

CARIBBEAN DREAM

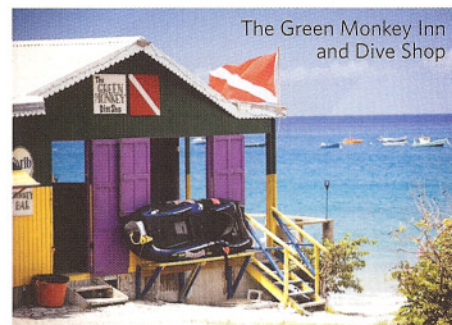
ON THE ISLAND OF MONTSERRAT,
A FORMER ST. LOUIS COUPLE
GOES WITH THE FLOW

Most people would have given up after the 18 months of bureaucratic red tape required to start their new business. Or after volcanic activity forced them to evacuate during their house-hunting trip. Or certainly after they had to be rescued from their sinking boat on the way to their new island home. But Melody Schroer and her husband, Troy Deppermann, weren't about to relinquish their Caribbean dream.

In St. Louis, Schroer taught paralegal studies at Maryville University, while Deppermann was a top salesman in the marble and granite industry. He also taught scuba diving part-time at The Dive Shop, then located in Rock Hill. Deppermann learned to dive as a young Marine stationed in Hawaii, and whenever he dived the frigid quarries and lakes of Missouri, he came home saying, "We need to move south."

For six years the couple looked for the right Caribbean island on which to open a dive shop of their own. Many were unaffordable; others simply felt unwelcoming. Then the pair discovered Montserrat.

In truth, Schroer and Deppermann almost turned around when they arrived in Montserrat for an initial scouting trip in June 2003. "We looked at the beach, which contained a few buildings, most of which could better be described as shacks,"



The Green Monkey Inn and Dive Shop



Schroer recalls. "I turned to Troy and said, 'I don't think I could live here. It doesn't look like there's anything to do.'"

The 39.5-square-mile island, part of the British West Indies, has never been a tourist mecca. There are no casinos and no shopping complexes, and the restaurants and bars are small and owner-run. The island has just two small hotels. Most visitors stay in guesthouses or rent villas.

Schroer and Deppermann decided to stay a few days anyway, and what they saw changed their minds. "When you think of the Caribbean, this is what you want," Deppermann decided. "Friendly people, uncrowded beaches and unspoiled nature."

Still, Montserrat remained a risky place to start their new lives. When the Soufrière Hills volcano erupted in 1997, it flattened villages, destroyed agricultural lands, wiped out the airport and buried the capital, Plymouth, in ash and rubble. Some 8,000 Montserratians, two-thirds of the population, left the island.

The remaining islanders harbored an indomitable spirit, however, and they began to rebuild. A portion of the island remains deserted today, uninhabitable because of the continued threat from the volcano, but the other side of the island is thriving. That's where Schroer and Deppermann established **THE GREEN MONKEY INN AND DIVE SHOP** last year.

With the opening of a new airport in 2005, the island is just a short hop by a small plane from neighboring Antigua. Montserrat is eager to attract visitors again and is doing



A Montserrat coral reef

For more on scenic Montserrat, visit visitmontserrat.com and divemontserrat.com or call 664-491-2230 and 664-491-2628.

so in part by actually playing up the volcano; promotional materials call the destroyed city of Plymouth a modern-day Pompeii.

Schroer and Deppermann are part of that tourism renaissance. They replaced the boat that sank with a new custom-designed dive boat and turned a boarded-up nightclub into a combination beach bar and dive shop.

During the day, Deppermann takes tourists out snorkeling, diving or touring the island. Often his is the only boat around, and with so little traffic the reefs remain pristine and teeming with tropical fish of all types: giant southern stingrays, moray eels, sea turtles, sharks and barracudas.

The volcano has threatened more than usual lately, forcing the couple to move to another part of the island because their house was too close to the danger zone. Still, they say they don't question their decision to move to Montserrat. "The existence of the volcano is what made the island affordable to us," Schroer says. "It's also one of the attractions that sets Montserrat apart."

—Theresa Gawlas Medoff