

Grenada runs deep with shipwrecks, history, scenery

By Neil Cote

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GRENADA, West Indies - When a small island chain's chief natural resource is nutmeg, you need to bring a lot of stuff in.

And when the goods typically arrive in diminutive, aging rustbucket freighters, well it figures that the regional seabed would be littered with shipwrecks. At last count there were nine off the coast here that were diveable and likely many others too deep to be explored.

Not good for mariners. But good for marine life and for those of us who delight in observing the undersea world with fins, mask and compressed air.

Case in point: the humble little Shakem, which on May 30, 2001 went from working freighter to unplanned artificial reef while steaming in from Trinidad with its holds overloaded with concrete that shifted, causing the ship to list in rough seas. The Shakem went down within easy sight of the mainland. And there it remains, on keel and upright in 110 feet of water with both anchor lines down and many sacks of very wet concrete still in place.

Accessible to divers with basic certification, the Shakem is now one of the must-see wrecks that make the waters of Grenada a diver's delight.

Soon after going under the waves, the Shakem attracted a slew of pelagic critters, and they've kept on coming. Octopus and moray eels have found haven in the deteriorating vessel's many nooks and crannies. Barracuda hover over the deck like stationary torpedoes.

More experienced divers can drop onto the stern, working their way through the cabin decks and into the lower rooms where a generator is still in place, although we're talking water so dark that a torch may be necessary for visibility.

Up until last March 5, the Shakem was the newest addition to the submerged wrecks, but then the freighter Hema I went down in 90 feet of water just a few miles off the south coast en route to Trinidad. Among its tenants is the ubiquitous nurse shark, a usually docile species that resembles a huge catfish. Rays, turtles, moray eels and lobsters also have taken up housekeeping at Hema I.

Then there's the so-called Titanic of the Carribean, the Bianca C, a 600-foot Italian cruise ship that sunk in October 1961 while being towed to port after an explosion and fire had disabled her engine room. Its final resting spot is between 90 and 140 feet beneath the waves; current and depth make her suitable for expert divers only (despite my protestations, my guides would not let me dive there).

The fact that our hotel, the True Blue Bay Resort (www.truebluebay.com; rates from about \$160) on Grenada's southwest side, lacks a real surf beach wasn't of much concern to those of us who know the best swimming is always underwater, and at True Blue's entrance is Aquanauts Grenada (www.aquanautgrenada.com), a PADI 5-star diving operation.

Founded and run by some adventurous Europeans, Aquanauts operates three custom-designed dive boats and is most familiar with the reefs and wrecks that make up 30 nearby dive sites.

Among the other dives my companions and I did with Aquanauts was Shark Reef (named for the nurse sharks, most of which stayed away).

We also tried a night dive along another reef that led to the stern quarter of a cargo ship, where Caribbean lobsters were hanging out. If you've never dived at night, the act of descending with moonbeams shining through the water gives one

the sensation of a most peaceful ascension to the hereafter. Go to the light . . .

Much as we might have desired, we couldn't spend all our time underwater, if for no other reason than extended time on dry land is advisable between the last dive and flight home as a precautionary measure against the bends (doubly important here because the nearest recompression chamber is a helicopter's flight to Trinidad, and flying is never advisable for one vexed by excess nitrogen in the blood).

So my companions and I toured the mountainous, 133-square-mile island with historian and guide Kennedy Jawahir. He pointed out landmarks such as the St. George fort where the late leftist Prime Minister Maurice Bishop was executed by far-left extremists following the coup that preceded the U.S. invasion of 1983. Faded pro-U.S. graffiti still decorates walls.

We lunched at Morne Fendue, a hill-country inn and restaurant where Ronald Reagan visited after the U.S. invasion, and toured a nutmeg plantation and chocolate factory before a drive up the 2,700-foot-high Mount St. Catherine that dominates Grenada's geography.

Located on the very end of the Caribbean's hurricane zone, Grenada usually is spared the megastorms. But last year's Hurricane Ivan did not play by the normal meteorological rules and made fast work of hundreds, maybe thousands, of shack homes, tore the roofs off even sturdier buildings, flooded waterfront hotels and flattened much of the rainforest's fauna.

From mountain roads through the rainforest, we saw the devastation, with acres upon acres of trees felled. "It'll take 30 years for this to grow back," Jawahir told us. House and building repairs won't take that long, although the 50-year storm that was Ivan didn't wait another 49 years before revisiting. Emily had the honors this past summer. Which, of course, has meant a lot more rebuilding to do. And a lot more lumber, steel and concrete to be imported. Some of it aboard ships that might make an insurer cringe. Potential dive sites of the future? No one's wishing for that, but . . .

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