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Ben Davison's **In
Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

Riding Rock Inn, San Salvador

Diving Chris Columbus's old haunts

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Dear Fellow Diver,

"An' dis", our San Salvador guide explained matter-of-factly, "is where Christopher Columbus first set foot in de New World." Nodding, I stifled the impulse to argue that historians disagree on where old Chris first paddled ashore. But there we stood beneath an inexplicable piece of the pipe fitter's art, a sort of sculpture marking the spot.

But I didn't come for a faux history lesson. Nor did I come for a test of my endurance; I came for an easy diving trip. I settled on an easy-to-reach destination that had carved out a respected niche but wasn't overrun by the hordes: Riding Rock Inn, San Salvador, the Bahamas.

After a flight from Atlanta to Nassau and then a half-hour Dash 8 flight to San Sal, my buddy and I were met at the airport and whisked into a van for the two-minute trip to the Inn. Check-in was painless, and all that was required for the rest of that afternoon was to meet at the Inn's Driftwood Bar for a free drink, a brief orientation, and logging of C-cards.

Getting in over Our Heads

At 5 p.m. we got the skinny on the daily plan: a two-tank dive leaving the dock at 9 a.m.; a one-tank dive at 2 p.m., except for Tuesdays, when it's replaced with a night dive (weather permitting), and on Thursdays, when a majority vote decides it. Dives are 130 feet max, 500 psi when you come back -- and stay the hell off the reef. Computer diving is encouraged. The assumption is that if you have a C-card, you are a responsible diver. If you want your hand held, a divemaster will hold it, but that's not the way they prefer to operate.

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The next morning we discovered how well organized a boat can be when people aren't dragging gear over and around one another. You hold on to your own skin or wetsuit, mask, and weights. When you and your buddy are ready to go, the staff has your BC and fins ready. You getwet and your camera follows immediately.

A full-width stern platform with plenty of room to walk out and step in makes for easy entry. A heavy-duty aluminum stern ladder likewise makes it a cinch to return. If you want to climb aboard in your BC, fine. If you want to let the boat crew hoist it up, they're there -- also to hand out and take back your camera. Back at the dock, you rinse your divesuit and hang it to dry in a roomy, open-air cage. The crew takes care of everything else.

What's Down There

And the diving? Well, it's said that the quintessential walls of the Bahamas are those of San Salvador, and I wouldn't argue with that. These are indeed dramatic dropoffs, featuring a variety of deep cuts, tunnels, and swim-throughs. One dive, Double Caves, leads down through a chimney that splits to one

exit at 130 feet and a no-no exit at 150. Orbits Cavern leads down between sections of a huge outer wall with great crevasses. Drifting through it is like flying a helicopter through an underwater canyon. To all this, add water clarity billed as the best in the Bahamas, commonly 100 feet or better (200 feet always happens for people who were there last week).

The corals on San Salvador's walls are lush -- deep-water sea fans, several kinds of black coral, a seemingly endless variety of sea whips, and a range of other gorgonians and octocorals. A healthy fish population all along the wall completes the picture.

In addition to having a great variety of soft and hard corals, San Sal is one of the fishier Caribbean spots I've dived. There's

lots of coney, Nassau and spotted groupers, some large resident jewfish hanging out under ledges and caves; triggers, durgons, hogfish, filefish, trunkfish, trumpets, and cornets;

The Roar of the Crowd

Hotel rooms on San Salvador number about 350 — 50 or so at the venerable Riding Rock and 300 at Club Med, where the premises are fenced, the gates are guarded, and outsiders are unwelcome.

While boats dispatched daily by these two operations can carry 225 divers a trip, there are scores of dive sites, so bumping into divers from other boats is unlikely. Still, numbers are a concern for healthy reefs.

Riding Rock boats visit more than 40 dive sites on what is normally the lee side of the island. Other sites around the south end, outside the lee, are diveable when the breezes blow kindly; they're 5 to 45 minutes distant. Those with moorings are used by both Riding Rock and Club Med. At others it's possible to anchor in the sand. Club Med's less experienced crew can't always find the sites. Unfortunately, they keep looking — which probably is why large coral heads get knocked over by the dragged anchors.

I didn't sense that Riding Rock people wanted to take pot shots at Club Med. They don't seem even to view them as competition. But they *are* concerned about their potential effect on the reefs. Each and every day Club Med drops a swarm of inexperienced and resort-course divers onto the reef. When you see a major coral head freshly broken off or knocked over (as I did) and you know your own crews didn't do it — and there's only one other dive operation on the island — who else can you point to? One can only hope for a sudden outbreak of intelligence regarding where and where not to train inexperienced divers.

C. J.

varieties of angelfish and puffers; huge midnight parrots; stingrays and skates; rockfish for your close study, and -- well, I'm not going to say, If it's in the Carribean it's at San Sal, because that's a major stretch, but it might be easier to list familiar "absents" than "presents." There aren't tons of morays, for example; I didn't see a single drumfish, and frogfish are unheard of in those parts; but when there's that much to see, it seems pointless to note what's missing.

San Salvador serves up critters in all sizes. Lobsters and reef crabs aren't prolific, but those I saw were BIG. I swam around a washtub-sized crab, taking pictures for five minutes as he waved those Everlast gloves at me, challenging me to duke it out with him. The lobsters? When they refer to them as bugs, they're talking Volkswagen bugs -- a slight exaggeration, sure, but you get the idea. It's a less of a stretch, though, when applied to some of the hawksbill turtles I saw on almost every wall dive. Ditto for barracuda. When I'm inside three feet staring eyeball to eyeball with a barracuda that's as long as I am, and he opens his mouth to smile with some of his recent lunch trailing off his pearly whites, I say, Okay, pal, you've got the right of way.

Looking for Mr. Hammerhead

But you can't talk about San Salvador without raising the subject of hammerheads. The water temperature in mid-April was 74-76°F, chilly for a cold-puppy diver like me. But hammerheads favor cold water, it seems, and only then do they spend much time at divers' depths. These sharks aren't fed, so they don't congregate on cue. They just appear, and there are few greater kicks than having your buddy wildly jabbing your shoulder as you turn to see a big hammerhead a few feet away, closing on you and then cruising past.

While not everyone saw sharks on every wall dive, there wasn't anyone who didn't see at least one five- to nine-foot hammerhead during the week. It was our luck to be really close to only one, a seven-footer. We played hooky from a couple of afternoon dives and, of course, missed multiple hammerheads for our sins. We also heard that one group of divers had spotted a rare albino hammerhead the week before.



The Bahamas

Because San Sal is located outside the effects of the currents that wash up the nutrients from South American rivers, the water is a clear brilliant blue instead of the usual Caribbean green.

J. Q.

Out of the Depths

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On most second dives you'd need a Bobcat with a backhoe to go deeper than 25 feet. The shallowness of these dives and the available light provide great opportunities for photo shoots, and plenty of time -- up to 80 minutes. Split Reef is two patches of coral with a broad, sandy channel between. The outer reef is a good place for major lobster and spotted scorpion fish sightings. MacroMania, another shallow dive, is said to have produced more covers for one of the scuba slicks (SDM) than any other location; the reef's name tells it all.

Because good shallow dives are so plentiful in San Sal, macro opportunities abound. Shallow coral heads and see-through windows host all sorts of blennies, gobies, coral and other cleaner shrimp, juvenile wrasse angels, and others. You can shoot the eye of a flounder, the face of a lizardfish, the radiole of a tube worm, the mantle of a file clam, and more flamingo tongues than there are flamingos.

Head 'em Up, Move 'em Out

It's no secret that many dive guides view female tourists as sexual fodder. Not long ago Rodale's *Scuba Diving* featured the "Cayman Cowboys," dive guides who get the babes drunk and bed them. One Caribbean dive guide told me how he "kissed one good-bye at the gate and ran to Immigration to kiss the next one hello." An acquaintance of mine aboard a Honduras live-aboard last year was offered a cheap week this summer on the craft by a crew member who told her, "I'd like to get to know you." She doubted that was the reason.

But now: payback time.

A 41-year-old San Francisco diver has just sued Club Med because, she says, she contracted herpes from the dive guide. "It's unconscionable someone would do this," said the woman, a 41-year-old CPA. "He should have been forbidden from having sex with guests."

The suit switches blame from the instructor to Club Med because, after all, their pockets are deeper. It seeks unspecified damages for sexual battery, emotional distress, and negligent supervision. It accuses Club Med of failing to ensure that its employees "did not abuse the title and position of their employment . . . to inflict unnecessary pain and suffering." The suit contends that management "issues condoms to its employees for use at the resort. The only prohibition . . . was to avoid problem situations such as pursuing married women."

Tip to resort owners: Keep your cowboys in the corral. B. D.

On all the shallow dives, the coral slopes at the edges of the walls and down the walls themselves; the fish population, big and little, is prolific and varied. As with most areas in the Bahamas and throughout the Caribbean (or the world, for that matter), you'll see a unique mix of species. But that's part of what diving in different places is all about.

The Operation

The entire Riding Rock complex lies in a long strip between the ocean and San Sal's main coastal road. The main building houses the registration desk, restaurant, and bar. The veranda is a great

place to loll about with an after-dinner cup of whatever, watching the sunset and awaiting the elusive green flash.

All of Riding Rock's rooms are only steps from the beach, and all face the ocean. A few steps along the path south from the restaurant and bar lies the original one-story group of rooms, built perhaps 25 years ago. Further along, between the beach and the freshwater swimming pool, is the

new two-story facility; beyond that, one- and two-bedroom villas for families or those who simply want more space.

I selected a deluxe room in the new two-story building. These have two firm double beds, a refrigerator, overhead fan, air conditioning, cable TV, phone, an ample tub/shower bathroom, and good reading lamps. This was plenty of room; it's hard to imagine that two people would need an entire villa.

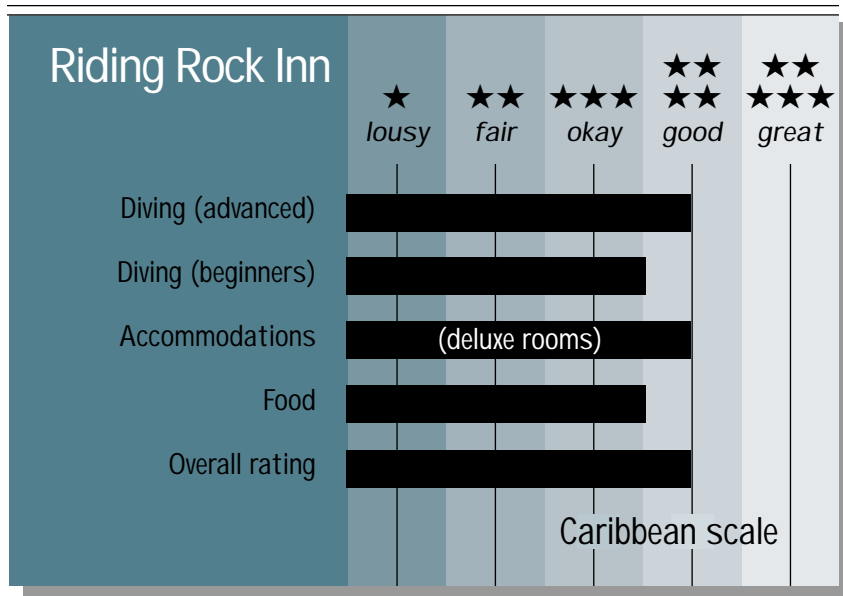
About five minutes by foot south of the hotel is Riding Rock's diving nerve center -- the marina, dive shop, and photo lab/auditorium. Here you can rent dive and camera equipment, get minor repairs, store your gear, and, as a nice and most useful touch, grab a fresh towel to take with you on the boat. Riding Rock has a decent range of Nikon equipment available and, at the moment, one 8-mm video camera for rent. I didn't need either photo or dive equipment, but we were assured that everything they rent is up to snuff -- a claim the rest of the operation gave me no reason to doubt.

General manager Ednald Thompson has Riding Rock well organized and staffed and runs an efficient operation. Whether on the boat, in the restaurant, or in your room, service is obviously a primary goal. Staff take their jobs seriously but in good humor.

The dive staff is headed by Kevin Collins, an old hand at Riding Rock. Kevin, who was off the island during our week there, has surrounded himself with able assistants: Darley Ware, his second, and Rodney "Moon" Crossman, Riding Rock's newest divemaster. A transplant from Nassau, Moon was our primary divemaster; he's enthusiastic about what he does, helpful, and pleasant. For a recent addition, he's well informed about the sites and what you're likely to see. Dives are well briefed, so you always have the choice of finding your own way about or staying with the divemaster. Usually we did our own thing, but when you stay with the dive staff, they show you the things you missed when you went off on your own.

Don't ask them where the shore diving is, though. There isn't any. When you dive at San Sal, you do it from a boat.

Riding Rock has two 41-foot boats, well maintained, dependable and fast. They can handle upwards of 20 divers, but in mid-April we had 9 to 11 (33 were coming on our departure day). Divemasters Moon and Darley, along with Shawn and Owen as alternating boat captains, got us to most of their first-



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choice dive sites throughout the week, although they sometimes had to adjust schedules on the spot due to such things as weather or unruly currents.

You have to show up on time; otherwise, you snooze, you lose. And if all divers are on board a few minutes early, you'll leave a few minutes early. I don't mean for all that to sound regimented, because it isn't; they just do things when they say they will. And if everyone is ready ahead of time, why wait around for the weather to change? I appreciated their philosophy of taking every opportunity to make every dive a good one. Too many operations make getting back in time for lunch their sole criterion for selecting a second dive site.

Food and Other Diversions

Not that lunch wasn't always welcome. Food was plentiful and varied, good for an out-island dive resort with limitations imposed by location and lines of supply. As with most things, Riding Rock gave it its best shot. Serving time and service were punctual. Breakfast was at 7:30 a.m., lunch at noon, dinner at 6:30 (6:00 p.m. night-dive days).

Breakfast was cooked to order for our group's size; we had two options at lunch (except on special buffet days) and two options at dinner, which featured grouper and another seasonal fish (when I was there, the wahoo were running). Dinner featured a complimentary glass of white jug wine.

Meat and fish courses are usually grilled or broiled, sometimes sautéed. If you choose conch as one of your options, it will probably be deep-fried -- as will the worldwide staple, pomme frites. There's always a good selection of fresh fruit or vegetables.

The bar has plenty of island mixed drinks, standard hard stuff, beer, and sodas. Beer is three bucks a pop, most mixed drinks \$3.75 or \$4.00, sodas a bit less.

Bottled goods are available at the Cockburn Tower bar, and beer by the six-pack is ten bucks. There's an ice bucket in your room, you can get free

We're Supposed to Eat the Fish. Right?

Dear *In Depth*:

After reading your pro and con on shark feeding, I decided you should see a video I shot during a shark-feeding venture on the *Gulf Stream Eagle* out of Southeast Florida. Our shark didn't approach the stream of chum, which we made by scraping grouper backbones left over from sup-

per. It came from behind and struck the diver doing the chumming in the back of the head. Fortunately, there was little physical damage, except to his heart. The shark then proceeded to disappear for a time. When it did reappear, it came straight for me, running into my video camera, which was running at the time.

While the footage may be exciting, it illustrates the potential danger to the shark viewer.

Having said that, I would also like to say that I heartily agree with *In Depth* reader E. W. Strawbridge that the Walker's Cay shark feeding is probably the most exciting shark dive in the Florida/Bahamas area. After a while I stopped looking behind as sharks went overhead or around my side, because it had become so "old hat." The sharks appeared to be interested only in the block of fish carcasses (Thank God)!

Ray McAllister
Prof. of Ocean Engineering, FAU
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ice at the bar, and you've got a fridge if you want to relax with something cold in your room.

Most other entertainment is simply book du jour. Cockburn Town, a 15-minute walk, boasts one reportedly good restaurant, a couple of churches, a cluster of homes, a general store, a bar or two, and the seat of the island's government. On night-dive afternoon, the hotel runs a van for an island tour. If your book isn't a page turner, go for a ride. You'll get to go to the top of the lighthouse and see where Columbus's New World footprints might have been. The Inn also has a few bicycles for rent. On Friday night there are several short, well-prepared one- and two-projector slide shows with musical sound tracks. E-6 processing is available.

To Go or Not to Go

There's a lot to like about San Salvador and Riding Rock as an all-around diving experience. I found it hard to be disappointed, and I actually worked at that because I knew I was going to write this piece. After all, who wants to be told later, Man, what a bummer. . . . You sure we went to the same place? John Q, my faithful editor, would not be happy. Still, I quickly gave up picking nits and flat-out enjoyed myself.

The flaky April weather in the Midwest and East this year also affected the Bahamas. The first few days of our week were actually cool, with highs only in the mid-70s. Later in the week it got into the more seasonable 80s, but it was pleasant throughout, with bright sunshine every day.

The best time to go is, naturally, when the weather can be more or less counted on, and that's probably in the summer months (except for hurricanes, of course). Summer is not the best time for hammerhead sightings, though. As the water warms, sharks go deep and are seen only occasionally, hanging well off the wall at depth. The best hammerhead time is winter and spring.

There are never guarantees, so don't say, But you said. . . . Nonetheless, keep a sharp eye out for some big stuff -- it may loom up at any moment. And, in particular, watch out for the fish in the gray suit with the funny-looking head.

Riding Rock uses a weekly Saturday charter out and back from Ft. Lauderdale. While you may not need to carry much more personal gear than shorts and T-shirts, the charter flight's 70-pound weight limit can get pushed by camera bugs. Bahamasair, which costs about the same as the charter flight, is less weight sensitive at 88 pounds and has a good schedule from the U.S. mainland. I opted for that, as well as the Saturday-to-Saturday time frame. Our 727 flight left from Atlanta; we changed to a smaller kite in Nassau for the half-hour hop to San Salvador. Our Midwest location called for an early morning roll-out for sure, but how many out-island trips do you remember where you left home in the morning and arrived at your destination in time for lunch? . . . Customs is a fast question about what you brought with you for whom. If you answer "Nothing," it's a wave-through. Clearing U.S. customs at San Sal on the way out was equally uneventful. You'll need \$15 cash for departure tax. . . . Winter rates \$1,099 for deluxe (double occupancy), 8 days/7 nights (18 dives); summer, \$995. Standard room: \$739 winter, \$635 summer. As noted, these accommodations are next to new. All dive packages include three meals a day. . . . Most wholesalers will book you, or call direct 800-272-1492 or 954-359-8353, fax 954-359-8254.

Ditty Bag

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C. J.