

Caneel Bay, St John, USVI Feb 2015

Places we stayed this trip:

“**Caneel Bay**”, St John, USVI. The original staff at Caneel are all so wonderful and helpful. We set an all-time record for the fish-count rate (average of 18 fish per day). The weather was perfect and the water usually clear.

About Finding and Identifying Fish:

You find octopi by finding the Octopus’s garden, which is a bunch of large shells in one spot, with a hole nearby. Look into the hole and you may see the octopus looking back out at you. If s/he is not home, go back frequently and eventually you will find it home eating whatever it went off to get. Sometimes you find one on a walk-about by seeing several large grouper family (grouper, hind or cony) in a group following it to catch the little fish scared up by the octopus. It is important to ask other snorkelers if they have seen one.

Eels are often found by seeing several grouper family (Coney, hinds, groupers) all nosing around a chunk of coral. Look closely and you may find the eel they are accompanying. You also can find eels among coral, especially finger coral or in small caves with long-spine urchins. The main trick is to look at small openings at the bottom of coral heads. Often you will see their bodies, and then you find their head when you dive down to photograph and they defensively peek out.

Many fish hide under ledges. These include glass-eyed snapper, spotted drums, jackknife fish, many of the squirrelfish, porcupine fish and more. It is easiest to go straight down head-first and shoot pictures upside down, inverting them later. That way your entire body doesn’t have to be down so deep. It also is safer from the aspect of bumping into corals.

Fish identifications are done using three guides by Paul Humann and Ned DeLoach titled “Reef Fish”, “Reef Creatures” and “Reef Coral”. The “Fish” book is only fish, the “Creatures” book includes many genera including arthropods, cephalopods, mollusks, worms, sponges, jellyfish and more. The “Coral” book includes many types of corals, algae and sea plants. Sometimes confirmation includes searching the hypothesized fish in Google images. The fish, corals and other creatures are identified with a high confidence (>98% confidence) but the sponges are to a lesser degree of confidence (~75% confidence). Often algae imbed themselves in sponges, making them green or purple when the base color is brown or yellow, for example. Identification corrections are welcome! Sizes are, of course, estimates.

About the Photography:

Some of the photographs were taken with a “**GoPro 4 Black**” with a GoPro extender arm. It is a wonderful camera with some caveats:

1. The subject must be within a few feet of you. The fish-eye lens makes things farther than that seem very far away.
2. Be sure to get an extender stick. The GoPro “3-Way” is a wonderful, durable extender.
3. It takes a little time for the brightness meter to figure out intensity, so you need to take several pictures of the subject.
4. I use the time-laps setting set to 1-second, which:
 - a. Works great while chasing a fish or shooting under a ledge.
 - b. Eliminates the camera movement when you push the button.
 - c. Keeps your fingers out of the view area.

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5. Movies are very clear. I have switched to 1080p, which seems better than the “4K”. It is important to move slowly when filming and try to hold the camera steady.
6. The GoPro is not useful inside buildings, as the fish-eye distortion is considerable.
7. I did not use the “GoPro Studio” software, but that is due to never really trying it.
8. **Overall:** This is a superb little camera.

Sharon used a **RICOH WG-4**, which takes very clear pictures and can be identified because the frame dimensions are wider. The images are amazingly clear, so cropping out a small segment (like an individual fish in the scene) results in a clear image. Rinse your camera very well before opening it and be sure to dry the sealing surface when opening the door to the battery and SD chip.

To get good pictures underwater, the key is getting close to your subject. Try to shoot on sunny days. When diving down, be careful of your bubbles, as many great shots get ruined by bunches of tiny bubbles between you and the subject.

Most pictures are then shoved through Photoshop where “Auto Levels” removes constant background colors and some (few) needed “Shadows/Highlights” adjustments if in dark shadow of a cave or coral. Color balance or Hue/Saturation alterations are NEVER done. The pictures were then loaded into iPhoto for rotation and cropping. The iPhoto “Export/Web page” function was used to build the index sets for the webpage. The controlling “buttons” in the website are simply hand written in HTML pointing to the iPhoto built sets.

IMPORTANT SAFETY TIPS: When diving to get closer to your subject: **NEVER**, ever, touch a subject. Nurse Sharks and eels look approachable, but can be very dangerous (deadly) if, **and only if**, they are touched. If touched, they can latch onto you and not let go... sometimes leading to drowning. They are friendly animals but need their space.

Also watch out for the long spine urchins. Their quills are VERY sharp and sting painfully if touched. If stung, soaking in vinegar dissolves the spine under your skin, helping a great deal. You need to also look out for the invasive Lionfish, which are beautiful to photograph. Their sting is very painful. If you see one, report it.

Restaurants

***** **“La Tapa”**: This is the finest restaurant on the island with fabulous food and very knowledgeable staff. Food there is “NYC good” – not just “Island good”.

***** **“De Coal Pot”**: This is authentic island food that is just delicious. We feasted on a Chicken Roti appetizer and a whole Red Snapper. Both were just delicious. This is a wonderful little restaurant with very helpful staff and authentic, delicious food. We ate there three times in 11 days!

**** **“Scoops”**: These are home-made ice creams that are scrumptious.

**** **“Caneel Breakfast Buffett”**: Wonderful array of foods with wonderful sous chef making eggs to order. The offerings are fresh and the assortment of breakfast juices is great. I do wish they would bring back Sour sop juice though! The entire staff are all so helpful and wonderful.

*** **“Caneel Beach Bar”**: The sushi is very good as are some other items. We liked the appetizers. Fish & Chips and a hamburger will run you \$60, but is good (not great – but

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good). The 8", \$24 Pizza was just okay. If you eat there, sit up over the bar, facing the sea. It is lovely up there.

St John Shopping:

- “**St John Spice**” was good gift shopping store. It is a fun little store right at the boat landing.
- “**Mongoose Junction**” has many interesting shops, including the finest art shops on the island.
- “**Caneel Gift Shop**” Everything was GROSSLY over-priced. A beach wrap like what Sharon gets at T.J. Max for \$20 costs \$250. Don't bother going in.

Beaches and Snorkel Sites:

The snorkeling at the Caneel beaches is just wonderful with each one having its own character. The rock ledges on each side of the beaches holds many amazing fish populations. The octopus, squid and eels are often found there too. The sandy and grassy center has rays, turtles, conch and razor fishes among others.

Caneel Bay & Scott's Bay: We often snorkel from Scotts to Caneel and back again for a great snorkeling experience (is about a mile swim). We saw the Nurse shark about in the middle of the trip, on the Caneel side and the Spotted Eagle Ray near the point. We also saw a huge Permit fish and got a video of it swimming past. The squid family was always present swimming among the rocks.

Hawksnest: This is fabulous turtle sighting bay with a constant family of five to ten Green Sea turtles there with their companion Remora and Shark-Sucker Remora. Usually we also see Hawksbill turtles, but not this year. The rocks to the left and right are wonderful, with the Octopus's garden on the right side rocks. He was very outgoing and unhappy with my taking his picture – reaching out and grabbing my camera! It was on a pole, so I was able to hang onto it – but just barely!

Little Caneel: This is a very lively wall and coral all the way around to Salomon Bay and back. This year we found a large Nassau Grouper, a spotted moray eel and more.

Scott Beach: Spectacular in all ways.

- **To the left:** You can snorkel all the way to Caneel Bay and back and see a wonderful array of amazing fish. We saw squid, Permit fish, Nurse Shark, Spotted Eagle Ray and dozens of others.
- **Center:** This bay has several Green sea turtles, Southern stingray and sometimes Spotted Eagle ray. To the center left, near the sea buoys is a group of Garden Eels. When you dive down, they slide back into their holes.
- **To the right:** This reef area is very healthy and full of every sort of wildlife. It is a bit dangerous, as the current is very strong at times. If you get caught in the current, the important thing is to swim as far out as you can, so you are drawn around as if on a carnival ride all the way to Turtle Cove.