THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Reef madness

Roatan's underwater jungle

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From above, Roatan seems to rise out of the Caribbean like a giant green Iguana. Narrow and long, the island's rain-forest spine rises 200 metres and stretches 40 kilometres from head to tail.

On the final approach to the airport's bumpy landing strip, an even stronger feature comes into focus -- an aura of swimming-pool blue that nearly surrounds the place. It radiates out from coves and beaches until it meets dark ocean. A murky middleground rules the space between bathwater and open sea.

It's the reef.

No ordinary reef. This is part of the second largest coral reef in the world. Only Australia's Great Barrier is larger than this reef network, which extends north along the coast of Belize to Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula.

It's what made Roatan legendary as a haven for pirates.

By navigating through the razor-sharp channels of coral and taking shelter in the island's jungle-covered coves, John Coxen, Henry Morgan and other 17th century English and French privateers found in Roatan a natural base from which to raid passing Spanish ships.

Its proximity to the coast of Central America (only 50 kilometres to the Honduras mainland), and its prominence as the largest of the nine Bay Islands in this mini-Caribbean cluster, made Roatan a handy outpost from which to stage these raids. The most treasured cargo to plunder was Europe-bound gold that the Spanish had just previously looted from mainland civilizations.

Today, the reef remains a legend among a different breed of adventurer -- divers.

With snorkel and mask in chest-deep water, you quickly find yourself immersed in an aquarium filled with fluorescent Queen angelfish, schools of Blue chromis, and Banded butterflyfish. Clinging to a wide variety of shapes and sizes of coral in this underwater garden are all manner of urchin, anemone, star fish, sponge and sea fan.

Twenty metres farther out and 20 metres down, scuba divers are scouring the channels alongside sea turtles, barracuda, Moray eels and Reef sharks. The largest of the creatures roaming the depths here are 15-metre-long Whale sharks. Ominous in size (often as large as the diving boats themselves), these sharks are surprisingly gentle and of much lesser threat to humans than their more unpredictable brethren. Whale sharks' nourishment comes from drawing in big gulps of small fish, not from tearing at flesh.

This underwater jungle is well known to divers. John Lachelt of Juneau, Alaska has been coming here for 30 years. Roatan's rich sealife and rustic charm is an unbeatable combination for him. The professional "dry" suit diver (it permits winter dives in icy waters of Alaska), has been under water on about 4,000 registered dives all over the world. For him, Roatan is paradise.

Part of the return attraction is a place called Anthony's Key. Lachelt is on a hammock, steps from the crashing surf at sunset, on the deck of one of the best seaside cabins that the resort can offer. It's a clean, comfortable room, but not much else. Outside of the fantastic view and the natural soundtrack, there are no other amenities. No TV or phones in the rustic cabins. No stocked mini- bar. No room service.

Anthony's Key opened in 1968 and for the first decade or so served small groups of divers from the U.S. and Canada who looked upon the place as a remote and somewhat exclusive playground, says the resort's co-owner Julio Galindo.

Divers were a rugged bunch back then. "It was all about spear guns and such," Galindo says. "Everyone swam with a knife strapped to their calf."

On an island that was more geared to a fishing economy rather than tourism, you had to make your own fun back then. As a result, the aprs-dive parties of the day were memorable. Galindo says the Canadians were a particularly lively bunch, often organizing all- night toga parties on the beach. But everyone still got up for their morning dives.

A shift occurred in the mid-1980s. Travellers began arriving who had more outdoor interests than just diving. "They were cyclists, runners, climbers, skiers," Galindo says. This serious and increasingly younger lot came to the reef well educated about what they would see and what they wanted out of the experience. The Galindo family realized their vision of a small, upscale and rustic resort made it a natural destination for this new breed of eco-travellers.

The island's throwback charm, combined with its professional reputation as a diving destination is the main reason 30-something couple Nick Fugaccia and Orla Butler are here. The swimming instructors from England read about the island in a travel magazine and made a spur-of-the-moment decision to take a break from work to learn how to dive. They could not get a direct flight to Honduras, so they flew to nearby Belize and headed overland on a milk-run bus- route. They left the mainland on the last prop plane trip of the day and arrived on the island at night, exhausted with no reservations. Luckily they found room at the inn.

Over a Bombay Gin martini (not shaken or stirred) sipped in a paper cup, and through a cloud of Cuban cigar smoke, Alaska's John Lachelt recounts how the island has dramatically advanced in recent years but how Anthony's Key, to his delight, has resisted. It was only last year that the resort caved in to pressure and installed a pool. Why guests would want to swim in a 78-degree pool instead of the 80-degree ocean water baffles Galindo. He and his family agonized over the decision about the pool and finally gave in.

From the moment you arrive at Anthony's Key, the pace slackens. The main lodge is built into the hillside, Swiss Family Robinson style, and reached by a staggered wooden stairway that is shrouded in tropical vegetation. The dense foliage opens up to a wide wooden terrace for breathtaking views at mealtimes, and sunsets at happy hour. At the end of the day, a water taxi takes you across the channel to a small island, around which wooden guest cabins are situated, some on stilts above the water.

By 8 a.m activity is buzzing along the wharf, where three or four boats are being refuelled, tanks are charged with air, and divers are furiously changing into scuba suits. They are bound for sites with names like Mandy's Eel Garden and Herbie's Place (you can see a short video of this underwater world at www.thespec.com on the Passport to the Caribbean site).

An hour later, the place is near deserted. The handful who remain have decided to take a pass on the four scuba dives a day, including night dives and shark encounters, where divers safely huddle together on the ocean floor as dozens of sharks circle by, chowing down on supplied bait.

This bunch of late risers is either a laid-back brand of snorkel divers or general vacationers who are content to lounge in the hammock and read, or maybe take a late breakfast and grab a taxi to the funky seaside shops of West End or the resort cafes of West Bay.

Divers and non-diving guests can take part in the resort's beach picnics, barbecues and outings, but these events are low-key and early-to-bed affairs. Veteran divers are now returning with small families, and the resort is keeping pace with junior programs for children aged 5 to 14 years of age. One of the biggest family attractions here is something called the dolphin encounter. It allows small groups to wade into waist-deep water and, with the guidance of a trainer, get up close and swim with about a dozen of these magnificent mammals in a large pen.

Other diversions such as botanical gardens, canopy tours and horseback riding are within easy reach. A rented scooter gets you around Roatan's half-dozen roads in a day, from the relatively well developed west end to the rugged eastern tip. Coxen Hole is the largest community and the port of entry for passengers on the growing number of cruise ships that include Roatan on Western Caribbean tours.

For many, the name Roatan doesn't instantly ring a bell. Some may recall that Fox Television shot a segment of its Temptation Island reality show here three years ago. The Palmetto Bay resort was the setting for a competition in which couples tested the boundaries of fidelity. Good taste was the loser.

Until very recently, Roatan has not been the easiest place to visit. This is changing fast. WestJet charter flights now take travellers direct from Toronto to Roatan in four hours. Other U.S. airlines offer regular flights here from Miami, Atlanta and Houston.

The island won't remain unknown for long because the developers have arrived in a very big way. Construction on private homes and resorts is approaching fever pitch, with activity concentrated in the western and central part of the island.

Canadians are at the forefront of this investment. Eduard du Monceaux is one of the new breed of developers. The real estate agent from British Columbia moved to Roatan full-time and is now known to locals by the handle "Island Ed." He is building beach- side condominiums in the exclusive West Bay area. He finds the pace, the people and the tax holiday most welcoming.

It's all good news to the government of Honduras, watching tourism and foreign investment grow. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch devastated the coast with 250 km/h winds. It lingered as a tropical storm and, in the resulting floods, 8,000 people were killed.

Late last year, the entire Caribbean was under siege from category 5 storms. Coastal damage from these storms came not from winds, but from a tidal surge that lifted docks and swamped low- lying coves.

The development of Roatan and the other Bay Islands is central to the country's attempt to build itself back up and to diversify its exports beyond fish and coffee, but rapid progress has its costs. With no rivers or lakes on the island, wells or rain-water collection and cisterns is the only water supply for its 60,000 residents. There are few roads on the island, but as lanes are cut into hills to give access to new cliff-side homes, the land loses its ability to retain moisture. Soil run-off from excavation is beginning to collect on sensitive coral formations.

There is no central electrical power generation here. Diesel engines provide power to local neighbourhoods. With no hospital on the island, the small diving clinic at Anthony's Key doubles as an emergency care facility. It's free to locals -- a dollar tacked on to the cost of pumping up diving tanks helps to underwrite expenses.

As Roatan's economy heats up, the promise of a better lifestyle is bringing growing numbers of Hondurans from the mainland. Construction work, jobs in the hospitality industry and small enterprises are bringing more wealth to local residents. But crime is also moving in. Home invasion armed robbery is an unsettling new trend that is putting residents more than a little on edge. Tough decisions must be made about how to control population growth on such a small island, says Julio Galindo, who unsuccessfully ran for mayor.

How to restrict migration from the mainland, how to balance the benefits of foreign investment with the needs of local Bay Island residents, and how to preserve the fragile beauty of the reef -- these are big issues that fall into a class of problems that are far from category 5 on trouble-in-paradise scale.

But if you are compelled to see what Costa Rica was like 20 years ago, the clock is ticking in this behind-the-time zone.

The Hamilton Spectator's Tom Hogue prepared this report based on travel and accommodation provided by Seasmoke Public Relations Inc.

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[Illustration]

Photo: Cesar Rodas, Anthony's Key Resort / Beautiful fish, in a colourful variety of shapes and sizes, swim among the channels of the reef for which Roatan is famous.; Photo: Photos by Tom Hogue / West Bay -- with cafes, boutique hotels and diving shops -- is the most developed beach on the island of Roatan.; Photo: A dazzling Caribbean sunset exemplifies the tranquility of Roatan.; Photo: Palms add an artistic touch to this picture of a beach resort.; Photo: Tom Hogue / Cabins are on stilts above the water at rustic, relaxing Anthony's Key Resort.

Credit: The Hamilton Spectator