

We took our first trip to Utila on July 17th-24th, 2004, where we stayed at the Deep Blue Resort (www.deepblueutila.com). In short, it was a fantastic week! We really enjoyed the resort and the diving was terrific (yes, we got to swim with a whale shark!)

We have been diving in the Caymans, Cozumel, Belize, Bahamas, Hawaii and Bonaire, and we both thought the diving on Utila was among the best that we have done, primarily because of the walls on the north side of the island. The only other location that would rival Utila in my mind is Little Cayman, but lodging and diving on Little Cayman costs substantially more (at least twice as much for comparable quality). We also love Bonaire for the whole “Bonaire experience” with its shore diving from the truck and Western amenities, but the actual diving is not equal to that of Utila.

First – getting there. We decided to book the trip to Utila when Continental began to offer same-day service from Atlanta through Houston to Roatan on Saturday. From Roatan, Atlantic Airlines offers a shuttle service to Utila. Our flight left Atlanta at 7 a.m., requiring an overnight stay at a nearby airport hotel on Friday. The Continental flights were fine with no delays, and we had time to grab a quick bite in Houston. One thing to be aware of is that when you land in Roatan, the Atlantic Airlines representative will take your passport and disappear for about 45 minutes to clear you through immigration while you retrieve your bags and re-check them onto the Atlantic flight to Utila. However, this is the same system used by all of the dive resorts on Roatan, and everyone in our group ended up with their documents back in hand without trouble. The Roatan airport was modern enough with air-conditioned waiting areas. The Atlantic plane to Utila is a small prop plane that can seat about 12 passengers. On Utila, there is an airstrip but no airport – Deep Blue representatives were there to meet the plane and take guests to the Deep Blue dive shop in town via taxi van. Utila is still quite underdeveloped, and there are only a few narrow paved roads in the small town area, so we traveled by boat from the in-town dive shop to the resort. The front of the resort is on the ocean, but there is a lagoon that goes around behind both Laguna Bay Resort and Deep Blue Resort and boats from both operations dock in the lagoon, which has a narrow entrance and thus remains very calm. The trip home the following Saturday was uneventful except for a one-hour delay in Houston – we left the resort at 9:15 a.m. local time and arrived back in Atlanta at 10:30 p.m.

Now for the resort – Steve and Jasmine have been running the Deep Blue Dive Shop in town for three years while working to complete the resort, which opened to guests just this year. The resort consists of three buildings: two which house the guests (one with 4 guest rooms and the other with 6 rooms) and a nice common building in between them where meals were served. Our room was spacious and decorated very nicely (as seen in photos on Deep Blue’s web page) with a window air conditioner which cooled the room reasonably well. All rooms have private baths with plenty of hot water and good water pressure. The rooms also have mini-refrigerators stocked with drinks and snacks which are replaced each day during the daily maid service. All rooms also have private balconies with stunning views overlooking the beautiful blue ocean waters through palm tree fronds.

The resort package includes three hot meals daily: breakfast included eggs and meat as well as cold cereals and pastries; lunch featured a single hot entrée each day (quiche, hamburgers, spaghetti, fajitas, etc.); dinner included a choice of 4 entrees each night (chicken, beef, fish or specialty of the day) with a nice salad, plenty of good vegetables and tasty dessert choices. Friday night's dinner offerings included lobster tails and steak. Dinner is served anytime between 6:30-8:30 at your convenience (except for Tuesday & Thursday, when dinner is served when everyone returns from the night dive). We thought the meals were excellent – all prepared from scratch with quality ingredients. Jasmine's meatballs were especially good -- also, try the tres-la-chese local dessert and Jasmine's strawberry cheesecake and tart lemon meringue pie – yum!. There is a window between the dining area and the kitchen which is always open and guests are always welcome in the kitchen to get fresh drinking water, glasses or whatever is needed. The kitchen is very clean and sanitary.

In addition to the dining area, the resort common room includes a very comfortable sitting area with overstuffed couches and chairs where we spent another hour or two each evening talking to the other guests as well as Steve and Jasmine and the divemasters. Those of us taking pictures downloaded photos onto the resort computer for everyone to see and we would talk about the day's diving. There is also a lovely front porch with a number of rocking chairs where we sat and enjoyed our coffee and breakfast and read books in the morning. While we were there, the only other guests were a family with 4 divers so we really got to know everyone pretty well. We had two divemasters (Tim and Reese) assigned to the boat for the entire week and we dove on the same boat with the same captain (Swin) each day, which was very nice. All in all, Jasmine and Steve are wonderful hosts who will do their best to meet every special request to ensure that your stay with them is enjoyable. Jasmine (British by birth) even learned how to make unsweetened iced tea for me and got CD's for me to burn my photos on. You will truly "arrive as guests and leave as friends."

As for the infamous Bay Island bugs, we used Deep Woods Off starting in the Roatan airport and continued spraying it on every time we went outside or got out of the water (probably 4-5 times a day) as I am a mosquito-magnet. I am very happy to report that I never got bitten by a mosquito or a no-see-um or anything else during our stay.

Finally, the diving – what can I say? We swam with dolphins on Sunday and a whale shark on Friday, and saw just about everything else on the dives in between. The resort dive package includes 3 boat dives a day except for Friday, which is limited to the standard day-before-travel morning dives. Two of the boat dives are night dives (Tuesday & Thursday), which we loved. Also, excellent shore diving is possible from the front of the property. The only negative about diving in Utila is that the boat rides are long as many of the best sites are on the northern side of the island, while Deep Blue (as well as the other dive resorts on Utila) is located on the south side. During our stay, we experienced a mix of calm and moderate surface conditions; on most days the seas were not bad and we had sunny weather every day with no rain during the daytime all week. Current was essentially nonexistent on almost all dives with only a moderate current on

one or two sites and some surge on one dive. All of the sites near shore are buoyed (over 70 total around the island) while sites on some of the sea mounts further off shore are not.

The set-up at Deep Blue requires somewhat of a walk from the rooms, which are located on the ocean-side of the property, to the boat dock and gear lockers, which are located on the back side of the property off the lagoon. Our divemasters for the week were Tim and Reese, and they were really great. Steve also went on most dives (except when Jasmine made him stay in to cook lunch so she could go with us!) and they all did a great job of finding interesting critters. Steve and Jasmine and the divemasters clearly love diving, and they made sure that we dove many of the best sites on the island. It is obvious that the quality of the diving is their number one priority. One morning, there was trouble with the boat and so the entire group did a morning shore dive, then we went out for the two afternoon dives on the boat. In addition, Darren and I did two more shore dives, one on Tuesday afternoon and one on Wednesday night. For shore diving, the divemasters brought all of our gear from the lockers to the entry point on shore, then met us as we came out of the water and took all of our gear back and cleaned it up for us – very nice service! Also, since our entire group arrived early in the afternoon on Saturday, they took us out on the boat for our first dive that day before dinner – wow! The dive boat is a converted 40' boat with about a cover over about half of the deck and it was fine for our group, but I imagine it would seem cramped with more than about 10-12 divers plus divemasters on board. The owners plan on installing a larger engine, which would cut down somewhat on the lengthy boat trips to the north side.

In general, the diving in Utila does not offer the best visibility (around 40' to 80', depending on the specific site when we were there), but this may be the reason that the reefs seem so healthy – the walls are literally covered in most areas with sponges and corals and plant life and the colors are gorgeous. We saw lots of juvenile reef fish at many locations as well as some large fish including tarpon and big groupers, but generally didn't see large numbers of fish or schooling fish except on a couple of sites. We saw several turtles, lots of lobsters, several eagle rays, a few eels, 2 seahorses, 3 octopi, a couple of toadfish, some squid, three scorpionfish, a decent number of macro critters, lots of purple tunicates and an adequate number of reef fish.

Following are highlights from our dives day-by-day. For a more in-depth technical description of the dive sites, check out [Lonely Planet Honduras' Bay Islands: Diving & Snorkeling](#) (Lonely Planet Pisces Books) by David Behrens and Cam O'Brien (available on Amazon for about \$12). In general, the north side of the island has the most spectacular walls and the most well-known dive sites, but we found sites on the southern side to be very nice as well. The sites directly in front of Deep Blue Resort are considered among the best southern sites, and they are accessible as shore dives from the resort.

Saturday: Our first dive -- we went out on the boat to Labyrinth, one of the sites in front of the resort. This was a nice site along a wall with lots of sea fans and other gorgonians, various sponges, and numerous large pillar corals. We did not see a lot of fish here.

Sunday: On the way to the first dive site in the morning, we spotted dolphins in the water so we made a detour to swim with them in our snorkel gear for about 15 minutes – it was

fabulous swimming with a pod of about 8 dolphins. Our first dive was conducted at Duppy Waters – a beautiful wall. Here we saw huge barrel sponges, a juvenile spotted drum, angelfish, lots of pretty purple tunicates and some large groupers. Next we went out to the Black Hills sea mount, where the top of the mount was at about 30’-35’. This was one of the few sites where we experienced some moderate current. Here we saw schools of large fish including jacks and creole wrasse. There were also lots of purple tunicates here and we saw a filefish and several juvenile spotted drums. For the afternoon dive, we headed to the southern site of Jack Neill beach. This was a very pretty dive with sandy shallows and a spur and groove reef system. There were lots of sea fans and sponges on the reef, as well as macro critters including a very small slender filefish, flamingo tongues, and arrow crabs. A toadfish, baby stargazer and sand eel were found in the sandy shallows.

Monday: We did a shore dive at Pretty Bush in front of the lodge in the morning. This was a very pretty dive – we spotted a slender filefish, a brown seahorse, arrow crabs, cleaner shrimp, a balloonfish and gray angelfish. Some staghorn and elkhorn corals were found in the shallows. In the afternoon, we dove 2 sites on the southern side of the island near the harbor. First was Ted’s Point, where we explored a medium size sunken ship, which was neat. This wreck could not be penetrated but had sponges and corals growing on it. On the reef, we saw large pillar coral formations, a large school of tangs, and some staghorn coral. Our last dive of the day was conducted at Moon Hole. The topography here was very interesting – a 40’ deep sand flat surrounded by a circular reef formation, very much like being inside a crater on the moon. Here we saw a brown longsnout seahorse, lobsters, flamingo tongues, Pederson shrimp, and lobsters. An eagle ray and a small turtle both cruised through the site while we were there.

Tuesday: We started the day on the north side at the Maze -- an absolutely stunning dive through canyon walls with beautiful topography. Here we were found several lettuce slugs, and lots of juvenile fish on top of the reef, which came to within 10’ of the surface. Our second dive brought us back to the western end of the island to a site called Aquarium. There was some surge here and the surface conditions were a little rough. We saw several lobsters here, an eagle ray and a huge spotted filefish. For the third dive of the day, Darren and I did a shore dive at Pretty Bush in front of the resort. We saw lots of juvenile fish in the shallow and a number of fish here. The wall was very pretty with lots of corals and sponges. The entire group went back out on the boat for a terrific night dive at Moon Hole. We saw so many lobsters here that we stopped counting. We also saw a baby stargazer, an octopus, a toadfish, a seahorse, a huge scrawled filefish, and a yellow stingray.

Wednesday: Our first dive was at Old House on the northern shore. This was a very nice wall dive with lots of colorful corals and sponges. There were lots of juveniles here, including a juvenile drum. We saw a spotted eel hiding in a coral head and an octopus was moving about the reef. For our second dive, we came back to the southern side of the island to Little Bight. This was a very clear dive with a nice sandy shallow. The sponges and corals were very colorful here and we saw lots of macro critters, including lots of purple tunicates, Pederson and banded shrimp, arrow crabs and flamingo tongues. For

the afternoon dive, we went out to Pretty Bush Mount, a sea mount offshore in front of the lodge. This was an awesome dive – the seafans, gorgonians, pillar corals and sponges created a forest here. We found a small turtle resting in the sand, a beautiful scorpionfish, a balloonfish, and several eels. At night, Darren and I did another shore diver in front of the lodge at Pretty Bush. The wall here is stunning at night – color on every square inch. We saw lobsters, an eagle ray, huge banded coral shrimp, and brittle starfish on every sponge.

Thursday: Pinnacle on the north side was our first site. There was a great swim-through that came out on the wall at about 125'. We saw a nurse shark, a free-swimming large green moral eel, juvenile and adult drums, some very large groupers, pork fish, lobsters and lots of large barrel sponges. For our second dive, we went back to the Black Hills sea mount. Again, there were schools of horse-eye jacks, adult and creole wrasse and small silvery fish. We also saw two ocean triggerfish, porkfish, a balloonfish and lots of purple tunicates. Our third dive of the day was a night dive on Black Coral Wall close to the resort. Again, the colors on the wall were stunning at night. We found a large toadfish hiding under a ledge in the sand shallows, and we saw more huge banded shrimp, a number of sleeping parrot fish, brittle stars everywhere, giant basket stars, lots of urchins and an octopus.

Friday: When we got around to the north side, Swin and Steve saw “boiling” – the surface activity created by small fish jumping out of the water that indicates the presence of a whale shark, so we cruised the open waters for a while but didn't find one. We then started the dive day started at Blackish Point, a drift between two mooring buoys. This was a gorgeous dive with lots of overhangs covered with sponges and corals. We saw arrow crabs, cleaner shrimp, a large crab inside a barrel sponge, a large elephant ear sponge, several spotted moral eels, a chain moray eel and a white-spotted nudibranch. After we returned to the boat, Swin took us back out to look for the whale shark again and this time he found it! We all donned our snorkel gear and sat on the side of the boat until Swin told us “GO!” – then we all jumped in just feet away from the beautiful creature. He swam away fairly quickly, so we got back in the boat and cruised around a while longer. When we spotted him near surface again, we all jumped back in. This time he stayed near the surface for three of four minutes letting us swim near him – an awesome experience! Although it was quite late, Steve offered to let us do one last dive, so we stopped at Big Bight on the western shore on the way back to the resort. We saw two squid right away, a number of lettuce slugs, a scorpionfish, an ocean triggerfish and lots of juveniles on the coral heads.

It was truly a great week. Utila offers beautiful diving, and Steve and Jasmine's Deep Blue Resort makes the entire experience fantastic. We will definitely be back again one day.