

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Laguna Beach Resort, Honduras

in search of whale sharks

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Dear Fellow Diver:

During three decades of diving, I've observed that most traveling divers aren't explorers. Oh, certainly they're underwater explorers, but they are so single-minded about diving that they consider a day touring to mean one less day of diving. If the choice were offered to be the first visitor to a lost tribe, or if Jimmy Buffet were planning to shoot a Margaritaville video in the resort bar and needed extras, a three-dive trip would still win, hands down. These folks want seamless dive vacations, no hassles, a good bed, room to work on their cameras, meals on time, and plenty of diving. Anything else is a diversion. If a resort delivers, they overlook the warts and go nowhere.

Laguna Beach Resort on the Bay Island of Utila does deliver. Even if you want a diversion, there is none – save a five-minute boat ride to visit the funky town of Utila. I visited it twice, for a little local color and a little walking exercise. None of my other fellow divers left the resort. Not that they needed to, for it is a perfectly self-contained venue for that seamless vacation.

After a 20-minute early February flight from La Ceiba on the Honduras mainland, I was greeted at the air strip by the pony-tailed Argentine manager, Luciano. Then a five-minute van ride to town. Baggage was loaded into an LBR dive boat, and we sped off for a rough five-minute ride to the resort. It had been raining for weeks and drainage from land had turned the lagoon into a Coca-Cola color. That water flooded into the sea, darkening it a hundred yards out. My wife, who loves to swim and snorkel, was disappointed. Water that color, no matter that it was simply the result of leaching from the land, wasn't for her.

Luciano's warm and attractive wife, Romina, and the

island's resident dogs, including the lovable little Cindy Lauper, greeted us at the dock, where sit rinse tanks, the large equipment storage room, and the dive shop. She led us 50 feet to the main house for a complimentary drink and a full resort briefing. The thirteen bungalows (some are duplexes) are built on stilts over the lagoon, opposite the ocean side of the narrow peninsula. The farthest is a couple hundred yards along manicured, palm dotted, sandy pathways. Our cabana, as were all, was a comfortable, natural wood cottage, with a large firm bed dominating the

Is the Inspiration Rebreather a Death Trap?

In the past five years, according to testimony at a recent trial in Ireland, at least 16 divers have died using the Buddy Inspiration Rebreather, manufactured by the British company AP Valves. One highly experienced diver, Nicholas Gotto died within minutes of entering water leading to the sunken Kowloon Bridge shipwreck in Ireland, reported the Irish Examiner.

In an inquest seeking the precise cause of his death, a technical expert said the rebreather was functioning properly after its recovery several days later. However, neither Gotto's buddy nor four other divers heard a warning alarm from Gotto's equipment. His buddy, Tony O'Mahony, said Gotto had difficulty calibrating the rebreather earlier that day, but it was working correctly before the dive. He said he was 10 feet above Gotto as they descended. They exchanged OK signals twice within minutes, but at 80 feet he found Gotto on his back with his mouthpiece removed. Mahony, who lost his mouthpiece trying to help Gotto, rose to the surface to raise the alarm before returning to help recover the body, which floated to the surface within minutes.

Experts could not determine which metabolic disorder — high oxygen or excess carbon dioxide levels — was the primary cause of death.

In March, the jury returned an open verdict, which meant they were genuinely uncertain as to what happened.

A barrister representing AP Valves denied that their equipment was at fault, saying "The deaths were accidents, caused by diver error."

Nonetheless, sixteen deaths on one piece of equipment should be enough to shy anyone away. By the way, since September 2001, the Buddy inspiration has been known as the "Inspiration" and manufactured by Ambient Pressure Diving Ltd, a British company. It was originally marketed by another British company, AP Valves

main room, a toilet and shower separate from the vanity, and a pleasant porch and dock. The first night our air-conditioning shut down, leading to a restless sleep, but once we learned that it simply — and frequently — overloaded the fuse box, we could keep it running. Water is not potable, so they provide purified water. While the cabin was tightly screened, one night I collected more than a dozen lumps on my back. After that, nothing.

As has become the drill at well-managed dive resorts, you have a peg and a number, your gear is set up daily for you and changed between dives, and you're helped on board and in and out of the water. Afterward, you rinse off your dive clothes, mask, fins and snorkel, and they handle the rest. We dived from the 36-foot Newton, which departed at 8:00 a.m. for two tanks (returning at 12:30 p.m., plus or minus) then departing two hours later, and twice a week, before dinner. During my week, another Argentine, Arturo, was the guide, efficiently helping everyone in and out of the water, offering glasses of cold water after each dive, and cookies or brownies between morning dives. He limited dives to an hour, and, while he stated depth limits such as 90 feet for the first dive, he did not attempt to monitor divers or enforce limits. Though most divers loosely followed him, we were essentially on our own. Occasionally, he would stop to point out a lobster, an eel, or a scorpion fish.

Unlike virtually every other Caribbean venue, LBR has a spe-

ciality – whale sharks! While there are no guarantees, divers frequently see them. Boat captain Wagner, who on first blush seems like a Texas Good Ole Boy, is a life long Utila resident. Between morning dives he spent the surface interval roaming the seas looking for the critters. Unfortunately, I saw none during my stay, though we did cruise with a pod of dolphins in the boat wake, then we jumped in to snorkel with them briefly. Seeing whale sharks is all in the luck of the draw. The day I left, *Undercurrent* subscriber Cheryl Morgavi Mire (Metairie, LA) arrived and in her week swam with the behemoths – she told me they ranged from 20 to 36 feet – four times! She even reported encountering a goliath grouper, which she estimated to be “more than four feet in length and over 300 pounds.” Some divers have all the luck.



Bay Islands diving is noted for its pretty reefs, a paucity of big fish, and a modest amount of tropicals. Utila is no different. The first dives were deeper and better, with Michael’s Hole a winner by any Caribbean standard. At the 35-foot bottom we edged into a narrow crevice, emerging into the deep blue at 70 feet along a superb sheer wall. I gradually dropped to 100 feet. Twisted lengths of wire coral jutted out randomly, giving the wall a look like a construction site. On a few wires were tightly wrapped basket stars, and some had unfolded to feed. At first the fish were few, but as I moved along a few chromis and boga began streaming, and a juvenile spotted drum danced a jig beneath an overhang. A photographer chased a balloon fish that pattered along at precisely the right speed to stay out of range. As I rose to the shallows at 50 feet, profuse gardens of soft coral held pairs of foureye butterflies, spotfin butterflies, an occasional French angel, mahogany and mutton snappers, and a jolthead porgy. In one patch, I saw 18-inch tiger, Nassau, and red groupers among candelabrum and giant split pore corals. On one brain coral fluttered a dozen clusters of Christmas tree worms, each in the pair a different color: red and white, yellow and green, etc. Nearby, a cluster of social feather worms remained unperturbed.



Another day’s first dive, CJ’s Drop Off, was superb. I dropped to 100 feet along a barren wall. Above, against the bright surface, streams of boga and Creole wrasse filled the sky. As I edged up, divers gathered to shoot scorpionfish. Soft coral, largely in brown hues, prevailed, skirted by yellow tails, trumpet fish, pluma, and mahogany snappers. Several sea fans sported flamingo tongues.

Typical of second dives were two at Raggedy Keys sites, with a bottom at 70 feet. Oddly at these

sites I saw no schools of fish, but rather a solitary French grunt looking for his chums, a lone Bermuda chub, and even an occasional blue chromis or a sole Christmas tree worm. I can't imagine any reason for it, so I wrote it off to chance. A 60-foot slope of mountain star coral created a fairyland of castles. Occasionally I spotted a wriggling lobster antenna, once with a small spotted eel sharing quarters. In more shallow water, perfectly formed basketball-sized brain coral were scattered about, though parrot fish had grazed much of the coral, leaving an algae cover. A second dive at Airplane Caves was largely among coral rubble picked over by parrotfish. I passed 45 minutes looking for the unusual: The best I could do was soapfish under a rock, a goby cleaning a parrotfish balanced on its tail, an indigo hamlet, and a friendly scrawled file fish. At dive's end, a 6-foot wide tunnel in a bommie housed a score of silhouetted black margate and Bermuda chubs, all being watched by a large barracuda – one of two during the week – who made no move until I reached out and nearly touched him. Visibility ran a murky 40-60 feet and, while the dives were pleasant enough and good for photographers hellbent on shooting fish, there was nothing special about them.

Hard core divers were always game for dive three, but a few divers sat out because these dives, closer to the resort, were a notch below the second dive, with visibility lower and fish fewer. Cool water contributed as well. Though I called a week before my arrival and was told the water was 83 degrees; it was 75-76 degrees, making dive three chilly for divers without sufficient rubber. A wreck dive was somewhat of a bore, with few fish, a couple of chromis, blue tangs, yellowtails, and not much coral. A white hog fish standing on its head was the fish featured in this 30-foot visibility, 40-foot dive.

Drifting the Day Away

Perhaps the best dive in Maui is the backside of the Molokini. It's also the most dangerous dive there, as eight divers will attest. On a drift dive on February 15, they were swept away and spent more than six hours in the water until being spotted by a Coast Guard helicopter eight miles from Molokini and 11 miles from the Maui coast.

Two dive instructors and six divers were diving from the *Maui Diamond II*. Fast currents, strong winds, and choppy seas separated the divers from their boat and after they were 20 minutes overdue, the boat captain reported the group missing at 10 a.m. The Coast Guard dispatched rescue boats, an aircraft and helicopter, and several commercial and private vessels joined in the search. Conditions deteriorated throughout the day, with winds increasing from 15 miles per hour earlier in the day to 45 mph, and ocean swells as high as 10 feet.

About 3:30 p.m., the Coast Guard helicopter dropped a flare, indicating the location of the divers. Two boats brought the divers back to the harbor around 5 p.m. "The first thing they wanted to do was drink beer," Paul King, a crewman aboard the Piper, told the *Honolulu Advertiser*.

The fully air-conditioned main house has couches for relaxing and a large, centrally located bar, where one may mix drinks, grab beers and sodas, and keep track until check out. Around the room are several tables, where one can eat individually or join the inevitable group table. Upstairs is a single-channel TV, a video player, and a library of used airport novels.

While I looked forward to going there nightly to visit with my fellow guests, I began to look forward to meals only because I was hungry. The food was unremarkable. From buffet pans, one could serve up usually a meat and chicken or fish course. Fish dishes – red snapper, fish cakes, etc. – were often dry or deep fried; a leathery pork chop, fried chicken fingers, and barbecued lobster tails (they were winners) were typical offerings. A lunch-time lasagna had an off-taste. A pot of soup and iceberg lettuce salads were always available, as

were rice dishes, perhaps scalloped potatoes, tasty fried plantains, and vegetables such as green beans or carrot and corn salad. The favorite meal was a lunch of thick tortillas, chicken, fresh salsa, and beans. For dessert there was usually fresh fruit, then a simple cake perhaps, though key lime pie was a hit. A tray of breakfast eggs might be scrambled or fried, or there might be pancakes, with bacon or ham. There was always plenty to eat, it's just that it was the kind of food one gets at summer camp. During cocktail hour, shelled peanuts usually appeared, occasionally crackers and cheese. I should add that five of the 12 guests had serious stomach problems for a day, but none could pin down the source.

The ramshackle town of Utila is surely worth a walk-through. Small stores, businesses, and houses are jammed together on both sides of the narrow main street that runs the better part of a mile. An occasional car, motor cart, motor bike and bicycle wove through the pedestrians. In the center of town a large generator complex noisily produces the island's electricity. What was once a fishing-based community now depends on youthful tourists looking for a \$5 room, a \$3 meal, and free coffee at the local Internet cafe, where they could check their e-mail for fifteen cents a minute. An endless array of dive shops offers \$30, two-tank boat dives, and most seemed willing to negotiate. In the center of town is one upscale dive operation, the Utila Diving Lodge, which offers cheery rooms on a pier jutting into the harbor, with a nice restaurant. The Lodge has a large dive shop and operates the island's chamber, which was replaced after being destroyed by fire a couple of years ago. Off the main drag, a walk past homes turned into a pleasant stroll.

The well-managed and organized Laguna Beach Resort offers a seamless vacation, rating among the best of the Caribbean. The only difficulty, really, may be making a connection from La Ceiba or San Pedro Sula. Occasionally travelers end up unexpectedly overnighing in one town or another, especially if their flight from the States arrives late; the Utila air strip has no night landing lights. Other than that, however, one can reasonably expect everything to go just as planned ... just don't plan on whale sharks.

P.S. I began my trip in Guatemala, thanks to Continental Air, which offers an inexpensive roundtrip fare from the states to Guatemala City, with a return from San Pedro Sula. (TACA flies between the two cities.) I visited the remarkable walled colonial city of Antigua, with its rich culture and fascinating vistas; traveled to Lake Atitilan, where volcanoes rise from the shores of this beautiful lake; and hiked the forest. Lost World Adventures put together a superb trip for me, with private guides and transportation and accommodations, for \$200/person/day; they can also handle several Honduras extensions, such as a day trip to the Copan ruins, bird watching, hikes, river rafting, and other fun mainland tours. (www.lostworldadventures.com, 800/999-0558, 404/373-5820) Reef and Rainforest, a favorite agency among dive travelers, also has Honduras extensions. (800/794-9767, 415/289-1760, www.reefrainfrst.com) My advice: take another few days and soak up a little Central American culture and beauty.

Laguna Beach

Diving for Experienced	★★★★
If Whale Sharks	★★★★★
Diving for Beginners	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★1/2
Food	★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★1/2

★ = poor

★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale

-- Ben Davison



Diver's Compass: Double occupancy with three meals/day and as many as 23 dives is \$922/person, which includes tax ... U.S. reservation office number is 800/66-UTILA or 337/893-0013 ... www.utila.com for the LBR website ... 3000 psi tanks were always full; Nitrox was available; Nitrox certification cards were carefully checked and divers acknowledged the Nitrox mix ... The shop has good rental gear ... Expect bad no-see-ums anywhere in Honduras; a repellent containing DEET is an essential item ...

Free kayaks for paddling the lagoon at the resort ... Rent a bike in town to pedal the rough roads.

Star Dancer, Papua New Guinea

quarter inch critters, thirty foot monsters

Is Papua New Guinea among the best dive destinations in the world? Having been to Palau, the Maldives, Indonesia, the Solomons, and Yap, I have a basis for comparison. To find out, I chose back-to-back September weeks on the Star Dancer, a craft that was my first liveaboard, in 1996 when it was Sun Dancer I in Palau. I even had the same cabin!

An erupting volcano had closed the airport at Hoskins, forcing the Dancer to come and go from Rabaul instead of the Walindi-Rabaul and Rabaul-Walindi itineraries I had expected. It also forced us to change our Air Niugini itinerary, and my partner and I failed to make most of our scheduled flights. Our travel agent, Cliff Comfort from Reef & Rainforest, happened to be with us on the first day and managed to get us to the boat in Rabaul on time.

For the most part we had perfect weather – days in the 90s, nights in high 70s – but rough seas made for a few uncomfortable nights, though this was supposed to be the best season. Under the surface, we usually had calm water – 80-84 degrees and usually 100-foot visibility but as low as 20 feet near shore in the muck. Almost every dive was on a bommie with the bottom at 15-25 feet. Captains Jock or Matt tied up to moorings, so finding both the reef and the boat was easy, as was making safety stops on the reef. Everywhere the hard coral was healthy, and so were the soft corals, fans, feathers, whips, and gorgonians. Midway Reef had acres of staghorn coral, and bright red anemones were home to many spine-cheek clownfish. There were clouds of fish – big schools of trevally and fusiliers and rainbow runners racing around the reef perimeter, as well as varieties of unicorns and groups of barracudas, snappers, and triggers. Often batfish followed me around like puppy dogs. Floating over the reef like confetti were swarms of brightly colored anthias, pennant butterflies, and many kinds of damsels, busy threatening all other fish and all the divers.

The divemasters found plenty of flesh-colored seafans with quarter-inch pygmy seahorses, which are exactly the same pink shade. They showed them to me with the help of magnifying glasses, but I dive with bifocals for occasions like this. Mostly the pygmies hung on with their tails and swayed with the fan, but I saw some motor a couple of inches to a new post. Our divemasters were very protective of them, cautioning us not to do anything to disturb these fragile little treasures. Then, at the other extreme, the second dive day we encountered a massive whale shark. The resulting celebration looked like an underwater version of a home team's winning touchdown. Everyone was jumping up and down and cheering.