

Virgin Gorda & Guana Island, 23 Nov–17 Dec 2014

Places we stayed this trip:

“Crosswinds” Virgin Gorda, BVI. This is a wonderful villa sitting just minutes from Spring Bay up among the palms and the fragrant oleander. The owners, Chip and Keith, are delightful to rent from even stocking the fridge before we arrived with items we requested. The wind flows through the windows as the palm fronds rattle like millions of small marimbas. It is absolutely silent (except for crickets, frogs and roosters) on the large porch facing the gorgeous sunsets. It is far enough from town to be quiet, but close enough to be convenient to all the local stores and restaurants. With such a nice kitchen, we cook in most nights. This is our 8th time staying there and it feels like “our” Caribbean home.

“Little Dix Bay”, Virgin Gorda, BVI, (284 495 5555). All the staff are delightful with their caring and “can-do” attitude. The food service has recovered from last year’s low point to a level of excellence. They have a new Chef and a new Food and beverage manager. The people at the waterfront were friendly and helpful. Our room (#57) was quiet, clean and perfect – right on the beach. Even the water-pressure was great in the shower! This resort has great ambiance and is a delight to be here and we highly recommend it. The food service was much improved over last year.

“Guana Island”, BVI, is the largest privately owned island in the BVI’s and it is marvelous. It can be characterized as rustic elegance. The food was delicious with excellent preparation and presentation. The setting is romantic and wild with hiking trails of all levels, a beautiful beach and snorkeling nearby. The staff are all warm and helpful to every need. With so few cottages, the number of guests was few, so we got to know each other over our time here. This island is a must got everyone’s “bucket list”.

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.

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

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lesser degree of confidence. Often algae imbed themselves in sponges, making them green or purple when the base color is brown, for example. Identification corrections are welcome!

About the Photography:

At the beginning of the trip, the camera was the Olympus 790 SW with an underwater enclosure. It flaked out after just days here, so we got a “GoPro 4 Black” from St Thomas and had it delivered on Speedy’s ferry. 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. According to others, the GoPole costs less, but also is more cheaply made.
3. You MUST hold the camera as still as you can.
4. It takes a little time for the brightness meter to figure out intensity, so you need to take several pictures of the subject.
5. 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.
6. Movies are very clear. I am still learning how to stop the occasional jerkiness. I have switched to 1080p, which seems better than the “4K”. Still learning...
7. The GoPro is not useful inside buildings, as the fish-eye distortion is considerable.
8. I did not use the “GoPro Studio” software, but that is due to never really trying it.
9. **Overall:** This is a superb little camera.

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. 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 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. None of these animals will approach you, but you don’t want to touch them.

Restaurants

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“**Chez Bamboo**” has excellent food (best on the island in our experience) and often with live music. The owner, Rose, is very personable and is always on the premises, making for a well-run restaurant serving delicious food, which is NY delicious, not just island good. We heard Morris Mark twice this year. His music is absolutely wonderful.

“**Hog Heaven**” Perched high on the ridge overlooking North Sound, (toward Bitter End), the view is as delicious as the Ribs. These are the BEST ribs we have ever eaten – and we are from the south, so know good ribs. This restaurant is situated on the new road running from Nail Bay to just north of the park on North Sound Road. The food is delicious with the staff friendly and inviting. DO NOT MISS HOG HEAVEN!

“**The Fat Virgin**” at Biras Creek is a tiny restaurant right on the water and has delicious food. We had Chicken Roti, which is the best in the Virgin Islands with fresh crust and delicious filling. We always meet nice people at adjacent tables too. It is a MUST on Virgin Gorda. Take the Biras Creek ferry from Gun Creek. It stops at the Fat Virgin. There is also a nice little gift store with many interesting items in it.

“**The Tree house**” (**Above the Rock Cafe**): Was a spectacular view with good food.

“**Bath & Turtle**”: Their Fish & Chips (Fresh Grouper) and chicken Roti are very good as is their pizza and burgers. Use cash when eating there.

“**CocoMaya**” was a real disappointment. Nice view of the sunset, but the food was only “okay” with everyone’s dishes arriving at random times. Our main course arrived with very stale pita (obviously has sat for some time under a hot light). Everything was grossly over-spiced to the point of not being able to taste the main ingredient. The music was so loud you could hardly think let alone talk. It was VERY expensive for mediocre fare. We will never go back.

The “Mineshaft”: We didn’t even try it this year. It was very poor last year, and we heard from others that it is even worse this year. Some friends found it closed this year.

“**Little Dix Bay**” We were happy to see a marked improvement in the food service this year over last year’s rather poor performance. There is a new Chef and a new Food and Beverage Manager and it is VERY noticeable. Below are the several restaurant venues:

- The **Monday night Buffett** at the Pavilion was wonderful (last year it was a serious disappointment) with a return of the Tandoori oven and lobster among other delicious offerings.
- The **Sugar Mill Restaurant** was amazingly delicious. Everything we had from the appetizer to the desert was prepared with perfection.
- **Breakfast Buffett** at the Pavilion was excellent, unlike last year. The offerings were plentiful with many staff members to assist in any way we needed.
- **The Beach Grill** prepared delicious **Tapas** in the evening that were delicious and were presented artistically. This little restaurant is a gem.

“**Guana Island**” Every meal (lunch and dinner) were absolutely deliciously prepared and presented. They will also prepare special dishes upon request. The culinary adventure on that island is just wonderful.

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Virgin Gorda Food Shopping:

- **“Bucks”** has many essentials in a well-stocked general food store right at the boat harbor. The produce and meats were both impressive. You still need to find out when they re-stock (Tuesday evening) to get fresh produce. Good selection of wines, but expensive.
- **“RTW Road Town Wholesale”** Most item must be purchased in set so three or by the case. Very good prices on wine, beer, booze and water. The wines are quite good and reasonably priced.
- **“Rosie’s”** Good selection of produce and many food items.

Beaches and Snorkel Sites:

Virgin Gorda:

Spring Bay: Snorkeling around the boulders are a vertical reef with amazing fish. Since we were staying just up the hill from the bay, it was our most often visited beach. It was delightful with amazing snorkeling. Everyone on Spring Bay beach is friendly and the conversations endless. After a good snorkel floating on noodles with the many friendly faces is always fun. You can walk north from Spring Bay to little Trunk and Trunk bay. Both are deserted, lovely beaches. The Baths is always over-crowded and something to avoid, but swimming past to Devil’s Bay is a good swim with many delightful fish. This year we identified and photographed 122 different fish and sea-life in 7 days just at this one beach.

Mountain Trunk beach just South of Nail Bay is spectacular in every way. The beach is long and soft with the sand going well into the water. It is always essentially deserted with lovely soft sand. Facing the water, to the left and right are rock outcroppings, which have coral reefs and loaded with fish. The reef to the right is wonderful and extends for several miles. It has all sorts of fish, lobster, rays and coral of every color to snorkel past. On a good day, it is an easy snorkel all the way to Nail Bay and into its wonderful reef. The reef continues past Nail Bay and onto Long Bay. This stretch of reef is the best on the island. The reef to the left of Mountain trunk (when facing the water) is also spectacular but shorter with deep crevasses and huge sea fans.

Savannah Bay is a fabulous snorkel if the weather cooperates. It faces the sea, so if there is any storm out there, the waves churn up the water. If it is calm, or even moderately calm, the entire reef is amazingly active with large openings in the coral full of very many species of fish.

Little Dix Bay: The bay was surprisingly full of interesting fish and corals. It is VERY shallow, so be careful. Some of the coral is damaged by people walking on it too. It was a breeding ground for millions of tiny fish (not silversides, but fry).

Dive BVI Snorkel trip:

- **Vanishing Pinnacle (VP):** Marvelous snorkeling including white spotted filefish, and Black Durgon. Could have gone around ten more times and still seen new fish.
- **Chromes Bay:** Less dramatic than VP, but still amazing with both blue and brown chromis and many others.
- **Cooper Island:** ALWAYS a good snorkel between Cistern Point and the little panicle poking out to the water. Snorkel all the way to the beach where the food is wonderful.

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Guana Island:

Monkey point is a short kayak ride away. You can also hike there. They will take you to other beaches for 45 minute short excursions or for 4 hour trips (at a cost). We snorkeled Camino Island pass, which was very rich in sea life. Then another day we took a trip to the Indians and to Cooper Island. The last 45 minute trip was to Crab Cove, which is very dynamic with huge coral heads and many fish. To the north is Crab Cove with huge coral heads and amazing fish including an enormous porcupine fish and schools of Blue Tang among so many other fish. We had turbid water and rough seas, and still saw so much.

Daily Log (Summary):

Summary from the daily log:

We only had 15 snorkeling days out of this 24-day adventure due to many stormy days and days with very turbid water. We still photographed and identified 183 sea-life and land life. Due to the many lost days to snorkel, we added the animals above the water too. We saw our friends and met new friends, so the lost time in the water was just fine. We did a lot of floating and schmoozing in the waves and the rain.

Crosswinds at Spring Bay” Nov 23th to Dec 5th: “Crosswinds” is a wonderful place to stay with Chip and Keith being excellent hosts. Spring bay is just a short walk to the shore and Spring Bay is an amazing bay to snorkel. Since we have been coming there for so many years, arriving is like a homecoming with our “annual family” greeting us with warmth and hugs. This year the reef was healthier than last year. The first few days was very stormy, so we just visited with friends and floated in the high seas. Get out beyond the surf, and just ride the waves up and down for a wonderful, relaxing time.

Most meals were made at home (Sharon is an excellent chef), but some dinners were at Chez Bamboo (Great Thanksgiving dinner) and Hog Heaven (Best ribs in the world). We also had two lunches at the “Fat Virgin” for their amazing delicious Chicken Roti’s.

Little Dix Bay Dec 5th to 12th: Little Dix is a resort run very well with excellent staff and clean, comfortable rooms. The reef is limited (but full of breeding fish) but they offer daily beach drops to many of the inaccessible beaches on the island. It is a wonderful place to stay. As always, we saw friends from previous years and met many new friends. This is “summer-camp” for grown-ups. The grounds are gorgeous and the staff so warm. The food was MUCH improved over last year, resulting in a delicious island adventure.

Guana Island; Dec 12th to 17th: Guana island is the BEST place on this planet that we have ever been. The room (D4) is so fabulous with rustic and elegance fused to perfection with white-painted stone buildings reminiscent of the Greek Isles. Our room had a private cabana area that is absolutely private with a view of the ocean and the inter-island sea. The stars are so amazing that it takes your breath away. The food here is a culinary delight. The island is very wild with miles of hiking trails of every level of difficulty, gorgeous beaches and an intimate feeling with few guests and absolute privacy in your living space. The food was just amazing with lunches and dinners prepared with perfection and presented artistically. This is a magical island.