

“camera only” rinse bucket to keep salt from crystallizing while on the boat. A Sea and Sea mx10 with flash is \$25/day at the shop — also available are accessory lenses.

### ST. EUSTATIUS

A historically significant island, St. Eustatius, which lies 50 miles south of St. Maarten, was the first to recognize the United States as a country. As a result, British Men o’ War pounded the island to a pulp. Some artifacts from the barrage can still be found in the murky water of the bay, and low-profile reefs offshore provide pristine coral and plenty of fish; thanks to the marine park, the diving here is much better than average Caribbean diving. A hike up the Quill, an extinct volcano, is worth the effort. The people are friendly, there are a few small and excellent restaurants.

#### **Dive Statia, Gin House, June 2003, Edward Leibowitz, Jersey City, NJ.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 feet. Water: 73 to 77 F, choppy, surge, no currents. St. Eustatius had nice diving sites. Unfortunately, when I was there, algae were blooming, which sufficiently cut visibility to 25 to 50 feet. Rudy and Rinda Hees, operators of Dive Statia, along with Caroline and Nick, were very accommodating. Saw some big fish, neat coral formations, and a lot of small critters. The night dive was exceptionally good. I enjoyed eating at Sonny’s Chinese restaurant, with-

in walking distance of the Gin House. The food was exceptionally good. ([www.divestatia.com](http://www.divestatia.com))

#### **Golden Rock Dive Center, Old Gin House, January 2003, Deb Swackhamer & David DeVault, Stillwater, MN.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm. We had a wonderful experience — met our expectations and then some. Glenn and Michele Faires of Golden Rock were warm, friendly, professional, and made sure we had great dives and great accommodations at the Old Gin House. They even arranged a quick trip over to Saba for us. The reef was pristine and rich in abundance and diversity — plus they have wall diving, wreck diving, reefs. Annouck and Benji are the dive instructors, and they were terrific — made you feel like family. A personal trip, sometimes just us diving with one of the DMs, and we always saw something special. We didn’t find any blue beads, but one of the other divers on one dive found two beauties. Very laid back, but professional operation. The Old Gin House was elegant in a colonial fashion, terrific food and service, we felt pampered. Exceptionally friendly local folks. Not much to do other than dive, but if you want exceptional Caribbean diving at a small, friendly, out-of-the-way place — this is fabulous. ([www.goldenrockdive.com](http://www.goldenrockdive.com))

**Golden Rock Dive Center, February 2003, L. Douglas Graham, Chicago, IL.** Experience: 25 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 79 F, choppy. My trip closely followed the January 2003

report in *Undercurrent*. The owners, Glenn and Michele Faires, worked hard to provide an enjoyable trip. Michele was especially helpful in arranging connecting flights from St. Martin, as the local airline, Winair, was not accommodating. The water temperature was consistently 79 degrees, and a 3mm wetsuit was adequate, but a vest underneath would have provided more comfort. We frequently took out an inflatable, backrolled for entry, and re-entered over the side. Most dives began at 60 feet, although at Off the Wall, we started at 118 feet. The dive-masters, Benji and Annoch, were personable, easy to dive with, and worked hard to provide a good diving experience. The dives were first-rate. On the first dive, to Blair's Reef, I saw a large spotted drum. The fish life at Double Wreck was astonishing. At about 20 minutes into the dive, a series of a variety of large schools began to swim by in all directions: French grunts, margates, porgy's, and others. At Barracuda, we saw four reef sharks, a large Spanish hogfish, and a few barracuda. The corals and sponges were impressive — bigger than those at Little Cayman Island. The deep water gorgonians were huge. While on the way up from Off the Wall, we saw a four-foot long spotted moray moving among the rocks. The S.T.E.N.A.P.A. Reef, an artificial reef made up of three new wrecks, had light penetration wreck diving, Southern rays, peacock flounders, a scorpion fish, lobsters, and a school of large permit feeding near the wrecks, in addition to the usual assortment of reef fish. It didn't seem that the fish were affected by our pres-

ence: we were followed by a pair of large blue French angel fish during one of our dives, and on the wreck I was able to lightly touch a lobster's antenna for a minute or two without the lobster moving. I had dinner with a pair of divers from Cleveland, Ohio, who had each logged over 300 dives, including the Red Sea, Truk, and Palau. St. Eustatius was one of the three places that they want to dive again.

**Golden Rock Dive Center, Old Gin House, March 2003, Bob Santini, Brookfield, VT.** Experience: More than 1,000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, choppy, currents. The island was what I expected. Pretrip information was gathered from the Chapbook, the January *Undercurrent* issue, and other sources. Great place for divers and those who want a quiet and relaxed vacation. Not for those looking for nightlife or shopping. Food at the Old Gin House was excellent and no more expensive than a good meal in the U.S., and there were many good places to eat that were inexpensive for the meal provided. I booked a dive package with Golden Rock Divers and was pleased with the operation. Divemasters Benji and Annouch were great in all respects. Mid-week a large group arrived and Glen, the owner, adjusted the dive schedule to accommodate all by adding dive times to the schedule, not over crowding the boat. Glen asked for volunteers to go out in the inflatable to help relieve the congestion on the boat. I gladly volunteered along with others and did about four dives with Glen and a couple from Amsterdam, and this just added to the

diving pleasures we enjoyed that week. The only negative was the refusal of customs on St. Maartens to hand inspect my film, and they were extremely rude and callous about it. In closing, the trip didn't start out well with the film incident, but the people and the dive operation on Statia more than made up for it. Michelle, Glen's wife, was extremely pleasant and helpful in arranging the trip.

**Golden Rock Dive Center, Old Gin House, March 2003, Gabriel I. Peñagaricano (guigo34@hotmail.com), San Juan, PR.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, choppy. Everything is good about this dive operator. Even though small, everyone makes your dive as pleasant as possible. The dive sites are great, as is the marine life. A place to return to several times. The dive boat is relatively small, so there are no special facilities for large camera equipment. However, the crew is extremely attentive and helpful with your photo gear.

**Golden Rock Dive Center, The Old Gin House, May 2003, Allison Stenger, Portland, OR.** Dives: 205-500. Vis: 40 to 50 feet. Water: 82 F. Dive own profile, stay with buddy, dive guide in water — use if you want to. Spotter stays on boat. Photo equipment issues: on boat, no camera table, small rinse bucket. Hose and picnic tables on shore. Staff always ready to help haul, hand off, or rinse for you. I brought a European power cord for my strobe, so Michele offered to power the strobe for me at her shop. Never a hassle with this company. Golden Rock is one of the

best. If you e-mail before you arrive, they'll have everything ready for you. Each day they asked what type of diving we wanted. Several times they cheerfully changed their plans to make us happy. When two in our group wanted to snorkel and half wanted to dive, we were taken to Jenkins Bay to do both. Huge stingrays made everyone happy. Another day when the group was split, two boats were used. We were treated like best friends. Boats new, rental equipment excellent, special equipment brought in for you if not available at Golden Rock. Old Gin House, however, was another story. They lost their manager the week before. Service went from friendly Dutch style to the worst of what you might see in the Bahamas. Food quality top notch at hotel, but dinners \$22 to \$50 (plus drinks and tips). Lunches on the patio, reasonable. Service, however, awful. Twenty minutes to get drink or just water, then you might be allowed to order food. Smoke Alley, down the street, reasonable and really good. Chinese food above fort also great. Only bad attitude at the Old Gin House. Rooms there large and plenty of storage. Cleaning depended upon the day, but each room clean for arriving guests.

**Golden Rock Dive Center, Old Gin House, May 2003, Sandy Falen (skfalen@cox.net), Topeka, KS.** Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 feet. Water: 78 to 79 F, choppy. Statia is a step back in time: a Caribbean island with limited development, and roaming goats, donkeys, cows, and chickens at every turn. The diving is relaxed, and the reefs are

healthy. The reefs of Statia were covered with giant barrel sponges and large, beautiful gorgonians, along with tunicates of every color. We noticed a great deal of brown algae, although we were told it alternately grows and recedes. Statia seemed to have less coral bleaching than I've observed in other Caribbean destinations. The fish life appears healthy and fairly abundant. Huge spiny lobster were seen on virtually every dive — sometimes 10 or more in one crevice. It seemed to be mating season for many critters, given the level of activity on the reefs, and the number of juvenile fish. Interesting finds included burrfish, mating coral crabs, fighting lobsters, a school of six tiny juvenile drums, a yellow phase coney, king mackerel, nurse sharks, hawksbill turtles, large angels, friendly morays, numerous large stingrays, and one yellow seahorse. The fish, in general, seemed more curious and less fearful than typical, which may be due to the small number of divers that visit the island, as well as the marine park protection. We encountered currents on a few dives, but nothing too serious. When the currents slowed down midweek, the vis fizzled, too, dropping to 40 feet on some occasions. The staff at Golden Rock (GR) was friendly and accommodating. Divemasters Benji and Annouck were terrific — but they're moving to Bonaire. GR just took delivery on a new boat — a large pontoon that's fast and has tons of space in which to spread out. We often went out on the older, smaller boat, but had no complaints; the boat (*Stumpy*) was more than adequate, and GR was making an

effort to separate divers based on expected dive profiles — which we appreciated greatly. We were diving Nitrox exclusively and found it to be a huge advantage with Statia diving. The reefs are fairly deep, and without Nitrox dive times would be significantly shorter. Several divers found blue beads at the infamous Blue Bead Hole; and while I didn't find an artifact, I found the dive site to be utterly fascinating for its critters — including flying gurnards ("walking" along the bottom), sailfin blennies, jawfish, garden eels, and juvenile fish of a multitude of species. The Old Gin House does have its charms, but I wouldn't list the wait staff among them. Service at the ocean side bar/restaurant was surly and rude, or simply nonexistent. The breakfast that's included in the dive/hotel package is marginal. While it was to include cook-to-order eggs, the staff seemed to resent having to make the effort and sometimes didn't bother. Bacon appeared or disappeared, depending on their mood. For cold drinks in the afternoon, I resorted to serving myself — including writing up my own ticket. We asked for ice cream several times and were told there was none, although I later noticed a large container of it in the main kitchen's freezer, when I retrieved some ice for my room. The fabulous cuisine I'd heard raves about never materialized, as the chef was on vacation for the entire 10 days of our stay. Of course, no one bothered to warn us about that ahead of time or even upon check-in. Finally after two days of seeing no activity in the main restaurant, I inquired of the staff. I

was told a guest chef would be arriving the next day, but that never happened, either. The pool-side rooms are roomy and clean, with nice furnishings, but have almost no natural light. The beds were comfortable, there was decent water pressure and plenty of hot water, and the a/c worked well, but unfortunately there was no in-room fridge. The pool area could use a bit of sprucing up, and the pool itself needed a good scrubbing. The ocean front rooms were quite nice, but unless you spend a lot of time in your room, they probably aren't worth the price differential. Lunches next door at Golden Era Hotel were good and reasonably priced. I would also recommend Intermezzo, the coffee shop in town (which makes fresh bagels and Panini sandwiches), as well as Ocean View Terrace for wonderful grilled fish. Meals in "upper town" were generally less expensive than along the water front, and you really earn your dinner climbing that steep road up the cliff. It's worth the climb to explore Fort Oranje, and I was treated to a personal introduction to the historical museum, courtesy of the charming gentleman on duty. Statia is loaded with colorful history, and the locals are friendly and happy to share it. This island is very much "old Caribbean," and well worth a visit. The boats and shop had no specific accommodations for photographers, although a salt water bucket was provided to keep equipment wet and protected on the return boat ride. Given the short distance to reefs, and the time between dives, the lack of special facilities was not a problem.

**Golden Rock Dive Center, Old Gin House, June 2003, Greg and Nan Froemming, Orlando, FL.** Dives logged: 101-250. Vis: 50-75 ft. Water: 80-82 F. Dive restrictions enforced: Marine Park requires that a divemaster accompany divers. But after the tour of the reefs, those of us that had enough air could stay under the boat to explore until air was at 500 psi with one guide staying with us and the other guide going to the boat. The *Undercurrent* newsletter Jan. 03 that reported by Ben Davison on his visit to Statia was accurate. Statia is no longer our well kept secret diving destination. We really like diving with 10 divers on a boat and some times just 3 divers. The abundance of sea life on Statia's colorful reefs, the professionalism and helpfulness of Glenn and Michelle, Golden Rock's owners, the lack of crime and lack of cattle boats of divers make Statia our kind of dive spot. The divemasters that Davison met in Jan. 2003 have been replaced with two energetic, knowledgeable, and fun loving divemasters, Michael and Lisa. If you wish to dive at a different time, location, or wish to avoid diving with a large group that has booked with Golden Rock then ask Glenn. He will arrange for you to go with a divemaster in the zodiac. Glenn and Michelle give such special attention to all their divers. For example, when a stomach ailment threatened to ruin Nan's vacation and they found out that yogurt would help, the two made a trip to the grocery store after a long work day and delivered it to Nan at her room. Imagine our surprise to hear a knock on our hotel room door with a shout of "room serv-

ice.” We were dumbfounded. When Greg opened the door, there was Michelle holding a bag with the last bit of yogurt on the island until the next island freighter would stop at Statia. Locals are always kind and helpful. The Belgian chef of the Gin House (that Davison so aptly praised in his article) took extra trouble to cook special foods for lunch during Nan’s illness. Glenn or his apt staff rescued us several times when equipment broke. This friendly, safe atmosphere is what draws us to Statia. Golden Rock has a new, bigger, more stable boat that will accommodate groups of 20. This new boat also changes how gear is prepared from the previous reports about Golden Rock. You are responsible for your gear now. They happily help anyone that asks, but we prefer doing our own gear anyway after staying at resorts that advertise “you don’t touch your gear until you leave” and then beat it up by throwing it in piles. Golden Rock provides air dry space outdoors for you to hang the gear and you leave it and they will stow it indoors before they close for the night. Golden Rock can also arrange for you to fly to near-by Saba to dive. And a note to Mr. Davison about his suggestion to the people of Statia about trash clean up. Whether they heard about your suggestion or just decided on their own, the island was noticeably cleaner than our first visit in 2002. Take all possible medications and extra gear for repairs as Statia is limited on some supplies. Always allow at least a two hour lay-over in St. Martin because in St. Martin you are required to claim your luggage and recheck it on to your con-

necting flight and there are only one or two check in lines which can be very slow and long. Winair’s luggage allowance is 10 kilos per diver extra if you speak up and tell them you are a diver. If you are polite they often waive any additional over weight kilos. Our dive computer was still on and the hand luggage checker wanted the battery out. But when Nan explained that opening the o-ring sealed compartment would prevent her from diving in two days, he was agreeable to seeing it her way. Also get your tickets stamped “in-transit” at check in to avoid the airport departure tax in St. Martin. ATM and internet access is available in town. Use your last day to take an island tour with Mr. Daniel, who can make Americans ashamed that they do not know more about the Declaration of Independence. It is a must do for history buffs. Climb The Quill, the island’s extinct volcano and rain forest which also has rare orchid species. There isn’t much beach near where you stay on Statia but rumors are that the government is talking of recreating the beach that has eroded, so we will be looking in *Undercurrent* for updates.

## ST. KITTS AND NEVIS

These small, intimate islands have a lot of “Old Caribbean” charm. Their strong suits are gracious hotels and old inns, verdant, green scenery, and lovely beaches. The diving is decent, but there are no thrills.

**Ken’s Dive Shop, Dive St. Kitts,  
Timothy Beach Resort, Ocean**