

ISLANDS

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Harbour Village offers a little slice of heaven

Mexico — part of it is in the Caribbean).

And if you do run into Tiger, Keanu or Mick, peer at them over your sunglasses, nod and make them wonder just who YOU are.

KRALENDIJK, Bonaire

Divers and snorkelers love the crystal-clear water and serenity of Bonaire and the fact that the tourism board of the quaint country seems to be in no hurry to market itself as the be-all, end-all vacation destination. Which means that while Bonaire may be the least well-known of the ABC islands — Aruba and Curacao make up the remainder of the alphabet triangle — it's a scuba diver's paradise and a vacationer's dream.

Don't know how to dive? You can learn at any number of dive shops. One that's favored by hard-core athletes is the Plaza Resort Hotel's Toucan Diving (www.toucandiving.com). Ask for Steve or Ebi. Trust me, no last names are needed. The pair are legendary on the island. The shore diving is easy to access and it's a fantastic way to check out the beautiful coral and fish life.

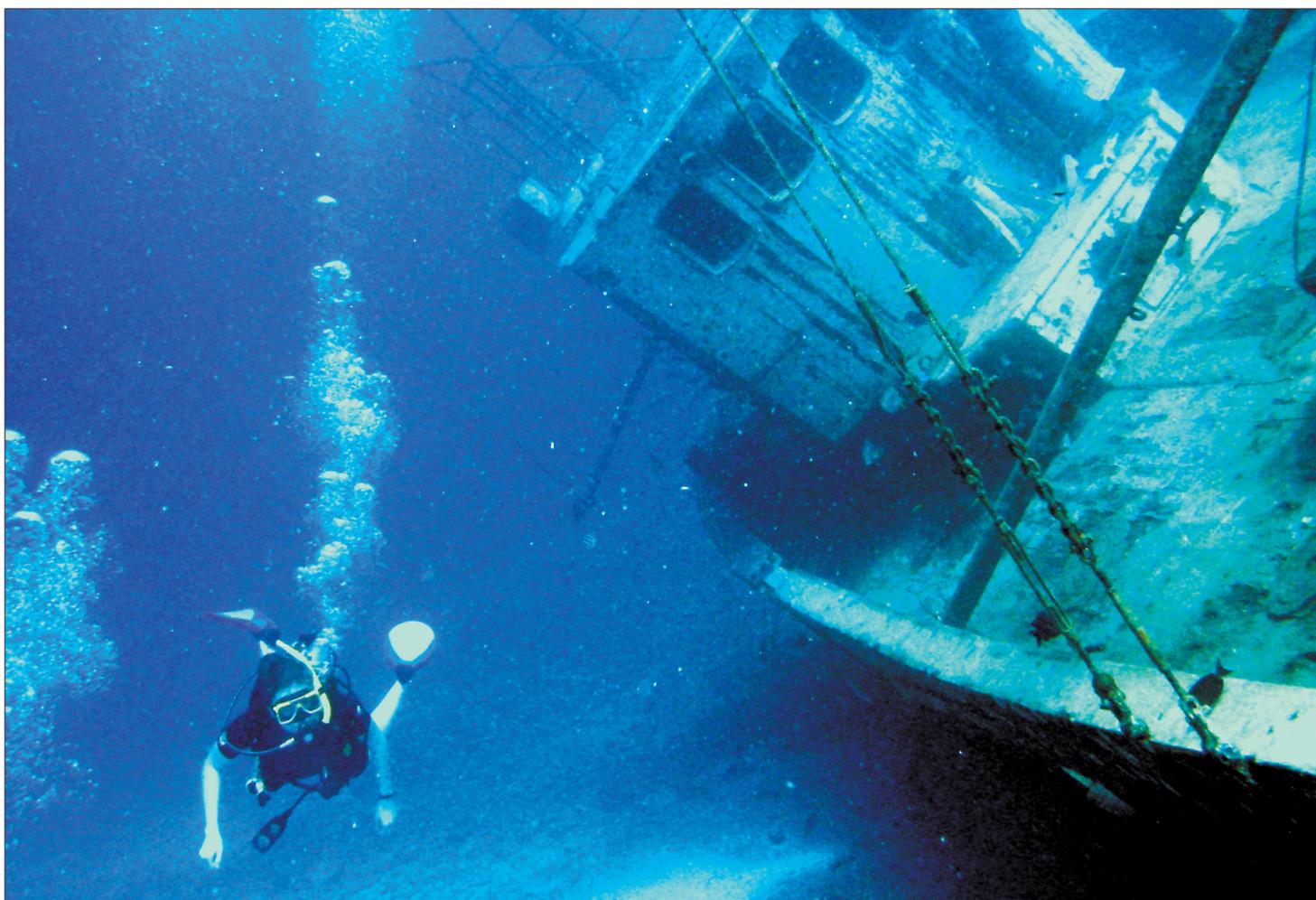
You don't have to be a water baby to enjoy all that Bonaire has to offer. For a little slice of heaven, check into the newly renovated Harbour Village, where the staff dotes on you as if you're one of the hotel's many celebrity guests. Easily one of the Caribbean's most luxurious properties, the resort is run by Nick Davies, the gregarious general manager who personally sees to it that no one's glass is ever empty. When one young pregnant woman wondered out loud if she would be able to wait until dinner to eat, Davies had the chef whip up a tasty snack to tide her over. Speaking of food, opt for at least one dinner on the resort's beach. It's a great way to enjoy a sunset in Bonaire.

Try to spend an afternoon or evening walking into town, which is about a mile from either resort. The view from the pier is beautiful and a wonderful spot to people watch. If you enjoy a good walk, take a day trip to Washington-Slagbaai National Park. A former plantation, the park is full of cactus and rugged rocks as well as a few beautiful secluded beaches. These sites are a huge contrast to the dingy huts where the slaves lived when they were working in the salt mines.

CELEBS WHO LOVE BONAIRE: Tom Cruise, Penelope Cruz, Gene Hackman, Kathleen Turner.



Check out the Harbour Village (www.harbourvillage.com), the Plaza Resort (www.plazaresort-bonaire.com) and Washington-Slagbaai National Park (www.bonairenature.com/washingtonpark).



Bonaire might not be as well known as other islands, but it nonetheless is a scuba diver's paradise and a vacationer's dream. —DENTON MORRIS/FOR THE SUN-TIMES

GROSS ISLET, St. Lucia

Part of the deal when my husband and I got married was I would plan the wedding and he would make all the arrangements for our honeymoon. When he asked if I'd like to go to St. Lucia, I knew I was definitely marrying the right guy. With St. Lucia, you get to revel in paradise while soaking in the country's long and illustrious history.

Once occupied by both the French and English, St. Lucia was ceded to the British in 1814. In 1979 it became an independent democracy within the British Commonwealth. Note to tourists: English is the island's official language (though many of its inhabitants also speak French patois) and the locals drive on the left, just as Britains do in the United Kingdom. So look left, then right, and left again when you're crossing the street.

Though it's easy to spend every day at the beach without getting bored, it'd be well worth your while to take a day trip to Pigeon Island, a nature park filled with the remains of an 18th century British fort. There are still cannons poised precariously at the edge of the fort's walls. If you're prone to allergic reactions from bug bites, remember to lather on some bug spray before you head out sight-seeing. After I was bitten, I grew a third "knee."

During the hourlong drive from the airport to our resort, it was obvious St. Lucia shared some of the same poverty as other Caribbean destination spots. The modest huts varied drastically from the impeccably maintained tourist spots and accentuated the difference between the haves and the have-nots.

Still, it was easy to forget the reality when you're there on a fantasy vacation. My husband had booked us into the Sandals Grande St. Lucian for a variety of reasons. He knew I

would enjoy the upgraded concierge service, which meant we could order room service any time. The resort also was offering honeymooners a set of china or Waterford crystal.

Never mind that our crystal was mailed to us with one glass broken. St. Lucia always will bring back fond memories for us as the country where we first vacationed as husband and wife.

CELEBS WHO LOVE ST. LUCIA: The late Princess Diana, Sylvester Stallone, Robert DeNiro.



Check out the Sandals Grande St. Lucian (www.sandals.com/main/grande/gl-home.cfm) and the St. Lucia Tourism Board (www.stlucia.org).

GEORGE TOWN, Grand Cayman

The newer, nicer hotels are north of George Town on Seven Mile Beach. The beach is beautiful but there's almost no shore diving there, which means you have to pay extra money for boat rides to reach diving spots.

If you don't mind staying in a place that's not particularly luxurious, the modest Sunset House, south of George Town, is a great option. You won't find any celebrities hanging out in the lobby, but what draws divers there is its awesome dive shop, access to easy shore diving and Cathy Church's underwater photography studio. She'll teach you how to get that perfect underwater shot. Imagine the fun you can have at pool parties back home with that little bit of expertise tucked away in your bag of tricks.

The Caymans are a great place to swim with the fish. At



Tiger Woods and Elin Nordegren chose to have their wedding in Barbados, lessening the media frenzy in spots such as New York or Los Angeles.

Sting Ray City, you have the unique opportunity to snorkel among dozens of stingrays.

Meals can be a little expensive here. The island's best dining is at the Rum Point Restaurant at the Hyatt hotel. But if you're resourceful you can eat just fine without having to head to the ATMs too often. Remember that this is a former British colony and that fish and chips (\$10) at just about any joint will fill you up nicely.

Save room for dessert. The rum cake here is to die for.

CELEBS WHO LOVE GRAND CAYMAN: Danny Glover, Cheryl Tiegs, Naomi Campbell.



Sunset House (www.sunset-house.com) and Cathy Church's

underwater photography studio (www.cathychurch.com).

PLAYA DEL CARMEN, Mexico

Lying 41 miles south of Cancun, Playa del Carmen is a popular vacation spot with Europeans, who account for 80 percent of tourists. Playa del Carmen boasts pristine beaches, clear blue water and, yes, topless sunbathers. The crowd is older than the spring breakers who flock to Cancun every year, so the aura is relaxing, rather than frenetic.

The city's famous main tourist strip is along Fifth Avenue, where half a mile is closed off to autos. Before you get to the restaurants, you'll meet the vendors urging potential shoppers to peek inside their stores. Hairstylists will offer to braid hair into tiny locks. Don't worry about finding them. They'll find you. (Hint:

They usually have life-size plastic heads on sticks showing off the style they're offering.)

The bus terminal is conveniently located at the town's center. And it's also very close to the public pier, which ferries passengers back and forth to Cozumel.

Gourmands will be happy to learn that Fifth Avenue also is lined with just about any kind of food they might be craving. Just a few feet from a British pub lays an Italian eatery called Idea Pasta. Take a few more steps and you'll hit Capitan Bob's seafood restaurant. Look down the street and you'll see Cabalova, a sushi restaurant sporting both Japanese and American flags. Decorated in modern steel, the Japanese eatery touts its trump card at the entryway: the promise of soccer matches on streamlined TVs.

After lunch or dinner, take a walk along some of the side streets and get a good look at the gorgeous fences surrounding many of the homes. The tops of the walls are dotted with broken glass, which they put in before the cement dried, to hinder break-ins. Though it costs less than \$5 to take a cab back to many of the hotels, it's not a bad idea to return via a leisurely walk on the beach. Besides working off some of that day's calories, the white sand also gives your feet a natural pedicure.

CELEBS WHO LOVE MEXICO: Tyra Banks, Marc Anthony, Matt Damon.



One of the best ways to experience the city is to rent your own house (www.bluebeachhotel.com) and shop at the local stores for that evening's dinner.

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