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Ben Davison's **In Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

Plantation Beach Resort

Quiet time in Cayos Cochinos, Honduras

While diving the Bay Islands aboard the Maid'en Desert in 1993, I dropped by Cayos Cochinos to check out its Third Annual Music Festival. Because of the festival, things were not normal at Plantation Beach, so I didn't review it. We sent a reviewer back this April to take a look at the resort during its normal operations.

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Dear Fellow Diver:

"Ready? Let's go!" It was just the pilot and me, with the control wheel bumping my knees. The plane ride was short, a mere 16 miles from La Ceiba, on the Honduran mainland, to Cochino Pequeno's tiny grass runway with a shack for a terminal building.

I'd been to the other Bay Islands -- Roatan and Guanaja -- but this time I was looking for something more remote, less traveled. Cayos Cochinos fit the description, a group of more than 60 small cays dotting the turquoise water between the Honduran mainland and Roatan. Two of the dots are forested and large enough to be called islands -- Cochino Pequeno ("Little Hog"), where the Cessna 172 lands, and Cochino Grande ("Big Hog"), with the only resort, Plantation Beach.

After the plane had bumped to a halt, I was met by Roger, a somewhat scruffy, laid-back dive guide from the resort. During a short, mostly dry trip to Cochino Grande in the 26-foot launch, he filled me in on the routine -- a two-tank boat dive in the morning, one-tank in the afternoon, and all the shore diving I could stand.

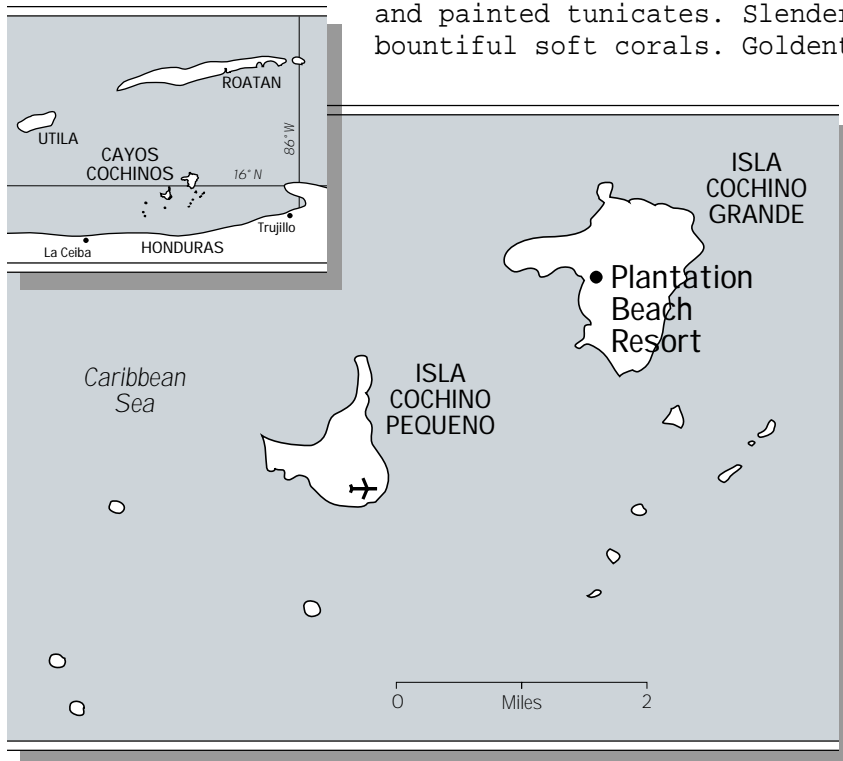
A Long Way from the Mall

As the boat pulled into the bay, I studied the tiny resort, nestled in foliage on its own small, sandy beach. I could see just a few private residences, visible only from offshore in adjacent coves. The island has no roads, no casinos, no shopping malls, no other resorts.

Like animated gargoyles, pelicans perching on the beams over the dock anointed the unwary and startled newcomers by suddenly plunging into the dense school of fry around the pilings. Once

With no roads and no way to get to the island except by bush plane or boat, PBR seems an unlikely place for a music festival. However, every year a crowd of mainly locals, yachties, resort staff, and expats take over the island, and the regular operations of PBR are shut down. Catch it if you can; the Fifth Annual will be sometime this fall.

J. Q.



Cayos Cochinos, Bay Islands, Honduras

safely past this welcoming committee, I took in the whole show in five minutes of leisurely exploration: dining room/bar/erecreation center on the beach, patio with deck chairs in front hammocks on the side, a pair of enclosed showers. Several two-level guest bungalows are close by, with other, single-story cabins (with a better view) a brisk hike up a small hillside. There's a dive shop (which I never entered) and a boutique the size of a large closet. Grand Cayman this is not. It's not even Roatan, with its dolphin-and-pony-show antics. What would I do to pass the time -- dive?

More Blennies Than Big Boys

Diving four times a day did while away the hours. The many small cays offer numerous sites, with new ones still being discovered and explored. At Charlotte's Choice, a typical site, we tied to the permanent mooring and backrolled into 80 water, with visibility only 40 feet. Roger accompanied the only guest -- me -- and showed his proficiency at spying out obscure organisms. No fewer than five quillfin blennies showed themselves. Arrow blennies cocked their tails, ready to pounce on their minute prey. Bizarre sponges encrusting the reef enjoyed the nutritious, murky broth, as did numerous bluebell and painted tunicates. Slender filefish hovered among the bountiful soft corals. Goldentail morays hid in crevices, but a sharptail eel (snake eel) was out and about, looking for lunch. An eagle ray happened to glide by -- the only one I saw all week.

Some sites, such as Bonker's Nose, have a bottom of sand or coral rubble where it's easy to find unique critters such as upside-down jellies, corkscrew anemones sheltering snapping shrimp (happy to demonstrate their trick to probing fingers), razorfish, queen, and milk conch, "shank shells" (looks like a Triton's strumpet), majorra -- the list goes on and on.

But a diver cannot live on small creatures alone, so I was eager to get out to "the banks." Three to 5½ miles

offshore, these reefs rise to within 45-70 feet of the surface from a bottom about 250 feet deep. Weather permitting, the dive operation tries to get out to the banks once or twice a week. Usually the weather does permit, but, being overzealous, we made the mistake of pushing for a trip when Don, who is exceptionally affable and low-key for someone in charge of a dive operation, thought it inadvisable.

As a result, we tried to anchor on one of the banks, Bajo Tito, in stomach-churning swells, thought we had done so, but descended to 25 feet only to see the anchor dangling in open water. Don repeated the same misadventure twice more while the other paying customer and I sat it out on the boat. After strike three, we settled for Mariposa II, a shallower but less interesting bank.

Later I did get to sample the better banks. Mariposa I was a good site, but Roatan Banks, the farthest, was best. Visibility was up to 70 feet and the current was a knot or so. The inshore sites never seemed to have any current, but neither did they have the schools of horse-eye jacks, yellow jacks, bar jacks, and Creole wrasse. An occasional permit put in an appearance, as did some large grouper. Don acquired a large remora in a rather personal area, though we had no great desire to inform him. Reef fish were well represented -- shy and indigo hamlets, a large and curious barracuda, and the only shark of the week, an infant nurse shark dozing on a sandy bed.

A Bit Like Camping Out

Helen Murphy, the manager of Plantation Beach, runs the resort with a fair but firm hand. She always has the straight dope on what's happening, even managing to detect and correct a flight booking error for me that had escaped everyone else's notice. She seems to know the local politics as well as the flora and fauna and always has an amusing anecdote to relate. She's a great story teller, well worth engaging in conversation.

Our meals were simple and nutritious (a little heavy on fried items, but that doesn't count on a trip). We dined family style. There was always fresh fruit, bread, and salad, plus an entree -- usually fresh fish, pasta, or Mexican-style dishes. Breakfast was tasty, if less healthy, with bacon and eggs, refried beans and tostados, French toast or pancakes. Lunch was always quite large and desserts too tempting. The wine was too expensive (\$20) for its quality, but local beer was cheap.

... We tried to anchor at Bajo Tito in stomach-churning swells, but descended to 25 feet only to see the anchor dangling in open water

I'd envisioned Copan enveloped in dense tropical forest like Tikal in Guatemala. Nothing could be further from the truth. While huge jungle trees festooned with epiphytes arise from the pyramids and plazas, Copan has become an ecological island in a sea of denuded agricultural land.

Honduras in general gives the impression that an attempt has been made to fell every forest in the country, with unfortunate success. The town of Copan, however, is not without charm. As many cowboys ride horseback as in pickups over the steep cobblestone roads. Women wash their families' clothes in the Copan River, spreading them on the banks to dry. The ruins themselves, a short walk out of town, boast many intricate and sophisticated sculptures, a ball court, small pyramids, and the longest text in the Mayan world, the hieroglyphic staircase.

Deer and monkeys roam the ruins freely while parrots, mot mot, and orioles abound. A "horseback" ride (they looked like ponies to me) around the town and hills above the ruins is well worthwhile, affording impressive views of the valley and a picturesque ride along the river.

Tour companies tend to be a bit sneaky in pushing hotels in which they have an interest. The Marina Copan looks best. It has a pool and is clean, comfortable, and air conditioned. The food is no worse than elsewhere, the beer very cheap. The clip-clop of horses' hooves on the cobblestones outside my window was a pleasant wakeup call.

I'd chosen Maya Tropic Tours, but was disappointed when after a mixup at the airport they failed to meet me and left me stranded alone and without so much as their phone number or address. The last night of their tour is unnecessarily spent at the Gran Hotel Sula in San Pedro Sula. I'd recommend giving it a miss.

Coping with Copan

I stayed in a two-story cabin and found the extra room a real plus — my dive buddy needed at least one of the floors for his camera equipment, backups, and backups of backups.

J. Q.

Just in case you have never caught an agouti, it's a guinea pig-like creature found throughout the West Indies.

J. Q.

One of the owners described the accommodations as "a bit like camping out," but I found them comfortable. The ground floor of my two-story bungalow had a stonewall and floor, with a steep staircase rising to the bedroom. There's no air conditioning, but fans cool the rooms well; the generator (located well out of earshot) keeps them running all night. Downstairs, a well-stocked bookcase, a cot, and a table make the room homey. Sufficient hot water distinguished the experience from camping, but gecko lizards adorned the walk and occasional giant tropical cockroaches intruded. I was content, however, because I didn't see a rat all week. The notorious no-see-ums of other Bay Islands were far less troublesome on Cayos Cochinos a little DEET kept them at bay. The only other guest (except for two biologists who caught agoutis and bats all day and night and never dived) described a colorful snake basking on his patio. Large hairy tarantulas stalking roaches were frequent dining room visitors; they're harmless, and Helen gently shooed them out the door as if they were disobedient pets.

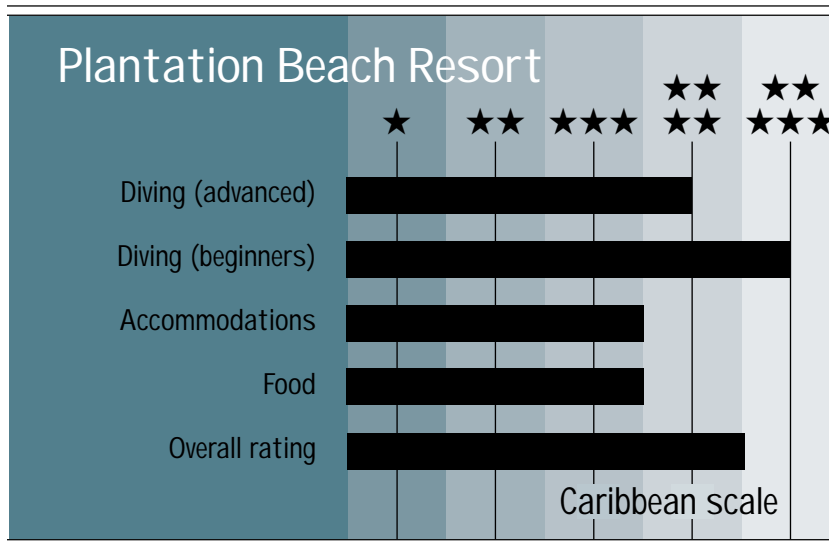
Except for beverages and T-shirts, one is hard pressed to spend money here. You do have to be able to entertain yourself. Walks on the occasionally rugged trails bring you to the thatched-roof, wattle-and-daub fishing village, a lighthouse, many quiet beaches, and a long, cliff-hanging boardwalk with terrific views -- but only if you aren't too timid to walk boldly across private property (no one seems to mind -- I was always greeted with a friendly smile and cheery "Hola!"). An elderly American showed me around his little estate, then sat me down with a cold beer on his porch to talk and watch the hummingbirds dog-fighting around his feeders.

Nightlife's the Good Life

The night diving was a real treat; I went most nights off the beach, sometimes alone. Although the water was shallow, there were more mollusks, corallimorphs, nudibranchs, and shrimp than you could shake an ID text at. Baby scorpionfish and burrfish no more than two inches long hid in the grass. A juvenile high hat patrolled

the same five-square-inch territory under the dock every night. Squads of red arrow squid hunted small fry with visible success. Decorator crabs were particularly plentiful on the pilings. Red night shrimp glared with fiery eyes from every nook and cranny of the reef. Not a night dive went by without a toadfish making an appearance, its croaking call constantly audible.

One or two days each week, Plantation Beach cancels the afternoon dive and substitutes a night boat dive on Pelican



Point. With a bottom at 115 feet and top around 6, this site is the only real wall around. I found a dapper decorator crab sporting two lovely Florida corallimorphs, unidentified nudibranchs cruising over red encrusting sponges, neck crabs, deer cowries, spotted drum, and large channel clinging crabs. Pelican Point also makes a good day dive.

The divemasters were easy-going. I dived my computer all week and made my own profiles. Both Roger and Don were eager to accompany divers but didn't force anyone to stay with them. Interesting and friendly, they proved very adept at finding and identifying the local denizens. Both are American. They smoke too much but still manage to scoot around efficiently underwater.

Away From It All

To reverse an old '60s phrase, Plantation Beach is a place to "drop out, tune in, and turn on." It's quiet. It's out of the way. And you can tune into the underwater world and get turned on by the variety of uncommon reef life. While such oddities as quillfin blennies may not draw the crowds like Cayman's Stingray City, the macro creatures are, in many respects, more interesting. And now that a reserve has been established, many of the larger fished-out species should return.

My friends seemed perplexed about this choice of destination. When you sum up what the diving in Cayos Cochinos doesn't have -- large pelagics, good visibility, impressive dropoffs, wrecks -- even the diehard divers could lose interest. The charms of Cayos Cochinos are subtle, no doubt, but I found them worthy of consideration.

One of Plantation Beach's calling cards is its remoteness, and it looks like it's going to stay that way. In November 1993, with the support of the Smithsonian Institution, the entire archipelago of Cayos Cochinos became a biological reserve. The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute set up on the island will study its corals, marine life, and land plants and animals.

The reserve not only puts a ban on all commercial fishing in the area (which should improve the fish life), but also prohibits any further construction of hotels or resorts. Looks like Plantation Beach is it.

*No Fishing,
No Construction,
No Crowds*

Most dive wholesalers book Plantation Beach, or you can call direct, 011-504-42-0974. I booked this trip through Dive Tours, 800-628-3723, or 713-680-2090, fax 713-680-2306 and a previous trip through Island Dreams, 800-346-6116 or 713-973-9300, fax 713-973-8585. It's \$795 for one week plus \$125 round-trip transfer from La Ceiba. My eight nights, plus single supplement, was \$995 plus air transfers. The side trip (three nights in Copan, one in San Pedro Sula) was \$539, but shorter, cheaper trips are available. All meals were included in both trips, and guide and entrance fees were included for Copan. Because I departed from the Northeast, I had to stay overnight in Houston to make the 9:55 a.m. flight to Tegucigalpa. Round-trip air from Houston cost me \$545. Routing via Roatan is iffy; often the plane arrives too late to catch the connecting flight for Cayos, necessitating an overnight stay for which the resort will not reimburse you. . . . The dive boat, the *Wahoo*, could be a bit snappier. It's seen better days and would feel crowded with more than eight divers, but it's serviceable, and most excursions are only 10-15 minutes away, the banks 30-60. Rental gear was limited, but they did have computers. There's no E-6 available, and no oxygen aboard the boat, the old tank having deteriorated. . . . Water temperature when I was there (April) was 80-82°F, visibility 20-40 feet inshore and 40-70 out on the banks. Best season is probably spring or fall; summer is also good but often windy; winter carries the risk of a norther dropping down, but still good on the average.

Ditty Bag

M. G.