

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.

Aquanaut Dive Center, January 2007, Francis and Deb Bollag (debbollag@earthlink.net), New Rochelle, NY.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, calm, no currents. Since we heard that the diving in Antigua wasn't great, we hoped to fit in only a tank or two during the week we spent sailing there. As luck would have it, we were taken by a good operator to some very nice sites and ended up diving six tanks. Aquanaut is a full-service dive center based in English Harbor and it maintains 20 dive moorings on the southern side of the island. The habitat is comprised of ledges and sloping drop-offs littered with boulders (some huge) covered with sponges and hard and soft corals. The rocks form channels and overhangs that shelter an amazing number of juvenile and adult fish and eels. While the area isn't the most colorful in the Caribbean, the diving is in an overstocked aquarium. At one site, we found a group of over 50 high hats. There were huge numbers of reef and four-eye butterflyfish. We also saw silversides and big numbers of glass-eye snapper, blackbar soldierfish, wrasses, parrotfish, fairy basslets, grunts and small groupers, gobies and blennies. Bigger fishes were cero, barracuda, cubera snapper, black jack and porgy. The diving was easy: Small groups, no currents, short runs to the dive sites, backward roll entry and ladder exit. John, the owner and lead divemaster, knows the area and sealife well and was

very good about pointing out interesting sights. He was also happy to let experienced divers explore on their own while he guided others. At the SI, John served fresh fruit from his trees and cookies. While we enjoyed the diving and highly recommend Aquanaut's services, we can't recommend Antigua for a dive-only vacation. There is better diving elsewhere in the Caribbean. But this is a great place for new divers or to sneak a few dives into a family vacation in Antigua.

ARUBA

Near the Venezuela coast, Aruba diving doesn't match neighboring Bonaire and Curacao, but some operators will take you to some decent sites. 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, August 2006, Maribeth and Charlie (Zelda5747@aol.com) Stratford, CT.

Clive, the owner of the operation, is a nice, helpful man. Clive brings you to his home/office to get the paperwork, equipment if needed, each day after he picks you up from your hotel. If there is a new diver, each day you have to spend up to an hour of precious time at his home. He is the only crew member on this boat! If something was to happen to him, we would all be at the mercy of a possible save from another passing boat. Clive moors the boat, takes the divers approximately halfway through the dive and then leaves the divers to return to the boat.

Once you finish your dive, which is up to you, he will come pick you up. The first day, there were only three divers. The current was strong and in a matter of seconds I got lost from my buddies. I followed proper protocol and surfaced. The boat must have been a mile away and I had to hold up my safety sausage, which was barely visible due to the waves. The other two divers also came up within minutes and the current had pushed them almost the same distance I was from the boat. We should have known better than to dive with this operation when we found out that he was the only crew on board and did not show us how any of the equipment worked in case of an emergency. The two-tank dive also lasted from 8:30 until 2:30; by the time you got back to your room and cleaned off your gear, the entire day was gone as the stores in Aruba close promptly at 6:00. I hope this helps you to make a smarter choice than we did. I have over 150 dives, and am an Advanced and Nitrox Certified Diver.

Dive Aruba, Renaissance Ocean Suites, January 2007, JoAn Ferguson, Herndon, VA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Water: 79 F, choppy. Clive Paula runs Dive Aruba (divearuba.com), a small dive op that takes a max of 7 people diving. One of our dives was 1 hour and 14 minutes. He has a weekly dive plan on his website, but he alters the plan to get the best diving for the conditions. On some dives, it was just our family and Clive; other days one or two others. One day there were four others — a full boat, but still enough space for all. Though Clive is a one-man operation, we never felt rushed getting in the water or out. It was comfortable diving and safety was never a question. He kept a close watch on the less experienced. The Renaissance Ocean Suites

is right next to the Renaissance Marina where Clive's boat is docked. We stayed in a one-bedroom suite that had a small kitchen (small refrigerator, microwave, and sink; no dishes or utensils). Other suites have a more complete kitchen. The balcony was big enough for three sets of gear. However, this is not a dive resort; people asked all kinds of questions as we schlepped our gear through the lobby. They have a tiny beach, but also a private island with two beach areas — one for adults, the other for families. A boat launch runs every few minutes. It was a nice diversion for a few hours. Some people spend all day, every day on the island. There were two nice pools and a good (but expensive) pool bar. The Renaissance has two parts — the Ocean Suites (where we stayed) and the Marina Tower. The Marina Tower is for adults only and has hotel rooms, rather than suites. Most of the restaurants and other services are available at the Marina Tower. It is across the street from the Ocean Suites, and a golf cart shuttle runs between the two. I did my research (including restaurantsaruba.com) and tried getting recommendations from other people there. We didn't have any great meals — lots of pretty good meals. We think that we are spoiled by all of the great restaurants in the DC area. Comparing Aruba to other places: Bonaire: Aruba has more variety (reefs, drift dives, and wrecks) and more topside activities (casinos, lots of restaurants, historic sites, horseback riding, ATVs, beaches, etc.). Aruba's shore diving is limited and the visibility wasn't as good. Bahamas (AquaCat itinerary out of Nassau): Aruba has much healthier reefs (many of the Bahamas reefs were covered with algae with limited fish) but few big animals (didn't see a single shark in Aruba!). St Croix and Grand Cayman: Aruba had better

wrecks but no real wall dives. Cozumel: Aruba has drift dives, but slow and easy drift dives, not the speed of the Cozumel drift dives.

Dive Aruba, Unique Sports, LaCabana BRC, January 2007, Lester Licht (chiroman@comcast.net), North Haven, CT.

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 90 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, choppy. LaCabana BRC was a really nice place to stay. Great for families and non-diving companions. Very good choice of restaurants on site and within walking distance. Food was good and reasonably priced. All units have full kitchens so one trip to a supermarket gets you set for the week. I ate most breakfasts and lunches in my room and went out for dinner nightly. BBQ pits on site for your use, as well. Also, there's a really good gym you can use there. We stayed in a studio unit and it was spacious and comfortable with a fabulous sunset view. I used Dive Aruba for my operator, based on previous Chapbook reviews, and had mixed feeling about the dive side of my vacation. On the positive side, I found the dive sites and corals more interesting and healthy than I had anticipated. The wrecks had way more critters than I had been led to believe and a couple of hour-long drift dives took us over miles of reef. Way beyond my expectations for Aruba diving. I was somewhat less impressed with Clive's operation (Dive Aruba). With 7 divers aboard the space is really quite tight. Entry was a giant stride off his small dive platform and with him screaming at you about not snagging the lines and hoses off the twin outboards. He told us all to "just go with the current," then he tore into one diver who did just that and came up where Clive didn't expect him to. The diver swore he just followed the current and gave him back the flack in spades.

Meanwhile a loyal, repeat customer who was on the boat came up hundreds of yards away and Clive said not one word to him. I don't need pampering or hand-holding from a dive operator but Clive clearly lacked 'people skills' in a service oriented business and that certainly lessened the enjoyment on our trip and made it clear that we won't be diving with him again. I did go out with Unique Sports one day when Clive wasn't open (he doesn't go out on Sundays) and enjoyed their service immensely. The boat was spacious, even with 16 divers, and the dive briefing excellent. The Dutch lady divemaster was on a "critter finding" roll when we hit the water at the 'airplane wreck.' First she found a moray in a propeller housing (there's another moray in the other prop housing nearby as well), then she spotted an octopus in a tiny crack in a coral head that was barely visible, even after being found. She found some other notables I just don't remember. I would definitely recommend Unique Sports over Dive Aruba for my money.

Dive Aruba, Marriott Hotel, July 2007, John Crellin (john15237@yahoo.com), Wexford, PA.

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, choppy, no currents. Clive Paula has a great operation. He picks you up promptly from your hotel and takes you to his house to sign waivers, pay and pick up rental gear if needed. Then he transports you to his small boat, holds 7, but is fast. Clive gives excellent dive briefings covering safety boat operation and dive site layout. He guides you through the dive, especially the wreck dives. When the first buddy team is ready to ascend, he ascends with them to help them back on the boat, but allows you to continue your dive. He lets you dive your full capability. My buddy and I were the last on the

boat each time and got the full amount of our dive, ending with 500 psi each time. On the first dive we ended up about 300 yards down current from the boat; he picked us up and went back to retrieve the other divers. You can count on being back to the dock by 1 pm to 1:30 pm with the morning dives and back to your hotel before 2 pm to enjoy the rest of the day. There are no camera facilities on Clive's boat.

Red Sail Sports, Marriott on Palm Beach, February 2007, Barbara Rizzardi, Sandy, UT. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. My boyfriend and his son, new divers, selected the Marriott, Palm Beach, Aruba, primarily for the wind surfing operation located at the hotel. I flew in from Salt Lake City via JFK in New York on Jet Blue for our week-long stay. No problems flying down but the return was sketchy due to major problems with Jet Blue at JFK due to a major Valentine's Day snowstorm with some prolonged terminal/tarmac waits in JFK even 4 days after the snowstorm. We arrived unknowingly during Carnival and all the hotels in Oranjestad were completely full with traffic snarled due to the large but colorful and festive day-long parade and the marina had several large cruise ships. The Aruba Marriott resort is not dive-dedicated and is filled with mostly tourists from NYC, so sometimes you think you are in Queens. It's beautiful, new but expensive with a great pool, impressive buffets, and huge rooms on an expansive sandy beach. They have a casino but that's not my thing so I didn't check it out. Red Sail Sports (RSS) books dive trips (one, am or pm, or two tank, am only, boat dives) from a desk in the lobby and you have to take a shuttle (5 minutes) to the Hyatt for the dive boat. No shore diving available. At the

Hyatt they have a small facility to hand out rental equipment (with moderate wear and some leaky tanks/BCs) and weights but no dive shop. Nitrox has to be ordered the night before (\$10/ tank) but half the time I arrived at the boat and no Nitrox was available and I had to have the divemaster scramble to get it. I could only get 33 ppm Nitrox tanks. Boats were spacious (48 foot or 40 foot) with head on board, camera rinse tank, water/ice tea, and fruit was served between dives. Usually there were 8 to 12 divers, mostly divers with less than 50 dives experience. Several stops were made to pick up divers from other resorts/ships. Rides to the sites took less than 30 minutes. Dive sites were limited to 2 sites on the calm West Coast (Antilles freighter wreck at 60 ft, no penetration allowed, balls of darting silversides; and Pedernalis oil tanker wreck in 25 ft. with a few unexploded bombs in the sand) or the captain's selection on the rougher south side depending on weather conditions. The south side diving is more challenging with some current and drift dives. Notable dives included the Jane Sea Wreck, a 250 cement freighter, at 90 ft, Captain's Choice (a drop off at 100 ft with lots of brain coral and sea fans), Skalahein (25-50 ft. drift dive with zillions of schooling Creole wrasse, lots of purple eggs nests from mating sergeant majors, and usual trumpets, damselfish), Sponge Reef (with many iridescent purple sponges, a few big green morays, drumfish), and the Sonesta Airplane (a large intact plane you can enter at 80 ft). No pelagics. Larger fish are fished out. Addison and Cierra were enthusiastic and conscientious divemasters and Osma was a delightful captain. However, not the case with Manuel. He may have just had an off day but seemed indifferent, swimming far ahead of the

group on a wreck dive, eventually disappearing into the murk with one diver, leaving the rest of the divers at 80 ft. to find their own way to the boat/surface, two surfacing with less than 200 psi and too brief safety stops. On the next dive, two novice divers were completely separated from the main group and spent the whole dive in 25 ft of water while the rest of the group proceeded to dive the reef at 50 ft. The DM seemed unaware he was missing any divers. Fortunately, this was the only day we had that DM and as I mentioned, the other DMs were fun and engaged with the divers, pointing out interesting fish and frequently checking on all the divers. Overall the diving was fair to good, Arubans were very friendly, and accommodations superior. I felt safe and welcome the whole time in Aruba. If you are a serious diver, however, arrange a private boat to visit less frequented sites and dive your own profile, dive a dedicated Aruban dive resort, or dive nearby Bonaire, a protected marine park which I have dived numerous times and highly recommend.

S.E. Aruba Fly and Dive, December 2006, Joel Solomon (Solomander@aol.com), Scarsdale, NY. Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 75 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm. Direct flight from NYC. On the way home, you go through US customs on Aruba, which eliminates the big bottleneck at JFK. We were advised to be at the Aruba airport three hours early. We checked our bags and got through customs within about half an hour, so I would not get there as early next time. Jet Blue ran on time. I hooked up with S.E. Aruba Fly and Dive. I had an enjoyable experience diving with them. Dived between Xmas and New Year's — a peak week. There were 12 divers the first 2 days and 18 the last day. 12 divers on the boat was

comfortable. On the last day, there were a lot more divers and the shop ran a second boat. 18 divers was cozy but not crowded. There were enough divemasters and staff to keep things running well. Ben, the captain, picked me up from my hotel every morning. The first day the crew sizes the new divers. If you are an experienced diver, you are given some latitude. If you seem to need help, the staff rides closer herd on you. There was a DM in the water per 6 divers. Divers had the option of diving on their own with their buddies instead of following the group. The dive briefings were good and informative. There were suggested bottom times. Only once was the dive a bit shorter than I would have liked. The dive operation was professional, friendly and competent. The level of service was in the middle. You aren't on your own, like I was in Florida, but you aren't fawned over the way I have been in Cozumel or the Turks and Caicos. A lot of coral in good shape. There were a lot of fish and a lot of schools. Aside from seeing 2 turtles (my first in 50 dives) and a scorpionfish, there weren't many striking or unusual fish. I did see a big rainbow parrotfish and an enormous puffer. Aruba also has the most honeycomb trunkfish that I have ever seen. We had to wait half an hour before we could splash when we dove the Antilla. Apparently there are a limited number of mooring sites for the wreck and we had to queue up and wait for a site to open up.

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