

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

May 2001

Vol. 16, no. 5

South Caicos Ocean Haven

a return to yesteryear

IN THIS ISSUE:

South Caicos Ocean Haven.....	1
Miami Vice	2
America's Caribbean Island: Navassa.....	3
Navy SEALS Strap on Cochran Computers.....	5
The Maldives Aboard the Manthiri.....	6
Travel Report Form.....	7
Coral, Science, and George W.	9
No more jelly stings.....	11
Is A Spare Air Worth It?..	12
Why Divers Die.....	13
DAN's Darwin Awards...14	
Flotsam & Jetsam	15

Website address is:
<http://www.undercurrent.org>

Subscription Office:

Ben Davison
Publisher and Editor
125 East Sir Francis Drake Blvd.
No. 200
Larkspur, CA 94939
BenDavison@aol.com

Dear Fellow Diver:

On a visit to South Caicos several years ago, I was one unhappy camper. Oh, the diving was especially good for the Caribbean, among the best, but the only hotel on the island, The Club Caribe, ran out of water. Then, it ran out of food, except hotdogs. One of two boats was out of commission. Its advertised recreational gear was nowhere to be seen. And no one could have cared less.

I wasn't the only one who had troubles there. Three years ago Toronto home health care executive and dive shop owner Bob Musselwhite and his significant other, Diane Corrich, a tool and die shop partner and nurse, organized a trip to Club Caribe for 40 divers. Before they left home, Club Caribe went up for sale, potentially leaving the group out of a big deposit. Rather than disappoint their divers, Musselwhite and Corrich got resourceful. They bought the property and began running it themselves. The rest, the old bromide goes, is history.

Six hundred miles southeast of Miami -- an hour plus flight -- sits the Turks and Caicos tourist haven of Providenciales. A 20-minute flight away -- really, a world away -- lies the "Big South," hanging from the lip of East Caicos like a backwards "6." Eight square miles, it's home to 1,200 mellow "belongers." And to the renamed "South Caicos Ocean Haven," the only resort and dive-op on the island.

Less than a 10-minute walk from Cockburn Harbour, the unkempt primary township that remains sleepy even at the height of commercial activity and frenetic piglet crossings, the resort has 22 rooms on two floors. The upper floor has a large deck with patio furniture and a small covered area.

Avoid the "town-view units" and reserve an upper-ocean-front unit, which, in the wee hours, will mercifully distance you from the choir of barking dogs, crowing roosters and partying islanders. Nonetheless, all rooms were clean with A/C and ceiling fans, and no phones, TVs or radio. I had a comfortable queen-size bed, though friends -- I organized a group trip -- complained of singles with hard mattresses. Fortunately, there were few flying insects, as my window was not sealed around the A/C unit. The cheesy



Venetian blinds only afforded partial privacy. There was plenty of hot cistern-collected rainwater, generating gratifying lathers after a long day of diving. The building itself needs paint and occasional pieces of lumber need replacing.

You have to travel some to reach the nearest beach, an isolated and picturesque stretch of fine white sand, but Ocean Haven does have a small saltwater pool around which patio furniture invites guests to socialize. I engaged in most excellent evening sky gazing from this spot, and was treated to the splendor of the Milky Way and shooting stars. Over the azure bay is Dove Cay to the East and to the West, Long Cay, which has recently become home to hundreds of iguanas transplanted from

Ambergris Cay, Belize where development is destroying their habitat. Essentially, Ocean Haven is no romantic venue. You come here to be romanced by the sea.

Miami Vice

Whenever you see a Pelican hard case, you know that the contents are valuable. That's why they have become a favorite target of baggage handling thieves at Miami's International Airport. In the last week of March, we learned of three separate incidents in which Pelican cases were opened as they wove their way through the innards of the Miami baggage handling system.

Kevin Gill, on his way to Houston, saw his Pelican case loaded on the plane, intact, in Providenciales (Turks and Caicos). Yet it was not on the baggage carousel, nor in baggage service, upon his arrival in Miami. When he reached Houston, the case was on the conveyer, without the twin Master Padlocks. Missing were a CD player and speakers and a camcorder.

Larry Lozuk's Pelican case went through Miami on the same flight. The lock was cut. Luckily, he had no camera inside, but only a housing, which arrived intact.

On his way to Dallas, Sam Stanley's Pelican case went through Miami on his return from Trinidad. It arrived with the locks cut, his Nikon F4 missing and the housing left behind.

None of our three bags made it to the baggage carousel. All were ultimately delivered, although late. All three were Pelican cases. All three had the locks cut. Cameras were stolen from two. All three passengers were flying American.

When a bag is lost and customs has to open it outside your presence, they are required to leave a notice inside the case saying what they did. None of the three bags had this notice.

If you're traveling with a Pelican, hand-carry it. Or, put it inside another case — an old suitcase or duffel, anything that won't attract attention.

Diving almost exclusively takes place along the south shore, a protected area where fishing is verboten. There are about 20 sites within a 10-minute boat trip, some with surface moorings, some with subsurface moorings and others where they drop anchor. The obligatory check-out dive takes place in 45-55 feet on the scattered partial remains of a crashed Convair. Inside the fuselage I found a small aggregation of jacks, a few schoolmasters and French grunt, and a lovely lone gray angel. Our merry band of 11 experienced divers, having passed the muster, immediately began to do our own thing, as we agreed with management before we made our booking. While we usually stayed in a loose cluster, some went off by themselves. I usually dropped down the wall to 115 feet, then worked up enjoying the overhangs, crevices and spur and groove reef planted with impressive plate coral and stovepipe sponges. I cannot envision a more hospitable environment for properly trained divers wanting to go deep --

warm water (76-78F in March) -- good vis (80 feet, yet still a bit disappointing), easy navigation, and minimal current with no surge below 40 feet. On the first dive of the day, others and I occasionally dropped well below 130 feet, seduced by the 7,000-foot wall of the Turks Island Passage.

So, this is a good venue for experienced -- and inexperienced -- divers alike, thanks to Bob and Diane, both attractive individuals, inside and out. With an obviously deep affection for each other, they unfailingly sported warm smiles and upbeat attitudes despite long days of hard work. Their positive attitude makes the resort very flexible, indeed. Want to do four dives a day, skip a day, return to the same site, go to another site, night dive, dive before vs. after breakfast or vice-versa? Can do. For tomorrow's breakfast do you want bacon or sausage or both, eggs or pancakes? Just say it. Burgers at noon, but if you want a lunch meat and cheese sandwich with lettuce and tomato, if it's there, it's yours. Want a type of liquor not present at the modest honor-system bar? Ask and when they have time they'll see if it's on the island. Attack of the sweet tooth? Let's see what's left in the fridge.

And speaking of the fridge, the food was basic but well and freshly prepared, rating well compared to similar small-dive resorts. Dinner entrees included lightly blackened grouper, chicken wings in barbecue sauce, tuna casserole, and let's not forget lobster night. One night, Diane made spaghetti and meatballs, and her garlic bread is nothing short of celestial. A green salad accompanied most dinners. Breakfast brought forth bread, bagels, assorted cereals and fruit besides the main offering. For me, dessert was eagerly anticipated and included such delectables as Snicker's Bar pie, Key Lime pie, strawberry cheesecake and homemade chocolate brownies. Used to losing a few pounds on a dive trip? Fugeddaboutit.

Ah, but I came to dive. Thirty yards from the resort is their concrete dock housing two aging 24-foot Carolina skiffs in a protected cove. These comfortably hold six divers and two crew, but can hold a couple more without real discomfort. It's an easy back-roll entry; exits were gear-doffed and hauled over side of boat, with someone always present to assist, and a climb up the ladder. Though experience has left me leery of dive boats with just a single engine (here a 75HP Yamaha), both

America's Caribbean Island: Navassa

Looking for a new exploratory dive? I suspect that one of these days some live-aboard will have a look at one of the least known American possessions, Navassa Island, 35 miles west of Haiti, 89 miles east-northeast of Jamaica, and 104 miles south of Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The 1.9-square mile island rises from a submerged bank (100 feet deep at the island and extending 2 miles offshore to 160 feet at the outer drop-off). It has no beaches and is isolated from boats by overhanging, 30 to 50 foot cliffs that completely encircle the hard, pot-holed, fossilized limestone island.

In 1998, an expedition headed by Dr. Michael Smith, Senior Scientist with the Center for Marine Conservation, made 78 dives to more than 110 feet. They found "spectacularly colorful, mixed communities of sponges, coralline algae, tunicates, bryozoans, hydroids and low-growing iridescent algae: along the under-cut walls that drop to 115 feet, saying "these submerged over hanging ledges and cave systems rank among the most impressive of the tropical United States continental and insular coastal dive sites that we have encountered during our more than thirty years of scuba surveys."

The coral varieties around the island change dramatically, due to wave action, guano, and runoff from the island. In some places sponge growth was "remarkable for abundant barrel, tube, rope and encrusting sponges" and in other places uninteresting. Grazing by the abundant herbivorous fishes -- parrotfishes, chubs and surgeonfishes -- and sea urchins was high. "The marine biota, although teeming with life, is most remarkable for what it lacks." In addition, they found "historical debris from two former onshore operations, mining and the lighthouse -- submerged railway track, mining-cart wheels, twenty large acetylene tanks, and large ship anchors."

What's the potential? The scientists say, "Although these waters have not been explored and documented, a survey of geographic features indicates that there may be sea mounts whose crests reach the shallow depths at which corals and the richly associated biota would be expected. The island platform and sea mounts appear to harbor relatively undisturbed populations of coral and reef fishes and are subject only to low technology level fishing."

More information at www.cmc-ocean.org/navassa/navassa.php3.

South Caicos Ocean Haven

Diving (Experienced)	★★★★
Diving (Inexperienced)	★★★★
Boats	★★★
Accommodations	★1/2
Food	★★★★
Ambiance	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★
★ = poor	★★★★★ = excellent
(Caribbean scale)	

boats typically traveled to sites just minutes from shore. Fortunately, surface conditions off the south side are usually calm, as these skiffs -- which are used on Grand Turk and Salt Cay as well -- are intolerant of much wave activity. A V-hull craft in the upper 20-30-foot range would be a capital addition. The boats are without cover, so I lathered up with sunscreen and donned shades. On board are DAN O₂ kits and cell phones. During my visit, Doug, an escapee from the Chicago corporate culture served as divemaster (his wife Cynthia cooked and performed other tasks) but has now left to run their fishing lodge in northern Wisconsin. A British couple will replace them.

Among my favorite sites was The Grotto, a main flight path for spotted eagle rays. At least one appeared on each of several visits here, and schools of as many as 14 have been sighted. Caribbean reef sharks occasionally cruised the wall, and once I observed a group of three. I was uncertain if they were hunting as a team, but it was a distinct possibility. On most wall dives, reef sharks from 5-8 feet in length cruised along and small aggregations of jacks circled.

Spanish Chain typifies many sites along this coast and neighboring Grand Turk, 22 miles due west. Drop to a sand and patch reef bottom at 40 feet, then explore the area or fin out to the wall, which starts at 50-70 feet depending on the site. And what a wall it is. At some points it's stepped, at others precipitous, nearly always covered with plate, rope and wire coral, and massive tube sponges. I dropped deep, then looked skyward -- great. As I worked my way back to the shallows, massive southern stingrays rest in the sand. Moving slowly, I could reach out and stroke them, which, if I'm not being too anthropomorphic, they generally seemed to enjoy. The shallows corralled all the customary tropicals, and on one dive I observed a large school of blue tang grazing as a pack. Dallying at a small coral head, I was delighted to espy a corkscrew anemone harboring two minuscule Pederson cleaner shrimp lounging while awaiting the next customer. Lower down crouched a pistol shrimp that fired its shot-like bubble jet when too closely approached. What a magnificent place the reef is -- the longer you look, the more you discover. When I hear people say they didn't see much on a living reef dive, I am saddened they have not learned to observe.

After all this intense wall action, my computer would always demand something shallower. Once, Bob dropped us in the sand channel just east of Long Cay, from where we could work our way around to the rear of the cay. Previously unnamed, I'm campaigning to dub this dive "Doc's Drift." (And, this article is part of my campaign! After all, not many sites left in the Caribbean remain unnamed.) Proper navigation leads to Admiral's Aquarium, a patch reef at 15 feet exploding with critters ranging from shovel-nosed lobster to spotted moray. After passing the spotted eagle rays and southern stingrays, I entered a long stretch of fine sand bottom with eel grass and tiny, sparsely scattered coral heads. To enjoy this potentially tedious stretch, I looked for fry and other marine life and got close views of yellowfin mojarra, and a posing intermediate phase bucktooth parrotfish. Fry included blue-head, yellowhead wrasse and slippery dick.

The most distant site is The Caves, about a 35-minute boat ride to the East side. Once there, I swam down a long, comely trench with nothing but blue water

ahead. Then I entered a cave perhaps 50 yards long that exited in a lovely coral reef -- not for the claustrophobic. Along the way, I spied a budding Pillar Coral that was a breathtaking dark blue in the body and robin's egg blue on the tips.

On the ride to one site, I spotted a pair of humpbacks and started yelling and got the boat captain to drop us off as close as we could get, losing sight of the wisdom of getting in where they seemed to be headed rather than where they had been. We spent the next 35 minutes hanging in stark open water, watching each other swim in circles, trying to keep our orientation and breaking out in spasms of wild gesticulation upon sporadically hearing whale singing and ping-pong. We saw not a thing other than the passing pelagic tunicate and thimble jellies. I left the water feeling a bit of a fool, and I suspect so did some of the others.

I would say the dive operation has room for improvement. This would be an excellent venue for Nitrox, but it's not offered. Somewhat vexing was the absence of drinking water or other potables on the boat, and the photo buffs grumbled about the lack of a rinse bucket. At first, aluminum-80s fills were 300 psi light, but improved after mild complaining. While the dive shop is well laid out for

Navy SEALs Strap on Cochran Computers nearly 20 years after sport divers

The U.S. Navy finally seems to be catching up with the recreational diving community in the use of wrist-mounted computers. At least, if the specially-designed Cochran computers currently used by one SEAL team live up to expectations.

SEALs began requesting computers more than two decades ago, but it took the Navy brass this long to develop its own custom decompression algorithm and to negotiate for a specially-designed unit that would allow that algorithm to be applied to air, Nitrox or the Navy's Mark XVI rebreather without requiring divers to reprogram it underwater. Then the Navy put out the project for competitive bids.

Dive computer pioneer, Cochran Undersea Technology, won the bid and filled the bill by adapting its Commander model to the Navy's specs. The Commander is the most aggressive sport diving computer on the market — even more aggressive than the PADI tables, allowing no-deco limits of 60 fsw for 54 minutes. The Commander also automatically adjusts for water temperature, salinity, actual rate of ascent and altitude (barometric pressure). Moreover, each user can program it from a selection of 50 degrees of conservatism. The computer has passed hyperbaric tests conducted by the Navy Experimental Diving Unit and Navy divers have begun testing it underwater.

There were several reasons why the Navy chose to go with its own algorithm, according to Dr. Dave Southerland, who's overseeing the reliability assessment of the Cochran computer for the NEDU. First, none of the existing sport diving algorithms had been sufficiently documented by Navy standards. They are, after all, closely guarded by the manufacturers as trade secrets and there is very little information available on their performance. The Navy felt more confident developing its own decompression profiles, which are based on the assumptions that users are all 25 years old and in tip-top shape, working harder than recreational divers, in more hazardous environments, and willing to accept more risk. For sport divers, "the dive itself is the ultimate objective," as Dave Southerland points out. However, "for SEALs, water is camouflage."

That said, the algorithm in the Cochran Navy model is more aggressive than sport computer formulas in some ways, but more conservative in others. For instance, it allows dives to 60 fsw for more than 60 minutes with no decompression. But once it kicks into deco mode, it typically calls for longer decompression times.

The SEALs have already made some suggestions for tweaking the Cochran computer ("empirical modifications" in Southerland's terminology). "Too often the end user has not had input" to the development of military technology, he points out. If the Navy model gets the final blessing, then the Naval Sea Systems Command (the approving authority for navy dive gear) may make it available to other military divers, as well.

But don't look for the Cochran Navy unit to show up in dive shops. Sport divers looking to push their no-deco limits must make do with the Cochran Commander, which retails for \$495-\$1,450 depending on such options as Nitrox compatibility and choice of backlighting color.

By the way, the developer of the computer, 59-year-old Michael Cochran, co-invented the microcomputer at Texas Instruments in the 1970s and then used this so-called miracle chip to build TI's first hand-held scientific calculator. Cochran got hooked on diving 17 years in the Bahamas. In 1993 he introduced the first wireless, wrist-worn dive computer at the DEMA show. Cochran says they have a return rate of less than 1 percent. "Most returned units come back because the diver has opened the case to see how it works," he says. "We call these curiosity failures."

storing/drying gear, and harbors a decent bench for quickie repairs, you carry any parts you need. There is only a modest amount of rental gear, and very little for sale. Bring all that you need, plus critical spares. But, I'm picking nits. After all, one reason the diving is excellent is because it's not developed, not easy to get to, and not fully fished out. Clearly, it's one of the top diving destinations in the Caribbean.

Overall, I had an excellent trip. It's definitely for one who needs no stimulation beyond diving. The only tourist activities are a visit to the salinas to see the flamingos or a bone-fishing jaunt on the new 24-foot airboat. My big nights out were hashed lobster at Mama Love's, a restaurant complete with Christmas-themed place mats, Coke Classic and a couple of cold beers on one of the two bar stools at the Eastern Light Inn Bar (aka "chicken ranch"). South Caicos is the old, undeveloped Caribbean, and with it goes outdated accommodations, few tourists, and pristine reefs.

When you hear older divers talk about the good old days, back in the '70s, visit South Caicos and you'll see exactly what they mean.

-- Doc Vikingo



Diver's Compass: Fly into Provo on Delta from Atlanta, AA from Miami, TWA from NYC. Rooms start at \$749 p/p double, all meals for seven nights and five days of two-tank morning dives. Website shows specials and details (www.oceanhaven.tc). Bring along everything you might need for personal comfort and diving. Peak humpback season is Jan-Mar, although the resort makes no dedicated trips to observe them. Soda \$1; beer \$2.50; mixed drinks \$3.50. If you really want to

go on the cheap, Mae's B and B, in the Old Governor's House, has three non-A/C rooms on the upper floor with commanding views and a shared bathroom. It looks every bit of its reputed 106 years, but somehow exuded the same ineffable trashed and tatty charm that characterizes much of South Caicos. Mae herself was preparing to host a dignitary, and the kitchen was covered with picture perfect quiches. Give her table a go ... Nearest chamber is on Provo.

The Maldives Aboard the Manthiri

great diving despite El Niño

It was with some trepidation that I began my giant stride from the Manthiri dive tender. The last time I dived the Maldives was just before the 1998 El Niño that had caused massive coral bleaching. *Undercurrent* readers had reported the death of much of the hard coral. Anticipating my first dive for a 20-day trip, I hoped I was not going to be visiting an underwater desert.

Dropping down off the wall I was excited to see the familiar clouds of fish. But as I finned closer to the wall, I saw that indeed a lot of hard coral had died, perhaps as much as 90 percent. There lay piles of rubble that was once healthy *Acropora* branching coral. I was happy to see lots of healthy soft corals, gorgonia, tubastrea, and a profusion of mushroom corals everywhere -- and the buds of new hard coral growth. I didn't see any 'bleached' coral -- that which bleached had died. One encouraging sign was the number of tridacna clams. Since they, like the corals, need zooanthellae to survive, their condition indicated that at least part of the reef system is on the rebound.

This was NOT the Maldives I visited three times before -- still excellent diving, considering the wealth of fish life of all descriptions on every dive, which