

undercurrent

The Private, In Depth Guide for Serious Divers

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Turks & Caicos Hideaway

Languid Salt Cay is my kind of place.

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Until a decade ago, the only time Salt Cay got much attention was after a Hollywood mogul read a 30s Nelson Hayes romance novel about Salt Cay salt barons. Called Dildo Cay, after the Saguaro-like cactus that grows on the island, the novel was turned into a 1941 film starring heartthrob Sterling Hayden and Madeline Carroll. Showing a rare streak of good taste, Paramount Studios retitled it "Bahama Passage."

While salt production ended long ago, mordant salt ponds still dominate the landscape of this somnambulant outpost. With something like 130 residents, several deserted 19th-century buildings, a few wild donkeys, and arid land dominated by scrub brush, the only real activity is at the rustic Mt. Pleasant Guest House. Here, proprietor Bryan Sheedy has been quietly operating for a decade.

Sheedy, an ex-New Yorker, started a dive operation on Salt Cay in the late 80s, selling out in 1996 to ex-Arizona nurse Debbie Manos and one of Bryan's local guides, Ollie Been. While occasional groups book the whole shebang, most of the divers are making side trips from Providenciales or Grand Turk (which is less than five miles away). Yet they all go home quite happy: the diving is comparable to Grand Turk, though more Bahamas-like; there's adequate lodging, great food, and the price is right; and the residents treat you like you've lived there all your life.

As we circled the barren, three-square-mile island in a four-seat Cessna, I could see the two small settlements joined by a dirt road along the beach. The airstrip and its garage-sized terminal was deserted. Yet the buzz of the plane alerted the island's only cab driver to leave



Salt Cay, Turks & Caicos

his TV and drive a few hundred yards to pick up the only two tourists of the day – of the last three days, in fact.

We had selected Castaways Cottages, two isolated duplex cottages on a deserted beach. Canadian proprietors Bram and Eleanor Davies greeted us warmly and gave us our pick of the rooms – at the end of April, we were the only guests. Each has a small carpeted living area, a couch, a few books on a board-and-cinderblock book case, a sizable kitchen with sufficient cooking gear, coffee and tea, and a kitchen table, a bedroom with a queen-sized bed and chest of drawers, and a spacious bathroom with a shower. No AC, but there are overhead fans. Clean and pleasantly appointed, the duplexes' only drawback to pure privacy is that each has a single large front deck with chaise longues and separate hammocks. Nevertheless, on the always-deserted beach, one can leave civilization far behind.

While some guests bring food to prepare (you'll be unable to buy much at all on the island, save a fish or two), we had decided to take our meals at Mt. Pleasant, a mile and a half away. We rode bikes from the cottages (turn left at the telephone pole with the osprey nest on top), walked, or occasionally got a lift. Once, not wanting to battle against the usual 20-knot tropical tradewind after a big dinner, we called the cab (\$8 for two) and picked up our bikes the next day. (If you reserve ahead, you can rent a \$25/day golf cart to get around.)

Mt. Pleasant, built in the 1800s, reminds me of a 1960s-era New England bed and breakfast before everyone spiffed them up. It has four guest rooms, three of which share bathrooms (an "annex," half a block away, has two rooms with a private bath, one without, and a small dormitory), painted floors, and Bryan's pewter collection and other memorabilia. As Bryan is quick to say, "this is not the Hyatt Regency, you know."

A small building on the premises houses Salt Cay Divers. Debbie and Ollie (husband and wife, they met when she came to Salt Cay on a diving holiday) moor their two 24-foot, covered, outboard-powered, Carolina skiffs behind a small breakwater a hundred yards away. At lunch at Mt. Pleasant the first day, Debbie showed up to discuss the diving, explaining that she would pick us up each morning. We could eat breakfast at Mt. Pleasant, take a couple of dives, return for lunch, have a third dive, and she would motor us back. Or we could dictate the schedule.

Bram, always personable and cheery, picked us up after lunch, returned us to the Castaways, then invited us to his manager's cottage for beers at five, a get-to-know-you chat, and a viewing of a nicely-done video on the splendors of Salt Cay. Bikes to town for dinner and that was that.

The next day Debbie picked us up at 9:30. After a quick breakfast, we signed forms and Ollie carted our gear to the boat. The skiff is certainly adequate for getting to the close moorings, but without amenities for cameras. (They can

handle ten divers, but more than six gets crowded.) During our five days, winds kept us to the lee of the Cay, where moorings mark a variety of sights along the wall. Diving here is easily accessible and similar to Grand Turk (see the last issue), with a nice variety of soft corals and a wide, though not particularly prolific, range of tropical fish. While the Grand Turk Wall is perpendicular to the surface, this wall had a general slope of 50-80 degrees.

Ollie is a gung-ho diver. He almost seemed hurt if we passed on a third dive. He helped with gear and gave a rule-free minimal briefing. You roll over the side when you are ready. If you want him to take your aluminum 80 before you climb up the small ladder, he'll get back on the boat ahead of you; if not, he just might keep puttering around on the bottom.

My first dive was 70 minutes at Talley's Folly, where I drifted down to 80 feet, past pretty brown and purple soft corals, sea plumes, and sea fans, with a couple of Flamingo tongues and common Caribbean reef fish. I watched a pea-sized spotted drum wriggle around, swam with a barracuda longer than Ollie's leg, and almost petted a couple of orange-spotted file fish. The nearly vertical wall had a few jutting corals, fairy basslets, and an occasional Creole wrasse. My partner had decided to recline for the day, so the three of us – there was one other paying diver – did our own thing, paying little attention to one another.

Back on board, I asked how long the surface interval would be. "How much do you want?" Ollie replied. A half hour later we were back in the water at the Power Station. Visibility had been 80 feet, but dropped to 50 feet; the reef was more sanded, the coral and fish less, but it was still an easy and pleasant dive. At 40 feet among the hard and soft corals, I spent ten minutes stalking a compact ball of 100 grunts, goatfish and yellow tail snapper, which I could part with my hand, causing them to flow in opposite directions, and then watch them congregate again. Curiously, a French angel swam with me for a while -- why do some of them like company? -- then I dropped down to 70 feet, where the fish life noticeably thinned. There was never much of a reason to go deeper. Throughout my dives the water ranged from 75-77 degrees, polartec plus 3 mm wetsuit water for me.

North Wall again had lovely sea fans and corals along the lip and over the wall; a small spotted eel gnashed at me near the surface, then from the blue a trio of ocean triggers finned in, then out, then in again, while an occasional porgy eyed me. At the second dive a large sandy area was packed with long, weaving garden eels dancing to the ocean's rhythms while a massive conch labored along. At 35 feet among the hard coral, a small Nassau grouper spaced out, while cleaners worked it over. After the dives, Ollie and Debbie took the gear back to the shop and rinsed and dried it, and my partner and I made the three-minute walk to Mt. Pleasant for a cold one and lunch.

An inexperienced diver might feel a little uncomfortable with the freedom and lack of direction



Mt. Pleasant reminds me of a 1960s-era New England bed and breakfast before everyone spiffed them up.

here; also, a new diver might not know what to look for and could use help in finding critters. But Ollie is a congenial host and I suspect you'll get whatever you ask for. For people into larger critters, I saw nothing sizable, but that's my bad luck. In February, readers Doug and Amy Daza (Evansville IN) dived with eagle rays and southern stingrays, critters that ran for cover when I dived. And, due to the weather, I didn't get to the 1703 wreck of the Endymion where 15-foot anchors make for fine photography. Nor did I get to dive with the whales, regular winter visitors, as did reader John York in January, who reported he snorkeled with humpback whales, one 45 feet long! Bryan reported that divers petted a 50-foot humpback that hovered vertically with its nose in the sand. Unlike the U.S., where you can't approach these behemoths, the only rules here are common sense.

Sheedy's covered outdoor eating area is the size of a humpback whale and is the island's cracker barrel and watering hole. Bryan is always about, getting a Presidente beer (from the Dominican Republic) for a traveler, pouring half a rum bottle for one of the locals who might sit at the bar after a day's labor (or, more commonly, lassitude), grabbing a Coke for his disabled wife, for whom he cares, serving meals, or directing the kitchen.

And what a kitchen he directs. Nothing grows on Salt Cay: no vegetables, no fruit, no cows. Yet Bryan insists on getting what he needs and takes great pride in what he presents. Breakfasts are standard, tasty fare, with bagels on the menu. Lunch can be real hamburgers with French fries, salmon salad sandwiches, or specials like a delicious whelk (a sea snail) soup, a salad of chilled endive and tomatoes – "with balsamic vinegar and extra virgin olive oil," he likes to proclaim – or a delicious bouillabaisse, with fresh fish and lobster. (Fill your bowl a second time.) For dinner, he'll offer a first-class, restaurant-quality N.Y. steak, fresh fish – dolphin, hogfish, pasta with a clam pesto sauce, fresh green beans, baked potato, fresh bread, and a variety of house-made desserts. This man likes good food – he's beginning to show it, I might add – so he makes certain his guests get the best he can produce. Then he joins them for meals and tells a colorful tale or two – like when, in 1967, he escorted playwright Lillian Hellman to Dorothy Parker's funeral.

Your Own Photo on a Postage Stamp

How would you like your underwater photo gracing an official postage stamp? And your name as well?

That's the coveted prize for eight winners in the 1998 Turks and Caicos underwater photo competition, which runs until November 15, 1998. The stamps of last year's winners are already in circulation.

Moreover, the eight 1998 winners will share \$10,000 in cash, and several will earn free one-week stays at Turks and Caicos hotels. All entrants, after

paying the \$35 entry fee, will get discounts on American Airlines and T&C hotels.

Of course, you must take your photos in Turks and Caicos waters sometime during the contest period, which began May 1 and continues through November 15. There are no contest restrictions as to camera, equipment, or film, although rules specify that contestants must operate from one of the land-based or live-aboard dive operations in the Turks and Caicos. Last year, 150 people entered, and this year only 225 are expected to take a shot.

You can get more information by calling or writing Ralph Higgs at the Turks and Caicos Tourist Board, Providenciales, Turks and Caicos Islands (649 946 4970 or fax 649 941 5494), or visit their web site at <http://www.underwaterphoto.com>.

The Mt. Pleasant, with double rooms at \$85/night, will be just the ticket for youthful people who are happy with the basics. It's a five-minute walk to the nearest beach and one can stroll in solitude along miles of empty sands or hang out in hammocks strung in an 8-ft. deep pit.

Back at Castaways, snorkeling was very good, with the patch reef nearly reaching the surface from the 10-15 foot bottom. While there is plenty of pretty live coral, including elkhorn, the shallow reef has taken storm

beatings. But all the tropicals were present, and I spotted an ocean trigger, lots of parrot fish, hunting barjacks, a large puffer, and under a ledge I came face-to-face with a sizable barracuda, something of a heart stopper on snorkeling gear only.

The only other diversion was dinner at Irene's, a must. (Debbie called a day ahead to make reservations and place our order.) We headed out on bikes looking for a restaurant, but the only light I spotted came from a house. And that's the place. Matronly Irene welcomed us into her home – with Christian paraphernalia, a clock with a cross, and a piano covered with family photos – and motioned us to sit at a long table. She scurried into the kitchen, returning with dishes of broccoli and Brussels sprouts in cheese, scalloped potatoes, superb fresh grouper, and salad of lettuce, tomatoes and green onions (with Kraft dressing) and cake for dessert. While her cute three-year-old grandson stared at us with big eyes, she sat at the far end of the table, keeping one eye glued to "The World's Greatest Home Videos" on the tube. And we gorged ourselves on a great, family-style meal: \$12/person, \$2 for a beer.

As you might have figured by now, languid Salt Cay is my kind of place. Typical of the Caribbean, there is no electricity in the diving (hell, the island has only had twenty-four hour electricity since 1986), but it's easy, pleasant, and Ollie's ready to go whenever you are (or take tanks off the beach and kick out a hundred yards or so). I love little islands lost in the past, where a week-old local newspaper is the only indication that there is any other world out there. It's hard to imagine the hustle and bustle that occurred here when the salt barons were in their salad days. Perhaps if "Bahama Passage" gets issued on video I'll get that glimpse.

P.S.: Bryan's ready to retire. ("I want to write before they haul me off in a pine box," he said.) He's done all right with Mt. Pleasant, though he was one of the unlucky suppliers to Sea Safaris travel agency. Three years ago, they beat Bryan out of more than \$27,000. In a story *Undercurrent* broke, we learned that the owners, Nancy and Bob French, may have bilked as much as a million dollars from divers and resorts. (Bryan says he's got \$100 "for anyone who can furnish me with an 8x10 glossy of Nancy and

Salt Cay

Diving (experienced)	★★★★
Diving (beginners)	see article
Snorkeling	★★★★
Accommodations:	
Castaways	★★★★1/2
Mt. Pleasant	★★★
Food	★★★★1/2

★ = poor

★★★★ = excellent

(Caribbean scale)

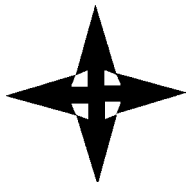
It's Better Than We Said

Grand Turk is better diving than I reported on our star chart last issue. I

apologize for not catching the mistake. For experienced divers in the Caribbean, I'd give it 4-1/2 stars (not three). Night diving is generally good and there's fun to be had at their own version of Stingray City, Gibbs Cay, an afternoon snorkel and lunch trip.

Bob in L.A. County dress stripes. There's a special spot for it on my Wall of Shame.) Anyway, he'll take a half a million for the Guest House and for \$750,000, he'll throw in the annex. Seems a little stiff, but what the hey... When you make your offer, get him to throw in the 1941 "Bahama Passage" movie-house poster he has in his foyer. That's gotta be worth something.

Ben Davison



Diver's Compass: While any good dive travel agent can organize this trip for you, I called Salt Cay Divers and Debbie, who tied down the Castaways for me; there is also a sizable house on the island one can rent by the week. . . . Dive packages at the Mt. Pleasant for room, all meals, three dives per day: 7 days, 6 nights: \$795; 4 days, 3 nights, \$495; a dive package at the Castaways – pay for your own meals – and two tanks/day for five days is \$895 (the night rate is advertised at \$150; we paid \$125); to these prices add 8% tax and 10% gratuities. . . . It's a 90-minute flight from Miami to Providenciales, then 30 minutes to Salt Cay; you must arrive during the day since there are no lights on the runway; Lynx Air flies a nonstop prop plane from Ft. Lauderdale to Grand Turk; call 888 LYNXAIR. . . . I chartered a plane to fly the five miles from Grand Turk to Salt Cay – only \$50 for two of us. . . . The only other hotel on Salt Cay is the pricey – read \$600/night – Windmill Plantation; I toured the property and would consider about \$175/night as top dollar, though the pool would be nice; it's half a mile closer to town than the Castaways on the same beach. . . . Phone or fax Bryan Sheedy at 649 946 6927; Castaways Beach House, U.S.: 315 536 0737; 649 946 6921 (e-mail castaways@vikingresort.com); Salt Cay Divers 888 332 3113; 809 946-6906, fax 649 946-6922.

Why Divers Die

Part III, have you ever run out of air?

When I meet someone who is not a diver, I'm frequently asked, "have you ever run out of air?"

Certainly not, I say, because it should flat-out never happen. And it shouldn't, but it does all the time, especially to inexperienced divers. Here are some "insufficient air" cases taken from DAN's 1998 and 1997 reports of diving deaths in America.

A newly-certified 50-year-old male with only five dives under his belt went diving with his buddies. During the first dive, he finished

with a nearly empty tank. On the second dive he ran out of air again but got separated from his buddy. Another diver found him floating beneath the surface, unconscious and without his regulator in his mouth. He couldn't be resuscitated. His weights had been incorrectly attached so that the quick-release buckle would not operate.

Sometimes an out-of-air diver refuses aid. This fellow, with eight lifetime dives, went to 123 feet for twenty minutes. He ran out of air

and refused to buddy-breathe, but he did accept his buddy's spare air. During the ascent, he panicked and headed back to depth. When he was found two days later, he was still wearing his 46-pound weight belt.

A 49-year-old certified diver made a wreck dive to 70 feet for twenty-three minutes. He signaled to his buddy that he was out of air but declined to share air. As they ascended, he lost consciousness and had to be towed to the boat. Resuscitation was unsuccessful. A

malfunctioning regulator may have contributed to the decedent's difficulty while at depth.

While a diver may be experienced in some situations, diving in conditions for which one is untrained or unprepared can be dangerous. This 32-year-old certified diver without cave training was in a freshwater spring when he decided to enter a cave. He found an air pocket within the cave, removed his regulator from his mouth, gasped for air, and panicked. His buddy attempted to get him to take an octopus without success. He was pulled from the cave and could not be resuscitated at the surface.

Of course, this case has an element of panic, which shows up frequently in people who drown. When someone panics, their behavior may become bizarre. Unless someone can help them, they can get into serious trouble.

Consider this 26-year-old certified diver who had made 30 lifetime warm water dives. She undertook a dive in an extremely cold freshwater lake to visit a wreck at 140 feet. At 70 feet, during her descent down the anchor line, she inexplicably spit her regulator out and panicked. Her buddy gave her his octopus, but she spit that out as well and began to drift away from the line. He went to the surface for help, and two divers entered the water and found her on the bottom. Surface resuscitation was unsuccessful. She still had 1800 psi in her tank.

A 54-year-old woman with minimal diving experience was diving on a wreck at 90 feet. For unknown reasons, she removed her regulator from her mouth while on the bottom. An instructor took her to the surface, but resuscitation was unsuccessful.

A 33-year-old male with moderate diving experience was

Tragedy on Saba at Saba Reef Divers

Curtis Huber, a 30-year-old PADI Master instructor and one of the owners of Saba Reef Divers, was killed when the pickup truck he was driving was hit by a landslide and a 16' x 3' boulder landed on top of the

Saba Reef pickup truck. Three other crew members, including Kathy Mikita, his fiancée and co-owner of Saba Reef, were injured.

Memorial contributions may be made in Huber's name to A. M. Edwards Center (Saba Hospital) in care of Saba Reef Divers, c/o Islands Communications Services, P. O. Box 527668, Miami, FL 33152-7668.

on a large dive boat but diving alone. When he did not return, the crew conducted a search and found him unconscious in a cavern at 50 feet. His BC would not hold air and his first stage was incorrectly attached, which may have resulted in a

When someone panics, their behavior may become bizarre. Unless someone can help them, they can get into serious trouble.

large air leak, emptying his tank.

A 14-year-old certified diver with minimal diving experience made a wreck dive to 140 feet with his father and several other divers. After an uneventful first dive, they realized the anchor was entangled on the wreck, so they decided to make the second dive to free the anchor in the process. During ascent, the 14-year-old motioned to another diver that he was out of air. While he buddy-breathed off

the other diver's backup air source, he was unable to continue the ascent due to being overweighted. The spare air ran out and the assisting diver lost consciousness as he headed to the surface. The 14-year-old's father, who had exited the water, went back down to help his son. Both the father and son were found unconscious at 140 feet and died. The diver who had rendered assistance was treated for an embolism, and the two other divers required treatment for symptoms of decompression sickness.

Yes, these father and son cases are tragic, but one wonders why fathers expose their sons to such dangers. Nonetheless, if there is a reason to run out of air, I suppose trying to save your son qualifies. An inexperienced diver got lost in a cave and his 43-year-old father, with less than twenty lifetime dives and no cave-diving experience, went back to find him. He had little air left in his tank, and, though he made it out of the cave and back to shore, he lost consciousness and drowned.

Next issue: embolism deaths: and a couple of tips on preventing them.

— Ben Davison