

Overview:

We took our first trip to Dominica in March 2005, and Darren and I agreed that the diving here was the best diving we have done to date in comparison to Grand Cayman (North and East End), Little Cayman, Belize (Lighthouse Atoll), Hawaii (Kona), Bonaire, Cozumel, Utila and the Bahamas. The most outstanding feature of diving here is the breath-taking color on the reefs, which are literally covered with large sponges and corals of every color imaginable, most with crinoids growing in and around them. A wide angle lens is a must here for photographers. The visibility was not great while we were there; while you could see about 50 feet on most dives, it was not extremely clear as there seemed to be a good bit of particulate floating in the water. Despite this, we still were awestruck by the breathtaking colors here.



We dove with Nature Island Divers (NID) in the southern village of Soufriere and stayed at a nearby cottage owned by the dive shop. We found NID to be among the most accommodating dive operations we have experienced (they tried to go to the sites we requested each day and they took us out on multiple night boat dives, even with just the two of us as customers). Also, NID is located on the Soufriere/ScottsHead Bay, which offers the best diving on the island. All of our dives were conducted in and around the bay, so boat rides were usually between 5-15 minutes and we always returned to the shop between dives for our surface interval. Our stay was limited to one week, so we did not explore the interior of the island, which is known for great hiking and beautiful waterfalls.

Travel:

Our trip was Saturday to Saturday. We are very fortunate to be able to fly from Charlotte as we can make the trip in a single day, unlike people from many other parts of the country who have to spend the night in San Juan. We flew US Air from Charlotte to Antigua, then Caribbean Star (US Air partner) from Antigua to the Melville Hall airport on Dominica. We made the connections both ways and all our bags arrived with us. Try to avoid Antigua if at all possible – there is no international in-transit area, so you must go through immigration and customs, even when your bags are supposed to be checked through, then you have to go check in at the Caribbean Star or US Air counter and go back through departure screening area from outside the airport. Needless to say, all of these processes require waiting in long lines. Also, the airport itself is hot, crowded and dirty. On the positive side, when our return flight was very late leaving Melville Hall, the Antigua airport attendants were very helpful and walked us through customs and baggage claim to make sure we made our flight back home (which was, of course, then delayed 90 minutes). The Melville Hall airport on Dominica is very small and could definitely use a good cleaning and a fresh coat of paint.

There is no jet service into Dominica at this time; Caribbean Star and the other carriers operate large prop planes here.

Travel from the airport via taxi-van to Soufriere was arranged for us through NID. If you are prone to motion sickness, definitely take some Bonine before this ride, as it is like a long, slow roller coaster on a very narrow road with hairpin turns across the mountainous interior of the island. It takes approximately an hour and a half to reach Soufriere from the airport. That being said, it is truly a beautiful ride through of this mountainous rain forest. Our ride down to Soufriere was quite interesting, as our van picked up and dropped off numerous people along the way, in addition to delivering vegetables and sodas here and there. Cost per-person was \$60 US round-trip for the taxi-van.

Town/Lodging/Dining:



Soufriere is a small fishing village without much in the way of accommodations or restaurants. It is located near the southwestern end of the island, about a mile from the last village on the island, ScottsHead. The town itself is not particularly attractive, with make-shift shacks and abandoned or neglected buildings on every street, and chickens and dogs freely roaming around town. There are no sandy beaches as the shoreline is composed of smooth stones. The closest town within walking biking distance is ScottsHead, and it was very similar. By and

large, we did not find the indigenous people in this area to be overly friendly to tourists, though there were some exceptions. This part of the island is not known is not a tourist destination, and many people stay in hotels in the larger city of Rousseau about 20 minutes north of Soufriere. However, since we were here to dive, we chose to stay in Soufriere and would definitely do so again.

We stayed in the upper apartment at NID's Gallette Cottage on the bay. The cottage was nice, similar to a small lake cabin here in the States, with a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen and den, and a covered porch overlooking the ocean. There is no A/C, but we never needed it. The windows and the louvered panels in the bedroom and den allowed for plenty of cool air. Photos are included in the slideshow and are also available on the NID website. The only downside is that the road between Soufriere and ScottsHead runs about 5 feet behind the cottage, so you do get some traffic noise and the waves at night can also be quite loud, so you may want to bring earplugs (we used them). The dive shop provided us with bicycles to travel back and forth from the shop to the cottage, a trip of about 4-5 minutes.



There is not much choice when it comes to purchasing food or dining out. The taxi-van stopped at a grocery store in Rosseau on the way to Soufriere and we stocked up on cereal, bread, milk and some canned goods for the week. There is one small mini-market in

Soufriere, but the offerings there are quite limited. There are two restaurants in Soufriere that we frequented almost daily. One is Tony's – a small place where you can get tasty chicken or fish with fries or rice for \$10 EC or \$12 EC, respectively (\$4 or \$5 U.S.) We got take-out plates from him almost every day for lunch and took them back to the cottage to eat. We also ordered sandwiches from Bobby's (a.k.a. Café Rendezvous) almost every day and refrigerated them for dinner after our night dive. He makes great ham & cheese sandwiches with fresh cucumbers, lettuce & tomato and a tasty sauce. On the morning we left, we had an

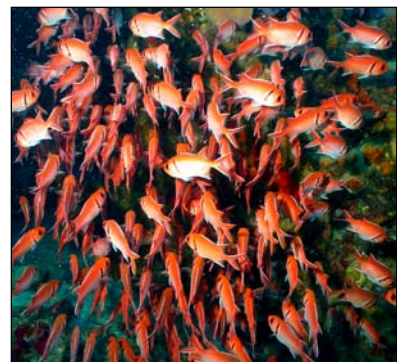


excellent omelette breakfast at Tony's. There is also a restaurant called the Rainforest Bistro away from the center of town, but reservations are required and we did not check it out. Two fellow divers did go there for lunch one day and said that it was good. We ate dinner at Chez-Wen in ScottsHead on Sunday because the places in Soufriere were not open. The food was pretty good – chicken or fish with rice, beans & potatoes. A good bit more expensive than Tony's though (\$20 EC for chicken and \$30 EC for fish plate).

The weather could not have been more perfect during our trip. As it was dry season, the weather was sunny with occasional clouds each day but no rain other than a very light shower during the night that we arrived. Bugs were not a problem except for a few mosquitoes on the night that it rained; other than that, we didn't see a single one and didn't use insect repellent.

Diving:

We were most impressed by the color on the reefs and the large sponges and corals. The dive sites consisted of walls and pinnacles for the deeper dives, and scattered coral heads in the shallower areas. There were some macro critters, but not as many here as other places like Bonaire. We found one juvenile seahorse and one adult, but the frogfish were nowhere to be seen on this trip – they seem to be in hiding at this time. We didn't see any large animals (no turtles or sharks, etc.) but there were schools of small fish, and always large schools of blackbar soldierfish in the swim-throughs at ScottsHead Pinnacle. Among the most common fish we saw during the day were parrotfish, damselfish, drums, chromis, longsnout butterflyfish, trumpetfish, trunkfish, scorpionfish, grunts and squirrelfish. We saw very few angelfish, and only occasional butterflyfish other than the longsnout. On the night dives, we saw numerous lobsters and crabs of many varieties and occasionally squid; no octopus. Our favorite divesites included ScottsHead Pinnacle, Condo, Crater's Edge and the Abyss.



Visibility here reminded us of Utila – a good bit of particulate in the water, especially near the reefs, limiting visibility to about 50' on most dives. The water temperature was a

consistent 78F for all day dives. I was fine all week in a full-length diveskin (adding a 2/3 mm wetsuit for night dives), though I did find myself getting cold on the last day. Darren was comfortable in his 3 mm wetsuit.



NID has 3 covered pontoon boats (1 large and two medium-sized), allowing for very smooth rides to the dive sites, most of which are between 5 and 15 minutes from the dock. The divemasters set up our gear each day and took our gear between the boat and the dive shop, which is located just a short walk across the street from the dock. Our main divemasters during the week were Wefee and Oscar. Tony took us on one night dive and Simon dove with us on our last day. Selwyn served as our boat captain

most days. All of these guys were great – they let us go at our own pace but also pointed out interesting fish, critters, etc.

All photos were taken with a Canon A40 digital camera and Ikelite YS-90DX strobe. Wide angle shots were taken with a Sea&Sea 16mm lens (mounted externally to the housing). Macro shots were taken in the camera's macro mode (no accessory lens).

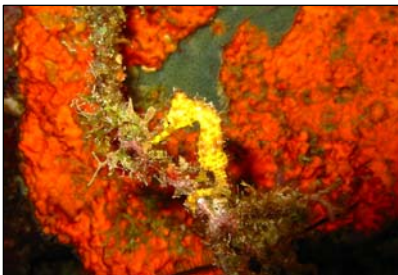
Sunday:

We started the day with a short drift dive at *ScottsHead Drop-Off*. There was a nice small wall here with lots of color. Interesting sightings here included drums, scorpionfish, a yellowtail eel, a sharptail eel, a lettuce slug and a school of squirrelfish. Our second dive took us to *L'Abym*, featuring a pretty wall at the beginning of the dive. There was a lot of life here, including a bright yellow trumpetfish hanging out in a school of grunts, more scorpionfish and typical reef fish, several white-spotted filefish, a spotted eel and a sharptail eel.



Monday:

We went to *ScottsHead Pinnacle* for our first dive – a fantastic dive with great swimthrough caves filled with schools of blackbar soldierfish and grunts. The sponge and coral growth on the pinnacle was amazing – abounding with bright clusters of tube sponges, barrel sponges and elephant ear sponges. We saw a huge fireworm, a nimble spray crab hiding behind an urchin, a large crab sitting in a sponge, and a variety of other typical fish. Next, we dove *Champagne*, a shallower dive, where we found a tiny blue nudibranch in the sandy area as well as a flounder. One interesting sighting was a juvenile drum doing his figure-eights beside a spotted eel. The hot water coming up from the underground volcanic vent was neat, but the “bubbles” for which the sight is names were not nearly as prolific as we had anticipated. We made our first night dive of the week at *Tousab* – and this was definitely the best night dive of the trip. Darren puts this dive in his all-time top-five Caribbean dives. This dive was an absolute



explosion of color and critters – we saw two conger eels, spotted and sharptail eels, huge crabs of many varieties, spiny lobsters and a slipper lobster, Florida corallimorphs, and several orange ball corallimorphs. I found a juvenile yellow seahorse silhouetted against an orange sponge along the wall, and we finished the dive with two squid hanging around us in the shallows.

Tuesday:

The day began at *Dangleben's Pinnacle*. Large sponges in all colors and sizes were prolific here. We saw a couple of eels foraging for food, a small burrfish, schools of creole wrasse, a juvenile blue tang, and several flamingo tongue snails. Our second dive was conducted at the *Abyss* – a beautiful sheer wall covered with sponges and corals. Sightings here included schools of grunts and squirrelfish, a juvenile French angelfish, several adult drums and more flamingo tongues. A third dive in the afternoon went to *Point Guynard*, a shallow dive with coral head and a spur and groove formation. This was probably our least favorite dive, because the topography paled in comparison to the deeper dives. We saw a tiny juvenile drum here and a squid, as well as a number of lobsters hiding in a cave. There were also some pretty yellow-green tube sponge formations in the sandy shallows.



Wednesday:

We headed to *Crater's Edge* for our first morning dive. This was a steep wall with a pinnacle, covered everywhere with all types of sponges and gorgonians as well as sheet and plate coral. A school of black margate was hanging out in a deep cave, and we saw eels, drums and many other fish here – a very nice dive. Next, went to *Coral Garden South*, a shallower dive with coral heads and mounds. There were numerous sponges here and the fish and eels were very active foraging for food. We saw more macro critters here than normal, including a nice colorful dive featuring lots of life and activity. Basket stars were prevalent here, and we saw both spotted and goldentail eels, spiny lobsters and a slipper lobster, and all sorts of crabs – both hard-shell and hermit, including a pair of really strange looking decorator crabs that looked like they were covered in leaves.



Thursday:

We went to *Condo* for our first dive, a great pinnacle starting from a floor of about 60', which we circled around at various depths. We experienced some moderate current here. This was a really pretty dive with color everywhere on the walls and tons of gorgonians – beautiful sponge and coral formations were the highlight of this site. We saw a group of 5 juvenile drums, numerous reef fish, and schools of soldierfish. Next we went to *Tousab*, where we noticed lots of Christmas-tree worms and a number of scorpionfish and drums. Schools of



grunts, soldierfish and blue chromis were swimming about here. Our night dive was conducted at *Dangleben's Pinnacle*. We saw a number of fish as well as many crabs and lobsters, including 2 adult slipper lobsters and one juvenile, and numerous basket stars.

Friday:



We started the day with a dive from *ScottsHead Pinnacle* to *West Bank* with Simon, who found an orange see horse for us (but he was burrowed too far into the coral to get a photo). Many schools of fish were feeding here, including brown chromis, creole wrasse, soldierfish and grunts – it was neat hearing them clicking as they ate. Unusual sightings included a tiny juvenile trunkfish and a mushroom scorpionfish. We went back through soldierfish caves and swam through the schools of soldierfish and grunts. We ended our week at

Missing Link. First we swam to Scottshead Pinnacle to see the orange seahorse again. Fish were abundant on this dive and we noticed a lot of macro life, including arrow crabs and cleaner shrimp everywhere.