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Ben Davison's **In
Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

Return to Roatan

Kickin' back at the Bay Islands Beach Resort

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Dear Fellow Diver,

It was late afternoon toward the end of my stay, and I was reading a Kinky Friedman mystery, listening to Jimmy Buffet on the CD, and sipping a Diet Coke at the bar. The sun would be setting in an hour or so; should I make that night dive off the beach, or order a margarita and try to catch the legendary green flash? At this point it wasn't much of a decision: the dive from the beach was lame, but the setting topside was about as picturesque as it gets. The margarita went down well.

This was my first trip to the Bay Islands Beach Resort (BIBR) on Roatan in the Bay Islands of Honduras. I've been to these islands a lot in the past dozen years, but it had been a while since I had visited Roatan. The resort sounded interesting: picturesque, small, lots of amenities, a nice beach, three or four boat dives a day, some shore diving. And it was cheap.

I arrived at Roatan's new airport terminal -- quite a change from the old wooden building that used to serve as such. Loading what luggage had arrived (about a third of us were missing at least one piece of luggage), we made the 15-minute ride to the resort over paved roads (another big change in Roatan) through lush island vegetation dotted with small villages. Real estate signs sprouted alongside the road. Roatan is developing fast, but still seems to maintain much of its old charm.

The Resort

Bay Islands Beach Resort is on the northwest side of the island, not too far from Anthony's Key Resort (AKR). Formerly known as the Roatan Beach Resort, it has since changed hands and been upgraded. I was impressed by the hotel management.

. . . The resort is run a lot like a cruise ship, with a smorgasbord of activities.



Joel, a soft-spoken native of Roatan who used to work at AKR, and Tracy, a gringo who's been in Roatan for a couple of years, were personable, conscientious, and organized.

With a bar on the beach and an upstairs deck at the end of the pier, BIBR is nicely laid out. Twelve rooms sit on 44 acres with 450 feet of beachfront. My room was plain and simple: two beds and a ceiling fan with plenty of water on tap -- hot, cold, and as in much of Roatan, safe to drink -- but the real surprise was that it also had an air conditioner.

The beach, home to the Bay Islands' infamous "flying teeth" (a.k.a. no-see-ums or sand flies -- successfully warded off by Avon Skin So Soft and DEET), is well groomed and offers a nice view of the sunset over the water, but it's a dud for swimming. The water's only a foot deep and full of eel grass.

Meals were served in a dining area that had an outdoor balcony with a parade of hummingbirds flying to feeders hanging from the rafters. Each meal offered a choice of two entrees. Food was plain and simple, like the rooms, but sometimes came to life with selections like coconut grouper and grilled lobster. Breakfast started with a fruit plate and offered, in addition to the daily special, standard fare such as French toast, pancakes, and omelets. Lunch was a sit-down hot meal with chicken, soups, salad, and such. On a couple of occasions meal planning was poor and portions were small. The ravenous complained and were given another helping from the kitchen, probably from the staff's larder.

The resort is run a lot like a cruise ship, with a smorgasbord of activities -- ocean kayaking, sailing, horseback riding, and island tours. The management also set up a full activity schedule for the week: Saturday, welcome drinks and feast at the bar; Monday, a night dive; Tuesday, a punta party on the beach; Wednesday, dive the *Prince Albert* wreck on the other side of the island near CoCo View Resort; Thursday, a picnic at West End, one of

Roatan's best beaches; and an optional sunset cruise (skip it) and final feast on Friday night in the bar area. Fortunately, it's not mandatory.

And, Oh Yes, the Diving

Okay. I'm where I always lust to be -- tropical jungle, sandy beach. My room is simple, but spacious, the food is satisfactory, and the setting is super. Now all I need is good diving. Do I get it?

After the clear-mask, remove-regulator checkout dive, the normal schedule is two



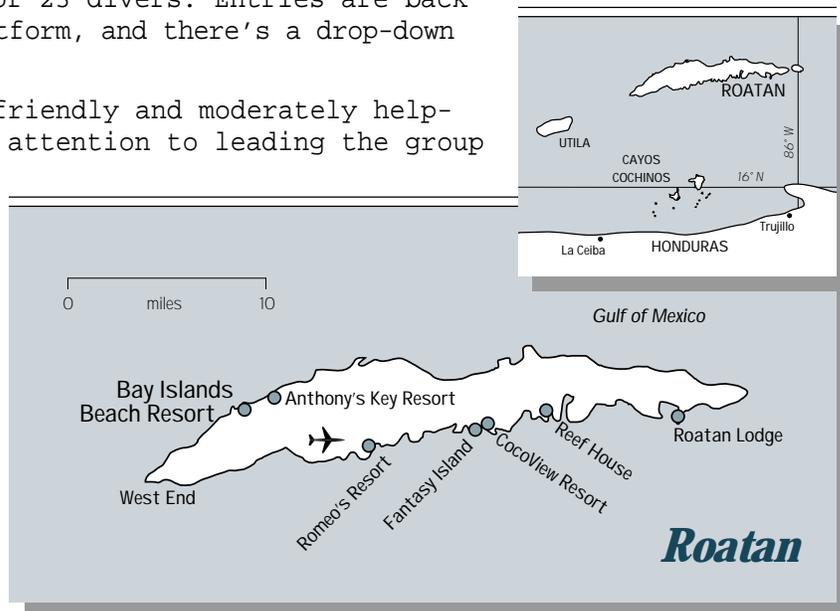
morning dives, back to the resort for lunch, and one afternoon dive. There are two boats, 42-footers -- one a cabin cruiser with racks for the aluminum 80s near the wheel and along the back gunwales, the other a covered panga; both were a bit cramped with our full complement of 23 divers. Entries are back rolls or stride off the back platform, and there's a drop-down ladder for getting back aboard.

The dive staff members were friendly and moderately helpful, but directed most of their attention to leading the group around. Diving was a mixture of drift and non-drift; the latter afforded more chances to break away from the group.

The fish life at Roatan has increased in the last several years, thanks to the government's marine protection. I still don't count Roatan as a fishy destination, but I did see plenty of bulldog-sized grouper and mutton snappers as well as occasional pelagics. Reefs are healthy with plenty of coral and fish life of the usual Caribbean varieties -- creole wrasse and wandering schools of blue tang. I noticed an abundance of cleaning stations, lobsters, queen conchs, and larger crabs, but few morays. Unlike at the other Bay Islands, Guanaja and Cayos Cochinos, macro critters were few and far between. Visibility was typically 80 to 120 feet.

Most dive sites are a 10- or 20-minute boat ride from home plate. Half Moon Bay features a beautiful wall loaded with colorful sponges and good fish life; Mangrove Bay has lots of swim-throughs to play in but few fish; Pete's Place (named after Peter Hughes) sports a resident large green moray that is often free swimming (the resort's video guy hogged him on my dive). A yard-long midnight parrot swam with me, getting as close as five feet while feeding on the coral -- pretty unusual behavior for this species. Both of the boat night dives were a bust.

On Wednesday, the schedule was to dive the Prince Albert. Since several in the group were susceptible to mal de mer, we persuaded Joel to take us across the island by bus (for another \$5 each) rather than pound us through the waves for two hours each way on the boat. (When we rejoined the boats, everthe



At Anthony's Key Resort you'll find the Institute for Marine Science, which for several years has been training dolphins. For \$100, they'll take up to six divers to a nearby site, where for 40 minutes you and some wild dolphins can cavort with one another. I was encouraged to swim around to get the dolphins' interest, but warned about dolphins possibly grabbing our arms or legs. It was impressive to have a dolphin stare into your face mask and bark. A dolphin snorkel is also offered for \$75, but reports from those who went were not so glowing.

Dolphin Dancing

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crew was looking worse for wear.) The wreck, though, is not worth the bus or boat ride; it hasn't been there long enough to accumulate much marine life. It's worth a shore dive from CoCo View or Fantasy Island, but certainly not a trip around the island.

Side Trips

The Bay Islands Beach Resort offers several other trips through outside operators, such as the Mayan ruins at Copan and a jungle river rafting trip, both on the mainland. I've previously visited Copan and recommend it to anyone even vaguely interested. It's a beautiful drive from San Pedro Sula, and you stay in a picturesque little town with cobblestone streets, cowboys on horseback, and loads of shy, curious, beautiful children roaming the streets. I recommend staying two nights, rather than the tour's one night plus one in San Pedro Sula.

The river rafting expedition did not disappoint. The \$99 cost includes the flight to La Ceiba, pickup by the rafting guides, and lunch. The guides, both American and Australian, have been doing this for several years now, and they obviously love what they do. The rafting conditions depend on recent rainfall; they provided typical class III and IV rafting conditions on my trip. The bus up to the river travels through the mountains of a national park of uninhabited rain forest with scores of exotic birds, sometimes even toucans, and several waterfalls, swimming holes, and beaches along the way.

acceptable. What justification can a resort have to demand that experienced computer divers cut their dives short after having set aside the time, paid the money, and traveled the distance? None. Too many times I found myself back on the boat with 1,000 to 1,600 psi in my tank, plenty of film in my camera, and loads of bottom time left on my computer.

Ditty Bag

Most of BIBR's business is based on selling packages to dive stores and groups. If you call the resort direct and they don't have a group booked, the week is \$725. If the resort is already booked, they'll call the group or the dive store booking it and ask if there's a spot for you. These groups vary in the price they charge — some more, some less than the \$725 walk-in rate. Call 800-4-ROATAN or 407-624-5774, or fax 407-624-7751. . . . Five rooms are in the main building on top of the hill, two adjacent to dining area — no late sleeping here. Another two are in a small, two-story house that looks larger and has screened porches; the rest are duplexes, like bungalows, down toward the beach. Bring your own reference and reading material. . . . Boats have oxygen aboard, and there's a recompression chamber just a mile from the resort. . . . Fills are pumped to 3,000–3,300 psi. . . . They provided well-maintained rental gear to all (me included) while our luggage was being retrieved from the airlines. . . . Water temperature was a couple of degrees cooler than the 85° air temps during this June trip. . . . There was little to accommodate photographers — no camera tables or separate dunk tank. If you wanted film processing, you had to take it down to AKR or into town.

My Bottom Line

Yes, the dive operation runs smoothly and has a sizable storage room, two decent-sized dive boats, three dives a day, and beach diving. And yes, having been to the Bay Islands several times, I say the diving here is among the best bargains in the greater Caribbean. But the dives are too regimented at BIBR.

Bottom times were by the tables, whether you used a computer or not. Morning dives were usually 80 for 30 and afternoon dives 50 for 40. In my book this is simply not

My trip package ran \$1,099 for the first week, including air from Houston, all meals, diving, and transfers; the second week was \$649. For a well-run, well-equipped small resort with all the amenities, I consider this an excellent price. Diving is easy, safe, and ideal for newer divers and those for whom bottom time is not a concern. Side trips and other activities provide a lot of options for non-divers.

If you're a gorilla diver or photographer, however, I wouldn't recommend it -- unless you'd rather kick back with a margarita than dive.

W. D.