

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

August 2000

Vol. 15, no. 8

Provo Off the Beaten Path

Flamingo Divers leaves Grace Bay behind

IN THIS ISSUE:

Flamingo Divers	1
Other Provo Ops	4
Live-aboard Picks	5
Should You Choose a Live-aboard?	6
Tipping Survey	7
Equipment Tip	9
Beached Whales	10
More Aluminum Tank Controversy	11
Rescue Device Study ..	12
Women's Dive Pubs ..	13
Why Divers Die, Part 4: Embolism	14
Flotsam & Jetsam	15

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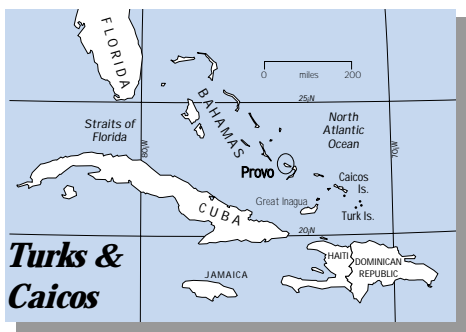
Dear Fellow Diver:

To many people, me included, Providenciales is a great vacation island, a bit goofy and terribly entertaining. Some old timers -- unless they invested money -- don't like that it's becoming Grand Cayman-esque (there's a new first-run movie theater, a super IGA food store, and more cars on the road than ever) with increasing pressure on waste treatment, utilities, and the environment. Still, it's a civilized (perhaps we should call it Americanized) island and an easy 1.5 hour flight from Miami, with some pretty damn good diving -- if you pick the right operator, that is.

Crescent-shaped Grace Bay, on the north side, is the equivalent of Cayman's Seven Mile Beach. In the middle at Turtle Cove sits the slightly funky and pretty laid-back Turtle Cove (and Turtle Cove Inn). To the east are more up-scale resorts -- Beaches, Le Deck, The Sands, Point Grace, The Mansions, Allegro Resort, Club Med, Ocean Club and more.

The Turtle Cove Marina (managed by Provo diving pioneer Art Pickering, whose Provo Turtle Divers is here) provides hours of people-watching. The *Aggressor*, the *Wave Dancer*, private craft just as humongous, and myriad fishing boats and pleasure craft provide the motley crew that mingles with the locals and British, Canadian, and American ex-pats. It's a constant party with lots of familiar faces -- including the proverbial hangers-on who are taking their first drink when the sun has yet to reach the yardarm.

The 45-room Turtle Cove Inn, which has been my home for four trips to Provo, is at the marina, smack in the middle of things. From the back porch of my very comfortable and newly renovated second-floor room, I could watch the activity with lovely Grace Bay in the background (less expensive rooms have



a pool view only). Yet, even in the face of antics on the boats outside the window, my room became peaceful once I shut the sliding door. I had two queen beds, an open closet, a big chest of drawers, cable TV with scores of channels, a small refrigerator, a room safe (\$2/night to rent a key), a/c, and a nice-sized bathroom (though unfortunately it was flawed by low water pressure). With Flamingo Divers right next door, these were perfect diver quarters -- if you don't require a beach front and lots of pizzazz.

Provo has a lot of dive operations, some with 42' or 48' Newtons dropping a couple dozen divers in the water. No thanks. I prefer a small-scale operation, and Flamingo Divers was a fine choice. It represents a class of vanishing dive operations: high-quality, suitable for experienced divers who limit themselves to small groups. It's run by an all-Brit team headed by 60-ish Andrew Watts, who comes from a stint in Amman, where he provided dive training for the Jordanian Navy. A knowledgeable, conscientious, and enthusiastic fellow, he calls his divers "guests" and consistently treated us that way. He's assisted by his 28-year-old son, Jamie, who sported a "built-it-myself" BC that looks like something Mad Max would wear. Matthew Barrett, previously with Dive Provo, rounds out the crew. The three work exceptionally well together, making Flamingo one of the best Caribbean operations I've dived with.

One has to get used to the sight of Andrew in his Arabian head cover. A therapeutic downshift from Type-A behavior is in order: while Flamingo was never late, the pace was slow. Surface intervals were longish. We detoured a couple of times to drop Jamie (in snorkeling gear) in the water to chase schools of tuna. Meeting Andrew in the morning always included polite inquiries and chat about our previous evening's activities -- Noel Coward meets Lawrence of Arabia. The three of them were charming, and their competence and pacing threw me into vacation/la-la mode.

Flamingo has two boats, the 30-foot *Sand Dollar*, which carries ten, and the boat I dived off, *British Spirit*, a 28-foot canvas-canopied craft with speeds up to 24 knots. She carries a cozy eight divers. There's oxygen, first aid and a radio. There are plenty of benches, racks for the aluminum 80s, a dive platform with an easy return ladder, and a nifty hang bar. A big cooler was filled with fresh water for cameras, but no camera table -- shooters used the bench on the boat. One drawback -- there's no head, so you'll need to pee in your skins. (That's half the fun of diving anyway, isn't it?)

You also set up your own gear. As Andrew told me, "someone would be absolutely daft not to set up his own gear!" I suppose so. But the crew did store my gear every night, and it was on the boat every morning, leaving only gear assembly for me.

While some operations take divers into Grace Bay (the equivalent of diving off Cayman's Seven Mile Beach), Andrew's destinations are West Caicos, Northwest Point, and French Cay (which we couldn't reach due to winds. Nor could we visit a few more distant sites). To keep the runs as short as possible -- it's still 50 minutes -- he docks his boat on the south side of Provo. Meet them at the shop, where they check your c-card and you sign a disclaimer -- or they'll pick you up -- and it's 10 minutes by car.

Once my buddy and I proved our mettle, we were encouraged to dive as we pleased, with or without guides, after a good site briefing. We had several days with a four-person family along -- Jamie swam with them, and Matt and my wife and I swam the same wall, deeper and longer. Matt is a wall guy. He loves them, and he makes a great leader. Both Andrew and Jamie are enthusiastic macro divers and point out lots of interesting stuff. (One note: on several dives no one remained in the boat. I don't mind diving like this because the currents are negligible and the shore is close. It's what

diving used to be like, and for some small operators still is.)

The dives were terrific, among the best the Caribbean has to offer. For example, at the Crack at Northwest Point, I headed to the sandy 40' bottom to be greeted by zillions of Creole wrasse at the edge of a sheer and gorgeous wall. Typical of Northwest Point, the vertical wall here has deep cuts, dramatic overhangs, huge chunks of plate, leaf, and swirl coral, and plenty of soft coral. Though the walls tend toward the monochromatic, when I swam close, I could see the yellows, reds, and greens. The Crack offered drama at depth: huge shelves below me and, below that, headed toward the 6000' trench, there were pinnacles and coral heads, sandy "valleys," and an array of dramatic features. Along with the large schools of wrasse, there were grunts, lots of angel fish, a parrot fish or two, and a few trigger fish. A reef shark cruised the wall back and forth, staying in sight for 5 minutes. To top off the end of the dive, I spotted an uncommon Volkswagen-sized Jewfish and, back on the sandy bottom, two stands of 10-15' pillar coral -- killer dive.

One of Flamingo's innovations is "drift" diving in the slightest of current, allowing us to cover a lot more reef. Drifting between Magic Mushroom and Boat Cove, I came across an unnamed hunk of West Caicos wall completely covered with soft and hard brain and star and plate coral, with huge tube and basket sponges and dramatic overhangs and shelves. I swam with large schools of honker-sized horse-eye jacks, the usual groupers, yellowtails, queen and French angels, a couple dozen Atlantic spadefish, and a sizable squadron of barracuda-like southern sennets. A lone reef shark ambled by.

Magic Mushroom is a meandering, zigzag wall with tons of relief features. Swimming at 90', I looked down to a huge shelf at 200'. Everything's big on the wall -- tube and barrel sponges, huge hunks of scroll and leaf coral. Coming around the corner of a huge shoulder, I frightened a baby nurse shark that freaked out and scooted away. Farther along I swam with a school of large horse-eye jacks. At 50', I ran into hundreds of blue tangs working their way down the edge with me.

At Maggie's Magnificent Buns on West Caicos, a 6-foot reef shark mixed a high level of curiosity with complete ignorance of how a shark was supposed to regard divers. He took one pass, then another and another, then he stopped just a few feet away to stare me down, as if he hadn't seen a human before, before departing. Curious? Hungry? Who knows?

A few sites were better than others. Everything was good. Some were excellent, the walls among the Caribbean's three best. The reefs were in fine shape -- I saw no bleaching -- though there was a lot of plankton; first dives usually had slightly lower viz (75') than second dives (averaging about 100'). The June water temperature, 81-83°, made it very comfortable.

My wife's lycra skin protected her from the thimble jellies (though it's their larvae, not the jellyfish themselves, that get you). Me, Mr. T-shirt diver, got hit in the forearm. No big thing -- Andrew keeps a jug of vinegar on board, and a generous application of vinegar usually solves any thimble problems and makes everyone crave salad for lunch. The secret of self-protection for me was a flat BC and a fast descent

Flamingo Divers/Turtle Cove Inn

Diving (experienced)	★★★★1/2
Diving (beginners)	★★★★
Dive Ops & Staff	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★1/2
Hotel Ambiance	★★★★★
Hotel Service & Attitude	★★★★★
Food	★★★★1/2
Money's worth	★★★★1/2
★ = poor	★★★★★ = excellent

(Caribbean scale)

to 15-20 feet when I jumped off the boat. On the way back, if I saw thimbles, I'd blow a column of air up with my octopus as I was ready to get on the ladder. One diver had an allergic reaction -- he got a rash from the thimbles. Everyone's reaction is different. Mine's mild -- a little redness and itch.

The only "challenging" part of the dive program was the bumpy runs home over high-interval, two-foot-plus chop -- and perhaps my hunger pangs. With an 8 a.m. meeting time at the shop and a 2 p.m. return, the distinctly British cuisine of flavored potato chips or cheese crackers (the à la vending-machine variety) with coffee and/or tea service between dives didn't stem the pangs. There are fresh water and sodas on board, so I sometimes opted to bring my own snacks. On Mondays Andrew brings homebaked muffins.

Upon return, the first item on my agenda was lunch. Afterward I had enough time for a 10-minute walk to a fine beach, maybe a dip in the Inn pool, hiding out for the daily 15-minute burst of rain, and a snooze before cocktail hour. While a car is indispensable at many Provo resorts, virtually everything I needed -- several restaurants, a liquor store, even a car rental agency -- was accessible by shank's mare. I ate a 7 a.m. breakfast and lunch at the Inn's Tiki Hut (grilled grouper sandwiches, jerk chicken quesadillas, tropical chicken salad, and killer conch pizza) -- good grub, but service was surly on occasion. The Inn's Terrace offers more upscale eats -- rack of lamb, chicken breast stuffed with mushrooms and crayfish, well-sauced snapper -- worth putting on cute clothes for. With wine, look for a tab exceeding \$100. Nearby there's Baci, with waterside Italian dining and Asian/Caribbean fusion food and a great view at The Erebus. The Shark Bite (sort of British pub meets Caribbean waterside bar) has great burgers and fantastic fish and chips, and you sit over the water overlooking the marina. My biggest disappointment was the Banana Boat, decidedly poorer with changed ownership.

All in all, Provo is an excellent destination for divers who want a bit of comfort, plenty of good food, and very good Caribbean diving -- as long as you go with an operator that will take you to it. And Flamingo Divers does it very well!

-K.B.

Provo Dive Op Alternatives

If you don't mind larger-sized operations, *Undercurrent* readers say Art Pickering's Provo Turtle Divers (800-833-1341; e-mail ProvoTurtleDivers@Provo.net; website www.artpickering.com) offers excellent diving opportunities. (Ben Davison first dove with him 20 years ago and says that even back then, Art was tops.) Reader Stephen Cohen, there in March, writes, "Fourth time diving with Turtle Divers since '87. First-class. They get you to the best sites -- Northwest Point, West Caicos, Parrot Cay -- and let you dive your own limits. Saw reef sharks -- a tiger shark cruised by the boat in the shallows -- many spotted eagle rays, lobster, a dinner-plate size octopus. Art has amassed a good collection of guides, and while he caters to experienced divers (who can stand one-hour open water trips that can be bouncy even in his great 42' Newton), there were also a few people doing their first open-water dives."

And, of course, everyone seems to love Fifi Kunz and his Caicos Adventures (809-941-3346; e-mail divucrzy@tciway.tc; website www.caicosadventures.tc). David E. Bishop (Bratenahl OH) says of his March trip: "Caicos Adventures dives 2 tank West Caicos dives six days a week. On Thursdays it is a 3-tank trip. Fifi has been diving West Caicos for a dozen years. One day we stopped and Fifi sent a divemaster over the side to check the site. We went to another -- Fifi said the visibility wasn't good enough. Half the days we never saw another dive boat once we approached West Caicos. We dove from a comfortable 40' custom dive boat equipped with a marine head, fresh water shower, and plenty of shade. 4 to 12 divers. They urged, but not forced divers to stay above 130 feet. Each diver's air supply determined dive length. After an 80 minute surface interval, our second dives were relatively deep -- 80 to 90 feet -- within the computer limits. After the first dive, Fifi serves a tasty lunch of sub sandwiches and pasta salad and soft drinks. Saw eagle rays, Nassau groupers during the week, three large nurse sharks, couple of reef sharks. Caicos Adventures is an A+ operation."

You can't expect to get this kind of diving at places such as the Club Med or Beaches, so make reservations with one of our three recommended operations.



Diver's Compass: Flamingo Divers: e-mail Flamingo@Provo.net, website www.provo.net/flamingo, \$393 for 6 days of 2 tanks. Turtle Cove Inn has a relationship with Provo Turtle Divers. Book Flamingo and Turtle Cove Inn separately and directly. Turtle Cove Inn: e-mail TurtleCoveInn@Provo.net, website www.turtlecoveinn.com/TurtleCoveInnHome.html, \$999 for 7 nights -- includes all those tricky taxes and services charges...Cabs from the airport about \$20 (been using Nell's Taxi Service for 8 years)...Flamingo Divers charged me 4% for paying

my tab with AMEX, but not Visa. Scooter Bob's on the premises rented jeeps (\$55/day) AND scooters (\$35/day). Flamingo offers a 3-tank all-day (lunch provided, and hopefully better than potato chips) trip (\$100) and night dives to West Caicos (\$75); both require a min of 6 divers...Equipment repair, but no Nitrox. Rental gear including wet suits and skins...American Air is the main carrier to Provo; look for Delta later this year...A nice web site to get the scoop about Provo: <http://www.provo.net/AboutProvo.html>.

Live-Aboard Lowdown

readers report on new craft, small ops, and boats that save a buck

More and more live-aboards are being launched annually. Boats from the Peter Hughes and Aggressor fleet maintain generally high standards, while one might have an edge over the other at any given location. Nonetheless, most divers return satisfied. Still, there are other craft to consider, some of them superior. Here's the latest from our readers.

In Australia, the *Spoilsport* gets good reviews (888-MIKE-BALL; e-mail: usa@mikeball.com, website www.mikeball.com). Bill Smythe (Scott's Valley CA), on board last year, writes, "I am 70 years old and I had 30+ years on most of the divers. The crew was always there to help me, though I needed none. I don't use a computer; no problem. I took extra time at the decom bar and knowing my limits, only dove twice a day. The *Yongala* was all that they said."

Susan Carter (Oakland CA) says that on her exploratory trip into the Coral Sea, "I was so impressed with the diversity of south Pacific corals and sea life, especially fish. Sharks on every dive, but no rays, only a few turtles and beautiful lionfish." However, there was a problem. "Weather turned nasty on the last night and the boat broke anchor and ran up on the reef, causing major damage to the reef and minor damage to the boat. The crew handled the situation well, however there were two divers in the water, and with no underwater recall system and their lights not visible from the boat, we spent 20 minutes anxiously trying to locate them before the Captain could get the boat off the reef (he didn't want to move the boat with divers in the water). Result: further damage to the reef; anxious friends and crew. When they were located by their lights, the crew went to alert them to the problem and directed them to surface rather quickly, leading to anxious divers as well (they ended up on O₂ for a few hours, but weren't bent). Mike, get an Underwater Recall System! They didn't have an informal recall procedure (e.g., revving of engines)."

Long time *Undercurrent* reader Harry Cure (Fort Worth TX), in Truk in February, suggests an alternative to the *Aggressor*: "The *Odyssey* is one of the nicest live-aboards I have had the pleasure to dive. The dive deck is perfect. The accommodations have separate baths and are large. The lounge has surround sound and big screen TV. Best set up for cameras on a live-aboard I have seen! The maximum number of divers is