

My Summer Odyssey

Hanging With Your Peeps,
Under Sail and Underwater

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TEEN CONTRIBUTOR

I couldn't believe it: I finally had a chance to descend on the trip's most highly anticipated wreck dive — the *Lirico* freighter that sank in the mid-90s off Isla La Quatre in the eastern Caribbean Sea — and my ears started acting up. I began to get upset, but then remembered what I had been told in a diving lecture once. Swimming up a few feet, I tried again to equalize. Just as the pressure released, a giant stingray appeared in my periphery.

I began shooting pictures left and right. This was no shy stingray: She paraded across the top of the wreck like a runway model. My buddy and I followed as she led us straight to one of her stingray friends, concealed in a corner of the wreck under a camouflage quilt of sediment. I moved in



COURTESY: JORDAN WESTMORLAND; BOTTOM: JASON BUCHHEIM



for the meet-and-greet. Wanting nothing to do with the photo op, the shy stingray rose and shook off her disguise, stirring up sand and mucking up the visibility. I swam away, thankful for the sightings.

Two weeks before I had joined an Odyssey Expedition voyage along with nine other adventure-seeking teens on a quest to explore the eastern Caribbean archipelagos of the Grenadines and Windward Islands. I've been lucky to have been diving for a number of years with my family, all of whom are divers, and couldn't wait to see what these islands had to offer.

Our journey began dockside in St. Lucia, where I met my boat mates: a group of teens from just about everywhere. Together we boarded the *Alana Rose*, a 43-foot sailing catamaran — our home, dive shop and classroom for the next few weeks. All in a stunning tropical setting.

Once our gear was stowed and departure and safety checks were complete, we were off and running downwind, head-

ing for my true love — the diving. Our first stop, St. Lucia, did not disappoint. Superman's Flight became an insta-favorite, named after a scene in *Superman II* filmed at Petit Piton in which our hero flies down a cliff. The name fits the area's current, which allows divers to soar effortlessly above the underwater mountains. We had great fun spreading our arms and pretending to be superheroes gliding above the colorful reefs and fish.

Upon surfacing, we couldn't stop raving about our findings. Unfortunately, we didn't know the names of any of the fish we saw, and could only vaguely describe our finds: "You know, it had a black forehead and it was kind of blue ... " Our instructors put up with our version of verbal fish charades

for a bit — just long enough for us to feel the frustration — before easing into a talk about underwater life. "That thing with the black forehead that's kind of blue — Creole wrasse," they explained. "It happens to be one of the most common fish in the Caribbean." Over the next few days we studied the *Who's Who* of fish, including slide shows and fish-ID books. Then we quizzed each other in preparation for our next challenge: helping R.E.E.F. and Reef Check get accurate counts of the area's fish population.

Now we had to put our knowledge to use. I was really nervous at first. It's one thing to enjoy looking at what swims in front of your face; it's quite another when you're responsible for keeping track of all those fish.

Luckily, they had a simple system: We identified the fish and recorded seeing one, more than five or a school. In the beginning, I barely swam at all and had to keep peeking at the ID card. But I knew I had



JASON BUCHHEIM (4)

NEW DAY, NEW ODYSSEY Clockwise from above left: Learning opportunities include navigation, identification, conservation and (opposite) trimming the sails.



CAMERON THORP

DESTINATION PRIMER

AVERAGE WATER TEMP 79-83°F WHAT TO WEAR 3 mm fullsuit AVERAGE VIZ 60-100 feet WHEN TO GO Year-round; busiest time is December

gotten better the day my dive buddy swam after me, handing me the ID card after I was already 10 minutes into a count — I hadn't needed to look once.

After several days of diving, surveying and sailing, our ship's captain tested our seamanship during a 30-mile passage to St. Vincent. Our team had the *Alana Rose* to wind, doing 11 knots! As captains, we each had a turn at the helm before arriving at our mooring in the shadow of La Soufriere volcano, a 4,000-foot behemoth towering over black-sand beaches and the surrounding Caribbean.

We first entered the water of St. Vincent at night, when the nocturnal critters come out to play among the coral and black sand, giving the dive a sinister feel. Two friendly but very squirmy octopi crossed our path as colossal, crusty lobsters scampered across the bottom, rummaging for anything in sight. Parrotfish slumbered within their protective mucous webs, sitting exposed on the sand like cowboys on a prairie. (To me, they looked more like moray fast food than aquatic campers.) After just one dive, it was easy to see why so many call St. Vincent "critter country."

Topside, our adventures included a hike over huge boulders and through rain-

forest to reach the Falls of Baleine, where we snorkeled under powerful 60-foot waterfalls. Then we discovered the movie sets where *Pirates of the Caribbean* was filmed; they were abandoned, allowing us to roam freely and re-enact our own swashbuckling adventures. Sadly, my dream of meeting Keira Knightley was not realized.

As our trip's end approached, we said goodbye to the beautiful St. Vincent and headed nine miles south to Bequia. Though only seven miles in circumference, Bequia happens to be the largest Grenadine Island. With constant steel-drum music wafting through the streets and bright pastel-colored buildings, it was the liveliest location of the trip. Wandering its streets, I heard a voice from inside a shop call out to

me, inviting me to look at souvenirs. Like most guys, I'm not a fan of shopping and started to turn away, but he seemed to be daring me. I poked my head inside and found a fish-shaped refrigerator magnet that I thought my dad might like. Before I knew it, the shopkeeper and I were playing a game where we kept naming numbers: I was trying to bargain his price down, and he was laughing, trying to raise it again. He seemed to enjoy the game as much as I did, so we played a few rounds over various gifts for my friends and family.

On the outskirts of town we visited the Old Hegg Turtle Sanctuary run by Orton King, who works to save hawksbill turtles. He gave us a tour of the place, located only yards from the beach — very convenient for releasing recovered turtles back into the wild. Then he put us to work, which we were happy to do, scrubbing the turtles and their aquariums. The older ones didn't seem to mind, but the little guys wiggled and tried to swim away when I brushed the growths from their backs. Apparently the younger hawksbills don't realize that without our help their shells would deteriorate. If these turtles still lived in the ocean, most likely they would find a cleaning station where fish would nibble

RIGGED AND READY



Skull Notebook

How can you resist keeping a journal if its cover sports a skull? Assouline's latest is perfect for pirates of all ages. sportdiver.com/assouline

iKaraoke

Party it up anytime, anywhere, with an iKaraoke, radio and iPod. If only they could improve your voice. sportdiver.com/griffintechology



Erasable Slate

Asking questions and amusing buddies during deco stops is laughably easy thanks to Innovative Scuba's erasable slate, perfect for passing underwater notes. sportdiver.com/innovative-scuba



MUST DO

Go Local
The hike up to the Falls of Baleine is as rewarding as the destination: Experience the lush environs for which St. Vincent is famous. Then swim in the pools and let the falls massage away any stress as they cascade on your shoulders.

1. **Lirico**
2. **Superman's Flight**
3. **Scotts Head**
4. **The Pearl**
5. **Diamond Rock**

the snacks growing on their shells.
We spent half the day talking with Orton and scrubbing turtles before saying farewell not only to our host, but also to a



recovered hawksbill that had grown strong enough to return to the ocean. We gathered around as the turtle rowed to the brink of the water, then jetted away.

Sailing back to St. Lucia, where it all

FOR MORE INFORMATION



More on the Web:

For a complete guide to Odyssey Expeditions, go to **sportdiver.com/odyssey-expeditions**.

began, I thought about how it was only two weeks ago that I didn't know a keel from a crustacean. But learning has a funny way of sneaking up on you when you're having fun and curiosity takes hold. Pulling lines is fun when it means the boat will race through the water at speeds that make adrenaline course through your body. Counting fish can be amusing when you realize you've seen the same faces again and again, and their names pop into your head without much thought. Scrubbing

turtles isn't so bad, either, when you think about them having a chance to be free again — and maybe swimming with you on a dive someday. Yeah, you could say I learned something. But I'd be more likely to tell you how much fun we had.

Special Thanks to Odyssey Expeditions (odyssey-expeditions.com), the Old Hegg Turtle Sanctuary, the St. Lucia Marine Management Area (smma.org.lc) and the Moorings (moorings.com).

