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Under The Boardwalk: Diving St. Croix's Frederiksted Pier

CALIFORNIA DIVER – JANUARY 20, 2017

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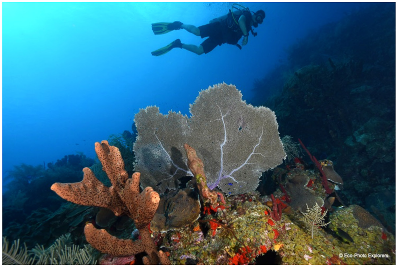

Soaring along the Davis Bay Wall

Standing at the edge of the pier, with the tropical sun beating down on us as we stood fully kitted in our dive gear ready to step into the water, the famous chords of the old Drifter's song "Under the Boardwalk" seemed to be locked into our brains.

"Under the Boardwalk,
Out of the sun
Under the Boardwalk,
We'll be havin' some fun
Under the Boardwalk,
People walkin' above
Under the Boardwalk,
We'll be fallin' in love
Under the Boardwalk,
Under the boardwalk, boardwalk"

It was too enticing to wait any longer and so we took a giant stride step off the side of St. Croix's Frederiksted Pier and splashed into 15 feet of warm, clear Caribbean water. After a brief moment on the surface to clear masks, adjust cameras and check the rest of our gear, it was time to dive.

Words and photos by Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver
Eco-Photo Explorers

We swam a brief distance along a fairly nondescript bulkhead until we reached the first set of pilings…and our hearts nearly stopped in awe. There, shimmering in perfect unison in and around the coral and sponge-encrusted pilings was an enormous baitball of Scad. The school of innumerable fish twisted and turned, morphing into myriad shapes and formations like an ever-changing underwater Rorschach test!

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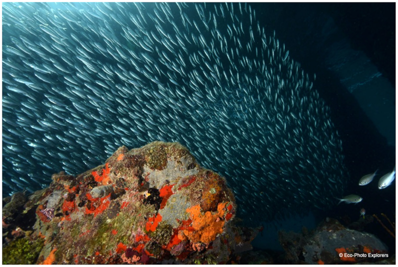
The Fredericksted Pier is one of St. Croix's best dives

And then we spied the source of the baitball's fear: several three foot long Tarpon, the large scales on their sides glinting in the sun and their black eyes intently sizing up the school of fish, were swimming beneath them. They would circle and then strike, moving into the ball and emerging with one of the hapless fish. The Scad were mistaken in their perceived safety beneath the pier…the real danger came from below!

We watched transfixed as this simple but merciless act of nature played out before us. And we were crestfallen as we realized our cameras were set up to shoot macro subjects beneath this man-made universe of marine creatures! We would have to return another day with different lenses and hope the baitball survived!



A large school of baitfish seeks shelter beneath the pier

Words and photos by Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver
Eco-Photo Explorers

The Frederiksted Pier is a 1,526 foot long deep water cruise ship pier located at the Ann E. Abramson Marine Facility in the town of Frederiksted on the west side of St. Croix. Although cruise ships are somewhat infrequent, the pier can accommodate vessels weighing up to 142,000 gross tons with drafts up to 29 feet. Within walking distance of the pier is the town's shopping area, with museums and restaurants available for visitors to St. Croix. When the cruise ships do put into port here, taxis and buses are readily available for tours to other parts of the island. The pier and the sleepy town jump to life at these times. But when the ships are not here, the pier is quiet, the town is refreshingly empty and the underwater world of Frederiksted Pier beckons divers to explore.

We had planned two dives on this day, starting with a late afternoon plunge followed by a night dive to capture the weird and wonderful nocturnal creatures of St. Croix. Shortly after turning our attention away from the baitball, we encountered a shy seahorse peeking out from behind a small tube sponge. The pilings are adorned with colorful corals, sponges, hydroids, gorgonians and other sedentary organisms. Christmas Tree worms abound, as do feather-dusters, and photographers can spend entire dives on one single piling captivated by a seemingly endless bounty of subjects.

© Eco-Photo Explorers

Longsnout Seahorse (Hippocampus reidi) are common beneath the Fredericksted Pier

Moving along, we came across a small purple-tipped anemone and as we looked more closely we spotted a community of Squat Anemone Shrimp standing guard among the tentacles. We even photographed a Spotted Cleaner Shrimp, its translucent body punctuated by day-glow purple and pink splotches.

Our first dive whet our appetites for the transformation into night, and our second dive began just as the sun was setting to the west. Immediately, we sensed a new dynamic beneath the pier. Many of the reef fish were tucked into nooks, crannies and crevices and were beginning a night of sleep while other creatures were just emerging for the night. A small octopus caught our attention, as did an Ocellate Swimming Crab scurrying along the bottom. We photographed the weirdly shaped Arrow Crab and came across a pair of Banded Coral Shrimp, one with the greenish clutch of eggs easily visible in her translucent belly.

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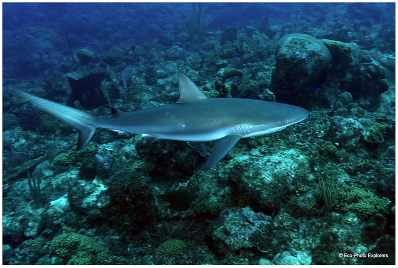
The Giant Anemone (Condylactus gigantean) provides shelter for numerous shrimp

The supposed silent world of the ocean was anything but quiet as we tuned our ears to the snapping of popping of shrimp and other crustaceans. And, as we encountered the baitball again towards our exit, we could hear the rush of fish through the water as they twisted and turned into the night.

Diving the Frederiksted Pier is an easy endeavor, but its beauty and grandeur should not be underestimated. Navigation is simple (just follow the pilings) and there is often little to no current. Divers rarely reach water deeper than 25 feet and there is no reason to try to swim to the very end of the pier as the marine subjects along the way will steal your attention.

The Frederiksted Pier is reason alone for divers to venture to St. Croix, but there are other dive sites worth exploring as well. The Davis Bay Wall on the north side of St. Croix is only a few hundred yards offshore and is within swimming distance from the shore. Here, divers find a dramatic coral reef that starts at around 30 feet and tumbles into thousands of feet of water. Swimming along the wall, we kept one eye focused on the blue water and spotted Caribbean Reef Sharks patrolling the reef in the deeper water along with Spotted Eagle Rays and a lone Amberjack.



Caribbean Reef Sharks can be encountered on St. Croix's reefs

Nearby is Cane Bay, which is home to more reefs and walls and healthy populations of typical Caribbean Reef life. It, too, is accessible as a shore dive. As with any shore dive, pay attention to wave conditions. Usually mild, the northern exposure can bring large waves on occasion that divers must respect during entries and exits. At Cane Bay we enjoyed seeing sea turtles, southern rays and healthy populations of reef fish.

On St. Croix, there is a rich history embedded into a thriving and proud community of residents. Touring the island, you are able to walk through Forts used during various time periods of St. Croix's history, the remains of old sugar mills and plantations and hike to an abandoned lighthouse built by the Danish government before the island was sold to the United States in 1917.

© Eco-Photo Explorers

The remains of old sugar mills dot the countryside of St. Croix

But for divers, the star attraction is the Frederiksted Pier. Hurricane Hugo destroyed the original pier in 1989. Construction of the new pier used some of the remains of the old pier as landfill for its platform, but most of the remnants of the old pier were removed and sunk in 110 feet of water about two miles away. And in just a few decades, the new pier has quickly become overgrown with marine life creating a healthy marine habitat for divers to enjoy.

We surfaced from our night dive and gazed at the canopy of stars above. Our minds, and our camera's memory cards, were full of images of the wonders we found below the pier. We knew we'd be back to try to capture the baitball with wide angle lenses, but for now we floated on our backs, enjoying the silence of the night and wistfully watching the trail of bioluminescence trailing our fins as we pushed slowly towards our exit point. It was time to say good night to the Frederiksted Pier.

Getting There

St. Croix is part of the United States Virgin Islands. Several air carriers service the island through Miami, Atlanta and Charlotte, North Carolina, as well as Puerto Rico.

Immunizations and Medicine

As with any travel to tropical regions, make sure all your vaccinations are up to date! All travelers should visit their personal physician or a travel health clinic to discuss what vaccinations *(e.g., Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Malaria, Typhoid, or Tetanus-diphtheria)* and travel medicine are recommended. All medicine should be packed in their original, clearly labeled containers. Having a signed and dated letter from a physician describing your medical conditions and medications is suggested.

Zika Virus is an emerging health hazard throughout many islands in the Caribbean, including St. Croix. Travelers should take appropriate mosquito precautions including the wearing of long pants and long-sleeved shirts, and the use of insect repellent.

Note: Travel health clinics usually provide more detailed health protection measures since they specialize in travel medicine. Beware of travelers' diarrhea, which is the most common travel-related ailment. Insect protection is a must and essential!

Baggage

Baggage allowances vary for each international carrier so check before you leave.

Weather

St. Croix enjoys a tropical environment, with the warmer temperatures (86-89 degrees Fahrenheit) in the summer months of May-November and the cooler temperatures (82-84 degrees Fahrenheit) in the winter months of December-April. Hurricanes are a threat during the hurricane season, which runs from June through November.

Electricity

The voltage on St. Croix is 110 volts.

Currency

The local currency is the US Dollar.

Rental Cars:

On St. Croix it is recommended to rent a car. Driving is done on the left side of the road. Taxis are expensive and local regulations prevent dive operators from providing transport to various shore diving sites, so a rental car is the best option.

Dive Operations

There are a number of dive operators on the island. We dove with Sweet Bottom Dive Center, located on the grounds of the Renaissance Carambola Beach Resort. They provide guided shore dives of Davis Bay Wall, Cane Bay and the Frederiksted Pier. They also work with many other dive shops on the island when boat dives are desired.

Words and photos by Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver
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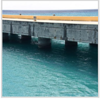
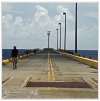
Photo Gallery (Click to enlarge):

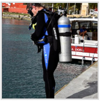


The Fredericksted Pier is one of St. Croix's best dives



The cruise ship pier at Fredericksted makes for an amazing dive when the cruise ships are not in port

The colorful town of Fredericksted



Author Michael Salvarezza prepares to dive the pier

The remains of old sugar mills dot the countryside of St. Croix

The idyllic beach at Davis Bay

Tarpon (Megalops atlanticus) hunt baitfish beneath the pier

A Tarpon (Megalops atlanticus) on the prowl

The pilings of the pier are overgrown with marine life

A diver observes the baitball beneath the pier

A large school of baitfish seeks shelter beneath the pier

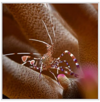
The Davis Bay Wall begins to drop off at about 50 feet of water

Soaring along the Davis Bay Wall

An Ocellate Swimming Crab (Portunus sebae) photographed on a night dive beneath the Frederickcksted Pier.

The Giant Anemone (Condylactus gigantean) provides shelter for numerous shrimp

A shy Longsnout Seahorse (Hippocampus reidi) peeks out from behind a sponge



Living in close association with anemones are the Spotted Cleaner Shrimp (Periclimenes yucatanicus)

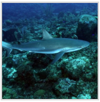
Longsnout Seahorse (Hippocampus reidi) are common beneath the Fredericksted Pier

A pair of brilliantly colored Flamingo Tongue Cowries (Cyphoma gibbosum)

A Barred Hamlet (Hypoplectrus puella) photographed at St. Croix's Cane Bay

A Peppermint Goby (Coryphopterus lipernes) stands guard on a coral head

A Glasseye Snapper looks warily out from a rocky crevice



Caribbean Reef Sharks can be encountered on St. Croix's reefs

Caribbean Reef Shark patrols the Davis Bay Wall

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1 COMMENT

N2THEBLUE SCUBA DIVING

January 21, 2017 at 5:33 pm — Reply

☀🌴😎🐠🐟⚓
Thank you for a great review of St. Croix's Pier! The diving here is the reason many of us moved here — the diving and the relaxed pace of life. The west side of the island is the calm waters and us about 35+ sites, wreck dives, and lots of life on the reefs. The north shore has both the Salt River Canyon dives and The Wall (and is our second location).

N2theBlue worked with Google Maps and took all the images for both StreetView and Trekker (hikes and trails) for St. Croix to showcase the raw, natural beauty of this place we call home.

Airport code is STX
No passports are needed for USA citizens.

Looking forward to seeing you!
N2theBlue Scuba Diving
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http://www.facebook.com/N2theBlue

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