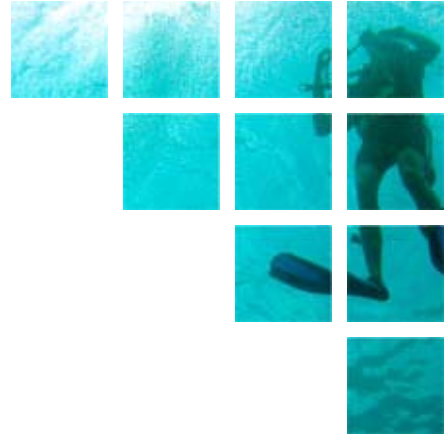


TRIP REPORT



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One good thing (if you look at it that way), is that the Caribbean island of Tobago is warm and sunny year round, with the water temperature a constant 28 degrees C.

A sure-fire tonic for the doom and gloom of a British winter, the 9 hour direct charter flight from Gatwick doesn't seem quite so bad when you know that a tropical island paradise awaits you when you disembark the aircraft.

The direct Excel Airways service aboard their 767 aircraft afforded more legroom than most of the scheduled services, so a comfortable outward trip was enjoyed by all.

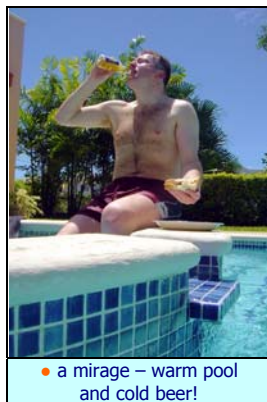
Our accommodation for the week was a self-contained villa, in the quaintly named Sea Shells development, just a short 5 minute walk from the main area of Crown Point, on the south west tip of the island and close to all the amenities such as bars and restaurants.

The villas themselves are stunning and very comfortably appointed, with twin bedded rooms, all with air conditioning, large pool with Jacuzzi and pleasant private gardens.

There was a daily maid service, the lovely Beverley in our case, who would also, for a small fee, come along one evening and cook a local meal in the villa's kitchen.

Having said that, eating out in Tobago is both varied and relatively inexpensive, with sea food a local speciality.

Another option for dining, was to make use of the villa's barbeque, which we did one evening and enjoyed a great



• a mirage – warm pool and cold beer!

al fresco meal on the patio to the chirp of the local cricket population.

Here's the geography spot – Tobago is only 27 miles long and 7 wide at most, roughly equivalent to the Isle of Wight in size.

Only a stone's throw from it's bigger brother Trinidad, the two island republic lies just a few miles from the mainland coast of Venezuela in South America and as such benefits, from the nutrient rich waters flowing out from the Orinoco river.

Thus, the fish-life and corals around Tobago are abundant, vibrant and colourful.

We spent the week diving with World of Watersports, with the weeks' diving centred around the south-west tip of the island at Pigeon and Crown Points.

Tobago is renowned for its stimulating drift diving, and our first dives of the trip were to be drifts, at Stingray Alley and Flying Reef, one of Tobago's best known sites.

Flying Reef is in line with the international airport at Crown Point, and is a gentle drift in a maximum of 12 to 14 metres of water.

Angelfish, boxfish, barracuda, morays and batfish are seen in large



• world famous Pigeon Point beach

numbers on every dive and although the visibility is not that which you commonly get in the Red Sea, the corals and variety of fish life more than make up for it.

Flying Reef gave us all the species mentioned above with many more besides.

The typical dive day with World of Watersports meant a morning two tank dive, with our drop-off back at the

villa by 1pm – meaning a whole afternoon of sightseeing, or lazing by the pool, cold Carib beer in hand with the occasional swim in the bath-like pool.

Our second days' diving took us to the wreck of The Maverick, an artificial reef sunk a few years ago by the local authorities to provide a safe wreck diving experience – and as such one of the only wreck dive sites on the island.

The Maverick lies in 30 metres of water and the car deck (she was an inter-island ferry until her demise) makes for an interesting swim-through.



● typical Tobagonian brain coral

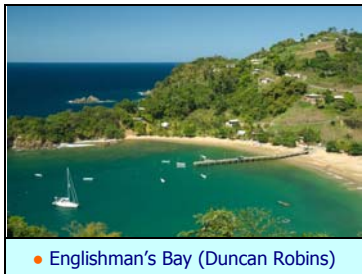
Large enough to provide an interesting dive, but small enough to circumnavigate in a single dive, The Maverick is slowly being colonised by the hard and soft corals, with families of fish making their homes in the nooks and crannies of her hull.

In the shallows off Mount Irvine beach is Dutchman's Reef, the second dive of the second day. Shallow and quite murky due to the sand movement, the reef is quite interesting as it features cannon from vessels that ran aground centuries ago, the large metal tubes being the only visible remnants of a bygone era.

Sunday gave two dives in the same area, at Mount Irvine Extension and Mount Irvine Wall. This was the place where seahorses were seen the previous year, but alas we were unlucky this time around and there were none of the odd little creatures to be found.

Having said that, they are incredibly difficult to spot, and even when searching in an area you know them to be located, actually finding them is quite another matter!

The Mount Irvine Extension dive provided us with a nice encounter with a green turtle, who lazily swam to the surface from about 9 metres to catch a breath of air, before turning and disappearing into the blue.



● Englishman's Bay (Duncan Robins)

Monday was a delayed day of rest, with none of the group diving. Half went on a tour of the island, calling into Englishman's Bay, Bloody Bay and down past the famous Argyll Waterfall.

The remainder of the group just chilled (or "limed" as the locals say) in the comfort of the gardens of the villa. The attraction of the cold beer and beautifully warm pool just too much of an attraction to be passed up!

Tuesday was our day of exploration and venture as we travelled up to Speyside on the far north-east corner of the island.

Only 27 miles away, but taking over an hour and a half to get there along single track and winding roads, the vista of the bay as you come down into the village is stunning. This was countered by the evident damage caused by the hurricane in November 2004, which devastated neighbouring Grenada, but passed just far enough away from Tobago to spare the island much serious damage.

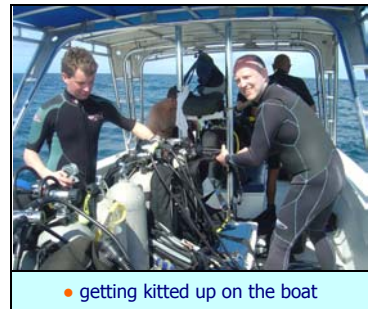
There was evidence of land slides and a fair degree of damage with some small homes washed down the mountainside, but thankfully, the number of injuries was low.

The dive sites at Speyside are accessed from a small but fast hardboat which takes a 10 minute run out from the shore to go around the side of Little Tobago island to drop the divers in the water.

The dives in this area are all drifts, with varying degrees of current.

The first of our two dives at Speyside took us to the Kelleston Drain, home of the largest brain coral in the Caribbean.

From a drop into about 16 metres of water, the gentle drift takes you along a stunning ride over soft and hard coral gardens which funnel up as the dive progresses.



● getting kitted up on the boat

The brain coral (the size of a car) is in about 10 metres depth and its size is really only put in perspective when a diver swims alongside.

The Japanese Gardens were to be our second dive, and again a profusion of corals awaits as you meander along the sloping reef, choosing your depth at between 8 and 20 metres. About halfway into the dive, the current forces you between two large rock outcroppings and the closer you get, the faster the drift becomes until you are literally flung out the other side and the current slows again.

Seven days and ten dives later, it's back off to good old Blighty.

There's so much great diving to be had around Tobago, that a week is nowhere near enough time to get even a fraction of it done – great sites like "Bookends" and "London Bridge" will have to wait for another visit.

As a chill-out destination with guaranteed warmth and sunshine, Tobago is hard to beat.