

cell phones would also link up. I booked with Dom Macan (dom@reefrainforest.com), a reliable dive trip expert, of Reef and Rainforest (www.reefrainforest.com) and had no difficulties in any aspect of the booking. The Baani web site is www.maldivesliveboards.com.

Grand Turk, Turks and Caicos Islands

Unspoiled for another month

Dear Fellow Diver,

During the last week of February, Holland America's 1848 passenger Noordam will be the first cruise ship to dock at the new Grand Turk Port. That's close to half the island's population and about ten times more tourists than visit Grand Turk on any given day. The pier, next to where the Arawak Hotel was, is a five-minute boat ride to town. Officials say that the new complex, with shopping, a 10,000 sq. ft. Margaritaville, and beaches should keep the tourists isolated. But that's unrealistic. On cruise days if you don't have dive reservations or reservations for lunch in the handful of small restaurants, you may not get a seat on either the boat or a bar stool.

Diving on Grand Turk is easy and beautiful. Fish life isn't remarkable, though in winter whales pass close by. A fine wall starts about 500 yards offshore. The 20-plus moored dive sites are far enough apart so you don't bump into other groups, at least not now. The three main dive operations - SeaEye Diving, Blue Water Divers, and Oasis - pick you up on shore and whisk you to the wall in minutes. I've dived with them all, but used only Oasis on my November trip. All three are on Front Street within a five-minute walk of each other. They use identical outboard-powered six-passenger Carolina skiffs with canvas covers. I think the only real difference between them is the personnel and they all have their groupies. Mitch Rollins, who has run Blue Water Divers forever, has more than 8000 dives around Grand Turk. And SeaEye's Smitty, an ex cop, is a favorite of many divers.

With Oasis, I dived mainly with Mackie, a competent, hard-working local, fun to dive with. There were two to five divers on each trip and every dive is similar: swim a couple of minutes to the wall, drop over, go in one direction -- usually right -- turn around when someone has 1500 psi, then move up to the shallows at 20-30 feet or so and work your way back to the boat. After Mackie climbed aboard, I stayed down until I decided to get out, an hour at least. First dive was loosely to 100 feet, the last about 60, but just follow your computer. And keep an eye on Mackie - he didn't pay much attention to his divers - unless you can find your way back without him. If you don't, what the hell, you're only 30 feet from the surface.

The inn of choice is the renovated Osprey Beach, a well-managed, well-kept, nicely furnished two-story



27-room hotel, a dozen steps from water's edge. (I actually saw an osprey fly past). My room had a poster bed, couch and coffee maker and refrigerator, A/C, and TVs with HBO and CNN and three stations with American evangelists like Creflo A. Dollar asking for alms. Lower rooms have small patios; the small decks upstairs are private, with ocean views. Note: I failed to close my deck door at dusk and mosquitoes slipped in. No-see-ums that focused on feet were active in bars and restaurants.

I also roomed at the venerable Salt Raker Inn, a seafarin' place built in the 19th century. It's clean, furnished mid-20th century. One early morning, 4:30 a.m., young drunks staged a drum concert across the street on the beach. Not long ago roosters announced the sunrise and donkeys strolled Front Street, but no more. With the cruise ships coming, nearly all the old - and charming - houses have been replaced by modern structures, at a big cost to the government. Streets are paved, the half-mile main street downtown has been spruced up, and most donkeys were shipped to Jamaica, or so I was told. Front Street, however, with the hotels and dive operations, retains its charm.

As for the diving, nothing's changed -- well that's not quite true. On my first dive, Mackie toted my BCD from the shop to the boat (it's backed into the beach) which is loaded with tanks and gear from previous dives (he carries it back after the final dive, you wash and rinse, and hang in their secure drying room). Five minutes later at Austin's Reef, Mackie helped me don my BCD and tank, gave the usual instructions and I and four other divers backrolled in. As I swam across the bottom at 25 feet, a school of goatfish clustered under feathery sea whip branches. At 40 feet, I eased over the top of the wall, past flowing creole wrasses. I swam 20 feet into the blue, then turned. The wall looked like a cauliflower patch, with abundant white plate corals polka-dotted the reefscape. Interesting, but I didn't remember this look. Then, I realized these corals were bleached from an event that occurred throughout much of the Caribbean in late summer, when water temperature headed toward the 90's. About 10 percent of the wall shone white. As I finned along, I watched a small hawksbill turtle rise slowly to the surface to grab a breath of air. A larger hawksbill ripped hunks from a hard sponge, pushing his front flippers against the sponge for leverage. Two queen angels scrounged for leftovers and a black bar jack buddied up with a hogfish. As we headed to the top of the wall hundreds of slender bogia streamed by and a dozen jawfish backed

Club Cantamar Revisited

Dear Ben :

Thank you for your review of Cantamar in your October issue. However, I need to make some corrections .

First, our live-aboard the Fiesta does have a compressor aboard, a Poseidon P-500 and we are installing a backup Bauer 9 CFM.

Second, our procedures say that three different people aboard have to make headcounts before the boat moves somewhere else. You did not witness the procedure and assumed we are too soft. I can assure you we are not.

We have been in operation since 1983, originally known as Baja Diving & Service. The fact that in all these years we have never had an accident - any kind of accident, road, boat, diving, etc. - should count for something, wouldn't you say?

I made 150 copies of your

report and handed it to customers. The vast majority of these comments disagree with your perception, but it did help me to improve and pay more attention in certain areas.

Fernando Aguilar

Dear Fernando,

It's good that your procedures say that three different people aboard are to make headcounts. Still, during my ten dives on your day boat I never observed anyone making a headcount - and I watched closely. As you know, a diver left behind in the middle of the Sea of Cortez would be in serious straits. I trust my article will lead you to ensure that your crew follows your procedures to assure that all divers are aboard before your boat departs a dive site.

Ben Davison

into their holes as I passed. Later Mackie climbed aboard the boat and I dawdled at 25 feet rather than hang on the shot line. When I surfaced, he was ready to take my gear and fins, before I climbed the tiny ladder. One hour, 1000 psi remaining, 80 degrees.

Black Forest is an apt description of a lush wall with frequent black coral bushes among the wire coral, plate and other corals and sponges. A large spider crab clung to the wall and others were secreted in holes. After 30 minutes I rose to see a small nurse shark meandering down a long sand patch, a 3-foot tiger grouper watching. Under the boat a hefty midnight parrot fish shot by, and I poked around, watching a smooth trunk fish flutter along, with enough common tropicals to keep me entertained.

Each operation offers dives roughly at 9, 11, and 2 p.m., returning to the shore between dives. While Oasis is only a five-minute walk from the Osprey, they'll pick you up on the hotel beach if you ask. I'd have lunch back at the Osprey, or at one of the two small restaurants on piers nearby. While the Osprey has salads, club sandwiches, and a few entrees for lunch, everyone is in the big hamburger business - about \$10. The Osprey's restaurant has tables and chairs around a small swimming pool - no cleaning dive equipment - with tables overlooking the beach (and a too-small bar). For dinner, it's romantically lighted, they serve such fare as rack of lamb (\$25) or wahoo (\$22) and key lime pie, or barbecues on two nights. I also enjoyed meals such as conch fritters and a good conch creole in the courtyard at the Salt Raker. The bar was usually filled with interesting locals ready for hearty conversation.

One afternoon dive was at Finbar, where the murkiness portended a bad dive, but once at the wall we were back to the 80 foot viz. Unexpectedly, my BCD started to inflate. I kicked down to grab a piece of coral and tried to disconnect the inflator, but couldn't with just one hand, so a fellow diver helped. Mackie was out of sight -- an example of how capable divers are on their own. That's OK, just be forewarned. The wall here is covered with hard and soft corals, some wire coral extending ten feet or more. I spotted a rare quill fin blenny, which disappeared before I could share my find. Below, a large hawksbill turtle finned nonchalantly by, while a pair of tiger groupers hovered on a ledge. It was a slow-moving dive, with

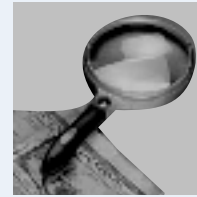
Delight in the Details

On my last trip to Cozumel, besides nurse sharks and turtles, I didn't see big critters. But I saw an eye-popping painted elysia sea slug looking as fine as the one pictured in Paul Humann's *Reef Creatures*.

When I was a new diver, I was out for the big stuff. But after seeing hundreds of barracuda and lobsters, I appreciated more diverse pleasures in the reef environment.

That's where my magnifying glass comes in. The tiny shrimp lurking in the lettuce coral, the clinging crab in the anemone, and the pipefish in the sand flats are easier to ID and a lot more spectacular with a good glass. I also get a lot more detail on other denizens, including the corals.

If you want to go small, you need a glass lens, not plastic. That's because the index of refraction of water is about 1.33. Plastic lenses have about the same index as water, so they become useless underwater.



Optical glass has an index of about 1.52, so it works, though the magnification underwater will be a bit less than above.

Index of refraction?

That's a measure of how much a substance slows the speed of light, and thus bends (refracts) it. Water's index of 1.33 also explains why objects appear 1/3 larger underwater, and why your buddy swears that a 3-foot grouper was a 4-footer.

Magnifying lenses in your mask (bifocals) are not very useful for viewing underwater subjects except gauges. This goes for the plastic stick-on bifocals as well as the Mares ESA mask, which has separate lens frames in which you can put magnifiers.

Instead, you need a good hand-held glass. I've tried several and my favorite is Edmund Scientific (www.scientificsonline.com). Look for the Round Magnifier With 10X Spot Lens. The 4-inch lens (you don't want a small one that you need to hold too close to the subject) is available there for \$11.95, plus \$6.40 for shipping. It fits in a BC pocket and has a hole in the handle for a lanyard. Happy hunting.

- M.A.

Grand Turk, Turks and Caicos Islands

Diving (experienced)	★★★★
Diving (Beginners)	★★★★★
Accommodations	
Osprey Beach	★★★★½
Salt Raker	★★★
Food	
Osprey Beach	★★★★
Salt Raker	★★★★½
Beach Snorkeling	★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

creole wrasse in their usual hurry. At the top of the wall, Mackie pointed out a green moray, longer than my outstretched arms from head to tail. And there were tomtates, French angels, a porgy or two, yellowtails, and a nurse shark with her nose in a hole -- until Mackie shook its tail. Interesting to see him swim, more interesting to leave him alone and observe his behavior. Under the boat a large patch of garden eels swayed in the currents.

Amphitheater is a beautiful dive, starting with a large sand patch, then through a cut to the wall, covered in corals and sponges. I traveled along at 100 feet, seeing a pair of queen angels, an ocean trigger, two jacks, and a pair of reef runners scooting past, then back to the flats. The water dropped to 79F. "Winter is coming," said Mackie.

Grand Turk remains an excellent destination, easy to get to from the East Coast, friendly, a wall among the best in the Caribbean, and a good range, if not abundance, of fish. And, it's still inexpensive. You can find high season seven-day dive packages less than \$1000/pp, double occupancy (Salt Raker, with low season rates around \$800), or in the Osprey in a deluxe room for \$1130 (food additional). December through at least March the water is chilly, the nights can be cool. That said, enjoy your stay.

PS: I started this trip hoping to review a small and unknown dive operation at the Ocean Beach Hotel, on West Caicos, next to the defunct Prospect of Whitby Hotel, which we reviewed favorably many years ago. They were at first uncertain they could come up with four divers - the minimum - or get their boat fixed, but I got an email two days before I was to depart saying they could accommodate me. While I was in the air, they called my home to change their minds, but I didn't get the message, so I showed up 8:30 a.m. after a brief flight from Provo. Nice people, but Captain Poach had no divers, the hotel had no guests, and it was "too windy" anyhow. Back to Provo, then off to Grand Turk.

PPS: Oasis Divers is getting new boats to serve the cruise business. Owners Dale Barker and Everett Freitas are building a shop near the cruise pier. Dale says "That keeps our current diving operation in town the same for all our customers that come to Grand Turk for week-long dive vacations. We will maintain the same small group diving and personal service for the extended stay diversCruise passenger divers will experience the first-rate dive spots in Grand Turk."

PSSS: On my way home, I had a layover on Provo so I hired a cab for a tour of the island. At Leeward Harbor, a boat pulled up with the captain yelling for help. In the stern a man and a woman were competently administering CPR to a diver, but it was all in vain. It was a tragic event and a sad one to witness. But it reminded me that every dive we make carries risks. Take care of yourself.

- Ben Davison

Divers Compass: Nitrox is a pricey \$11-\$13 extra per tank; and single dives are \$45, pricey for the short rides to the reefProvidenciales is about an hour and a half from Miami. . . .All the shops offer night dives, trips to Gibbs Cay, a mini stingray city, or across to Salt Cay, but you'll need enough people interested. . . .the Oasis web site (www.oasisdivers.com) features photos

and information about most hotels on Grand Turk. . . .What was once the Guanahani Hotel, then the Pillory Beach Hotel, has been renovated and rechristened the Bohio and has its own dive operation. It's a leisurely ten-minute bike ride north of town, on the beach, and its restaurant is considered the best on the island. It has its own dive operation: www.bohioresort.com. Sea Eye Diving: www.seaeyediving.com Blue Water Divers: www.grandturkscuba.com.

Dead in Belize Waters

Divers drift three days off Placencia

John Bain, a lawyer from Kansasville, WI, visiting Belize in October, drove to Placencia, on the southern coast, hoping to get in a few good dives. Looking for a dive operator, he came across a beach shack belonging to Advanced Divers and returned the next morning to book a trip. Six snorkelers and three other scuba divers joined him: Nancy Masters, a nurse from Portland, Oregon; Abigail Brinkman, a medical student at Indiana University, and Yutaka Maeda, a Japanese tourist.

headed back. He switched everyone into a larger boat, fueled up and started again. Yet the motor quit two-thirds of the way to Silk Cay, restarting only after Cabral fiddled with it. When they finally reached the Cay, Cabral went ashore with the snorkelers, and Tucker motored the divers toward Gladden Spit. Then the motor died for the last time.

Bain told *Undercurrent*, "It was obvious that Tucker didn't know what he was doing," trying to restart

authorities and the media that he had warned the divers against leaving the vessel, but Bain said, "He never said a word, and he helped us on with our dive gear." The group began gearing up, without much further communication.

Once in the water, says Bain, "the current was stronger than any of us realized." The divers were swimming up current toward the cay while the boat drifted in the opposite direction. The divers quickly became separated, with Maeda drifting away. Bain tried unsuccessfully to lead him to the others, but soon everyone had split apart.

"We were going at different paces," Masters recalled. "Abby was really scared, so I tried to find her. I never did. I never saw her or the others again."

Bain soon lost sight of both the cay and the boat, and discovered that the BCD he'd rented from Advanced Diving was full of holes, so he had to keep inflating it. Hungry, thirsty, sunburned and chafed by his wet suit, Bain drifted alone for nearly three days. When he finally emptied his tank, he mouth-inflated his leaky BCD, while dodging jellyfish and wondering if he'd ever be rescued. After nightfall, he shivered uncontrollably, wheezing from the salt water he had ingested. Only thoughts of his family kept him going. After his second night in the water, Bain recalls, "I was becoming resigned to another night and didn't know, really, if I could make it." Fortunately, sailors in a catamaran rescued him.

Describing her own experience to

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Had Bain and the others read the April 2004 *Undercurrent*, they would have seen the *Thumbs Down* we awarded Advanced Divers for an earlier incident that included an engine failure and swamped boat, and learned just how unsafe they were. Had they seen the weather reports, they would have known that a small craft advisory was in effect. In an exclusive interview, Bain told *Undercurrent* that Advanced Divers owner Vince Cabral agreed to take them out, with no warning about the conditions.

The trip was ill-fated from the start. Cabral and his dive guide, Henry "Bee Bee" Tucker, loaded everyone into a small boat for the ride to Silk Cay, 20 miles out. A few minutes from the mainland, Cabral realized the boat was overloaded and

the engine. Tucker ignored Bain's request to drop anchor, but after drifting "a mile or so," says Bain, Tucker finally threw out the anchor. The chain snapped. Tucker raised the radio antenna to call for help, but the radio was on the fritz. Bain worked on the radio while repeatedly cranking the ignition as Tucker continued trying to restart the motor.

A Fatal Error: They Left the Boat

Silk Cay was now more than two miles away, and getting smaller, says Bain. Masters, wearing shorts and a shirt over her swimsuit, told the others she thought they should swim to the cay. Brinkman, 28, wearing only a bikini, was frightened but decided to go along. Tucker later told Belize