

In Depth

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Consumer Reviews for Sport Divers

The New Captain Don's Habitat Return to the Planet of the Divers

Last month, In Depth sent one of its editors to Bonaire to have a look at one of the granddaddies of Caribbean dive resorts, Captain Don's Habitat. Known best for its conservation-oriented, hands-off-the-reef and hands-off-the-profile policies, Habitat has traditionally attracted experienced, hard-core divers rather than beginners. Some years ago, Captain Don Stewart, in a wonderful interview with Sports Illustrated, said that Habitat wasn't, in fact, a dive resort, but "a place for divers to eat, sleep, and fornicate between dives."

Since then, personnel and facilities have changed considerably over the years, and Don's influence over day-to-day affairs at Habitat has declined. Our editor — who has visited Habitat every year or two since the early 1980s — returned to see if the rumors of upscaling were true, and whether a dive gorilla could still be happy there.

Cold Showers and Flaming Toilets

When I first started visiting Habitat, it was pretty close to my idea of Heaven for Divers. Habitat's daily charge for lodging and diving was half of what everybody else on the island was getting, and Don had a sliding scale that couldn't be beat. In addition to the simple cottages where most guests stayed, he maintained a few tiny rooms that he called "monk cells" that were rented

to casual passers-by for whatever they could afford. Boat diving was optional, and Don would frequently berate his guests if they didn't spend their surface time gearing up for the next dive. I watched him hassle his own clients every day for lying around in the sun instead of flinging tanks in a rental car and going shore-diving.

There were a few rough spots, though. We stayed in a couple of old cottages that

had a few dented pots and pans, a fridge that complained about the heat, and a coldwater shower that actively discouraged me from making night dives. We hung black garbage bags full of water out on the patio during the daytime, and when they had heated up in the sun, we poked holes in them with forks and

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stood under them just to get a warm shower. The bizarre toilets in the cottages had a sign that said, "If you think our toilets are funny, you should see the ones in Venezuela!" At

Captain Don's New Environment

Don has moved out of Habitat and into the *kunuku* (Bonaire's boonies), redirecting his energy toward another ecological project. He and Janet, his lady, have put in several enormous greenhouses and are importing and raising drought-tolerant plants. They are promoting landscaping appropriate to Bonaire's arid climate. Hotel and condo development has accelerated on the island, and new tax laws have attracted lots of new Dutch residents, many of whom are building homes north of town. The road near Karpata now swings inland for a stretch, detouring around a high-dollar housing tract that literally bought the old road along the coast. Traditional landscaping requires plenty of fresh water, which is in short supply on Bonaire. The financial cost is high, and the increased demand puts a strain on Bonaire's seawater distillation plant. Worse yet, heavy watering causes runoff of soil, fertilizer, and so forth into the ocean, which seems to reduce near-shore visibility.

The use of drought-tolerant plants could reduce the impact of development considerably. Don spends his time these days putting in gardening and landscaping with that in mind. Once again, he has foreseen a potential problem and is taking aggressive steps to reduce its future impact on Bonaire.

dinner in the Habitat restaurant the first night we arrived, Don cruised by the table waving a dive knife and verbally reamed a surgeon from Houston for not eating all his peas: "I had to fly those peas in from the states, and they cost more than I'm making from your stay." The doc ate the peas while Don stood over him. The rest of the food was barely adequate to sustain life.

On another trip, we returned from a dive to find flames and smoke pouring out of the toilet. "Just burning out some roots in the sewer," said the maintenance man we summoned, holding his nose. Everyone had at least one hysterical story about the lodging, the restaurant, or Captain Don himself, but the REAL divers could hardly wait to come back to Habitat. Why? Habitat was, as its brochure accurately stated, "the Home of Diving Freedom."

Diving Freedom

At Habitat, the philosophy on diving was *laissez faire*. Near the office was a big plaque that said (in essence), "You have the freedom to dive in any way you wish, but natural selection *will* prevail." It was made clear that individual divers had the main responsibility for their own safety. Assistance was freely available, but nobody on staff imposed arbitrary dive schedules, depth limits, or other restrictions on certified divers. Reef conservation was foremost, spearing fish and collecting organisms was forbidden, but that was about it for rules and regs. At some dive sites, gloves weren't allowed because divers had just realized that contact with corals caused long-term reef damage. Briefings on boats did not include depth or time limits. Tanks could be used any time night or day for shore diving. If you wanted to

take a buddy along, fine. It was up to you.

As a result, Habitat was booked almost entirely by experienced divers who had been turned off by other, more authoritarian dive operations and were willing to put up with Spartan accommodations. There were some beginners mixed into the brew, but many of Habitat's guests arrived with their own doubles yokes, pony bottles, and U.S. Navy Exceptional Exposure tables. The hotel bar had a Farallon DPV scooter on the wall, hard hats for lamps, and bent up pieces of high-pressure line for decor. Outside the dive shop, there was a twisted spear gun and a strong hint that the same fate would befall you if you dared shoot a fish on the reefs of Bonaire. It was just great.

A Kinder, Gentler Habitat?

Habitat's day-to-day grind got to be a bit much for Captain Don some years ago, and he sold off a major portion of his financial interest. He still spends a few evenings a week at Habitat carousing with the guests and hassling the unworthy just to keep in practice, but his function there is almost entirely ceremonial. His love affair with outboard motors and compressors is over.

The new partners have pumped large amounts of cash into the facilities, hoping to attract a more upscale clientele, including families and less-than-fanatical divers. At the same time, Habitat has kept its commitment to hard-core divers. The two are balanced fairly well, and the fiscal basis appears to be more sound. The place was full of divers and non-divers alike.

The monk cells aren't rented to impoverished hitchhikers

any more, and luxury condos surround the swimming pool and the heart of the main property. Adjacent to the northernmost condos, a mammoth building offers giant apartments and a penthouse for rent. Habitat's facilities have been upgraded. The diver's bar has been replaced, sadly, but overall the place looks snappier than it did in the past.

On this trip, my group split up between one of the condos north of the dive shop and two of the old cottages. The cottages had been spiffed up. The paint was new, the showers had hot water, the kitchens had adequate utensils and cooking tools, bedrooms had functioning air conditioners, and the furniture was comfortable. The condo was large, offering more space than three typical hotel rooms, and had a fairly well equipped kitchen.

Thanks for the Tanks

The diving operation, under Jack Chalk's guidance, continues to run very smoothly. Satisfied guests from previous years probably will like the new dive operation just as much as they liked the old one, though they may reminisce about the steel 72s that have all been replaced with aluminum tanks. Habitat's traditional philosophy toward personal responsibility in diving remains in effect.

We got a detailed briefing the first morning, emphasizing buoyancy control and no-contact diving (hands off the reef), followed by an admonition to keep our profiles on the safe side. We were then popped for \$10 by the Marine Park (which requires a permit for diving anywhere on Bonaire or Klein Bonaire), issued weights, and left to our own designs. By the way, we were checked by a park warden for permits when gearing

up on the beach, so there is at least some enforcement.

Because we weren't tough enough to swim to Forest (a favorite site) on Klein Bonaire, we did one boat dive but spent the rest of our week diving from shore. Tanks were nearly always full or extra full. The docks, ladders, and waterfront gear storage lockers were in fine shape, and the boat had

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oxygen and radio on board. Jack himself was extraordinarily helpful, fixing several pieces of broken gear for us at no charge during the week.

Burned-Out Staff and Slippery Tiles

On the negative side, some of the staff seemed grouchy and burned out. One afternoon toward the end of the week, I overheard a group of divers from California discussing the "don't bug me" attitude of several dive staff members, and the consensus was "We won't be back." The room staff was somewhat lackadaisical, too. We sometimes had to remind the maid to bring us clean towels (or any towels).

It's also high time that Habitat either replaced or sandblasted the slippery ceramic tile floors on all the cottage patios where everybody dries diving

gear. As soon as the patios get wet, they turn into skating rinks. One of our group fell down the second day, and was not amused.

Funny Smells and Rubbery Meat

The area around the cottages smelled like raw sewage. When we complained to the office, we were told that the gardener used liquid from Habitat's septic system to water the plants. While recycling "gray water" makes sense from an environmental standpoint, it has to be done right, and gray water has to be adequately seasoned before being withdrawn from a septic system. The odor was gross enough to make us transfer our cooking to the condo, even though it was much farther away from where most of us were staying. The condo was more comfortable and didn't have any odor problems.

Over the years, Habitat's restaurant has flip-flopped from traditional Bonairean food to Tex-Mex to pseudo-French to American Tourist, and so forth. The only things that didn't seem to change were the quality and the service. Both remained mediocre at best. As a sign of desperation, for a while Habitat refused to sell a diving and lodging package without prepaid dinners. Despite this tacky coercion, guests still ate at other restaurants in town. Unfortunately, Habitat's restaurant is still bad, having metamorphosed unsuccessfully into a Yuppie Diner.

Breakfasts were good — coffee, toast, pancakes, bacon, eggs, and the like — but the dinners were poor. The barbecue on Buffet Night was rubbery and tough, the service was

slow and disorganized, and we were hustled for tips even though Habitat added a mandatory service charge to the bill. The highlight of the culinary experience was a fire in the kitchen during one breakfast. It didn't do much damage, but it slowed the staff down. I was glad I didn't have a morning boat dive to make.

The Bottom Line

By and large, the new Habitat is very similar to the old Habitat, but a great deal more comfortable. In the old days, a hard-core diver wouldn't have considered taking a beginner to Habitat, let alone a non-diving spouse or children. There just wasn't anything to do there but dive, and it took a 4-tank day to make you tired enough to eat whatever the restaurant flung at you.

That's changed. As before, Habitat is an economical place for serious divers to dive their brains out without anybody bugging them, but now there's a swimming pool to lounge around, reliable hot and cold running water in the rooms, and much more luxurious accommodations. The place has been refitted to cater to families, rather than just to those of us with salt water in our veins. The next time I go, I'll probably take my wife and kids, even though they won't see me for more than the minimum surface interval between tanks.

Most wholesalers book Habitat. Our 8-day, 7-night package, included lodging double occupancy in a cottage for four, breakfasts, weights, transfers to and from the airport, and all the tanks we could burn from

the beach for 6 days. Cost was around \$500 per person. The same package in a condo for two added about \$20 a day per person. Boat dives were an extra \$15 per tank above and beyond the basic land diving package. Since most of Bonaire's dive sites can be reached easily by car, I suggest doing what old Habitat guests favor: hit the beach for most of your dives, and buy a few morning boat trips to sites on Klein. Airfare runs about \$540 from Houston, \$620 from Los Angeles or \$370 from Miami. You'll want a rental car to get to decent restaurants — the Green Parrot at the Sand Dollar is the best nearby bet — or shop for food, and of course to hit shore diving sites.



Time to Spare?

Go by Air

I've always heard that LIAT, an airline that connects a great number of Caribbean islands, stands for "Leave island any time," but none of my experiences on LIAT can match those of In Depth readers Greg and Nancy Earle. Traveling to Dominica, they enjoyed the diving and the island, but as you will see from their account below, their trip there and back pushed the limits of even the most experienced dive travelers.

Dear *In Depth*,

By far the worst aspect of the trip involved the flights on LIAT airlines. Avoid them and

fly on Winnair if at all possible. As you'll see in what follows, in all we were robbed by LIAT airlines to the tune of over \$300, plus a day and a half of wasted vacation time sitting in airports. It's a long, sad story, so you may want to sit down and get comfortable before reading further.

In essence, LIAT didn't have us in their computer system for either leg of our trip, and despite our printed tickets stating "status OK," they refused to recognize us as valid passengers. Unfortunately for us, we didn't find this out until

we hit St. Maarten. As a result, LIAT would only put us on standby for the flight to Dominica and book us on a return flight one day earlier than planned. One day of vacation shot already, plus \$50 to change our American Airlines reservations, and we hadn't even arrived in Dominica yet. On top of this problem, the scheduled LIAT flight from St. Maarten to Dominica never arrived, so we had to stay overnight in St. Maarten and fly standby the next day. No effort was even made to let passengers waiting at the gate know that the flight was canceled; we all found out only after going back through security to the ticket counter. LIAT's stated reason for not making an announcement was that the PA system was broken! Even though they knew 13 people were waiting at the departure gate, they never