

Basse Terre, Guadeloupe

by Jean Michel Machefert

In June my wife and I decided to go back to Guadeloupe in the French West Indies. We are quite familiar with Guadeloupe having visited it quite frequently since 2000. Guadeloupe is convenient to reach from France since there are a lot of direct and not too expensive flights from Paris to Pointe à Pitre.

Guadeloupe is an island looking like a butterfly with 2 sub islands: the first one almost flat in the north east named grande terre and the second one in the south west built from volcanic mountains (the highest volcano is the Soufrière (altitude 1407m)) is named basse terre.

Guadeloupe is also well known for diving spots all around the coast of both of the islands and the most famous is the “reserve Cousteau” in Malendure (on the west coast of basse terre). The reserve Cousteau is the place where Captain Cousteau performed the first tests at sea of the diving saucer SP 350 in 1959, and because of some technical problems during the tests the team of Cousteau had plenty of time for diving and found the location very interesting with a lot of fauna.

Now the reserve Cousteau is still a nice place for diving but crowded with more than 60,000 divers every year. More over some other activities such as cruises with glass bottom boat (almost over the divers!), and a dedicated police looking at the divers for preventing damages to the coral and the fauna (divers can be fined if they go “too close” to the bottom or to the coral (estimated by the police through a glass window from the surface! and so

this is not really easy for macro photographers!) makes the place less and less attractive for experimenting divers and photographers.

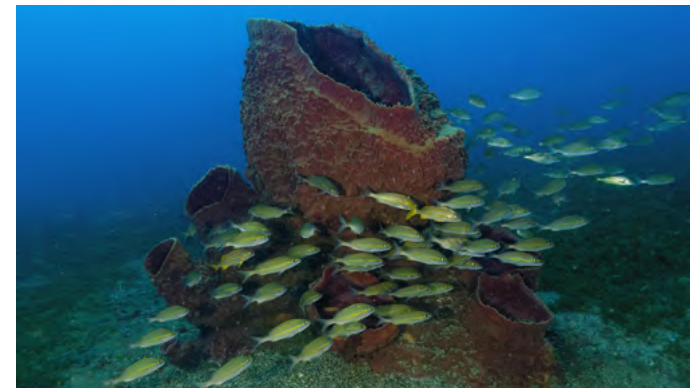
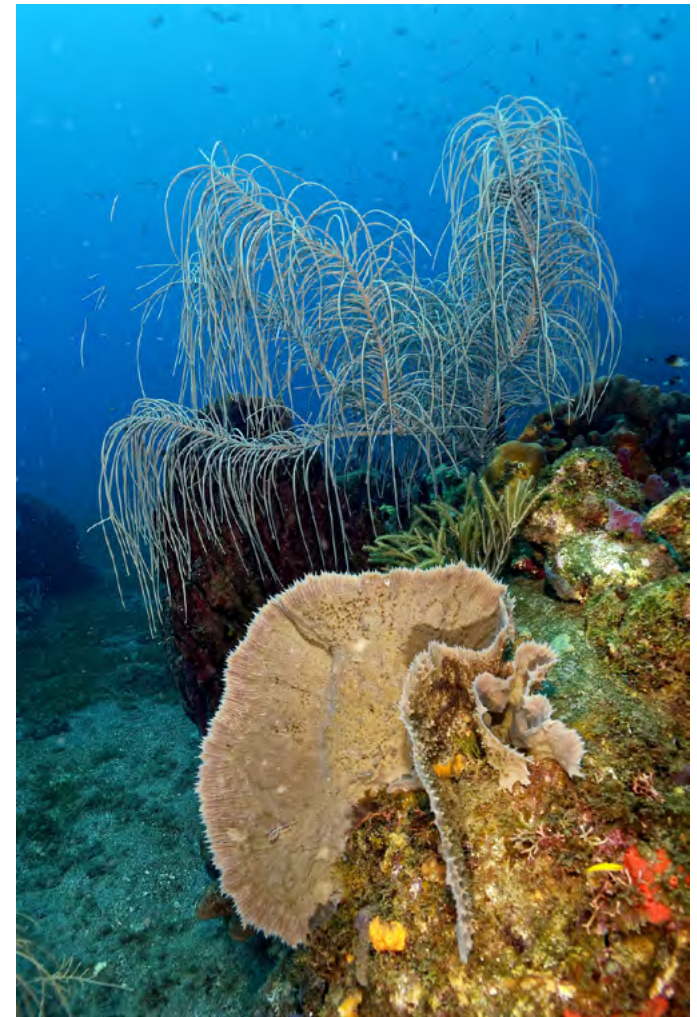
So this year we decided to explore the south part of basse terre in Vieux Fort.

Why ? because Vieux Fort is located along the channel between Guadeloupe and Dominica and several rivers and plenty of nutriments are coming from the mountains right over Vieux Fort so we can expect a lot of life under water. More over close to Vieux Fort on the Caribbean coast there is an impressive dive along a deep cliff named “sec Delgres” showing beautiful scenery and all the fauna of Guadeloupe from 10m down to 140m.

There are also some wrecks a little bit to the north acting as artificial reefs concentrating a lot of life. Vieux Fort is also by far less crowded than Malendure and the diving club “inspiration plongée” managed by Jean Philippe Dufayet offers us a perfect small service (max 8 divers on a comfortable RIB designed for 20 persons!) for photographing and exploring the south part of Guadeloupe.

Vieux Fort, general view of the reef Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica sigma 17-70mm at 17mm, 1/125s, f8, ISO400. 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power

Vieux Fort, fish and barrel sponges Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica sigma 17-70mm at 17mm, 1/125s, f8, ISO400. 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power



For the first dive let's go to the "sec Delgres". 20 minutes from Vieux Fort harbour and we are on site ready to dive. 10m under the RIB on the top of the cliff is a sandy plain inhabited by hundreds of garden eels and not too shy for a picture. The water is clear but not crystal clear as in some other locations in the Caribbean sea; this is due to a river flowing down from the volcanic mountains surrounding the site, but as said before it's better for the fauna.

Going deeper we follow an impressive vertical cliff covered by many sponges looking like trees with interconnected arms and also white sea fans and black corals and of course plenty of colourful fishes.

Time to time big turtles are coming close to us, and they stay with us for several minutes without being afraid. This is perfect for a portrait!

By going deeper the big white sea fans are more and more impressive and scenery is more dramatic than in shallower water. In some places there are some remains of fishing traps covered by fixed life



such as sponges, corals... Along this cliff as soon as there is a support the life is there and also clouds of fishes gathered in shoals or hidden under the sponges or sea fans.

For the next dive we go to the wreck of the Augustin Fresnel a little bit to the north of Vieux Fort close to Bouillante and the "Anse à la barque".

The Augustin Fresnel is a 53m long freighter built in the late 40's in



The wreck of the Augustin Fresnel, general view of the deck. Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Nikkor 10.5mm, 1/160, f10, ISO 320, 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power

sec Delgres, the life is growing on all the supports Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica sigma 17-70mm at 17mm, 1/100s, f8, ISO320. 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power

Canada and used in the Mediterranean sea until 1990 and then in the Caribbean sea until 1994 by the French administration in charge of the lighthouses. In 2003 the Augustin Fresnel was sunk as an artificial reef to attract life. She now lies 30m underwater.

As soon as we enter the water and going down the rope we can see almost immediately the huge shape

of the wreck lying on a sandy seabed. We begin the dive just in front of the bow with a classical but always impressive picture of the front part of the wreck as a dark silhouette surrounded by deep blue water (we are still at 30m and in the morning the water is darker than at noon) and then we continue to dive along the edge of the wreck down to the stern.

The deck is covered with



Vieux Fort, angel fish on the reef, Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica sigma 17-70mm at 38mm, 1/60s, f7, ISO200, 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings.

colourful sponges and corals growing on the metal. There is no space free and it looks like a healthy Caribbean coral reef and of course there are shoals of small fishes everywhere.

It is also easy to enter inside the wreck taking care of the steel edges sharpened by the coral and the view from inside is also nice and quite unusual for the West Indies since the wreck still looks like a ship and is not collapsed as they often are.

The dive continues down to the stern with 2 big propellers also covered with sponges and corals surrounded by plenty of fishes. In the

shadow under the stern some black corals looking like white ropes can also be seen.

It is time to go back to the surface and the best option consists of going along the deck up to the bow. The deco stops can be done along the rope marking the wreck. The rope is also fully covered with sponges and soft corals. This is also beautiful for some pictures during the stops but quite aggressive for the hands. Here in the Caribbean sea any support is covered by life in a short time.

Close to the shore in Vieux Fort at few hundreds of meters from the



The wreck sec Delgres, shoal of fishes under the boat Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica sigma 17-70mm at 17mm, 1/100s, f8, ISO320, 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power

harbour in shallow water (less than 10m) the seabed is a typical Caribbean reef covered with all kinds of corals going along the coast line. Because of the big amount of nutrients at this place (we are still close to some rivers coming from the mountains and also Vieux Fort is located in the channel between Guadeloupe and Dominica named "canal des Saintes" with a constant flow of water coming from the Atlantic and going to the Caribbean sea).

The dive site can be reached either after a very short trip by boat or from the shore. It could also be a perfect place for beginners, since there is almost no current in the small bay of Vieux Fort.

Here all photographic options can be done: macro photography on all the small inhabitants of the reef, wide angle for the scenery with bushes

of corals and shoals of fishes, and all the intermediate lenses for portraits of fishes. Everything is possible and comfortable at this place.

For this dive I decided to go with a 17- 70mm lens allowing me some macro pictures some portraits and some scenery. This is a perfect choice.

Just after entering into the water there are shoals of fishes between boulders covered with sponges and sea fans. There are even sea fans and soft corals in the barrel sponges! The barrel sponges are quite big and usually in Guadeloupe we need to go deeper in order to see such big sponges. By looking closer at the surface of brain corals growing on the boulders some are covered by Christmas tree worms and by looking even closer it is sometimes possible to see some very small fishes living in the holes inside the structure of the

*The wreck of the Augustin Fresnel
view from the top. Nikon D2x, housing
Aquatica, Nikkor 10.5mm, 1/160, f
7, ISO 320, 2 strobes nikon Sb 910,
Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power*

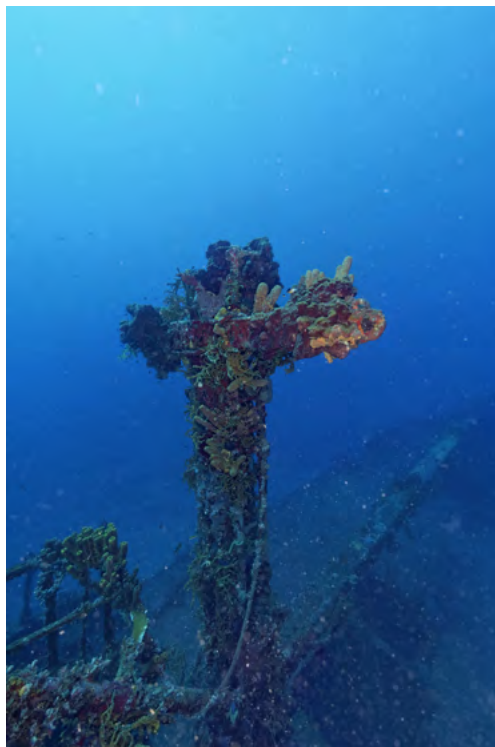
brain coral.

So to conclude we spent a wonderful and unusual diving week in Guadeloupe and we were very happy to discover a new location not crowded in a place we go quite often and supposed to be well known to us.

This week offered us plenty of new diving spots in Guadeloupe and we hope to come back soon and discover more promising possibilities offered in the south of Basse Terre.

Jean Michel Machefert
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Jean Michel began to dive in caves, lakes and the oceans in 1987. He started underwater photography in 1992 using a Nikonos IV. After shooting many years with a Nikon D70 he now uses a Nikon D2x in an Aquatica housing with 2 Nikon SB910 strobes in Patima housing. Some pictures can be seen on the website: www.jmfrog.com regularly updated with new diving destinations and also surface pictures of the nature.



Rebreathers and photographers are
welcome in the south of
Guadeloupe at inspiration plongée

FWI

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