
Stephen Frink Dives Tobago Aboard Peter Hughes' Wind Dancer, May 8 - 15, 2004

It may be hard to stop and take a picture sometimes, but given the chance Tobago reveals what may be the most diverse and fascinating reef structure in this hemisphere.

May 2004 Text and Photography by Stephen Frink

We were anchored up for the final dive of the day, just offshore of the village of Castara. "Hey Steve," Peter said. "C'mere and look at this. See those kids playing soccer on the beach? No stinkin' high rise condos, no crowds, no crime. No worries. That's the way the Caribbean's supposed to be. That's why I'm back". Peter of course is Peter Hughes, the boat is the Wind Dancer, and the island is Tobago. Oddly, in 25 years of traveling the Caribbean I'd never dived Tobago, so when Peter told me this was someplace special, I had to pay attention. And having the opportunity to dive it with my old friend made it all the more special. Peter Hughes To understand the fondness Peter has for this island we have to go back in time to 1954 and imagine a schoolboy from Trinidad going on summer holiday with his parents to the far less developed sister island, Tobago. Each summer the Hughes family would rent a small cottage in Speyside, and Peter would hang out with the local kids. They'd play soccer, no different really than the kids on the beach now 50 years later. Or maybe they'd help the local fishermen pull in their nets, taking home some jacks or whatever the local catch of the day might be as payment. Life was simple then, a great adventure for an island boy, and ultimately all about the sea. Lives often turn on a single circumstance, and in Peter's case that circumstance was a telephone. The cottage they rented had the only one on that part of the island, and the owners allowed a local businessman named Bill Petrie use of that phone. Which meant young Peter met Bill, and Bill invited him to help out around his summer camp, Camp Crusoe. Related Link www.stephenfrink.com www.peterhughes.com www.VisitTNT.com Click for exclusive savings from Peter Hughes Diving! Developed as a Caribbean wilderness getaway for boys ages 13 - 18 from the southeastern United States, Camp Crusoe had a scuba program among its activities. By the time Peter was 10, Bill figured Peter was old enough to learn scuba. That one event no doubt changed his life, for it led to his employment as an assistant scuba instructor during the summers until he finished high school, and forged his earliest memories of the underwater world.

Wind Dancer Peter's parents figured he should have a "real" job of course, so from '65 to '68 Peter trained to be an oil field engineer in Trinidad. For a young man with his heart in the sea, having work boots stuck in the dirt was hard duty. So instead he followed the siren call of the sea back to Tobago to work for Bill as a camp counselor, finally becoming camp director. For the next 3 years Peter taught scuba and ran the camp during the summer season, but also served as caretaker during the off season. With lots of spare time and a salary of just \$50 a month, Peter augmented his cash flow by spearfishing along the reefs off the northeast point of Tobago. It would take all day in a 20-foot wooden skiff with a 7-HP outboard, but he'd come home with 300 - 400 pounds of fish in a day, and an abiding appreciation for how pristine and plentiful the sea could be. From here we'll fast forward past Peter's years working at Anthony's Key Resort, past his years developing Dive Bonaire at the Flamingo Beach Resort, and even beyond meeting his wife Alice, another of the pivotal moments that shaped and defined his life. We'll move past his collaboration with Divi Resorts, through his involvement with Spanish Cove and South Cove resorts on Grand Cayman, and even past the time when he bought his first live-aboard, Sea Dancer. (Editor's note: The Sea Dancer was the progenitor of the Dancer Fleet, live-aboards that have operated in such diverse destinations as the Turks and Caicos, Belize, the Bay Islands, the Silver Bank, the Bahamas, the Red Sea, Palau, the Galapagos, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea.) Despite this long experience with some of the best diving available on the planet, Peter still fondly remembered those early dives on Tobago and was eager to share his passion for what he considered the most healthy reef system in the Caribbean. To that end, I found myself Tobago-bound on my birthday in early May. I'll have to admit I've had birthdays better-spent than leaving Miami Airport at 10:00 a.m., flying 2 hours to Barbados for a 4 hour layover, before finally landing in Tobago at 7:00 that night. There are a variety of connections to Trinidad and Tobago via American or BWIA, and then connecting with Liat or Tobago Express through either Trinidad or Barbados; but it will likely take most of a day in transit no matter where you come from. Unless of course you happen to start in the UK, where they enjoy several non-stops each week. Hard to imagine it is easier to get to Tobago from London than it is from LA, but hey, if it was too easy, it wouldn't likely be as good. At least that was my rationalization at the end of a long day of travel. Being met at the Crown Point International Airport by a uniformed representative of Wind Dancer was certainly a comfort, and having dinner and drinks waiting inside the beautifully appointed main salon made it all start to feel a bit festive after all. There were still guests arriving on a late connection from Trinidad, so most of the welcome and briefing formalities were gratefully deferred until the next morning. Here we met our 17 shipmates and 10 crew members (the Wind Dancer offers 9 double staterooms, each with en suite head and shower, see www.peterhughes.com for more specifics on Wind Dancer and Tobago in general). Here we learned of our itinerary, departing Scarborough Harbor and doing a clock-wise circumnavigation of the 23-mile long island of Tobago. See www.visitnt.com for a graphic map of the island, and a reference for our itinerary of the week. We also learned a little bit about the unique marine environment of Tobago. Trinidad and Tobago are the southernmost of the Caribbean islands, just 7 miles from Venezuela, South America. In fact, the islands were once part of what is now Venezuela, and the peaks of both islands are continuations of the Andes mountain range. Over 11,000 years ago the continual flooding of the Orinoco River washed away the land bridge, separating the islands and creating a diverse marine and terrestrial ecosystem. The island is situated with the Caribbean on one side, and the Atlantic Ocean on the other. Apparently we should expect visibility in the 60-foot range and the nearly certain probability of strong currents on some dives. These waters are fed by nutrients that originate in the Orinoco River in Venezuela. Nick Lucey of Scuba Diving magazine describes it as "a boulder in the middle of a swift river; in this case, the Guyana Current, which flows up along the South American coast and hits the island's Atlantic shore." I found an old copy of Canada's Diver magazine on

board quoting Peter with the following explanation as well. "The River is filled with brackish nutrient from the jungles of Venezeula, and when the jungle water mixes with the Equatorial Current around Tobago, the particles drop out of solution and become the food that feeds the corals and attracts the fish. Sometimes this affects the visibility, but that's why we are seeing the pinnacle of the underwater food chain. Everything from schooling hammerhead sharks to giant manta rays to prolific reef tropicals abound here. We brought the Wind Dancer here specifically for the wild beauty and pristine nature of the reefs". High praise indeed, and now we'll have a week to form our own opinions. I won't cover every single dive of our week, but will describe some of my personal favorites, dives that demonstrate the diversity of the Wind Dancer itinerary. The Crown Point region is the primary tourist center on the island, and is where the airport is located. Nearby is the island's main commercial center, Scarborough, and the marina where Wind Dancer boards and provisions. The trip from airport to boat is brief, as is the steam from the dock to the first dive site. The first dive, gratefully, was not a throwaway checkout dive like happens too often on too many boats, but actually a nice 350-foot shipwreck called the Maverick. The Maverick was once a car-ferry that plied the waters between Trinidad and Tobago, sunk intentionally as a shipwreck in 1997. She now rests perfectly upright in 100 feet of water, rising to a depth of perhaps 60 feet. There might be a bit of depth to contend with considering this is the first dive of the week, but there is no current, making it a nice intro to Tobago diving. Once on the wreck we found a lavish decoration along the bow, mostly white colonial hydroids, and marine life consisting of schooling bar jack, barracuda, grouper, and the French and Queen Angelfish that appear so prolific in these waters. True to prediction, visibility was about 60 feet, but likewise true to prediction, there was enough marine life surrounding the wreck that less-than-stellar water visibility was not much of an issue. Dutchman's Reef was our first affirmation that the coral reef is indeed healthy here. Visibility was only in the 50-foot range but there were healthy stands of elkhorn coral, an all-to-rare sighting in the Caribbean these days. The boulder corals and sea fans were the most dominant species along this reef however; each crowding the other so there is barely a fin-tip's space to alight for a photograph. Most photography had to be done holding neutral buoyancy mid-water to avoid contact with the pristine corals, or perhaps at the base of the reef slope in the sand at 45 to 50 feet. Even early on in the trip I had a sense of which fish would be easy and which would be tough to photograph. The French angels were fearless, while the queens were skittish. Grunts were not as bold as I'm accustomed to finding them in the Florida Keys, but the smaller fish like hamlets, drums, and butterflyfish were quite cooperative. Eels, both spotted and green morays, seemed pretty common. These seemed like the kind of waters where camouflaged creatures like seahorse, frogfish, and flying gurnards would be sighted as well, but I saw none of the above this day. Castara Reef was an easy dive along a mini-wall, conducted from the mother ship's anchorage for the night. Like Mt. Irvine Wall dived earlier, invertebrate life abounds here with massive congregates of Christmas tree and feather duster worms decorating a sponge-encrusted rocky wall. Small chromis and damsels were prolific, and as the dive was done at dusk there were the normal transitions from day to night. This was a classic example of the wrong tool for the wrong job, for I went down set up with a 17-40mm zoom on a Canon EOS1Ds thinking I would photograph medium sized reef fish and maybe be poised to catch a diver portrait or sea turtle. But this was really right for a 100mm macro, and if I hadn't been so lazy I'd have gone back to the Wind Dancer to change lenses.

Tender Diving - It should be noted that all the dives this week were done from the two dive tenders, custom built twenty five-foot fiberglass Privateers equipped with twin 90HP four-stroke Honda engines. Each tender is equipped with VHF radio, signaling device, first aid kit, oxygen equipment and a hull filled with foam floatation for safety. The foam injection makes them essentially unsinkable, and the normal Peter Hughes dive amenities such as custom tank racks, equipment bins, camera storage area, Bimini top for protection from the sun, and a heavy-duty boarding ladder make these convenient dive platforms. Given the probability of currents sweeping the reef, and the fact that the very best diving is not in the very best place to attach a mooring buoy, diving from smaller chase boats is the only logical way to handle this destination. Being fit enough to handle a back-roll entry from a small boat, and then climbing back up a dive ladder, should be obvious prerequisites for the Tobago adventure.

I awoke the next morning with the distinct impression we had made a wrong turn and ended up in the Galapagos. Of course, there were still the verdant hillsides of Tobago to starboard, but off the port bow were a series of five large pinnacles known as the Sisters. These small islets were geographically reminiscent of places like The Indians in the British Virgin Islands, some of the rock formations off Saba, or even some of the rock outcroppings in Cocos. While similar in many ways, Sisters I offers a fairly easy drift, reef on your left, along rock ledges filled with bigeye snapper and squirrelfish. The sponge life here is quite impressive, and while yesterday's dives were notable for the boulder corals, today sponge life dominates. Testament no doubt to the prevailing currents here. While I stayed in 70 feet of water and less this dive, those who explored the deeper reaches of the reef were rewarded with relatively close encounters with great hammerhead sharks. Only lately has the Wind Dancer been noticing how common great hammerheads are at certain times of the year, and while the divemasters predicted we'd see hammerheads on this site, I figured it was too much of a wild card to plan the dive around. Maybe next time I'll listen to local knowledge and come home with a hammerhead shot to prove it. Sisters II has the potential to lure a diver deeper, as the drop-off plunges from about 50 to 120 feet. Large gorgonia sea fans decorate the reef below about 65 feet. Up in the surge zone, from the surface to about 25 feet, there is always good potential to spot tarpon or schools of copper sweeper. Later in the day we made an exploratory dive to nearby Brothers Rock. While not part of the normal itinerary, Peter remembered it as a great place for spearfishing from his youth, so we opted to give it a try. Gratefully, whatever the progeny of whatever fish Peter and his

friends might have taken away three decades before had returned. We found plenty of angelfish, eels, chromis, barracuda, and even a few turtles on this dive; but the seas were rough enough so the visibility was only about 30 feet. Because these islands are closer to shore, runoff from any rain (and it had rained a lot earlier in the week) will step on visibility, making the Sisters a better call this day. On a calm day in the dry season, this site bears great potential. By Tuesday we had motored to the St. Giles Islands. Lawson Wood describes this region in Lonely Planet's Diving & Snorkeling Trinidad & Tobago thus: "This small group of islands is unique in that it lies at the crossroads of the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. They are often regarded as Mecca for adventure diving, and rightly so. Most dive sites around the island are subject to oceanic surge, and the Guyana Current pushes through the area at quite a speed. The waters in this area contain vast amounts of plankton and sustain large colonies of giant brain corals. Though the Guyana Current lessens the underwater visibility somewhat, the rewards of diving the area are very high in terms of pelagic life. Stingrays are common, as are mantas, large tarpon, and barracuda. Because of the confluence of the Caribbean and the Atlantic, the St. Giles Islands tend to have different marine life communities than other areas of Tobago". Well, I might not go so far as to say mantas are common, for I did not see one, but the part about it being rewarding in terms of marine life is pretty right-on.

With two dive tenders the normal protocol is for each group to dive different areas of the reef, or in this case, different pinnacles. Our group started off with London Bridge while the other tender dived Marble Island, and then we alternated for the subsequent dive. London Bridge is a solitary rock with a massive natural archway, once again topographically reminiscent of the Galapagos. It was relatively calm this day, but when the winds are raging this is probably a pretty rowdy dive due to surge conditions. As all dives this week, we were very thoroughly briefed by the dive staff ahead of time with an illustrated rendering of the highlights and potential concerns of the dive. True to their predictions we started with the reef on our left and gently drifted along the wall face, stopping now and then to photograph huge sponge formations or tropical reef life. There is a long rocky ridge that funnels the water from the east through the archway. Underwater it is not nearly so massive as topside, in fact at one point is probably only about 4 feet wide. It is pretty heavily shadowed inside the passageway, but the model light from my strobe revealed all kinds of colorful encrusting sponge and gorgonia fans lining the wall. Actually, this is a pretty amazing dive site, not only for the colorful filter feeders lining the wall, but also for the tarpon and rainbow runners that prowl the shallows. While we only did this one once, I'd be game to dive it all day actually. But then I would have missed Marble Island, which I likewise enjoyed. Decisions, decisions. Marble Island is really two separate rock formations, but the surge channel between the two islets is fascinating both in terms of texture and inhabitants. Dives along these channel present depths from 30 to 70 feet and a high probability of spotting hawksbill turtles, barracuda, snapper, rainbow runner, and possibly spotted eagle rays.

A note about drift diving in Tobago - The trip preparation information from Peter Hughes Diving was pretty explicit about the probability of heavy currents, but so far we'd seen only some gentle drifts and a bit of surge. But nothing really to justify the disclaimers I'd heard about Tobago diving. I asked Peter about this, and he said that he would rather overstate the possibility of heavy current in the hopes that divers would be well prepared for the eventuality. Besides which, we hadn't been to Speyside yet, and currents would no doubt increase along that part of the island. Peter made the logical observation that currents of course depend on local tidal and wind conditions that sweep the Guyana Current closer to any given dive site. But all dives will be conducted as if there is current. Which means divers will be equipped with a signaling device like a safety sausage (my favorite being the Aqua Lung SOS, but that may be because I invented it). Divemasters will deploy a ball on the surface, tethered to a reeled line so that the dive tender can follow their progress along the reef. They will also have a redundant safety sausage they can deploy at depth so the boat can follow the group even while they do their subsurface safety stop.

By Wednesday the Wind Dancer has navigated past the northeast tip of the island and set a southeasterly course for Speyside, typically regarded as the best diving in Tobago. While the seas are pretty well protected from the prevailing winds here, currents very much determine which sites should be dived when. The Lonely Planet guide notes that Japanese Gardens is a "slow-moving drift dive", yet the day I was there divers from a land-based operation had already aborted their dive due to excessive current. So, every day is a bit different, and here is definitely the place to pay attention to the dive briefings. For example, when they say terminate the dive at a certain point or come up close to the protection of the wall, believe them. Some of the divemasters are from Speyside, so they know the peculiarities of these reefs intimately. They can read the surface currents and will have sage advice for diving these sites safely. Judging from what I saw in the Speyside vicinity, we could easily spend a week here alone and never exhaust the potential. In the two and a half days we did around Speyside most of the diving was done in proximity to Little Tobago Island and Goat Island. There appear to be countless small pinnacles and offshore islets in this region, collectively providing some pretty amazing underwater potential. Bookends gets its name from a pair of giant rocks with a vertical slit cut by wave action separating the two. Diving the wrong side of the islands at the wrong time can present a challenge, or even a hazard if surge conditions are strong. But with a good dive briefing and good local guide, this can be a very entertaining dive. At around 15 - 25 feet there is a natural coral amphitheater carved into the rock face which is totally protected from the current. Here one is likely to find nurse sharks or green moray eels, as well as the omnipresent French angelfish. Huge congregates of Creole wrasse and blue chromis attract large tarpon as well, and photographing them with the breaking white water behind is one of the signatures of a dive at Bookends. One of the highlights will no doubt be Kelleston Drain. I guess I should have had some trepidation about jumping into any dive site that has the word "Drain" in it, but somehow I

missed the illusion to accelerated current. And in fact it was fairly modest at the outset. I found gorgeous concentrations of orange elephant ear sponge decorated with crimson rope sponge to serve as foregrounds for some diver portraits, but quickly discovered that if I situated myself comfortably downcurrent, my model would quickly sweep past the set-up and have to struggle to reposition. Again, the problem became finding a place to anchor upcurrent without impacting the reef. Given the density of the sponge and coral life along the slope, it was pretty well obvious there was no sand or rubble bottom in which to kneel. Instead, we developed a system whereby both photographer and model would fin into position, grab a quick few shots while swimming against the current, and then release to drift on to the next set-up. Actually, once we got the rhythm of the shoot, it became kind of fun, and quite productive. Kelleston Drain is the site where you'll find the massive brain coral head (*Colpophyllia natans*) that so often appears in Tobago promotions. Billed as "the largest brain coral in the Caribbean", it is indeed a massive structure. Judging by the perspective of a diver in proximity to this coral head, I guess it to be maybe 20 feet wide by 12 feet high. While I haven't seen all the brain corals in the Caribbean, but I've seen quite a few and nothing seen so far leads me to dispute their claim to fame.

At Angel Reef I found a fairly steep reef slope decorated with delicate finger corals and punctuated with sea fans. While the divemasters and most of the group went for a drift along the 50 to 60 foot depth range, I stayed in the shallows at no more than 30 feet photographing snake eels foraging for their dinner and white-spot filefish at cleaning stations. Actually, this site was terrific for medium sized reef tropicals and I doubt I moved 200 yards down the wall during the entire dive. The rest of the group however was in drift mode and they exited downcurrent from where I popped up. However, I was comfortable floating with my SOS deployed while the dive tender picked up the rest of the group and then quickly motored to my location. Not that it was a concern at all, but it did serve to illustrate how the needs of a dive photographer are so often different than those who wish merely to look at the reef. The pace is different, the objectives are different, and it is sometimes hard for a dive operator to coordinate both priorities on a single dive. Related

www.stephenfrink.comwww.peterhughes.comwww.VisitTNT.com Click for exclusive savings from Peter Hughes Diving! Peter and I had a conversation early on in the cruise where I told him in reading his promotional materials I thought he might be understating the water clarity and overstating the challenges of diving Tobago. Now, having spent a week aboard Wind Dancer, I see he is probably pretty accurate. The water clarity is not normally the stunning 150-foot vis we might find in the southern Bahamas, but rather 50 to 70 feet on average. Sometimes more, sometimes less. The tradeoff is that these are some of the richest reefs anywhere in the Caribbean. There is virtually zero algae here, and what exists is being grazed upon by long-spined sea urchins. As it should be. This is obviously a very healthy and balanced ecosystem, colorful and vibrant. The water is clear enough for most wide-angle photography, and there is a wealth of imaging potential as the reef is viewed in smaller vignettes. I suspect there is terrific potential for the smaller, more cryptic reef dwellers as well. However, the divemasters have spent so much time watching over groups in currents, their watchful eyes have not yet targeted the frogfish, toadfish, and seahorse that have to be here. I suspect there is great potential for this in the future as Wind Dancer logs more Tobago-time with underwater photographers aboard. The "big boys" of the reef are not necessarily common, but manta rays, great hammerheads, and even whale sharks will certainly make their presence known as well. As for the challenges of Tobago diving, clearly this is a destination for experienced divers, at least in the St. Giles/Speyside regions. There will be current, but the dives are structured with that in mind. The drifts can be exhilarating and they are conducted very safely aboard Wind Dancer. It may be hard to stop and take a picture sometimes, but so long as that is not your only 24/7 obsession, Tobago reveals what may be the most diverse and fascinating reef structure in this hemisphere. Peter Hughes Diving is offering a special discount to experience Tobago aboard Wind Dancer, available only to readers of this article. Please check out <http://www.peterhughes.com/TobagoValueDays.shtml> for details.