

Grenada

IF YOU'RE looking for the quintessential Caribbean island, look no further than Grenada. A mountain topped by a rainforest, packed rich with flora and fauna, encircled by long stretches of sandy beaches and interspersed with attractive bays – Grenada ticks all the boxes.

Renowned as an exporter of spices, the island is equally well known for its friendly locals, who famously exhibited their hospitality in 1961 when a flotilla of local boats rescued and accommodated survivors from the Bianca C liner following a fire in the ship's engine room.

Tourism is now Grenada's largest industry, with a large number of Brits taking advantage of the frequent flights to the island. In 2004 Hurricane Ivan hit the island and caused considerable damage. However, within weeks of the hurricane, power lines were back up and divers were back in the water. Services are now restored and in many cases better than ever. Unfortunately, Ivan has taken its toll on the island's tourist industry. With visitor numbers down, there are plenty of good deals to be had. In fact, now could be the best time to visit the island.

THE DIVING

The best of the diving is located around the southwest of the island in the area between the capital St George's and Grenada's southern tip at L'Anse Aux Épinés. Here there are two types of dives, those situated on the Atlantic side of the island and those on the Caribbean side. The Atlantic side has stronger currents and conditions, and is characterised by big fish such as nurse and

reef sharks and barracuda. On the Caribbean side, conditions are generally easier, with smaller schooling fish and good quality reefs. This side is also host to one of the world's greatest wrecks – the mighty Bianca C.

Hurricane Ivan's effect on the diving has been mixed, but in one way has been positive. While Shark Reef had considerable damage to the colourful sponges that rise from the reef and the San Juan wreck was broken in two, on the plus side the hurricane swept away a lot of algae allowing for new growth on many of the reefs.

Wrecks are the crown of Grenada's diving, with the Bianca C being its jewel. At 200m long and lying in 50m of water, this ship is quite simply stunning. The stern section lies on its starboard side, but from midships to the bow the wreck sits upright. Black corals thrive on either side of the wreck, and schools of jacks and spadefish follow you along the length of the ship. You can even swim inside the on-deck swimming pool, which sits at 30m.

The Bianca C, however, is not the only wreck in the area. The King Mitch is a former US Navy minesweeper which sits four miles out into the Atlantic at a depth of 35m. The ship is home to a number of sharks, as well as eagle rays and turtles.

Also on the Atlantic side, and now broken in two as a result of Hurricane Ivan, the San Juan is a former fishing vessel that is now packed with nurse sharks. The sharks went AWOL for a few weeks following the hurricane, but they are now back in bigger numbers than ever.

Situated between the San Juan and King

Bigger view: left, a diver checks out one of the davits on the Bianca C; a school of reef sharks



Mitch, a new wreck has recently been discovered. The Hema I is a freighter which sank in March and is set to become a major dive site for Grenada. The wreck lies at 30m and sharks are already visiting the site.

Wrecks and sharks are Grenada's greatest features. The reefs aren't packed with fish, compared with the Red Sea or the Maldives, but the setting is undeniably exquisite and well worth a visit.

WHEN TO GO

The rainy season is from June to November. Average temperatures range from 24°C to 32°C, with water temperatures averaging 26–28°C. The lowest temperatures are from December to February.

WHERE TO STAY

There's a lot of accommodation on the island, most of which takes the form of large beachfront hotels. True Blue Bay (www.truebluebay.com) to the south of Grand Anse beach offers stunning views of the bay and is the base for Aquanauts Grenada dive centre (tel: 001 473 4441126, website: www.aquanautgrenada.com). The Calabash Hotel (www.calabashhotel.com) on L'Anse Aux Épinés beach offers a variety of rooms and villas and is the base of ScubaTech Grenada (tel: 001 473 440 6789, website: www.scubatech-grenada.com).

GETTING THERE

British Airways, Virgin and Excel Airways (book through Golden Caribbean on 01342 3169000, www.goldencaribbean.com) offer regular direct flights from London Gatwick.

