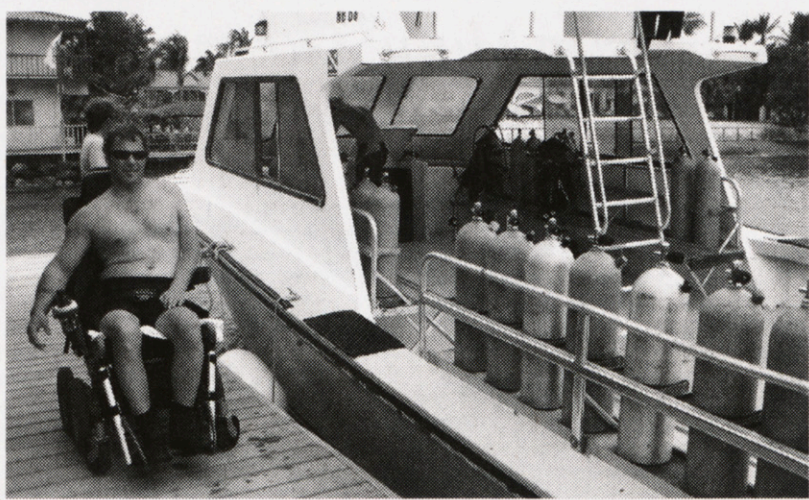
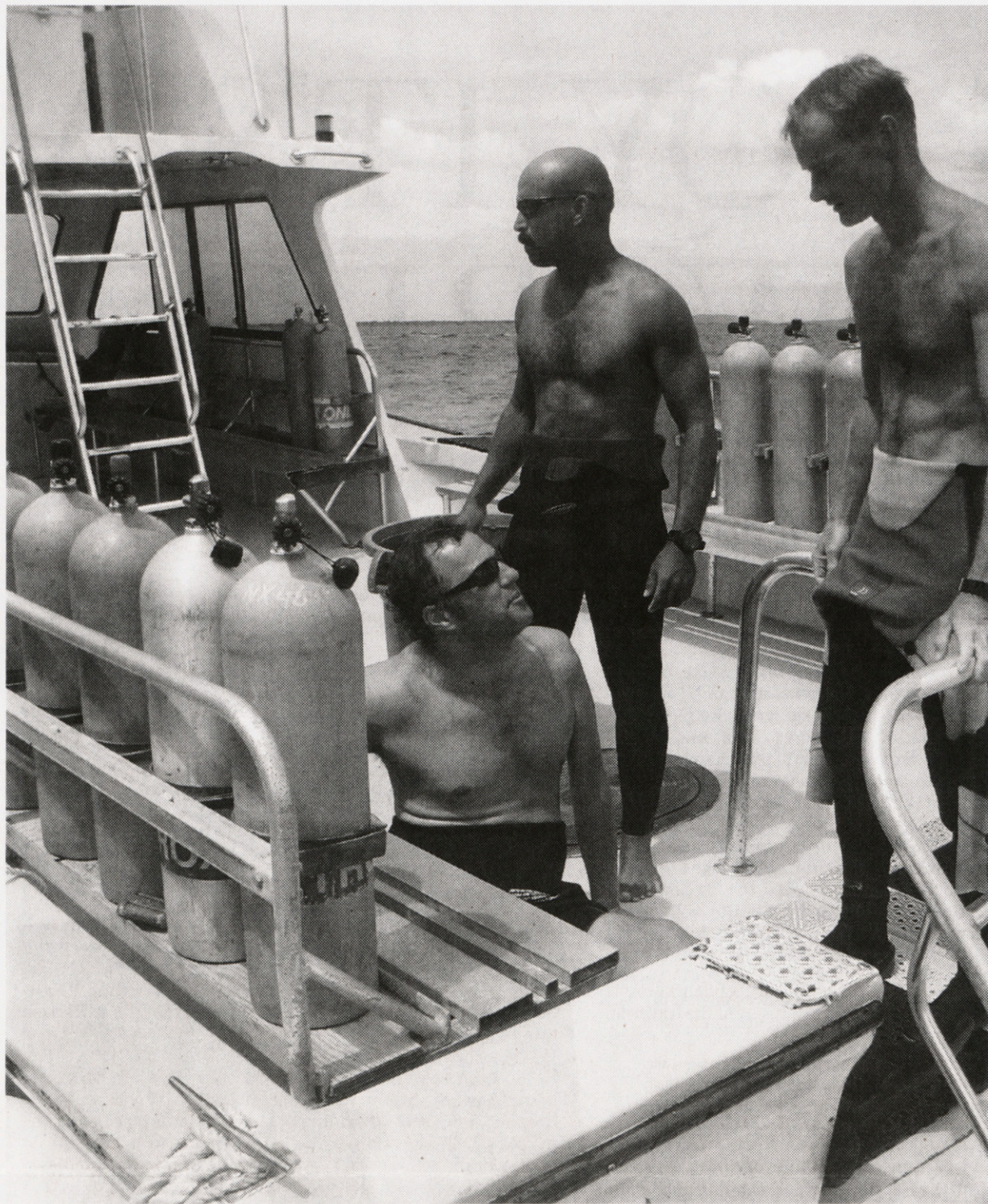


TRAVEL: BONAIRE



JUDITH RITTER

Left, from top: Divi Flamingo Resort is well appointed on the waterfront; David Whedbee wheels in for a dive; long ramps extend from the rooms to restaurants and right to the dive dock. At right: Whedbee chats with divemaster Rofino (left) and instructor Ruud about the day's dive.

'UNDERWATER ... WE ARE ALL EQUAL'

DIVING

Caribbean island is premier spot for those with disabilities

BY JUDITH RITTER

Divers are a hardy lot, hauling around all those 18-kilogram tanks, clambering on to heeling boats, slipping off into dark waters for hours and resurfacing loudly in their tight black rubber suits as they hoist themselves over the gunwales and back on to the boats. David Whedbee, a Seattle civil-rights lawyer, is one of those divers. He is brawny, tan and square-jawed. He is also in a wheelchair.

Whedbee is one of hundreds of divers with disabilities who come each year to Bonaire, a small Dutch island in the Caribbean, and a mecca for scuba divers. It is also reputed to be the most accessible spot in the world for disabled divers.

Whedbee, a paraplegic, is staying at Divi Flamingo Resort, a cluster of low-rise buildings in bursts of pink, ochre and turquoise stretched along the waterfront. Rooms, snack bar, restaurants and dive shop are connected by

a series of smooth wooden ramps and wide decks, which make for pleasant strolling for able-bodied folk but are crucial for people with disabilities. Add to this eight handicap-accessible rooms, the Alice H, a boat designed without gunwales so that wheelchairs can slip on and off with ease, a staff with two decades' experience dealing with divers with disabilities and a surrounding village where every restaurant is ramped, and Bonaire is, Whedbee says, "the most accessible place outside of the U.S." And Whedbee is very well-travelled.

It all seems to have happened by serendipity. Sara Matera, Divi Flamingo's general manager, says, "There are no regulations on handicap accessibility on Bonaire. We're just 14,000 people, and we seem to talk about everything and this all seems to have happened by word of mouth."

A stroll through Kralendijk, the island's main town, bears out what Whedbee and Matera say. Townspeople seem accustomed to manoeuvring their cars around wheelchairs. Tourists in shorts sporting artificial limbs occasion no stares, and servers at local restaurants, such as Casablanca, Richard's and Bambu, don't blink an eye as they quickly move tables and chairs to accommodate a guest rolling in. The town, a strip of little restaurants and

houses along the harbour, has a haphazard quality, a lack of deliberation unlike the towns on more posh resort islands. Front yards are covered in knee-high grasses and accidental flowers, and little boats lie keeled over at the edge of the long stretch of harbour, seemingly belonging to no one.

Getting back to Matera, word of mouth is how news of this special island, rated by the Professional Association of Diving Instructors as the No. 2 diving destination in the world, spread through the community of people with disabilities. Eventually, word reached the icy north and Hubert Chrétien, who runs Freedom at Depth Canada, a school that teaches people with disabilities to dive and trains instructors to work with the handicapped. Chrétien spends about a month a year in Bonaire, where, he says, "Everything works easily, from the wheel-aboard boats to the fact that it's possible to roll — or walk — directly from the airport to the Divi Flamingo without even waiting for a handicap-equipped taxi."

Another important element is the presence of divemasters such as Divi's Alvin Clemencia, who, while not a certified HSA (Handicap Scuba Association) instructor, is comfortable and competent working with people with disabilities. Clemencia, who just gently lowered one of his

GUIDE BOOK

GETTING THERE

■ There are no direct flights from Canada, but American Airlines flies direct to Curaçao from Miami; passengers then fly by Dutch Antilles Express to Bonaire. Starting Feb. 8, Delta Airlines will commence weekly return flights to Bonaire from Atlanta. And Continental Airlines has two weekly direct flights out of Newark, N.J. infobonaire.com

LODGING

■ Divi Flamingo Resort has 129 rooms and suites starting at about US\$140 a night. Children under 15 stay free when sharing a room with an adult. diviflamingo.com
■ Summer rates at Captain Don's Habi-

tat start at about US\$113 a night. Diving, snorkel and eco tours start at US\$26 a day. habitatdiveresorts.com/bonaire

DIVING

■ Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI): padi.com/padi/default.aspx
■ Freedom at Depth Canada: freedomatdepth.ca/home-en.html
■ Handicap Scuba Association conducts regular group trips for divers and non-divers to Bonaire, including an upcoming trip in August to the Divi Flamingo. The typical cost per person for a week's stay is US\$880 to US\$1,670. hsascuba.com
■ Wounded Warriors: woundedwarriors.org

charges into the dive boat, says he's been taking people with handicaps out diving for years. He has held the hands of blind divers underwater and helped them to "feel" the wonders of the ocean. He has guided quadriplegic divers through schools of parrotfish, damsel and strange spiny scorpionfish. "Once underwater and weightless, we are all equal," he says.

Organizations such as HSA and Freedom at Depth Canada have made the Divi Flamingo their No. 1 holiday diving destination, but other island resorts are comfortable for people with disabilities. Though they may not have the same facilities as Divi, their well-trained dive instructors make up for it. Wilco Landzaat is one of them: He's a divemaster at Captain Don's Habitat, a resort with winding cement ramps to the water, making it easy for wheelchairs to roll and disabled divers to slip easily into the ocean. Captain Don's has that clubby diver ambience that may be short on up-market amenities but is long on full tanks of air and nitrox. A rough-and-tumble-looking Landzaat sits among the vacationing divers around the bar where the fish stories get more

dramatic as the evening goes on. The sun sets, no-see-ums hum around exposed ankles and with every round of drinks the sharks get bigger and more numerous, and the shipwrecks at the bottom of the bay get more glamorous.

Landzaat has heard it all and done it all. Or so he thought, until last year, when the first round of Wounded Warriors, young veteran amputees from Iraq and Afghanistan, came to Bonaire. Many were teenagers or the age of university students. They came with no legs, high-tech legs, or no arms to learn to dive, most thinking it would be impossible. "You could see them light up when we got them in the water," Landzaat says. He wasn't the only one to welcome the group: The entire island came out to greet them, and they were hosted by the Bonaire governor.

Over dinner one night, David Whedbee tries to explain the freedom of underwater weightlessness for someone like himself. "In the water," he says, "the difference between me and someone without disabilities is largely erased." He might have added that the same is true of Bonaire itself.

Weekend Post

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