

St. Thomas

Bottle Divers Port of Plenty

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A view of Bolongo Bay.

Through history St. Thomas has been a crossroads of maritime shipping. First contact came when Columbus anchored off of St. Croix on his second voyage in 1493. During this visit Columbus named the entire group of islands in honor of St. Ursula and her 11,000 martyred "virgins". Hence the Virgin Islands were claimed by Spain and warred over during the next 200 years with the Dutch, English and French. All towards the pursuit of growing sugarcane to distill and bottle rum... a prized commodity in Europe during that era.

The French finally won out only to be outdone by the Danes in 1671. In 1764 St. Thomas was declared a free port by Danish King Frederick V. This single event opened the door to trading vessels of every nation venturing into the Caribbean. From this date till the 1850's (when slavery was abolished curtailing sugar and rum production and the concurrent advent of the steamship) St. Thomas was a bustling seaport, and the bottles which come from its surrounding waters are testament to these rich times.

Diving for bottles in the waters around St. Thomas is markedly different from other Caribbean islands. The diving that occurs in this area is done at locations other than the harbor, a distinct contrast to many other island destinations. Here in St. Thomas, diving is not allowed in the harbor adjacent to Charlotte Amalie. Consequently, diving for bottles is done in areas where one of several events took place in olden days of yore:

- Refuge was jettisoned outside the port, of which bottles were included.
- Many ships actually anchored just outside of major harbors, and constantly disposed of their waste by simply discarding them overboard.

- Numerous ships have been known to capsize thereby unexpectedly dumping their contents overboard. This usually occurred due to hitting obstacles, swamping during hurricanes, or as a result of fluke rogue waves (see headlines from newspaper) also known universally as tsunamis.

We had the pleasure of visiting St. Thomas during the Month of Feb. and were hosted by Bolongo Bay Resort and St. Thomas Diving

Club (which is located on property). Bolongo Bay offers an ideal location for visiting bottle divers. It is located just a few miles to the east of the harbor entrance and just north of a submerged area known as Packete Rock. Its unique location and excellent accommodations, beautiful beach and accommodating PADI dive operator, make this the property of choice for visiting divers in search of bottles.

During our visit we had the fortune to dive with Sigrid "Tejo" and Doug Sprotte both veteran dive instructors as well as avid bottle collectors. On one of our many dives we traversed featureless bottom in 60 feet where Tejo came upon twin Webb torpedoes. As the sand was



Two bottles found on diving trip.