

Secrets of the Bay Islands

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How to find the hidden sites
of this diving hot spot.



N. 16.4° W. 86.4°

Bay Islands



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Roatan

WHEN I STEPPED OFF THE PLANE in the Bay Islands' central hub of Roatan, two distinct faces of the dive tourism experience here immediately presented themselves. Outside the arrivals gate, taxi drivers jockeyed for fares for the 25-minute drive to West Bay, where the crowd is young, a variety of languages fills the air and the price tag leans toward budget. There, oceanside dirt streets lined with island guesthouses hum with divers loading docked boats and attending open-air certification classes.

Shoulder to shoulder with the taxi men stood the resort drivers, crumpled signs reading "Fantasy Island" and "Anthony's Key Resort" in hand. A plethora of all-inclusive resorts fringes Roatan's coastline and fills out the flip side of this coin in almost every way. Here the settings are often a form of island luxury where hard-core divers come for an all-inclusive experience and guests are shuttled from dive boats to mealtimes and topside distractions along a well-beaten path.

Despite their differences on the surface, these two faces both focus on the main prize: diving, all day, every day. And in both scenarios, divers inclined toward relaxation can

fill their logbooks right from their doorstep. But for those looking for a little more adventure, there's a lot going on beyond West Bay or the secluded resorts. I made the extra effort on my recent trip to this string of islands off the coast of Honduras, and I was not disappointed. From the pristine reefs of untouched dive sites to an underwater graveyard, a heart-pumping shark feed and awe-inspiring topside attractions, here's how to find the wilder side of the Bay Islands.

ROATAN DIVING

Looking to extract myself from the throngs of divers populating the western third of the island, I based myself at Turquoise Bay Resort, a fairly new addition carved out of the north central coast where the on-site dive shop, Subway Watersports, has one of its three island-wide locations—a real plus for divers like me hoping to dive different parts of the island.

My first day in the shop, French divemaster Vanessa Canseco Lozano looked up from the dive map on the counter and said with a sly smile, "You want something different? I take you to the **Dolphins' Den.**" My eyes lit up. "Dolphins would be great!" I said. But she shook her head, "No, not like that. Wait and see." I didn't have to wait long. The dive site was less than 10 minutes from the dock, and we backrolled off the Boston Whaler over sand flats only 20 feet deep on the inside of the fringing reef. We set off down a narrow

The accommodation quarters at the stern of the 300-foot-long wreck of the *Odyssey* boasts zigzagging exterior stairways and multiple levels of wide-open, well-lit rooms for easy penetration.



Deep inside the twisting cavern nicknamed Dolphins' Den, divers pass by a macabre collection of bleached dolphin bones, all that remains of the animals that died here, trapped and fighting to escape.

canyon between coral-encrusted rock formations until we came to a wide hole in the wall. The current seemed to flow into the mouth of the cavern as I approached. Lights clicked on all around me. I followed Vanessa into the gaping maw of the tunnel, and we broke through clouds of silversides and shafts of light that streamed from holes in the ceiling. About halfway through, we came to a break in the passage where fish swirled in the sunlight above us, and then we plunged at a steep angle into the next passage where, off to the left, I saw my dolphins. Bleached bones, some of them telltale, long-snouted skulls, littered the floor of the cavern—a macabre desert scene spread out on the ocean sand.

Back on the boat, Vanessa explained that the site had gotten its nickname because of a few old sets of bones, and locals had assumed the fate of those dolphins without knowing for sure. In August 2007, however, this assumption proved devastatingly true when divers found the fresh carcasses of a pod of common dolphins decomposing in-

side the cave, their rostrums smashed, likely from pounding the cavern walls in a desperate attempt at escape.

WRECKS

The next day I needed a wreck fix, so we made the obligatory swing over to the northwest side for a deep dive on the *Odyssey*. This cargo freighter was being rebuilt in French Harbour in 2002 when it caught fire. The flames raged for days, and eventually local dive shop owners, led by the Galindos of Anthony's Key Resort, ponied up the money for a solution: prep and sink it as an artificial reef. The ship went down off Mud Hole in 110 feet of water, and there it rests, right-side-up in the sand alongside the sloping reef wall. While it's technically 300 feet long, the main attraction on the *Odyssey* is the accommodation quarters at the stern, as the holds that made up the bulk of the

ship's length have collapsed pretty much to the sand. At the back end, I explored the accommodation decks inside and out. Exterior stairways zigzagged up the stern, and gray angelfish grazed along the rails. I followed up this dive with a drift along the **West End Wall**, where marine park status and patrols effectively keep out the fishermen, and the corals and fish live in protected abundance. This dive has generally the same structure as most of the reef dives around the island: a shallow fringing reef starting in 15 to 20 feet that drops along a steep slope or vertical wall down to about 110 feet. After a dip to 80 feet, where massive barrel sponges grew perpendicular to the wall, I made my way up to its lip and let the mild current sweep me through swarms of blue chromis and ocean triggerfish. A grazing hawkbill made a leisurely appearance as I hung in the shallows on my safety stop.

Topside

CANOPY TOURS All around the island, touts spout off about the canopy tours. Now, this ain't Costa Rica, so the trees aren't exactly tall and thick enough for what I'd traditionally call "canopy," but you can get up in them and strap into a zipline for a rowdy ride through the island forest that makes for a lively afternoon. There are four canopy tour operators on different parts of the island and they offer pick-up service. I opted for the Jungle Canopy tour, a kilometer-long collection of 14 ziplines and six suspended bridges located in the center of the island. My guide was a 17-year-old local named Danny Welcome, whose treetop antics deftly proved my awkwardness at hanging from a string. roatanjunglecanopy.com



ULTRALIGHT FLOATPLANE For a different view of the island, you can book a trip in an open-cockpit, ultralight floatplane. The pilot will pick you up from the bay of your resort and take you on a custom air tour of any or all of the Bay Islands. Flying after diving? No worries—the plane stays below 500 feet. bayislandsairways.com

DRINKS Centrally located along Roatan's main road is an unassuming, open-air restaurant clinging precariously to the side of the mountain. It's called The View (take a wild guess), and I stopped in more than once for a Monkey La La sundowner and a chat with bartender Deal Heath. The crowd is a wild mix—mostly locals and ex-pats—and when the band's playing its odd mix of country and reggae, the house is so packed it's a wonder the whole thing doesn't tumble right into its postcard-perfect tableau.



Cara a Cara means face-to-face. And this shark feed dive with Waihuka Diving Adventures delivers just that, letting divers get up close and personal, and even swim the reefs, with a pack of gray reef sharks.

SHARKS

All that evening I bounced around the sleepy resort with enthusiasm because the next morning I planned to get up bright and early to navigate Roatan's primary pockmarked road to the Las Palmas Resort where, tucked down a rutted dirt track, Waihuka Diving Adventures has a dockside location for launching its singular dive: **Cara a Cara**. It means face-to-face, and that's what I got when co-owner Sergio Tritto pulled up to his daily dive site. From the side of the boat we could see the superstars finning in on the spot, the boat's motor eliciting their primal Pavlovian response. But this shark dive was a little different than others out there.

We started out normally enough, sitting in the sand in about 70 feet of water, with Sergio shepherding a closed but perforated 5-gallon bucket-o-fish. But once all the divers made it to the bottom, he hoisted the bucket and took off down the reef. We swam together, a pack of humans and a school of gray reef sharks. They were only there for the food and didn't give a damn about me, but swimming side by side with them still made for quite an experience. After 20 minutes or so, we made our way back to our starting point, and Sergio ushered us to the edge of the sand patch. He moved front and center and cracked open the bucket. The sharks knew the score and made a mad dash for the trough, diving in up to their dorsal fins and shaking the bucket like a bull goading a matador. There were only a few pounds of fish, and shared among about 15 sharks, the wad was blown in a matter of seconds. But there was no post-climax depression. As the sharks thinned out, the divers rushed for the sand to search for lost teeth, and once I found one, I backed off



and made pleasantries with a Nassau grouper who was so docile he turned onto his side so I could scratch his belly.

EAST END

If you do only one thing on Roatan, a full-day dive trip to the East End and the Pigeon Cays is it. Subway Watersports owner Patrick Zingg keeps a Colombian go-fast boat on the south side, and we loaded that puppy with tanks enough for three dives, a cooler full of picnic fixins (and plenty of après-dive beer) and hit the smuggler's coast. Along the way, we took a detour into the canals of Oak

Ridge, where stilted houses walk on water and day-to-day life is all done by boat. Come down here and water taxis will take you to the Hole in the Wall restaurant—check out the Sunday surf-and-turf bash—or on tours through winding mangrove tunnels. After a look around, we moseyed on to our first dive at **Fort Cay Wall**. Both this and our second dive at **Morat Wall** blew me away with a proliferation of corals and fish unlike anything I'd yet seen around the island, not to mention turtles, nurse sharks—and not another dive boat for miles.

After our second deep wall dive off the

island of Morat, Patrick pointed the boat toward the shifting sands of the Pigeon Cays. You could call them three islands, but one is little more than a sandbar. The other two have a sparse cluster of palm trees and underbrush in the center of their deliciously deserted beaches. After lunch, I circumnavigated my little piece of paradise in less than 10 minutes, and along with some of my bikini-clad dive buddies, I took a much-needed surface interval sitting in the shallows with the ripples lapping at my chin. The group unanimously decided to make our third dive right there from the beach. Dropping down over seagrass beds in about 10 feet of water, my first sight was a spotted eagle ray furiously digging in the sand, and as I made my way around the shallow coral heads at about 20 feet, I knew the decision to dive here was the right one. Stands of painfully rare elk-horn corals were everywhere, some with racks nearly 8 feet wide, and at every turn, I saw reefs not only teeming with fish life, but also bursting with healthy, colorful corals. With satisfaction, I climbed back into the boat. "*Necesito una Salva Vida* (I need a Life Saver)!" I cried out, and a fellow diver came to the rescue with the aptly named Honduran cerveza.



Topside

DRINKS What day in the islands would be complete without a sunset drink? West End is loaded with hot spots like Sundowners, where I met owner Aaron Etches Wood as he sat nonchalantly on the steps with a handful of phone cards, punching numbers into his cell phone. Being a nosy kind of guy, I asked what he was doing, and I got a quickie explanation of the Honduran prison system, which requires inmates have a de facto source of income—his friend on the inside would barter the codes from the phone cards to survive. "Where's he locked up?" I asked. "The bad one," he replied as he handed me another Salva Vida from his private stash and the sun slipped below the horizon.



Dive Site Sampler

DOLPHINS' DEN Looming walls hem you in as you fin across the shallow, sandy canyon floor on the inside of the fringing reef. A hole in the rock offers access to a twisting, narrow passage filled with silversides, at times passing through shafts of light streaming from holes in the ceiling. Inside you'll find the bleached, scattered bones of dolphins that found their way in, but not the way back out, before you pop out the end of the tunnel on the outside of the reef.

MORAT WALL This rarely dived site lies off Roatan's East End. The virgin reef starts at about 20 feet and the edge drops off quickly past 130 feet. A lack of moorings and a good chance of current mean this is always done as a drift dive.

PIGEON CAYS These tiny sand spits south of Barbareta are available via day trip from Roatan, and they boast a beautiful collection of shallow reefs

that fringe their gleaming white shores. At a max depth of 20 feet, you'll have plenty of bottom time to explore the massive elk-horn coral gardens, bathed in sunlight and teeming with abundant fish.

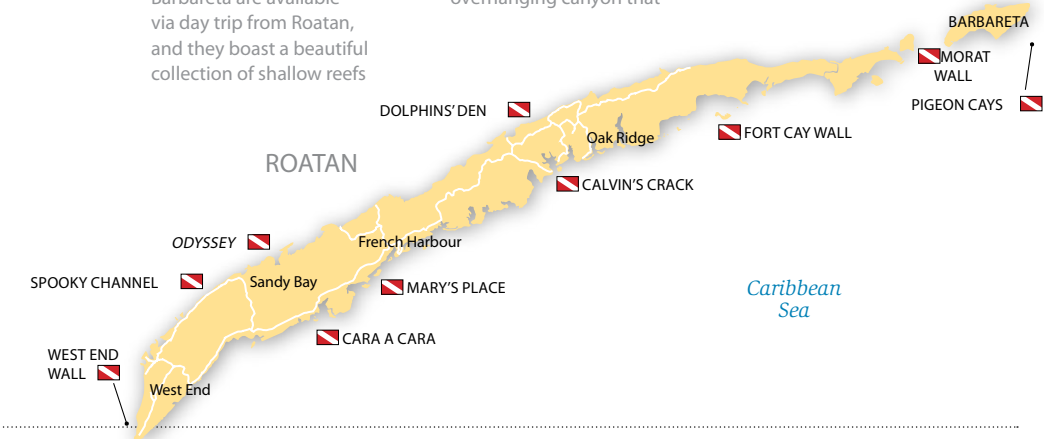
ODYSSEY Resting at 110 feet, the bow is relatively intact, as is the stern, but the mid-section of this transport ship has collapsed onto the sandy bottom. The stern is the highlight of the dive. Here, the multilevel accommodation section boasts zig-zagging exterior stairways and easy penetration into the open quarters.

MARY'S PLACE One of the most popular dives on the island, Mary's Place features a deep reef fissure ornamented by rope and tube sponges. Follow the chasm to the reef wall where black corals populate the depths.

CALVIN'S CRACK An overhanging canyon that

lives up to its name. The deep fissure feels like a tunnel as you make your way to the steep drop of the wall at about 70 feet. **WEST END WALL** Start this dive in the shallows, about 20 feet, where beautiful coral gardens are swarmed by blue chromis. Make your way down sand chutes in spur-and-groove coral formations until you reach the plunging edge of the wall that drops to about 110 feet and is punctuated by huge barrel sponges. Turtles and ocean triggerfish frequent the area.

SPOOKY CHANNEL Shore dive this site from the Bay Island's Beach Resort. The deep channel runs seaward through the reef, creating a cavern-like experience that has an eerie quality to it: fragments of sunlight filter down to the 95-foot bottom from the narrow opening above.





Utila

Coral-draped walls ring tiny Utila, where diving is the name of the game 24/7.

AFTER CRASH LANDING IN MY WATERFRONT ROOM at Utila Lodge, I wasted little time settling in. I jumped straight from my doorstep to the waiting boat from the Bay Islands College of Diving next door, where a chain-smoking, foul-mouthed, Welsh vixen of a divemaster named Anna McPhee made me feel right at home. She took me out to Black Coral Wall and led me through a steep canyon that ran to the edge of the drop and spat me into blue water.

Utila is the smallest of the three main Bay Islands—6.5 miles long by 2.5 miles wide—so dive boats leaving from the main harbor can dive anywhere around the island’s perimeter. The water is deeper on the north side and it often gets rough there later in the day, so dive operators usually hit the north for more advanced dives in the morning and the south for easier fare in the afternoon.

The next morning we swung around the west end to dive **Spotted Bay**, where the gently sloping reef was pockmarked with sand patches. I saw yellow head jawfish poking their heads out of the sand and made an unsuccessful search for a large

resident green moray. During the surface interval we made a detour to the string of cays on the island’s southwest corner for a fish burger lunch. We docked at Jewel (aka Suc Suc) Cay, which is connected to nearby Pigeon Cay by a footbridge. These tiny islands have about 600 inhabitants and at least five churches. And the locals’ heavy dependence on fishing made itself clear as I walked down footpaths lined with salted barracuda drying in the sun.

The great thing about Utila is the diving experience doesn’t stop when you get out of the water. The town’s narrow streets, restaurants and funky dive shops

are hung from head to toe with dive flags, whale shark pictures and signs filled with the never-ending schedules of certification courses—some of the cheapest in world, as Utila is world-famous as a dive-training Mecca. Anna kindly extended her dive-master role to my topside explorations, and when I met up with her at the steamy divers’ hot spot, the Tranquila Bar, she was flanked by a veritable United Nations of expat researchers and dive guides, all more than willing to match me drink for drink and tall tale for tall tale well into the night.

WHALE SHARK TRIPS

There’s no one spot to look for these gentle giants—they’re just “out there” in the deep water of the Cayman Trench that lies just shy of Utila’s north coast. They’re around all year, but March to June and August to October are the high seasons. Encounters here are snorkel-only, and researchers from the Whale Shark and Ocean Research Center offer four-hour trips to look for them.

OUR THANKS

TURQUOISE BAY RESORT (turquoisebayresort.com) for taking care of our team on Roatan.
SUBWAY WATERSPORTS (subwaywatersports.com) for its excellent Roatan dive support.
UTILA LODGE (utilalodge.com) for hosting our staff on Utila.
THE BAY ISLANDS COLLEGE OF DIVING (dive-utila.com) for the great dives around Utila.

Dive Site Sampler

■ **BLACK HILLS** Here, a sea-mount rises from 130 feet to about 35 feet. Schools of pelagic fish—horse-eye jacks, yellow snappers and sometimes, even whale sharks—circle the pinnacle.

■ **AIRPORT CAVES** The main features here are three large caverns between 20 and 40 feet that an experienced dive guide can lead you through. Just a short trip from Utila Town, this spot makes a great night dive.

■ **DON QUICKSET** A double canyon splits the reef. Drop down one to about 70 feet where your dive guide can show you a fish-filled cave surrounded by coral heads.

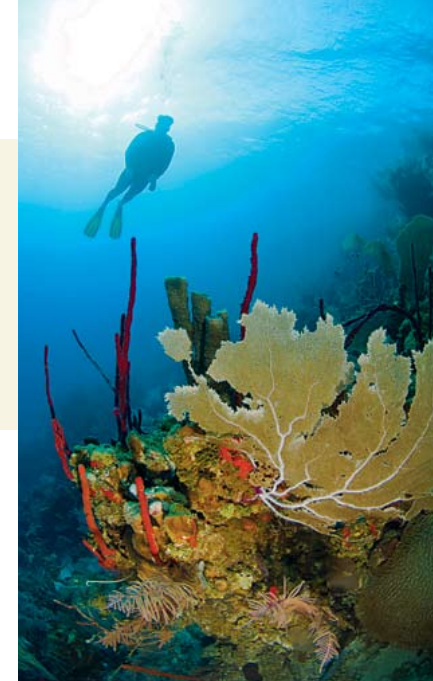
■ **BLACK CORAL WALL** A series of swooping canyons run seaward to the edge of a sharp wall at this south shore dive

site. Dramatic overhangs house schools of fish, and you’ll find the dive’s namesake growing on the deeper parts of the wall.

■ **LIGHTHOUSE** A shallow, fish-rich site just outside of Utila Town. The reef starts in 10 feet and the jagged wall drops to a sandy bottom at about 60 feet.

■ **HALLIBURTON** This 210-foot cargo ship is a 5-minute boat ride from Utila Town’s East Harbor. It sits in 100 feet of water. Its masts and davits sport purple tunicate encrustation, and the ship’s holes and overhangs provide shelter for lace and cup corals.

■ **GREAT WALL (AKA DUPPY WATER)** “Duppy” means ghost in the islands, and rumor has it, tricky duppies try to lure



divers into the depths at this gorgeous open-ocean wall. Stay strong and keep above 130 feet—look into the blue for the chance to see a whale shark or other pelagic fishes.

■ **RAGGEDY CAY** There is a wall here, but the top end of the reef is the most attractive part of tiny Raggedy Cay at Utila’s West End. Check the sand flats for eagle rays, garden eels and yellowhead jawfish.



Bay Islands Resources

Anthony’s Key Resort
800-227-3483
anthonykey.com

Bay Adventures
888-599-3483
bayadventures.com

Caradonna Dive Adventures
800-328-2288
caradonna.com/Destination/Honduras.aspx

CoCo View Resort
800-510-8164
cocoviewresort.com

Laguna Beach Resort
800-668-8452
utila.com

Utila Aggressor
800-348-2628
aggressor.com

Topside

HORSEBACK RIDING I hooked up with Red Ridge Stables to see some of Utila’s inland attractions by horseback. Guide Stirlen Whitefield, perched barefoot in his saddle, proved a fountain of knowledge along the trail. At every tree, shrub and twig we passed, he’d stop to explain their medicinal uses in his island drawl. Even more impressive, he could spot an iguana on a tree branch from a hundred yards, and he went into exuberant detail about how, were he not restricted by the law, he’d shoot, skin and make a right tasty meal of the buggers. “I should be on that *Fear Factor* show,” he said as he gave me his family recipe for cow testicles.

Along the way we made a hiking detour to a rock wall, and I precariously followed Stirlen’s hand and footholds up the face to the mouth of a cave. “Go on down there,” he said casually, pointing into the darkness. “I’ll wait here for you.” I switched on a headlamp and squeezed through on my stomach until my head popped over the edge of a steep drop. As my eyes adjusted, I noticed the dark space was moving, and the fleshy wings of thousands of bats broke the beam of my light. “Next time you come, we bring ropes and go all the way in,” Stirlen promised, as I backed my way out. We then made another detour to another set of caves with a more refreshing treat inside: freshwater pools—great for cooling down and washing off some of that bat guano. redridgestables.com

