

# Roughing It in Islas Los Roques

*One hundred twenty miles southeast of Bonaire*

What better way to introduce the upstart publisher of In Depth than his report on what might be his most exciting diving discovery in the Caribbean. It's not perfect, by any stretch, but for you restless sorts who want to move beyond the predictability of Cayman and Bonaire, here's your chance.

Dear Fellow Diver:

I knew I was onto something when I stopped in a quiet cavern at 100 feet. I'd given up struggling across the stiff current to catch my buddy, so I drifted along the wall to sit on the sheltered soft sand bottom and watch fish float by. What's this? A stream of jacks, unlike anything I'd expect in the Caribbean. I began counting clusters . . . 20 . . . 40 . . . 60. Before the last fish disappeared, I estimated that twelve hundred jacks had meandered by.

Continuing along Cayo Sal's coral-laden wall, I passed great mixed schools of creole wrasse, bogia, and brown and blue chromis; a pair of huge filefish; thick schools of yellowtail snapper in the mist. The 60-foot visibility didn't give me the perspective I wanted, but I was in fish country, no doubt about it. Shades of the South Pacific!

## **Islas Los What?**

Islas Los Roques is a barely inhabited archipelago of over 60 cays, 80 miles off the north coast of Venezuela and a 120 miles southeast of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao. Here I dived reefs as free from exploitation as I've found in 20 years of Caribbean diving. Sure,

it's been fished, but except for conch and huge fish, it's not been harvested. Large porcupine puffers have never been poked like market cantaloupe, so they float freely, unafraid of divers. Lobsters don't retreat at the first human vibration. Even barracuda in numbers – a dozen at once on one dive – home in. And it's designated a national park, so if divers keep their hands to themselves, Los Roques can avoid becoming a Bonaire-like petting zoo and remain the wild thrill that it is.

My partner and I arrived in mid-December on one of many 30-minute twin-engine commuter flights from Caracas (which, by the way, is only a half-

## **The Venezuelan Connection**

pilot off the top of the Andes, mountain biking, and river rafting; bird watching and piranha fishing (successfully, I might add) in the plains (los Llanos); and boating 60 miles up a tributary of the Orinoco to meet Indians and sleep in hammocks, where we watched toucans and scarlet macaws overhead. All with personable bilingual guides. And I even saw river dolphin.

The journey included a couple of romantic hotels, some fine meals, endless adventure, and 2 nights near Caracas at the Sheraton beach hotel. We were met punctually at every airport, taken past long lines, and weren't frustrated by a language we didn't speak. The full price, including flights between venues: \$1,895/person. A bargain, I'd say.

Then we went diving. They brought the dive bags we had stored in Caracas, took our dirty laundry, and put us on the plane to Los Roques, where they had organized the diving ahead of time, and arranged our sailboat sojourn — the whole megillah. Picked us up on the return, took us to the hotel for the night, and shuttled us back for the flight home. I've never been more efficiently and pleasantly served. An unequivocal recommendation for these folks.

Lost World Adventures, 1189 Autumn Ridge Drive, Marietta, Georgia 30066, 404-971-8586, 404-977-3095, 1-800-999-0558. The adventure now begins in Los Amazonas and ends in the Andes.

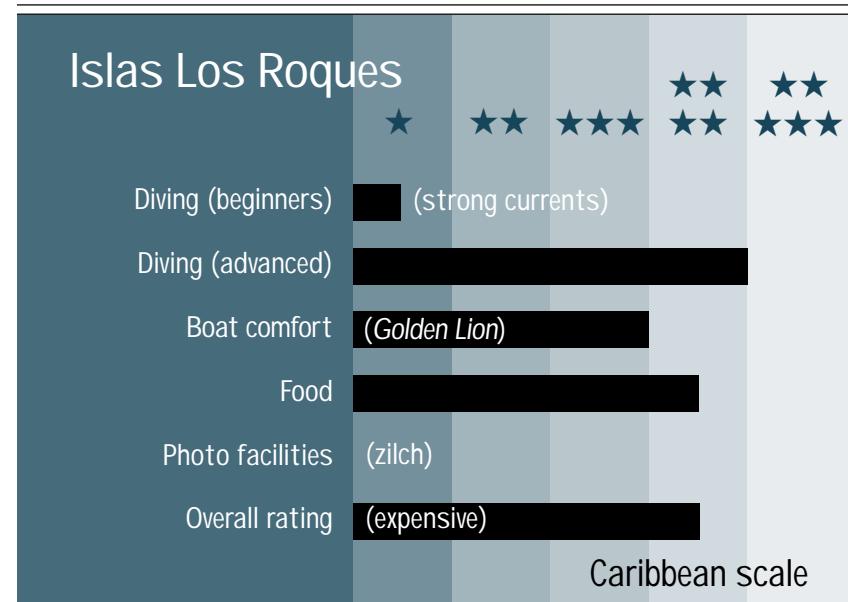
B. D.

hour flight from Bonaire). We were met by Swiss Charlie, captain of the 42-foot *Golden Lion*, our home for the week. He took our bags to his inflatable dinghy, then motored us a few hundred yards, past the full length of the town, to the dive shop to meet Saul and Marianne (soon-to-be) Wainschtein.

Tall, blond, and Dutch, Marianne, who has lived in Africa and Peru, requested our C-cards in perfect English, explained the organization of the diving, and asked us our gear needs (their rental BCs and regulators appeared in good shape). As was not surprising for a remote outpost, their dive boat (a 28-footer with a flying bridge) had been out of commission for seven weeks, so they were contracting with any fishermen they could find with 15- to 30-foot open boats. Of the assortment we rode, one was comfortable, none had diving ladders, and each was a bitch in the wind-strafed seas. Whether I or my buddy got help with gear, which was seldom, was up to le capitán du jour.

While the glimmering azure and aquamarine waters are magical, the islands themselves are not; they're dry, rocky, scrubby, and littered with flotsam and jetsam, piles of bleached conch shells, and residents' rubbish. The town of Gran Roques, quaint indeed, has only 900 hundred inhabitants in colorful stucco houses sharing common walls and open courtyards. While I saw tire tracks on the sand streets, I saw no car – but with 90 percent of the residents within a Frisbee throw of each other, why bother? Food is not grown on Los Roques and water is barged in (as it was on Bonaire 30 years ago), so life is expensive. While rooms can be had for \$40 a night with three meals, those with a private toilet and "up to American standards" run \$100 or more, even a stiff \$170 per night per person. These guest houses serve only residents, so you eat and drink where you stay – unless you select the one seedy bar serving only cerveza. English is uncommon; you're better off with Italian, French, or German.

That's why many Americans opt to bunk on one of several charter sailboats, where meals are continental and the tongue is English. Charlie and Laura fly to Caracas to supply their cruises; on our six-day stay, we had ample fresh fruit, salads, fresh bread, Venezuelan and Dutch cheeses, fresh mackerel and barracuda they caught or purchased from fishermen, simple desserts, bottled water, beer, and sodas. Nightly we moored in deserted harbors, often without a single boat in sight. If you've ever been on a sailboat outfitted for cruising you have



A sailboat is something like a bed and breakfast inn; a room, a lounge, intimacy with the hosts, and not much room to wander. For some people it can be claustrophobic. Two additional guests on this 42-footer would have been unwelcome, but tolerable.

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Dear reader: If you have visited Los Roques recently, we would like to hear your comments about visibility, sea life, accommodations, etc., to help us build up our data base on this location. Please address your remarks to In Depth, P.O. Box 90215, Austin, TX 78709.

## Los Roques Live-Aboard?

Avis, an archipelago between Bonaire and Los Roques, but the Venezuelan government wanted boats to clear customs at a mainland port. He dropped the idea.

Carl Roessler reports that he was contacted several years ago about representing a live-aboard, but nothing came of it.

Wayne Hasson took the *Antilles Aggressor* to both Roques and to Avis. The Venezuelan government wanted the boat to dock on the mainland before going to the islands, but he "got around that." As for the diving, he said he didn't find any worth the time and effort. He saw no large schools of fish, and water temperatures were "at least 10° colder than Bonaire or Aruba." Hasson said he'd like to see it, now that it's being protected.

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So, did protection bring back the fish? Or did Hasson just miss them?

a good picture of the accommodations. It was standard sailboat. Our comfortable bed in the aft cabin had a private head and a shower, sans warm water (bring a solar shower).

Being the only two passengers on the *Golden Lion*, we could do pretty much what we wanted, which wasn't much. The first night the boat rolled so much that my landlubber partner had a hard time sleeping, so the next day Charlie and his Italian wife, Laura, motored to calmer water. (Days were in the 80s, with tradewinds up to 20 knots.) After each day's diving, Charlie would motor us to a beach — desolate or with a ramshackle small fishing village — to look for shells and hang out. Wherever we went, hundreds of pelicans fed on schools of baitfish that formed dark patches in the green shoals. On one beach, more than a thousand pelicans and terns perched along the shore and inland pond. As sundown approached, I'd kick back on the ketch with a tumbler of Pampero Aniversario rum, a good book, and my partner, and chat with Charlie about the day.

## Mystery Fish and Forbidden Environments

Each day a boat from the dive shop came to our mooring to take us for the day's dives (which were guided mainly by Marianne),

either returning us to the ketch for lunch or to a cay near the dive site. After the first day, we were the only divers. Two dives off Cayo Sal reminded me of the most splendid dives in Bonaire, with magical castles of coral and tall, swaying soft corals, but with even more fish. But not all dives were great. I took two tanks on Los Noronkys, where Marianne said we had the best chance of seeing sharks. I saw two: nurses no longer than my forearm (she later confessed that she had seen only six other sharks in her 14 months on Los Roques).

These were ordinary Caribbean dives, though pretty, and with

plenty of fish — and the thrill of being encircled by hundreds of swirling southern sennet, a small member of the barracuda family. And, I came across a small, golden-brown eel with bright, electric lines on its face (thanks to Paul Humann's latest book, I guess it's a chain moray).

It's typical, I had heard, for the first dive to be an easy intro, but my buddy and I proffered evidence of enough experience to join two experienced divers for the 10-minute ride to the Rock of the Jewfish. While the behemoths are long gone, there was plenty to see at this seamount that topped out 30 feet from the surface. PADI instructor Saul (Saw-ool), a Venezuelan who had lived his formative years in Israel, briefed us

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(brief it was) on the dive and, after struggling with my gear as our craft bounced in 3-foot waves, I back-rolled and dropped through a crevice to 60 feet. Above me, six yard-long barracuda hovered, half a dozen bar jacks swam by, and a school of horse-eye jacks circled. My slow circumnavigation of the mount took 25 minutes. White gorgonia stood out among hard corals; everywhere basket stars had cocooned themselves tightly in gorgonia, waiting for sunset. Visibility ran 40-60 feet, not enough for us to fully enjoy the mess of fish in the distance, so I bided my time watching whitespotted filefish, little smoothtrunk-fish, trumpet fish galore, schooling greysnappers, and the full range of tropicals flitting about. Man, a lot was going on.

That afternoon, we returned nearby. I hurried to beat the surge, and as I hit the water, the 20-foot visibility depressed me. Following Saul, I swam along the cliff, past great clusters of grey and brown gorgonia. As I rounded an outcropping, the sunlight popped out, doubling the visibility. For 15 minutes it was an ordinary dive, save a grouper the length of my partner's leg — and a long-legged woman is she. Then the water darkened. Visibility dropped, as if the sun had been eclipsed. Above me shimmered an enormous cumulus of bait fish, the volume of an Aggressor hull. Ahead lay a house-sized cavern, occupied by an army of glassy sweepers that swept past me as I entered. Saul finned forward. My buddy and I followed around an elbow into a cave, leaving only a faint glow behind — aye, the so-called "overhead environment," where the self-appointed diving police say guides should never take us. Then back out, swimming off to an arch harboring another school of baitfish, where an enormous tarpon jammed past me. Queen angels, spotted drum, snapper schools, then back to the boat and all the critters once again. (Thanks, Saul, for an exciting dive; to hell with the dive police).

On the second dive off Dos Moquises, I ignored the brief suggestion to stay above 60 feet, so I foolishly wasted 10 minutes at 90 feet in what might as well have been Barbados. I floated up to 50 feet and a great reefscape of pristine hard and soft corals. Black coral bushes — colored green, of course — testified to what a reef looks like when branches aren't clipped for jewelry. Perfect brain corals had escaped the jaws of the large midnight parrot fish that scooted about. I moved into a school of a thousand silvery blue bogia; after they passed, another school, ten times as large, engulfed me. Along the way, scores of multihued Christmas-tree worms decorated mounds of star coral, all swirling with the usual tropicals. Tall, gentle soft corals swayed harmoniously as I rose toward our dive boat, which had drifted along overhead.

A right-before-we-print-this-issue report indicates that a new live-aboard could be serving Los Roques. I haven't seen it and could find no one who has, but the brochure (in Spanish) says it has five double bedrooms and one quad, all with private bathrooms and air conditioning, salon, kitchen, dining room, and two Worthington E-5000 compressors — to fill an empty tank in 7 minutes. That sounds like quite a package for a craft that appears to be under 70 feet. Lost World says it will be able to book the boat when it reaches the Roques.

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Aluminum tanks were filled to 2,800 psi; bottom times ran 1 hour, depths to 100 feet, but they let you follow your computer and set your own profile. . . . Water temperature was 81°F October and December. . . . Marianne said they were willing to arrange night dives and three dives a day for groups; check ahead of time. . . . Los Roques is an easy side trip from Bonaire: 32 minutes nonstop to Caracas 4 times/week, connect with commuter flights to Gran Roque. . . . or use Caracas as a hub, flying there from Miami or New York, then on to Bonaire and/or Los Roques. . . . RT air fare from Caracas, \$120; the boat with all meals and diving (six days) runs \$1873 for a seven day-six night package; all arrangements can be made by Lost World Adventures, 1-800-999-0558. . . . Only a passport is needed to enter Venezuela; if you stay on the coast, inoculations are unnecessary. . . . To talk with Sesto Continente Dive Resort management, phone (58-2) 743873; fax (58-2) 749080.

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## Ditty Bag

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## Bottom Line

What Los Roques has to offer is, shall we say, wild, untamed diving, unpredictable visibility, occasional hefty currents, thick forests of soft coral, unending stretches of virgin hard coral, fish up the ying yang – perhaps like the best of Belize or Cozumel or Cayman's north wall, 30 years ago. Expect a journey to the past, when life was simple, when fish were caught – not harvested – and when diving was for skilled people who strapped on their own tanks, put up with rough boat rides, and had no idea what to expect beneath the surface. Expect a simple room, to eat what you're served, and a bathroom down the hall.

Expect an experience.

Ben Davison

## Another View of Los Roques

With so few divers traveling to Los Roques I had virtually no data in our files. Was Ben's experience with such large schools of fish unique? Or would other divers have similar impressions? It so happens that one of our travel correspondents was there 2 months before him, in October. Here is his report.

Like Ben, I too stayed aboard a sailboat – the 46-foot *Morgan Caribe VI*, captained by Frenchman Philipe Valero. I had hot showers and fine food – fresh fish and vegetables, pastas, quiche, even homemade banana ice cream.

And, yes, I agree – these were some of the best dives I've had in the Caribbean. The healthy reefs were packed with life; I was greeted by huge schools of large fish on every dive. Punta Salina offers a rock-and-roll drift dive along a wall that starts at 30 feet and drops straight to 180 feet. I cruised in the 60- to 90-foot range, in and out of caves, through large schools of jacks, Spanish mackerel, and barracuda. Visibility exceeded 100 feet, although it dropped as low as 25 feet at Dos Mosquises. Spotted and green moray eels, groupers, and enormous lobsters were among the plentiful marine life. The seamount off Gran Roque had an incredible array of life. A 6-foot barracuda accompanied me as I descended on the anchor line through a strong surface current. Circling the seamount, I finned through schools of jacks and red snappers and almost bumped into a giant hogfish. The rock was crawling with shrimp, eels, and lobster. This is an action-packed dive to thrill the most jaded diver.

Saul provided safe, crisp, professional service; the park limit is ten divers to a site, which makes for intimate and comfortable diving. Saul let us choose whether to dive with him or on our own. Their 28-foot boat – it hadn't broken yet – was fast, provided shade, and allowed for easy entry and reboarding. Space for dive gear was ample, but lacking for cameras.

I too traveled with Lost World Adventures – they performed flawlessly – and toured Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "Lost World." A 3-day journey in a dugout canoe, up a jungle river to 3,200-foot Angel Falls, wound past scenery and bird life that left me breathless, as did the 2-mile hike up to the base of the world's tallest waterfall. I overnighted in camps, sleeping in hammocks while listening to the night sounds of the jungle.

F. T.