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Ironborn
Contributor

Apr 22, 2021

#1

Introduction

I enjoyed my first dive trip to St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The highlights for me included the rich critter spotting and photographic opportunities of the Frederiksted pier and the multiple shipwrecks of Butler Bay,

on the west side of the island. Beyond those specific highlights, I found the reefs on the west side of the island to offer fairly typical Caribbean reef diving – enjoyable but unremarkable. Given that and certain aspects of the topside environment of Frederiksted, I doubt that I would return in the future for a Frederiksted-based trip focused on the west side, once the removal of travel restrictions provides more alternatives outside the U.S. I am nonetheless curious as to whether or not the walls and shore diving of the north side of the island and the urban environment of Christiansted offer a different enough experience to warrant a return trip to explore that other side of the island. The operator that I chose for this trip, *St. Croix Ultimate Bluewater Adventures*, provided quality service, and I would consider them again if I were to return for a trip focused on the north side of the island.

How and Why I Went There

Travel restrictions left me with few options for a week-long dive trip when I had some vacation time that I wanted to use before it expired the week leading up to Easter. I had been quite happy limiting myself to Mexico last year, with trips to Cozumel, Cabo Pulmo, and a Playa del Carmen-based trip focused on the cenotes of the Mayan Riviera. My first choice would have been a liveaboard trip to Socorro, but the introduction of a COVID-19 testing requirement to return to the U.S. in January 2021 posed the unacceptable risk, however small, of getting stranded and quarantined overseas.

This situation left me with only domestic options. I already dive locally in Florida on weekends now that I have moved to Miami, and I would not want to set aside a whole week of vacation time for local diving at a time of year when there was still a high risk of cancellations due to rough seas. The spring break mobs were still running amok in South Florida at the time, driving up hotel prices astronomically and spilling over into my own neighborhood after the introduction of the curfew in Miami Beach. Hawaii still required COVID-19 tests or quarantines for arrivals. The North Carolina wreck diving season had not begun yet. The cold water diving of Southern California has been on my radar for some time, but I concluded that I was better off waiting for better surface and kelp conditions and the resumption of liveaboard service in the fall. The cold water diving of Puget Sound has also been on my radar, but the operators that appealed to me were either not running at all or did not fit my itinerary, so I decided to wait for warmer air temperatures to dive there “wet” in my “semi-dry” suit.

That left St. Croix, which had been on my radar since last year, as I started looking into domestic dive destinations more thoroughly. The Frederiksted pier caught my eye due to its reputation for macro critters and photography and my general interest in diving man-made underwater environments. That interest in man-made environments also includes shipwrecks, and Butler Bay on the west side of the island has multiple wrecks. I decided to stick to the west side of the island and avoid the north, at least for this trip, given the distance and the added logistical factors. The specific dives that interested me most were all on the west side. I read that the north side of the island often experiences rough seas at that time of year (I got enough of that in Florida this winter). In retrospect, my reasoning was correct, as rough seas forced the dive shop to cancel many of its north side boat trips that week. I also prefer reefs to the deep walls typical of the north side. I do like shore diving, which is available on the north side, but if I want to shore dive for the sake of shore diving, I would rather go to Bonaire (whenever that is feasible again). The Frederiksted pier was more than enough to scratch my itch for shore diving.

Logistics and Planning

St. Croix does have some COVID-19 testing requirements for entry from the mainland U.S., but they were more manageable. Unlike most foreign destinations, they do accept an antibody test result for travelers from the U.S. mainland, in addition to the more typical PCR tests that most countries require and the rapid antigen

tests that a few foreign countries will accept (Honduras and Belize, I think). They will accept antibody tests as old as four months. That much longer window of time gave me plenty of opportunity to plan a trip only after receiving the antibody test results, rather than booking and paying for a trip in advance and then just crossing my fingers that a negative PCR or antigen test result would arrive in time for my departure. The return trip to the U.S. mainland required no testing of any kind.

Two airlines offer direct service to St. Croix (STX) from South Florida: American out of Miami (MIA) and Spirit out of Fort Lauderdale (FLL), lasting about two and a half hours. These flights could also serve as connections for travelers from other states. I am not a fan of either airline, but Spirit seemed to be the better choice because: it was cheaper (even with Spirit's notorious extra charges); FLL is a more easily manageable airport than the madhouse at MIA; and Spirit does not confiscate carry-ons if one pays for them in advance (I travel with a substantial camera rig in my carry-on). There were moderate delays on both my departing and returning flights, but nothing that had a significant impact on my trip.

Frederiksted is a very small town, which made my choice of lodging easy. I ended up staying at the Inn on Strand Street, which is just a few blocks from the pier and the dive shops. The lodging was decent enough for my limited purposes, although the price was a bit high relative to the quality of the facilities, perhaps due to the Easter holiday. My only gripe was the "island time" breakfast service, which could take up to 45 minutes to deliver a simple breakfast. For a quick lunch between morning and afternoon boat trips, I ate at Polly's, which is right next to the pier and the dive shops. There are a handful of restaurants for dinner in that part of town, but they seemed to keep odd hours; it was not clear to me if these odd hours were due to pandemic restrictions or low demand in such a small town.

I knew when I planned my trip that Frederiksted was a very small and quiet town, and I was OK with that. I did not realize, however, that the town was so ghetto. Strand Street looks nice, and I presume that they keep it that way for the cruise ship crowds. The rest of the town behind it, however, looks like a war zone. The town does have some historic 18th century colonial architecture that looks quite charming along Strand Street, but it is unfortunate that they do not take better care of the rest of the town. More troubling were the number of locals walking around who appeared to be mentally ill or on drugs (if not both). As a native New Yorker, such phenomena do not bother me and in of themselves, but the town is so deserted at night that I was uncertain about walking around by myself at night, with no witnesses or bystanders to deter any crimes. I am OK with boring places if they are comfortable, and I can certainly appreciate risky places if they have attractions that interest me or other reasons to visit, but I would hesitate to stay again in a place that struck me as both boring and sketchy at the same time.

I chose St. Croix Ultimate Bluewater Adventures on the basis of positive reviews here on Scubaboard, on Trip Advisor, and elsewhere online. My experience with them was similarly positive, as they provided high-quality service and went out of their way to accommodate me and other guests. My only gripe was about the boat that they normally use for their west side trips, which is a relatively small fishing boat that they repurposed. Its size and design made it a bit cumbersome. It finally broke down one afternoon, causing the last-minute cancellation of our two-tank trip. They replaced it with their much bigger north side boat, a purpose-built Delta dive boat from Florida, which provided a much smoother experience. If I were to return to dive the north side of the island from Christiansted, I would be happy to dive with this shop again on their north side boat. They offer two-tank trips in both the morning and the afternoon, and night dives on the Frederiksted pier whenever there are at least two divers. Nitrox is available in principle, although they indicated that their supply is not always reliable, and they charge a relatively high price for it at \$15 per tank. They also provide weights and air tanks for self-guided pier dives, which they let me dive solo after they had seen that I was a competent diver.

(to be continued on this thread)

 morecowbells, txdamselfish, DevilEyeDog and 3 others



Ironborn
Contributor

Apr 22, 2021

#2

The Pier, the Wrecks, and Other Man-Made Structures

I found the Frederiksted pier to be the jewel in the crown of west side St. Croix diving. I would put it in the same league as the Salt Pier in Bonaire and the Blue Heron Bridge in Florida. It should be a bucket list item for photographers. If you look at the images from my trip on my Instagram profile, you will notice that a disproportionately large number of them came from the pier, even though I did only a fraction of my dives there. It is remarkable for its combination of macro critter spotting and wide-angle views of the pier structure, the rich sponge growth on them, and the schools of fish and other non-macro creatures that they attract. It is an excellent day dive, but the night dives are really off the charts, particularly in terms of macro critters. I view the pier as one of the many examples of the degree to which man-made structures often yield more rewarding dive experiences than natural environments. It was interesting to see animals making use of the structures for shelter, camouflage, or other purposes.

Specific creatures that I encountered at the pier included: the only frogfish that I have ever seen outside Southeast Asia; multiple seahorses, including one at night; numerous scorpionfish, including a pair of them, which I have never seen before; a pair of squid; southern stingrays; jawfish; a slipper lobster at night; a tube anemone at night; anemones with cleaner shrimp; arrow crabs and teardrop crabs; fireworms; a variety of smaller eel species; and flounder. There was a baitball to the north of and under the pier for a few days. I saw several turtles at the pier, during the day but more so at night. There was a pile of debris on the south side of the pier where at least three of them congregated at night.

The pier is normally a shore dive, but the dive shop occasionally does it as a boat dive. This approach is worthwhile because it enables divers to reach the further, deeper parts of the pier that they might not be able to reach from shore, or at least to spend more time there before turning around. These further parts of the pier were different enough to add significant variety to one's overall pier diving experience.

One of the more interesting boat dive sites is Armageddon, which consists of the wreckage of the previous Frederiksted pier that Hurricane Hugo destroyed in 1989. The wreckage has some impressive sponge and coral growth on it and attracts quite a bit of marine life, such as schools of fish and the only non-nurse shark that I saw on this trip (a Caribbean reef shark). They dumped the pier wreckage in a deep spot in Butler Bay, with an average depth of 90-ish feet.

Butler Bay is also home to multiple shipwrecks, which I found to be the other main attraction of west side St.

Croix diving. There are two pairs of wrecks, one deep and one shallow. Both pairs of wrecks are close enough to each other to dive two wrecks on the same dive, as this dive shop did. They have been there a long time and have thus accumulated lots of sponge and other marine growth. I would rate them all as above-average by Caribbean standards, but I preferred the deeper wrecks (Coakley Bay and Rosa Maria) for: their greater relief; their richer sponge and other marine growth; and the greater number and variety of mobile animals that they attracted, such as turtles and schools of spadefish.

One of the natural reef dive sites on the west side of the island also has some man-made structures; undersea cables that have been there long enough to attract significant sponge and other marine growth. It was interesting to see the degree to which sponges and corals have adapted to and taken advantage of these structures, such as growing up in the midst of the water column, rather than at the bottom.

The Natural Reefs

Beyond these artificial structures, the reefs on the west side of the island offered typical Caribbean diving. Surface conditions were calm, even when the wind picked up, perhaps because it is on the leeward side of the island. Visibility was consistently good, perhaps 80 feet or more. Water temperatures were consistently 80F or so. Currents were consistently mild or negligible. Maximum depths were moderate, ranging from 50 to 75 feet or so. The typical topography was a gentle slope.

Reef growth was decent, but there was also a lot of dead or bleached coral and overgrown algae smothering the reefs. The dive shop mentioned some reef damage from Hurricane Maria, but it looked to me (admittedly as a layman) more like longer-term environmental stresses were at work here. There were, however, many healthy and impressive sponges that had grown into unusual and interesting shapes. Fish density was low and consisted mainly of smaller individual reef fish or pairs of butterfly fish; larger schools of larger fish were generally absent outside the wrecks, the pier, and the old pier wreckage. We fared better with larger individual animals, as we encountered more than a few stingrays, turtles, and nurse sharks. The most abundant reef-dwelling creatures were feather duster worms, which seemed to be far more common here than anywhere else that I have been. I found that they make excellent subjects for close-focus wide angle photography. The reefs had some typical Caribbean macro, like Christmas tree worms, flamingo tongue cowries, Pederson and banded coral shrimp, and the occasional blenny, but one of our guides also found a seahorse for us.

As for much larger animals, we heard but did not see whales during one or two dives, which was an enjoyable first for me. The crew explained that they occasionally see whales from the boat around that time of year. We had also planned to investigate reports of a whale shark sighting at the northwest corner of the island, but the breakdown of the shop's west side boat prevented us from doing so.

(to be continued on this thread)



Ironborn
Contributor

Apr 22, 2021

#3

Conclusion and Further Discussion

I had to limit my dive trip options to U.S. dive destinations for non-diving reasons, and St. Croix was a good enough choice under those conditions. The pier and the wrecks in particular distinguished the west side of the island from run-of-the-mill Caribbean diving, and above all the pier is a must-see for macro enthusiasts and photographers like me. If I could do it over again, knowing what I know now, I would have just dove the pier from shore by myself instead of taking afternoon two-tank boat trips to the reefs. Beyond those highlights, the reef diving on the west side of the island was average. Now that I have "been there and done that," I would prefer other Caribbean destinations with better reef diving in general (e.g. Cozumel) or more distinctive features (e.g. the pinnacles of Saba, the wrecks of Grenada, the macro of St. Vincent, the sharks of Bimini and Tiger Beach, etc.), whenever international travel becomes feasible again. With that said, and since it remains unclear when international travel will return to some semblance of normalcy, I am curious about the diving on the north side of the island. If nothing else, Christiansted would probably be a more appealing place to stay than Frederiksted, at least for me. I also wonder if the north side walls have healthier reef growth and more moving animals, or if they are just deeper and more vertical, with occasionally rough surface conditions.



morecowbells, txdamselfish, living4experiences and 4 others



Rob9876
Contributor

Apr 22, 2021

#4

Nice report! We went to St. Croix in mid-March for similar reasons. I've been meaning to write a report, but I'm bad about that kind of thing. I generally concur in your experience: the diving was decent, but under normal circumstances I would not choose it over Cozumel or other places.

We stayed on the north side, and dove the Pier 3 times and did 7 dives on the north side -- including 3 shore dives (2 at Cane Bay, 1 at North Star) and 4 boat dives. The shore dives ended up being better than the boat dives, but the waves on the north side could be a bit much, and the viz was what I would describe as generally more hazy than Cozumel usually has, perhaps around Bahamas viz (still pretty good). Your description of the reef conditions sounds similar to what we experienced on the north -- lots of small fish, but less of the bigger creatures than we are used to (few rays, turtles, eels, crabs, nurse sharks). The exception being that we did see a good number of reef sharks on our boat dives.

One thing that was as bad or worse on the north side was "island time" at restaurants. I've done a good bit of island travel and never experienced anything like the times spent waiting on St. Croix. Most restaurants there you would wait a long time just to get water and place your order (so bad we started timing -- one place 37 minutes to get water and place order), drink refills 20 minutes later, perhaps 20 minutes to get the check after asking. In general the restaurant employees just did not care one darn bit. This was a consistent

problem almost everywhere -- and especially frustrating since meal prices were about 1.5 to 2 times as much as prices on Cozumel. Also, though I read that St. Croix was the best of the USVI for food, none of the meals that we had could really compare to the consistently great food we get at so many places in Cozumel.

I'll mention that the prices for most things were a good bit more than Cozumel. We paid over twice as much for lodging, about 50% more for boat dives, at least 50% more for similar food and drinks. Rental cars (a necessity) were about as much or slightly more than Cozumel even though (being part of the U.S.) we could use our own insurance rather than needing to buy from the rental car place.

I don't want to be too negative: in general the diving was decent, most people were nice, and the island is beautiful. However, we will not likely choose St. Croix over Cozumel or other places in the Caribbean in the future.

 Brodydog, living4experiences, drrich2 and 1 other person



Scooter961
Contributor

Apr 22, 2021

#5

Great report, It's like we dived the same place by looking at your pictures lol. We were there March 27th through April 4th, so we probably passed you at some point lol. I totally agree about the review of Frederiksted and will add the roads look like they were bombed. Some of the potholes were HUGE and the guy who we picked the car up from said to drive on the side of the road with the least potholes and that is truer than you can believe.


We flew American Airlines through CLT on the way and MIA on the way back with no major issues. We stayed at Sandcastle on the Beach and highly enjoyed the location and everyone there. We rented a car from Judi of St. Croix with no issues.

Our diving was done with Nep2une and I would highly recommend them! The boats are small 6 packers and it's all valet style. If you do the multi-day package, tanks and weights to dive the pier are free and after the boat dive in the morning you just tell them you want to dive the pier after lunch, they will switch over your gear to a new tank and have it all set up in a cart that you can use to take everything to the pier and as long as you are back before they close they will store your gear overnight and have it on the boat for you the next morning. We dived the pier every afternoon and one night dive and there was always new stuff. Four of the pier dives were over 100 minutes. We didn't do any diving on the north side because the "Christmas Winds" were still there and Nep2une doesn't have a boat there, however they do offer a shore dive somewhere on the north side.

As far as food goes, we ate lunch most days at Polly's, mainly because it's right there. Their food was good for a quick lunch. For dinner our first night we ate at Sand Castle on the Beach and I didn't think it was good, I asked my wife how her chicken was and she said it Mahi... It was very overcooked. One night we went to Rhythms at Rainbow Beach which was ok and the drinks were strong. Lost dog pub had decent pizza but it took forever to come out, but they were nice enough to keep us filled with alcohol while we waited. Turtles Deli was delicious, we went there numerous times, the sandwiches were huge and tasty. We went to Louie

and Nacho's twice, My wife got the Mediterranean wrap and loved it. I got chicken wings which were very good but the wings themselves were on the smaller side. They have alcoholic crushes which were great! On taco Tuesday we drove over to Christiansburg and went to Maria's Cantina, the food was good and worth the drive. Our last night we ventured over to "The Landing Beach Bar at Cane Bay" and the food and drinks there we thought were the best of the week and also worth the drive. When we return we will definitely go there again.

The one thing I would love to see at the pier is an easier entry/exit point.

 morecowbells, txdamselfish, living4experiences and 3 others



Ironborn
Contributor

Apr 22, 2021

#6

Rob9876:

We stayed on the north side, and dove the Pier 3 times and did 7 dives on the north side -- including 3 shore dives (2 at Cane Bay, 1 at North Star) and 4 boat dives. The shore dives ended up being better than the boat dives, but the waves on the north side could be a bit much, and the viz was what I would describe as generally more hazy than Cozumel usually has, perhaps around Bahamas viz (still pretty good). Your description of the reef conditions sounds similar to what we experienced on the north -- lots of small fish, but less of the bigger creatures than we are used to (few rays, turtles, eels, crabs, nurse sharks). The exception being that we did see a good number of reef sharks on our boat dives.

@Rob9876 What was it about the shore dives at Cane Bay and North Star that you liked better?



Ironborn
Contributor

Apr 22, 2021

#7

Scooter961:

The one thing I would love to see at the pier is an easier entry/exit point.

@Scooter961 For the entry, it looked like most people just did a giant stride into the water on the north side, near where they park the boats. I suppose that the boats could pose a safety issue if a diver has just entered the water and a boat wants to park or leave, but one could avoid that by just submerging and heading out along the pier as promptly as possible, and making sure no boats are coming or going when one jumps. The only other issue was getting my rather substantial camera in the water when diving the pier by myself, which I solved either by jumping in with it, or lowering it into the water a small distance away from where I planned to jump in.

We would circle around the pier and exit on the south side, which is quite rocky. There were some rocks that functioned as a sort of natural staircase, but one or two of them might have been unstable to walk on. An actual staircase, rather than a pile of rocks arranged to function as one, would be a good investment there.

 living4experiences and drrich2



Rob9876

Contributor

Apr 22, 2021

#8

Ironborn:

@Rob9876 What was it about the shore dives at Cane Bay and North Star that you liked better?

The visibility, coral health, and variety of creatures. North Star was actually our best reef/wall dive, but the hardest entry (made the Pier shore entry look like nothing) -- we went with a guide (Jeff at Sweet Bottom Dive Center -- both Jeff and SBDC were great) who helped tremendously. I'm a big guy with no rocky beach shore diving experience, and it was pretty rough -- but I started to find a pattern (sliding my foot rather than stepping) about halfway through the exit . Cane Bay was much easier, though a long kick out to the buoy which didn't really bother me. Wanted to try a shore dive at Davis Bay, but the north side waves were too rough the day we were going to go.

 living4experiences and drrich2



Scooter961

Contributor

Apr 22, 2021

#9

Ironborn:

@Scooter961 For the entry, it looked like most people just did a giant stride into the water on the north side, near where they park the boats. I suppose that the boats could pose a safety issue if a diver has just entered the water and a boat wants to park or leave, but one could avoid that by just submerging and heading out along the pier as promptly as possible, and making sure no boats are coming or going when one jumps. The only other issue was getting my rather substantial camera in the water when diving the pier by myself, which I solved either by jumping in with it or lowering it

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We tried to do the giant stride on the North side when the gates were open, I have a bad back and can't carry the gear around the fence over to that entry if the gate was closed. The south side is what I was referencing.



drrich2

ScubaBoard Supporter

ScubaBoard Supporter

Apr 22, 2021

#10

Glad you had a good time. When I went a few years back, we stayed at Christiansted, and it was indeed a little livelier and had a nice boardwalk. Especially taking non-divers, I'm glad I stayed there. When we visited Frederiksted, I liked it, and near the pier it was a bit scenic (and had the nearby fort), but it did strike me as...

- 1.) Quaint and a bit charming.
- 2.) Infrastructure-challenged.
- 3.) A bit 'sleepy.' As if the population were maybe half what one might think.

On the issue of people acting strange; my wife noticed one in Christiansted, and I happened to converse with a psychologist who was a fellow diver on a boat one day. From what she said, at least when I was there, St. Croix didn't have an inpatient psychiatric mental ward. In other words, there was no on-island place to put markedly mentally ill people when they were decompensated. I don't know what they do with them (e.g.: ignore, jail, send off-island). Any society setting with substantial numbers of people will have some schizophrenics, some of the more severe bipolar disorder cases, etc... As long as they're harmless and non-disruptive, I imagine they're either left alone (or kind, charitable people unofficially look after them some; I was told some of that goes on).

I agree that diving in Cozumel was better (in my limited experience), but the charms of St. Croix (which has a variety of topside natural vegetation - from eastern grasslands to northern 'rainforest' (I still balk at that term, but the 'woods' are nice). For a rustic (i.e.: not a bunch of cruise ship excursion activities), beautiful island with sandy beaches, natural variety and some varied good diving including some shore diving, it was really nice.
