

SEARCH  GO

- Diving News
- Travel News
- Gear News
- Travel Features
- Diving Gear
- UK Diving
- Wrecks
- Training
- Skills Booster
- Marine Life
- Photography
- Other Topics
- Trade News
- LIVEBOARD GUIDE
- Directories

- Gear QuickLinks**
- Andark
  - Apeks
  - Aqualung
  - Atomic
  - Mares
  - SeacSub
  - Simply Scuba
  - Underwater World
  - Watersports Warehouse
  - Whites

- Travel QuickLinks**
- Dive Quest
  - Dive Holiday Designers
  - Diverse Travel
  - Egypt
  - Planet Dive Holidays
  - RegalDive
  - Scuba Tours Worldwide
  - Scuba Travel
  - Sportif Dive Holidays
  - The Scuba Place



- ▶ How to save a life one dive at a time
- ▶ Your Strangest Dives
- ▶ The hangers-on
- ▶ Pandora's Box Of Wonders
- ▶ Tulamben hat-trick
- ▶ Alor unto itself
- ▶ Confessions of a Photo Pro
- ▶ The final frontier?
- ▶ BE THE CHAMP! - a close look at bokeh
- ▶ Dolphin Dreams Come true
- ▶ Under the boardwalk 1
- ▶ Reviews
- ▶ DIVER Tests

From OCTOBER DIVER



## Under the boardwalk

Appeared in DIVER October 2016

**MICHAEL SALVAREZZA and CHRISTOPHER P WEAVER have been diving St Croix's Frederiksted Pier**

**STANDING AT THE EDGE OF** the pier, the tropical sun beating down on us as we stood kitted-up ready to step into the water, the famous chords of an old Drifters song seemed to be locked into our brains: Under the boardwalk, out of the sun; Under the boardwalk, we'll be havin' some fun...

It was too enticing to wait any longer, so we took a giant stride off the side of St Croix's Frederiksted Pier and splashed into 5m 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.

We swam a short 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.

And then we spied the source of the baitball's fear. Several metre-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 perception of 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 realised that 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 that the baitball survived.

We were diving a 465m-long deepwater cruise-ship pier in the town of Frederiksted on the west side of St Croix. Although ships visit infrequently, the pier can accommodate vessels weighing up to 142,000 gross tons, with drafts up to 9m or so.

Within walking distance of the pier is the town's shopping area, with museums and restaurants. When the cruise-ships do put in, taxis and buses are readily available for tours to other parts of the island, and the pier and normally sleepy town jump to life at these times.

**AT OTHER TIMES THE PIER** is quiet, the town refreshingly empty and the underwater world of Frederiksted Pier beckons divers.

We had planned two dives, 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 colourful corals, sponges, hydroids, gorgonians and other sedentary organisms. Christmas-tree worms abound, as do featherdusters, and photographers can spend entire dives on a single piling captivated by a seemingly endless bounty of subjects.

Moving along, we came across a small purple-tipped anemone and, as we looked more closely, 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-glo purple and pink splotches.

Our first dive whetted our appetites for the transformation into night, and the second began just as the sun was setting.

At once 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.

The world of the ocean was anything but quiet as we tuned our ears to the snapping and 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 in the night.

**DIVING FREDERIKSTED PIER** is easy, 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 8m and there is no reason to try to swim to the very end of the pier, because the marine subjects along the way will steal your attention.

The pier alone is reason for divers to venture to St Croix, but there are other dive-sites worth exploring. Davis Bay Wall on the north side is only a few hundred metres offshore, within swimming distance. Here, divers find a dramatic coral reef that starts at around 9m and tumbles into thousands of feet of water.

Swimming along the wall, we kept one eye focused on the blue and spotted Caribbean reef sharks patrolling the reef in the deeper water, along with spotted eagle rays and a lone amberjack.

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 on any shore dive, pay attention to wave conditions. Usually mild, the northern exposure can occasionally bring large waves, and divers must respect the possibility on entries and exits. At Cane Bay we enjoyed seeing turtles, southern rays and healthy populations of reef fish.

St Croix's rich history is embedded in its thriving and proud community of residents. You can walk through forts, 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 USA in 1917.

But for divers, the star attraction is the pier. Hurricane Hugo destroyed the original in 1989, and construction of its replacement used remains of the old pier as landfill for its platform. However, most of the remnants were removed and sunk in 30m about two miles away.

And in only a few decades, the new pier quickly became 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 had found beneath 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 goodnight to Frederiksted Pier.

**FACTFILE**

**GETTING THERE:** St Croix is part of the US Virgin Islands. Several air-carriers service the island through US hubs. Car rental is recommended – taxis are expensive and, oddly, local regulations prevent dive-operators providing transport to shore-diving sites.

**DIVING & ACCOMMODATION:** Mike and Christopher dived with Sweet Bottom Dive Centre at the Renaissance Carambola Beach Resort. It provides guided shore dives of Davis Bay Wall, Cane Bay and the Frederiksted Pier and co-operates with other centres when boat-dives are required, [www.sweetbottomdive.com](http://www.sweetbottomdive.com)

**WHEN TO GO:** It is warmest from May-November. Hurricanes are a threat during hurricane season from June through November.

**CURRENCY:** US dollar.

**PRICES:** Return flights from UK from £1030. Renaissance Carambola rooms from US\$285 a night. Sweet Bottom six-tank shore-dive package including pier day and night-dives, \$285.

**VISITOR INFORMATION:** [www.visitusvi.com](http://www.visitusvi.com)



Tarpon hunt baitfish beneath the pier



The cruise-ship pier at Frederiksted makes for an amazing dive when the vessels are not in port



A barred hamlet at St Croix's Cane Bay



ocellate swimming crab beneath Frederiksted Pier



longsnout seahorses are common beneath the pier



a pair of brilliantly coloured flamingo-tongue cowries



The pilings of the pier are overgrown with marine life.



Caribbean reef shark patrols the Davis Bay wall



A diver observes the baitball beneath the pier.



The beach at Davis Bay



St Croix



Michael Salvarezza



Christopher Weaver

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