




The current-swept reefs of Grenada and the Grenadines feature large sponges and deep-water sea fans, which thrive on the blast of clear, clean water.



grenada and the grenadines

By Keith Phillips

Photography by Steve Simonsen

From the second we backrolled into the enormous school of brown chromis swarming like locusts just beneath the surface, I knew that Fish Mouth was going to be one of my all-time favorite dives. Equalizing furiously and dropping fast to find the bottom, I broke through the dense cloud, only to find myself in an equally thick school of black durgon. At about 40 feet, the curtain of fish parted at last to reveal a colorful sloping reef.

Located off Isle de Quatre in the swath of Eastern Caribbean between Grenada and St. Vincent known as the Grenadines, Fish Mouth is a stunning mix of healthy hard corals, colorful sponges and waving gorgonians. But the best part was the blistering three-and-a-half-knot current. For the next 20 minutes we jetted along, angling into the stream or ducking behind small boulders to look for moray eels, to go eyeball to eyeball with wary cardinalfish and to admire a seemingly endless school of creole wrasse that cascaded down the slope and around coral heads like a flowing river.

Then everything changed. Current and reef parted ways—the gust of water elbowing left; the reef becoming more vertical and angling to the right—and we lurched to a sudden stop inside a steep-sided amphitheater of calm, still water.

When we surfaced and climbed back aboard the tender, an awestruck silence soon gave way to excited stories of the dive. Mottley, our divemaster from the live-aboard *M/V Wind Dancer*, wore a satisfied, knowing smile and simply nodded agreement when photographer Steve Simonsen summed it all up: “That was unbelievable!”



Fish Mouth has it all: Thrill-ride currents, abundant fish, healthy hard and soft corals, and a surprise twist at the end.

Grenada: The Starting Point

I admit it: When I drew this assignment my first thought was: “Grenada? Didn’t the U.S. send troops there once?” My second thought was, “Didn’t it get hammered by a hurricane back in 2004?”

The answer to both those questions is yes, but if that’s all you know about this rarely explored corner of the Caribbean, you’re mired in the past. For the record: The 1983 U.S. military intervention (which restored democratic elections after a Marxist military coup) is ancient history, and the damage from Hurricane Ivan has long since been repaired. After a week of exhilarating diving, I’m ready to make a prediction: Grenada and the Grenadines will be the next “must see” Caribbean destination. It has all the elements—warm, clear water, beautiful reefs, great marine life, and some truly amazing wrecks—to turn the heads of jaded “been there, done that” divers.

One day of diving with Peter Seupel, the operations director of Aquanauts dive center at True Blue Bay Resort, is all it took

to change my way of thinking about Grenada. The island has more than 30 named dive sites conveniently clustered along its southern tip—none more than a 30-minute boat ride away regardless of whether they fall on the Caribbean or Atlantic sides of the island. Purple Rain is a beautiful example of the Caribbean side. With a maximum depth of 80 feet, it’s a healthy collection of brain, star and pillar corals, decorated with colorful gorgonians and sponges and crowded with the usual reef fish suspects. Shark Reef on the Atlantic side has many of the same elements, just in different proportions. The current was stronger, there were more soft corals than hard ones, and from the nurse sharks napping in small coral caves to moray eels slithering across the reef in broad daylight, the marine life was bigger and bolder.

The other big surprise was the wealth of wreck diving. I’d heard about the *Bianca C*, the 600-foot luxury liner that holds the title of the Caribbean’s largest wreck, but discovered there are many more sunken vessels to explore (see “Wrecks of Grenada,” p. 61). Throw in a two-tank day trip

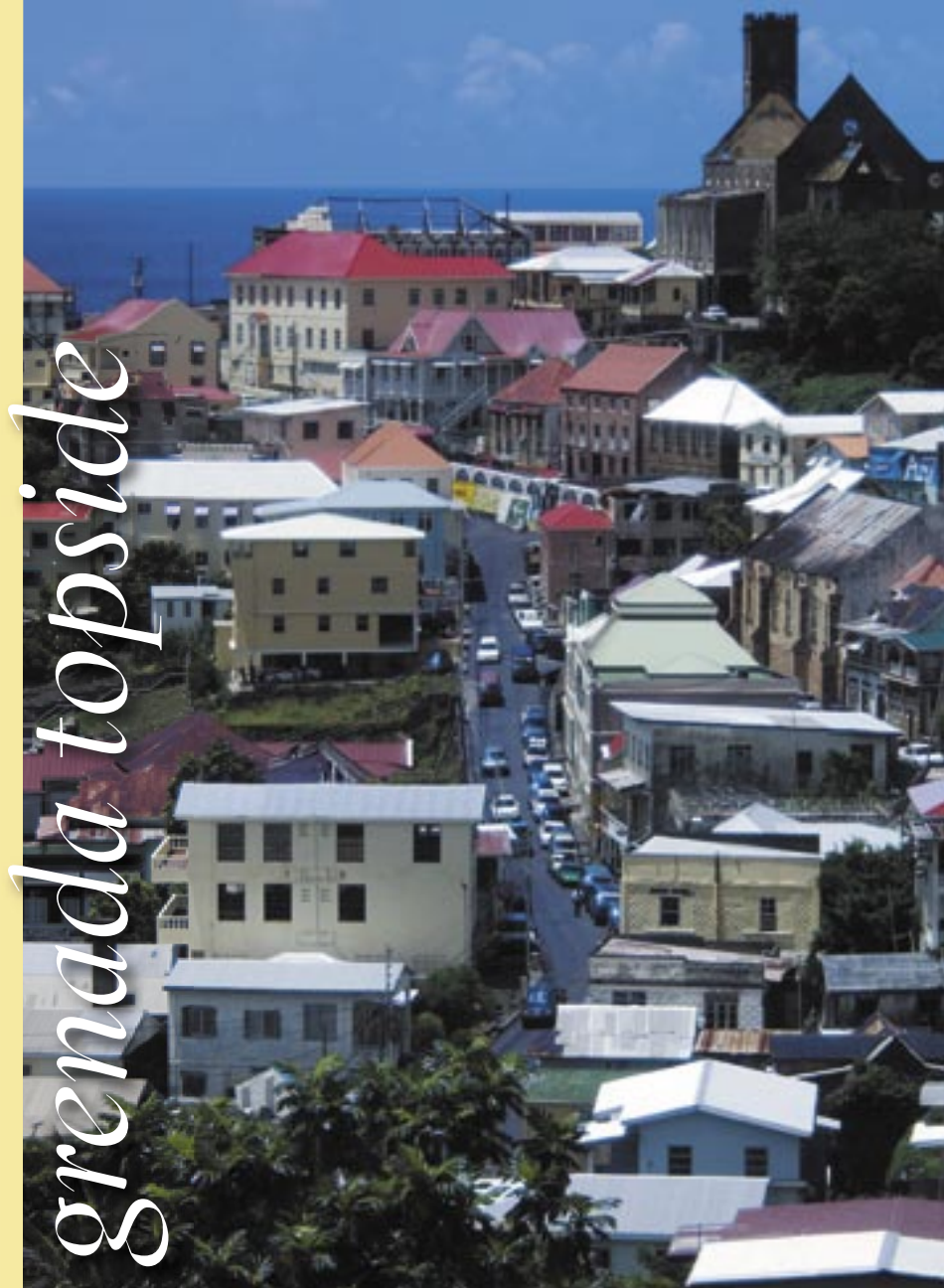
to Isle de Ronde, an uninhabited rock off the island’s north end, and you have more than enough underwater excitement to fill a week’s worth of land-based diving.

The Grenadines: The Cruising Ground

Another reason you’ll be hearing more about the diving here is the recently expanded options for live-aboard cruising. Peter Hughes Diving now stations the *Wind Dancer* in Grenada from August to November, offering cruises that hit the best sites of Grenada, but also of the Grenadines, a chain of more than two dozen islands stretching north to St. Vincent. The boat’s cruising ground covers the territorial waters of two countries, Grenada (which includes Carriacou and Petit Martinique), and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The itinerary will take you as far north as Bequia and Isle de Quatre, before returning to Grenada with stops along the way to sample the diving off the islands of Mustique, Canouan, Carriacou, Mayreau and in the sheltered Tobago Cays.

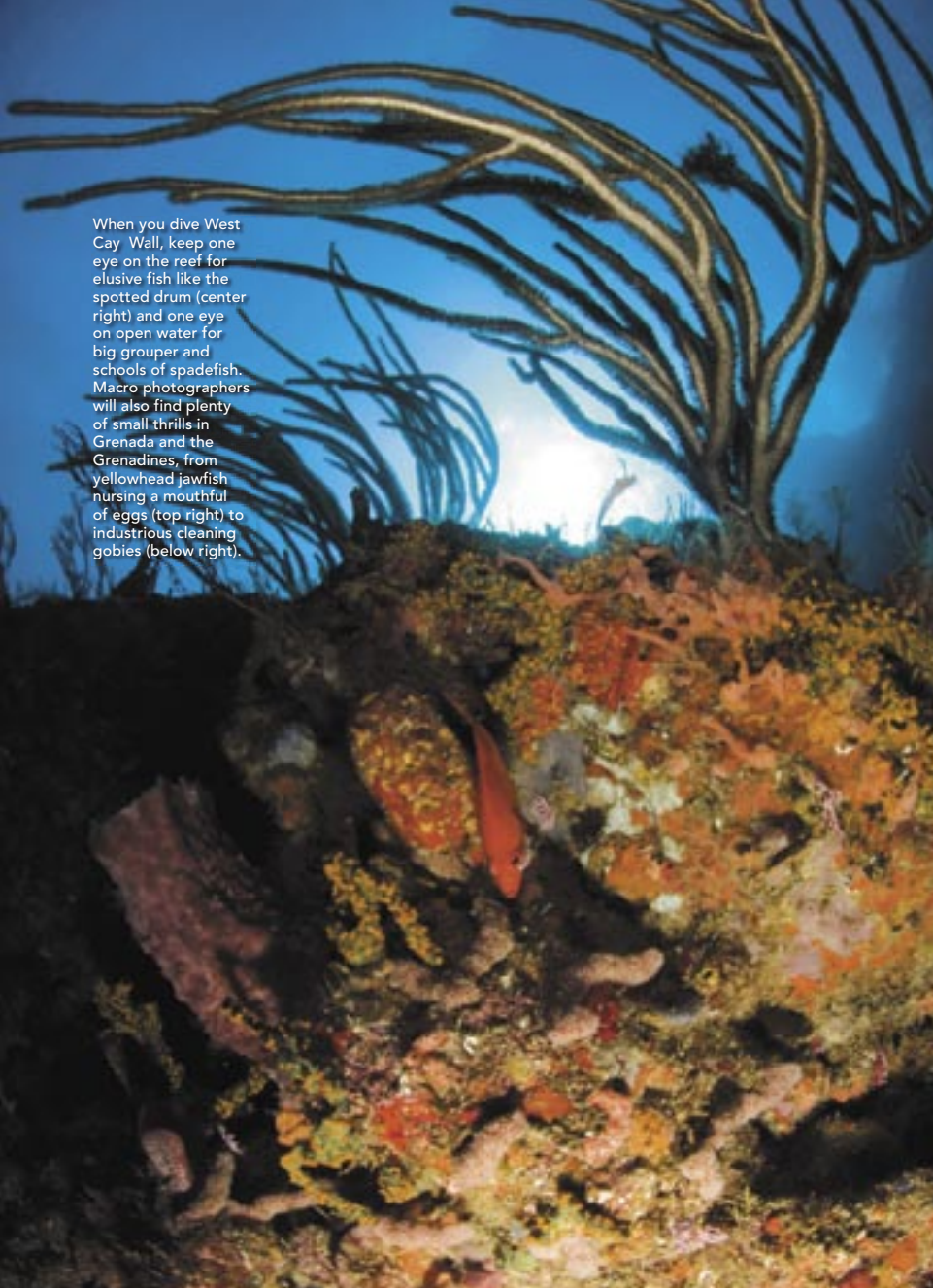


Located 100 miles north of Venezuela, Grenada is the southernmost of the Windward Islands. Covered in lush vegetation, the island is almost as beautiful topside as it is underwater. Annandale Falls (above) is just one of several waterfalls on the island where you are virtually guaranteed a scenic photo. The pastel buildings on the hillside overlooking St. George's Bay (above right) also make a great photo backdrop.



Grenada topside

Whether you're diving Grenada by land or by live-aboard (or ideally, both) plan to spend some time touring the topside attractions as well. Grenada is a mountainous island covered with a lush central tract of rainforest. Known as the Spice Island, it produces nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, mace and cocoa in abundance. The whole island is only 21 miles long by 12 miles wide, so even if you have only an afternoon to spare you can hire a guide and cover a lot of ground. Most guided tours start in St. George's, a city of pastel-colored buildings, and include a visit to historic Fort George (built in 1705), which commands the best view of the harbor. Other popular stops include: Annandale Falls, a postcard-perfect waterfall framed by elephant ear plants; Grand Etang National Park, a forest preserve and bird sanctuary that's home to a 36-acre crater lake; River Antoine Rum Distillery, a living museum where you can see raw sugar cane transformed into a potent rum; and Grand Anse, a two-mile crescent of golden sand considered one of the very best in the entire Caribbean. And, of course, no tour of the Spice Island would be complete without a stop at a spice shop where you can load up on tasty and fragrant souvenirs. For more information, visit www.grenadagrenadines.com.



When you dive West Cay Wall, keep one eye on the reef for elusive fish like the spotted drum (center right) and one eye on open water for big grouper and schools of spadefish. Macro photographers will also find plenty of small thrills in Grenada and the Grenadines, from yellowhead jawfish nursing a mouthful of eggs (top right) to industrious cleaning gobies (below right).



This is exactly the kind of free-ranging itinerary that live-aboards were made for. You wake each morning anchored in the lee of a new island, each with its own mix of exciting dives. Off Bequia, for example, you won't want to miss West Cay Wall, a steep-sided coral cliff punctuated by undercuts and crevices. This reef has it all: big grouper and schools of spadefish patrolling the open water and reef fish such as the elusive spotted drum hiding in crevices. For a break from the current, there is Devil's Table. It's really three dives in one—a shallow reef, the upright wreck of a small freighter and a white sand bottom. The wreck captured my attention at

once, but all the photographers zoomed right past it and plopped face-down on the sand, cameras poised and ready to catch the emergence of shy garden eels, skittish cleaner shrimp and yellowhead jawfish, some nursing a mouthful of eggs.

The biggest change of pace, however, came on our stop at Mayreau Island and the nearby Tobago Cays. The low islets with palm-studded beaches (movie buffs may even be able to identify Petit Tabac, the island where Elizabeth Swann and Capt. Jack Sparrow were marooned in the first *Pirates of the Caribbean*) were a stark contrast to the towering rock islands we'd been diving for much of the cruise. They're

also protected by a series of fringing horse-shoe-shaped reefs, so when we dropped into Mayreau Channel, the current was just strong enough to carry us along in a surreal, dreamlike fashion. Adding to the gentle ambience was the reef itself, deep coral canyons made all the more colorful by the abundance of light reflected off the white sand.

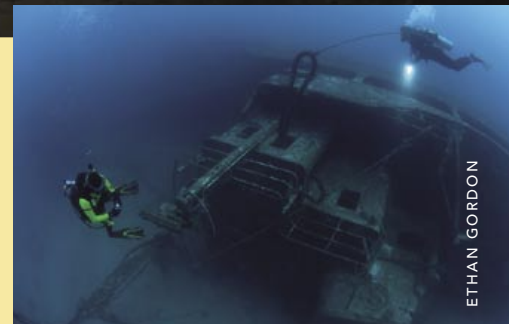
And then everything changed. Suddenly, everyone was signaling frantically to each other and kicking like mad for a deep corner of the reef. There, wedged inside a crevice barely big enough to contain them, were five of the biggest Caribbean spiny lobster you could ever hope to see.

Back on board the tender, we compared estimates on just how big those monsters of the deep had to be. Then the boat fell silent for a minute and it was my turn to give the summation. "That," I said smiling, "was unbelievable!" **SD**

GET THERE > For more information on Grenada and the Grenadines, turn to *In Depth*, page 96, section 3.

wrecks of grenada

Diving the *Bianca C*, the “*Titanic* of the Caribbean,” should be at the top of every diver’s list of things to do before you die. The signature wreck of Grenada is a 600-foot luxury liner that sank on Oct. 22, 1961, when a fire broke out aboard the vessel. Islanders helped shuttle passengers and crew to safety and only two lives were lost before the ship was towed to its current location and allowed to sink. The vessel came to rest upright on a sand bottom creating a great wreck with abundant opportunities for recreational and technical divers alike—the top of the bow is at 90 feet, the keel at 165. Given the depth and the strong currents that sweep the wreck, this should be considered an advanced dive. Also on the roster of great Grenada wreck dives is the *Shakem*, a homely cement freighter turned into a living work of art by a heavy growth of telesto soft corals—the wreck is so heavily overgrown that it’s hard to believe it sank only five years ago. The *Hema 1* was an inter-island freighter that sank in 2005 landing on her port side. She, too, is well on the way to sporting a dense layer of growth. On the Atlantic side of Grenada, the wrecks of the *King Mitch* and *San Juan* are also heavily encrusted, but come with a bonus: excellent odds of seeing rays and nurse sharks.



You'll need multiple dives just to get an overview of the massive *Bianca C*. The heavily encrusted wreck is the largest in the Caribbean and offers countless opportunities for divers of all skill levels. Here a diver explores the anchor locker of the former luxury liner that sank in 1961. Middle: In a former life, the *Shakem* was a homely cement freighter. A thick layer of encrusting growth has since turned the wreck into an underwater work of art. Bottom: One of Grenada's newest wrecks is the *Hema 1*, which landed on her port side in 2005.