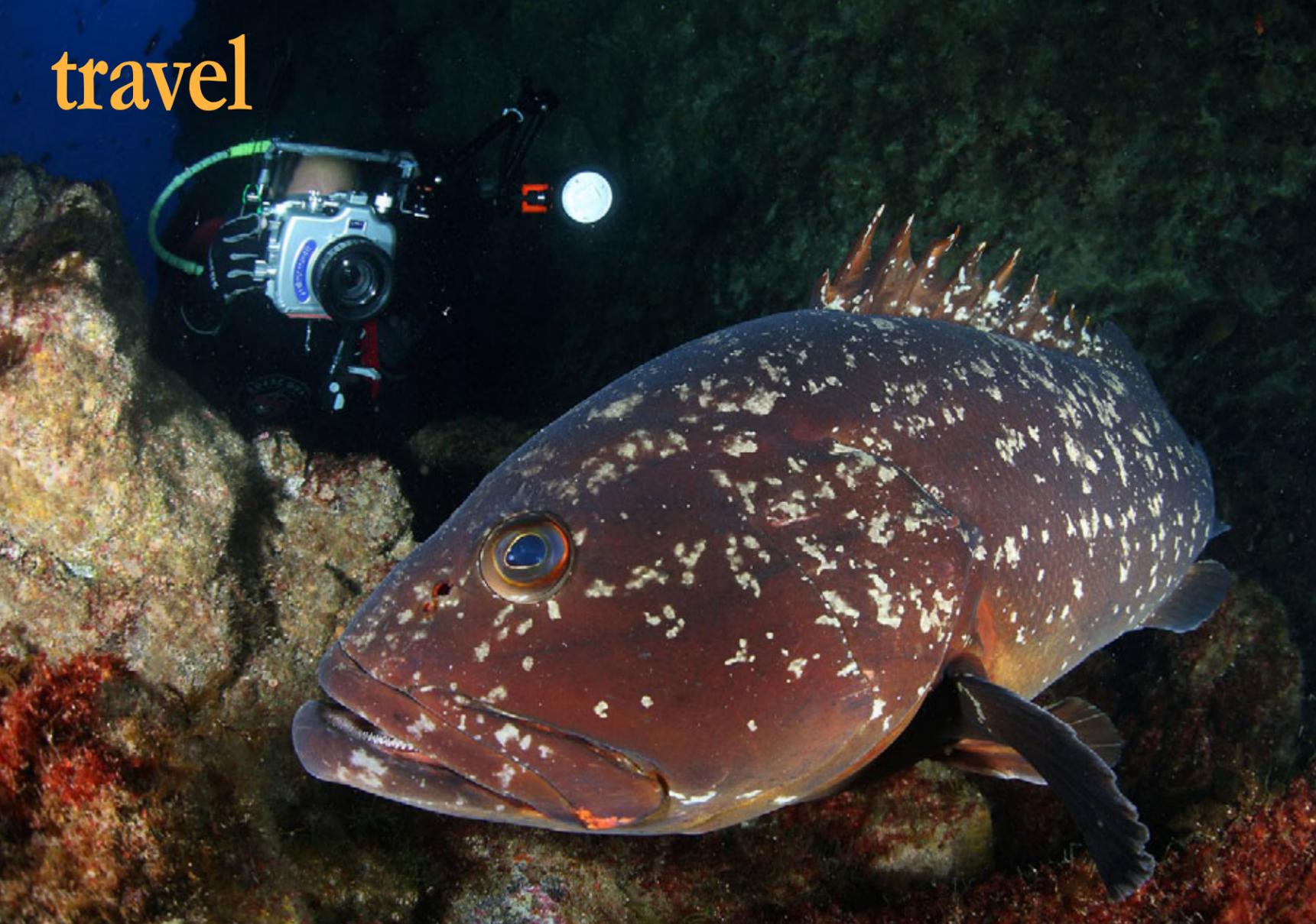


An underwater photograph showing a large school of small fish in the background and four dolphins in the foreground. The dolphins are swimming towards the right. The water is clear and blue, with sunlight filtering through from the surface.

An Oasis in the Atlantic Azores

Text and photos by Nuno Sá



It's been almost 15 years since my first visit to the Azores. I was studying law then and was on my first diving trip, with all of eight dives written down in my brand new logbook. Six years later, I was living in the Azores. I had traveled and dived in many remote locations by then, Africa, Australia, Asia... but one place never left my mind—those nine small islands that stood alone in the middle of the Atlantic. So, I hung my law degree diploma at my parent's house in Portugal and left for the Azores with a single goal in mind: to live in and discover a place with one of the highest levels of biodiversity in the world, and maybe even become an underwater photographer.

Friendly dusky grouper, Graciosa Island; Diver with curious common octopus, Faial Island; Blacktail comber, São Jorge Island. PREVIOUS PAGE: Wild dolphins corral and hunt prey in a bait ball

And it came to pass. After five years of diving in these nine islands as a professional nature photographer, I have seen the world's largest animal—the majestic blue whale—and dived with orcas, pods of sperm whales, dolphins, turtles, sharks, devil rays, whale sharks and many other fascinating creatures. But I am sure I can spend the rest of my life on these

islands without discovering all of the secrets the Azorean seas have to reveal.

Although whale and dolphin watching are the main tourist attractions of these nine islands, more and more divers are discovering this group of islands by exploring a myriad of dive sites where the visibility is startling and the presence of large pelagic



Azores



fish unique. Located in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, almost half way between the United States and Europe, the Azores are a small oasis in the middle of a blue desert for many species that annually venture on Atlantic migrations. Located in the frontier of cold and nutrient rich currents coming in from the north and a ramification of the warm waters of the Gulf Stream coming in from the south, the upwelling effect of the only landmass between these two continents creates an explosion of life every year.

The beginning of this cycle starts with the spring “bloom” as water starts to get warmer and filled with microscopic algae, giving it a greenish hue. With it come the biggest and smallest of the ocean’s beings. As a frenzy of small zooplankton

organisms feed on the algae, they will soon serve as nourishment to giant travelers crossing the ocean. Blue whales, fin whales, Bryde’s whales, sei whales and minke whales arrive, stopping in these nutrient rich waters, gathering strength to complete their migration north to the cold Arctic waters. Undoubtedly, these large baleen whales will meet pods of sperm whales—the Azores’ resident giant of the seas, which hunts giant squid in the deep waters surrounding the archipelago.

When the first days of summer arrive, water gets clearer by the day as the food chain develops, the microscopic plankton gives way to large bait balls, and a multitude of predators follow. As the warm summer breezes arrive so do the more tropical species, such as large pods of Atlantic spotted dol-

phins, loggerhead turtles, devil rays, whale sharks and finally, large schools of fish.

Nine gems—one by one

The archipelago of the Azores is constituted of nine islands and spreads through 500km (311 miles). These nine islands are the most isolated in the North Atlantic, situated 1,300km (808 miles) from the southwestern coast of mainland Portugal. Diving is possible on all of the islands of the archipelago and range from shore dives to cave dives and wreck dives as well as diving in distant underwater mountains where dozens of manta rays and big schools of fish are common sights.

Divided in three groups (Eastern, Central and Western), the islands can be very close to each



LEFT TO RIGHT: Free diver surrounded by Almaco jacks, Santa Maria Island, Ambrósio; Pod of Sperm whales. Photo obtained under a special permit of Azores environment authorities; Friendly Loggerhead turtle, Santa Maria Island

PHOTO OBTAINED UNDER A SPECIAL PERMIT OF AZORES ENVIRONMENT AUTHORITIES



other in a group (just four miles from Pico to Faial in the central group), but up to over a hundred miles away from the next group. Each of these islands is so different from the other that it is hard to describe them as a whole. What they do have in common is peace and quiet, breathtaking volcanic landscapes and cows everywhere—roads included!

Underwater, these islands are as different as on the surface, with blue sharks on one island and whale sharks on another, or a World War II shipwreck on one island and 15th and 16th century wrecks on another. Coastal dives are, however rather similar throughout the archipelago. Being islands of volcanic origin, underwater rock formations can be very impressive, with large arches originated by ancient lava flows and deep caves with numerous

connections to various chambers.

The typical sea life includes large dusky groupers, curious trigger fishes, several species of little nudibranchs, morays and octopi in amongst the rocks. Colorful red hogfish are normally more common at a greater depth—20 meters or more—where the black coral (*Antipathella wollastoni*) branches are also quite common. Many small and colorful species can be sighted, such as peacock wrasse, parrotfish, Azores chromis (*Chromis limbata*) and Mediterranean rainbow wrasse.

Large schools of pelagic fish such as guelly jack, almaco jack, yellow-mouth barracuda, Atlantic bonito or—for the lucky few—a majestic devil ray, a turtle or an ocean sunfish are occasionally sighted on coastal dives, but the offshore underwater seamounts are definitely the place to visit for the big pelagics and are

what make the Azores a unique diving destination.

Western Group

Of the nine islands of the Azores, Flores and Corvo are the most distant and secluded, also being the westernmost point of Europe. Only ten miles separate these two islands, however, they are 130 miles away from the nearest island group. With less than 4,000 inhabitants—Flores Island and Corvo Island with 400—the so-called “Western Group” still offers the closest we can get to nature in its purest state, with waters that are pristine, unpolluted and almost untouched by humankind.

But visiting these two islands is not just a unique experience underwater, as these islands have breathtaking landscapes and are off the beaten track of the more touristic islands. *Flores*, in Flores Island, liter-

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Group of devil rays at offshore underwater seamount; Cows on the road, peace and quiet. View of Faial Island from Pico, Central group; View of Corvo Island from Flores, Western group



ally means *flowers* in Portuguese, and the island can best be described as “Hawaii in the Atlantic”. Beautiful waterfalls cut through the green landscape and lagoons, and there are flowers everywhere. Corvo, on the other hand, is only one-eighth the size of Flores with a total area of 17 sq km, thus being the smallest in the archipelago.

Although small, Corvo Island offers its visitors, without a doubt, one of the world’s most unique and beautiful landscapes. The giant crater of the extinct volcano that occupies almost the totality of the island is composed of several small lagoons surrounded by green

meadows filled with flowers, as the outer ridge of the crater falls steeply into the blue sea. UNESCO has recently recognized the uniqueness of this natural heritage nominating it a Biosphere Reserve.

The only village on the island is the small village of Vila do Corvo, a picturesque town with white houses and cobblestone streets.

Due to its geographical isolation from islands with more developed fishing industries, the islands of Flores and Corvo still have a diverse and abundant marine life. Large schools of yellowmouth barracuda can be found here as well as almaco jack and jack

fish, an abundance of red hogfish, blacktail combers, various types of morays and so many other typical species of the Azores. On the boat crossing from Flores to Corvo many species of whales, dolphins, sea turtles and sea birds are usually sighted.

Corvo’s highlight is undoubtedly the dive with the big dusky groupers at the Caneiro dos Meros dive site, located just 300m from the harbor. This is a natural reserve (amazingly it was voluntarily created by the island’s fishermen) where you can dive with up to eight or ten large and friendly dusky groupers.

Flores, on the other hand, also has many

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Corvo Island’s crater—a Unesco natural heritage; Sperm whale fluke; Atlantic spotted dolphins; The “Triangle Islands”, São Jorge Island with Pico and Faial in the horizon



LEFT TO RIGHT: Diver explores Shrimp Cave, Faial Island; Rock goby (*Gobius paganellus*); Diver and red scorpion fish (*Scorpaena scrofa*)

diving spots on its extensive coast, one of the most famous ones is Gruta do Galo—a dive in a magnificent cave that ends under a freshwater waterfall in the sea. Most divers who visit the Azores “Western Group” take advantage of the proximity of the two islands to visit and dive on both of them. After all, it is just a one-and-a-half-hour boat ride between the two islands.

Central Group

Five islands stand relatively close by in the central group of the Azores. Amongst them Pico and Faial are the most visited by divers and are only four miles apart. Together with São Jorge Island, they form the islands of the “Triangle” with daily boat connections between them.

The islands of Terceira and Graciosa are relatively isolated from the rest of the group, so con-

nection by boat can be more difficult. Graciosa has excellent coastal dives, cave dives and a very good wreck dive—the *Terceirense* shipwreck—located just a few hundred meters from the coast. Terceira Island also has excellent coastal dives but is mostly known for its archeological dives.

Terceira’s capital, Angra do Heroísmo, is a UNESCO world heritage site. Monuments and colorful

historic buildings are reminiscent of its historic importance in the 15th and 16th centuries as the main shelter harbor for ships crossing the Atlantic, with many stories of pirate ships and naval battles to be told. The historic importance of this city is present above and under the water, with several archeological diving sites. Although time has taken its toll over most of the fragile wooden ships, there are still many

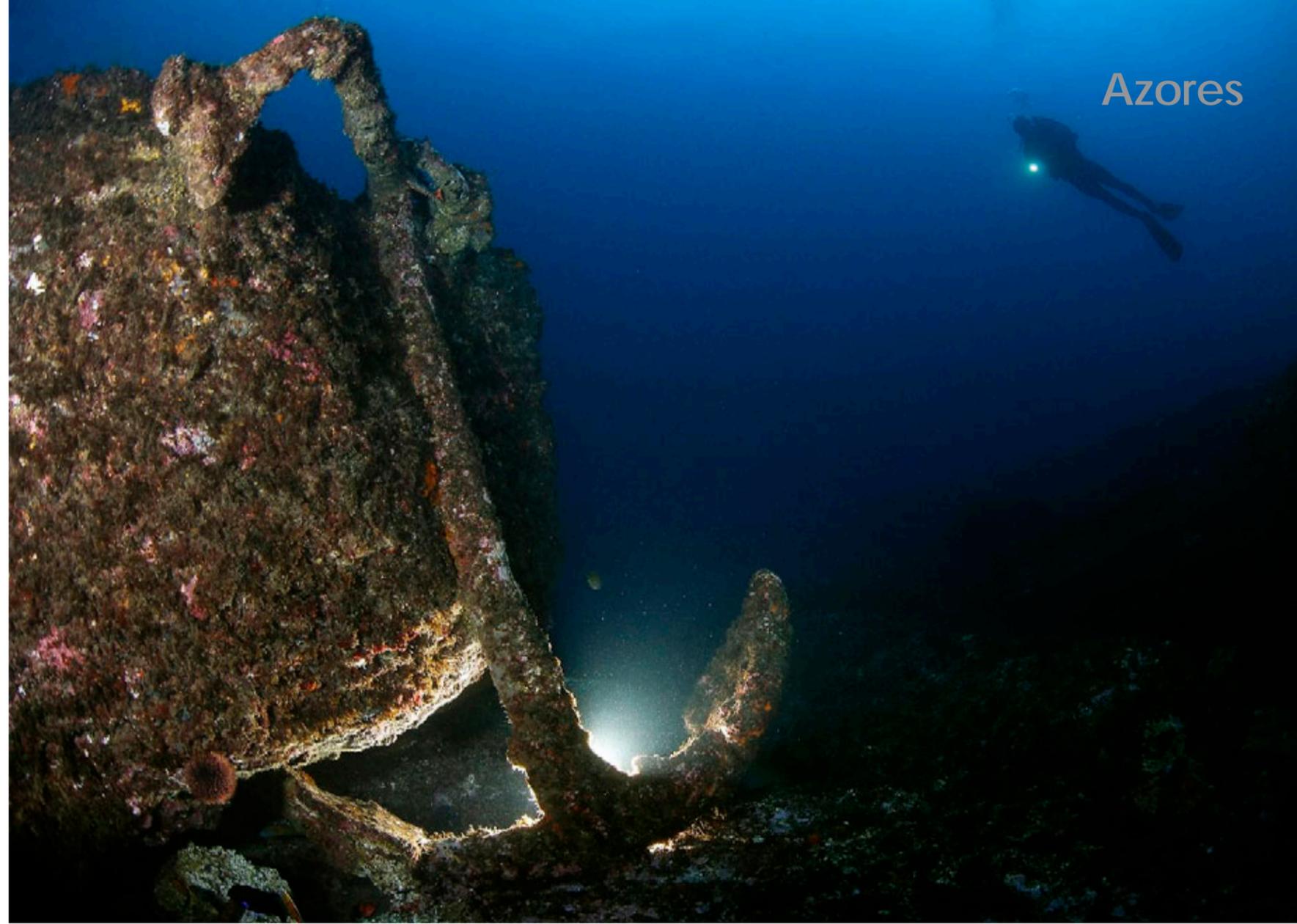
artifacts and wrecks that evoke ancient times.

One of the most interesting dives is the “anchor graveyard” where you can dive amongst over 40 large anchors, which range from the 16th to the 20th century, left by ships in distress, some of them over three meters long. The *lidador* shipwreck, a

19th century steamship that sunk just 50m from the coast when crossing from Portugal to Brazil, marks its presence in the bay—its shadow visible from the surface on days of calm sea.

Faial Island is well known as one of the world’s most famous marinas, where sailors crossing the Atlantic usually stop for a few





Terceira Island's Anchor Graveyard has over 40 anchors, some over 3m long, from the 16th-20th centuries left by ships in distress

days, giving the small town of Horta a mystical look, with colorful sails filling its bay. Just across the strait channel, Pico Island seems to still be erupting from the sea floor into a volcanic mountain over 2,000m high.

Both of these islands are the main access points to two of the Azores' most famous diving experiences: the Princesa Alice offshore seamount and diving with blue sharks in high seas.

Diving in offshore seamounts are amongst the best dives these islands have to offer, and the Princesa Alice dive site is definitely second to none. Located about 45 miles off Faial island (a three-hour trip) this seamount erupts

from the sea floor from over 500m deep up to around 35 meters.

Offshore dives in high seas are completely unpredictable, but big groups of curious devil rays and big schools of up to thousands of large pelagic fish, such as yellowmouth barracudas, jacks, and especially Atlantic bonitos, are among the main attractions. Several species of sharks, ocean sunfish or manta rays can also be sighted. Of course, being the Azores home to over 20 different species of whales and dolphins, the trip to Princes Alice always includes some ocean travellers such dolphins, sperm whales or loggerhead turtles.

These two islands are also one of the few places in the world where you can dive with one of the seas most beautiful predators—the blue shark. Diving with blue sharks is done “in the blue”, either snorkelling or scuba diving, and is definitely an unforgettable experience. Just minutes after a container with bait hits the pristine water, subtle shadows can be seen shooting from hundreds of meters deep, straight to the surface. Cautious and elusive at first, as confidence is gained, these predators of the deep are extremely curious, approaching and inspecting every diver, sometimes even slightly brushing divers, receiving a tactile test

Terceira Island *lidador* shipwreck—a 19th century steamship



Peacock wrasse, Formigas Islets (offshore dive 25 miles from Santa Maria Island)



Curious grey triggerfish (*Balistes capricus*), Pico Island (left); Blue Shark (*Prionace glauca*), Pico and Faial Islands (below)

Azores

are about 50 miles from each other and over 70 miles from the central group. The largest island—São Miguel—is the capital of the Azores, and is known for its natural beauties, with amazing landscapes marked by green mountains and blue lagoons. It is, however, also the most developed island. Coastal dives can be less thrilling due to a larger fishing industry. However, the presence of a World War II shipwreck just five minutes from the marina makes this the most visited diving spot in the Azores.

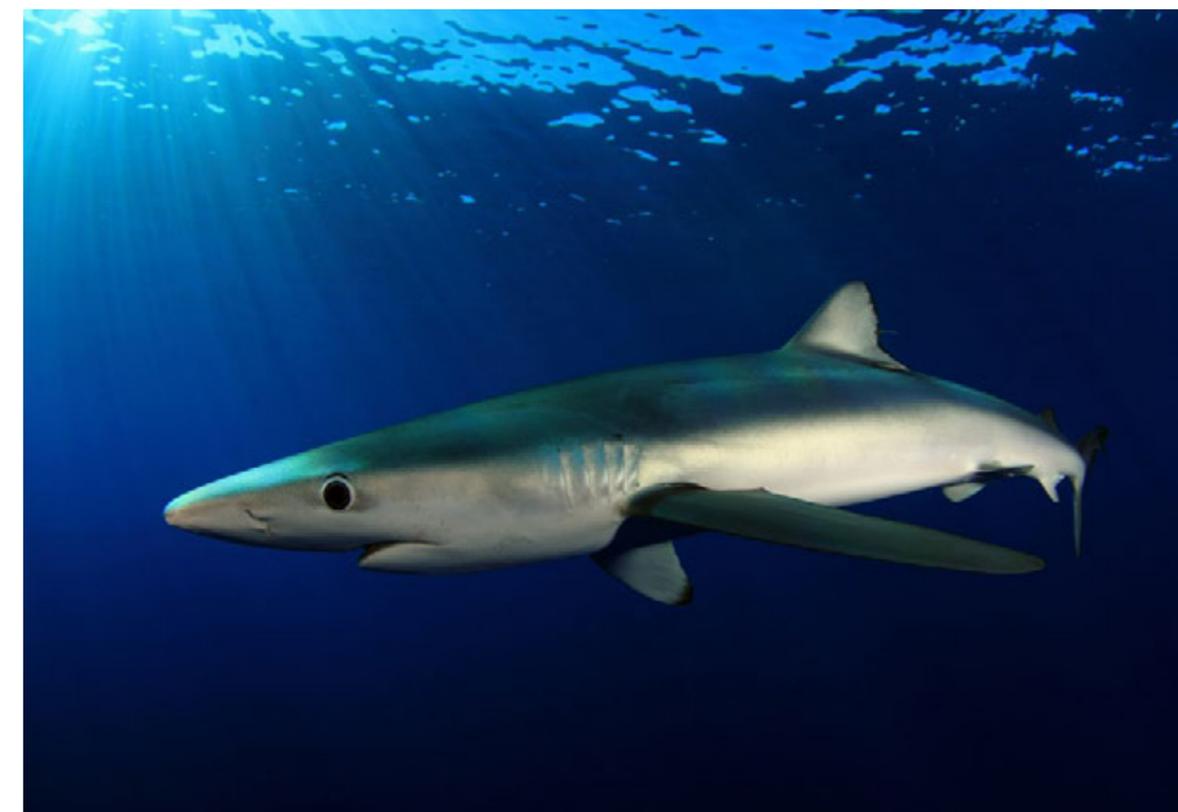
Built in the United States in 1943, the Liberty Ship took part in the world's

from its sensitive lateral line. On a normal dive you can have between three to five blue sharks around you. If you are lucky, you can also see the open ocean's top predator and fastest fish—the mako shark.

Pico is also the birthplace of what has become the tourist symbol of the Azores—whale watching. The Azores is one of the world's top whale watching destinations, with the chance to spot 23 different species, and with large pods of sperm whales all year long. Along the mountainous coast of Pico and Faial islands several small looking points are daily occupied by "Vigias" (look outs), armed with binoculars and a radio tracking the horizon for whales and dolphins, and giving directions to the fast zodiacs.

On a typical summer day it is normal to sight up to four or five different species of whales and dolphins as well as several species of sea birds, turtles and who knows what else. Swimming with dolphins in high seas is an unforgettable experience. Swimming with whales, however, is not allowed.

São Jorge Island—the third island of the "Triangle"—is less known for its diving than for its breathtaking landscape and offers excellent coastal dives as well as a well-known offshore



dive—Ponta dos Rosais. This is an excellent dive with many schools of pelagic fish, however the typical sea-mount groups of devil rays are rarely seen here.

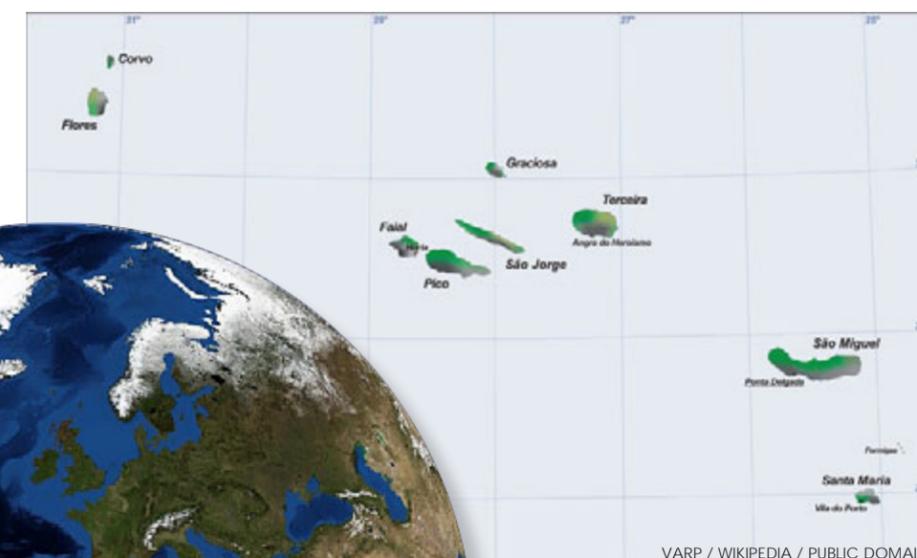
Eastern Group

The two Islands of the eastern group

largest military operation—operation Overlord off the coast of Normandy. Originally called *Edwin L Drake*, it would find its resting place 21 years later off the coast of São Miguel with the name, *Dori*. Today, this 130-meter-long wreck is visited by hundreds of divers every year. Located on a sandy



Vineyards descend into the sea on Santa Maria Island (left); Portugal's highest mountain, Pico Island (above)



VARP / WIKIPEDIA / PUBLIC DOMAIN



Location of the Azores archipelago on global map (left); Map of island groups in the Azores archipelago (above)

bottom just 16m deep, this is probably the best and easiest accessible wreck dive in the Azores, with many parts of the ship still intact and the typical species of the Azores sea bottom present in great numbers.

Santa Maria is probably the Azores "best kept secret"—a small island with white sandy beaches and completely off the beaten track, with whale sharks and groups of dozens of devil rays just 30 minutes from the harbor! Although big groups of devil rays are typically seen on offshore seamounts, Santa Maria is the only island of the Azores where you can see dozens of these majestic fish slowly gliding around divers, on a daily basis and just three miles from the coast. This happens in a place called Ambrósio, and you can literally see over 50 devil rays on a single dive, as well as large schools of pelagics and

the occasional whale shark.

Up to three years ago, whale sharks were a very rare sight and mostly described by tuna fisherman after encounters in high seas. However, since 2008, the biggest fish of seas has chosen the island of Santa Maria to spend the summer. Nonetheless, spotting this colossus of the seas is not for the faint of heart, as they usually appear about six miles from the coast, so it typically involves taking a whole day specifically to search for them and being prepared for many hours out at sea. But when you do get lucky, the experience is priceless: pristine blue waters several hundred meters deep, shades of sunlight descending beneath you, and a massive whale shark followed by hundreds or thousands of tunas hitching a ride through the Atlantic—simply amazing.

Around 25 miles south from Santa Maria (or about 45 miles north of São Miguel) are two of the Azores most known offshore dives—Formigas and Dollabarát. Formigas has a series of small rocky islets in the middle of the ocean, where a small, uninhabited lighthouse was constructed to prevent ships from colliding (unfortunately there where many before it was built). Dollabarát is an underwater seamount just three miles from Formigas, so making the trip usually involves diving both sights. What both dives have in common is amazing visibility (up to 40m and more) and a chance to see oceanic pelagic fish such as big schools of wahoos, yellowmouth barracudas, jacks, and Atlantic bonitos, as well as curious devil rays, hammerhead sharks and the occasional manta ray or whale shark.



Free diver surrounded by devil rays at the amazing dive site, Ambrósio, off Santa Maria Island (above); Black coral, Terceira Island (left)

Between dozens of devil rays at Ambrósio, going out for the whale sharks, taking a trip to Formigas and Dollabarat (including a few species of whales, dolphins and sea turtles that will probably be seen on the way there), and a few sunsets at Praia Formosa beach, it is no surprise that the divers that are lucky

enough to live these experiences like to keep this island a secret.

Visiting the Azores

These nine islands definitely offer some world-class dives and a unique experience of diving in a less touristic destination with amazing landscapes and a lot

of peace and quiet. With reasonable coastal dives and the chance to have some unique experiences in offshore dives, the Azores has dives for every taste and level of experience. However, thinking you can visit all of the Azores' "highlights" in just one trip is simply an illusion. The distance between islands makes some of the more isolated ones a destination of their own. However, it is possible to dive two or three islands in a one to two week trip and still have time for some whale watching and sightseeing.

When to go: July to September are the months with the warmest water, best weather, best visibility and best chances to sight pelagic species. Water can get as cold as 16-17C° in the winter, and an easy 25C° in the summer. Air temperature is not surprisingly pretty much the same as the water, since these islands are very

small and hugely influenced by the mass of water around them.

Getting there and around: There are airports and daily connections between all the islands, as well as regular boat connections during the summer. TAP and SATA have direct flights to the Azores from Lisbon and several other European capitals as well as Boston, Oakland, Montreal and Toronto.

There are two official boat operators in the Azores as well as plenty of private taxi services. Transmaçor (www.transmacor.pt) only operates in the central group, while Atlanticoline (www.atlanticoline.pt) connects all the Islands. Boat connections work very well in the Western Group (Flores and Corvo) and also between the Triangle Islands (Faial, Pico and São Jorge) with several daily

connections. However, moving between any other islands can sometimes be very time consuming and well worth the flight. However, if you don't mind taking a day off for the trip, it can be very nice (and cheaper) to take a trip along the islands.

Other than that, just relax and get into the Azores' easygoing ambiance. After your first visit, I'm sure you will feel you have discovered a small paradise in the Atlantic.

Nuno Sá is a Portuguese underwater photographer and author who resides in the Azores. A regular contributor for several magazines, including National Geographic, Sá is co-author of The Azores Diving Guide—Portugal's first published diving guide. For more information, visit: www.photonunosa.com ■

Grenada

Text by Kelly LaClaire
Photos and captions by Kate Clark

— *Spicy Diving on the Spice Isle*





Grenada's countryside (above). PREVIOUS PAGE: Seated atop the *Shakem* wreck lays an old crane adorned with red coral fans

The island of Grenada is affectionately known as the Spice Isle for its exotic spices of nutmeg, clove and cinnamon. Indeed, as we stepped off the plane, its warm, fragrant breezes welcomed us. Just a few hours earlier we were shivering in the drizzle and cold, wrapped in several layers of clothing dreaming of this exact moment. Kate, my cousin and photographer on this trip, laughed, "Oh my gosh, I think I'll tear up my return ticket and violate my visa. I'm not leaving!"

The King Elvis taxi service took us the short drive to True Blue Bay Resort, a family-owned tropical haven perched above a small, lush inlet on the Atlantic side of the island. This would be our home for the next few days while we explored the island, reefs and, of course, the wrecks of Grenada.

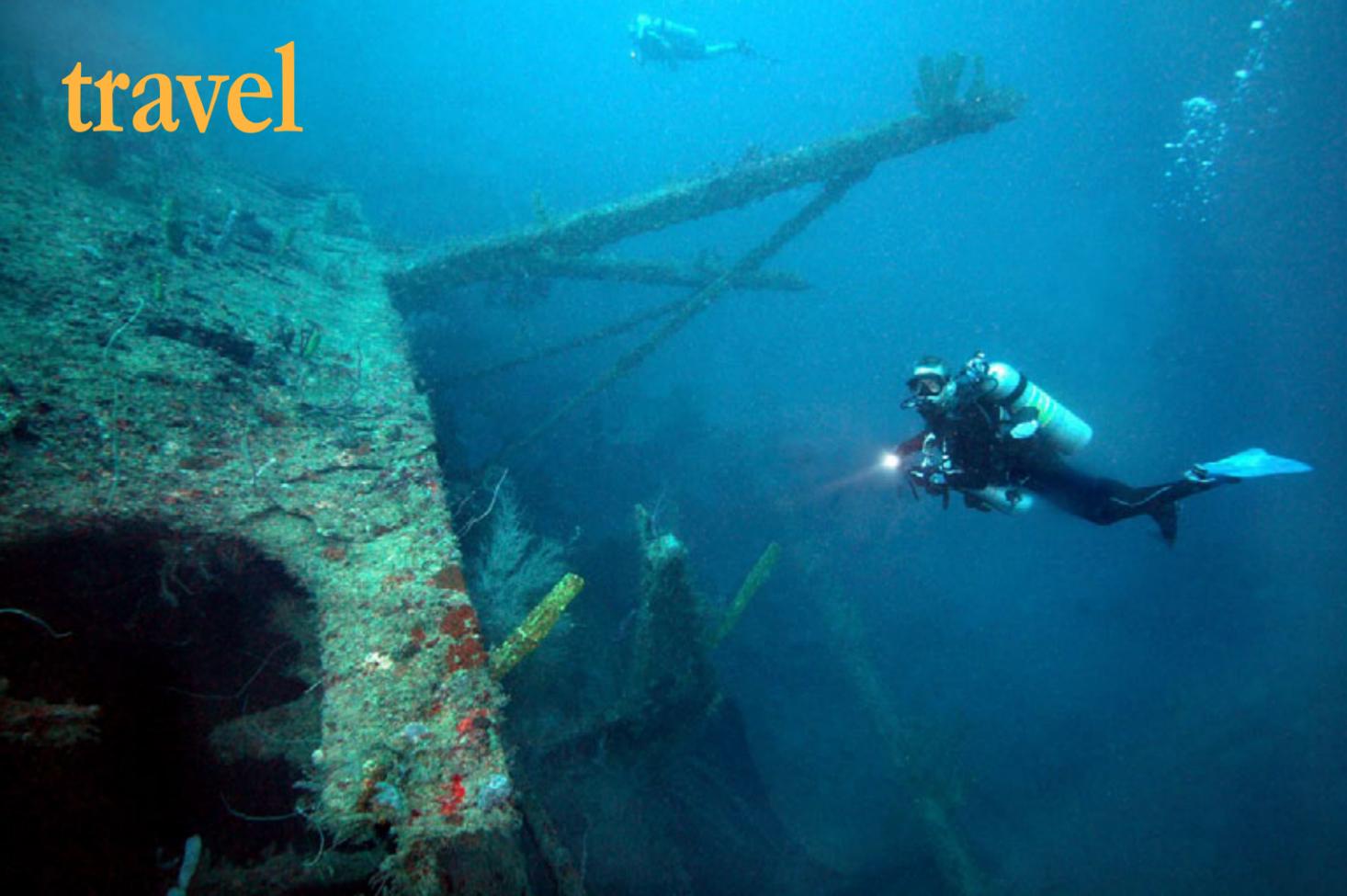
Binca, the hotel's concierge, had everything prepared and our rooms were gorgeous. Set just above the resort's white sand pool, our spacious suite came replete with a full kitchen, private balcony, large flat screen and fresh flowers. We made ourselves comfortable and headed down through the palms and manicured lawns to the dive shop.

Our hosts, Peter and Gerlinde Seupel—owners of Aquanauts Grenada—greeted us as their crew took our gear and readied the boat. We talked briefly on the deck over-

looking the bay, getting a short briefing on our upcoming dives. The more they described our schedule, the more excited Kate and I got. I heard a motor turn over and Peter smiled, "Ok, go get wet!"



Seemingly glowing in the blue waters, the azure vase sponge (above) is one of the most brilliant in the reefs of Grenada; Freshly harvested nutmeg with red outer venous portion, often used in pharmaceuticals (left)



Owner and operator of Aquanauts Grenada, Peter Seupel, shines his light on the side of the largest wreck in the Caribbean, the *Bianca C*

everything was all right.

His briefing on the boat a few minutes before gave me an idea of what to expect once we reached the largest shipwreck in the Caribbean, but when I first saw her misty outline, growing more definite and vast with each meter we dropped, I skipped a few breaths—breaking PADI’s golden rule.

Just below us Kate turned on her back and spreads her arms as wide as they would go. She was smiling behind her regulator, and I knew what she was thinking

—*This thing is HUGE!*

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the sinking of the *Bianca-C*, an Italian cruise liner that caught fire from an engine room explosion while she rested in the harbor of Grenada’s capital city, St. George. The ship burned for nearly three days but, fortunately, due to the heroic efforts of her crew, numerous local fisherman and selfless townsfolk, only two people perished and over 670 passengers were saved.

Hearing the distress calls, a British warship, *Londonderry*, arrived to offer assistance. They were able to sever the anchor chain and secure a tow line, removing her from shipping lanes and local boat traffic with the intent of beaching her in a safer location. Damage to the cruise liner’s rudder made the tow difficult, and after a squall arose, the job became impossible. The line was severed, and the *Bianca-C* sank, coming to rest on her keel at a depth of 55 meters (165 ft).

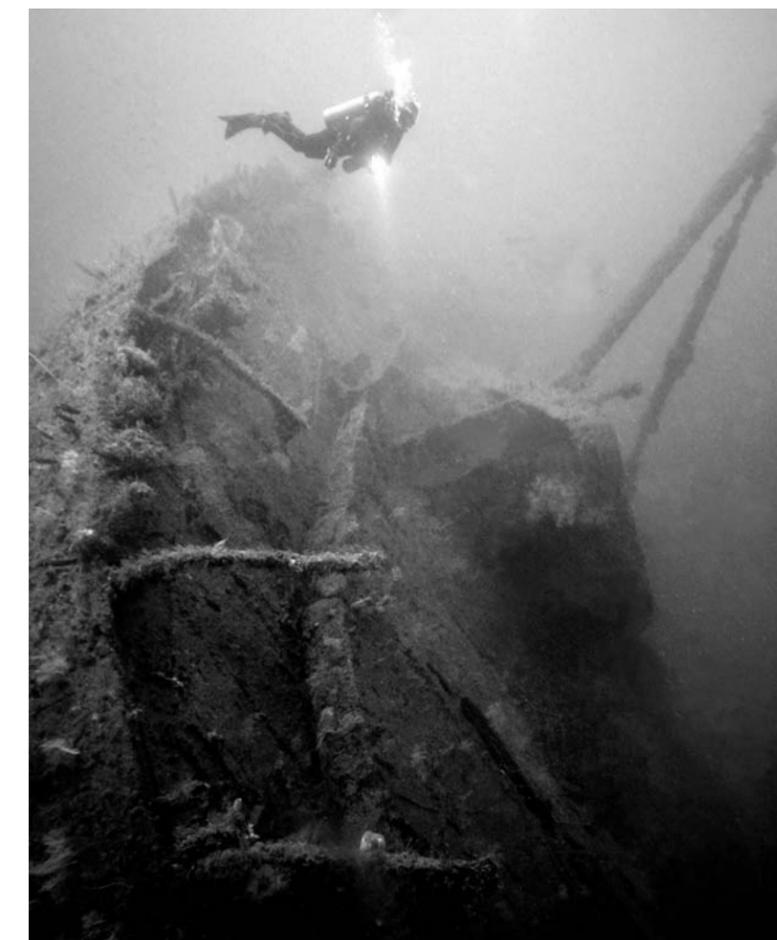
Italian Titanic

Our dive boat, *Salsa*, bobbed up and down in the turquoise swells just off the white sands of Pink Gin Beach at the southern tip of Grenada. I was the last of the group to take a giant stride off the stern and begin my descent into the empty blue below.

It was the first dive of our trip and as I floated down, fingers looped around the reference line already set by the dive team, I checked my gauges and computer knowing that at 20 meters (60 ft) the mythical *Bianca-C* would start to appear from the depths.

The water was 80°F (27°C)—both exhilarating and soothing at once—and a welcome change from the frigid temperatures of Puget Sound where I do most of my diving back home in the Pacific Northwest.

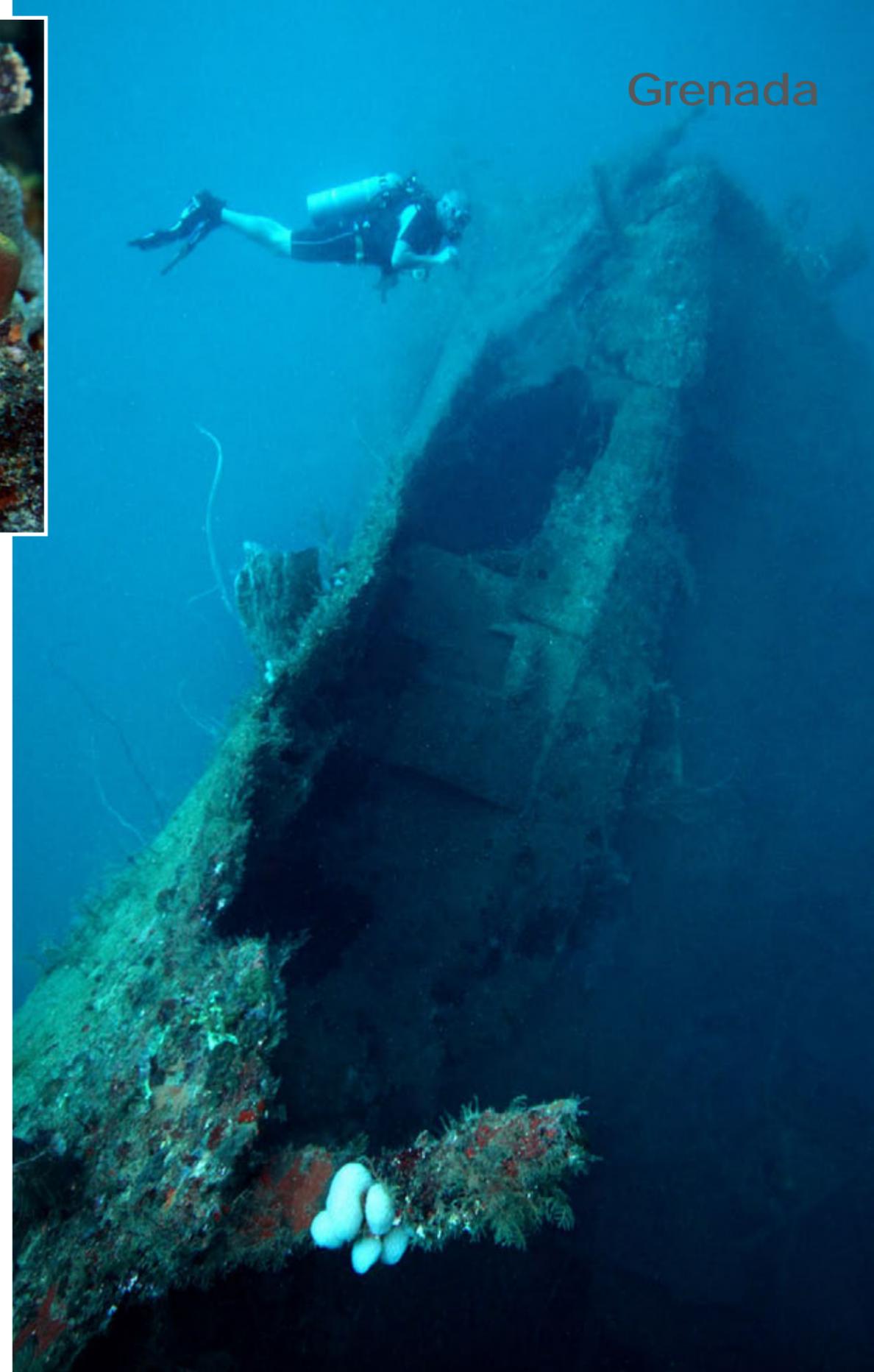
Paul Ward, instructor with Aquanauts Grenada, stayed close, flashing me the “OK?” sign, making sure I was equalizing properly and



Looming huge in the blue waters, the *Bianca C* (above) dwarfs divers Peter Seupel and Kelly LaClaire with her massive 200-meter long body; Diver explores the bow of the *Bianca* (left)



Seupel (left) swims by a few smaller masts on the stern of the *Bianca C*; Master of disguise, a scorpionfish (above) lies motionless among some coral on a reef just beyond the *Bianca C*



So large a wreck is she, exploring *Bianca C* takes a wide gaze. Nurse shark, barracuda, and spotted eagle rays can often be seen cruising by or finding shelter in her deep hull

We slowed our descent as the famous swimming pool on the deck of the ship came into view, and we leveled off just above the rear quarter. I looked around the impressive ship for a few seconds to get my bearings.

Kate was right, the *Bianca* was massive—roughly 200 meters (600 ft) long—and I realized one visit wasn't going to let us explore the wreck fully. I let go of the dive

this site) this was my first wreck dive past 33 meters (100 ft), and I admit I was a bit overwhelmed by the sheer size and scope of the twisted and listing goliath. My inexperience became all too obvious when, after only a few seconds of wide-eyed gawking, I heard Paul clinking a metal carabiner on his tank to get my attention. He motioned for me to ascend a bit. I was shocked when I looked at my depth

line and a mild current swept us gently towards the bow.

Large black tree corals rooted along the hull swayed back and forth amidst multi-colored whip corals, and a group of curious but cautious jacks came to investigate our bubbles.

Even though I am an advanced card holder (recommended for

gauge reading 44m (132 ft) and realized that I was so enthralled with my surroundings, I'd completely forgotten the depth warnings he'd given us topside.

The visibility is deceptively good here—33 meters (100 ft) plus—so it's imperative you keep a close eye on your computer. If you're not careful, you'll find yourself in a deco situation before you know it.

I finned slowly up a few meters, drifting past giant coral encrusted davits—cargo and life boat hoists—that curved like metallic alien claws over the ship's side and above the twisted and crumbling mid-section. The bow started to take shape below a school of fish so thick they looked like an underwater cloud swarming the foremast. For years the towering flagstaff remained vertical and reached proudly towards the surface, but just recently, it fell and now sits at a 30 degree angle toward the starboard rails.

I quickly scanned the foredeck for the nurse and reef sharks that like to congregate here, but I didn't see any. Instead, a giant barracuda nearly two meters long stared me down, brandishing his fangs. This was his territory, and he wasn't shy about letting me know it.

Paul tapped his tank and then his computer, indicating our bottom time for this



The *Shakem*, originally a cargo vessel, now lies in 25 meters of water just off the Grenada coast. Her hull and frame teem with life as sergeant majors dart about the coral encrusted railings (above and left); A sharp zigzag in the walkway on the edge of the *Shakem* wreck (left) exists as evidence of the hard landing she experienced upon settling to the sea floor

depth was reaching its limit. We were diving air, so we only had a few minutes with the “Titanic of the Caribbean”. As we slowly ascended along a nearby reef, I looked back, and though it had only been a few moments, I already wanted to spend more time with the *Bianca-C*.

Shakem

While not as imposing and ominous as *Bianca*, the cargo vessel, *Shakem*, is a fantastic wreck for most any level of certification and should not be missed when diving the Spice Isle—provided your skills

aren't rusty and the currents mild.

Our first visit began with a rapid descent down to 20 meters (60 ft) to the uppermost deck. She's a large ship—60 meters (180 ft) of coral encrusted metal sitting perfectly straight on her keel. We descended a bit around the stern, scaring a few jacks and two large mackerel that bolted at the sound of our bubbles.

White ribbons of snowy telesto (soft coral) clung to the metal rails lining the bridge. We swam through the open promenade wrapping around the first two levels of the freighter. A school of

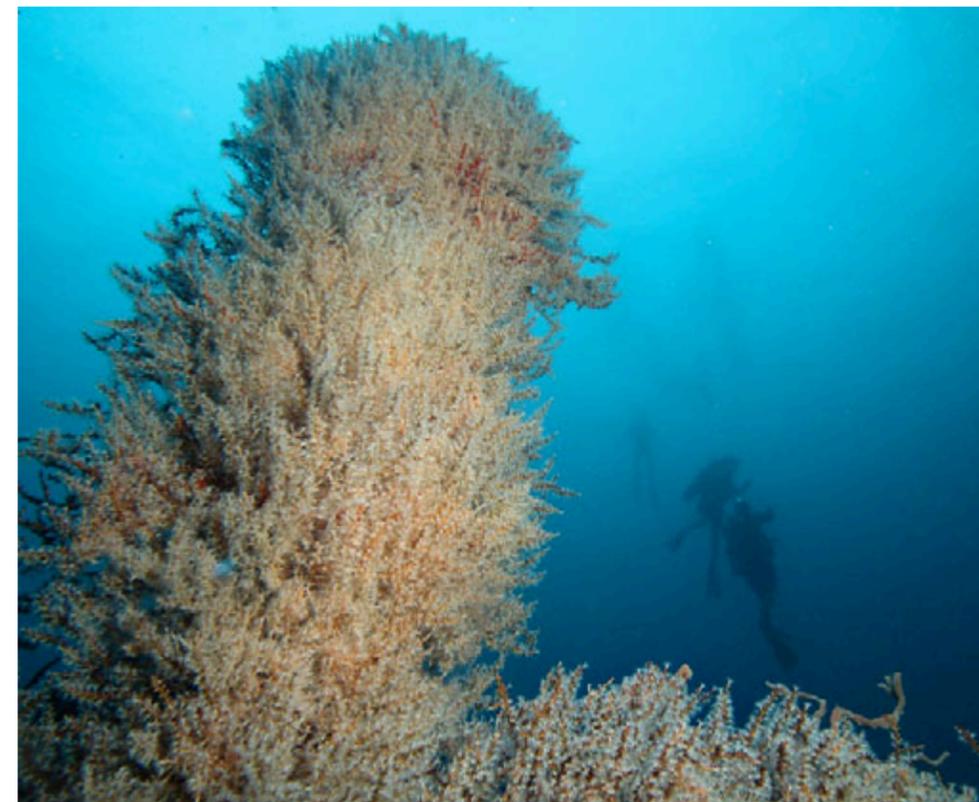
playful sergeant majors, striped and shifty, joined us as we glided over the large open hull, still fully loaded with enormous pallets of stacked concrete bags. This particular sight is one of the things that made this wreck so unique.

In 2001, a skeleton crew of four were bringing a load of concrete and baby diapers (yes, I said diapers—you can still see a few if you know where to look) to Grenada when the cargo, improperly loaded, shifted from the large swells near St. George. The ship began listing badly. She continued taking on water, and a final wave



A large puffer fish on a reef near the *Shakem*





Grenada

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Sitting perfectly on its keel, divers can explore the prop of the *Shakem* wreck that sits still amidst wire and fan coral; The top of *Shakem's* mast, covered in telesto, frames divers rising up the ascent line after exploring the wreck; Sergeant majors fill the waters surrounding *Shakem* with movement as the bright coral offset the brilliant white and pink of the telesto, which cling to its frame



pitched her to the port side. The *Shakem* sank just off shore down to the coral beds 33 meters (100 ft) below.

Sponges and enormous black sea fans soon took root and now dominate the outer hull giving refuge to the ubiquitous squirrel, trumpet and parrot fish hiding in its nooks and crannies. Many divers report octopus and squid sightings here, but if they were around, they were staying well hidden.

Kate's camera strobes illuminated the enormous crane running the length of the cargo hold and the corals momentarily lit up in rich, vivid color. The sergeant majors moved in closer, swimming more frenetically than ever as we drifted toward the bow, still fitted with a good size hoist, its ropes twisting with

the current.

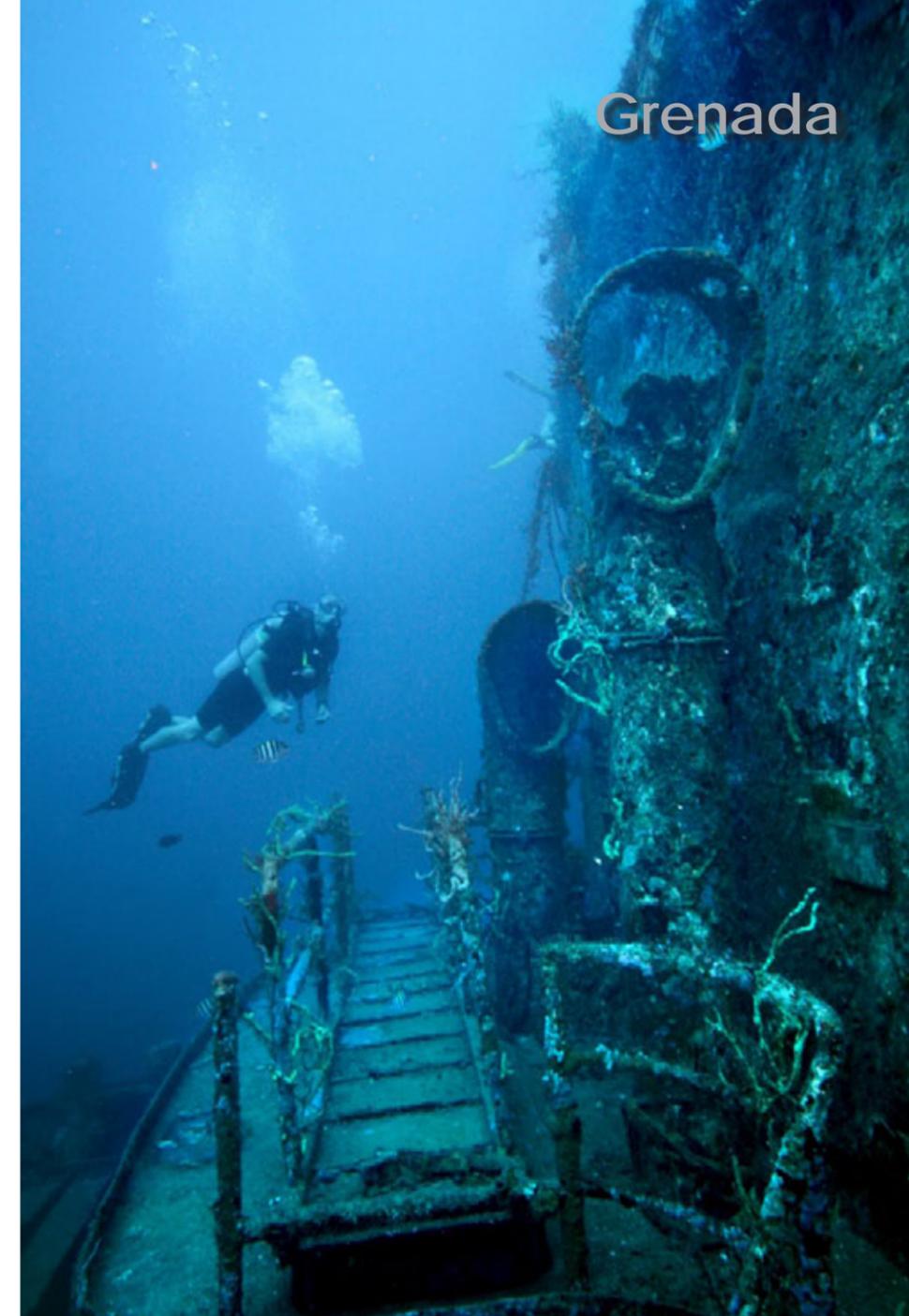
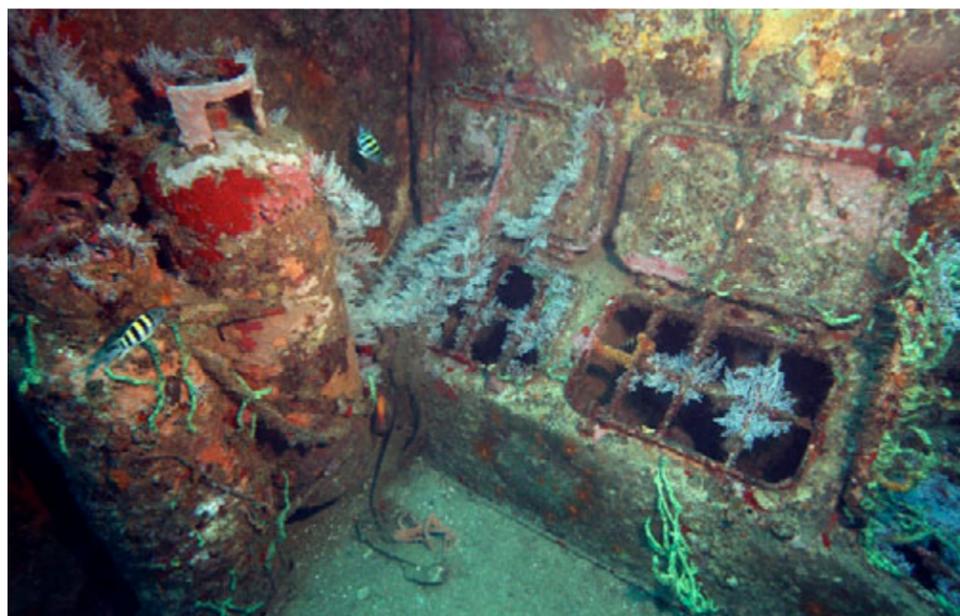
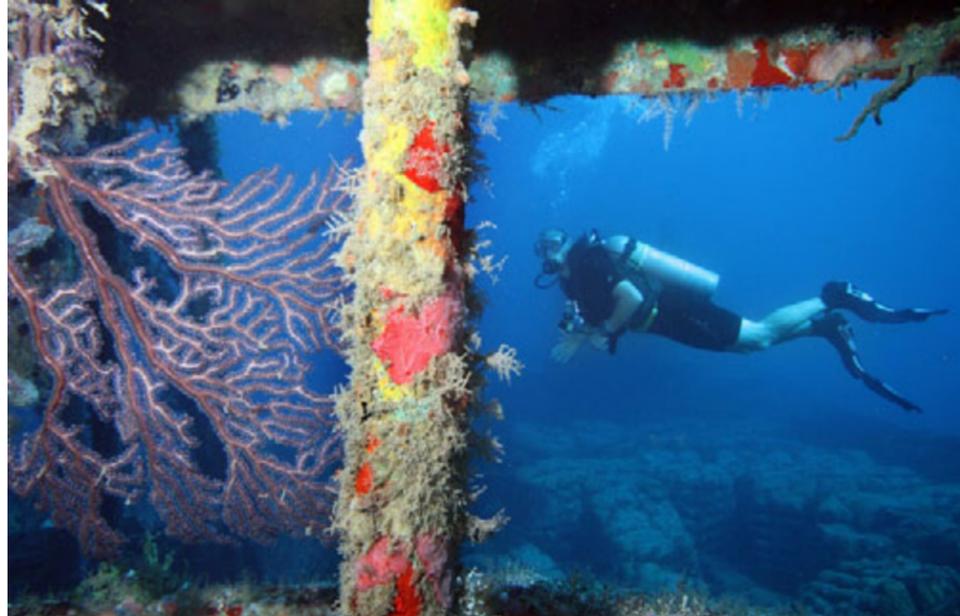
I frightened a large silver fish away from its nest on the bow and finally came to understand why the little striped school seemed so eager. Apparently, they've developed a unique behavior at this site—using people to hunt for food. As soon as a diver frightens away local fish guarding their nests, the sergeant majors swoop in, frantic and frenzied, eating every last egg they can get to before the larger fish returns, and then hurriedly catch up to the diver they have chosen, waiting for another opportunity.

They followed us over the starboard side as we swam back to take a look at the prop, relatively unharmed and surrounded by red and green wire corals. A large grey

angelfish joined us, but after a moment seemed bored and disappeared into the labyrinth of fans and sponges below.

Again our computers started to squawk and I momentarily had an urge to ignore it. Twenty minutes just wasn't enough, and I wanted to stay a while longer. Kate, a PADI instructor, sensed my reluctance and raised her thumb towards the surface—more of a command than a suggestion. I shrugged in acquiescence and reluctantly drifted upward.

The sergeant majors stayed with us for several meters as we rose toward the surface, darting and slashing through our bubbles and then, realizing we were no longer of any use to them, started down and faded into the blue.



Divers (left) rise on ascent line behind *Shakem's* top deck railing covered in telesto; The concrete bags (top center) that led to the sinking of *Shakem* can still be seen from the numerous swim-throughs the wreck offers; Diver (right) explores the port side of the captain's tower; Tanks and barracks (above)

Nitrox

After the first two wrecks, sunning ourselves on the bow of the *Salsa* as we cruised back to True Blue Bay, I expressed to Paul my disappointment at the short length of time that we were able to explore each ship; I wanted more time to take in the scope and grandeur of them. In short, I was getting addicted to the thrill of seeing these coral covered iron giants, and I wanted to squeeze every ounce of bottom time I could out each dive.

nitrox certified," he said. "Diving on air is extremely limiting when visiting the wrecks in Grenada. With nitrox, you can stay down longer and take all the time you want. Plus, our nitrox mixes are included free in your dive packages, so you have no excuse."

If you're unfamiliar with nitrox, also called enriched air, it is a mixed diving gas that has a larger percentage of oxygen, making the chances of nitrogen narcosis fall markedly. Many divers say they think clearer at depths when diving with nitrox, and it allows one to stay

deeper far longer without the risks of nitrogen toxicity.

Twenty minutes later we had the manuals in our hands, and the next morning, instead of air tanks attached to our gear, two green and yellow banded cylinders stood ready for testing.

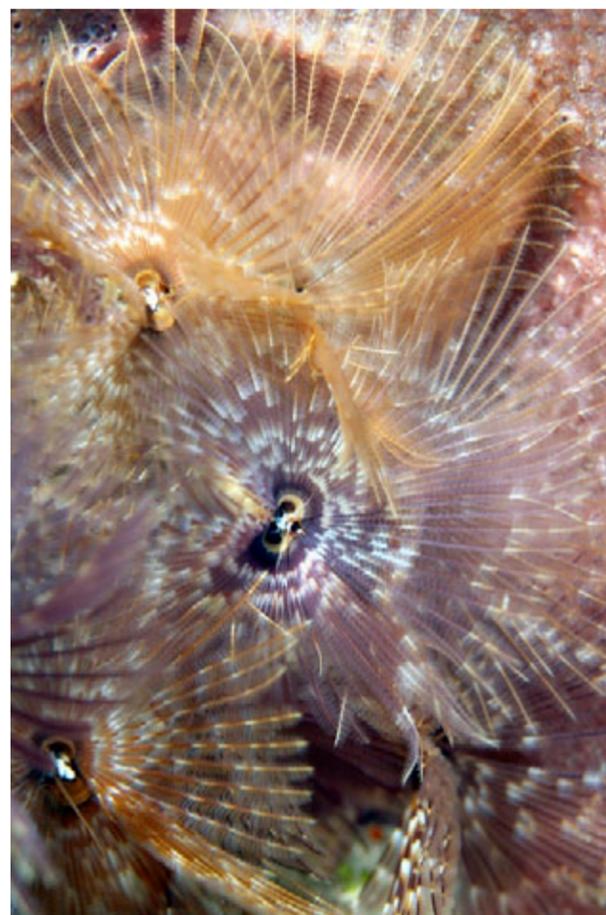
Paul went over the procedures and precautions before we headed out that morning. We were diving a downed catamaran called, *Rhum Runner*, followed by a reef drift to look for turtles, sharks and smaller critters hidden in the coral beds.

We reached the small wreck at right around 40 meters (120 ft), and I checked my computer. The bottom time read over 50 minutes, and I thought it was malfunctioning. Then I remembered the tank on my back was filled with enriched air, effectively giving me more time to remain safely at this depth than my tank would last. I got busy exploring the wreck, confident I'd have all the time I wanted.

A spotted eel was making his home among the red and purple corals taking hold along the ship's frame and a small

school of gray angelfish swam in lazy circles between the twin hulls. A swarm of blue chromis raced back and forth along the portside hull moving like a regimented flock of birds.

We circled the small wreck for more than ten minutes before moving on and, thanks to the nitrox, I didn't leave feeling cheated or hurried. We let the current sweep us up and over a nearby strip of reef where we found another spotted eel, this one over a meter in length (3 ft), protecting his turf by hissing at us. Kate pointed out two French angelfish, my



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Front rail of *Shaker* wreck covered with coral growth; Pair of four-eye butterfly fish; Curious and friendly spotted trunkfish swims among brightly patterned coral; Flamingo tongue snail; A long and cleverly disguised lizard fish disguises itself by lying incredibly still among the sand; Feather duster worms filter food from the sea



favorites, swimming close by. We followed them for a bit, mesmerized by their gleaming yellow spots and graceful profiles.

Nearby, a set of spiny lobsters were trying to hide beneath an outcropping of corals while a sour-looking scorpion fish eyed us suspiciously.

A metallic tink-tink-tink sounded, and we swam over to Paul and the rest of our group who were getting a look at a nurse shark

sleeping under a shelf of jagged coral. We had been under for nearly 60 minutes and my computer indicated I still had 40 minutes of remaining bottom time. I took another look at the shark, his beady white eyes almost glowing, and began my ascent.

As we surfaced, I wondered why I hadn't

taken the specialty enriched air class long ago and saved myself the heartache I had on my previous dive at *Bianca*. I knew I was going to get another shot at her before we left, but at that moment I vowed I would write this recommendation for you, the reader: do yourself a favor—if you book



Mandoo, the most sought-after tour guide in all of Grenada, feeds a bite of banana to a Mono monkey perched on his shoulder

a myriad of adventures for anyone visiting.

One of our favorite activities was a full island tour with Mandoo, a local guide known as "The Guru

of Grenada." There isn't anything about his homeland he doesn't know, and he is the perennial winner of Grenada's "Tour Guide of the Year" award. Plan on taking a whole day, as Mandoo takes you in his clean and comfortable—as well as air conditioned!—van through the back streets, hillsides and forgotten neighborhoods of the Spice Island.

You'll tour a rum distillery, walk the cocoa and fruit trees of an authentic working nutmeg plantation as well as eat at a beachside café, feed a monkey or two and learn the impressive and enthralling history of Grenada's rich and turbulent past. The tour is slow and easy, just like Mandoo, whose motto is: "We're on Island time here. If you're walking too fast my friends, you're breaking the law!"

Mandoo also gives personal tours if you would like a more private experience and is available for taxi service. He also offers hiking and trekking tours through the rain forests where waterfalls abound, and the wildlife is never dangerous. As Mandoo puts it, "The only thing risky in Grenada is the rum punch!"

After taking his tour, I honestly can't imagine trying to use anyone else for these services. To

book a tour or nature walk, visit www.grenada-tours.com or just type the name Mandoo into a Google search, and he'll pop right up.

Fish Friday – Lobster, Breadfruit and Carib

A few kilometers north of St. George lies the fishing village of Gouyave (pronounced, gwauv) where every Friday night a local food festival known as Fish Friday takes place. Here you will find two narrow streets lined with local vendors frying, boiling, stewing and Bar-B-Queing all kinds of seafood and native dishes. Kate and I splurged and each ordered a lobster tail brushed with lemon garlic butter with a side of fried breadfruit and hot sauce.



a trip to Grenada, get a hold of Aquanauts and ask to take their nitrox certification straight away. You won't regret it.

Topside treats

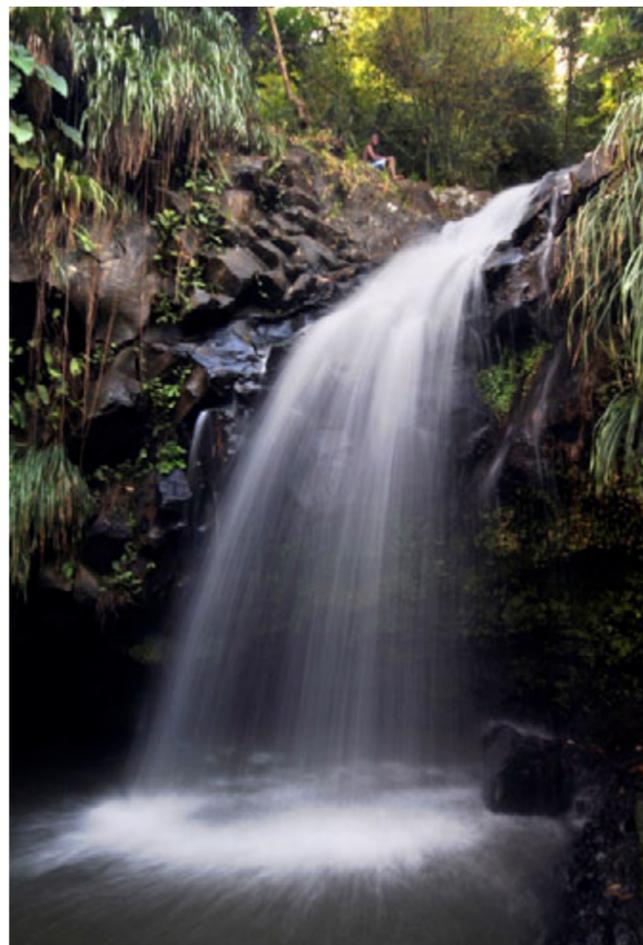
When visiting the Caribbean islands, you can't just dive all day and not explore the islands themselves. Well, okay, I suppose you could, but in Grenada that would be silly. There is far too much beauty and history to be found. We recommend the following excursions when you're not under the water.

Mandoo can do!

The island of Grenada is lush and fertile, offering a rich history and

THIS PAGE: Scenes from Fish Friday in Gouyave, including a delicious lobster and veggie dish (center); Grenada's famous rum (right); Festive drums (left); View of St. Georges (top center); Coconut seller in town (far right)





Every food tent had cold Carib on hand—Grenada’s local brew—and observing Benjamin Franklin’s sage pronouncement, “Beer is proof that God exists and wants us to be happy.” We both drank several.

A few vendors were selling Lambie (conch meat) while all had various fried fish on the menu. Two or three stalls offered spices, jewelry and gifts for tourists. We stopped at one to try the homemade nutmeg ice cream.

On the night we attended, a local drumming group performed on benches along the road wearing Santa hats. It’s a good time, and if you find yourself in the area, be sure to swing by and sample the dishes.

Hashing with the Harriers

— *A nice drinking club with a social problem*

Hashing is a British “sport” invented in the 1930s when a couple of bored expats in India needed to get outside but didn’t know what to do. Of course, they went to the pub—where



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Peter Seupel, owner of Aquanauts Grenada, stands on his boat, *Salsa*, overlooking divers enjoying a pleasant surface interval while snorkeling a shallow reef; A picturesque waterfall streams into a placid pool in a mountain village in Grenada; Participants in Grenada’s Hash group emerge from the wild and thick foliage that covers the hills of Grenada. Following a path marked only by piles of shredded paper, Hashers hike through varied terrains to get a unique feel for the wilds of Grenada; An antique, but

all great thinkers go—to come up with some ideas. Several pints and a few arguments later, the pastime known as hashing was born!

What is hashing you ask? Well...it’s a bit difficult to explain. Think nature walks mixed with trekking, throw in a few piles of shredded paper, a

couple false trails and random shouts of “Are You?” followed by cold beer and fried fish. Confused? Yeah, so were we, but it’s something you don’t want to miss when you’re in Grenada.

Peter and Gerlinde, owners of Aquanauts dive centers, are mem-

still utilized coco grinder awaits another batch of properly dried coco seeds that it will grind into a fine coco powder; Undersea murals decorate the walls of Aquanauts Dive Shop, which is welcoming and tidy with a professional staff ready to accommodate divers





Grenada

than ever, as over the last few dives she'd noticed that the headaches she normally got from diving deep had vanished and working the small buttons of her camera housing had been far easier on enriched air.

She mentioned this to Peter and his answer, like his nature, was direct and concise: "That's because of the added oxygen in your mix. Listen, everyone, and I mean everyone, who dives at 30 to 40 meters experiences some form of nitrogen narcosis. Whether they feel it or not, it's happening on some level. Obviously, you feel it more than others, but if you keep using nitrox, you won't have to continue to deal with those problems."

The boat ride was over before we knew it. Peter stepped off first, and I silently snickered at his old-school fins that looked like they were manufactured in the 60's.

We reached the *Bianca-C*, and the viz was outstanding—at least 40 meters (120 ft). I looked at my computer and was pleased to see we would have over 30 minutes to investigate.

A few giant barracuda aggressively showed us their teeth, as we started making our way forward. The current was mild, and I didn't feel hurried at all, taking time to study the enormous black and green fans making a coral forest on the outer hull. Purple wire coral spiraled out from the decks amidst great clusters of

bers of the Hash House Harriers and can help you set up a hash on your day off from diving. In fact, they will probably join in and run circles around you, as they are both in better shape than most!

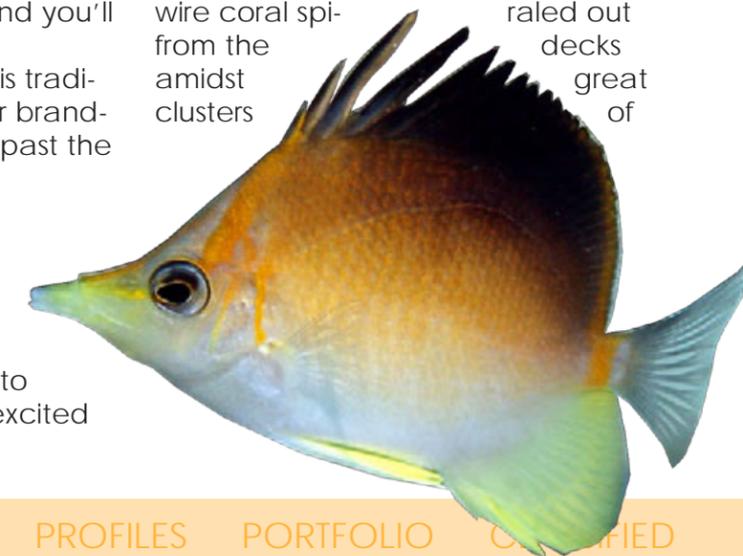
If you decide to go, and I HIGHLY recommend it, here is what you'll need: 1) clothes you don't mind getting dirty in and a good pair of running shoes—no flip-flops; 2) a towel; 3) a full change of clothes; 4) your sense of humor. Be sure to bring a few dollars for drinks and food after and don't forget to sign up with the mis-management when you get there.

All first timers get a signed certificate after the hash and a special gift from the Harriers. It's a riot, and you'll love it! We promise.

Oh, yes, one last thing... It is tradition that all newcomers wear brand-new, white socks that reach past the ankles, so bring those too.

Bianca-C —Take two

Peter, a diving virtuoso and technical master known as "The King of *Bianca C*" joined us on our second visit to the *Bianca*. Kate was more excited



CLOCKWISE: A majestic eagle ray glides over the *Bianca C*; Pulling up his reel attached to the safety buoy above, Peter Seupel in his cool fins finishes up the first dive of the day at *Bianca C* amidst a school of blue chromis; Longsnout butterflyfish (inset) *Prognathodes aculeatus*



Grenada

gliding down into the deep.

We lingered at the giant leaning mast where circling jacks and large masses of creole wrasse and yellowtail congregated. Coral, sponges and fans covered the long pole completely, leaving not an inch of bare metal.

Kate took a few more shots frightening a group of small silver fish that came to have a look at us and then signaled me to check my gauges. She knows I use far more air than she does and, as an instructor, she tends to mother me in the water. I was at 700 PSI, so Peter pointed his thumb to the waves above.

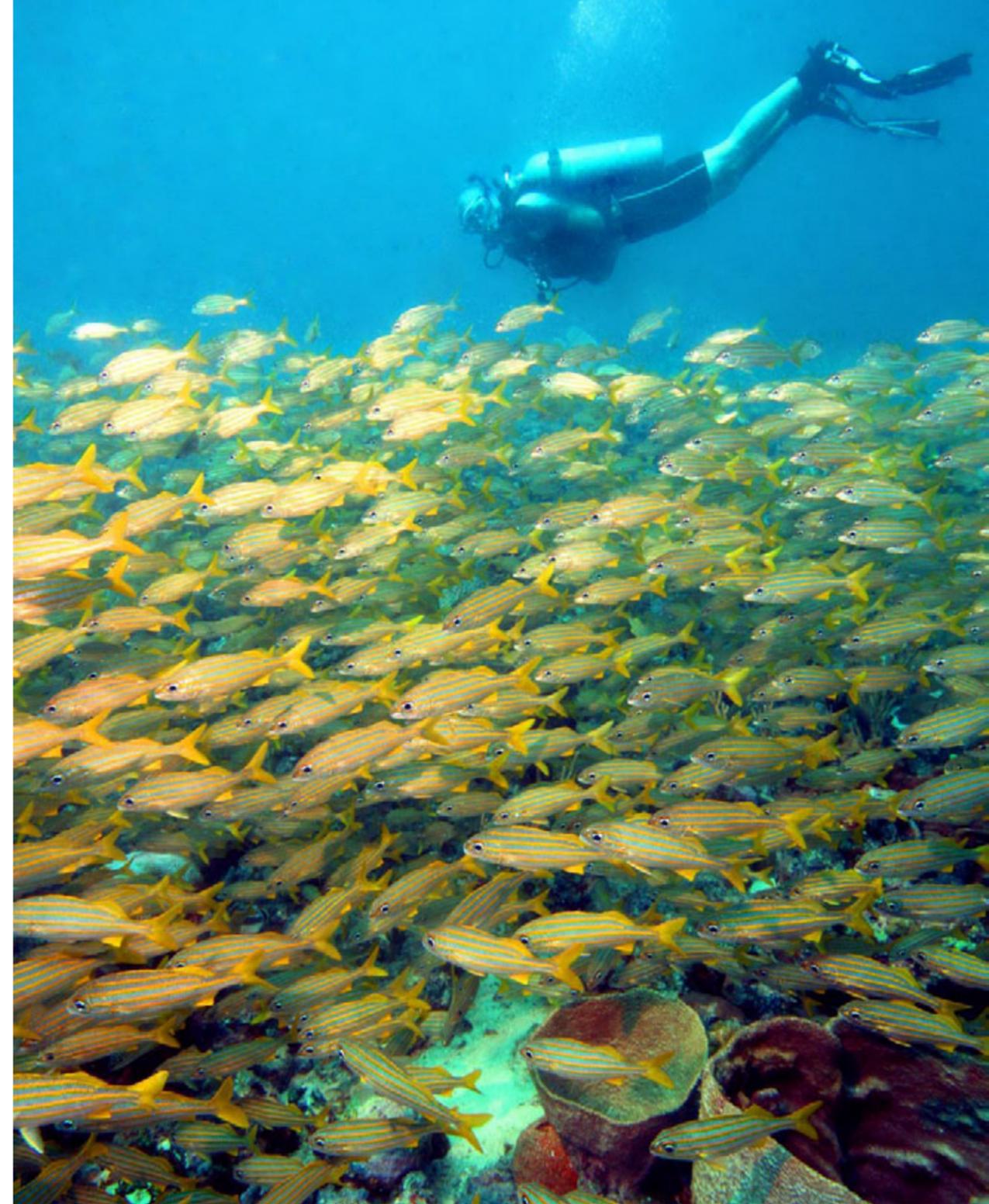
It had been a nice, slow dive, and after my second visit, I didn't feel cheated as I had before. But she's a big boat with lots of things left to discover, so I'm reserving the right to come back again. As they say, third time's a charm.

Shark Reef

One of the most memorable dives, as far as sea life was concerned, had to be our trip to Shark Reef. Only a few minutes boat ride from True Blue Bay hiding behind Glover's Island in the Atlantic, this reef is known for the sharks, stingrays and abundant species of fish that spend their time here.

It's a shallow dive, ranging from 15–25 meters, so any diver at any level of certification can get lots of time to search the coral and rock shelves for pelagics and smaller fish. We weren't in the water more than a minute before we spotted two or three stingrays hiding in the coral breaks. We moved closer for a better look and one of them became nervous, wriggling out of its sandy bed and gliding off toward more secluded waters.

Paul tapped his tank and pointed out a rare spotted drum feeding among some red sponges. He didn't see it yet, but just below him, under a coral shelf, lay a juvenile nurse shark trying to hide its wide



green head; apparently under the delusion that if it couldn't see us, we wouldn't see him.

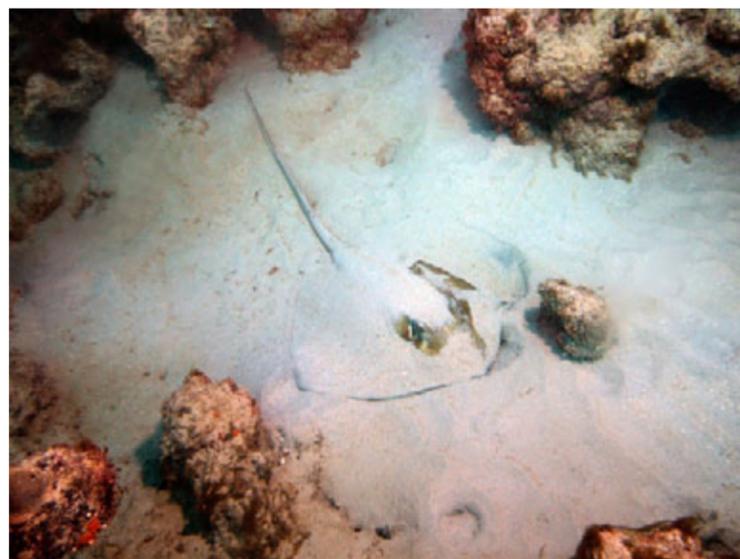
We let the current take us, and I saw another rarity— two hawksbill turtles playing among a growth of sea fans and tube sponges. We gathered around them, but they seemed oblivious to us, too wrapped up in their little sparring match. A dozen or so black durgons swam by, and, as I do

every time I see them, I marveled at the way their upper and lower fins glowed with electric blue lines that move in peristaltic waves.

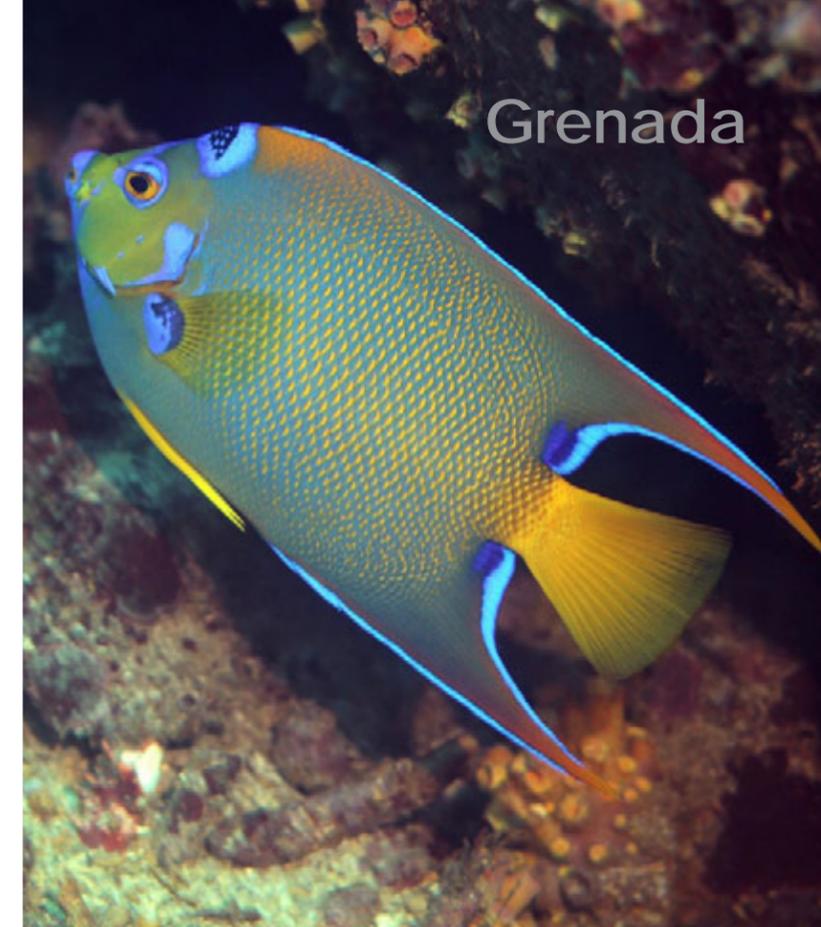
We came to a large section of massive coral mounds, and Kate sank down swiftly. She was taking pictures of a nurse shark, easily three meters (9ft) in length. It was sleeping, and we were able to get very close. Its skin looked like tri-colored

sponges and trees, which a school of yellowtails were using for shelter.

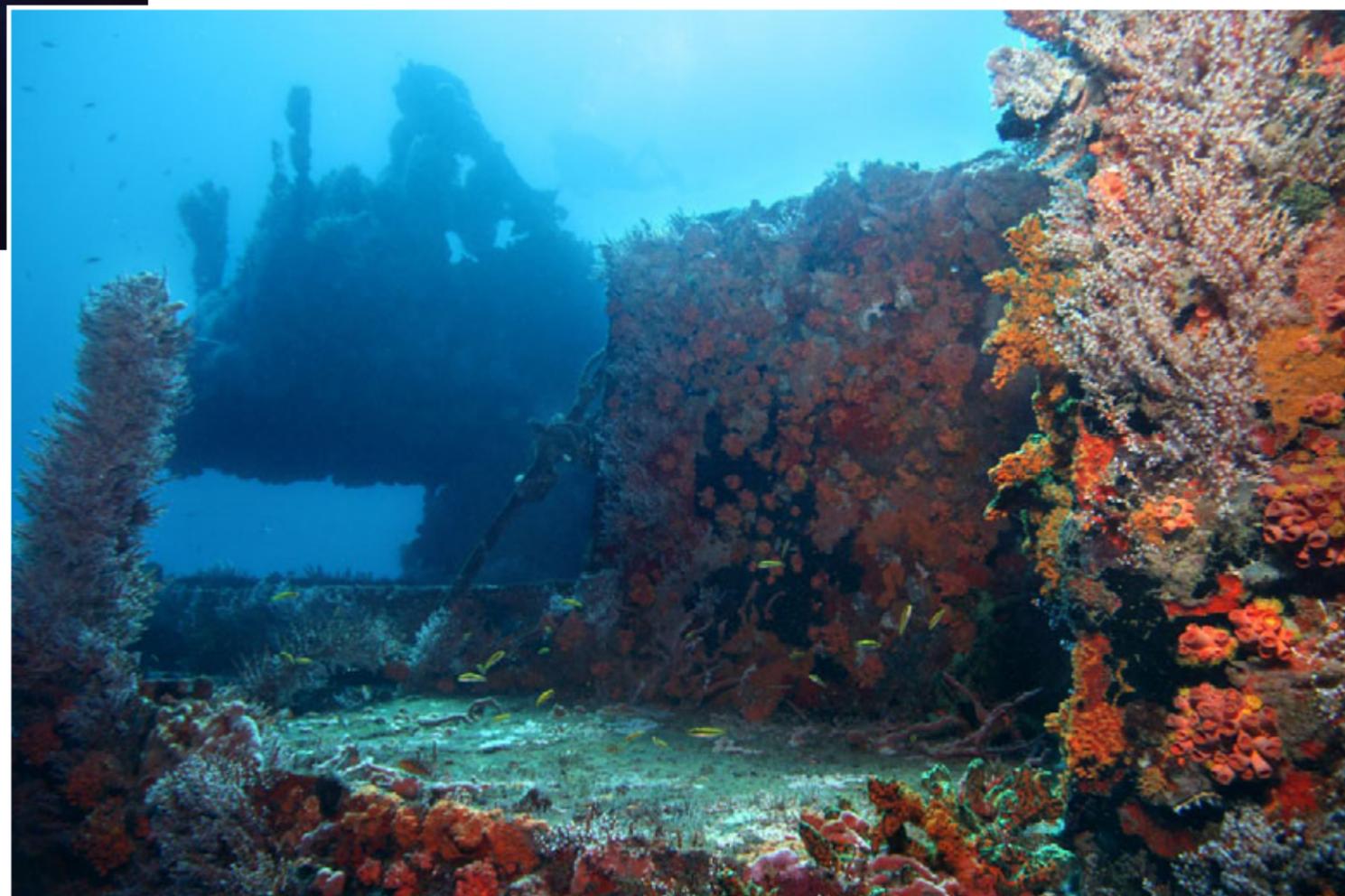
Peter pointed emphatically toward the bow, and I looked up to see an eagle ray flying in slow motion across the mid-section. Fluid and elegant, they are an absolute delight to swim with. Peter knew we might miss a great photo-op, as the ray moved into more blue water, and he took off after it. Suddenly my misgivings about his fins vanished, and I watched in disbelief as he out-swam the spotted ray and turned it back toward the bow. It made one more slow pass, indulging us, before



THIS PAGE: Scenes from Shark Reef. CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Divers can get quite close to large nurse sharks sleeping in the coral farms; A hawksbill turtle glides slowly among the coral; Swarms of yellow French Grunt surround a diver; A stingray lies in wait buried in the sand



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver in hull of the *Veronica*—a smaller wreck situated just over 20 meters deep, has a wide-open frame and is easy and safe to explore in and out of all her nooks. Divers can even find air pockets, trapped in her hull from when she went down; A goat fish swims in the coral reef near the wreck; A gorgeous queen angelfish is easily spotted due to its bright neon fin tips. This beauty was found swimming just under the *Veronica*; Side view of the wreck



The *Veronica* wreck

If you have never been wreck diving before, the *Veronica* would be an easy and lovely introduction. Sitting in shallow, clear waters – her keel rests at around 16 meters (50 feet) – the small ship hosts numerous species of reef fish and has a wide open hull divers can enter with no danger. Large expanses of soft-pink cup coral, as well as brown and green sea fans, have rooted themselves along the outer skeleton providing shelter for large numbers of blue chromis and the creole wrasse are absolutely thick here. Surrounding the ship is a large coral bed that stays relatively shallow making a perfect environment for photography as the colors here absolutely sing and the mounds of diverse formations are filled with colorful critters and small fish. If possible try and dive this site twice—once with a macro lens and once with a wide angle. It is shallow enough that you can do this on one tank if necessary; just make sure you watch your air consumption carefully so you have ample time on both dives.

A macro image of telesto on *Veronica* shows the intricate detail of each single branch





Grenada

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sunset is reflected in one of the two pools at the True Blue Bay Resort; Tiled dolphin motif decorates floor of pool in front of Indigo rooms; A sunset banquet at the Dodgy Dock restaurant; Diver and sleeping nurse shark in reef; Gerlinde and Peter Seupel (inset)

sandpaper, and the green flecks on its dorsal fin shimmered from the sunlight falling on its back. A black and white remora hovered near, obviously afraid of us but not wanting to leave the safety of the shark.

We backed off, and Kate took out her regulator, flashing me a big smile. It wasn't just the shark she was happy with. It was everything. Grenada is a magical place—a still unspoiled paradise of beauty, wonder and adventure for divers and non-divers alike. I feel lucky to have been able to share in all the island had to offer, and my sincerest wish is that you will give yourself the chance to experience it for yourself someday. You deserve it.

Born and raised in the mountains of Montana, Kelly LaClaire, is a dive writer based in Portland, Oregon, where his cousin, underwater photographer and PADI instructor, Kate Clark, also resides. The team covers dive sites in the Pacific Northwest as well as various destinations abroad. At just 22, the already accomplished Clark aims to travel the world teaching others the joys of the underwater world, while LaClaire's dream is to become less of an air hog. ■



Cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves

AQUANAUTS GRENADA — *The Spice Island's Premier Dive Operator*

Ask most any diver who has spent time in the waters of Grenada what operator they prefer to dive with and the answer, most definitely, will be Aquanauts owned and run by Peter and Gerlinde Seupel. With three centers on the island and three well-equipped, beautiful boats, you won't find a more qualified outfit.

"I've dived dozens and dozens of times here. I've even worked for many of the shops around the island, and I always go with Aquanauts," said a British PADI instructor who was on vacation and happened to be diving with us. As we sat in the sun on a surface interval, she told me why. "Of all the places I have been out with, Peter runs the safest—and hands down—the best dive shop in Grenada. No one else even comes close."

I asked Peter about this when he joined us a day or two later, and he instantly became serious. "It's not just all about fun. Of course, we do everything we can to provide that for our guests—that's why we're here—to give people a great and enjoyable dive experience they won't forget, but safety has to be a dive shop's first concern. I don't care if you've got a

five star PADI rating; if you're putting you're guests' lives in the hands of an 18-year-old kid just because he's certified a few people... well, that's just crazy—and very dangerous. There's far more to scuba diving than how many certs your instructors give out. How much do they know about their boats, the swells, the currents? How much do they really know about their equipment and do they maintain it properly? How often do they inspect it and buy new gear? How well do they know rescue procedures, and how often do they practice them? This is what makes a quality dive shop—nothing else—and we work hard to make sure our team is well qualified in all those areas. We have to. That's the only way to ensure our guests will be happy and want to



return."

After spending a week with them, I believe it. Aquanauts' boats are brilliantly clean and superbly maintained. Our gear (BCD's, computers, regulators, suits) worked perfectly and looked new. Before every dive, we were given exact briefings with exact plans and exact safety procedures. Each instructor and dive master carried backup pony tanks while also making sure we all were given our own inflatable safety tubes. We didn't have a single problem on any of our dives, and it became obvious that Aquanauts puts every effort into ensuring things stay that way. And as Peter pointed out, once we knew everything was well taken care of, we had a blast. ■



Trumpetfish of many different colors can be seen almost everywhere in Grenadian waters, from right off the boat dock in the harbor to darting in and out of coral formations in the reefs

Grenada

will not give you one, or tell you they can't, then something is wrong! Usually this means they have oversold the flight (nearly all flights in December and February are oversold, so this is important). Even though you have paid for a ticket, if they do not give you a specific seat assignment, you will almost certainly be put on standby and may not be able to get a seat once at the airport. The airlines are often neglectful in explaining this so, again, demand a seat assignment or fly with another carrier

Use a travel agent. Sure you will have to pay a little extra for booking fees, but your agent will go to bat for you if any trouble occurs and, if needed, can do your re-booking faster and easier than you can when stuck at an airport due to weather delays, cancellations, missed connections or mechanical problems. Keep your agent's cell and office phone numbers with you in your carry-on so you can call them if you run into trouble. You paid for this service, so don't be afraid to use it.

Get travel insurance. Again, this will add a few dollars, but if you lose a day of travel, like we did, your insurance covers all expenses, meals, clothes and can even refund part or all of your flight costs. If you're working with a travel company, they can set this up for you.

Be sure to pack your carry-on with extras—two days of extra clothes, your toiletry bag, a swimsuit and any dive gear you deem essential like your computer, regulator, mask, shorty—things you don't want to borrow or rent from the dive center if you can help it—in case your checked luggage is lost. Nothing is worse than a couple days stranded in airports, waiting on planes and stuck in hotel rooms wearing the same underwear and socks. ■

Flight Tips

Many divers plan their trips in the winter months, specifically December, so they can leave the cold and dreary weather behind and do some warm water diving in a tropical paradise. This is also

the busiest time of year for the airlines, and that means passengers are faced with possible delays, missed vacation days, lost baggage or equipment and extensive—hmm, how do I put this lightly—security probes and body searches.

Unfortunately, my photographer, Kate, and I had to endure all of the above on the trip to do this story. Here are a few tips to avoid the same holiday hassles when flying to Grenada:

Get a seat assignment right away. Whether you book the flight with an agent, online or over the phone, be sure to ask for a seat assignment for each leg of the flight you will be on—especially with American and Continental. If they

fact file



Grenada



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History Carib Indians first inhabited Grenada when Columbus "discovered" the island in 1498, but it remained uncolonized by Europeans for more than a century. The first attempt to do so was by the British in 1609, but they were routed out by the native population. In 1650, Frenchmen tricked the local chiefs into selling them a portion of the Island for next to nothing and over the next year constant skirmishes had decimated the Caribs. Over the next 90 years the British and French fought constantly for ultimate possession of the island and today there are still several forts dotting the landscape. At that time sugar and tobacco were Grenada's main exports but cocoa, coffee and cotton crops were soon being cultivated as well. In 1783 the Island was ceded to Britain who began bringing huge numbers of African slaves to extend their sugarcane production. The plantation system reigned until the emancipation in 1834. A few years later nutmeg was introduced to the island; a commodity nearly as precious as gold at the time due to its healing, preservative and flavoring qualities. The local soil proved so perfect for the spice that Grenada is now the world's second largest nutmeg producer. The island gained independence from Britain in 1974 but only five years later was taken over by a communist group that had financial and political ties with Cuba and the Soviet Union. The United States, Jamaica and several Eastern Caribbean states jointly responded with the now famous "rescue mission" and restored order. In 1984 a general election was held, reestablishing

a democratic government and ensuring free elections for the future. Capital: St. George

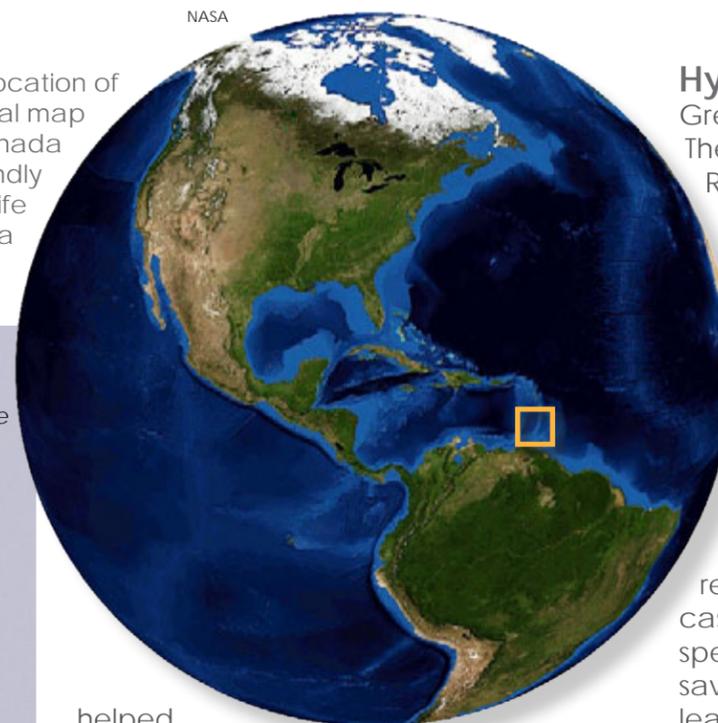
Geography

Grenada is located a few hundred miles north of Venezuela where the Caribbean Sea meets the Atlantic Ocean. The terrain is dominated by lush mountains densely covered in every conceivable variety of spices and fruit trees: nutmeg, cinnamon, cocoa, star fruit, orange, banana, breadfruit, mango, guava, clove, mango, cashew, almond, avocado, grapefruit, palm and bay trees. Coastline: 121 km of white sand beaches and small volcanic cliffs. Lowest point: Sea level. Highest point: Mt. Saint Catherine 840 meters (2520 ft).

Climate Of course, Grenada has a tropical climate with an average temperature in the low 80s F. The dry season runs from January to May and the rainy season from June to Dec. Natural hazards include hurricanes. Although Grenada lies on the edge of the hurricane belt and they occur less frequently than other Northern Caribbean islands, they do happen - witness Ivan in 2004 and Emily in 2005. The season lasts from June to November.



RIGHT: Location of Grenada on global map
BELOW: Map of Grenada
BOTTOM RIGHT: Friendly mono monkey in a wildlife reserve of Grenada



helped Grenada make a comeback but the world's economic problems over the last two years have stagnated that industry as well, making current growth difficult at best. Currently the unemployment rate is at 12.5% with 32% of its citizens struggling below the poverty line. One of the biggest challenges facing the agricultural economy is the strikingly few young adults working in that sector - 90% of all farmers are over 55 years of age and the number of young farmers has done nothing but decline over the last decade. Tourism, it seems, is Grenada's biggest hope for the future.

Currency East Caribbean Dollar (ECD). This currency is pegged to the U.S. dollar. USD1.00 = ECD2.70

Population 107,818 (July, 2010)
Ethnic groups: black 82%, mixed black and European 13%, European and East Indian 5%, and trace of Arawak/Carib Amerindian. Religions: Roman Catholic 53%, Anglican 13.8%, Protestant sects 33.2%. Internet Users: 24,000 as of 2008.

Language English is the official language but some locals also speak French patois (French mixed with local slang, abbreviations and accented colloquialisms). The literacy rate is 96%.

Environmental issues All of Grenada power comes from diesel burning generators and currently there is no recycling program in place. Hurricane Ivan wiped out 83% of all agricultural crops and the soil is still recovering. The nation is party to several international agreements: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Law of the Sea, Ozone Layer Protection, Whaling

Economy Grenada relies on tourism as its main source of income followed by agricultural products - namely: nutmeg, cocoa and other spices. Hurricane Ivan caused massive economic problems and, while the island is recovering, the country is saddled with large debts from its rebuilding efforts. Tourism growth has

Hyperbaric Chamber

Grenada does not have a chamber. The closest facility is: Roxborough Hyperbolic Facility, TLH Building, Milford Rd. Scarborough, Tabago 868-709-5655 (phone)

Transportation

TO RENT OR NOT TO RENT? Unless you're from the United Kingdom or a Commonwealth nation and you're comfortable driving on the left side of the road, I strongly recommend that you DO NOT rent a car here. Just bring some extra cash and hire taxis. Chances are you'll spend less money this way, and you'll save yourself the headache of trying to learn how to drive on the other side of the road while simultaneously trying to figure out Grenada's confused, hurried and seemingly lawless traffic system. If you choose to rent a vehicle, e-mail me and tell me if you survived.

Websites

Grenada tourism
www.grenadagrenadines.com
Grenada hotel and tourism association:
www.gogrenada.gd ■



Text and photos by Lawson Wood

False Killer Whales

— *Enchanting Cetaceans of Dominica*



Once or twice in a rare Blue Moon, opportunity sometimes comes along and hits you on the head—or in my case, I was hit on the head—by a juvenile sperm whale.

Let me recap. Along with a small group of like-minded conservationists and underwater photographers, we were working under a special permit issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries on the Island of Dominica (pronounced *DOMINEEKA*) to try and identify returning sperm whales and other cetaceans.

Dominica is the youngest of the Caribbean islands and is flanked by Guadeloupe to the north and Martinique to the south, which are both French colonies. Inevitably, many of the locals speak a derivative of a French, Carib and West African creole known as Kwéyòl.

Ancestors of the original Carib Indians, the Kalinago still live by traditional fishing and farming methods and are rather distinctive in appearance, resembling South American Amazon tribes and are much shorter in stature.

The Kalinago name for the island is Wai'tukubuli. The local beer is called Kubuli!

Extremely mountainous in aspect, two of the peaks are over 1,300 metres (4,500ft). I can honestly say that the topography is incredible with fantastic rain-forest fauna and flora all found within cloud-topped peaks, dra-

Eye of scarred sperm whale, Band Aid



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pod of false killer whales patrol the seas around Dominica; Rugged coastline of Dominica draped with mist; Pair of false killer whales (inset)



matic gorges, caverns, waterfalls and hidden lakes. There are many hot sulphur springs and one of the dive sites is known as "Champagne" due to the continuous streams of bubbles coming up through the reef.

The underwater reefs also resemble more tropical dive sites due to the rarity of curious fish species, thousands of colourful crinoids, black coral forests and superb colourful sponges.

And so to sea...

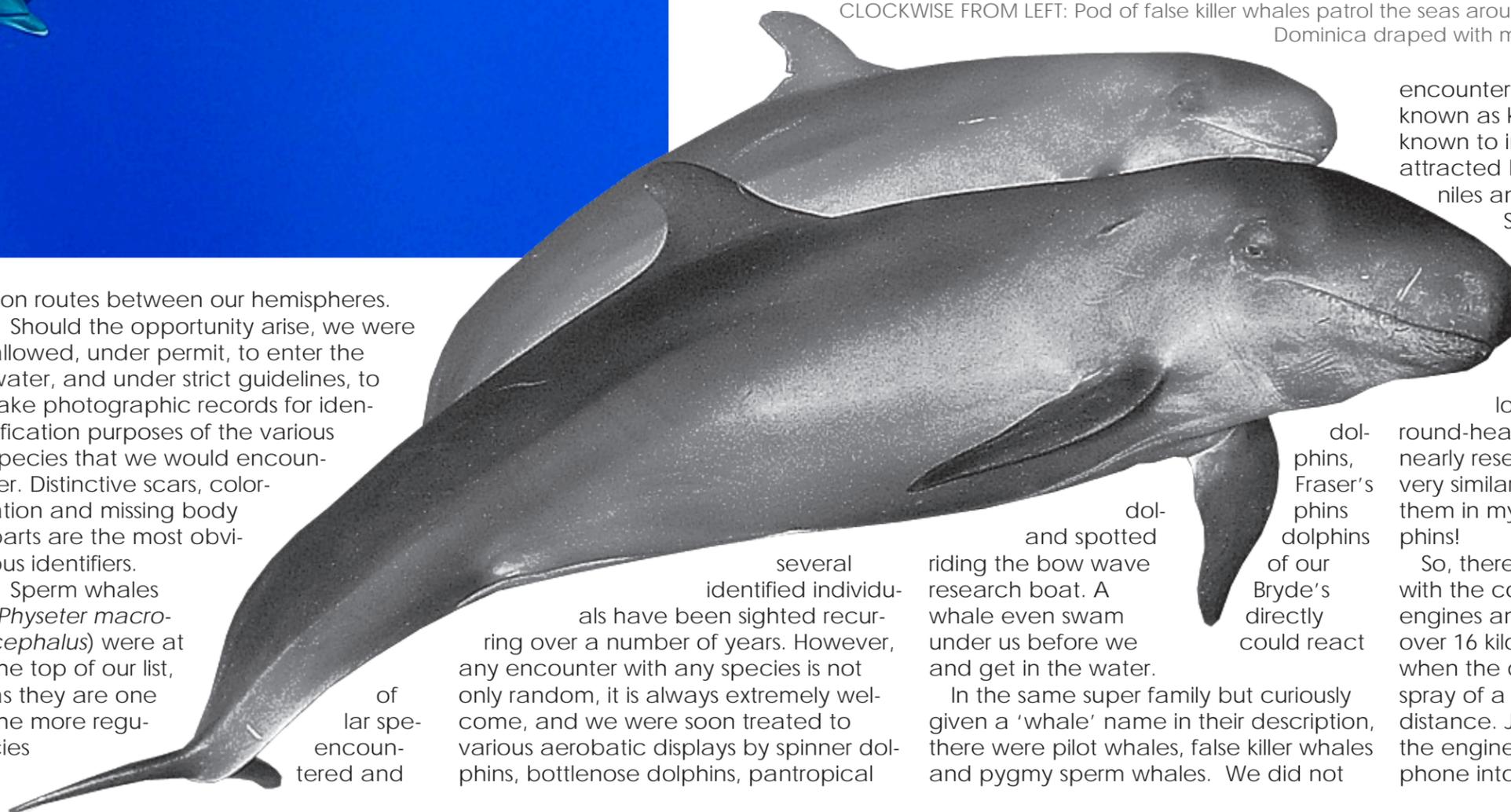
Struggling along approximately five to ten miles off the western (Caribbean) coast of Dominica, our goal was to catalogue as many cetacean species that use these deep waters as breeding and feeding grounds on their annual migra-

tion routes between our hemispheres.

Should the opportunity arise, we were allowed, under permit, to enter the water, and under strict guidelines, to take photographic records for identification purposes of the various species that we would encounter. Distinctive scars, coloration and missing body parts are the most obvious identifiers.

Sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) were at the top of our list, as they are one of the more regular species encountered and

of lar species encountered and



encounter any orca (unfortunately also known as killer whales), but they are also known to inhabit these coastal waters, attracted by the large number of juveniles and calves of the larger whales.

Speaking of which, whilst orca are members of the dolphin super family, so are false killer whales. Like orca, false killer whales are also known to prey on other dolphins and sperm whales, however they look more like pilot whales, or

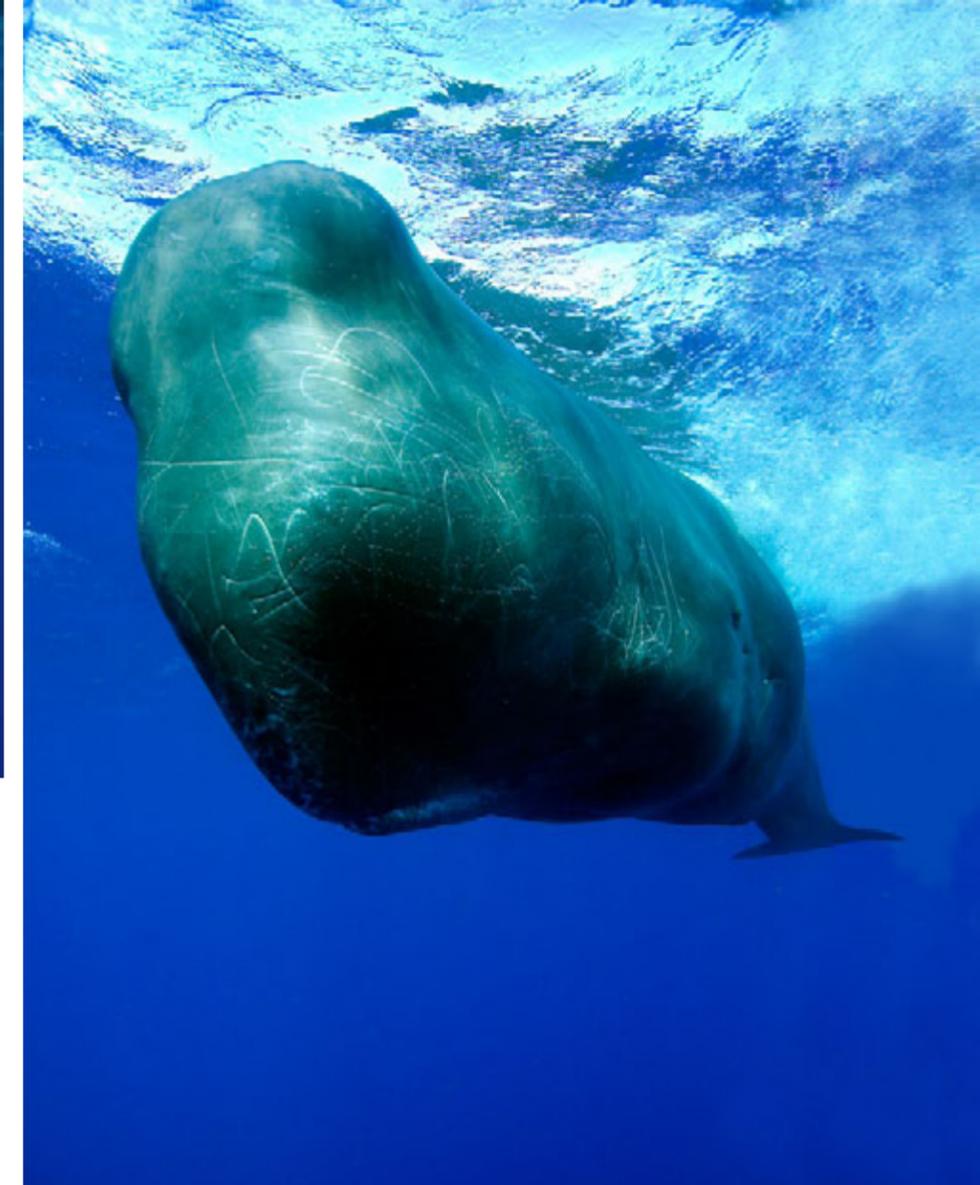
round-headed dolphins, than anything nearly resembling an orca, yet they have very similar behaviours. I have renamed them in my personal logbook as killer dolphins!

So, there we were, bobbing along with the constant drone of our vessel's engines and the roll of the oceanic swell over 16 kilometers (ten miles) offshore, when the distinctive plumed exhalation spray of a sperm whale was seen in the distance. Jerry, our captain, quickly cut the engines, dipped his directional hydrophone into the water and confirmed the

several identified individuals have been sighted recurring over a number of years. However, any encounter with any species is not only random, it is always extremely welcome, and we were soon treated to various aerobic displays by spinner dolphins, bottlenose dolphins, pantropical

dolphins, Fraser's dolphins and spotted dolphins of our Bryde's directly could react riding the bow wave research boat. A whale even swam under us before we and get in the water.

In the same super family but curiously given a 'whale' name in their description, there were pilot whales, false killer whales and pygmy sperm whales. We did not



THIS PAGE: Views of the cheeky juvenile sperm whale, Band-Aid—nicknamed thus due to the scar over his left eye—that pushed underwater photographer/dive writer Lawson Wood out of the way with its large head

sonar clicks of a juvenile sperm whale.

We maneuvered into position ahead of our moving target and quietly slipped into the water. Undeterred by our presence, this young small fellow, at over 12 metres (40ft) in length actually swam directly towards us (me!) I then found myself squished between the research boat and a the spy-hopping whale, which casually shunted me out of its way by its rather large and scarred head.

Hey, don't worry—I was out of there! This was a BIG baby beast, which quite pointedly informed me who was the boss.

After the initial shock and seeing my compatriots swimming off after Scarface, it took all of my effort to catch up with them. The sperm whale, which deigned to allow me to have an encounter, can only be described as magical. Now nick-

named, Band-Aid, due to the curious scar over his left eye, he put up with our intrusion into his space for over 20 minutes before he very obviously vented all of his orifices and sounded in front of us. What an end to a rather perfect day.

Day two

Day two was another matter altogether. There was an ocean, empty of noise, out there.

We motored and plunged through a rising oceanic swell, and the constant rain battered our hopes. It was so bad at one point that we lost sight of the island of Dominica. Our captain continually tried the hydrophone, but other than a few distant dolphin clicks, there were no whales within ten miles of any of our positions.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Landscape shot of Dominica; Playful dolphins mixing in the waves; Typical Dominican homes dot the hillside; Wild dolphin leaps out of the sea

Our team leader Brandon Cole (ever the optimist) informed us that there may not be any whales in our research zone, as they always swim away whenever false killer whales are in the vicinity—a behavior that had been observed on previous occasions. “So, keep a look out for false killer whales!” he said.

They are kind of like large dolphins, with that same wry, or sly grin, but are almost black in colour and have rounded bulbous heads, not dissimilar to a pilot whale.

Impatiently, we strained our eyes as the very patient boat captain scoured the ocean and deployed his hydrophone to search for any indication of life in the depths.

We did not know at the time, but when false killer whales are hunting, they travel in stealth mode—completely silent—as

they attack their intended prey. So, the ocean was silent—for hours—and then, just in front of us, a black, rounded head breached, and then several more immediately behind it.

Brandon Cole immediately identified them as false killer whales (*Pseudorca crassidens*). They were hanging around, enjoying their own company and socializing.

Get in the water!

With heightened adrenalin and nervousness, we all entered the water and swam slowly towards where the group could be seen



on the surface. They certainly spotted us before we spotted them underwater in the low visibility, as we were quickly battered by their sonar clicks when they all swooped around us, to check out visually what their sensors were telling them. (Stupid, slow, landlubbers, pretending to be dolphins, uttering unrecognizable



squeals and whoops trying unsuccessfully to communicate our love and passion for the species!). What a joke. They left us floundering about on the surface.

Just when we were about to give up hope and return to the research boat, a young bottlenose dolphin (*Tursops truncatus*) appeared.

Very quickly, a large male false killer whale returned, swam in and started to escort his ‘cousin’ towards the larger group, then a second false killer whale appeared and acted as ‘shot-gun’ on the other side of the dolphin. I had a moment of unease over the plight of this young fellow, as false killer whales are

known (as mentioned) to go into stealth mode when hunting, but when interacting with other dolphins, they have been observed to mimic the sounds of other species and also to actively hunt and kill other dolphins.

I may well be wrong, but, for me, it looked like a young dude had just swam into the wrong neighbourhood. Soon, the small dolphin was in the middle of at least ten BIG guys, many of whom were exhibiting very obvious sexual behaviour, as well as rather exaggerated movements. Thankfully, whilst this scene was being played out beneath us, we all had a window of opportunity to duck-dive down and quickly snap as many photographs as possible of this quickly changing scenario.

The false killer whales (killer dolphins) have a very distinc-



tive, rather large, toothy, sly grin, which they continued to flash at us, as if they were stating, "We know something you don't," or, "Don't mess with us—we may look like we are smiling, but the teeth are big and sharp, and the little guy is ours!"

I had a rather unsettling feeling, which, as the pack led this young innocent dolphin away from us, that this may be the last time anyone would ever see the dolphin again.

Our group was somewhat stunned, yet exuberant over the encounter, yet all of us had quite an uneasy feeling during

the encounter. Rather humbling, these beasts made us feel amateurish, ungainly and clearly out of our depth.

The rest of the week yielded few results other than sightings of small dolphin groups, the killer dolphins had certainly spooked the bigger whales as well as ourselves. Deciding to concentrate on a few reef dives before leaving our lodgings at the Titiwi Inn in the capital Roseau, we were soon enthusing about the very high quality of reef life, colourful critters and friendly fish.

Dominica had certainly lived up to its reputation as being the

whale watching capital of the Caribbean, but no-one had prepared us for the quality of the reef diving.

Things you need to know

As Dominica was formerly a British protectorate, electricity is all 220v (British style plugs).

Most hotels will have 110v adapters.

Driving is also British style, and cars usually drive on the left side of the road. For those more nervous types who would rather not negotiate the narrow, winding, often single-track roads on the island, there are local taxis and minibuses that are quite inexpensive and very regular.

Currency is the EC\$ (Eastern Caribbean Dollar) which is approximately 2.67 to the U.S. dollar. U.S. dollars are accepted everywhere, but the exchange may not be in your favour.

Flight services are handled

by America Eagle (American Airways) from Miami and Tampa (via Puerto Rico) or with Liat or Winair for transfers from Antigua, Barbados, Virgin Islands, St. Maarten, Guadeloupe, Martinique and St. Lucia. There is a departure tax of EC\$59.00 (US\$23.00) payable at the airport.

For those who love island hopping, there is a 300-seat catamaran ferry that operates between Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique and St. Lucia.

Whale watching scientific permits are rarely issued and then only to bona fide enthusiasts who will pass over photographs and a report to the ministry in charge. Tourists can go whale and dolphin watching on a number of boats, but are not allowed in the water.

The Dominica Hotel and Tourism Association (DHTA) can be found at: Dhta.org. Diving information can be found at: Dominicawatersports.com.



Dominica

Lawson Wood was raised in the Scottish east coast fishing town of Eyemouth and spent his youth exploring the rock pools and shallow seas before learning to scuba dive at the tender age of 11. Now over 44 years later, Lawson has been fortunate to make his passion his career and has authored and co-authored over 45 books mainly on our underwater world. He is a founding member of the Marine Conservation Society, founder of the first Marine Reserve at St. Abbs in Scotland, and made photographic history by becoming the first person to be a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society and Fellow of the British Institute of Professional Photographers solely for underwater photography. For more information, see: Lawsonwood.com ■



THIS PAGE: Scenes of a pod of false killer whales surrounding and escorting their captive, a single dolphin, away from the divers