

That Sinking Feeling

Funny how some dive holidays stay in the mind for a lot longer than others and some times for all the wrong reasons. We were off, the eight of us on our way to our first diving holiday in the Caribbean. Despite the effort of carrying all our suitcases and dive gear the excitement was building throughout the long journey to Antigua.

After a good nights sleep at Jolly Harbour we were ready for the off, fall out of bed, amble down to the beach two minutes away to pick up some info on local dive operator and we would be in the water in no time!

Think again. Not for us the easy option, our D.O Pauline had been on the Internet. She had found a dive outfit that sounded OK, all we had to do was find it. We hired a minibus for the eight of us and with some vague directions that the dive outfit was somewhere near English Harbour we set off for our first taste of island driving and diving! At first we could not understand why all these lorry's and buses were driving towards us on our side of the road after we had been told to drive on the left? We soon realised that you only drove on the left if the potholes were smaller and the overhead electric cables were higher on your side. After the rain some of the potholes would have been rated as good dives back home. After some searching round the English Harbour area we found our man, an ex-pat, tucked away at a swish resort, we made some plans to dive the following day, job sorted? Don't you believe it.

Next day bright and early we arrived for our diving, boarded the boat and took a right out of the harbour. Following a nice gentle dive we got back on board to move to next dive site, the engine was somewhat reluctant to start but then coughed into life so off we went.

At this point the wind was getting up and a swell developing so it was decided to drop the non-diver, my wife Chris, off at the local yacht club beach for an hours sunbathing. Then it was back out of the harbour and on with the diving.

Another nice dive, back on the boat for home but this time the engine was definitely not going to start.

After some time and some worried looks between the skipper and his partner he decided to lift the engine cover. Now I know it was a water-cooled engine but was it supposed to be underwater? Not only was the engine underwater the battery for the bilge

pump was there as well. Not to worry the skipper had a spare one. The only problem was that we had to hold the wires on the sparking terminals with our bare hands, not easy in a rolling boat, and boy was it rolling! At this point I thought we should calling on the radio or mobile for help but some one pointed out that Antigua was not renowned for its lifeboat service. I didn't think this argument held water, pardon the pun, if a round a world yachtsman can be rescued in the middle of the South Atlantic we should have no trouble. It was all immaterial anyway, we didn't have a radio or mobile on board.

By now the wind was up and the sea getting rougher, the skipper decided it was time for action, he abandoned ship. Well he said he was going for help but seeing we were about a mile from the harbour and a quarter of a mile off a coast with steep cliffs we had our doubts. Still he had left his partner behind so perhaps we were being cynical. The last we saw of him was scurrying up the only gap in the cliffs for miles, the thought did cross our minds that he had done this before. Left to our own devices the instinctive survival skills of the BSAC diver came to the fore. Some prepared to don their dive kit and join the rush for the shore but were persuaded to stay for the cause. We commenced baling out the water with everything we could find. Dave used his vaguely remembered boy scout skills to fashion a baler from an empty drinks container, I promptly lost it overboard on the first scoop and was relegated back to holding the afore mentioned wires on the spare battery which was now almost underwater. By now the water inside the boat had reached parity with the sea with only the buoyancy of the bow keeping us afloat. One good wave and we would have a new wreck to dive.

After what seemed an age the cavalry arrived, well actually it was the harbour taxi boat, manned by a local Rastafarian and powered by a 50cc outboard motor. It was the sort of boat you would have thought twice about if offered a trip round the local boating lake and here it was on a rescue mission. Still any boat in a storm! After some tricky manoeuvres we transferred some passengers to the rescue boat, connected a tow rope and made our steady way back at all of a quarter of a knot. Only when we made it back to the sheltered waters of the harbour did we breathe a sigh of relief. Now we just had to persuade the rescue boat skipper to pick my wife of the beach where we had left her about 3 hours before, any diver with a non diving partner can tell you how tricky that was going to be. Not only was she slightly miffed but she had also witnessed our skipper in

his wet suit come tearing passed her down the beach shouting for help to save his boat!

Now you would think that would be the end of our association with this particular dive outfit, not a bit. We arranged to give him time to sort his boat and we would dive with him in a couple of days time. It was then we got the full story of why his boat had nearly sunk. It seems a couple of days before our diving he had some work carried out on his boat which involved drilling some holes through the engine bulkhead, unfortunately these were in the wrong place so they re-drilled the holes and then installed the new wiring. This would not have mattered until he took on seven divers and all their equipment, the boat with it's new set of holes sat lower in the water with all the extra weight and we were virtually sinking from the moment we went on board.

On our second days diving the skipper was taking no chances, he had got his mobile with him and was towing a lifeboat that was bigger then the dive boat we were on. Turned out we needed it because after the first dive the dive boats prop shaft broke while we were out at sea! After our first ordeal this was a mere trifle and we carried on diving with him on his friends boat for the rest of the holiday.

The postscript to all this was that we ended up paying in full for our diving and our skipper telling us how he was lucky we weren't lawyers from New York, they would be suing him for every penny he had! Not quite his words but you can get the jist,

Still after all that guess which diving holiday gets the most mentions on winters nights, yes Antigua.

Furry