

Virgin Gorda & Caneel Bay, 26 Nov–18 Dec 2013

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. Chip and Keith are wonderfully nice and helpful with stocking 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 (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 stores and restaurants. With such a nice kitchen, we cook in most nights. This is our 7th 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 degraded seriously from last year. The people at the waterfront were friendly and helpful. The room (#60) was quiet, clean and perfect – right on the beach. Even the water-pressure was great in the shower! This resort has great ambiance and even with the problems in the kitchen is a delight to be here and we highly recommend it.

“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. There are five beaches, each with its own special character and reefs associated with them. If one is wavy – the others will be calm. We were in room 50 again this year – which we like best of all. We think it is better than cottage 7!

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.

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 in sponges, making them green or purple when the base color is brown, for example. Identification corrections are welcome! The size of

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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.

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. Her food 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. This is well worth the drive, which is also delightful. 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.

"Bath & Turtle": Their Fish & Chips (Fresh Grouper) and chicken Roti are very good as is their pizza and burgers. They are located across the parking lot from Bucks in the center of the small shopping ring of stores.

The "Mineshaft", we are sad to say has fallen considerably in the past two years. They were out of all but one bottle of red and white wine. They were out of all bread and the food was not

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up to their old standard. They have changed the menu to include few offerings, and even they were done without the flair of the old Mineshaft.

“**Little Dix Bay**” This year we were disappointed with all of their restaurants. We will still return next year with high hopes for an improvement.

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.
- “**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.

St. John Restaurants

“**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 enjoy fine food.

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

“**Banana Deck**” Makes great hamburgers, fish burgers, steaks and salads... and a desert called an “Xango” 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.

“**Zozo’s at the Sugar Mill**” serves delicious main courses with personable wait staff and a spectacular view. Prices are quite high and servings large, so we recommend sharing main courses. Salads and bread were mediocre. Wine selection is excellent but pricy.

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.

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

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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. 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.

Bitter End Yacht Club offers a three-stop snorkeling trip for just \$25 each! But this year, we missed that activity.

Mosquito Island has several great reefs around it, most notably on the southern tip of the island and in the bay on the NW side.

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. This year it was a breeding ground for millions of tiny fish (not silversides, but fry).

Little Dix Beach Drops: Little Dix offers beach drops which are always fun. But this year, it was rainy most of the five days we were there, so took no beach drops.

St. John:

Caneel: All the beaches are amazing. 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 another 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 and back.

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 many fish on it. The center of the bay out toward the buoys, one can find Garden Eels and occasionally Spotted Eagle rays. This year there was a conch breeding ground with hundreds of 1 to 2 inch conch prancing around in the 20 feet of water. Out toward Turtle Bay Point is gets very dangerous with strong currents that can drive you into the rocks so stay well clear of the shore. If the current is high swing out as far as you can, then enjoy the ride to turtle bay but stay well away from the rocks as you enjoy the carnival ride.

Hawks Nest Bay was hosting a Green Sea Turtle convention! We saw at least 15 of them in one day. Several Remora were pestering them as well. The rocks to the left was a breeding ground with thousands of fry of every variety and a nice octopus's garden. The rocks to the right hosts very many fish including a huge scrawled filefish.

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Daily Log:

Summary:

This year, we decided to summarize the three phases of the trip rather than bore you with daily summaries.

Crosswinds at Spring Bay” Nov 26th 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. Rain was constant all ten days, but the water was still clear and the fish identification was excellent. 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 Chicken Roti’s, which are just delicious.

Little Dix Bay Dec 6th to 10th:

Little Dix is a resort run very well with excellent staff and clean, comfortable rooms. The reef is limited (but full of breeding fish this year) but they offer daily beach drops to many of the inaccessible beaches on the island. It is a wonderful place to stay. We met our friends Mike and Janna there for several days of snorkeling and visiting. As always, we met many new friends including a group from Wisconsin (Bob’s home state)!

Last year we met Joan Massel Soncini who wrote the book “Virgin Gorda: An Intimate Portrait”. This year we got together several times including a fabulous tour she organized of Necker Island with a wonderful young man named Gumption seaitclear@gmail.com. Is that a great name or what? He has a glass-bottom boat and takes you out snorkeling all around the North Sound. We had two wonderful snorkeling dips on Mosquito Island. He is personal friends with Sir Richard Branson and arraigned for us to tour his Island (Necker). Sir Richard is building a wildlife sanctuary for endangered animals there and it is a wonder to see. We saw Black and White Lemurs, Galapagos tortoises and Ibis’s among so much wildlife. On the way back, we passed the “Blue Guitar” (Eric Clapton’s boat) anchored in the North Sound and he was on the fantail and returned our waves! We then had a nice visit with Joan and Mario at their lovely tree-house home on Mahoe Bay. It was a perfect day capping a wonderful, perfect time on the magical island of Virgin Gorda!

We hopped the Wednesday ferry to Caneel Bay on St John, USVI...

Caneel Bay; Dec 11th to 18th:

Caneel Bay is “summer camp” for adults. The beaches are wonderful with excellent snorkeling – including many octopus, eel, turtles and rays. If it is wavy on one beach, walk across the peninsula to another and find calm waters! We have been coming so often that we have a circle

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of friends there that, like on Virgin Gorda, is a homecoming each year. This year Zozo's restaurant (formerly at Gallows Point) is now at the Sugar Mill, which offers very nice (but expensive) dining. The Beach Bar at Caneel now has excellent shush, pizza, fish n chips and more. We saw so many old friends and made new ones too... it is another annual family.

The wildlife photographed included turtles, octopus, eel, squid, puffer fish (several types), groupers, and many corals & sponges among so many fish. We did see two Lionfish there, but also more grouper and eel. One has to wonder if the influx of Lionfish is being balanced by more predator fish, to counter the newcomers. The snorkeling at Caneel cannot be beat anywhere.

We look forward to coming back the day we leave. We hope that our many Caribbean friends have a good year until we see them again. We also hope the reefs continue to grow healthfully and their colorful menagerie continues to flourish.

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Detailed Daily Log

Tuesday, Nov 26th

Flight down was pleasant – leaving Atlanta in the pouring rain in the low 40's – and arriving to 86 and sunshine! Met two Little Dix employees coming over on the NEW Speedy's ferry: Judy in reservations and D'Ann with her adorable 18 month daughter. Arrived and shopped and came "home" to a warm greeting from Chip.

Dinner was Sharon's chilly over rye-crisps because the noodles we bought at Bucks was full of bugs!

Wednesday, Nov 27th

Stormed last night and the waves this morning at Spring Bay were HUGE. So we simply floated out in the surf (behind the breakers). I forgot to take the camera with me (darn it) because the sights were spectacular. The wave crashed on the boulders with huge rooster-tails before rolling up onto the beach. At one point the rain came down so hard we could hardly see the beach. Sharon was so cute under her large sun-hat that we tread water with, was like a miniature tent with water cascading over the wide brim. As the storm rolled out to sea, we got to see a waterspout just as it reached Tortola with a central black spout and many smaller black-looking water fountains around it. Spectacular. Met some nice people from Colorado.

In the afternoon we went snorkeling in the milky water to get that "first fish" of the trip. Near the bottom and in the cove, it was not clear, but some fish were found with the first fish a spotted goatfish.

Dinner was potato latke and chili. Happy Chanukah!!!

Thursday, Nov 28th

The weather calmed down and the snorkeling was great. We swam to the Baths and back from Spring bay and then in the afternoon swam north around the rocks and back. Today, 39 fish were photographed and ID'ed for a total of 47 in 2 days. It gets harder now that the common ones now spotted. Thanksgiving dinner was at Chez Bamboo where Rose serves a delicious traditional turkey dinner with all the trimmings. Many of our beach friends are arriving now with many hugs and hellos. It was a wonderful day indeed.

Friday, Nov 20th

It POURED all night, but this morning it is clear and beautiful out. But the water was crystal clear and bay rather calm. We saw two octopi, a turtle, three Jawfish and more. It was so much fun to talk with our friends on the beach too. It was a great day on Spring Bay.

Dinner was home-grilled steaks we picked up at Bucks with baked potatoes. Yum.

Saturday, Nov 30th

A perfect birthday! The day started with Sharon giving me a Tee Shirt saying "There's Bob...And then there's **BOB**". We snorkeled Mountain Trunk bay and saw a huge porcupine fish, a very large Spotted Drum and so many more. Identified 20 new fish today bringing the total to 92 in three days of snorkeling!

Lunch was at Hog Heaven", where the ribs are

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Also snorkeled Spring Bay to visit the octopus site from yesterday, and the snail was still there – intact, but acting very dopey. It is in front of the “Octopuses Garden”, so I suspect he injected the venom and is waiting for it to die so he can have his meal tonight. Tomorrow I will check it again.

It never stopped raining on and off all day, but between were calm, blue skies.

Sharon is preparing a delicious dinner of salmon paddies and pasta.

Sunday, Dec 1st

The seas were calmer, but strangely the water was cloudier than usual. Only saw 10 new fish to ID today, but the total is at 102 for the trip, so very good. More and more friends are arriving here with more hugs and hellos. It is our island family. Lunch was leftover chili (yum). Dinner is homemade vegetarian mushroom-barley soup with salad. (yum again).

Monday, Dec 2nd

Swam several miles today north from Spring Bay to Little trunk Bay and back. Strangely it was into the current in both directions! It was like Neptune was angry with us! Ugh. But we saw many fish and got some good photos... but all were lost due to an error in managing the pictures. Oh, well.

Lunch was at the Fat Virgin where we enjoyed Chicken Roti's that were delicious. This is on the Biras Creek property in the north of the island. It is a nice drive to Gun Creek, then the free ferry to the dock right at the Fat Virgin.

The afternoon included floating in the surf while talking with friends. We invited six up to the room (Tracy & Gary, Marilyn & Don and Donna & Dan) for snacks, drinks and to see some of our art works, especially the Cheshire cat and the fireflies.

Dinner was leftover home made soup and salmon patties.

Tuesday, Dec 3rd

Snorkeled Savannah bay this morning and it was wonderful. We saw three huge porcupine fish (>36") that were not shy like they usually are. They were willing to pose – so got great pictures. The reef looked good and a total of 14 new fish, coral and algae being photographed and identified. We are up to 116! Looking good to beat our total of 244 of last year. The weather was just absolutely perfect.

Lunch was leftovers (yum) and then we floated and talked with Tracy and Gary as we floated in the increasingly wavy water as clouds came in heavy (but no rain yet). We could see Tortola was getting hit hard with rain.

Dinner was home with baked potato and steaks. :D

Wednesday, Dec 4th

Snorkeled Spring Bay saw millions of Silversides. Dinner at the Mineshaft with Joan and Mario. [more](#)

Thursday, Dec 5th

Spectacular snorkel at Spring Bay with Scrawled Filefish, eel and more. Lunch at Hog Heaven where we met Jacky & Ed. [more](#)

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Dinner at Chez Bamboo with Don and Marilyn, and Tracy & Gary. Meals are always excellent there. [more](#)

Friday, Dec 6th

Peter and Gigi came to visit in the morning. It was a delightful visit with an exchange of contact information. [more](#)

Moved to Little Dix Bay and met up with Mike and Janna! These are dear Atlanta friends we have known for 17 years. They are fun to be with.

Ate at the “Pavilion” where the food was not very inspired and over-cooked. I returned my shoe-leather hard tuna and had a burger that was okay.

Saturday, Dec 7th

Two snorkels at Little Dix Bay, both very interesting with sightings and pictures of a Green sea turtle, sting ray and many more. Dinner was at the “Pavilion” where the food again was expensive and mediocre.

We met a group from Wisconsin that Mike and Janna had flown in with. It is a nice group of five couples, including [Russ Cole](#), the [x- CFO \(CHECK\)](#) of Spectrum Brands (AKA Rayovac). I used to work for them in Madison WI!

Sunday, Dec 8th

Re-rented a car to take Mike and Janna on an island tour. We started by driving to the Baths, where we visited the shops there (but did not waste the time to go in). Then we snorkeled Spring Bay, which was good as usual, but the rain kept the sky dark, so pictures were poor. Lunch was at Hog Heaven so they could see the North Sound area. Everyone enjoyed the ribs – they are the best in the world. Next, we drove back down the East side of the island, stopping at the overlooks.

We returned to LDB where we met up with Dwayne and Patty who just arrived today. These are friends we have run into three separate times by accident, so now we write to intentionally meet up in beautiful places. It was good to see them again.

Monday, Dec 9th

Finally a day without rain! We snorkeled LDB several times, seeing the usual collection with the Trunkfish being the highlight. The green sea turtle made several appearances today as well. Had long conversations with several of our beach friends including the Wisconsin friends. They are friends from college (UW-Madison) and have been friends ever since. Most of the day was relaxed talking with friends.

Dinner started at the Manager’s “cocktail Party”, which was fun talking with even more old friends. Some were from last year and many from this year. Then we taxied to the Bath & the Turtle in Spanish town.

Tuesday, Dec 10th

Today was a special day. Our friend Joan Soncini arraigned for us to get a guided tour of Necker Island! The guide was a delightful young man named Gumption. Is that a great name or what? He is a personal friend of Sir Richard Branson and knows the island very well. First we snorkeled Mosquito Island at two spots with wonderful results. Then we toured the island

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where we saw Sir Richard's attempts to help endangered species. He is raising Black & White Lemurs, Ring tailed Lemurs and Galapagos tortoises among other animals. All are very happy and multiplying like rabbits! While there, Larry Page walked by and said "Hi", Sir Richard Branson's personal assistant came by and was very friendly. The admission was a \$50 donation to the animal rescue charity. On the trip back by boat, we passed the "Blue Guitar" (Eric Clapton's boat) and we waved to the man on the back deck. He waved back and when I blew it up in Photoshop, I saw that it was Eric himself!

Dinner was at Chez Bamboo where we heard Morris Mark once again. He is just excellent the food, as always there, was delicious and perfectly prepared. What a perfect day!

Wednesday, Dec 11th

Arrived at Caneel with sunshine and smiles. Captain Thomas piloted through rough seas keeping us high and dry. Caneel greeted us with lemon scented towels and hugs. We immediately ran into some of our Caneel "family" Renee and felt at home again. We snorkeled Caneel bay and saw some wonderful fish and a beautiful squid family. We met Roman's girlfriend Debbie. She is very nice. Dinner was at the beach bar, eating up on the roof. It was delicious sushi that was also reasonably priced. It was a delightful day indeed.

Thursday, Dec 12th

Started snorkeling at Caneel and found the reef in better shape than last year. The brain coral, sponges and sea fans are growing profusely. We are seeing many more of the grouper family too.

Dinner was at Zozo's with Debbie & Roman where the salad was vial and Bob had Osso Bucco which was good (but vegetable inedible) and Sharon had lobster which was good but grossly over-priced.

Friday, Dec 13th

Snorkeled Caneel and Scott today and found a GREAT octopus's garden, which was "furnished" exclusively with conch shells! We were guided to it by our friends Greg and Debbie. Our friends Harvey and Maria came in today. It was so good to see them again!

Dinner was at the beach bar with Maria & Harvey and Debbie & Roman where we had lots of appetizers and then sushi. Was delicious.

Saturday, Dec 14th

Lots of snorkeling on Caneel, Scott and Hawks nest. We saw the Spotted Eagle Ray! I even got a movie of it swimming around in circles around us.

Dinner was at Zozo's with Maria & Harvey and Debbie & Roman where Sharon told them how to make a salad (which was delicious) and we shared one steak. It was very good.

Sunday, Dec 15th

Snorkeled Caneel reef (right side) and saw a huge spotted moray eel and more. Then we snorkeled Little Caneel and saw a lionfish among many others. I am up to 209 fish and sea life with three days left. It rained today, but then the sun comes out. It is perfect island weather.

Dinner was at the Banana Deck and was wonderful.

Monday, Dec 16th

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Text

Tuesday, Dec 17th

Saw 3 Octopus in one snorkel from Scott to Caneel and back.

Dinner with six friends at the Beach Bar

Wednesday, Dec 18th

Went home with sunshine.

You can check out the pictures at <http://www.doppstein.com/VG&SJ2013/>