



Roatan, Honduras
August, 1983

An unintentional aspect of our selection process for potential dive resorts is the fact that they sometimes were in areas on or near war zones. A fact that my Mother found disturbing. But few Central America countries can boast of complete tranquility and often what we read in the press is greatly exaggerated. Our reasoning for choosing these islands was, let's get in and out before we can't get in at all. Probably not the most sound of reasoning.

In August 1983 we began the first of what was to be two trips to Honduras. Our selection of a dive operation was more logical than the previous poke-and-pray method. Anthony's Key Resort on Roatan had a dive operation managed by Peter Hughes. Having been impressed with his operation on Bonaire, we figured we could not go wrong - and we didn't.



A bit of history...

Roatán, located between the islands of Útila and Guanaja, is the largest of Honduras' Bay Islands. The island was formerly known as Ruatan and Rattan. Located near the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, the largest barrier reef in the Caribbean Sea (second largest worldwide after Australia's Great Barrier Reef), Roatán has become an important cruise ship and scuba diving destination in Honduras. Tourism is its most important economic sector, though fishing is also an important source of income for islanders.

The pre-Columbian indigenous peoples of the Bay Islands are believed to have been related to either the Paya, the Maya, the Lenca or the Jicaque, which were the cultures present on the mainland. Christopher Columbus on his fourth voyage (1502–1504) came to the islands as he visited the neighboring Bay Island of Guanaja. Soon after the Spanish began raiding the islands for slave labor. More devastating for Native American communities was exposure to Eurasian infectious diseases to which they had no immunity, such as smallpox and measles. No indigenous people survived the consequent epidemics.

Throughout European colonial times, the Bay of Honduras attracted an array of individual settlers, pirates, traders and military forces. Various economic activities were engaged in and political struggles played out between the European powers, chiefly Britain and Spain. Roatán and the other islands were used as frequent resting points for sea travelers. On several occasions, they were subject to military occupation. In contesting with the Spanish for colonization of the Caribbean, the English occupied the Bay Islands on and off between 1550 and 1700. During this time, buccaneers found the vacated, mostly unprotected islands a haven for safe harbor and transport. English, French and Dutch pirates established settlements on the islands. They frequently raided Spanish cargo vessels carrying gold and other treasures from the New World to Spain.

In 1797, the British defeated the Black Carib, who had been supported by the French, in a battle for control of the Windward Caribbean island of St. Vincent. Weary of their resistance to British plans for sugar plantations, the British rounded up the St. Vincent Black Carib and deported them to Roatán. The majority of Black Carib migrated to Trujillo on mainland Honduras, but a portion remained to found the community of *Punta Gorda* on the northern coast of Roatán. The Black Carib, whose ancestry includes Arawak and African Maroons, remained in Punta Gorda, becoming the Bay Island's first permanent post-Columbian settlers. They also migrated from there to parts of the northern coast of Central America, becoming the foundation of the modern-day *Garífuna* culture.

The majority permanent population of Roatán originated from the Cayman Islands near Jamaica. They arrived in the 1830s shortly after Britain's abolition of slavery in 1838. The changes in labor force disrupted the economic structure of Caymanian culture. Caymanians were largely a seafaring culture and were familiar with the area from turtle fishing and other activities. Former Caymanian slaveholders were among the first to settle in the seaside locations throughout primarily western Roatán. Former slaves also migrated from the Cayman Islands in larger number than planters, during the late 1830s and 1840s. Altogether, the former Caymanians became the largest cultural group on the island.

For a brief period in the 1850s, Britain declared the Bay Islands its colony. Within a decade, the Crown ceded the territory formally back to Honduras. British colonists were sent though, and asked William Walker, a freebooter with a private army, to help end the crisis in 1860 by invading Honduras; he was captured upon landing in Trujillo and executed there.

In the latter half of the 19th century, the island populations grew steadily and established new settlements all over Roatán and the other islands. Settlers came from all over the world and played a part in shaping the cultural face of the island. Islanders started a fruit trade industry which became profitable. By the 1870s it was purchased by American interests, most notably the New Orleans and Bay Islands Fruit Company. Later companies, the Standard Fruit and United Fruit Companies became the foundation for modern-day fruit companies, the industry which gave Honduras the sobriquet "banana republic".

The 20th century saw continued population growth resulting in increasing economic changes, and environmental challenges. A population boom began with an influx of Spanish-speaking Mestizo migrants from the Honduran mainland and in the last decades, they tripled the original resident population. Mestizo migrants settled primarily in the urban areas of Coxen Hole and Barrio Los Fuertes (near French Harbor). But in terms of population and economic influence, the mainlander influx was dwarfed by the overwhelming tourist presence in most recent years. Numerous American, Canadian, British, New Zealand, Australian and South African settlers and entrepreneurs engaged chiefly in the fishing industry, and later, provided the foundation for attracting the tourist trade.

The trip occurred during a time of military unrest that was evident when we flew into the airport at San Pedro. The United States - having been sent to assist in quieting the trouble - had established a temporary base along side the Honduran military post. We arrived just in time to see a Globe Master land and unload its cargo. How those flying warehouses get off the ground and stay in the air is beyond my comprehension.

Customs at San Pedro was very militaristic; with armed guards standing at each check point. All I could think of at the time as, "if we get in trouble, how fast could we run to the U.S. side?" Not being able to speak a word of Spanish didn't help matters. Our success was the fact that we were very composed, didn't smile, and did everything they asked us to do.

After being searched and our luggage inspected, we boarded another jet for La Ceibe - a smaller island closer to our destination. La Ceibe International Airport (at that time) was a gravel runway, concrete blockhouse terminal with a customs desk, restaurant (sort of), and a souvenir stand. not much to look at, but it filled the purpose. At La Ceibe we boarded a DC-3 for Roatan. Another short runway beginning and ending at the water's edge and we had arrived.



Anthony's Key Resort was beautiful. It would attract divers and non-divers alike. My memory fails to do it just. Having arrived by riding in the back end of a pickup truck, we were taken to a small boat dock where we were ferried from the main resort facility to a small cabana some 50 yards away on a tiny island. The huts were about 20 square feet with two beds, a freshwater shower, and a place to hang your clothes. Although we were in a warmer climate, the louvered sides of the hut and ceiling fan kept the room quite comfortable with the evening breeze. To return to the main facility, you merely had to walk down to the landing and bang on a suspended dive tank with an attached steel pipe and your taxi boat would take you across for dinner or whatever.



Having checked into the dive shop to pick up weights for our belts and to show them our dive certification cards, we were prepared to make our first dive the following morning. "Peter's Place" (named for Peter Hughes) was our checkout dive. It was also the maiden voyage of a new dive boat for the resort - christened the Don Pablo and constructed there on the island from wood, freshly painted light blue with white trim. So fresh, the afternoon's sun made the paint stick to our equipment. We carried traces of that boat on our equipment on every subsequent dive trip.



The dive itself was lovely. We encountered a large green sea turtle gracefully gliding through the water. The water was a comfortable 85 degrees and visibility was easily 100 feet or better. The diving as a whole was much slower paced and we didn't venture as far from the boat or stray from the Dive Master - we had learned our lesson the hard way. Covering less ground and probing more, we learned what to look for and where to search. We were also consuming far less air by expending less energy and were frequently the last divers out of the water and into the boat.

The afternoon dive was at "Pillar Coral" - aptly named for the coral formations that grew upwards to appear to support the water's surface. I had just bought a close-up lens and was anxiously snapping away at every micro organism and fish that could fit within the frame. I wasted a lot of air to situate myself for the perfect picture that never turned out as good as I remembered. A professional with all of their equipment might get one good shot for every ten taken, but an amateur like myself couldn't get one good shot in 100.

"Crab Hole" is where I first learned to look for small crustaceans that I would look for on every subsequent dive - a sort of mascot for me - the Arrowhead Crab.

This spider-like crab with its pencil-thin legs and body, tiny claws, and pointed head fits easily onto the palm of your hand. Ranging in a variety of sizes and colors and situations, I rarely turned down the opportunity to carefully pick one up to watch it crawl around before placing it back where I found it.



The dining at Anthony's was superb and included a large selection of seafood prepared in very imaginative ways. Another delicacy we enjoyed were the banana chips. Sitting at the bar before dinner one evening, the staff brought out a large platter of chips hot from the fryer. Thinking they were just potato chips, we were pleasantly surprised to find they were in fact bananas, sliced diagonally, and rolled in Parmesan cheese before being deep fat fried. I could have made a meal on them alone. All attempts to reproduce them at home have failed miserably - but they wouldn't taste the same even if I knew the recipe.

Our night dive wasn't anything of note. The entry from the boat was poor due to rough surface conditions. My dive light only worked part of the time - the part when I didn't need it. I eventually lost it altogether. Literally, I lost the light and ended up diving close to Dad whose light was working.

The drift dive, on the other hand, was a wonderful experience. This was our first drift dive. Drift dives are generally done in an area where the currents make swimming impractical or impossible. The diver enters the water and lets the currents do the work - you float along for the ride. The dive boat follows the trail of surface bubbles and picks you up when you are done. The disadvantage is that if the current is too strong, you can't stop to look at anything for very long without expending a lot of energy and air. It's a relaxing way to dive and even more enjoyable when done along a vertical wall.

Picnics were a staple at the resort. It's a day when the staff can relax and have time off while they ship the guests off with coolers filled with fixings prepared the night before or that morning. The picnics were generally on a beach and the trip consumed the entire day. A dive was made in the morning, picnic for lunch, snorkel as your food digests, and then a dive in the afternoon. Our picnic was on a beach of glistening white sand. Some of the guests went crab hunting, and one of the boat crew trolled for mackerel; which he did catch but was eaten by a barracuda as he brought it in. The afternoon dive was a drift dive along a wall. We saw numerous angle fish, sand dollars, and sea biscuits as well as an ENORMOUS rock crab.



Sand dollars and sea biscuits are burrowing members of the sea urchin family. The flat species are the dollars, the inflated species are the biscuits.



August 18th was an uneventful day of diving and nightlife. We dove "Hole in the Wall" in the morning; a keyhole tunnel downward into a coral head. Most of the divers went down the tunnel that came out at 150 feet. Dad and I chose to stay in the shallows so that we would have more bottom time - the deeper you go, the greater the pressure, the less air time you have. Those that went down the tunnel had a bottom time of five minutes; Dad and I dove for almost an hour.

The afternoon dive was at S.O.S (Same Old Story) which wasn't as repetitive as the name implies. We observed several bristle worms - which are a no-touch - a large green eel, and the first Portuguese Man of War I had ever seen. The color of the float was a striking hue of purple with tentacles that hung for several yards below.

The highlight of the day was what occurred that evening. Among the guests at the resort was a man and woman with several other couples who had traveled together to various islands for several years. The previous day, the man proposed to the woman and they decided to get married there at the hotel. The local minister (Methodist or Baptist, I don't remember) agreed under the condition that she wear a long dress; formal attire is not necessary or comfortable in the islands where t-shirts and shorts are the typical fashion. The man and his soon-to-be-bride made a trip into town to buy a dress while the hotel staff and their friends made arrangements for the wedding and reception.

The following evening just before dusk on the little Cabana island under the arch of palm trees facing a beautiful orange sunset, the man and woman were married. The minister's daughters sang a duet in their native tongue. All the guests were invited and the ceremony was charming. The minister said, "Now you woman, you obey your man. And if your mama tell you one thing and your man tell you another, you obey your man." "And man, you treat your woman right." The traditional vows were exchanged and the marriage was complete.

The hotel staff made a lovely layered wedding cake with - of course - coconut icing. It was as nice as any professional cake I've seen. The music for the reception was live and lively. The music equipment was held together by duct tape and luck. Friends of the couple made arrangements for a couple cases of champagne to be flown in for the occasion. I have seen most of my friends married off; some more than once. I have never seen a wedding that meant so much to so many. What a marvelous way to start a life together. I've always wondered if the couple is still together.

Most of our afternoons were spent sunning like the local iguanas on the deck of an uninhabited Cabana, laying on bamboo mats. Preparation for surviving the hot sun usually began months before our trips soaking up as much Midwest rays as possible to be as tan as possible when we arrived. We still used a waterproof sunscreen, but it helped keep us from looking like boiled lobsters during our stay.

"Lighthouse Bay" and "Gibson's Bight" were both shallow water dives where we saw numerous brittle stars, spiny lobsters, jelly fish, and arrow crabs. We also saw two extremely large crabs facing off. They were far too big to approach and did not seem threatened by our presence. one of our dive party

reportedly saw a nurse shark. We have never seen sharks in the areas we dove. We were more apt to see skates and rays.



The "Gwenda Lynn" was our deepest dive to date. She was an old wooden banana boat that got caught in a storm and sunk in 120 feet of water taking one crewman to a watery grave. The boat lies on her hull exposing a cargo of batteries and gears. We anchored over what appeared to be nothing. The Dive Master said the wreck was just below us and our bottom time was not to exceed 10 minutes. After gearing up, we dove in, attained a lightly-less-than-neutral buoyancy, and floated spread-eagled down to the wreck. The feeling was exhilarating. Once at the site, I was amazed to find two large spotted drum fish - a beautiful black and white fish (left). The juvenile drum (below) has banner-like fins. Tap-tap-tap on a tank and we look for the Dive Master who signals it's time to make our slow ascent.



I've neglected my narrative in not mentioning anything about our Dive Masters. Tino - the head Dive Master - was the most experienced of the divers and was trained personally by Peter Hughes. A short, stocky, but well-proportioned man, Tino was an excellent Dive Master. His assistant was David. Tino had a beautiful wife and young son who would gallop by the dive shop on his stick horse wearing a cowboy hat and cap guns. Peter Hughes also dove with us once while we were there. The man wore more gold than Mr. T., but he was a consummate diver and a stickler for perfection.

Our last dive was "West Wall." The wall dropped off to what seemed infinity. It was a good dive and an excellent end for a tremendous dive trip.