

You never forget your first time

Diving with Caribbean Explorer I, that is

By Corrinne Lutter

Hanging vertically along the reef wall, a hawksbill turtle chomped heartily on the crunchy coral cuisine spread out before it like an underwater Bahamian buffet.

Five days into our first-ever liveaboard dive trip and our third day exploring the reefs off San Salvador Island, my dive buddy and I could check another sea creature off our "hope to see" wish list.

We had already watched the shadowy silhouettes of hammerhead and reef sharks swimming off into the deep blue; visited with giant lobsters and crabs that peaked warily out at us from rocky crevices and bonded with a friendly grouper named Oscar, who liked to be gently scratched on his black and white striped belly.

Stringrays, lionfish, eels, a constant entourage of gaudy but gorgeous reef fish and endless, unspoiled coral gardens made each dive site a new experience to be discovered.

As new divers with less than 20 dives each under our weight belts, it was an exciting and unforgettable adventure that began when we boarded the Caribbean Explorer I at the docks on Great Exuma, the largest of 365 tiny islands that make up the Exumas archipelago. We had already spent a week exploring island's sleepy settlements, searching for Johnny Depp, sipping on Kaliks and relaxing on deserted, postcard-perfect white sand beaches. It was time to see what was hiding beneath the crystal-clear turquoise water.

We got our flippers wet at dive sites off Hog Cay and Long Island before heading northeast to Conception Island, where strong currents and big waves tested our skills. On day two, swimming along the walls of Conception Island, we got our first fleeting glimpse of reef sharks, not to mention a myriad of tropical fish lighting up the seascape with their technicolour displays. All the usual suspects were in attendance, from parrot fish and angel fish to triggerfish, butterfly fish, tangs, trumpet fish, squirrelfish and more.

With inclement weather on the way, we made an overnight passage east to the remote shores of San Salvador Island, where Christopher Columbus is rumored to have first landed when he arrived in the New World.

We never made it onshore, but the diving around San Salvador was a whole new world in itself. Vertical walls and dramatic underwater cliffs, cuts, chutes, canyons, crevices, cracks and caves impressed even the most seasoned divers in the group. A carpet of sea fans, sponges and corals encrusted the walls at depths from 40 to 110 feet and beyond. With calm seas and water visibility from good to excellent, we set anchor around San Salvador and visited 11 different dives sites over the next three days, with names like Double Caves, The Cut, Devil's Grotto, The Humps, Runway 10 and North Pole Cave.

At Telephone Pole, where an underwater monument commemorates Columbus's visit, our keen-eyed divemaster was the first to point out a hammerhead shark venturing up from the dark blue depths. A couple hours later, this was also the site of my first-ever night dive. It was a toss-up which dive provided the biggest adrenaline rush: watching a magnificent predator slicing through the water below me or jumping into a pitch-black sea, going through my first enclosed swim-through in the dark and seeing the magical glow of bioluminescence for the first time!

Oscar the friendly grouper, hawksbill and green turtles, stringrays, more sharks (reef and hammerhead), bustling cleaning stations and countless lionfish sightings were among the other highlights of our San Salvador experience.

Back near Long Island on our last day of diving, we descended down the anchor line to explore the M.S. Comberbach, a 110 foot steel freighter sitting upright in 100 feet of water. Every inch of the vessel, from bow to stern, was alive with vibrant sea life. The only thing disappointing about our first-ever wreck dive was that we could only stay down for 30 minutes.

Our last dive of the week was on Shark Reef, where a local resort does a shark feed in about 40 feet of water. We got up close and personal with a half-dozen reef sharks, lured in by the sound of the Explorer's engines. Realizing there was no free food to be had, the sharks soon dissipated, leaving the photographers in the group with one last hour to snap pictures of the lush, sunlit reef, capturing prized keepsakes to remember our first (but definitely not last) dive trip with Explorer Ventures.