

# Secret Harbour Log 2014

## Places we stayed this trip:

**Secret Harbour, St Thomas USVI.** Our stay here was a return after 7 years of being away. It was wonderful to see our friends from previous years with endless conversations. The reef is in rather poor shape due to two hurricanes in recent years, but is clearly coming back with many young coral growths and there were many of the familiar fish. The best snorkeling is to the left and right of the main beach, out toward the rocky points you see a few hundred yards in each direction. The reef straight out to where boats moor is also still vibrant. The entire area is still loaded with many fish.

## 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 the octopus 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 coney) in a group following it to catch the little fish scared up by the octopus.

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.

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 "Creatures" are identified with a high confidence but the sponges are to a lesser degree of confidence. Often algae imbed themselves into sponges, making them green or purple when the base color is brown, for example. Identification corrections are welcome! The size of the fish are shown in parentheses and of course are estimates, but give the general size of the fish we saw.

**An important safety tip** when diving to get closer to your subject: NEVER, ever, touch a subject. Nurse sharks, stingrays and eels look approachable, but can be very dangerous (deadly) if, and only if, they are touched. Also watch out for the long spin urchins. Their quills are VERY sharp and sting painfully. If stung, soaking in vinegar helps. Now you need to also look out for Lionfish. Their sting is very painful. None of these will approach you, but you don't want to touch them.

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## About the Photography:

Camera is the Olympus 790 SW with an underwater enclosure. Often set to “Macro” with the flash disabled. To get good pictures underwater, the key is getting close to your subject. Never use the zoom except for exceptionally shy animals like Garden Eels, Tilefish, Jawfish and Rock beauties. Try to shoot on sunny days. Only use a flash if shooting under a ledge or to stop the endless movement of a fish like a spotted drum. The flash brighten all debris in the water. 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. I never use color balance or Hue/Saturation alterations. 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 sets built by iPhoto.

Several of the fish have more than one image to show color variations and sometimes just because more than one was a good image of a particular animal.

## St Thomas Restaurants (in the order of recommendation)

**“Caribbean fish market”** At the Elysian Beach Resort: The menu is varied and delicious. The wine list is extensive and the wait staff knowledgeable and helpful. The prices are not outrageous and worth the cost. It is a fine restaurant.

**“Island Time Pub”** on the upper level of the Red Hook Marina has absolutely delicious pizza.

**“The Cellar”** just south of the main marina in Red Hook is elegant with excellent food and very friendly, knowledgeable staff.

**“Sangria”** At the Elysian Beach Resort “Beach Bar” offered delicious food (sandwiches, wraps and the like) with a perfect sea-side ambience.

**“Texas Pit BBQ”** at the north end of the Duffy’s parking lot. It is what became of the old pick-up truck that used to sell ribs years ago. They are still wonderful ribs with rice & beans.

**“Sunset Grille and Cruzan Beach Club”** on the beach of Secret Harbour Beach Resort, has kitchen troubles. Their meals can be great or awful depending on the moment. If they could get their act together, it may become a good restaurant and bar (same kitchen).

**“Latitude 18”** across the bay from Red Hook is a MUST for anyone visiting the area. The live music is always excellent, the wait staff friendly and helpful and the bar makes great drinks. The food is.. well.. not so good, so eat first; But still go.

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## Beaches and Snorkel Sites

### St Thomas, USVI:

**Secret Harbour:** The reef is in rather bad shape but recovering. It has been battered twice in recent years by hurricanes, which covered many coral heads with silt and sand. There was a lot of new coral growth. The fish population was still robust. The octopus and stingray populations seemed very reduced with my finding only one Octopuses' "Garden" and seeing none (it was out on a "walk-about" when I found the garden). We saw no stingray either. The rock walls on the left and the right both showed a large fish population including huge Rainbow Parrotfish. The grouper family is in good shape with us seeing a Nassau grouper and many rock hinds. There seemed to be a large number of glass-eyed snappers, Horse-eyed Jacks and we saw four Spotted Drums! Another special find was a baby High Hat. I have never seen the adult High Hat, but the baby sure was cute! The reef straight out from the beach is healthy out about 100 yards.

**Christmas Bay:** This bay is fabulous – we were taken there by the Dive Shop at Secret Harbour. Bill drove the boat and Jim got in the water with us. Both are very knowledgeable and helpful. The reef was very healthy with many fish to see. We also saw Garden eels there.

**The Ledges at Little St. James Island:** This is a popular snorkeling and diving site with a series of ledges that fish love to hide under. It was there that we saw a Goliath Grouper! There are many fish under the ledges and surrounding coral. It is a deep and robust snorkel site.

### Trip Summary:

Our stay here was a return after 7 years of being away. It was very nice to see our friends there and to snorkel the reef and rock walls. The reef is in rather poor shape compared to the last time we were here, yet there were many of the familiar fish there. The best snorkeling is to the left and right of the main beach, out toward the rocky points you see 100 yards in each direction.

We heard "Dick Solberg and the Sun Mountain Band" (AKA "The Fiddler") at Latitude 18" and they were WONDERFUL. We enjoyed the music and watching the dancing, which included a couple named Dewey and Sue who danced so fluidly that it was almost hypnotic. The food there was rather awful (except the "shark-bites" that were delicious), but the ambiance, drinks, staff and music were all just excellent. Latitude 18 is a MUST if you visit this island.

We went to Charlotte Amalie only once – waiting for a day with no cruise boats. Several of the stores were closed, but with the crowd so diminished, it was a very pleasant time. "Mr. Tablecloth" is a great place to visit, as are all of the shops on "Palm Passage" where much of the works are locally made.

Generally, it was a relaxing time of snorkeling, reading, finding good restaurants and visiting with both old and new friends.