

ANTIGUA

On my way to Dominica I stopped and dived Antigua. What I remember most about the island was its beautiful beaches and scenery, high-dollar hotels, and a five-buck hot dog. The diving was forgettable. If you find yourself here, avoid boats that take divers from the cruise ships, as they do only the close-in, shallow reefs.

ANGUILLA

Anguilla (almost rhymes with vanilla) is a small, pricey Leeward Island a few minutes' ferry ride from St. Maartin. Its main appeal lies in its beautiful beaches and exclusive ambiance. Good, typical Caribbean reefs are close in, but expect no drama. The fish population is low due to overfishing. It's not an island to visit just for the diving, but if you end up there, by all means get in the water. It's in the hurricane belt. . . .

Shoal Bay Scuba and Waterspout, Sonesta Beach Resort, August 2000, Les Heselton, Moorestown, NJ. Vis: 25-75 ft. Water: 80-84 degrees. Weather sunny. Water calm. Dove own profile. Anguilla is a small, laid back island, with excellent resorts/hotels, great beaches to kick back on, and good diving. The food is outstanding at the major resorts and good to excellent other places. They allow spear fishing almost everywhere, so there is limited large fish. Diving is generally good with the wrecks being

better and the night dive being best. Shoal Bay Scuba had a nice clean fairly new dive boat that could carry about 20 divers. During my 7 days of diving there were 8 onboard once and 3-4 the rest of the time. The staff is very professional, pleasant, friendly, and knowledgeable. Anguilla has a Spanish Galleon that they protect, but can be dove on (with Shoal Bay) when and IF the weather cooperates. Unfortunately, I was not able to dive on the Galleon. Mid-March through early June seems best. (264-497-4371)

ARUBA

Just off Venezuela's Caribbean coast, Aruba has not been a prime scuba-diving destination, but bring your gear. Some of our readers are now reporting finding operators who will take you to some pretty decent diving. . . . Miles of white sand, glitzy casinos, and beaches cater to windsurfers. . . . For the best deals on lodging and air, ask your travel agent to look into gamblers' packages. . . . There are several good boat dives, such as the wreck of the *Antilla*, a German freighter scuttled at the start of World War II. The South Wall, past San Nicholas near the southern tip of Aruba, is also good. . . . Expect water temperatures in the low 80s most of the time. . . . Aruba lies south of the hurricane belt. . .

Aruba Pro Divers, Dive Aruba, Native Divers, Casa Del Mar June 2000, Steven Neal, Fairfield, TX.

Vis: 40 to 80 ft. Water: 76 to 78 degrees, calm and flat. We didn't make reservations to dive until we got there. Ended up diving 3 operators. Aruba Pro Divers: Jair (JJ) took us on 3 shore dives; no drinks or snacks, in the Pos Chiquito area. Saw turtle, 3 kinds of eels, scorpion fish, lettuce leaf nudibranchs by the score, spotted drum and usual tropicals, also green anemones, trunk and cowfish. Pro divers has a big boat, but apparently it was full and we were overflow. Jair does the shore diving for Pro Divers. He was personable, knowledgeable, life-long resident who spearfishes on the north side on his days off. Dive Aruba: Owned by Clive; our dive-master was Patrick. 21' rickety-looking boat, patched rub rails, 85 hp motor, no cover, no shade, did bring drinks. O₂ at shop. Boat is loaded and then backed down nearby ramp for passenger loading. When new diver hit fire coral, we furnished vinegar from our med bag for relief. Max 5 divers and the boat was full w/5 divers and divemaster. Did a deep dive on Barcadera Reef and shallow on Plonco; saw largest collection of Christmas tree worms of any place I've been. Large scrawled file fish and juvenile orange filefish, white spotted, and usual tropicals. Shallow dive 8 flamingo tongues. Patrick tried to cover too much ground; we like to study. Native Divers: Romeo and Vanessa Croes (crews) have small mom and pop operation. Had adequate rental equip. 24' open boat w/Bimini; plenty shade, 225 hp motor. Very dry boat; no water, no drinks or snacks, over sides when travel, no water on

floor. 6 divers max. *Debby II* wreck and reef, plenty corals, 6 eels, red and blue cleaner shrimp, trunk fish, lizard fish, octopus at wreck, barracuda. Laidback; let us go at our own pace; we had computers, he didn't, but did have O₂ on boat, cell phone, etc. We were only 2 divers. (Aruba Pro Divers 2978 2-5520; Fax 2978 7-7722 ; Dive Aruba 297-827337; Fax 297-821817; Native Divers 297-864763; Fax 297-864763)

Pelican Watersports, Holiday Inn, October/November 1999, Barry Lipman, Brookfield, CT. Sunny, with almost no cloud cover. Waves no more than one foot, little to no current. Water temp: Low 80s, 3-mil suit nice, many divers wore no thermal protection. The diving on Aruba is severely underrated. There are some excellent shipwrecks, most notably the Antilla and the Jane Sea. Both are penetrable with a local guide. The Antilla is four hundred feet long and the entire inside is accessible. Both are nicely encrusted in corals and sponges. The Antilla is a fantastic night dive. The corals on the South side of the Island are similar to those found in Curaçao's Mushroom Forest, and are quite healthy. Not much in the way of big stuff, but plenty of smaller tropicals and lots of macro opportunities. The wrecks provide lots of beautiful wide angle views. Pelican Watersports was reliable and professional, with a sincerely helpful and cheerful staff. They can handle newbies and resort coursers while recognizing more experienced divers' needs. The boats are clean and well equipped and the

rides to the dive sites are generally short. Accommodation at the Holiday Inn were excellent, with plenty of good food, clean rooms, all the amenities. The island has an active night life, suitable for most tastes (somehow I wound up at the Aruba's Harley Davidson Motorcycle Club's Halloween party in time for the bikini contest —very entertaining.), but of course you can always do a night dive...but even after that there is plenty to do. I heard the North and South Eastern sides have some excellent reef diving with lots of big fish, but the only operator willing to take, John of SEAruba canceled me with no warning at the last minute — rude and not professional! I've never been stood up by a dive operator before, so this bears some detail. I had spoken with John Thursday afternoon. We agreed I'd dive with him the following Saturday afternoon and he seemed excited about diving the Shark Caves and another site infrequently dived. We left off that I'd call him Saturday when I was free to go to his boat. When I called him Saturday, he told me he was too busy to take me. I told him it was too late for me to make other plans, but he insisted he was too busy. I immediately called Pelican, and they fit me in no problem, so the afternoon was not wasted. John didn't go out of business, the weather was good, his boat didn't break down, no one got sick, he had my telephone number, but he flaked out — not good!

**Pelican Watersports, La Cabana,
June 2000, Renee Sherwood,
Tucson, AZ.** Water: 78 degrees. Here

is supposed to be better diving but dive operations won't take you there. They say the other side of the island has strong currents and surges. They cater to the beginner. **(1129-783-1228, 1129-782-4739; Fax 1129-783-2655)**

**Red Sail Sports, Pelican Watersports,
Hyatt, August 2000, Robert W.
Gleeson (gleesonr@swbell.net),
Bulverde, TX.** Vis: 40-80 Feet.

Water: 82 to 84 F, no currents.

Restrictions were made and on some dives enforced and on other dives ignored. Restrictions were on time and depth and made sense but dives never lasted the limit or made the depth. I can unconditionally advise that for a vacation the hotels, sunbathing, swimming, Windsurfing, nightlife, food and relaxation are the best I have found in the Caribbean. The two diving operations touted as the best, Red Sail Sports and Pelican Watersports, stink. I dove with each two days. Had not carried my gear on 3 separate legs to get there and back I would have hung it up after the first day but as an optimist I hung in. With Pelican Watersports we had two dives on Southern Aruba dive sites. The boat was packed with all levels of divers, a cattle operation. We did have two divemasters one who dove in front of the herd and the other behind. They herded all of the divers up when the first got to 1000 psi — that did not take long. Both dives were over almost barren areas with little if any sea life. They did have a camera barrel but the divers that did not speak English all washed their masks in the barrel before the dive and it did not

look like the water was fresh from the day before. The second dive trip was with Red Sail and we visited what was supposed to be a wrecked airplane. The dive was in 35 ft. of water and was actually a checkout dive that one of the divemasters (Instructor?) was making on about 6 or so students. The other divemaster jumped in with the rest of the divers to explore the area. I took off by myself and spent the allotted time and resurfaced. I was never missed and had the best dive of the trip since no one messed with me. I actually took 10 pictures. The wrecked plane had been scattered everywhere by a storm last winter and the few pieces that remained hardly warranted a dive. I took a buddy on the third day to a sunken WWII wreck that is interesting with Red Sail Sports. The diver that I took with me had not been diving for several years. I enjoyed watching someone refine the enjoyment of diving. The boat was loaded with beginners and snorkelers and after a lecture on depth and time and instruction to follow the guide they left us totally alone and I took my buddy down the open side of the wreck and back. The wreck was 400 ft. long with very open holds, a very good beginners dive without penetration. We only saw 3 or 4 other divers the entire dive and it would seem that the dive crew spent their time with the students that they had on the boat. We booked a return with Pelican Watersports and went back to the wreck the next afternoon. This boat was crowded with students, snorkelers, and all levels of diving experience (mostly low). We received

a good lecture before the dive and the divemaster made a Drill Sergeant check of everyone's gear. They herded us on this dive down one side of the wreck and back up the other. Swimming along side of the underside of the hull was boring. The divemaster stopped and began counting divers after about 20 minutes. The count took quite some time 5 minutes or so and during the count the divemaster found one diver with 1000 psi remaining. They signaled us to follow him and I noted that we were swimming away from the dive boat but I could not get the divemaster to respond to this. When the low diver got to 500 psi the divemaster had everyone surface and as I suspected we were several hundred yards from the moored boat. The surface swim was not bad but was unnecessary. I would rate Aruba a zero for diving. The Hyatt is excellent. The food everywhere is excellent. Take money or a good credit card you pay upscale prices for everything. Our buffet breakfast was \$20. Lunches the same and dinners with wine ran \$60 to \$80/person. (Ph: 415-743- 5306; Fax: 415-981-6203; or Telephone 297-861603; Fax 297-866657, e-mail: info@redsail.com, Website: www.redsail.com)

Red Sail Sports, Marriott Ocean Club, September 2000, Bill Harvey (billharvey@21stcentury.net), Chicago, IL. Vis: 40 to 90 Feet. Water: 83 F, calm. Strong suggestion to not go below 100 feet, time restrictions, back on boat with 500 PSI — none were too restrictive due to location and dive sites. Pleasantly

surprised. West had only a few sites — mostly wrecks, and was pretty shallow — we did not go below 60 feet there. Little current and less viz— typically 40-50 feet. Only 5-10 minutes to the dive sites. But the wrecks were very good — Antilla and Pedernalis we dove several times. The Pedernalis is an AWESOME night dive. The wreck has been there 50 years or so and is overgrown with orange coral that is beautiful when feeding at night. Blue bell tunicates are everywhere. We even saw a free-swimming nudibranch. I think it was a Caribbean Spanish Dancer. In the afternoon, millions of silversides are on the wreck. Also saw green moray eels and some of the largest lobster I'd seen. The south shore had some wrecks and lots of good coral. It is about a 45 minute boat ride. It had better visibility and stronger currents than the west side. On the wreck of the Jane Sea, we saw a frogfish. On another site we found 2 seahorses and a chain moray. Red Sail Sports — if a cattle boat is more than 20 divers, then it was a cattle boat. But their boats are big, well laid out, and efficient. A separate camera rinse tank, 2 gear rinse tanks, a fresh shower, a marine head, plenty of space for shade and sun, fresh fruit between dives, plenty of ice water, and a friendly knowledgeable crew — what more does a diver need? They picked us up at the hotel and took us back after the dive (no pickup for night dives). At the site, they gave an orientation, let divers go on their own or with a guide. 2 guides were normally in the water

(not dive police). Unlimited diving for a week for \$300 — I did 19 dives so my per dive cost was pretty low. They were a well-run operation. Warm water, plenty of critters, lots of sun, great beaches, and a good dive operator — a great vacation.

Unique Sports of Aruba, Playa Linda, August 2000, Bob Oberle, Norwalk, OH. Vis: 30-40 ft. Water: 80-82 degrees. Never went to a site deeper than 90 ft. back on boat in 40 mins. Having been to Aruba previously, we knew the diving was not going to be extraordinary (and it wasn't). The island of Aruba is beautiful for vacationing — great weather, first class hotels, fine restaurants, and casinos. The people are great. Unique Sports was competent but nothing more. The divemaster had only been there 2 months and had responsibility for 16+ divers. The boats were in bad shape — cramped, lacking rinse tank for cameras, and while having the basic emergency equipment, it looked like we were lucky to not need it. Contrasted with our resort's dive operation — Pelican Watersports — their boats were huge, brightly painted and very uncrowded. All of the required amenities were also on board — camera table, rinse tank, fresh water shower, etc. Everyone we spoke with stated that they were very satisfied with Pelican. They have a first class golf course, so I guess we'll trade our regs, BC, and wetsuits for 7 irons, putters, and drivers. **(2978-6-0096; Fax 2978-6-0096)**