

My Internship Experience with Blackbeard's Cruises

Blackbeard's
CRUISES



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Summer 2009

This year I was lucky enough to be selected by the Our World-Underwater Scholarship Society for an internship with Blackbeard's Cruises. Although I did not realize it when I was selected, this internship would turn out to be one of the most valuable and enjoyable experiences of my life. In addition to learning all about running a dive business and marketing that business effectively to a specific group of customers, I was also able to experience beautiful sunrises over the ocean, spectacular shipwrecks in perfectly clear water, and the camaraderie of a working with a knowledgeable and dedicated crew. All of these opportunities contributed to an internship experience that surpassed all my expectations.

During the stressful winter and months last year I joined all my fretful friends in looking for an internship or summer job. When I interviewed with Ms. Lindsey Fundine at Blackbeard's, I knew that this was an opportunity that I did not want to miss. This internship offered excitement and adventure in addition to real-world business and marketing experience. A few days later when Lindsey called to tell me that I had been chosen for the internship, my roommate and I threw an impromptu dance party to celebrate my acceptance! Although I still had a few months until I left for the Bahamas, I was already starting to make a packing list and get all my scuba gear together!

After a long day of flying, I finally arrived in Freeport, Bahamas in late May. Mrs. Peggy Purdy, one of the owners of Blackbeard's, picked me up at the airport, showed me the room she had prepared for me, and introduced me to the two crew members who were staying at the house that week. Immediately I felt welcomed and right at home as we all shared diving stories.

The first week I arrived I was able to go on a five day cruise on the Sea Explorer, the original Blackbeard's boat. Although the weather was a little rough, I absolutely fell in love with working on the water. Our captain, Ernie, took the time to train another new crew member and myself in the ways of sailing, anchoring, mooring to dive sites, and driving the boat. Being able to raise the sails of a massive boat is an exhilarating experience, and each new task that I completed gave me the confidence to tackle new challenges like learning how to work the dive compressor and pump the bilge system onboard. Even though the crew was working extra hard because of the bad weather, everyone maintained a great positive attitude, and the last two days of the cruise had perfect weather.

Our dives around western Grand Bahama that week were spectacular! Having been a diver for five years now, I was so excited to get in the famously clear waters of the Bahamas and see what I could discover. In addition to diving beautiful coral reefs with bright colors and tons of fish, I also got to experience my first few wreck dives at the Theos and Sea Star wrecks, as well as complete my first night dive! I was a little apprehensive about the night dive, but my dive buddies and I had a great time, and saw a sleeping turtle as well as the ultimate night dive find, the elusive octopus!

In addition to the awesome diving, I had other unforgettable experiences such as driving the boat in complete darkness under a starry sky, which is a feeling of freedom that I will not soon forget. Seeing the sunrise and sunset each day on the water was another empowering feeling, one that cameras cannot possibly imitate. After the trip was over, I already could not wait to get back on the water.

The following week I met with Bruce and Peggy Purdy, the owners of Blackbeard's, as well as Lindsey Fundine, the marketing director, to discuss my

internship project that I would be working on for the summer. I have always wanted to be involved in educating young people about the wonders of the ocean and how to best protect the ocean's fragile ecosystems whose health and integrity is so often determined by human practices. Luckily, Blackbeard's was also interested in education and marine conservation efforts. Additionally, Bruce Purdy discussed the fact that the numbers of teen and young adult scuba divers has declined in recent years, mainly due to the expenses associated with paying for a certification class and equipment purchases or rentals. Our joint goal for the summer merged these two interests, and took on a dual purpose of getting more young people involved in both the sport of scuba diving and the marine science of sustaining the ecosystems and habitats that are such valuable natural resources for scientists and divers alike.

We decided that the best way to encourage our goals of getting students involved in scuba diving and marine science was to create an opportunity for Blackbeard's boats to become the setting for marine science-based field trips chartered by educational institutions. Since Blackbeard's is usually a tourist-centered operation that caters to dive vacationers out on the boats to combine diving, sailing, and fun, we knew that certain adjustments to the way our normal trips run would be necessary to create a more research and scientific activity based program for student groups. We also knew that many students are not scuba certified, and that school groups may want to vary their itinerary to examine shallow water and terrestrial ecosystems, so the normal mantra of "dive, dive, dive" would probably have to be altered to accommodate academic programs that were not dive based. While one of our main goals was to encourage young people to become involved in scuba diving, it made more sense to build an all inclusive program that did not require scuba certification in order to open the experience up to all students and educational groups interested in spending time in the natural habitats of the Bahamas.

With these goals in mind, I began the research process. Although Blackbeard's has been running trips for educational and research groups for years, we needed to figure out how to improve these programs and make them appeal, both in terms of cost and experiential value, to the wide variety of universities, colleges, and lower school groups that could potentially use Blackbeard's as a platform for marine science education. In order to find out about our existing programs with educational groups I interviewed several professors who had taken students on a Blackbeard's field trips, all of whom gave me excellent feedback in terms of Blackbeard's strengths and weaknesses as a "floating classroom."

I then focused on researching what professors and educators were looking for in a marine science field experience for their students. To help me reach the most diverse group of educators possible I created a database of several hundred colleges from all over the United States that had a biology or environmental science faculty member interested in an area of study that could overlap with the experiences offered through a Blackbeard's cruise in the Bahamas. The database I created had professors interested in coral reef ecology, ichthyology, marine mammals, conservation biology and aquatic plant biology. Also included in the database was the contact information for every marine science department in the country, as well as information about colleges and high schools with scuba clubs or certification programs. By the end of compiling the

database, I had accumulated about four hundred entries to be utilized in the next stage of my internship project.

Once the database was completed, I went to work creating a survey to send to the professors in the database. The six question survey was carefully designed to gauge professor's experience and interest in Caribbean field studies, and also generate information about the responding professor's rank within the biology program and the length of breaks during their school year. These questions helped narrow down the best times to market educational trips, such as winter breaks and summer terms, as well as informed us what rank of professor was mostly likely to run extended trips with students.

After responses started coming in from the survey, I followed up with each of the respondents. Almost all the professors who responded to the survey were involved in extended field trips, with the majority of the trips conducted in the Caribbean region. It was extremely helpful to speak with professors who took students on these kinds of field trips, as I learned about the educational goals for trips comparable to those offered by Blackbeard's, the benefits of studying in the Caribbean, and the often high costs associated with travel and field courses in this region. I was also able to learn more about the more traditional field study option favored by most of the professors I spoke with, which involves conducting marine research from a field station on an island, often with included boat trips to gather data offshore. By hearing about professors' experiences with Caribbean field stations, I was able to come up with advantages that a liveaboard field experience could offer educational groups and generate effective selling points for a Blackbeard's trip. The contributions of interested, knowledgeable, and curious professors were truly crucial to the success of the website and the information presented within it, and helped me formulate much of my intern project.

After spending ten days in Freeport, I was able to hop aboard Sea Explorer again for a cruise with Venturing Crew 2125 out of Wellington, Florida. I acted as a deckhand for a week, but since the scouts are responsible for most of the dishwashing and cleaning when they are aboard the ship, I did not have to do much work! Instead I helped the troop with their shipboard duties, making sure everyone was cleaning their heads, and having a ball! The crew was a great group, and enjoyed every minute of their trip. The crew had just recently been scuba certified, so our divemaster Jeremy dove with the group for the first few dives to review their skills. By the end of the week, however, the group could not wait to giant stride off the boat and into the deep blue sea. Captain Ernie picked some awesome dive sites for the group, including a site called Bomb Rock, a rocky outcropping that served as target practice for soldiers during World War II. In addition the group did their first drift dive along a seventy foot wall full of colorful sponges, as well as diving Bull Run in Bimini, the sight of Blackbeard's shark dive. It was great to see the group improve their diving skills as the week progressed, and become more confident in the water and on the boat.

When they weren't blowing bubbles all around Grand Bahama and Bimini the Venturing Crew were enthusiastic sailors and fisherman, catching enough fish to have a delicious fish fry snack at the end of the week. Besides traditional fishing off the stern of the boat, the scouts eagerly took up the sport of spear fishing, and managed to catch a few keepers, which is quite an accomplishment for first time spear fishermen and fisherwomen! The group also climbed two lighthouses in the Bimini chain, and did a number of "island explorations" to various blue holes and deserted beaches. In Bimini,

the crew enjoyed a relaxing port night, complete with a grilled dinner and swimming in the marina pool, as well as a trip to the Bimini Biological Field Station to study shark ecology. But the true highlight of the trip, as is to be expected from a group of teenagers, were the two brilliant bonfires the crew constructed during the week. One occurred in Bimini, on the beach during our port night, and the other happened on a small beach in the canal waterway of Grand Bahama the night before we returned to port. Both were magnificent, the work of true scouts who spend their weekends camping in the wilderness, and despite the fact that everyone was sweating profusely, the bonfires continued to rage until bedtime. The Venturing Crew were enthusiastic about the whole trip, and their adventurous spirit was refreshing, and helped me focus on my goal of getting as many young people as possible out on the water learning about the marine environment.



After my week with the scouts, I was scheduled to return to the office to work on my internship project. However, because of a crew scheduling conflict, I was able to work for another week as deckhand on another Blackbeard's ship, the Pirate's Lady. This trip was a more traditional cruise, with a group of passengers from Iowa and a couple from Florida. This was one of my favorite cruises during my time in the Bahamas. I felt confident enough after my initial weeks at sea to really help out on board with tasks such as mooring, anchoring, docking, deck maintenance, and even free diving for moorings. Again, it was exhilarating and peaceful to drive the boat under the stars, and

driving shifts at night were some of my favorite times of the week. I also got to dive some awesome sites in Bimini, and even got to hold the chumsicle for the dive master during the shark feed at Bull Run (my parents were not happy seeing those pictures!).

The captain that week, Pancho, was extremely helpful toward me and the other crew members, all of whom were among the youngest in the staff. He instructed us in free diving and spearfishing, as well as onboard duties like mooring and driving the boat effectively. Pancho was such a skilled spear fisherman that we were able to have a whole afternoon of fresh sushi on board, as well as a delicious conch salad. I have never free dove or fished before, so learning all of these new things was absolutely exhilarating! It was really gratifying to be able to catch a fish, fillet it, and cook it, all in a day! I relished every moment on deck, enjoying the company of the passengers and crew, watching the sunset, and getting some amazing night dives under my belt.

The uncontested highlight of this trip was an afternoon when we were motoring to our next dive site and a pod of four dolphin started swimming around our boat. Immediately the group donned their snorkel gear and jumped in the calm, shallow, clear blue water. Pancho instructed us that if we swam and dove and twirled near the dolphins, they would start to play with us. Sure enough the pod zigzagged between the passengers and crew in the water, close enough to touch. The pod consisted of two calves and their babies. The babies were all about playtime and kept coming back to show off for the group for about twenty minutes, all while the group kept up the twirling and spinning underwater. Seeing such powerful and intelligent animals at such close distance, and in their natural environment, was a truly profound experience. I think that if everyone had a chance to experience an encounter like that, the ocean's inhabitants would be in much better shape. It is impossible to see such underwater agility and awareness and not want to protect it from destruction and habitat loss.



Upon returning from my amazing trip on board Pirate's Lady, I settled into my office in Freeport for a few intense weeks of interviewing professors and building the new Blackbeard's educational website. After collecting responses to my online survey, I was able to form more concrete ideas about the types of marine science field experiences that were being offered to students around the country, and what they entailed in terms of cost, location, and activities. Several key questions and their associated responses were very valuable in determining the existing market for marine science and scuba trips and Blackbeard's potential advantages within that market.

The first thing we were interested in was finding out what existing opportunities for marine field study were available to the educational community, and what kind of schools and professors were already involved in such experiences. By tracking the survey responses I saw that a number of professors were engaged in marine science activities with their students in the Caribbean and other tropical locales. Interviewing these professors, even though the chances of them ever using Blackbeard's was slim due to their existing arrangements at field stations and marine labs, helped me determine what kind of programs were prominently featured as part of a marine science field study program, as well as obtain information about the advantages and disadvantages of running a trip from a land based field site. These types of questions also helped me learn what a college professor is likely to expect from a field station in terms of accommodations, transportation, food service, and scientific equipment such as microscopes, lab space, and holding tanks. This allowed me to make sure that Blackbeard's could offer similar services while still being cost competitive.

Another aspect of our newly emerging educational program that had to be addressed before making the website was how to tailor our trips to students of all ages and ability levels. From its inception we knew that Blackbeard's had the capacity to serve many different educational goals, ranging from graduate and doctoral level research projects to middle school extended field trips and educational summer camp type programs. Our ability to provide different services to a diverse educational audience meshed nicely with my feelings that everyone should experience marine life up close in order to better understand and preserve it, and I was glad that Blackbeard's "floating field station" would be able to accommodate a wide range of students of all ages. However, we needed to market the website to all kinds of educational groups without seeming too advanced for younger students or not challenging enough for older groups. To accomplish this I spoke to educators at the high school level to discern their goals for scuba or marine science trips, and find out what they would expect from a venue like Blackbeard's Cruises. While their academic expectations were in the same vein as most of the college professors I spoke with, the high school educators I spoke to placed a higher premium on the security and supervision of their students, something I told them was easy to accomplish on board a self-contained boat with limited cabin space!

With this information in mind, I set about brainstorming ways to turn a traditional Blackbeard's dive cruise into an educational marine science opportunity that appealed to all types of emerging scientists. After speaking with Bruce and Lindsey we determined that we should certainly encourage participants to get scuba certified before

their trip and utilize scuba's underwater benefits as a tool for scientific discovery, but that we would also devise itineraries that were snorkeling based. I researched shallow, easily accessible snorkel sites along our travel routes to Bimini and the Exumas, and built a separate page to illustrate the snorkeling spots available on each of our trips out of Freeport or Nassau (www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/freeportsnorkel and www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/nassausnorkel). I also looked at some of the scout activities and shore-based activities and used them to build a land-based program for groups that wanted to study both terrestrial and marine tropical habitats.

During my weeks in Freeport, my parents came to visit for a few days, which was a lot of fun for me! I got to show them around Freeport and Port Lucaya, as well as take them to some "local" spots like the Fish Fry at Taino Beach. One highlight of their visit was our Dolphin Encounter with UNEXSO, a dive operator based in Freeport that runs a program where you can touch and swim with dolphins. We also went fishing for a day and caught some delicious Mahi that we ate for lunch at one of the restaurants at Port Lucaya, which was definitely the freshest fish I had ever tasted! Even though it was the rainiest week of my stay in Freeport, my parents enjoyed a little vacation and it was great to show them around the island that I called home for three months.



After my parents left, I again buckled down to create the website that I had been planning and researching for so long. As someone with very little web design

experience, I had no idea the amount of work that goes into creating a seemingly simple website. I spent hours working with the format, text, and pictures featured on the website, always tweaking something to present the information more effectively. The goal for the page was to offer a taste of the opportunities offered by Blackbeard's educational program on our main page (www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu) and then go into deeper detail about the variety of programs and educational experiences we offered by navigating through the menu bar. To give educators a better look at what kinds of trips could be run with Blackbeard's I created options such as marine science field trips for all levels (www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/marinescience), research projects (www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/research), scuba club trips (www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/scubaclub), and even conservation and service-based projects that students could contribute to while on board (www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/conservationprojects). A broad-based "Habitat" page gave educators a short look at the variety of ecosystems present in the Bahamas, and gave ideas about how to incorporate each habitat type into a trip (www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/habitats).

In addition to providing information on the academic options available on a Blackbeard's trip, the website was also designed to convey information about safety equipment on board out fleet (www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/boatsafety) and sample itineraries for departures out of either Freeport or Nassau. Because Blackbeard's has boats running from both those locations, it was important to provide information on the diving, snorkeling, shore excursion, and travel options for each departure city. The website also had "Request Information" option (www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/requestinfo), where professors and educators could submit their queries to the Blackbeard's office and receive more information about our program.

Although getting the website up and running required patience and dedication, I was very proud of the finished product, and was happy to see the website launch by the time I left Freeport. It was a tremendous feeling to see a project through from its creation to its final state, and it truly built on my writing and intrapersonal skills. It was great to be able to speak with a professor over the phone, ask intelligent and relevant questions, and then translate that information into something useful for the website. I learned so much from Bruce, Peggy and Lindsey about marketing and the challenges that face the dive industry today, and I was happy I got to translate what I learned from them into a marketable, useful tool for their business and for the people who are teaching young people about our precious marine environment.

I finished out my summer with two weeks aboard Sea Explorer with Captain Ernie and a scout group each week. Besides running as deckhand continuing to learn more and more about what goes into running a boat like the Blackbeard's fleet, I also looked at similarities between the Scout program and our future educational program in terms of cost analysis and activities that we would be able to offer. Some of the Scout activities such as spearfishing, learning maritime history, and learning how to drive the boats would be appropriate for some school groups to incorporate into their trips, especially with younger students, which was important to recognize when deciding how to structure our educational program. I also looked at dive sites that would be appropriate for some of the projects groups could partake in on a Blackbeard's trip, such as coral reef structures that would be useful for coral health comparison programs

and wrecks that could serve as study sites for the analysis of artificial reefs. I came away from those two weeks confident that youth enjoy diving, being on the water, and learning about the marine environment, and that we could successfully get youth excited about marine science through an adventurous and educational Blackbeard's program.



From swimming with dolphins to diving beautiful coral reefs to completing a website with no previous web design experience, I gained so much from this internship. I am so lucky to have had the opportunity to delve into something I am interested in and learn that, indeed, I can succeed at it, whether it is mooring on a dive site, interviewing potential customers, or driving a boat at night. This summer was beyond comparison, and truly the adventure of a lifetime. When I am shivering in the snow back home in January, my mind will definitely be perusing an awesome shipwreck in the warm waters of the Bahamas.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to George Wozencraft and the Our World-Underwater Scholarship Society for making adventures like mine possible for so many internship recipients.

Thank you to Bruce and Peggy Purdy for teaching me all about your business, and helping me accomplish all of my summer goals.

Thank you to Lindsey Fundine for taking the time to interview me and for all your guidance throughout my internship.

Thank you to Beth from the Davie office for helping me with the website design.

Thank you to Ernie and Pancho for showing me the ropes (literally) on Sea Explorer and Pirate's Lady.

Thank you to the Blackbeard's crew for welcoming me into your big "family" and making my summer truly unforgettable.

Below is the complete list of the website pages I created for the Blackbeard's educational page. Please visit these links to learn more about the final product of my internship.

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/marinescience

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/conservationprojects

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/research

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/scubaclub

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/outdoorclub

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/freeportdives

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/freeportsnorkel

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/freeportshorebased

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/freeporthotels

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/traveltofreeport

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www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/nassaushorebased

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/nassauhotels

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/habitats

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/accomodations

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/boatspecs

www.blackbeard-cruises.com/edu/othervessels

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