



Guanaja, Honduras
June, 1987

I mentioned previously that we had, on occasion, unintentionally selected island to dive that were in war zones. This was true of our trip in 1987 to Guanaja off the coast of Honduras.



We had made our reservations several months in advance to assure a slot. Between the time we made our nonrefundable reservations to a few weeks before our departure, the newspapers were full of articles of riots and bombings in Honduras. We have been known to take chances, but nothing so foolhardy as to enter a war zone. We called the hotel with our concerns. They assured us that what we had read was greatly exaggerated and in no way affected the island or our trip. Since most of the trouble was south and we wouldn't be landing in San Pedro, we would sit tight and wait to see how things played out. Shortly after our call, there was no mention in the papers of any further trouble.

A bit of history...

Guanaja was discovered by Christopher Columbus on his fourth voyage in 1502. Notably, this was the first time he came across cacao, which is the core of chocolate. He landed on Soldado Beach on the north side of the island. In later years Cayman Islanders settled in the Bay Islands, which explains the diffusion of Spanish and English language.

Columbus called it *Isla de Los Pinos* (Isle of Pines) although it already had a name, *Guanaca*, used by the natives that inhabited it. This name appears as early as 1511 on a map drawn by Peter Martyr but it later was corrupted by English pirates, privateers and settlers and was pronounced Bonacca. There has been other names for the island over the years before the Bay Islands were turned over to Honduras as the English, the Dutch and the Spaniards modified the name to their liking.



Upon gaining possession of the Bay Islands the Honduran government made *Guanaja* the official name of the island but the residents kept the old name for as long as they could and older inhabitants throughout the islands still call it Bonacca. The main settlement is called The Cay, an abbreviation of Lower Cays, the original name. It was first settled by the Haylocks who had moved to the two little cays that lay about a half kilometer off the south shore of the main island to get rid of the flies that plagued them during calm nights. They eventually stayed and later sold the southernmost cay (Hog Cay) to the Kirkconnells. Many other families, among others the Bordens, the Phillips and the Woods, came later and by the 1880s a thriving community had developed.

Homer Hickam, author of *Rocket Boys/October Sky*, was one of the first scuba explorers of Guanaja, first visiting in 1973. Along with a team of other scuba explorers, he extensively mapped the reef system around the island for sport divers. He still owns property on the northeast end of the island.

The primary source of income for the islanders is fishing and shrimping. Tourism is confined to a handful of small resorts that cater to divers, snorkelers and adventure travelers. The island's warm, clear waters support an extensive coral reef that is part of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef and second only to the Great Barrier Reef off the coasts of Australia. Currently, there is still access to fresh water on Guanaja, and several waterfalls can be seen.



Our flight was scheduled to leave Omaha on June 4 in the early hours of the morning. Our flight was then directed to Dallas and from there we would transfer to Tan Shasha Airlines for the flight into Honduras and on to Guanaja. Tan Shasha was the airline of the Central Americas at the time. Their fleet of planes consisted of 707s and DC-3s. The interiors were nothing to look at; seating was tight, and smoking was permitted on all flights. There were no seating reservations on the DC-3s so it was first-come-first-seated.

After a three-hour layover, we boarded our flight for La Ceibe Honduras. The airport in La Ceibe hadn't changed since we were last there in '83. After customs and a bag check, we waited in the air conditioned room reserved for flight passengers. There were no roads or telephones on the island, just sea and land and diving.

A dive boat transported us from the Guanaja Airport in the twilight hours to Pasada Del Sol; our home for the next eight days.



We were greeted at the door by a pair of large dogs who became everyone's companions for their stay. Also greeting us with a rum-punch drink in hand was the hotel's manager, Dave. When all of the guests had arrived, we sat at poolside for our instructions. Our room was #11 - Sagittarius - on the upper level close to the pool and butted up against the wall of an inactive volcano on which the hotel was built.

Originally, the inn was a private residence. Having a dozen or so rooms, pool, bar, and dining area, Posada Del Sol was a beautiful facility with one exception - there was no breeze in the rooms regardless of how windy it was outside. The only relief came from the ceiling fan. We rearranged the room so that our beds were directly under the fan for sleeping. In the morning we were ready to go. Another diving adventure awaited.

Breakfast at the Inn was as much and as formal as you wanted. Eggs, pancakes, waffles, omelets, cereal, breads, coffee, juice, whatever your pleasure. The dining area would accommodate the guests and a few more and table were arranged to seat to to twenty. The napkins were always folded in different figures for each meal. It was an extra touch we always remembered.

After breakfast we went to the dive shop for a short presentation on procedures and to check out our weights. Our checkout dive was at "Lee's Pleasure." Enter the water, each diver was asked to remove their mask, replace and clear it. The remove their regulator, purge and replace it. This being done, we were off. This was the first dive with a new pair of fins that were purchased to replace a bulkier pair. The fins worked like a charm but the straps had to be modified to avoid chafing the heel.

Posada ran three dives a day; two morning and one afternoon. We would often replace the afternoon dive with some other scheduled trip such as a tour or hike. But in the beginning, we made every dive. The first day we dove "Hector's Run" and "George's Wreck." The elk horn coral formations were spectacular and leaf coral varied in colors of greens, yellows, rust, and reds. The reefs were extremely clean and relatively free of urchins (urchins literally devour a reef).

One serious problem we experienced was sea sickness. We attributed this to sinus conditions and rolling waves. It was serious enough that Dad had to vomit while diving; a tricky feat through a regulator. We tried various doses of Dramamine and Sudafed but nothing seemed to work. That queasy feeling never left the entire week. Dad also ran into a related problem of his ears not clearing.

Lunch was more food than anyone has the right to eat but the menu was so tempting it was hard to resist. From grilled fish to fajitas to hamburgers and quiche, each lunch was a delight and topped off with desert. Joining us for lunch were a pair of parrots that sat on their swinging perches squawking, whistling, and repeating phrases in Spanish and English taught them by the guests and employees.

There was a diverse group of divers there that week. One couple, who had breakfasted with us each morning, was the mayor of Deerfield, Illinois and his wife. Becky and Herb were a charming couple with a rugged outdoor appearance. They owned two jewelry stores as well as a bakery. Their first shop was in an old bank that they had modernized but yet retained the charm of its original structure. They made and specialized in custom jewelry and wax castings. I have no doubt about their success judging from the quality of the work they were wearing. The name of their shop reflected their lifestyle; Voyagers.

A fireman and his wife - Ron and Carol - were another pair. Ron was boisterous. When we dove, he was almost head-down vertical. How he managed to maintain that position is beyond me. He looked like a file fish. Carol was working on finishing her diving certification which she did by the end of the week.

Then there was a group from Texas (sound familiar?). A man (Don) and his wife and daughter. Of the three, Don was the only diver. Frosty White (yeah...that was her name) had a quick wit and charming personality. She was the life of the party. Frosty worked at a nuclear power plant.

The next day we dove "Silver Load", "Afternoon Delight", and "Windmill Reef". "Silver Load" we would dive on more than one occasion. The group dove down a permanent mooring line to the reef and then down an additional 70 feet to where a tunnel went through the reef into a bowl. The bowl was a chumming area for large barracuda, eel, and schools of grouper, lemon tails, and sea bass. We sat as the Dive Master fed the fish.



That afternoon I made the mistake of taking what is rightfully called the Death March. It was a trip up the mountain behind the hotel. Granted, the scenery was fabulous but one false step would have spelled the end to diving for the week. Most of the guests started the hike, a few made it to the first stop. Dad and a few more went to the next stop. Myself, Herb, Ron, Carol, and our spry tour guide went to the top...and oh yes, the dogs were with us. What surprised me was the mountain was covered with pine trees - thus the original name of Island of the Pines. The trek was exhausting and I returned almost two hours later with not an ounce of energy or dry clothing

Dinner was always an experience. We never had the same meal twice. Soup or salad came first along with fresh hot bread. The main course might have been fish, chicken, kabobs, or lobster. The deserts included key lime pie, coconut or banana cream pie, ice cream, etc. We weren't big bar attendees but the local beer was a refreshing Pilsner and the mixed drinks were smooooottth.

"Vertigo" was our first float dive - similar to a drift dive. The boat took us to what appeared to be the middle of the ocean and, with difficulty, tied to an anchoring. The seas were rough. Gearing up was difficult and once in the water it was a workout to get to the anchor line. While we waited for the rest of the divers to arrive, our air supply continued to decrease. The Dive Master ended up having to cut the anchor line loose. The purpose of the dive was to see the rare cricoid (sp?) stars; similar to a brittle star but much larger.

We spent our surface time on a nearby island where the crew supplied us with fresh coconuts. The bay was home to large schools of fish and with fish you get pelicans. In the safety and shelter of the bay, large numbers of brown pelicans could be seen folding their wings and plummeting into the water for a meal. Not very graceful, but very efficient.



That afternoon we opted to take a tour of Bonaca - Venice of the Caribbean. We took one of the older dive boats to the island with its houses built on stilts.



Originally, just a small volcanic outcropping, natives began to build on the island to avoid the no-see-ums of the mainland. As the population grew, residents were forced to build further towards the water's edge and even over and in the water. Thus the appearance of Venice. The boats used to navigate the limited waterways are also narrow and are usually dugouts made of mahogany.

In earlier days when the island was really two distinct halves, a pig farmer set up operation on one end of the island. The smell got so bad that eventually the farmer was evicted to a location downwind. That area of the island is still known as Pig Key. The population at the time was around 5,000 and the living conditions were poverty. While they had no local pollution, the refuse of other islands was left along the shoreline by the ocean current. We toured the fish factory - which was the major source of income for the

island - and walked through the small town. You don't appreciate what you have until you visit a place like Bonaca.

The following day was the typical island mid-week picnic. We were scheduled to spend the day on the opposite side of the island, eat lunch, dive, and return for dinner. The boat ride was extremely rough. At the tip of the island is a lighthouse and around the opposite side, diving was as different as night and day. We dove "Volcano Caves" and "Paradise" which were volcanic projections onto which little of anything grew. There were not the coral reefs of the other side of the island; just outcroppings of lava that had cooled when it hit the water creating numerous passageways and shallow caves. Dad had problems clearing his ears and chose not to make the dives.

The picnic at Paradise came complete with chicken, coleslaw, potato salad, and bugs. After eating, everyone headed for the water for relief from the sun and insects. Being the only person who wanted to visit a nearby waterfall, I turned down the trip so as not to delay the others. Judging by the pictures...it would have been worth the trip.



That afternoon we dove "Pavilion" which was just as nondescript as the morning dives. Thank goodness we were not diving this side of the island all week.

On June 9th we dove "Captain's Crack" and another site whose name eludes me. We dove the Crack to see the black coral and giant gorgonia (sea fans). While the dives were nice, it was the afternoon's expedition that was unique; we went digging for "ting-tings".

We took a boat to a small town north of the hotel where, with Philberto our guide, we were going to dig for Mayan artifacts. Philberto was a maintenance man at the hotel where he had worked for eight years. His English was very good and he was an excellent guide. We toured the local school that was in session; four small rooms filled with small, neatly dressed children and their teacher.

We continued down a road to where there was a shack of a house with chickens and guineas in the yard. An old man was preparing a bowl of vegetables under the watchful eye of a military guard; soldiers being in the area looking for contraband. We macheted our way up a hillside where we left a small duffle and some water for the return trip. Philberto led us to an outcropping of rocks and issued us each a trowel, explaining that we just pick an area and dig. So we did. It wasn't difficult to locate fragments of pottery that we discarded to look for more decorative pieces. We found legs from pots, rims with frogs, shells by the hundreds, fish bones, and a piece of obsidian with edges that had been sharpened for a knife.

The soil was full of humus and was easy digging. About an hour into our dig and up to our elbows in a hole, we were cautioned to be wary of scorpions. Now he tells us. We gathered up our cache to try another site. Philberto had said that at times, large pieces had been found but it was all a matter of luck. he asked if we wanted to try digging in the caves. If we did, he would need to get a rope. We turned down the offer after looking at the caves; which looked more like wells. We wrapped our ting-tings in dirty socks to bring some home through customs.

The other divers had made arrangements with the photo shop to have a videotape made of their last day diving. They chose to return to "Silver Load" and be filmed feeding the fish. As they went off to diving stardom, I dove the area around the bowl. Dad was still having ear problems and didn't dive. It was the only time i ever dove alone, but I was in constant sight of the boat and knew where the other divers were by the mass of bubbles. Our last dive was at "George's Reef". The other divers stayed on board to wait for Carol to finish her open water dive with Dave so that they could all be in the video, so it was just Raul and I. It was a nice shallow-water dive through eel grass.

That evening, we viewed the video. It was remarkably sharp and the colors were vivid. It began with an overview of the hotel and grounds and then the entrance of the divers. The divers were in the bowl as the camera filmed the tunnel leading into the feeding area. One at a time they would feed the fish for the camera - some more cautiously than others. herb and Raul enticed a moray eel with gentle stroking to leave its burrow. It became curious enough to swim underneath herb's BC; not once but twice. My idea of eel skin is a wallet or belt, not something wriggling in my vest. Becky was aghast.

The evening meal was a seafood delight. Two lobsters, beets, salad, bread, and key lime pie for desert. If it hadn't been for the bugs, the trip would have been as nice as you could wish for. The hotel was up for sale at the time. I hope that other divers will have the opportunity to enjoy both the hotel and the diving in Guanaja. War and military skirmishes seem to be a fact of life in these countries and the victims usually aren't associated or even interested in the causes.