

Virgin Gorda, Anegada & Caneel Bay, 23 Nov–17 Dec 2010

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!

“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 just one turtle in the BVI's but saw many at Caneel due to being protected. The staff at Caneel are all wonderful and the property almost surreal for its beauty and spaciousness. Breakfasts are fabulous.

About the Photography:

Camera is the Olympus 790 SW with an underwater enclosure. Set to “Macro” with the flash disabled. I also increase exposure +1. 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 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 (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. They were then exported to a folder as high-resolution jpg's and built the web folder and images using Photoshop “Automate/Web Photo Gallery” then loaded into the website using FTP. The controlling “buttons” in the website are simply hand written in html.

An important safety tip when diving to get closer to your subject: NEVER, ever, touch a subject. Nurse sharks and eels look approachable, but are very dangerous only when touched.

Side Trips on Boats (Virgin Gorda)

“Double D” Boat charter: DoubleDCharters@gmail.com, 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, fishes 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 many times over the years and will certainly return more.

Bitter End Snorkel Trip: Last year we were very pleased with the snorkel trip, but this year we were over-charged, taken to a very poor site (passing a great reef on Mosquito Island) and the driver was surly. We will give it one more try next year, but only one more chance.

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Restaurants:

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. He is an absolute must to hear on this island paradise. The storms this year took the outside dining porch off, so they rebuilt it twice as large with a roof! The acoustics are and the seating comfort are both much improved. The food here is always delightful and delicious.

“**The Fat Virgin**” at Biras Creek is a tiny restaurant right on the water and has delicious food. We had the flying fish sandwich and chicken roti, which were both wonderful. We always meet nice people at adjacent tables.

“**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 with Morris Mark on the lead drum. Was well worth the cost. The Beach Restaurant served excellent fish sandwich and fish taco.

“**M&M Bakery**” makes the best breads and pastries on the island. For Thanksgiving, we enjoyed two BBQ chickens from there that were delicious.

“**Bath & Turtle**”: Their Fish & Chips and hamburgers were delicious. Pizza was dry to our taste.

“**Bitter End Beach Restaurant**”: Was good for a fair price.

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.

“**Sun Dog Café in Mongoose Junction**” Excellent tuna and Mahi-Mahi dinner plates. Their salad was also delicious. This establishment is small with tables in the hallway but serve food fit for a fine restaurant.

“**Caneel Bay Beach Bar**” Makes good hamburgers and appetizers. We had crab salad and grilled grouper that were both excellent. Wine by the glass is ridiculously expensive but beer is only a little inflated. The service was very good.

“**Turtle Bay**” in Caneel Bay The meal was spotty with poor salad and breads but delicious steaks and sauces. The sides were also prepared well and tasty. All were very expensive.

“**Cactus on the Blue in Cruz Bay (across the street from the Beach Bar)**” Excellent Mexican food. The night we were there an outstanding classical and popular guitarist named David Laabs entertained us as we enjoyed the delicious food. Their margaritas were strong and delicious.

“**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. They are messy and delicious.

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Food Shopping on Virgin Gorda:

“**Bucks**” has many essentials, and much improved over last year. Competition was good for them! This year they offer many more products in a better organized, more spacious layout. The produce and meats were both impressive. You still need to find out when they re-stock (Tuesday evening) to get fresh produce.

“**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. The wines are quite good for the price.

“**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.

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. 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.

Mountain Trunk beach just South of Nail Bay is spectacular in every way. The beach is long and soft with the sand going well into the water. It is always essentially deserted with lovely soft sand. To the left and right are rock outcroppings, which have coral reefs and loaded with fish. Facing the water, the reef to the right is wonderful 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. The reef to the south is also spectacular with deep crevasses and huge sea fans. While there a pair of huge Spotted Eagle Rays were playing with us swimming circles around and around. Great pictures were taken and even a short movie.

Cooper Island: FABULOUS snorkeling from the rock to the beach. We saw many wonderful fish included huge Great Barracuda, large Tilefish and many others. The food at Cooper Island was very good in their newly remodeled beach-bar restaurant. We got there on the Double D charter, which we HIGHLY recommend.

Long Bay: The road was totally washed out and is now an impassable gully, not even fit to walk down let alone drive. This fabulous beach and adjoining reef is now only accessible by boat. It is a hidden treasure on this island.

St. John:

Caneel: All the beaches are wonderful. All Caneel beaches and reefs are wonderful because they are protected and never fished or hunted.

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

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

Little Caneel Bay toward Honeymoon is more sparse, but with its own unique population of fish including Nassau 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 where we saw both Octopuses (Common and Reef). The beach itself has several Green Sea turtles always present, a Spotted Eagle ray and Southern Stingrays that visit often. To the right have many shelves with great fish hiding under them including a very large Porcupine fish and a baby Nurse Shark. Out toward Turtle Bay Point is gets very dangerous with strong currents that can either drive you into the rocks so stay well clear of the shore. If the current is high, enjoy the ride but well away from the rocks.

Turtle Bay Beach is very soft and clean sand, but we saw very little there. Is a great beach to just float in the silky water. It is a bit wavy from the constant boat traffic just beyond the buoys.

Daily Log:

Tuesday, Nov 23rd

Arrived with smooth travel all the way. Speedy Ferry was very convenient from the St. Thomas airport to Virgin Gorda. Met Bonnie and Peter on Virgin Gorda. Dinner was Sharon made chili on pasta.

Wednesday, Nov 24th

Spring Bay snorkeling 24 fish identified the first day! Took care of local essentials shopping. Dinner was steaks on the grill with baked potatoes and peas.

Thursday, Nov 25th

Snorkeled Spring Bay and relaxed. Thanksgiving dinner was two BBQ chickens from M&M bakery that were delicious with Sharon's potato salad. Delicious.

Friday, Nov 26th

Went to Mountain trunk and snorkeled that wonderful reef. Dinner was at the Mine Shaft listening to Morris Mark. Fabulous evening indeed.

Saturday, Nov 27th

Very wavy so we rode the waves and relaxed. Lots of reading and Bonnie and Peter walked to the Baths. Dinner was Sharon made salmon paddies, bruschetta and homemade soup. Had a party for Chip, Keith and Betty. Was a very fun evening.

Sunday, Nov 28th

Still quite wavy but better. Relaxing day of reading and snorkeling Spring Bay. Bonnie and Peter hiked to the Baths. We drove up to Biras Creek to enjoy lunch at The Fat Virgin, which was delicious Chicken Roti and flying fish sandwich. This year we met an interesting and sweet couple from San Diego, Kari & Zorin, who were on their Honeymoon. We returned and visited Chip and Keith's house for a garden tour. The potted plants are lovely and the landscaping open and refreshing. Dinner left-overs.

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Monday, Nov 29th

Snorkeled Spring Bay and found a huge lobster that was the least shy lobster we have ever found. He almost posed for me. Dinner was at the Little Dix buffet, which is like nothing you have ever seen with lobster, crab, shrimp, prime rib, spare ribs and more. The desserts are wonderful too.

Tuesday, Nov 30th

My Birthday was celebrated taking a Double D sailing charter to Cooper Island where 19 new fish (to this year) were photographed. Sharon spotted our first Octopus on a walk-about near the rock at the Cooper island snorkel area. The count now stands at 93 fish photographed and identified. Dinner was wonderful potato latkachs and Farmer salad. It was a perfect birthday!

Wednesday, Dec 1st

Bonnie and Peter left for home. It was so nice to have significant time with them. I don't think I have had 2 consecutive hours with her since 1959 when she went off to American University in DC. We snorkeled Spring Bay but was rough and cloudy. Did laundry and met Sheila and Steve from Ithaca. Very interesting, nice folks. Lunch was at Bath & Turtle. Fish & Chips and Cheeseburger. Both very good. Dinner was soup.

Thursday, Dec 2nd

Snorkeled the far end of the Baths seeing many fish along the way. The water was a little rough but clear. Dinner Tuna Noodle casserole.

Friday, Dec 3rd

Attempted to snorkel Long Bay beach, but the road to it was TOTALLY washed out and impassable. That pristine beach and adjoining coral reef is now only accessible by boat. So we snorkeled the southern reef off Mountain Trunk Bay. It was spectacular. While there two Spotted Eagle Rays joined us and playfully swam around us. Got great pictures and even a movie of them. The reef is large and healthy. Bob managed to swim with the car keys in his pocket which, of course, fell out somewhere in the reef. It did afford us the opportunity to visit Nail Bay Resort and see Kasha and Cardel. We had stayed there at the Sundowner two years ago. Both remembered us well and we had a nice long conversation as we waited an hour for a new key to be driven up form Mahogany Car Rentals. Dinner Mine shaft

Saturday, Dec 4th

Snorkeled Spring Bay, heading north this time. It was nice with no dramatic fish seen. A relaxing day. We took a nice drive to find the Copper Mine and were surprised to see this island was not inhabited until the 1400's, less than a century before the Spanish arrived. In 100 years, the Arawaks settled the island and mined the native copper and farmed. Then the cannibalistic Caribs came and munched their way through the Arawaks, then the Spanish came and killed or enslaved the Caribs. Now it is a peaceful paradise! Timing is everything! Dinner was steaks on the grill. YUM.

Sunday, Dec 5th

Drove up to Gun Creek to catch the ferry to Bitter End Yacht Club to do the snorkel trip there. It took us to Mountain Point, which was mediocre. We did see a wonderful Jackknife fish though. The water was clear and not very wavy. Lunch was at the Bitter End beach bar and very good. At sunset we drove to the harbor (by Bucks) for live music. The amplified volume was cranked

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up SO HIGH that no one was in the beach bar for the pain of it. If you walked to the end of any one of the boat docks, it was tolerable and okay. We grabbed a pizza from the Bath & Turtle, which was also just okay. But eating it on our porch of our house was delightful. The evening was one of managing the fish pictures, reading and relaxing.

Monday, Dec 6th

Too wavy to snorkel but we floated and schmoozed for hours on the beach, first in the morning and again in the afternoon. Was very pleasant. Dinner was leftover steaks and Potato latkes. The evening was reading in the hammock until a sudden unexpected rain shower startled Bob out of his hammock with a laugh. Reading then moved to the open porch area with rain all around. There is nothing quite as soothing than a gentle rain in the tropics (when not accompanied by high winds!).

Tuesday, Dec 7th

It rained all day and threatened all day. A short snorkel on Spring Bay was followed by a long relaxing floating time in the clear Caribbean water. A HUGE yacht came by named the Ocean Victory that was fun to see. The folks on board would not tell us who owned it, but Google told us its specifications. We took care of some town business and read and relaxed this cool, wet day. Was relaxing. We packed for tomorrow's move to Caneel.

Wednesday, Dec 8th

Was too wavy for good snorkeling the morning, so read and packed. Went to the Little Dix beach grill for lunch, which was delicious. Took the Caneel ferry from Little Dix resort to Caneel. This was a VERY smooth way to re-enter US territory. Arriving at Caneel and were very glad to be there. This like Summer Camp for adults. It was too late for snorkeling, so went for a long, slow evening swim and float. Dinner was at the Caneel Beach Bar where Sharon had crab salad and I had grilled grouper. Both were excellent. We will sleep very well tonight for sure.

Thursday, Dec 9th

Snorkeled Hawksnest in the AM and it was cloudy and wavy but still saw a nice stingray and a Gray Triggerfish. Then went to Scott Beach where the water was calm and clear. Saw many fish and turtles including a Tophat, which is a new one for us. Met lots of nice people including Greg and Pam from Detroit with whom we talked for an hour floating in the bay. Dinner was at the Sun Dog Café in Mongoose Junction, which was just excellent. Then we wandered the little streets of Cruz Bay visiting shops.

Friday, Dec 10th

Snorkeled from Caneel to Scott. Great snorkel with many new fish including a Common Octopus just resting on a rock. Dinner was at the Cactus on the Blue, which was just excellent and reasonably priced. Heard an outstanding guitarist there named David Laabs who could play Led Zeppelin as well and Villa Lobos or Bach. Was wonderful enjoying wonderful Mexican food, listening to fine guitar music while watching the sailboat masts slowly swaying in the harbor.

Saturday, Dec 11th

Snorkeled Hawks Nest (the left rocks) in the AM because it was the first day it was calm. Wonderful snorkeling all the way to the end. We then re-snorkeled Scott all the way across it and to the point headed toward Caneel. Again, always with many fish sightings. We are up to 149

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fish and sea life photographed and identified this year (only 8 away from a new annual record). Dinner was at the Turtle Bay restaurant, which was expensive and mixed. The starters were poor and the meal very good. It was quite expensive.

Sunday, Dec 12th

We snorkeled from Caneel to Scott seeing many great fish. The water is crystal clear now with calm seas. Perfect. Dinner was at “Uncle Joe’s Barbeque”, which is two blocks south of the ferry dock on a busy corner with all sorts of town activity. Great ribs and fun people watching.

Monday, Dec 13th

Snorkeled Caneel again seeing a large Nurse Shark sleeping in the open about halfway to the point leading toward Paradise Beach. Then we snorkeled Scott back toward Caneel. Water was perfect.

On Monday evening there was the “Manager’s Cocktail Party” which is always a fun time to meet other guests. After it was over, we heard the baby grand piano playing and people singing, so wandered in to see what was going on. There, we found an impromptu music with a bunch of friends including a woman named Kimberly Kahan who we didn’t realize is with the Chelsea Opera in New York. It started with singing light jingles and her daughter belting out tunes from “Annie”. The pianist is an Italian friend we met two years ago who (it turns out) played the piano professionally in Italy and is also a Physicist. Then he nodded to Kimberly and she started belting out areas from Italian operas! When she hit those high notes my throat tighten and eyes got wet. Other guests like Renee and Debbie, both with fabulous voices. The concert went on for hours with the Italians asking for one after another and she knew them all! I need to get re-acquainted with opera. You couldn’t buy tickets to an event like that.

Tuesday, Dec 14th

Snorkeled Caneel first, then Scott all day covering both sides and the middle. Maria and Harvey snorkeled with Bob around the point to Turtle Bay and back again, as the current that sometimes is wicked was nil. The coral there is spectacular with deep canyons full of mature corals and millions of fish.

Dinner was with Maria and Harvey at the Sun Dog Café, which was delicious and the conversation delightful.

Wednesday, Dec 15th

Was a stormy night and very rough seas today so we floated for hours in the milky water in the morning and relaxed, read and wrote in this journal in the afternoon. Dinner was with Maria and Harvey at La Toppa restaurant in Cruz Bay. This is the best restaurant on the island.

Thursday, Dec 16th

Stormy morning, then somewhat clearer, but still very windy. Caneel was calm and Scott mostly calm. Water a bit milky. Swam twice with some good sightings. Dinner at the Caneel Beach Bar. Very good hamburgers. Spent much time just visiting with friends we will not see until next year. The fish and se-life count stands at 180 for the year, 23 more than last year. Now Sharon is worried I will be even more OCD next year!

Friday, Dec 17th: Traveling home. You can’t come back if you never leave.