

## Bragg Trip to St. Maarten, Saba, and St. Kitts Nov. 13 – 23, 2013

We were joined on this trip by our friends Sharon and Jeff Mouton. Sharon and I worked together at Ernst & Young back in the late 80's/early 90's and their kids (Katie and Ryan) are the same ages as Victoria and Andrea. In fact, we shared a nanny for a couple of years when Victoria and Katie were babies. Jeff has been diving since he was a kid growing up in California and has been on a number of live-aboard dive trips. Sharon has been diving for several years but this was her first live-aboard trip.

The flight times into the island of St. Maarten (north-eastern Caribbean) dictated an overnight stay in Miami, FL. We arrived early on a drizzly, overcast afternoon, checked into a hotel near the airport, and then grabbed a taxi down to South Beach. There we strolled along Ocean Blvd enjoying the art deco architecture of the many hotels built there in the 1930's and doing some people watching. While the rain let up for us, the number of folks out was definitely lower than it might have been. We walked up to one of the pedestrian shopping areas and did some window shopping – neither Sharon or I were tempted to buy the sequined platform & stiletto heeled shoes that were displayed in several shop windows! Some window shopping at local real estate offices convinced us all that area real estate was exceedingly pricey; especially those with waterfront locations. We enjoyed a casual dinner at a Cuban restaurant (think chicken w/ rice & beans) and topped things off with a stop at a gelato place before heading back to the hotel.



The next morning we continued onto the island of St. Maarten which is divided into two parts: one governed by the French and one governed by the Dutch. It is a very friendly governance situation with no official borders between the areas. Turns out the Dutch King and Queen were also going to be on the island – luckily we missed the major closedown of roads for their arrival by just a few minutes. We landed on the Dutch side but took a taxi to our hotel on the French side, arriving in the late afternoon.

We stayed at the Hotel L'esplande which is a lovely little place on a hillside overlooking the Caribbean Sea. For dinner, we walked down the hill into the town of Grand Case where we enjoyed a bbq dinner at one of the LoLos -- local outdoor picnic-tabled place to eat. The next day, Friday, after a delicious breakfast of quiche and croissants delivered in a picnic basket from the best French bakery on the



island (which happens to be located on the Dutch side) we took it very easy ... spent several hours beachside under the shade of an umbrella with occasional forays into the sea to cool off, grabbed a late lunch poolside at our hotel, and generally veg'd. That evening another walk into Grand Case for dinner resulted in dining on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor outdoor terrace of an Italian place.

On Saturday, after another French pastry breakfast and some poolside reading, we checked out and took a taxi into Phillipsburg (back on the Dutch side) where the Caribbean Explorer II, our home for the next week, was moored. We dropped off our mound of luggage dockside and then strolled through the myriad of jewelry and souvenir stores that is typical for cruise ports in the Caribbean.

We boarded the boat late Saturday afternoon and met up with our crew and fellow passengers for the next week. We had an international crew (from Honduras, Puerto Rico, England, Scotland as well as the US) and a mostly US dive group plus one gentleman from Austria.



Steve and I settled into our cabin and set up our dive gear on the dive deck. We got the honeymoon suite – so called as it just had a single large bunk as opposed to the more traditional double bunk-under-single bunk layout.



After the first of many delicious meals from Chef “Tuna” we turned in for the night as the boat cruised over to the island of Saba 28 miles to the south where we would be diving for the next few days.

We easily settled into the daily schedule:

- 7am breakfast
- 8am 1<sup>st</sup> dive
- Morning snack – something baked and sweet
- 10:30am 2<sup>nd</sup> dive
- 12noon buffet lunch
- 2pm 3<sup>rd</sup> dive
- Afternoon savory snack
- 4:30pm 4<sup>th</sup> dive
- 6pm buffet dinner
- 7:30pm 5<sup>th</sup>/Night dive
- Post-dinner card games/chatting/etc. then bedtime



Sunday through Tuesday we dove along Saba’s west coast including its north-west corner Diamond Rock area. We experienced some very calm waters as well as some significant currents when you really had to kick like mad to get down into the more protected coral-sided canyons (you then feel like you’ve really earned the next meal!) With water temps at about 82, it was comfortable diving with 3mil wetsuits though I’m glad I had my hooded sharkskin top for the night dives. During our dives we saw a nice diversity of fish, creatures, and soft and hard corals. Steve and Jeff, both avid photographers (Jeff more so than Steve) enjoyed the challenge of snapping pixs of the many “small” creatures we saw – fireworms, sea horses, shrimps, etc.



Our island tour of Saba was quite interesting. Since 1816, Saba has been a Dutch governed island. It is a small, volcanic island with a very rocky, steep shoreline with no natural harbors/inlets – fulltime population is approx. 2000 (it gets about 25, 000 visitors annually). Before the current pier was built in 1972, all goods reaching the island were processed through the “Customs House” which is reached via 800 steps carved into the steep hillside. There is one main road, called “the road,” on the island which is a marvel of civil engineering. Pilots flying into/out of the Saba airport must have



special training due to its extremely short nature (it is reputed to be the shortest commercial runway in the world). Beside diving, Saba is also popular for its many hiking trails. As part of our tour, we did a short hike on the Mt. Scenery trail.

After the Tuesday night dive (which I did with one of the dive masters as my buddy), the boat headed the 26 miles south-east to the island of St. Kitts. This island, together with the neighboring island of Nevis, constitutes the self-governed Federation of St. Kitts and Nevis.



Wednesday morning through Friday morning we dove along St. Kitts' south-west coastline. There we experienced something we had never experienced before while diving: an underwater "dust" storm. As a result of heavy rain high on the island, a significant amount of dirt/soil was washed down a river whose mouth we just happened to be diving near. The resulting *dust cloud* traveled out into the ocean directly through the area we were diving in – one moment the visibility was fine and the next Steve and I could see each other but not much else, including the other divers that a moment before we could see not too far away. Needless to say, that dive ended early and the boat headed south to another clearer water dive site for the next dive.

Thursday night I did my 2<sup>nd</sup> night dive of the trip with another of the dive masters as my buddy (I figure they won't get lost and know where to find lots of things to see). We were diving an interesting "wreck" site (made up of an intentionally sunk boat, crane, and taxi van) – home to many of the creatures that become more active at night: octopi, lobsters, sea cucumbers, eels, etc.



After two dives Friday morning, the boat tied up in Basseterre where we had our last on-board meal (another cruise port full of jewelry stores). We spent the afternoon cleaning dive gear and getting packed up. Along with Sharon and Jeff, we chose to check into a hotel late that afternoon instead of sleeping on-board and then having to be off by 9am Saturday despite a late Sat. afternoon flight. Our St. Kitts hotel was beachside and after enjoying a free welcome cocktail at the beach bar we walked down the beach to a local restaurant for a final bbq dinner sitting at a beachside picnic table.

Steve ended up doing all the day dives except for the 4<sup>th</sup> dive on Tuesday when we took a land tour of Saba for a total of 21 dives. I ended up doing basically 3 day dives per day plus 2 night dives for a total of 19 dives.

After some poolside time Sat. morning (under the shade of an umbrella), a short taxi ride deposited us at the St. Kitts international airport for a straight, 2-flight shot back to Denver.