

General:

This was our second trip to Dominica. We had such a great time in March 2005 that we re-booked the trip for March 2006. We wondered if we would be as impressed with the diving the second time around and I can say that it was every bit as good, if not better, in 2006. Simon and rest of the DMs at Nature Island Dive in Soufriere accommodated our requests for specific dive sites as much as possible, and we got to visit a couple of new sites in addition to some old favorites. You simply couldn't ask for a better crew to dive with – Simon, Wefee, Oscar, Tony and Selwyn are all wonderful. Be advised that they do operate on “island time” - not really a big deal for us since we're on a dive vacation and all we're doing is diving, but it could be frustrating if you are trying to stick to a tight schedule for some reason. Since people from some of the resorts away from Soufriere book dives with NID, you often end up waiting for them to arrive – sometimes half an hour late, then get geared up, etc.

For more details about the dive operation at Nature Island Dive and the cottage we rented from them, see the 2005 trip report. There are also photos of the cottage, dive shop and Soufriere in the 2005 slide show.

The weather was great during our stay every day except for Thursday, when it rained on and off all day. For the remainder of the week we had beautiful skies with lots of sun – mostly sunny every day with no rain during the daytime. Bugs are not a problem here, we never used insect repellent at the cottage or while diving. The only time we used it (as a precaution) was when we had dinner one evening at an outdoor restaurant in a heavily wooded area.

The water temperature was noticeably colder this year than last year. Simon told us that last year had been unseasonably warm and that the temperatures this year were more normal. I wore my diveskin and 3/2 wetsuit on all dives and still got chilled on some dives.

Note: Since Soufriere is isolated at the southern end of the island and lacks grocery stores, convenience stores, etc., we have prepared a “Soufriere Survival Guide” and included it at the end of this report for those planning to book a trip here. It is a compilation of tips and a list of things to bring to make your stay in Soufriere as easy and enjoyable as possible.

Travel:

We again flew from Charlotte to Antigua on US Air, then from Antigua to Dominica on Caribbean Star. This year, our bags were tagged all the way through to Dominica, but we were advised by US Air in Charlotte to go to baggage claim in Antigua anyway to make sure we didn't need to collect our bags and re-check them with Caribbean Star. We went through immigration in Antigua to get to baggage claim, and found that our bags had indeed been routed on to Caribbean Star, so we were escorted back through Immigration to the in-transit Caribbean Star counter. This is a very nice improvement to have the bags checked all the way through and be able to avoid Immigration and go through as in-transit passengers in Antigua.

On the way back, our Caribbean Star flight from Dominica to Antigua was cancelled and we had to catch a later flight to Antigua, leaving us stranded at the Dominica airport (small, hot, remote) for 5 hours waiting for the next flight to Antigua. Our schedule was changed to spend the night in Antigua, then catch an early flight to San Juan on Sunday morning with a connection to Charlotte in the afternoon. All seemed okay until we got to San Juan and discovered that all flights to Charlotte that afternoon were overbooked and we did not have confirmed seats on the US Air flight that Caribbean Star had booked us on. After visiting both airline counters several times, the best that we could arrange was to be first on the stand-by list for the first flight back to Charlotte. We made it onto the plane at the last possible minute and it was filled to capacity with no empty seats.

On both of our trips to Dominica, the Caribbean Star flight from Dominica to Antigua has been very late (or, in this case, cancelled) – I would strongly advise taking the morning flight from Dominica to Antigua to avoid missing your flight back to the U.S. on Saturday. In fact, I had scheduled the early flight but US Air called with a flight change and implied that the early flight had been cancelled, but we were informed at the Caribbean Star counter in Dominica that the flight had run that morning. Lesson learned.

Lodging/Dining:

Again, see last year's report for more details. We were quite happy with the upper unit of the NID cottage and really enjoyed sitting on the porch overlooking the bay while we were there. It is very simple and peaceful – no phone, radio, TV, or computer – a nice change of pace. The upper unit has wooden louveres in the bedroom and living room which open out to the porch, making the unit very light, open and breezy. Another couple was staying in the lower unit this year so we checked it out. We did not like it nearly as much – it seemed dark and closed-in – not open and airy like the upper unit.

We did try two new restaurants this time – the Sulphur Springs restaurant and the Forest Bistro – both up the hill from Soufriere. You need to call ahead to Sulphur Springs to place an order (Merlin will call from the shop). We did this for lunch one day and biked there – it is a pretty steep ride all the way up the hill but the food was good and plentiful (chicken and assorted vegetables). The Forest Bistro is an open air restaurant also up the hill from Soufriere. Reservations are required here also. It is deep in the woods and far down a very bumpy road – you need van transportation, especially if you go at night. We went with the other couple from the cottage. It was nice – multiple courses including bread, soup, meat and veggies, and dessert. For everyday standard meals, we again frequented Bobby's for sandwiches (one day he made really great burgers for us) and Tony's. We got take-out chicken and rice from Tony's as well as ribs, and Darren really liked the fish soup there.

Diving:

The consistently great topography, vivid colors, and large sponge and coral formations are what sets Dominica apart from the other dive locations we have visited and keeps it at

the top of our list for favorite Caribbean diving. The only contender of the places we have been would be Little Cayman. (we have been to Grand Cayman, Little Cayman, the Bahamas, Bonaire, Belize-Lighthouse Reef, Cozumel, Grand Turk, Roatan, Utila).

There are conflicting opinions from divers posting on the dive boards about the quality of diving in Dominica. I think it is important to clarify that we dove the southern sites in Scott's Head Bay and around on the Atlantic side in the Martinique Channel at the southern end of the island. We have not been to any of the central or northern sites on Dominica, which may not be similar to the Scott's Head Bay area. A good description of the southern sites can be found on the Fort Young Hotel website: <http://www.divefortyoung.com/desfous.html>. (Note: Fort Young is supposed to be a nice hotel, but it is in Rosseau – meaning that the boat rides to the southern sites are quite a bit longer and they don't do all their diving at the southern sites.)

NID uses pontoon boats which have plenty of space (especially the larger boat). Most of the sites can be reached in 5-15 minutes from the dock, and the boat typically returns to the shop between dives. More details on the NID operation can be found in last year's report (Dominica 2005). Below is a day-by-day description of the dive sites we visited.

Sunday:

We began the trip with a drift dive at *Coral Gardens South*. The topography here consists of coral heads and mounds without a vertical wall, but there are many pretty sponge formations in all colors as well as a good bit of fish life. Here we saw a spotted drum, a juvenile tang, a spotted eel under an orange sponge, and a school of jacks. We also saw sponges spawning – I wouldn't have known this if Simon hadn't told us – they were releasing a whitish substance into the water. Next, we dove *L'Abym Central*. The view down into the deep over the canyon wall was neat, and the wall was vibrant with lots of color. Here we saw both a large turtle and a small turtle on the wall. We did an afternoon drift dive to *Suburbs* on the Atlantic side. This was an awesome dive with nice current pulling us along in some places. The wall here was great – and we saw schools of creole wrasse and silvery fish swimming up over the top of the wall, a couple of golden tail eels, and a small banded lobster.

Monday:

We started the morning at *West Bank* – a beautiful wall bursting with color with tons of deep-water gorgonians, elephant ear sponges, and huge barrel sponges. We saw schooling blackbar soldierfish, a rare web burrfish and a huge snapper. Next we did the obligatory dive at *Champagne* because some other guests wanted to go there. It is a so-so site – very overrated in our opinion – mostly fairly drab coral heads along the sandy bottom. We did find some macro life here – Pederson shrimp, red-banded shrimp, and a slender filefish, as well as some spotted morays hanging out. We enjoyed a fantastic night dive at *Tousab* (going toward the village from the mooring) – the colors on the wall here really pop at night. We saw 2 spotted eels, over 20 lobsters including slipper lobsters and yellow-banded varieties, a number of orange ball corallimorphs, and lots of pretty basket stars. We didn't see any crabs, octopi or squid. The most interesting sighting was a scorpionfish who was feeding – a small trunkfish was swimming near him

and just after the scorpionfish had ingested another small fish he sucked the trunkfish into his mouth and then blew him back out, after which the little guy just swam away.

Tuesday:

This was quite possibly the best dive day we have ever experienced. We went out by ourselves with Simon to the Atlantic side to try a dive at *Mountain Top*, a sea mount a bit further out from the reef. The mooring ball was gone, but we found the site and jumped in amid some fairly heavy swells. Once underwater, the current was fine. Here we saw two gigantic barracuda following a school of fish and another that apparently shadowed us for a while without my knowledge (I was bringing up the rear and never noticed him). A huge sea turtle also checked us out and ultimately swam up to within a few feet of us before I took a picture and the strobe scared him away. The top of the pinnacle contained numerous large (probably 15') barrel sponges that had been shaped into curvy works of art by the current over time. As we were doing our safety stop at the end of the dive, a large school of bar jacks swam nearby. We did our surface interval on the boat in the bay near Tousab, then went to *Scott's Head Drop-Off* for our second morning dive. There were lots of great sponge and coral formations on the wall here – it is almost sensory overload. We saw schooling soldierfish here and the most massive round barrel sponge I have ever seen. We also found some type of unusual small shrimp or crab hiding in the bottom of a tube sponge at the end of the dive – we couldn't identify him in the creature ID book back at the shop. The night dive at the *Wreck at Champagne* rounded out a perfect dive day. We found 3 seahorses (one on the mooring line, one on the wreck, and a tiny baby floating on top of the water at the end of the dive), 2 spotted morays poking their heads out of pipes on the wreck, 2 hermit crabs, 2 decorator crabs, numerous arrow crabs and brittle starfish, a crab with really long arms (not sure what variety), a pair of flying guynards, and a small flounder with spots on his back that we still can't identify. An awesome day!

Wednesday:

We started the morning at *Scott's Head Pinnacle*, where we saw lots of schooling blackbar soldierfish, great sponges and corals – especially in the large swim-through here. We found a juvenile trunkfish, a mushroom scorpionfish, 2 slipper lobsters, and a cool big crab hiding inside a sponge. Next, we dove at *Condo*. This is a large cylindrical rock formation that is only about 60' deep with its top at about 15' – you swim around it at several different depths and there are some neat tunnels and swim-throughs to enjoy. There is one particularly great section that is covered with thick gorgonians and sponges of every type and color imaginable. We saw a queen angel here (unusual for this area), as well as another large crab down inside a large sponge. For the night dive, we went back to *Tousab* and followed the wall in the other direction (away from town). While this dive was good, we enjoyed going in the other direction more because there were some areas that didn't have much color or life on them here. We saw a number of king crabs, 4-5 lobsters, basket stars, lots of brittle stars, orange ball corallimorphs, and a couple of spotted eels. A large school of silvery fish swam above us and flew by very quickly.

Thursday:

It rained off and on all day Thursday, making it our most uncomfortable day of the trip – we stayed cold, especially between dives. We did *Scott's Head Drop-Off* again and found a juvenile French angelfish, an octopus, a chain moral eel, and other reef fish. One section of the wall was fantastic – covered with corals and sponges. We also found a lobster and a balloonfish hanging out in a small cave. Next, we dove *Dangleben's Pinnacle to Coral Gardens North*. The topography here isn't as good as other dives, but we did see a large school of horse-eye jacks swim by very fast, schools of sergeant majors and creole wrasse, and lots of reef fish in the shallow areas. We also saw a flounder, a filefish, a balloonfish, a number of spotted moray eels and a juvenile tang. We had a great night dive at *Condo*. There was some current, especially between the mooring and the actual site. We found 4 different types of eels: white-spotted, conger, sharptail and chestnut. We also saw a decorator crab with a very large piece of purple sponge on his back, a juvenile trunkfish, lobsters, red shrimp and banded cleaner shrimp, lots of basket stars and brittle stars, orange ball corallimorphs, fireworms, and numerous urchins

Friday:

The weather was clear and sunny again on Friday – a beautiful day to end the trip. We started with a nice dive on the *Wreck at Champagne*. Lots of cool critters here, including some anemone shrimp, an eel peeking out of one of the pipes on the wreck, a juvenile drum, a juvenile queen angelfish, a pipefish, arrow crabs, and a cut-out in a sponge that appeared to have been dug out by a hermit crab. We found 2 baby (1") juvenile French angelfish in 2 separate coral heads in the shallows, and a flying guynard with his wings spread. To close out our trip, we did a drift dive at *Village*. This was a nice dive with pretty sponges and coral formations. We saw a large school of small-medium size barracuda as well as schooling creole wrasse and grunts. There was a big barracuda swimming off the wall, and we spotted numerous king crabs here.

Soufriere Survival Guide:

This guide is intended to help prepare divers who plan to stay in Soufriere (or Scotts Head) and dive with Nature Island Dive. The dive sites are awesome, but the amenities in the Scott's Head Bay area are very limited, so it is best to be prepared. First, there is no grocery store in Soufriere. There is a small "convenience" store – but if you are expecting to shop there for groceries, you will end up eating candy, chips and canned mackerel in tomato sauce (no kidding).

If you are hungry for dinner when you arrive in Dominica on Saturday, have the van driver stop and get some b-b-q chicken along the way in Rosseau, unless you want to "cook" when you arrive at the cottage. Also, stop by the bakery in Rosseau to pick up bread, if there is any left.

You will have very limited eating options on Sundays: nothing – and I mean nothing – is open in Soufriere. You can bike or walk down to Chez Wen in Scott's Head for a meal. We did that in 2005 and the food was okay – fish or chicken with rice, etc. Other fellow divers seem to really like Chez Wen, but we weren't that impressed. This year, we biked

to Scott's Head and bought b-b-q chicken from a woman who was grilling chicken legs beside the road – they were very good and we had them for a couple of meals with rice that we brought from home.

There are 2 restaurants in Soufriere that are open most of the rest of the week. There is Tony's – you can get fried chicken or fried fish with French fries or rice for lunch or dinner Monday-Saturday. He makes ribs once or twice a week and fish soup once or twice a week, as well. Tony's is also open for breakfast, but not early enough if you're doing morning dives. We like to have breakfast there on Saturday morning before we leave Dominica – great omelets, bacon, toast, etc. Then there is Bobby's – right across from NID. Sometimes Bobby is open, sometimes he's not. He makes sandwiches (ham, cheese, egg, tuna) and sometimes he makes hamburgers. His food is actually very good – it's probably our favorite in Soufriere. Then there are the 2 restaurants up the hill (mentioned earlier in lodging/dining section). Merlin from the shop can call ahead for a take-out or dine-in order at Sulphur Springs – be prepared for a long bike ride up the hill. Also, Merlin will make the reservations for Forest Bistro (also noted earlier) and she will arrange for the van to drive you from the cottage and back home. Food in Soufriere is very reasonable – it is lack of choice rather than cost that is the issue.

Take advantage of the grocery stop in Rosseau on your trip in from the airport – the van routinely stops for guests to do their shopping here. If you don't, you would have to miss half a day of diving to go back to Rosseau for groceries. Here's what we buy at the grocery store in Rosseau: i) breakfast cereal, ii) milk, iii) crackers, iv) cookies, v) Spaghetti-O's (in case of emergency), and vi) bread/rolls. You can also purchase beer or wine, though you can find that in Soufriere as well. Here's what we bring with us from home: i) coffee, ii) Equal/Splenda, iii) Creamora, iv) Crystal Light, v) peanut butter (never leave home without it), vi) nutrition bars, vii) packaged rice mixes, viii) instant oatmeal, ix) trail mix and x) Ziploc bags.

Several places in Soufriere sell bottled soft drinks, fruit juice, and beer, including Bobby's, Tony's and the convenience store, but there are no diet sodas sold anywhere. You can get wine from Tony's as well, though there is not much selection if you want to buy a bottle. You can get bottled water at any of these places if you prefer that to the tap water, though we usually just drank the tap water (especially with Crystal Light). You can also get candy and chips at Bobby's or the convenience store. We were unable to find any fresh fruit in Soufriere or Scott's Head, and I don't recall if there is any at the grocery store in Rosseau.

If you think you might need any incidental items like OTC medication, band-aids, personal grooming items, etc. – bring them with you. Also, bring all the batteries you will need. If you need batteries for dive lights, the dive shop can get them for you, but they will be expensive. I don't know if you'd be able to get spare batteries for cameras or other portable devices – I wouldn't count on it. If you want to read, bring books/magazines with you – you won't be able to purchase any in Soufriere.

Also, definitely take advantage of the bikes that NID offers to guests who stay in the cottage. It makes the trips back and forth between the shop and the cottage very easy – about 4-5 minutes each way. We bring small day packs to transport camera, snacks, etc. back and forth.

Finally, as mentioned in our 2005 report – take Bonine for the ride from the airport to the cottage if you are at all prone to motion sickness. This is a very long (1.5 hour) twisting, turning, winding, hilly, long, mountainous ride across the island.