

up for underwater equipment on the boat but Doug (the owner) will arrange a plastic case or special area for your camera while on the boat. Then when we got in the water it was so choppy, the whole time I was there, that Doug would have the captain hand him the camera with strobes and he would bring it to me so that I did not have to deal with getting to close to the boat during the choppy seas. When I would come up from the dive he would give me bottled water to rinse the camera housing and strobes and then when we would get to the dock he would take the camera and diving equipment and rinse it all off with fresh water.

## ARUBA

Near the Venezuela coast, Aruba diving doesn't match neighboring Bonaire and Curacao, but there is good diving and some operators will take you there. Miles of white sand, glitzy casinos, hotels and restaurants may make it a good compromise destination for the nondiving spouse. 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.

**Dive Aruba, Holiday Inn Sunspree, September 2004, Roland & Pam Hebert (rolpenny34@earthlink.net), New Bedford, MA.** Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 20 to 50 Feet. Water: 78 to 84 F, calm, no currents. We got to Aruba 2 days after Hurricane Ivan which limited the visibility. The Holiday Inn Sunspree was an upgrade because the Mill Resort

was flooded. They were wonderful. The only bad part was there was no pool. One is under construction. We booked with Aruba Pro Dive who subcontracted us to Dive Aruba. Clive the owner/dive master was helpful and friendly. We wanted a small boat with not a lot of divers on board, and that's just what we got. Maximum seven divers worked out just right. The variety of dives was excellent. We did wreck diving for the first time, with Clive leading the way. The pre-dive briefings were professional and fully prepared us for each dive, even providing a history of the wrecks. We had no limit on the time of each dive. We were never rushed. If you had more air you could stay down longer. We heard that the larger dive operations had 45 minute time limits per dive. The drift dives were a real treat. Clive took the time to point out interesting fish, lobsters etc. Clive's van is not new. And the first day it wasn't working so he arranged for a taxi to pick us up at our hotel. He was always on time, with an 8:30 a.m. pick-up. He was also helpful in equipment assistance.

**Dive Aruba, Boardwalk, December 2004, Bob Souza, Felton, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 75 Feet. Water: 76 to 77 F. Booked ourselves on-line at [www.arubaboardwalk.com](http://www.arubaboardwalk.com), a small 12 room resort across the street from the beach at the far end of the high rise hotel area, and reserved diving on-line with Clive Paula at Dive Aruba ([www.divearuba.com](http://www.divearuba.com)). The Boardwalk was fantastic, pleasant and clean. The casitas were large and equipped with full kitchens, utensils, outside decks, barbeque, cable TV, VCR/DVD (with

free movies at the office!), etc. They have a small pool. The supermarkets in town were well stocked and reasonably priced, and we had the majority of our meals at our place. Dive Aruba is a one man show, with Clive doing everything. He promptly picked us up every morning at the resort (without any moaning about ours being the furthest spot from town, even the days we were the only divers). Our first day diving, we went to his house in town to do the waivers and set up weight belts and then went there again on the days he had other first day divers. This took a little while. His boat is adequate for the maximum 7 divers, but could be a little tight if a few camera fanatics were aboard. Clive had no qualms about motoring out to one of the farthest sites (about 1/2 hour) on one day when I was the only diver. Back roll entry is easy, and entry is via ladder, after removing fins. Clive provided ample assistance with those who needed it. Good dive briefings, and he handled divers with varying skill levels well. No time limits, most dives went over an hour. Loose group under water, stay with your buddy on days I dove alone it was no problem to drop solo down to deeper spots while he guided the others. He always had cold drinks and some fresh fruit onboard. No large fish or pelagics, but plenty to keep you occupied. The wrecks were interesting (the Jane C was a good dive) and the reefs were generally healthy. Plenty of tropicals, octopus, shrimp and many eels (green, chain and golden), great night dive on an airplane wreck highlighted by catching an octopus feasting on an eel. Well- developed island with great beaches, friendly people, good food and decent diving.

**Dive Aruba, Marriott Surf Club, September 2005, Douglas (therealdougsmith@cox.net), Las Vegas, NV.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 84 to 88 F, calm. Four of us dove with Clive from Dive Aruba. While many operations limit bottom time to 40 minutes, Clive let us dive all our air. In fact, he gave me what was left in his tank to finish off my dive with the rest of the group since I had come up early. His boat is only 26' and can hold 7 divers. Clive is the only one on board — Captain, mate, and dive master. He does a great job. Air fills were 3,000 PSI Aluminum 80's. Clive picked us up at our hotel the first day and took us to his house to do paperwork. We met him on his boat the next days. The first day was windy, however, the last two days were dead calm behind Hurricane Rita. The locals say the hurricane stole their wind. Made for great surface conditions but limited visibility. There was a good variety of corals, including black coral below 70'. Fish species were limited and we saw no large fish except one wahoo and a fair sized parrot fish. Some in our party saw octopus, large green moray eels, small spotted eels, large banded shrimp, one jelly fish, two turtles (while snorkeling). The Antilla wreck was our best dive. Toured the outback. The famous "Natural Bridge" had recently collapsed. The people were friendly and helpful. There are many good restaurants though the food is expensive. Enjoyable trip, however, the diving was not great for experienced divers. Great spot for beginners and intermediate divers. The South side of the island is the only side accessible for diving or beach activities.

The north side is too rough with dangerous undertows and currents —no one dives there.

**Mermaid Sport Divers, February 2005, Jack Kelly (jkelly@vectorbenefits.com), Sugarloaf Key, FL.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 35 to 70 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, choppy. I have been going to Aruba for 16 years (time-share owners at Playa Linda Beach Resort) and diving it for 6. It gets short shrift in the Chapbook, with reports saying the diving is a pleasant diversion from the night life, bars, casinos. While Aruba definitely has all that (and some recent less than stellar publicity), the diving is underrated. The Antilla (a German WW II freighter intentionally sunk by its German crew on the high-rise hotel side of the island) is a great site, good for easy penetration and home to many large and occasionally free-swimming green morays and spotted morays. Vis can be poor to good. Another wreck on this side is the Pedernales, sunk at 30 feet. Vis is usually quite good and the surrounding reef and fish are always interesting. The Jane Sea wreck on the South Shore is 95 ft. to the sand by the stern and easy to penetrate. Twin plane wrecks by the Sonesta reef: the newer one is intact; you enter the rear of the plane and swim through the fuselage — all seats removed — up toward the cockpit, which has all controls and pilot seats. You can almost picture the skeleton people from Pirates of the Caribbean sitting at the controls! You exit at the side of the plane by the cockpit. What seems to be a secret is the reef diving. Corals and sponges can be surprisingly healthy. "Fingers," a deep

reef dive can drop to 130 feet, though most dive ops will keep you well above that. Tire Reef, Mango Halto and Sonesta are medium depth drift dives with interesting critters. Squid, shrimp, huge lobster, numerous large green morays and occasional reef sharks, turtles and sea horses. I have dove with practically all of the ops in Aruba and Mermaid Sport Divers is the best. They are near the high-rise hotels and Carlos, the owner, will pick you up from any resort and take you back. Their boat is at the town pier in Oranjestad (which saves a long boat ride from the resort-strip to the South Shore dive sites). Tito, the boat captain, is an Aruba legend whose talents include everything from stunt-motorcycle riding to steel-drum playing. The main divemaster, Bero, is one of those rare individuals who is always happy! Bero's goal is to assure a safe, memorable dive for everyone — and he makes everyone feel like a part of his family. He's uncanny at finding all sorts of critters, large and small. A true professional and a compassionate, caring person. As for profiles and freedom, if they are familiar with your skill level, they'll let you dive your own profile. You won't want to wander too far away from Bero, though — you'll miss too much! Find a seahorse, show the divemaster, and get a free dive.

**Native Divers, Marriott Ocean Club, September 2005, Jerry Butler, Rolling Hills, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 feet. Water: 80 F, choppy. Five divers and 2 non-divers Four of us stayed in a 2 bdr. condo at the Marriott Ocean Club, while the others had the same at La Cabana. Both facilities nice, with full kitchens, a/c, cable TV, pool,

and beach. Marriott nicer, but more expensive. Weather 85-90F, sunny, and breezy. Many nice restaurants. The Paddock and Iguana Joe's for lunch. Excellent dinners at Tango Argentine, Que Pasa, Flying Fishbone (table on the sand), Azzurro's Italian at Playa Linda, and Simply Fish at the Marriott. Pass on Charlie's in San Nicholas. First 2 dive companies I called, Mermaid and Pelican, were obviously "cattle boat" operations, taking 16-20 divers on a 38 ft boat! Dive Aruba was booked, but suggested Native Divers. They booked from a large awning on the beach in front of the Marriott. Vanessa was pleasant, and since we had 5-6 divers, reserved the 37 ft. boat exclusively for us for 3 days. Charged \$50 per two tanks with our own equipment, \$70 with theirs. Four referral certification dives with equipment were \$225. Picked us up at Marriott dock or drove us to another harbor near airport when diving south end. Owner, divemaster, Romeo was helpful, friendly, and professional. Also had a deck hand on board to assist. Nice boat, with deck covered seating for max 8 divers, below deck cabin, head, fresh water hose, swim ladder, soft drinks and water. Plenty of room to move around. Out at 9, and returned around 12:30 for 2 tanks. Numerous wrecks. South end had healthiest reefs with lots of tropicals, but few big critters. First dive was Antilla wreck, 400 foot WWII German ship. Next was shallow Pedernalis wreck, with "clouds" of tiny baitfish and yellowtails. Later dove Debby II, 70 ft dive with ok reef and wreck, and Arashi reef, 40 ft with lots of critters, sting ray, eels, lobster, flounders, plus lots of angels, parrotfish and trumpets. Our

last dive day was the best. Took Romeo's van to south end harbor. Dove "chain sea wreck and reef." 95 ft in-tact upright wreck with penetration into deckways and rooms. Nearby healthy reef with lots of tropicals. Second dive to 50 ft at nearby reef. We received a rescue tow request from Mermaid Divers boat, which had to drop its load of divers on a sandbar, while we towed them back inside the harbor. Good hotels, restaurants, beaches, shopping, casinos, and weather. Something for everyone, except the real die-hard divers.

**Red Sail Sports, Hyatt Hotel, August 2005, Paul Morrissey, Summit, NJ.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, choppy, currents. Aruba's northern coast dive sites have poor visibility. The southern coast has much better visibility — 80 to 100 ft — but it is a longer boat ride from the large hotels, the winds make it choppy and the current can be strong. The southern reefs are in good shape with many small fish and critters. Overall, the diving was better than I expected. Red Sail sports for a cattle boat operation is well run. Their boats had drinks, snacks and fresh water rinse tanks. They no longer have storage area for your own dive equipment. Lugging it back to your hotel room every day was a pain.

**Red Sail Sports, Renaissance Hotel, September 2005, Paul Schmieder (pschmieder@sbcglobal.net), Bellville, TX.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 60 Feet. Water: 82 to 83 F, calm. Because an imminent strike from Hurricane Rita had closed the Houston airports, Continental shut down all

flights to IAH and I was unable to return home from Bonaire and remained on Aruba four extra days. I dived with Red Sail, which I would not do again due to generally indifferent attitudes. On the wreck of the Antille, there were two dive masters and three divers which was a significant improvement over the morning dives that included 14 divers in one group. The wreck is on a relatively shallow sandy bottom and is enormous, providing habitat for moray, jacks, sergeants, many common garden eel and jawfish at the bottom and much more. This alone was worth the time and inclination to spend some extra time on Aruba. The Continental supervisor went to bat for me and granted a reaccommodation fee and bought my ticket home on American Airlines or else I would've had to wait until Saturday to catch the next scheduled Continental flight to Houston. Aruba is nice for the beach, shopping, cruise boats and glitz but for diving I'll go back to Bonaire.

**Unique Sports of Aruba, Divi Aruba Phoenix, November 2004, Matt Grace (mattgrace@cox.net), Encinitas,**

**CA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy, currents. Windy and unusually rainy (it rained every day but one) resulting in poor viz and no chance to dive the Antilla wreck. Unique Sports of Aruba ran a great dive operation. The divemasters were helpful in finding critters and would go as slow as you wanted. Our boat was spacious and never crowded with only 4-8 divers, unlike the Red Sail Sports cattle boat we saw. Aruba was too Americanized. Too many American fast food restaurants and businesses

(the last straw was seeing a Hooters on the way to the resort). Everyone spoke English, the road signs were all in English and dollars were the preferred currency. The local restaurants were fabulous. Some recommendations: Le Dome, Chalet Suisse, Driftwood, Texas de Brazil, and Madame Janette. They are all superb.

## THE BAHAMAS

Easily accessible from Florida for long weekends. Diving varies substantially among islands, with pretty reefs (many are affected by algae), decent tropicals, and resorts that feed sharks. Live-aboards out of Florida take divers to spots with bigger fish and more dramatic seascape. Keep hurricane season, June through November, in mind; winter weather means low 70F water, and sweaters in the evening; nighttime temperature is in the mid-60s, but can drop into the 50s if winter air blows off the continent.

## Andros Island

**Small Hope Bay Lodge, April 2005, Phil Tobin (Philtobin6625@yahoo.com), Portland, OR.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 75 Feet. Water: 74 to 74 F, choppy. The resort is wonderful. The staff was outstanding and truly cared about its guest. The rooms were clean and comfy, with plenty of hot water and a spotless kitchen. The food was good and plentiful. The staff was great, especially the dive staff. Wonderful place just to relax. The diving was disappointing. The corals were bleached