

Diving Trip Report

Curaçao

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Agent.

Snooba Travel, with special thanks to Nikola, who as always, was very efficient and able to put together a package to fit my preferred travel dates, accommodation type and vehicle hire for my stay in Curaçao

Resort location and diving

My strategy for this trip was to carry out research of dive sites before departing for Curaçao and then hiring a car to drive to the various dive sites I had identified as being suitable shore diving sites and to indulge in some photography without the potential for 'diver soup'

I decided to stay at the Habitat Curaçao resort because the location was central to the west coast with the dive site information I had found indicating that the best diving was to the north west of the island. The house reef at Habitat Curaçao is also considered to be the best house reef on the island. I had paid for unlimited shore diving and also had the option of signing up for the dive centre's dive boat trips.

I had previously stayed at the Habitat resort on Bonaire and had been impressed with the accommodation and dive centre arrangements.

Getting there.

I flew from Heathrow with KLM to Amsterdam and transferred to another KLM flight that flew down to Curaçao. I stayed at the Habitat Curaçao resort, which is about a 35 minute mini bus ride from the airport.

KLM have a policy of allowing passengers a 20kg baggage allowance with no consideration for divers. There is a separate charge for carrying diving equipment. I was about 10 kg over my 20 kg allowance. However, I was not charged for the excess baggage on the outward journey and although KLM advised on check in to depart Curaçao, I would be charged, I 'objected' in the nicest way possible and the charge was waived.

So what's the location like?

Curaçao, in the southern Caribbean, is one of three islands forming the southern group of the Netherlands Antilles along with Bonaire and Aruba. These three islands are also known as the ABC islands. Curaçao is the central island, and located about 35 miles north of Venezuela.

Curaçao is also the largest of the three islands and is more commercially developed than Bonaire.

Habitat Curaçao proved to be ideal base for my trip to the island. This self-contained complex has good sized air conditioned rooms and an excellent dive centre. There is a restaurant & bar which has a varied menu of local and international dishes.

I was based in the north west part of the island and here the semi-arid landscape is tranquil and punctuated with little villages and secluded resorts on the coast.

Car hire is essential to get out and see the island. I drove from the Habitat resort most evenings to dine in Willemstad, which is about 30 minutes drive. Willemstad seems to be a collective name for a collection of districts. Once you are on the outskirts of Willemstad (the ring road) you will not see any signs for the city or town centre. If you plan to eat, you should follow the signs for Punda or Otrobanda where you will find a good selection of restaurants and some shops. The Queen Emma swing bridge over the deep harbour approach allows you to walk between Punda & Otrobanda.

The weather

I visited Curaçao in late October. The average air temperature was about 29 degrees, dropping to 25 degrees at night. The prevailing light sea breezes made the daytime temperature pleasant, but be warned that the sun is very strong and the potential for sunburn should not be overlooked.

The sea conditions were very settled with no more than force 2 conditions most days. October to January are the advised rainy months, but I was lucky and did not experience any rainfall. Do not pay too much attention to the 5 day weather information on The BBC website- It seems to indicate that there is thunder and rainstorms nearly every day. The weather data is actually for nearby Venezuela which has a totally different climate.

What do non-divers do on Curaçao ?

It is worth visiting the Otrobanda and Punda districts of Willemstad. There is a good range of shopping in the free port area, but goods tend to be imported rather than indigenous. The museum in Van Leeuwenhoek Straat in Otrobanda is also worth visiting. In addition, there is also a sea aquarium, the Venezuelan market and quite a few public beaches with eating and other facilities for children, non-divers and even divers. Typical examples being Playa Kalki at West punt, Playa Lagoen & Cas Abao Beach.

Easy Divers dive centre at Habitat Curaçao

Easy Divers is owned and managed by Anne-Marie. This is a very friendly dive centre with a flexible & 'can do' attitude to ensure visiting divers enjoy their stay.

The house reef is a good dive and coupled with unlimited diving, you can dive this site any time of day or night and take responsibility for your own safety if you are sufficiently qualified and experienced to do so.



I attended the dive centre orientation on the first day, was issued with weights and a belt, shown the tank system and provided with a locker for my kit. I spent some time discussing where I intended to dive with Anne-Marie, who was able to confirm if my choice of dive sites was as good (or not) as the guide books made out and most importantly, the safety aspects per site.

I was able to take as many tanks as I could fit into my hire car and go shore diving for the day.

Anne-Marie and some of the guides were also able to identify some of the marine species I had photographed and could not identify myself from the reference books.

Nearly all the visitors at Habitat were from the United States and came as club groups. During my stay there were 2 groups who had separate boats/guides and tended to specify the dive sites they wanted to visit. I had not intended to do much boat diving on this trip, but did go out on a boat on my last day to dive the mushroom forest (not possible as a shore dive) and a slight drift dive at a site called Mike's reef on the return to Habitat.

So what's the diving Like ?

The marine life can not be described as profuse and you have to spend a little time looking for what can only be described as diverse reef life. Other than a few barracuda, there were no big fish, such as tarpon, Jacks or the like as we had previously encountered on Bonaire's dive sites.

However, I was more interested in concentrating on my photography, so the advantages of being able to go shore diving and not be told I could only dive with a guide ' because that's the rule' out-weighed the pure entertainment element of the diving for me.

I used Jack Jackson's excellent book, The Dive Sites of Aruba, Curaçao & Bonaire as my planning guide.

The Dive Sites

Habitat Curaçao House Reef

Simple access via the jetty in front of Easy Divers. There is an under water rope that runs from the jetty some 50 metres or so at 2-3 metre depth to the drop off. From here you can decide to go either left or right. If you go straight down you will find the sea bed at 47 metres. Most of the marine life is in the 4-15 metre depth range with a good selection of reef fish, moray eels and crustaceans. Look out for the slipper lobsters if doing a night dive. You may also want to dive about 45 minutes before darkness falls so you can see the fish dart about feeding before settling down for the night. Water temperature was 28 degrees C with about 20 metres of viz.



Playa Kalki, West Punt

I dived the site also referred to in the guide books as Alice in Wonderland. Entry/exit can be from the beach, but the local dive centre had no objections to us using their jetty. I swam out to the drop-off and saw some large cow fish, puffer fish and a moray eel. The corals are also in quite good condition here. My maximum depth was 22 metres. On completing the dive, I stored my kit in the hire car and took lunch at the beach side café which is also part of Playa Kalki. This location would also provide a relaxing few hours by the beach for non-divers. Water temperature was 28 degrees with about 20 metres of viz

Playa Lagoen

A small secluded bay with a beach and small dive shop/café. I entered from the beach and left the bay to the left hand side and swam out over the sand and isolated rocky outcrop for about 60 metres before arriving at the drop off. There is a good selection of marine life and coral at this site. The highlight of the dive was discovering a seahorse and then on the way back in, two octopus basking on a rocky outcrop at about 3 metres depth in the afternoon sunlight. I also noticed that there were quite a few stone fish on this site. My maximum depth was 26 metres with 20 metres of viz.





Playa Mansalina

A very isolated beach about 4-5 Km off the main road via a dirt track. Halfway down the dirt track I came to what looked like an abandoned homestead complete with an attendant who charged USD 3 per visitor. Entry was from the beach with a swim of 50-60metres to the drop off. The corals were very good at this site, but the fish life was sparse. My maximum depth was 18 metres with 20 metres of viz.

Cas Abao Beach

A well developed facility with café, water sports and changing rooms. Entrance is USD 3 per person. Entry was from the beach with a swim of 60metres to the drop off. The corals and fish life were good at this site. My maximum depth was 20 metres with 20 metres of viz.



Mushroom Forest

I was told by others in the know, that this was a 'must dive' site. I went out on one of the Easy Divers boats as this site is not a shore dive. The mushrooms are strange formations of coral which looked more reminiscent of pagodas than mushrooms but, a strange geological spectacle worth diving. I also saw a hawksbill turtle here, which was by far the largest marine creature I saw on this trip. Our maximum depth was 14 metres with 20 metres of viz.

Mike's Reef

This dive was made on the return trip from the Mushroom Forest and billed as a drift dive. Technically I suppose it was a drift dive but at 0.25/0.5 knot, not in my book. Putting that little matter for the trading standards officer to one side, this was a gentle dive with all the usual coral and marine life on show. My maximum depth was 16 metres with 20 metres of viz.



Superior Producer Wreck

I particularly wanted to dive the Superior Producer wreck which lies in about 30 metres just off Willemstad. Easy Divers advised they did not normally run trips to this wreck, due to the shipping traffic and the potential for choppy seas etc. However, it is possible to dive this wreck as a shore dive if sea conditions are no more than force 2-3. Anne-Marie made a phone call to the harbour master on the Wednesday and was advised the weather forecast and shipping movements were such that Thursday morning seemed like a good time to dive this wreck.



Anyone planning to do a shore dive to this wreck should be experienced in making entry/exits in challenging conditions. The entry/exit will be from waste land over sharp/irregular rocks. I could only get the car to within 100m of the entry point so had to carry my kit the last 100 metres. The surface swim is about 200 metres to a permanent marker buoy secured to the wreck by a large chain. The current was running at about half a knot when I got to the Buoy and the descent via the chain should be with caution if you have to hold the chain, as the potential for crushed fingers is high. The chain is also greased so you are going to get dirty. This is the one site I would suggest gloves should be worn.



The wreck sits upright with a depth of about 22 metres to the deck and 30 metres to the sea bed. This former cargo ship sank in 1977 but there is no cargo left in the holds. Penetration is straightforward as the hold covers have long gone. The main mast is intact. The wreck is covered in corals and I had over 1 knot of current in places so swimming in the lee of the superstructure should be considered. The current meant that we had several sightings of lone great barracuda.

After leaving the wreck you can swim to port and over towards the step drop off that takes you back towards the entry/exit point to minimise the surface swim.

Conclusions

The diving and pace of life in Curaçao provides for a relaxed trip, but don't expect to go diving and be entertained by a never ending procession of reef dwellers.

If only other countries and resorts could universally adopt the diving freedom philosophy found in the ABC islands.

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