



Anegada, British Virgin Islands
June, 1990

It's been nearly six months since our return from Dominica and I'm just finding time to jot down my thoughts from one of our favorite dive trips. With school and work, there just hasn't been time. Perhaps it's best to let memories ferment.



Anegada (Spanish for the Drowned Island) is the second largest of the British Virgin Islands - a chain of familiar names like St. John, Virgin Gorda, and Tortola. The island is about three miles wide, eleven miles long, and has an elevation of 28 feet. So what was the attraction for diving? As always, we tried to find a remote island yet unspoiled by cattle-boat diving operations and the infestation of tourism. Anegada fit that profile.

We flew out of Omaha for Atlanta on June 18, 1990 arriving at 9:18 AM. From Atlanta we flew to San Juan then on to Beef Island on a Costa 212-200 that looked like a shrunken-down version of the Spruce Goose. The tail was flat where the cargo was loaded. The ventilation was very poor, the seats were uncomfortable and cramped, but it was only a 50 minute flight.



Beef Island is the site of Tortola's airport. It is said to be named for Queen Elizabeth II who dedicated it. I'm not sure if that means the queen is "beefy" or if it was a reference to the "Beefeaters.". Beef Island is connected to Tortola by means of a two-lane steel bridge. From the Quonset hut airport on Beef Island, we flew to Anegada on the same day. The airport on Anegada is a brick structure of a single room surrounded by a cyclone fence. When we arrived, we were met by a van whose black driver would take us to the Anegada Reef Hotel. The ride was short over a bumpy, rutty, sandy road - but we didn't come to the island for the drive.



We were met at the hotel by Sue - the owner - a young woman with blonde hair, heavy British accent, pleasant manner, and definitely Anglo. Her husband - Lowell - also had a British accent, was a large

man, tall, big and black. They were a warm and friendly couple. Lowell had a cold that he blamed on the dive master.

It being nearly 8:30, we chucked our gear into our room and came back to the dining area for dinner. We dined on a course of grilled trigger fish, baby lima beans in butter, marinated red cabbage, sliced potatoes with cheese sauce, apple pie, and a complimentary rum smoothie - with an emphasis on the smooth.

Being late, we didn't do much looking around and there wasn't much looking to do. The rooms were clean, spacious, and contained only the barest essentials for a pleasant stay - beds, chest of drawers, toilet, sink, shower, and air conditioner. The beds were firm and short.



We met our Dive Master at the bar who was also battling a cold. Paul was of Lithuanian ancestry - short, muscular, blonde, blue-eyed and very pleasant and professional. He said that he would meet us in the morning for our first dive. The next morning we woke to an overcast day and headed for the dining room for breakfast. To our mistake, we tried the greasy fried eggs, sausage, English muffins and coffee. Not being accustomed to such a heavy meal, it didn't set too well with either of us. We grabbed our dive bags and headed to the dive shop next to the gift shop.

Paul met us with a smile and took our gear - which as the last time we carried it on the trip. Paul introduced us to a close friend named Chip who was a dead ringer for a boy I had been in Boy Scouts with named Bubba. Chip was a Dive Master from Virgin Gorda and had come over to visit Paul and help with the dives until Paul's cold broke.

Our first dive was to be "White House Reef." Breakfast began to take its toll on the ride. The diesel smell from the engines combined with the rolling conditions were too much. We were both sick. Dad lost his and we decided to head for calmer waters. We settled on a wreck called the "Rocus" - a bone ship that sank on New Year's Eve in 1929 with its load of animal bones. The captain and crew survived, but disgraced, the captain hung himself - a fact commemorated with a noose swinging from a davit on the wreck. The air temp was a comfortable 85 with a water temp around 70. The wreck lay torn apart with millions of animal bones strewn throughout the sand. It was a short 43 minute dive with a maximum depth of 50 feet. The visibility was good and the fish life was active. It was a unique dive site.

Not wanting to push our sea legs or stomach again, we decided not to make an afternoon dive. After a cheeseburger, fries and Pepsi, we lounged in a chair. The motel had a dozen or so back-to-back rooms. We were the only guests. There was no beach to speak of, or at least not one you would lounge on so we soaked up the sun in the courtyard in front of our room. There was a constant breeze and no bugs. Next to the rooms was a building with screened dining, a kitchen, an unscreened dining area, office, and waiting/reading room. Next to that and conveniently close was a thatched-roofed bar. The bar was open 24 hours. Guests were asked to keep an account of what they had a room bills stuck under bungee cords - you were on your honor. Anyone and everyone tended bar. The rum smoothies became our favorite. A mixture of tropical juices, rum, rum, rum, and nutmeg. Three of those and you were out like a light.

The gift shop was the finest we had seen on any of the islands. Sue ran the shop and had filled it with everything you might have forgotten, quality clothing, snacks, a fine selection of local artisan gifts, and everything the States-side shops could offer. The dive shop in the same building was outfitted with more-than-adequate rental equipment, the usual T-shirts for divers with both humorous and artful depictions of the wildlife, and a single desk. The boat was docked at a short walking distance down a sandy path to the public dock. There was no deep-water port and the island - being surrounded by a coral reef - had been the final resting place of many ships. The lack of a deep port was also the reason for the lack of heavy tourism.

That evening we dined on lamb chops with mint jelly, corn on the cob, rice, Italian vegetables, and polished it off with cherry pie with brandied cherries. As the days wore on, numerous sail boats would come in and anchor just in front of the hotel. They would dive in the afternoon, dine there at the hotel at night, and leave sometime the next day. Their numbers increased as the week went on and we were to later discover why - the lobsters.



I have never in my life seen lobsters alive, in a tank, in the ocean, or frozen that were as large as what they served at the hotel. No wonder every sailboat was anchoring here. Skippers had to radio in before 3 PM to reserve dinner for that evening. All dinners were grilled over firewood that had burned to a hot bed of coals in one of two steel oil drums cut lengthwise and fashioned with legs and a grate. The taste was smoky and fabulous. Everything was prepared this way by Lowell who was the master of the grills. We began to plan when we were going to have our lobsters.

The next morning we stuck to English muffins and coffee - a diet that seemed to work - along with a heavy dose of Dramamine and sinus medication. We weren't taking any chances. The weather being partly cloudy and the waters rough, we opted to take an afternoon beach dive at "Loblolly Bay." Over lunch we got to know Paul and Chip better. Paul had lived in the islands for a number of years where he learned to dive at an early age. Then 23, he was the Dive Master for Anegada. Paul was a mature

23. An avid surfer, he said that there is world-class competition surfing in the BVIs in winter. He kept his surfboards locked up in the cage with the spare tanks and air generator. Chip would be leaving the end of the week to work on a sailing cruise ship "for rich brat teenagers" - a fact he wasn't looking forward to.

"Loblolly Bay" was a short ride from the hotel - everything is a short ride on the island. The gear was loaded in the worse excuse for a pickup I have seen. It literally had swayback. If it had been a horse, it would have been shot. But it ran. We rode in the comfort of the hotel van with another couple from one of the sailboats that had just arrived and would be joining us for the dive. The beach was what tropical pictures are made of. Beautiful white sand, thatched shelters for shade, and a serene aqua blue ocean. We geared up at the truck and walked to the water's edge.

Being lousy snorkelers, I slipped my regulator in after a few desperate gulps of air. The perk of this dive was the numerous tunnels and shoots through the reef that the swells would propel you through. There was a lovely pair of both French and Queen angels. The fish were not skittish and you could easily swim along and almost touch them; almost. The visibility was good despite the swells and it became a marvelous dive shooting in and out of the tunnels. On the return trip I also found a treasure - a dollar bill stuck in the sand.

That evening we had as fine a fillet as any Nebraska corn-fed beef could produce. Desert that evening was a parfait of raspberries, bananas, and whipping cream. Then it was back to the room for a game of cribbage.

On June 21st the weather cleared and we prepared to make two boat dives. Typically dives were made in the morning leaving the afternoon free for whatever. Our first dive was a return to "Rocus." I don't know how Paul did it, but with no landmarks to steer by, and with pinpoint accuracy he weaved the boat between the shallow reefs that would have torn the hull apart. After being wrecked on the reef, hurricane Hugo destroyed what was left above the waterline leaving nothing visible above the weaves. The current in some areas was excessive and it became a workout to swim from handhold to handhold. In other areas there was no current.

Around noon we had arrived at our second dive site, "No Name Reef." We offered several names, but none of them seemed to tickle Paul's fancy. Here were pinnacles of coral formations much like "Alice in Wonderland." It was a very fishy reef. Not a lot of any one particular type of fish, just a nice variety of small reef fish. The water was clear, warm, with no current to fight giving us a bottom time of 52 minutes.

Oddly there were no sailboats in front of the hotel when we returned. We made our ritual trip to the gift shop to narrow down what we intended to buy for mementos and a gift for mother before we left. And of course, a trip to the bar for a couple of smoothies. Dinner that evening consisted of bar-b-q ribs, potatoes, peas with pickled pearl onions, cabbage, and pumpkin pie. There was no nightlife.

The following day was fine and clear. After our morning muffins, coffee and drugs, we met Paul at the dive shop to find out what was in store for the day. The agenda called for two dives on a wreck called the "Chikuzen." The wreck lay in waters a considerable distance away and would be a longer boat ride than usual. We were still the only divers on the boat. We were the only divers on the boat for the entire week.

The Chikuzen was a 240 foot Korean freighter laying on her port side in 75-100 feet of water. A favorite of all the area island dive operations, Paul expected company at the dive site. Paul found the wreck with his usual accuracy and, yes, there was another cattle-boat dive operations from Virgin Gorda at the site. Between Paul and Chip, they managed to snag a buoy and tie off the anchor line. The draw of the wreck is that it is a favorite for large schools of fish that the divers chum with muscles pulled from the rusting hull.

Our first dive was to be our deepest at 75 feet at which we were to fully scout the vessel. The other divers were just leaving the site when we entered. We swam the length of the freighter, awed at the size of the anchor chains and the ship's screws. The closer we got to the surface, the stronger the current and we could just drift along the wreck and look into every port hole.



Our second dive was a shallower 50 feet. By this time some of the larger fish were returning to the wreck. Paul fed a large gray angel by holding a piece of muscle in his teeth. An immense school of spade fish leisurely swam by. We spotted a large sting ray - true grace in motion. There were millions and millions of fish in large schools all around the wreck.

It was a long and relaxing trip back to the dock where Paul would drop us off. We would take our regulators and whatever small articles we brought on board. Everything else Paul and Chip carried back to the dive shop. We lunched that day on honey-stung chicken - a half chicken breaded and deep fried. We made arrangements with Susan for a tour of the island. At mid afternoon a van pulled up to take us on our tour. Our driver's name was Sidney and he seemed well versed on the history of the island. We asked Sidney to take us into town. Talk about a small island, the town didn't even have a name; it was merely called "the settlement." The settlement used to be at the west end of the island, but during an earlier century when slave ships were prone to sneaking up on the inhabitants, the natives resettled to the east end where ships could be more easily sighted.

The office of Governor was shared by Anegada and Virgin Gorda and he lived on Tortola. They had the same Governor for the past seven years. Seeing that an election year was approaching, a road paving project was just beginning on Anegada. They had also began construction of what was to become the Government House. Typical of the islands,, it was made of steel, wood and concrete with a plain design. Being more than just one story tall, it was already the tallest structure as well as being on the highest point of land. Other houses were of wood and corrugated steel roof occasionally decorated with gingerbread seen on other British-influenced islands. Nonetheless, the lifestyle for the majority of islanders was poverty. The majority of the male population were fishermen. We found it odd that many years ago the predominant crop on the island was corn.



There were two churches on the island and one school with five teachers and 35 students. The grave yards, as on most islands, was above ground. This was definitely one of the shortest island tours we had or would ever make. So back to the hotel and a cool drink before dinner - which was usually around 7 PM. That evening we had grilled trigger fish, brown rice, broccoli, and cauliflower, finishing with a tasty key lime pie. Then it was back to the room for a few hands of cards, reading, writing, and sleep.

The next day we began our dive at a reef with no name on the east end of the island. A truly beautiful reef. It had the largest stand of elk horn and stag horn coral we had ever seen. It was a particularly clean reef with lovely sea fans and eerie formations of coral. Paul managed to catch a small hawks-bill turtle while it was sleeping and it endured our petting it for only so long before it wanted loose. We were later to catch up with the very same turtle later snoozing under another formation. The reef was very fishy with large numbers of parrot fish.

Our second dive that day was memorable. Being surrounded by a reef, Anegada has become the graveyard for ships of all nations, from all centuries, and Dad and I had never done a lot of wreck diving. In the 1750s, a French pirate ship accidentally set itself on fire while trying to lure another ship to the reef. The "Rosenbloom" had the habit of feigning fire while safely anchored, luring ships to their fate on the reef. But on this occasion, the fire got out of control and the ship became its own victim and burned to the waterline. The remains sit in 35 feet of water protected by the government as a historic site. It was breathtaking to step back more than 200 years to see the overgrown capstan sitting in the sand. Paul said that it was not uncommon to find musket balls and other ship artifacts. The timbers were strewn in no specific order across the sands. I was amazed that there were any wood beams left at all. Most were charred black and would crumble on touch.

While waiting for dinner we amused ourselves by watching Paul fish for shark off the end of the hotel's dock using nothing more than a hand line. He did manage to catch a small shark which he released. That evening I had lamb and Dad had a steak. Corn on the cob, red cabbage, potato salad, and pumpkin cheesecake rounded off the meal. Tomorrow we would dine on lobster.

The last day of diving is always depressing and I suspect that knowing this most Dive Masters save their best till the last. Our first dive of the day was near a barge that had been run up on the reef by the Coast Guard for attempting to smuggle cocaine. Its rusting hull is easily visible. The site had no name. The area was blanketed with elk horn formations, mostly dead, but creating an unusual underwater sculpture. Debris from other wrecks littered the floor and have been quickly inhabited by aquatic denizens.

Close by, our second dive was at the site of a proposed underwater hotel. It was a beautiful reef and undoubtedly would have made an ideal site for the hotel. At the time, they were having design problems. I picked up an immense rooster tail conch and saw my first immature French angel - with bands of black in gold, it in no way resembled the adult. On the final ascent we saw a large spotted eagle ray that seemed to be waiving goodbye. A beautiful ending to excellent diving.

After lunch we decided to walk the beach from the hotel to Pomato Point. It was easy walking and we leisurely made our way toward the west end of the island. We saw the usual litter of a disposable society that drifted its way to paradise. We passed by several large homes of people obviously not too poorly off; one had its own gazebo and entrance flanked by an old sea anchor.

Pomato Point beach was lovely but the waters from the Atlantic were a bit cooler and our stay was short. We walked back to the hotel a little slower knowing that this would have to do for another year. We bought our polo shirts with Anegada embroidered on the pocket, and a piece of carved coral in the shape of a cattle egret (which were predominant on the island) for Mother. That evening, our final meal was lobster. It was well worth the wait, with a complimentary glass of wine, brown rice, carrots, beans, and pecan pie for desert.

Our flight out of Anegada was to be first thing in the morning, but Paul insisted we meet him at the shop before we leave. After a light breakfast, we met Paul at the shop to convey our sincere thanks and best wishes. It was tradition - for us at least - to tip the Dive Master at the end of every trip. Paul was one of the finest Dive Masters we have ever met.

We flew out in the reverse order that we flew in, but the approach to Beef Island was a rough ride. The pilot had to fly near one mountain, then turn sharply and drop fast. From the airport, we were taxied to the Treasure Island Hotel on Tortola. Tortola was a prime example of paradise spoiled. What must have once been a jewel in the British colonial island crown was now a busy, noisy, smelly, crowded rock. From our hotel room, we could see the marina bristling like a porcupine with sailboat masts. The water was impossible to drink so we went to the bar and paid four dollars for two small glasses of Coke.



It being still early in the morning we checked at the front desk for the possibility of an island tour. A taxi rolled up to the carport and off we went. Our black guide was difficult to understand but we headed towards Beef Island along a road running next to the Sir Francis Drake Channel. Ruins of ancient stone fortifications built by the Dutch in the 18th Century are now overgrown with vines and memories.



Our taxi began to climb its way up the road towards one of the highest peaks on the island where a restaurant and bar offer a fantastic but blustery view. There was also a small observatory built by the local scientific community on the same site. The road skirted the tops of the mountains until we descended to the beach cove area of Cane Garden Bay. A lovely beach area obviously catering to the wealthy with its row upon row of lounge chairs. The bars were quiet at that time and the shops were nothing to comment on.. We continued on to the west end of Tortola and Frenchman's Cay where slaves would swim to freedom across the channel from St. John's.



We asked the driver to drop us off at Pussers where we planned to have lunch. In the heart of Road Town there is a truly unique shop - a must-see in Tortola. The Pussers Company Story and Pub (bottom picture) is the epitome of British colonial old-world charm. The two story building is brightly painted and decorated with all sorts of gingerbread and fretwork. Walking into the store walks you into what I had always imagined an English pub to look like. Dar, with Victorian brass, leaded glass windows, heavy woodwork, and old prints. Seating ourselves at a booth, I ordered the seafood pita and Dad ordered the shepherd's pie. We both started with the infamous Pusser's Pain Killer - rum, cream de cocoa, spices, and who knows what else.

After lunch we walked through the bar into the store. The building was decorated with nautical memorabilia of unbelievable value. A beam from HMS Victory was encased in glass. original oil paintings depicting famous naval battles of the 18th Century were everywhere. The clothing and gifts in the Company Store were of the highest quality and reasonably priced. I bought two bottles of rum for friends and a small flask for myself. It's my understanding that Pusser's is still stored in wood casks onboard British ships gently rocking to age. A portion of the sale proceeds support the British Sailors Home. I wasn't aware that rum was made from sugar cane which explains the large number of cane mills throughout the islands.

We left to try and find coinage with the British Virgin Islands seal. The bank down the street didn't have anything but gave us directions to the ministry of finance. We walked up a couple flights of stairs in a concrete building, down a hallway, and through a door. We were introduced to the Minister of Finance, a striking black woman who explained that they were in the process of having Franklin Mint coin a tourist medal but that it was not to be completed for several months.

One of the more unique sites we visited was the Joseph Reynold O'Neal Botanical Gardens. The gardens occupy a historic site near the Government Schools in the center of Road Town and cover just under four acres. The gardens were began in 1902 when Henry Steel was appointed by the King to create a botanical station on Tortola. He was followed two years later by W.C. Fisclock. In 1970 a group of islanders including J.R. O'Neil began what was to be the gardens as they were when we visited. The gardens were dedicated in 1985 and consisted of rare and beautiful as well as native plans of all forms. The stone ruins of Fisclock's original residence are just inside the gates. When hurricane Hugo swept through the islands in 1989, the gardens were especially hard hit.

It being too hot and too far to walk back to our hotel, we hailed a taxi and returned to our room to watch the sun set over the harbor. We dined in the restaurant veranda. While the atmosphere and setting were more formal, the food was no better than our meals on Anegada.

The next morning we had an early flight and planned to be at the airport an hour ahead of scheduled departure. We left Beef Island and the British Virgin Islands on June 26th and were in San Juan in half an hour. We had a four-hour layover in Atlanta; we snoozed and visited the airport gift shops.

Anegada was a treasure of dive trip. The diving was excellent, the people friendly, the scenery serene, and the dining delightful. I hope that like so many of the neighboring islands it doesn't become spoiled with heavy tourism.