

# Pirates' Plunder

## A DIVER'S SANCTUARY

### IN THE TURKS & CAICOS

BY DALE SANDERS

From dead calm, a flutter of damp tropical air ruffles the nearby palm trees; then suddenly a cool gusty wind from the northwest slaps me in the face and funnels down the hairs on the back of my neck. Shiver me timbers! A dreaded Nor'wester moves across the island like a rambling herd of buffalo, rattling everything in its path. Then as quickly as it hit, it's gone. The wind dies, the palms steady and life seems normal again. Such an event caused the plight of many a seafaring vessel traveling northward in the gulf stream. With little or no steerage, these heavily ballasted vessels were soon swept into the the feared barrier reef, caught without recourse, only to be thrust upon the Caicos bank's coral teeth.



Diver and old anchor, Grand Turk.

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Inset: A coney rests at a cleaning station off White Face reef. By Dale Sanders.

Opposite Inset: One of the many wrecks off Provo at Pine Cay. By Dale Sanders.

Remnants of this violent, historical past are found submerged in many places throughout the island chain now known as the Turks & Caicos. Just north of Provo, snorkelers can dive on six large cannons pointing seaward in a semi-circular arrangement. These remnants of Ft. George, standing as a silent tribute to the privateers, are all that remain of this early 18th century English fort, whose anchorage was used as a retreat to seek out and eliminate pirates in these British waters.

With more than 400 miles of treacherous barrier reef surrounding the Caicos Bank and known wrecks well

into the hundreds, it is no wonder that pirates flocked to the reclusive Cays of the Turks & Caicos Islands. They would await meandering ships laden with valuable cargoes leaving Havana in route back to Europe. However, pirating in these waters was by no means a picnic. Life lay at all times balanced between extremes of frolic and violence. Buccaneers found themselves in an ever-present atmosphere of fever-ridden heat, thirst and looming hurricanes, with the possibility of becoming shipwrecked upon an uncharted desert island an all-too-possible reality.

Among the many buccaneers, pirates such as Calico Jack and Ann Bonny

were known to have used the small cays north of Provo to plunder unsuspecting ships.

Divers can find an anchor now suspended from a crevice in 70 feet of water on a site known as White Face. Here thick stands of gorgonians and black corals line the lip of the wall. Sand chutes, similar to the one concealing the 18th century anchor, are found both north and south of this dive site. Divers will find that each chute harbors several exceptionally friendly grouper of varied species.

As we leave West Caicos in perfectly flat, calm waters, we reflect on the fact that periodically these gorgeous, idyllic seas are convulsed in hurricanes