

## **Virgin Gorda, Anegada & Caneel Bay Winter Holiday, 27 Nov – 20 Dec 2009**

### **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!

**“Neptune’s Treasure” Anegada, BVI (284 495 9439).** This was an escape for the modern world. The staff is all in the family and everyone was delightful to meet and talk with. The food is absolutely deliciously prepared with a real flare for flavor. The highlighted food is fresh-caught lobsters. These folks are the fishermen for the BVI, so the fish could not be fresher.

**“Caneel Bay”, St. John, USVI (340 776 6111).** Caneel is always wonderful. It is summer camp for adults done right. The snorkeling is superb with many wonderful animals not seen elsewhere since this is a protected national park. We saw no turtles in the BVI’s but saw several at Caneel due to being protected. On the other islands, people tend to eat them.

**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 use the zoom except for exceptionally shy animals like Garden Eels, tilefish and Rock beauties. Try to shoot only on sunny days and limit the use of a flash, which tends to brighten all debris in the water. If diving down, be careful of your bubbles, as many great shots get ruined by bunches of tiny bubbles between you and your subject. Most pictures are then shoved through Photoshop where “Auto Levels” removes constant background colors and some 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.

### **Side Trips on Boats**

**“Double D” Boat charter:** [DoubleDCharters@gmail.com](mailto:DoubleDCharters@gmail.com), [www.DoubleDBVI.com](http://www.DoubleDBVI.com), (284 499 2479). David Irwin has two types of snorkeling and diving charters: a motor yacht and a catamaran. He is very knowledgeable about the waters and the history of the Virgin Islands. A trip with him is a learning experience as well as great snorkeling experience. We have sailed with him four times so far and will certainly return more.

**Bitter End Snorkel Trip:** For \$25 person this is very worthwhile. We enjoyed lunch at “The Fat Virgin”. Then we were taken to Necker Island reef, then two reefs on Mosquito Island. Was a very good snorkel day.

### **Restaurants (in order of our visits):**

#### **Virgin Gorda**

**“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. On Friday evenings Morris Mark plays his acoustic guitar and sings beautifully.

**“The Island Pot”** Delicious BBQ ribs and chicken which are delicious and very inexpensive. The sides are good but not spectacular. Food is carryout to enjoy on our balcony

**“The Fat Virgin”** at Biras Creek is a tiny restaurant right on the water and has delicious food. We had the chicken sandwich and chicken roti, which were wonderful.

**“Little Dix Bay”** The Monday night buffet is loaded with lobster, crab, ribs, standing rib roast and so much more, the dessert table is heaped and the Steel Drum Band played in the background. Was well worth the cost.

**“Bath & Turtle”**: Their pizza and hamburgers are delicious.

**“Chez Bamboo”**: Delicious fish and very friendly staff. They are not cheap, but not over-priced either. We enjoyed a very nice evening there with Betty.

### **Anegada**

**“Neptune’s Treasure” on Anegada**: Food here is the freshest fish there is – these are the fishermen for the BVI’s. The lobster is fabulous and the fish is prepared in many different ways, each wonderful. Neptune’s is also a great place to stay with delightful people and a typically Anegada low-key pace. We highly recommend both the restaurant for dinner and to stay there.

**“Cow Wreck” on Anegada**: Best fish (Grouper) sandwich ever! Is a great place to swim, walk the miles of beach and enjoy a great lunch!

### **St John**

**“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.

**“Caneel Bay Bar”** Makes good hamburgers and appetizers. The fish and chips were good in previous years.

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

**“MoJo Cafe”** is on the back side of the Cruz Bay boardwalk near the ferry. The food was absolutely wonderful and varied. The Gyro is not like any that you have had with lots of veggies with the perfectly done lamb. The Maho taco was also delicious. The two running it are very nice making you want to give them business.

### **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. Only expensive wines are offered.

**“Bucks Wholesale”** Good selection of many staples. Very good meats at reasonable prices and vegetables. Most everything is less expensive than at the Bucks at the marina with good selection.

**“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.

**“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. Their bread is delicious.

**On Anegada** there is no food shopping.

### **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. The snorkeling was amazing. One day there was no snorkeling due to the HUGE sea swells CRASHING dramatically over the rocks. It seems everyone on this beach is friendly making just floating around delightful. No bug problems that we noticed.

**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. We did find more sand fleas than some other beaches.

**Cooper Island:** FABULOUS snorkeling from the rock to the beach. We saw THREE octopus there and two flounder all in one snorkel. The other assortment included huge Great Barracuda, large Tilefish and many others. The food at Cooper Island was very good. We got there on the Double D charter, which we HIGHLY recommend.

**Necker Island reef:** This is a private island (owned by Sir Richard Branson) with a nice reef around it. It was a good snorkel, but not spectacular.

**Mosquito Island:** Snorkeled two reefs on this island, which were quite good. On a 1 to 10 scale, we would rate them at 8 based on variety of fish and beauty.

**Long Bay:** Getting to this beach is fun, driving along a steep dirt road. At the bottom of the hill take a sharp left to find the beach. This has the healthiest reef we have seen on this island. We saw many wonderful fish including the largest Porcupine fish we have EVER seen. The corals and sea fans are absolutely HUGE with hoards of fish.

**Savannah:** Was too wavy to enjoy the coral, but we could see that the back side of the reef facing the sea is spectacular. We need to return on a calm day.

**Nail Bay** Just one of the best reefs there is. It is connected to Long Bay with its huge coral outcroppings. It is the best series of reefs on the island. Lets hope the planned marina is never built which will destroy this gem.

## **Anegada:**

**Loblolly Bay Beach:** It was very windy and wavy when we arrived but snorkeled anyway. The under-current was very strong, but became calmer near the coral. It was wonderful snorkeling with several “new” fish recorded and a very old Great Barracuda who was friendly and curious. Last year it was calm and the snorkeling was spectacular all the way to the sea.

**Flash of Beauty:** Had heard this was lovely snorkeling, but a HUGE storm came up as we tried arrived to the beach. Never got wet 9from the sea anyway).

## **St. John:**

**Caneel: All the beaches are wonderful.** We snorkeled Caneel bay and Scott beach the first day and saw many wonderful fish and a Green turtle. Saw two octopuses in one snorkel trip! Counted 14 new fish in the first two snorkel trips. Amazing.

Caneel Bay: Right side (when facing the water) all the way around to Scott beach is wonderful reef loaded with octopus, eels and thousands of fish. The coral is healthy with many colored sponges too.

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

Paradise and Scott is essentially one beach with great rocks on each side. Facing the water, the left is great all the way to Caneel beach. To the right have many shelves with great fish hiding under them including a very large Porcupine fish. Out toward the point is gets very dangerous with strong currents that can either drive you into the rocks or wash you out into the bay. We have heard that if you get our near the buoy, there are nurse sharks, but it was too rough out there for us.

## **Daily Log:**

### **Friday, Nov 27th**

Flew here on the Island Birds four-seater airplane. Sergio helped us with our luggage and was well worth the cost. The flight from St. Thomas to Virgin Gorda was just 15 minutes, which meant we arrived early enough to swim on the first day. The best was that Sergio let me fly the plane (with his hands close to the wheel)! What a perfect Birthday present. Dinner was at the Mineshaft where we had great ribs and listened to Morris Mark croon into the evening.

### **Saturday, Nov 28<sup>th</sup>**

Snorkeled our local Spring Bay to the baths and got pictures of many wonderful fish with the water crystal clear. Dinner was take-out at the island pot, which was very good.

### **Sunday, Nov 29th**

Drove up to Mountain trunk bay where we snorkeled north toward Nail Bay. The reef was healthy and fish population good. We did encounter sand fleas when we relaxed on the beach, but that may have been because we used the thatched “umbrellas” which are at the very edge of the woods. It was not to see they got new beach chairs, since last year there was no where to sit. We then returned to Spring Bay where we simply relaxed floating on the rather high waves from sea swells.

### **Monday, Nov 30<sup>th</sup>**

HUGE crashing waves at Spring Bay with the red flag up at the Baths. Was very dramatic to watch and scary when a couple climbed up on one of the large rocks at the shore only to be washed off

and bashed into another rock. They were okay and judging by their laughter, have no idea how close they came to dying that day. Except for the drama of the fools on the rock, it was nice, relaxing day watching nature's spectacle. Bob & Jill treated us to Little Dix Bay bazaar for Bob's birthday. This is all the lobster and roast and every other food you can imagine with a steel drum band playing in the background. Very excellent evening and perfect birthday.

### **Tuesday, Dec 1<sup>st</sup>**

Took the Double D charter catamaran to Cooper Island. David is a great Caribbean teacher, understanding everything from wildlife to weather. He has sailed these waters for many years and knows them like his backyard. The snorkeling from the rock to the beach was spectacular with us seeing very many wonderful fishes from Octopus (3 of them!), Great Barracuda, Peacock flounder, Tilefish and Arrowhead crabs among many others. Dinner was Sharon's famous chilli, which is always wonderful.

### **Wednesday, Dec 2<sup>nd</sup>**

The waters of Spring Bay finally calmed down enough to snorkel. Was a good snorkel seeing a large Honeycomb Cowfish and cute Smooth Trunkfish that was so curious, he swam right up to my lens like he wanted to kiss it! The day was mostly relaxing, reading and talking with Jill & Bob.

### **Thursday, Dec 3<sup>rd</sup>**

Drove up to Gun Creek to take the ferry to Biras Creek where we enjoyed a wonderful lunch at "The Fat Virgin" which is excellent food right on the beach. (Christopher Columbus named Virgin Gorda "The Fat Virgin" because the silhouette from out at sea looked to him to be a large reclining woman.) We then walked the 30 minutes to "The Bitter End" where we chartered a snorkeling trip to Necker Island (one stop) and Mosquito Island (two stops). It was very much fun with everyone friendly and the snorkeling wonderful. The drive home was pleasant with a spectacular sunset viewed from the overlook high on Gorda Peak (Day 7 Sunset). Dinner was omelets, which are always a good standby meal after a wonderful but tiring day.

### **Friday, Dec 4<sup>th</sup>**

We drove up to Long Bay Beach just north of Nail Bay. This is a fun beach to get to, as the dirt road looks like a "wrong turn" until you get to the water. The reef south of the beach toward Nail Bay is the best on the entire island with huge Elkhorn coral and sea fans at least 6 feet in diameter. We saw the largest Porcupine fish we have ever seen (good spotting, Jill!) and much, much more. We came back and enjoyed more ribs at the Mineshaft once again as we listened to Morris Mark's wonderful voice.

### **Saturday, Dec 5<sup>th</sup>**

Sadly said goodbye to Jill and Bob. It was so nice to share this island with them these 8 days. We caught up on household stuff like laundry and enjoyed a delicious pizza at the Bath and Turtle. We returned to Spring Bay and had a nice crystal-clear snorkel to the baths and back. Met more nice folks on the beach and generally just relaxed.

### **Sunday, Dec 6<sup>th</sup>**

Woke to heavy rains, followed by a beautiful rainbow. Looks like rain on and off all day so ran to Spring Bay for a quick snorkel between the rainstorms. The rain seemed to clear the water with many spectacular sightings.

### **Monday, Dec 7<sup>th</sup>**

Morning snorkel at Spring bay the drove up to Gun Creek to ferry to Biras Creek. We met Glen and Barbara on the boat and spent a delightful day with them, eating lunch at the "Fat Virgin" and touring Biras Creek. The resort was deserted like a "Day After" movie with everything lovely but no one willing to pay \$800/night to stay there. It was a very pleasant day indeed.

### **Tuesday, Dec 8<sup>th</sup>**

Drove up to Long Bay and had a long, wonderful snorkel. The reef here is the best on the island with huge Elkhorn coral and sea fans as large as bed sheets. There was a Trumpetfish "convention" with dozens of them sighted of every color variation. Some were very large and we assume was pregnant as she was several inches in diameter. We also saw many tiny Trumpetfish no more than 3 inches long. Was fun to see.

### **Wednesday, Dec 9<sup>th</sup>**

Rained in AM with high seas. The water was like skimmed milk. We floated for hours and simply relaxed chatting with many others. A totally relaxing day. We took Betty out to Chez Bamboo as a "thank you" for all her sweet help. Dinner was delicious and the conversation never waned for a minute with talk of the island and our families. It was a delightful evening.

### **Thursday, Dec 10<sup>th</sup>**

We went to Savannah bay only to find it very wavy and churned up. So we floated around and relaxed all morning. The afternoon was spent at home packing for tomorrow's trip to Anegada while Bob worked on a report due on Monday. This is great place to write and think.

### **Friday, Dec 11<sup>th</sup>**

Ferried to Anegada to stay at Neptune's Treasures. Snorkeled at Loblolly bay, which was quite rough. Still saw some nice fish. Lunch was at "Cow Wreck" with a delicious fish sandwich. Dinner was at Neptune Treasure where Sharon had a 3 pound lobster! My Tuna was also delicious.

### **Saturday, Dec 12<sup>th</sup>**

Went straight to Loblolly again and found the water better than yesterday. Saw a HUGE barracuda and many other interesting fish. No other spectacular finds though. Lunch was once again at Cow Wreck for another delicious grouper sandwich. Dinner was at Neptune's where we both had fish.

### **Sunday, Dec 13<sup>th</sup>**

Was a stormy day with no snorkeling or swimming. Very dark clouds and huge waves. Spent most of the day in the room reading (Sharon) and working on a report (Bob). Was nice to have a down day. Dinner was at Neptune's where Sharon had another huge lobster and Bob had Tuna.

### **Monday, Dec 14<sup>th</sup>**

Ferried to Tortola then St John, arriving at Caneel in the early afternoon. They got our room ready early and we snorkeled the afternoon away, doing the Caneel Bay loop. The right-side of this bay is spectacular. We also swam a small portion of Scott Beach across Paradise Beach and back. Dinner was at the "Manager's Buffet" and was delicious. It is so nice at Caneel. There is an acre of land for each cottage and right now they are only at 20% occupancy. We love it here, as it is always perfect. It is truly "summer camp for adults".

### **Tuesday, Dec 15<sup>th</sup>**

A typical night's rest is 6.5 to 7 hours for us. Last night, as we sunk into the cloud-like support of a perfect mattress and heavenly pillows we passed out for 10 hours! Snorkeling was superb with the sighting of two octopuses with one mostly out of its garden. We added 8 fish to our list if sighted species today! It rained in the afternoon, so it was a one-snorkel day – but it was a wonderful long snorkel from the middle of Scott to nearly Caneel beach and back again. Dinner was at the Caneel Beach Bar, which makes good hamburger and appetizers.

### **Wednesday, Dec 16<sup>th</sup>**

First we snorkeled the left side of Hawksnest Bay. It is wonderful. We found an octopus and many other fish along this magical rock and coral wall. Then we were snorkeling along the right side of Scott beach edge toward the open channel. As we got close to the end of the peninsula, the current grabbed us and we were pushed into some rocks and sort of wedged among them. Fortunately, we always swim with gloves and fins so we could hold ourselves on the urchin covered rocks without getting hurt. Just then some wakes cam in from a passing ferry, which made it worse! Poor Sharon was terrified and I was seriously concerned. There was a brief lull and we headed for deeper water as fast as we could swim where the current grabbed us, but now in barely deeper water, giving us a carnival ride past the rocks and coral with us energetically guiding ourselves around the gorgeous spires of coral heads. We rode it all the way around the point to Turtle bay beach where we got out and walked back to where we started. Poor Sharon was very frightened and now tells everyone the “Bob tried to kill me”! Which usually stops the conversation for a few moments! We will never snorkel that area again..

### **Thursday, Dec 17<sup>th</sup>**

We did two long snorkels today – repeating the Hawksnest right-side then a long snorkel from the middle of Scott to most of the way to Caneel and back. Tonight while walking home from a light dinner at the Caneel Beach Bar, we looked up and saw the sky was ablaze with stars. Directly above was Orion and Pleiades (seven sisters), two of our favorite consolations. It is just magic here. Today we saw 25 squid all in a row like they were expecting us! We have seen 8 octopuses this trip and count 139 different fish photographed and ID'd. We come home on Sunday to freezing rain and snow.

### **Friday, Dec 18<sup>th</sup>**

Snorkeled from Caneel to Scott, seeing the octopus yet again. This is the eighth one seen in their garden, but have seen none on a walk-about. Snorkeled Scott again, but this time went deep and found a HUGE stingray digging one of its deep foraging pits. Went to Uncle Joe's for ribs, which were spectacular.

### **Saturday, Dec 19<sup>th</sup>**

Went snorkeling with Andrea first at Hawks nest (was too rough) then from midway in Scott to near Caneel beach and back. Saw a wonderful spotted Moray Eel. Met Sue and Cheryl and snorkeled little Caneel and then went to the MoJo Café in Cruz Bay. Was a delightful day and evening with endless conversation.

### **Sunday, Dec 20<sup>th</sup>**

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