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# Grenada's dive sites offer a vast and colorful array of marine life

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- ▶ [Photo gallery](#)
- ▶ [Video: Flamingo Bay](#)
- ▶ [Video: Schools of fish](#)
- ▶ [Video: Veronica L wreck](#)
- ▶ [Video: Veronica L top deck](#)
- ▶ [Video: More fish](#)

Scuba diving in the Caribbean is something every diver dreams of - especially those relatively new to the sport. I have been open-water certified (which allows you to dive with a buddy) only since last October, so my diving experience has been limited to trips to a Pennsylvania quarry, the Shark River and Key Largo, Fla.

Each month I'd pore over the latest editions of Sports Diver and Scuba Diving magazines. I'd read about far-off, exotic places, look at the incredible photos and imagine myself there. The clear water, the colorful reefs teeming with fish, the shipwrecks - that's where I wanted to be, that's where I wanted to dive.

I imagined my first Caribbean dive trip would be exploring a wreck off Aruba, logging some bottom time at Sting Ray City in the Caymans, or - if I was really ambitious - diving with the sharks at Stuart's Cove in the Bahamas. But when the opportunity came to dive Grenada, I jumped at the chance.

It may not be the first place a new diver thinks about, but after reading about the island, my dive buddy Billy and I found it offers "some of the best diving in the Caribbean," as one dive-related Web site declared. Reefs, sea life, great visibility (or "viz," as divers refer to it) - Grenada had it all, along with the Bianca C, one of the largest wrecks in the Caribbean. The Bianca - or the Titanic of the Caribbean, as it is known — is a must-see, but because of currents and depth, it's for advanced divers only.

So I'd have to wait on that experience, advised Billy, who's logged nearly 200 dives in places like Mexico, the Bahamas, Canada and Belize. Billy and I would focus on dives within my range (60 feet maximum depth). We spent many hours researching dive shops and sites, organizing and planning our trip.

Lots of fish would be a given, I knew, but I hoped for a really great wreck or, if we were really lucky, a shark - nothing too big, maybe a nurse shark or, even better, a reef shark. Something that would get my heart pounding.

Aquanauts ([aquanautsgrenada.com](#)) was the dive operator we used for our trip. The staff was great, an enthusiastic bunch who love to dive and



▲ The author near a school of fish at the wreck of the Veronica L, a cargo ship; top, scenes of the marine life on the wreck, which is about 45 feet from the surface. (BILL HILLERMEIER/THE RECORD)

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wanted us to experience all that Grenada has to offer underwater.

The first day, while the non-divers in our group spent the morning taking a resort diving course, learning the basics in the beautiful pool that overlooked the bay at True Blue Bay Resort and Marina, Billy and I chatted with Pete, the dive instructor and manager of Aquanauts, and settled on Shark Reef as our introduction to Grenada's underwater life.

Shark Reef? My heart was pounding already.

We went over our dive plan with Pete and Bruce, our dive master and boat captain, as we motored to the reef. The water here had a slight current. "Easy man, let the current guide you, nice and easy, relax and enjoy": Bruce's words were reassuring.

The weather was hot and humid, the water calm and brilliant blue. We geared up, made the giant stride off the back of the boat, splashed, and slowly descended.

Shark Reef ranges in depth from 25 to 60 feet and consists mainly of hard corals and rock. It took me a few minutes to get used to the current. Remembering Bruce's words, I relaxed and tried to breathe more slowly, letting the current do most of the work.

The current gently pushed us past mounds of coral. Small fish darted in and out of the openings. My eyes bounced back and forth as I tried to watch everything. As I passed over one opening in the coral, I spotted something long and brown. My heart began to race, and soon I was directly over it: a three-foot nurse shark trying to hide under an overhang of coral. I fought the current as long I could to keep my spot and watch, but slowly was pulled along, continuing to drift.

There were plenty of fish swimming about: yellow snappers, grunts and angelfish. I was so caught up in the amazement of seeing the nurse shark that I never noticed the six-foot reef shark swimming close by. Back aboard the boat later, Bruce and Billy told me what I missed, and we all had a good laugh. It was a great dive to start the trip.

That afternoon, we gathered the rest of our group and headed towards Flamingo Bay, "a sheltered bay that's a good dive for beginners," Pete said, adding that there would be "plenty for you guys to see as well."

He was right. We first saw a golden spotted eel making its way across the sandy bottom. Then we passed gardens of brain, whip and pillar coral, sea fans gently swaying and lots of blue wrasse, sergeant majors and yellow chromis darting all around. Another great dive; we could hardly wait to hit the water again. As we motored back to the dive shop the group was abuzz about what they had just experienced. I recognized that look in their eyes, their smiles. I knew they were hooked.

Two days later Pete suggested we dive The Valleys and the Veronica L. The Valleys are part of the larger Boss Reef that stretches five miles from St. George's harbor to Point Saline, with depths ranging from 20 feet to a drop-off of 80 feet.

The Valleys were teeming with fish in all shapes, sizes and colors. Coral formations, plants, barrel sponges and other sea life abounded. We saw two spotted eels side-by-side poking their heads out of holes in the coral, their mouths opening and closing in constant motion. As I hovered above the reef watching the fish pass by I couldn't help but think that this was like swimming in a giant aquarium.

The wreck of the Veronica L, a cargo vessel, sat about 45 feet down in aquamarine water and would be our final dive. Billy and I wondered how this could top what we had seen so far, but then again, each dive had been better than the one before.

## WHY YOU SHOULD GO:

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- Grenada offers a wide range of diving options: reefs, wrecks, marine parks, walls.
- There are more than 30 dive sites around the island.
- There is diving for all skill levels, from beginner to experienced.
- There's an abundance of marine life.
- The island and the dive sites are unspoiled by crowds.
- The average water temperature is 79 to 83 degrees.

As we descended the ship came into focus - it was certainly the largest object I've seen underwater: 130 feet wide, 195 feet long, 21 feet tall with an open hull covered in colorful marine life. It was simply awesome to look at.

We dropped down to the sandy bottom, where the vessel towered over us. We also studied the intricate micro life on the sides of the ship, close up, before exploring in and around the Veronica L.

As I hovered horizontal over the open hull, I raised my head to find the most amazing sight I have ever seen underwater: a wall of "purple rain." "Purple rain" is the name given to large groups of blue Creole wrasse, an unbelievable number of fish all in one place at the same time.

I actually yelled "Wow!" through my regulator. I felt as if I was on another planet, especially when the wall of purple rain was followed by walls of yellow chromis, black-and-white-striped sergeant majors and grunts.

I knew my air couldn't last long enough for me to get my fill of the experience, and soon my dive buddy was giving me the sign to surface. As we boarded the boat, Billy turned to me and said, "That was definitely one of my top five dives."

Grenada turned out to be the Caribbean experience we'd imagined - and more.

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