

shop overnight; rinse your own gear, but they transfer it to and from the boat ... West Caribbean Airlines has flights to San Andres from San Jose, Costa Rica, Managua, Nicaragua, Havana, Panama City, Grand Cayman, and Bogota ... Sunquest Tours has charter flights from Toronto to San Andres; see photos at www.sunquest.ca or call 1-877/485-6060 ... I set up my trip with Reef and Rainforest (reefrainfrst.com; Tel: 1-800/794-9767; Fax: 1-415/289-1763) ... The manager of the Nirvana Inn - www.nirvanahotel.com - made the reservations at Sol Caribe, Providencia, and Sonny's Dive Shop for Reef and Rainforest ... He also made the reservations for my flight from San Jose, Costa Rica to San Andres, and on to Old Providence ... Both R&RF and I had much difficulty getting anyone on San Andres to respond to our e-mails ... Sending e-mails to info@nirvana-hotel.com generally got us a response within 24 hours ... In July there will be a charter flight to San Andres from Miami leaving at 5 p.m. Fridays (June 27, July 4, July 11, and July 18) and departing from San Andres eight days later (July 5, July 12, July 19, and July 26) ... Price is \$1350, including round-trip airfare from Miami, all airport transfers, an eight-night hotel stay, three meals a day, and seven two-tank boat dives ... They have packages from San Jose and Costa Rica and sell air-only or land-only packages ... www.scubasanandres.com or call 1-314/614-0181.

Old Providence Island

Diving for Experienced	★★★★★
Diving for Beginners	★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Food	★★★
Ambience	★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor

★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale

Providenciales, Turks, and Caicos

great for a quick trip

There's a moment every year when the weather turns foul and the urge strikes to head quickly to any easy-to-reach dive destination. With Providenciales convenient (just over an hour flight from Miami), the diving good, and plenty of off-season bargains thanks to few travelers between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I made a spur-of-the-moment decision and headed south. As I learned, a dearth of divers can be a double-edged sword.

Among the resorts populating the 12-mile stretch of beautiful beach, the new Sands at Grace Bay offered better Internet rates than its neighbors for comparable ocean view rooms. It's wedged between the all-inclusive (if not intrusive) Allegro Resort and the family-friendly Beaches. You can almost smell the freshness of the pastel paint on the six buildings, each decorated in that nouveau colonial motif sweeping Grace Bay development. From the 118 "suites," I opted for a studio suite with a "full kitchenette."

After being picked up at the airport and greeted with a frozen daiquiri at check-in, they showed me to my ground-level room. While spacious and impeccably clean, the "ocean view" from my private screened patio didn't extend beyond the nearby pool, though the beach was just a minute walk. The "full" kitchenette was a microwave oven. There's a well-stocked miniature market on the property, and the

resort will take you to and from IGA for \$5 round trip, or a jitney will drop you off and pick you up anywhere for \$8-\$10.

With no dive reservations, I considered help from the "Tour Desk" (where I could get free hobbies, kayaks, masks/snorkels, clean beach towels), but I started cold-calling, only to learn many folks weren't even answering the phone, including Art Pickering's Provo Turtle Divers at the nearby Turtle Cove Marina. So I checked in on The Sharkbite at the Marina for a conch burger and fries for \$7, where I hung out until someone finally showed up at Provo Turtle -- Pickering, himself, pulled up from a fishing trip. He seemed almost bothered to arrange for my \$90 two-tank trip, but obliged me nonetheless.

The next morning, after a short ride to the marina, the dive guide Morgan, a fetching 26-year-old Canadian who grew up mostly on Provo, offered a warm hello. A retired couple now living on Provo were the only other divers on *Chuck's Other Honey*, a 26-foot, single-engine veteran vessel. As I set up my gear, I heard a dreaded hiss from my high-pressure hose. Having tossed this trip together at the last minute, I failed to check my gear and the hose was frayed. I jumped off the boat to rent a regulator and a BCD (Provo Turtle Divers didn't have a replacement for the hose), but afterward Aussie captain Piers said I didn't anticipate the malfunction, so he didn't charge me (nice guy, since he damn well knew I could have prevented it).

After a 40-minute ride to Northwest Point, Piers (pronounced Pearce) gave us a laid back briefing -- then I stepped in, dropping next to a bold 3-foot barracuda with the scowl of a nightclub bouncer. I spotted a Caribbean stingray on a sandy break on the way over the wall to 95 feet. Bushy and feather black corals swayed in the gentle current alongside sea whips and red branching sponges crawling with brittle stars. Black durgon cruised around barrel sponges. Yellowtail and blackfin snappers ventured over to investigate me, and in the distance two reef sharks scampered into the great blue. In the shallows, reef fish were plentiful, and I extended the dive to 55 minutes before heading to the hang-bar at 15 feet, where the sentry barracuda still lingered. I handed my fins up to Piers and lumbered on board after taking care of a little business -- better tended to in the water than on a small boat with no head, I always say.

After 45 minutes topside, we shuttled to Chimney, with many of the same features as the first dive. I scoured the small spaces between brightly colored yellow and orange encrusting sponges looking for hidden treasures, finding mostly hefty lobsters the length of my forearm betrayed by waving antennae. Among the brain coral, a spotted trunkfish hovered. Water was a comfortable 81°F, and the visibility, 60 feet. With a vibrant reef, plenty of the standard tropicals, and so few divers, it was practically a private outing. Afterward, I ambled up to the Tiki Hut for a spicy conch salad in the warm afternoon breeze and watched a Miami-Buffalo football game in a blizzard.

That evening I tried Aqua, down the dock a piece, but beside the check (\$12 for a spiced chicken wrap and a beer) my meal cost me a day and half of diving. I spent the next 36 hours purging whatever strain of food poisoning I had picked up,

Providenciales

Diving for Experienced	★★★★
Diving for Beginners	★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Food	★★★★
Ambience	★★★★
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Caribbean Scale

eventually emerging from my room eager to get wet again. The tour desk at The Sands tried finding an afternoon dive at Dive Provo, Flamingo Divers, and Big Blue Adventures, but no luck. There weren't enough divers on the island to justify firing up. I called Fifi at Caicos Adventures and got a seat on his boat the next morning.

Running on island time, Fifi picked me up 30 minutes late with his ebullient south-of-France energy oozing out the bus door as it swung open. The *Caicos Cat*, a 43-foot twin-engine catamaran, was docked on the south side, and she was bustling with activity, because as readers of *Undercurrent* know, he is the dive operator of choice for divers in the know. While his craft can fit 20 divers comfortably, we had 14 plus Fifi and divemaster Aisa. As Fifi briefed us (while picking up sunflower seed shells from the deck and holding them aloft with a wry "I want names!"), he explained that we were going to be on TV. A pair of French ex-pats was along to film for a Francophile satellite network. As we pulled out of the marina -- looking cheery of course -- the cameras rolled. But then we had to return to the dock to pick up the camera operator, which added 30 minutes to the trip.

The *Cat* got us to Tons of Sponges, where I joined Fifi's group on a sandy bottom crawling with conch. A spotted eagle ray big enough to take me on a magic carpet ride soared away, sensing the impending rumble of bubble breathers. A hawksbill turtle joined us for several minutes. There were barrel

Spoilsport Tragedy

I was on Mike Ball's *Spoilsport* in December for a seven-day trip to the Barrier Reef and Coral Sea. The first day's dive was on the *Yongala*. All precautions were taken, yet I couldn't help but notice that the spare tank on the wreck itself was out of air.

The following day while hanging on the deco bar, I noticed a crew member free diving to considerable depth. I asked around and learned there was a friendly competition going on between two crewmembers.

A few days later, while diving, I noticed a crewmember snorkeling on the surface. He dove, waving to divers at 100 feet and started coming back up but then sank to the bottom. A dive-master doing a Nitrox checkout dive with two guests dove down to 140 feet to get his body. He took him to 60 feet where he tried to give him air. Another crewmember dove down and took him to the surface.

An emergency alert went out for us to surface. One guest, who tried to alert the divemaster that he was very low on air just as the divemaster tried to get attention for the drowning man, was out of air when he reached the deco bar. We had been told that there was spare air there, but the tank was empty or not turned on during that dive. His buddy shared air.

The crewmember died, but they never told us that — we assumed it when we saw all the staff crying. They told us we were returning to Townsville, a 10-hour trip. They never told us anything else, but they gave us three options: three days on the *Supersport*, 50 percent off a new trip, or a refund for this portion of the trip.

They took us to the police station to give statements and put us up in a hotel for three days. This was supposed to be the trip of a lifetime, but — because of the stupidity of crewmembers — it ended in tragedy.

- Tamara Merz

The death of Mike Ball's crewmember (Mike Ball will not release his name) was one of four recent free diving deaths in Australia. This death and at least one other were caused by shallow water blackout, in which the victims hyperventilate to dive deeper and longer.

Dive Queensland general manager Col McKenzie said that the people that have died have been deliberately doing massive hyperventilation and very deep snorkeling in excess of 10 meters. "It's a deliberate act that is inherently dangerous, and that's why we've now seen three fatalities in the last 30 days," he said. He added, "In the previous 10 years we have not seen a fatality from this."

That PADI Liability Release: Lose One

In 1998, Mary Jean and Paul Olivelli enrolled in a scuba certification class offered by Paula German at The Diver's Way Dive Shop in Long Island, N.Y., where they executed a standard "Liability Release and Express Assumption of Risk" form in favor of German, The Diver's Way Dive Shop, and International PADI. After completing class and pool work, they traveled to Puerto Rico for open water training by Chuck Rew at the Copa Marina Beach Resort, where they executed a similar release agreement in favor of Chuck Rew, the Copa Marina, and International PADI. By signing the release, the Olivellis agreed to assume all risks associated with the dives, whether foreseen or unforeseen.

On their fourth and final certification dive, Ms. Olivelli ascended with her instructor. On the surface, she swam to the dive platform, removed her weight belt and BC, and hoisted herself onto the dive boat swim platform. She suddenly collapsed. The boat headed one mile back to shore where an emergency medical technician team transported her to a clinic, but they ultimately pronounced her dead of an air embolism.

In a lawsuit, her husband alleged that the death of Ms. Olivelli was caused by the negligent acts of the defendants, saying that they failed to devise a dive plan adequately, they failed to supervise the dive adequately, they failed to provide adequate first-aid on the vessel, and the boat was not functioning at full capacity.

The defendants did not challenge the facts, but simply argued for summary judgment in their favor because the deceased had waived any and all claims related to Ms. Olivelli's death through the execution of the liability release.

The plaintiff made several legal arguments, but two of particular interest are that the waiver did not sufficiently explain the dangers associated with scuba diving and the waiver did not cover the defendants' gross negligence.

The court agreed that the waiver was clear, concise, and unequivocal, saying "we find that it would be difficult to imagine language more clearly drafted so as to put a person on notice of its legal significance and effect." The court found that Ms. Olivelli "clearly accepted responsibility for the consequences and had the particular knowledge of the specific and precise risk (embolism) which caused her death."

The plaintiffs also argued that the pre-accident release did not release the defendants from liability for gross negligence, but the court found that "plaintiffs have alleged no facts or produced no evidence to establish a higher degree of culpability approaching willful or wanton misconduct on the defendants' part."

On September 24, 2002, the judge issued a summary judgment, ruling in favor of the defendants and effectively dismissing the case. So another victory for the PADI liability waiver.

sponges that even the biggest grouper could comfortably lounge in and still accommodate the rainbow parrotfish roaming the reef. I had stopped to admire a French angelfish scanning the outcropping that was teeming with countless energized wrasses, when I saw an epic battle unfolding between a hapless octopus and a hulking grouper. It was unbridled violence; a speed-of-light fight to the death. It was awesome. And then suddenly, in a blinding flash of black, the octopus unloaded its defense system and disappeared. The grouper gobbled his souvenir leg and sauntered away. Indeed, one hell of a match up.

Soon someone hit 1,500 psi, and it was time to head back. When I noticed that I still had 2,200 psi left on my back, I wasn't too pleased. Along the way, I found a small spotted moray slithering through a labyrinth of rough star and cactus coral, grunts, a puffer, and more angel fish as I penetrated valleys between sprawling coral heads along the shallowing bottom. Under the boat I still had 1,400 psi, so Fifi signaled me to join him on the continuing video shoot. We were rewarded with

two 5-foot blacktips that approached and then veered away. I eventually heaved my happy self onto the boat where the Cat was already abuzz with stories from our time below.

After an hour of drying out and half an IGA sandwich courtesy of Caicos Adventures, we grabbed a buoy at Melissa's Cove. I dove with Aisa and stayed relatively shallow as dictated by the site. It's essentially a large sandbar channel with a slopping wall. The visibility was at least 100 feet, but the reef was quiet. Maybe it just felt that way after so many feature creatures on the first dive. The only unusual sight was small schools of darting horse eye jacks. We finally got back to the marina well after 3:00 p.m. I wasn't back in my room until after 4:00 p.m., a long day for only two tanks and half a sandwich.

The Sands doesn't offer the immediate access to several restaurants that Turtle Cove does, but Hemingway's -- on the resort's beach -- offers fine eats at palatable prices. I had plaintain-encrusted mahi mahi after a conch salad and a Turk's Head for \$27. The water practically licks your feet as you dine under swaying palms. Another evening I strolled 10 minutes to the Allegro to see the casino (don't even try to go beyond the casino door or you may be abruptly approached after several minutes in the lobby by a security detail who will semi-politely inform you that they have been following you "all night" and you need to leave) and dine across the street at Bella Cuba in Grace Bay Plaza. I was the only patron in the open-air Caribbean-style joint. It's overlit, but the fare is bountiful, tasty, and reasonably priced. A mildly curried snapper over rice, fried plaintains, fresh avocado, and steamed veggies go for \$13 including service. That leaves spare change for an uplifting mojito -- the cheapest drink on the menu.

I decided to log a few nights at the Turtle Cove Inn, which sits in the heart of the marina flanked on either side by restaurants and bars, all with reasonably priced fare. Acqua, the on-site bar/restaurant, has its cast of regulars who come nightly, none of whom appeared to have been afflicted by the food poisoning I contracted. From my second-floor balcony I watched boats move in and out and people stroll between the Shark Bite on one end of the boardwalk and the Tiki Hut on the other. (The money view is actually from the bar at the Miramar, a two-minute walk up some stone steps from the marina.) Saturday night is karaoke night at the Banana Boat where locals and tourists alike croon away.

The Inn also has the only liquor store around where you can stock your mini fridge with water, OJ, and rum. The rooms are serviceable, kept clean, noisily air-conditioned, and have cable TV which you can surf with the remote you get at the

That PADI Liability Release: Win One

Two years ago this month, the dive guides from the Cool Aqua Sun Sports shop at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Rose Hall Jamaica instructed the divers and guests, without appropriate supervision, to dive in the water and descend along a rope line attached to a floating buoy. The bottom, they said, was 50-70 feet deep.

Brian Schiner, 43, of Glenelg, Md., a certified diver, was the first diver in the water. He unknowingly descended to 160 feet and, when he realized how deep he was he quickly ascended. When he surfaced, apparently in serious trouble, the crew failed to give him oxygen, and there was no recompression chamber nearby. Schiner was airlifted from Jamaica to Mercy Hospital in Miami and treated there, but he remains paralyzed.

The Ritz-Carlton initially claimed erroneously that the dive operator was a separate company. They said Schiner was negligent for descending too deep. But Schiner's attorney, Stuart Z. Grossman of Miami, negotiated a \$17.5 million settlement in November.

Grossman told *Undercurrent* that Schiner had signed a PADI release, but it had been improperly executed.

check-in desk. Lose the remote and you pay an extra \$25. There's also a pool, which is the only dip you can take unless you want to take the 10-minute walk out around the entire marina to the sea, where there's virtually no one on the beach.

All in all, Provo diving -- if you go to the right areas and not Grace Bay -- is good Caribbean diving, perfect for a quick getaway. There are plenty of reefs, most similar to what I've described here, so in a week you're unlikely to return to the same spot twice, though many spots are worth a second visit. If you take a quick trip, plan in advance. As my experience shows, these operators are bound by their own economic rules. Just because you are spending a few hundred bucks for a vacation doesn't mean they have to fire up their boats, and Fifi's popularity and have-fun attitude at times fills up his boat, even in the off season.

- J.J.

Diver's Compass: Art Pickering's Provo Turtle Divers: Tel 1-649/946-4232, Fax 1-649/941-5296 or 1-800/833-1341, and on the web at www.provoturtledivers.com ... Philipe "Fifi" Kunz's Caicos Adventures: Phone-Fax 1-649/941-3346 and on the web at www.westcaicosadventures.tc ... Both offer comparable seven-night hotel dive packages on their websites, ranging from \$800-\$1300, depending on property and season ... Refer to the Chapbook for other excellent operators.

Those New Baggage Requirements

how to protect your gear and your film

Flying? Seems the only way to protect your dive gear these days is to wear it on the plane.

Not long ago we warned about Pelican cases being rifled by handlers at airports like Miami and recommended that if you couldn't hand-carry photo gear, then place it inside a well-secured but uninteresting piece of baggage. Alas, given the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) baggage screening procedures that took hold January 1, such a precaution may mean little these days.

Today, all checked luggage may be hand inspected, so TSA advises not to lock checked baggage. Any item deemed suspicious as it winds its way past x-ray and explosive detection devices will be opened and inspected. In those airports where bags go through these devices in your presence, you'll be asked to open the luggage, if necessary. However, where screening takes place within the bowels of the baggage system, TSA will attempt to open locked lug-

gage with master keys. If that fails, they will cut the locks.

TSA will soon provide free tamper-evident seals. Essentially cable ties, they have a tear-off tab containing the tie number so that one can determine if the tag they affix is the same one on the bag at the time of arrival. If TSA opens a bag, it will place an official card inside and close it with a security seal. By the end of the year, TSA also expects to videotape inspections that take place behind the scenes.

TSA doesn't assume responsibility for damage to the locks they remove. If, upon arrival, you are missing anything from a bag that they have inspected, you must file a claim. TSA has six months to settle claims. However, David Stempler, president of the Air Travelers Association, says that it is not yet clear who will take responsibility in case of theft or harm of luggage — the airlines or TSA. So don't be surprised if TSA and your airline point fingers at each other.

So before you depart home make a record of everything in your checked luggage, including serial numbers of articles or detailed descriptions and the replacement cost. Place one copy in your luggage and carry another one elsewhere.

What should a traveling diver do?

Carry on as much as you can, ranking items by value and utility. Medications, medical assistive devices, and prescription masks may be more important than a regulator that you can easily rent. Balance the likelihood of missing diving days with the value of your gear. Note that most U.S. airlines limit you to two carry-on items, including a purse, briefcase, laptop, or the like, neither to exceed about 22" x 14" x 9" and 40 pounds. These must fit in overhead storage and under the seat.

Pending availability of TSA seals, continue to lock your bag-