



Email + Social Media Get your free guide now!



FREE GUIDE Download it today!

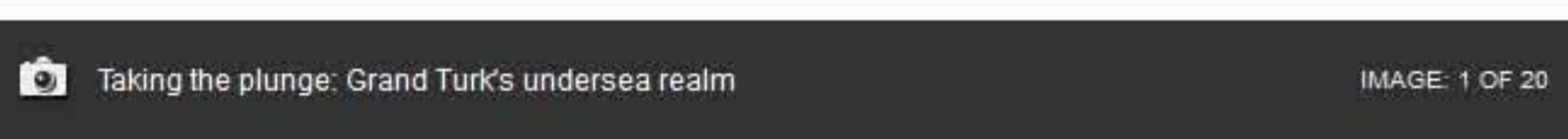


TRAVEL INTERNATIONAL

Taking the plunge: Grand Turk's undersea realm

STEPHEN RIPLEY, WINNIPEG SUN

FIRST POSTED: SUNDAY, JANUARY 08, 2012 07:08 AM CST



A dive boat is moored off Pillory Beach at Bohio Dive Resort on Grand Turk Island in the Turks and Caicos, Dec. 9, 2011. The resort is owned by Canadian expats Tom and Ginny Allan. (STEPHEN RIPLEY/Winnipeg Sun)

Social sharing buttons: Recommend, Tweet (4), +1 (0), Share

Report an error



More Coverage
Turks and Caicos offers a slice of Canada

Topics
Sun and Sand

GRAND TURK - With 30 feet of ocean separating me from my next breath, I'm tempted to panic.

Instead, I begin to kick for the surface, my flippers propelling me toward the light in a controlled, steady ascent. To make sure the air trapped in my body doesn't over-expand — potentially rupturing a lung — I slowly exhale while making an "aaaah" sound through my mouth, just as I've been taught.

It seems much longer, but it only takes about 30 seconds before the water above my head finally gives way to sky and I can inhale again. After a few breaths, I begin blowing up my buoyancy control device — basically an inflatable vest — to ensure the weight of my now-useless air tank doesn't drag me back down into the depths.

My instructor, who has been hovering just a few feet away the entire time, flashes the OK sign, which I return. We then exchange a high-five, celebrating the fact I am now one step closer to becoming a certified scuba diver.

I arrived at Bohio Dive Resort on Grand Turk three days ago with no diving experience whatsoever. I had snorkeled several times on previous trips to the Caribbean and Central America, but always thought it would be too much of a hassle to get my scuba certification.

Turns out I was wrong.

The first step was visiting the Professional Association of Diving Instructors website and doing my "e-learning." Instead of spending days in a classroom, listening to lectures about scuba gear, gas expansion and depth charts, PADI now delivers this information in an easy-to-follow online format, complete with audio narration and video examples. I managed to complete the whole course in about four hours on the day before I left Winnipeg.

DIVE MASTER STEVE

Once I arrive at Bohio, I am introduced to dive master Steve Giles, a wiry Englishman whose close-cropped hair and halting speech puts me in mind of a marine drill instructor ... albeit a friendly one. Steve has me sign a sheaf of medical waivers, helps me select some gear from the resort's fully stocked dive shop and before I know it, I'm standing in a swimming pool for an afternoon of confined-water instruction.

Steve teaches me how to prepare for a dive: attaching my regulator to an air tank, checking the pressure, putting on a weight belt and inflating my BCD. Once I'm in the pool, he shows me how to blow water out of my mask, control my buoyancy and use a buddy's backup regulator when mine isn't working.

On their own, each task is simple enough, but together they are crucial to ensure a diver's survival in the undersea environment. And until I can master each of them, Steve won't let me out of the pool and into the crystal-blue waters lapping at the white-sand beach just a coconut's throw away.

Fortunately, I turn out to be a quick study and a day later I'm in the back of a boat, speeding out into the Atlantic for my first open-water dive. It's a short trip to the dive site, as Bohio sits on the western, leeward coast of Grand Turk Island, less than a kilometre away from The Wall, where the coral reef abruptly falls away, from a depth of about 30 feet to more than 7,000 feet. Running the entire 10-km length of the island, The Wall is a perfect location to view a kaleidoscope of aquatic life, from turtles, sharks and stingrays to massive humpback whales, which can often be spotted in the winter months.

Today, though, it's a school of yellowtail snapper that darts around Steve and I as we descend along the boat's mooring line. Once we hit bottom, about 30 feet down, we begin to explore.

Surprisingly, despite being utterly dependent on the tank of compressed air strapped to my back, I feel completely at ease. Whether it's because of the mammalian diving reflex — which automatically slows my heartbeat and respiration — or the placid, blue surroundings, I find I have no trouble relaxing and following Steve through the reef, occasionally detouring to get a closer look at a brain coral or a multi-hued parrotfish.

After about 35 minutes in the water, Steve signals it's time to go to the surface. We add some air to our BCDs and begin to rise, pausing at a depth of 15 feet for a three-minute safety stop. This is standard practice to ensure we don't suffer decompression sickness, in which nitrogen bubbles form in our bodies as we rise to the surface. The depth and duration of all recreational dives are planned to ensure a decompression interval isn't needed, but safety stops are added as an extra precaution, in case of miscalculation.

We dive again later that afternoon and twice more again the next day, combining general sightseeing with specific tasks I must perform in order to earn my certification. I grow more and more comfortable, gradually learning to use slight changes in my breathing, rather than swimming or the BCD, to adjust my position in the water.

I put these skills to the test on my final dive when Steve motions for me to check out a cluster of rocks and coral below us. I exhale a little longer than normal, which causes me to gradually descend until I'm at eye-level with the rear end of a grey, three-foot-long fish whose unmistakable tail and dorsal fin identify it as a shark. I swim around to the other mistakable take a peek at its wedge-shaped head, tucked into a small opening in the rocks. Steve tells me later it's a baby nurse shark — a docile species that prefers to rest during the day and hunt at night.

Back on dry land, Steve presents with my PADI certification card and a log book, where I'm supposed to record all of the pertinent details from each dive, including the location, depth, time and any highlights. After writing a couple of sentences about my shark sighting, I thumb through the remaining empty pages, vowing to start filling them the first chance I get.

StealTheDeal.com SAVE UP TO 90% on Things to Do, See, and Eat in your city! SIGN UP

TOP STORIES POPULAR LATEST VIDEOS
from EPC
There can be only one WJ0001 Jets fan
Record-breaking winter weather over
Plane crash kills four near Ontario reserve

SOCIAL ACTIVITY Recent Activity
Jason Guille shared Occupy Wall St.? Damn right — it was the scene of the crime in '08 recession.
Plane crash kills four near Ontario reserve
South 'Peg highway a trap: WiseUp
'Your kid is not here' sign left on memorial

HILTON HONORS GET 1,000 POINTS PER NIGHT PLUS 5,000 POINTS PER WEEKEND STAY. Learn more >

MORE FROM INTERNATIONAL
Rambling around Bridgetown
Top 10 hotel swim-up bars
Deals on magical winter getaways
Taking the plunge: Grand Turk's undersea realm
Turks and Caicos offers a slice of Canada