

dominantly Christian and the people are welcoming and friendly ... I spent five days at Kungkungan Bay Resort, which was included in my package ... I flew the nonstop Singapore Air flight for about \$1200. The flight to Manado, booked through Singapore Air, cost another \$500. Get details at [www.aggessor.com](http://www.aggessor.com), or e-mail [northsulawesi@aggessor.com](mailto:northsulawesi@aggessor.com). The weekly cost is \$2295 with \$100 surcharge for gas, and a 10 percent VAT tax on goods.

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## Kids Sea Camp, Curacao

*good for parents and grandparents, too*

I waded in from the beach slowly, although there were no breakers in Curacao's Blue Bay. I dropped slowly to 15 feet, waving encouragement to my wide-eyed buddy, who was making his first open water dive. I pointed out sergeant majors and juvenile wrasse flitting about the rocks, and elicited a smile by waving at a tube worm, causing it to retreat into its armor. It was a short, shallow dive, but my buddy got scared when he couldn't clear his ears, aborting the proceedings. Yet it was the most memorable dive I've ever made, because that buddy was my 8-year-old son. Just seeing him suited up in scuba gear made this fanatic diver of a parent grin ear to ear.

The open water dive is the culmination of a week at Kids Sea Camp, a family program offered at multiple dive destinations, mostly in the summer (see the sidebar for details). Founder Margo Peyton, another self-proclaimed "Scuba Mom," hosts two months worth of Kids Sea Camps with her own children, 12-year-old Robbie and 10-year-old Jennifer. As a travel agent and owner of World Dive Adventures, Peyton saw a lack of dive programs that let kids and their parents spend time together in the water and have quality time apart. In 2001, Peyton opened Kids Sea Camp so kids could get a fun-filled, educating week, parents and grandparents could have a guilt-free dive trip, and both groups could get together at day's end. In Curacao, the adults dive with Ocean Encounters while kids are at camp. Spots fill up quickly through word of mouth and former campers returning for another round. My boy, who has a poor track record with group activities, couldn't get up early enough every morning and has asked if he can go back next year.

The kids were occupied from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., leaving me time for a shower and a post-dive beer before offspring retrieval time. A pizza-and-movie party allowed parents one night dive, and the staff babysat in the evening for an extra fee. During the week, my son participated in a treasure hunt on the beach and created masterpieces with his found objects, kissed a sea lion at the aquarium (yucky breath, he informed me) and learned about sea life. Months later, he popped his head up while snorkeling to announce, "I saw a juvenile French angelfish, mommy." And he was right.

Sea Camp made use of local facilities, so the program is a little different in each location. The Curacao camp used the Seaquarium, a facility designed for children's educational programs, with a theater for films and an airy classroom full of games and supplies. The kids snorkeled and dived in an artificial cove full of fish, while sharks swam on the other side of a Plexiglas wall.

Sea Camp's centerpiece is diving lessons, something young children ordinarily cannot get. Kids older than 10 could earn their junior open water certification. (A new program debuts this year for older kids up to age 15 who are already certified.) The youngest kids (age 4 to 8) snorkeled on the surface using a regulator attached to a stationary air supply. The "Seal Team" learned to use scuba gear in

## ***Sea Camp Dates and Sites***

Sea Camp offers one-week programs at four different Caribbean locations during the summer, and Fiji hosts a Sea Camp during Thanksgiving. You can pay for room and camp separately, or purchase a package rate with meals included.

- **The Sea Camp headquarters in Curacao** kicks off the summer dates on June 16-23, June 23-30, June 30-July 7 and July 7-14. It also hosts a Dolphin Encounter experience at the Seaquarium.
- **Grand Cayman's Sea Camp** is next, on July 14-21 and July 21-28. Rooms are at Cobalt Coast Resort, and its dive shop Divetech leads five days of 2-tank boat trips. Nitrox is \$12 for boat dives, \$15 for shore dives.
- **Roatan's Sea Camp** is July 28-August 4 at Anthony Key's Resort. A Dolphin Encounter program is held in the bay. Twelve boat dives are included, excursions to Barbetta Island and Cayos Cochinos Island are \$75 each, and shark diving is \$100.
- **Bonaire's Sea Camp** is August 4-11 at Buddy's Dive Resort and includes five days of two-tank dives and one night dive.
- **Fiji's Sea Camp** takes place during Thanksgiving week, November 17-24, at Castaway Island. The dive package has five days of two-tank dives, and one night dive. Kids age 11 and under fly free on Air Pacific.

For more details, log on to [www.kidsseacamp.com](http://www.kidsseacamp.com).

the pool, made a dive in the Seaquarium lagoon, and then dived with their parents. The adult-to-child ratio was very high, and I never felt uneasy about the children's safety. The staff was uniformly superb and gave any child one-on-one attention when needed. My son can be especially difficult, but they handled him with exceptional understanding.

The adult diving was enjoyable enough to hold my attention for a week. Ocean Encounters was thoroughly organized without being impersonal. Owner Nolo Ambrosi mingled with divers daily, always asking if there were a way to make our stay better. A few steps from the dock are a fully stocked rental gear counter and gear maintenance room. I had a storage locker and was expected to rinse and store my gear and set it up in the morning.

Divers were assigned to one of two boats at the start of the week. The Curacao Princess was comfortable, with a fresh water rinse, oxygen, and first-aid kit aboard. Sometimes we had as many as 15 divers but it didn't feel crowded. The divemasters, all locals, were personable, professional, and good about pointing out interesting critters. They imposed no unreasonable restrictions, allowing buddy teams to go on their own with a 60-minute time limit. I got no guff about my depth or being the last one back on board. They either anchored offshore for a surface interval or came back to the dock between dives.

The dives were no more than 15 minutes from the dock and similar in topography: scattered coral heads in the

shallows, a sloping dropoff that begins at 25 feet, and no dramatic walls. You'll be repeating sites if you stay here more than five days. Visibility ranged from 50 to 90 feet with little current, the water temperature was a constant 81 degrees, and the summer day temperature averages 89 degrees. Afternoon dives were sometimes available for an extra fee. Gear and tanks were always available for shore diving, which could be accomplished by swimming out of the cove between the resorts, or by scaling a ladder attached to the rocks next to the Seaquarium.

The coral was healthy; I even saw small stands of nearly pristine elkhorn coral at the sites around Jan Thiel. This surprised me because Curacao is a heavily industrial island. A huge oil refinery in the island's center lights up the night surrealistically with flames rising from tall smokestacks. Nearly all dive sites were littered with the debris of ships and other man-made objects, most of it old enough to be covered with marine life. Depending on your point of view, this either makes the sites more interesting or detracts from the natural beauty. I saw the usual tropicals: swarms of brown chromis, French angelfish, damselfish, fairy basslets, creole wrasse and parrotfish, including a couple of large mid-

nights. I saw no pelagic fish, no rays and only two turtles. However, I saw a number of eels, including purplemouth, chain, spotted and goldentail morays.

The standout dive on this end of the island was the Tugboat, named for a small wreck in the shallows of Caracas Bay. A large school of grunts swarmed around a coral head at 50 feet. An adult spotted drum cruised in its grotto. Cocoa and yellowtail damselfish defended their territory. I pointed out banded and Pederson

***The standout dive on this end of the island was the Tugboat***

shrimp and arrow crabs to my buddy. In the tugboat wreck, in less than 15 feet of water, I found an octopus wedged into a crack between rocks. At least a dozen small morays wriggled in crevices on the wreck, which is also home to many blennies.

Ocean Encounters' satellite dive shop on Playa Kalki near the west end had a boat to take divers (who arrive by bus) to the well-advertised Mushroom Forest. Once we entered the "forest," I saw the formations that give the site its name: large heads of star coral eroded at the base that indeed look like mushrooms. They cover a significant expanse of sea floor above the dropoff at a depth ranging from 30 to 55 feet. Some formations have caves in their centers; I saw a pufferfish the size of a small Labrador retriever in one and a nurse shark in another.

Sea Camp accommodations were at Royal Resorts Seaquarium condominiums, next to the aquarium and across a man-made inlet from Lions Dive Resort, where Ocean Encounters is located and those who book late (like me) were housed. I found my room adequate, with attractive wood furnishings and soft comforters. The patio would have been nice if the door hadn't been so difficult to open and close. The current is European 220 volt and most of my stuff did not work even with standard adapters. Maintenance brought a big bricklike power converter which helped a little, but my laptop charger never worked at all.

The maintenance guys, who are locals, were great. But the largely Dutch staff at the desk and restaurants was unresponsive at best. For starters, I was shown to a room overlooking a dirt construction zone. The location and "view" were unacceptable, and I had to stare down the desk clerk to get a different room. The food was adequate, but the prices were high and the service painfully slow. I spent a ludicrous sum on a rental car to escape them. While their service was also slow, the restaurants with non-Dutch staff were much better. I recommend Rijstaffel Restaurant Indonesia in the middle of town which serves Indonesian and Thai food; La Pergola, where I had a first-class Italian meal at a very reasonable price; and the Grill King, where the waiter threw scraps into the tidepools next to our table, attracting a swarm of eels.

I think a serious diver not toting kids would be better off at Habitat Curacao or Sunset Waters Resort (reviewed in the February 2005 issue), on the northwestern end of Curacao, closer to the best diving. But for me, the week was worthwhile for the smiles on my child's face seen through a mask.

--A.W.



**Diver's Compass:** Information and signup details are found at [www.kidsseacamp.com](http://www.kidsseacamp.com)...The trip cost over \$2600 for my son and me, including room, meals, five days of boat dives, and camp activities ... Ocean Encounters charges \$5 per Nitrox tank. Connections to Curacao are hard to find; Air Jamaica was our best option (I stopped over in Jamaica at no extra charge)...The Seaquarium has a Dolphin Experience program, and charges an additional \$100 to dive with a dolphin in open water. It's less canned than snorkeling with a confined dolphin in an inlet although I still felt uncomfortable with the sideshow feel. Let your own conscience be your guide.