

Trip Report:

Caneel Bay, St. John, USVI, June 2009 (Sharon's Birthday), 16 Jun – 24 Jun 2009

Caneel Bay: Caneel bay is a wonderful retreat that is both rustic and elegant. The rooms are Spartan and the staff warm, helpful and wonderful. The beaches and reefs are the amazing, among the best in the Virgin Islands, and it is all about the water.

St. John, USVI: This Island is still wonderfully wild, but not like it was ten years ago (but what is?). Cruz Bay is getting over-grown with a slot machine casino in Warfside Village is a blight. But most of the town remains delightful with Mongoose Junction with its art shops and boutiques always wonderful. Most of the island remains unchanged and ever so green.

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. Use the zoom only in very clear water and only when absolutely necessary (like when seeing a garden eel or Jawfish which are extremely shy). Try to shoot only on sunny days and limit the use of a flash, which tends to brighten all debris in the water. Almost always have the camera in "Macro" mode. This is only in focus under about 3 feet, but you should be that close anyway. It is useful to dive down and with camera ready, swim over a lump of coral ready to shoot. It also works to float very still and patiently over an active bunch of coral waiting for the opportunity to shoot. Remember that a half-trigger focuses, and the second half clicks the shutter. 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 adjustments. 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.

Summer versus Winter Observations: We typically visit the Caribbean in December. There are some interesting differences. The Blue Tangs are nearly black this time of year and sky blue in the winter. The Yellowfin Mojarra swims in schools now and art loners in the winter. The juvenile squid swim separate from the patents in the summer while in the winter they are a family. Clearly they hatch in the fall and are "teenagers" by the summer. We only saw young Puddingwives where in the winter we see the large adults. It could be they are out to sea now.

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. We could not recommend this establishment more highly.

"Roma Cafe" Delightful Italian fare at good prices. We enjoyed a Cesar salad, pizza and spaghetti – which was WAY more than we could eat. We have been enjoying this little gem for years and it consistently good.

"Caneel Monday Night Buffet" The all-you-can-eat Lobster alone makes this worth the \$55. Add to that osso bucco, prime rib, chicken, fish, shrimp, pasta and a large assortment of fresh fruit and you have a feast. The deserts are also plentiful.

“Caneel Beach Bar” Hamburgers are great as is the Fish & Chips and the salads. Be sure to ask the fries be well done or they will be soggy. Nice people working there as everywhere at Caneel.

“The Sugar Mill” on Caneel Bay property. The meal was good but very expensive. A \$69 lobster is exactly what you get at the Buffet for \$55 and a \$9 bottle of wine is \$50. The scenery was spectacular with St. Thomas sparkling across the water.

Beaches and Snorkel Sites:

Caneel Beaches:

Caneel: Great on both sides along the rocks with about 2/3 of the fish we saw among it's rocks.

Paradise: A great place to relax and snorkel both. Being in front of cottage 7, we spent more time here than anywhere else. Therefore, at least half of the fish photographed were from this beach and the rocks on either side. It is a small beach with excellent snorkeling on both sides. Directly out toward the buoys, we saw garden eels and Jawfish. The turtles here are so friendly they seem unfazed by pesky photographers. A very friendly Stingray comes right up to the shore to say hello.

Scott: This beach is very long with perfect sand. The grass is home to tilefish and turtles.

Hawks nest: Is wonderful snorkeling along the left side.

Turtle Bay: Did not snorkel this trip.

Daily Log:

Tuesday, Jun 16th

Arrived after an easy flight in the pouring rain. By the time we arrived at Caneel Bay, the sky was opening up and it was beautiful. Our room (7C) on Paradise beach, is spectacular overlooking Paradise Beach. We snorkeled paradise around cottage point and back to Scott beach seeing many wonderful fish. No camera this first time out since it was cloudy and pics would be dull. Saw a HUGE Mutton Snapper, Peacock Flounder, Large Bar Jacks feeding on the silversides and the usual array of many other familiar fish friends. The best was a close view of the “Mystery Fish” from last year, which with better sighting, is clearly a Sand Tilefish.

Dinner was at the Beach Bar and was good. We read only for a short time, falling to sleep by 10:30 (which is very early for us).

Wednesday, Jun 17th

We slept until 8:15!! We enjoyed the buffet breakfast at Caneel, which is wonderful with fabulous juices, eggs to any style, delicious pancakes and waffles, cereals, heaps of fresh fruit, pastries, bacon, sausages, and on and on. Wonderful. Then we snorkeled from Scotts beach, across paradise beach and to Cottage Point and back. We saw turtles, sand tilefish, barred Hamlet, French Angelfish, banded Angelfish, Surgeons and so many others it would be take a page to list.

Then we snorkeled Caneel beach starting up the right side, then across to the raft. We saw many fish, but the most amazing sight was the conch. It was like a convention – hundreds of them across the entire floor of the bay. We also saw a Southern Stingray with a Bar Jack tagging close behind.

The afternoon “Tea” was fun meeting interesting people from Massachusetts as we enjoyed delicious afternoon treats. Dinner was at “La Tapa” in Cruz Bay, which is the best restaurant on the island.

Thursday, Jun 18th

Snorkeled three beaches today: Hawks Nest, Scott and Paradise beaches. Saw so many fish it is hard to know where to begin. The water is so clear it is absolutely amazing.

Dinner was at the Sugar Mill. The food was good but extremely overpriced. The view was beautiful.

Friday, Jun 19th

Snorkeled Caneel long and hard in the AM, then floated for an hour or more with the couple we had met at dinner last night, Beth and Bernie. She is an artist (painter) and he is a High School math teacher. After resting a bit, we snorkeled Paradise beach and saw another turtle, flounder and more. We wandered the stores at Mongoose Junction, and then wandered downtown. “St John Ruth” was not in but we chatted with the other workers in her wonderful little store: St. John Spice. Dinner was at the Roma Café that is always nice.

Saturday, Jun 20th

Spent the entire day at Paradise Beach. Snorkeled all the way to Caneel and back. Dinner was again at the Caneel Beach Restaurant.

Sunday, Jun 21st

Snorkeled the left bank of Caneel seeing a Nassau Grouper, huge Porcupine fish and more. We then snorkeled the right side of Caneel beach with Beth and floated with Bernie. All afternoon was spent relaxing on Paradise beach where we mostly floated with some snorkeling too. Met our neighbors from Delaware whose son is a singer, Ian Walsh. Dinner was again at the Caneel Beach Restaurant.

Monday, Jun 22nd

Sharon’s Birthday!!! We had a wonderful day on Paradise Beach. Caneel brought Sharon a bottle of Champaign and fresh squeezed OJ so we sat on the beach sipping on mimosas after our first long snorkel toward Caneel and back. It was a totally relaxing day with many short snorkeling expeditions and even more floating in the clear azure sea. There was the manager’s cocktail party that was nice followed by the famous Caneel Buffet with all you can eat lobster, osso bucco, prime rib, several fish, pasta and all the trimmings. Nice Birthday party!

Tuesday, Jun 23rd

After breakfast, we walked barefoot to Caneel beach and swam all the way back to Paradise beach, starting at the raft where we ran into two new friends Diana and Jimmy. We then swam along the right side rocks all the way. On our beach we met a very nice family from Cleveland with whom we chatted as we floated in the warm Caribbean sun. It is one of the delights about Caneel – you are constantly meeting nice people here.

Wednesday, Jun 24th

Another perfect day in paradise... but sadly is the day we are flying home. The Caneel staff waved to us as the ferry pulled out of the bay. We look so forward to returning in December.