

The Province

Reefs off Roatan a magnet for the snorkel, scuba set;; [Final Edition]

Ken Rockburn. The Province. Vancouver, B.C.: Oct 30, 2005. pg. E.2

(Copyright The Province 2005)

Ran with fact box "If you go", which has been appended to the story.

HONDURAS: Underwater wonders, white sand beaches lure vacationers

ROATAN, Honduras - Just a scant 55 kilometres off the coast of Honduras, Roatan is the largest of the three Bay Islands that are a magnet for snorkellers and scuba divers from around the world.

Stretching 65 kilometres long and just three kilometres wide at its thickest, much of Roatan's north coast is paralleled by a coral reef second only in length to Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

Roatan is a beautiful place. In fact, much of what makes it appealing is out of sight, under water -- stunning coral with thousands of brilliantly coloured fish.

For the tourist the critical issue, of course, is beaches. Are they clean? Are they white, granular sand? Are they under- populated? Are there many of them? The answers are: yes, yes, yes and yes.

The best beach on the island is called West Bay Beach. It is at the west end of Roatan and is everything you want to imagine in a beach when it's mid-February and you're watching TV at 7 in the evening and it's pitch black and frigid outside and won't stop raining. At one end of the bay the coral reef comes to within a few metres of the shore. For the novice snorkeller it is paradise.

Not far from West Bay Beach is West End, a laid-back, Jimmy Buffet-like village. Here tanned and muscular youngsters from around the world stroll down the main street in various stages of scuba- gear undress.

There are many decent restaurants to choose from and the inevitable shops filled with T-shirts and other overpriced bric-a- brac. Special mention should go to Lighthouse Restaurant in West End, which features local dishes and has a wonderful patio that looks out onto West Bay Beach.

In fact, the restaurant scene in Roatan is surprisingly varied and good. Local rum is about \$3 US a bottle and cold beer goes for a buck a bottle. Rick's American Cafe offers very tasty seafood and a variety of appetizers. The Blue Parrot Bar and Grill in Sandy Bay is another great spot, as is the Argentinian Grill in West End.

When you're not noshing, you can check out Sherman Arch's iguana sanctuary. This Roatanian has decided to single-handedly save the local iguana population by providing a home for the listless lizards, as well as some macaws and monkeys. He charges \$5 for a leisurely look; the money goes to feeding the animals.

There are canopy tours of the forest, a garden sanctuary that features local flowers and plants and a butterfly garden that boasts butterflies, parrots, toucans and a macaw that yells, "STELLA!!!!!" just like Marlon Brando.

To get to any of these places you can choose between water taxis or land taxis. Make sure you negotiate the fare in advance. There are no meters.

But even if your idea of vacationing is to sit and veg, you can watch the vibrant green geckos, the skinks running on their back legs like miniature T-Rexs, the hummingbirds that are so totally different from the ones that sip at our flowers, the woodpeckers that are very noisy, the palmettos, the rock doves and the palm trees.

Roatan is filled these days with expats from mostly two places: the U.S. and Italy. In fact, the Italians like it so much there is a regular charter flight from Milan straight to the island. What is truly surprising is the number of Anglos who have tossed everything over and moved here fulltime.

Bob and Lynn, a late-middle-aged couple from Memphis, came to the island on a vacation, went home, gave most of their belongings to charity, had a lawn sale to get rid of the rest, and moved here permanently.

Bob, the owner of the Blue Parrot Bar and Grill, is another Yank who packed in his life and set up shop here. And Drew, the new owner of Rick's American Cafe is a transplanted Brit who has several health clubs in Los Angeles, came to the island six months ago and stayed.

It is a land filled with newcomers. Even the owners of the cabana where we had set up shop are semi-transplanted foreigners. Ottawan Dan Davis came here two years ago on a vacation and ended up buying a modest cabana as a retirement sinecure.

"The idea of being able to slip into the ocean at the end of the dock and snorkel out to the reef right in front of your place sold us," says Dan. "We did not realize that we loved the place until our two weeks were up and we had to go home."

"They blamed it on the gringo with the dark glasses and the big white car. That was me. So I thought I'd get off the island for a while until things cooled down."

Stuart is a Scot living in Spain with some business "interests" in Roatan. He is the living embodiment of the dilemma the island is experiencing. He tells us that he has some American partners who want to develop a chunk of land close to the airport. But the land was occupied by squatters. He says they offered other land, plus money, but the squatters weren't buying, so they got a court injunction. Still no dice. So they sent in the cops and ejected the squatters and their furniture out onto the road. Some of the squatters showed up at the airport, where the company has its offices, and threatened to "shoot up the place." Now there are private shotgun-toting guards around the property while the squatters and their furniture sit by the side of the road.

Development on Roatan is following the same path that has plagued many other remote, idyllic locations. The big money wants to be there but there is little in the way of infrastructure.

The problems are plentiful. The island has a freshwater aquifer that provides sustenance to the locals. But the regular visits by grotesquely huge cruise ships have threatened even that basic human need. When the skyscraper-sized behemoths pull into the pint-sized port at Coxen Hole, they suck up thousands of gallons of fresh water, draining the aquifer. Yet Roatan needs those tourists.

As with many developing-world vacation spots, the beautiful beaches and tasteful resorts stand in sharp contrast to the poverty. Roatan is dotted with barrios, like El Swampo where ramshackle plywood houses lean against each other for support.

So when the cruise ships arrive, taxis jack up their prices, the knock-off watch/purse/hammock industry hits the beaches, and the plastic chairs that were once free to sit on now cost \$5. This is a fleeting but necessary prosperity.

Yet even with its problems, Roatan is an adventure vacation that far outstrips the usual package tours and will leave you with some fine memories to hang on to on those cold February nights.

IF YOU GO

n Getting there: You can take Air Canada Sundays through Toronto to Miami, then switch to TACA Airlines, which has Airbus service direct to Roatan. Any other day of the week, you're going from Miami to Honduras and then to Roatan, which takes much longer.

n Where to stay: Roatan offers accommodations from the high-end to the mid-end all the way down to modest digs for a few bucks a night. **Anthony's Key Resort** is the big spot for divers and is competing with many other upscale resorts including the Paya Beach Resort, The Sanctuary and Foster's Resort. There are any number of modest but acceptable cabanas, including Sundancer at Sandy Bay. Check out what's available at www.roatanet.com or www.roatanonline.com

n Packages: Nolitours (formerly World of Vacations) is to start offering all-inclusive package trips from Toronto to Roatan in December, with accommodations at the three-star Fantasy Island Beach Resort. Prices for seven nights range from \$1,289 to \$1,599. See www.nolitours.com.

www.roatanet.com or a travel agent.

n What to spend: Roatan accepts American dollars but the Honduran currency is the lempira. There are 18 lempiras to the U.S. dollar. ATMs are available.

n When to go: The temperature is pretty much the same all year long (above 30 degreesC).

n Reading: A good guidebook for water sports enthusiasts is Honduras' Bay Islands: Diving & Snorkeling, by David Behrens and Cam O'Brien (Lonely Planet Pisces Books).