

Some Internet users have even called for a boycott of the Carib Inn over the issue.

Bruce Bowker, evidently successful in obtaining TRR's real name from AOL, has now released information describing a situation that is a little more complex. His statement has been edited for space:

"Since legal proceedings are still pending it is not appropriate to say a great deal at this time. However, I do want to clarify several things, because some people appear to think freedom of speech may be involved and at risk.

"The single posting reported in the press was not the reason for the lawsuit. The person who adopted the alias 'Jenny TRR' merely used the posting to draw other AOL subscribers into e-mail dialogues. In the course of these dialogues that person impersonated an FBI agent, a Florida state trooper, and others. The person did not, as many appear to believe, express opinions, ideas, or comments on bad service. Rather the person stated numerous false facts and accused our staff of repeated acts of criminal behavior. The person used the many false identities to create the

impression that these accusations were backed up by many persons of authority.

"The person who created these bogus facts did not stay at the Carib Inn and was not even on Bonaire as claimed. This kind of attack has nothing to do with free speech.

"I hope that this message will help to clarify what has occurred to date and why we had to act to protect the Carib Inn and those whose lives and reputations were being injured."

J. Q.

Caribbean Roundup

Readers report from Hurricane Country

The Caribbean has scores of islands, but only a few make it as destinations for dedicated divers: Bonaire, the Bay Islands of Honduras, Dominica, the islands of Belize, Turks and Caicos, and, of course, the Caymans. Because you're a current subscriber to *In Depth*, we want to give you a head start on picking the best land destination for your next trip. Next month the 224-page *Diver's Chapbook* goes in the mail, and all those new diver-subscribers will be jumping to make reservations. Let us clue you in ahead of time.

With this year's bad Caribbean weather, **Bonaire**'s location out of the prime storm belt has made it the hurricane-season destination of choice. Easy diving, especially from the shore, beautiful coral, and abundant tropical fish population make it great for beginning

divers, occasional divers, and underwater photographers.

On the other hand, stock in **Divi Flamingo Beach Hotel** — accommodations, at least — seems headed south. Some readers have commented on its deteriorating facilities — for example, Janice Parmelee of New Orleans: "I visited Divi Flamingo in 1990 and 1984 and was pleased. But in July the resort was in desperate need of maintenance. Employee morale was horrible. However, the dive operation is still good. We have no complaints about that." My visit to Divi's Tiara Beach in August uncovered similar problems. Makes me recall the deterioration of Divi properties in the late '80s and a subsequent bankruptcy. Hope you didn't own stock in it then.

Of the three Bonaire operations preferred by our readers, all

seem to have first-rate dive services. **Captain Don's** has the spottiest track record, and an uneven kitchen, but super shore diving. The **Sand Dollar** boasts the popular Green Parrot restaurant, and its condos are well liked by nearly everyone. Readers tell us that **Harbour Village** is the "best hotel." As Jay Erlich (Washington, D.C.) says, of his April visit, "Our second time at Harbour Village; the only really good hotel and the best restaurant on the island. It's never full and the dive operation never seems crowded. Extremely pleasant attitude of dive and hotel staff. More expensive than elsewhere on Bonaire, but well worth it for the landscaping, shade trees, and marina. The highlight was a course with **Dee Scarr** — 'Touch the Sea.' Shook hands with an octopus, petted a scorpion fish, stroked a moray and a spotted eel, was kissed by some grunts, and generally partied with some very friendly critters."

One note: development has affected visibility, reduced the number of unique critters,

attracted crowds, and increased crime; its also has brought better restaurants (Richard's) and better dive services. Still, the primary airline, ALM, continues to lose luggage like a child loses mittens.

The **Bay Islands** can be dived year round, though occasional rough winter weather may reduce sites. Also unpleasant: the endless parade of no-see-ums, those gnarly bugs that attack any unprotected flesh, causing some people to swear never to return. But for those in search of value — and compared with Cayman and Bonaire, Honduras is a bargain — they are worth putting up with.

In Depth editor John Q likes the small, remote, charming **Plantation Beach Resort** in Cayos Cochinos, and Karl and Mary Schneider (Anchorage) agree. "A pleasurable February dive trip. Cayos Cochinos are part of a Smithsonian Marine Preserve, and development and commercial fishing are restricted. We were overwhelmed by new creatures from our very first dive. Tunicates, quillfin and sailfin blennies, cryphis teardrop and gaudy clown crabs, corallimorphs, upside-down jellyfish captivated us. The variety on the reef was remarkable. Plantation Beach is well run, clean, comfortable, and picturesque. We'll come back. That's more than we can promise for most of the other Caribbean dive destinations we've been to."

On the isle of Roatan, **Anthony's Key Resort** has had mixed reviews over the years, but for the last 12 months, at least, most readers have been pleased. Karen and Craig Lange (Yakima, Washington) write, "Resort was great, food was good, accommodations were rustic but clean and nice. Everyone was friendly and helpful. Dive operation was organized and professional. Coral was plentiful and healthy. Lots of

fish, great weather and calm seas in June. Diving was easy and relaxing. Boat was flexible if we wanted to go to a specific reef. Made three to four dives a day." But J. S. Evans (Aliquippa, Pennsylvania), there in July, was critical: "Some places had much dead coral; west end and wall had many fish and some current. Night dives a disappointment — little to see, almost devoid of critters. Overall, could not

"Glover's Reef isn't the South Pacific, but it's the best diving I've had in Caribbean."

compare to the Brac." Another diver noted that he was too often back in the boat with well over 1,000 psi.

Coco View is just about everyone's favorite. Say Randy and Jan Cooper (Glen Ellyn, Illinois) of their March visit: "Shore diving unlimited, and their front yard is second to none. A 150-foot shipwreck, an airplane wreck, and two beautiful walls 100 yards from the beach. Dive operation smooth and efficient, honest fills, three different boats to three different sites. . . . Food: plenty, and a mix of island and American. Often choice of two entrees (fish, meat), fruit juice and iced tea always available." Tom Hower (Kingsford, Michigan) notes that "the 'unlimited' shore diving was on the same spot, dive after dive; this got boring. Dive sites were pretty much the same with only a few exceptions. Lack of fish, and suspended particles in the water, saved me lots of film."

Modern Fantasy Island has air conditioning and room TVs. Less charming than Coco View, it has ardent fans: Jean and Bob Kirkpatrick (Russellville, Kentucky) say that the coral was "as beautiful as we've seen in Caribbean. Shore diving and snorkeling excellent, and include Coco View's famous wall. Dive operation professional, yet personal. White sand beach with roped-off swimming area, and ocean kayaks, water skiing, and sailing available. Staff friendly and helpful, food plentiful and good. Baby-sitters available." Readers' complaints? Too many divers, slow restaurant service, and no overnight E-6 processing.

Get away from the madding crowds at the **Reef House Resort**. Daniel Brady (Palo Alto, California), a March visitor, says, "A small resort (30 people maximum). Accommodations are simple and clean. Meals are good and food is plentiful. The diving is very good if you enjoy corals, sponges, and small fish. Two well-equipped dive boats and an excellent dive operation. The wall in front provides the opportunity to get in an additional two or more shore dives on top of the two boat dives each day. The staff is friendly and attentive, so much so they become family."

The Parkers (Charlotte, North Carolina) told us about **Sueño del Mar**. "We dove from Anthony's Key to West End and around the south side to Coxen Hole. A staggering variety of sponges, varied coral formations, all the usual small tropicals. Jacks, tuna, and larger groupers schooled off West End Wall. Huge lobsters and crabs — the area is a marine preserve. Resort was comfortable and service was good. No shore diving due to the distance to the reef."

Dominica's Castle Comfort Guest House remains the leading destination for lush reefs with plenty of unique critters, the old Caribbean experience, and real rainforest adventure. "Derek Perryman and his family are great hosts," says Ray Fealko (Cortland, Ohio). "Their establishment serves wonderful food, most of it local dishes. The rooms are spacious and well kept, service efficient and accommodating. The diving is easy. . . . Hiking to several waterfalls is magnificent. People on this island are friendly." Gayle Jamison (Woodstock, New York) says that the dive operation "is well run. Plenty of room on boats for

cameras, rinse buckets. Hugely diverse ecosystem above and below. Lots of uncommon reef critters: flying gurnards, frogfish, seahorses, chain morays, etc. . . . I want to return, but may stay at the slightly more upscale **Evergreen Hotel** next door because of the pool and setting."

Turks and Caicos Islands, with the Virgins to the south and the Bahamas to the north, are as close to Miami as Grand Cayman. First stop is Providenciales, and the dive operator of choice, as he has been for nearly two decades, is Art Pickering and his **Provo Turtle Divers**, headquartered at the **Turtle Cove Inn**. Says Milton Provel (Edison, New Jersey), there

about a year ago: "Art runs a great operation. The diving can't be compared with any other place in the Caribbean. The walls are beautiful and huge. Make sure you go to West Caicos and Northwest Point. Every dive was great. Saw sharks on five of twelve dives. Turtle Cove Inn is nice. Good restaurants in the area." Fred and Maxine Botti (Napa, California) were there in August: "The reef is in excellent shape and is loaded with juvenile tropicals. A night dive showed the extensive variety of life: squid, upside-down jellyfish, turtles, tulip snails, several species of shrimp, lobsters, crabs, all on one isolated coral head. . . . Turtle Cove Inn is nice, clean and friendly. Beautiful pool with their own restaurant and several others nearby. Food is expensive, and a room with a kitchenette would save some bucks. Experienced divers who like macro invertebrates will find Provo a paradise. New divers will find Provo exciting and rewarding, with lots of small fish and chances for really big ones. Long boat rides and cost of food were the only negatives."

God Must Be a Diver

week reported that they were diving again October 12. The deeper reefs were unaffected, but some of the sites shallower than 30 feet, such as Columbia Shallows, were sanded over. Broken windows have been repaired and hotels and dive shops are functioning at full force. The major noticeable effect is some defoliation.

Luis and Marilyn were more dangerous storms, and their legacies aren't so quickly repaired. It will be some time before St. Martin/St. Maarten recovers, although millions of dollars of reconstruction are underway. Even before the hurricane, its reefs were mediocre at best. The killer pinnacles and reefs of nearby Saba — as well as the charming island itself — were basically undamaged. St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands (the "Cruise Ship Capital of the Universe") also sustained major damage both above and below the surface that will take months (in the case of buildings) or decades (in the case of reefs) to rebuild.

According to Duncan Muirhead, owner of the *Cuan Law* and the *Lammer Law*, "Both hurricanes moved enough that we did not have the destruction that St. Thomas received. Some boats were thrown up on the beach and we lost electrical power, but the power was restored within a couple of days and a cruise ship sailed in three days after the hurricane." Duncan told *In Depth* that as far as he knew all dive operations were in business.

I've heard that the reef on Antigua suffered the most damage of all. Hawksbill turtle nests on adjoining islands were also destroyed. While Puerto Rico got through largely unscathed, its satellite island of Culebra was heavily damaged.

I wonder: Will there be any bargains during next year's hurricane season for those of us willing to roll the dice? Maybe I'll be looking for a trip outside the hurricane belt.

J. Q.

Anderson of New York City might take issue with Si about the Salt Raker: "Grand Turk a real find, decent diving is close. Reefs are in good condition and fish life is good for Caribbean. Blue Water is easy to dive with. Mitch and Nancy and Carl are excellent guides. Salt Raker is a pleasure, kind of funky but fun. Food was very good. Island is a typical sand bar, though with a few nice beaches."

And if you want to keep traveling, head further to Salt Cay and the **Mt. Pleasant Guest House**. Says Katherine Dockerill (McKinney, Texas), "Terrific people and service, great February weather, terrific food. Coral and fish less than St. Lucia. Wreck was the best of all dives. Quiet, rustic island; can't beat good hospitality, and Brian provided that." And Carol Block (Mosinee, Wisconsin) seconds that: "Brian operates a unique small-island guest house that lets you feel part of island life. This is not for anyone who demands luxury, as accommodations are basic — no air conditioning, share a bath, etc. The food (ask for key lime pie and you get one baked) and diving are excellent, although the divemaster's and boat captain's attitudes are not terribly accommodating. Brian needs a dive staff more willing to work; however, all other employees were friendly and eager to please."

Serious divers are often disappointed in **Belize's Ambergris Caye** once they see the possibilities on the outer islands. Let us recommend a couple:

Down on Glover's Reef, the beautiful setting of **Manta Resort** charms many, though it's an arduous boat ride to get there. Frank Simons (Colorado Springs), there in May, says, "This isn't the South Pacific, but it's the

best diving I've had in the Caribbean. Been to Little Cayman, Brac, Bonaire, Anthony's Key, Bayman Bay, Cozumel. Coral healthy, nice walls. Warm water, no current. Few large fish, but I'm a coral freak, so I didn't really care. Not all sites were great, but the best ones were really outstanding. Fierce no-see-ums." Kendall Botello (Phoenix, Arizona) reports, "Diving was out-

"Fred Good persuaded me to take Nitrox certification, and I became convinced of the safety and advantages for experienced divers."

standing, all wall drift dives. The boat returned to resort between dives (approximately 2- to 3-hour surface intervals), and we all liked that. Staff and food were exceptional. Saw nurse sharks, eagle rays, turtles."

Fred Good's **St. George's Lodge**, a 20-minute boat ride from Belize City, doesn't get you to the drama of the edge of Belize's barrier reef, but Fred makes up for it with his knowhow.

Harry T. Edwards (Washington, D.C.) says it's "a great dive resort, with comfortable accommodations, terrific home-cooked meals, a great owner, and easy access to wonderful diving. Fred knows the reef like the back of his hand, so we saw gorgeous coral, marvelous cuts and caverns, and an enormous array of marine life, from dolphins, sharks, large grouper, jewfish, and tarpons to anemone shrimp."

Two unique aspects about St. Georges: First, you can try Nitrox. Says a fellow named Wood from Houston: "I have been to St. George's before. This time Fred Good persuaded me to take Nitrox certification, and I replaced misconceptions and became convinced of the safety and advantages for experienced divers."

And for years he has been just about the best-regarded instructor in the Caribbean. Here's current proof from Bonnie Gordon, who resides in Miami: "I am 50 years old and the editor of *Sea Frontiers*, a marine science magazine. For the six years that I've held this job, I've felt guilty because I didn't dive. Everyone else on my staff does. I tried to pretend that diligent snorkeling was enough. . . . I was finally

Cinematographer Stan Waterman led a trip on the *Palau Aggressor* in April, after which he let us in on an inside tip on a great photo gimmick:

"For Kevin Davidson, who spelled the regular captain during my week aboard, I provided a cigar for his underwater hoot. To the great delight of the camera people, he appeared to puff on a cigar while sitting on the reef 30 feet down. Smoke emanated from his mouth, or so it appeared. To prepare his stunt, he had bitten the edge off a milk carton and sucked out a mouthful. While exhibiting this submarine sang-froid, he was wearing a pair of sunglasses. Rest assured that will appear in my next video production."

Smokin'

willing to take the risk because I love Belize so much. I figured if I were going to die trying, it may as well be in Paradise. I didn't have to die. I spent some time with Fred and his assistant Fran at the end of the dock learning skills, and within ten minutes of getting wet I was no longer terrified. But the real joy came in the first dive. Before I had time to think about terror, claustrophobia, or where my next breath was coming from, Fred was pointing out the critters,

the coral formations, the odd patterns on the sandy bottom — whatever looked fascinating. I couldn't stand to do anything but pay attention. He was right with me all the way, pointing, praising, gently testing at just the moment when my confidence was high. . . . The accommodations, food, company (when I wasn't too tired to notice) were the best I've had in Belize."

Finally, two other good possibilities, both of which I've

visited. To dive the Blue Hole and excellent outer reefs, there is **Lighthouse Caye**. It's easy to reach by a short hop by plane. From **Turneffe Lodge**, another long boat ride, you can dive the Elbow, about as close as you can come to a South Pacific fish life experience in the Caribbean.

Ben Davison

Next month: a look at Grand Cayman

The Sad Saga of Sea Safaris

The end of the road for a rip-off . . . or is it?

Never have so many travelers been screwed by so few travel agents. The sorry history of Sea Safaris' treatment of divers, dive operators, and resort owners over the last 18 months is a saga with twists and turns but apparently without end.

Owned and operated by Bob and Nancy Ackerman French in Manhattan Beach since 1981, Sea Safaris sent thousands of divers off happily to hundreds of destinations. I was one of them. But something went awry, and some time in 1994 the Frenches apparently stopped forwarding some of the money to the resorts they booked. Divers would arrive at their destinations and discover that their reservations had not been paid. One industry insider estimates that Sea Safaris may have siphoned off a million dollars.

At first, resorts let the divers stay and trusted Sea Safaris to make good. But after it became obvious that Sea Safaris was not

going to pay, business owners had no choice but to tell divers that their Sea Safaris vouchers were worthless and require them to pay again for their accomodations and diving.

In October 1993, *In Depth* became the first publication to break the story. Readers Steve and Beth Green informed us that they had paid Sea Safaris for a trip on the live-aboard *Bilikiki*, only to learn on arrival in the Solomon Islands that Sea Safaris had not paid their passage. After faxes and phone calls failed to get Sea Safaris to forward their payment, they had to pony up again the full amount for a two-week trip. Their attorney was able to get Sea Safaris to refund some, but not all, of their money.

Over the next several months, we heard from scores of divers who had had similar experiences. Several hotels that had been stiffed by Sea Safaris refused to book them any longer. Little hotels like

Fiji's Garden Isle and Mt. Pleasant Guest House in the Turks and Caicos were owed as much as \$20,000. *Skin Diver* magazine, too, was owed money, and publisher Bill Gleason had stopped taking their advertisements.

In March I spoke twice with Bob French. He denied owing anyone anything. When I quoted from letters and other documents written by disgruntled clients, French claimed that the hotels had lousy bookkeeping. What was really happening, he told me, was that certain people, whom he did not name, were orchestrating an industry-wide vendetta against him.

We outlined our investigative findings in our April 1995 issue, citing interviews with several divers who were out thousands of dollars each. That didn't end the problem. People who hadn't read our previous pieces reported the same pattern; they paid Sea Safaris, then had to pay again after traveling halfway around the world.