

Over The Volcano!

Graham Sands was looking for a relaxed holiday destination with a little scenic diving thrown in. He got both in abundance and these are the thoughts of our man in Carriacou ...

OVER THE volcanic area, I took out my regulator to taste the bubbles rising from the sea bed. The main vent with all its primeval fire and energy was several miles to the south of us, but since I was here for a holiday not a tekkie trip, this hint of dilute fart was as close as I was going to get.

Apart from the ferry ride over from the main island, which more or less motors over the top of it, 'Kick 'em Jenny' rears up 1300m to reach within 160m of the surface; the next time she erupts it could create the Caribbean version of Surtsey. But for now all you see are the pointy extinct peaks of the Grenadine islands, hauntingly reminiscent of the Western Highlands; I kept thinking that round the next headland I would stumble upon Ullapool.

In fact what does appear is the harbour at Hillsborough; what mixture of rum and homesickness for Sheffield has inspired that name? It's the main settlement on the island of Carriacou, and laid-back does not begin to describe its torpor. Shops and cafés slid from being closed for the Carnival, to being closed because Carnival was over, without any intervening spasm of activity.

The giant octopus generally put in an appearance around 5pm, along with the nylon/papier maché cuttlefish, shark and small fry, jiggling and dancing behind the float entitled Fruits of the Sea. Some 50 yards in its wake lurched the other float;

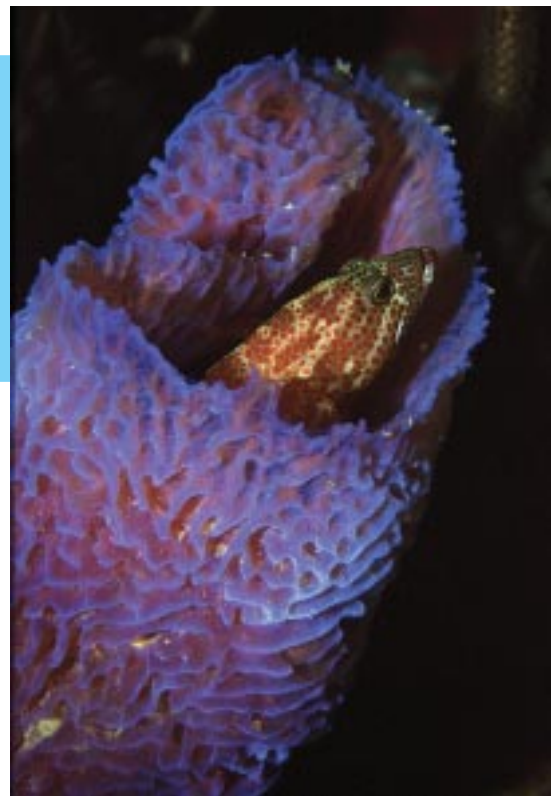
a one-horse town this may be, but hey at least Hillsborough manages two trucks in its Mardi Gras parade.

A relief to get to sea, on Silver Diving's slick operation. The main dive sites are the islets just 10 minutes out in the bay, so the usual schedule is for one-tank dives at 9.30am and 1.30pm. Sandy Island belies its name - as the main snorkelling and sun-lounging spot, it is composed mostly of mislaid sunglasses, wallets and picnic baskets. Sisters Rocks, my favourite, are twin pinnacles connected just below the waterline, and perhaps the best for life and general scenery.

Mabouye Island has the volcanic area and (maybe coincidentally) some very weird critters; I'm not sure if I'd dare to do a night dive here. I was trying to admire the common but colourful stuff - tang, drum, jacks, triggerfish while the group kept waving me over to peruse the rare grey slugs. I was sorely tempted to whack a few and increase their rarity, to everyone's benefit, not least the miserable slugs. And then at the base of the reef lurked The Thing, in all its hideous coiled, segmented glory. We debated later whether it was a nereid, a eunicea worm or just plain mutant.

Between dives, I returned for midday siesta at Ade's Dream B&B, almost next door to Silver Diving. A deep hush descended upon Carriacou, broken only by the crash of dominoes from the guys in the café.

There were seldom half a dozen of us for the morning dive, and afternoons I was sometimes the only customer. So who should come here? I wondered about this as I padded around the island, late afternoons, in flimsy unsuitable deck shoes, along roads gone to rack and ruin. Past abandoned indigo works, down plantain-fringed lanes where iguanas skittered, past Dumfries and Dover and all the way up north to Gun Point, where the view stretched out over calm reaches of sea, to Petit Martinique, Union and beyond. I would still be wondering come nightfall, as I sat with a beer and a plate of chicken and rice, just me and the insectocutor - the only activity in the bar. You certainly need to bring your own company if you come here.



A native Carriacouan has found a home in an azure vase (photo reproduced courtesy of James Burns)

The diving is laid-back; suitable for novice/early open-water level, but there are other places you'd think of first for that purpose. Think especially of Grenada, which you usually have to transit to get here (it is possible to fly via Barbados and avoid the overnight stay in Grenada, but you pay a lot more). Grenada is an excellent all-round holiday destination; say you had two weeks there, you might consider two or three days on Carriacou in the middle. Or, as in my case, if you've done Grenada already, and just want a peaceful dive holiday with limited other amusements.

There are inter-island flights but the ferry is a more relaxing method, it only takes 90 minutes, and doesn't constrain you over weight or dive-to-fly intervals. Either way, you'll step off into the welcoming calm of this out-of-the-way island of Carriacou; but perhaps that calm is deceptive, for beneath the sea's surface, the volcano and The Thing await you.

Practical stuff: Graham Sands booked through Divetours, based in Chester (www.divetours.co.uk), and paid £740 - great value - for Saturday return flights Gatwick - Grenada with Excelair, one night's accommodation on Grenada, transfers and ferry, and six nights B & B at Ade's Dream in Hillsborough. He paid about \$330 for ten dives (tank and weights, but own kit) with Carriacou Silver Diving (www.scubamax.com). He returned by ferry and flew home without an overnight stopover, but this connection was much too close for comfort. And the volcano Kick 'em Jenny can be contacted via vulcan.wr.usgs.gov