

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## *The Nautilus Explorer*

### *adventure diving in British Columbia*

#### **IN THIS ISSUE:**

<i>Nautilus Explorer</i> .....	1
Getting Into Dry Suit Diving.....	2
Discriminatory Pricing.....	4
Split Fins vs. Quattros.....	6
New Dive Destinations, Part II.....	8
Travel Insurance? Credit Card Refund?.....	11
Aussies Mean Business.....	12
Panic in Recreational Scuba Diving.....	13
Panicky Divers and Death..	14
UWATEC Sport Dive Computers Go Dumb.....	15
Flotsam & Jetsam.....	15

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Dear Fellow Diver:

Everything came together on the third dive of my trip to the Inside Passage. The Polartec pullover I'd added under my rented dry suit staved off the chill of the 41 degree water. The two-pound weights I'd stuffed in each BC pocket combined with the 34 pounds on my belt to adjust my buoyancy perfectly, and the nearly slack current carried me gently along the chute at Lucan Pass, off Port Hardy near the northeastern tip of Vancouver Island.

Visibility was only 25 feet, but since I was drifting alongside a wall teeming with life, who cared? I spotted three-pound Puget Sound king crabs hiding their colorful carapaces in dark little crevices; sea cucumbers the size of my arm lolled about on rocks. A brilliant 3-foot orange sea pen pulsed in the current like a neon sign at dusk.

With 1,000 psi left, I ascended to 15 feet where the colors were brighter, and my buddy and I continued to drift. There I came across bright yellow sea lemons so big I almost expected to see signs reading "Home of the Foot-Long Nudi." We surfaced with no one else in sight, but I was confident that Mike Lever, owner and captain of the Nautilus Explorer, would find us. So we inflated our BCs and laid back, enjoying the solitude and watching a bald eagle soar through the densely forested islands that surrounded us. In a few minutes Mike pulled up beside us. Rhian, the deckhand, lowered the side ladder, and I grabbed hold, lifting my feet so she could pull off my fins. Then I climbed on board. The rain -- or "liquid sunshine," as Mike calls it -- had stopped so we had a pleasant 10-minute ride back to the mother ship.

I traveled to B.C. in April to see what Jean-Michel Cousteau has called "the best place to dive in the world." I booked a cabin on the 116-foot Nautilus Explorer, which

Mike Lever designed and built three years ago as an expedition yacht. Lever's promotional literature says: "These trips are best suited for experienced divers who are in good physical condition and comfortable diving in current and 'cold' water." He's not kidding. The clientele ranged from middle-aged dive shop owners and instructors to an adolescent girl, but all had prior dry suit experience. Three of us from California had recently been dry suit certified, and we were clearly the rookies of the trip.

I boarded the ship on a Saturday night in Steveston, a suburb of Vancouver. We spent the first night -- 18 hours -- motoring to the Campbell River area, halfway up the eastern shore of Vancouver Island in the Strait of Georgia. The *Explorer* was designed to be a comfortable "night runner" with a heavy, stabilized steel hull, and extensive soundproofing. At times forgetting that we were under way was easy. However, the engine noise reverberating through my cabin below decks did keep me awake that first night. I wish I had known about the ear plugs left out in the lounge.

Those who'd been aboard the boat previously (about half the passengers), immediately set up their equipment on the 38-foot aluminum skiff on the ship's sloping rear deck. Following suit, I chose a station, set up my regulator and BC on an aluminum 80, and stored my other gear below the bench. For the rest of the trip, all gear except my dry suit remained on the skiff.

Mike explained that each dive would have a time limit, due to the tide-related currents. Tides rise and fall as much as 15 feet in the Northwest Passage, creating "rock 'n' roll" currents. So most dives are timed for slack water -- at least in theory. Beyond that, we were free to dive our own profiles and to dive solo if we chose. On deep dives, Lever recommended a safety stop at 60 feet, then another five minute stop at 10 to 20 feet, with at least 500 psi to start.

Lever treated us like responsible adults and expected us to behave accordingly. They offered Dive Alerts to those who didn't bring them, but they were only to be

## Getting Into Dry Suit Diving

Usually, a dry suit certification is required to buy or rent a dry suit. Because you inflate a dry suit to keep warm, buoyancy control is the major skill that must be mastered. The trick is to keep the air in the suit from rushing to your feet if you become inverted and then correcting the problem if it occurs. My SSI course consisted of reading a 99-page book, taking an open book quiz, practicing in my dive shop's pool, and then making a two-tank boat dive in Monterey, CA. My dives were unsupervised; just a chance to get used to the suit in open water. I recommend more open water experience before going on a cold water live-aboard like the *Nautilus Explorer*.

Renting a dry suit can be tricky. Only a few dive shops carry them, and when I went to reserve one at the shop where I'd been certified, all they had left was a large size, loose-fitting, trilaminate suit, which created a lot of drag when I tried it in their pool. I decided to rent from the *Nautilus Explorer*. They were offering a crushed neoprene suit that I hadn't tried before; neoprene dry suits fit like wet suits, and require less in the way of undergarments but more weight than trilams (I carried 13 pounds more weight than I do with my 7 mm wet suit). Also, I didn't have to transport a bulky dry suit to Vancouver and back. And I saved \$20 over the local rental rate. Finally, I figured the *Explorer* crew would have a bigger stake in fixing any problems with their own suit; nothing went wrong, but Mike Lever did cluck over me like a mother hen each time he saw me putting it on or peeling it off.

Over the phone, Lever took my measurements (basically height and weight) and selected one of four neoprene suits for me he carries on board. He suggested that I bring my wet-suit as a backup, which I did, but I never needed it.

On the *Explorer*, there was no standing around wet between dives, partly because the cool, drizzly weather drove us inside. As soon as we rinsed our suits, we hung them up, then went back to our cabins to change into "street" clothes until the next dive.

D.L.

used in an emergency, so the crew would drop everything if one were sounded.

We also had a life jacket drill, but the flotation devices were stored in our cabins, below decks. The drill was orderly enough, but I could imagine the panic that would result in a real emergency, with people jamming into the companionway to retrieve their vests. He stressed staying hydrated. They have had unexplained DCS hits, which dropped off since he began warning guests to heavy up on water and juices while cutting back on tea, coffee, and booze.

The Explorer's liability waiver is a "short form" by most live-aboard standards, but as usual it places the liability squarely on the divers. If anyone was uncomfortable signing it, Lever offered to refund the entire cost of the trip and pay that person's airfare home. When he said, "You're on your own nickel once you leave the ship" to dive, hike on shore, or kayak, there was no doubt he meant business. On the other hand, nobody checked my C-card, although I was renting a dry suit from the Explorer.

Throughout the trip, Lever sought consensus on the types of diving we preferred. He asked those with special needs such as limited mobility or medical conditions to see him privately to arrange assistance. His forthright approach seemed to encourage candid responses.

Even with the safety precautions, our checkout dive at Walt's Wall was a major bust, especially for me. It started with a briefing in the ship's lounge, which looked like a pajama party, with everyone dressed in their dry suit undergarments. Lever told us he had timed the dive so we could follow the current's flow in one direction until the tide turned, then have a leisurely ride back. But something went wrong with his calculations.

Divemaster Cricket helped me squeeze into the Oceaner crushed neoprene dry suit that Lever had reserved for me. It fit pretty well, considering it was "off the rack" and I'm an odd size (42 short). Because the neck seal felt snug, I wore just a Polartec skin underneath. After taking a giant stride from one of the gates, I began drifting briskly past a virtual pygmy forest of white plumose anemones (called metridiums in California). Visibility was 50 feet, and the invertebrate life was more profuse and larger than in California waters. I soon felt cold, however, even after inflating my suit. When I reached 1,500 psi I had to turn back, but the tides didn't cooperate. Kicking into the current with my Scubapro Twin Jets, I had difficulty keeping up with my buddy and his stiff-bladed Mares Quattros. Chilly and winded, I soon got down to 500 psi and decided to rise from 71 feet to safety stop level. But I couldn't vent air fast enough from the valve on my left shoulder and made a barely controlled toes-up ascent, flaring as much as I could to slow my progress. When I broke surface, I floated like a bathtub toy until I could deflate the suit and get my feet under me. Lever spotted me and recommended that I drop back to 10 feet until I used up my air. I descended to a nearby rock and hung on for dear life, rising again with just enough air in my tank to inflate my BC. I scrambled up the skiff's ladder somewhat sheepishly, feeling like I'd just had a trial by ice water.

Lever suggested that I skip the night dive planned for the same spot, and I



was glad I did. This time, the currents were stronger, and buddy teams became separated in the dark. People surfaced in choppy waters and clung to rocks in hopes that the skiff would find them. It sounded hairy, but the divers marveled at Lever's skill in picking them up. Later, Mike apologized to everyone for the errant currents, which he couldn't explain. No matter how careful the dive plan, these were erratic waters, and it was up to each diver to adjust to the conditions.

The following morning I had a better dive thanks to gentler currents at Plummer Rock. The shoal at 45 feet was drab and populated mostly by sea urchins. But the wall was festooned with red soft coral and anemones. Lavender-tinted encrusting hydrocorals reminded me of Monterey, California. Spooky white basket stars stretched out like skeletal remains. Two beefy ling cod fought over a hole.

## Discriminatory Pricing



One of the worst kept secrets in dive travel is the discriminatory pricing policy of various dive operations in the South Pacific. Quoted rates have varied widely depending on where travelers book from. Americans and Japanese pay the highest tariffs, subsidizing cheaper packages for Europeans and locals.

For years, one of the more notorious multi-tiered prices was Mike Ball Expeditions out of Australia. On the aptly named Mike Ball boat *Spoilsport*, Americans and Japanese were charged 20 to 30 percent more, depending on prevailing exchange rates, than what others paid.

Company spokespersons often explain this two-tiered pricing by blaming higher marketing costs in the U.S. and Japanese markets. Some special services, such as Japanese interpreters, were also cited. But mainly it seems the company believed that Australians and others wouldn't pay the kind of rates Americans and Japanese were willing to pay.

Mike Ball sold a majority interest in the company in 1990 and is still a director but is no longer involved in day-to-day management, although he hosts a dive trip occasionally. General Manager Stan Kielbaska confirmed to *Undercurrent* that while the company "did have different prices for different parts of the world," since 2002 Mike Ball has been offering one rate in Australian dollars (AUD) with a converted rate in U.S. dollars (USD) for the American market.

Unrelenting pressure by savvy travelers and industry insiders, as well as bad publicity on the Internet, helped change the company's policy. We spoke with both an American and an Australian trav-

el wholesaler who book Mike Ball live-aboard trips and confirmed that they had received and forwarded numerous complaints to the company. We also confirmed that Ball's prices match up when converted from AUD to USD.

Yet discriminatory practices still occur. Reader Vann Johnson recently stopped at the Walindi Plantation Resort in Papua New Guinea as part of a Peter Hughes dive package. He asked Shanda, the manager, for the "rack rate" for his bungalow for two, and she replied, "It would depend on where you're from." When Johnson told her he came from Raleigh, VA, she quoted him \$153 USD/person/night (including meals), leaving him to conclude that "U.S. citizens are paying through the nose."

Johnson wrote to Peter Hughes about this incident and received the following reply from Hughes vice president Sue Hamilton: "I'm guessing there was some type of miscommunication. Because of the strength (or weakness) of the Australian dollar over the past couple of years, they do enjoy a lower price, but I'm told the Australian dollar is increasing and shortly will most likely be on par with the U.S. dollar. By the same token, Europeans who choose to pay in euros actually pay about 15 percent more than Americans. This is not discrimination, just the differences between currencies. I hope this helps clear this issue."

Unfortunately, this has little, if anything, to do with the difference between currencies. We e-mailed Walindi and got the same \$153 quote for a bungalow for two. Then a colleague e-mailed from Bali and was quoted 163 AUD — about \$108 USD. And while the Australian dollar is gaining strength against the U.S. dollar, it is years — if ever — away from parity.





This time I got to my safety stop all right but struggled to remain at 15 feet. I needed to begin venting my dry suit before ascending. Next time I added another layer of Polartec for more insulation.

After the dive, the skiff was winched back on board. We rinsed our dry suits under the shower on the dive deck, and some folks threw their fleece undergarments into the nearby dryer. After changing into dry clothes, I dug into breakfast: two different frit-tatas, hot oatmeal or cold cereal, fresh fruit, homemade bread, and the usual breakfast beverages. All meals

were buffet; the dining salon easily accommodated all 22 passengers (two short of the ship's full complement). Lunches might include pizza, sandwiches, or wraps, all served with soup, salad, and fruit. Dinners ranged from Greek-style chicken with spinach moussaka, pocket bread, and rice, to grilled salmon filets with asparagus. Fresh-baked desserts completed each evening meal. Occasionally the cooks, Josie and Kim, were late putting out salad dressings and desserts, but they were so cheerful and accommodating, those little mistakes were easy to overlook. The food on the Nautilus Explorer was among the best of any live-aboard I've taken.

Soft drinks were available any time from a tap, and beer, wine, and hard liquor could be purchased at the Salty Dog Bar in the lounge next to the dining salon. A local microbrew set me back \$2.25. The comfortable lounge has been refurbished and had a library of books, dive publications, and videos. Several nights we watched old Sea Hunt reruns. In one episode, after Mike Nelson's abalone diving buddy had supposedly been devoured by a bogus-looking killer whale, Mike ranted something like "we ought to wipe them all out!" Hmmm.

While we cruised to the Port Hardy area, I marveled at Vancouver Island's scenery, snow-capped mountain peaks shrouded by rain clouds. Thick stands of trees came down to the waterline or to the tops of rocky cliffs. We passed a series of smaller islands, also heavily wooded. Occasionally we saw small settlements with names like Alert Bay.

Browning Pass is B.C.'s best-known dive site, and Mike briefed us on the octopuses we could expect to see. Pacific octopuses are enormous -- 10 to 15 feet across -- and I've been waiting to see one for decades. This time we started the dive swimming into a stiff current along Browning Wall, then drifting back. The invertebrate life was colorful, even in the low light of a 7 p.m. dive, but less lush than other sites. And the octopuses? They lived up to their elusive reputation, and no one saw any -- the closest thing was a plump eight-inch cushion star.

This trip was filled with gearheads. Most divers wore top-of-the line DUI drysuits, with fleece undergarments in nylon shells to keep lint out of their dry suit valves. Several had trouble with them. Some folks spent entire surface intervals patching tears, but the major problem seemed to be with the seals of "dry" gloves. I wore wet suit mitts and, while my fingers were chilled, I still had all the dexterity I needed. One California diver actually switched back to his 7 mm wet suit. Several used backplates with wing-style BCs. A Russian immigrant named Yevgeny dove with a rebreather and warmed his dry suit with Argon. When a buckle snapped on my Scubapro split fins, Yevgeny lent me his buddy's, since she was sit-

## *The Nautilus Explorer*

Diving for Experienced	★★★
Diving for Beginners	Don't go
Accommodations	★★★★★
Food	★★★★★
Ambiance	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor

★★★★★ = excellent

## Split Fins vs. Quattros

The British magazine *Diver* is well regarded for its honest equipment appraisals. As for fins, their editors consider the Mares Plana Avanti Quattros “the industry standard.” We might quibble, but certainly not disagree.

They recently tested the single-bladed Quattro against two U.S. split-fins: the Apollo Biofin XT and Atomic Split Fins. Quattros are single-bladed, water-scooping fins made from a mix of soft and stiff materials that provide a four-channel flex. Apollos and Atomics stem from the same patented split-blade design, licensed from the Nature’s Wing Company. However, each differs in construction and appearance.

When you kick with a split fin, the claim is that the two portions of the blade form a pair of propeller blades that slice through the water independently. The idea is to create lift in the forward direction while reducing drag. The hype is that they allow divers to fin more easily but faster within a narrower range of leg movement. But are they superior to the more traditional design of the Quattro? After five test-divers used all three models in a swimming pool, the results were mixed.

The Biofin XT (they’re stiffer than standard, natural-rubber Biofins) outperformed the Quattros in speed trials, being the only fin to break five kilometers per hour. One tester noted that he could start finning at high speed right away with the split fins. “With the Quattros,” he reported, “I felt as if I was starting in a higher gear, with more pressure on my calf muscle.”

In ocean tests over a short course, the Apollos and Atomics performed identically on the speedometer. Even when a tester tried one on each foot, he couldn’t detect any difference in performance. (Try that with a Force Fin on one foot.)

From there, the differences came down to comfort and style. The open-heeled Quattro has a longer foot-pocket encompassing the sole of the boot up to the heel, so each fin becomes an extension of the lower leg. *Diver* technical editor John Bantin noted that the foot pocket’s ribbed interior prevented it from being jammed onto a bootie and makes it easier to remove. He also liked the Quattro’s buckle system, which easily cams the straps tight. Finally, he preferred the lighter weight and shorter length of the Quattro.

Bantin concluded he would use any of them. However, ultimately the Apollos lost out on weight to the Atomics, which in turn lost out because of their extra size in the water, in the boat, and in the bag.

With Quattros costing at least 25 percent less than the others, they’re clearly the best buy.

ting out that dive. Kevin, an instructor from B.C., later sold me a replacement strap and buckle combination he’d packed into his save-a-dive kit. Pretty fortuitous, considering how far we were from the nearest dive shop.

Most photographers shot digital, so between dives they didn’t fiddle with housings and strobes much. After a dinner of English-style roast beef (translation: overdone), one fellow treated us to a complete PowerPoint presentation of the day’s diving on his laptop. Easy, instant gratification: the American dream!

We had only three tide-dependent dives a day. So between the hot tub, lounge, and dining salon (where snacks, juices, and soft drinks were available all day), there were plenty of opportunities to socialize, read, or nap. The *Explorer* has nine double staterooms below decks, each with a separate shower and head. A few changes of clothing could be stored in a couple of drawers, and luggage went under the bunks. There was just enough room for two of us to dress at once. An air-conditioning vent over the door supplied fresh air, but it got stuffy. I could see the passing scenery through a porthole between the bunks, but it was sealed tight, so there was no fresh air. Two executive suites on the upper deck are near the hot tub and away from the major traffic flow.

At Dillon Rock, we encountered another icon of B.C. diving: wolf eels. These fierce-looking characters are so docile we were encouraged to take off our

gloves and pet them. I tried it, and my hand felt no colder with my glove off than on. The wolf eel felt slimy and squishy, even on the top of his head. I also saw a 16-inch octopus, 10 percent the breadth of what I hoped for.

Mike put variety into the diving, with a wreck dive on the remains of a Civil War-era paddle wheel gunboat and an old quarry by the shore of Alert Bay, but most of the time was spent on sheer walls or pinnacles. Other than some dolphins playing in our bow wake, we never saw any marine mammals (although Undercurrent reader Nikki Mahan from Bellevue, Washington, reported an amazing encounter with at least 15 stellar sea lions for more than 20 minutes a month after my trip).

A Puget Sound diver agreed with the California contingent that we hadn't seen anything in B.C. that we couldn't have seen in California or Puget Sound. However, the size and profusion of the critters, especially the invertebrates, were stunning. To me, the lure of this trip was venturing into an unspoiled wilderness and diving unpredictable waters in sometimes rugged conditions. That said, the Nautilus Explorer provided an extremely comfortable platform, even luxurious by live-aboard standards. The crew was especially helpful and friendly, though most were new and had little diving experience. And a true camaraderie developed. By the end of the trip we had all swapped e-mail addresses, and one passenger, Mike, set up a website so photographers could post their digital images for everyone to share. With all these pluses, the diving was just one part -- and not the highlight -- of a very memorable trip.

P.S.: In October and November 2004, the Explorer will move to La Paz, to dive the Sea of Cortez. They will also take trips to the Revillagigedo Islands. It's a super boat for these locations.

-- D.L.



**Diver's Compass:** U.S. citizens need a current passport to enter Canada. ... Steveston, where the Nautilus Explorer docks, is a \$20US cab ride from Vancouver International. ... Driving directions are on the website: [www.nautilusexplorer.com](http://www.nautilusexplorer.com); toll-free number is 888-434-8322. ... A six-night trip to Port Hardy runs \$975US for a stateroom, \$1145 for an executive suite. ... Dorm berths are available for very close friends. ... Bedding is provided in the staterooms, but bring your own towels and soap. ...

Two kayaks are on board. ... My dry suit rental ran \$120US for the trip. ... The Explorer offers 32 percent Nitrox for conventional scuba and up to 40 percent for rebreather bottles. ... Argon fills and rental setups are also available for insulating dry suits. ... Besides the standard aluminum 80s, 100 cubic feet steel tanks are available at an extra charge. ... Still and video cameras can be rented, but

## *Underwater Suicide*

In Croatia last year, a scuba diver was found dead at the bottom of a cave at 180 feet, with a knife protruding from his chest.

After his body was retrieved, an autopsy found that the death was due to both drowning and the penetrating knife wound.

Officials believed it at first was a homicide and arrested two suspects. However, the "blood stains" on their clothing proved to be paint, and they passed a polygraph test. A forensic analysis of the profile of the diver's last dive stored in his computer and other findings led officials to conclude that the diver committed suicide, most likely because he ran out of air and wanted to avoid the agony of drowning.

However, drowning, once underway, is considered a peaceful way to pass. Not so for a knife wound.

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Doc Petri confirmed the story by e-mail to Undercurrent.

there's no onboard processing. ... With advance notice, the Explorer can usually accommodate less experienced divers by providing a personal divemaster for an additional fee. ... Late spring and fall are peak seasons in B.C. ... In the summer, the Explorer moves to Alaska and offers longer trips with less diving and more topside exploring. ... The Nautilus Explorer sells a range of merchandise, and I bought a fleece vest for \$55. ... Air was consistently in the low 50s, with some rain on each of our six days so the hot tub on the top deck was a popular destination.

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## New Dive Destinations, Part II

*from our fearless subscribers*

When we get good tips from readers that check out, we offer periodic updates so you don't have to wait until the end of the year to get it from the Chapbook. Last month we offered several, and here are a few more to give you an update on unique dive destinations to consider:

**Fiji:** There's a new resort in Fiji, says Rosemary Gutwillig (Greenport, NY): Tiliva Resort on Kadavu Island. In April, she landed "on a gravel strip and embarked in an open 27-foot skiff for an hour-long, scenic but bumpy ride to the resort. Guests are housed in beautifully appointed wooden cottages modeled after Fijian bures. The tiled bathrooms have up-to-date fixtures and plenty of hot water. There is no air conditioning, but the ceiling fan worked well. The cook makes marvelous original combinations of local and Western cuisine; the fish dishes were especially good. You could become an addict of their coconut sauces. Steak, chicken, and pork chops were served other evenings. The dive operation is run by a Fijian divemaster; the boat is the same outboard that met us at the airport. There is new Apollo gear (regs, BCs, fins) — no rental fees are charged. The Astrolabe Reef is a beautiful perpendicular wall, broken into canyons, caverns, pinnacles, overhangs, and swim-throughs that are fun to explore and dramatically eerie at night. There are gor-

geous soft corals, sea fans, whips, and enormous plates of hard coral. There are countless species of pairing and single butterflies, half a dozen different bannerfish, and varieties of angels, puffers, triggers, surgeons, groupers, glasseys, and tangs. Schools of copper sweepers, pyramid butterflies, scissortail sergeants, and bannerfish, and groups of steelhead parrots and harlequin sweetlips. Clark, skunk, and tomato anemone fish. Banded sea snakes. Ringed pipefish. Thorny oysters. Brilliant painted crayfish. A turtle and a few whitetips. And a 4-inch Fijian octopus to hold in the palm of your hand." ([www.TilivaResortFiji.com](http://www.TilivaResortFiji.com), +679-331-5127)

**The Bahamas:** *Easy Goin'*, says Robyn Churchill (Hollywood, FL), is a first-rate dive live-aboard. "The

for each guest. Besides spectacular diving, there are other activities such as fishing, snorkeling, and kayaking with their onboard ocean kayak. They do weekend trips to Bimini and weeklong trips to the west end of Grand Bahamas. There are upper and lower berths in each cabin, with a storage room. Two of the three guest cabins have full-size lower berths for couples. The boat has satellite TV, VCR, and stereo. There's also a sun deck with lounge chairs. First mate Peg serves three delicious meals each day, with great appetizers before dinner and snacks between each dive. On past trips we've been treated to grilled steak, lobster, swordfish, shrimp Creole, homemade conch fritters, and fresh-baked breads and desserts. There's also complimentary beer, wine, and Captain's rum punch after the last dive of the day.

*"We stayed down as long as we wanted — my average dive time was 69 minutes, about a 38 percent increase over the 45 to 50 minutes the Brac dive boats allow."*

three-member crew is beyond wonderful. You never feel smothered by needless rules and restrictions on your diving. The 62-foot vessel is spotlessly clean and comfortable. Trips are limited to six or seven guests, with personalized attention

In March, there was a great abundance of tropicals and lots of colorful soft corals. Turtles and rays are numerous in Bimini, and on one dive we saw four nurse sharks, six reef sharks, and several large grouper. Wall diving, wreck diving,