

## ARUBA

Just off Venezuela's Caribbean coast, Aruba has not been a prime scuba-diving destination, but bring your gear since some operators 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 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. . . . Aruba lies south of the hurricane belt. . .

**Mermaid Divers, Sonesta Suites, October 2001, James McMeins, Carnation, WA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 75 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm. Though Sonesta contracts with Redsail, it was more convenient to go with Mermaid next to hotel. Small boat and when there was more than ten divers, it was really crowded. No room on boat for anything other than smaller range-finder type camera units. Because the boat is kept at the marina and the dive shop is toward the big resorts, they haul the tanks and other gear down every morning. So you can either sit back and watch them load or save time and help them get the boat loaded quickly. Crew and divemasters friendly and helpful. We did three tank dives. After the first day when several of us more experienced divers stayed

down for an hour, the divemaster got upset and strictly enforced the dive time of 45 mins. or less. Visibility wasn't that great on most of the dives and not many small tropicals around the reefs. Soft corals and sponges are beautiful. A cargo ship was sunk recently in 110'. Once it's been down for a few years it will be an awesome dive. Most of the airplanes were pretty well broken up by the storm surge that also hit Curacao and Bonaire but they're still interesting. The DC-3 has broken in two and the wings are now up the slope from it. Sonesta Suites Beach Resort: beautiful hotel, immaculate landscaping, huge free form pools, private swimming lagoon and its own private island. The rooms are excellent and well maintained, no restaurant on site other than the breakfast buffet but since you're in downtown Oranjestad there are plenty of options. (Ph: (297) 835546 or (297) 837525; mermaid@setarnet.aw; website [www.scubadivers-aruba.com](http://www.scubadivers-aruba.com))

**Mermaid Divers, Costa Linda, November 2001, Terry Rinkes, Beaver Creek, OR.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 100 to 200 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, calm. Rates were lower than advertised with operators that were competing for customers Mermaid offered \$25 dives if you bought six or more; no extra for night dive and the same rate for all in my party even if they only made one dive. Because we were return divers they cut 15% off the bill. Glad I didn't buy dive packages before I left home as many operators I e-mailed published

higher prices and said they were discounts and I would pay more after I arrived. Loved the no hurry easy going but safety continuous attitude of Mermaid Divers. No short cuts on surface intervals and at least three, usually five minute safety stops.

**Mermaid Divers, Renaissance Beach Resort & Casino, August 2002, Barry S. Yoss, Vestal, NY.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, choppy. Hotel was Sonesta Beach Hotel, now Marriott. Well maintained, comfortable rooms. Small terraces. We had room overlooking the pool, with afternoon sun, convenient for drying dive gear. Across from marina, convenient for shopping. Two casinos within three blocks. Many excellent restaurants nearby. Inexpensive taxi ride to Palm beach for other dining. Three pools between hotel Marina Tower and Suite (timeshare) buildings. Beach at Suite building and larger beach on private island reached by complimentary boat (ten minutes one way). Small dive operation. Boat moored across from hotel (convenient). Office at Manchebo Beach Hotel. Free pickup at hotels. Dive boat is 38 foot Mermaid II, equipped with DAN oxygen, radios, cell phones, and marine head. We had 8-16 divers per day. Students were segregated from certified divers. Dive packages average \$25/dive. Equipment for rent. Boat captain (Tito) helpful with equipment, especially for my buddy with recent back surgery. Divemasters were safety conscious and tried to find critters. Green morays on most dives.

Reasonable numbers of typical reef fish. Antilla wreck was excellent with many areas to swim into and through. Lack of shore diving.

**Red Sail Sports, March 2002, Dave Dobbins (yourmotheralso@aol.com) Henderson, NV.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 76 F, choppy surge. Red Sail picked us up at the cruise ship pier, great boat -- plenty wide. Room for 60 tanks, only took 23 divers. Not on top of each other. Dove the "Antilla" and the "Pederbakes" good briefings. Made accommodations for divers needing additional equipment. (Ph: 415-743-5306; Fax: 415-981-6203; or Telephone 297-861603; e-mail: info@redsail.com, Website: www.redsail.com)

**Red Sail Sports, Renaissance Beach Resort, May 2002, Greg Rodden (A9230@AOL.com) Philadelphia, PA.** Vis: 50-75 ft. Water: 75-80 F. Dives logged: 200+. Aruba is a good destination to go if you have a nondiving spouse or companion. Excellent restaurants, night life, casinos, fantastic beaches and snorkeling. The people are friendly and crime is almost nonexistent. Red Sail Sports is a professional dive operation. Their boats are well equipped and spacious. Their staff is knowledgeable as most are PADI instructors. The wreck, Mantilla, is north, and a decent wreck dive with swim-thought the cargo holes. As I found out too late, the better sites seem to be on the South Coast where the reefs are healthier. Surface conditions were usually rough making exits challenging. Renaissance

Beach Resort (formerly the Sonesta) has excellent rooms and convenient to town. It has a private island accessible only by a shuttle boat that comes about every 20 minutes. Red Sail has a concession on the island and shore diving is available, but only if the staff is available and the surface conditions are calm.

**Red Sail Sports, Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino, July 2002, Gil Zeimer (gil@zeimer.com) San Rafael, CA.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 40 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. Many regard the “Antilla” as the best, biggest and oldest wreck dive in the Caribbean. Part of this 400-foot ship is visible above water and from the shore. The remainder slants into the sand at 60 feet. Known as the Ghost Ship, its captain on May 10, 1940 purposely sank this German freighter, rather than surrendering to the Dutch Marines. It was one of the best dives of my life, featuring swim throughs of the roomy compartments, thousands of bait fish that surrounded me in a 20-foot swirling mass for about five minutes, dozens of colorful tropical fish, coral-encrusted surfaces, and an eerie feeling of timeless beauty.

## THE BAHAMAS

The Bahamas are easily accessible from Florida and excellent for long weekends, with pretty reefs (though many affected by algae), decent tropicals, and plenty of resorts that feed sharks. . . . Keep hurricane season, June through October, in mind; winter weather

from December to March means mid-70s, chilly water, and sweaters in the evening; average nighttime temperature is in the mid-60s, but can drop into the 50s if winter air blows off the continent. . . . Out-island are resorts small and personal, but the best diving is now being reached by live-aboards.

## Andros

**Froggies Out island Adventures, August 2002, Hank Martin, Boonton, NJ.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, choppy. Mediocre dive op. Primarily interested in filling the boat with snorkelers or divers. Not a dedicated dive boat, tanks and gear are assembled and laid on the floor. Did not bring my equipment since this was a family, not a dive, vacation. Rental equipment substandard — couldn’t take a breath from the reg without getting a mouth full of water. Dive sites were unimpressive — second dive was at a max of 22 feet, and was the better of the dives. Surface interval consisted of the ten minutes it took to get everyone back in the boat and the ten minutes to go to the next site. Dive masters were uninterested in any real interaction with the divers. The one leading our group seemed to think the dive was an aerobic exercise — not much time for stopping to look. My 12-year-old son pointed more stuff out to me than did the divemaster. They charged a buck a piece for sodas and water. As a vacation destination, the cays of the Abacos are tremendous. We rented a private home in Hope