift dives that range from mild to wild. Surface condition were usually choppy, with wave height from two or three to more than five feet. This is definitely safety sausage and siren country. I used my H-U-G-E *Undercurrent* sausage on one dive and would have probably floated a long time without it as my guide did not have one with him and we were diving away from the group under very rough surface conditions. (I always carry two sausages.) The corals are at least 80% or more healthy, and the sponges are prolific and colorful. Despite reports of Mantas and Hammerheads, I never saw any during eight days. I noted an unusually large number of good sized Queen Angelfish on every dive, Creole wrasse, sergeant majors, stingrays, barracuda, damsels, grunts, jacks, blennies, gobies, etc. June is not the best time to go, as the Orinoco River in nearby Venezuela can cause the waters to become green and the vis to collapse to 20 or 30 feet. I had several days of blue water followed by a couple of days of green, and then the

rains and runoff caused it all to become brown and undivable for a day. Later in the summer is better and still off season. December through May is high season and has the roughest surface conditions. I'd shoot for August as the best of all worlds. Most of the operators do only two dives per day, with night dives on request. You can arrange three per day with some operators ahead of time. Blue Waters Inn in Speyside is far from the least expensive place to stay when compared with all the low-key guest houses, but is still very nice, and very convenient to Aquamarine Divers, the largest operator in Speyside. Manta Lodge with its Tobago Dive Experience operation is another good choice of accommodations with "built in" diving. If keeping the budget under control is an issue, the guest houses can't be beat, and many have AC. All the local eateries I tried were excellent, and most were inexpensive. Tobago provides a very laid back, low key, undeveloped tropical atmosphere with some very good diving, and possibly the best mangos in the entire Caribbean.

Scuba Adventure Safari, Manta, June 2000, Susan and Paul Moliken, (pmol@mindspring.com), Dover, DE. First dove with Scuba Adventure Safari based on web site which promised modern dive boat (over local fishing boats), stressed safety and on-time diving, diving your own profile with computer, etc. Modern dive boat was out of commission so there we were on fishing boats and converted banana boats. Dives were very short

(1/2 hour @ 30' for one — which was OK since vis was very poor and nothing was living at this site). One of our party suffered a broken reg. cable tie and was urged to dive solo using only octopus and was told there were no more cable ties back at the shop but he could rent a regulator. They certified two of us there and had only 2 dives (total of about an hour). They came to the surface and descended again twice. I guess that's supposed to count for the required 4 dives. Poor planning/shop often closed/missed days of diving. Moved over to Manta Divers and were satisfied. Tobago is a lovely island with lots to see topside. Highlight of the trip was seeing giant leatherbacks laying eggs on shore and seeing hatchlings! **(868-660-7767; Phone/Fax 868-660-7333)**

Tobago Dive Experience, Manta Resort, August 2000, Christopher Trauth, M. D., Beaumont, TX. We won this trip at a DEMA show so our airfare, hotel and diving for three days were compensated. Did not arrive in Tobago due to flight delays till 11:30 PM. The Manta Lodge had a driver waiting since the hotel is 26 miles away on a very winding road to Speyside on the northeast side of the island. The hotel sent a Toyota Corolla to pick up two divers with large Photography pelican cases, two large dive bags, two carry ons and two divers. It was a miracle that we got everything in the car. The hotel staff was tops and had drinks and sandwiches waiting for us at 12:30 AM! The room had no AC, so we switched to another the next day. There is little

ocean breeze for an ocean side resort. The following day we checked in the dive shop. There was no one in the shop of dive instructor level. The operation never ran on time. The boat was a small open boat with no shelter. We took a truck from the lodge to a concrete dock with a broken severely leaning tie-up for boats. This was dangerous just to enter the boat. We did two one tank dives each morning. The boat ran back to the dock for the surface interval and to pick up fresh tanks. One day the surface interval was on the hot concrete dock with burning sun and no shade. At least two of our party had heat exhaustion. The next day the surface interval was at the same place, only in a driving thunderstorm with lightning and the only cover was to get in the water under the dock! They provided water with a little fruit. There were no personal cups and everyone had to drink out of the same jug. We y got cups when we told them that I had a serious communicable illness (not true), but it worked. Dive briefings were confusing and not one dive-master had computers. The divemaster asked us why we did such long safety stops of 5 mins. I said where have you been? I am a physician and have attended many Diving Medicine Seminars so I know about diving safety. This diver disappeared on one dive but the group hung with us because of our level of experience. Upon surfacing we found the dive-master on the boat with all his gear off, before his group had even surfaced! Most days were rainy and currents were quite strong at times.

Water was around 84° F. The visibility was very poor due to the overflow of the Orinoco River that happens this time of year. Visibility in the first 20 ft. was only about 15 ft, then it got better but never more than 50-60 ft. The visibility was so bad that we did no photography. Even the most famous "world's largest brain coral" was not worth a picture. There were no large fish, no pelagics and no mantas, which are the main reason for going there. There were many good macro opportunities but current too strong. This is not a site for beginners. The reefs were very healthy but I have been all over the Caribbean and can see good reefs without traveling so far. We considered paying for an extra day of diving but a two-tank dive was \$70. There is no way the dives were worth this with the level of service. We found no tank with an up-to-date hydrostatic check and no marks for visual inspections. An instructor assistant gave a resort course to a hotel guest in the pool then took him to 65 FSW. He could not equalize but they added weight and pulled him down. I examined his ear and after only one dive they had succeeded in perforating one eardrum and the other was severely hemorrhagic. The hotel staff was friendly and professional. They allowed access to the Internet for weather checks for hurricane Debby and email. Meals and service were consistently good. **(Tobago Dive Experience: 868-660-5268, Phone/ Fax 868-639-7034 ; Manta Resort: 868-544-7631; 868-660-5268)**