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The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

Caribe Bay, Crooked Island, Bahamas

What if they had a resort but nobody came?

I first became interested in Crooked Island about three years ago when the resort was still Pittstown Point. Because they catered mainly to a clientele of private plane owners, they weren't that interested in divers. With new owners, it's now Caribe Bay. Our reviewer takes a look to see if the new resort will fly, but this time for divers.

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Dear Fellow Diver:

My first impression was that Caribe Bay was the quintessential dive resort. Remote. Relaxed. Pink buildings, pine trees, and coconut palms on a point of land surrounded by turquoise, sapphire, and azure water – all directly across from the traditional picturesque lighthouse.

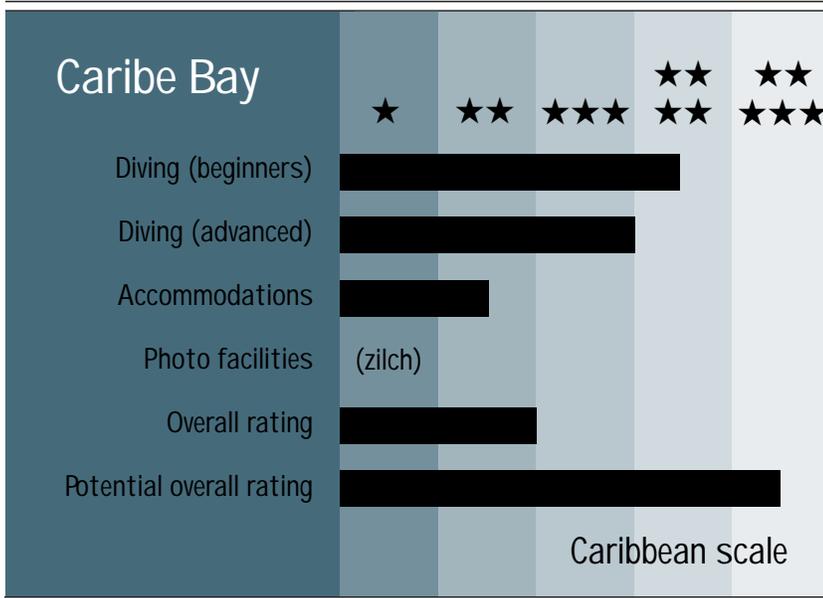
Underwater, pristine reefs have suffered little from diving pressure in spite of the fact that you can don your gear and walk out to most dive sites. Fall on your face and you're over the wall. All of this and nobody knows about Caribe Bay?

Resort Course

The current owners, who *do* want divers to know about their resort, label Caribe Bay a Sustained-Yield/Sustained-Development Resort and claim to serve as a world model for conservation of marine resources. Visiting divers may assist with the scientific survey if the researchers are there at the time. It sounds good, but what Caribe Bay really is is a dive resort waiting to happen. They need to drop the pretentious attitude and upgrade the dive operation. A decent dive boat with tank racks, dive platform, wide ladder, and gear storage would vastly improve the dive experience. Don't even expect a pier or a flat, sand-free area for gear setup. We walked through knee-deep water to enter and exit the boat. Photographers won't find a camera soaking tank – we improvised by using an old regulator bag filled with water. A convenient onshore dunk tank near the beach and a building for storing dive equipment are also much needed. Throw in E-6 processing, and then maybe, in a few years, this place will naturally sparkle. Right now, the owners are so caught up in the idea of running a dive resort in the Bahamas that they can't seem to run a dive resort in the Bahamas.

Enormous Ears, Queens, and Barrels

None of these management demerits diminishes the inherent beauty of Crooked Island diving. Expect a wide diversity of fish, sponge, and soft coral species to overshadow the unspectacular hard corals. Queen triggers are enormous and plentiful. Fuzzy gorgonians dance in the gentle currents. Four-foot Nassau groupers gape at each other. Kite-sized stingrays scour sand bottoms.



Resist the urge to crawl inside the five- to eight-foot-tall barrel sponges, but don't forget to pose alongside one or two for photographic perspective. Ditto for the bright orange elephant ear sponges — many measure over five feet across and jut over the edge of a wall leading to a 1,500-foot dropoff. Barracuda visit every dive, changing attitudes with a black to-silver flash as they cruise over reef fingers and the

wall's edge. Reef, gray, mako, and sometimes hammerhead sharks navigate deeper waters.

Black coral is common and not deep. I saw most of it just over the wall at about 60 feet. Deep-sea fans also draped from the wall occasionally.

The dive operation does have some things going for it. Unlimited tanks are available for unsupervised shore dives right off the beach in front of the resort. A flexible dive schedule allowed us to choose not only where, but when, how long, and how deep we wanted to dive. We could choose from one to six dives daily, which always included at least two boat dives.

Rendezvous, Caribe Bay's dive boat, a 26-foot Bayliner, better suited for inland lake fishing, got everyone soaked with deck wash on the five- to ten-minute rides to dive sites. Dave, the friendly, laid-back resident diver/pilot/boat captain, let us choose where to dive. Our small group included several

Wildlife Research

Caribe Bay lists the Bahamas National Trust, the Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans, Louisiana, the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and the National Marine Fisheries Service as Crooked Island Research Project participants.

Caribe Bay is funding a two-year research project that began in August 1994. According to John Hewitt, Director of Husbandry at of the Aquarium of the Americas, a population dynamics study of the three most important species — Caribbean spiny lobster, Queen conch and Nassau grouper — is well underway.

Researchers have located and identified nursery grounds for all three species. Quarterly visits assess the production, holding levels and carrying capacity of the area. Once data collection is completed, researchers plan to make their recommendations to the Bahamian government. The ultimate goal is to establish a marine preserve.

divers who had visited before, when the resort operated as Pittstown Point. Since they knew the reefs about as well as Dave, he gladly accompanied us to new areas.

A giant stride off the boat put us into the water. We were never given any type of orientation, safety, or ecology-minded lecture. Even in December, the water was a comfortable 82°F. We got along fine with skins or 3-mm wetsuits. Visibility varied from 50 to 75 feet.

Light to nonexistent currents precluded drift dives. On Haitian 44, named for a fishing vessel that grounded there years ago, tube sponges of pale lavender, green-yellow, brown, and mustard point every which way. Bushy trees of black coral hang from the wall. Bicolor coney, black durgon, yellowheads, and blueheads weave in and out of sea whips, fans, and plumes. Bright red wire coral threaded its way through the live rock.

Almost anywhere we swam along the edge of the wall (60-80 feet), we saw sharks patrolling the deeper waters below us (75-100 feet). Most often their dark shapes faded in and out of the blueness as we hovered over the dropoff. Although we were interested in them, they showed no interest in us.

Prickers and Masochists

Back on shore, I took care never to walk barefoot. When the tiny, woody pine cones weren't making me hobble, sand spurs throughout the resort grounds did their best to jab me from every angle. My fingers bled from picking needle-sharp burrs off my diveskin and booties. I left the sand volleyball to the masochists.

If the sandspurs and pine cones don't get you, the mosquitoes and no-see-ums will. I slathered myself with Avon's Skin-So-Soft and various insect repellents, to no avail. These pests even attack indoors. Don't bother going outside after dark unless you want to be eaten alive.

To help pass the surface time, Caribe Bay offers several excursions at exorbitant prices. Take their boat to Bat Caves, Hope House Plantation ruins, Bird Rock, or other places and expect to pay \$160 to \$550. Rent Caribe Bay's van — which wasn't running at the time I visited — for a mere \$30 per hour. You can catch a ride with a local or walk to some of these places for free.

The High Cost of Surface Interval

If it's still afloat, a boat at the brine ponds makes a good side trip. If you're interested in fishing, all Caribe Bay charters include boat, fuel, guide, bait, ice, lunch, and soft drinks. Blue water and bonefishing are \$550 and \$240 per day, respectively. (Half a day of bonefishing is \$130.) All gear is furnished for the former, but Caribe Bay suggests using your own gear for bonefishing.



Crooked Island, the Bahamas

No luxury digs or service here. Caribe Bay provides 12 just-OK ocean-view rooms, each with two double beds, tile floor, and bathroom, with no phone or TV or air conditioning. We didn't eat at the resort, but others told us to trust the local Bahamian cook to make up for the advertised but absent Cajun chef. Snorkel for lobster, conch, or spear fish with a sling – they'll cook your catch.

Ditty Bag

Caribe Bay, Ltd., Crooked Island, Bahamas, United States Division, 300 Mariner's Plaza, Suite 303, Mandeville, LA 70448; 800-PLACE-2-B (800-752-2322); 504-624-3998; fax 504-624-9546. Special packages include

accommodations, three meals a day, rum drinks, manager's party, dives, taxes, and service charges. An all-inclusive four-day, three-night stay with six dives is \$583 per person, double occupancy. Hike that up to eight days and seven nights with 12 dives and pay \$1,142 ppdo. . . . Other per-night rates include soft drinks, tea, coffee, three meals per day, and rum party: adults \$110 per night, double occupancy (children under 12, \$100). Expect to pay an additional four percent hotel tax, 15 percent service charge, and four percent resort levy with this deal. . . . One dive is \$40 per person, with subsequent dives \$30 each; three dives daily costs \$100. Pay \$500 for a six-consecutive-day, three-dive-per-day package. Resort instruction with first dive is \$150. PADI Open Water certification, including books, course materials, and six dives in three days is \$395. All dives include air and weight belts. . . . Visibility is commonly 50–75 feet, up to 125 feet or better seasonally. Water temps vary from 85°F in summer to 78°F in dead of winter. . . . Nearest chamber is in Nassau. A limited amount of adequate rental gear is available, but don't expect a lot. . . . Fly into Nassau via a U.S. domestic flight or BahamasAir; travel to Crooked Island on BahamasAir, leaving Nassau twice weekly. Incoming, overnight in Nassau. I recommend the Orange Hill Resort. The food's great there, and friendly staff members will provide airport transportation both ways if you ask. Or charter a private flight to Crooked Island and land directly at the resort. Caribe Bay has on order its own commuter plane, so Dave will be able to shuttle guests to and from Florida himself.

You probably won't go hungry, but you might go thirsty. Caribe Bay ran out of beer while we were there. You can't buy any in Landrail Point, the nearest village, because religious beliefs prevent them from selling or drinking it. You might think about bringing your own supply from Nassau or the States. If you can't manage that, the tap water is safe to drink. By the way, don't expect thrill-a-minute night life. There is none. However, the resort is perfectly situated for a good chance of catching the fabled "green flash" at sunset.

The laid-back atmosphere and beautiful setting are tarnished somewhat by the diesel generator spewing fumes 24 hours a day. The generator, in its own building, is about 1,000 feet from the restaurant and bar. Since the resort originated as a resort/stopover for pilots, the runway instead of the beach. Not much ambiance here, especially when the wind pushes the diesel fumes and white noise toward you.

It could be the Catch 22 of dive resorts: charge more because of fewer guests, can't get more guests because the cost is too high. With air from Miami to Crooked Island running about \$300, a week at Caribe Bay approaches \$1,450, compared to Cozumel, under \$1,000; Roatan, \$1,150; or Belize, \$1,100.

J. Q.

the restaurant and bar overlook the beach. Not much ambiance here, especially when the wind pushes the diesel fumes and white noise toward you.

In Essence

Caribe Bay doesn't pamper divers. If you're willing to schlep your own gear and can put up with adequate but not luxurious accommodations, come on down for some good to great diving. Nearly pristine reefs and tons of biodiversity wait for you to discover them, and you may even get a chance to name a new dive site. Viz is seldom less than 50 and often over 100 feet.

Beginners through intermediates will enjoy the easy reef and wall diving. There's not a lot of variety in types of diving, but experienced or gonzo divers can drop directly over the wall to scout for sharks and other large species of fish or search out new dive sites.

Currently a capacity crowd would have to use the Rendezvous in shifts. Eight divers aboard this boat would be severely cramped. Caribe Bay says they are awaiting delivery on two new bonefishing boats that will be able to double as dive boats.

Caribe Bay is not up to the standards of basic dive operations elsewhere in the Caribbean, but it has the potential to become a premier dive resort. Whether the owners ever realize that potential remains to be seen.

Prices are steep for what Caribe Bay itself is offering now, but if you like out-of-the-way resorts, you won't mind paying. A few dips over the wall may change your mind about the inadequacies of the management and the hassles of getting there.

D. C.

If I try to list the number of places that have a decent wall dive from the shore in front of the resort, I come up with several fingers left over. CoCo View on Roatan, Sipadan off Borneo . . . hmm . . . good beach diving certainly enhances the odds of a land-based operation getting my attention.

J. Q.

Accidents and Incidents

Learning from the mistakes of others

It's not as enjoyable as reading about the thrill of crystal clear water and large pelagics, but the benefits of analyzing how divers die are real. We are expanding our coverage to deaths of divers around the world, selecting those cases that we sport divers should study so that we can save our own bacon.

Last year, the Aussies released studies of several deaths occurring a couple of years before. Here are some cases that deserve our attention.

Rough Water

While their son was having a scuba lesson from the instructor who had trained them, the parents made a separate dive. The wife had completed her training eight months before, but her husband had several years of diving experience. Neither of them had dived before in this location.

They swam underwater from the beach to a depth of 35 feet. After 35 minutes, the wife had 700 psi remaining, so she stayed where she was while her husband surfaced to check their position. Unsure where they were, they swam north about 30 yards and surfaced, she near shore in moderately rough water, he 10 yards further out in calmer water. He signaled for her to join him but then lost sight of her. He dived, intending to meet her underwater, but instead saw her lying on the bottom with the regulator out of her mouth. When he replaced it in her mouth, she did not respond. He inflated both their BCs and brought her to the surface. She vomited when he attempted to revive her.

He towed her to the rocks, but the power of the surf tore off his mask and pulled the regulator from his mouth, and he lost his grip on his wife. He managed to

climb the rocks and reach the beach, where he told the instructor what had happened. The instructor found her under a ledge but had to wait for a surge to abate before he could retrieve her.

She may have hit her head and lost her grip on her regulator while being tossed about in turbulent water, but she appeared to have no significant head injury. Nonetheless, both she and her husband seemed to have underestimated the power of the water and the strength of its flow off the rock, resulting in her death.

Air Embolism

The charter boat carried five divers and an instructor, who was also the boat operator. Diving conditions were excellent, with no current and good visibility in 45–50 feet of water. The divers were assigned as a buddy pair and a trio, with the instructor