

### **The Flight**

No issues at all flying with the "world's favourite airline". Both flights were pretty much on time leaving and we even arrived about 20 minutes ahead of schedule in Tobago which can't be bad. This was probably our last year flying Club Class as I'm now out of air miles; I'm going to miss the Club sleeper seats next year, they are a bit wider and the extra area around the seat is huge. The big plus with BA is the large baggage allowance of over 60 kgs so all the diving gear gets to go and you get that travelling economy too so we will probably keep flying with BA for that reason.

### **Bluewaters Inn**

The first 10 days were booked at Bluewaters Inn, Speyside which is about 1 ½ hours in a taxi. Only 30 miles from the airport, but once past Scarborough the road is very twisty and has lots of pot holes. There are also still a lot of repairs being carried out from the landslides around the Delford area just before you arrive in Speyside which slows you down even more. We requested "Bully" again as the taxi driver who came all the way down to pick us up at the airport. He is one of the steadiest drivers I have ever come across and seems to know half the people on the Island given the number who wave as you go past.



We were able to experience the general refurbishment at BWI first hand as we were in the same room as last year which had obviously had been decorated since last year. Most of the changes were the soft furnishings and painting which made the room very light and airy. The AC had also been improved and while it was as efficient as last year and would easily drop the temperature down to the low 20's if you set it that low, it was a lot quieter and did not disturb us at all.

Going back to BWI was more like going back to see old friends, all the staff remembered us again. Both the bar and restaurant were really friendly I saw no evidence of the previous reports of them being a bit on the frosty side. Food wise the BWI has also improved again. There was even more choice in the main restaurant and also in the bar at lunch times with daily specials as well as the usual bar menu.

We ate out in Speyside a few times: at Jemma's tree house which has not changed; still has some rather bizarre opening times but serves up an excellent lobster, Redman's which now has an upstairs area and still provides very reasonably priced Caribbean style food, Birdwatchers which also does good Caribbean food and if you are lucky, free steel pan entertainment from one of the locals who was giving a music lesson whilst we ate. We also went to the Speyside Inn for the first time this year. They have a very interesting menu which is more European in style, with fresh Caribbean produce which was excellently prepared and presented; fantastic steak! We also managed to get over to Sharon and Pheb's in Charlotteville for lunch on the days we had use of a car or could con a lift and the shrimp was just as good as ever.

### **The Kariwak**

The last 2 days were spent Crown Point end of the Island booked in at the Kariwak. This was our second visit to the hotel as we had a week there last year and found being at that end of the island very convenient for the airport on the last day. This year we managed to get one of the secluded garden rooms which are situated past the herb garden and Ajoupa. This area is really cool due to the number of ponds and water features and tranquil and a world away from the hustle and bustle of Crown Point.



Our last days were spent relaxing in the outdoor Jacuzzi or reading a book while lazing in the hammocks at the top end of the garden. The food at the Kariwak always gets good reviews and we were not disappointed on our second evening when we had a very pleasant evening with Roger de Matas another MyTobago regular and his mum Patsie. The lunch menu deserves particular mention as the choice is very good and the Kariwak club sandwiches are excellent and enough to keep you going all day.

## Dividing in general

Having dived both Speyside and the southern Caribbean end last year the plan this year was to spend longer at the BWI and purely dive in the Speyside area with the hope of getting out to the St Giles Islands and doing a few night dives.

Having dived just after hurricane Ivan last year I was able to see first hand the recovery the corals had made from the damage last year as this area took the main force of the hurricane and the damage was pretty extensive.

The good news is that the recovery is very good and even the rubble from last year's damage has been colonised by soft corals and sponges. Another big change for this year was the visibility it was over 25 meters on almost all the dives and currents were a bit less too. The water temperature was up around 30°C which is fine for us divers, but not so good for the coral as the temperature had been this high for some months and patches of coral bleaching were seen on a number of dives. Whilst it was not as extensive as the Maldives, it was not a pleasant sight and the sea temperature needs to drop a few degrees or more bleaching will take place.



## Speyside Dives

All the dives at Speyside were with Aquamarine Dive who operate out of the BWI. I have dived with them before and always found that they give excellent service. That hire gear I saw was mostly in good condition and this year there were only a couple of problems with short air fills and leaking tank O rings. Over the week I can only recall two tanks being rejected for being under 200 bar/3000psi and a couple of O ring were changed. One Octo also was set a bit light and free flowed when the air was turned on, but this was quickly rectified when the gear was being set up. US style alloy tanks are still in use so anyone with DIN fitting regulators needs to take an A clamp adaptor as you cannot remove the "slugs" to convert from A clamp to DIN in the same way you can with European tanks. Both dive boats were in operation and these are a good size with twin outboards and can easily accommodate around 12 divers and I noted that they always carried oxygen first aid kits and radios. The dive guides are all very competent and gave good briefings on both the dives and emergency procedures there are also a couple of dives briefed by trainee guides but these were always attended by one of the senior guys who filled in any missing gaps. On occasions when both boats were going out together they don't go to the same site so the dive was never overcrowded and they also try to avoid sites that are already occupied with dives from other centres for the same reason.

Stuart Sampson has recently joined the Aquamarine team to run the dive operations so there have been some very positive changes in the scheduling. The day now starts at 9am getting ready for a dive leaving the jetty around 9:30 am and than back in for lunch followed by an afternoon dive leaving around 1:30 pm. They will also more willing to do night dives or dives a bit farther a field when there is sufficient interest. Talking to Stuart he is also planning on taking divers to the Sisters on the Caribbean side once there is a chance of seeing hammerheads which will be around January to May.



The first dive was nice gentle drift dive on the west side of Little Tobago Island called **Cathedral**, a coral plateau around 15m, then a wall dive to 20m with a sandy bottom around 25-30m. It was clear from the dive boat that the visibility was going to be good as you could clearly see the coral 15m below and once in the water the visibility was

around 20m and a constant 30°C at all depths. There was a small amount of coral bleaching on the coral plateau but once on the reef wall the corals were in good condition. Fish life was very good with a number of green moray and black tip reef shark. Towards the end of the dive I was very surprised to notice a frog fish too on one of the soft corals. One concern I did have was the lack of spiny lobster; last year Cathedral was a real lobster city. I was getting worried that I might have to forgo my lobster dinner at Jemma's

Over the 10 days I had a few more dives on Cathedral including one night dive, but more of that later, the dives in daylight all followed a similar pattern to the first dive if anything the vis was even better at around 25m the fish life was always very varied and as well as the usual reef fish such as angels of various types, puffers and pipe fish we also saw a couple of spotted moray.

**Favourite** is another dive around from the southern end of Little Tobago Island and further around from Black Jack Hole. I have not found it in any dive guides and this year was the first time I had dived it. The site is very interesting as it starts off as a reef wall bottoming out at around 20m with many species of juvenile reef fish. As you move along the wall this changes to a rock headland with some very interesting crevices, for lobster and moray. The dive ends on a plateau at about 10m which was a great place to end with before ascending for the safety stop. In all I had 3 dives at this site including another night dive and to be honest I would have been happy to do a few more. The visibility was very good on all of them between 20 and 25m.



Fish life was very extensive on the reef wall with various types of angel, trunkfish and puffers. It also paid to keep an eye out in the blue, as at one stage we were being followed by a spotted eagle ray of about 1.5m span and a few of the group missed this as they were so interested in the small stuff on the reef. One small disappointment was the areas of coral bleaching on this dive, mostly around the start on the reef wall.

**Kelliston Drain or Coral Garden** as it is sometimes called is a 24m deep drift dive off the southern end of Little Tobago that starts at the end of Black Jack. The visibility was still very good; over 25m on both of the dives. The dive is over a coral plateau with plenty of life including spotted moray, box fish and lobster. One nice surprise was a peacock flounder about 40cm long. It was the first time I had seen one of these colourful Caribbean flat fish. A small amount of coral bleaching was evident but the famous large brain coral is still okay. This was another good dive to keep an eye out from the reef and on to the sandy plain that flanks it as there were a couple of small black tips and rays about 10m out from the edge of the plateau.

**Angel Reef** is a steeply sloping fringe reef on the west shore of Goat Island and the visibility was excellent getting up to around 25 to 30m. The dive this year was much gentler drift than last year and we probably only travelled about 200m in the 50 minutes gently drifting along the reef wall. The wall is full of nooks and crannies and provides an excellent habitat for Spotted spiny lobster and moray. During the dive we were followed for some time by a large barracuda that was at least a metre long and not at all worried by divers. Besides the usual reef fish a rather large midnight trigger fish was seen at the base of the reef a little below us at about



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25m. Towards the end of the dive I also came across a good number of nudibranchs and I recall from last year that there was a small colony of them in the same area on the surrounding rocks and coral.

I recall from last year that **Black Jack Hole** was extensively damaged by hurricane Ivan with many of the soft corals and sponges ripped away looking at the site this year you would never have imagined there had ever been such damage to the site. This is a sloping reef at the southern end of Little Tobago Island and will take you from the drop off point in a nice gentle drift to what would be the start of Kelliston Drain about ½ a kilometre away. We dived the site twice during the week and both dives were 40 minutes plus and around 24 meters. Visibility was good around 20m on both dives. The scenery is very similar to Kelliston Drain which is really just an extension of this dive. There was a little confusion at the end of one dive at Black Jack Hole when we were caught up by a group from one of the other Speyside dive centres. I was quite happily taking photos of a green moray when my buddy noticed we were the only ones left from our group. After a few seconds we saw our group hanging at 5 meters already on their safety stop and the dive guide looking at us and pointing to his watch.

Fish life on both dives was very good with a number of spotted moray, grouper, lobster and good size cowfish as well as the usual parrot fish and shoaling jacks.

The **MV Roundtable** is another dive you will not find in the dive guides as it is a small 28m wreck of a local rig supply vessel that was sunk in December 2003 in about 33m of water on a sandy plain just off the point Bluewaters Bay in the direction of Speyside. The Wreck has been prepared for diving with the windows and doors removed and numerous cut-outs to allow safe penetration. The top of the wreck is at about 18m and this could be seen almost as soon as we hit the water. I had tried to dive the Roundtable last year but the conditions were not that good and with the poor visibility following Ivan it never happened.



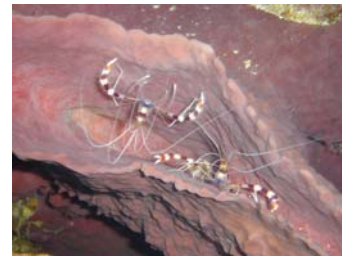
This year the only chance to dive it was with a group of Austrians who had been diving as a group at BWI before I arrived. We spent about 20 minutes on the wreck but following the Austrians around was a little disappointing as they managed to stir up silt in every hole they entered and were generally a rather undisciplined lot. As yet there is not much life on the Roundtable but fish are starting to colonise it and I got a rather nice photo of a banded cleaner shrimp and squirrel fish living in one of the engine room overboards. After diving on the wreck we moved off to a shallow fringing reef close by at around 10m which was probably a good idea as I had gained about 6 minutes of deco with diving down to 33m on the Roundtable. This was not a real worry as the dive guides plan the time on the shallow reef to work off any deco time which is just as well. The reef itself was a nice easy dive with many types of juvenile reef fish and good soft corals.



The dive site called **Bookends** derives its name from the pair of rocks with a split in between them that the current surges through. This creates clouds as you look up from the natural wash out bowl at the base of the rocks and as usual a squadron of tarpon were cruising about above us. Also in the bowl was a large green moray of around 2m that seemed rather annoyed at a group of divers invading his domain. The rest of the dive was a drift at about 18m in a brisk current so a lot of ground was covered in

the hour we were in the water. Once again there was a surprising lack of spiny lobster spotted on the dive and by now I really was thinking my lobster dinner would be in jeopardy, mainly because of my guilty conscience. I asked the dive guide at the end of the dive and was quite relieved to be told that lobster often move off the reef into deeper water when the water is warm, blue and clear as it was at the moment. Last year there were many more lobsters on the reefs because of all the green water from Ivan and the rain.

**TD Special** is one of the rock pinnacles off the south end of Little Tobago Island and has always been particular favourite of mine. Visibility on the dive was going to be good as the reef could clearly be seen over 20m below so I knew we were in for a great dive. Once in the water the visibility was really great 25 to 30m. Once we started to move off round the pinnacle the first thing we came across 2 large crabs that seemed to have got themselves inside a barrel sponge a little odd but it made a nice photo all the same. Carrying on around the rock pinnacle we saw a good number of grouper, one or two being a quite large in size, as well as 3 large green morays and schools of jacks. One of the more unusual sights were a pair of slipper lobster which I would have just mistaken for small rocks had they not been pointed out on the previous night dive. For the next 50 minutes we made our way all round the pinnacle down to depths of almost 30m and once again I managed to end up with a bit of deco time on the computer at the end of the dive however as there is no shallow end to this dive I ended up with rather long safety stop.



I have been trying to dive **London Bridge**, at the St Giles Islands, at the very northern end of Tobago ever since I first arrived in Speyside. The site is a massive rock arch exposed to the full force of the Atlantic currents. What makes it special is the hole through the centre that has created a canyon about 30m long rising from about 17 to 10m at the exit and is mostly about 2m wide but narrows to about 1m at some points. The site is about a 30 minute boat ride from BWI and there is usually a bit of reluctance to go that far with all the other sites right on the door step. The usual excuse from the dive guide is the sea conditions but looking across the calm waters of Bateaux Bay to Little Tobago Island this has usual been seen a bit of a lame excuse. Word of warning LISTEN TO THE DIVE GUIDES!!!.

The morning we arranged to finally do London Bridge dive Bateaux Bay was flat calm so we thought there was going to be no bother getting to the dive site, but once out of the bay it was clear we were in for a rough ride. However, credit to Scott (Cross) Warwick the dive guide driving the boat as he picked his way in and out of the small bays and headlands and got us all up there in one piece even if there were a few green faces. Once at the dive site the conditions were less than perfect but Scott decided that we could proceed with the dive and after a very comprehensive briefing that even included minimum air requirements for entering the swim through and how to tackle the surge we kitted up and did a negative entry about 50m away from the waves pounding the north side of the rock. The person I felt sorry for was the boat man who was in for a very bumpy hour while we were away enjoying ourselves.



Once in the water we dropped down to around 30m and made our way round to the entrance of the swim through. The rock is pretty bare as the currents in the area are normally quite strong, but the life was good with moray, some very large spiny lobster and more open water fish such as jacks. Once at the entrance of the canyon Scott did an air check gave an OK and off we went. The surge seemed come in about 5 second bursts, which meant you really had to kick like hell to stop being pushed back and then suddenly you were racing along the canyon dodging the rocks and walls to come to a sudden stop for the whole cycle to start again; definitely not for the faint hearted. After about 3 cycles I

realised why Scott had insisted on at least half a tank before starting off. My old Oceanic Alpha 7 was really working for its money and it performed really well never leaving me short of air even though I was breathing very hard.

Once you get to the other end of the swim through the fun isn't over as the current pushes you to the surface, which not to be recommended, so it's nose down and fin for the seabed. Once we re-grouped and got our breath back, it was a gentle swim round the rock to the pick up point. The back of the rock was very much like the other side with patchy soft coral but good lobster and moray. Those of us that managed to get our breath back also saw a large hawksbill turtle that seemed intent on just keeping on the edge of visibility effortlessly swimming round the rock. After a slightly longer safety stop to clear any nitrogen build up from the exertion of the swim through it was back in the boat for the ride home. This was even more fun than the trip out as the boat was now running with the seas and surfing up and down the waves with an unsettling corkscrew motion which caused one or two of the party who had just manage to keep there breakfast down on the trip out to loose it on the way back.



After the morning excursion at London Bridge most of the dive group decided to give the second dive a miss, which was a pity as the second dive at **Back Garden** was a real chill out for the small group who went, with 30m visibility and lots of juvenile reef fish. This site is on the opposite side of Goat Island from Angel Reef and very different. It consists of a reef that drops off to about 25m behind the house rising to about 10m at the north end of the island. The first part of the dive had good hard corals, but towards the end there was a fair amount of coral bleaching in the shallower water. The dive itself was a very gentle drift, but there was a lot to see, including a couple of small rays in the sandy patches between the coral and a barracuda about a meter long. The most exciting thing to happen was one of the divers losing her weight belt. She was quickly grabbed by her buddy to stop her shooting to the surface, whilst I retrieved the belt and acted as a ballast while she and her buddy sorted things out; a slightly unnerving experience for a novice diver. The whole episode was missed by the dive guide who was drifting up the reef in a world of his own.

Another dive I had not done before was **Runway** a long flat sloping reef off the south end of Little Tobago Island. The dive starts at about 25m and works its way up to about 10m.

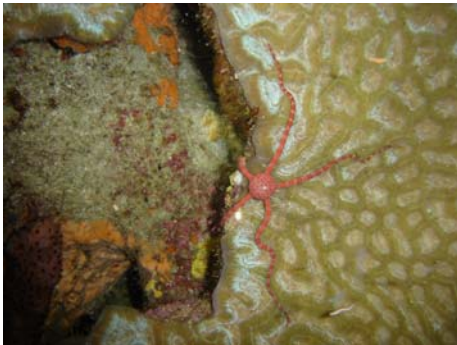


On the way up to the dive site a series of 5 fishing buoys were seen across the reef and the dive master was unsure if this was a net or set of lobster pots but warned the divers in the group of the potential hazard. Once in the water the 30m visibility made it quickly apparent that the buoys were attached to large wire mesh lobster pots but there was no need for anyone to join the Lobster Liberation Army (LLA) as the only real occupant was a rather large green moray eel who had gone in after the bait. The reef has a number of deep gullies in the hard coral and these proved favourite haunts for nurse shark and we found about 4 of them as we drifted steadily along, the largest was around 2.5m. In addition to the nurse shark there were a few small black tip reef shark swimming around the edge of the reef and blue water. Besides the moray eels and sharks the reef was also home to many quite large reef fish such as angels of all types and large pipe fish. The condition of the coral on this dive was very good with no bleaching at all which was good to see. In general it was a very good dive and one I would not mind returning to on my next visit to Tobago.

**Spiny Colony** has never been my favourite dive site; having done it a more than a few times over previous years and I had not found it very challenging or interesting. Last year the site had suffered badly from the hurricane as much of the broken corals had rolled down the slope doing more damage and leaving a bolder field at the base. It is usually used as a safe check dive for new visitors to Aquamarine and as there were a few new people

on this dive Spiny was the ideal site so I was a little disappointed to find this was going to be my last dive at Speyside. The site is off the headland at the south end of Tyrrel's Bay at the base of a cactus covered cliff. Once in the water you drop down on to flat reef at about 12m and swim seaward to the reef wall which slopes down to around 30m. The visibility was a little poorer this close into the shore, but still not as bad as last year at around over 15m. The top of the reef is still very bare but it has been colonised by numerous yellowhead jawfish which are great fun to watch. Moving down the reef wall the slope has greatly improved and for once the site lived up to its name as a good number of spiny lobster had found homes in the debris at the base of the slope. In general there is much more life on the reef now and the dive was not as bad as I recalled from previous years and the recovery of the soft corals and tube and barrel sponges has provided a good habitat for many reef fish.

Thanks to Stuart this was my first chance to do any **Night Dives** at Aquamarine as he was very keen to provide divers with what they asked for. As long as he had over 4 divers and about 24 hours notice he was more than willing to set dives up. As it gets dark very



quickly in Tobago we kitted up at about 6pm and were all ready to go half an hour later in complete darkness. In the 10 days we did 2 night dives, one on **Cathedral** and one on **Favourite**. Aquamarine had a good supply of torches and small red tank strobes for the divers that needed them. Stuart gave a good night dive briefing before we left which covered separation procedures, use of the torch and hand signals, and the things we might see. Both dives were excellent with many surprises, including a couple of slipper lobster and a red brittle star which I

had never seen before. One of the things you get told at the briefing is not to look directly at a torch beam as this destroys your night vision, unfortunately one barracuda that joined our group on Cathedral missed the briefing and swam directly at Stuarts torch and then spent the next few minutes bumping in to dives and the reef. The phosphoresce on both dives was very spectacular and it was as if you had your own firework display every time you moved, even keeping still you were treated to green flashes off the other divers close by.

Special thanks to Alice, Stuart and all the dive guides at Aquamarine Dive, especially Scott for boat driving and great dive at London Bridge. Also thanks to Kay, another single diver, who often ended up as my buddy and had to put up with me drifting off to take photos all the time.