



Dominica, St Lucia & St Vincent

Caribbean Islands

It's not by chance that the producers of the Pirates of the Caribbean series of Hollywood movies chose St Vincent and Dominica as locations. They both offer the rustic charm and unspoiled richness of environment that can, with little effort, take you back hundreds of years. Add in a third island, St Lucia, which lies between the two, and you have destinations that provide three very different experiences for the tourist and diver. St Lucia is a maturing package tourist destination, with well established dive schools

offering multi-lingual instruction and guidance for both beginner and experienced divers; Dominica is a nature tourist's idyllic location offering more adventurous dives and above water scenery that is equally as spectacular as that below water; St Vincent, on the other hand, has become known as the "muck diving critter capital of the Caribbean"—a

dream offering a diversity of species that rivals Lembeh Straights in Indonesia, but with one difference: these are Caribbean species, and many cannot be found in the Indo Pacific.



Various species of sponge festoon a St Lucian Reef. TOP RIGHT: Lucia's most famous landmark, the twin peaks or "pitons", can be found in the southwest of the island amongst the best diving areas

Text and photos by Steve Jones



LEFT TO RIGHT: A trumpetfish swimming amongst sea fans; A crinoid makes home in a barrel sponge; giant barrel sponges are a common sight in St Lucian waters

every island to be found in this sea. Having chosen to settle on St Lucia over ten years ago says something about what this place may offer.

In recent years, St Lucia has undergone extensive development and is becoming a popular package tour destination, supported by an international airport in the south of the island. Many international hotel chains now have established luxury resorts on the island, mainly based in the north near the capital Castries. Nevertheless, the island is far from over developed, and it only takes a short trip away from the tourist areas to see the rural nature of the island and the many picturesque fishing villages.

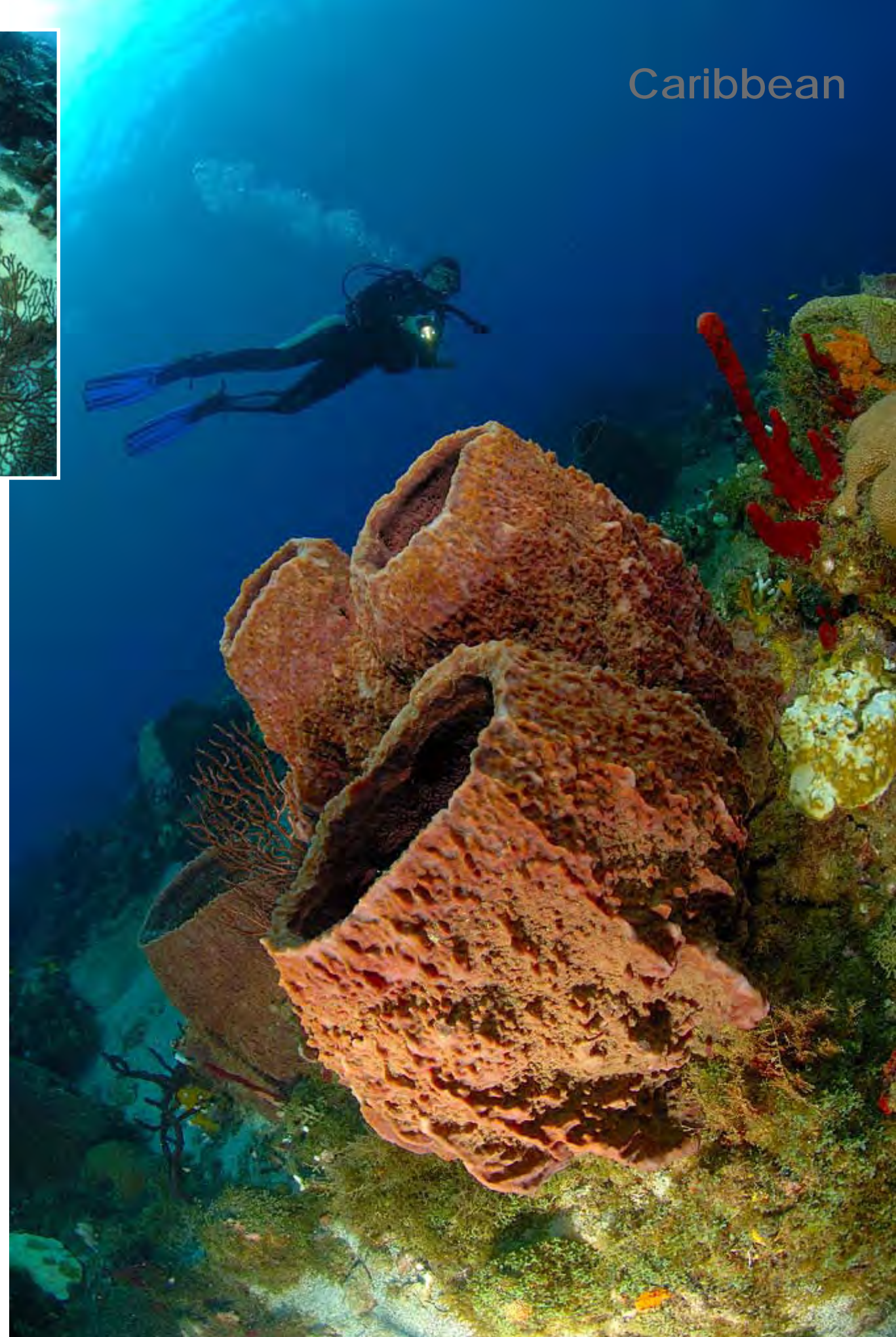
St Lucia is a mountainous green island with a coastline pocketed with quiet bays. The most scenic area is in the south near the town of Soufriere. It is here that the most photographed landmarks on St Lucia exist: the "pitons"—twin peaks that reach into the skies almost vertically from the sea. It is here also that the Anse Chastanet marine park and resort resides, which promises the best diving St Lucia can offer from a location conveniently located in a stunning setting.

St Lucia

"European divers have been spoiled on the Red Sea and the Maldives," explains Bernd, a long serving diving instructor with Scuba St Lucia. "For sure, the Caribbean is a younger tropical sea, but you can see things here you cannot see anywhere else. You can see things on St Lucia that you can't see on many other islands, and if you travel 30 km to St Vincent, you can see things there that you can't see here.

Most people don't appreciate the true variety of marine life that exists in the Caribbean," he maintains.

I'm inclined to agree, for having spent countless hours underwater in the aforementioned Indian Ocean destinations and knowing the marine life intimately, I always find the Caribbean refreshingly "different". Bernd is certainly a good authority on these matters, having left his native Germany in 1990 for the Caribbean, he has dived nearly





ABOVE: Scorpionfish can be found on Anse Chastanets house reef.
TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: St Lucian seascapes

Anse Chastanet resort is set in a secluded and private cove, and landscaped sympathetically to the lush jungle that surrounds it. The area is blessed with having a house reef that many

dive operators on the island travel for miles to visit.

Conveniently, Scuba St Lucia is based right on the shore, and after kitting up, you can walk down the gently sloping sandy beach either following the sand out to the drop off or taking a route that follows the shoreline closely, allowing the caves and overhangs to be explored. Once the drop off is reached, you can work your way around the headland. The reef drops away well below safe diving depth—there are no offshore sites on this island since St Lucia’s seascape falls away underwater as rapidly as the landscape rises above the water.

The house reef allows a gentle dive, although you must always be wary of the presence of any currents as you make your way further around the coastline. The rich biodiversity on St Lucia is immediately apparent—scorpionfish, morays, pufferfish and various species of shrimp are in abundance.

Following the reef along to the left, we pass over a series of coral gullies where large barrel sponges are seen

and schools of Jack skirt over the reef, preying on the reef fish. Small shallow caves provide homes to a great variety of life. Resident schools of Wrasse, Needlefish and Chromis seemed used to our presence.

The marine diversity is possibly the result of nutrient rich waters that surround St Lucia, due to the volcanic nature of the island. Indeed, during the journey from the airport to the resort, we passed “The World’s Only Drive-in Volcano”—and the smell of sulphur during the trip serves to emphasise the volcanic heritage of the island, although there hasn’t been an eruption since 1766.

The high quality shore diving is not the only attraction here—taking a short boat journey around the headland from the resort’s bay affords a view that is simply breathtaking—Petit Piton and Gros Piton, the twin volcanic spires eminently soaring out of the sea, dominate the view of the landscape. Designated as world heritage sites by UNESCO, it is easy to see how this area was deemed to be an outstanding

example of cultural and natural heritage when they awarded this coveted title in 2004.

You can dive at various locations around the base of the pitons—most are best done as drift dives. “Superman’s Flight” gained its name after being used as a set during the filming of “Superman II” and offers an excellent dive. Large sea whips drift lazily in the current, and hawksbill turtles can be spotted making their way along the reef.

The huge fish schools that are common in the Indian Ocean will not be found, rather, the beauty of the diving is the variety of smaller life and richness of the reefs, all set in majestic surroundings above water.

St Lucia is teardrop in shape, and during its history, it alternated between British and French colonial occupation. Now independent, English remains the national language, although a local French based dialect (“Patois”) can often be heard being spoken.

Aside from diving, you will also find that hiking, mountain biking and horse-



Map of the island of Saint Lucia



LEFT: A Giant barrel sponge at "Fairyland"
BELOW: Sea fans at "the Pinnacles" dive site



back riding are popular activities here, owing to the largely mountainous interior.

Across the bay from the pitons, the pinnacles represent a stunning dive. With four seamounts that nearly kiss the surface after rising over 300 metres from the seabed of Soufriere Bay, the reef is richly blanketed in a variety of species of soft coral and sponges. Trumpetfish and filefish can be seen dancing between the colourful gorgonians. Large basket sponges rise from the reef itself, often providing home to shrimp or goby.

Scuba St Lucia offers diving tuition in English as well as other

languages, certifying to various international bodies including PADI and SSI. The quiet, private nature of the bay and the wonderful surroundings, teamed up with attractive nearby reefs make this an ideal location for beginners and more experienced divers looking for something very different to the more popular Red Sea and Indian Ocean destinations.

Top Spots for St Lucia

Anse Chastanet Reef

This reef is just a short walk from the dive centre. It comprises of a plateau running down to eight metres before dropping off into deep water. The reef is covered

in gorgonians, soft corals and sponges. A good site for macro photography, the reef is home to over 150 different species of fish including morays, parrotfish, needlefish and scorpionfish.

Fairyland

Continuing on from the Anse Chastanet reef, this area is covered profusely in corals and sponges. Best done a drift dive, the reef slopes gently from 12 to 18 metres before dropping off into deep water. Turtles can be seen occasionally at this colourful site.

Pinnacles

A stunning dive on four coral

pinnacles that rise abruptly from the depths to within a few metres from the surface. Swimming between these pinnacles, trumpetfish, filefish and seahorses can be seen amongst the whip corals and gorgonians.

Superman's Flight

This site is located at the base of the Petit Piton. The cliff face was used in the filming of the movie "Superman II". It offers a great drift dive along a steep slope that is covered in colourful coral life. Surfacing from the dive you are greeted by truly spectacular scenery.



over the sea before a final run through an emerald comb towards Melville Hall airport.

Over the years, Dominica has become known as the 'Nature Island', an eco-tourist's dream destination. Volcanoes, boiling lakes, rainforest hikes, over 160 species of birds, towering waterfalls, whale watching and spectacular under-

water scenery—Dominica has them all. Despite these reasons to visit, Dominica has remained relatively unknown and most definitely off the beaten track, largely due to the lack of an international airport. One of the windward islands of the Caribbean, the country is only 46 km long and lies between Martinique and Guadeloupe. It's not to be confused with the Dominican Republic, the much larger package tour destination in the Northern Caribbean.

Melville Hall airport lies in the North East of the island. Choosing a self drive in order to explore with freedom, I picked up a hired 4x4, which I had prearranged to be waiting for me. My destination was the capital Roseau, which lies

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Sunset over Scott's head; The emerald pool is one of many of Dominica's natural attractions; The quiet village of Soufriere lies in the heart of a national marine reserve; Map of the island of Dominica

some 35 km away in the South West. Despite the relatively short distance, the journey took over 75 minutes. The trip took me on tight winding roads through rich rainforest, banana planta-

Dominica

Legend has it that when Christopher Columbus returned to Spain from the New World, he was asked to describe the island of Dominica. His response was to crumple up a piece of paper and throw it on the table, replying "that's Dominica!", the paper showing all the sharp edges and folds that are so apparent in this country.

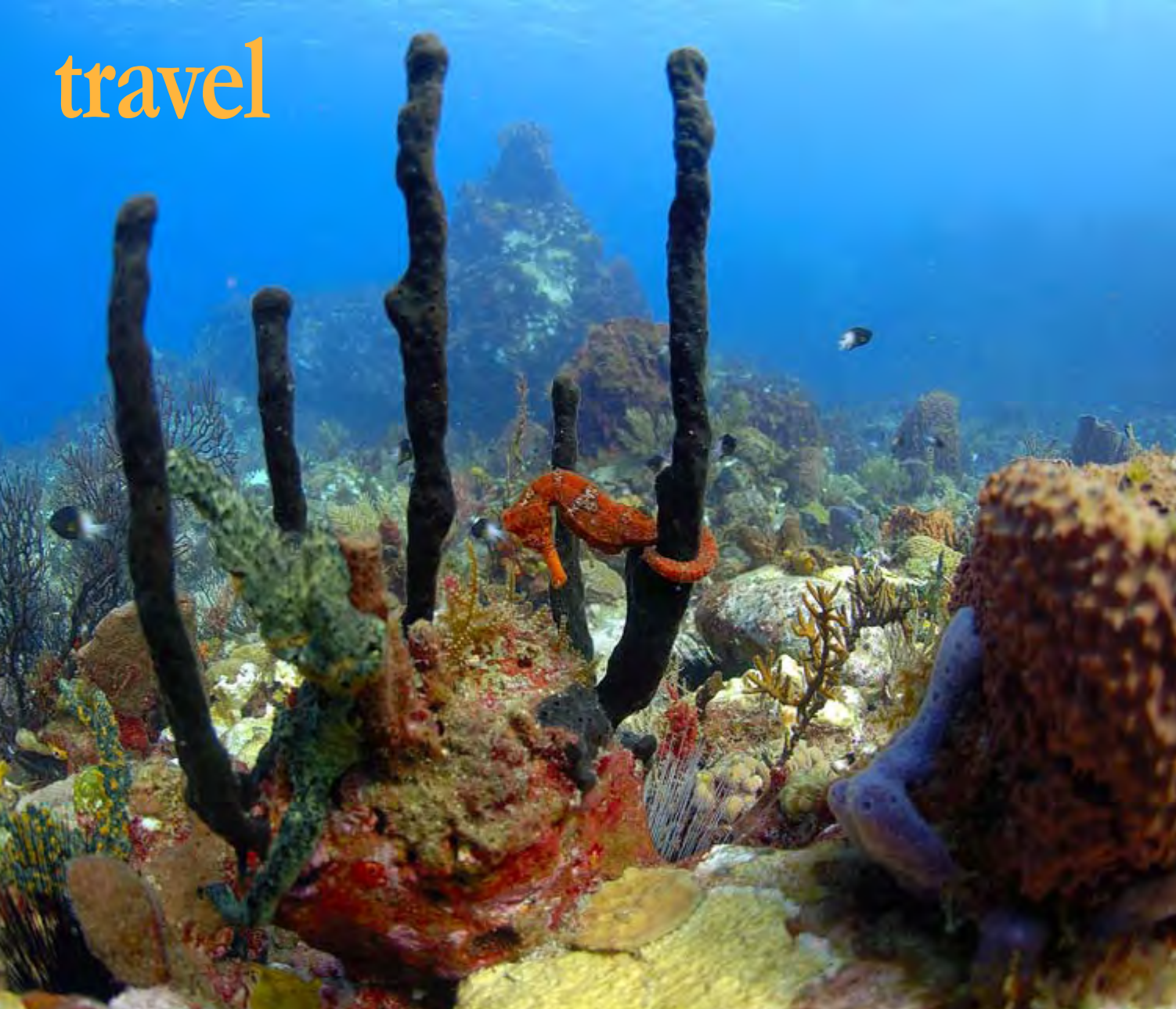
This image stays in my mind as the island appears on the horizon—it is spectacular, looming like no other in the Caribbean. The island is mountainous, covered in rich green forest. Steep ridges rise from the coast, which then give way to lush river valleys. Adventure beckons from this place as our light aircraft banks steeply



travel

Caribbean





PREVIOUS PAGE: Soldierfish gather in a swim-through at "Scott's head pinnacles". ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT: Seahorses are a common sight in Dominica; Northern Dominica's reefs; Arrow crab; Trafalgar falls are another of Dominica's famous landmarks

tions and the territory of the one the last settlements of the original inhabitants of the Caribbean, the Carib Indians, who maintain their culture on the island. It was apparent throughout the whole trip just how unspoilt the island is. I arrived in Roseau with a smile on my face.

Roseau is a colourful town bursting with character and traditionally West Indian. I felt I had taken a step back in time as I passed through its streets. They are lined with old stone and wood buildings and despite it being a relatively poor area, it is well kept and the locals are friendly and welcom-

ing. Dive operations on the island are well established, however you will not find resorts on Dominica on the scale that you will on St Lucia—accommodation is in the form of small hotels, guest houses and Inns. I based myself at the Castle Comfort Lodge, which benefits from being 30 seconds walk from one of the island's longest established dive centres, Dive Dominica. This is a centre that is equipped to cope with large groups of divers, having multiple purpose built dive boats.

My first dive in Dominican waters exceeded all my expectations—

proving to be one of the most spectacular dives I have done in the Caribbean. Scott's Head pinnacles lies at the South West tip of the island, near a peninsula where the Caribbean Sea meets the Atlantic Ocean. Such nutrient rich waters have developed a stunning reef, which comprises a series of pinnacles, along with swim throughs that are filled with Soldierfish. The water was remarkably clear with visibility exceeding 30 metres, and the variety of reef life was rich—frogfish, mantis shrimp and seahorses can all be seen here. The pinnacles stand on

a plateau, and in the distance, the edge of the drop off can be seen. As with St Lucia, Dominica plunges into the abyss; the sea bed lies hundreds of metres below.

Diving in Dominica is arranged in a way that allows you time to explore the delights that she also possesses above water. Boat trips are arranged so that two 60-minute morning dives are completed by around 13:00. This leaves the afternoon free for other activities, although for those that prefer spending as much time as possible underwater, the jetty at Dive



Giant Barrel sponges are a common site on Danglebens pinnacles



THIS PAGE: Sperm Whales are resident off the coast of Dominica, where they feed on the giant squid that lives in the depths below

Caribbean

Dominica provides an excellent shore dive any time of the day. Stunning scenic attractions such as the Emerald Pool and Trafalgar falls are within half an hour's car drive of Roseau and are easy to reach by foot from the car parks. Dominica also boasts the world's second largest actively boiling lake.

Already providing many attractions for the serious nature lover, Dominica has also earned a reputation as being one of the finest whale watching destinations in the Caribbean. Its extremely deep waters provide a home to the giant squid, which live over a thousand metres down. This, in turn, has attracted a permanent residence of Sperm whales.

Whale watching is an activity not to be missed, and with skilful boat captains and knowledgeable watch leaders, the experience is both exciting and informative. In the space of three hours, we encountered four different Sperm whales at close range and schools of hundreds of dolphins. Orcas, false killer whales and pilot whales can also be seen here, and in winter, Baleen whales such as the Humpback can

sometimes be seen passing through.

A 20-minute car journey down the narrow coastal road south will take you even further back in time. The village of Soufriere (named after the French word for sulphur) lies in a bay that was formed when the walls of a volcano crater collapsed into the sea.

The whole area around the bay is now a marine reserve, managed by a friendly Londoner known to his friends as Izzy, a well travelled gentleman who seems to know just about everyone in the diving industry. When not in the Caribbean, he spends his time diving the Egyptian Red Sea. He is an instructor and qualified marine biologist.

It was comforting to see that Dominica takes the management of its natural heritage very seriously—this is a country that holds its environment in very high regard. Many more developed countries, in addition to some of our favourite diving destinations, could take a valuable lesson from their approach.

Dominican diving

It is in a sleepy village, domi-

nated by a picturesque church, where Nature Island Dive can be found. It is run by Simon Walsh, president of the Dominican Watersports Association (www.dominicawatersports.com). This well organised federation is made up of all the dive centres on the island, and working together, they provide a voice to the government and fisheries to ensure that different users of the sea remain harmonious, safety standards are defined and enforced and marine reserves governed and respected. Again, this is yet more evidence of a well-managed and responsible approach to tourism on this island. Ever helpful, they represent a good first point of contact for anyone wishing to visit the island.

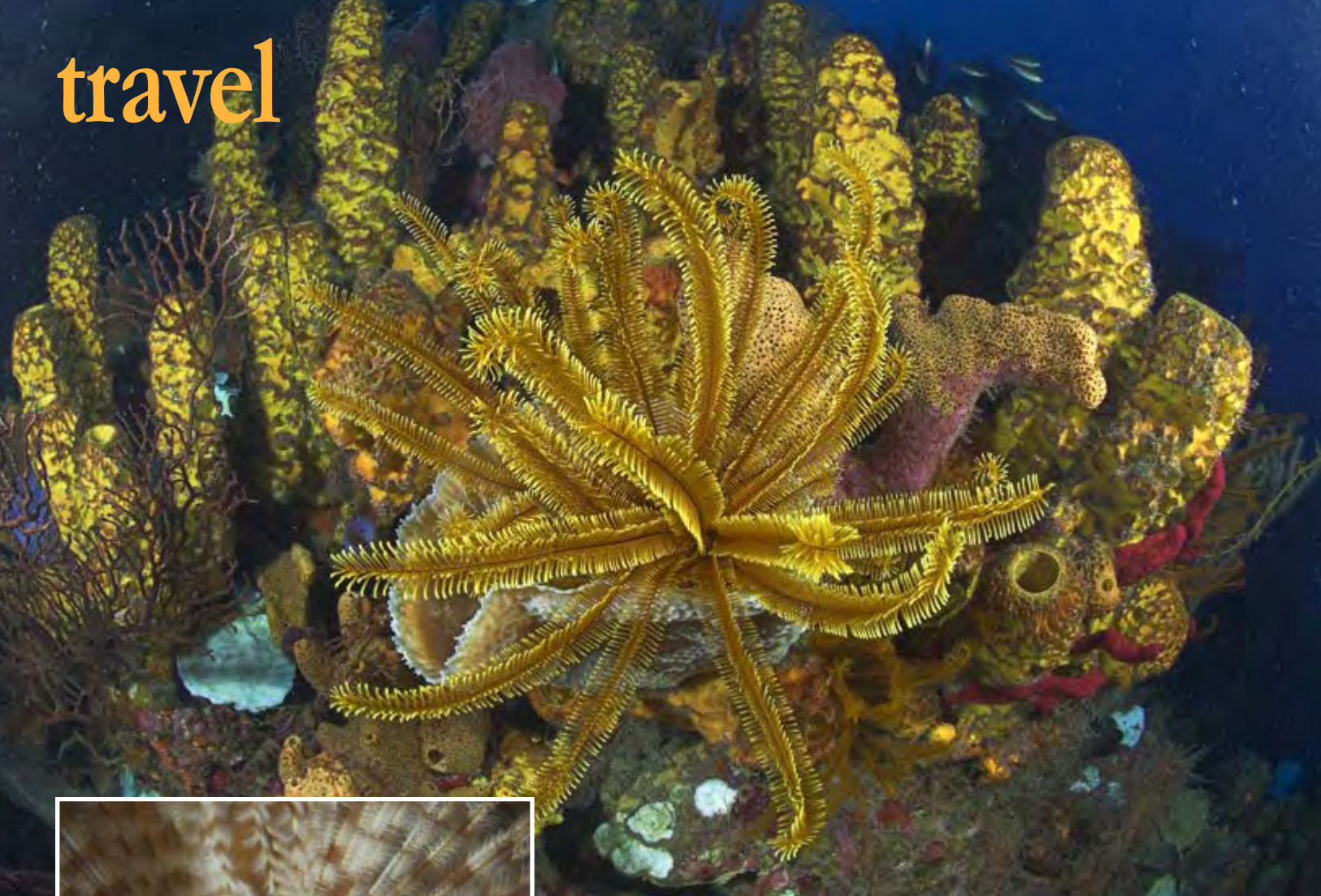
Nature Island Dive is conveniently located right in the centre of the Soufriere bay marine reserve, and the whole experience of diving with them was a very laid back affair, which mirrored the quiet and relaxed

pace of the village itself. Simon is an expert photographer and having hosted some of the world's best image makers, he knows exactly how to find what photographers look for when exploring Dominica and goes to great lengths to ensure they get what they need.

After only a 10-minute boat journey, we descended onto "Danglebens Pinnacles". Upon dropping to the bottom of the buoy line, I came across one of the largest barrel sponges I had ever seen. It's interesting to note that the marine fauna of Dominica also possesses that "spectacular" element that describes so many other attributes of this island.

The journey back from Soufriere allows one to take in some of the set of the film *Pirates of the Caribbean II*. One of its main themes involving a cannibal village was filmed on the headland and Cannibal huts still dot the hill. Many of the diving guides I met had been commissioned





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Featherduster worm; Crinoid featherstar amongst sponges; Dominica's reefs are encrusted with corals and sponges; longsnout seahorse

spring with sand almost too hot to touch, reminded me of the truly volcanic nature of Dominica. Cabrits' owners, Helen and Peter Hepp informed me they even venture round to the rarely explored Atlantic side of the island, offering the chance to dive in unexplored territory.

Dominica's highlights are its diving and hiking, both of which are world class. Mountain biking, canoeing the many rivers, and bird and whale watching also feature high on the list. It offers a raw beauty with wonderful scenery both above and below water. I left with a definite feeling that I had seen a special place, which has been totally unspoiled by industry and tourism. For anybody looking to experience tropical Caribbean nature at its purest, you need look no further than Dominica.

Top Spots on Dominica

Scott's Head Pinnacle

In the south of the island, Scott's Head Pinnacle is arguably one of the island's most famous dive sites. The dive begins on a large rock formation before one enters a large swim through that is filled with Soldierfish. The Soldierfish part like a curtain to allow you to swim through before you emerge on a large plain of coral encrusted outcrops. This leads you to the pinnacle itself. A swim through cuts the pinnacle in two, and on the other side a spectacular drop off to well below diving depth, looms before you. Soldierfish and lobster intermingle amongst the sea fans as the reef drops away.

Crater's Edge

Continuing from Scott's Head Pinnacle in a northwesterly direction is a volcanic ridge that leads out to the site known as Crater's Edge. Looking out into the blue, masses of predatory fish, including tuna

and snapper, can be observed swooping in on their prey. Barracuda also prowl this area. The pinnacle itself is covered in colourful corals and can be easily circumnavigated in one dive.

Dangleben's Pinnacles

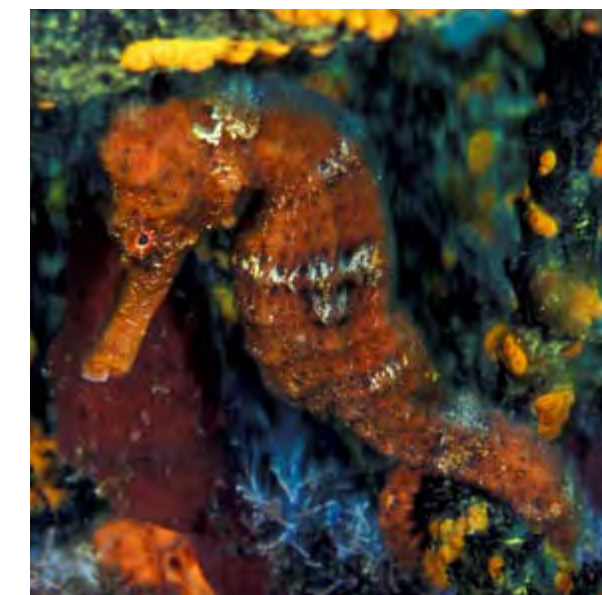
A series of five pinnacles ranging in depths from 12 to 25 metres, this site is notable for its enormous barrel sponges. The pinnacles themselves are encrusted with a variety of colourful coral species and during the winter months, large schools of jacks, can be seen hunting. A spectacular dive and a favourite of many of the local guides.

Champagne Reef

This reef lies in the northern area of the Soufriere Marine Reserve and is a much talked about site by anyone who has visited. In around five metres of water, a sub-aquatic hot spring jets out hot water, and bubbles can be seen rising from the reef in the surrounding area, hence its name.

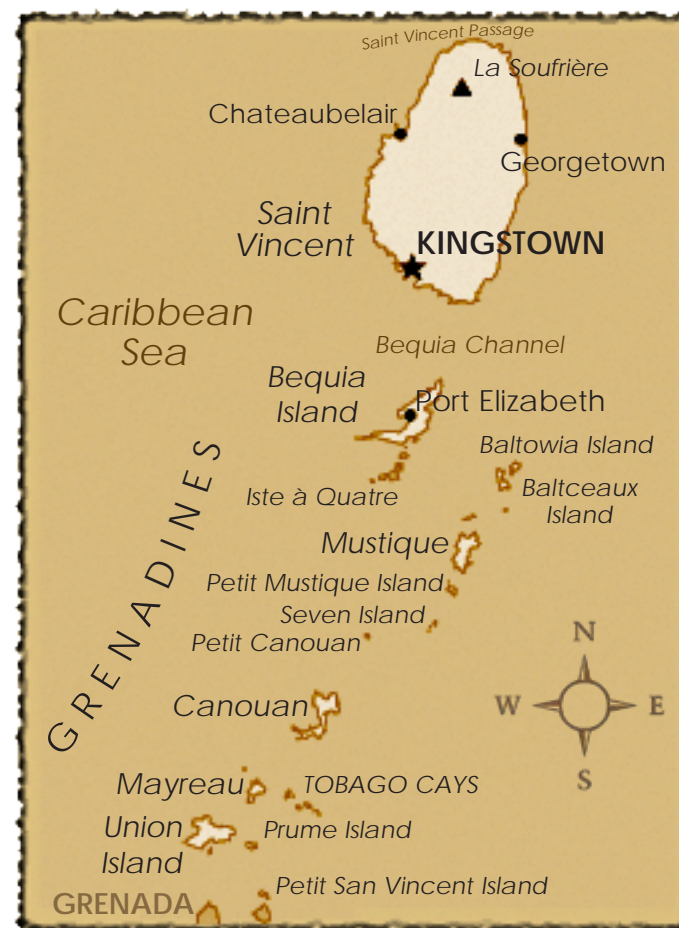
Toucarri Caves

This site lies in the north of the island and can be dived from Cabrits dive centre. A beautiful, healthy reef, the high point of the dive is swimming through a cave and archway abound with lobster. The whole area is rich in fish life and ranging in depth from 10 – 30 metres, it is suitable for both beginner and advanced diver.



as extras for the film, which bought huge benefits for the local economy.

An hours drive north up to Portsmouth shows even more of the underwater diversity that Dominica has to offer. Cabrits dive centre is a very well equipped centre geared towards teaching. The underwater scenery is very different here, lacking the huge abyssal drop offs of the South, but containing gentle coral covered slopes with schooling fish. Finding a bubbling underwater



CLOCKWISE: Young Island resort; sunset over the jetty on Young Island; Peacock Flounder; Map of the island of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; Longsnout seahorse are commonplace on St Vincents reefs

St Vincent

An intimate knowledge and genuine enthusiasm for marine life are attributes that define some of the best dive guides. With these qualities, they are able to turn an hour underwater into a whole learning experience. Bill Tewes, proprietor of Dive St Vincent, takes that experience to another level altogether. He has placed St Vincent on the map as being amongst the premier locations for critter diving in the Caribbean.

Bill is a weather-worn Texan, full of energy and anecdotes. "I'll dive every day until I die. Hell, there's nothing else to do, is there?" he quipped in his strong Texan twang as the huge twin engines of the dive boat roar into life.

Bill moved to St Vincent 24 years ago. Previously he was

in Papua New Guinea, one of the pioneers of diving in that area. Given the enormous marine biodiversity that exists in PNG, Bill can certainly speak with authority and experience. "I decided to leave New Guinea," he said, "and I saw a guy who was selling a dive centre in St Vincent, so I thought, what the hell, seems like a nice place, but I had no idea just how special it really was."

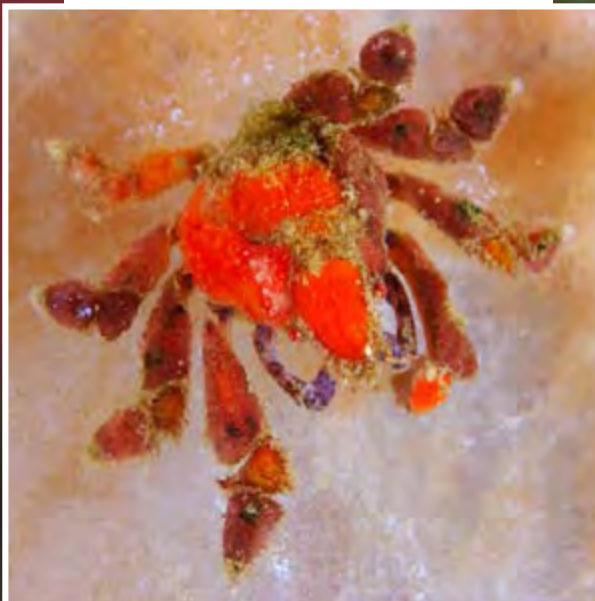
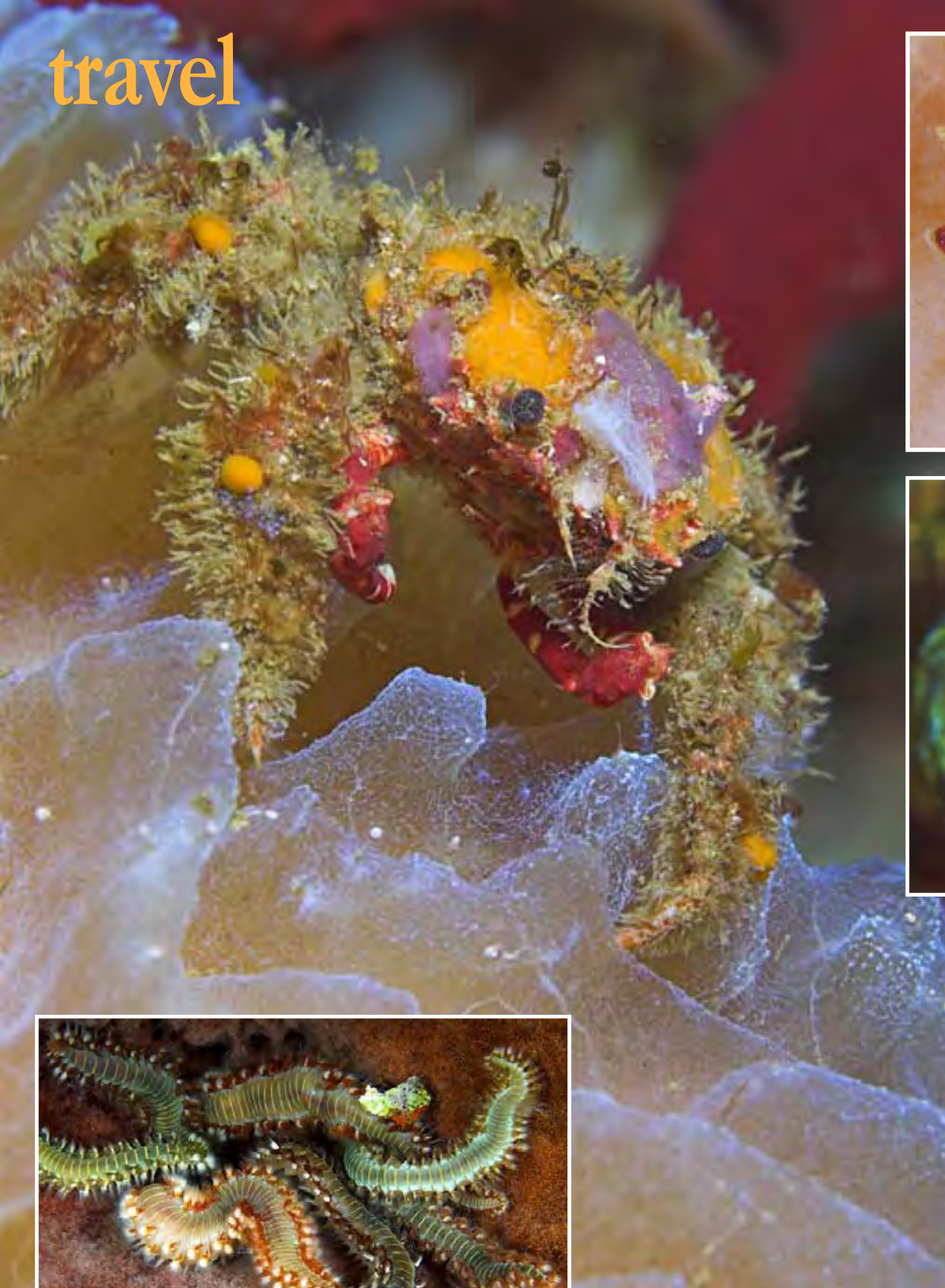
The discovery of St Vincent's true underwater treasures did not come instantly though. For years St Vincent was regarded as typical Caribbean diving. It had nice reefs but was without the special attractions to bring divers in from over the world.

It isn't that St Vincent has changed, but rather that Bill has used his time well focuss-

ing on a more unique aspect of what the island has to offer in the waters that surround.

Entering the old shack that forms the dive centre, one is bombarded with a plethora of colour. Images of the weird and wonderful—some animals of which I'd never seen before—adorn the entry porch to the dive hut. The images were produced by some well-known photographers. My own attention was immediately focussed.

Pointing out any one of the animals portrayed in the images, Bill replies with a description of the animal and where it was taken. "I can show you that," he said and goes on describing every animal to me, like a living encyclopaedia. I can't help but feel eager to get in the water; his enthusiasm is infectious.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Some of St Vincent's weird and wonderful marine inhabitants: Fireworms (inset); Decorator crab; Southern teardrop crab; Snapping shrimp; Secretary Blenny

Diving St Vincent

The dive boat leaves at a respectable 9:30am, allowing time for a relaxed breakfast. His boats are fast, so we're at our first dive destination known simply as "The Steps" in no time at all. Tanks are filled only to 175 bar, but at an average dive depth of ten metres, this is enough for an hour or more.

The diving is slow and relaxed, mimicking the pace of life above water. The aim is not to cover ground, but to find the unusual, weird and wonderful. Good buoyancy control is a must; it's all too

easy to stir up the sediment and ruin visibility.

Much of the time we spend moving along the sand or mud flats, which at first appear as no more than a barren moonscape, but it is here that some of the most unusual critters can be found. It seems every square

metre of this underwater realm contains life, some of it more obscure than I had ever witnessed. Bill and his guides identify each creature and use waterproof writing pads to name what they have found—it was akin to diving with an active guide book.

Indeed, after only one dive here, it is clear that the marine fauna of St Vincent is unusually rich. I wonder if the other dive destinations are equally as rich, and it's really down to the guide's abilities to find the unusual that make this place seem so special. Bill has a theory on this. "I believe

it's the nutrient rich currents that run from the Atlantic through the channel between our neighbour Bequia and us that have made St Vincent what it is. When I first came here, I didn't realise that this place had the treasures it has. But over the years, I've come to realise that it is a truly special place," Bill told me. Special, it most certainly is.

The divers that visit Bill were certainly not what I'd call casual divers. Keen photographers and critter enthusiasts equipped with an array of animal identification books, these were serious divers, and some I spoke to visit several times a year—such is the attraction of this relatively unknown place.

Some world leading marine life experts have also recognised the uniqueness of what Bill has discovered. The chances of discovering the undiscovered is high, and Bill himself found an undocu-

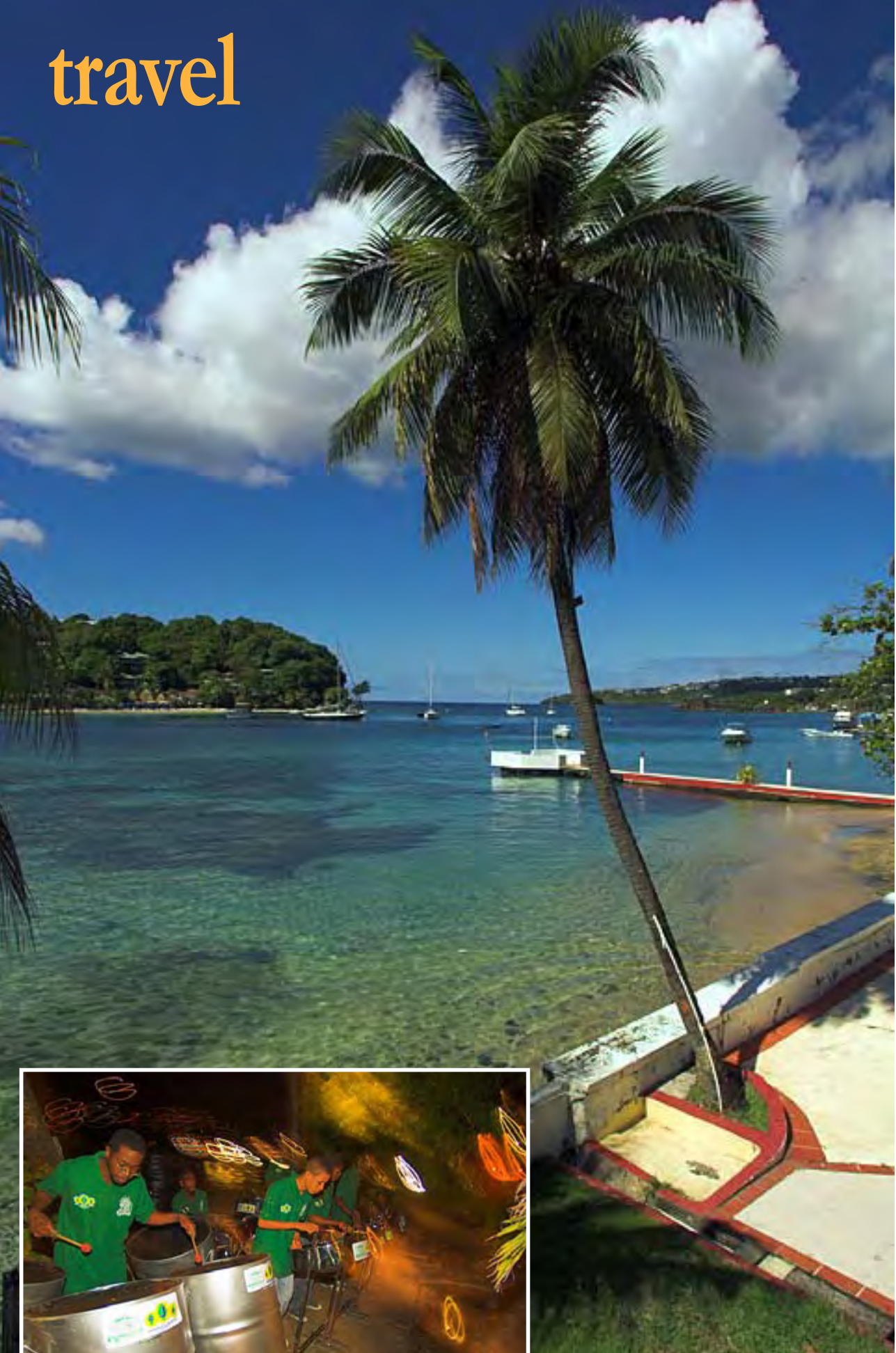
mented species whilst I was diving with him. "My enthusiasm for diving has never been greater," Bill informed me. "I just never know what I'm going to find even on reefs I've visited countless times before."

The island

St Vincent itself lies about 35 km from St Lucia, its nearest neighbour to the north. It's a small island, only 29 km long by 18 km wide, and its interior is a tangle of lush vegetation, distinctly mountainous with deep valleys.

The Grenadines group of islands run 75 km south all the way to Grenada, and include such islands as Mustique and Bequia—popular with the rich and famous and known for their white sandy beaches. It's also a popular sailing destination.

St Vincent is much like Dominica in that it has shied away from becoming a package destination, hav-



The location used as the "pirates treasure cave" for the first of the *Pirates of the Caribbean*

movies

used as the "Treasure Cave" set for the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie.

As we descend beneath the

ing no international airport. Its period charm is evident in my choice of accommodation; The Mariners Hotel is styled in typical Caribbean architecture—fresh, clean colours and full of character—it boasts a superb restaurant and lies only a few minutes walk from Dive St Vincent's jetty. Together they lie on the edge of a small stretch of water that runs between the mainland and the more exclusive Young Island Resort. St Vincent therefore offers good accommodation within easy reach of the best diving spots.

It is off the shores of the aforementioned Young Island, only two minutes' boat journey from the dive centre, where

I had one of the most bizarre of dives. For having moored on an anchor buoy, I was to take around 20 minutes to reach the seabed, which lay only eight metres below. The reason lies in testament to Bill's theory on the nutrient rich waters—I found that the entire buoy rope was in itself an oasis of marine life. I never have before seen a rope so encrusted with corals and sponges with a whole variety of creatures making this place their home. I daren't have touched the rope itself, for fear of the absolute destruction I would have caused to this fragile mini ecosystem. The remainder of the dive was no less interesting—burrowing starfish, deco-

rator crabs, jawfish, the rare golden coral shrimp, all found on a flat, seemingly featureless sandy bottom.

St Vincent's coastline itself is no less absorbing than the undersea environment. It is pocketed with coves and hidden bays, whilst various species of sea bird nest on the steep cliffs. It fuels the imagination.

"You may recognise this place," Bill said as our boat snaked around the headland. Indeed, our dive site this day was Orca Point, the bay

boat, we quickly discovered our own undersea treasures, far more beautiful than any man-made creation. The rare magnificent urchin greets us with a plethora of colour, reds richer than I have ever seen.

I look on in wonder as I observe that these animals are actually capable of walking at some speed. I wonder if they



ABOVE: View from the Mariners hotel
LEFT: local entertainment





FROM LEFT: Secretary blenny; Juvenile Magnificent urchin, rarely seen at sport diving depths; Longarm octopus

know where they are going, as one heads off in the same direction as the other, clearly with intent. Not satisfied with such a wonderful find, Bill was keen to point out the miniscule shrimp that live amongst the spines of this rarely seen animal.

Our attention turned now to the green vegetation that blankets the seabed. Perseverance paid off as we spotted the tiny Bumblebee shrimp—no less special than our earlier find. Smaller than my little finger nail, we

tracked it as it darted amongst the seaweed, ever eager to escape our prying eyes.

Every dive on St Vincent ends with one wanting more, and every dive begins with the excitement of not knowing what one will find, but a feeling that one will certainly find many things, most of which will be new.

Despite the slow pace of life on St Vincent, the time there ends too quickly. I now recall my visit to St Lucia when the dive

guide, Bernd, made a statement about how different the diving can be from one island to the next in the Caribbean—how right he was.

St Vincent's Top Sites

The majority of Dive St. Vincent's sites are on the leeward, or western, side of the island. The journey to the sites by speed boat takes an average of 10 to 15 minutes. There are moorings at the most popular sites, installed to protect the reefs.

The Wall

Beneath the cliffs that protrude into the sea, this reef has a richness of life that rivals the top-side flora and fauna. The wall is full of black corals in an array

of colours. Gorgonians, barrel and vase sponges intersperse the reef. Large populations of Chromis and creole wrasse flow over the seascape.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Tube Sponges; Christmas tree worms; Blennies of a whole range of species are common in St Vincent

Orca Point

This site is full of critters of all shapes and sizes and also makes an excellent night dive. A wonderful area for macro photography, on a typical dive you will see several types of seahorse, flamingo tongues, frog fish and a whole variety of crustaceans. The site descends from six to 30 metres, and the best way to explore it is to start out on the deep side

and work your way to the shallow boulders with swarming fish.

Orca II

Has the best of both worlds: encompasses a beautiful reef and has an area for muck diving. The reef side is very coral rich, containing an abundance of life. The muck diving side displays many of the critters that St Vincent has become famous for

including flying gurnards, seahorses and a diversity of crustaceans, in addition to pike blennies.

Critter Corner

A photographers dream site, in only eight metres of water you'll be limited by film or the space on your flash card rather than bottom time. Pistol shrimp, cardinal fish, torpedo ray, gurnards, seahorse—all can be seen here.

The buoy line itself is encrusted in coral and sponges; so much life is to be found in this small space.

Getting there

LIAT Airlines (www.liatairline.com) offers extensive inter-island flights running several times a day. The flight time from St Lucia to Dominica is 45 minutes, and St Lucia to St Vincent only 20 minutes. International flights land at

Puerto Rico, Barbados, Antigua and St Lucia, all of which are interconnected by LIAT.

Climate & hurricanes

St Lucia, Dominica and St Vincent all lie in the tropical Caribbean. Therefore, the temperature varies only slightly all year round averaging around 30°C, with minimal variations in the number of hours of daylight.

The rainiest time of year is May through November. Even so, rainfall is heavier on the northeast (windward) side of the islands, with much less on the leeward sides, where the diving operations are based.

Hurricane season starts in June and officially ends at the end of November. This is the low season for tourism to this region. All three islands are at the southern edge of the hurricane belt, so the chances of a "direct hit" are low, although tropical depressions passing by

may produce bad weather during the season.

Water temperature averages 27°C year round, so a 3 or 5mm wetsuit is adequate.

Currency

All three islands use the Eastern Caribbean dollar, with US dollars also widely accepted. Cash is readily available from autobank machines and most popular credit cards are accepted by resorts and dive centres. ■

