

dive safari to Maripipi Island and other islands. They have a wreck dive on the Dona Marilyn, a ferry that went down in 1984 with the loss of 2,000 souls, a dive on a Japanese WWII wreck, and many pretty soft coral sites. Dives are \$20 and for a buck more you can get 35 percent to 37 percent Nitrox, to extend your 75-foot dive from 40 minutes to 80.

So, if you're a fish photographer, put the Philippines high on your list. March through May is normally the warmest time of the year because it has the least rain. The water is 78 to 79F in March, warming to 82 to 84F in May during a normal year. June brings monsoon season. Diving is still OK, but heavy rains can reduce the visibility and ambient light. From July through October there is a significant risk of typhoons (hurricanes) anywhere north of about 11 degrees latitude.

-- T.A.



Diver's Compass: All the operators have you sign a waiver and provide your C-card number and level of certification; overall, the "big brother quotient" is very low. Everywhere aluminum 80s are the norm, always filled to 3000 psi. All boats have cell phones to call for help. There are chambers at Anilao and Sabang. Most places cook American breakfasts, with eggs, bacon, and orange juice for \$2.50. Lunch and dinner are often buffet style with barbecued

chicken, pork, steamed fish, curries, steamed rice, shrimp, or lobster. Filipinos are very aware of American eating habits. After all, they have Denny's, McDonald's, Burger King, etc., in all the larger cities. Most traveling divers are either Europeans who mostly don't tip or Asians who tip little. Even Aussies and Kiwis rarely tip. I always tip my Club O dive guide and it is very much appreciated. Club Ocellaris: e-mail: Boy Venus boyv@clubocellaris.com; Sabang Inn Dive Resort phone: +63-973-490 101; e-mail: sab-inn@mozcom.com; Web site: www.sabang-inn.com; Malapascua Island Exotic Dive Resort: phone: +63 (0) 32-4370983; e-mail: info@malapascua.net; Web site: www.malapascua.net.

Hawk's Nest Resort, Cat Island, Bahamas

now, if they'll only get a dive operation

The Bahamas out islands have some pretty fine Atlantic/Caribbean diving, so in July 2001, I headed to Cat Island and the Hawk's Nest resort, where word had it that a pleasant little resort was developing a dive operation. Indeed, the reef formations were excellent and the fish life prolific. However, when I arrived I learned the divemasters who owned the dive boat had departed. I could only dive by driving forty-five minutes along washboard roads to another resort. I managed to dive at Hawk's Nest, though the boat could handle but four divers at a time. Nevertheless, I saw the potential, so I stayed in contact with the folks at Hawk's Nest, who promised a new dive boat, divemasters, and a full-service operation this summer. With that, I arranged a stay for eighteen family members, ranging in age from nine months to seventy years and residing in five U.S. cities and England.

Thanks to a twenty-eight-slip marina about ten minutes away and a nearby forty-six-hundred-foot airstrip, vagabond sailors and private pilots from the U.S. frequent Hawk's Nest, but divers have yet to discover it. With only ten rooms in two buildings facing the sea (and a private two-bedroom cottage with a kitchen),



Hawk's Nest is small and intimate resort. The rooms have TV/VCR to play the huge selection of movies available. In the clubhouse, there's a satellite TV, an honor bar, and an open-air dining room with many windows overlooking the pool and the sea. Bicycles, adult tricycles, a tennis court with a basketball goal, table-size chess and backgammon sets, hammocks and thatches on the beach, kayaks, and jeep and van rentals -- and even hair plaiting and massages -- will keep you busy. At the marina, the Plane to Sea Pub, which was open only occasionally, sports a pool

table, dart board, and good drinks. With palms, casuarinas, and blooming hibiscus, the Hawk's Nest environs, it seems, would be the perfect destination for a dive club or large family.

By Bahamas standards, the diving was very good. Close by, Hawk's Wall is a big coral formation with lots of gorgonia and sponges at seventy feet. Grooves run through it like rivers. A big scrawled filefish greeted me as I descended, and there were clouds of blue and brown chromis with a few sunshine fish swimming along. A big school of white margates cruised past. Everywhere were blackcap basslets with their bellies aligned with the coral. On another dive here I saw a big spotted moray curled under a coral ledge and a huge Nassau grouper being cleaned by tiny Spanish hogfishes, as well as four queen angels along the way.

At B.C., several patch reefs on a wide expanse of sand attracted a variety of fish. You can't dive deeper than 42 ft. here without a shovel, so dives are long, with plenty of time to count fish. One big coral head with overhangs and tunnels was home to schools of white margates, white grunts, French grunts, schoolmasters, Nassau and tiger groupers, queen angels, triggers, and lots of sharpnose puffers. Tube blennies poked their heads from holes. Two enormous lobsters hid under ledges. The sandy area was dotted with occasional patches of garden eels and populated with yellowhead jawfish hovering above their holes, only to disappear tail first when I got closer. Once, a huge barracuda stared me down. Indeed, a fine site for fish photography.

At Playground, five queen angels maneuvered the channels, tunnels, and overhangs. Along one side, a sheer wall dropped to at least 200 feet. While big growths of lettuce-like algae appeared on some of the reef, the coral appeared healthy and the fish were prolific. A 5 ft. barracuda checked me out, as did a queen trigger. Six majestic ocean triggers swam past, and I spotted stoplight parrots, a pair of white-spotted filefish, several tiger groupers, and lots of "dancing" diamond blennies. While a big trumpetfish hunted, blueheads cleaned two red hinds. Big mutton snappers followed me around.



We dived this site four times, and we usually saw a couple of reef sharks, and we were once accompanied by a big school of horse-eye jacks.

And, therein lies the rub -- diving one site four times. You see, while the "new" dive boat had arrived (a twenty-eight-foot converted fishing boat) it held only five divers and the two guides. At that, it was crowded. And slow. Through choppy seas, the rides to these sites were uncomfortable and about thirty minutes each way, so we did well to manage two morning dives. Furthermore, Hawk's Nest had booked six divers into the cottage, so our groups had to take turns between morning and afternoon dives, with neither group able to do both. Some of my family members never got to dive, and none did as many dives as he or she wanted.

The divemasters, Lani and Jeff Sloss, had arrived at Hawk's Nest less than three weeks before. They did their best to get us in the water -- and they did certify one of our teenagers but Hawk's Nest can't run a dive operation without the essentials, and the resort simply doesn't have them.

Oxygen was on order, supposedly, but not yet available -- not good when a chamber is a flight away. Because of the lousy dive boat and overbooking, we got to only three different sites in the entire week. Of course, "there are wonderful sites a little farther away," but the boat couldn't get us there, and got us back for late lunches.

During the week, the buffet lunch, often spicy, included cold cuts, pasta salad, gazpacho, tuna salad, corn salad, BBQ chicken, cole slaw, crab salad, hamburgers, French fries, quesadillas, bratwurst, and sauerkraut. After begging for sweets, we got brownies, sugar cookies, and even pecan pie. Breakfasts were also buffet style, with decent variation, but not enough fresh fruit. For dinner, the staff set up two tables for our group. Comestibles included, soup, salad, and dessert, with two main course choices: pork tenderloin or grouper, red snapper or veal piccata, grouper or Chinese chicken, New Zealand rack of lamb or mahi-mahi. As

It's the Salsa!

If you want to know why you're getting Montezuma's revenge when you travel to Mexico and elsewhere, the answer is at Carlos and Charlie's—in the salsa, jalapeno sauces, and guacamole.

Researchers from the University of Texas found *E. coli* in two-thirds of the condiments they tested from Mexico, and on average the levels of contamination were one thousand times what they measured in restaurants in Houston. What's more, they repeatedly found two particularly virulent strains of *E. coli* that together account for half of all cases of traveler's diarrhea.

The bugs come from human feces and contaminate the sauces via unwashed hands, says Herbert DuPont, an expert in infectious diseases and chief of internal medicine at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital in Houston.

"Most people think it's the water, but it's not," says DuPont, who's been testing food for nearly three decades. He has found that bad food is responsible for about ninety percent of traveler's diarrhea.

DuPont's team collected samples of seventy-one sauces from thirty-six restaurants in Guadalajara and compared them with twenty-five sauces served in twelve Mexican-style restaurants in Houston. Of the many bugs that can cause food poisoning, they only found *E. coli*, but it was present in sixty-six percent of the sauces from Guadalajara and forty percent of those collected in Houston. While none of the Houston samples contained dangerous strains of *E. coli*, sauces from Mexico commonly contained two that wreak havoc in the gut. One releases a toxin, and the other causes inflammation.

DuPont's group found that nine percent of Mexican samples harbored the first kind, and forty-four percent the second. The Mexican restaurants in Houston are probably safer because they serve their condiments either freshly made or from the refrigerator. In Mexico, the same sauces sit on the table all day. Not only are they unrefrigerated, but many consecutive diners may stick their fingers in them while dipping their chips, says DuPont.

Diane Martindale
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a rule the meats tasted better than the fish -- cooking was spotty all week.

All week Murphy and his law beset managers Brian and Jennifer Campbell and Randy and J.R. Holder, as well as the divemasters. The dive boat wouldn't start one day, and the backup boat, a small v-hull, broke down. The pool pump was broken, and by the time the managers noticed, the water was too dirty for swimming our last three days. The Jeep had a flat tire, and when the van wouldn't start, they took us back to the clubhouse in a truck that had no inside door handles. The supply boat was three days late with the groceries. Furthermore, the details --

Divers Stuffed as LCD Leaves Little Cayman

Like many *Undercurrent* readers, Wilt Nelson of Leesburg, Florida, had been aboard the Little Cayman Diver II and had a great time. So after the ten-passenger live-aboard changed hands last year, Nelson had no qualms about booking it again with six friends to dive Little Cayman and Cayman Brac. Now he wishes he hadn't.

Unbeknownst to Nelson, new LCDII owner Bob de Gouveia, a diving entrepreneur from South Africa, had moved the boat to Grand Cayman in April after the LCD dock got ruined in storms last October. The small boat wasn't up to taking diver passengers between the islands, so he changed itineraries to the waters off Grand Cayman without informing his prepaid guests. Nelson only learned of the change shortly before their May 19 departure date.

He and his friends had no interest in diving Grand Cayman. They called and e-mailed de Gouveia to see what could be done. Three days before their departure, de Gouveia canceled the trip and said he would refund everyone. Because they had nonrefundable airline tickets, Nelson's friends switched their booking into Little Cayman Beach Resort through the Reef and Rainforest travel agency of Sausalito, CA, which had put them on the LCDII. Nelson, who had paid his money directly to de Gouveia, had to pony up an additional \$1400 for the resort. Upon his return he made several attempts to contact de Gouveia for his refund, but his inquiries went unanswered.

At this point, Reef and Rainforest had paid both de Gouveia and the Little Cayman Beach resort, on word from de Gouveia that he would refund the money. He said his capital was tied up outside the country, but would make the \$9000 refund to Reef and Rainforest shortly.

We spoke with de Gouveia in July, who assured us that his partner was in New York arranging for a transfer of funds that very day. That was about the last time Nelson got a "check is in the mail" phone message. Of course, that check never arrived. At the end of August, de Gouveia told us he was expecting a wire transfer that very day and he would pay back everyone and outfit a new dive boat. So far, neither Nelson nor Reef and Rainforest has gotten refunds. De Gouveia's credibility is shot, and Wilt Nelson is pursuing legal remedies.

Undercurrent has heard from other divers who prepaid trips and, after getting the same runaround, are out tens of thousands of dollars. Most booked the boat directly, so they don't have a standup travel agency like Reef and Rainforest to go to bat for them.

The LCDII Web site (www.bracdiver.com/index.cfm) now acknowledges that the boat is out of service. Although the Web site talks bravely of "negotiating with a number of vessels" to replace the LCDII, de Gouveia admitted to *Undercurrent*, "I may do nothing if Caribbean bookings don't pick up" in the wake of the post-9/11 travel slowdown.

In today's environment, as travel agent commissions are cut to the bone, travelers are being encouraged to book directly over the Internet. Nevertheless, just because a resort or live-aboard has a slick looking Web site, that's no reason to assume it's a substantial or honest outfit — even if you've done business there before, as Wilt Nelson discovered. Things change and desperate operators may resort to desperate measures, such as taking deposits for bookings they can't fulfill. More than ever, it's crucial to deal with operators you know you can trust either through recent recommendations from your friends, or through reputable travel wholesalers or agencies that will stand behind their bookings.

Hawk's Nest Resort

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|--|-------------------|
| Snorkeling | ★★★1/2 |
| Scuba | ★★★★ |
| Accommodations | ★★★★ |
| Food | ★★★1/2 |
| Money's Worth (if there is a real boat) | ★★★★ |
| ★ = poor | ★★★★★ = excellent |

Caribbean Scale

such as keeping the glass table tops clean and free from dirty glasses and empty cans -- will need to be managed if this is to become the four-star resort it claims to be in its brochure.

But let me note that Hawk's Nest has plenty of potential. The reefs are much more interesting than, say, those at Andros around Small Hope Bay, and they compare favorably with Riding Rock. Fish life is good, with lots of species and numbers of reef fish and some cruising sharks and barracuda. It's a pleasant property, boasting spacious, air-condi-

tioned rooms with views of the sea, a comfortable clubhouse overlooking the pool and the beach, lots of activities, pleasant grounds, and 460 undeveloped acres. The beach is fine for swimming, and for snorkeling with the kids the sea life is decent (last year they took us to a good snorkel spot by boat, but this year no boat was available). It's also a safe property -- they don't issue room keys -- and none of us worried about where the children were. Management says the owners intend to get a "new" dive boat and upgrade the dive operation. They also "plan" to remodel all the rooms. If all this happens, then Hawk's Nest will become a comfortable venue for easy diving, especially suited to groups. But, they'll also need to get new dive guides. The couple who was there for our July trip has already departed.

-- K.I.



Divers Compass: Hotel rooms (one king or two queen beds) are \$134/night, double occupancy, add \$50/person/day for three meals. E-mail at info@hawks-nest.com; Web site is www.hawks-nest.com. Call 1-800-688-4752 or 1-242-342-7050. Individual dives are \$55 for one tank, \$75 for two tanks. They have some rental equipment, but no repair capacity. There are rinse and storage facilities at the dock. We flew to the resort's airstrip on nine-passenger planes

chartered from Air Flight at Ft. Lauderdale (1-954-359-0820), and customs agents checked our documents and collected fees. Bahamas Air and Cat Island Air have commercial flights from Nassau, and Lynx Air flies from Ft. Lauderdale; they all land at New Bight, an hour's ride over bumpy roads to the resort. Bonefishing and deep-sea fishing are available.

Malaria and the Traveling Diver

a serious threat, but be leery of Lariam

Undercurrent has reported before on malaria and problems with Lariam, the most widely used malaria prophylaxis. Most problems concern the drug's neuropsychiatric side effects, but now *Undercurrent* reader, Dr. Jose

Miguel Duran, has written us with a different Lariam tale.

Dear Ben,

"My wife and I were diving in Irian Jaya for two weeks last year.

Like we have done before in other tropical destinations, we took Lariam (mefloquine) for two weeks before our trip, during the trip, and for four weeks afterwards. We also used lots of one hundred percent DEET.

"Two months after our return I