
Roughing It in Roatan

Diving on the cheap at Romeo's Resort

Dear Fellow Diver,

I was in need of a cheap dive trip. Roatan, in the Bay Islands of Honduras, is known for good deals on good diving, so when I found an eight-day, "all inclusive package" for \$450 that promised 21 boat dives, sunset cruises, kayaks, and paddle boat and hinted at unlimited shore diving, all at a "country club style resort," I signed right up.

Upon arrival at Romeo's Resort (and Dive and Yacht Club), I quickly discovered that the water and electrical systems were intermittent, the only TV at the resort had blown up, and their best dive boat had been sold, leaving two failure-prone floating hulks. The shrubbery was draped with damp sheets and towels because the dryers were on the fritz. The kayaks, jet skis, and paddle boats apparently had not been unchained for an eternity, but this was not altogether a bad thing, as Brick Bay, where the resort is located, featured an afternoon oil slick and assorted trash floating in from French Harbor. The swimming pool had been taken over by tadpoles and mosquitoes. No one at the resort could work up any kind of enthusiasm for swimming, and with no other activities available, there were lots of folks just wandering around between dives.

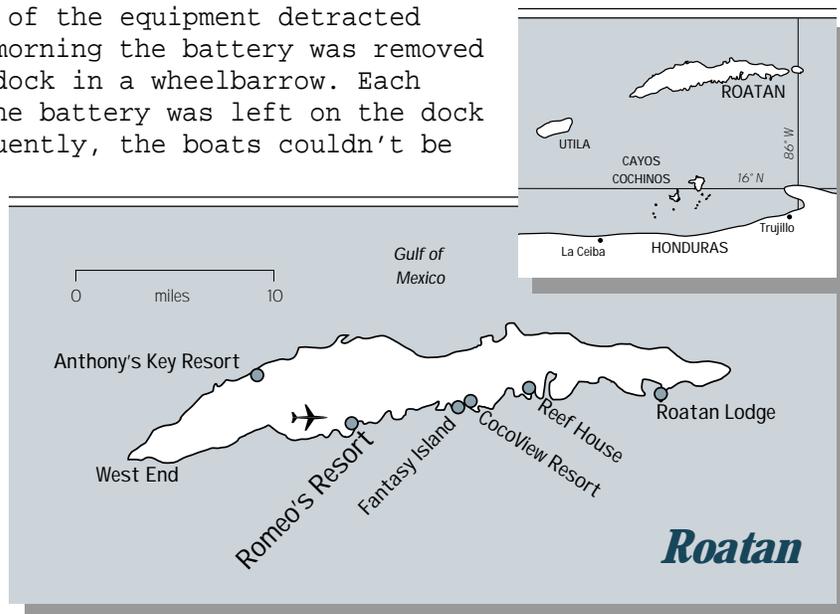
Cheap, but Not Luxurious

Sometimes the poor condition of the equipment detracted from the dive experience. Each morning the battery was removed from the bus and hauled to the dock in a wheelbarrow. Each boat was started in turn, and the battery was left on the dock to go back into the bus. Consequently, the boats couldn't be shut off at the dive site. They idled throughout the hour-long dives, and we ended each dive by climbing up the stern ladders through an oil slick and clouds of exhaust fumes.

But if it's tropical you're looking for, Romeo's has authentic jungle sounds, a resident pet monkey named Mona, and a real sense of nature encroaching on civilization's farthest outpost. Lizards and land crabs roam the premises; exotic birds flit about. The sprawling main building (in bad shape) contains the kitchen, dining room, resort office, and bar (behind which, one evening, a boa con-

The original owners, Romeo and Connie Silvestri, sold the resort about a year ago. The problems on this trip could be an adjustment period for the new absentee owners. If you're considering booking Romeo's, you'll be armed with the right questions to ask.

J. Q.



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Take Two Aspirins and Go Diving

Does aspirin prevent the bends? While there may be no "medical evidence," there is "indirect proof," says Dr. M. B. Strauss of the Baromedical Department of the Long Beach (California) Memorial Medical Center.

In a phone conversation with *In Depth*, he said that "bubbles cause inflammation and these inflamed areas seem to increase the chances of bends [because bubbles will collect there]. Aspirin reduces inflammation and thus reduces the area where bubbles might be caused to collect.

"And," he added, "there are those Hawaiian divers who seem to break all the rules and do not get bent as often as would seem likely from their profiles. The only factor that seems consistent is that they all take aspirin before diving." C. C.

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stricter was discovered). Two-story wings sweep out from either side. All rooms face the marina and are fairly clean and comfortable. The 20 standard rooms on the second level come with balconies, hammocks, and ceiling fans. Downstairs, near the dive shop, five dockside rooms offer air conditioning (which sometimes works) and none of the above features.

The dining failed to surpass the low standards set by the rest of the resort. The service was impeccably British, with the waiters falling all over themselves to straighten your silverware and apologizing profusely if forced to serve your soup from the wrong side. On the other hand, there wasn't enough food. Meals were heavy on fried foods and pork chops, with little local seafood. Coffee for early risers had been made the night before and had a "stewed all night" flavor. I learned quickly which tables to sit at during meals; bats hanging from the ceiling rained guano on unwary guests. On Thursday nights an optional (but expected) trip is offered to Gio's Restaurant in French Harbor. This is an excellent place, with a seafood special consisting of an enormous pile of lobster and crab, all for \$14.

The resort is dominated by a decent marina housing a half a dozen pleasure yachts with absentee owners, Romeo's two-boat fleet, several dive boats needing engines or other significant attention, and a 65-foot sailboat with a live-aboard Rastafarian and his painter girlfriend. There's no beach, so sand flies are not a problem, but at dusk the mosquitoes come out in force and a potent insect repellent is a necessity. The dive shop is certainly not full service; there's nothing for sale, but they do have a good selection of modern equipment available for rent. The compressor is practically new, and aluminum tanks are in good shape and pumped to 2,900 psi. Gear lockers are available in the shop and two rinse tanks and outdoor showers are on the dock. There's a sign-up board outside the dive shop, but with just two operating boats, it doesn't much matter.

Who Cares, Let's Dive

Both of the divemasters tried hard to make up for some of the resort's inadequacies by serving up good diving. The reefs of Roatan boast stupendous coral and sponge growth, along with walls that start in 15 to 20 feet of water -- and we were free to dive our own profiles. Time after time, on sites along the

south shore, I would descend to the top of the reef at 20 feet, slide over the edge of the almost-vertical wall, and sink another 90 to 100 feet. Then I'd work my way back up along the wall, photographing every exotic coral outcropping. After 30 or 40 minutes of this, I could spend another memorable half-hour diving the incredible fields of lettuce and staghorn coral surrounded by schools of aquarium tropicals at 10 to 20 feet.

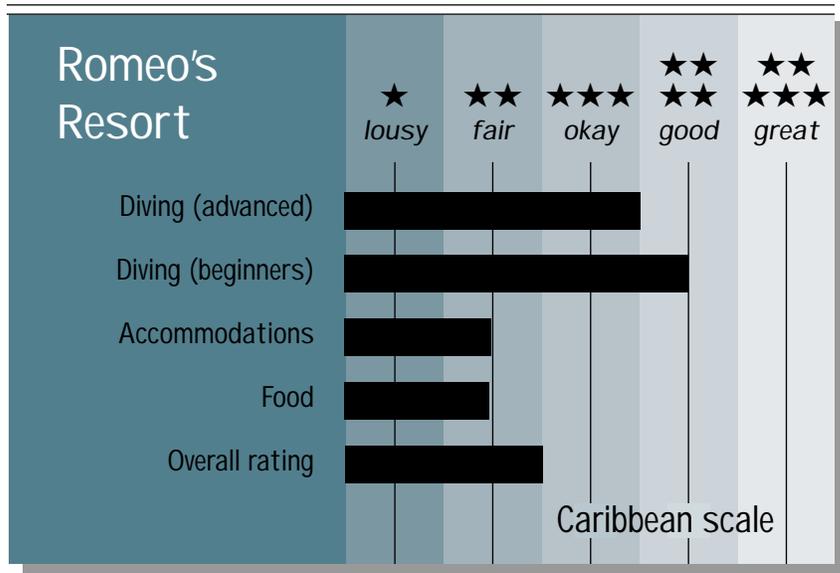
I did get the feeling, however, that most of the south sites are fished out. Except for a few cruising barracuda, the biggest fish I saw was a large midnight parrot. Certain highly touted dives, like Mary's Place, have been closed to divers by the government (ostensibly because of diver pressure and coral collecting), but the overall condition of the walls and the excellent dive profiles still make the south sites worth doing.

The west-end sites, however, which are in the protected marine park near Anthony's Key, were the highlight of the week for fish watchers, with big schools of jacks and grouper. This end of the island is a little more affected by the weather but offers a much better chance to see pelagics and other large critters.

Visibility was variable, from 30 to 75 feet, throughout my week. Some sites had better vis on the top of the reef, others were better at depth. Water temperature ran a consistent 83° to 84°. Night dives offered the usual collection of sleeping fishes, lobsters, squid, macro subjects, and cosmic bioluminescence. Sea wasps were a problem one night, and a dive skin or thin wetsuit was a much-appreciated accessory.

I've heard Roatan described as "where every dive is a wall dive." I found this to be true, and I enjoyed the diving. I even laughed my way through most of the inconveniences, but I was also reminded of another saying: "You get what you pay for."

X. P.



Round-trip airfare on TACA from Miami to Roatan was \$345. My "bargain trip" booked through Tropical Concepts was \$482 (tax included) for an eight-day, all-inclusive package. They promised 21 boat dives, but I had to argue with the management to get 16. The normal plan is for a two-tank morning dive followed by a single-tank afternoon. TACA held onto our bags, but Isleña's puddle jumper from San Pedro Sula to Roatan lost my luggage on the way down. Like we've always said, carry on the essentials.

Ditty Bag

Readers give Romeo's 2.5 stars for accommodations, 3 stars for service, and 1.5 stars for food. Diving for experienced divers was only 2 stars, but 3.5 for beginners.