

CUBA

Ancon, November 2006, Brian Verbonac (verbonac@sympatico.ca), Huntsville, Ontario. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, choppy. One week all-inclusive from Toronto was \$370 Canadian plus taxes ... the cost of diving for the week was \$300 Canadian, so all in all, a cheap week. The dive masters here, as in all of Cuba, are knowledgeable and true professionals — as good as anywhere we've been diving. The flight was a late one from Toronto, so after clearing customs, finding the correct bus, stopping at another hotel on the way, e didn't get to the Ancon until 3:00 AM. No one around except the desk clerk, who could not leave to show us where our rooms were. We were in the "new wing," but the rooms were still tired. We have made numerous trips to Cuba, so this is a true value description of the accommodations. The food was not up the standards found in other parts of the Island. Normally, when there are several hotels together on a beach, you can visit back and forth to see what's available elsewhere. But, here you cannot do this without taking a taxi and arriving at the front of the hotel to get clearance. The guard won't let you into the hotel from the beach entrance ... extremely annoying. The dive boat was broken and its replacement was a 40-foot catamaran. This is a fun boat, but not a dive boat; cramped quarters for the dive deck area, difficult to get into the water and a pain to get back on board. Getting from shore to the boat was another adventure — there is no dock, so you get into a small tender at the beach, row with pieces of plank (no paddles or oars) to the catamaran, and hope you don't fall into the water as you climb aboard. The crew paddle for you. The diving ... well,

OK for beginners. Shallow dives with not a lot of variety. Corals were average. No large fish at all and few small fish or critters. The whole area has pretty well been fished out with no regard for marine management.

CURACAO

A short hop from Bonaire (and a nonstop flight from Miami), Curacao's colorful, historic, cosmopolitan Dutch Willemstad offers plenty for the nondiver — shopping, casinos, night life, hiking, an orchid-filled forest, attractive rural villages, half-naked Europeans, 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. Many divers who cut their teeth on Bonaire now prefer Curacao, which has less diver traffic and development, and an increasing number of popular shore diving sites.

Caribbean Sea Sports, Marriott, February 2007, James Cooper (mcnkeg@aol.com), East Greenwich, RI. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 79 to 81 F, calm.. I went to Curacao for the purpose of getting some additional pictures of frogfish and sea-horses and left after a week with much more than good pictures. Caribbean Sea Sports are the onsite dive operation for the Marriott, an excellent resort. They have first class restaurants, pool and landscape areas, fitness facilities, a great beach ... and friendly, service-conscious staff. The dive operation is safety-conscious and more geared to divers who don't mind diving within a DM-led group. As a single diver, I took

advantage of their private DM service for \$20 more, to do my own thing and have someone point out the hidden macro opportunities at the dive sites. I brought along my 60 mm macro, 100 mm macro, and 10-22 mm lens and rarely had an opportunity worthy of a wide angle lens. There is a noticeable lack of large marine life. Anything above a certain size seems to have been fished out. However, juveniles and small critters were in abundance. Christmas tree worms by the thousands on practically every dive site. Tom has assembled a great group of DMs, Instructors, and staff to make the diving experience enjoyable. They all share his enthusiasm for the sport of scuba diving and go out of their way to meet all of your needs. The shore facilities are excellent, and the primary dive boat has twin jets (no props), that made for easy and safe entries and exits on the few drift dives we did. Be advised that there is no marine head onboard.

Curacao Marriott Beach Resort, May 2007, Robert White (rcwhitejr@comcast.net), Lakewood, CO. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, choppy. I was with five research scientists and we decided to blow some bubbles at the Marriott where we were staying. This operation gets low grades for providing unacceptable air fills that smelled of paint but with some organic content. All five of us rejected the tanks. This was the first "reject" experience I have had in nearly 500 dives. The staff here was incredulous we rejected their tanks, but several other people we spoke with on the island confirmed that there are known problems with the filters and moisture in these tanks. Who knows?. We were able to obtain some replacement tanks from another dive operation adjacent to the hotel. There is a "house reef"

adjacent to the hotel, but it suffers a bit from pollution and degradation. Still not bad if you only have an afternoon or two to kill. Reefs to the north and west (up near Sunset Waters Beach Resort) are far superior.

Habitat Resort, November 2006, Bill Schlegel, Jefferson City, MO. Experience: about 700 open circuit and 200 re-breather dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: 85 F. Weather: 85 degrees every day and sunny. Ocean surface was calm with some wind waves of up to a foot. Coral: some of the healthiest I've seen in the Caribbean. No bleaching or very little. The Mushroom Forrest had hundreds of particularly impressive six to ten foot high very healthy coral heads infested with innumerable small fish such as chromis and wrasse with lobster, and turtles. There were hundreds of anemones and associated anemone crabs, Pedersen cleaner shrimp and banded coral shrimp. The small fish population is prolific with all of the usual Caribbean small critters represented well. We were especially impressed with the numbers of frogfish, spotted drum, moray of several colors, parrot fish, wrasse of several types, chromis, sharp tailed eels, peacock flounder, hard and soft corals, black coral, tangs, barracuda, yellowtails of several varieties, Caribbean reef squid, filefish, tilefish and lizardfish. I saw no sharks, large groupers, or other large predators. The dive operation is organized and the divemasters are professional and personable. Some of the divemasters were more inclined to carefully pick their way over the reefs and point out every critter they saw, others didn't do that. The boats have oxygen, radio and all the usual safety equipment. One boat was a Newton 42 and the other was almost identical. Both have twin diesels, very nice dive

ladders and decks, dedicated camera tanks, usable dry areas. They do carefully check everyone back in after a dive. Everyone had one-hour dives routinely. Most dives were less than 60 feet although you had the option to dive your level of proficiency. Along that line, they will pump any concentration of oxygen you want (Nitrox) and work with re-breather divers. You can bring your own Soda-Sorb or order it into the resort before you arrive if you're smart. The fish population is somewhat off balance with no large reef fish. I saw a large school of horse eyed jacks spiraling off of the reef wall on one dive. The divemasters commented on the absence of large critters. We all liked the resort itself. The rooms are clean and serviceable. The "infinity" pool is beautiful and has a deep end should you want to practice some dive skills there. The restaurant and bar are about average for a dive resort. Most hotel packages include a buffet breakfast. Lunch and dinner costs are additional. Food prices are reasonable and food is tasty, although everyone was ready to get out and sample some other restaurant. Bar prices are fair. The cab fare downtown is about \$50 for a round trip, but that's for a van that will take up to 9 people. Rental cars available. The town is one of the oldest in the western hemisphere and very quaint. There are multiple sophisticated European-style restaurants. The Fort Nassau restaurant is situated on a mountain overlooking the town and the large harbor. The Landhuis Daniel restaurant is closer to the resort (an 18th century Dutch plantation house in the middle of the island) and is run by a very serious European chef. The Governor restaurant on the waterfront of downtown Willemstad is a nice place to eat and watch people go by. As we were checking out, everything

packed and all of the valuables taken out of the safe, most of our group decided to meet at the pool. My wife and I left our luggage temporarily in our room which was within sight of the pool. Someone, who I presume knew we were leaving, got into our room from the other side and took several hundred dollars, credit cards and a nice new Nikon camera. This happened just as the bus was going to leave for the airport. We were told by the Habitat Curacao's desk clerk to make a police report at the airport, as there was no time to go downtown and still catch the flight. When we got to the airport we were told that there is no police station at the airport. So we contacted airport security who called the police station in Willemstad. We thought that the police would come to the airport. They never came. So, we left Curacao literally feeling "ripped off."

Habitat Curacao, December 2006,
Clare Petosa, Neptune, NJ. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 70 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm. Good dive operation. Briefings are at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. and last approx. 30 minutes. Once you have the briefing, you can grab a tank and go. Diving the house reef couldn't be easier. A rope runs out and down the wall for you to follow. During our visit, only one boat was running in the AM and was a bit crowded. Follow the divemaster or dive on your own. Afternoon boats only ran if 6 people were signed up; however, one day they cancelled. The rooms at Habitat are very basic and fairly clean. We don't think the filters in the AC have been changed. Several people were complaining about sore throats during the week. Oceans restaurant is good but does get tiring after a while. Its not as bad as some reviews have indicated. We opted to stock our room with breakfast and lunch items

and had dinner at the restaurant. If you like to explore or need a variety of food, then rent a car at the Habitat. They have small Hyundais with manual transmissions and steering. Made it fun to parallel park in Willemstad.

Habitat Curacao, December 2006, Steven Kovacs (ngfl666@hotmail.com), Naples, FL. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, choppy. The Habitat hotel is nice. Beautiful pool and grounds. Large rooms with air conditioning, stove, fridge, plates and utensils. It's tough to load up with food, though, unless you want to waste several hours in town. Had no hot water in my room all week. No screens on the door and one of the windows that had open shutters so the bugs were able to come right in and have a feast. The on-site restaurant is adequate. Not outstanding but quite acceptable. Service was also very good. Internet access available for a fee. The reefs are quite healthy and impressive by Caribbean standards. Don't expect to see anything big. Lots of small and medium-small stuff. Even the eagle ray and 2 small turtles I saw were juveniles. I chose Habitat Curacao because of the unlimited, unrestricted diving allowed. They live up to their promise, thank goodness, otherwise it would have been a tough vacation to swallow. The dive-masters are pretty much useless. Didn't see a single thing pointed out all week. I asked three different divemasters about possible dive sites where specific critters might be found and all I got was a blank stare. They have no clue to the names or locations of most marine life. Their goal seems to be to get in the water, swim around a bit and bring you back to the boat after one hour if you choose to follow them. They would freak out if you touched or went near dead rubble or sand. Not touching live

coral everyone understands, and I'm very careful not to disturb anything, but sand and dead coral? The winds are constantly blowing from the south-west so that it's never really calm on the surface for any extended period. Viz the first 30 feet can be very poor on the house reef. Even deeper will be diminished. When I asked if it ever calms down, a longtime divemaster said he had never seen it so windy before and that it's usually calm! Everyone else laughed at this. The winds are constantly blowing year round so, due to the location of Habitat, don't expect incredible viz on the house reef. It is diminished compared to the boat dive sites where it can commonly reach 100 feet. The good news is I saved a lot of money by not tipping this pathetic bunch.

Habitat Curacao, March 2007, Monte Chandler, Charlotte, NC. Water temp was 26 C. Viz was excellent as usual. Full moon made the night dive nice. First incident was my dive buddies torch going out didn't refresh the batteries and the lighting was so good she navigated by the moonlight! The usual array of critters were out and about including the green morays, crabs, lobster and octopus. Habitat has an air-fill right next to the parking lot so you just back the truck up to the little shed and load em up. First stop of the day was Playa Kalki, a 45-minute drive from Habitat. The road goes up along the coast through a few little towns. Lush coral and bountiful fish life. Lots of macro life as well. nice bright-blue lettuce sea slugs — other colors as well, but the blue were nice. There is a small dive shop on the site with lockers (actually a cubby hole. but they lock the door), rinse shower, rinse tanks, camera rinse, a pier that makes entry and exit a breeze. The cost to use the dive shops facilities is US\$2.

Fifty meters from the dive shop there's a nice little cabana area and a beach with lounge facilities. The cabana area has a decent little bar/diner area. Don't leave any valuables in your car. Thieves had jacked up the right side of one couples rental car and stolen both wheels/tires. Poverty will drive stupid people to do dumb things without regard to what it does to other people. Kleine Knip has a longer swim out to the drop area over the reef. Playa Jeremis a pretty little cove-type beach. It is a remote site without facilities. I forgot to put all my stuff away in the safe before heading out. Thieves found entry into our truck and made off with my wallet, the US\$5.00 it contained, and my sons sunglasses. I spent two hours on the phone canceling credit cards. It cost me \$120 as my room keys were in the little pouch that was grabbed and since they got our room key, we changed rooms when we got back to the Habitat. Porto Marie is a privately managed beach with a dive shop, showers, rinse tanks (which are a bit on the unusable side due to the rinse water being less than desirable), a nice shower, lockers and a nice outdoor eatery. There's a map of the site near the bar so you can see the myriad of ways to dive the site. I like the back wall of the second reef best as you will see interesting sights there. We watched some jacks round up bait fish and then began attacking. The reef is lush with lots of beautiful coral, sponges, macro life and various fish. Don't forget that you have a 20-minute trek back to your entry point. Playa Lagunt has a fairly long swim out to the reef. There is a dive shop at the site. It's a beach in a small cove, which means a fairly narrow entrance out to the open ocean. There is a marker in the form of a 2-liter bottle mounted on a rod which serves as a marker too. There was a little

current flowing from north to south, so we headed off into the current at the beginning of the dive. The return was much like a drift dive back to our marker, though. Nice dive and pretty coral with lots of fish, etc. Cos Abao: a small entry fee on a per-vehicle basis. Nice entrance/exit on the beach. It's a beautiful beach to look at as you're swimming out to the reef. The reef here is gorgeous, with lots of critters and fish swimming about. In keeping with our belief that the nicest reef to dive in Curacao — and certainly the most accessible for us — is the Habitat house reef, we decided to dive here this morning. We got up early so we could be in the water just as the sun was rising so we could witness the transition from night to day. Lots of critters about including eels, crabs, and other nocturnal fish as well as the daytime fish beginning to swim about. Went back up to the villa and cooked my favorite meal of the day — hot coffee, bacon, eggs, fruit and fresh-squeezed orange juice.

Ocean Encounters, Lion's Dive, October 2006, Patricia (psincl5611@yahoo.com), Tampa, FL. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 82 to 90 F, choppy, surge. We arrived on the island of Curacao at 7:45 PM. After going through customs and getting our luggage, we picked up our rental car. We got directions from the rental agency to the Lions' Den Resort (go over the big bridge, etc.). Well, it was dark, who could see if the bridge was the big one or not? After driving around for 3 hours, and mostly in circles, we finally located a Domino's Pizza, went in for directions ... surely they would know how to get there. They did! They gave us directions (at the Burger King turn left, go down and turn left, then go down and turn right ...) One little problem: the Burger King is closed, no

longer has a sign on it. So we went back to Domino's, ordered a pizza to be delivered to Lion's Dive and then followed the driver to the resort. I go to check in, and they have no record of my reservation (which was made in June.) OK, after much checking they found the reservation, on paper next to the desktop computer. They have no room (so, it is 11:30 PM, pizza in rented car getting cold, and no place to sleep or eat the pizza.) By 12:30 AM, they had finally found a room for us, on the third floor, no elevator, just nice narrow stairway. The room was beautiful, it looked out over the resort toward the ocean, had a nice little balcony, two really large queen beds, nice restroom, sliding glass door onto walkway in back. Rooms well kept and clean. Ocean Encounters requires that you do a checkout dive before you go out on a boat dive. You get a tank, and go in at the pier and check your buoyancy. No DM, no one at all from the shop is there to see if you really get wet or not. What is the point? First real dive was the Tugboat, a reef dive, along the shallow ledge/wall for a ways, then back to the Tugboat wreck (20 ft.) where you do the safety stop and check out the fish all around the wreck. They tend to feed the fish at this site, so most of the fish here are not afraid of divers. There were some huge terminal phase blue parrots here as well as the usual yellowtail snappers, grunts, trumpetfish, stoplight parrotfish and others. There was an octopus hiding in its hole. Orange cup corals were growing on the tug. Second day: we made the first two dives in the morning. First Dive was Gill's Finger, max depth 65, time was 1:01. Second dive was Cornelius Bight, depth 60, time was 1:02. Third day: First Dive, Diver's Leap, depth: 57, time: 1:00. Second dive, Shipwreck Point, depth 50, time: 1:01. The

Pier, depth 50, time, 1:10. With the light filtering through the piers from above, it was ethereal. There is monofilament everywhere here, and if this site were cleaned up (removal of bottles and other trash), it would be absolutely awe inspiring. Take a dive knife with you. Entanglement could happen easily here. Fourth day: First dive, Care Pile, depth 101, time 44 minutes. This dive (from the viewpoint of the wreck itself) is not one I would do ever again. Second dive, Misha's Mischief, depth 55, time 1:03. Fifth day: First dive, Jan Thief, depth 53, time 1:02. Second dive, the Tugboat, depth 50, time 1:04. Night dive: Coral spawning dive, depth 30, time: 1:15. Cost was \$90/person. 20+ people on the dive boat plus 4 dive masters in the water. I did see 3 different heads of coral spawn, and it was an amazing sight. Sixth day: First dive, Shipwreck Point, depth 53, time 58 minutes. Second dive, The Tugboat, depth 50, time 52 minutes. Total number of dives this vacation: 11 Total bottom time this vacation: 10 hours and 32 minutes. Breakfast was part of the package, so we ate at Nemo's daily. Lunch: We generally ate at Hemingway's next to the dive shop between the morning dives and the afternoon dive. Service was very slow. Food most often delivered to the table cold or cool. Dinner: We ate once at Hemingway's, and the dinner fare was better than the lunch fare. Service was better.

Ocean Encounters, Sea Aquarium Resort, December 2006, Barbara Shively (barbshively@comcast.net), La Plata, MD. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 75 to 125 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, choppy. Divemasters were well trained and safety conscious. Dive boat was comfortable. As "mature" divers, my husband and I would like to have the option of the staff handling our

gear for us Setting up our gear on the tank, switching it between dives and rinsing it at dive day's end are not our idea of fun. We can check the setup to be sure all is well without doing it ourselves. One complaint was that the dive operators changed the location of the next day's dives to ones we did not want to do, then were reluctant to let us out of doing those dives without being charged anyway. They finally relented but not without pressure. UW Photography Comments: Have separate large rinse bucket on boat for cameras — no masks, etc., allowed (thanks!). I do not remember any shore facilities for cameras. Divemasters were good about handing camera gear down to divers in the water and taking it back on board at end of dive.

Ocean Encounters, Lions Dive, March 2007, Steve Davidson (sdavid8000@yahoo.com), Columbus, GA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. Lions Dive is an older resort but it is a really romantic setting. We were in the older part and it was well maintained but our bed needs to be replaced hard as a rock.. The newer part is a multi-story deal, but nice, and overlooks the pool and restaurant. The setting is awesome, with a huge beach and lots of beach seating with umbrellas and shaded palapa-style stuff. The food at the resort was good, nothing to write home about, but adequate. We took most of our meals across the lagoon at a restaurant near the Aquarium. Ocean Encounters is a well equipped and staffed with friendly and helpful staff. They have two great dive boats, well equipped and, for the most part, properly maintained, but the one we were on belched huge clouds of black smoke constantly. The wife got deathly seasick, and she is not prone to seasickness, so we didn't dive

much for that reason. It wouldn't have been so bad if the boat anchored during the dives, but it would circle the area while waiting on the other divers so that it was almost constantly enveloped in its own stench. Most of the diving we did was from the resort on the southern end of the island. We did one day trip to the northern part of the island where we drove to another resort, boarded another boat and dove the Mushroom Forest and another site nearby. The water was calm and the boat was clean. I really enjoyed those dives but the wife declined to take the risk of getting seasick again on another smoker. If you are staying on the southern end of the island, its an all-day trip to the best shore diving. Crime is clearly a problem. Curacao is picturesque and much larger than Bonaire. If diving is your primary reason for being there, it seems that the northern part of the island is a better choice for calm conditions. Otherwise, Lions Dive is a great resort, located on the main beach and the associated restaurants and gift shops on the beach.

Ocean Encounters, Breezes, May 2007, Bill Wentz (dirtracer1227@aol.com), Bethlehem, PA. Experience: 800+ dives. Vis: 50 to 80 feet. Water: 80 F, choppy, surge. Booked trip through Caribbean Adventures at Beneath the Sea Expo. Was assured diving was included in trip. Two days before departure I learned the only diving included was shore diving once a day. The resort was nice, but the travel agent should have informed me that only shore dives were included.

Ocean Encounters West, Lodge Kura Hulanda, July 2007, Ernie Feleppa, Rye, NY. In July, I took a large group to the Lodge Kura Hulanda, a new resort at the remote western tip of Curacao. My group consisted of five young children, 20 adult non-divers, and 40 adult

divers. The staff were warm and friendly including bell boys, wait staff, and maids. Valentina Rodriguez saw that everyone was pleased. She placed people in units according to my requests, to expedite check in and check out, and to allow individual billings for incidentals (bar, restaurant, etc.). Camille at the front desk also was especially gracious, helpful, and efficient. However, the well-meaning staff generally was slow. An hour might go by after eating until a bill was provided. The units were not made up until late afternoon. The remote location of the Lodge, with ocean-front units on the brink of a cliff above the sea and the sunset visible in the west were major plusses; however, the Lodge was too remote for some. The Lodges shuttle to the centrally located sister resort only made runs at 8:30 AM and 4:30 PM, which was too infrequent for many. Taxis required more than 30 minutes getting to the Lodge for pickups because they originated from distant central locations. Our ocean-front units were clean and well appointed. To some, the suites were cramped, but we are used to larger condominium apartments. The kitchenettes had a small two-burner stove and a tiny refrigerator that held little; some found this to be too compact. The downstairs studios were more spacious and open than the roughly equal-area upstairs one-bedroom suites, except the studios had no private sleeping area. The Lodge misleadingly terms the combination of a downstairs studio and a distinctly separate upstairs one-bedroom suite a two-bedroom suite, but the two units are quite separate. The spacious bathrooms had European-style shower-tub combinations with a small hinged glass door at the shower end. Even when taking great care while showering, water inevitably sprayed over the floor and

sometimes spread into the adjacent bedroom and kitchen. One unit had a handicapped shower without a tub, and regularly flooded the adjacent rooms. Only one US-style, parallel-slot, 120-V, 60-Hz AC electrical outlet was available in each unit; all other outlets were for European-style, round-prong plugs and had 220-V AC electricity. Outdoor showers in upstairs units had no place to put soap or to hang towels, and offered limited privacy. Free high-speed internet connections were slow and iffy. Adapters for US plugs and Ethernet cables were available at the front desk. The grounds were well maintained and nicely landscaped. A path ran along the wall on the cliff edge seaward of the ocean-front units; another ran on the landward side of the units and provided access to their entrances. No way existed to get from the seaward path to the landward path or from the studio patios to the seaward path. The beach was hot, crowded, rocky, and a bit dirty. The restaurants and bar were pleasant and served adequate food and drink. The menus showed no variety and the menus of the two main eating places had similar content. Service was slow at all of the resort restaurants. A nearby restaurant, Jaanchie's, had a warm, hospitable host, a family atmosphere, and good (not great) food, but the mosquitoes were pesky. Other restaurants were a half-hour or longer by car. An on-premises shop had a variety of small gifts and basics such as milk, but it did not have other key breakfast items (cereal or bread). The Lodge issued two beach-towel cards to each guest; the guest then exchanged a card for a towel at the lobby reception desk. Armed guards patrolled the grounds in the evening. This plus the dogs, fences, glass-topped walls, etc. The staff of Ocean Encounters West, particularly Louis, the

co-owner of the facility, Heather, the four divemasters, the boat captain, and the Cuban first mate, made a genuine effort to make our stay and our dives pleasurable. Few dive operations have to deal with a group as big as ours, but these folks did a great job of checking us in and managing all the accounts. The divemasters led the divers on every dive in four groups, and did their best to find special things such as seahorses and frog fish. Touki, the Curacaoan divemaster, seemed to be the most proficient one at finding special things; one divemaster was new to the island, and did not know the western reefs or the creatures that were resident there. Divemasters gave only sparse briefings and essentially no assistance with gear. The mate assisted divers exiting the water, rinsed them with a fresh-water shower at the exit platform, helped them with fins, and guided them safely up to the main deck. In over 1,400 dives in Grand Cayman, Bonaire, and Providenciales, I never have seen reefs as lush and healthy as those at the west end of Curacao. The coral was thriving and the higher forms of sea life — fish, eels, and invertebrates (such as iridescent blue lettuce sea slugs) abounded. Our best site was Watamula Reef, exquisite in terms of its massive healthy star and brain coral formations, and the eels, lobsters, seahorses, etc. Playa Kalki, the house reef required an easy swim to the drop-off. Although the coral there was not quite as healthy as it was at Watamula and other boat sites, the creatures were plentiful. We dove from a spacious, 60-foot, twin-hull boat, but getting 40 divers into and particularly out of the water (via a single ladder and cramped platform) was problematic. However, the boat was comfortable and stable, and protected us well in several downpours or provided us with

a spacious upper deck for relaxing in the sun when conditions allowed. This boat was unsuitable for drift dives, and drift diving would have been preferable at several sites. They gave us delicious, raisin-filled, local bread along with cold water and juice. They provided tanks for shore diving at the house reef and offered storage rooms for hanging suits to dry. Shore diving after 5 PM required locking tanks and gear in a separate room that was used for overnight storage of snack-bar equipment, which made access to gear tricky in the crowded space. Access from the Lodge grounds to the locked gear room and to the entry point (the pier) also required passage through a locked gate using our room key cards. An unusual water mass came into the region from the east; it dropped temperatures into the low 70s F and reduced visibility to no more than about 40 feet in some locations. Currents were uncomfortably strong at some sites, and they even changed during a few dives so that divers had to swim into the current at the beginning and then again at the end of the dive. The rented water-sports items (kayaks, etc.) were not readily accessible. Security seems to be a serious concern. A highlight of the trip was the barbecue provided by Ocean Encounters West on our last night; the food was delicious and the camaraderie was warm.

Seascape, Hilton, May 2007, Randy and Carol Thompson, Boynton Beach, FL. Experience: 0-25 dives. Vis: 40 to 65 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, choppy, surge. Corals are a mixed bag. Some are in good shape, other areas made me want to cry with all the trash such as bottles, beer cans, styrofoam cups, etc. Clarcke is the in-house instructor. He shares dive supervision with divemaster Seal. Clarcke is fun, knowledgeable and easy-going. Went with Seal on a night dive

off the beach. His wife, Jassan, oversees the dive shop and booking. Found out the hard way that he does not carry a dive knife, when I became ensnared in fishing line toward the end of the dive. Word to the wise: Always carry a knife when in Curacao. My husband finally freed me by taking his reg out and biting through the line. When we returned to shore, I asked Seal why he doesn't carry a knife. "There's one in the shop," he shrugged. "Well, one in the shop doesn't help," was my reply. Hope he learns something from this. Clarcke said he always carries one. The island's reefs could benefit from some intensive clean-up and more stringent marine protection laws. We observed fishermen motoring in and setting up right over one of the popular dive sites. Clarcke told us they throw out their beer bottles, hence the mess. It's a shame, because the corals in many spots are every bit as good as those in Bonaire. However, marine life isn't quite as abundant as it is on Bonaire. We saw two frogfish and some four or so seahorses the whole week. One big turtle joined us while we were doing a shore dive. One of the frogfish lives on the abandoned pier at the resort. We did see a good-sized Goliath grouper on one dive, but he was the sole big boy for the week. The prevailing attitude of the locals is far more cordial than that of the residents of Bonaire. Bonaire's newly conceived, grossly misplaced rule about no gloves was far more than an irritation. I received several jellyfish stings on my hands, two of which blistered and tore, revealing deep, raw flesh that became severely infected. No explanation and entreaties on my part to the harbormaster made any difference. Without a signed note from my physician (we had been to Bonaire two years prior and no such rule existed,

so I didn't know to bring one), he was absolutely intractable. Why? "To protect our marine environment." Bonaire is designated a "protected marine sanctuary" and they have the actual temerity to charge you \$25 per diver for the privilege of diving there. However, when we almost got snagged by a fishing hook as it was being reeled up, we asked. The answer we got was that yes, it is a "protected marine sanctuary" but you can line fish. My wearing gloves is no threat to their marine environment. However, locals throwing in lines and lures sure is. Until they clean up their real threats to the marine environment, Bonaire can do without my dollars. But back to Curacao, no problem with using gloves there. No problem with just about anything. The one big difference between the diving there and Bonaire is the wave action of the sea. Bonaire is mostly flat calm. Asking your doctor for a prescription for Transderm Scop patches. Morning is a better time to dive for calmness of the seas. Even so, the end of the second morning dive, the exits were always a little wild. We were charmed by Curacao with its colorful facades, picturesque streets with sidewalk cafes, its warm, charming people, and its great diving. The one sour note was that our digital camera was stolen from our room.

Sunset Waters, December 2006, Tripp Jones MD (Tjones@sc.rr.com), Columbia, SC. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 70 Feet. Water: 76 to 81 F, calm, no currents. This was our dive shop's (Wateree Dive Center in Columbia, SC) first trip to Curacao. On the way back, we had to overnight in MoBay since Air Jamaica canceled the flight from Curacao to MoBay and had to go via Kingston. Montego Bay Airport had security checking us as we got off the plane from Atlanta, as if we'd

stopped in Haiti or somewhere. Baggage handlers were obviously “flying high” and selling the weed just outside the airport. The airport in Curacao is clean and relatively efficient. The resort is about 30’ from the airport and we were met promptly and journeyed by van to the resort. It’s a pretty drive and the island is clean and well kept for the most part. The hotel is fine and the rooms were clean. The restaurant is all buffet. The food was plentiful and good. There was a variety of fruits, etc., at breakfast, along with omelets, etc. Lunch and dinner were also good with a beach Barbecue being a lot of fun for all. There were a number of guests from Europe. The dive operation is good. They have 2 boats, 1 that can hold about 20 divers comfortably and another that can hold about 10 or so. The staff is good, with a divemaster in the water and another on the boat. They set up your gear each day and you just take your fins, masks, etc., to the boat from the storage area each morning in a clothes basket, which is stored under the seats. Nitrox for \$12 tank or \$128 for the week. We had six days of two tank dives, leaving at 9 AM and returning about 12:30 PM. Shore diving is good with a lagoon in front of the resort and the reef was fine. There are guided snorkel tours for non divers. The water temperature was somewhat cool at 76 degrees at the bottom and about 80-81 degrees at the surface. The coral looked good and healthy. The small critters were fine and there were plenty of opportunities for good shots. There were several seahorses seen, with one on the reef in front of the hotel. We saw no grouper larger than my hand and only 1 triggerfish and no sharks. There were only a few moderate-sized barracuda. The island needs a marine park since it is overfished by the locals. I

don’t think it has the fishlife of Bonaire, and this is likely due to the lack of a marine park. The people are very nice and I liked the resort. A trip to Willemstaad is worthwhile one afternoon.

Sunset Waters Resort, May 2007, Robert White (rcwhitejr@comcast.net), Lakewood, CO. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 100 to 150 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, calm. Sunset Waters Beach Resort is 35 minutes via taxi ride from Willemstad. The resort has shuttles to shopping centers. Non-divers should be prepared to enjoy lots of quiet time, baking in the sun, listening to steel drums, and enjoying the swim-up bar. Sunset Divers — a separate business from the Sunset Waters Beach Resort — is at the bottom of a moderately steep hill a few hundred yards from the resort, offering excellent diving on healthy reefs. The dive boat has a wide deck and good design to accommodate 12-15 divers. Sign up the day before on the dry board if you wish to go diving on a given day. Steaming time to the dive site seldom exceeds 15 minutes. Entry is by giant stride. Separate onboard containers for cameras and masks lie adjacent to the entry point. Water exit is via two ladders on either side of the stern of the dive boat. The layout of the boat is suited to handicapped scuba divers, and it appears the guest rooms are as well, but didn’t have wheel-in showers and just regular toilets. The dive shop is on the same level as the sheltered dock for easy, calm boat access. Lynn Bean runs a safe, tight ship. There are no unnecessary rules, but the current checks, roll calls, and critter finding were all appreciated. The divemasters are a bit outrageous so be aware if you bring your kids, and if you don’t bring your kids bring a dirty joke to share. There is a 60-minute dive limit, but other limitations are per your own dive

computer. I did not experience much current at most dive sites. Some divers had problems with sea lice, so I recommend full 3 mm wet suit and a beanie, at least in late May. Divers store stuff between dives in a small laundry basket and then load it on the boat for each dive. Dive masters will set up your BCD each day if you desire. Resort restrooms are 50 yards away. There is a house reef with unlimited shore diving. Nitrox is an extra \$125/week or \$12 a la carte. Relatively shallow dive profiles. The dive shop is a full PADI training facility offering retail items. It has a separate convenient room to hang wetsuits and BCD/regulators with 24/7 access. On my dives, generally along a drop-off wall, I saw frogfish, several octopi, spotted eagle rays, scrawled filefish, drums, numerous moray eels of various types. Fish life is small but abundant, including lots of Creole wrasse and brown chromis on the reef. There were no large pelagics, no nurse sharks. Hard and soft corals are abundant and fairly healthy. Saw some large soft corals literally the size of small palm trees. Black and white banding disease is evident on brain corals on some dives. Sunset Waters Beach Resort offers good quality food on an all-inclusive plan. Typical offerings include salad bar, fish, chicken, pork, and beef dishes, and always club sandwiches, hot dogs, and hamburgers. There was a barbecue buffet some nights. Seafood is usually absent. The resort is open to locals on weekends for a discounted price; my weekend included 150 additional guests. Buffet and hotel facilities are crowded and stressed during this time, especially at breakfast. The crowds and noise were a bit of a surprise. The hotel staff was always friendly and accommodating. Wireless internet access, allegedly available in the bar area, was down.

There is one computer in the office where you can buy an overpriced online access card for \$10/30 minutes. The computer will cut you off when your time is up even if you are in the middle of an email. My cell phone/Blackberry with email would work by the dive shop. You must make prior arrangements with your cell service provider for international service. Otherwise there is a single phone outside the office where you can use a separately purchased phone credit card. I paid \$40 each way for cab fare (including \$5 tip). Transfers are apparently available sometimes at a reduced cost, though this is never mentioned on the web site. There are no other businesses within walking distance of the resort.

DOMINICA

Dominica is the best all-around adventure island in the Caribbean, with gorgeous reefs, plenty of reef fish, lush rainforests, hiking, waterfalls, warm water springs, splendid fruits and vegetables, modest hotels and restaurants — and it's inexpensive. Small seaside hotels and diver retreats are affected by the nearly continuous cloud cover over the mountains, and there's not much happening beyond residents leading their lives. Expect daytime temperatures in the 80s and night lows around 68 in winter and 73 in summer, although a few minutes up the mountain into the cloud forest can change that. July to November is the wet season. Dominica's at the edge of the hurricane belt. The 13-mile, round-trip hike to Boiling Lake is worth getting in condition for.

Cabrits Dive Centre, Calibishe Lodges,