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Ben Davison's **In
Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

Short Trip, Long Weekend

The Orange Hill Beach Inn/Nassau Scuba thing

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Dear Fellow Diver,

"You want to spend how much? You want to be gone how long?"

Sometimes I think the rest of my family doesn't understand my passion for diving. Sure, six grand and three weeks are a lot to invest, but, honey, it's Papua New Guinea.

No matter. It wasn't going to happen. What I needed was a long weekend somewhere that was easy to get to and inexpensive. After considering several destinations, I went for a package at the Orange Hill Beach Inn and Nassau Scuba Centre.

Room and Board

Indeed, this was no luxury trip. The diving is inconvenient, requiring a 20-minute van trip from hotel to dive operation. The hotel is across the road from the beach, not on it. It's an older hotel, with a "Fawltly Towers" sign over the undistinguished entrance. There's an absence of porters, bellhops, or anyone remotely interested in carrying your bags. Get used to it. At Orange Hill, guests are not pampered. But I found the experience, while not without a bump or two, well worth the money and, in many ways, unique in my 20 years of dive vacations.

Accommodations in the 32-room Inn are plain, clean, and spacious. It's owned by Danny and Judy Lowe, who live on the premises. It's also home to a colorful assortment of ex-pat British construction workers and off-duty pilots who mostly drink there and gab with bartender Rick, who has an arsenal of stories to relate. This leads to an enjoyable atmosphere that is decidedly un-hotel-like -- the kind of place where Andy Capp might spend his time if he vacationed in Nassau. Their

restaurant food is excellent and modestly priced by Nassau standards (entrees in the \$12-\$20 range included fresh grouper and a spicy chicken curry).

Long Weekends, Short Trips

In reviewing comments from our readers, we notice that a sizeable number are taking three- to five-day diving trips, the proverbial long weekend. With cities like Memphis, Atlanta, Phoenix, New York, New Orleans, Chicago, Raleigh, Baltimore,

and many others having nonstop flights to tropical diving, it's easier and easier to arrange a short foray to the reefs. And if you can't get out of the country, you can always head to the Florida Keys.

In this issue we review two likely candidates for a short sojourn. Below are some others, including the names of agencies that can help you put these or other trips together.

Art Travers at Poseidon Ventures can get you three nights at La Concha Beach Resort in Cabo San Lucas, Baja California, and two 2-tank boat dives for \$387 (plus \$230 airfare from L.A.) or three nights at Turtle Cove Resort in Providenciales, Turks and Caicos, with two 2-tank dives for \$261. The one-hour flight from Miami is \$268 round trip (800-854-9334, 714-644-5344).

Bob Goddess at Tropical Adventures has five-day packages in Cozumel for as little as \$219 (800-247-3483, 206-441-3483).

Ken Knezick of Island Dreams offers several short packages including air for Belize, Honduras, Cozumel, Grand Cayman, the Bahamas, and elsewhere (800-346-6116, 713-973-9300).
B. D.

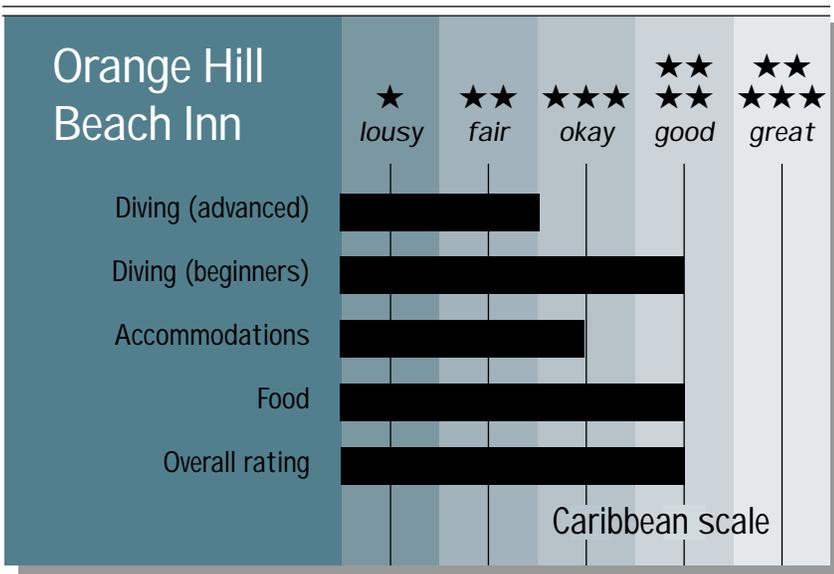
Blue Water, White Sand

"Please be ready promptly at eight," I had been warned the previous afternoon, so I woke myself at 6:30 a.m., had a leisurely breakfast, then humped my dive gear up to the basketball court/parking lot at 7:50. The Nassau Scuba Centre van was waiting, Kennedy, the driver, who is also a capable divemaster, took my bag and started a weeklong conversation about life, diving, family values, women loose and unloose, and fleeting youth. At the Scuba Centre I signed the waiver, flashed my card, got the tour (they store your equipment in a well-ventilated, clean, secure place), and boarded the boat.

We left promptly for a 45-minute ride to Razorback Ridge. With 16 divers, plus captain, mate, and divemasters, the boat wasn't crowded. Once moored, we were told to stay above 100 feet and pay attention to our computers or the tables. The usual milling was kept to a minimum as the two divemasters efficiently worked people into the water. They offered to join anyone who wanted a guide; otherwise, buddy up, which I did with a fellow who had snuck away from a conference he was attending.

I expected an average dive, but this proved to be a great dive site. I descended to a white sand bottom at 60 feet, swam to a coral ridge that rose to 45 feet, then crested the ridge, where the bottom fell steeply to nothing but deep blue. I frolicked with reef sharks and

rays and lots of small tropicals -- amid healthy coral, too. At dive's end, the crew efficiently strapped cylinders and



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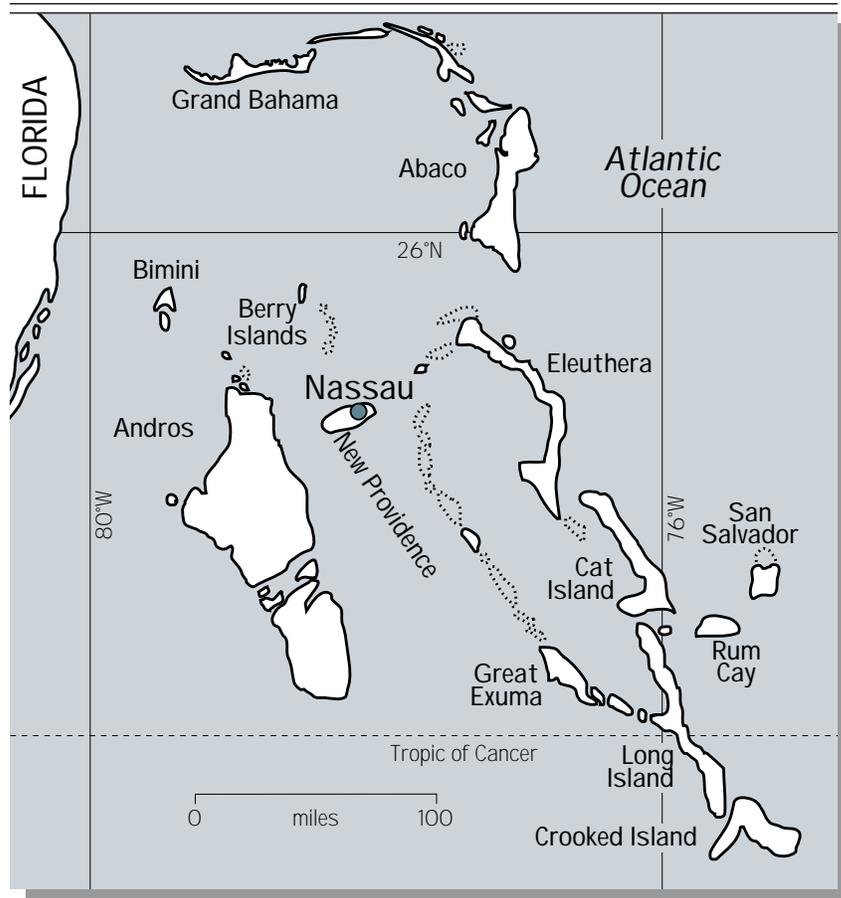
hustled us to dive number two, chosen, like most Caribbean second dives, for its proximity to a straight line between the first dive site and the dock. Shallow, with lots of patch reefs and sand, it was unmemorable.

Movie Locations, No Action

Yes, much of the diving was definitely average. The Bond Wreck, a prop from an old James Bond film, wasn't worth the bother. Coral hugged the bottom at Cessna Wall, where there was no drama to the reef and no sighting of anything out of the ordinary. Hole in the Head, though, had a bottom that stepped from 30 feet to 80 to 120 to another sheer drop, and again I was cruised by rays and reef sharks. I had the option for afternoon and evening dives, which I rejected because of the ordinary nature of the shallow dives, though many less traveled divers than I especially enjoyed the night dives.

A shark dive was available for \$65, and a "YOU get to feed the sharks" dive for around \$200. I declined. I object to divers feeding any kind of fish anywhere -- it screws up the diving.

I dived from all three of their boats and had no problems. The divemasters were personable and competent, evidently enjoying their work. In fact, an unadvertised attraction is the daily show performed by the divemasters as they swap the cylinders on the boats. These athletic young people toss aluminum 80s from boat to dock, dock to boat, exchanging 30 to 40 empty cylinders for full ones in about 45 seconds with a precision a NASCAR pit crew would envy. It's a crowd-stopping performance. This well-oiled teamwork seemed symbolic of the way the entire operation ran during my week of diving; the van was never late, the boats were always ready.



The Bahamas

So what do I consider an affordable vacation? The Orange Hill Beach Inn/Nassau Scuba Centre packages include airport transfers, full American breakfast daily, the ubiquitous "welcome island rum punch," all hotel taxes and service charges, and daily two-tank boat diving, except for arrival and departure days. A four-night/three-day package retails for \$325 per person (double occupancy) from now until December 16. . . Nassau Scuba Centre is an affiliate of Neal Watson Undersea Adventures. Packages can be booked through their Florida office at 800-327-8150, or you can call either the hotel (809-327-7157) or the dive operation (809-362-1964) direct for booking information. . . There's plenty of night life, shopping, and activity in Nassau, making it a good destination for someone with a nondiving partner.

Ditty Bag

. . . Why not just start the entire dive day an hour earlier to avoid this unpleasant "hurry hurry" attitude?

My only significant complaint: Nassau Scuba Centre rushed the surface intervals and the second dives way too much so they could get back to set up for their afternoon charters. Why not just start the entire dive day an hour earlier to avoid this unpleasant "hurry hurry" attitude?

The Verdict, Please

So the Orange Hill Beach Inn/Nassau Scuba Centre package did the trick. I got a decent dose of diving, lost only a couple of days of work, and hardly made a dent in the fortune I'm putting aside for that PNG trip -- which just has to happen soon.

G. D.

Santa Catalina Island Fantasy

Twenty-six miles across the sea . . .

Dear Fellow Diver,

Leon Fichman, a transplant from Brazil and Israel, has an American dream: building a spectacular group of Tahitian

fahres covering the hillside overlooking beautiful Emerald Bay Harbor on Southern California's Catalina Island.

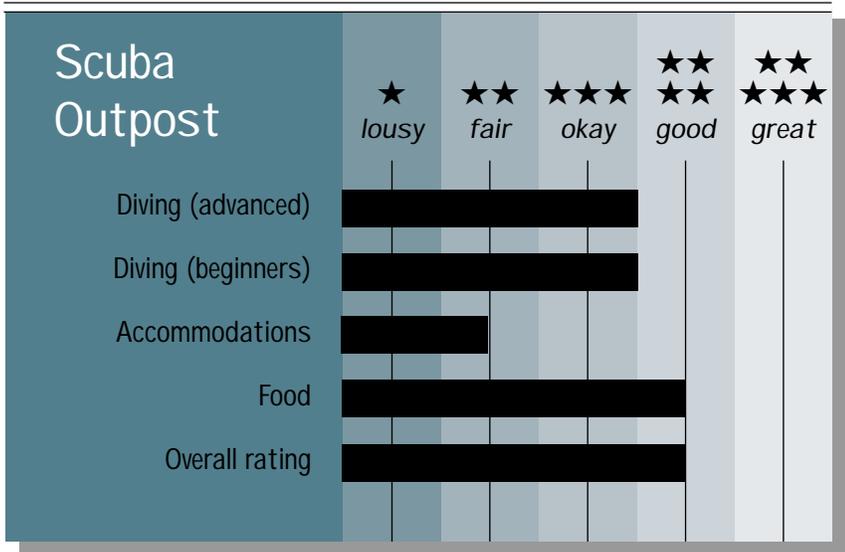
His Scuba Outpost would become a dedicated diving clone of Club Med. The price would be moderate, accommodations modest, the food and service superb. Divers from all over would come to dive

California's scenic underwater world, replete with golden Garibaldis and mystical kelp forests.

Leon, a visionary and enthusiast with a strong background in hotel and restaurant management, has made a

good start. He still has a way to go; nonetheless, Santa Catalina, largely an undeveloped island and marine sanctuary 26 miles across the sea from L.A., is a super choice.

. . . You'll need a wetsuit; the March water temperature was 59°.



A Coldwater Scout Camp

My partner and I were drawn to this excursion by the convenience and economy of his Long Weekend Package: depart Marina del Rey, near L.A. International Airport, at 7:30 a.m. Friday