

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

July 2007

Vol. 22, No. 7

## Isla Cozumel, Mexico

### *recovering nicely from Hurricane Wilma*

#### *IN THIS ISSUE:*

Isla Cozumel, Mexico .....	1
Help With Project Cozumel .	3
Slow Versus Fast Boats .....	4
<i>SMY Ondina</i> , Raja Ampat, West Papua .....	5
Other Raja Ampat Liveboards .....	8
When You Decide to Go It Alone .....	9
Younger, Newer and Female Divers Show DCI More ..	10
So How Many Divers Are There, Really? .....	11
Thumbs Down: Sherwood Scuba .....	12
Irrational Fear of Flashing Dive Computers .....	13
Regulators: Two Recalls and NOAA's New Favorite ....	14
Diving Fantasy v. Reality ...	15
Flotsam and Jetsam .....	16

[www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)

#### **Editorial Office:**

Ben Davison  
Publisher and Editor  
Undercurrent  
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102  
Sausalito, CA 94965  
BenDavison@undercurrent.org

Dear Reader:

I'm a Cozaholic. I've taken three dozen trips to Cozumel in 33 years and still I'm compelled to return. For me, there's no better season than spring; after El Nino and before hurricane seasons, it is not yet too hot or humid. Days are usually sunny and seas calm.

I can depart from Baltimore in the morning and be absorbing nitrogen in Cozumel waters by early afternoon. It has the Caribbean's best drift diving at the best value. Any diver can locate digs and food to his liking. Accommodations vary from the high-end InterContinental Presidente Resort and Spa, rebuilt after Wilma in 2005, to inexpensive places downtown. Eateries range from the upscale Wynston and La Cocay to mom-and-pop places serving delicious, cheap "comida corrida." And there are the friendly attitudes, variety of dive sites, and generally excellent weather and scuba conditions.

Clearing the airport in April was a breeze, less than 25 minutes. The drive to town was 10 minutes, although it can be a half-hour for those staying in the south. Just three hours after I landed, I was backrolling into 80-degree water for a meandering swim-thru at Palancar Caves. With visibility well past 100 feet, it's a good place for intermediate divers to get introduced to walls, swim-throughs and openings formed by the fusion coral heads, and Wilma exposed even more. I entered several openings that dead-ended but there was ample room to turn around easily. Upon emerging from a swim-through, I spied a sizeable



**Surface interval at Playa Paradise**



black grouper and green moray engaging in cooperative hunting. Eyeing me suspiciously lest I try to horn in, they soon got back to business.

The next dive was at Tunich, the Mayan term for a beheading stone. This site consistently delivers a rollicking roller-coaster ride and an odd wicked vertical current, and it didn't disappoint. I shot past a tawny-toned, six-foot nurse shark festooned with remoras. As I floated north, a massive crab claw protruded from cement coral below me. A giant green parrotfish, the color of corroding copper, chewed up the coral as it bullied its way

down the reef. A fine first day of scuba.

I dived with Liquid Blue because of its excellent customer service and orientation to more advanced divers. They had me diving before most of the Cozumel fleet had even gassed up. They also provided Worthington HP steel 120s and a willingness to visit more distant and challenging sites. The owners are Michaela, a pleasant but serious businessperson originally from Colorado, and her easygoing Mexican husband Roberto who likes to laugh and loves to dive. The Bonita Luna and Tara II were shaded and uncluttered with a small storage space beneath each seat. Having once been stranded off the far Yucatan when the engine on a single screw craft went south, I preferred the Bonita Luna as she had twin outboards.

After my first day's diving, I repaired to the Suites Bahia and my balcony room for \$55 per night. It's a block away from Liquid Blue's shop, several blocks south of the main plaza, and just off the waterfront drag. Suites Bahia is a small, basic place but spotlessly clean. I had two large beds, a tiled bathroom, desk and a large closet with overhead storage. The small kitchen had a mid-sized fridge, sink and electric stove, but no cookware or utensils. The price included a modest continental breakfast but it wasn't available until 7 a.m. so I usually missed it due to Liquid Blue boats' early departure times. There was no bar or restaurant, and the only common area is the small lobby with a TV, vending machine and free Internet service.

Everything a diver needs is right outside their door. Within a block were two dive shops, the American Discount Drug Store; a convenience store for snacks; a boutique eatery named Sorrisi that served a medium cup of gelato for \$5 and wood-oven pizzas starting at \$11; and a Pizza Hut for more pedestrian tastes. But I dined at the small loncherias, chicken and ribs places and taquerias that dot 30th Avenue east of downtown, where turistas mingle easily with locals. Nine assorted tacos and two orange sodas at El Pique (across from the old San Francisco market) set me back \$10 with tip. Compare that to Wynston, where a small green salad with a vinaigrette dressing runs \$5, and chicken Dijon with rice and grilled vegetables fetches \$16. But being perched on top of the El Cantil Norte condos, Wynston does have a boffo view. And I must admit my most memorable meal was a Caesar salad, mixed seafood pasta fra diavolo and a nice bottle of red wine at Prima, a longtime favorite, for \$25.

I've never been a big fan of the storied Barracuda Reef because its visibility is sometimes so-so and the wicked, vertical currents can deplete gas in a hurry, but on this trip I enjoyed it thanks to the mild current and primo visibility. A big spotted eagle ray cruised the wall and allowed a long, close approach. So did several hawksbill turtles, one of which was munching a large hole into a barrel sponge. I drifted across an impressive aggregation of porkfish, schoolmasters and mahogany snappers, many sporting mating colors and shades, as if overcome by a spring fever of pheromonal frenzy. For surface intervals, I relaxed on the beach at Playa Azul, tranquil and pleasant although much of its sand had been Wilma'd away.

San Juan in the north, a longtime favorite, reminded me why Cozumel is synonymous with drift diving. It's a mid-depth reef with excellent visibility, and

its vigorous, steady current let me cover lots of ground. Pre-Wilma, San Juan was loaded with hawksbill turtles, free-swimming morays and carpeted in vibrant coral but sadly is now a ghost of its former self. Finger corals now lay in skeletal heaps and only nascent algae regrowth peeked out. The high point was several triggerfish going about their mating and nesting behavior, oblivious to the death lying below them. Cozumel used to have a few nice snorkeling sites but they've also been badly damaged by Wilma. However, Dzul Ha, a small beach club south of the InterContinental Presidente, and Parque Chankanaab next door are the good bets.

Liquid Blue offered two morning dives and one afternoon dive. The boat left between 7:30 and 8 a.m., with the first dive starting at 8:30. I backrolled in for my dives and got back in the boat via side ladder. Surface intervals were at one of the beach clubs. After the second dive, it was back into port for lunch, then the afternoon dive at 2 p.m. They supplied me with a mesh bag with my name on it for storing and toting gear. The crew set up my gear daily and rinsed and stored it each evening (except for wetsuits). With the exception of a very few dive operators, tank fills on Cozumel are done at a central facility; mine averaged 3,000 psi. Bottled water and big towels were onboard, but divers had to bring their own extras.

Liquid Blue affords divers lots of freedom. Each day, they asked where I'd like to dive. Once divemasters Jorge and Roberto were satisfied with my competence and trustworthiness, they went along with relatively extreme dive profiles and pointed out great photo ops. This meant I could do deep sites and get profound perspectives on sites normally dived at shallower depths. Instead of the typical 120-foot depths at Maracaibo Deep, I once dropped to 200 feet. Santa Rosa Wall was far better at 150 feet than at 90 feet. That my dive buddy and I were the only customers for four of our six dive days only added to the feeling of freedom and personal attention. However, even on days with more divers, there was still plenty of space.

Bright and early another morning, I wafted over Columbia Deep, a dive typically done at 70 to 100 feet that boasts massive coral heads rising 70 feet from the sea floor. There, I was stunned by an unanticipated display of sponge spawning. Bowl and basket sponges gave off smoky plumes of gametes. Barrel sponges, resembling top-loading washing machines overfilled with detergent, positively splooped. Snow-white spawn churned, frothed and spilled into the current. Spectacular.

## Help With Project Cozumel

If you decide to visit Cozumel, combine some good deeds with your diving. *Undercurrent* reader Frank Evans (Rochester, MN) is asking fellow divers to help out with Project Cozumel, a volunteer group who travel to Cozumel at their own expense every spring to put concrete roofs on houses for poor families. Divers build in the morning and dive the rest of the day with Blue Angel Dive Shop.

Evans and his wife were celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary in Cozumel in October 2005 when Hurricane Wilma struck. He spent three days walking into various neighborhoods and surveying the damage. "What struck me most was the attitude of the poor people living there," he says. "They immediately began to clean their homes and help their neighbors, but their roofs were made of treated cardboard that give no safety from the wind and rain of hurricanes." That inspired him to start Project Cozumel.

Last year, 12 volunteers constructed a roof on one house, then built a bedroom and bathroom for a teenage girl undergoing chemotherapy. "Her parents were so happy, they cried the first day we started work," says Evans. Next year's project will take place February 16-23, and Evans needs 20 volunteers to meet the goal of putting roofs on four houses. Work starts at 7:30 a.m. and stops at noon, then Blue Angel takes the divers out on their own afternoon boat. Every volunteer contributes \$100 for roofing materials and medicines for local children, and two churches help out with extra supplies. Donations are also accepted, in exchange for gift receipts. For more information, contact Evans at [frankevans@charter.net](mailto:frankevans@charter.net) or (507) 287-8184.

Even if you're going to Cozumel some other time, locals can still use your donations. Evans says there's a need for clothing, especially childrenswear. If you have extra room in your luggage, bring down some extra attire and drop it off at the Blue Angel Dive Shop.

Surface interval was on the southern end at Playa Paradise, which now runs together with Playa San Francisco and a new Carlos 'n Charlie's to the north. The beach clubs have been overwrought for the cruise trade and lost their rustic charm. For example, the traditional palapa at Playa Mia (formerly Playa Sol) was replaced by an outlandish contraption resembling a mutant bovine udder. Cozumel is working diligently on becoming tacky, but blessedly still has a long way to go to catch up to Cancun.

Back in the agua, Dahlila, a low-profile shelf reef I dived at 40 feet, was still scoured and silted from Wilma. I hoped to find Cozumel's splendid toadfish here, but not this time. I was amused by a pair of spotted scorpionfish locked in an obviously thorny relationship. Here also was my most salacious sighting -- three flamingo tongues extending their hermaphroditic gear, finding home and forming a ménage à trois that lasted longer than my gas.

On this dive, my first stage sprung a leak, then my dive computer flooded and died. Liquid Blue provided replacements, did repairs on the spot and didn't charge me a peso. Not surprisingly, a small, personal operation with oversized tanks and a willingness to go to the most distant dive sites at no premium charged more. While most Cozumel dive outfitters charge \$60 to \$75 for a two-tank morning dive, Liquid Blue commands \$85. Nitrox, averaging 36 percent, was \$12 per cylinder. Money well spent.

Diving the distant sites on Cozumel's eastern side requires a boat with enough fuel to go from west to east and back, and a crew knowledgeable about the sites. After several years of surveying, Aldora Divers now offers daily excursions for small groups, conditions permitting, as does Liquid Blue. I have dived the east side several times, although not with Aldora on this trip, and found it ho-hum compared to the western sites. However, it did provide my only Cozumel hammerhead sighting, and was a change of pace with its gradually sloping bottom and rocky formations.

## Isla Cozumel

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★★
Diving ( <i>beginners</i> )	★★★
Snorkeling	★
Accommodations	★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Food	★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent  
Caribbean Scale

## Slow Versus Fast Boats

If you're new to Cozumel, it'll be helpful to understand the difference between "slow" and "fast" boats. Indeed, it's a big difference.

*Undercurrent* reader David Sifre (Bronxville, NY) recently went on Dive Paradise's *Paradise Diver*, a craft that can carry 24-plus divers (although mercifully, they usually stop at 16). He reported that: "The 'slow' boats literally take an hour to get to the first dive destination. On our first day, the boat did not return from the second dive until 2:15, and the afternoon dive was scheduled for 3 p.m. The second day we made it clear we did not want to get back so late, but were told, 'Relax, it's your vacation' as if taking a dive vacation meant we ought not be concerned about missing the third dive

of the day! Finally, since seven of the 14 people on the boat had a 3 p.m. dive, the crew did not go as far as they had originally intended."

While there is no agreed-upon distinction between slow and fast boats, the latter typically get you to dive sites in much less time, take only six divers (hence the term, "six packs"), tend to depart earlier and cater to an experienced crowd. They also cost more. Some operations run "fast" boats exclusively, and there is only one price. If an operation runs both types, it assesses a surcharge for the fast one; Dive Paradise, for example, charges \$7 more for a morning two-tanker in its fast boat. But for serious divers, fast boats are well worth the added charge.

-- Doc Vikingo

Since my visit in 2006, Cozumel topside has bounced back with a vengeance, bigger, flashier and more expensive. Underwater, delicate life such as long tube sponges, sea fans, thin lettuce-leaf corals and leafed algae are making a slow comeback. Silting is evident but reduced. The fish life is improved but some notables remain either in short supply, such as trumpetfish, or missing in action like slender filefish. Return divers may lament the hurricane damage but will also find new scuba joys, like new swim-thrus. Newcomers should not be disappointed -- it's still boffo diving. The plankton-rich currents continue to assert their regenerative powers. While la Isla Cozumel was down for a period, she most assuredly is not out. There's magic in the water.

-- Doc Vikingo



**Diver's Compass:** U.S. airlines have daily flights to Cozumel for around \$500; American Airlines flies from Miami and Dallas, Continental from Houston, US Air from Charlotte and Frontier from Denver . . . Taxis can't do airport pickups as the shuttle vans have a union lock, but they do dropoffs; my shuttle to downtown cost US\$5, ditto for taxi upon return . . . Bahia Suites charges \$59 for a standard room, \$65 for a balcony and \$81 for an ocean view through December 23...English-only speakers will have no difficulties getting around; food and toiletries are readily available and locals are friendly . . . Traveler's diarrhea is not a serious concern if you follow basic, common-sense precautions . . . Be on the alert for "taxes" on your dining tab, because there is no food or drink tax on Cozumel; look out for gratuities that sneak onto your tab or an "additional suggested gratuity" block at the bottom, sometimes already filled out for you . . . Worth visiting topside are the Museum of the Island of Cozumel in town and the new Discover Mexico cultural theme park in the far south, although it's pricey at \$20 . . . It's also worth going to the undeveloped east side to wander beaches and dine at Mezcalito's or the cliff-side Coconuts . . . Liquid Blue Divers' Website: [www.liquidbluedivers.com](http://www.liquidbluedivers.com); Suites Bahia's website: [www.suitesbahia.com](http://www.suitesbahia.com)

---

## ***SMY Ondina, Raja Ampat, West Papua***

### ***the center of the diving universe***

Dear Reader:

One o'clock in the morning was an unusual time to meet the divers I'd be spending a week with in the Coral Triangle, but then this photo-focused liveaboard trip to Raja Ampat was far from ordinary. We met in the worn-around-the-edges lobby of Manado's Ritzy Hotel and, hours before sunrise, ate breakfast in the palatial but deserted restaurant. Afterwards, I boarded my fifth plane ride, to Sorong in Irian Jaya where the SMY Ondina was anchored.

My trip last November was one of two Raja Ampat liveaboard trips organized annually by Deb Fugitt, a Texas-based photographer. Located off West Papua (known as Irian Jaya until last February), Raja Ampat, or the Four Kings, is an archipelago of 1,500 islands, cays and shoals and considered the epicenter of the world's coral reef biodiversity. Its currents sweep coral larvae across the Indian and Pacific Oceans to replenish other reef ecosystems. Marine biologists have recorded 1,070 fish species here, 537 coral species and 700 mollusk species. Fish swim together in enormous schools, mixed with large groups of turtles, mantas, sharks, and dolphins.

At Melissa's Garden, I was all but weeping in my mask from the sheer splendor. This garden is profuse with corals, hard and soft, of every size, texture and color. A brain coral the size of a large igloo had nary a mark on it. Cup corals in the





thousands blazed in orange splendor. Branching corals formed vast fields and shimmered with clouds of tiny hovering anthias. A huge giant clam shaded lavender and green and the size of a Volkswagen lay with its sunroof open to expose its upholstery. A large, beige wobbegong shark lounged on scalloped coral, protruding eyeballs peering up at me from its fringed, flat face. Amid all this, reef fish flowed like rivers, lionfish hovered like alien spacecraft, occasional sharks darted by, and the sun kissed them all.

Enjoying Raja Ampat meant long flight times and layovers. I spent a day in Seoul touring sprawling palaces, and another in

one of Singapore's high-tech transit terminals, taking a long nap in a comfortable chaise before boarding a small jet to Manado. I spent two days in Tangkoko, a national jungle reserve 180 miles east of Manado. Tiny Tarsier monkeys with huge eyes that pop out of tree knots at dusk are a sight to behold. Throngs of black apes congregate at dawn, either swinging through branches or grooming each other. One sidled up to me and gnawed gently on my shoulder.

After the 90-minute flight from Manado to Sorong, Deb met us at the airport along with her partner, Tony, and the Ondina crew. We drove to the edge of a greasy bay where rusty hulks mingled with native Indonesia schooners, then I was whisked across the dawn-streaked water to the mother ship. My C-card was checked and I filled out the obligatory release and a brief questionnaire about my diving experience. Note: I was required to show proof of emergency evacuation insurance.

The Ondina is constructed entirely of wood in the traditional "Pinsi" style and tailored for the liveaboard life. The lower deck houses two double cabins and two singles in the bow. The crew lugged my gear into a comfortable single cabin, with huge storage space underneath my bunk and two floor-to-ceiling cabinets. Track-style lighting fixtures aimed directly at the cabinets, entryway, and my book before bedtime. A remote-controlled AC unit was responsive to adjustments. In the bathroom, wood pallets on the floor kept my feet above the waterline while I used the shower.

The bow was off limits but aft was a lovely deck with built-in wooden table and benches where divers mingled. For afternoon naps, I walked to the top deck, in front of the bridge, and lounged on the pillow-lined chaises. My fellow divers were internationally diverse, widely traveled and with out-of-the-ordinary careers but they were also just plain nice folk. Jeff, a stockbroker, was the only other person besides me who had some semblance of a day job. The others seemed to spend their lives traveling.

Deb and Tony were always gracious and accessible. Deb shot video during the dives, getting terrific footage, while Tony remained one of the last holdouts using film. A dozen Indonesian crew members were perpetually amused and laughing. Their English was limited, but they knew "camera" and "ready", with an occasional "many fish!" thrown in. Jufre, the Indonesian captain, always had a smile to offer. Deb and Tony often decided where and when to dive, a marked difference between their cruises and the standard Ondina ones. Head divemaster Norberto from the Canary Islands provided great briefings and Deb would translate or give further explanation when needed.

At the stern of the main deck, a camera table and storage shelves with plastic baskets provided working space for serious photographers. Built-in light fixtures aided camera prep. There was a leaky crack in the ceiling over the camera table, and the water drip took dead aim at my open housing. A few windy squalls one afternoon soaked my gear stashed in a basket under the camera table. I was assigned a bench space, tank, and a motorboat seat for all my dives. In the dive prep room, one wall held the briefing whiteboards and assigned cubbies, each with a 220-volt power strip

## *SMV Ondina, Raja Ampat*

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★★
Diving ( <i>beginners</i> )	★★
Snorkeling	★
Accommodations	★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Food	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent  
*Worldwide Scale*

and thick blue towel. Up the deck, wetsuits were hung in a small room. Two compact water-heating units provided instant hot showers.

My aluminum 80 tank was always filled to 3,000 psi. Because there had been problems with the Nitrox-dedicated generator on the previous trip, Deb thought it prudent that it be reserved for electricity rather than pumping diving gas so she offered credit for the Nitrox deposit I paid. Dives began with crew hauling gear down the suspended stairway to the boats. After a short ride to the site, I was helped into my gear, backrolled in, then swam back to the boat where I was handed my camera. There were no official buddy pairings and no babysitting by Deb or the crew. We tended to stay close

together, and with the divemaster, at the beginning of dives but often ended up solo when concentrating on a photo subject.

A site named Waterlogged is relatively mundane-looking without dramatic coral but peppered with wire coral crabs, nudibranchs, and Coleman shrimp. I did nine dives there with my 105-mm lens, but many subjects I never would have spotted without the aid of the eagle-eyed divemasters. Dives averaged 75 minutes, mostly drift dives. At some sites, strong currents converged in a V-like juncture. I had to drop as quickly as possible to the convergence point and swim forward into the point. If I failed, I'd be swept over the reef to be picked up by the boat driver and dropped again. Embarrassing. Each time I surfaced, I was spotted instantly by the boat driver, even once when I suffered a minor flood just a few minutes into my dive. Exits were completed by unhooking and handing up my rig, then finning up onto the inflatable gunwale. Some divers looked like stranded fish as they flopped aboard, but we all got better as time went on.

Most dives were between 60 and 80 feet, with a few below 100 feet. It wasn't uncommon to dive a site multiple times because Deb's photo-oriented philosophy was to become familiar with a site and acclimatize fish to our presence and "tame" them into becoming our subjects. Fabiacet was a small site but we stayed for two days. It had some gorgeous regions, featuring schools of barracudas and mobula rays and a few mantas, but they were always swimming in fierce currents and just out of my camera range. I got itchy to move on and experience something new.

According to Deb, this trip was unusual because the currents were either nonexistent and therefore not good for fish abundance, or they were coming from the wrong direction for easy boat pickups. Some of the highly touted sites, such as Cape Kri, were nearly devoid of fish and plagued with poor visibility. The currents also thwarted some good photo ops. At Mike's Point, I fought my way forward to a group of 100 sweetlips, hovering motionless, while I did some mad finning to place myself in front of the crowd. I turned to shoot, only to be swept right through them.

Daytime temperatures averaged 86 degrees, evenings were in the 70s. A few hot, sunny days showed off the reefs below and the gorgeous, uninhabited rock islands above. The sun was capable of searing skin in minutes. But clouds and rain shrouded some dives and



**The *Ondina* under full sail**

## Other Raja Ampat Liveboards

Deb Fugitt only schedules two trips a year on the *MV Ondina*, but other liveboards cruise the same waters and offer more trips.

**Grand Komodo Tours and Dives.** Its five boats have limited passenger counts (the *Nusa Tara* takes six divers, the largest *RajaAmpat Explorer* takes 14). *Undercurrent* readers Chrisanda Button and Rickie Sterne (Elkins, AR) went on the *Nusa Tara* last October and say, "It's a simple boat but we found it comfortable and clean." "The crew was always friendly and there when you need them," says Dan Purnell (Vancouver, WA) of his October trip on the *RajaAmpat Explorer*. "The divemasters know where and when to dive to find critters." Food is good but simple – "don't expect fine wine and gourmet dining," says Purnell. Both agree the price is friendly to divers' wallets. Rates are \$240 per day for 2007 trips. Web site: [www.komodoalordive.com](http://www.komodoalordive.com)

**Odyssea Divers.** The *Odyssea I*, a new monohull motor cruiser with eight ensuite cabins and a speed of 13 knots, started trips in April 2006. Reader Mel McCombie (New Haven, CT) went last February and says it's still getting some kinks out. "Several divemasters were new to liveboards and somewhat cavalier about dive safety, the dive deck is crowded and some of the food was bland. However, the cabins were the biggest and most comfortable I've seen, and the *Odyssea I* is easily the most uncrowded liveboard

I've ever experienced." Trips go from December through April; rates are \$1,700 for seven days and \$2,950 for 11 days. Web site: [www.odysseadivers.com](http://www.odysseadivers.com)

**The Seven Seas.** The upscale schooner takes 16 divers in eight ensuite staterooms. Trips are September through March and include kayaking, birdwatching, jungle hikes, and fishing. Rates are \$331 per day for a week-long trip, and \$310 for 8- to 14-day trips. Web site: [www.thesevenseas.net](http://www.thesevenseas.net)

**MV Pindito.** The 16-passenger wooden yacht was refitted and refurbished in 2006. Nitrox fills are free. Two itineraries are offered November through April – the "Equator" visits northern islands, while "Misool" goes south. Rates are \$3,520 for a 12-day trip. Web site: [www.pindito.com](http://www.pindito.com)

**KLM Shakti.** The least expensive of the bunch, this 12-person boat is the only one permanently based in the region, running April through December. However, it caters mostly to Europeans and we have not yet received any reader feedback about it. Rates are approximately \$2,650 for a 12-day trip. Web site: [www.songlinecruises.com/shakti.php](http://www.songlinecruises.com/shakti.php)

For more information about Raja Ampat liveboards and resorts, contact any dive travel agency listed in the "Scuba Travel Agency" directory in *Undercurrent's* annual *Chapbook*.

dulled the spectacular colors. A couple of storms put the wooden *Ondina* to the test, finding openings to drip into buckets set in hallways and cabins. Water temperatures hovered in the low 80s but dipped to 78 degrees on a few occasions. Doing five dives a day, I got pretty chilled even though I was wearing a 5-mm suit with a hood. Many fellow divers, who initially laughed at my suit, were quiet toward trip's end.

I looked forward to every meal, all feasts. For breakfast, there was the obligatory French toast, pancakes and fried eggs. For the "Spanish" breakfast, I was encouraged to smear raw garlic on my toast to devour with a spicy omelette. Other breakfasts included soups, startling at first but ultimately tasty and compatible with the other morning dishes. Lunches were either chicken or fish with a variety of ingredients and flavors. Dinners were usually silent as everyone wanted to savor the meal. Shrimp, fishes and chicken were spiced Indonesian style. Loads of fresh vegetables accompanied every meal, followed by platters of papaya, melon and local fruits. Post-dive afternoon snacks were blended juice drinks and cookies, and a fruit basket was kept full all day.

During the rain showers, I watched a Hollywood DVD in the salon or edited photos on my laptop. Sunsets, when visible, were breathtaking. There was an easy camaraderie among the divers, with conversation circles on deck and in the salon. We never sat in the same order twice for meals. As night fell, fellow diver Hugh, a Discovery Channel documentary maker, usually hooked up his big video rig to the TV monitor. When his videos weren't playing, Deb's were. I sat on the deck with fellow divers and swapped travel stories while some of the crew strummed their ukuleles and guitars.

A few night dives from jetties, averaging one to three feet in depth, turned up their share of bizarre critters, but I don't like digging through tires and cloudy bottles to find the otherworldly denizens. The last night dive, far from the *Ondina*, involved a long, cold, spray-drenched motorboat ride. I became so cold that



I surfaced early, only to sit on the boat for 30 minutes until we headed back.

Despite the rain, clouds and cool waters, Raja Ampat on good days offered dives more spectacular than any I've done. At Sardine Reef, its name derived from the abundance of fish packed together as tight as sardines, glittering balls of silversides blew like snowstorms. In one area with hard-driving current, a battalion of bumpheads stoically faced the oncoming water, barely moving. I fired off a bunch of photos at point-blank range. And always there was the parade of reef fish - the blazing beauty of coral trout, entire reference book chapters of butterfly and angel fish, friendly troops of Moorish idols, surgeon fish and blue-masked, regal, emperor and saddled angelfish.

Near trip's end, I took the hour-long tour of some islands in the motorboat. Some were long and hilly, densely thatched with palms and jungle, others were small rock islands shaped like the Grand Tetons. We circled tiny lagoons framed by majestic walls, and raced through head-ducking arches. Finally we circled the Ondina, in full sail for the first time of the trip. One of the crew scuttled up a mast several hundred feet above the deck. He worked his way across the rigging and stood atop the mainmast, arms out and hooting. It was a fitting final photo-op.

-- P.J.M.



**Diver's Compass:** Deb Fugitt and Tony Matheis lead two 11-day trips a year, departing from and returning to Sorong, Indonesia . . . Next dates are November 8 - 19 and November 22 - December 3 . . . Rates are \$3,345; single cabins cost an additional \$100 per night . . . Extra fees include a \$150 fuel surcharge and a \$35 tourist and diving permit . . . Nitrox is free on November trips . . . Fugitt will help with flights . . . I flew to Seoul followed by Singapore, then on Silk Airways to Manado and finally a "local" carrier to Sorong; immigration and customs were swift and unstressful . . . luggage overage charges can be Draconian on the domestic carriers but Fugitt negotiates a lump sum ranging from \$30 to \$70, payable only in Indonesian rupiah . . . Weather conditions are hot, humid days and slightly cool nights; November is supposedly best for smooth surface conditions, good visibility and minimal rain . . . Even in heavily Muslim areas, I found Indonesians to be warm, friendly and welcoming to Americans. Deb Fugitt's Web site: [www.cityseahorse.com/rajaampat](http://www.cityseahorse.com/rajaampat)

---

---

## When You Decide To Go It Alone

### *trip tips for divers traveling solo*

I remember my worst trip as a single diver. I was sleeping in a cottage on a Little Cayman beach, dreaming of Caribbean reefs, when I was awakened by the muffled voices of intruders attempting to open my door. I didn't have a room telephone and if I screamed, I wasn't within hearing range of other guests. I jumped out of bed and grabbed my dive knife. Huddling behind the door, I yelled in my most ferocious voice, "Get the f-- outta here." The rest of the night was quiet, but I lay awake for most of it.

In the morning, I told the proprietor what had happened. Apologetically, she said, "It was probably two of my employees looking for a love nest. I'll give you a cottage with a lock." You would have thought she'd routinely give a single female

diver that measure of security, but I announced I was checking out. At a hotel in San Jose, Costa Rica, a man followed me to my room to invite me for a drink. I thought these events would stop happening once I boarded the now-defunct liveaboard *Isla Mia*. My mistake. Asleep in my bunk, I was awakened by a man giving me a grope. My yell was so loud, he rushed off immediately. According to the captain, he was a drunken crew member.

Times have changed. Solo travel is a growing trend - nearly one-quarter of American travelers have vacationed by themselves. And many divers, myself included, have learned how to protect themselves while enjoying dive trips to the fullest. Traveling alone offers many benefits - your schedule is your

## Younger, Newer and Female Divers Show More DCI Symptoms

Neurological problems are common in divers suffering decompression illness, but researchers from the Ohio State University Medical Center decided to look at the full range of physical effects. In a presentation for the Undersea and Hyperbaric Medical Society, they presented their review of 200 recreational divers treated for DCI at a hyperbaric chamber in Cozumel, the largest study of its kind to date.

The researchers found that 88 percent of divers had at least one severe neurological symptom. Two-thirds of them had some numbness or tingling in their bodies, and half of the divers also felt a more painful “pins and needles” sensation. Other common symptoms were loss of coordination, motor weakness, dizziness, nausea, headache, blurry vision and vertigo.

Most interesting was that divers with Type II DCI, showing neurological symptoms, compared to those with

Type I and no symptoms, were typically younger and less experienced divers. “The affected divers averaged 39 years old compared to the median age of 46, and they also averaged a total of 80 dives compared to a median of 289,” says Herbert Newton, professor of neurology at Ohio State University Medical Center and a physician at its hyperbaric medicine unit. “We don’t know exactly why that is, but we’re thinking less experienced divers are more likely to injure themselves more seriously and get hit harder.”

DCI also differed by gender. Female divers were more likely to feel painful skin symptoms; 41 percent had some skin-related symptom compared to 3 percent of men. The affected women were also less experienced, averaging 76 dives to 143 dives for the affected men. Newton says there is a gender difference but it still is unexplained. “We don’t think this is freak data though because 200 divers is a pretty large group to be tested.”

own, you can focus time and money doing what *you* want to do, and you’re more likely to meet other divers and locals.

But solo traveling requires more patience and organization. Couples can share travel tasks that create more of a burden for a lone traveler. You won’t have the luxury of combining and sharing personal items like toothpaste or Advil with a partner, so you’ll need to make a list and check it twice. You may have to pay overweight baggage fees because you won’t have anyone to distribute heavy gear with. Some travel costs will be increased because you won’t have anyone to split the cab fare or post-dive bottle of wine with. Because all responsibilities are yours alone, you’ll need to be especially mindful of all your gear and to-do tasks.

### ***Sleeping Arrangements***

Don’t deny yourself the amenities of a nice dive resort or liveaboard, just don’t pick one catering to couples, families or big groups. Before I book, I inquire about the divers who’ll be on the trip. Will they be honeymooning couples? A big dive group reunion? Japanese divers who speak no English? I once joined a group on the recommendation of Bilikiki in the Solomon Islands. They knew the group and assured me they were friendly and welcoming. Despite our being from Pac 10 football rival schools, we got along famously.

*Undercurrent* reader Harry O’Neil (Alexandria, VA) has not encountered any serious roommate problems, but “I have talked with other single divers who have had major roommate problems: slobs and snorers.” With the exception of my husband, a workaholic CPA who prefers golf over diving, I prefer not to share a room because I’ve had bad roommates foisted on me on past liveaboard trips. I’ll never forget the

woman who left everything where she dropped it, including her dirty underwear. Then there was the depressed roommate who I had to help in and out of her bunk and pick up from the shower floor. She never made it into the ocean.

Most dive lodgings price packages and room prices on two people sharing. When it’s just you, you may be required to pay a single supplement fee, up to a few hundred dollars more. If you’re diving off-season (late January along with April, May, September and early December), ask to have that fee reduced or waived. There’s no harm in asking, says Kim Nisson of Poseidon Venture Tours, a dive travel agency in Newport Beach, CA. “I have a good client going solo to Papua New Guinea, so I asked the resort to waive the single supplement. It did, because I am also a good customer so they can’t complain. If you’re staying a week or longer, there’s less resistance to waive or reduce that fee.”

More dive resorts are accommodating single divers. Richard Mitsoda of Miami-based dive travel agency Maduro Dive Fanta-Seas says some resorts have “singles weeks” with special rates for solo divers, and others sell “twin share” rooms. “They’ll sell you one-half the room, then add another person so you don’t have to pay a single supplement. If there’s no one else, you luck out and still avoid the single supplement.” Dive resorts with single-diver-friendly policies include Habitat Curacao, Captain Don’s Habitat in Bonaire, CoCoView Resort in Roatan and Wakatobi Dive Resort in Sulawesi, Indonesia.

*Undercurrent* reader Eldon Okazaki (Sunnyvale, CA) says Papa Hogs in Cozumel recently waived its single supplement. “A \$499 package includes five two-tank days and seven nights in Unit #2 with a large bed, private shower, air conditioning, TV and breakfast for seven days.”

Keith Connes (Goleta, CA), who refuses to share accommodations with strangers, had a good experience at Anthony's Key Resort in Roatan. "Their reservations agent told me I could have a room for half the double-occupancy rate if they didn't fill up during my stay, otherwise I'd have to pay extra. They did not fill up."

Liveboards are usually considerate when pairing up divers. Peter Hughes and the Aggressor Fleet let single divers book at the double occupancy rate. If they don't pair them with someone of the same sex, the diver still only pays for his half. If you want your own room, Peter Hughes charges 65 percent of the total cabin price. Aggressor charges 75 percent. I can often get my own room when traveling during low season, or booking at the last minute. However, single divers are still lower on the totem pole because lodgings view one couple worth far more than one person. A week before a trip with Explorer Ventures, an agent offered me a 50 percent discount if I would move into a below-deck quad without a bathroom so she could sell my room to a late-booking couple. When I declined, she slapped me with a hefty single supplement.

*Undercurrent* reader Melanie Shain (San Francisco, CA) was given a male roommate on the *Golden Dawn* in Papua New Guinea. "I was promised, even though I did not ask, that if I was the only single woman on the boat I wouldn't have to share a cabin. Instead, I had to share with some weird banker from Hong Kong." Shain didn't ask for a refund or discount because, "As a woman traveling solo on a liveboard for 10 days, I'm afraid I'll be viewed as a bitch if I start complaining." The boat didn't offer her either. Let the liveboard know your roommate requirements, especially if you prefer one of the same sex.

Some solo divers find dining alone unappealing. You can use mealtime to read or plan your next dive. Or, you can do like Keith Connes and sit in the open, make eye contact and engage conversation. "While sitting alone in the dining room, I was invited to join a table of couples who hadn't known each other previously. We all bonded and later exchanged e-mails and photos."

Eat in informal places more conducive to mingling, like cafés or pubs. Have your meal at the bar where locals and other solos usually congregate; side-by-side seating is easier for starting conversations. *Undercurrent* reader Janice E. Smith selects land-based resorts located near nightlife. "I hang out in the bar on the first day to observe different groups and determine who seems like fun. The following day, I plot a strategy to meet them. The next day, I try to get myself adopted." She avoids all-inclusive resorts because many guests are non-divers, couples-oriented or are in large groups. Another option is to pick smaller lodgings, like a bed-and-breakfast, guesthouse or hostel that offer common spaces.

### **Your New Buddy**

If you prefer to be on your own, dive time is the one time you want to make a connection. A dive buddy is not just a dive

## **So How Many Divers Are There, Really?**

Some readers had comments about the question we raised in the May and June issues. Regarding our estimate of 1.2 million active divers in North America, Craig Harper (Collierville, TN) agrees we're in the ballpark. He works for market research firm Simmons, which published a study last fall about Americans' leisure activities. Adults who said they dive or snorkel make up five percent of the population, or five million people. Those who dive or snorkel "every chance they get" total 1.8 million people. "There's a huge difference in snorkeling once a year on vacation and serious divers making multiple trips, but we think this is a reliable indicator of market size given the questions we asked respondents," says Harper.

Elaine Hopkins (Bratenahl, OH) took issue with the reasons given for scuba's flatlining growth rate, saying it's not just about younger people going for extreme sports. "Younger people have families, demanding careers and barely enough time to manage both. Diving requires time to learn the skills needed to master it. Dive trips take time and money. And don't forget the cost of obtaining and maintaining equipment. It's an expensive passion."

Mike Boom (Oakland, CA) pointed out a mathematical error we made when calculating decompression illness cases in Canada's Abacus project. "You came up with 0.00002 percent for three deaths out of 146,291 air fills. Because it's a percentage, you then needed to multiply by 100 to get 0.002 percent. Too bad, because the other figure gave me more confidence to dive."

Another error concerns the quotes from NAUI vice-president Jed Livingston. He cited a National Sports Association survey from 2001 calculating two fatalities per 100 divers. That should have been the National Sporting Goods Association. However, when we called to check on the two fatalities per 100 Livingston mentioned, the NSGA told us it never has published information about fatality rates. That just underlines the fact that when it comes to knowing the number of divers out there, dive industry experts are just as clueless as anyone else.

companion but also someone to help you out in a tricky situation, so pick yours wisely.

On a Peter Hughes boat in the Turks and Caicos, I had a memorable dive with an unknown buddy. He tugged my fin so I could turn to see a humpback whale approaching us. We hugged the wall, not knowing what to anticipate. The whale breached, then returned to check us out, and we timidly swam toward him. Without a ripple, he swam away. Unfortunately, my buddy then felt entitled to drink beer at lunch. When he

## Thumbs Down: Sherwood Scuba

Not only does Sherwood Scuba make a defective BC, it does a poor job of giving out its contact info to customers, says *Undercurrent* reader Thomas Cranmer (Great Falls, VA).

Cranmer went to the Web site Scuba.com and, on its recommendation, bought a Sherwood Magnum 2. On his fourth dive with it, the left rear integrated weight pouch broke while he was getting back on the boat. "My weight in the mesh pouch was four pounds, but the Sherwood brochure says a diver can use up to a five-pound weight," says Cranmer. "If the weight had dropped out while diving, I would have ascended without knowing what happened, because the rear weights are not accessible while diving."

He e-mailed Sherwood but got no response after twice filling out its Web site's "Contact Us" form. There was no physical address listed. He sent Sherwood a certified letter to the Irvine, California, address listed on its brochures, but the post office returned it with a "moved" notation and had no forwarding address.

Cranmer also had a hard time getting a response from Scuba.com, which still features the Magnum 2 BC on its site. Finally, a repairman there mentioned that Sherwood Scuba was now part of Cramer Decker Industries, a conglomerate that also sells non-diving items like industrial gas equipment. Cranmer sent certified letters to Cramer Decker's president, but it wasn't until he alerted PADI and the U.S. Product

Safety Commission that he finally received a reply, expressing concern and asking for his Sherwood BC's serial number.



Kent Roorda (Denver, CO) also had trouble. When he noticed a problem with the hose of his Wisdom dive computer, he sent an inquiry letter to Sherwood. "I got zero response," he says. "I'm very disappointed that Sherwood would ignore a purchaser's attempt to gain more information about a potential defect."

After losing one of our voice mails, Sherwood got back to us about the matter. Customer service manager Kelly Grimes says Sherwood doesn't place an address or phone number on its Web site because it wants customers' main relationship to be with an authorized dealer. "We're not trying to avoid anyone, but we cannot do any repairs, returns or sales for our end customers."

Still, most manufacturers in other industries list some type of contact information on their Web sites to help customers. Once upon a time an industry leader, Sherwood seems nearly invisible now. Why, we don't know, but they certainly aren't user friendly. We're all for supporting local dive shops, but there's no need for scuba gear makers to work in stealth mode. If you need to contact Sherwood, call (800) 347-9766, or e-mail [scuba@cramerdecker.com](mailto:scuba@cramerdecker.com). But there is no guarantee you'll get a response.

was given the "drinking, no diving" policy, he canceled payment on his credit card and Peter Hughes banned him forever.

Nothing ruins a dive trip like a buddy from hell, says *Undercurrent* reader Edie Sumney (Carbondale, IL), especially if dive operators require that you ascend together. "That happened to me when I was assigned a buddy who was an inexperienced air hog. He consumed his air in 30 minutes on a wreck and had to ascend, leaving me 30 minutes short on my profile."

During the checkout dive, I am as busy as the divemasters, looking for the best diver. I then tell my choice that he or she wants to be my buddy. When they look at my silvery hair, I say, "Trust me." If you don't find one you like, ask to be buddied with a dive guide. Whether you choose your buddy or not, get to know him before hitting the water. Reaffirm plans, including the goal of the dive, depth, time and air limits. Review hand signals and what to do in an emergency.

During looser group diving or solo diving when I have been put on a dinghy with the less experienced divers, I tell the divemaster, "I'm not going to have a good time if you don't move me to the other boat." It's not the divers as much as the better sites the more advanced divers get to experience.

My request has always been granted, even when my addition to the other boat creates an uneven number. If you're a solo diver, ask two other divers to make sure you're back onboard before the boat departs. It's a good backup to the crew's diver check-off list.

### Join A Party

Adventure companies have long offered group trips for solo travelers. This option is now available for divers through SingleDivers.com ([www.singledivers.com](http://www.singledivers.com)). The three-year-old organization claiming 3,600 members was founded to avoid single supplements and find appropriate roommates and dive buddies for dive trips worldwide. "We're not a dating site and our hookups focus on tanks, but 90 percent of our members are single and we've had some relationships bud on our trips," says founder Kamala Shadduck. Upcoming trips are Holbox in August, the Philippines in September and Baja California in October. Another Web site to check out is DiveBuddy.com ([www.divebuddy.com](http://www.divebuddy.com)) to pair up with a local dive buddy.

You can also meet travelers through a local dive shop or dive club. It's a good way to do a dive trip with people you know in advance while also minimizing the financial costs of traveling solo.



Diving alone requires more effort in getting to your destination because there is no group leader to make all the arrangements. It helps to make friends with liveboard operators and their agent reps to help you plan your next trip. Marc Bernardi of Aquatic Encounters knew I had been unsuccessfully searching for whale sharks. After sighting them in the Galapagos, he called me. I was on the next flight out and finally saw two of them.

### ***Meet the Locals***

A good perk of solo travel is you are more likely to strike up conversations with anyone and, if you're visiting a non-English-speaking country, work on your language skills. Locals are more likely to come to you because one person isn't as intimidating as a group.

Reader Toni Rose (Rowlett, TX) had broken up with her dive buddy and partner but still decided to do a Fiji dive trip. "I made friends with a barmaid whose uncle drove a cab, so

I hired him for two days' sightseeing," she says. "Those two knew everyone, and they took me to their villages to meet their family. They were thrilled I took an interest in their culture and lamented tourists who never left the resorts."

But without someone around to watch your back, you're more vulnerable to thieves. While being friendly, don't share too much information and always arrange to meet in public places. Don't walk alone through shady-looking places after dark, pay a little extra for safety and take a cab. Give someone at home your itinerary and contact information.

Ultimately, solo travel is a luxury, not a burden. If you start feeling lonely, ask yourself if you'd rather be at home alone wishing you were diving, or on a great dive trip with the best travel partner around – yourself.

*Mary L. Peachin is a Tucson-based adventure travel writer who is author of The Complete Idiot's Guide to Sharks and is currently writing Scuba Caribbean, scheduled for publication in late 2008.*

---

---

## **Irrational Fear of Flashing Computers**

### ***why your only fear is fear itself***

You're a serious diver. You read *Undercurrent* and know how to manage your dives with your computer, so this article really isn't for you.

But how often have you witnessed this scene? A diver has been down for 25 minutes exploring a reef, varying from about 90 feet deep to 60 feet. He checks his remaining air before beginning ascent, about 1000 psi. He looks at his dive computer and suddenly his entire body language changes. He stiffens, his kick becomes disjointed and he initiates an accelerated, urgent escape to the surface. What happened? As with some divers, he has just experienced the ultimate nightmare: His computer went into decompression. Oh my God!

***It's not a big deal if your computer puts you in decompression mode...really.***

It happens every day on liveboards and day boats. Divers who have managed to navigate around a wreck or explore a drop-off wall face, or cruise around a sprawling coral forest to take photos suddenly react as though their doctor had told them to come in for "more tests." At that point, the only thing that matters to them is getting up to shallow water as quickly as possible. That "flight reaction" probably is the worst possible behavior because it can trigger off-the-scale ascent rates as well as a failure to trim buoyancy. Both lapses

can have them arriving in 10 feet of water and blowing right past a safety stop because they forgot to vent their BC.

We've now escalated a benign situation into a potentially dangerous one, simply because somewhere along the line some divers have mistakenly learned to avoid decompression at all costs. Well, for folks who become apoplectic when their computer readout slides into the next color, here's the reality -- all dives are decompression dives. Get used to it.

Remember, even with dive tables (does anyone still use these throwbacks to the 1970s?), the ascent and descent rates are part of the algorithm model. Essentially, even while remaining within "no stop" parameters, a diver must observe the prescribed ascent rate because this will provide the off-gassing release rate within safe limits. Dive computers perform all the functions you once had to do with the tables, a pencil and paper, and they do it in real time. They analyze time at depth; ascent and descent rates; surface intervals between dives; time before flying, etc. Some also sample water temperature and breathing rate as a predictor of workload, and adjust the no-deco time accordingly. The real-time monitoring by dive computers has greatly increased diver safety by eliminating human error in time-keeping, depth recording and ascent rates.

Decompression mode is not a bad thing. Not doing required decompression is. It can ruin your day. Unfortunately, many divers have been indoctrinated to believe that decompression is something to be avoided and



## Regulators: Two Recalls and NOAA's New Favorite

There have been a couple of regulator recalls in recent months. Apeks found a potential problem in its yoke clamp-type regulators with serial numbers 7010001 to 7053528. The threads weren't cut cleanly, so there is a possibility for the screw to fall out. You can return the regulator or just the yoke clamp screw to your local Apeks dealer for inspection. Get more information at [www.aqualung.com](http://www.aqualung.com), or call (877) 253-3483.

Check your regulator's first stage if you recently had the swivel replaced. Innovative Scuba Concepts (ISC) has recalled 170 regulator swivels it bought in Taiwan and sold to dive shops between January 2006 and March 2007. The HO110 swivels could separate while underwater and cut off the air supply. It happened to one diver, who had to turn to his buddy for aid. There's no serial number, date or production code listed, so look for the marking "HO110" on your swivel and take the regulator back to the dive shop that fitted it for you. If it was sold by ISC, you'll receive a cash refund. For more details, call ISC at (800) 472-2740.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced its new regulator pick. In the June issue of *Undercurrent*, we wrote about NOAA's new rules and regulations for government divers in response to the death of

two Coast Guard divers in Alaska last summer. One major change was giving the boot to all regulators Coast Guard divers had previously used for cold-water diving. After testing of multiple regulators, NOAA found Oceanic's Delta IV to be the most reliable.

"It consistently came up first for meeting all our criteria, and it won't freeze up in cold water," says Lieutenant Eric Johnson of the NOAA Diving Program. The Delta IV is an environmentally sealed diaphragm regulator and its first stage has Oceanic's Dry Valve Technology, designed to stop moisture and contaminants from entering and to prevent corrosion of internal components. NOAA bought 350 of the regulators and now requires its 500 divers to use that model when diving in water temperatures of 50 degrees or less. Johnson says the Navy's experimental dive unit is using them, too. The Delta IV is also commercially available for sport divers; Oceanic's suggested price is \$510.

Cold-water divers should definitely invest in a good regulator that won't freeze up underwater. Two people died last April because of that problem. Jason Balsbough and Daniel Frendenberg, both age 21, and Sherry Eads, 43, went diving in a quarry in Gilboa, Ohio, where the water temperature was 38 degrees. Another diver called 911 to report the divers were down. Balsbough had regulator problems but was able to surface by himself. Frendenberg and Eads were too deep and their regulators were too iced for them to breathe.

roughly equivalent to skydiving without a parachute. That's simply not so. You are at no greater risk during decompression dives than you are during no-decompression dives. The key is that you complete your required decompression. Of course, you can't do a seven-minute deco stop if you don't have enough gas to breathe. However, assuming you have responsibly monitored your tank pressure, it's not a big deal if your computer puts you in, or near, decompression...really.

In most circumstances, a dive computer will clear itself of decompression obligations during your ascent. If you depart the bottom at 80 feet or so and observe the computer's ascent rate (typically 30 to 60 feet per minute), you will be pleasantly surprised to see the deco stop clear as you approach the 30-foot level. Some computer models display decompression status by a reverse countdown showing minutes remaining within no-deco limits. Others use a green/yellow/red scale to warn of status, and they may flash. No matter what display is incorporated, all computers are trying to tell you the same thing: when you may safely surface.

Too many divers I've observed don't realize this. They're in "yellow" at 80 feet and their only option is to head for the light, jeopardizing themselves and those of us who decide to help. For example, here's a scene reported

by *Undercurrent* reader Bud Foster (Duluth, MN), who was diving in the Turks and Caicos Islands with Dive Provo:

"During the first dive, a mother-and-daughter pair stayed a little low and long on the dive, and were not on Nitrox like the rest of us. By the second dive at Black Coral Forest, the mother's computer alarm went off. She panicked and started swimming for the surface at full speed. I turned to catch her and assist (and the back of my leg rubbed up against fire coral). I got to her and offered air. She stopped and showed me that her computer was saying she was in Deco. I calmed her down and signaled for her to wait until the dive guide got to her. I showed her that her computer stated she still had 1,000 pounds of air, plus I had a buddy air bottle, and that calmed her down. Her computer was saying 24 minutes deco at 20 feet. Seconds later, the dive guide was there and sent the other guide up (after his three minute safety stop) to get another bottle with a regulator. The fire coral that had rubbed my calf felt like a match's flame being held against my leg. I can see why people say it can make a grown man cry. I had to compose myself and keep from wanting to bolt to the surface. It seemed like the longest safety stop I had ever taken and my leg was killing me. When I got on the boat, the captain got me some solution to ease the pain, which it did, slightly."

More accident scenarios are manifested by divers who freak out and bolt for the surface. As in the case Foster described, it will only make your computer think you've lost your mind, and most models will revert to requiring more deco time since you violated the ascent rate - - a key factor in your overall out-gassing and rate of release. In fact, many divers will discover that they were well within no-deco limits before doing a faster ascent. They surface with a deco obligation triggered solely by their fast ascent rate.

Making a decompression stop is simple. Don't rise above the indicated depth, establish neutral buoyancy to maintain the depth of the stop, and simply breathe normally until the time clears. Of course, a deco bar is helpful, and you can use the vessel's anchor line, especially if there's a current. In fact, that 10-to-15-foot safety stop you make is just a form of decompression stop. And you should, even if your computer clears you to surface. There's no such thing as too much decompression within the last 20 feet. Hang out as long as you want. The key safety issue is completing decompression if required. It's not going to put you at greater risk.

In a perfect world, divers who are untrained in decompression techniques ought to avoid doing dive profiles that require planned decompression. But if you inadvertently go into deco, slow down and take your time. Do the slow ascent and do your stop. That's far better than racing through the last minutes of your dive to fly to the surface to stop your computer from going into deco. It's not going to happen.

Also, your computer doesn't care if you go into deco. It's programmed to handle that very efficiently. So chill. Take the long way home, as Norah Jones sings in the song. You'll be just fine. Spend a little more time on your next surface interval if you like. Don't fret about deco, just be responsible in completing whatever is indicated and get on with enjoying the scenery.

PS: I'll bet you know someone this article will benefit. Pass it on. You might save a life.

*Bret Gilliam is a 36-year veteran of the professional diving industry with more than 17,000 logged dives. He was the founder of the TDI and SDI training agencies and CEO of diving computer manufacturer UWATEC.*

## Diving Fantasy Versus Reality

While flipping through an issue of *Men's Style Australia*, writer Jo-Anne Klocke came across an ad for dive equipment showing a young, virile guy with a six-pack of abs wearing full dive gear while gallantly protecting a young, partially-clad blonde. "I'm wondering if the advertising gurus who think up these ads are divers because every time I go diving, I seem to only spy older, dolphin-shaped divers (just like me), not those hunky, spunky divers portrayed in the magazines. Or is it because I'm going to the wrong dive sites and clubs?"

However, she did give kudos to an ad in *Dive Log Australasia*, the magazine that publishes her column "Scuba Diving and the Single Female." It was from another dive equipment supplier showing its female "Diver of the Month." But it was a real diver in all her salt-encrusted glory. "Yes, she was a young, blonde female but she is a genuine, realistically portrayed diver. I hope that others in the dive industry follow that example."

But the reality bite is understanding that we need fantasy in our lives. It drives us to desire things, to spend money. If it were portrayed 'as is,' would we want to own it? Klocke admits that while perusing dive magazines and Web sites to pick out a new dry suit, she selected one because of how way the model looked wearing it. "The dry suit manufacturers make the suits models wear skintight-like wetsuits, but the one you receive is made baggy to fit the thermals underneath, so it fits more like a second skin for the Michelin man. Would I have bought this model of dry suit if they had portrayed it realistically? The answer: 'No.'"

We all need fantasies, otherwise life would be depressing. But let's remember what Keats wrote: "Truth is beauty, beauty is truth." It's hard to measure up to the media's fantasy of the ideal

diver with the hot, 20-something body, but, as Klocke writes, "once we see past the outside wrapping, we discover true beauty."

*From the article "Reality Bites" by Jo-Anne Klocke, published in the March 2007 issue of Dive Log Australasia.*



**Look what the marketing of fins has come to**

# Flotsam and Jetsam

**Our Latest Book Pick.** The *2007 Diving Almanac and Yearbook* by Jeffrey Gallant is perhaps the best single reference book ever published for divers. This 470-page paperback provides capsule glimpses of virtually every diving topic, including diving medicine, diving history and records, navigation, bios of notables, oceanography, absurd stories, even military diving. Plus, plenty of hard data about population, water temps, and vaccinations needed for all countries. Essential for any serious diver's library. \$18.95, plus \$5 shipping and handling for US and Canada, \$7 for other countries. Order at [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org).

**Diver Survives Stingray Attack.** Joe McKnight will no longer laugh at any jokes about Steve Irwin's death. That's because he survived his own encounter with a stingray. While diving for crayfish in New Zealand's Okiwi Bay, McKnight, 35, swam over a crevice and suddenly felt a stab on his leg. He looked down to see a three-foot-wide stingray attached to it. The stingray pulled away after five seconds, and there was a squirt of blood. McKnight described the pain as "having a dead leg with a bee sting on top

of it." He thinks he provoked the sting by accidentally cornering the stingray. McKnight was released from the hospital within two hours with three stitches and a hole in his wetsuit as a souvenir.

**New Options For Frequent Fliers.** *Undercurrent* reader Jose Kirchner (Carmichael, CA) sent us a note that Japan Airlines has joined the oneworld airline alliance (including American Airlines, British Airways, Cathay Pacific and Qantas). Japan Air adds 47 new airports to the oneworld map, meaning divers can use their AAdvantage miles to some new Asia-Pacific destinations.

**Fainting and Free Diving.** A study in the *International Journal of Sports Medicine* says competitive free divers commonly faint or show other signs of poor oxygen circulation. In major free diving events held between 1998 and 2004, about 10 percent of competitors were disqualified due to severe signs of brain hypoxia, such as confusion, spasms and difficulty standing. The study's author, Dr. Peter Lindholm of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, said free diving is risky compared with tennis or chess but not especially dangerous within the realm of extreme sports.

*Undercurrent* is the consumer newsletter for sport divers that reviews scuba destinations and equipment. We accept no advertising. Subscriptions in the U.S. and Canada are \$99 a year (addresses in Mexico, add \$20; all other foreign addresses, add \$35).

*Undercurrent* (ISSN 1095-1555, USPS 001-198) is published monthly by Undercurrent, 3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102, Sausalito, CA 94965, with the November/December issue being the annual book-sized *Travelin' Diver's Chapbook*. Periodicals rates paid at Sausalito, CA, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to 3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102 Sausalito, CA 94965

#### Letters to the Editor/ Submissions

**Undercurrent**  
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102  
Sausalito, CA 94965  
Fax 415-289-0137  
[undercurrenteditor@undercurrent.org](mailto:undercurrenteditor@undercurrent.org)

#### Subscriptions/Address Changes

To subscribe, renew, change address, or order back issues, call 800-326-1896 or 415-289-0501, Mon.-Fri., 9-5 Pacific Time  
E-mail: [pete@undercurrent.org](mailto:pete@undercurrent.org) or write:

**Undercurrent**  
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102  
Sausalito, CA 94965

**Editorial Office**  
Ben Davison, Publisher and Editor

E-mail:  
[BenDavison@undercurrent.org](mailto:BenDavison@undercurrent.org)

[www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)

Printed on recycled paper 

**undercurrent**

July 2007 Vol. 22, No. 7

**undercurrent**

**The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers**  
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102  
Sausalito, CA 94965

Periodicals  
Postage PAID  
Sausalito, CA  
and Additional  
Mailing Offices