

drink. Breakfast and lunches were excellent, dinners spectacular. Meals here were the best of my 16 years of dive travel. Cuisine included creative seafood entrees, Caymanian and Mexican cuisine, paella, Continental dishes, Texas BBQ, etc. accompanied by numerous side dishes, various red and white wines, and great deserts. Second and third helpings were encouraged. On full moon nights, Gladys serves dinner on the balcony of her nearby home, preceded by champagne and hors d'oeuvres. Chefs Diana and Cameron went out of their way to satisfy my wife's dietary requests. Gladys has created an elegant but informal, dive resort that overflows with hospitality and good vibes.

Pirates Point, August 2004, David Reubush (davereubush@cox.net), Toano, VA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 85 to 86 F, calm. 6th trip to Pirates Point. We decided to try it after reading Undercurrent and have been going back ever since. Gladys Howard and her staff make you feel like family. We have become good friends with people from all over that also come at this time. The staff typically have been with her for years. Bloody Bay wall is one of the best places in the world. Swimming from the boat in 25 ft. of water over the edge of a sheer wall that drops for 6000 ft. is the closest to flying. The coral is generally in great shape, the fish life prolific, and there are lots of turtles. The number of sharks has also increased. The Cayman marine park is really working. One dive site even has a resident Nassau

grouper that likes to be petted like a cat, though no feeding is allowed. Food is out of this world. We were there for 2 weeks this year and I gained 5 pounds. It is not cheap, but it is a premium experience. Photographers get exclusive use of the top shelf of the table on the boat. The rinse tank is a converted cooler. The water is changed frequently, but because of the small size most times all your camera gets is a dip before it goes back on the table. Back at the resort there is a deep sink devoted to camera rinsing. I typically put the camera in on our return and retrieved it just before dinner, several hours later. On the boat the crew was always quick to hand you your camera once you were in the water and to take it from you at the end of the dive.

Southern Cross Club, May 2004, Jim Chambers (jimbo_limited@mindspring.com) Tucker, GA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 90 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. This was our third trip to the Southern Cross Club (SCC), and we enjoyed it as much as our previous trips. Owner Peter Hillenbrand has a real gem of a dive resort. The cottages are simple, but they're comfortable and they're kept very clean and well-maintained, and the A/C works very well. Meals are served in a dining room in the main building, and the food is wonderful. If you have any special dietary issues, they're great at accommodating you (for example, my wife can't eat onions, so they don't use onions on her meals). While we were there on our last two trips, the annual Sister Islands cook-off was held, and SCC won the grand prize, which

was no surprise to us. Dive crews are very friendly, and they clearly wanted us to have fun. They're knowledgeable of the dive sites, and their dive briefings were very thorough. They ask you to go with the guided dive tour on your first dive, but after they're sure about your abilities, you can do your own dive if you like. Sometimes Deborah and I went off on our own, but sometimes we followed the divemaster when they promised something really good (and they always delivered). The reefs on Little Cayman are just as good today as they were when we started diving Little Cayman and Cayman Brac in 1989. Sea life is prolific, and sea turtles seem to get more abundant every year. We saw huge groupers and barracuda on every dive. The massive spur-and-groove coral formations are teeming with fish, and if you look hard enough, you'll see every manner of little critters, which are my favorite photographic subjects. I spent a lot of my time on my belly in the sand flats and coral rubble photographing the little guys, and I got some super photos. Deborah and I are not deep divers, but it's impossible to not love Bloody Bay wall. We've dived a lot of walls in the Caribbean and the Pacific, and nothing tops Bloody Bay wall! There are cheaper places on Little Cayman, but we don't mind paying a little more for the Southern Cross Club. Dive crews were very camera-friendly and took care to keep photographic gear safe. Dive boats did not have camera tables, but cameras were placed in large coolers filled with fresh water. If there were too many cameras, they put more coolers onboard. (www.southerncrossclub.com)

Southern Cross, June 2004, Brian Bolton (Meg1gator@cfl.rr.com) Winter Springs, FL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm. All good, great as a matter of fact. The food was outstanding! Large rinse tanks available, guides found critters as requested and more, entry and exit with heavy photo gear done well.

COLOMBIA

Two islands, while under the Colombian flag, are less than 75 miles off the coast of Nicaragua and have a strong Caribbean flavor. They do not pose the travel risks of mainland Colombia and you can reach them from Costa Rica. You may find good diving, though some operators may make no effort to take you to it.

Providencia

Felipe's Diving, Sol Caribe, November 2003, Sandy Falen (skfalen@cox.net) Topeka, KS. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 70 to 110 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm. This is remote and virgin diving, and the island is a step back in time compared to much of the Caribbean which is a large part of Providencia's charm. After an overnight in San Jose, Costa Rica (SJO), my companions and I flew West Caribbean Air (WCA) to San Andres, connecting on to Providencia. WCA was efficient and friendly, and when our flight from SJO was late, the WCA staff whisked us through the San Andres airport to ensure we'd make our connection. The Sol Caribe Hotel

was modest but adequate. Rooms were Spartan, clean, and included a little fridge and plenty of hot water (which at times was dangerously scalding). Service was hit and miss, and the food nondescript. The poolside bar was rarely staffed, although service is available if you can pry someone out of the kitchen. Lunches at Martin's Place (about a quarter mile down the road) were fabulous, and Martin graciously accommodated us even when our long dive times meant we often didn't arrive until mid-afternoon. Lunches were so filling that we often weren't hungry at dinner time — which, given the caliber of food at the Sol Caribe, was just as well. The diving conditions were superb: warm water (81 to 83 degrees), calm conditions with almost no current, and while the vis varied during our 8 days of diving, it was, at times, breathtakingly clear. Felipe Cabeza was a delight to dive with — laid back and friendly, with a great sense of humor. The dive shop is just a short walk down the road from the Sol Caribe, and divers set up their gear on shore before wading out to a small, open skiff. While I carried my own small gear bag, Felipe or one of the staff members would carry the tanks and BCs, and they were always helpful when it was time to suit up. My friends and I were frequently the only divers on the boat. While we didn't see as many large fish as I'd hope for, we did catch sight of one Goliath grouper, a few eagle rays, large stingrays, nurse sharks, midnight parrotfish, and some of the biggest angel fish I've seen anywhere. "Curtains of fish" aptly describes the huge schools of reef fish

seen on some of the shallower sites, and the little critters were equally fascinating. We sighted juvenile lobsters, masked hamlets, arrow blennies — and a more abundant grouper population than in other Caribbean Islands. Much of the diving is along deep crevices — straight vertical walls that were encrusted with healthy and beautiful sponges and black coral. We cavorted in the water with a pod of dolphins for at least 20 minutes before moving on to our morning dive. Boat rides were generally from 10 to 20 minutes, and most surface intervals were spent in some quiet cove, or at the "downtown" pier. Almost no one accepts U.S. currency (including the hotel), so try to get some Colombian pesos when you pass through San Andres. There is an ATM downtown, but owing to unreliable phone lines, we were never able to complete a transaction. We were able to change some currency at the little art and jewelry shop near the hotel, but in limited quantities. Moped and "buggy" rental is easy to arrange at the front desk. \$8/day for a moped and \$27/day for a buggy. The Colombian beer we purchased at the market next store was quite good. 35 cents per bottle! Beware of credit card transactions at the Sol Caribe — they have trouble getting authorizations due to those unreliable phones. We made our dive, hotel, and WCA flight arrangements with Lauren McKinney at Scuba San Andres and were pleased with the service. On the return trip, we discovered that connecting in San Andres can be a cluster of inefficiency, requiring no less than 3 x-ray machines and a hand search. Since our schedule returned us to SJO early

in the day (but too late to catch a U.S. bound flight), we stayed at the Vista del Valle Plantation Inn. It's a stunning mountain resort only 20 minutes from the airport, and our only regret was that we were staying only one night. (www.scubasanandres.com)

Felipe Diving, Sol Caribe Hotel, January 2004, Roger Zander (rwzander@netzero.net) Dearborn, MI. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, calm. Our dive trip to Providencia, also known as Old Providence, was the second half of a two island dive package. Lauren McKinney, of Scuba San Andres, did the booking. From San Andres there is one plane, a Russian built LET 410 turboprop that hops back and forth, the "bus" for the islanders. The flight was only 30 minutes and all 19 seats are filled for every flight. At the Providencia terminal, after passing immigration, we had to confirm our departure flight. Tourists can only stay 5 days. Our taxi, a Ford pickup, took us over a concrete road that reminded me of Saba. Sol Caribe Hotel: the buildings, grounds and pool were all neatly maintained. Our room was overlooking the water, average size and clean. The water was not potable, we bought bottled water from a nearby market. It was 10 am by the time I walked down to the beach, the dive boat was just pulling away. I called out to Felipe, who turned around to pick me up for a wall dive and a shallow dive at a place called Manta City. I saw a couple small rays. Felipe Cabeza runs a small one boat operation, 100

yards from the Sol Caribe. My Apex first stage needed an O-ring, that was not a common size, bring your own "save-a-dive" kit. You rinse your own gear in the outdoor shower and they hang it in the shop for you. The dive boat has a Yamaha 75 and Suzuki 85, no oxygen. Felipe and the other local operators use an anchor at all dive sites. They try and drop it on a sandy bottom. There were buoys purchased, white with a blue stripe, that the Colombian government decided had to be yellow. So the site marker project is stalled My Alum 80 tanks were filled with 2700 to 3200 psi, the compressor is outside under a shed, protected from the rain. A two tank trip costs 90,000 pesos or \$36. The next day's diving is to two walls, one has some large grouper and the other has 3 turtles, one of which allows me to swim parallel for a long period. There is not an abundance of fish. After diving, we stroll ? mile down the road to Martin's Place for lunch, the hotel serves breakfast and dinner only. The grilled fish lunch special with corn ice cream for dessert, so good, I had it three days in a row. My wife and daughter went on the island tour by boat, which took most of the day. I decided to go diving. We went to a deep wall called Nick's Place, the top is 100 ft. In the distance is a shark, swimming away, about 15 ft long. There is abundant black coral. Under a relatively small rock, I discover 13 lobsters, packed like sardines. For the second dive, Felipe picks a shallow spot and we take along an extra 4 snorkelers. There were 3 large spotted eels, 2 nurse sharks, a scorpion fish who showed his wings, and more spot-

ted rays than I could count. The French grunts and goatfish were everywhere. The fish were sitting in cleaning stations and there were photo ops everywhere. This was my favorite shallow dive of all time. Back at the Sol Caribe, we enjoyed another beautiful Caribbean sunset. Dinners at the hotel were buffet style. A typical meal is: oxtail soup, island salad, bread plant, sausage, potatoes, grilled chicken, pork chops, multiple fruit juices, and rice pudding. For our last day of diving, Felipe took us to Peta's Place. We swam along a ridge, 100 ft at the top, and along one side we came to a huge crack that was begging for me to explore. I'd need more air than the Alum 80 had left, so we stayed at about 120 ft and shortly began our return. Felipe motored slowly and trolled for fish with a bright green lure. Five fish later, we came to Felipe's Place, which had more than the usual number of fish seen at other Providencia sites. Midway in the dive, two spotted eagle rays arrived and did a double loop to give us plenty of time to enjoy their graceful flight.

San Andres Island

Sharky's Dive Shop, Nirvana Inn, January 2004, Roger Zander (rwzander@netzero.net) Dearborn, MI. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm. We had Scuba San Andres (Lauren McKinney) arrange all our travel. On the way down, we spent an overnight at a Comfort Inn in San Jose, Costa Rica then flew on a Western Caribbean Airlines jet for the half hour

hop. Carlos, from Nirvana, met us at the terminal. At the hotel desk, Loreen gave us a quick tour. www.nirvanahotel.com. The website images show all the buildings bright white. Most were spotted with the black tropical mold and were in need of cleaning and repainting. Our room was tidy but, the bathroom showed wear and tear. The door wouldn't shut, cracked window, strong musty odor. The pool water was cloudy the first day. By the second day, it was considerably cleaner. There was a noticeable sewer odor from the rear of the complex. The Nirvana Inn is about 25 years old, owned by Americans, according to Roger Madero who owns the Sharky's Dive Shop, next door. Since we were the only guests at Nirvana, we felt like royalty. The cook, Inez, was preparing meals just for us. For our first dinner, we had chicken, rice, potatoes with a salad of green tomatoes and cucumbers. The salad was ruined by the olive oil which had gone bad, otherwise all the meals were fine. We had everyday items like pork chops, fish, chicken and my 8 year old daughter was particularly fond of pancakes for breakfast. Each day, Inez made a different fruit smoothie drink. The next morning, I met Edgar, the divemaster, and we went out for a 2 tank trip, I was the only diver. It was a 5 minute ride to a coral reef that was in good condition with no special features. I counted 3 large spotted drum, two scorpionfish and at least a dozen pufferfish. The next day, Jose is the DM and I am the only diver. The first site is called Punta PADI with typical reef fish like snappers and parrotfish on healthy coral. We dive with computers and have about 30 minute surface

intervals. The second dive is to the Diamond shipwreck, sunk in 1995, broken in the middle and only 42 feet down. For day three, the winds are right for a trip to the other side of the island. Edgar says that usually the water is too rough for the "six-pack" sized dive boat. We motor for 15 minutes, anchor in 60 ft of water on top of the Blue Wall. The Blue Wall is just that, a sheer vertical drop to nothing but, deep blue. The surface of the wall is so straight that it almost appears man-made. This was my most memorable dive on San Andres. The second dive was to a shallow wreck, there was too much wave action to enjoy this dive. This day there were two robberies. At Sharky's Dive Shop and Sunset Hotel, Edgar and Roger had about \$2000 currency stolen. At the Nirvana Inn, our room was broken into and I lost my digital camera, housing, strobe, laptop computer, and other personal items for a loss of over \$3000. The thieves were selective and Roger Madero says it was an inside job, one of his employees with possible assistance from Nirvana staff. The police eventually arrived to "investigate" and I visited the police headquarters to make a police report. Lauren contacted the Nirvana Inn's owners, who say that they have not had problems with their staff. Lauren offered a complimentary stay at Nirvana as a goodwill gesture, the owners appear that they could care less. The last day of diving was off shore of the Nirvana Inn. The shoreline is too rocky for entry and is only accessible by boat. (www.sharkydive.com)

Sharky's & Felipe's Diving, Nirvana Inn & Sol Caribe, January 2004,

Tracey Bennett (Tdives@prodigy.net), Las Vegas, NV. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: to Fahrenheit, choppy, surge. The Nirvana Inn at San Andres was dilapidated and dirty, with exposed wires, water damaged ceilings, and chipped paint. We were told the staff did paint and clean our room before our arrival and except for the broken out glass in the bathroom window, it looked better than the rest of the resort. The bar had not been in operation for some time and kitchen did not stock sodas, snacks. A 15 minute cab ride into town into town solved this. The food was adequate at best although the staff did try hard to work with what was available. Fish and critter life was extremely sparse. There were beautiful sponges and gorgonians. On Providencia, the Sol Caribe was clean and close to markets and restaurants. They had a bar and laundry service, and the buffet style meals were much better than Nirvana. We lunched at Martin's place which was excellent. The diving was not good, with choppy water and low visibility. There were huge beautiful barrel sponges and walls lined with tube and vase sponges but hardly any fish. Felipe, the owner of Felipe's Place was friendly and accommodating.

Sharky's, Nirvana Inn, February 2004, Ronald Presutti (Smiles3@aol.com), St. Clairsville, OH. Dives logged: 250+. Vis: 60-80 ft. Water: 80-81 F. Dive restrictions enforced: no buddy diving. I have been a faithful follower of Undercurrents, using your insightful guidance for scuba trips. I am so disappointed with your 2002 report

on San Andres.. Seven day stay at the Nirvana Inn after an overnigher in San Jose. Unless otherwise requested, you dive with Sharkey's Dive Shop located in the Sunset Inn, a short 50 yard walk. Since most dive spots were 10 minutes or less away, everyone was encouraged to dress and gear up on the dock before leaving. There was no room to move on the boat, let alone dress and gear up. During one dive, out of the thirteen divers on the boat, five countries were represented, The United States, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, and Columbia. Diving: 50% of the reefs on San Andres are dead. Some reefs were bleached, others showed signs of wear, all were eerily missing medium to large size fish. The diving confirmed what over fishing and environmental non-control will due to the reefs. Although soft coral was abundant, the week produced sightings of three turtles and one ray. Sharkey's, although helpful, congenial, and friendly above the surf, had questionable actions and techniques once on the boat. On one dive, packets of crackers were handed out to feed the fish. I watched in horror, as the divemaster and others let the plastic wrappers float away. Approximately twenty discarded tires were dumped around the reef. Since no moorings are available and little to no currents exist, an anchor is dropped and most dives occur around the boat. The dive briefings and safety lectures were all but an after thought. Most were only time and depth of the dive, neither being strictly enforced. On our divemaster's day off, the new divemaster gave a three minute dive briefing only in French. Then jumped in the ocean with the rest of the boat, leaving

the three of us from the U.S. scratching our heads and laughing about "plan your dive, dive your plan". On another dive a local from Colombia was so grossly over weighted, I watched as he crawled on the bottom of the reef. The divemaster had him by the yoke pulling him up, clouds of soft and hard coral billowed around his body as he kicked his fins, trashing the reef in the process. Throughout the dive, this fellow kept landing hard on the reef due to his weight, yet the divemaster never intervened to help him gain neutral buoyancy or remove some weight. The Nirvana Inn, located seven miles out of town, is a perfect dive Inn. Conveniently located on the leeward side of San Andres, it's but a short truck ride to the marina and most dive spots. The Inn is kept clean with all rooms facing the ocean or the court yard and grounds. The courtyard is filled with a variety of tropical flowers, palm trees, and shrubs. The rooms, although Spartan, were cleaned and straightened daily with fresh towels and soap placed out. Although not a four star hotel, it's starting to show signs of wear, the ambiance and friendly staff made up for any shortcomings in the physical plant. There were only two other guests checked into the Nirvana Inn, one American and one Canadian, for the first three days of our stay. After they had left, we had the entire Inn, grounds, and pool to ourselves, no other visitors arrived for the rest of the week. The staff asked us what time we would like our meals served, all depending on our plans for the afternoon, we could set a different time for lunch and dinner. A convenience and a perk I've never

experienced on any other dive resort. A meal plan is recommended since there is not a restaurant for miles. The food, plentiful and wholesome, was served in courses, both lunch and dinner. The first course was always soup, home-made, hot and extremely tasty. A "salad" came next, usually consisting of cucumbers, tomatoes, and garnish in a wonderful lime/ olive oil dressing. The main meal consisted of either meat or fish with potatoes or plantains and rice. From ice cream to flan, desert ended the meals. Everything is cooked fresh on premise, with the biggest surprise being the juice. Every meal is served with liquefied orange, guava, or papaya juice. Fresh fruit is placed in a blender, liquefied, poured into a glass and served. Indescribably delicious! Buses circle the island on a five to ten minute interval; some are painted and decorated directly out of the 60's, costing 35 cents to take you the seven miles to downtown. Downtown is a beehive of activity with small shops lining the side streets and bars, restaurants, discos, and a few casinos lining the beach. We ended up renting motor scooters and touring the island on bikes. Although only 26 square kilometers, the island has two distinct personalities separated by a 100 meter high island center: the leeward side is relatively deserted and isolated while the windward side is crowded with four star resorts, beaches, shops, restaurants, and bars. The topside attractions on the windward side, staff at Nirvana's, and ambiance of the leeward side of San Andres made the trip enjoyable, charming, and quite relaxing.

CURACAO

A short hop from Bonaire (and a nonstop flight from Miami), Curacao's colorful, historic, cosmopolitan Dutch city of Willemstad offers plenty for the nondiver — international shopping, casinos, night life, hiking, an orchid-filled forest, attractive rural villages, windsurfing, half-naked Europeans, horseback riding, and excellent restaurants. ... Dive resorts prefer the relatively undeveloped northwestern side of the island, where there's outstanding beach diving from protected coves that are generally calm and easily accessible by car. The windward side is usually too rough to dive, but the diving's good if the wind shifts from its prevailing pattern. Many divers who cut their teeth on Bonaire now prefer Curacao, which has much less diver traffic.

Caribbean Sea Sports, Curacao Marriott Beach Resort, October 2003, Kevin, Knoxville, TN.

Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 40 to 70 Feet. Water: 84 to 81 F, calm, choppy. Curacao has very good shore diving. Most Dive operations have decent shore diving plus many more optional shore sites resembling Bonaire. Reefs and a few wrecks are close to shore. I dive by boat for convenience. Caribbean Sea Sports(CSS) on Marriott property. CSS very efficient and well-managed operation. Experienced and informative staff. Everyone friendly. Tip jar in dive shop.