

for the hotel restaurant, most clients were in classy casual in general. The grounds are gated with controlled entry; the swimming beach is protected by a rock jetty; and lush tropical plants are everywhere. Although the appearance is classy, underneath the veneer it is typical Caribbean. We had little water pressure in our room; from about 5PM - 6:30PM when everyone was coming off the beach before dinner there was no hot water, either. The AC unit in our room vibrated like a DC-9 on take-off; although it was worked on twice it never was acceptably quiet. I had scheduled a massage; it was not until I was standing at the desk at the appointed 3 PM time that I was told the masseur had called in sick — so an afternoon was shot from that. I rescheduled for the next day, and discovered on arrival that the A/C was not working in the spa. The room was about 98 degrees with no windows, and a fan. The food for breakfast and lunch was good but not outstanding. On the upside — messages were delivered with great speed, housekeeping was outstanding (fresh towels twice a day) and the staff was friendly. We ate at local restaurants — Coco's, Dillon's, Ru-B-Lou's and the Pelican. All were good and well priced.

## TURKS AND CAICOS

This island group, south of the Bahamas and north of the Virgins, features awesome walls and clear water. Provo, the glitzy island, has spectacular beaches, but it's an hour's boat ride to the better diving of South or West Caicos. Grand Turk is a funky, laid-back island that

has a wall right offshore and occasional fishy surprises — and coming cruise ships. Salt Cay has pretty diving and the boats visit Grand Turk's wall. Bring a long-sleeved shirt during the winter; it can get cool in the evenings. The flight to Provo from Miami is a little over an hour.

**Beaches, February 2005, Robert McDonald (rmcdonald99@shaw.ca), Coquitlam, BC.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: choppy. Most dive were at 60' for 30 Minutes. But we did dive up to 90' on 4 dive just because there was enough advance divers on the boat. My wife and I both dove on our own since we had dive computer we were aloud to go any depth as long as our dive was no more then 40 minutes. The small test before diving is standard at every Sandals resort (Beaches is part of Sandals). The test in the pool was quite simple (mask on/off, reg recovery and fin pivot). If you did not have a dive computer and the boat was mainly open water diver then you were stuck to 60' for 30 minutes. Boat was well equip with radio, oxygen, 15 feet Bar and safety stop reg, first aid on board, water, food and shower. All dive were PADI standard Briefing before dive we knew our profile before we got in the water. So we plan the dive and dove the plan. We did 60', not like other resorts where 60' always ends up 90' or so. This includes the deep dive we were toll 90' and we did 87'. Great two weeks.

## Grand Turk

**Blue Water Divers, July 2005, Embry Rucker, Prospect, KY.** Experience: 251-

500 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm. Mitch and divemasters are good. It is a small personal operation and has been in business for twenty years. Grand Turk is changing. Go now. They help you take care of your gear on board and you rinse it off when you get back to your hotel.

**Blue Water Divers, Osprey Beach, July 2005, Anthony V. Dresden, Arlington, VA.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. This is my fourteenth year of diving on Grand Turk. Owner-operator Mitch Rolling and top-flight divemasters such as Conchy offer a first-rate diving experience, especially for those who like the personalized touch. Not to sound too clichéd, but it's the way diving used to be. The dive boats are never crowded and the sites are never more than 15 minutes away. Mitch has logged an insane number of dives on Grand Turk's reefs and walls and while others would be tempted to phone it in after all these years, he seems energized. After one absolutely kick-ass dive on Aquarium, he was as enthusiastic and pumped as the divers. The walls and reefs are still vibrant and healthy. Although mantas and eagle rays are in short supply, abundant turtles and dolphins and big schools of Creole wrasse that literally spill over you. This year, I also saw big midnight and supermale blue parrotfish. Other divers saw large hammerheads but I had to settle for a lot of nurse sharks. I have been staying at Osprey Beach ever since Jenny Smith purchased it and left the Salt Raker. The rooms are spacious and clean and I chose an upstairs one with a balcony and great view of the ocean.

Jenny's staff — from the front office to the bar/restaurant to the maids — is helpful and friendly. The food is very good, the Presidente beer from the DR is ice cold and there is barbecue night on Wednesdays and Sundays. Mitch plays these evenings and stick around for the second set when his band and many Turks Islanders sit in. They tear up the place. Try the Boiho (the old Guanahani) at Pillory Beach for dinner. The new owners brought in a chef from the States who is first rate but the prices are steep. There are smaller, less expensive restaurants. Carnival Cruise Lines should begin operations on Grand Turk in 2006. For those of us who have left other islands ruined by cruise ships and all that they bring, this is sad news indeed. At the Courtyard Café, I struck up a conversation with a marine biologist who was doing a survey of reef health in the Caribbean/tropical Atlantic. He said that the Grand Turk reefs were among the healthiest he had seen but that they were under stress and could go either way. Just what you want to hear as these huge cruise ships are poised to enter Grand Turk's waters. Let's hope for the best.

**Oasis Divers, Osprey Beach Resort, December 2004, Douglas Peterson.**

Experience: 400+ dives. Grand Turk was home for a NASA tracking station during John Glenn's first orbital flight. Laid back, middle-of-nowhere; friendly people; and short boat rides to a fascinating dive wall. There is almost nothing to do there except dive, have a few drinks with the friendly locals ("belongers"), eat a slow meal (wait staff at every restaurant move like molasses), and enjoy the fantastic sunsets. Everett

and Dale, the married owners of Oasis Divers, were knowledgeable and accommodating. Everett used to be a captain for the Aggressor fleet! Tyro and Mackie were fantastic divemasters — low key, super friendly, and experienced. Every person in their employ was all smiles, every day — and if you needed help with anything — no problem! We dove during the winter, and churning seas (or perhaps the four summer hurricanes) seemed to have spilled “sand dust” on much of the reef system. It looked like a light snow had fallen. The wall was mind boggling! Dropping down to 7,000 feet — straight down in some places— the water underneath you gradually darkens until it disappears into a completely opaque abyss. I found myself mesmerized at times staring down into that void. Plenty of life— including a 5 pack pod of dolphin playing with us for a minute or two at 70 feet, and swarms of Creole wrasse zooming along in their long lines, flapping their “wings.” Osprey Beach Hotel owner and employees were aloof to the point of being rude, the room was overpriced and Spartan (with broken air conditioning that took two days to fix), and the restaurant was poor. I recommend the Salt Raker Inn and Manta House for their unique rooms, delicious food, and friendly owners!

**Oasis Divers, Aqua House,**  
**March 2005, Susan Durchslag**  
**(suedl@mailbag.net), Newbury, OH.**  
Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 74 to 78, calm, choppy. The diving is good. The boat rides are short 10 minutes or less and the coral is in good condition. Oasis Divers is a

good dive operation and provides lots of extras (whale watching, snorkeling with the rays off of Gibbs Caye and dive trips to Salt Caye). We had heard much about a cruise ship coming, but only saw one and there is little change since being there two years ago. (they do have a wonderful new airport however). My average dive time was 63 minutes with my longest dive being 74 minutes. We stayed at the Aqua House and two-bedroom condo about a ten minute walk to town. We were picked up in the morning for diving, but did walk to dinner. This was a nice accommodation right on the water and in calm weather provided good snorkeling

**Oasis Divers, Osprey Hotel,**  
**April 2005, Mark & Lynn Thorne**  
**(thorne@mindspring.com), Raleigh,**  
**NC.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm. Our fifth year going to Grand Turk. We have used Sea Eye Diving in the past; however, we found their service, dive boats and attitude of staff had become less customer friendly. In contrast, we found Oasis Divers to be exceptionally customer friendly with their boats in great condition and friendly staff. They use 18 plus feet Carolina Skiffs for all dives. You back roll off the boat to begin your dive. The water, fish, coral and horizon are beautiful. Our dive master (“Mackie”) is always with a smile and great sense of humor. Although he has done a lot of diving, he always seems to enjoy getting wet. There is some really good food and some just fair food. Osprey Hotel seems to get better every year. Make sure to have breakfast with Phyllis in the Courtyard Restaurant.

**Oasis, Island House, April 2005, Van Freidin freidin@pacbell.net), Mountain View, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 45 to 150 Feet. Water: 76 to 79 F, calm. Grand Turks is a beautiful island, underwater. Island House did not suit my needs, so I quickly lowered my expectations of the accommodations and had a great time from my lower perspective. The rooms were clean, the shower hot, refrigerator kept my beer and tequila cold. A/C in one bedroom only. I had the fan, open windows no screens, and mosquitoes. Early wake up call by donkey. The Island House is not on the beach, not near any restaurants, taverns, or anything else you may have thought should have been. The room does include the use of a pick-up. They ask that you fill the tank to where it was when you got there, but the gas gauges don't work. The best food on the island will be the food you prepare in your room, or at the grill pool side. After your last dive stop at the grocery store pick up rice, beans, veggies, meat, beer, and more beer or wine. Did I mention the stench from the salt ponds? Six days of diving, 3-4 tanks a day at one of many colorful walls, swim thrus, and coral gardens. The variety of tropical fish and invertebrates was huge. Most larger fish are gone. Please don't order local fish from the restaurants. The highlights include sharks, eels, spotted eagle ray, several turtles, large barracuda, and octopi on night dives. I was part of a group of 14 divers, so overall we had a good time. They had fresh water rinse bucket on each boat and one larger (kegger size) tub at the shore side shop. No drying area or compressed air.

**Oasis Divers, Island House, May 2005, Charlotte Ware (2divers@thewares.net), Germantown, TN.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 200 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm. We chose Oasis Divers based on Undercurrent reports, and we couldn't be more pleased. Oasis Divers is a professionally run dive operation where our enjoyment seemed to be their first priority. They rinsed our gear nightly and had it set up on the boat for the next dive in the morning. At the conclusion of each dive, we just had to hand up our fins and weights and Mackey, our DM would take the BC up into the boat for us. He was knowledgeable and wanted us to have a good time. All sites were only minutes from shore and gorgeous. Amazing walls every dive, and once Mackey got to know us we dived our own profile. The only restriction was to come up with 500 psi. We never had a dive that was less than an hour long. We saw turtles on most dives, numerous huge lobsters, several eels and even a few juvenile spotted drum. We took a day trip to Salt Cay and ate at a little bar called Island Thyme which was a delight. Porter the proprietor was entertaining. The Island House was perfect. Collin, the owner, greeted us and took us for a tour of Grand Turk, pointing out places to eat and shop and gave us a truck to use for our visit. We were able to explore the rest of this quaint, charming island on our own. The one bedroom suite had a kitchen (two burner stove, microwave, and refrigerator), a deck and a porch with a hammock. Food is expensive per U.S. standards but considering the cost to import food it is to be expected. Waters Edge had excellent

conch (cracked and salad) and Mookie Pookie had delicious pizza. The Osprey Hotel had good food and nice ambience; dining alfresco by the pool and the ocean at the same time. The best food was at the newly renovated Pillory Beach Hotel, now called "The Bohio." The chef delights in creating marvelous dishes. The desserts are to die for. A cruise ship dock is currently under construction, with expected arrivals in 2006.

**Oasis Divers, Salt Raker Inn, June 2005, Mark Segal (marksegal@yahoo.com), Santa Cruz, CA.** Experience: 0-25 dives. Water: calm. Having never dived before, and since there was little else to do there, we decided to get certified. Dale was our instructor, and she was great. She adjusted the pace of the classroom work to our ability to absorb it, and it went by quickly. The same was true of the confined water training, and we were out doing open water dives in no time. Her attitude was low-key and positive. This attitude extended to the rest of the staff at Oasis. All the divemasters were knowledgeable, fun to dive with, and even inspiring. Safety was taken seriously, but not obsessively so. And they went out of their way to accommodate us, always with a smile. The tourist area is small and free of commercialism, accommodations are simple but charming, and the few small restaurants were friendly with good food. Actually, everyone on Grand Turk was friendly and helpful, including the non-tourist-industry locals.

**Oasis Divers, Osprey Beach Hotel, June 2005, Shawn Nelson (snelson@blackhole.com), Monticello,**

**MN.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, no Currents. Oasis Divers owners Dale and Everette Barker ran an excellent dive operation including knowledgeable and friendly dive support staff. The facility is just a couple minute walk from the Osprey Beach Hotel. My wife and I dove on a small boat with no more than 7 divers throughout the 7 days. Cookies, water, and towels were provided. There was no oxygen, rinse tank or table for cameras but they told us they were unnecessary because of the short boat rides. All entries were back rolls and exiting the water required removal of your gear and handing it to the dive master before climbing the ladder. Our dive master/boat captain (Mackie) was laid back but informative and responsible. We enjoyed his sense of humor. We only repeated one dive site as we went to the "Library" again on one of our night dives. Many times Jackie and I were the only divers. The diving was easy with no dive restrictions. Our 19 dives averaged 71 minutes while our max depth averaged 83' on each dive including many dives below 100'. Dale accompanied us on one dive and we spotted a pod of dolphins when Mackie stopped the boat and let us snorkel with them. We were impressed with the abundance of fish life and the soft coral. We didn't see much that we hadn't seen before in the Caribbean other than a Batfish and approachable Grouper — not a lot of sharks, turtles, or rays. Our most entertaining creature was a playful octopus on night dive. The wall was no more than 5-10 minutes ride from Oasis dive shop. Good shore diving was nonexistent although Oasis will

provide all the air you want. eAir was in the low 90's, water was a nice 82F. We only experienced one small stretch of rain. We rented bikes one day from Val's. We rode them 3 miles and pushed them 5 miles. We each got flat tires on tar roads and a pedal broke off. Val was rude as she accused us of wrecking her bikes and stated that now she had to pay someone to get them fixed so our attempts to obtain a partial refund failed. We were entertained almost every night by the enthusiastic band High Tide. A great value and great time to spend an afternoon was going to Gibbs Cay for barbecue and swimming with the stingrays. Osprey was nothing special. We enjoyed their barbecue one evening — it was about \$30 each which included one entree (fish or chicken) and all you could eat salads — drink not included. We had horrible service at the Water's Edge restaurant but the food was fine. Hopefully the waitress was just having a bad day but upon simple questions about menu items she rolled her eyes numerous times and sighed heavily as if we were seriously inconveniencing her. We enjoyed meals at the quaint and friendly Sandbar restaurant/bar on the beach. The food on the island is quite expensive. Each meal could reach \$50 US with just one drink each. We brought items from home for breakfast and snacks. Oasis is building a second facility on the south end of the island by the new cruise ship pier being built. We were promised the arrival of cruise tourists would not alter the experience that we encountered but it's hard to believe. Although it was the most expensive of all our dive trips thus far (including Maui) we had a great trip.

[www.oasisdivers.com](http://www.oasisdivers.com)

**Sea Eye, Osprey Beach, October 2004, Brenda Speer (brendaspeer@pbsllc.biz), Pulaski, TN.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, no currents. Quaint place, the ambiance is surreal, quiet. Sea Eye is an excellent operation. Smitty took care of us. He is probably the best dive master I have ever dove with. The night dive was excellent. They understand everyone's level of experience. Osprey Beach is a lovely place to stay especially if you get a room with an ocean front view and a kitchenette. Grand Turk has no great place to eat and the food is expensive.

**Sea Eye, Island House, February 2005, Cathy Mack (crmack1@aol.com), Washington, DC.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 77 F, choppy. February is chilly and windy and rough. That said, the island is so laid-back and friendly that you sort of don't even care, particularly when you are there for several weeks, which we were. Sea Eye was going through a rough time because the only dive master got sick and so we just went diving with the boat driver, who really knew all the dive sites and is a great diver but he is not a divemaster. No problem because we were all experienced divers and we had lots of fun together. The weather improved as it got later in the month and I kept putting on more wet suits to get used to the cold water. Diving was terrific. Island House is wonderful place because it offers small apartments. Although it is not on the beach, the owner (Colin Brooker) gives each guest a truck/van and you can drive all over the place, including the

beach. There is a pool and he is always around to help you out. Not much to do other than explore, dive, swim, lay in the sun, eat, drink and read good books. There is a self-selection process that goes on so only serious (and really nice and friendly) divers go there. Grand Turk has a brand-new international airport.

## Providenciales

**Caicos Adventures, Royal West Indies, October 2004, Laurie Gneiding (laurierg@eclipse.net), Lebanon, NJ.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Water: 80 to 85 F., choppy. 13 dives in six days. You do not touch your equipment from the moment it arrives onboard — everything is set up for you and then rinsed at the end of the day. Fills were between 3000 and 3500 psi. Nitrox available. During our first 10 dives, the large cat was in dry dock getting its drive shaft fixed and the smaller cat was used. Not a problem with five divers but for a few days, we had 10 divers and two divemasters. Conditions were “cozy.” The small boat also did not absorb the bouncing during the 45 minute ride to West Caicos. Fresh water and Gatorade are available and lunch is a large, unimaginative ham/cheese or turkey sandwich from the local IGA. The last day of our diving (the 3-tank day) the big catamaran was back in the water with Fifi as the captain. And what a difference! It's huge! Lots of room for divers and equipment and sunbathing during surface intervals. Snacks served in between dives and lunch upgraded to sandwiches with pesto pasta salad and a bag of chips. Due to recent hurricanes, visibility was 40-60 feet. Lots

of silt on reef and evidence of broken corals/sponges on shallow reefs, especially in Grace Bay. West Caicos fared better and the U/W life was incredible! Many huge lobster and crabs as well as tiny cleaner shrimp and arrow crabs. Gargantuan Nassau groupers! Many southern stingrays and spotted morays. angelfish, hogfish, tang, wrasse, and other fish in great abundance. At least one Caribbean reef shark on each dive and usually several. One day we had two hawksbill turtles, six sharks, and a manta ray. The reef is in great shape, i.e., fry, juveniles, adults, and large fish. Kenard, Asa, and Rich were helpful and gracious divemasters. Reef fragility was not sufficiently stressed. Certain divers in our group dragged their way across the oflinebottom knocking over sponges and corals and no one was corrected until we suggested it later to the divemasters. The Royal West Indies Resort was immaculate and spacious. We had a one-bedroom condo with the full kitchen. Given that restaurants are expensive and taxis even more so, we opted to get the (\$20) shuttle to the IGA and stocked up. Ask for the rooms that are NOT adjacent to the Club Med. We were kept up late nearly every night with their incessant loud music.

**Caicos Adventures, Royal West Indies, February 2005, Steve Bergerson, Lake Geneva, WI.** Experience: 600+ dives.

Vis: 50 to 80 ft. Water: 77 F, calm & flat, choppy, no currents. Caicos Adventures is a well run operation. FiFi was off island. Vince was in charge and ran an impeccable operation. Great boat; great crew all around. Took excellent care of all dive gear. Same sandwiches for lunch 5 days in a row a little tiring.

Nice walls, good coral, fair amount of fish. Best service I have ever had on a non-live-aboard. Royal West Indies a nice condo complex approaching Cayman standards.

**Caicos Adventures, The Seagate, March 2005, Cathy Mack.** ([crmack1@aol.com](mailto:crmack1@aol.com)), Washington, DC. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, choppy, currents. We have been to Provo for five years in a row during the first week of March and this was the first where we experienced rough seas and bad weather. The island is turning into another Grand Cayman with too many people and too many fast cars. Turks and Caicos Adventures has stayed relatively unaffected, as has The Seagate. A wonderful island with great diving except that the long boat trips are only fun when Fifi's big boat is operating. His dive instructors and dive masters are really wonderful and the service on the boat is terrific. Fifi, who owns the business, lost his wonderful catamaran so we were diving on a small boat. Because of the rough waters, we switched to another operator for our second week. The Seagate is a large apartment (in a small mansion that is only apartments) that is right behind Coral Gardens. A real bargain and wonderfully located.

**Caicos Adventures, July 2005, Sheri Ray, Dallas, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 90 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy. My husband and I enjoyed each dive and the entire dive experience. Caicos Adventures is an excellent dive operation, run by "Fifi" Kunz, [www.tcidiving.com](http://www.tcidiving.com). Dove French Cay and West Caicos. Boat ride about 45

minutes. Two tank dives and a substantial sandwich between dives. If staying in Grace Bay or surrounding areas, will pick up divers in bus. Leave about 28 and back around 2ish. Nitrox available. The dive boat is a 54' catamaran built for divers. My favorite spot on the boat was in the front, with my legs dangling over the water watching the shimmering turquoise ocean speed by and seeing the flying fish. The crew, Andy, Oliver, Richard, and others took excellent care of everyone, from setting up the gear to leading the group dives to being fun to be with. Coral is healthy, mostly wall dives, saw reef and nurse sharks on about 80% of the dives. Magical moments spent with a large turtle that swam along with our group! All the "usual suspects" in Caribbean sea life, which was diverse and healthy. Saw numbers of schooling fish. Areas protected from fishing. Ours was usually the only dive boat in the area. The dive boat rents a full line of gear. Several on our boat had malfunctioning gear, but replaced it and were able to dive. Both Aqua and Magnolia were excellent dining and romantic; Hemingway's was tasteless, but great view; Tiki Hut was fun and filling and pretty cheap. UW Photography Comments: Provided freshwater tank for cameras only and large area to care for cameras.

**Dive Provo, Hotel Sibonne, May 2005, Brian & Andrea Westbrook** ([brianawestbrook@aol.com](mailto:brianawestbrook@aol.com)), Atlanta, GA. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F., choppy. Hotel Sibonne is the smallest and oldest on Grace Bay. It's motel-style, clean and right on the beach. Continental breakfast is in the price, but it's not for

the hungry! Provo is a construction site right now with million-dollar condos going up everywhere, though we were not disturbed by this activity. You don't need a car on Provo if you intend to dive every day. There are plenty of restaurants in the hotels along Grace Bay; all open to the public. The island is still sleepy — Grand Cayman it is not — and we didn't feel unsafe anywhere. The local bus service (the 'Gecko') visits all the Grace Bay hotels, the grocery store and Turtle Cove Marina. Gecko tokens or passes must be bought at the large hotel/resorts (but not from Sibonne), as you can't pay on the bus. Dive Provo picks everyone up from their lodgings if required. Their boats are at 2 locations and you only find out which boat you're on when at their shop each morning. A 2-tank dive starts with pick-up at 8 a.m. and drops you back at your hotel around 3 pm. You don't have to touch your gear after checking in with them; they set up, store and rinse everything for you. They help you into and out of the water considerably regardless of ability and provide food and plenty of drinks during the long trip. The 3 boats are all well equipped, even the smallest one has a camera table and somewhere sheltered to sit. The crew always tried to find the best sites under the conditions. This meant West Caicos for us — an hour at least from the marina. French Cay is even longer and although North Point is nearer, it's a rough trip if the weather isn't completely calm. Reef life is prolific with lots of lobster, barracuda, reef sharks and southern stingrays, juveniles and cleaning stations. Saw many groupers, angels, triggerfish, spadefish and a school of jacks

showed up under the boat on almost every dive. The walls are spectacular and in good shape. A particularly nice site is Spanish Anchor which has a nice swim-thru' to the wall. Most sites start at 45' over sand with the wall (to infinity!) a short swim away. Dive Provo place a marker at the wall which makes navigating in your own buddy team a cinch. You can also dive guided if you choose. Good eats at Hemmingway's, Mango Reef, 21 North, Bay Bistro. It's not cheap, but everything on Provo has to be imported.. Hotel Sibonne is clean, spacious and informal. It feels more like a guest-house than a hotel. It's unique, great value for money and we hope it doesn't get bought out by the big boys who are clearly in town now.

**Provo Divers, Royal West Indies, May 2005, Rod Dingess (dingess8374@adelphia.net), Statesville, NC.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F., calm. I made 10 dives. Sites ranged from below average to outstanding. "Aquarium" in Grace Bay is world class for variety of intermediate sized species. French Cay has spectacular walls, and coral. Dive Provo has wonderful staff. Kudos for Claudia, Lucy, Chris, David and Jules. Boat was comfortable, snacks were above average, lots of choices for hydration between. Well organized, and made double checks on all roll calls. Dive shop was too retail oriented, lacking in gear, over loaded with T-shirts. One diver went off by herself, the infraction was picked up within 5 minutes, and an immediate recall and search was commenced. The lady was immediately found, professionally and nicely reminded to stay with a buddy,

and the dives continued. Being a dive professional myself, I was impressed.

**Dive Provo, The Sands at Grace Bay, August 2005, Ernie Feleppa (ernie@casuarina-aquatics.com), Rye, NY.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 85 F, choppy, no currents. I have been taking dive groups to the Caribbean since the mid 1980s, and this year I took 33 people (27 divers) to Provo. The folks at Dive Provo, particularly Alan (owner), Bill (dive-operations manager), Lucy (divemaster and captain), and several of their staff are absolutely super. The boats are reliable and well set up. Diving Northwest Point is as good as diving at the more sought-after more-distant regions such as West Caicos, French Cay, etc. Runs to Grace Bay sites take less than a half hour (one way); to NW Point they take 45 minutes to an hour; and beyond that, two hours or more. We chose to stick with NW Point and Grace Bay, but conditions were noticeably better at NW Point this year for visibility and reef health. (the unbelievably rapid and extensive recent development along Grace Bay may be affecting the environment — much as extensive development has affected the reefs along the western shore of Grand Cayman.) Most people saw Caribbean reef sharks on more than one dive; one diver saw at least one shark on every dive. We saw several turtles, a few nurse sharks (including a 6-footer), the usual reef fish, and healthy pillar coral. Flamingo tongues abounded and I saw a few fingerprint cyphomas. The highlight may have been our “playing” with a pod of at least 50 spotted dolphins that we encountered en route to a NW-

point dive site. Our two boats circled the pod for about 10 minutes while the dolphins constantly rode and body surfed our bow waves and wakes. The best dives were the Crack and Amphitheater off NW Point. The Sands where we stayed and the Royal West Indies resorts may be the best values for quality accommodations on Provo, and the restaurant at RWI is among the best on the Island. Unfortunately, nearly all the beds at RWI are king or queen, which is not well-suited for a large group such as ours. Caicos Cafe, Magnolia, Coco Bistro, and several other restaurants offer good food at not-unreasonable prices for the Caribbean.

**Dive Provo, Sibonne, August 2005, Charlie Killam. (ckilo3@yahoo.com), New London, NH.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 86 to F, calm, choppy. Dive Provo (www.diveprovo.com) is an exceptional operation. From Rich, my reservationist in Ft. Lauderdale, to Jaliylla and Sally in shop, Jules, Dave, Ann, Chris, & Sebastian our divemasters, and Ann, Dave, and Sebastian our bus drivers! They began by introducing each diver/bubble watcher (my wife rode along to West Caicos) to the boat, its features, and the procedures. Refreshments were good, but turned excellent Sunday with croissants and a deli platter. The Provo Conquest was super clean, had plenty of room, a hang bar for wet-suits, a head, a hang bar and hookah rig for any necessary deco stops (their rule is no deco diving), and a partially inflated noodle at the wall in direct line to boat. Northwest Point, had calmer waters than Grace Bay where we dove Eel Gardens & the Amphitheater. Here

I saw plenty of lobster and jacks; Grace Bay had murky waters, better over the wall at Pinnacles and Piranha Cove. I saw plenty of grouper, but missed the turtle and sharks because I had my face in the reef looking at the tiny creatures; and at West Caicos we dove Magic Mushroom and Boat Cove with their great macro sea life and beautiful walls. Provo is growing leaps and bounds. Get there before it's spoiled. Sibonné (www.sibonne.com) is a tiny hotel with comfortable rooms and an excellent restaurant in Bay Bistro. They are being hemmed in by two large resorts and we speculate that the hotel will disappear some day soon. If you only go to dinner, a rental car is unnecessary because the taxi fares actually save you money. Eat at Coyaba.

**Provo Turtle Divers, March 2005, James Bayley, Bolton, MA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Water: 78 F., choppy. We have been diving off and on in Provo since the early 1980s and helped find some of the original dive sites. Diving with Art Pickering's Provo Turtle Divers had always been the best. Recently, he sold his operation and now works as a fill-in. The new owners have changed his personal attention diving and now run a cattle car, high volume, tourist oriented dive operation. I am an instructor with >1000 dives and my sons are new to diving. None of us had a good time. The "dive guides" treated me as a novice, requiring me to check out and prove my abilities. They failed to lead the dive, never pointed out any critters, supervised too many divers, and yelled at my sons for not paying attention, when they in fact were nowhere to be seen. I had to

confront one of the "guides" when she inappropriately criticized my son for her lack of supervision. The management was prompt in their response to my criticism and fired her on the spot. Provo is not what it was. Development is rampant. Traffic jams are commonplace. People are surly.

**Provo Turtle Divers, Ocean Club East, May 2005, Gregory Kiyoi (gmk@sn1per.com), Pleasanton, CA.** Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 71 to 78 F., calm, choppy, no currents. From the store front staff to the dive boat crews they were friendly and accommodating. When we arrived our gear was setup at a dive station. After each dive they took our bc/tank off at the swim step and swapped tanks for us. After the last dive they would breakdown our gear for us and we simply put it into the gear bag. When we returned to port they would unload, rinse and hang our gear for us. It was hung/stored in a secure locked area. Detailed dive briefings and the site was always drawn on a huge whiteboard for all to see. Nice amenities — mask defog in large dispensers on both sides of the boat, sun tan lotion, Listerine in a spray bottle for your mouth piece. Great snacks between dives and plenty of drinks. Between dives at NW Point, Mickey cruised the boat near shore so we could snorkel or swim to shore. They have boats at the North and South side of the island so boat rides are within 45-60 minutes to NW Point or to West Caicos/French Cay. UW Photography Comments: Dedicated table for cameras, fresh water rinse tank (on boat and shore).

## Salt Cay

**Salt Cay Divers, Villa Frangiapani, August 2004, Tim & Jill Kolakowski (tkolakowski@choiceonemail.com), Erie, PA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 76 to 77 F, calm, choppy, no currents. The most quiet, laid back island in the Caribbean with an airport, more so than Little Cayman. There are about 60 locals, and 30-40 ex-pats on the 1.5 mile per side triangle. There may be more donkeys and cows than people strolling the dirt road that goes halfway around. The other half is covered by a series of paths. There are about 10 cars and trucks, one for the 2 policemen. We were 3 of maybe 15 guests during Easter week. We stayed at Villa Frangiapani (email Debbie at Salt Cay Divers for info) in absolute luxury, so much so that the house does not fit into the quaint cottages and guest houses that dot the island. The price is reasonable (hardwood cherry floors and furniture, Corian counters, top of the line appliances) and it would hold 3 couples easily. Candy took wonderful care of us, entertaining our 7 year old son James. Salt Cay Divers takes great care of their divers. Only a few divers per trip in the 23 ft skiff, but for 6-8 divers they use a larger boat. Lots of nurse sharks and turtles populate the plunging walls a stone's throw from shore. Most rides were 3-5 minutes, except to the "Endemyon" about 45 minutes. Grand Turk was 20 minutes, much worth the effort as the walls, swim throughs and fish life reminded me of Little Cayman.

**Salt Cay Divers, Tradewinds, March 2005, Cindi and Bob Robertson**

**(uzisu@aol.com), Traverse City, MI.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, choppy, no currents. Had the opportunity to snorkel with 17 Humpback Whales in one day! This was our third visit to Salt Cay. Island survived Hurricane Frances — no significant damage above or below. One dive site was almost completely white, covered with sand from the surge? Debbie and Ollie of Salt Cay Divers went out of their way to make sure we had all that we needed. We spent 2 weeks on the island and we not only dove Salt Cay, but also Grand Turk and South Caicos. Because we had already dove the wreck site Endymion, twice before, Debbie suggested that we do a snorkel instead. Thanks to Ollie who pointed us in the right direction, we were lucky to have a pod of 8 humpback whales glide past us 20 feet away. One went up for air, and when it exhaled, it sounded like a steam valve had been released. The other divers got back on the boat after diving the wreck, and as we motored back to Salt Cay, we snorkeled with groups of 3 more whales, on 3 separate occasions. We packed in all of our food. Freeze Dried Camping food. We ate out a few times at Porter's and Miss Pat's as well. We had a good time with the Hermit Crab Races at Porters! Snacks were with Jagen and Sue at the Green Flash, and with Debbie and Ollie at Coral Reef. Tradewinds was within walking distance of the dive shop and had a fridge. and microwave. We brought a hot plate. The dive boats are two 22' Carolina Skiffs and on 42' Big Boat they use for larger groups and to go to the wreck. Most dive sites are within 10 minutes.

Dives are at 9:00, 11:00 and 3:00. This is a small, desert island, with no shops, no grocery stores as we know them, no gas stations, and no night life.

**Salt Cay Divers, April 2005, Richard R. Sziede dsziede@hotmail.com), Reston, VA.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Good dives, healthy coral, friendly locals, and a laid-back "island time" experience. Turks & Caicos Air was on-time for the hop from Provo to Salt Cay — in an island kind of way. Overweight charge was \$1/kilo. Debbie of Salt Cay does a little of everything. Gate agent at the Salt Cay airport, transfer driver, (the back of her pickup,) rental agent, and sometimes cook. Trade Winds Guest Suites are condos on the beach. Plain but comfortable. Excellent housekeeping. Keys? You must be kidding? This is Salt Cay! Debbie did put our passports and such in her safe. (At least I hope she had a safe.) All establishments are mom & pop. There are about 60 permanent residents, supporting four churches. Commercial enterprises run by Canadian or US ex-pats, frequently married to "natives." Wild donkeys roam, fed and watered by locals. Keep the fence gate closed, or find one in your kitchen. No museum, two gift shops. No dive shop. Salt Cay Divers has rental and some repair. Forget or bust dive gear, you are out of luck. Little to do for our non-diver. Anticipating this, J. brought her watercolors, needlework, and a pile of books. Diving was quite good. Water was on the cool side 76-78F. Vis was 60-90 feet giving the opportunity for panoramic video shots. Cool water was supposed to favor whale watching, but somebody forgot to tell the whales. Our non-diving day we rented a golf cart

and explored the island. That was the day a pod of humpbacks came right by the Salt Cay Divers dock. Debbie's husband loaded whoever was around into one of the dive skiffs for an impromptu whale-watch. We missed out. T. and I have 200+ dives under our weight belts. C. was on her first dive trip. As soon as the DMs saw us riding herd on our beginner, they shouldered us aside and began instructing her themselves. An apt student and really good DMs are a winning combination. C. ended her first week of diving with her AOW certification! The big boat has a dry spot for gear. The little boat is a Carolina skiff with no shelter other than a canvas sunshade. Most dives are within a few minutes of the dock. Neither boat sported a camera tank. After cooking in the sun the dome port of my video housing fogged in cool water. Back-roll entry, hand up your gear before getting on the ladder. DMs escort all dives, but do your own profile once you have made your chops. Nurse sharks on most dives, juvenile turtles, one really big Hawks bill in a cave on the night dive. Barracuda are camera-shy. Few fish bigger than a frying pan. Spiny lobster and a sharp-tailed eel out in the daylight. Night dive started at dusk. Fewer night critters than expected. No squid or octopus. A lone cuttlefish posed for video under the dive boat. Used the big boat for the 45-minute ride to the Edymion wreck dive. The per-capita consumption of motion-sickness drugs was high. The wrecks (there are two) are worth the trip. While divers were oeing and aahing the cannon and anchors, a young Hawks bill came out to schmooze. Although our condo had

a kitchenette, there is little to cook on Salt Cay. Most of our food we brought in ourselves. We ate breakfast and lunch in the condo. Limited fresh supplies: milk, eggs and little else. Miss Netty periodically baked bread. Otherwise food is *BYO*. Supper at excellent restaurants. the best is Miss Pat's. Her subtly flavored island fare brought us back for a second visit. Miss Pat's son is chef in the island upscale (not Manhattan upscale) Windmills Plantation. Very good, but mama still knows best. You call your order ahead to the restaurants at noon. The Green Flash has a wild happy hour. Most restaurants are in walking range of Tradewinds. Miss Pat's will send a car for you. North beach on Salt Caye looks like the deserted beaches you see in travel magazine ads. Over a mile of empty beach framed by reef coral and dunes.

**Salt Cay Divers, Tradewinds Guest Suites, June 2005, Sandy Falen** ([skfalen@cox.net](mailto:skfalen@cox.net)), **Topeka, KS.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 , choppy, no currents. Tiny Salt Cay, with its all of three square miles of flat, scrubby, unpaved island charm, will take you back to the Caribbean of years ago. I never locked my room and the only strangers trying to get in were the local donkeys. Beach was right outside my door. Trade winds swept through my room constantly, eliminating even the thought of air conditioning. Finest nighttime entertainment to be had was lounging on a seaside hammock under the stars. Debbie and Ollie of Salt Cay Divers were my hosts. Columbus Passage is a massive trench in the ocean floor, which in the winter serves as the migration path

for humpback whales; sunning underwater scenery along breathtaking walls. The reefs are healthy, with the beautiful sea fans, frequent opportunities to spot southern stingrays, eagle rays, nurse sharks, and turtles. Saw a pair of bottlenose dolphins cruising past me along the reef! I was entertained at length by an octopus that had caught a large lobster for "lunch." and hauled it across the reef to his den — the long, antennae protruding out from the octo's fully fanned arms. Fascinating reef formations provided lovely swim-throughs and beautiful scenery. Black Coral Canyon is stunning. Salt Cay is also blessed with lush shallow reefs, allowing for plenty of bottom time. Boats were usually the 24-foot Carolina skiffs, which can get a bit crowded with 8 divers (the most on the boat during my 7 days of diving), but given the short boat trips, this wasn't a big deal. By the end of my stay, I was the sole diver on the island, and enjoyed a private boat. Salt Cay Divers will schedule weekly boat trips to both Grand Turk (a 30-minute ride) and South Caicos (an hour and a half), depending upon the weather. Our ride to South Caicos was a bit rough and longer than usual; but with calmer seas, it would be well worth the travel time. Getting to Salt Cay isn't difficult. Air Turks & Caicos will sometimes reschedule flights without notice; my 4:15pm flight out of Provo turned into 6:15pm, when they switched aircraft for the earlier flight and the larger plane was unable to land on Salt Cay. The airline staff offered consolation for the delay by waiving the overweight luggage charge. I wasn't charged the fee in either direction, but I was the only

passenger boarding at Salt Cay for the return flight. Tradewinds has 5 rooms, some with full kitchen, and some with kitchenette. All have a screen-in porch facing the beach. Water is potable, and I refilled bottles of water to place in my freezer so I'd always have a cold drink on hand. The rooms are simple, but clean and comfortable, and bicycles are available for your touring pleasure. The dive shop is a short walk down the road, and it's easy to return to your room between the 9:00am and 11:00am dives. The afternoon dive, which was scheduled for 3:00pm, allowed plenty of time for lunch and a leisurely siesta in a hammock. Depending on the wishes of the divers, a night dive can be substituted for the afternoon dive. Dining at Island Thyme Bistro was an unexpected pleasure, as proprietor Porter Williams has created an oasis of good taste and warm island hospitality. The food was outstanding and graciously served, and the choices varied. I also sampled Pat's Place and Mount Pleasant Guest House. In every case, the welcome was genuine and the food prepared with care. Reservations must be made in advance at all the restaurants, as on this small island, no one cooks on speculation. I'd simply make my breakfast plans at dinner, lunch plans at breakfast, and dinner plans at lunch — which allowed me to choose the entrée for my next meal. At Island Thyme, I was able to run a tab for the week.

## UNITED STATES

### Florida – Boca Raton

**Force-E, Diversity, October 2004, Mar-**

**sha Stout (astrl@cfl.rr.com), Cocoa, FL.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 Feet. Water: 81 to 81 F, choppy, surge. Force-E will schedule you with one of several dive boats according to the type of dive you want to do (wreck, reef, depth, night dive, etc). Nitrox and rental equipment available. I went out on the Diversity with Captain Tony. The dive master stayed on the boat to help with entries and exits and everyone was paired with a buddy. Water and packaged fruit drinks were provided. With the boat at full capacity (15 divers) it was a little crowded. We dove the Sea Emperor (Sea Empress) with a max depth of 71 feet and then Boca Trench with a max depth of 65 feet. At the wreck, there were a couple of attentive stingrays and even a nurse shark in the sand. The wreck itself is upside down as it flipped during sinking. You can penetrate the wreck through some open areas in the top (hull). The reef was healthy and had some ledges for lobster, crabs and moray eels to hide in. We saw another stingray swimming around in the sandy area to the west. The crew of the boat were friendly and helpful. No on-board rinse bucket — brought my own. DM was happy to hand me my camera after entry.

## Islamorada

**Islander, Keys Divers, August 2005, Ben Glick (bglick@vgnernet.net), Williamstown, MA.** Experience: 1500 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 feet. Water: 86 to 87 F, calm and flat to choppy. Both dive shops good with nice boats. Dive on Eagle wreck was excellent with good visibility and no current. Other dives were shallow with occasional interest.