

ANGUILLA

Anguilla (almost rhymes with vanilla) is a small, pricey Leeward Island a few minutes' ferry ride from St. Maartin. Its main appeal lies in its beautiful beaches and exclusive ambiance. Good, typical Caribbean reefs are close in, but expect no drama. The fish population is low due to overfishing. It's not an island to visit just for the diving, but if you end up there, by all means get in the water. It's in the hurricane belt ...

Anguillan Divers, December 2003, Daniel Spitzer, Suffern, NY. Dives logged: 350. Vis: 40-80 ft. Water: 78 F. "A bad day of diving is better than a good day at work" is a well-known divers' aphorism. While not a "dive destination," Anguilla — a small friendly island at the northern end of the Caribbean chain, is well worth a visit. I have taken my family there yearly for over a decade now. Last year my son was certified by Norjon at Anguilla Divers. This year my nephew from Israel joined us and the three of us had a great time diving on three small wrecks and exploring some gentle reefs. Norjon from Holland and Robert from England are wonderful fun and run a nice dive shop. (www.anguilliandivers.com)

ANTIGUA

Beautiful beaches and scenery, high-dollar hotels, and forgettable diving. If you find yourself here, avoid boats that take divers

from the cruise ships, as they do only the close-in, shallow reefs.

Sandals, November 2003, Ken Robertson, Calgary, Alberta.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 30 Feet. Water: 82 to 83 F, calm, no currents. When one's wife is a non-diver, you occasionally end up at places where diving is not the resort's first priority and such is the case at Sandals' Antigua Resort. Having done my research, I had no delusions about the diving in Antigua. The reefs are fairly battered (Sandal's dive boat's careless anchoring destroyed more than one gorgonian while I was there) and there are not a lot of fish, let alone large ones. Certainly those I saw would likely be of interest to new divers though. I took my copy of Paul Humann/Ned DeLoach's Reef Coral Identification and worked at learning more about corals and coral diseases. This made the trip both fun and educational! The Sandal's Resort is a very nice place to stay, but there are better values in other all-inclusives. The dive operation, with the exception of one instructor, was one of the weakest I have seen. I took the time to write to the Resort Manager with a list of suggestions for general diver safety. To his credit the guy did respond, but only to tell me that they do everything right and have very stringent safety procedures — yah right! But I guess that's the view from the rose colored glasses. (www.sandals.com)

ARUBA

Just off Venezuela's Caribbean

coast, Aruba has not been a prime scuba-diving destination, but bring your gear since some operators, especially those catering to the Dutch, will take you to some pretty decent diving. ... Miles of white sand, glitzy casinos, and beaches cater to windsurfers. ... For the best deals look into gamblers' packages. ... There are several good boat dives. The South Wall, past San Nicholas near the southern tip of Aruba, is also good. ... Aruba lies south of the hurricane belt.

Unique Sports of Aruba, Casa Del Mar, Hyatt, January 2004, Leora Rosen (leorar@comcast.net) Deerfield, IL. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm. Unique Sports of Aruba provided an enjoyable series of dives from very shallow (Pedernales wreck-25ft.) to the Sonesta airplanes at 90 ft. There were never more than 8 divers and divemasters were knowledgeable and able to find interesting critters; I saw 3 octopi on one dive during the day! Lots of smaller, colorful fish and healthy invertebrates on every dive, but not many big animals. Did see one enormous Southern stingray, and several morays. Wrecks are abundant, and the Antilla is particularly interesting if you've never actually gone through one before. Everyone was extremely friendly and helpful; they even helped with an emergency repair to my BC. The water was a bit cold for even those with a 3mm wet suit; after 40-50 minutes on the shallower sites, several of us were pretty chilled. Because they

follow a similar schedule every week, they print where they plan to dive, with a description, so you can plan your week's activities in advance. Aruba has lots of good restaurants, gambling, shopping and even movie theaters, so there's lots to do for non-divers as well. Get an "Aruba plus" card in advance to get 10% off lots of things, including dives and restaurants. (www.visitaruba.com/uniquesports)

THE BAHAMAS

The Bahamas are easily accessible from Florida and excellent for long weekends, with pretty reefs (though many are affected by algae), decent tropicals, and plenty of resorts that feed sharks. ... Keep hurricane season, June through October, in mind; winter weather from December to March means mid-70s, chilly water, and sweaters in the evening; average nighttime temperature is in the mid-60s, but can drop into the 50s if winter air blows off the continent. ... Out-island are resorts small and personal, but the best diving is now reached by live-aboards.

Andros Island

Small Hope Bay Lodge, October 2003, Nicole Elise, Wilton Manors, FL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 90 to 120 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm, no currents. As soon as you arrive and get checked in at the bar overlooking the clearest water that I have ever seen, you feel instantly relaxed. The shore