

Virgin Gorda

A Serene Island Vacation

BY MELISSA L. BOGEN, ELS

With nearly deserted beaches, clear turquoise waters, idyllic scenery on land and underwater, and genuinely friendly people, the British Virgin Islands (BVI) are a serene place to rest and relax. Of the 60 islands known as the BVIs, Virgin Gorda is my favorite, not only because it is host to spectacular scuba diving, but also because it is off the beaten path with a small island atmosphere and not much nightlife.

ACCOMMODATIONS

For our fourth trip there, in early November 2008, we were repeat guests at Guavaberry Spring Bay Vacation Homes, in an area of the island known as Spanish Town. Guavaberry provides a wide selection of rentals, from budget-minded homes for two people (one of which we rented) to beautifully landscaped five-bedroom villas. Each house is fully furnished and has private baths, a living room with kitchen/dining area, and a covered deck. The homes are up on stilts that capture the ever-present trade winds and provide a view of the Caribbean from our deck that was breathtaking.

Guavaberry has a private beach, known as Spring Bay, which boasts shady tamarind trees, clean sand, picnic benches, and the beautiful blue 82°F water just steps away. Guavaberry also has snorkel gear available for rent, so everyone can check out the colorful sea life.

WHAT TO DO

Virgin Gorda is dotted with beautiful, uncrowded beaches. Be sure to bring a towel, fresh water, and sunscreen, because most do not have concession stands.

The day we stopped at Savannah Bay we had forgotten sunscreen. So, instead, we went for lunch at The Mine Shaft Café, where we enjoyed West Indian jerk wings, along with a 360-degree view of the Caribbean. Then we stopped at Coppermine Point, the site of a 400-year-old copper mine.

No trip to Virgin Gorda is complete without visiting the giant volcanic boulders of The Baths, adjacent to Spring Bay. To avoid crowds, go on a day when cruise ships won't be visiting (usually on Tuesdays or Wednesdays). We snorkeled over from Guavaberry's beach to enjoy the swirling pools and fish darting in and out among the rocks. Then we walked up the rock path for a salad at Top of the Baths—great views and a relaxed dress code.

One of our wildest walking adventures was to Devil's Bay, reachable by water or a very tricky trail through The Baths. (This trail would never be legal in the U.S. because of

the potential liability of the rickety ladders and slippery rope supports!) Once you finish rock climbing and wading through shallow pools, the trail opens up to a secluded cove where you can sunbathe and swim in peace.

DIVING

Avid scuba divers, our faithful dive operation for all our trips to Virgin Gorda has been Dive BVI. We dived with Captain Johan and Divemaster Belinda aboard the well-equipped *Sea Monkey*. November is the tail end of hurricane season and is a slow time for tourism, so we had the boat almost to ourselves. We got in 13 dives, including one at night.

Our first dive was to the famous wreck of the *Rhone*. Johan dived with us and pointed out parts of the wreck, such as the ship's condenser, signal cannon, and the rope Jacqueline Bisset pulled on while filming *The Deep*. Among the many fish, we saw spotted drum, cardinal

fish, glass eye snapper, queen triggerfish, and whitespot filefish. The next day it was off to the Ledges at West Dog Island and Joe's Cave, where we saw a shiny swarm of copper glassy sweepers riding the surge in and out of the cave.

A highlight of the week was finding the rare "fingerprint cyphoma," a brightly colored sea snail, at the dive site known as Ginger Steps off Ginger Island. Other terrific dives treated us to sights of hawksbill turtles, spotted eagle rays, porcupine fish, nurse sharks, spiny lobsters, reef squid, and a big octopus swimming freely.

After diving, we chowed down good burgers and fried chicken at The New Dixies, a tiny joint frequented by locals, before heading back for a nap and more snorkeling.

We made the right choice by going to Virgin Gorda. The underwater sites and quiet atmosphere can't be beat. Check it out if you want to spend time in and around the water without a lot of tourists.

Melissa L. Bogen, ELS, is a Freelance Medical Editor, Bogen Editorial Services, 207 Gibson Hill Road, Chester, NY 10918. She can be reached at 845-469-2646 or melbogen@optonline.net.



Melissa scuba diving.



Fingerprint cyphoma