

Virgin Gorda Winter Holiday, 25 Nov – 18 Dec 2008

Nail Bay Resort: Top of the line. The Sundowner is the best place we have stayed (and we are very well traveled). It is well equipped with a breath-taking view, very private and with a wonderful staff. Our housekeeper is Cordell and is just excellent. He takes such good care of us and makes wonderful animals out of the towels every day. Kasha is on the front desk and is as competent as she is friendly. She is the brains and the sweetness behind this place.

Virgin Gorda, BVI, is a marvel of relaxation and wild beauty. The beaches and reefs are unparalleled and the general atmosphere is relaxed and peaceful. We seldom find more than two others on a beach, and usually are alone. It is unspoiled beauty. We don't even have a lock for our door and don't need one. Everyone we have met here is friendly – even strangers you pass on the road wave back with a smile.

About the Photography: Camera is the Olympus 790 SW with an underwater enclosure. To get good pictures underwater, the key is getting close to your subject. Never ever use the zoom. Try to shoot only on sunny days and limit the use of a flash, which tends to brighten all debris in the water. Most pictures are then shoved through Photoshop where “Auto Levels” removes constant background colors and some needed “Shadows/Highlights” adjustments. Never use color balance or Hue/Saturation. The pictures were then loaded into iPhoto for rotation and cropping. They were then exported as jpg's and loaded into the website using Photoshop “Automate/Web Photo Gallery” and FTP loaded into our webpage. The controlling “buttons” in the website are simply hand written in html.

Fish seen but not photographed: Yellowmouth Grouper, Blackcap Basslet, Nurse shark.

“**Double D**” Sailing trips are wonderful with James and Sara who were not only excellent sailors; they were also knowledgeable about the places to snorkel and very interesting people. The catamaran trip to Anegada had two other couples on board (for a total of 8 passengers and two crew) and the ship easily held that number. There was plenty of shade and refreshments. It was delightful to meet our four new friends who were as interesting as they were nice. The second trip with James and Sarah was a solo sailing to Cooper Island and Fallen Jerusalem. Cooper Island is a wonder of natural beauty and fantastic snorkeling. We highly recommend the sailing trips with “Double D” with Sarah and James. Fallen Jerusalem was sort of a dud with clear waters and dramatic coral, but we didn't see many fish. Could have been the luck of the timing.

“**Leverick Bay Water Sports**” in the Leverick Bay Marina was very testy and grumpy. He is the only sour person we have met on this entire island. We will avoid him in the future. (This is the only negative comment in this entire trip report!)

Restaurants (in order of our visits):

“**Sugar Cane**” at Nail Bar Resort: Stanly is a fabulous chef and he grows his own vegetables. Our meal was superb, the staff wonderful and the atmosphere relaxing. Seating is outdoors under a roof with some tables under the stars.

“**Mine Shaft**” has the BEST sunset view on the island, and the best ribs too! We suspect their other offerings are also great, but we can only attest to the Ribs, which were out of this world. The staff (Emily, Mary and Lilly) who are wonderfully personable, knowledgeable and outgoing. Each visit was very enjoyable, with the first including a long conversation with Lilly who is interesting and intelligent (and beautiful). We have returned five times and have never been disappointed by either the staff or the food! It is just a very good restaurant with a wonderful staff.

“**Willy T**” floating restaurant and bar at Norman Island was fun. The food was good and atmosphere wonderful with boats constantly tying up. Fish & Chips and burgers are both good.

“**Bath & Turtle**” is in the marina area of Spanish Town. Their hamburgers and fries were very good. There are lots of interesting shops all around this restaurants.

“**The Grill at Leverick Bay**” had delicious hamburgers and pizzas at reasonable prices with an ever so refreshing swimming pool to rinse the salt water off before you eat!

“**Mad Dogs**” above the Baths had wonderful \$6 sandwiches and drinks. The setting is pleasant and relaxing overlooking the blue water.

“**The Big Bamboo**” on Anegada’s Loblolly bay is just excellent. The Anegada lobster and fresh fish are both delicious grilled on their wood fire. We mean: the best lobster you will ever eat in your life! Prices are reasonable and setting delightful.

“**Top of the Baths**” has a nice lunch menu and a swimming pool right there to rinse off in before eating. It is completely refreshing.

“**Rock Café**” This was the finest meal we have had on Virgin Gorda (or anywhere in the Caribbean for that matter), but it is expensive. The setting is delightful with many levels among huge rocks. Be sure to ask for outside dining nestled among the HUGE rocks. The food was wonderful including the appetizers and entries. The lobster and snapper were both word-class. Morris Mark played his guitar expertly as we enjoyed the feast. He is a MUST to hear while in the islands.

Food Shopping (all stores are staffed with courteous, helpful employees):

“**Bucks**” has many essentials, but stocking is spotty being on an island depending on ferries for deliveries. If you see something, pick it up, don’t hesitate, for it may not be there in an hour and not reappear for a week. It is best to go there and get what you can and THEN decide on what you will make for dinner. Meats are very good on Fri, Sat and Sunday. Produce is good depending on what comes in. If you don’t see something be sure to ask for it, for often it is in the storage area, but just not on the shelves. Check expiration dates, as anywhere in the islands.

“**RTW Road Town Wholesale**” Most item must be purchased in set so three or by the case. The best items we found beneficial to get here was beer, water and wine.

“**Super Value**” Small store, which is good to check to fill in what Bucks didn’t have.

“**Rosie’s**” Good selection of produce and many food items. We found them to be better stocked than Bucks, but that makes sense since they are not right on the dock where boaters are constantly removing items from Buck’s shelves, and could also have been related to the day we happened to show up there.

“**Leverick Bay Grocery**” Very well stocked.

Beaches and Snorkel Sites:

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. 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 the most spectacular with 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. On this reef we saw three quarters of the fish we identified including the largest lobster we have EVER seen (but terrible picture of it).

Savannah beach was cloudy the day we went there so we will return. The reef appeared to be very nice but the sand is full of sand flies and the little picnic areas are full of sand burrs. Others have said this is a great snorkeling beach.

Nail Bay is very rough much of the time. When the waters are calm, we entered just north of the smooth black rock, which is 10 feet in the surf and about 50 yards north of the walkway to the beach. It is the only entry point we have found. The reef is very healthy with many fish and many coral species.

Peter Island was very wavy, but we saw many interesting coral outcroppings. We didn't see anything very spectacular, but two others saw an octopus and a Spotted Eagle Ray. On a calmer day, it would have been good snorkeling.

Norman Island was amazing. In front of the caves are some coral outcroppings that were so loaded with fish that it was like swimming inside an aquarium. Most of the new fish entered yesterday was from this site. Inside the caves, were swarms of Glassy Sweepers and a few larger fish. The floor of the cave entrance was a carpet of Sun Anemone which gave an eerie appearance. This was definitely NOT the "caves" we were taken to many years ago on a catamaran, which was a very deep cave with very much current. The snorkeling makes it well worth coming to.

The Indians is a rock and a reef out in the middle of the sea. It was VERY wavy making it dangerous to snorkel over. We explored some, but returned to the boat after a short time due to the rough water. On a calm day it may well have been a good stop – but ONLY on a calm day.

Cooper Island was delightful with many new fishes to see. Unfortunately, the camera battery died so the Glasseyed Snapper, Yellowmouth Grouper, and Common Octopus was watched but not recorded digitally. It is a very active and delightful area. We were not at the beach, but rather off to the right of it near a huge rock outcropping.

We returned to Cooper Island a second time on a calm day and it was amazing. I finally got the photograph of the octopus and many other fish. There is a very large number of Barracudas there. The beach is delightful there with a nice restaurant. This island is "green" and intends to replace its small diesel generator with wind and solar arrays. The rooms there are airy and nice. The staff is very friendly, like old friends on the first meeting. This would be a great place to "hide away" for a while. Just natural beauty.

Long Bay: Take the little dirt road down the hill from the end of the concrete heading north from Nail Bay. At the bottom of the hill, turn abruptly left and you will find yourself on the beach. The sands extend 20 yards before the coral begins and it is spectacular. The bay is protected so the water is clear and calm with some of the healthiest coral we have seen. Saw Squid and a huge Rock Hind there among the hundreds of other resident fish.

Spring Bay & the Baths: Snorkeling around the boulders are a vertical reef with amazing fish. We saw a very large Ocean Triggerfish as well and many others. It was delightful. One hint: Check for days' without cruise boats as there were hundreds of people eat the Baths, all with their yellow life jackets on. The snorkeling was amazing. Saw our first Nurse Shark of this trip under a ledge by the rock just left of center.

Loblolly Bay Beach on Anegada: Fantastic day! We sailed to Anegada on "Double D" catamaran with Jamie and Sara who are competent, interesting and very friendly. The reef holds very large fish. Even the Blue Tangs were twice the size we have seen anywhere else. We saw a 6-foot Spotted Eagle Ray there with its entourage of large Palometa. That reef is so worth the boat

and taxi ride! The restaurant at the site (“**The Big Bamboo**”) was among the best lobster and fish in the BVI’s.

Mango Bay: Wonderful reef most of the length of the bay. It was too cloudy when we were there, but the coral was still magnificent. Along the rocks, the water clarified (has been stormy for two days) so the multitude of fish became apparent. There is so much to explore on this reef, one would need weeks to just see most of it. We have heard there are turtles and rays along the rocks to the right. We will return to this reef next year to finish exploring it. We heard from others that the deep region to the left of the beach is spectacular with large fish and steep drop-offs.

Daily Log:

Tuesday, Nov 25th

Left Marietta for a pleasant flight to St. Thomas. We had just a two-hour wait for the 1.5 hour ferry ride to Virgin Gorda. The sunset was beautiful over Water Island and the ride was not too bumpy. We were picked up at the ferry dock by a Nail Bay Resort Taxi who took us first to Buck’s food store. We then were dropped off at the beautiful “Sunset Watch” villa for one night, as our room was occupied. We came in one day early, and ours was occupied. Sunset Watch is a beautiful villa with sweeping porch and breathtaking view of the Caribbean Sea and Nail Bay. Sharon made tuna fish and cheese over English muffins for dinner. Delicious! It was a perfect night’s sleep with all the windows open and cool ocean breezes sweeping over us.

Wednesday, Nov 26th

Rose early and headed to town to shop for the stay. We tried three of the four groceries on the island and discovered that Bucks is the best, but is very spotty in their offerings. If you see something you want, grab it now, because soon it will be gone and not re-appear for at least a week. Peanut butter was not on the shelf last night, but we snagged the one jar that appeared today. Sour cream seems impossible to find that day.

We snorkeled Mountain Trunk beach today and found it wonderful. Met Hugh and his three friends today and they are delightful. Hugh is the president of the neighborhood association and as nice as can be. He is from just south of London and his wife is Kenyan. I asked if she was related to Obama, but later learned (when we met her) she is Caucasian. If she was Irish, she still could be! The snorkeling is getting better as the weather is now clear and not stormy as it was last week.

Thursday, Nov 27th

We attempted to snorkel at Savannah beach, but it was very murky there and found the sand terrible – full of burrs and sand flies. The reef looks wonderful if the water were clear. We will return one day after the water settles, but not stay after. Then we snorkeled at our own Mountain Trunk beach and it was wonderful. By day’s end I was up to 20 fish photographed and identified. This first set was uploaded into the website.

Thanksgiving dinner at “The Sugar Cane” (at Nail Bay) was at made with locally grown food both grown and prepared by Chef Staley. The sauce was a cranberry-strawberry sauce that was delicious with pumpkin soup and pie both from Stanley’s gardens. We met four folks from Ohio who were a HOOT. We met other gusts at nail Bay: Leslie & Brad and Heidi and Todd who we enjoyed the energetic and delightful company of many times at the beach during this stay.

Friday, Nov 28th

We attempted to snorkel Nail Bay, but it was still too rough and murky. Tomorrow we may try long beach and save Nail for later. We snorkeled Mountain Trunk bay again today and it was spectacular. Photographed many more fish. Met our Ohio friend from last night on the beach. They spotted two different rays and an octopus! We are up to 31 different fish photographed and identified. Ate dinner at home – Sharon made a huge pot of Tuscan soup that sure tasted great. The temperature has never exceeded the low 80 with cool nights. Perfect.

Saturday, Nov 29th

Kyle & Mindy arrived today to join our new friends. Snorkeling on Mountain Trunk with spectacular results including the largest lobster we have ever seen. Also saw a Southern ray and many other fishes. Relaxing on the beach was wonderful with much banter with Heidi and friends. We then rested in the Sundowner and enjoyed the relaxed breezes. Dinner was at the “**Mine Shaft**” which has the BEST sunset view on the island, and the best ribs too! We suspect their other offerings are also great, but we can only attest to the Ribs, which were out of this world. The staff (Mary and Lilly) are wonderfully personable, knowledgeable and outgoing. The evening was very enjoyable. We enjoyed a long conversation with Lilly who is as interesting and intelligent as she is lovely.

Sunday, Nov 30th

All day on the “Double D” to Peter Island, Norman Island, The Indians and Cooper Island. Saw but not photographed: Glasseyed Snapper, Yellowmouth Grouper Juvenile, and Common Octopus. Our Captain was Elaine who is a dive instructor when not taking snorkeling groups out. The weather was challenging, as many of the snorkeling sites were so wavy as to be dangerous. Lunch was on board the “Willy T” at Norman Island, which was fun. We returned in the early evening exhausted and happy. It was a perfect birthday for Bob. Dinner was Sharon’s amazing minestrone – lentil soup and a very refreshing glass of wine.

Monday, Dec 1st

Swam in Nail bay for the first time. Was still a bit turbid from all the wavy weather last week, but the character of the reef still stood out as so excellent. Not too many fish were spotted, but the amount of coral and sponges bodes very well for future snorkeling. A disturbing sight there is where someone has been taking the stag horn coral. They are breaking it off at the base and many groupings were totally destroyed. Very sad.

The afternoon found us back on Mountain Trunk beach where we saw thousands of silversides leaping out of the water. Snorkeling into the fray revealed that a school of Bar Jacks was feasting on them and the source of their panicked flight. There also were squid around, perhaps feasting on the leftovers. For dinner, Sharon prepared delicious salmon patties and noodles.

Tuesday, Dec 2nd

Drove to Leverick Bay on the north end of the island. We rented a “Dingy” which turned out to be a small rowboat with a motor. It splashed and was tossed by the waves rather than the way a rubber dingy sort of walks over the waves. We managed to get to Mosquito Island for a wonderful snorkeling adventure, seeing a Porcupine fish and another HUGE lobster. We could not continue so returned the “dingy” to the very grumpy proprietor of the Leverick Bay marina (first and only grumpy person we found on this island). We enjoyed a nice lunch at the “Grill at Leverick Bay” where pizza and hamburger were both delicious. We then drove back, stopping at the over-looks

for spectacular beauty. Once again we snorkeled Mountain trunk bay, which is never a disappointment.

Wednesday, Dec 3rd

Today we explored Guavaberry Spring Bay resort just north of the Baths. The villas are nice, but not as private and wild as Nail Bay. The “Sandy Bottom” is very open and breezy and a real possibility. We liked it very much. We met many interesting people and swam in their beach called Spring Bay. It is immediately north of the baths. The rocks look so uninviting from a snorkeling perspective as you stand on the beach (no visible reef), but are WONDERFUL to snorkel. The “reef” grows vertically along the rocks with amazing results. As you swim around to the baths, you encounter huge numbers of people taxied in from the cruise boats at the Baths. We saw so many fish, with the best being a huge Ocean Triggerfish, which Sharon spotted and I got a distant picture of. Thank goodness for 8.5 megapixels!

Thursday, Dec 4th

We drove down to Long Bay Beach (the beach just north of Nail Bay). The road is the scary little dirt road dropping off to the left where the pavement ends heading around the island north of Nail Bay. When you get to the bottom of the hill, turn left and it takes you to the beach. It is a WONDEFUL beach with 20 feet of soft sand before the reef begins. It is more protected than the rest of the beaches here, so the water was calm and crystal clear. We saw many new fish and enjoyed it a great deal. We met some very nice folks from Maine who were on a boat anchored just north of the beach. This is a beach like from another time in history when we might have met Robinson Caruso.

Then we visited Little Dix bay (a Rosewood Resort). The lunch buffet was mediocre and expensive but all the staff there are delightful and the grounds very impressive with the most comfortable beach chairs we have ever enjoyed. They are very welcoming to visitors and encourage you to use their facilities. Lilly (met at the Mineshaft) works in the front office and was like an old friend when we saw her. This island is just SO friendly and she is so sweet.

Al and Aileen Nettleton arrived today, surprising us in the mid afternoon (we expected them at dusk). Went snorkeling at Mountain Trunk bay where Aileen had her first snorkeling experience. The reef was quiet and many fish came out to say “hi” to them.

Friday, Dec 5th

Very windy day. We all tried to snorkel at Mountain trunk but it was too wavy to even bother. Bob lost his snorkel and mask while floating in the wavy water, but Sharon always carries extras – She knows her Bob! We then went to the Nail Bay pool where we relaxed, read and swam to the little bar enjoying a beer while swimming. The best of everything! It was a perfectly relaxing day. In the evening, we drove to “The Mind Shaft” and enjoyed those fantastic ribs again. Lilly was there again and both she and Mary are so inviting.

Saturday, Dec 6th

Had a fabulous day sailing to Anegada where the snorkeling was spectacular including a HUGE Spotted Eagle Ray. Captains Sara and Jamie (jamieblewis@hotmail.com) were talented intelligent and knowledgeable. We enjoyed lunch at the “Big Bamboo” on Anegada, which was delicious. Sharon had fresh Anegada Lobster and I had Grouper - both delicious. We added 10 fish to our list; now up to 85 fish. After a day on a 53-foot catamaran in rather high seas, our "boat" is still rocking

this morning! Today we explore two different beaches. Al and Aileen Nettleton have been here since Thursday and it sure is fun to share this adventure with them. The weather has been cooler than any year we have been here – and it is perfect. In the low 80's every day.

Sunday, Dec 7th

We drove up to the Baths and first wandered the rocks for a bit, then snorkeled the magnificent vertical reefs of those rocks. Saw our first Nurse shark, but did not get a picture of it. The day was perfect snorkeling weather. After a nice lunch at the top of the Baths. Then we went off to Spring bay and snorkeled there. Saw our first Nurse Shark of this trip under a ledge by the rock just left of center. Sharon made chili for dinner that was delicious.

Monday, Dec 8th

A great snorkeling day. We drove to Long Bay reef, which was an adventure by itself, as the road is very steep and very rutted... glad the car is a rental! Allen found a family of squid that were just too cute! They change color to confuse predators, so become clear, then brown then iridescent green. I am now over 100 fish identified. After lunch of leftovers, we relaxed on Nail Bay, and then snorkeled this marvelous reef. It was not as clear as we would have liked, but was still spectacular with towers healthy coral-heads. Al and Aileen both enjoyed snorkeling this perfect reef.

Al and Aileen treated us to dinner at the “Sugar Cane” where the fish and steak were wonderful.

Tuesday, Dec 9th

Last night was stormy with torrential rains and cool breezes.. We slept like a coma. The day started very stormy with torrential rains and high winds. Perfect day to curl up and read. By the afternoon, however, it cleared up and we snorkeled Mountain Trunk Bay, which was surprisingly clear. Saw a Grey Angel fish that was a real show-off. Sharon made a dinner of Tuna casserole, which is one of my favorites. After dinner we all talked and talked into the night on the porch.

Wednesday, Dec 10th

Sharon and I explored the South Bay to look at another villa possibility for next year. Al and Aileen went exploring the National Park here in the northern portion of Virgin Gorda. In the afternoon we read, relaxed and tried to snorkel Mountain Trunk bay. It is VERY windy and wavy today, so the water was as turbid as skim milk and the waves were so huge, we could have boogie boarded! Was a fun day to just ride the waves on our “noodles”. Dinner was at “The Rock Café” which was outstanding. A delightful evening.

It is very rainy and windy tonight, so sleeping will be fabulous. Have not turned on the AC this entire trip and sure won't need to tonight.

Thursday, Dec 11th

The day is clear and windy. We are laying low hoping the winds calm down for snorkeling this afternoon. At the Sundowner, “laying low” is easy to do with books to read on our porch with the surf pounding below.

Went to Mango Bay today to check out the villas and enjoy the water. It was fabulous although too turbid from the days of stormy weather. We will return in a few days. Ran into Patty & Duane Tschappat who we had met twice in previous years at Secret Harbor, St. Thomas, USVI. The world is so small sometimes. Was a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon.

Dinner was (again) the Mine Shaft for ribs. Aileen had a beef taco salad that she said was delicious while the rest of us had delicious ribs. We have never been disappointed there.

Friday, Dec 12th

Today the Nettleton's left. :- (It was so much fun sharing this adventure with them. They are off for a few days in Puerto Rico then home to snowy Wisconsin. After our farewell, we visited the Spanish Town "Holiday Festival" which consisted of a few tents selling baked goods and odds and ends. We snorkeled Mountain trunk Bay finding it had clarified considerably since the recent stormy weather. Added only two new fish to the list. It gets harder and the collection grows, but was lovely snorkeling with spectacular findings. We came back to this little hide-away (Sundowner) and read and relaxed.

The evening meal was Omelets prepared by the best chef on this island: Sharon. Yum.

Saturday, Dec 13th

The main activity today was returning to Mango Bay on Maho Bay where we put \$\$ down on a one bedroom place right on the beach. It is much less private (end to the skin-dipping in the pool) and not as luxurious as the Sundowner, but it is right on a nice beach with chairs to relax on and a reasonable cancellation policy if something goes wrong. Because the beach is inviting it is conducive of meeting people on the beach and inter-personal contact. We spent the day on Maho Bay, which is essentially total reef with spectacular fish. There is so much to explore there.

Dinner was another Sharon meal. Yum.

Sunday, Dec 14th

Sailed to Cooper Island with Sarah and Jimmie on the "Double "D"" which was delightful. It was a perfect day with low seas and crystal clear water. We saw so many fish and got a picture of that illusive octopus over there and a new Moon jellyfish picture which is spectacular. We saw many huge barracuda, a spectacular Scrawled Cowfish and some mystery fish, which I sent to others for identification. Cooper Island is a wonderful place, which is nearly "green". They intend to convert their diesel generator to wind power next year, so we sent information regarding the Robert Essertier vertical blade machines to them. This island is very isolated and friendly. The restaurant was good and the staff inviting. We may stay there for a part of next year's adventure.

Dinner was delicious steaks and potatoes prepared by our fabulous chef Sharon.

Monday, Dec 15th

First day we simply stayed "home" and rested, read and snoozed. A truly lazy day. It is very windy and cool today with scattered showers, so was a good day to cocoon. I finished my second book of the vacation and Sharon finished her fifth. Dinner was one last drive to the Mine Shaft for ribs. They are just SO good! There are very few lights on Virgin Gorda so the sky seems to have 100 times more stars than in Atlanta. When we got "home" to the Sundowner, we turned all the lights off and wandered out onto the deck and looked up. As we stood there amazed at the uncountable multitude of stars: A brilliant shooting star streaked across the sky. Was like out of a movie. We both made the same wish...

Tuesday, Dec 16th

Last full day in the Sundowner at Virgin Gorda. :- (We relaxed at home. The winds are high and waves pounding the rocks below us so much we can feel it in the floor. By mid afternoon, we

went to Mountain Trunk Bay and floated in the wavy Caribbean. The water was murky, but the cool waters were a delight to float on with our Styrofoam noodles. We met Allen and Alex who are homeowners here on Nail Bay. Dinner was leftovers as we try to empty the fridge. Tough job, but someone has to do it. The evening was spent finishing this trip report.

We will be in St. Thomas tomorrow night and then home to Atlanta on Thursday. We already miss these islands and look forward to next year's adventure. Sharon and I refer to each other as "Co-Hobbits" which is exactly what we are in this life's adventure.

The pictures from this tip are at www.doppstein.com/vg08

Wednesday, Dec 17th

We packed our bags and said goodbye to the wonderful Sundowner at Nail Bay and took the ferry to Tortola where we wandered the crowded streets of Road Town until our Ferry to St Thomas left. Now we are at the Best Western next to the airport for our flight tomorrow at 3:45 PM. We will go into town tomorrow morning just to window shop and then return home. The view from our balcony is very pleasant, with the beach just 20 yards away and the sun setting.