

# Virgin Gorda & St. John, Nov–Dec 2015

## Places we stayed this trip:

**Virgin Gorda, BVI:** This sleepy island is a paradise with very friendly people. They do not have locks on the doors and when you rent a car, they tell you “leave the keys in the ignition, as someone might need to move it”! There are some nice restaurants, decent food shopping and Morris Mark – the finest Caribbean singer we have ever heard in the islands (we are his “groupies”). The island has many excellent reefs that come right to the shore, so snorkeling is wonderful. The fish and coral populations are healthy and varied.

**“Crosswinds” Virgin Gorda, BVI.** It is always a delight to come to Crosswinds and see so many annual “family” of friends. Spring bay was excellent snorkeling again with us seeing squid, baby octopus and stingray all on the first day – as well as the usual collection of fish. Bob’s former lab assistant Crawford and his wife Nicole joined us this year for the first 10 days. They were delightful guests helping in every way, and we sure enjoyed their company.

**“Little Dix Bay”,** Virgin Gorda, BVI, (284 495 5555). Is just the best resort we have ever enjoyed. The staff simply do not know the word “no”. Everyone is so helpful. Morris Mark gave us a 3 hour concert at the main dining room, playing so many wonderful songs. He is a fabulous musician.

**St. John, USVI:** This island has interesting little shops in Cruz bay and some larger food stores too. The Cruz bay boardwalk is fun to wander as are other little stores. There is truly delicious food in Cruz bay (see below). Many of the beaches are excellent snorkel sites including the five Caneel beaches and the many public beaches.

**“Caneel Bay, St John”,** Caneel is not the “old” Caneel it once was. We will not be returning to Caneel bay unless there is a change of management. The increasing cost and decreasing service has become more than we are willing to tolerate.

## About Finding and Identifying Fish:

There are two octopi in Virgin Gorda: The **Common Octopus** feeds in the daylight and the **Caribbean Reef Octopus** feeds at night. One way to 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 a Common Octopus on a daytime 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 fire corals, which are everywhere.

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**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!

## **About the Photography:**

We used two cameras this year. One was a “**GoPro 4 Black**”. It is a marvelous camera. I set it to “Time Laps” mode, taking a picture every 0.5 seconds. It actually shot a little less than 1 per second. The “bursts” were then shoved through “Preview” to find the individual that is best for further management. This gives you a 12 MP image that is easily cropped with clarity. An image captured from a video is only a few hundred KB and can not be cropped and is very low quality. Some videos were taken, but for the movement, not the frames.

1. The subject must be as close as you can manage.
2. Be sure to get an extender stick. The GoPro “3-Way” is a wonderful, durable extender.
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.
  - d. Then use “Preview”, sliding god pictures to another folder. In my experience, only 1 in 10 are usable, but it doesn’t take long to run through them.
6. Movies are very clear but must be “converted” through the GoPro Studio software to eliminate the little gaps in movements. I have no idea why this happens. But once it is “converted”, the flow is smooth. “Export” the resulting video (is now an .MOV) and works well in other video management programs like iMovie. I found the color and other image management capabilities of the “Studio” much inferior to iMovie.
7. The GoPro is not useful inside buildings, as the fish-eye distortion is considerable.
8. **Overall:** This is a superb little camera.

The other camera was a RICOH WG4 underwater camera. It has none of the fisheye distortion of the GoPro, so is also fine for above-water shots. The images are clear and easily cropped. The shape format is different then the GoPro, and shots taken by it carry the suffix “(S)” because Sharon took those images.

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) images needed “Shadows/Highlights” adjustments if in dark shadow of a cave or coral.

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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. I should add that the new “Photo” in Apples have taken that ability away, so I only use iPhoto. 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.

A universal rule of snorkeling is “**Only take photographs and memories from the sea**”.

## Virgin Gorda Restaurants

“**Chez Bamboo**” Always a treat – especially with Morris Mark singing.

“**Hog Heaven**” the ribs are like none you have ever tasted. Blondie's sauce is fabulous – sure wish he sold it in a bottle! The view overlooking North Sound is breathtaking. DO NOT MISS HOG HEAVEN!

“**Soggy Dollar**” White bay, Yost Van Dyke. It is essentially only reachable by boat, and with no dock, you have to swim or dingy in. Thus the name: “Soggy Dollar”. Wonderful Chicken Roti with salad. The setting is fun with a real beach-bar feeling.

“**CocoMaya**” What an improvement from last year! Now the restaurant is well organized, the food delicious and served with a smile. We highly recommend it now (unlike last year).

**Mimi's Food Stand across from Scotia bank.** The Chicken Roti was just delicious and enormous – you might want to share one! We wish there was a way to enter it in TripAdvisor. This is one wonderful little food tent set up only on Fridays a little south of across from Spanish Town Marina, next to the vegetable tent that is usually there.

The bananas at the vegetable stand are ripened on the tree were so sweet and delicious. The pineapples (also ripened on the plant) are so sweet smelling!

“**Sugar Cane**” Restaurant at Nail Bay: We would give it a C+. The food was just okay.

“**The Fat Virgin**” was not visited this year due to the closing of Biras Creek and their ferry. We hope the transportation problem gets resolved, as they made the best Chicken Roti there is.

“**Bath & Turtle**”: Always a dependable and convenient restaurant.

“**The Mad Dog**” (above the Baths): A nice hangout with sandwiches and beer and drinks.

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## “Little Dix Bay”

- The **Monday night Buffett** at the Pavilion was more expensive than last year but every bit as delicious. The prime-rib and the sea-foods were both well stocked and delicious. We were too full to savor the deserts.
- The **Sugar Mill Restaurant** was disappointing in quality and very expensive. We returned an inedible grouper dish and the steak was half fat & gristle.
- **Breakfast Buffett** at the Pavilion was very good with custom cooked eggs and a willingness to make anything you ask for. The smoothies station was moved to the bar and still delicious.
- **The Beach Grill** had very good fish taco and lobster roll.

## St John Restaurants

“**Caneel Beach Bar**”: Very mediocre. The salad came totally undressed and skimpy (I mean a small bowl of lettuce with nothing at all on it or mixed in and was called a “Caesar” salad!), the fish was over-cooked and the steak was very thin and over-cooked (asked for rare and got medium well). A Pizza was okay.

“**La Tappa**” in **Cruz Bay** was excellent as always. The chef is outstanding. <http://www.latapastjohn.com>

“**De'Coal Pot**” in Cruz Bay offers island food that is just wonderful. This is an experience not to be missed. Was the best meal we had on St. John. <http://decoalpot.com>

“**Zozo's**” at the **Sugar mill (Caneel)** was surprisingly good. The steak was thick and salad well prepared and delicious.

## Virgin Gorda Food Shopping (these are the only ones we used this year):

- “**Bucks**” has many essentials in a well-stocked general food store right at the boat harbor. 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 items must be purchased in sets of three or by the case. Very good prices on wine, beer, booze and water. The wines are quite good and reasonably priced.

**We did not food shop on St John this year.**

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## Beaches and Snorkel Sites we visited this year:

### Virgin Gorda, BVI:

**Spring Bay:** Spring Bay is absolutely wonderful for snorkeling. There are several large boulders in the bay that are surrounded by shelves. From there, snorkeling south to the Baths and onto Devil's Bay and back will have many species to see including octopus, file fish, Ocean Triggerfish, rays and so much more. Snorkeling north to Trunk bay is also rich with fish including nurse shark, rays and eels.

**Savannah Bay** is wonderful snorkeling, but can be very dangerous when the seas build up. The waves can lift you onto the coral. On a calm day, it is wonderful with porcupine fish and many, many others there. This reef looked a bit stressed this year.

**We used Dave of "Double D" (Phone 284-499-2479)** to reach the next two destinations. Dave is very knowledgeable about the entire region and where the seas are best on the day you go out. We highly recommend him. Angel is his associate who gets in the water with you to guide you. You can request him for a guided snorkel experience. He is excellent.

**Diamond reef:** Off of Scrub island is always wonderful snorkeling. This year we saw three nurse sharks and a huge spotted Eagle ray as well as a multitude of more common fish. Several scrawled filefish were also there this year. In past years, we usually see several turtles (Green or Hawksbill). The reef is very healthy and full of life.

**Monkey Point,** Guana Island. This little cove holds so much sea life including (this year) white-spotted filefish, giant hermit crabs, spotted moray eel and a huge tarpon. Usually there are also clouds of silversides, but we did not see them this year.

**Cooper Island:** We snorkeled from Cistern Rock to the resort. It is always spectacular with sightings of barracuda, turtles, spotted Eagle ray, octopus and moray eel. This reef is also very healthy.

**Little Dix Bay reef:** The bay was full of interesting fish. It is basically a breeding ground, so there are thousands of small fish of all varieties. The first snorkel we saw four types of Hamlets (Black, Butter, yellowtail and Barred), thousands of baby School Masters, French grunts, Squirrelfish, Tang, Goatfish, Caribbean Reef Octopus, and a Green Sea turtle.

**Great Dog:** Close to shore was nothing but rocks, but 20 yards deeper was a very active reef. We saw a Yellowmouth Grouper and several other interesting fish.

**Long Bay:** Many fish, and reef is impressive, but not nearly as healthy as five years ago when we snorkeled it last. It was actually worrisome due to the many dead coral heads. Perhaps it got battered by a hurricane? We saw a lovely Queen Angelfish there.

**Mountain Point (Seaward form Long Bay):** Is dramatic and beautiful with many fish. Not the highest fish count, but so beautiful, it is worth the swim for sure. It must be rather calm to do it though, as the sea can be brutal there is rough.

**Mountain Trunk** beach just South of Nail Bay is lovely but we saw nothing extraordinary. The coral seemed to be stressed compared to other years. Since it and Long Bay are next to each other, perhaps they got battered by a storm.

# Virgin Gorda & St. John, Nov–Dec 2015

## Caneel Beaches, St John, USVI:

**Caneel:** We snorkeled from Scott to Caneel and back most every day and the reef between them is just wonderful with healthy corals, sponges and a multitude of fish and other sea life. We saw Octopus, eels, nurse sharks and much more over the years.

**Scott:** To the left toward the buoy, are resident garden eels in about 20 feet of water. They are fun to dive down to, as they withdraw into their holes as you approach. In the shallower parts in the sea grass are queen conch, razor fishes, turtles, remora and stingrays. Spotted Eagle Rays sometimes visit.

To the right is a shelf with interesting fish and toward the point on the right of this reef gets deep and full of sea life including octopus and eels among so much more. Be careful of the current here as it can drag you all the way to Turtle Bay like a carnival ride, but if you are too close to the rocks, it can pull you into them.

**Little Caneel:** This is a shaded wall, so snorkeling is best mid-day when the sun is best. There is a nursery about 1/3 of the way out that always seems to have a large Grouper also resident. This year it was a large Graysby.  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way up the wall was a lovely Caribbean Reef Octopus sleeping in its Octopus's Garden.

**Hawksnest:** You will always find turtles at Hawksnest. This year, we only saw Green Sea Turtles, where most years there is a mix of them and Hawksbills. There are also usually both Remoras and Sharksucker Remora there, hitching rides on the turtles. The rocks on the left and right sides are always full of interesting fish. Huge parrotfish are usually on the left and large Bermuda Chub and Grunts.