

Dive Dominica

by Peter Rowlands

Having been a great fan of liveaboard diving for a long time I wondered how I would take to a land-based diving trip in the Caribbean. I was persuaded by Hilary Lee of Divequest to part with £1400 per person for a weeks full board in Dominica (pronounced dom-en-EE-ka) with two morning boat dives and unlimited shore diving as well as a night dive, if desired.

Now before I start, yes, I DID pay so you're not going to get a freebie-biased report (although travel agents, please note, my integrity can become fragile should you wish to send me somewhere nice at no cost...).

Dominica is an island 29 miles (47km) long and 16 miles (26km) wide just south of Guadeloupe and north of Martinique in the West Indies chain of islands. I flew in November on British Airways from London to Antigua and then a short 40 minute Liat hop to Melville Hall airport on the north east side of the island.

On the hour long mini-bus transfer to Castle Comfort Lodge and Dive Dominica on the more sheltered south west coast, I immediately began to like the place - some hospitable locals had taken the trouble to paint the initials UWP on most of the telegraph poles! Now I am not a man of deep emotions but this welcome was really most touching indeed - a simple gesture and much appreciated. It mattered not that the United Workers Party were campaigning an election at the time - I knew what those initials really stood for.

Castle Comfort Lodge is a 15 room resort right on the waters edge just south of the capital Roseau and ideally situated for access to the best dive sites in the area. I had not come unprepared, having done some research on the internet and asked a question on the excellent "uw-photo" forum. This resulted in my being contacted the very next day by another Dominican dive operator, Simon Walsh from Nature Island Dive (a great fan of UWP, by the way, and I mean the magazine, not the Workers Party) as well as none other than Michael Lawrence who wrote the excellent Lonely Planet Guide to Diving and Snorkeling in Dominica. They both provided very useful help and information and I am very grateful to them for their assistance. I even spent a very pleasant



The visibility was very good as Dominica is a volcanic island. Scotts Head on the outer edge of Soufriere Bay offers some excellent diving with varied topography and plenty of life.

Coolpix 5000, Subal CP5, WC-E68 lens, URPro filter

evening in Roseau with Simon partaking of a Quiz Night where my deplorable knowledge of American 80's television trivia let the side down terribly, I'm afraid.

Most of the rooms at Castle Comfort Lodge have sea views with balconies overlooking a grassy area with a hot tub, small pool and a beach bar. The rooms are basic but provide you with everything you need including airconditioning and plenty of power points. My room had both UK and US style sockets.

Dive Dominica is in the same compact complex. They have four boats and enough aluminium cylinders to become a major player in the metals market should the dive business become unprofitable. There are three compressors which hum away quietly most of the day for, as well as Lodge guests, they also cater for the cruise liners which visit Roseau on a regular basis. This results in a flurry of activity on "cruise ship days" but, with their 4 boats, they are able to keep the numbers per boat down to a comfortable level.

An alternative nearby dive operation is Nature Island Dive in Soufriere run by the aforementioned



Dominica is a beautiful island offering excellent diving and a wide variety of nature walks, waterfalls and whalewatching

Simon Walsh (originally from Camden Town, London). This is a smaller operation but probably more capable of catering for a small groups specialist needs and as Simon is a keen underwater photographer he understands how demanding small groups of underwater photographers can be!

Anyway, the Dive Dominica package includes two boat dives in the morning with an hour interval on board. Most of the good dive sites are about 20 minutes away and all of your gear is taken to and from the boat by the very helpful and friendly local staff. This makes for a most restful form of diving and the dive sites they take you to are very impressive indeed.

The best site by far is not always diveable due to currents but we were lucky and managed to get on the outer edge of Scotts Head where there are four really good sites. The unspoilt marine life (Soufriere Bay is a marine reserve) and topography were beautifully colourful - in fact far more colourful than I was expecting. Barrel sponges, gorgonians, black coral trees and a wide variety of marine life covered the whole area which had a really healthy feel to it.

Second dives were no less glamorous for photographers and divers alike - my very first dive in Dominican waters introduced me not only to a co-operative seahorse but also a couple of frogfish to boot! The dive guides are very helpful but not intrusive and you can proceed at a pace to suit your needs. I and my partner Debbie were left to our own devices most of the time playing with the Subal Coolpix 5000 and Olympus C40. They both had 128mb cards which stored up to 100 shots each



Dive Dominica have four boats and their friendly staff carry your gear to and from the boat.

Seahorses are a common sight on most dives. Olympus C40 with built-in flash



and it was not unusual to come back from the mornings activities with both cards almost full - so many and varied are the available subjects.

In November the water was warm enough (25°C) for just a thin dive skin and there were others who didn't even bother with that. Visibility was always good, as you would expect in a volcanic region. The stormy season tends to be around late August to early October so it is best to



When you find a striated frogfish you become a member of a very exclusive club. Coolpix 5000, Subal CP5 housing, standard lens, URPro filter, available light

avoid the area during these times. The surface weather was typically tropical in such a mountainous, volcanic region with squally showers being replaced by prolonged sunny intervals and the temperature was usually pleasant in the high 20'sC. More importantly, there was very little humidity to worry about and almost no insects that bite!

Back at the Lodge after your morning excursion you have the rest of the day to yourselves. The package includes unlimited shore diving so, after a quick bite of lunch (the food was a very good combination of Western and local cuisine served on an open-air terrace overlooking the sea and the staff were very friendly

and most helpful but be informed that Dominican "mountain chicken" is actually frogs legs), it was off the end of the pier and straight into a prolonged session of what is now known as "muck diving". To the uninitiated this may not sound very attractive but to a macro photographer it is paradise. Shallow water, plenty of sunlight and more subjects than you could wish for. OK, the terrain didn't lend itself to wide angle shots but when you've got flying gurnards, batfish (ugly creatures made up of the parts no other fish wanted), garden eels, snake eels, shrimps galore and frogfish-a-plenty, who needs wide angle?

The crowning glory for me was finding not one but two

striated frogfish (*Antennarius striatus* if you must know). I'm told that these are very rarely seen - the dive guide swore he had never seen one in over a decade and a much travelled American underwater photographer, Maria Hults, who was staying in the Lodge at the time, had never seen one in over 30 years of diving. Being a magnanimous sort of a chap I was happy to conduct tours to show off my unusual find which I was quietly very pleased to have discovered.

Diving discoveries aside, Dominica is far from a one horse dive island. There are whale watching trips, waterfall walks, rain forest treks and boiling volcanic lakes as well as exotic



There are whale watching trips, waterfall walks, rain forest treks and boiling volcanic lakes as well as exotic birdwatching.



The terrain may look boring but the shore diving was an excellent 'muck' dive with plenty of exotic creatures to photograph. Coolpix 5000, Subal CP5, WC-E68 lens, URPro filter

I've never seen so many garden eels on a shore dive! Olympus C40 with built in flash



birdwatching (we even watched hummingbirds from our balcony). All of these activities are available as well organised and informative trips with local guides providing useful background information with a tremendous sense of pride in their island.



We watched sperm whales and waterfalls but there is really so much to do in Dominica that a week is just not long enough.

Finally, being land based you have the luxury of cable TV in your room. At home I don't

have such a service so in no time at all I was glued to the remote control watching 5 seconds of each channel at a time. There were 50 channels (oh yes, I counted them...) and I'm convinced that, if you time it



(Left) Castle Comfort Lodge is compact but provides everything you could need and it is right on the water's edge.

(Below left) A frogfish on your first dive is a good omen. When you see two it's very impressive. Olympus C40, PT -012 housing and built in flash.

(Below) The scenery is colourful and varied with good visibility. Coolpix 5000, Subal CP5, WC-E68 lens and URPro filter with available light.



right, you can actually build a whole new channel of your own by just continuously changing channels every 5 seconds.

However my cable TV surfing was to stop abruptly when I discovered..... "The Shopping Channel".

Never having been exposed to such an informative and attractively presented programme, I became mesmerised by the food blenders, bracelets, carriage clocks and weight loss schemes, all of which, without exception, I wanted but definitely didn't need (well, OK, I qualified in every



department for needing the last one). It was then that I found myself definitely interested in a top of the range 2.4 Pentium computer system with all the usual drives, scanner and printer as well as over \$1500 of free software for just \$1499 by credit card (or 10 monthly interest free payments of only \$149.90 deferred for three months!). I must admit I was sorely tempted to have one of those beauties there and then - I was on the edge - completely ignoring the

consequences of excess baggage - but when they threw in a 24/7 helpdesk service that answered calls within 30 seconds I was lucky my partner Debbie came in at just the right time, recognised my wide-eyed state, wrestled the phone from me and hid my credit card. I really was THAT close.

What chance do I stand if they start offering underwater cameras?

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Arun Madisetti



Marine Park manager for the Soufriere Scotts Head Soufriere Marine Reserve in Dominica

Arun Madisetti, or Izzy, as he is most often called was fortunate enough to have spent much of his youth on the beach, swimming or snorkeling from an early age. He has been diving since the early 1980's, and has worked as either an assistant instructor for the BS-AC, or since 1992, full instructor (MSDT) for PADI. He has been fortunate enough to be able to do this on both sides of the Atlantic, off the coast of the United Kingdom, and ports of call in the Caribbean and the Florida Keys.

He and his family spent 5 years living and diving in the Commonwealth of Dominica and have made the Egyptian Red Sea their "home from home" when it comes to dive holidays. Dominica being the place they prefer to dive regularly. He holds a bachelors degree in Marine Zoology, and a post graduate degree in Shellfisheries and Aquaculture, both from the University College of North Wales at Bangor.

He has been instrumental in producing the groundwork from which two marine reserves have been ratified, one in the Caribbean and one off the North Wales coast, and has had various jobs as underwater surveyor, State marine biologist, and fisheries scientist. Taking underwater photographs since 1990, beginning in North Wales and off northern Scotland. He has had many photos published in tourist magazines and brochures in the Caribbean, in both English and French, and in 2000 he and his wife got some shots published in a coffee table book.

<http://website.lineone.net/~izzydiving/>

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