

Venice

Florida West Scuba, September 2003, Thomas Daly (oilertom@aol.com), Oviedo, FL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 6 to 20 Feet. Water: 84 to 85 F, calm, no currents. Great place to dive for the teeth of Carcharocles Megalodon. The teeth are laying right on top of the sand for you to pick up if you are lucky. There are numerous fossilized smaller sharks teeth. I found 8 meg teeth and about 20 other teeth. I also found a fossilized manatee bone with shark tooth scarring on it, whale ribs, and a whale tooth. I found numerous fossilized scallop and gastropod casts. The dive day begins at the dive shop at about 8 am. You check in and do your waivers, set up any special requests you may have regarding gear, weights, Nitrox etc — then head to the boat. The sites are as close as a quarter mile offshore. Steve Thacker who is a retired geologist gives a history lesson of the area. He also has a large assortment of the “treasures” you can find on the dives, from megalodon teeth, to ancient horse teeth, to manatee and whale bones. He briefs you to take a dive flag, dive with a buddy if you wish, or by yourself. When you surface Steve or his divemaster helps you aboard and hoses you down with warm fresh water. They handle your gear, then he helps you identify your treasures. If you are lucky, you may have brought up a “Chatah tooth” as he calls them. That is a tooth that he will trade for the price you paid for your charter that day. Between dives, water, coke, diet coke and homemade chewy chocolate chip cookies are offered. After

everyone is on board, the group heads to a second site. Once again, expect to get between an hour for heavy breathers to two hours for those who are good on air. Again, you are asked to bring some air up with the tank. The most exciting part of the dives is obviously finding the historic Megalodon teeth and other fossils, but equally as pleasing is comparing finds with everyone else on board. The visibility here ranges from diving by Braille to 20 feet. There is not much else to see on the mostly sandy bottom. On this day, from the time we got in the water, we could hear dolphins. On surfacing, there were at least 30 dolphins all around us providing a most enjoyable show and finish to our dives. The dive boat is set up for 6 and that is all the divers he will take. So book early. Also offered are deeper dives for spear fishing and wreck diving. The dive shop is well equipped with Dive Rite, Faber Aqualung and other equipment Steve considers the best out there. The prices are pretty fair in my opinion as well. You are pretty much back at the shop and dried off by 2 pm and headed to Captain Eddies nearby for some fantastic seafood for a late lunch. (www.floridawestscuba.com)

UNITED STATES - VIRGIN ISLANDS

St. Croix

Anchor Dive, Bluewater (SCUBA) Divers, The Waves at Cane Bay, February 2003, Donald Hoft, Holliston, MA. Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 feet. Water:

77 to 79 F, choppy. Anchor Dive is located at Salt River. They have a nice boat (eight divers max) and a terrific staff (Wiz, Tucker). Many good sites are within 15 minutes, with others in Cane Bay a little longer. Dive mostly with two to six divers. DM does good job of briefing and pointing out interesting sea life. Profiles unfortunately are conservative: 80 feet and 40 minutes. Back with over 1,000 lbs every time. Leave dock at 9 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Back to dock between dives. Their location is optimal to the best dive sites on the island. Christiansted operations require a longer boat ride to the better sites at Salt River and Cane Bay. Sites are pretty: quite good, healthy coral and plenty of fish life, not much that is large. Dives are generally easy, enjoyable, if not exciting, some walls. Always within view is a nice array of underwater scenery. Pleasant diving with the usual Caribbean sea life. Viz wasn't great — 50 to 75 feet. Dive shop stores your equipment and will set it up if you wish. A casual, pleasant, fun atmosphere. Not an advanced dive destination but an excellent complement to a St. Croix visit. I dove two days with Bluewater (SCUBA) out of Christiansted, probably the largest operation on St.C. They dive outside the Christiansted reef and/or travel the distance to Salt River/Cane Bay (20 to 30 minutes). A good professional shop with a large staff and good boat which leaves the dock steps from the shop at 8:30 a.m. and early p.m. for a two-tank dive. They will set up and store gear. Unless you are staying in town this means you need to drive and park. They may(?)

offer a pickup at some hotels. I did not find the diving outside Christiansted as good as the sites at Salt River/Cane Bay, but still worthwhile. St. C. is far more laid back than its sister island, St. Thomas — not nearly so overrun with tourists. Plenty to keep you occupied and interested across the island to complement diving.

(www.anchordivestcroix.com)

Scuba Shack, Cormorant, April 2003, Kelly Bookman, Denver, CO.

Dives logged: 7. Vis: 30 to 50 feet. Water: 75 to 90 F. Dive restrictions enforced: depth, time. Like being with family. No more than four people per boat. Allowed us to choose time and location. Personalized service, excellent overall experience.

(www.stcroixscubashack.com)

Scuba Shack, June 2003, Sharon Lumsden, Silver Spring, MD. Vis:

good. Water: 70 F. Excellent organization. They took us to great locations, were very professional, and their prices were terrific. Their expertise showed in everything they did.

Scuba Shack, August 2003, Richard Pastush, San Juan, PR. Vis: 60-70 ft.

Water: 75 F. Experience: 40 dives.

Brooke Morton, Store Manager, Scuba Shack, and divemaster was leading our dive. Near the end of our dive, my wife and I experienced difficulty with our buoyancy at a depth of approx. 30 ft. We went through a rapid ascent.

Brooke tried to slow our ascent rate and then accompanied us to the surface. She then kept us together because of the current and then called to the

skipper to pick us up at our position. Brooke is a great professional asset to the scuba diving industry.

The Waves at Cane Bay, January 2003, Richard Heath (rehcpa@att.net), Surfside Beach, SC.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm, no currents. The Waves at Cane Bay has about 15 rooms, most with A/C. Rooms have kitchens, king size beds, showers, and small, in-room safes. Very clean; reminds you of a 1960s/'70s Howard Johnson Motel room. Restaurant downstairs serves a good dinner; there is a neat breakfast place 100 yards down the road — excellent breakfasts at a good price (Off the Wall Restaurant and Bar). You should rent a car if you are staying out on the Cane Bay side of St. Croix. Compact cars were renting for about \$38 per day — probably less than you would pay a cab if you could get one. Victoria is the owner since April 2002. Extremely easy to get along with and accommodating. You only wish that all the island folks on St Croix were as focused on providing good service as was Victoria. At the time of our visit she did not have a divemaster on premise. She gives you maps of about five shore dive locations, and you plan your own dive. She will hook you up with another guest in the lodge if you need a buddy. She charges \$3 per tank. There are two great areas to wash down your scuba gear and each room is provided with a locker area downstairs to secure your gear after wash down (your room key fits both your locker door and your room). On the dive from The Waves,

you swim out about 100 to 120 yards on a heading of 325 or so — to a sea buoy and drop down to 70 feet. This is a wall dive with a wall that reportedly goes to 13,000 feet. I stop at 122 feet. Swimming parallel to the shore for about 10 to 15 minutes then coming back to the entry point on a heading of 120 is a relaxing 35-minute dive. Since there is no divemaster, this is not recommended for the inexperienced diver. However about 250 yards down the road there is a dive shop if you want to dive with a master and a group. I dove Cane Bay dive location also, same procedure as The Waves dive location (Cane Bay shore dive is located in front of the dive shop discussed above). If you want an easygoing wall dive with no restrictions, clear visibility, and good coral formations and some tropicals, I would highly recommend the Waves at Cane Bay.

(www.canebaystcroix.com)

St. John

Cruz Bay Watersports, Westin, July 2002, Angela Brown (ubacnme@LDD.net), Cape Girardeau, MO.

Vis: 50 to 70 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F. Dives accrued: 375. Diving restrictions enforced: follow divemaster. Reef seemed healthy. Excellent location for beginning divers. Divemaster Charlie was unbelievable. Very patient with the inexperienced and pointed out lots of critters. Cruz Bay Watersports does an excellent job and offers lots of variety such as trips to Foxys on Jost Van Dyke and trips to the BVI. Only drawback — all dives are guided. (www.cbw-stjohn.com)

St. Thomas

Blue Island Divers, Bluebeard's Castle, August 2002, Eileen Roach, Germantown, MD. Vis: 65 to 80 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F. Dives accrued: 200-300 (over 25 years). Dive restrictions enforced: 85 feet max. Wreck dive: Wit Shoal — not as publicized like the Rhone, but loved it. Dive operation tops. Never overcrowded, friendly staff. This wreck is in tact with bunks, rooms — plenty for divers to investigate and swim through. Sunk long ago — enough (believe early '80s) to accumulate fantastic coral growth. Tricky timing the tides — a bit of surface chop. (www.blueislanddivers.com)

Blue Island Divers, Marriott Frenchman's Reef, June 2003, David E. Reubush (David.E.Reubush@nasa.gov), Toano, VA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, choppy. The boat was small with no head, and when you reach a certain age a head is a welcome relief after each dive. (I was told a new boat is in the works). Great and agreeable staff. We delivered the gear (except for the camera gear) to the dive shop the day before we started diving, and the crew put it on the boat for us and picked us up at the hotel dock. They changed BCs and regulators to the new tanks after each initial dive and took the gear back to the shop and hung it up after each day's diving. The boat did not have a ladder so you had to swim up to the back of the boat and take off your weight belt and BC, which were lifted into the boat by a crew member. Then you had to kick up

onto the swim platform and climb the rest of the way into the boat. This got interesting when the boat was rocking and rolling early in the week. The wind had been blowing for about a week before our first day's diving. As a result, the boat could not go far out, and the visibility was only about 30 feet because of all the particulates in the water. Things calmed down later in the week, and we were able to go further out where the visibility was up to about 80 feet, and the dives were much more enjoyable. While St. Thomas is not Little Cayman, there was plenty to see, including some interesting (and large) wrecks. There was lots of shopping to make my wife happy. The clincher occurred when we settled up with Aitch at the end of the week. We had paid for five days of diving for myself and three days for my wife. Because of the poor conditions at the beginning of the week, I cut back to four days and my wife to only one. Aitch refunded the difference with absolutely no hassle. He can also hook you up with a local car rental that cost about half of the going rate for one of the majors. The things that I wished I had known before I left home were the water temperature (I didn't bring enough neoprene) and visibility (I would not have bothered to haul the camera gear). Told them up front that I had a camera. No camera table on the boat and rinse bucket was forgotten most days. When they brought it, was a big dishpan and camera and strobe would not really fit.

Casa del Mar, El Conquistador Hotel, December 2002, Gabriel I.

Peñagaricano (guigo34@hotmail.com), San Juan, PR. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 60 feet. Water: 83 to 84 F, choppy. Carlos Bejares, the owner/divemaster at Casa del Mar dive shop, is one of the most experienced and helpful persons it has been my pleasure to dive with. There are no restrictions for advanced divers, and the sites he chose were excellent, though they were quite a ways from his facility in Fajardo, P.R. Sail Rock and the Shoal wreck in St. Thomas are sites worth returning to, especially with this dive operator. Plenty of room and rinse tanks.

Chris Sawyer & Admiralty Dive, Marriott Renaissance Grand, January 2003, Richard Heath (rehcpa@att.net), Surfside Beach, SC.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 150 feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm. Dove with Admiralty Dive out of the Holiday Inn Windward Passage on Sunday and Chris Sawyer Diving Center, at The Marriott Renaissance Grand, on Monday. Both are well organized and run by folks that I highly recommend. Both dive operations had excellent dive boats — designed for diving — not just a boat that could be used for fishing or diving or whatever. Easy entry and easy return. A lot of room and well-organized space on the boats. Both were what divers would dream of if you were designing your own dive boat.

Admiralty Dive: Marty and Amy took us to the concrete shipwreck and then to Dry Rocks for our second dive. Both dives had that excellent visibility. The concrete shipwreck (the first dive — down to about 87 feet) was less than spectacular and has no real marine life

and no coral as it has only been down since about 1996 and has been savaged by a storm since its sinking. The second site down to about 56 feet — Dry Rocks should not be missed. We saw eight large lobsters, two manta rays swimming by in formation above the coral (looked like a scene out of an underwater movie), and a nurse shark at the bottom of a beautiful coral and rock formation. Many tropical fish, snapper, and grouper were also among the rocks and coral. What beautiful rock and coral formations they were. Amy, our dive-master, was an excellent tour guide and a joy to dive with, safe but not overly restrictive. Marty stayed with the boat but offered many good insights into the various spots we were visiting and where we should go. An enjoyable and friendly time was had by all. Chris Sawyer Diving Center, at the Marriott Renaissance Grand: The folks here were pleasant and a joy to dive with. The two divemasters on the boat *Fools Gold* were Frank and Wayne. Both conducted excellent pre-dive briefings and were understanding of an inexperienced, heavy set, female diver on the boat. (Apparently the young lady had only gotten her certification recently and this may have been her second open water dive. When she got in the water she was extremely nervous and even said that she would not be able to go — wanting to get back out. Wayne worked with her and stayed close and she completed both dives.) These dives were to Congo Key and Mingo Key — neither site would be in my top 50 dive sites. The visibility was less than 50 yards and not a lot of great things to see. The dive crew made up for it by being extremely

easy going and interested in the comfort of the divers, offering water between dives and peeling apples. There were seven divers on board, plus the crew and dive masters. An extra-added treat that made up for the less than great dive sites was having a professional underwater photographer on board that dove with us. Stacy took pictures of all the divers and makes a CD of the dive with your pictures and the sites you have seen. She mailed mine, and it was in my hands back in South Carolina within four days of the dive. The price was \$31. She did an excellent job, and, like I said, turned a less than stellar dive site into a memorial dive. (How often do you get pictures taken of you diving? I am usually taking the pictures of all sorts of things but myself). When reading Undercurrent.org for information on dive venues, my first concern after determining where I am going is looking for a dive company that is superb. With these two that is what you will get! (<http://sawyerdive.vi>, www.admiraltydive.com)

Chris Sawyer Diving Centre, Renaissance Grand Beach Resort, January 2003, Stephen Moore (s-moore@sympatico.ca), **Toronto, Ontario.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 75 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. The diving around the east of end of St. Thomas is average. The crew was friendly and helpful and showed us the best of what was available. The highlight was the RMS Rhone. These two dives were fantastic, and the Rhone's reputation is well earned. Chris Sawyer gives a 45-minute history talk on the way to the site which has

more info than any of the books I have subsequently read. The crew is a lot of fun to dive with but safety conscious. My wife's reg needed to have its tuning tweaked, and this was done overnight at no charge. My high pressure hose blew at the beginning of the second dive on the Rhone. I thought my second dive was toast. After I threw my BC onto the dive platform in disgust, Chris Sawyer had installed a new hose and SPG on my regulator by the time I dragged myself onto the dive platform. The second dive was saved, and I got some great video. No dedicated camera table or rinse tank. However, crew were helpful in assisting with still and video cameras. Also helpful in assisting in finding subjects to photograph or video.

Chris Sawyer, Wyndham Sugar Bay Resort, July 2003, Brian Smith (bkdpd@earthlink.net), **Lewisville, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 feet. Water: calm. Chris and his crew did an excellent job making us feel cared for. All the crew was knowledgeable about the area and about the fish life. We got our advanced open water certification, and the two instructors were terrific. Our first night dive ever was great! Everyone was helpful and patient. The boat and equipment first rate, with the best in safety precautions we've seen yet. Boats easily accommodated the divers (usually between six and 10) with at least one divemaster for every four divers. Sites were awesome, but visibility wasn't that good due to the weather. We had a great timer. As for the hotel, the service was poor, and the

need for a shuttle from the parking lot was a hassle. Find another place.

St. Thomas Diving Club, Bolongo Bay Beach Club, August 2003, Kenneth Marks (ken@marks.net), Reston, VA. Experience: 101-250 dive. Vis: 60 to 100 feet. Water: 80 F, calm. I first dove St. Thomas in 1980. There were urchins everywhere and the coral was healthy and fish plentiful. Then the urchins started to disappear and the coral declined. On this trip we saw the return of the urchins and the return to health of the reefs. Fish are plentiful again. The addition of dive site moorings is a big plus I'm sure. I was treated to first class service with the St. Thomas diving club in every way you can imagine. In my three days of diving, I visited some really choice sites. The boat was not crowded and the crew tried hard to please everyone. When one of my fin straps broke, they were there with a replacement set of fins. After determining my set up preferences, the crew set up my equipment and changed tanks between dives. Finally, the crew was a really nice group of people that you'd want to spend some time with. On my last day of diving I awoke to a glorious morning and "bathtub" calm seas. Some of the locals skipped work to dive that morning. We set off for French Cap, an offshore pinnacle offering potential for large pelagic fish. I dove a mini-wall with lots of ledges. Fish were plentiful and larger than those closer to the island. There was spectacular stag horn coral growth. The second dive of the day was to an equally choice dive site — Dog Rock. Again, beautiful ledges,

plentiful fish and nice coral growth. I saw many large lobsters on almost all of my dives (14 on one dive alone). I also saw several large rays and at least 2 small black tip sharks. St. Thomas diving is returning to its legendary status. Combining a visit to St. Thomas with a trip to St. Croix for some wall diving would be a stellar combination. There is a high speed boat between the islands, that operates only in high season, that makes diving both islands in one trip easy to do. In St. Croix, I dove with Dive Experience.

(www.st-thomasdivingclub.com,
www.bolongobay.com)

The Wider Caribbean Live-Aboards

THE BAHAMAS

AquaCat, February 2003, Don Paschal (dgpdiver1@aol.com), Orlando, FL. Experience: More than 1,000 dives. Vis: 50 to 150 feet. Water: 72 to 74 F, calm. Having experienced live-aboards around the world, this crew and accommodations are first class. Found their photo amenities and layout tops for both video and still. On board E-6 processing and a video produced by the crew using clients' footage. This trip will please everyone, hard-core diver to novice. Plenty of side diversions for those who choose to hike, kayak, beachcomb, snorkel, or fish. Met the boat late afternoon of the first day, but did not depart until the next morning. Wish the night dive was done before dinner, so you could enjoy