



Grand Turk, British West Indies
May, 1982

One of the finest diving experiences we had was our trip in 1982 to a small island at the end of the Bahamas called Grand Turk. There was no deep sea port when we were there so the cruise ships and the cruise industry hadn't made their presence known...yet.



We had a day's layover in Miami so we went to Ocean World and played the typical tourist as we watched the water show featuring seals, otters, porpoise, and whales. We walked through the botanical gardens and looked through all the glass sea tanks and had a lovely day of it. Our flight out of Miami delivered us to the island early the next morning.

A bit of history...

Grand Turk was first colonized in 1681 by Bermudians, who set up the salt industry in the islands. In 1766 it became the capital of the country. For some time, at least until the early 19th century, Grand Turk was often referred to as Grand Cay, not to be confused with either Grand Cay in the Bahamas or Grand Cayman.

It is possibly the landfall island of Christopher Columbus during his discovery of the New World in 1492. San Salvador Island or Samana Cay in the Bahamas is traditionally considered the site of Columbus' first landfall, but some believe that studies of Columbus' journals show that his descriptions of Guanahani much more closely fit Grand Turk than they do other candidates.

The name comes from a species of cactus on the island, the Turk's Cap Cactus (*Melocactus intortus*), which has a distinctive cap, reminiscent of an Ottoman fez.

Grand Turk gained international attention in 1962 when John Glenn's *Friendship 7* Mercury spacecraft landed in the vicinity of Grand Turk Island off the southeast shoreline. A replica of the *Friendship 7* is on display in Grand Turk at the entrance to the Grand Turk Island airport.

Island air service and airports are an experience. Most of our trips to the islands themselves were aboard older DC-3s. Some islands were still using Ford tri-motors for their service. The accommodations are snug since they cram as much luggage fore and aft and people in between. Flying close to Cuba you may see a fighter plane alongside to assert their air space. The Airstrips on most islands, including Grand Turk, begin and end at the water's edge. The pilot no more than sets the landing gear down on the tarmac or gravel when full-flaps are applied and the plane stops none-too-short of plopping into the ocean.

The arrival of a plane was an event for the natives who would come in to see the landing (maybe they were placing bets on its success). There were always plenty of young help for a few coins to carry the baggage to customs. Customs and custom officials are a different breed of cat. Rarely do these people seem to smile and God forbid you tell a joke. The normal customs procedure was for us to step up to a window, present our passport, answer a few questions, pay two or three dollars in exact change, get the passport stamped, and proceed to a table where our luggage was quickly inspected. Then it was throw your gear and baggage into a truck, van, or car for a ride to the hotel.



While on Grand Turk, we stayed at the hotel Kittina (now the Osprey Beach Hotel). The name was a derivative of the first names of the husband and wife owners - Kit and Tina. When we checked in there was one other father and his son in the hotel and they were leaving in the next few days. Otherwise, we were the only guests in the hotel. We checked into our room which didn't appear like the brochure so we checked with the hotel clerk who apologized and resituated us in a deluxe room.

The hotel sat/sits on Second Street. First Street slipped into the ocean many years ago.

Grand Turk is a page out of a history book and a trip through the village was like walking through a stereotypical British colonial island settlement of the 1800's.



Fresh water was a precious commodity and the buildings were constructed over large cisterns to collect rainwater. The larger houses were made of stone with tiled roofs and shutters with screened windows. The majority of homes were of wood but brightly painted and highly decorated with gingerbread and gables.



When we were there, the island was still a British colony and island officials were dressed in crisp white shirts and Bermuda shorts, knee-high white socks, and polished black shoes - a stark contrast to their dark skin. In all of the islands we visited, Grand Turk was the cleanest. The people were poor, but they and all of their children were clean and their property was neat.

The first afternoon, Dad and I went to the back of the hotel where the dive operation was housed. The Dive Master was a lithe young man in his thirties named Mike Spiller. Mike was originally from Texas - something about Texas and diving we never figured out. Visiting, and staying with Mike, was a young woman named Susan who was a professional photographer from New York who was doing some promotional materials for the island tourism. We also met Sucker, the dive dog, who joined us for every boat trip. As a Dive Master, Mike was excellent. His knowledge of the reefs and of the aquatic life made each dive enjoyable. As a person, Mike and Susan were friendly and outgoing.

Our first dive was at "Black Forest" - a wall beginning at 40 feet and dropping down to 7,000 feet. The water here was a bit colder and it was recommended that we wear our short wet suits. While on the dive, swimming in the sandy shallows, Mike and I both saw a piece of metal laying exposed in the sand. Mike got to it first. Not knowing what it was, he showed it to me. Once I pantomimed a sword fight and outlined the hilt across my hand, I got the "ah-ha" look. It was a hilt from an old broadsword.

Our evening meals were spectacular. The feast they laid out for just the two of us was staggering. Meals usually consisted of three meats, fish, seafood, salads, beverages, and several choices of desert. To think that most of the items were shipped in made the whole meal more than a little extravagant...but who were we to complain.

Two o'clock in the morning is early by any standard - certainly by mine. But this was the time when the roosters began to crow and the wild burros began to run up and down the street. First nights are never restful on trips and this certainly didn't help matters. In the morning, after hours of crowing which only stopped with the sun's rising, we learned that the trouble was with one elusive rooster who had evaded all attempts of capture and demise. It had been going on for so long that the island T-shirts featured a rooster with the initials S.D.I.G.T.K.T.F.R. - Some Day I'm Going To Kill That Fucking Rooster. Guests had even gone so far as to set hunting expeditions at wee hours of the morning armed with spear guns, bee bee rifles, rocks, sling shots, but all to no avail. The rooster would start the other roosters crowing and the burrows running. This trip produced little sleep.

Early dives included "Anchor Reef" - a shallow water dive to an old Spanish Anchor with exposed encrusted flukes and chain - and "Finbar's Reef" - a wall dive at about 80 feet and was where I first used my new underwater camera.

If I had to choose which type of diving I preferred, it would be wall diving. I found it easier to float along with the current in front of a coral wall, but it was also easy to lose track of your depth.



"Library Reef" was our first ocean night dive. Night dives are by their nature interesting because an entire world of animals come out that are not seen during the day. Shell-less but not defenseless nudibranchs such as brittle stars, basket stars, shrimp, lobsters, and crabs forage for food illuminated only by the night sky and our dive lights. This is another occasion where maintaining the proper depth can be difficult because you can become disoriented.

On a number of occasions, we were privileged to dive with the Governor of Grand Turk - John Strong - who Mike had certified as a diver in an attempt to create an awareness within the government of what a natural resource there was and how to protect it. John Clifford Strong (born 1922) was Governor of the Turks and Caicos from August 1978 to September 1982. John was a British government representative who was asked by the island government to stay over an additional year to ease the transition from British colony to an independent state. A year later, the island's new government was indicted on drug trafficking charges. John and his wife were joined by their daughter Penny and her husband Dave who worked at a distillery on Tasmania and were vacationing on the island for a few months.

Our trip to "Long Cay" - an island off the mainland - was an all-day event. Lunch was provided by the staff and the boat loaded with gear and supplies. The Governor and his family joined us for the trip to this volcanic island. The dive was rather non-decrypt; probably due to the rough seas and strong currents. And even though we vowed never to do it again, my navigation with the compass brought us up short of the dive boat. The seas were rough and it was a struggle to get back to the boat. Mike didn't hesitate to jump in and help Dad swim back.



The island of Long Cay is very small and is populated by a large colony of Noddy Terns, which is why the Governor's wife - an avid ornithologist - wanted to join the dive party. The natives come by boat to the island to help themselves to tern eggs. Dad and I spent the afternoon exploring the island sifting through refuse washed up on shore under the watchful eyes of terns and iguanas. The island surface was so jagged that it cut through the bottoms of our hiking shoes; taking entire chunks of Vibram with every step.

Mike and Susan, and of course Sucker, became good friends during our stay. One evening they asked if we would like a tour of the island. I believe it was to the northeast end where there was an abandoned US military base complete with barracks, officer's quarters, empty pool, motor pool, lighthouse, and other buildings all in relatively good shape and watched over by one of the island natives who lives on site. The Osprey enjoy the lighthouse and we enjoyed seeing the water spout that was created offshore where strong currents meet and spiral upwards of 200 feet. It was a most unusual sight.



The 60 feet lighthouse, overlooking North Creek, was completed by British architect Alexander Gordon in 1852 to alert sailors of the shallow reef. Brighter kerosene lamps and a more powerful Fresnel lens were added by the Chance brothers in 1943 and remained in use until 1972 when the lighthouse was electrified.

A Mr. Frith secured the building of the island's first modern lighthouse in 1852, saving the island's salt trade, which had waned when vessels stopped arriving due to difficulty with navigation. It was designed by the architect Alexander Gordon to alert sailors of the shallow reef. Constructed in the United Kingdom, it was shipped in pieces to the island. In its heyday, a lighthouse keeper stayed all night at the lighthouse to monitor the lamps and slept during the day in the small keeper's house at the side.

The still functional lighthouse site is often referred to as Grand Turk Historic Lighthouse Park. The lighthouse and lighthouse keeper's house are a historic site under the protection of the National Trust. A view point for watching whales tourists come to lighthouse hill in February and March.

Mike and Susan then drove us to a local restaurant for a native dinner. The restaurant looked more like a bath house than an eatery. The food was served family style in large bowls and included fried conch. After gorging ourselves, there was still enough light and time left in the day to visit the other end of the island. At the opposite end is a US installation that was manned by one operator. It was a tracking station built during the days of the Apollo space missions and was still being used as a radio tracking station when we were there.

There were relatively few native men on the island when we were there. They spend nine to ten months out of every year out at sea; just long enough to earn enough money to add a few more rows of bricks to their partially built home. There were houses all over the island in various stages of construction. It truly was a different culture. People didn't steal from others because there was nowhere to run. OK, one man did rob the bank and got away with bags of pennies and couldn't be found for several days. They finally located him with a military helicopter that was flown in from another island to search the caves. The sound was so unusual that he stuck his head out to see what it was, giving his location away.

The jail on the island reflects the culture. It was a relatively large complex of building with a walled parameter and barbed wire. The main gate was tied shut with a piece of rope but it was guarded. At the back of the compound, a section of the wire had been removed so that the prisoners standing on a box could converse with friends who could also pass them a beer over the wall. Certainly a relaxed penal system, but it seemed to work.

We returned to "Library Reef" for a night dive. The vertical walls looked like stacks of books - thereby its name - and we saw numerous slipper lobsters and what had to be the granddaddy of all crabs. Granted, everything looks larger under water, but this monster was inside a barrel sponge and its claws were as big as my forearm.

"Amphitheater" formed a large crescent-shaped reef resembling a coliseum. It was here that Susan spent time with Dad and I teaching us what could and could not be handled safely. But the general rule for divers is to take only memories and leave only bubbles.

Plans to dive a blue hole on our last day of diving had to be passed due to strong winds. Currents in a blue hole can be treacherous and unpredictable under the most favorable conditions. To dive the hole that day would have been foolish. We chose to return to "South Canyon" and were again joined by the

Governor and his family. There is something to say about English charm. John Strong was a very distinguished gentleman, extremely articulate and well educated, yet easy to talk to. I think he and Dad enjoyed their conversations because they were about the same age.