

Muck Diving in St. Kitts -

By Jason Phillip

Most people have the notion that scuba diving is meant to be done solely above color filled, fish infested reefs in the clear waters of far flung destinations like the Caribbean. While this does indeed sound like an alluring setting, there is a whole different world waiting to be discovered among the muck. Muddy flats, piers, sea grass beds and even breakwaters can hide a plethora of critters waiting to catch the eye of the keen diver willing to unlock the hidden treasures of the muck.

Muck diving is a relatively new term coined to describe diving anywhere other than on the coral reef, usually in unconventional places. Whether it be on muddy flats or among a scattering of rubble, muck diving can be a very rewarding experience especially for the macro photographer as many critters cannot be found by simply diving on the reef, due to different habitat and diet needs. Muck dives abound with some of the most interesting critters, from nudibranchs to snapping shrimp, all manner of little critters can be found in some of the most seemingly devoid areas.

Areas where muck diving is at

its best are also some of the most challenging for photographers. Generally most muck dives are plagued by bad visibility and hordes of particles suspended in the water which make good lighting a critical component for muck photography. Many locations also have very fine silty or muddy bottoms that can easily be stirred up and cloud an area for long periods rendering it useless for photography. Muck diving isn't for everybody, but for those who love the thrill and challenge of slowly picking through rubble to discover that jewel of a critter.

Personally, I do as much muck diving as practicable, exploring sea grass beds and coral rubble looking for those elusive nudibranchs and other critters that most divers never see. The island of St. Kitts offers a wide array of dive sites for the avid muck diver. From shrimp gobies guarding their burrows in the silt, to pike blennies bobbing in and out of abandoned tubeworm casings, muck diving in St. Kitts is just as thrilling as anywhere else in the world.

St. Kitts is not heavily marketed as a dive destination and has therefore remained relatively undiscovered.



Pederson cleaning shrimp with eggs. F 8 Shutter Speed 1/60. Canon G10 in WP DC 28 housing using Inon UCL m67 wet lens and Sea and Sea YS DX 27 strobe.



Yellowhead jawfish hovering over its burrow. Canon G10 in WP DC 28 housing using Inon UCL m67 wet lens and Sea and Sea YS DX 27 strobe. F 8 SS 1/60



Spotted anemone shrimp on a branching anemone. Canon G10 in WP DC 28 housing using Inon UCL m67 wet lens and Sea and Sea YS DX 27 strobe. F 7.1 SS 1/30

This means that the majority of the reefs are in very good condition and in many cases virgin, not having been touched by the roving fins of divers. This adds to the thrill of diving in St. Kitts as one is always filled with great expectation of making a new discovery.

On a recent excursion to the reefs off Bird Rock Beach on the Caribbean Sea coast, I came across an area of seabed roughly the size of three basketball courts covered in various types of sea grass. There was a scattering of large chunks of dead coral, which had undoubtedly been blown off the nearby reefs during the passage of various hurricanes and storms. The mixture of sea grasses and algae provided food for many different invertebrates including nudibranchs and various shrimp. The large coral heads deposited in the



Secretary blenny bobbing out of abandoned christmas tree worm burrow. Canon G10 in WP DC 28 housing using Inon UCL m67 wet lens and Sea and Sea YS DX 27 strobe. F 8 SS 1/60

Pike blenny poking its head out of abandoned tube worm casing. Canon G10 in WP DC 28 housing using Inon UCL m67 wet lens and Sea and Sea YS DX 27 strobe. F 8 SS 1/60

middle of an otherwise featureless plain, provided refuge and cover for many different species of juvenile fish as well as crabs and the like thus presenting an ideal setting for muck diving.

Knowing that I was one of, if not the first diver to be diving over and picking through this diverse



spot, I couldn't wait to see what this dive had in store for me. All of the coral heads were deposited at least ten meters away from each other and over a hundred meters from the reef, which meant that each one had become its own isolated community, surrounded by sea grass and small rubble, housing a



View of St. Kitts southeast peninsula from the water.

multitude of different organisms.

Wide-angle photography in this area wasn't a viable option as is the case in most other muck environments. Being relatively close to shore, visibility was no more than twenty feet due to particulate runoff from the surrounding land. Also, a mild surge had kicked up the already volatile bottom making it even cloudier. Anticipating the bad visibility, I did my giant stride with my Canon G10 and dual stacked INON 165 m67 wet lenses in tow, intent on macro shots.

Once on the bottom, I headed over to the closest of the coral behemoths for a closer inspection of what I believed to be a critter haven. Before I even fully got to the rock, a quick flash of movement caught my eye in a sandy patch at the base of the chunk. I immediately stopped finning and settled into a hover a few feet away from this



*Sharknose goby on a section of coral. Canon G10 in WP DC 28 housing using Inon UCL m67 wet lens and Sea and Sea YS DX 27 strobe.
F 7.1 Shutter Speed 1/50*

now apparent burrow in the sand. Patience being the virtue of any macro photographer, I waited a couple of minutes to see if the critter would reemerge offering a chance for a few shots. To my surprise two small eyes began slowly poking their way just above the lip of the burrow. I immediately recognized them as the eyes of a scaly tailed mantis shrimp, a notoriously skittish critter, and the first one I've seen in St. Kitts. Slowly inching my way closer, I took a few test shots to make sure the lighting and exposure were perfect. Unfortunately, before I was able to get close enough for a decent shot, the eyes vanished into the burrow with a flurry of silt and I knew that would be the last of him that I would see for the dive.

Ecstatic about my first find, I finally make it over to the coral head, which had now come alive in front of me with all manner of brightly colored

Useful Muck Diving Tips:

1. Don't flutter kick:

Fluttering tends to kick up silt and sand, ruining many good chances for photos. Frog kicking is better as it pushes the water behind you instead of down onto the bottom and keeps the water clear and bottom undisturbed.

2. Have all gear well secured:

Keep your pressure gauge, octopus and camera lenses clipped and secured properly to your BC or camera rig. This again helps you keep the bottom undisturbed since dragging gauges and the like can wreak havoc, kicking up silt when diving near the bottom.

3. Be thorough and vigilant:

It takes patience and keen eyes to find critters in most muck environments, since the visibility is usually subpar and many of the creatures that inhabit the muck, rely on camouflage to remain unseen.

4. Maintain proper lighting and exposure:

Sand, shells and silt have a higher albedo than most of the other backgrounds over a normal reef. This means that they reflect more light back to the camera. Therefore specific attention should be paid to adjusting lighting and exposure keeping them appropriate for the shot.



Flamingo tongue on a sea fan. Canon G10 in WP DC 28 housing using Inon UCL m67 wet lens and Sea and Sea YS DX 27 strobe. F Stop 8 Shutter Speed 1/160

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encrusting sponges and anemones. Spending ten minutes photographing many of the usual crowd of anemone shrimp, cleaning gobies and arrow crabs, I felt like I'd exhausted this rock and decided to move on to the next. Little did I know at the time that this seemingly "routine" rock would prove to be the most thrilling out of the whole lot. The dive continued on at the same gripping pace, between running into pike blennies and more mantis shrimp, this site was a macro photographer's heaven.

Finally with no remaining bottom time I was forced to head on back up, ending the treasure hunt. I surfaced with a camera full of proof of just how rewarding diving in the muck can be! After getting home and loading the images on to my computer, I came across a surprise in one of my shots. While taking a shot of a small pencil

urchin, I unknowingly photographed a little straggler in the background. On the very edge of the image, there was a tiny nudibranch, less than a quarter of an inch long. I'd captured an image of a "Painted Elysia". Checking out the ID books, I realized that that species hadn't been reported in the Eastern Caribbean. Just another treasure of the St. Kitts muck!

Jason Phillip



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