

# Virgin Gorda & Caneel Bay, 22 Nov–17 Dec 2011

## 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. Betty is very sweet and helped us stock the fridge before we arrived. The wind flows through the windows as the palm fronds rattle like millions of small marimbas. It is absolutely silent 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 stores and the Mineshaft restaurant!

**“Caneel Bay”, St. John, USVI (340 776 6111).** Caneel is always wonderful. It is summer camp for adults done right. The snorkeling is superb with many wonderful animals not seen elsewhere since this is a protected national park. We saw just one turtle in the BVI's but saw many at Caneel due to being protected. The staff at Caneel are all wonderful and the property almost surreal for its beauty and spaciousness. Breakfasts are fabulous, but other restaurants are not great.

## About the Photography:

Camera is the Olympus 790 SW with an underwater enclosure. Set to “Macro” with the flash disabled. I usually increased exposure +1 in previous years, but forgot to this year. 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 and Rock beauties. Try to shoot on sunny days and limit the use of a flash, which tends to brighten all debris in the water. If diving down, be careful of your bubbles, as many great shots get ruined by bunches of tiny bubbles between you and your 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. 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.

An important safety tip when diving to get closer to your subject: NEVER, ever, touch a subject. Nurse sharks and eels look approachable, but can be very dangerous if (and only if) they are touched.

## Side Trips on Boats (Virgin Gorda)

**Bitter End Snorkel Trip:** On Tuesdays and Thursday's there is a three-stop snorkel trip leaving at 2:00 PM until 4:30 PM. They supply towels and drinks (including rum punch). It costs just \$25 per person and is wonderful. We took it this year when the waves were a bit too high, so he found places more protected. We took an earlier ferry from Gun Creek and enjoyed a nice lunch at the Beach Bar restaurant there, which is always nice. It is great afternoon all around.

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## Restaurants:

### Virgin Gorda

“**Chez Bamboo**” has excellent food and often with live music. The owner, Rose, is very nice and is always on the premises, making for a well-run restaurant serving delicious food.

“**Mineshaft**” has the BEST sunset view on the island, and the best ribs too (and Roti and fish...)! On Friday evenings Morris Mark (<http://www.allmusic.com/album/songs-of-life-r2140443>) plays his acoustic guitar and sings beautifully. He is an absolute must to hear on this island paradise. The storms last year took the outside dining porch off, so they rebuilt it twice as large with a roof. We have enjoyed the famous BBQ ribs, Chicken Roti, Mango Chicken and the Lobster – all excellent. The Mineshaft is a must for any visitor to Virgin Gorda.

“**Mermaid**” (at the end of the road near the circle south of Spanish Town). We stopped there for lunch and the only word is “vile”. Sharon’s hamburger was both badly undercooked with ground beef that tasted old and almost turned. Bob’s “Mahi” sandwich was very fishy tasting with a fish that had dark brown meat. Couldn’t have been Mahi Mahi. When we told the proprietor, we were simply given attitude.

“**Saba Rock**” This isolated restaurant nestled on a tiny rock between Bitter End Yacht Club and Prickly Pear Island is a nice place for lunch. The food was good and reasonable and half the property is manicured as a small park with hammocks and lounge chairs. They have several rooms, which are nice for boaters to get a good shower and sleep on a real bed for a change. The restaurant also has many vintage outboard motors for mechanical types to drool over.



“**Hog Heaven**” Perched high on the ridge overlooking North Sound, the view is as delicious as the Ribs. This new restaurant is situated on the new road running from Nail Bay to just north of the park on North Sound Road. The food is cooked on a regular grill and is delicious with the staff friendly and inviting. This is well worth the drive, which is also delightful.



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**“Bath & Turtle”**: Their Fish & Chips and hamburgers were good. They are located across the parking lot from Bucks.

**“Bitter End Beach Restaurant”**: Was good for a fair price.

**“The Fat Virgin”** at Biras Creek is a tiny restaurant right on the water and has delicious food. We had the Grouper sandwich and chicken roti, which were both wonderful. We always meet nice people at adjacent tables too. It is a MUST on Virgin Gorda. Take the Biras Creek ferry.

**“Little Dix Bay”** The Beach Restaurant served excellent fish sandwich and fish taco.

### St John

**“Equator at the Sugar Mill”** This restaurant does wonderful fish but (in our experience this trip) awful beef. If you stick to seafood it is really excellent but over-priced. The view is outstanding.

**“Caneel Bay Beach Bar”** Makes good hamburgers, sandwiches and appetizers. Wine by the glass is ridiculously expensive (so bring your own in a paper cup) but beer is only a little inflated. The service was excellent.

**“La Tapa”** in Cruz Bay is the best restaurant on this island. We have been going there for many years and it is never disappointing. The food is not just “Island Good” it is “New York Good” and the price is reasonable for the quality and quantity. The staff are all delightful, helpful and very knowledgeable about the food, wines and preparation.

**“Sun Dog Café in Mongoose Junction”** Excellent tuna and Mahi-Mahi dinner plates. Their salad was also delicious. This establishment is small with tables in the hallway but serve food fit for a fine restaurant.

**“Uncle Joe’s Barbeque”** is right on the busy street a few blocks from the ferry dock. You sit on the little platform with the music from three different bars wafting past as people stroll by and the ribs are absolutely delicious for very little money. They are messy and delicious.

**“The Fatty Crab”** is one block up from La Tappa and much hyped but we found it just terrible. Their “Papaya & Mango” salad had no Papaya or Mango in it, and was so covered with hot sauce that it physically burned our tongues. We had pan-fried potatoes that were not special, but good. It cost \$10 for two small potatoes. The fish “sliders” were tiny and unremarkable. Even the wine was bitter. Stay away.

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## Food Shopping on Virgin Gorda:

“**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.

“**Bucks Wholesale**” Good selection of some staples. Meats at reasonable prices are available if in stock..

“**RTW Road Town Wholesale**” Most item must be purchased in set so three or by the case. Very good prices on wine, beer and water. The wines are quite good and reasonably priced.

“**Rosie’s**” Good selection of produce and many food items. It is a very well stocked grocery.

## Beaches and Snorkel Sites:

### **Virgin Gorda:**

**Spring Bay & the Baths:** 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. On one long snorkel trip north of Spring bay and back, a large school of Bar Jacks with two Great Barracuda joined us, swimming all the way back to Spring Bay.

**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. To the left and right are rock outcroppings, which have coral reefs and loaded with fish. Facing the water, 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. The reef to the left of Mountain trunk (when facing the water) is also spectacular but shorter with deep crevasses and huge sea fans.

**Bitter End Yacht Club** offers a three-stop snorkeling trip for just \$25 each! It is well worth it, with a guide that knows the spots best suited for the day’s weather. There is a nice little beach bar restaurant there that has good food. The drive there is always pleasant with great scenery.

### **St. John:**

**Caneel: All the beaches are wonderful.** All Caneel beaches and reefs are wonderful because they are protected and never fished or hunted.

**Caneel Bay:** Right side (when facing the water) all the way around to Scott beach is wonderful reef loaded with octopus, eels and thousands of fish. The coral is healthy with many colored sponges too. The bay itself is also home to many larger sea friends like nurse shark, spotted eagle ray, conch and much more.

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**Little Caneel Bay** toward Honeymoon is more sparse, but with its own unique population of fish including Nassau grouper.

**Paradise and Scott** is essentially one beach with great rocks on each side. Facing the water, the left is great all the way to Caneel beach where we saw both Octopuses (Common and Reef). The beach itself has several Green Sea turtles always present, a Spotted Eagle ray and Southern Stingrays that visit often. To the right have many shelves with great fish hiding under them including a very large Porcupine fish and a baby Nurse Shark. Out toward Turtle Bay Point is gets very dangerous with strong currents that can either drive you into the rocks so stay well clear of the shore. If the current is high, enjoy the ride but well away from the rocks. One disturbing sighting this year was the Lionfish in the reef on Scott Beach. Two more were sighted by others to the left of Paradise Beach. Their only predator is the Nassau Grouper, and they have been fished to near extinction.

### Daily Log:

#### **Tuesday, Nov 22<sup>nd</sup>**

Arrived after a smooth flight. Was evening, so no snorkeling the first day. It felt like coming home. For dinner was a grilled steak, baked potatoes and salad. Yum.

#### **Wednesday, Nov 23<sup>rd</sup>**

Snorkeled first south then north of Spring Bay. Identified 41 fish on the first day! Was so much fun. We also finished shopping for the essentials at all four groceries, each for their specialties. Bucks for many staples, RTW Road Town Wholesale for beer, wine and water, Rosies for other staples (is better stocked than Bucks). Buck's wholesale was out of most everything we wanted.

#### **Thursday, Nov 24<sup>th</sup>**

Lovely snorkeling to the south of Mountain Trunk Bay. The deep crevasses hold many delightful fish. The afternoon opened up with rain showers that made the island smell SO FRESH. We swam in Spring Bay in the rain and felt thoroughly refreshed. We enjoyed a Thanksgiving dinner at Chez Bamboo restaurant that was just excellent.

#### **Friday, Nov 25<sup>th</sup>**

Snorkeled all the way to Devil's cove and back (about 2 miles) seeing many wonderful fish including an Octopus on a "walk-about". His entourage was just a large yellow-tailed snapper as he/she glided from rock to rock searching for lunch. I got both still shots nice videos of the event. In the afternoon we returned to Spring Bay in the pouring rain and floated there like a couple of lily pads soaking up the liquid sunshine. When the sun came out, another short snorkel followed with more sightings. The count is now up to 74 fish identified and photographed with the many sponges and corals yet to be added.

The evening meal was at the Mineshaft where I had their famous and delicious ribs and Sharon enjoyed a chicken roti. Both were absolutely delicious! We listened to Morris Mark play two of my favorite songs: "Fields of Gold" and "Streets of London". You can hear samples of his latest CD at <http://www.allmusic.com/album/songs-of-life-r2140443>, which gives a feel of why we like him so much.

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### Saturday, Nov 26<sup>th</sup>

Another wonderful day at Spring Bay, snorkeling in both directions with good results. We saw our first hawksbill turtle of this trip along with many new smaller fish. We also got a picture of a Jaw fish, which we have only found twice before. Met several more nice folks on the beach as the winter community builds.

Dinner was a pre-seasoned whole chicken we picked up for \$9 at Bucks Wholesale Market. We asked the girl at the counter what the spices it was covered with were, and she said: “well, good spices of course”. Sharon added chopped garlic, kosher salt and pepper and we grilled it whole for an hour at about 425. It was spectacular. With scalloped potatoes au gratin and veggies and it was a delicious meal for so little money! YUM.

### Sunday, Nov 27<sup>th</sup>

Stormy Sunday with HUGE waves coming into Spring Bay. Waiting for a slow cycle between waves, we managed to get into the water and treaded water for hours like a couple of bobbing corks. A torrential downpour passed over and we enjoyed the invigorating event with another couple enjoying nature’s shower. It was delightful even if there was no snorkeling today.

Dinner was leftovers from last night by Sautéing some meat with mushrooms and onions and putting over rice pilaf risotto. It was as delicious as last night.

### Monday, Nov 28<sup>th</sup>

More stormy weather, so we floated in the rough surf, talked with others down there and read our books. It was very relaxing day indeed. I even got some work done. Dinner was Latkes and tuna salad.

### Tuesday, Nov 29<sup>th</sup>

We enjoyed the three-stop snorkel trip offered by Bitter End Yacht Club. It was still a bit choppy, but even with that we saw some nice fish, but mostly just had a delightful time. They have a very nice little beach bar café with good food. The trip up there is always pleasant. Dinner was Sharon seasoned steaks we found at Buck’s wholesale. Delicious.

### Wednesday, Nov 30<sup>th</sup>

My birthday was wonderful. The weather was absolutely perfect and we snorkeled our favorite reef – mountain trunk. I identified 12 new fish for this year’s count, including two brand new fish never seen before. We even saw a Hawksbill turtle and a stingray all in one snorkel. Lunch was at a new restaurant perched up on a cliff overlooking North Sound. We snorkeled Spring Bay in the afternoon and videoed a Southern Stingray swimming across the bay as I swam over it. The evening meal was at our favorite “nice” restaurant, the Chez Bamboo. The owner is a woman named Rose who is a long time resident who is very nice and a driven businessperson who now owns three of the best little restaurants on this tiny island. We even had a great sunset to finish off a perfect day. Sharon gave me a perfect birthday indeed.

### Thursday, Dec 1<sup>st</sup>

Snorkeled Spring Bay morning and afternoon. The morning had several new sightings including the lovely Black capped Basslet. The afternoon also had some nice fish including a Coney and a nice video of a stingray that came right up to the shore. Dinner was home made chili that was delicious. Sharon is such a great cook!

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### Friday, Dec 2<sup>nd</sup>

We snorkeled our beach to the right with nice results. At noon we drove up to Gun Creek to catch the ferry to Saba Rock for lunch. It was delightful. Good food (Mahi Rubin) and the restaurant fun with antique outboard engines set up around the restaurant. The property has a few rooms for wayward sailors who NEED a good shower and a bed that isn't rocking and the rest of the property is a tiny park with lounge chairs and hammocks. There is an endless

Dinner was omelet with all sorts of good things in it.

### Saturday, Dec 3<sup>rd</sup>

We were snorkeled up two bays north of Spring Bay (~ a mile) swimming close to shore on the way out, and then farther out upon returning (more direct since we are tired). A school of Bar Jacks and two HUGE Great Barracuda joined us like we were just two of the school! I clicked tons of pictures including one showing a small Remora on the back of one of them. They escorted us all the way back to "our" beach at Spring Bay where others were thrilled to see the Barracuda! They are frightening looking fish that are so curious and friendly. We have never heard a "bad" story about one, but lots of folks get scared. The first "close encounter" we had been on St. John many years ago when a very large one came right up to Sharon's mask, looking her in the eye with his snaggletooth & crooked smile. Sharon (who is not easily frightened) turned screeching and swimming like a crazy person back to shore where one of the laughing spectators commented while catching her breath, "That is 'Fred' who lives under the raft and he was just coming to say "hello". The next time Fred come to her, Sharon just looked him right back in the eye and bubbled "hello". We are now collecting shells and sea glass from the shore after snorkeling for some future jewelry project. Little Palometa love to join us, apparently hoping we scare up a small crustacean I would guess.

Dinner was Sharon made steaks – delicious.

### Sunday, Dec 4<sup>th</sup>

Stormy morning and a short snorkel with a long floating in the high surf. The water is getting rather cloudy from all the waves and rain. Lots of people joined in the watery fun with endless conversation.

Dinner was at the Mineshaft where Bob has Mango Chicken and Sharon a Chicken Roti. Both were excellent.

### Monday, Dec 5<sup>th</sup>

Last night is rained like under a waterfall! This morning was more of the same. We relaxed and read our Kindles most of the morning. The sun started to peek through so we hopped into the car and drove to Gun Creek for the Biras Creek to eat at "The Fat Virgin". Chicken Roti is the best on the island and the Grouper sandwich was wonderful. We highly recommend this restaurant. Tonight is the Mineshaft again – this time for their Monday 2# Lobster special. It was not so good – over cooked and dry. Every single other dish we have had there has been great – but they are not a lobster shack for sure!

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### Tuesday, Dec 6<sup>th</sup>

Went to Mountain Trunk again, but was quite murky due to the rough seas. Was still wavy too, so we floated in the lovely bay. We enjoyed lunch at Hog Heaven and met lots of interesting and friendly people up there, enjoying the view one more time.

### Wednesday, Dec 7<sup>th</sup>

Morning was packing to move. Had lunch at Little Dix beach bar then expected the Caneel ferry to Caneel Bay Resort on St. John at 3:00 PM like last year. Due to a series of mix-ups, the ferry left at 10 but no one told us so we were stranded. Caneel couldn't care less, but Little Dix bent over backwards to help us. Little Dix ferried us to Trellis Bay on Beef Island Tortola and the Little Dix taxi took us to West End to catch the public ferry to St John. We were very impressed by the help that the nice people (Lilly, Adam and Duncan) at Little Dix gave us considering we were not even guests of theirs. It was nice to finally arrive at Caneel. We ate at the "Equator" where Sharon had a wonderful Rice-paper wrapped Sea Bass that was delicious and Bob had a steak that was badly over-spiced gristly cut of meat.

### Thursday, Dec 8<sup>th</sup>

First day at Caneel was WONDERFUL. It took us 15 minutes just to walk across the breakfast room saying hello to all our friends from previous years. Snorkeling was great with 15 new fish added to the set (up to 145) with clear water. Some of the coral is stressed compared to last year, which was distressing. Among the dramatic sightings was a large Spotted Eagle Ray the Bob got many good pictures of and a short movie. Dinner was at the Caneel Beach Bar where Sharon had a good Hamburger and Bob a Turkey club that was also good. It was fun eating with Linda and Steven as the rain sprinkled down outside.

### Friday, Dec 9<sup>th</sup>

Snorkeled Scott today and saw many wonderful fish including the illusive Garden Eel. Also spent much of the time floating with Dwayne and Patty. Such fun. The afternoon was rainy, so we read our books and Bob napped. Nice relaxing day indeed!

### Saturday, Dec 10<sup>th</sup>

Snorkeled from Scott to Turtle with Harvey and Maria and hit an impossible current swimming back. It was almost panicky scary fighting the current, then finally just quit and rode the current back to Turtle. Sharon was so tired she was drained. We went into town and enjoyed dinner at the Banana Deck where we bumped into our old friends Kathy and Joe Hurley from Buffalo. We hadn't seen them for years. It was so much fun to see them again.

### Sunday, Dec 11<sup>th</sup>

We snorkeled from Hawksnest along the rocks on the left side when the sky OPENED up in torrential rains. It was a fun snorkeling with rain pounding down on the head and shoulders.

Dinner was at the "Equator" with Harvey and Maria where the fish was very good. It was a delightful evening.



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### Monday, Dec 12<sup>th</sup>

In the morning, we snorkeled from Caneel to the other side of Scott. In the afternoon we snorkeled with Harvey and Maria from the base of Little Caneel all the way past Honeymoon to Salomon beach and back. All together we snorkeled many miles. It was an excellent snorkeling day with 10 fish added to the set. It was the “Manager’s Cocktail” party. This year the amount of food was cut by at least 75%, a truly poultry amount of food. The company was fabulous though with so many old friends there to talk, laugh and sing. The “Songfest” followed with wonderful tunes and lots of fun.

### Tuesday, Dec 13<sup>th</sup>

Went out with Captain Phil of the “Wayward Sailor” to snorkel the Lovango Cay. It is fun to snorkel with him because he gets in with you to seek interesting fish. The water was clear and the sea relatively calm so it was a good time to snorkel there. It was good to see his first mate Tarn as well. Today the fish count matched last year’s record! Now all added fish are setting a new record. Dinner was in Cruz Bay at Sun Dog Cafe in Mongoose Junction. It was wonderful.

### Wednesday, Dec 14<sup>th</sup>

Snorkeled first Hawksnest then Scott and saw our first Lionfish on Scott. It is a beautiful fish that is terrible for American reefs. It is a lovey fish, but terrible for the future of the reef because they are voracious eaters with no predators. They also are very venomous, so inexperienced snorkelers will be getting stung. The fish count is now above that of last year, so Bob can now relax some. Dinner was at La Tappa – the best restaurant on St. John. It was “New York” good, not just “Island good”.

### Thursday, Dec 15<sup>th</sup>

Was rough water so we relaxed and floated with friends in the surf. We went into town for dinner and tried the “Fatty Crab” and found it very bad (read my review above).

### Friday, Dec 16<sup>th</sup>:

Relaxed with Maria and Harvey then snorkeled one last time at Caneel. It was a nice winding down day with packing nearly complete. Dinner was at the Beach Bar, which was a delicious hamburger and fries.

### Saturday Dec 17<sup>th</sup>

Traveling home. You can’t come back if you never leave.

You can check out the pictures at [www.doppstein.com/VG&SJ2011](http://www.doppstein.com/VG&SJ2011)