

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Adventuring in the Eastern Caribbean

Aboard the "Other" Cuan Law

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Dear Fellow Diver:

As we clambered into the van taking us to port and began chatting about dive experiences and expectations with our fellow guests on Cuan Law's "Adventure" trip (meaning it would go much further afield than the usual seven-day BVI two-tank-a-day trips) the thought entered my mind -- "This isn't your daddy's Cuan Law." Indeed, a few times a year, the Cuan Law transmogrifies from a families-with-divers-and-non-divers boat, into a fair dinkum dive boat with more challenge than the usual "Caribbean light" trips the ship is known for. I had high hopes the boat and crew could pull off this trick and was ready for high-end Caribbean diving.

I eagerly boarded the world's largest trimaran, moored off BVI's Beef Island airport, and was greeted by Duncan Muirhead, designer and owner of the Cuan Law (and the Lammer Law in the Galápagos). The crew included Captain Chas Ashby (a Brit transplant via years of hotel management in Kenya, equipped with a well-traveled sense of humor), South "Efffrican" engineer Ed Naude (if he can't fix it, it hasn't been invented yet), and the cast that would run the show for us the next eleven days. The plan was to head out to the Chikuzen, a nearly 300-foot-long Korean refrigerator ship sunk in 80 feet of very open water, described as a fish magnet only diveable during the calmest waters, such as those we expected this May. The crew dressed the tanks -- they store them

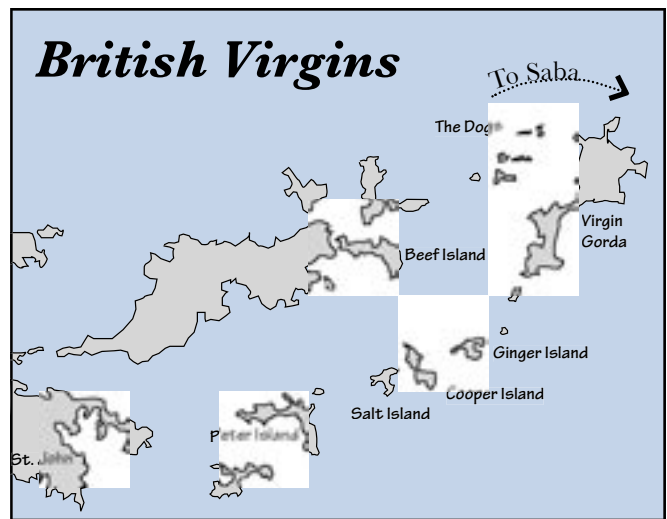
outside on the spacious poop-deck, which also means gear is exposed to the elements and salt during rough waters. Thirty-two percent Nitrox is blended here as well, though the equipment malfunctioned during our trip.

Of course, mother nature has the ultimate say, and weather was most unMaylike with unseasonable winds and wave action. The Chikuzen was unreachable, a major disappointment. So we cruised to The Dogs and dove "Coral Gardens," where we demonstrated skills at 55 fsw for dive-masters Abi Hillman (an English-Cypriot) and "Ajay" Page (Australia), then swam off to see what we could see. A number of venerable conches showed us these waters are treated gently for the Caribbean, and soon we were exploring the small airplane wreck of a Shorts 300 series aircraft with the airline logos painted out, home to a large green moray and other denizens. The one-hour dive, with the aluminum 80s filled at 3,000 psi, was a good one to tune up and balance my weights. The crew allowed us to dive as we saw fit once our "credos" were checked and experience levels established.

The next day's dive at "The Invisibles" (pinnacles just under the surface) was pronounced by Dunc himself to be "looking pretty good" at the outset -- but turned out to be hairy with ripping current. Divers were mostly blown off the objective, a couple of buddy teams were split up, and lots of scurrying became the order of the day as the crew was unprepared for the situation and had not launched dinghies. Several divers had to deploy safety sausages (they require everyone to carry one) and were retrieved at varying distances from Cuan Law. After we mercilessly dumped on Dunc, we relocated to safe mooring and a night dive. "The Invisibles" had never been truer to their name.

They had scheduled a day at Anegada -- not frequently dived, as it can be dangerous for boats, as evidenced by an estimated 200+ wrecks on the treacherous Horseshoe Reef's shoals. Furthermore, BVI authorities control the permits for diving there. We moored far from the tricky shallows and, after an illustrated dive briefing, traveled in the two hard-bottom inflatables to the 380-foot, relatively contemporary freighter Rocus.

Our dive was splendid Caribbean diving for all levels. (Our group included a recently certified diver, a grizzled diver celebrating his 48th "diversary," and Jade, a Midwestern dive instructor who was back for one more adventure.) We enjoyed a great 80+ foot vis, squadrons of the usual Caribbean suspect fishes were in evidence, and schools of various snappers and streams of Creole wrasse flowed about, dwarfed by the ghostly ribs of the old ship. These and remaining pieces of wreckage made for very photogenic scenery, among them the stern and rudder, boilers and davit (presumably sporting the line used by the captain to hang himself in shame). Adding



to the eeriness was the cargo spilled from the Rocus' guts, a huge shipment of sea-blanching cow bones en route from Trinidad to a rendering plant in Baltimore in 1927 -- the reason for her alternate name, "the bone wreck."

Our next scheduled dive was the historic wreck of one of the last paddle-wheeled steamers, the RMS Paramatta, sunk in 1859 on her maiden voyage. Again, the seas denied us a premier dive, so Dunc dinghied back to Tortola and Captain Chas hoisted the sails for our crossing -- not to lonely Sombrero Island, as planned, but, due to the weather, directly to Saba. With the strong headwinds piling up billowing waves, the usually-stable trimaran platform became a veritable galloping Gertie. We had traded the pristine diving and solitude of Sombrero for a long night of a rocking-and-rolling, gut-wrenching crossing that had most crew and passengers on board "looking for Mr. Roark" (imagine people crawling about the ship calling out his name, and you have it!)

At Saba, there is always a sheltered side of the steep, dormant volcanic island, and the deep spires provide fantastic Caribbean diving! There are two ways to dive in the marine park surrounding Saba, land-bound with the excellent local outfits or on one of two live-aboards, the Cuan Law or the St. Maarten/St. Kitts-based Caribbean Explorer II (see Undercurrent, March 2004).

At "Third Encounter," a flat bit at 90-100 feet,

Coast Guard Not Required to Rescue Divers

The Supreme Court refused to consider whether the U.S. Coast Guard can be sued for providing questionable emergency care to an injured Florida diver who later became paralyzed.

Federal law does not require the Coast Guard to rescue scuba divers, since they voluntarily accept the risks of deep-water diving. At issue is whether the Coast Guard can be held liable for administering inadequate aid once it agrees to provide a rescue.

The case involves Brandon Drew Lewis, who was diving off the coast of Jacksonville in February, 2000, when he developed the bends and subsequently lost consciousness. Family members on Lewis' boat immediately notified the Coast Guard, which agreed to help.

Once the Coast Guard arrived, however, its slower vessel transported Lewis to shore for medical help without providing any oxygen or other emergency care.

The lawsuit filed by Lewis' family contends Lewis could have avoided injury if the Coast Guard had either followed standard procedure by providing oxygen or refused to administer aid. Since Lewis' boat was faster, family members say they could have transported him to shore more quickly.

The Coast Guard counters that, under federal law, it has broad discretion in deciding if and how it provides emergency aid to ailing divers.

Of course, the question of liability is hardly the one that's foremost in divers' minds. The question of health and survival is. In moments of crisis, it's hard to think logically, but having the presence of mind to ask questions about the speed of the craft or what services and equipment are available could make a critical difference in the moments that really count. It seems divers will have to determine whether to accept or reject the Coast Guard's help in times of peril.

a collection of pinnacles emerged from the gloom on our early morning dive. Here were healthy populations of large Nassau and tiger grouper and lots of encounters with pelagics. "Diamond Rocks" was another favorite, navigated differently each time due to currents but a paragon of dive site health, with larger Caribbean angels, schools of horse-eyed jacks and other pelagics, and great vis. Saba's pinnacles are the best offshore and blue-water diving in the Eastern Caribbean, challenging and thrilling for even advanced and skilled divers.

While we dived the pinnacles from the inflatables, other dives were made off the moored Cuan Law, including the up and down levels and channels at "Ladder Labyrinth," with healthy populations of corals and brilliant sponges, large tarpons, and schools of healthy fish, day and night. Sabans have indeed protected their environment -- not much pollution, garbage, or evidence of overfishing or bottom scraping here! Though these shelves are more typically Caribbean dive venues, they are well protected and vividly healthy. Most of us averaged four and even five dives. In between, a few divers offgassed on kayaks or Hobie Cats.

The 105-foot ship itself is stable and commodious -- the ten 10 x 10 cabins, convertible twin or double and all en-suite, are laid out forward and on each side of the airy and spacious salon with its open and well-stocked honor bar. (A signal at the bar also displays "Dunc Angry" and "Annie Angry" lights, the equivalent of yellow and red terror alert codes in the U.S., I was told by one crew member with tongue firmly in cheek.)



Cabins and heads are illuminated with large bubble-skylights that double as escape hatches -- the Cuan Law meets all safety regs of Transport Canada, as Dunc built her in that northern land. Hammocks (and windsurfers and kayaks for recreation) adorn the massive flat deck above the trimaran's body. If watching or editing video floats your boat, there is a large "theatre" in the aft portion of the center hull -- you can crank up the volume, and nobody will hear you here!

Light breakfast fixings (cereal, toast, juices, and decent coffee), which often appeared a bit later than scheduled, were available in the salon before the first dive. Everything else was served under canvas on the huge aft deck on long teak tables that fold down for passage. Jessica regaled us with après-dive monster breakfasts ranging from fresh fruits to baked goods (even baked grapefruit!), pancakes, Portobello mushrooms with cheese, egg dishes, and sausages and bacon, all in generous quantity. Lunch usually featured soups and salads (e.g., pumpkin and coconut soup, Vietnam peanut salad), chicken skewers, melt-in-the-mouth ribs, or rice and beans; for dessert, chocolate-covered macaroons were a favorite. Dinners, still served al fresco buffet style, crowned her abilities -- spinach-stuffed chicken served on a bed of cous-cous, Beef Bourguignon, pan-seared lamb chops (with mint rice and sautéed

fresh veggies), ahi with garlic butter and buttered herb jacket potatoes, and excellent Caesar and other salads. Desserts ranged from a sweet Pavlova and pudding with chocolate ice cream to rich chocolate cake (served with Champagne!) and apple turnovers. If the chef makes the boat, Jessica's cooking was well up to the world's largest trimaran.

The 12-hour crossing back to BVI was much easier than the cruise down -- we now had quartering winds from the stern, and we all had our sea legs well developed. The remaining days were spent diving such lovely and easy BVI sites as the Ginger

Island and Gingers Steps, Manchioneel Rock, Wreck Alley -- with its two purpose-sunk smaller wrecks -- and by popular demand an entire day at the RMS Rhone. We enjoyed an end-of-the-trip picnic at the Baths on Virgin Gorda, then washed and dried our gear: the end of another dive trip.

I signed up for Cuan Law's adventure trip expecting more than their usual "two dives a day" junket, and they delivered. More importantly, however, I chose this trip because it was billed as an "adventure trip," one packed with challenging dives on lightly-dived sites, including sites on Saba. Thanks to the weather (the captain proclaimed ours "the worst crossing the Cuan Law had ever made"), many of those dives didn't happen, so I can't attest to whether all that "adventure" really exists. But, because of the quality of the Cuan Law and its accommodations, top-notch food, service, and ambience, I'd be tempted to try it again.

— L. J.

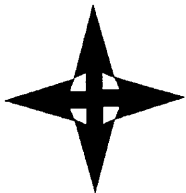
Cuan Law Saba Trip

Diving (experienced)	★★★
Diving (beginners)	★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Service & attitude	★★★★
Ambience	★★★★★
Food	★★★★★
Snorkeling	★★★
Money's worth	★★★★★

★= poor

★★★★★= excellent

Caribbean Scale



Diver's Compass: Most passengers are Americans, with some Canadians, British and other Europeans; families welcome. Cuan Law's family trips are well covered in the April 2000 Undercurrent. . . Cuan Law also has an October adventure including the wrecks of Anegada, "the secret island of" Sombrero and pinnacles of Saba (10 days, 11 nights) at \$3150 per person. Booking, land stays at Serendipity House near Josiah's Bay, and all transfers can be arranged

directly at www.cuanlaw.com or with Trimarine Boat Co.; Phone: 284-494-2490; Fax: 284-494-5774; E-mail: cuanlaw@surfbvi.com. Seven-day BVI family trips cost \$2,095 inclusive meals, diving, and water activities. Alcoholic drinks extra at bar prices or \$95 weekly unlimited. Air temps normally 80s, water varies high 70s -- low 80s. Hurricane season can affect diving June -- October. . . Well-maintained scuba, video, and photo gear available

for rent. . . Nitrox 32 (\$10 extra per tank) and DPVs for rent. Aluminum 80s in 3 sizes (100, 80 and 63 cu. ft.). . . C-cards, logs, and skills are checked. . . The easiest way to arrive is to fly to San Juan and on to Beef Island/Tortola (EIS) via American Eagle, or from St. Thomas via ferry. . . The "theatre" offers editing, 26" TV screen/VCP and connections, with slide projector and light table. There is no camera table, camera storage area, or dedicated charging station.

Broken Leg, Malaria, SARS

— *beware: your insurance may not cover you*

When divers contemplate injuries while traveling, we may first think about the bends or other diving-related accidents, but an out-of-country traveler is more likely to trip and fall heading into an unfamiliar bathroom in the dark or have a taxicab run over a foot in a busy city than have a dive-related accident.

Of course, there are also plenty of health problems unrelated to accidents, like a ruptured appendix or a malaria attack. Do you know if you're insured against all misfortunes when you're traveling abroad? You may not be.

Dive Insurance Offers Little Protection

First, you can't rely on dive travel insurance to cover you for medical problems not caused by an accident. It won't. DAN and PADI policies, for example, pay reasonable and customary charges for medically necessary treatment of nondiving accidents once your primary insurer has covered its obligations. However, these benefits are limited, and without primary coverage

you won't get much. DAN's Preferred and PADI's Gold plans afford a \$10,000 lifetime maximum benefit with a \$250 deductible. PADI's Platinum boosts this to \$15,000.

For other problems, however, you're on your own. Betty Orr, director of insurance services at DAN, told *Undercurrent* that nondiving illnesses like a heart attack or complications from

. . . whatever your coverage, carry a credit card or other financial instrument with a sufficient ceiling to keep you in motion

SARS or the flu are not accidents and not covered. That means that, if you have to be evacuated from your dive resort to Sydney and then you spend two weeks in the hospital recovering, you will have an enormous medical bill. Air evacuation alone costs a small fortune. A medical evacuation from Cozumel to Mercy Hospital

in Miami, FL, can run as much as \$20,000, while evacuation from Indonesia could easily hit \$35,000. Dan Nord, director of DAN medical services, told us of an \$80,000 tab for an emergency evacuation from southern Africa.

Health Insurance Usually Inadequate

So you need insurance that will cover you for health problems sustained outside the country. But the truth is, many policies don't provide that coverage. Those that do may have special limits and higher deductibles for these claims. Furthermore, few pay for medical evacuation home. Basic Blue Cross/Blue Shield benefits typically do not include foreign medical emergencies, though more advanced plans at higher premiums may. If you are covered under a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO) or a kindred plan, you may be out of luck abroad. So, before you travel, verify your coverage, and get it in writing.

If Medicare is your primary medical insurance, you are not