

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

October 2005

Vol. 20, No. 10

Club Cantamar, La Paz, Baja, Mexico

unique diving close to home

IN THIS ISSUE:

Club Cantamar, La Paz, Baja, Mexico	1
Don't Forget There's Malaria Out There	4
RV Coral Reef II, The Bahamas.....	6
Finding a Collecting Trip... 6	
Thumbs Down: Bananarama, Roatan	7
Diving After Eating	8
When Divers Die, Part II .	10
Convenient, High- Performance Octopus ...	11
Velcro, Water and Weights.....	12
Another Couple Swept Away in Australia	13
Undercurrent On Line	14
Flotsam & Jetsam.....	15

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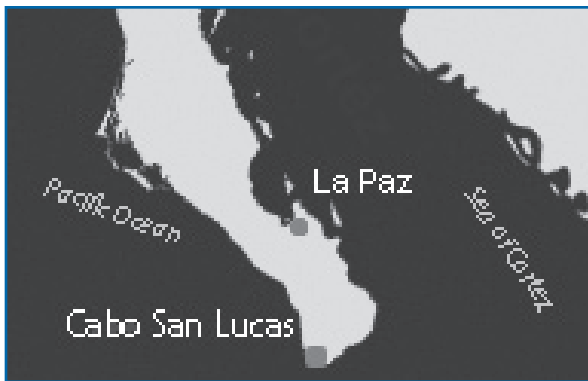
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Dear Fellow Divers,

It's a unique dive when one diver describes the seven-legged octopus he saw swim by, while another diver explains: "I saw a fish rip the leg right off that octopus!" Or, another diver says "A big bull sea lion shoots down in front of me, bites a snapper in half, returns for the other half, then floats to the surface for a snooze." Or I see a bumphead parrotfish and a bluechin parrotfish play smash mouth at full speed, the clang of their teeth sending shivers up my back as they swim woozily away from the collision. Oh, before that dive, I had cruised six feet above an 18 ft. whale shark sucking up plankton a couple of miles from downtown La Paz. All this in the Sea of Cortez, with the backdrop of unpopulated, starkly beautiful, desert islands.

The Sea is rife with unique marine events, above and below the surface. But, it's not been dived by many Americans because of limited services. There are a couple live-aboards, and there are land-based operations in Cabo San Lucas and Cabo Pulmo. One American has a good operation (Vista Sea Sport) up the coast in Buena Vista. But La Paz has had slow boats and slow development. That's been changing. Now, Club Cantamar, a 32-room divers' retreat 20 minutes north of La Paz, has a fleet of fast boats that can hold from 4 to 30 divers each and travel great distances for unique diving, as I found out on my late September trip.

For example, one day we traveled 2.5 hours to get to Las Animas, 55 nautical miles from the Club. Once there, divers had the choice to float into blue water at sixty feet, while the guide, Jonathan, went deep in search of schools of hammerheads. Or, we could cruise the reef, a series of pinnacles and rocks, keeping an eye toward blue water. Having heard that the hammers had been absent recently, I cruised the reef. Most everyone on the 51-ft. Uno Mas was from Flatiron Scuba Shop of Bloomfield, CO., but I was alone and buddied with one of their divers. Our guide was Bob Clarke, a divemaster from south-



ern California, on an eight-week work-study program for no pay, to learn the ropes of Mexican diving before heading north to Loreto to start his own business. Bob, who has dived La Paz a lot, was an attentive guide and provided plenty of onboard assistance. Cantamar's two youthful divemasters, Jonathan, who had been with Cantamar for a while, and Aki, a young Japanese woman who had come just for the season, were basically good kids and good divers, with a lot to learn about customer service and safety.

They gave incomplete briefings with large site maps and set no depth limits, but a 50-minute time limit. That's frankly too short when depths mostly run 30 to 90 feet and everyone was diving a computer. So, 60 minutes is more what people did. The staff did ensure everyone had a buddy and a guide to follow, but one could dive alone as well.

We made two dives at Los Animas, where prolific sealife brought alive the dull bottom. Everywhere, the water column was filled with scissortail damselfish flashing their white tail spots, swallowtail and other free-swimming damsels, and large schools of golden snappers and groups of sizeable yellow tails. Bright orange Clarion angelfish were common, as were yellow tail surgeon fish, convict tangs, and barberfish. I watched a school of bigeye jacks slowly finning above, and when a solitary sea lion cruised by the jacks closed ranks and charged, sending the sea lion away with a couple of brisk kicks. We drifted the second dive, and each group ended significantly apart, one so distant that it took a keen eye to spot the five-foot safety sausage, though seas were calm. Distances are vast, the islands unpopulated, and currents are often tricky. These are waters to be prepared for.

The drill was to serve lunch on the boat after the second dive, so at 2:45 p.m. we noshed on warm tacos with an odd filling of beef, potatoes, tomatoes, spaghetti, olives, and onions, apparently a goulash from dinner leftovers, proving that if you keep hungry divers waiting, they will eat anything and not complain. Tacos improved the next day, because the filling was chicken sans spaghetti (but with corn and a few peas). Refried beans and potato chips accompanied. Another day it was lunch meat and packaged Velveeta-type cheese with lettuce, tomatoes, bread and potato chips. Between dives it was boxed cookies, sodas, and usually cantaloupe or watermelon. Water and iced tea were aboard, but several days there were only a half dozen cups for 20 people, and one had to pluck them from the camera/mask rinse tanks to get started.

Half way on the long ride home from Los Animas, I saw leaping dolphin far ahead. As we closed in, there were hundreds, and the Sea World show began. Some rode bow waves, others surfed stern waves. Some rolled in front of the boat or alongside, while others leaped high in the air. One did a back flip, two others leaped in unison, scores of others leaped at random. The captain made two sweeping circles to let us enjoy the remarkable show. Farther along, an enormous whale -- a blue, someone said -- rolled his long, serpent-like back again and again for our inspection, while a single white butterfly danced above the ripples. Closer to home, we stopped at Los Islotes, a sea lion rookery, to provide tanks for the Cantamar's new live-aboard, the Fiesta. While seals barked and frolicked, the crews exchanged tanks, because the Fiesta had no compressor. An Undercurrent correspondent who has been to the Cantamar several times says the Fiesta "probably started life as a fishing boat as it has a huge refrigeration system and coolers. These waste a lot of space. The owners plan a major refurbishing to get it up to standards for live-aboard diving. It will need a lot of work. I certainly wouldn't book a week on this thing, the way it is configured (and smells) with the other vessels in the region."

On another day at La Reina, we took two dives where schools of herring were so thick and deep, it was nearly pitch-black below them. They extended farther than I could see in the 60-foot murky visibility. Schools of hundreds of machete were common, their yellow heads glowing like faint lanterns. In a groove, a wall of orange cup coral got snapped up by photographers while I watched several ornate giant hawkfish skitter.

Along the reef, there seemed to be an endless supply of burrfish and balloon fish, occasionally a spotted porcupine fish, a school of grunt, a pair of Cortez angel-fish and the only Moorish Idol of the trip.

No need to go into dive after dive, other than to say that fish life was prolific, nothing gargantuan (though I saw a spotted sandbass struggle to swallow a small fish that filled its jaws), plenty of blennies and soldierfish, large green morays galore -- just an endless supply of critters, many unrecognizable to a Caribbean diver. Like the giant damselfish, for instance, that almost looks like an angel fish. Or, tiger reef eels slithering along. Five-foot long needle-thin coronet fish hiding in schools of reef fish. Endless colorful starfish, a unique crab, a brown nudibranch with a yellow cross, a jewel moray, and a rock that wiggled just before I grabbed it to steady myself in a current. One of many scorpionfish. Friendly are the fish, so a patient fish photographer could capture just about everything (though visibility varies from 20 to 60 plus feet).

That said, divers need to be self-sufficient. More often than not, no crew member (never the captain) was at the stern to grab a weight belt, nor to help someone up the first few ladder steps. However, someone showed up to release and carry away the BC/tank combo. Before a dive, help with gear was random and no crew member helped steady divers, many of whom stupidly insisted on donning their fins and walking clumsily to the edge of the boat, before taking their giant stride four feet down. After my very first dive on the Salvestierri wreck, where I had decided to dive alone, I climbed aboard late; most everyone was out of gear, and another diver helped me up, not the crew. Soon, Aki yelled "Is everybody here," to which another diver responded "I'm not." There was laughter and the boat got underway. While the leaders seemed to keep track of the people in their groups, there were plenty of unguided buddy pairs and never a headcount. In a sea so vast, sometimes with bad conditions and swift currents, a disaster awaits. A disclaimer: I was with only one set of divemasters, so perhaps those on the other boat had higher standards. But, the lax attitude I observed did not set well. Everyone is nice, polite, and accommodating. However, they need training in both customer service and safety, and a boss to monitor them. A hired consultant for one week would shape it up.

As for the hotel itself, it's basic, clean, and functional. The standard rooms have about 150 sq. feet of living space, enough for beds (with a four-inch foam pad on a platform, too firm for some folks) a closet, a desk and stool, a telephone, a TV with CNN and the Discovery Channel, and a good air-conditioner. It's a step to the sink. The shower was on my left, the water closet to the right. End rooms have balconies, a plus when the temperatures are low enough to sit outside. If a diving couple has a lot of photo equipment, a larger room might be necessary. The club is next to the Baja Ferry Terminal, mainly an industrial



Siempre Fi and office and rooms to the left.

area, which has no redeeming features whatsoever for a vacationer.

A well-kept swimming pool, its white bottom peeled and scarred, is near the dining room and one can swim up to the small open-air bar for a margarita (\$4) or a beer (a buck), then shoot a game of pool. The food seems well matched to the rooms. The steam table breakfasts offered a couple styles of eggs, pancakes, potatoes, a bit of fresh fruit, yogurt, canned juice, cereal. On the last day, I asked for huevos rancheros and I got them. The dinner menu was ordinary, and after a saucy seafood pasta and garlic bread one night and fried fish and rice another (more than once did I hear other diners talk about "mystery meat"), I tried a Mexican plate that beat the others hands down. I finished with a good flan. I didn't find the brightly lit dining room conducive to dinner, so I ate outside by the bar. I drove 20 minutes to town a couple times, where I could sit at Carlo's and Charlie's, enjoy a margarita and tacos, and listen to a variety of bands playing nightly at the bandstand across the street by the water. La Paz, by the way, is a pleasant, truly Mexican town, where the few tourist restaurants are filled mainly with locals. There is no glitz, and the best entertainment is a stroll along the Malecon to watch the sun set and the pelicans glide. It stretches a couple of miles and across the street are shops, a few restaurants, small hotels and homes. It's a safe town, a family town.

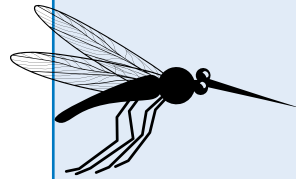
Some divers might prefer to stay in La Paz at a more comfortable or more romantic hotel, enjoy good meals and drive to and from the Cantamar for diving. Many divers on the boats did just that, and those without cars arranged transportation in a Cantamar van. I've stayed at La Concha, a mile north of downtown, in a beautiful ocean front condominium where I could watch the sun set, then stroll into town for dinner, and grab a cab back. That made for a much better vacation experience than lodging at the Cantamar. However, for dive groups, Club Cantamar works just fine.

The Club's fleet of boats is excellent. At least two large boats were running the days I was there, and one day four divers went out in a third small boat. There were always diving options. The boats are long and wide, with tanks running down the back sides, above benches and storage spaces. The decks are covered and there are heads below and plenty of dry space. Depending on the boat, they

Don't Forget There's Malaria Out There

If you are traveling to any tropical or subtropical country, you should check on the status of malaria. Parts of Mexico and Central America, South America, the Indian subcontinent, Asia, the Middle East, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands are presently reporting pockets of malaria risk.

In a recent Travelers' Health warning from the Centers for Disease Control, we found continuing cautions of risk in rural areas and in Roatan and other Bay Islands. Travelers should be on a chloroquine regimen. The caution is consistent with an article in the April 2005 *Bay Islands Voice* indicating



that the disease is on the rise. In children under 5, there were 115 recorded cases at Roatan Hospital last year. According to Dr. Duarte of the Galindo Clinic in Roatan, "We saw a wave of malaria in January—up to two patients every day." Last year, neighboring Guanaja recorded the highest adult malaria rate in the region with 37 cases per 1,000 inhabitants; this was followed by Roatan. In April, a Canadian tourist on Roatan contracted malaria.

What does this mean for the traveler to the Bay Islands? At this point, there clearly is malaria on Roatan, although there is no evidence that it is of epidemic proportion. Chances of exposure increase dramatically if one travels on mainland Honduras, or even changes planes there. So a diver would be wise to follow current CDC recommendations regarding antimalarial medications and take all routine steps to avoid exposure to mosquitoes.

For CDC guidelines on preventing malaria in your venue of travel, go the CDC Travelers' Health Web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/travel>.

To check for last-minute info on malaria outbreaks, go the CDC Travel Notices Web site: www.cdc.gov/travel/outbreaks.htm.

— Doc Vikingo

travel at speeds up to 30 knots and sites seem matched to speed. Many days there are three tank dives, which ended as late as 5:30 p.m., with an 8:30 a.m. departure. The morning I arrived I received no briefing, but I saw my name chalked under the name of one boat. As I climbed aboard, I was redirected to another boat, then sent back to the first. I was told the weights on the belts were four pounds, so I figured three weights would be plenty for me. But, they were three pound weights and I was underweighted (yes, I should have checked myself). Divers tote their own gear to and from the boat in plastic cartons. At days end, each diver hoses off his gear and stores it in a cage. The main office provides locks and keys.

Once aboard the 43ft. Siempre Fi, I was told that we were off to see whale sharks and there would be a \$20 surcharge. Jonathan the guide asked to see my C-card, which I had not brought aboard because I had signed a release in the office and figured that was that. So, he asked how many dives I had and when I had dived last. My answers satisfied him. Ten minutes later, the Cantamar's tiny pontoon spotter plane came buzzing over the water, leading the Cantamar's two boats to two whale sharks. We had several opportunities to drop into the water with them, though in the 30-foot visibility they quickly appeared and disappeared.

Now, while I've been critical of the service and safety, I liked the Club Cantamar. An experienced diver can handle the shortfalls (though the lack of a head count is serious). Every dive, even those at in low visibility over boulders proved full of interesting critters and fish, kept my attention, and ended too soon. Then there are the whalesharks, the sea lions, the dolphins and whales. And some folks see mantas and hammerheads. At \$778/person double occupancy for seven nights and five days of diving (2006 prices), breakfast and lunch, it's among the lowest priced operations around. For that price, I can tote my own gear. Never the less, I still want someone to grab my weight belt after a dive, steady me as I strap on my fins before a jump into the water. And for God's sake, conduct a head count so the same number of people leave a site as arrived.

-- Ben Davison



Diver's Compass: Most people fly to San Jose del Cabo airport because the airfare is cheaper; Cantamar will arrange round trip transportation to the hotel for \$75 (the trip is nearly three hours). . . . Nonstop flights from LA to San Jose del Cabo in December is as low as \$218, but to La Paz it's \$578. . . . All major rental car companies are at the San Jose del Cabo airport. . . . A nice one bedroom condo at La Concha runs \$954/week (www.laconcha.com). . . . The Cantamar office has one Internet computer, no fish ID books, virtually no lounging room; the only other

air conditioned common area is the dining room. . . . Club Cantamar has its own recompression chamber. . . . The diving season is considered August to November when the water varies from 76° to 84°F. It didn't drop below 80°F during my late September stay; one can dive any time, but in the winter water drops below 70°F. Nitrox is available and the resort offers technical diving support. . . . Dinners run in the \$12 range. . . . In late September, the day temp ranged from 90°-98°F; summers can see 120°F days. . . . Phone +52 (612) 125-1424; Email: info@clubcantamar.com; www.clubcantamar.

Club Cantamar, Baja, Mexico

Diving for experienced	★★★★★
Diving for beginners	★★★★★
Safety	★★
Food	★★★
Accommodations	★★★
Service	★★★
Money's worth	★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale