

Virgin Gorda & Caneel Bay, 27 Nov–19 Dec 2012

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! This is our 4th time staying there and it feels like “our” Caribbean home.

“Little Dix Bay”, Virgin Gorda, BVI, (284 495 5555). We were very impressed by the excellent way this resort is run and managed. All the staff are delightful in their caring and “can-do” attitude. We ate at three of the four restaurants and every one was wonderful with a large variety of offerings and food prepared with excellence and presented beautifully. The people at the waterfront were helpful and cooperative with the many beach drops and snorkel tours they offered. They also made good suggestions as to where the water should be clearest. The room (#74) was quiet, clean and perfect. Even the water-pressure was great in the shower! We very highly recommend Little Dix Bay for the perfect place to recharge and rebalance.

“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. The staff at Caneel are all wonderful and the property almost surreal for its beauty and spaciousness. Breakfasts are fabulous. The most spectacular aspect is the property, the staff and the beaches for snorkeling or relaxing. There are five of them, each with its own special character and reefs associated with them.

About Finding 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. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUFcfXgW_dQ)

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.

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.

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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. 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.

Virgin Gorda Restaurants

“**Chez Bamboo**” has excellent food (best on the island in our experience) 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. We heard Morris Mark this year. Her food is NY delicious, not just island good.

“**Mineshaft**” has the BEST sunset view on the island, and the best ribs too (and Roti and fish...)! On Friday evenings Morris Mark plays his acoustic guitar and sings beautifully. He is an absolute must to hear on this island paradise. The storms two years ago took the outside dining porch off, so they rebuilt it twice as large with a roof. They also have upgraded the entrance and made the room perfect for a large party. 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.

“**Hog Heaven**” Perched high on the ridge overlooking North Sound, (toward Bitter End), the view is as delicious as the 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. This is well worth the drive, which is also delightful.

“**Bath & Turtle**”: Their Fish & Chips and chicken Roti were very good. In fact, the Roti is arguably as good as the one at the Fat Virgin. They are located across the parking lot from Bucks in the center of the small shopping ring of stores.

“**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.

“**Little Dix Bay**” restaurants are excellent one and all.

- The Beach Bar (near the boat dock) serves many delicious dishes. We enjoyed the skewer dishes which could be beef, chicken, fish or vegetable and served on one of several salad offerings. The service people are very personable and helpful in making suggestions. They also have hamburger, pizza and more.

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- The Sugar Mill is the fancy restaurant at Little Dix and lives up to the reputation. It is expensive, but worth it for an elegant meal perfectly prepared. I had a short rib that needed no knife and
- The Pavilion has many specialty meals like “Mexican Buffett” and “Grand Buffett”, both impressive with their quantity and quality.

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 restock (Tuesday evening) to get fresh produce.
- **“Bucks Wholesale”** Good selection of some staples. This year, Buck’s Wholesale was under stocked and not worth the stop. It could be they were between shipments, but even meats were much better at Bucks at the harbor.
- **“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.

St. John Restaurants

“Equator at the Sugar Mill” This restaurant has a wonderful view and delicious salads. We were not hungry, so didn’t have anything else! In past years, the fish was very good. This year there was not one fish Entree that did not contain shellfish, which I am allergic to. There was chicken and beef offered.

“Caneel Bay Beach Bar” Makes good hamburgers, sandwiches and appetizers.... Now delicious sushi! We were so pleasantly surprised to find it absolutely delicious. The service was excellent.

“Banana Deck” Makes great steaks and salads... and a desert called an “Xamgo” that was spectacular. We have been enjoying dinners there over the years and have never been disappointed. The atmosphere is casual, the wait staff friendly and informed and food delicious at reasonable prices.

“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. If on St John, this is a MUST place to find fine food.

“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. They are messy and delicious and the people-watching is great fun while eating.

St. John Food Shopping:

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Dolphin Market is in Cruz Bay and is now quite well stocked. They have impressive fresh vegetables.

Starfish Market is also Cruz Bay, but closer to “Enighed Pond” just outside town. It is larger than Dolphin and well stocked.

There are also small markets that we did not visit.

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.

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.

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 reef to the right is amazingly active with large openings in the coral full of very many species of fish. Someone told us that snorkeling to the left, past the point of rocks and around that bend leads to a wonderful reef with huge brain corals and crowded with fish.

Bitter End Yacht Club offers a three-stop snorkeling trip for just \$25 each! But this year, they were closed for a corporate event taking the entire island.

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. The water was clear and the waves are stopped by the reef itself.

Little Dix Beach Drops:

Long Bay: Snorkel to the south across Nail Bay, staying a good distance from the shore. The coral is huge and healthy with clear water. Closer to shore, the water clouds up a bit from the houses on Nail Bay. The road to this beach was washed out a few years ago, but it is now drivable with a nice parking area.

Valley Trunk Bay: The left side has spectacular HUGE rocks with very good snorkeling. This year we saw a spotted eel, French Angelfish and a nurse shark all among those rocks (as well as the usual bunch).

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Maho Bay: This reef was large and some of it healthy but surprisingly devoid of fish! Perhaps it was the time of day, but nowhere have we seen such desolation among the coral.

Great Dog: This reef was badly damaged. It looked sandblasted! There were a fair number of fish, but certainly not a huge variety.

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 and corals too. The bay itself is also home to many larger sea friends like nurse shark, spotted eagle ray, conch and much more.

Little Caneel Bay toward Honeymoon is more a rich source of wonders. We have found octopus and Nassau grouper there among many others. Is a nice snorkel all the way to Honeymoon beach. A lovely Hawksbill turtle was also seen there.

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 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 stay well away from the rocks.

Daily Log:

Tuesday, Nov 27th

Arrived after a smooth flight. Met several interesting and nice people on the journey, which is always fun. Settled into Crosswinds at 8:30 PM tired and happy to be “home” to again. It is amazing how fast time passed since we were last here.

Dinner: Sharon made a delicious chili from ground beef she picked up at Bucks JUST before they closed at 8 PM.

Wednesday, Nov 28th

First snorkeling day was wonderful. We met our friends from previous years on the beach and it was like a reunion. We snorkeled first in the morning and again in the afternoon, photographing and identifying 35 fish on this first day. The first fish was a Surgeonfish and the last was an Inshore Lizardfish. A large barracuda joined us for a while. They are curious fish that look dangerous, but I have never heard a bad story about one. Mid day found us shopping for odds and ends around Spanish town. It was a wonderful day.

Dinner: Potato Latkes and tuna salad by Sharon

Thursday, Nov 29th

Snorkeled Mountain trunk then spring bay with the water very clear and the expected many fish observed. Unfortunately we saw a Lionfish and got a great photograph of it. It is such a beautiful fish, but do damaging to the reef. We reported it to “Dive BVI” where they collect sightings, the

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organize hints to kill them. At Nail bay last week they killed 65 of them! The reef looked good and heavily populated for now.

We enjoyed lunch at Hog Heaven where the ribs were just wonderful.

We then snorkeled Spring bay again, this tie to the right. So many fish!

Dinner was leftovers

Friday, Nov 30th

It was a perfect birthday for Bob. The weather was ideal with water clearer than we have ever seen it. Snorkeling from Spring Bay to the baths and back was delightful with many fish to see. Sharon made a yummy lunch and after “rest hour” we did another snorkel that also was excellent. For dinner we went to the Mineshaft where Sharon had chicken Roti and I had Mango chicken. Both were just excellent. Morris Mark is a fabulous singer and guitarist we have been listening to for 6 years and he played for 2.5 hours straight. We are his groupies! We danced to several of his songs... It was a perfect birthday.

I am up to 65 fish & wildlife photographed and ID'ed in three days, and that is without the coral or sponges.

Saturday, Dec 1st

Snorkeled Mountain Trunk to the right. It was very swift current, so was tiring and the reef seemed less full than previous years. I hope it isn't the Lionfish! In the afternoon we again did a loop around Spring Bay, but mostly just floated and talked with friends.

When in town, we got a “Whole Seasoned Chicken” from Buck's market. We got one last year, and asked what the spices were and the woman said – “Well, good spices, maan”! We added a little salt and pepper and roasted on the grill for an hour on low heat and it was spectacular. YUM.

Sunday, Dec 2nd

Snorkeled Savanna bay, which was amazing. We saw many new fish and corals. The coral there was very porous with openings that made for dramatic photographs. We snorkeled Spring Bay in the afternoon.

Dinner was leftover chicken and Sharon's soup.

Monday, Dec 3rd

Last night is STORMED like crazy! It was noisy and wet and wonderful. Everything smelled so good. Wonderful night's sleep.

Sharon started the day by making a pot of barley soup with all sorts of vegetables in it. It was just delicious and filled the house with aroma. We didn't even try to snorkel this morning though because we knew the water would be milky, so instead talked with our many friends on the beach and floated in the wonderful gyrating sea. We did snorkel the PM, but it was still too murky so floated some more.

Dinner was omelets full of veggies and salami. Yummy.

Tuesday, Dec 4th

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Rained again last night and the waves were quite high. We tried to snorkel Spring Bay, but the water was murky, went back to the beach area and floated and talked with friends there for hours. In the afternoon, we did get in a snorkel, trying to go around the right point, but the waves were quite large, so we spent a long time in the shallows to the right (when facing the bay) where the water was clear and we saw several new fish. It was delightful and slow going – relaxing snorkeling.

In the evening, we celebrated my birthday “officially” at Chez Bamboo where Morris Mark was playing. Sharon had the whole yellow tailed snapper and I the filet. We shared and both were absolutely delicious. We took Betty (the caretaker of Crosswinds) as a “thank you”. It was a very good day indeed.

Wednesday, Dec 5th

Worked in the morning and then went up to the Fat Virgin for lunch (at Biras Creek). It is also way s a pleasant trip up there with picturesque roads and a nice ferry ride. Then in the afternoon, Bob had a phone conference meeting with a client in the afternoon. Snorkeling had to wait. Bob finds it fun to work down here. It is like life’s smorgasbord: We relax, snorkel, read, eat.. and work all at the same location.

Snorkeling near sunset was wonderful with several new fish photographed.. but the best sunset pictures yet, as they were taken from the water with delightful reflections.

Dinner tonight was Sharon’s amazing steaks (from Buck’s) seasoned with garlic, wine and S&P. Also baked potatoes and salad. Was a delicious meal indeed.

Thursday, Dec 6th

Today is our last day at Crosswinds. What a delightful place this is! We only snorkeled once at Spring bay (to the left) and again saw three new fish for the year – two new to our record keeping. The rest of the day was packing and last minute shopping and finishing some work I had here. Tomorrow we shift gears by moving to Little Dix for a week (then on to Caneel). It was nice to talk with our beach friends who we will not see again until next year when the Spring Bay reunion occurs again. Such nice people are here.... We will miss them all until we see them again.

Dinner is Sharon made Salmon paddies with salad.

Friday, Dec 7th

Rooster was crowing from 2 AM onward! How I would love to roast that annoying guy. This morning a Puerto Rican Emerald hummingbird was flitting around the bougainvillea outside our window. Spectacular.

Moved to Little Dix Bay today. This place is spectacular. We have been going to Caneel for many years and there are many things we like better here. The room is much nicer, the people here are all so helpful and friendly, the sand is perfect, they have many activities for the guests, the food is excellent and more and more. We snorkeled Great Dog Reef and the reef was in seriously bad condition. Water was good, and did see two new sea-life forms including a Giant Anemone. We enjoyed a delightful lunch here and “tea” in the afternoon leaving us too full to have dinner so just had some snacks and wine. It was a perfect day.

Saturday, Dec 8th

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Snorkeled Valley Trunk Bay with the wonderful Little Dix snorkel drop and found it delightful with several new fish. We also met some nice people from New York that we bumped into several more time during her day. In the afternoon we snorkeled Little Dix Bay and found it surprising rich in sea life including a turtle and two stingrays as well as many fish that had not been seen yet this year like the Butter Hamlet and the Bandtail Puffer. Lunch was at the beach bar which was very good and dinner at the Old Yard Village. Afterwards we wandered “downtown” where the local festival was going on. It was VERY loud and crowded with nothing to buy. So we went to the docks and wandered the quiet piers looking at the yachts and the stars. It was very nice, with the music actually very good now that we were far enough from it that it didn’t hurt due to the volume.

Sunday, Dec 9th

Snorkeled Long Bay this morning, which was wonderful with a Scrawled Filefish showing off his colors for us to photograph. The reef is so beautiful with us swimming well into Nail Bay and back. So many fish and very healthy corals.

The afternoon was at Little Dix bay and to our surprise, it was also amazing. We saw a very large Green turtle with three Remora stuck to it’s underside. It also had a rather bad scar on its shell from a propeller. We also saw two sting rays and several other interesting fish. We tried the glass-bottomed kayak, but it’s lateral field of view is so small that we saw essentially nothing. We are definitely people who like to be in the water rather than on the water.

Dinner was at the “Sugar Mill” restaurant here at Little Dix and it was just outstanding. This kitchen is very well run and the chefs are superb.

Monday, Dec 10th

Snorkeled Mountain trunk and then Maho bay today. The first was amazing in every way and the second had fabulous corals, but not very many fish. Hard to understand why. It still was such a good snorkeling day with the water clear and the bays leeward of the wind, so calm. Saw the first Indigo Hamlet since 2007. Dinner was at the buffet which was delicious. We are so stuffed. Met some interesting people tonight too. Nancy and David from Chicago joined us for dinner with endless conversation.

Tuesday, Dec 11th

We had a snorkel drop at Valley Trunk Bay this morning where the snorkeling was spectacular. We saw a spotted moray eel, a family of squid, a French angelfish, a nurse shark and much more. We also met more nice people.

This was our last day at Little Dix Bay. This place is wonderful. The staff are all so nice and concerned about making our life happy. The restaurants are just wonderful with a nice variety of foods and all prepared with excellence. We VERY highly recommend this relaxing, adventurous and delightful escape from the busy world.

Wednesday, Dec 12th

Took the Caneel ferry to Caneel, which was very convenient. The trip was a bit bumpy due to high seas, but not terrible. Our room is EXCELLENT – it is room #50 which sits up on the hill just past Caneel bay. Our view is magical. Our first snorkel was only 30 minutes long in Caneel Bay and we saw so many wonderful fish right off the bat including Sea Stars (AKA “Starfish”), Red Hind and a blue-striped Grunt among many others. Dinner was at the Sugar Mill and just

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had salads because we were not hungry after lots to eat at the afternoon tea. Now we are on the porch to our room listening to the gentle rhythm of the waves on the beach and the chirping of frogs and crickets. The stars are also so bright – not having city lights to dull their luster.

Thursday, Dec 13th

Snorkeled from Caneel to Scott during periodic sun and showers. It was wonderful. Photographed 14 new sea-life species including a Trunkfish, Green sea turtle, brown garden eels and a jaw fish among others. We even spent time laying on the beach reading. We then went to town to shop and wander, ending at the Banana Deck restaurant where we enjoyed a delicious steak dinner with a sinfully delicious desert called a Xango. Upon returning, we met a nice couple from Boston named Bob and Rolinda with whom we talked for some time.

Friday, Dec 14th

Snorkeled little Caneel all the way to Honeymoon beach and back. Saw our first octopus! Then in the afternoon we snorkeled Scott to the left and saw our second octopus! Scott to the right also had many wonderful sights including two turtles and a new grouper too.

Dinner was at the beach bar restaurant here where we had sushi. We were with Harvey and Marie and her brother Roman.

Saturday, Dec 15th

Snorkeled first Hawks nest and saw many wonderful fish. A shark had been seen there, but we did not find it. We saw four turtles all in one bay! In the afternoon we snorkeled Scott to Caneel and back. We saw a spotted drum, a porcupine fish and Sharon saw a shark go WHIZZING by. Dinner was at La Tappa, which was just excellent. We were with Harvey and Maria and her brother Roman. What a fun evening it was.

Sunday, Dec 16th

Snorkeled Caneel to Scott, then later the right-side of Scott. Added 14 items to the “sea life” count. Between the snorkeling, we relaxed on Scott with a picnic lunch and read (and napped) in the mid-day sunshine. Was a relaxing and delightful day.

Dinner was at “**Uncle Joe’s Barbeque**” was messy and delicious. Watching the people from the restaurant’s outdoors benches is always fun. We then wandered Cruz Bay where we found some nice summer clothing for Sharon at “**Love City Beach Shop**”.

Monday, Dec 17th

Snorkeled Caneel to Scott and found a large octopus devouring a Banded Clinging Crab. Also got a picture of a snapping shrimp, which any snorkeler hears, but very seldom sees. The afternoon was just relaxing with reading and resting. I guess we are finally totally relaxed!

Dinner was first at the “Managers’ Cocktail Party” which featured some very nice food and we talked and talked with friends well after it was over. Dinner was just salads at the beach bar restaurant here. We heard that a Spotted Eagle Ray was seen near Scott beach today. We will try to see it tomorrow.

Tuesday, Dec 18th

Repeated yesterday’s snorkeling and saw two octopi and several other interesting fish. Went looking for the spotted Eagle Ray that was sighted on Scott bay yesterday but did not find it.

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Dinner was at the Banana Deck with Harvey and Maria which was delightful.

Wednesday, Dec 19th

Homeward bound. This was a fabulous trip to these beautiful, blue-green waters. You can't come back if you don't leave...

You can check out the pictures at <http://www.doppstein.com/VG&SJ2012/>