VOL. 139, NO. 5 MAY 1971

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HOWARD LA FAY, DICK DURRANCE II

BUCK ISLAND—UNDERWATER JEWEL 677
JERRY AND IDAZ GREENBERG

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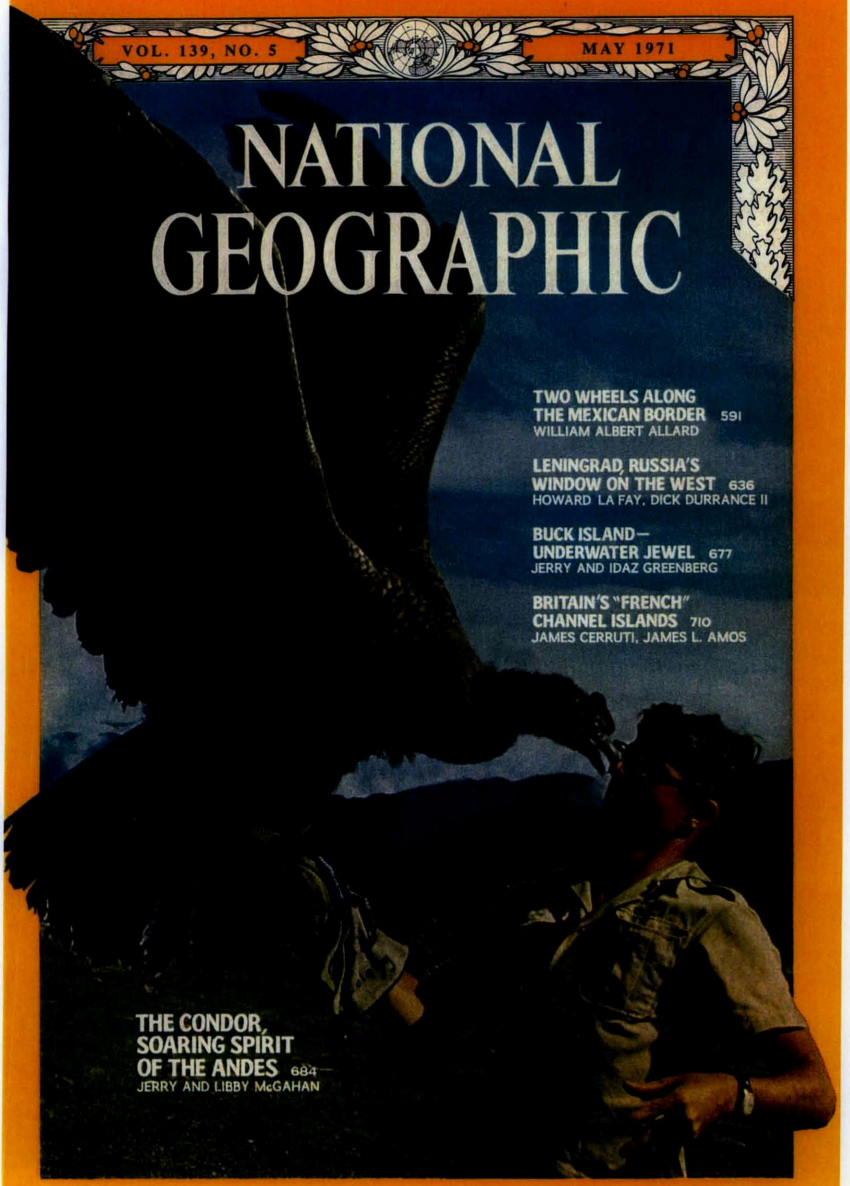
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# Buck Island–Underwater Jewel

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JERRY AND IDAZ GREENBERG

IN A TURQUOISE WORLD of sunlight and shadow, we swim through a multihued garden: clusters of golden elkhorn coral with antlers tall as a man; towering sea fans and feathers swaying in the current; and giant heads of convoluted brain coral. We are exploring a skin-diver's paradise, the fascinating underwater trail of Buck Island Reef National Monument in the U. S. Virgin Islands.

Following a series of submerged markers that point the way, we flipper through seas refreshingly warm and so clear that we can see 100 feet ahead. Everywhere we roam in this coral city, brilliant tropical fish keep us company: yellowtail snappers, blue tangs, French angels, Atlantic spadefish, striped porkfish, varicolored parrotfish, and foureye butterflyfish named for markings that resemble extra eyes. Tiny but pugnacious damselfish nip our flippered feet if we come too near their territorial nooks. Occasionally we spy an ill-tempered spotted moray eel lurking under a ledge in wait for a spiny lobster.

I've been an underwater photographer for more than 20 years. My wife Idaz and our children Susy, 14, Mike, 12, and Mimi, 10, have logged countless hours diving in Florida waters. Yet as we glide past outcroppings crowned with stinging coral and above twisting alleys carpeted with white sand, we are dazzled by this shimmering playground. We move with little or no fear of sharks or barracudas; Buck Island has never known an attack. With numerous shallow spots and deeper sections of 25 to 35 feet, the reef is a favorite training ground for novice snorkelers.

Even after hours of plumbing the marvels of this Caribbean realm, the youngsters plead to stay a few more minutes. Only one rallying cry—"Lunch!"—lures them shoreward across sandy shallows (below).

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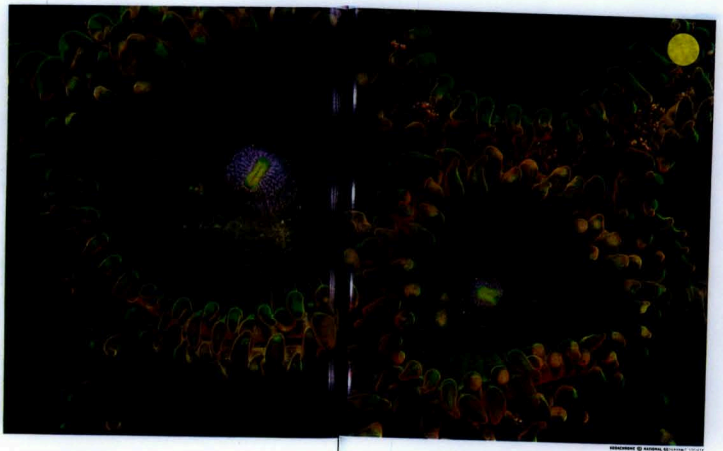



Submarine showcase of Buck Island Reef shelters an amazing variety of life, including sea anemones (enlarged ten times). Like their coral relatives, they are polyps, with a mouth opening and tentacles that trap food.

Miniature barrier reef almost rings humpbacked Buck Island (right), a mile and a half off the northeast coast of St. Croix. Visitors reach it aboard West Indian sloops piloted by local skippers.





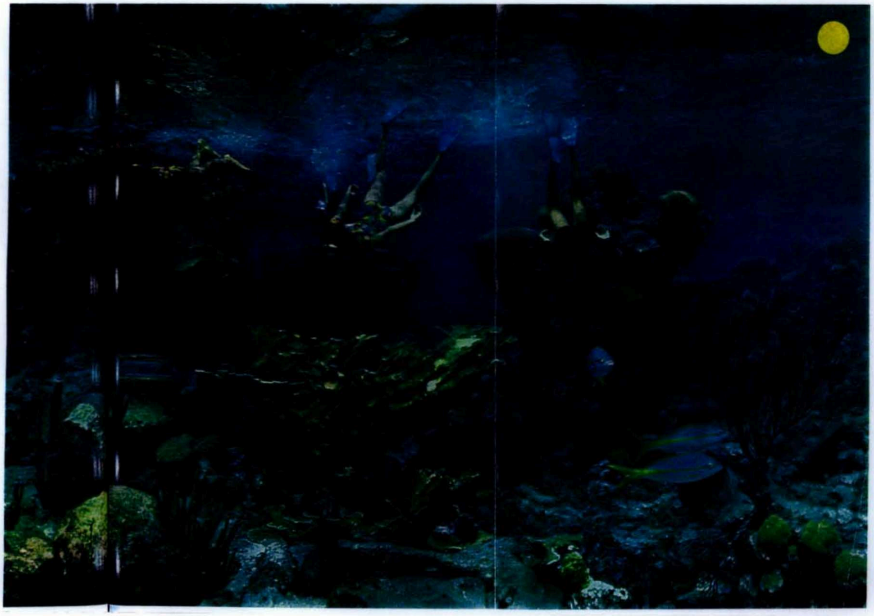






Submarine showcase of Buck Island Reef shelters an amazing variety of life, including sea anemones (enlarged ten times). Like their coral relatives, they are polyps, with a mouth opening and tentacles that trap food.

Miniature barrier reef almost rings humpbacked Buck Island (right), a mile and a half off the northeast coast of St. Croix. Visitors reach it aboard West Indian sloops piloted by local skippers.







FANTASTIC CORAL FORESTS reach toward the light on Buck Island Reef. Flippering above a giant brain coral encircled by elkhorn, Susy feasts her eyes on the reef's living colors of green and gold.

This underwater metropolis is the patient work of billions of tiny creatures. Each coral polyp divides into two or three of its kind, thus perpetuating a chain of survival centuries old. The outer layers grow atop a mass of limestone cups—the skeletal remains of generations of ancestral polyps.

Live polyps contain hordes of microscopic plants in a mutually beneficial partnership. The coral produces carbon dioxide and other wastes useful to the plants; the plants provide the polyps with oxygen in a convenient arrangement called symbiosis, from Greek words meaning "living together." *

*To learn more about coral reefs, see twin articles on Florida's John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park by the author and Charles M. Brookfield in the January 1981 GEOGRAPHIC.





PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES KAISERSEOT, © N.G.S.







EYES RIVET on junglelike brush when a sudden rustling stops our family as we climb to the 330-foot crest of Buck Island. Then a land crab scurries across our path. Bananaquits and warblers flit overhead, and an emerald-throated hummingbird probes brilliant blossoms. We follow a cactus-studded trail past acacia and poisonous manchineel trees, whose milky sap can burn the skin like lye. Mike likens the tortured branches of turpentine trees to "octopuses in knots."

On our daily run to St. Croix aboard Sea Angel, Mike rides the boom (lower left), getting a cool dunking in each wave. Mimi likes to believe that our vessel was once a pirate ship, and our skipper says nothing to disenchant her. All of us taste the thrill of lying back against the canvas as we ride the trade winds.

Adding to the fun, tour-boat captains engage in good-natured races on the morning run to Buck Island and on the evening return. Blowing conch horns when passing one another, they exchange tart advice. "Hey, mon, put out yo' hair 'n catch mo wind for yo sail!"

On the clearest days we strap on tanks of compressed air for a leisurely hour of movie-making on the underwater trail. Aiming a super-eight camera, Mike frames a yellowtail snapper drifting above a trail marker. Susy and Mimi like to feel the fish and try to pet them. They watch helmet shells and starfish gliding across the reef and see a parrotfish nibble a snack of coral. Then our hour of magic is spent, and we are back ashore, the girls in excited torrents of talk about what they saw, and Mike eager to identify an unfamiliar fish he spotted. If only he can swim Buck Island's underwater trail often enough, he's sure he'll discover a new species someday. □



