
Readers' Reports

Tales of the Caribbean

A new subscriber called last week with, she said, a simple question: "Where is the easiest good diving in the Caribbean?" The answer is Bonaire, hands down, with plenty of fish, including a few unique critters, beautiful coral configurations, and year-round calm water.

I quote reader C. Douglas Rorex (Olney, Illinois), who made his second trip to Captain Don's Habitat (305-373-3331) in January: "Strap on your tank, day or night, walk to the end of the dock and step into the water. Or rent a van for shore dives, at your own choosing, when you want. The staff advises on shore dives they enjoy and hazards to note. Like to dive solo? Captain Don's is one of the few places allowing it."

Accommodations are good; the food still lags, but Bonaire has plenty of eateries. Richard Madlener (McLean, Virginia) reports that the good Captain himself, Don Stewart, shows slides made from his original black-and-white negatives and tells stories of the "old days." He's got a few, like marking reefs in the early 1970s with inflated condoms sent by a Planned Parenthood Executive, or diving without a depth gauge, gauging depth by the color change in a red ribbon pinned to him.

The other resort of choice: Sand Dollar Condos (800-288-4773 or 407-774-9292), which also makes tanks available 24 hours a day. Joe and Mary Schutz (Elgin, Illinois) say, "Eating out is expensive. Use the kitchen; bring dry cereal, taco mix, dry milk, coffee from home. Supermarket selection isn't like the U.S." ALM Airlines is still a hassle, reports Jim Schwalbe

(Weatherford, Texas). "Must reconfirm return flight 72 hours before departure; even so, we did it by phone and when we got to the airport we learned we had been canceled."

John Gillespie, who with his wife Linda has owned Cayman Diving Lodge (800-TLC-DIVE or 809-947-7555) since October 1994, didn't like the slight we gave them in our January issue: "Yes, management has been inconsistent over the years, but we are not responsible for that. The perception of the Lodge is that it is run down and poorly managed; the reality is that it's in excellent shape with new boats, new compressors, renovated rooms, and an entirely new staff devoted to providing the best service possible to our guests. We also dive the East End. We're not perfect yet, but we're trying. Our problem is overcoming the mixed reputation of the past. Any ideas?"

Well, it is a tough problem. The Lodge has years of neglect to overcome. But reader Pat Sullivan (Spokane, Washington) thinks the Lodge is doing pretty well: "We loved the lodge, and location — we dove in front on the outside of the reef. Two dives a day for 10 days and never to the same place twice. The West End and North Side were too rough all week, so we had lots of day divers come over. Plenty of snorkeling right out front, too." One helpful hint: "We would have loved to have a soft chair to sit and read on the deck of the lodge."

Little Cayman's Southern Cross Club (800-899-2582 or 809-948-3255) is another neglected property to undergo refurbishing: ten refurbished units with AC and fans, a

new swimming pool, expanded bar, new kitchen, and a rebuilt dive boat. How do they withstand the history? By advertising it as "32 years of primitive luxury," whatever that is. Summer weekly rates: \$1,120/person, including 12 dives.

One comment that constantly appears in our readers' reports: "I packed too much clothing." Why do it? Only nudists wear fewer clothes than divers. On a tropical live-aboard all you need is a swimsuit and t-shirt and maybe a pair of shorts for dinner. At tropical resorts, long pants and long-sleeved shirts only for protection from bites; otherwise, shorts, t-shirts, light tops, and a pair of sandals. P.S.: Small airlines have weight restrictions. Guy Huse (Littleton, Mass.) reports that Island Air from Grand Cayman to Little Cayman delivers baggage of 55 pounds 24 hours later. Travel light. Caveat: winters in the Bahamas and the Southern South Pacific and squalls in the tropics call for a little more.

The live-aboard *Caribbean Explorer* (800-322-3577 or 307-235-0683), which dives around Saba, is back in operation after running aground more than a year ago. Sam Pearlstein (Manlius, New York) says he got a "wonderfully detailed 33-page trip preparation bulletin before his January departure; very helpful for my 1st live-aboard. Crew helpful, courteous, enthusiastic and personable. Logged 23 dives that were mostly enjoyable, but recent storms covered corals with sand. Several turtles, couple of nurse sharks, lots of morays, three dolphins. Boat laid out well: two rinse buckets for cameras, another for wet suits, warmwater showers on dive deck, camera table." Scott Kramer (Los Angeles) recommends "rooms 6,7,8 on top deck right off sun area have windows and are convenient. Food better than other live-aboards — not a hamburger to be seen (steak, ribs, fish, chicken)."