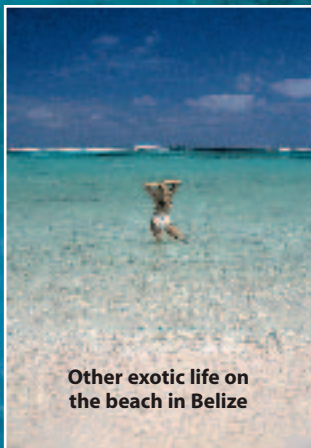


Sex, Drugs and Rock n' Roll

written and photographed
by Bret C. Gilliam



Other exotic life on the beach in Belize

The Great Blue Hole, Belize

There are few opportunities in life that allow almost complete and unmitigated indulgence in whatever may hold your personal interest. But over the years my career in professional diving and shipping has occasionally hit a home run in serendipitous situations. Consider that I was actually asked by the U.S. Navy in 1971 to volunteer to smoke copious quantities of marijuana and then perform otherwise mundane tasks underwater

put me over the top in their selection process. Anyway, I can assure you that there are few better ways to pass a month in the Caribbean than surrounded by nubile beauties with more than a passing interest in rope tricks. My own version of the GI Bill was coming along nicely.

Many years later when I operated a fleet of large motor yachts in the luxury charter trade, similar opportunities would present themselves and I was glad to have gained valuable experience on

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As it turns out, several of the Apollo astronauts were getting sick in the weightless environment of space and some genius in a white lab coat decided that it would be worthwhile to explore the anti-nausea benefits of pot to mitigate the space sickness side effects. The Navy was brought in to help with divers who would get stoned and then undertake sort of a "day in the life" of an astronaut... but underwater.

All this while belching clouds of bubbles and trying to ignore how terminally amusing the antics of the sluggish Virgin Islands sea cucumber could be while under the influence. Of course, I had nearly fallen to my knees in my rush to be the first to volunteer for this dangerous, but strategically necessary, experiment. Go ahead, call me a patriot. Someone had to do America's dirty work while everyone else was back home protesting. I'd hesitate to suggest that our gonzo dive team had "The Right Stuff" especially since we frequently had trouble driving home after a day's work. But we made up for our lapses with unbridled enthusiasm which impressed the scientists.

Then a year later I got a call asking if I would consider taking a four week assignment to supervise the ocean scenes in an early "adult" film to be shot in Virgin Gorda. Apparently, there would be a lot of cavorting in tidal pools along with naked swimming (and other activities absolutely necessary for full artistic plot development, you bet!) just off the pristine sand beaches of the Baths. And they needed a crack professional to make sure that no one poked any soft parts into an urchin or something.

I was quick to point out that I was additionally qualified to smoke marijuana and tie knots. I think those previously acquired job skills

earlier assignments. While on a charter with the Rolling Stones off Montserrat, bass player Bill Wyman coaxed me into relating the circumstances of my Navy experiment. This immediately drew the attention of Keith Richards, who, as it turned out, was a huge fan of pipe puzzles and tying things up. We got along famously and I like to think that my input helped him to further the advancement of valuable work in this exciting field.

So in 1987 when I was contacted by a group of investors who were putting together the Ocean Quest company which would operate a 525-foot cruise ship for divers in the western Caribbean, I didn't hesitate. By that time I had learned that no matter how zany a project could sound, inevitably someone with seriously deep pockets might want to finance it. I subscribe to the modified Ben Franklin axiom, "A fool and his money... are some party!"

They wanted me to do a whole series of projects for them in advance of their start-up. Like design the ten 35-foot dive boats, the recompression chamber facility, the air system, hire the staff, buy the diving equipment, write the operations and safety manuals, and, oh yeah, go to the Mexican Yucatan, Belize and Honduras to scout locations. Any job description that includes the phrase "scout locations" immediately gets moved up a notch or two in my consideration. Especially since they did not mean "scout locations" for a toxic landfill in New Jersey or some other less compelling mission.

So I went to work to plan an itinerary that would allow the ship to place us in reasonable proximity to the best diving while affording a comfortable anchorage that might amuse our non-diving guests. Things proceeded along quite well and a year later most of the advance work was completed and we had bought a ship. Now we had to finalize the route for each week's voyage. So it was decided that three of us "executives" would take

a gym bag full of cash and go resolve all the pesky little details like port entry fees, local agents, and government relations. Sort of like Ollie North's mission with the Contras but without any ramifications for the Republican party.

Mexico, with its traditional ports of Cancun and Cozumel, was pretty much a known product offering two distinctly different types of diving opportunities. Essentially, Cozumel had fabulously beautiful reefs, boundless marine life diversity, absurdly clear water and a lovely "old world" feel to the bustling local town of San Miguel. On the

meet anyone in Belize who seemed to have a last name. "Mr. Gilliam, we'd like you to meet our Minister of Tourism, Ralph." Maybe Madonna and Cher were from really from Ambergris Cay.

So as Gino and I pounded our way 65 miles to windward in search of Lighthouse Reef atoll, I outlined my plan of attack. Gino was a veteran scuba guide who was used to the rigorous schedule of about three or four dives a week with his charter guests. So when I started explaining that I wanted to do about 10-to-12 dives a day to maximize our exploration and identification of

nearly straight down into a blue abyss. Gino said I should go first and he would hand me my camera and then meet me under the boat. Great plan, well thought out all the way.

But when I reached to rinse my mask on the swim platform, my solid gold Rolex Submariner chose that exact moment to break the pin on the band and about \$20,000 worth of precision Swiss watch technology bounced once off the side of the boat and began spiraling over the drop off. Not good at all.

Luckily I was already into my gear and I crashed off the platform madly finning after my

island and was endlessly expounding on the exciting features of the atoll. "Ya gotta see da boobies, ya won't wanna miss dat," he confided. Being a booby fan from way back and noting the sans suit decorum of the ladies in the sailboat anchored just off the beach, I began to recount my adventures with the X-rated film crew in Virgin Gorda. Then Gino broke our mood by noting that our host was referring to the pink-footed boobies that resided in the bird sanctuary at the island's west end. Let's just say that my impression of that attraction the next morning paled in comparison.



Gilliam's 92 foot yacht *North Star*, host to the Rolling Stones, 1982



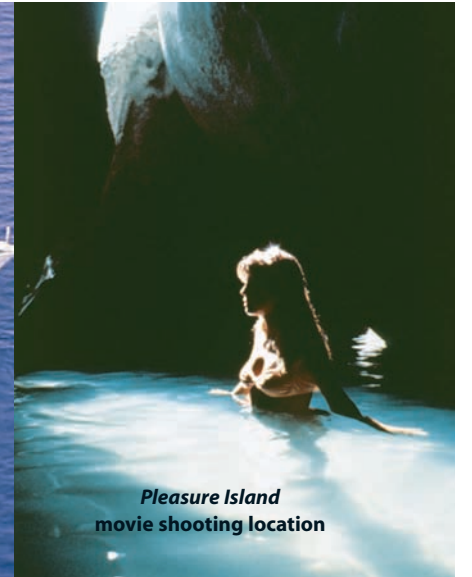
Capt. Gino
wry Belize guide



525-foot dive cruise
ship *Ocean Quest*



The infamous
Rolex



Pleasure Island
movie shooting location

other hand, Cancun's diving basically "sucked," which is a technical term for "bad viz, no fish, and not much in the reef department."

Belize, however, was a different story. We wanted to concentrate our visitation on the offshore atolls where we had plenty of room to maneuver the ship and excellent dive conditions awaited. Our concept was to have the mother ship deliver us and our dive boats to an area and then stand off while our guests tapped into the virgin waters for a two or three dives before rendezvousing for food and air fills. Then each boat would head out again for the afternoon.

But unlike the average dive operator who had to satisfy maybe 20 divers or so on a couple of dives a day with one boat, I had to multiply that by 10! That meant I needed enough good sites to spread out all these folks without them bumping into each other and keep them stoked. That basically worked out to 40 to 50 sites spread over a 15 mile radius from the ship.

Our local agent, Stanley, set me up with a charter sailboat guide named Gino who purportedly knew all the atolls on a first name basis. That was easy to believe since I had yet to

suitable sites, he expressed some trepidation, "Look, mon, ya can't do that many dives or we'll be bent up like pretzels by lunch time. And I'm not getting bent for \$40 a day."

Now, at least, I understood his reluctance and we swiftly confirmed that his price to be bent like a pretzel by lunch time was more in the order of \$50 a day. With those delicate negotiations handled faster than Bill Clinton can sign a midnight pardon, we settled into a discussion of my dive plan.

"There's no reason why we have to dive deep at all since the wall begins in water about 15 feet deep. With the great visibility we can jump in, look around briefly and set the coordinates for our site buoy. We mark it on the chart and move on to the next site. I doubt if we'll ever need to go deeper than 40 feet or so. That will give us a huge window for exploration without running up a lot of bottom time," I explained.

Gino could see the wisdom of this cunning plan and eased us into a sandy spot adjacent the precipitous wall at Long Key. Before even going in the water, I could see that this was going to be a great dive. The top of the wall featured exquisite coral growth and then dropped off

watch. Gino watched in bewilderment and wondered at my enthusiasm to get in so quickly. Meanwhile, I watched my Rolex rebound off a purple sponge and disappear over the edge. It had a good start on me but kept ricocheting off parts of the slope, slowing down just enough occasionally to entice me to pursue it. Finally, it came to rest on a narrow ledge. At nearly 300 feet. I grabbed it and started up. Observing the necessary decompression took a while, and I surfaced to find Gino eyeing me with the kind of look you might give teenagers who play in traffic. "So tell me again, how many dives a day were you planning?" he deadpanned.

"No, you got me all wrong. I dropped my watch and it's worth a lot of money, even more than \$50 a day. And I wanted to retrieve it. But I won't do that again, I promise," I apologized. Gino looked unconvinced but I suggested that we take the rest of the day off and just lay out some snorkeling sites for our non-diving guests and he calmed down.

We spent the night on Halfmoon Cay and had dinner with the lighthouse keeper who had guests drop in roughly every fifth year or so. He seemed fascinated that we wanted to bring tourists to his

We hit about a hundred great sites in the next week while living on the island and finally decided to wrap up our work with a trip to the famous Great Blue Hole located inside the reef about 10 miles from Halfmoon Cay.

As we prepared to drop in, Gino gave me his best serious dive guide face and said, "This is about 460 feet deep and it goes straight down. If you drop your watch or any other family jewels, just let 'em go mon, okay?" I agreed.

Later on I re-kindled his subliminal interest in pipe puzzles and nautical knots with the girls on the sailboat. They all agreed that we had the basis for a very successful cruise experience. Maybe the Navy might be interested in a long term experiment. I had the volunteers.

Bret Gilliam was Vice President of Ocean Quest, the largest sport diving operation in the world from 1987 to 1990. They routinely conducted over 1000 man-dives a day on weekly voyages along with frequent visits to the booby sanctuary. His research projects continue...