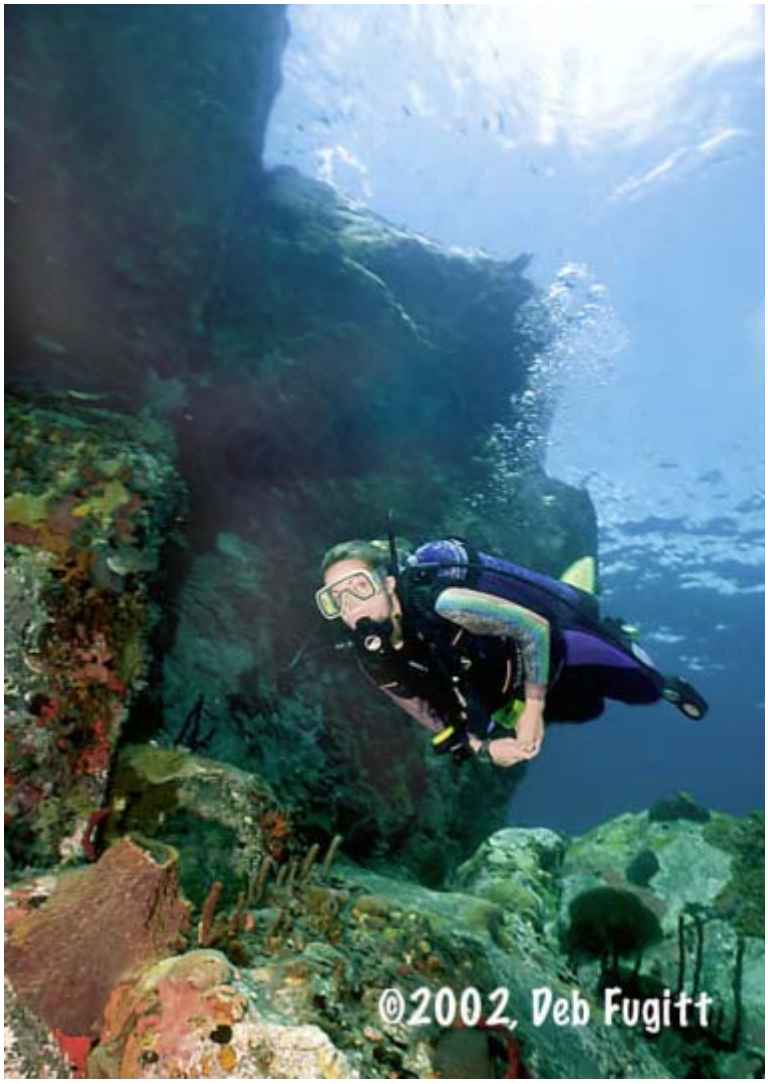
Why St. Vincent?

by Deb Fugitt

The best underwater camera equipment in the world doesn't create great photos, photographers do! Of course, it helps the photographer to have excellent underwater camera equipment all in perfect working condition. Even then the photographer must become skilled in their use. What else?

One needs clear water, good ambient light, just the right amount of current, film or storage, powerful batteries, plenty of air in the tank, the usual diving accoutrements plus a lot of patience.

Many times I've found myself somewhere in the world swimming around a dive site with all these necessities miraculously in order searching for subjects and scenes to create fascinating and colorful images and wished I was back diving in St. Vincent where unusual and colorful creatures and backgrounds are so numerous I have to choose, rather than search, for interesting compositions.



Katie enjoyed the diving at Ocra Point, one of our favorite sites with large boulders strewn about the mooring area. Nikonos V & 15mm lens, YS300 and YS120 strobes on manual, full and 1/2 power. Velvia, 1/60th @ f5.6.

What Keeps Me Coming Back?

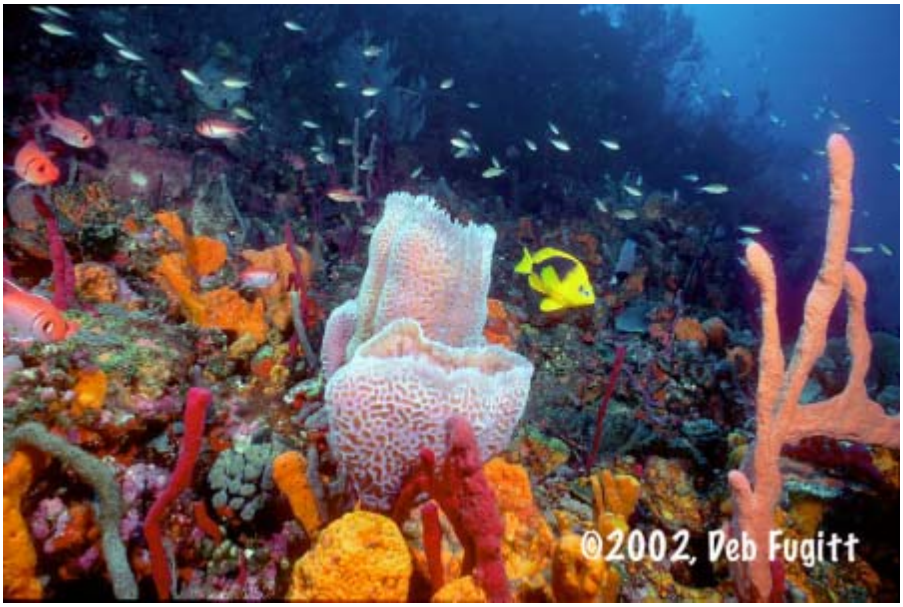
Since 1988 I've focused (pun intended) my dive trips on searching out the newest dive destinations. I wrote the first articles on the Lembeh Strait's KBR, sailed on one of the first cruises into the Banda Sea, created a web site for a Raja Ampat (Irian Jaya, Indonesia) eco-resort before the scientists began to survey the area. Nevertheless, I return every year to St. Vincent, the only Caribbean destination I visit, for a macro "fix". For me, the macro subject material there can't be beat. Anywhere.

St. Vincent is not especially well known, except by a handful of pro photographers and some lucky travelers who are becoming aware of its unusual situation. This lush green mountainous island is located in the eastern Caribbean's Windward Islands, only a 20 min. flight west of Barbados, north of Grenada and south of St. Lucia. The island is 18 miles long and 11 miles wide. Even a few kilometers north or south of Anchor Reef, Alternative Bay or Wayne's World we don't find this incredible density of marine life or array of vivid colors. It's a safe and easy exotic dive destination sure to please very experienced divers or beginners alike.

Any conversation on St. Vincent's diving quickly turns into a list of odd creatures. I've been visiting each year for over 20 years and on each visit, am still surprised to find creatures I've never seen before. Our guests' photo contest entries have been suspected of being digitally-created composite images because "Those colors and creatures don't occur in nature." I am writing to say "But, they do!"

I am most surely biased about this destination. After years of visiting on my own and with friends, I began organizing limited participation photo/dive tours to the island in 1996 so that I would have a purpose to spend 6 or 7 weeks on the island each year.

This 20cm long Tassled Nudibranch, Bornella calcarata, found at night on Harbor South South would be a prize anywhere. Nikon F4s in Nexus housing, 60mm, YS300 and YS120 strobes on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/60th @ f16.



Typical St. Vincent deep reef area. Sponges are plentiful. Nikonos V & 15mm lens, 2 YS300 strobes on manual, full power. Velvia, 1/30th @ f4.

Sailfin Blenny, Emblemaria pandionis. Left – female, right – male. Notice the blurred fin on the male due to its movement. You must have a good eye to spot these tiny wonders unless they are displaying their tall dorsal fins. Nikon F4s in Nexus housing, 105mm, YS300 and YS120 strobes on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/60th @ f8.

What IS that?

Anchor Reef is a large and beautiful reef. Like most of our chosen sites for the photo groups, it has diverse habitats for critters. Sand, boulders, sponge gardens, black coral forest, swim throughs, divers take their choice.

One morning our group split up, some following Sarah to find the yellow, black and green frogfishes in the shallow rocky reef; Wayne escorting a couple down to photograph the Bullseye Lobster in the sponge garden just above the black coral wall; Tony off looking for squid on the sandy slope amongst the soft corals; and the others on their own. Everyone is keen to see seahorses. They are plentiful and as a rule, very well camouflaged amongst the sponges or in the sea grass, so I decided to scour the shallow sandy rubble area for new seahorses. Success! I found two, but could not find another diver.

As we enjoyed the beautiful scenery during our surface interval, the group chatted about their finds and decided to do a second dive here with offers to share the finds from the previous dive. I offered to lead Kelly and Barb to my seahorses. As we swam across the featureless sandy bottom and spotted the first seahorse, I heard a squeak! Wow! Good eyes Kelly! That seahorse is tiny and still distant. More squeaks - loud squeaks! Kelly had found one of my favorite creatures of the entire trip. The seahorses were forgotten.

The Flamboyant Octopus

We called Kelly's octopus the "Flamboyant Octopus" due to its wonderfully hued arms, eyes and fascinating textures. Shades of green, magenta and tan covered its arms which were edged with dark brown stripes and white suckers. A dark brown stripe blazed across its eyes which were accentuated with orange and white highlights and for a chic finish, a siphon in a bold golden color. Somehow I feel as if I am writing this for a fashion magazine!

The Brown-Stripe (its common name) octopus, *octopus burryi*, lives in a hole in the sandy sea floor and is out during the day. The lens of choice for this octopus was a 60mm as it allowed us nearer the octopus, which, with patience, could be approached quite closely. The 60mm produced more brilliant colors due to the smaller amount of water between the camera and subject than the 105mm. (I can do the entire trip with a105mm and not be disappointed.)

We find octopus here, day and night. During our last trip we photographed the Brown-Stripe, White-Spotted (*octopus macropus*), Common (*octopus vulgaris*), Caribbean Reef (*octopus briareus*), Two-Spot (*octopus filosus*), Atlantic Longarm (*octopus defilippi*) and Pygmy (*octopus joubini*) octopi. Squadrons of squid are commonplace. In the summer months of July and August, we often find them mating and placing their eggs in the reef.

Muck diving is extremely rewarding on most of St. V's dive sites. For our photo trips, we use the moorings so as not to disturb the muck creatures. Our group commands the entire boat. We allow divers to enter and exit the water to fix equipment problems and change film, batteries or lenses. Our groups take advantage of it to shoot more than one roll of film per dive. Normally this is a "good thing", unless you find an interesting and skittish subject beneath the boat.

The "Flamboyant Octopus". We renamed this Brown-lined Octopus,Octopus Burryi , because of its unbelievable colors. For some reason, creatures are more colorful in St. Vincent than elsewhere in the Caribbean. A daytime photo, 9 meters, at Anchor Reef. Nikon F4s in Nexus housing, 60mm, YS300 and YS120 strobes on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/60th @ f11.

One morning I slipped into the water, the first one out of the boat, and watched as a flounder scooted across the bottom and oozed into a tiny hole! A Longarm Octopus' (a.k.a. "flounder's") home was beneath our boat's dive platform. This octopus is similar to the mimic octopus from the Indo/Pacific and I would love to watch it for an extended period. Sadly, others in the group only saw the octopus' head peeking out of its hole. It was too timid to stay out while divers were splashing in the water just above.

Eels, Worms, Sponges, Brittle Stars and Colors

I mention this odd quartet of creatures and color because they are included in the comments I hear from experienced divers on their first day in St. Vincent. Without exception, these divers remark that there are more eel species and eel quantities than

Bullseye Lobster, Enoplometopus antellensis. Taken at night at 22 meters on Anchor Reef. This rare lobster, common in St. Vincent, is one of my favorites. The target pattern on each side of its carapace is visible in this photo. I caught it in the midst of dinner, notice the crabmeat in its claws. Nikon F4s in Nexus housing, 60mm, YS300 and YS120 strobes on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/60th @ f11.

any destination they've dived. The same applies to the sponges, worms and brittle stars which are scattered like confetti all over the reefs. Many remark that the same species of creatures are more colorful in St. V than elsewhere..

Some of the prettiest images in my portfolio are still life images of the sponges, worms and brittle stars from St. Vincent. The colors are magnificent! Collections of several different species of Split Crown, Colonial Feather Duster and Christmas Tree worms live side by side in dense clumps. It's especially interesting to set up a shot with a nudibranch, blenny or eel amongst the "posies".

Frogfish

Like seahorses, frogfish are always a favorite find. The vast majority of frogfish are *"Antennarias muliocellatus*", the Longlure Frogfish or the Ocellated Frogfish, (skip the *multi*). Their color variations are remarkable. We find them in shades of red, orange, yellow, brown, gray, black, white, coral and green somewhere between 3 and 30 meters. Frogfish like to stay in the same area for months if they are not harassed. Once they get anxious, they become most un-photogenic, but we chose to dive the same site multiple times and all of us managed to catch several frogfish in great positions for photos.

I had never seen any colored Striated Frogfish, *Antennarius striatus,* besides the usual black and patterned brown until last summer. I certainly did not expect pink! In the sand at 17 meters in Alternative Bay the frogfish's color blended exactly with the nearby sponge, a convenient stop on the way to the boat from visiting the Shortnose Batfish at 30 meters. I'm withholding my pink froggie photo so as not to outdo Peter Rowlands' Dominica froggie in the next issue. *(Very gracious of you, Deb! Ed)*

Crabs, Shrimp and Lobsters

The "rare" Magnificent Sea Urchin, *Astropyga magnifica*, "prefers deep water habitats, rarely within depth range of scuba" according to my Reef Creature Identification guide. Hundreds of these urchins gathered in the sea grass beds at 10 meters depth. These beautiful orange and white urchins' segments are divided by rows of iridescent blue lines, making them one of the most beautiful urchins in the world. On their long spines, tiny purple and white shrimp danced away from our photographers, whom I could hear growling with frustration as they tried to get a clear, in focus, shot of the tiny crustaceans.

While sea urchins and sea cucumbers may not be the most exciting or difficult subjects, their undersides and spines regularly host small shrimp or crabs. In St. Vincent we commonly find pea crabs associated with Red Heart Urchins, Squat Urchin Shrimp with West Indian Sea Eggs or Variegated Urchins, Bumblebee Shrimp with any of the sea cucumbers, Red Snapping Shrimp with the Corkscrew Anemones and of course, the Basket Star, Sun Anemone and Wire Coral Shrimp with

their named hosts.

I've had requests to do 2 night dives every night from people in our groups. Unordinary lobsters, such as the Bullseye, Red Banded and Copper, inhabit our favorite night diving sites as do a considerable number of crab species.

Different species of decorator crabs are quite creative and numerous. So far, we haven't had any divers drown from laughter at their first glimpse of the Furcate Spider Crab. This crab, fondly known to us as the "Anemone Butt Crab", has elicited laughter from nearly everyone on a night dive at one time or another. I can't begin to list the names of all the spider, swimmer, decorator, box, hairy, mud, hermit, clinging or sponge crabs regularly found on St. Vincent's reefs.

Patience Required

Critter Corner, the recently re-named dive site beside Young Island, is a favorite with photographers. This area was recently declared an island treasure and is now protected as a Marine Life Sanctuary. The site is shallow and featureless with sandy rubble and sea grass areas. Shooting the Sailfin Blennies, Yellow-Face and Blue-Throat Pike Blennies, and Yellow-Head Jawfish there can require a large degree of patience (and may be impossible with framers). While pike blennies can be extremely difficult to find, sailfins are easy to locate, if one keeps on eye on the sand watching for their courtship dance. Every few minutes, the tiny male sailfin comes out of its hole, raises its sail to full height and gyrates wildly, in hopes of attracting a mate. Hah! He attracts photographers too!

Although we sometimes use a mirror to lure these miniscule beasts out of hiding and snap their photo as they attack their own reflection, the mating dance creates a much more appealing image. Patience will also get the pike blenny out with its tall dorsal fin and spaghetti-thin body. With their mouths full of eggs and their unusually brilliant blue and yellow coloration, St. Vincent's jawfish make the photo worth the wait.

This site has not only these small fish (often in adundance), but also frogfish, seahorses, Spotted Snake Eels and a curiously large number of urchin species.

Patience IS a virtue, but one shouldn't focus all attention on getting the shot. Sarah and I nearly had heart attacks as we watched Don inch along,

We searched for these two seahorses every week. When they were found I had 1.5 remaining frames, a 105mm lens and anxious twitchy seahorses. Nikon F4s in Nexus housing, 105mm, YS300 and YS120 strobes on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/60th @ f5.6.

arms on the sand, closer and closer to a male sailfin. As he moved in for that perfect shot, his forearm touched, moved and mashed the head of a Spotted Snake Eel into the sand. The snake eels are quite vicious looking and could be dangerous. Don was lucky.

When to Go?

The most prolific time for marine life in St. Vincent is July and August. The water is warmer, vegetation is greener, the Flamboyant Trees are in full (and very red) bloom, the crustaceans more numerous and the marine life more active. Visibility varies widely from 15m to 35+ and is not related to the season

Our groups average 3 to 4, 70-80 minute dives per day usually with one shallow dive of 90-120 minutes each day. The warm summer water keeps us comfortable with only a 3mm wetsuit for

Indian Bay, Young Island and Critter Corner with Bequia in the distance. Most hotels are in this area.

Frogfish,Antennarius ocellatus. This frogfish changed colors over a few days time. The photo is the in-between stage. We've noticed other frogfish change color overnight. The yawn is a defensive posture. Nikon F4s in Nexus housing, 60mm, YS300 and YS120 strobes on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/60th @ f11.

thermal protection. Hard core photographers should organize or join a like-minded group, otherwise they may dive with other tourists on a different agenda and schedule. The standard schedule for the three local dive shops is 1 or 2 morning dives.

What to bring?

Your macro setup for sure! With housed film cameras I've found the 105mm macro lens most useful and take it on 90% of my dives. The 60mm macro is very good as well. It is great for most of the eels, frogfish, batfish, lobsters, some of the crabs and reef fish.

There are some wonderful spots for wide angle photography if the visibility is good and you can control the impulse to continue shooting macro. Forests of black corals, walls of golden cup corals, stacks of large boulders, fields of delicate finger corals and areas of sensuous soft corals and fans can be reached from the sites where good macro is also available. If you have room, pack a separate system for wide angle photography and leave it on the boat until you want it.

Film? That depends on your preference, camera and strobes' color temperature. I shoot Velvia for everything. Just bring more film or memory storage than you think you will possibly need. The electricity is 220 volt, 50 cycles with the 3 prong plug. 110v is not always available in the hotels. Odd batteries may not be available. Bring all you need.

The dive shops have rental equipment but no computers. Multi-day, multi-dive trips such as ours require one computer per diver. Clothing is cool and casual. The temperature ranges from 24C (75F) to 30C (86F). A windbreaker is recommended for use on the dive boat.

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Deb is a professional photographer, specializing in Internet Marketing for dive and travel related businesses and leads trips to her favorite destinations.
Info on this destination: www.scubasvg.com
On Deb's trips www.dive-st-vincent-scuba-diving.com