

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Riding Rock Inn, San Salvador, Bahamas

where walls are the main attraction

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Dear Fellow Diver,

I'm here to sing the praises of traveling alone. At least sometimes. You see, my spouse and I have been unable to find the time together to take a dive trip (though we're about to head off to the Amazon). When she can get a week to go diving, I can't. And vice versa. So I forego the comfort and fun of traveling with her and stay home, making myself miserable while I read about everyone else getting wet. But, in May, I decided I was big boy enough to venture out alone. You see, it has been 15 years since I went diving without her, my buddies or friends. Ignoring my fear of having dinner alone, I headed to the venerable Riding Rock Inn, about 200 miles southeast of Miami.

Traveling alone to big city hotels is painless. Dial room service for truffle-stuffed partridge and a baked Alaska, then kick back and dine with Julia Roberts on HBO. Dive resorts are a different story. You're lucky to get someone to fix the plumbing; let alone deliver a meal. Unless you're bent, don't even ask. So, you can hide behind a book in a corner of the dining room and watch the group from Tennessee laugh their way through dinner. Or, you can get adopted, which two couples, one from Cincinnati; the other from Manhattan, did for me. The five of us met for drinks and meals and I even got "mothered" a bit. One of the wives gave me an Advil and a cold beer while I sat at the pool. Of course, my wife would have done that, but alas, she was home with the dog.

I shared a dive boat with these fine folks, but joyfully ventured underwater alone. Although I signed a waiver vouching that I would buddy dive, I told the divemaster I came alone and would dive alone. "That's cool," he said. And cool it was, as I went where I wanted, never needlessly



worrying that my wife might get stuck in a crevice (though as an instructor in an earlier life she certified legions of divers), or would need me to help her buddy breathe if she got down to 500 psi at 20 feet (although she's made 2K dives, about twice as many as I). Yes, I admit to protective, irrational, even ridiculous fears when I dive with her. Underwater, she doesn't worry about me, yet I torment myself about her. But if I brought someone else along, I'd never be a worrywart. It must be in my genes.

Riding Rock Inn is an adult place to dive. Their cozy bar's festooned with driftwood and Styrofoam flotsam, on which everyone who has gone before writes that they partied here. Long-time dive shop manager Chris McLaughlin offered an informative and amusing briefing (aided by a thirsty crowd, most into their third beer and complimentary conch fritters) telling us, "We'll take care of all your gear except your wetsuits -- you pee in them so we aren't touching them ... the depth limit is 130 feet, but if you see a hammerhead having babies at 142 feet and a turtle is eating them, drop down and have a look ... just spend a little more time in the shallows ... go 175 feet and sit out for 24 hours ... we don't check computers, but we'll check you in and ask how deep you went." My kind of place.

Assigned to the same boat and crew for one's entire stay, the draw gave me Captain Bruce and diveguide Alex (if you remember the late, late night comedian Sam Kinison, you might think Alex is the good twin). Alex was hard working and helpful. As I sat on the transom, he or Bruce would bring my tank, then steady me on the rocking boat until I stepped off. On my first dive at Shangri-La, I waited on the 45-foot bottom (no check out of any sort), and when Alex arrived I trailed along, as did a few others (many headed off on their own). As he kicked along, his neon green Force Fins (by George, some professionals do wear these things) made him easily visible. Shangri-La is typical of nearly every site, where the top of the wall is 40 or more feet. We slid over to 130 feet, into the not-so-blue water (the seas were up, it had been raining hard, the visibility hovered at 50 feet -- up to 80 later in the week). An exotic queen trigger emerged from a hole, cast one round eye on me, then continued his business. (I wondered whether homophobic divers realize they're fraternizing with male queens). Below me, a sizeable porcupine fish hovered, and above, as the sun peeked through, the sheer and rugged wall rose into sparkling water. Alex stopped to point out an enormous lobster, wriggling his antenna to keep us at bay. Then, we headed up into the shallows where I saw a small turtle flit away as I burned off nitrogen.

You say it's Caicos, but I say it's Calicos

We have a printer who likes to be helpful. So, when we sent him our May issue, he ran a spell check on the lead article. Damned if "Caicos" wasn't in his dictionary. But "Calicos" was. So rather than consulting an atlas — or us, for that matter — the unknown person at the word processor blindly accepted what he saw on his screen and changed South Caicos to South Calicos. And never said a word to us. Sure, we look silly. But it's not the first time. Probably won't be the last, either. Oh well. Anyhow, South Caicos is in the Turks and Caicos Islands, an hour plus flight southeast of Milanta. Or is it Miami? Oh, pass the Mylanta.

– Ben

Sand Castles was the second dive, along the wall at 70 feet, with plenty of coral features. At 40 feet, a solitary jack finned within a few feet, so close I could see little scratches on his body. A small Nassau grouper swam at me; as I reached out he slowed, allowing me to pat his side and scratch his belly. Then he rolled in the sand, as if to wash away my human scent. On these two dives, as on

most, there were a few sponges and little soft coral. Most of the coral was covered with a leafy algae, giving the reef an a dark green hue. All in all, two typical dives, except for ...

Hammerheads. They're a big reason people dive San Sal and sure enough I swam with a few, usually at a distance. At Orbit's Canyon I dropped through a quiet and peaceful canyon, where a couple of curious black jacks circled. Then I emerged at 130 feet over a bright white sand bottom, which contrasted mightily with the deep blue sea and the landscape blackened from lack of light. After an awe-inspiring five minutes, enhanced nicely by the nitrogen spinning around my brain, a 6-foot hammerhead, lazed by 20 feet away. His eye combed the wall as he swivelled his head up and down. As I rose to 50 feet, a school of Bermuda chub ambled by. Nice dive.



The low rise rooms

Yet, I found the algae-covered reef troublesome. Even when the sun appeared, much of the reef remained dull. Troubled by this, I contacted marine biologist Bill Alevizon, who wrote the *Pisces Guide to Caribbean Reef Ecology*. He told me, "I dove for two weeks at San Salvador in 1997 and the corals on the wall dives and elsewhere were clean. The algal infestation you are talking about appears to be widespread in the Bahamas now, and no one is sure why, although there are theories. At certain sites, there seems to be a tight correlation between Hurricane Floyd and the algal outbreak. My guess is that this is cyclical, and very likely related to the resuspension of nutrients that are normally trapped within bottom sediments. This happens over a broad area and at depths exceeding 60-70 feet during a major hurricane. The released nitrates and phosphates are sufficient to stimulate rapid algal growth. As these are used up and returned to the sediments in the ensuing years, the algae dies and coral cover expands again. Again, this is all very tenuous, but probably the most reasonable explanation. I saw the same thing at South Eleuthera this spring."

Well, good news someday, but not now. Floyd hit Riding Rock hard in September 1999, rendering the little waterside cottages uninhabitable. It took a month to get the resort open. Generally, the facilities are in decent shape, though neither the hotel nor the dive shop would pass a white glove test (nor on one day, a warm-water shower test). My room was on the end of one of two low rise motel-like structures, which had more light and better breezes than center units. It smelled horribly of stale cigarettes, but after a couple of days the smell of the sea took over. The tiled floor and screened louvered windows offered a bit of Caribbean ambiance, but the standard double bed, an air conditioner in the window, a cable TV (traveling alone, you get to flip channels till your heart's content) high on the wall, an open closet, and a small bathroom rendered a 1980's Holiday Inn-like touch.

To take my notes, I sat either on the hide-a-bed couch or at the small table, peering out to the sea but 50 feet away. One afternoon I placed one of the few lounge chairs on a sand strip on the rocky shore. Or, after the afternoon dive I lounged at the pool with a cold Kalik, that good Bahamian beer. (Traveling alone, I polished off two thick books; with my wife, it would have been one book, several walks with her, and at least one good afternoon ride on the rental bikes.)

In the main building housing the bar, office and dining room, the efficient staff served meals to groups of 4 to 18 at assigned tables. Strays could gather at their own community table or sit on the deck. Meals have a two-hour range, so you can steal in early or late to beat the crowd. I'd call the cuisine "good ole

American grub," the kind my mother, who opened lots of cans and boxes, might turn out on the weekend. Sometimes it was buffet, sometimes not. Breakfasts were All-American South, with grits, bacon or Jimmy Dean-like sausage patties, accompanying eggs, French toast or pancakes, with canned juices and fresh fruit. When lunch was sit down, it might be a hamburger or ham and cheese sandwich, with excellent fries. The alternatives were baked chicken with mac and cheese, stewed conch with rice and peas (beans to you), or chef's salad loaded with meats and cheeses. A Mexican buffet lunch could have been catered by Taco Bell. A New Yorker who dines out in Tony restaurants five nights a week told me, "I love this lunch, but Taco Bell is even better." Served dinners offered a different choice each night. Pork roast, a cut of beef -- not the prime rib advertised. Or grouper (but after I chucked one on the chin, I decided never to eat this fish again). Or perfectly cooked tuna. Or a buffet with prime rib, pork roast, coleslaw, beet salad, green salad. Or a chicken and rib barbecue. Steamed carrots, cauliflower or broccoli showed up at nearly every lunch and dinner. One night I opted for the vegetarian meal, a tasty stuffed squash. Barely drinkable jug Chablis (the label said "natural flavors") comes with dinner, gratis. Desserts were from the cake, pie and ice cream section of your local super-market. I speculated that only a Sumo wrestler could go hungry here -- and at more than one table there looked to be Sumo wrestlers -- but they didn't leave hungry at all.

It was wise to eat all you could, because strong winds kept the seas high and the boat rocky. To walk around, one needed ballast. Getting back on the boat could be a chore. During one safety stop, I watched the leaded decompression lines bob up and down so much that anyone who deigned to hang on could have been yo-yoed into an embolism. The surge would lift the boat transom out of the water, then slap it back down. Once, when I thought the surge had subsided, I rose to the ladder, removed my fins, grasped the ladder with one hand, and handed my fins up with the other. All of a sudden the boat pulled me high into the air, then dropped me down with a big thump. I was in a fury of bubbles, but immediately Alex was at my side, his wetsuit rolled around his waist, with no mask or fins, holding my tank. We bobbed to the surface. "Are you all right?" he asked. I said, "Fine, no problem." He had worried the boat had landed on me and in a flash had jumped in to assure I was O.K. That's good work, Alex. Of course, in those kinds of seas, divers need skills. Once Alex noted a weight belt on the deck and asked the remaining few divers if they had forgotten it. With no affirmative he said, "Well, we'll soon find out won't we?" Soon after, a diver surfaced for his belt. Alex handed it to him, telling him to drop to the sand bottom to put it on. "I can't, I've never done that before," he

Hurricanes, Diving and You

Looks like this year will be a "normal" hurricane season in the Caribbean and the Atlantic. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts as many as 11 tropical storms -- including five to seven hurricanes.

Hurricane season runs from June 1 to November 30, and while August through October are typically the most active months, even the most intense hurricanes can strike anytime during the season.

For dive travelers, any place in the Caribbean, Central America or the Bahamas can be risky, but satellites today enable forecasters to give up to three days warning, though where a hurricane will strike the coast is still subject to error by as much as 200 miles.

The biggest danger is not wave surge, but inland flooding where the storm's heavy rains raise water levels. Since 1970, 82 percent of Americans killed by hurricanes were drowned. So, the rush to leave an island in the path or a hurricane is more a panic reaction than a necessary choice. If you're in a solid hotel or away from the beach and flood possibilities, you might just as well ride out the storm and buy a memorial T-shirt. That's what I did when Hurricane Gilbert slammed into the Caymans in 1988. Overall, it was a great adventure.

While a hurricane can muck up a dive vacation, there's only a remote chance that your destination will be affected. Islands to the south like Tobago, Curacao and Bonaire are beyond the hurricane belt (though big waves demolished coral on Curacao and Bonaire two years ago). If hurricane season were the only time I could head to the Greater Caribbean, I'd give it a go and take my chances. And look for bargains. Many dive resorts cut prices in the summer because, after all, it's hurricane season.

-Ben Davison

said. He then climbed up on the rocking boat, tank and all, slowing everyone's entry. Who taught him? Another time, a diver tried to climb the ladder with his fins on -- until the surge flipped him off. Another climbed the ladder with his regulator out of his mouth and, when the surge knocked him back, took in a mouthful of water. His inflated BC kept him on the surface. While these conditions are apparently rare on San Sal, novice divers expecting a slam dunk must be aware.

At Vickey's Reef, we dropped down to 70 feet to swim among small Creole wrasses, blue chromis, fairy basslets and royal grammas. A 5-foot scalloped hammerhead appeared, swimming within ten feet, rolling his head as he kicked slowly along. On the reef top at 40 feet, a grouper at a cleaning station allowed photo buffs nose-to-nose shots. Behind the yard-high coral rim, a small nurse shark ambled on as I neared. Later, a shy queen angel swam up, four jacks paddled by, grouper hung at half a dozen cleaning stations, and garden eels everywhere seemed annoyed by pearly razor fish. These critters I had to find myself. Alex seems to envision his job simply as to show you the way -- he'll get you through the many cuts and tunnels, then back to the boat, but hunting critters was your gig. That said, he's a good guy and a skilled diver; guides like that are often fine by me.

Riding Rock can power up as many as three dive boats; each can comfortably hold 15 divers (but groups load them with many more) while motoring up to 25 minutes to the sites. The dive shop is a bit disheveled (and the head on my dive boat didn't work), but the staff produces. Tanks are filled to well over 3000 psi, the boats are prompt, you can hang your wet suits overnight to dry while leaving the other stuff on the boat. There are quick tank changes between dives. But, you better have a computer. Between the 130- and 70-foot dive it's but a 30-minute surface interval, and not because they're in a hurry to get back for lunch. It's just the way they do things here -- maybe because there's a chamber a mile down the road at the Club Med. (Before the third dive to 70 feet, it's a three-hour interval.) While it's easy enough to clear one's computer entirely before leaving the water, I can't imagine

Tips About Dive Releases

As my articles in the March and April issues of *Undercurrent* pointed out, dive releases are generally enforceable.

While your best bet is to find a dive provider who won't demand you sign one, that's unlikely to happen. So, if you must sign a release, try to persuade the provider to eliminate particularly objectionable portions. Assuming he agrees, you should both initial any changes.

If you are injured after signing a release, check the relevant law. Usually this is where the accident occurred, although under certain circumstances it might not be. Some waivers actually include provisions — which courts typically uphold — selecting the law to apply should a dispute arise. Because different jurisdictions subject waivers to widely disparate levels of scrutiny, it is important to understand where your state falls on the continuum. With the obvious cautionary note that laws can change, *Legal Aspects of Waivers in Sport, Recreation and Fitness Activities*, a 1997 publication co-authored by Doyce J. Cotten and Mary B. Cotten, provides an excellent state-by-state breakdown.

And, check for flaws in the release itself, including:

- fraud, misrepresentation or coercion in obtaining the waiver
- no opportunity to read or ask questions prior to signing
- misleading or deceptive title
- small or difficult-to-read typeface
- exculpatory language hidden or otherwise not conspicuous
- failure to recite the "consideration" (what the diver receives in return for waiving his rights) for the release
- in the case of a person who lacks capacity, absence of consent by parent or guardian
- an attempt to avoid liability for gross negligence
- no severability clause
- ambiguity in such important terms as:
 - individuals to be released from liability
 - nature of activities waiver covers
 - specific rights forfeited by signing
 - other individuals (relatives, heirs, etc.) for whom the signer is purportedly relinquishing claims

If you decide to challenge a waiver, consult an attorney. Just as you should meticulously research scuba professionals' backgrounds before enrolling in classes or signing up for trips, you need to carefully investigate lawyers, seeking one who specializes in diving accidents.

Phyllis Coleman, Professor of Law, Nova Southeastern University, Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., is an active diver. She is the co-author of *Sports Law: Cases and Materials* (American Case Book Series).

***Oh Captain!
my captain!
our fearful
trip is done!***

On a recent trip to Jamaica, my husband and I went diving with Resort Divers, based in the Jack Tar at Montego Bay. Our first dive was uneventful and we returned to the shop for our surface interval. For the second dive, it was the divemaster and boat captain, my husband and me. There was a current that was not present on the first dive. Once in the water, we tried to let the boat know that we would not be returning to it, that this was going to be a drift dive, but we could not get the captain's attention. While it was my gut feeling to scrap the dive, the divemaster assured us the boat would pick us up. When we surfaced, the boat was not within any reasonable distance for us to make contact. We had whistles and safety sausages; we waved our brightly colored fins. No luck. The boat captain was asleep!

The current swiftly carried us down the coast, past the airport, away from land. When we neared a navigational bell that I suggested we try to reach, the current was too strong. Land was fairly close. Do we ditch our equipment and swim for shore? Or float a while longer and hope for a passerby? Thank God for the little old fisherman passing by in his little rickety boat. As we were waving to get his attention, he waved back, then realized we needed his help. He picked us up and brought us to the dive shop. Ninety minutes had passed since we first entered the water. The boat could be seen from shore at the dive shop and it had never moved. The captain had to be radioed to be wakened from his little nap.

The dive shop was not too grateful to the fisherman for saving our asses and gave him no compensation. He wanted nothing from me but I made it worth his while. I asked for a refund for the rest of our diving, which they gave me reluctantly. The owner of the operation called me the next morning at my hotel, apologizing profusely and told me they fired the captain on the spot and anything that I wished to do the rest of the week was complimentary.

In hindsight, I should have trusted my gut and not continued the dive. Luckily, we were experienced divers and did not panic.

Tim and Lori Mattozzi, Griffith, Indiana.

anyone in the industry recommending such a short interval (although they request a three-minute stop after the first dive and five minutes after the second). I often left with 1000 psi because, frankly, diving under the boat was usually the same old, same old. And, with the water running about 75 degrees, it got a little chilly. (Somewhat disconcerting, I might add, is that Bruce napped on at least two dives while divers were down. Why disconcerting? See the adjacent sidebar.)

Besides the sheer walls and an occasional hammerhead, I thought the diving was pretty ordinary, due perhaps, to the algae cover. While on most dive trips, people climb out of the water exclaiming, "Did you see that (you name it)?" After the novelty of seeing hammerheads (or an occasional reef shark) wore off, the first comments were often, "Where did you go after we got out of the cut?" Or, "How much air did you have left? Or, "Did you see those turtles eat the baby hammerheads?" While I saw a queen angel or two on most dives, a few turtles, a couple of distant reef sharks and plenty of garden eels, there were no big schools of chromis, not a single eel (seen by me), only a couple of hogfish, an occasional school of grunts, and not much interesting macro. All in all, a population half of many other Caribbean venues. And while I passed on the night dive, my table mates returned sorely disappointed.

Yet, I had a fine time. After all, three tanks a day means one can only

spend 12.5 percent of 24 hours underwater. Sitting on the restaurant veranda with cup of coffee in the morning and a cold one at night was a great Alpha and Omega. The staff is helpful and friendly, especially Peaches. She would mix her deadly brews and as most every guest is a diver, there are endless tales to be heard at the bar. Although some people might say that there isn't much to do here, I entertained myself all the time, especially when I consider the beautiful, uninterrupted naps. Next time I go diving, I'll insist my wife come along. But, if she wants to stay home with the dog, I won't hesitate to go it alone. And I'll miss her a lot, just as I did at San Salvador -- but I'll still have a good time.

-Ben Davison

P.S. And why with algae covered reefs and the relative paucity of fish do I give the RRI diving four stars? Because cruising a wall is one of the best experiences diving can offer. As DEMA's slogan says, "It's like nothing on earth."

Riding Rock Inn

Diving for Experienced	★★★★
Diving for Beginners	★★
Walls	★★★★★
Reefs	★★1/2
Food	★★★★
Accommodations	★★★1/2
Money's Worth	★★★★
★ = poor	★★★★★ = excellent

(Caribbean scale)



Diver's Compass: The deluxe 8-day/7-night package runs \$1,205/person, with three meals, 18 dives, taxes and gratuities.

Deluxe puts you in an oceanfront room, worth the extra \$105/person ... RRI offers a Saturday charter flight to and from Ft. Lauderdale; Bahamas Air flies twice a day from Nassau, don't expect either airline to be on time ... Club Med dive the same reefs. Thanks to the Club, tap water everywhere is brackish; they tapped the water table in 1992 when they opened, and drained it in months; bottled water at the bar is

\$3/gallon ... I found better airfares from San Francisco to Nassau than to Miami ... In Nassau, I overnights at the 265-year-old Graycliff, where waiters in white jackets serve elegant meals in what is purported to be the only 5-star restaurant in the Caribbean -- they make cigars on the premises, priced as high as \$20 a smoke ... From RRI, you can walk to tiny Cockburn town in 15 minutes or get a ride to buy a \$42 case of beer, cutting in half the \$4/bottle charge at the bar; there are a couple of local bars and tiny markets ... The package includes an interesting 'round-the-island bus tour led by Snake Eyes, a local storyteller who spent much of the three hours offering "proof" that San Salvador was Columbus's first landfall ... December through May can mean chilly waters; for some people, a 3 mm shorty was not enough, so they rented more rubber ... Once a week the afternoon dive is replaced by a night dive ... When the wind dies, sand fleas fly, targeting flesh below the knees; bring DEET ... E-6 processing available; McLaughlin can scan the slides into his computer for instant prints ... www.ridingrock.com. Or call them at 800-272-1492 or 954-359-8353.

Boiling Seas, Bleached Coral, and Butt Cut Shorts

tips for the live-aboard lifestyle

One of the biggest complaints we get from divers who make their first live-aboard trip is that they pack too much. Jack and Linda Blake (Folsom, CA) were aboard Mike Ball's *Supersport* last year and wrote, "I wish I'd known what to pack and how much space would be available in our rooms. Having never been on a live-aboard, we had no idea what to expect."

Let us give you the basics for most boats plying tropical waters. First, while some cabins are larger than others and some boats have extra storage space, so what? You'll still use next to nothing. On board for a week you'll need three to four

T-shirts and shorts and a couple bathing suits. (Since most cultures aren't as crass as the American cul-

"With 8-foot swells in the Gulf Stream, 12 of the 21 passengers were ill and vomiting topside during the six-hour crossing."

ture, when you go ashore wear shorts that are cut well below your butt.) Underwear is optional.

Women often like to have some kind of cover-up. Assuming there is adequate fresh water, when clothes get salt stiff you can rinse and dry them.

While you'll probably be barefoot the entire time, bring a pair of sandals because you might make village or restaurant trips. Take a sweatshirt; if nights aren't cool, it's conceivable the AC in your cabin may freeze you. Consider taking a light nylon windbreaker and bring sunglasses and a hat to keep the sun off your face. Besides toiletries, books, dive and camera gear, you don't need much more. (Don't expect to find hair dryers on board and don't even bring them; after two days everyone looks like hell anyway, so why