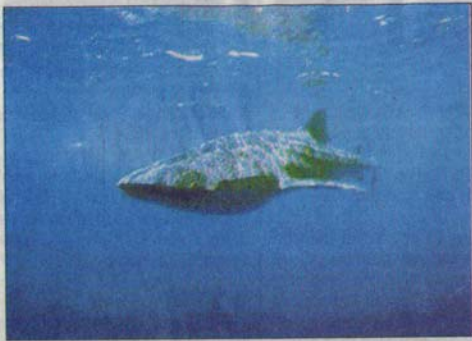


ARTS & TRAVEL

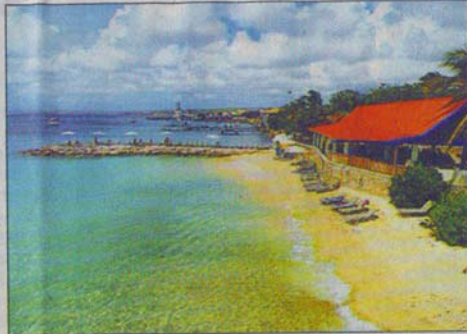
INSIDE: *Books 3.F, Crossword 10.F, Travel 14.F, Television 16.F*

SUNDAY, JULY 17, 2005



LAGUNA BEACH RESORT

A whale shark swims off Laguna Beach, Utila.



DIVI FLAMINGO BEACH RESORT

The beach at Divi Flamingo, Bonaire, is a good diving location.



LAGUNA BEACH RESORT

Bluebell tunicates in the waters at Utila.

DIVE INTO THE

CARIBBEAN

POST AND COURIER

CHARLESTON, SC
SUNDAY 112,008
JUL 17 2005



Burrelles Luce

120 .4930 .y..a. 101 XX...GK

DIVE INTO THE CARIBBEAN

DIVE from Page 1F

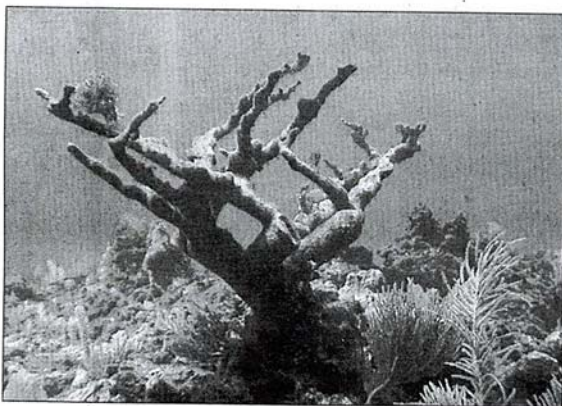
Our hut was rustic and comfortable.

Utila sits on top of the second largest fringing coral reef in the world. It's 150 yards from the Laguna Beach Resort, which offers three terrific dives a day, plus a night dive every week. The boat rides are mercifully short and the reef is spectacular, teeming with life. Outside the reef, there is always the possibility of seeing a whale shark. We weren't lucky, but it didn't matter. Laguna features a variety of near and offshore shallow (30-plus feet) and deep (90-100 feet) dives, as well as a few wall dives that range from depths of 30 to 100 feet.

Utila's best dive site is called "Black Hills." It's a cone-shaped sea mount off the east end of Utila that rises from the depths to 35 feet from the surface. Here, you'll see more pelagics than anywhere, schools of horse-eye jacks, Atlantic spadefish, southern sennets, ocean triggerfish and yellow snapper.

At Laguna, we were surprised to learn that the young dive crew would load, unload, rig and clean all our gear for each dive. All we had to do was get on the boat on time. There was always fresh fruit on board. The crew was attentive and fun to have along.

At night, the guests came together in the large dining room for dinners of fresh fish, served



LAGUNA BEACH RESORT

Coral forms an eerie shape in the waters off Laguna Beach in Utila.



LAGUNA BEACH RESORT

An eel hides amid the coral in the waters surrounding Laguna Beach, Utila.

sort that is rustic but has everything a diving family needs: Comfortable rooms, a beautiful white-sand beach, a good little seaside restaurant and a helpful dive staff.

A warning. It gets super hot at Akumal in the summertime. Going on a cenote dive is a good way to cool off. Cenotes are enormous, deep, underground caverns filled with clear, fresh water that honeycomb that region of Mexico. They're a little scary and a lot of fun. A guided tour through the dark maze of rock formations and stalactites is a must. The guides are fully cave certified and are equipped with full cave diving gear. Bright lights are required. The average temperature of the cenote water is 77 degrees. The standard cost for a cenote dive is usually about \$65 per person.

Offshore Akumal there are beautiful reef dives, an abundance of sea life, and it's usual to spot a nurse shark or two, turtles and eels. The resort has small boats that tend to get crowded with eight or 10 divers who must haul their own gear back and forth in the surf from the dive shop. There's very little current and lots to see at depths of 40-70 feet.

BELIZE

Belize has been popular, maybe too popular, for many years now. Ambergris Caye, which was not

SUNDAY CALENDAR

TODAY

OUTDOOR CONCERT:

American folk songs and works composed by American and European carillonneurs. 5 p.m. Thom Dry Howie Memorial Carillon and Tower, The Citadel. Free. Guests bring lawn chairs and blankets. 8-9013.

KIDS PLAY DAY: Every Sunday through August is Kids Play Day Freshfields Village. There will be activities, Frisbees, backyard games, golf and fishing demonstrations and more. 1-6 p.m. Freshfields Village, crossroads of Kiawah, Seabrook and Johns Islands. Free. 768-6491.

SEA KAYAK: Enjoy an early morning salt marsh paddle through tributaries of the Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge. 9 a.m.-noon. Sewee Visitor Center, 5821 Hwy. 17 N., Ave. dau. \$35. 928-3368.

MONDAY

MOVE IT MONDAY: Kids may enjoy games and activities while more relax on the patio and enjoy a latte. Healthy snacks provided. 10 a.m. Ear Fare, Mount Pleasant Towne Centre. Call 284-0240 to register.

TUESDAY

ENTREPRENEURIAL WOMAN SERIES — FRANCHISES:

Find out what franchises are available and affordable from those who have done it successfully. 6 p.m. Tate Center for Entrepreneurship, 9 Liberty St. Registration required. \$20 Center for Women members, \$25 non members. 763-7333.

WEDNESDAY

FAMILY FESTIVAL: There will be a jump castle, bands, wine tasting, kids finger printing, food and more. Seaside Farms, Mount Pleasant. 4-8 p.m. Free. 881-0049.

STARLIGHT CINEMA: Evn Wednesday at Freshfields Village, an outdoor showing of a classic film. This week's show is "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." 9 p.m. 768-6491.

LECTURE: The Charleston His

the day they were caught by local fishermen in johnboats without motors. They fished at depths of 300 feet without rods, using only spoils of line. It's an arduous task to hook and pull in the large fish they catch.

We got to know our fellow divers at mealtimes. We've learned more about the world's best diving spots by swapping stories at dinner tables than we ever could from magazines or brochures.

ROATAN

Roatan is a much larger island off the coast of Honduras. It has several small dive hotels and two all-inclusive dive resorts, Fantasy Island and Anthony's Key. We've spent a good bit of time at each.

Fantasy Island is where all three of us were certified years ago by a gregarious, but seriously safety-minded, dive instructor named Roberto Melendez, who still runs the resort's first-class dive operation. Roberto and his crew of dive masters are friendly, funny, warm and professional. They know every inch of the reef less than a half-mile from shore, and they are great at leading tours along the colorful reef wall at depths from 30 to 100-plus feet. Roatan's best dive site is called "Mary's Place." It has a steep wall with a deep canyon cut through one area. There's an abundance of hard and soft corals and fissures where jewfish, yellowtail snapper, silversides and grouper are encountered, as well as nurse sharks, large grouper, lobster and crab.

It's typical to find sea horses, squid, nurse sharks, hammerheads and rays at Mary's Place and other Roatan dive sites. We encountered free-swimming morays, holed-up spotted eels and sea turtles on every dive we made. There are a couple of fun wreck dives, one a sunken supply boat in 50 feet of water within swimming distance of the resort's gazebo, and the other a swim-through ship offshore at 80-90

feet.

The dive boats are roomy and comfortable, and the dive shop features large personal gear lockers.

The diving operation and the dives themselves at Fantasy Island are among the best anywhere in the world. The same can't be said for the hotel itself. There once were smaller crowds of seasoned divers with stories to tell and fewer tourists. A Canadian discount offer last Christmas drew more people than the dining room and bar could handle. Money was stolen from our room on the first night there, before we had time to place it in the resort safe. It later was replaced by the manager without apology. There seemed to be too few employees to handle the workload, and the bar was so crowded I felt sorry for poor Henry, who on previous trips proved himself to be the best-humored bartender we'd ever known.

On our most recent trip, there were more novices, more busloads of tourists who didn't dive and a more harried, less laid-back atmosphere at the resort. The staff seemed overwhelmed. It was too crowded onshore, but as beautiful as ever offshore at depths of 60 feet.

Anthony's Key Resort features comfortable, over-the-water huts similar to those at Laguna Beach Resort. The reception and dining area is beautifully hidden away on a steep, seaside hill covered with lush island greenery. Iguanas are everywhere.

The dives are as spectacular as at Fantasy Island, and the dive shop, gear-stowing areas and dive boats are more modern. But we noticed on our trip that the American dive master was less knowledgeable and less accommodating than Roberto and his crew at Fantasy Island.

At Anthony's Key, guests are invited to dive and swim in a beautiful lagoon with porpoises. It's a great thrill for young divers and

snorkelers. The animals nudge and play and seem to enjoy the company.

If diving is much more important than the accommodation hassles that come with larger, sometimes crowded, all-inclusive dive resorts, Fantasy Island and Anthony's Key are to be highly recommended for their three dives a day and regular night dives. Avoid holidays if possible. They seem to bring the crowds.

BONAIRE

Bonaire is well-known and popular; but it remains a great, secluded diver's paradise. It's a scrubby, desertlike island in the middle of turquoise seas. It's not overdeveloped. There are a few diversions in town — some good little restaurants and a few shops — but Bonaire exists for divers. Clean, comfortable waterfront hotels and condos such as the Divi Flamingo feature full-service dive operations on small finger piers, white-sand beaches, good restaurants and comfortable beach bars. The Divi's dive operators are knowledgeable and helpful. Three dives a day, most with boat rides less than half an hour, feature abundant sea life at 30 to 90 feet. Bonaire accommodates safe shore dives for couples and small groups better than any other island we've visited. All that's needed is a certification card, full tank of air, rent-a-Jeep and map that locates dozens of safe sites to enter the sea.

The boat diving operations are first-class. There's very little current and dive masters know where the underwater sights are. Bonaire is considered by many divers to be the best spot in the hemisphere. It has more repeat visits by divers than probably any other island in the Caribbean.

MEXICO

A couple of hours by car south of Cancun, off the beaten tourist track, is Akumal Beach Resort, a fun and interesting little dive re-

sort, a destination for thousands of tourists today. There remains much to enjoy, but great diving there usually features longer boat rides than we enjoy. The longest we took was to the famous Blue Hole.

The Blue Hole is part of the Lighthouse Reef System about 60 miles off the Belize mainland. It's a large, almost perfectly round limestone sinkhole about a quarter-mile across. Inside, the hole is 480 feet deep. Because of the depth, it presents itself as a distinctively dark blue area in a shallower sea of turquoise.

In shallow water around the hole, there is colorful coral and a variety of sea life. Deeper and darker, there are stalactites and interesting formations to explore along the wall.

Because of the depth of the typical Blue Hole dive, divers usually are allowed only eight minutes in the water after a boat ride usually longer than two hours across some choppy seas. On the ride back, we wondered if it was worth it.

Ambergris Caye diving is good, if not as hassle-free as on some islands, with a great variety of sea life and beautiful coral at depths that satisfy snorkelers as much as divers. If night life and long village shopping strolls are as important as the diving, this is your place.

Ramon's Village on Ambergris Caye is a great seaside resort that features nightlife and beach activities on the premises. Most rooms have kitchenettes and the resort is a five-minute walk to a full-service grocery store.

Belize is a diver's paradise offshore and a busy shopping village onshore. Great restaurants there are getting expensive, but are casual. All that's needed anywhere in Belize are shorts, T-shirts and dive gear. Belize gets many tourists who arrive and yearn to get certified, and most of the island dive operations (the best is Fantasea) offer thorough, safe instruction.

Catholic Church — Its Irish Roots," presented by Philip "Al" Stiles. 7:30 p.m. Karpeles Manuscript Library Museum, 68 Spring St. Free.

THURSDAY

TOUR & COOKING

CLASS: Tour Charleston Museum exhibit, "Bountiful Coast: Foodways the S.C. Lowcountry," then visit Charleston Cooks! for a cooking class 1:30-4:30 p.m. \$28 Charleston Museum members, \$36 nonmembers. Reservations required. Call Charleston Cooks! at 722-1212.

COOKING CLASS: Grill & Chill, featuring rubs and marinades. 6:30 p.m. Earth Fare, 74 Folly Road. \$5. To register, call 769-4800.

FISH IDENTIFICATION

SEMINAR: Learn how to identify fish commonly seen off the Carolina and Georgia coasts. 7 p.m. S.C. Aquarium. Call Ray Rhodes at 953-9384 or Arnold Postell at 579-8536.

S.C. AQUARIUM GROUP

SLEEPOVER: 7 p.m. to 8 a.m. Friday. Enjoy games, a scavenger hunt, evening snack and continental breakfast. \$40 adults, \$20 children. \$10 discount for members. Reservations re-

DOTTIE ASHLEY'S COLUMN

Geena Davis

FINDLAY from Page 1F

women have competed in the presidential primary elections, according to the Web site.

"Every presidential election year, numerous well-known men run for president. They know they are not all going to win. But they shape the national political debate, build their constituencies, keep those people in their political party and develop name recognition that adds momentum to their careers. Yet well-known women seem hesitant to build presidential campaigning into their career," the site says.

I haven't seen a script for "Co-

Columbia museums offer intriguing exhibits for summer

MUSEUMS from Page 1F

ones not publicly displayed before.

outdoor scenes and humans interacting with nature."

In addition to Degas and Diebenkorn, the show includes works by Sigmund Abeles, Alexander Archipenko, Milton Avery, Marc Chagall, David Hockney, Alfred Huxley, Katha Kollu-

Tropical destinations make for perfect scuba vacations

BY STEVE MULLINS
Of The Post and Courier Staff

A great scuba vacation usually includes a few hours at a few airports, rustic ground transportation, some unexpected expenses and sharing accommodations with bats and bugs. But it's worth it.

Each summer and at Christmastime, my family sets out to find the perfect Caribbean reef. We try to get as far as possible from popular crowded dive resorts such as those in the Keys or on Cozumel island. We've set high standards: Comfortable lodging, good food, interesting dive companions, short, hassle-free boat rides and spectacular underwater adventures. The bay islands of Honduras have fit the bill most often. Bonaire is consistently close to perfect. A few out-of-the-way spots in Mexico offer great diving.

My family includes three certified divers. My son, Spencer, 16, and I are advanced divers. I have about 200 dives logged. Spencer and my wife, Mona, have more than 100 dives each.

The three of us have different opinions about which dive vacation was the best one up to now. I believe it was Laguna Beach, a tiny peninsula jutting off the island of Utila in Honduras.

To get there is an adventure. Fly Charleston to Atlanta. Atlanta to Miami, Miami to Roatan, Honduras. Roatan to San Pedro Sula island. Then San Pedro Sula to Utila island in a small plane that lands in a vacant field, where bags are tossed onto the grass. At any given time during the year, the route might be easier, but that was the route we took two summers ago.

"Somebody will be along," the pilot said in Spanish just before flying off, leaving us in an empty field.

Sure enough, a 1988 Toyota truck pulled up and a young, bare-chested man gathered our luggage and we hopped in the back with a couple on vacation from Colorado. We drove about two miles down a muddy, narrow road, dodging children and dogs before stopping at a small dock. "Somebody will be along," the driver said, tossing our luggage off the truck. We waited.

Eventually, there came a 14-foot motorboat with a smiling young skipper. We climbed on board for the 10-minute ride to the Laguna Beach pier, happy to finally reach our destination.



Divers are seen off the coast of Roatan, an island off Honduras that offers some of the best scuba diving in the world.

WHAT IT COSTS

- ▶ Laguna Beach Resort, Utila: All-inclusive (room, three dives a day, transfers and meals) \$940 a week plus 16 percent tax.
- ▶ Fantasy Island and Anthony's Key, Roatan: All-inclusive (room, three dives a day, transfers, meals) about \$850 a week, depending on the time of year and room availability, plus 16 percent tax.
- ▶ Divi Flamingo, Bonaire: \$920 includes room, two daily dives, unlimited shore dives, breakfast and transfers.
- ▶ Akumal Beach Resort, Mexico: \$935 includes breakfast, two dives a day, ocean-view room and transfers.

These rates are subject to change almost weekly, depending on the season and occupancy levels. Special, huge discounts are becoming common and easy to find at all Caribbean dive resorts.

Open-water certification can cost anywhere from \$300 to \$600 and can take as little as two or three days.

Gear rental can run as high as \$50 a day, depending on what's needed.

Most dive resorts also feature great snorkeling packages.

Laguna Beach is an isolated, palm-fringed peninsula the size of about four football fields. On one side is a serene mangrove lagoon and on the other, the Caribbean Sea. Small, well-appointed guest bungalows several yards apart jut out a few feet over the lagoon. There is a wonderful big, old wooden building with a kitchen, a large dining room with long tables, an honor bar and a game room.

See *DIVE*, Page 2F