

Saint Pierre, Martinique

by Jean Michel Machefert

Saint Pierre is a small city with around 4300 inhabitants located on the north west (Caribbean) coast of the Martinique island at 30 km from Fort de France (with daily flights from/to Paris).

Even if this is easy to travel to Saint Pierre coming from Europe or from North America (there are also some flights from the US to Fort de France) here you will not find holiday resorts with huge swimming pools and hardly a hotel with a tropical garden along a white sandy beach or row of restaurants along the beaches as you could imagine when you think about tropical destinations. Here you can find usual accommodation, some restaurants and of course some (4 to 5) small but well equipped and highly professional diving clubs where nitrox, trimix and rebreathers are welcome.

So, why coming here and not in the south of Martinique with all the resorts and tropical facilities (as soon as you are in Martinique both can be visited of course. The island is not so big)? Let me first briefly tell you the history of Saint Pierre.

In 1626 Pierre Beslain d'Esnambuc landed with 100 soldiers

in the bay of Saint Pierre, near the river Roxelane and built here the first settlement. The bay of Saint Pierre is widely open on the west side without any protection in case of hurricanes (from July to October), but it has the huge advantage to provide big depths close to the shore (50m deep at few hundreds of meters from the beach almost everywhere!). So then this was very easy to build here a port where big vessels coming from Europe or America can be unloaded and loaded without too much infrastructure.

As a consequence Saint Pierre became rapidly a very rich city and in 1902 around 26000 inhabitants lived in Saint Pierre. At that period Saint Pierre was named the “petit Paris des

Postcard of Saint Pierre as it was before 1902, with the ships in the bay (collection JM Machefert), Lumix DMC FX 07, 10mm, 1/80, f2.6, ISO 250

Snorkeling over a huge anchor near the beach Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Tokina 10 - 17mm at 10mm, 1/ 100, f 11 , ISO 200 , 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power



Antilles“(little Paris of the West Indies). The city had a lot of monuments, huge and rich stone houses and was equipped with telephone, electricity. There was also several hospitals and even a theater with 800 seats built in 1786 on the model of the theater of Bordeaux. In the port at the season without hurricanes, always more than fifteen 3 masts were constantly anchored here. They were coming from Europe with consuming goods, from the United States of America with beefs and horses, from South America with woods and from Saint Pierre et Miquelon with cod. Before the XIX century slaves from Africa also landed in Saint Pierre for working mainly in the sugar cane plantations. After unloading the ships were then loaded with the local products (sugar, coffee, and mainly rum). 16 rum distilleries were registered in Saint Pierre in 1900 and some of them produced daily up to 10000 l of rum.

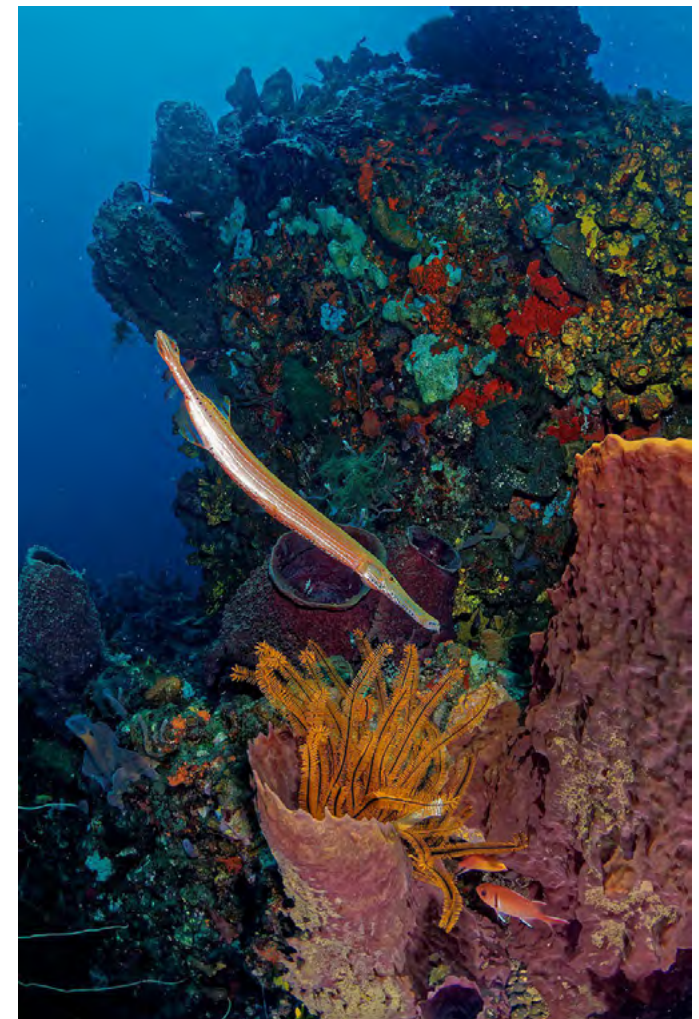
But, Saint Pierre forget that it was built on a volcano named “la Montagne pelée” and even if the activity of the volcano seemed to be weak for centuries, the Montagne pelée was still an active volcano.

In April 1902 some fumes are shown on the mountain and there was a sulfur smell in the air. Then some earthquakes and some columns of dust are observed. The rivers on the volcano are flooded and on May 2nd 1902 a mix of ash fall and water rained on Saint Pierre. On May 4th 1902 a 10 m high flow of mud came down from the Montagne pelée and destroyed the sugar mill Guérin killing 25 persons. On May 7th in order to reassure the population the mayor created a fully incompetent investigative commission publishing that there is no more risk to live now in Saint Pierre than in Napoli and that everything will be quiet as usual in



Huge barrel sponges near a solidified lava flow. Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Tokina 10 - 17mm at 10mm, 1/ 250, f9 , ISO 200 , 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and full power.

few days. (The population needed to be present in Saint Pierre on May 11th because of elections and the result was undecided between the 2 candidates. For political reasons the population had to be convinced to stay in Saint Pierre.). On May 8th at

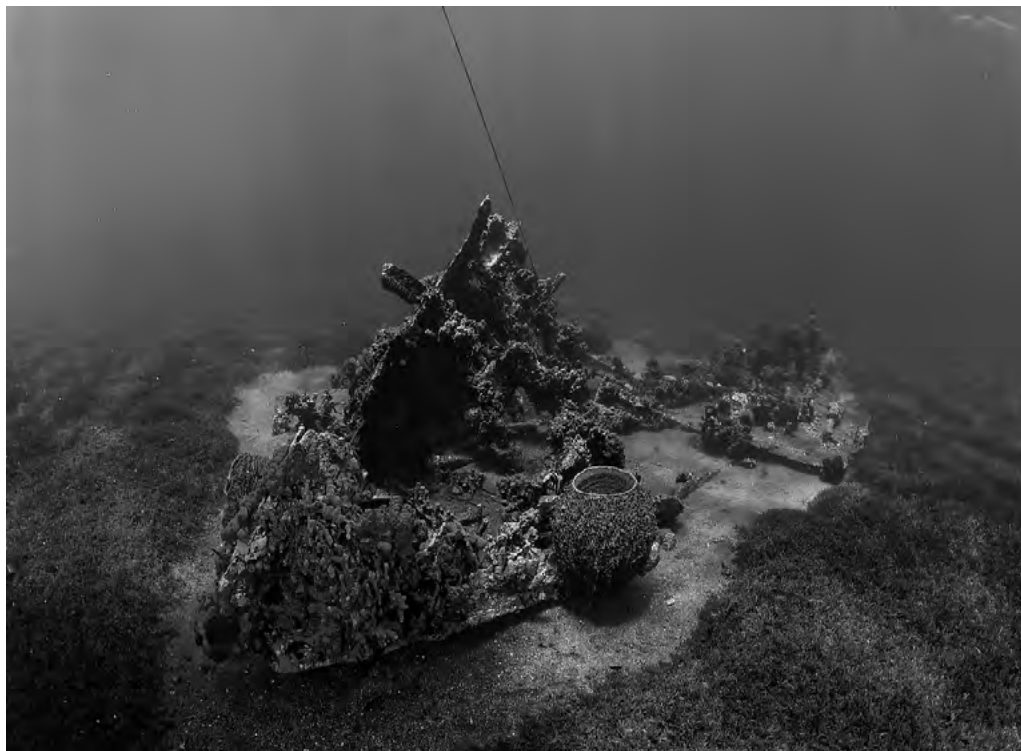


Typical view of the life on the rocky blocks in Saint Pierre. Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Tokina 10 - 17mm at 10mm, 1/ 200, f 10 , ISO 200 , 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and full power.

8h50, the volcano exploded and witnesses reported seeing a flash of light followed by the sound of a large explosion and a cloud of hot ashes (1100°C when leaving the summit and around 200°C after 6km) moving towards Saint Pierre at a speed from

50 to 150m/s blasting and burning everything on land and off shore. After few minutes 22300 peoples were killed (for comparison, “only” 3000 peoples were killed in Pompeii in 79 AD), the city destroyed and the 17 (estimated from a picture taken the 7th of May) big ships anchored in the port were destroyed and for sure more than one hundred of smaller boats were also destroyed. Since 1902 Saint Pierre never recovered the splendor of the past even if now the Montagne pelée is surveyed by a laboratory very well equipped and with fully competent scientists ready to forecast any new eruption.

Now because of this cataclysm diving in Saint Pierre is amazing. The flows of materials coming out of the volcano built canyons, underwater cliffs and rocky blocks supporting all the variety of the tropical fauna and flora of the Caribbean Sea. Near the surface and down to 20m life is everywhere with a lot of huge barrel sponges, corals, spiny lobster, turtles and of course plenty of colorful fishes. By going deeper, the density of life decreases but the rocky sceneries take place creating a wild mineral sleeping beauty. Because of the deep slope off shore the diving sites (at reasonable depth for divers) are very close to the shore and here there is no need to spend too much time traveling on the boats to join the diving sites.



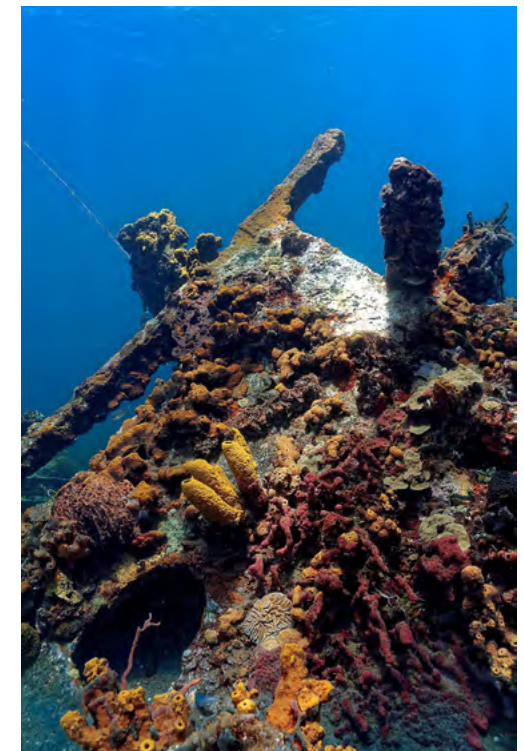
General view of the wreck of the Amelie, Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Tokina 10 - 17mm at 10mm, 1/ 60, f 11 , ISO 200 , 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, ½ and full power

Almost all the sites could be explored from shore but this is by far more comfortable and secure to go there with a diving club knowing the right locations and ensuring the safety of the divers.

And of course the wrecks from May 8th 1902. Most of the wrecks were identified (with some uncertainty for some wrecks) from 1974 by a local diver and photographer working also time to time with the team of JY Cousteau on the Calypso: Michel

Météry. JY Cousteau also dived in Saint Pierre in 1979 exploring the deep wreck (80m) of the Tamaya (steel sailboat with a double deck, 52,8m long, built in 1862 in Liverpool and owned by Mr. Rozier in Nantes (France)) and also the deeper places of the bay down to 300m (only at 400m from the shore line!) with the diving saucer SP350.

Now around 12 wrecks can be dived in the bay of Saint Pierre, and some are still to be discovered among



Wreck of the Amelie Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Sigma 17 - 70mm at 17mm, 1/ 30, f 13 , ISO 200 , 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, ½ and full power

them the Grappler (big cable ship repairing phone cables in the north of Saint Pierre the 8th of May).

The most famous wreck is the Roraima. The Roraima was 120m long steel British steamer built in 1883 by the shipyards Aitken and Maud in Glasgow and owned by the Quebec steamship company. In the morning of the 8th of May 1902 the Roraima was anchored in the bay



***Snorkeling over a cask (full of rum?) near the beach
Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Tokina 10 - 17mm at
10mm, 1/ 100, f 10 , ISO 200 , 2 strobes nikon Sb 910,
Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power***

of Saint Pierre and loaded with flammable goods (wood, oil, coal...). When reached by the blast she burnt for 3 days before sinking on depths between 40m (bow) and 55m (stern). This huge wreck is really amazing and full of life with a very big barrel sponge growing on the bow and almost everywhere "white hairs" (black sea whips (stichopathes) and other kinds of black corals (antipathes)) and so in

1979 JY Cousteau called her "the wreck with white hairs". Several dives have to be done to explore it and for sure every time the experience will be fascinating. The only drawback is the long deco stops in the company of triggerfishes we have to pay for the visit...

One other interesting wreck and may be the best location for underwater photographers is the wreck of the "Amelie" just in front of the beach called "Le Raisinier". The Amélie was a steel 3 masts ship built by the Dubigeon shipyard in Nantes near 1890. She was approximately 50m long and transporting goods between France and the West Indies. She arrived in Saint Pierre in April 1902 and after an injury on the hull she was moved by the steamer Diamant to a small bay with shallow water (Anse Turin) in the south of Saint Pierre for repairing. She was probably damaged and sunk by the blasts from the Montagne pelée. Now she is fully scattered (probably among many other smaller boats) on a less than 10m deep diving site fully covered with yellow and red sponges with plenty of tropical fishes and of course turtles, cuttlefishes... This is a perfect colorful aquarium for underwater photographers with always some porcupine fish to discover under a plate of steel. This is exactly the right place to spend hours underwater at looking and photographing the numerous possible subjects from the smallest shrimp with extra macro lens to the wreck sceneries with wide angle with almost no time limit in less than 10m deep water.

The other usual visited wrecks are, the 3 masts "Biscaye", 42 m long, coming from Saint Pierre et Miquelon with cods (Laying at a depth of 34 m this wreck is well preserved), the steamer "Diamant", 26m long, was transporting passengers and goods between Fort de France and Saint Pierre exploded

(explosion of her boiler) when the blast from the volcano reached her (now she lays at 30m deep), the sailboat "Teresa lo Vico" (the name have to be confirmed) at a depth of 34m and also several unknown sailboats. All these wreck are inhabited by a lot of tropical fishes.

Last but not the least even by snorkeling at 50 m from the beach in shallow water everywhere debris from the former life in Saint Pierre as mooring chains or anchors used for mooring and even casks (still full of rum?) or parts from sunken ships can be seen.

So, what else when you have the chance to dive in Saint Pierre? Only one idea: to come back as soon as possible for more dives.

Jean Michel Machefert

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. Pictures and some technical tips are presented on his website:

www.jmfrog.com



***Photo :
Marie Machefert***

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