

Roatan

with
Bruce Dickson

“A 100 foot wall a snorkel away from the bar”. So reads the advertising, and it is very close to reality. There are very few dive destinations anywhere that offer beach diving as convenient as CoCo View Resort on the Bay Island of Roatan, situated 40 miles from the mainland of Honduras in Central America. The rooms and facilities may be simple and comfortable rather than luxurious, the menu is more home cooking than gourmet, the visibility less than perfect on occasion, and yet CoCo View boasts one of the highest return guest rates of any dive resort in the Caribbean. I recently completed my tenth trip, and I keep returning for the laid back atmosphere and lack of rules, which is not to say there is anything sloppy or laid back about the running of the resort and the dive operation. Boats run exactly on schedule with expert, attentive crews, full tanks are always available and most important for a dedicated dive resort, mealtimes are planned around the dive schedule instead of vice versa. Underwater photographers who choose to dive solo are accommodated.

Getting there

Roatan has a modern airport, and is served almost exclusively by TACA, the national airline of Honduras. There are daily jet flights from Miami, Los Angeles and Houston. On most days, the flights connect through San Pedro Sula on the Honduran mainland to a twin engine commuter flight to the island. However, there are two non stop jet flights every week: on Saturday from Houston, and on Sunday from Miami. The flights leave the USA mid afternoon, which means that travelers from Europe generally will have to fly transatlantic the previous day and overnight in Miami or Houston. On the return however there is enough time to make a transatlantic connection the same day.

On arriving at Roatan airport, CoCo View guests are met by a representative from the resort right in the Customs hall, where bags are identified by the bright pink luggage tags that were supplied with the booking confirmation. The bags are taken through Customs and loaded on to the “CoCo View Taxi” (an old school bus) along with the guests for the 20 minute ride to the dock where one of the dive boats is waiting to take the guests and luggage for the 5 minute boat ride to the resort itself, which, although technically on a peninsula and not an island, is accessible only by boat. Check in is swift, and the luggage is delivered right to the rooms.

Accommodation

CoCo View has four types of guest accommodation. Cabanas and Bungalows are built on stilts over the water, and are non air



"The clubhouse looks over the Front Yard"
Nikon N90S, Sigma 14mm f3.5 lens. 1/125 sec at f11 on Velvia



"CoCo View's fleet of custom dive boats"
Nikon N90S, Nikkor 28-70mm f3.5 lens
1/125 sec at f11 on Velvia

conditioned. They have one entire wall (facing the ocean) of screen net, and adjustable shutters on the back wall. This, accompanied by at least three ceiling fans in every room, provides adequate breeze and cooling in all but the very hottest months. For those who cannot take the heat, there are also air conditioned rooms in several two storey buildings. The disadvantage is that these rooms have no outside view (although they do have balconies, not air conditioned of course). Lastly there are the Beach Houses. These are privately owned vacation homes which are managed and rented out by CoCo View when their owners are not there.

UW Photography

To say that CCV is well set up for UW Photographers would be an understatement. The boats have dedicated camera tables and rinse tanks built in. The crews are well skilled at handing off and retrieving cameras. For certain dives however, such as the daily “drop-off” dives, where the boat is not on a mooring, a camera line can be useful. This is a 10 foot length of stout nylon cord with a brass clip at each end. One end is attached to the camera or housing and the other end to a D-ring on the diver’s BC. When the signal to dive is given, the camera is lowered gently into the water and allowed to sink to the length of the line. The diver can then make a giant stride entry and reel in the camera while descending.

The rooms each have a large writing table which doubles as a camera work table. A word of warning here, the light level in the rooms is not good. I always try to do my camera maintenance in the daytime, and keep a small headband attached



Nikon N90S in Aquatica Housing, Sigma 14mm f3.5 lens. 1/30 sec at f8 on Velvia

flashlight handy for evening work. The power in the rooms is 110V 60 cycle with USA standard 3 pin outlets. European photographers will need to bring appropriate converters.

There is an onsite Photo & Video store which offers daily E-6 slide film processing, as well as a selection of film and batteries, and a limited supply of rental equipment.



*"Lush growth on the CoCo View Wall"
Nikon N90S in Aquatica Housing, Sigma 14mm f3.5 lens. Ikelite 200 Strobe on Full Power with Custom Diffuser. 1/30 sec at f8 on Velvia*

As for underwater subjects, Roatan is known as a macro destination. Large animal encounters are rare, but the photographer who is prepared to “think small” will be well rewarded. Seahorses, banded and yellowheaded jawfish, sailfin, secretary and arrow blennies, nudibranchs, cup corals and



"Bluestriped Grunts shelter in the Front Yard"

*Nikon N90S in Aquatica Housing, Nikkor 60mm f2.8 lens
Inon Quad Flash on TTL, 1/60 sec at f16 on Velvia*

corallimorphs are just a few of the species regularly seen and photographed. My favorite daytime lens for Roatan is the Nikkor Micro 60mm, which covers from 1:1 macro up to "fish portraits" at 3 feet. For night dives I switch to my Nikkor 105mm paired with an Inon Quad Flash and the Inon 2:1 external close up lens. In a week at CCV I might shoot one or two rolls with a 14 or 20mm wide angle setup, typically reefscapes of the lush growth on the walls, and of course panoramas of the Prince Albert when the visibility

allows.

CCV offers what is arguably the most convenient and rewarding beach diving anywhere in the Caribbean. A short walk from the gear room leads to the sandy beach where there is a platform in about four feet of water. Divers can pause there to put on mask and fins, and then swim out through the 'Front Yard' following an old anchor chain which leads to a cut in the barrier reef. Most divers speed through here to get to the walls, and in doing so miss a fascinating area. I have seen everything from baby



"Colourful Marco subjects abound"

*Nikon N90S in Aquatica Housing, Nikkor 60mm f2.8 lens
Inon Quad Flash on TTL, 1/60 sec at f16 on Velvia*

octopus to adult eagle rays. "In the know" divers frequently spend an entire dive (and roll of film) in less than 6 feet of water.

Once through the cut, there are several choices. A left turn leads to a sandy slope with isolated coral heads and rubble patches. The visibility here can be very variable depending on the direction of the tide, but macro life is abundant, including yellowheaded jawfish and colonies of garden eels. A five or 10 minute swim gets you to CoCo View Wall. This is the "110

foot wall a snorkel away from the bar" as featured in CCV's advertisements. This area is best dived in the morning when the sunlight falling on the reef is at its best.

Following the sandy slope straight down leads to the Prince Albert, a 160 foot freighter which was prepared for divers and sunk around 1989. The wreck sits upright in about 65 feet with the main deck at 30 to 40 feet. The best areas for photography are the stern and bow sections. The



"A videographer captures the lush growth on the bow of the Prince Albert"
Nikon N90S in Aquatica Housing, Sigma 14mm f3.5 lens
Ikelite 200 Strobe on Full Power with Custom Diffuser
1/30 sec at f5.6 on Velvia

stern rails are heavily encrusted with hard and soft corals as well as many varieties of sponge. Secretary blennies peek from their holes and with a little patience can be caught on film emerging to snatch passing food particles. The bow section is a waving mass of gorgonians and seafans and is often home to a very large green moray eel. A line attached to the bow leads to a DC3 aircraft in about 30 feet. Hurricanes have taken their toll, leaving the fuselage and wings in scattered pieces. Sergeant Majors lay

their eggs on the smooth aluminum, and aggressively guard them against inquisitive divers.

From the stern of the Prince Albert, divers follow a trail marked by tethered plastic bottles which leads to Newman's wall. Not as vertical as CoCo View wall, Newman's is bisected by a series of sand chutes which provide shelter to a wide variety of creatures including nurse sharks and the occasional hawksbill or loggerhead turtle.

Two walls and two wrecks within



"The Prince Albert shelters a variety of picture worthy creatures"
Nikon N90S in Aquatica Housing, Nikkor 60mm f2.8 lens. Inon Quad Flash on TTL, 1/60 sec at f16 on Velvia

a 10 minute swim from the beach. Paradise indeed!

In conclusion, CoCo View is excellent value for money. The inclusive cost for a week including accommodation, food, 4 boat dives per day and unlimited tanks for beach diving is around US\$900. As an incentive to repeat customers, every tenth trip is free! I'm already looking forward to trip number eleven.

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The author has been diving for 15 years, and has logged about 1,500 dives, most of them with an underwater camera of some kind in hand. His images have been published in DAN Alert Diver magazine and the CORAL Reef Alliance Calendar. A graduate of the Stephen Frink School of Advanced Underwater Photography, he has plans to submit his portfolio for Associate membership of the Royal Photographic Society.

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