



Dominica, West Indies
August, 1989

"In the wild grandeur of its towering mountains, some of which rise to five thousand feet above the level of the sea, in the majesty of its almost impenetrable forests, in the gorgeousness of its vegetation, the abruptness of its precipices, the calm of its lakes, the violence of its torrents, the sublimity of its waterfalls, Dominica stands without rival not in the West Indies, but I should think throughout the whole island catalogue of the Atlantic and Pacific Combined" W. Palgrave 1876

My John McDonald collection of five Travis McGee novels was dusted off and equipment hastily packed for our trip to the watery island of Dominica, West Indies. Flight and hotel arrangements were left to our travel agent Linda who looks with some trepidation to the challenge of booking our dive trips. Linda had to work with a company in Minnesota called "Go Diving" to make the final connections.



I was teaching a summer semester of Biology and wasn't able to get away until the first week in August. That's pushing into hurricane season. A week before we left, a hurricane had swept through several islands of the West Indies, serious enough to vacate some of the smaller islands. On August 4th, Dad and I once again set out on an adventurous trek to a remote hole in the ocean not one of our friends had ever heard of.

A bit of history...



Dominica, officially the Commonwealth of Dominica, is an island country in the Lesser Antilles region of the Caribbean Sea, south-southeast of Guadeloupe and northwest of Martinique. Christopher Columbus named the island after the day of the week on which he spotted it: Sunday (*dies Dominica* in Latin), November 3, 1493. In the hundred years following, Dominica remained isolated. At the time it was inhabited by the Kalinago people, (Island Caribs), and as European powers entered the region, more

refugees settled there after being driven from surrounding islands, eventually driving the Spanish settlers away. France had a colony on Dominica for several years, importing African slaves to work on plantations, at which time the Antillean Creole language developed. France formally ceded possession of Dominica to Great Britain in 1763. Great Britain established a small colony on the island in 1805.

Dominica has been nicknamed the "Nature Isle of the Caribbean" for its unspoiled natural beauty. It is the youngest island in the Lesser Antilles, still being formed by geothermal-volcanic activity, as evidenced by the world's second-largest hot spring, Boiling Lake. The island features lush mountainous rainforests, and is the home of many rare plants, animals, and bird species. There are xeric areas in some of the western coastal regions, but heavy rainfall occurs inland. The island has 365 rivers. The Sisserou parrot (also known as the Imperial Amazon), is found only on Dominica and is the island's national bird. It is featured on the national flag. Dominica's economy is heavily dependent on tourism and agriculture.

Our flight plans called for us to fly from Omaha to Chicago then on to San Juan, Puerto Rico via American Airlines. The flights were back-to-back which made the long flight a little less tiresome. The flight from Chicago to San Juan included a film called "Her Alibi" with Tom Seleck. It reminded me of several episodes of Magnum PI in which Magnum played a fictitious detective in an unbelievable situation.

In San Juan, we changed from America to Liat (Leeward Islands Air Transport). We came to learn that the airlines was subsidized by the government and therefore had a tendency of being unpredictable. From San Juan we flew Liat to Antigua where we overnighed at the Sugar Mill.



Centuries before, ships came to Antigua for other reasons. The island is dotted with the remnants of sugar mills once used to boil, extract sugar, and export its products. The sugar mills are conical towers 20-30 feet tall of thick stone. The mill at the hotel had been refitted as a bar and its iron cauldron was cast into the building's foundation.

The entrance to the hotel was gained by way of a pot-holed road leading to an open courtyard. After a quick check in, we were shown to our room - a comfortable lodging for the evening. After of a supper of breaded veal we heaved our tired bones into bed for an early flight the next morning.



The airport was only a two-mile ride from the hotel. We were scheduled to depart Antigua at 8:55 AM in a twin prop that seated about 30 with luggage and supplies. From Antigua our small craft made a stop on Guadeloupe; a more populated island than I expected. The stop was only to let some passengers off and others on. We landed at 11:00 AM and went through immigration and customs at Guadeloupe. From there, we flew to Dominica and landed at R.C. Bird Field (concourse B) at the southern end of the island. It was a short airstrip that required a sharp bank and rapid decent on the approach.



I kid you not. This is the runway; a grass shack with a sign "Concourse B." Makes you wonder, where is concourse "A"? A hotel representative was waiting to taxi us to the Anchorage Inn.

The islanders do all things slow but two; talk and drive. These people drive with unnerving speed over roads a car-and-a-half wide with a trench on one side. New York cabbies could take a lesson from these drivers. We wound our way through the bustling town of Roseau and pulled up to the lobby. Nothing impressive; an elongated concrete structure painted white to reflect the intense sun.

A thin native girl checked us in - no instructions - called for a boy to take our suitcases to our room and that was our welcome. The first room we were taken to was occupied. A second room key was brought and we were taken to room 221...on the third floor. The north wall was shuttered with wood louvers, an air conditioner ran loudly as we slept. There was one single and one double bed in the room with flimsy mattresses, a small table between the beds, and a lamp. The bathroom was rather large by island standards with a shower, toilet, and shelves for clothing. We quickly learned that we would rarely have hot water - sometimes lucky to have water at all - and that what water did flow would last long. Oh well, there was a pool.

At lunch, we dined on trout, beans, and had our first taste of breadfruit. The breadfruit was tasteless; certainly not worth creating conditions for mutiny on the Bounty unless you were forced to eat it regularly. We came to find that our lunches were not included in our package and therefore we quickly changed our eating habits to something more economical.

Having the afternoon free, we chose to take a short tour. A taxi was called and Winston - our driver - took us to the Botanical Gardens (which left a lot to be desired), past the factory where Rose Lime Juice is made, and up to a scenic lookout over the city. Winston was a black man in his fifties, very articulate and knowledgeable of the island. When asked whether or not the island was better off with its independence than under British rule, he replied it was all relative. After leaving, the British had not prepared the island for the inevitable turmoil that would follow. With no incentive for the youth to stay, after a free education they left for other islands taking the future of Dominica with them. Winston felt a shift in the education system was needed; getting away from the technical aspects and leaning more towards agricultural training.

Dinner was scheduled to begin at 7PM but when we climbed the stairs to the open dining room, we were told that dinner would be at 8 downstairs; they were expecting a large group. We took a table for two nearest those set for the smorgasbord. The group that came to dinner was composed mostly of women in their late fifties and over; a few with their spouses. Although I didn't bother to ask, I inferred that it was a church women's organization. We dined on a variety of salads, rice, fish, chicken, and mixed fruit for desert.

The evening's entertainment - and I use the term loosely - was billed as a native band. It turned out to be a quartet; one played a long piece of bamboo, one played a button accordion (his job was to play the melody, which he did over, and over, and over), one played a large hoop drum, and the youngest played a long-handled shaker with a corrugated side filled with something that went pa-chunk when it was shook. We didn't stay long and wondered back to our room to read before dropping off to sleep.

We woke to take breakfast at 7AM - French toast and juice - and went back to the room to prepare our equipment for the first dive. We met at the dive shop in the hotel at 9. It was a shack next to the bar and equipped with new rental equipment and a compressor to fill tanks, but little else. At previous dive operations, the first dive is the checkout. Not so here. Our gear was carried down to a strafed-hulled twenty foot wood/fiberglass boat with twin 200 Mercury motors on the stern. No canopy. No deck. No fresh water rinse tank. Just a place to sit. So off Dad and I went with Jerry the boat hand and David our Dive Master.

Jerry was the younger of the two blacks; in his early twenties if that. Relatively short but muscular with a birth mark on his left cheek and a smile and personality of gold. David was much taller and thinner. He had been Dive Master for the Guest House next door but had had a falling out with the owner. I still question his experience and ability to chart our dives.

We always dove the southern end of the island around Scott's Head. It was said that the northern end gets too much rain making the visibility poor. Our first morning dive was to be off Scott's Head; a dive we would attempt several times but never complete. This is the point where the Atlantic currents meet the Caribbean currents. After suiting up, I rolled off into a jet stream. I was immediately swept aft and luckily managed to grab the safety line. The current was so strong that I could have skied on the line. I pulled myself hand-over-hand back to the boat and shed my weights and tank before crawling in. We chose another dive site.

We rounded the point of land to the Atlantic side to make our first dive in that ocean. The waters were rougher and while preparing for the dive, I found myself getting sea sick. As long as I could see the horizon I was fine; it was when I looked down that I got into trouble. Once in the water I was fine. Our plan was to dive 90 feet for 30 minutes.

We found all of the reefs to be fishy with large schools of small fish, but very rarely did we see any large angels or parrot fish we found at other sites. There were a large number of spotted drum - varying in age from juvenile to adult - and an unbelievable number of arrowhead crabs. Dominica would be a macro-photographer's dream. The majority of fish were small.

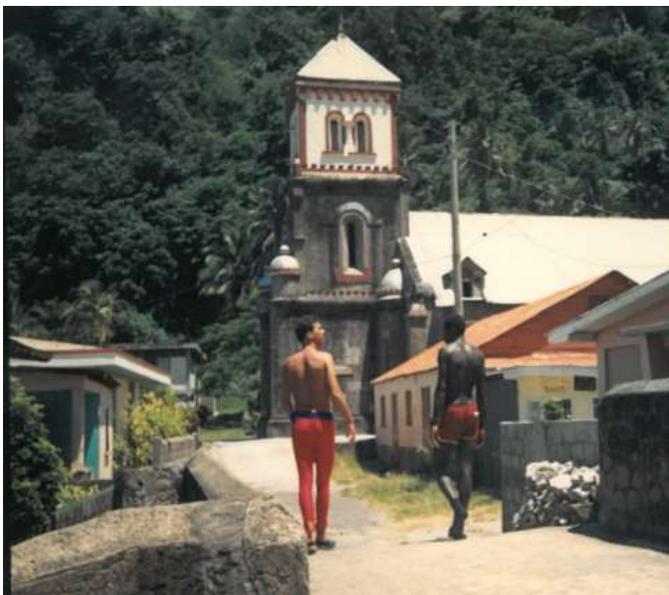
When the dive was completed, we handed our weights to Jerry and slipped out of our tanks and BC. Freed from this burden, with a flip of our fins we could propel ourselves into the boat. We had a surface time of one hour before our next dive.

Our second dive was in an area where sulfur hot springs bubble up from the shallows. Since our sites had no names, we felt Champaign Reef was appropriate because of the bubbles. The average depth here was a shallow 30 feet. We saw a pair of squid, large sea biscuits, anemones, and a large eel buried up to its gills in the sand.

Our afternoon was spent in a most relaxing manner lounging by the pool watching the preparation for the construction of a new boat dock. Since our lunch wasn't part of the package, we dined on sandwiches and tea. Back to the construction. Enormous steel pipes - five in all, with a chisel point welded to one end were lowered through a guide affixed to a barge with a crane. The crane then used a narrow solid tube to drive the pipes into the sand and coral. Over the course of the week, we watched the natives bail out the tubes after they had filled with water, slip rods into the top of each and pour concrete, slip a wood platform over the tubes, add more support rods, and fill the entire form with concrete. Before we left, they had removed the forms and the dock was nearly complete.

That evening we dined on pumpkin soup, rock Cornish game hens, sweet potatoes, breadfruit, beats, and a lemon lime banana pie. What was unusual about our out-of-water time was that it was free of bugs. We had anticipated a deluge of no-see-ums and mosquitoes, but our Deet sat unopened all week.

On August 8th, I made my 101st dive amassing over 75 hours of dive time. Not an impressive record for some, but for us it was an achievement. The dive was at Scott's Head in the morning and it started in current almost impossible to swim against. It was an effort to get to the anchor line and I was worried that Dad might not make it. But once we dropped over the edge of the reef and were out of the current, the dive was excellent. The strong current kept the reef clean. The anemones were huge.



Seufriere Bay was guarded by the old fortress of Scott's Head. Our surface time was spent touring the town of Seufriere; a poor yet spotlessly clean town. The Church of Your Baptism was lovely. Its rough-hewn stone cathedral shape boasted a vaulted ceiling, native frescos and adorned with leaded stained glass windows. The church and its furnishings were at least 100 years old and survived Hurricane David in 1979 with little damage save the steeple had to be rebuilt. As thick as the walls were, I'm sure that it will be there for another century.

There were also the remains of a gigantic lime factory with its massive rusting water wheel and abandoned walls of stone. The village survived by fishing and its crops of bananas and coconut.

We dove Seufriere Bay later that morning seeing several eels, sand dollars, and more spotted drum. There were a number of small eels, one of which I was able to coax out by brushing its tail with my finger.

The evening meal began with pumpkin soup and shrimp cocktail. The main course was grilled tuna. Dad had goat with side servings of rice, cabbage, and the potato-like dachene.



The next day we toured the island. We were told to be in the lobby around 8:30. We put on our hiking shorts and tennis shoes. I grabbed the binoculars and Dad took the camera and bug spray (just in case). While we were waiting, a tour group of seven men and women from Italy (who spoke no English) were shown around the hotel. We were told that they would be joining us for the tour. Our guide was a young black man named Danny who told Dad and I to ride up front with him. Lucky for us that we did. Our tour bus was a Ford pickup whose bed had benches built over each fender well and meagerly padded. I'm sure the Italian guests were expecting something a bit more plush.



We began with a trip through Roseau where we stopped at a Catholic church built in 1854. Much larger and more elaborate than the church in Seuferie Bay, this classic example of gothic architecture was beautiful. There were four rows of wooden pews on a beautiful inlaid floor. A children's choir was practicing in the loft over the doorway. The leaded stained glass windows were old and lovely. The murals in each arm of the church and at the altar were superbly painted. There were the usual figures and an elaborate high altar.

We continued our tour through the botanical gardens and then on to the lookout we had visited with Winston.



Our next destination was Trafalgar Falls. It was a winding road up the mountain over twisting roads. The Ford was parked at the power station below the falls. It was a brief and easy walk to the falls. They were twin falls; the smaller to the left was the male, the falls with the larger mouth was the female - their words not mine. At the top of the falls, hundreds of feet up and a hefty hike up Mt. Macque, is a fresh-water lake.

On the way back to the hotel, a young native boy told Danny of a boiling stream a short walk from the road. It was a hot, long walk through fields of banana crops and forests to a stream quite literally boiling from the escaping gas of the volcano. Only the young boy, Danny, Dad, myself, and two Italians made the trip.



Our trip continued in the Ford over more winding roads towards the interior of the island and the Emerald Pool. Along the way it began to rain and of course the truck didn't have a canopy. Luckily it stopped and on we went. Emerald Pool was a national park; well maintained and easy to get to. It was a short hike into the forest where a waterfall pooled before continuing down the mountain. The pool was at the bottom of Mounre Trios Pitas. The water was cool and no one wanted to brave going in.

We had lunch at the entrance to the park dining on chicken, salad, fruit, rice, and an extremely potent rum punch. Each glass got a little smooooother.

We continued on the same road up and down the mountain slopes to the eastern side of the island to stop at the Caribe Indian Reservation - the last reservation for the once vast tribe of native islanders. The Caribe are short in stature, stocky, muscular build, coppery skin, and far more attractive facial characteristics than their black neighbors. They have a classic Mayan look. They were not big enough for the labors expected of them by the Europeans, so African slaves were brought in.

Danny stopped the truck at several huts selling weavings and other crafts. I bought a wife leader (Chinese finger trick) and a bracelet for five Caribbean dollars (\$2.50 US). The reservation was spotless. Although extremely poor, their homes were brightly painted with neat gardens of cannas and paradise plants. The Italians found very little of interest in the stop.

The drive back was through the central portion of the island. More winding roads and the threat of heavier rain. The Italians had to be back at the airport (Cane Field) by 4:00. No more had we pulled in

when the skies opened up and it began to pour. Inside the airport, the group voiced their complaints. I'm sure they didn't recommend this trip to their countrymen, but Dad and I found the tour fascinating and well worth the time.

That night - before supper - we asked that the hotel confirm our flight back to Antigua. We got a call in our room from the front desk telling us that Liat didn't have a record of our reservation and that we would have to go to the airport office the next afternoon. That was the start of an aggravating flight home. That same day, a young couple arrived at the hotel. They joined us the next morning for a dive. The two dives were along the wall of Seufferie Bay. Of all our dives on this trip, those two dives were the worse. We assumed that it was because of the heavy rains the day before. The young man, Eric, was a lieutenant in the Special Forces of the California Police. His wife, Geri, and he were both competent divers and friendly people. Our last dive was named Pinnacle Reef; a cloudy but lovely wall dive.

After lunch we had Danny drive us to the airport. Sure enough, after we found someone to help us, we learned that we were not on the flight list. We were told that our flight was full and that we would have to take an earlier flight the following morning scheduled to depart Melville Airport at the other end of the island.

That evening's meal was depressing. We felt that we had been robbed of two dives since we had planned to dive before flying back to Antigua. On top of that, we never did get our night dive in and then there was a mix-up over whether or not lunch was included in our package. We settled our account that night and voiced our complaints with the desk clerk. The manager was not in.

Our flight out of Melville was at 10AM which meant being there at 9:00. It was a two hour drive to the airport so after a quick breakfast we waited for our taxi. At least the hotel paid for the taxi to the airport. One taxi took us to Rosseau where we were transferred to a smaller mini-van. It was just Dad and I, the driver, and a native airplane pilot. The ride was as close to a Grand Prix as I ever want to come. As previously mentioned, the roads were narrow, hair-pin turns, and with a sheer drop on one side and a trench on the other. Our driver managed an average speed of 65 through this course. We braced ourselves for the most white-knuckled trip we've ever taken. We had several near misses including one near escape with a Mercedes truck filled with bananas - it even shook our driver.

We arrived on time to an empty Melville Airport. Our flight was on a larger DC-7; since the runway was much larger. But the flight was late which then would make our flight to San Juan also late; we had to run in San Juan to catch our flight.

Back in Antigua again, we lounged around an empty pool, played a game of pool, and then ate an early dinner. Our flight was early the next morning and although we got there more than an hour ahead, the lines were unbelievably long. We still had not gotten to the counter when the scheduled departure came; we had to run to the plane. In San Juan, customs took longer than usual. The flight was late and again we were running in the concourse. We were the last to board and had no assigned seats, so they put us in first class. This was the first and only time we ever rode first class.

Chicago was just as bad. We had to transfer from one concourse to another and then our direct flight to Omaha was cancelled. We were to take a later flight to Des Moines and then on to Omaha. We called ahead to let Mom know we would be a bit late. It was a tiring trip.