

undercurrent®

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THE PRIVATE, EXCLUSIVE GUIDE FOR SERIOUS DIVERS

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Travel Reports From Our Readers:

-- *Big Fish, Little Fish, No Fish*

Dear Reader:

Last July, we printed a reader's comment about Dive Dive Dive Ltd. in Nassau. Our reader said, "Crystal clear water. We saw James Bond wreck, no big deal. Great wall dive. Best dive shop in town, as I was told by other divers. Good dive boat." That's all we printed. Nothing more. Last week another reader wrote to complain about DDD and sent us their current brochure; right on the cover is headlined: "'Nassau's Best Dive Operation,' Undercurrent Magazine, July, 1988." How's that for testicularity! It looks like Dive Dive Dive, Ltd. is apparently unlimited in its desire to distort. Another diver wrote to subscribe, saying that DDD suggested that he read Undercurrent. So we're biting off the hand that feeds us. It's not the first time.

We're never going to proclaim anything is the "best" unless we have been there ourselves, anonymously, and compared. Hopefully we'll always refrain from absolutes (did I say always?). But, unless my recollection has failed me, I don't think we've ever labeled any operator as the best.

This issue we're devoting strictly to readers' comments. There's so much turf to cover in getting updated on diving and resorts, we must take that great leap forward. By the way, how helpful are readers' comments? Does this sort of issue make sense to you or should they be presented in conjunction with a full travel review? Drop me a note and let me know.

HAWAII: My view is that April through November is the best time to dive Hawaii (although you may miss the whales); water temperature increases from 73° to 80° in the summer and the winter storms won't keep you marooned in the bars. The Kona Coast on the Big Island of Hawaii still seems to offer the best diving, due mainly to personalized dive services whose leaders specialize in tracking down unique critters (the coral is bland and soft coral rare compared to the Caribbean, but the lava tubes make for unique terrain). Dive Makai continues to

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get uniformly high marks from our readers. Says Tom Dickens (Campbell, CA): "guides know where to find most of the local marine life; they make you feel like you're part of the family; good pairing of dive buddies according to skills; small groups with photographers split up to avoid competition for the same shots." Lee Jones (San Jose, CA) says: "They recommended an excellent condo, Hale Kona Kai, that was a lovely half-mile walk into downtown Kona, very reasonably priced. We were treated to a Spanish dancer; lionfish, multiple morays and nudibranchs, a 4-foot whitetip shark sleeping in a cave, a leaf fish, conger eels being held by divemasters, Miss Piggy the tame green sea turtle who gets fed squid and can be petted by divers, a trumpetfish that had just eaten a pebbled butterfly which I could see through the membrane of the trumpetfish's mouth." (PO Box 2955, Kailua-Kona, HI 96740; 1-808/329-2025) . . . Our readers also like Kona Coast Divers. Says Charles A. Spitz (West Long Beach, NJ), "I have dived with others in Kona and this is the best operation. Various dive sites offer depths from 40 to 125 feet with a variety of lava tubes, coral and fish. I travel 5000 miles because I thoroughly enjoy the climate, the diving, and the excellent restaurants." K.M. McNamara and M.P. Munger (Dayton, OH) were there in February: "Very well-run, prompt, efficient, and helpful -- but even more impressive is their concern for safety. The experiences were fantastic! The coral was very diverse, as were the marine animals (colorful fish, curious sea turtles, soft and gentle octopus)." (75-5614 Palani Rd., Kailua-Kona, HI 96740; 1-808/329-8802) Harold Kit Carson, a 69-year-old diver from Berkeley, says, "I've learned over the years that you can beach dive for \$10 a tank, which is as good as the \$60 dive boat without following novice rules. Pick up a copy of the Divers Guide to Hawaii, by Chuck Thorne and Lou Zitnik. Very well thought out with maps and a complete breakdown of each dive area."

Although Kauai diving doesn't seem to stack up with Kona, our readers like Bubbles Below. Writes L. Barton Alexander (Portland, OR): "Ken and Linda Bails run a very good operation, and are a lot of fun to dive with. They only take six divers at a time, and give an excellent tour. I rate them very high." (6251 Hauaala Rd., Kapaa, HI 96746; 1-808/822-3483).

When I first dived Maui fifteen years ago, there was only one boat a day visiting Molokini Crater. Now, two dozen or more moor there in the morning loaded down with divers and snorkelers. While Kona is a place for a dive vacation, Maui is more suited for a vacation with diving. One example: the hotels are a ways from the shops, requiring you to truck your gear by rental car to the boat each day. Mike Severns is liked by our readers as an "affable biologist-diver whose knowledge of marine life is limitless." Michael Moonitz (Kew Gardens, NY) says he runs a "6-pack operation who goes to the less frequented sites." (PO Box 627, Kihei, Maui, HI 96753; 1-808/879-6596) . . . Moonitz also says after diving with Central Pacific Divers several times in the past that they're not producing like they once did: "CPD is good for beginners; crew too helpful in switching tanks and regulators -- experienced divers do not like anyone setting up their gear; not enough surface interval, only 30-40 minutes max. In a hurry to get back to dock!" Most people find CPD thoroughly professional, but where they once had the only game in town, catering to top divers, they are granddaddy of all operations, providing quality service to

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Splash . . . Or Carry A Sausage

How do you attract attention if you drift away from the dive boat in open seas? Reader Libby Langstroth of Carmel, California reports an incident that took place on a diving trip to Indonesia.

"We were diving off the Komodo Islands from inflatables some distance from the mother ship. To our surprise, one of the inflatables returned to the ship with two Indonesian divers they picked up who were being swept out to sea in the strong current, lost to their own dive ship.

"One of our divers was Australian Valerie Taylor, who had seen a splashing in the distance and turned to study it, assuming perhaps a whale or some dolphins. She was able to make out two small black dots -- the heads of the divers. She would never have spotted them if they had not splashed water into the air to attract attention.

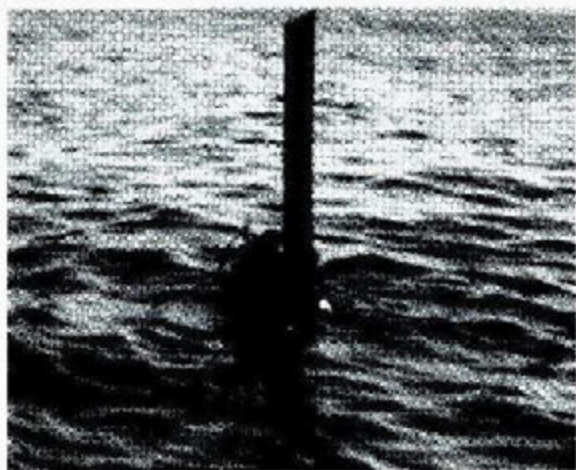
"If a diver throws water as high as possible into the air, almost anyone seeing it out of the corner of one's eye would turn to see what fish jumped. This technique undoubtedly saved two divers and could save others in the future."

Better yet, come prepared with an \$11 Safety Sausage, a bright red plastic tube that can be carried in a BC pocket and weighs about an ounce; it's about the size of a cigarette pack, but half as thick. Put it into action by inflating it with a regulator; when it goes from flaccid to firm it's about ten feet long and is visible to boats over the horizon and aircraft over head. It's available from Dr. John Knight, a longtime associate of the South Pacific Underwater Medical Society, who himself had reason to use his Sausage recently.

"The dive was off Mana Island in Fiji and there were strong currents flowing in different directions. Returning to the boat, my buddy and I started our ascent with the stern about twenty feet

above us. We got to within four or five feet of the surface and were caught by a very strong surface current which swept us away from the boat. The 'Jesus' line was only a short one, about ten feet, and I missed it by two feet. Realizing we could not hope to swim back to the boat, I inflated my Safety Sausage and relaxed. Within ten minutes all we could see of the boat, which had a flying bridge, was the whip aerial. We drifted about three quarters of a mile and had to wait until all the divers were back before the boat came to collect us. The people on the flying bridge could see the Safety Sausage at all times, although our heads were invisible."

The Sausage is \$11 US by credit card (send your Visa, AMEX, or MC number, expiration date of card, signature and date, along with your name and address) or \$16 by check (to pay the bank fee for conversion). Send to Dr. John Knight, Diving Security, 34 College St., Hawthorn, Victoria 3002, Australia. The price includes airmail postage.



The Safety Sausage

everyone. For example, Diana Short (El Cajon, CA) writes that CPD "seemed among the best. Our only complaint being that our dives were too closely monitored and the sites too popular. On Molokini, we saw as many other divers as fish." (1/808-661-8718) . . . Extended Horizons, writes Mark Schacht (Berkeley, CA), exhibits "professionalism with a commitment to preserving Hawaii's dive environment. We made 12 dives off the wild, steep cliffs of south Lanai and encountered rare beaked whales, porpoises and many green sea turtles. On the island's east coast, we dived the fantastic caverns and rich reefs which make diving here special. Another dive took us to the depths of the Lanai-Mau channel, locating a veritable forest of black coral at the 143-foot level in a deep trench." (P.O. Box 19785, Lahaina, HI; 1-808/667-0611) . . . M. Nice of San Jose says Mc Kenna Coast Charters runs a "6 Pac boat, with an excellent captain and divemaster. Dove on WW II tank -- recovered artifacts. Dove Kahoolawe Island, a Navy bombing range, open only few days each year." (808/874-1273)

Honolulu and Oahu: We hear few positive remarks from experienced traveling

speak for most Dipper owners who have been flooded out. "I trust the research and the tables it is based on. I am certain Orca will be able to correct the problems in time."

The Battery Door Again

Aside from the leakage problem, the comments issued by our readers are more minor annoyances than problems. The battery door, which serves as the on/off switch, is often difficult to manipulate. Josef D. Prall (Carrollton, TX) said that "the o-ring on the on/off switch gets hard to move after one or two dives post silencing, requiring teeth to turn." Wade Howard (Columbia, MD) said, "I did not turn the 'on' button all the way and it slipped to off in the middle of a dive." And Eric A. Wittenberg (Laguna Beach, CA) said, "The battery compartment flooded after I had pre-dive difficulty in manipulating the on/off switch on the second dive on a three-week trip to New Guinea. Good thing I carry backup gauges."

A number of other minor irritants were mentioned. "It fell out of the retaining holster in sixty feet of water," writes Charles Brandt, Lafayette, IN. "Under normal use," writes L. Barton Alexander (Portland, OR), "the display face cracked; it was not covered by the warranty, although it was within the warranty period." "Automatically goes into 'battery save' mode within one hour after power-on if not in water. Didn't realize this the first time and thought computer hadn't functioned," says Barry Tuder, of Boston. And a few users complained about the

Serious Skinny Dipping

To the Naturist Society, a Skinny Dipper is one of their 200 members who join regular tropical diving and snorkeling forays. You see, these folks charter boats and go diving sans suits and skins.

Last year they dived Belize on the liveboard *Pegasus*, whose captain, Maria Cook, doffed her swimsuit a mile out of Belize City and didn't retrieve it for the week at sea. They've gone for the good diving at the Prospect of Whitby clothes-optional resort on North Caicos, as well as at Bonaire, and Guadaloupe.

As Douglas Triggs, leader of the group writes: "We and the boat became part of the living sea, moving with the waves and surrendering to the wind. We lived our vacation with the delicious feeling of a life more on the edge, a welcome counterpoint to the normal humdrum of our daily existences."

If you want to be a buff diver, contact Triggs: Box 2455, Colorado Springs, CO 80901 (719/634-2836).

general unavailability of batteries; they are specially designed for the Dipper and are available only from Orca or from dive stores.

There are only one or two reports of apparent algorithm malfunction, and those might be attributable to the flooding problems. Of course no computer is a guarantee against the bends, and sure enough, five readers reported incidents using the Dipper. William E. McCullough, Jr. (Irmo, SC) says: "The first time is used the Skinny Dipper I was wreck diving. Both dives were with the limits set by the Skinny Dipper. The first dive was within the Navy tables, the second dive was slightly over. I did a five minute safety stop. I got bent the next day." James C. Brown, Newark, Delaware, says "I had a skin bends after doing a second decompression bounce dive following the first dive, back to back, no surface interval." And Mike Shindler says, "my fault, I wanted to take the computer to its limit."

Buy It Again?

Nineteen percent of the Dipper users don't know or would definitely not buy the Dipper again. That's the highest dissatisfaction rate among all the computers we surveyed, but it is a direct reflection of the leakage problem.

Divers who haven't had problems dote on their Dippers. They like the size, they like the price, and they trust Orca.

Says James M. Pryde, Fair Oaks, CA: "I use it like Jerry Falwell uses the bible! I trust it to tell me the truth. I am a Skinny Dipper Fundamentalist!"

Buying a New Dipper

There may be a few leakers left on the shelves of dive stores. Before you take a Dipper home, check for two things to guarantee that it's a solid model. According to Nordstrom the serial number should be greater than 13,800 and it should have a black door.

The Next Generation

This summer the next Orca computer, the Delphi, is expected to hit the market. Essentially a Skinny Dipper that attaches to the high pressure hose and can read air pressure, its introduction may mean that in the future the Skinny Dipper will be used mainly as a backup computer. Or even, as one reader said, "I carry the Skinny Dipper to lend to others when I want someone to dive with me beyond the Navy Tables."

"Consumers want a computer with batteries they themselves can replace."

While most new computers on the market are powered by long-life (2-5 years) batteries that can on-

didn't seal. They have changed glues and now also seal the units separately.

Third, to eliminate or minimize the battery door problems, Orca went to a quad ring, rather than an O-ring. This can be compressed at several points and allows for better dispersion of the silicon grease, creating a better seal.

"Even the redesigned battery door proved not to be the final solution."

Fourth, Orca redesigned the battery doors and, last September, sent the redesigned door (colored black to distinguish it from the original white doors) to all owners of record.

But even that redesigned battery door proved not to be the final solution. David Vaughn, a PADI instructor from Kingsport, Tennessee, writes, "I received a new black battery door and on/off switch. Previously, I had used the Skinny Dipper on more than 75 dives without incident. I used the new door at Orca's urging. Suddenly, with the o-ring properly lubed and properly installed my battery compartment flooded on five consecutive dives to a maximum of 68 feet. I am replacing my 'new' part with the 'old white door.'"

Nordstrom said they discovered a problem due to variances in the cooling of the plastic case or door after injection molding. There can still be tolerance variances of 1/1000 to 2/1000 of an inch, in some cases just enough to permit water to enter the chamber.

Nordstrom said that if a diver today returns a flooded Dipper, they replace the entire case as well as repair the mechanism. "This is something that we have to do. We're in business for the long run."

It seems remarkable that the Dipper has remained on the market and sold well with such a high rate of flooding and malfunction.

Has the Skinny Dipper remained popular because dive shops don't apprise the consumer of the return rate?

Is it because many people presume the problem is their fault; that they didn't seal the o-ring properly?

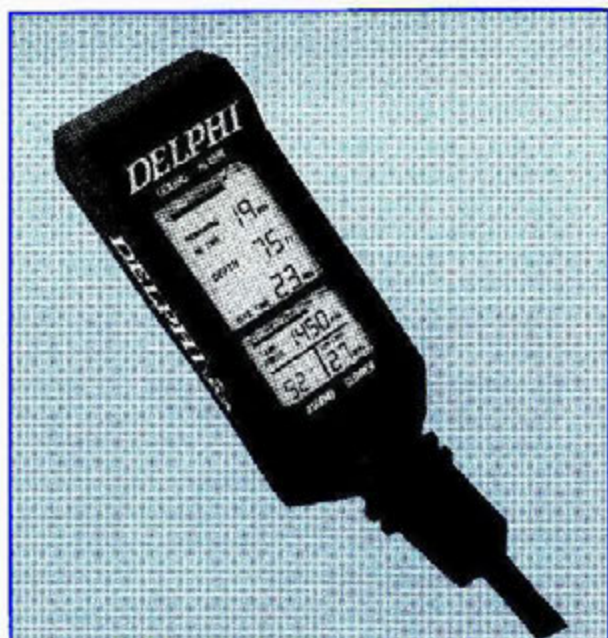
Is it because consumers believe that the batteries themselves leak, so the design is not questioned?

Is it because consumers are tolerant of such problems underwater because they know that the hyperbaric environment is a tough one in which to work?

Is it because Orca heads off trouble by acknowledging the complaints and is quick to repair the device?

Whatever the reason, Orca has put a great deal of energy and expense into addressing the leakage problems. And Nordstrom says they must. "We're in the business for the long run," he told us.

Kathi McCutcheon, Hollywood, FL, seems to



ORCA's Latest Oracle: The Delphi

At the Diving Equipment Manufacturers Convention in January, Orca unveiled its next generation computer, which combines good features from both the Edge and the Skinny Dipper, and has a few twists of its own. It's due to be shipped this summer.

The most significant change is that the Delphi connects to the air tank and provides tank pressure, eliminating the need for a separate pressure gauge.

According to Orca, "the Delphi is based on the same advanced technology that made Orca's Edge and Skinny Dipper world famous. A single microprocessor and fully temperature compensated pressure transducers assure precise calculating and constant depth accuracy to plus or minus 1.5 feet."

Although the Edge's 12 pixels are not present, there is a bar that graphically shows the degree of nitrogen saturation, tissue by tissue. Tank pressure is also displayed graphically, as well as numerically. Although the display has a slightly different organization than that of the forerunners, the face will be familiar to the Edge user both graphically and in readability. It provides ascent time required to surface, hours required to wait before flying, the temperature and tank pressure.

The Delphi has a slate on the back. A knife can be strapped to the back and a compass can be mounted below.

The standard model has a depth range to 200 feet and carries a list price of \$569. The professional model, with a depth limit at 300 feet, will be listed at \$680.

trip, "I was surprised how good diving was. I liked it better than Cayman. The dive shop was fantastic. Would highly recommend these people." (809/774-2775) . . . Barry Fetterman writes: "I went with Chris Sawyer's Dive Center at the Stouffer Grand Resort. They also have a shop at Compass Point. Their new boat the Christmas Wind was at least 48 feet. The crew and operation was first rate. These guys did a lot for the diver. We did 80 feet for 30 minutes on the bow section of the Rhone. For the surface interval we had lunch around the point on Salt Island. We snorkeled ashore and did some sightseeing. The second dive was on the stern section in 60 feet, propeller in good shape, nice for photos. Big drive shaft, had a stern mast. Overall, a great wreck dive I'd do again. Price for the day trip on the RMS Rhone is \$95 U.S. and worth it. Normal 2-tank trips are \$65." (Stouffer Grand Beach Hotel, Smith Bay, St. Thomas, 00802; 809/775-7320.)

On St. Croix, S.F. Black of Dallas visited the Carambola Beach Resort last year: "The people at Sea Shadows are fantastic. I found the guides excellent, cooperative, pleasant and striving to please; having not dived in four years, the guides helped me get over my apprehension. The Carambola is a plush and luxurious Rock Report. The diving was nice, not great." (Sea Shadows; PO Box 505, Christianstad, 00820; 809/778-3850) D. Seifert (Oregon City, OR) says, "Sea Shadows treated us like novices. By contrast, Scuba Tech was a professionally run shop -- and flexible about dive trip times (to fit group's desire) and sites. Very reasonably priced." (809/778-9718) . . . Dan Smith of Villa Hills, KY. "One of the better dive vacations I have taken. Hassle-free diving -- intelligent people running V.I. Divers -- good boats without the cattle barge overload. Had concern for photo buffs. Great place to vacation since country friendly. Lots to do -- felt safe at night walking the streets." Art Nelson of Oakhurst, NJ, says, "It's a shame that good guides and good boats from V.I. Divers and Dive Experience have to be used to explore such bad diving. The coral is dead or dying, the fish have been all potted out, including tropicals. Dove the north and northeast." (VI Divers, PanAm Pavilion, Christianstad, 00820; 809/773-6045; Dive Experience, PO Box 4254, Christianstad, 00820; 809/773-3307) . . . Vicki Gold (New Haven, CT) reports that last year, "The staff at the Fredrikstaad Hotel wanted no wet gear in hotel -- not at all accommodating to divers."

C.C., travel editor

Readers' Reviews Of Dive Computers

-- *Skinny Dipper Problems Solved?*

The Skinny Dipper dive computer, manufactured by Orca, was introduced in May, 1987. Thirty-one percent of the 904 divers sending us valid questionnaires owned Skinny Dippers; 43 percent owned the Edge. In 1980, the Skinny Dipper began to be marketed by Sherwood as the Sigmatech. We received only 12 responses from users.

Although it uses the same algorithm as the Edge, the Dipper differs in that it does not graphically display decompression data with pixels and a decompression line. Only numerical data is displayed (but not, as with the Edge, the amount of time required at a decompression stop). By eliminating this feature, and incorporating the electronics in a plastic case, Orca has produced a computer that, when compared

to the Edge, is significantly smaller (about half the volume), lighter (5.5 ounces versus 24 ounces) and less expensive (\$420 list compared to \$625 list), while retaining the basic characteristics.

The result is that a large number of sport divers find the Skinny Dipper fully satisfactory as their primary computer, while others use it as a backup for their Edge. In fact, that's exactly how Karl E. Huggins, the father of the Edge algorithm, uses the Dipper, as he reported to *Undercurrent* on the questionnaire he submitted.

The Leaky Battery Compartment

The Skinny Dipper case and battery compartment design is different than the Edge. Unfortunately, like

23/20

At a recent seminar on the Edge and Skinny Dipper in Oakland, CA, Orca Director of Engineering Paul Heinmiller displayed a slide of Skinny Dippers sitting on fire coral with a diver near the surface in the background.

Just as he was ready to flip to the next screen, a diver in the audience noted that the depth reading on one Dipper was 23 feet, while another, sitting right along side, read 20 feet. A few chuckles could be heard, while Neidenmiller, obviously surprised, could only say that they had better check the slides more closely before showing them.

But a few minutes later he recovered nicely. Flipping back to the 23/20 slide, he said that the Dipper has a depth accuracy of ± 2 feet. Therefore, any two Dippers could display a four-foot difference between them. The difference in the two Dippers in the slide meant that the true depth would be either 21 or 22 feet.

the Edge, it too has been a cause of leaks resulting in computer malfunction. In fact, slightly more than one-third of the respondents to our questionnaire indicated that their Skinny Dipper had flooded during a dive. Several readers reported that after they sent their Dipper to Orca, the repaired or replacement unit flooded as well.

To solve the problem, Orca has made many changes in the Dipper, including retooling the battery door and the case. At a seminar on the Orca in Oakland, California, recently, Orca Director of Engineering Paul Heinmiller said, "we feel secure that the leaking problem is resolved at the moment." He said that only five of the units manufactured after September, 1988, have been returned. Orca's Jim Fulton told us that no Dipper manufactured after October has been returned.

Readers report that the leaking is sometimes little more than a few droplets of water entering the case. But it's enough to cause problems. In some cases the computer malfunctions or stops operating during a dive. In other cases, the low battery indicator suggests the batteries are fading far earlier than they should. The water shorts the batteries and sometimes corrodes them, causing battery acid to leak.

The leaks often occur on the very first usage, at times rendering the Dipper useless for the remainder of one's trip. As Trina Bortko of Bellevue, WA, said, "I purchased new Skinny Dipper for use on Honduras vacation. It worked properly on the first dive, but registered 'lo lo' prior to the second dive. I had to discontinue use for the remainder of two-week vacation."

(The Dipper has three low readings. On the surface, a flashing "lo" indicates the batteries are beginning to go, but the Unit still functions normally; "lo lo" will flash underwater when the batteries need replacing; there are still several hours of operation left and no information is lost, but the two warning lights for the ceiling alarm and the ascent rate no longer blink to conserve energy; "lo, lo, lo," indicates the battery power is insufficient and the computer locks. The special lithium batteries provide about 500 hours of power under normal circumstances. When they are changed, no data is retained.)

In some cases the Dipper could be put back into service by the users. Elena Clark of Houston reports: "I rinsed out the battery compartment, blew it dry with tank air, inserted the batteries, greased the o-ring and turned it back on. It worked fine for the next six days after flooding on the very first dive."

Often, users put the onus on themselves for not applying enough silicone grease or for failing to put the battery door on properly. (It seems that we divers have been inculcated with the belief that if anything leaks underwater it is our error and never the fault of the product.) In most cases, it seems, the problem lies with the Dipper design itself.

Virtually all users of failed Dippers eventually return the computer to Orca. Our readers generally report satisfaction with Orca's response, saying they are quick to repair the device and return it at no charge when the product is under the two-year warranty.

But even these repairs, report several readers, didn't solve their problems. "I bought the Skinny Dipper for my boys," says James Barnard of Corpus Christi. "I have an Edge and the Skinny Dippers were less expensive and had the same program. I have been very disappointed. We have had problems from the first use with flooding. They were returned and tested and on first use flooded again." Richard Hocking (Seattle) said: "The second Skinny Dipper lasted less time than the first so they took it back too, and rebuilt the housing."

So What's the Problem

Orca staff have always been willing to discuss openly with *Undercurrent* any problems they have faced. Orca President Richard Nordstrom said that it has taken quite a while and great expense to pinpoint and resolve the problems with the leaking Skinny Dipper. First, there was a depression in the battery door compartment that allowed water to seep in. The decompression was so slight that it couldn't be seen and couldn't be measured with calipers. It was only discovered once they put the units under an optional scanner.

Second, glue used to fasten the power feed lines was also intended to seal. The glue adhered but it

end of a week. The hotel is isolated and extraordinary. As James T. Overfield (Pacific Palisades, CA) says, "Only bad thing -- 100-foot climb from beach to restaurant, and most rooms still higher up. Good food, excellent dive operation & hotel staff. Management very helpful too. Great place, if you don't mind stairs." Laurie Cameron (Waltham, MA), there in November, says, "Primarily a honeymoon place, so be prepared to entertain yourself. Beautiful setting. Best soft and hard coral I've seen in Caribbean; frog fish and sea horses abound in mind-blowing colorful caves and tunnels. Great beach diving. Staff at dive shop wonderful, especially Vitus, a native with incomparable relationship with fish. Food gourmet and plentiful in picturesque setting. Hotel beautiful! But Douglas Faraldi (Ridgefield, NJ) was there at the end of February: "Dive operation shaky at times; boats old and overcrowded; crews helped only when asked; dive management reception to suggestions; could be world class if it had a Divi dive operation and stricter laws to protect the underwater environment." (1-800/328-5285; 1-612/942-9687) . . . Of the Club Med, R. Sheaffer (Sanford, FL) says, "Cold showers, food poisoning once. On windward side of island, wind blows like a hurricane. Diving on leeward side excellent. Staff extremely helpful and cooperative."

ST. VINCENT: A lovely island as well, relatively undeveloped and slow paced, because its short air strip cannot handle major commercial jets. We wrote about St. Vincent in February, 1986 and that review still passes muster today, although Tewes is now located directly across the Young island pier and has two boats. Richard Janoss (Acton, WA) says, "Tewes very accommodating. Used the Edge and maxed every dive. Unfortunately, dive operation was much better than dive sites. A lot of small fish, lots of lobster, all the big fish are caught by fishermen." The coral and topography is quite interesting, but, yes, no big fish. Harry W. Livengood (Winter Springs, CO), there last July, said, "Tewes was most attentive. He took a great deal of time to point out things for us to see and me to photograph. Black coral, numerous aereo crabs, squid, a cloud (school) of anchovies, brittle stars, banded shrimp, scorpion fish. Bill's crew will change your tanks in between dives, wash your gear after diving, have candy waiting when you come up, help you with your gear." Young Island, a luxury resort, gets mixed reviews. People expect more for the high price, but get along okay on summer rates. Tewes can help you get an inexpensive hotel near the shop and there are a handful of good restaurants around. (Dive St. Vincent; POB 864, St. Vincent, WI; 1-809/457-4714) . . . Last May, Patrick D. Peters (Vineland, NJ) ferried from St. Vincent to nearby Bequia and Mayreau. Of Bequia he said: "Non-airconditioned hotel serves American food, well cooked and friendly service. Hard to reach but worth it for 'virgin' diving. NAUI certified to teach. The diver roughs it a little, but the unspoiled sights are worth it. (Dive Bequia, POB 16, St. Vincent, WI; 809/458-3504) Mayreau diving is oriented to the experienced, novices cared for. Wrecks of cruise ship 'Achilles' and gunboat 'Purina' (watch currents). Accommodations are 'roughing it' but definitely worth it. Access to limited wall, great coral and even wrecks make this a good slight. Boat is 20 feet long with crew of 3 and 8 divers. Excellent underwater guiding for new & old pros."

U.S. VIRGINS: Divers who want shopping or tennis or restaurants are usually quite happy with St. Thomas (because some of the diving is conducted in the neighboring British Virgins). The Bolongo Bay Club generally gets good marks as a pleasant beach front hotel from more than just dive reviewers. Alan Rothstein (Marietta, GA) says, "Extremely pleasant staff. 2-tank dives in AM, 1-tank PM dives not as good since resort course people go and need to be hand held. Not good for experienced divers except for weekly Rhone trip. Good training courses, 5 star PADI facility." (PO Box 7337, St. Thomas 00801; 800/524-4746) . . . Of the Pelican Dive Center, John F. Fuerst (White Plains, NY) said of last summer's

Truk Lagoon, of course, is where the Japanese Navy bought the farm in WWII. It's the wreck divers' dream. Three tanks available upon request. Decompression diving available. No TV, radio or bars. Most people combine Palau and Truk for one trip. Says William Ehler (Helotes, TX): "Our second trip. The wrecks were showing their ages and the typhoon has devastated many of the soft corals. Although visibility was much better than two years ago, the total marine life has drastically decreased, i.e., soft corals, anemones, inverts, lion fish, no eels, etc. The Truk Continental Hotel has drastically improved their food & service. Blue Lagoon headed up the trip. Cannot say enough -- true professional divemaster and crew. Only negative comment is that there is no chamber. Foolhardy for many sport divers." Harold Kit Carson (Berkeley), there in February, writes: "I like soft corals and walls with lots of fish. I am not a wreck diver, but these are unbeatable, but I was disappointed in lack of large fish. Blue Lagoon dive boats too small. At least they had shade, but could not stand up under top of boat. Inconvenience of getting gear on and getting into water. Climb on boat stepping on an auto tire hanging on the side of the boat." (1-800/247-3483; 206/441-3483; POB 429, Truk Lagoon, East Caroline Islands 96942) . . . The tony way to dive here is aboard the Thorfinn, which has certainly improved itself since our not-so-cheerful review a few years back. Says Ernst S. Reese (Honolulu) of his trip last May: "A memorable experience. I'm a marine biologist and have been diving for 30 years. Besides the wrecks, the marine life is superb, especially the soft corals. The Thorfinn is a wonderful ship, excellent accommodations and food, professional and friendly crew." H. Von Ohlsen (Avon, CO) says, "The panga rides very long to the dive sites and the dive briefings were poor. Otherwise, the Thorfinn did a good job." (See Sea Travel, 50 Francisco St., San Francisco, CA 94133; 1-800/div-xprt)

ST. LUCIA: A beautiful island! None finer in the Caribbean, from my point of view. Our review of Anse Chastenet (January, 1986), our readers tell us, still stands. Many dives are gentle drifts along a lovely reef, without large fish, but plenty of little critters and corals. There is a sameness that gets to be a little boring for many divers without cameras at the

Dive The Atocha?

The British don't always think highly of American divers -- and American ingenuity. Consider this from "the Beachcomber," a regular column in the British magazine *Diver*.

"What does one do when the wind is so strong that it rips the diving flag to shreds and even a lunatic wouldn't launch. Head for an inland dive site?"

"Well, maybe. But most divers don't do that. They just hang around the shore bemoaning their lot. After all, no inland dive site can compensate for the loss of a dive on a decent wreck. Or can it?"

"Well, that's not the way those damn Yankees see it. They've had a brainwave about bad weather diving that might, just might, come to Britain."

"The Florida Keys Community College, whose students are just as revolting as students anywhere, have got a pond that's 30 feet deep. Into this they have put some salvaged timbers of the treasure ship *Atocha*. And they are now selling a one-day package, which includes a talk on the history of the ship and, wait for it, a dive on the ancient timbers, which were brought up from the original wreck site to save them from souvenir hunters."

"They call this the '*Atocha* Experience' and charge \$10 a head. This may explain the number of American log-books with '*Atocha*' in them."

"And do you know what? Local dive shops are billing these dives as an alternative to the sea when it cuts up rough. And whole parties are booking them."

"Now how about that? Couldn't we do the same with some bits from the *Titanic* in a local pond? I wouldn't mind having her name written in my log book."

Dear Sirs:

Until now, I have always felt you to be informative and unbiased, but your article on 20/20 has changed my thinking.

You forgot to mention that DAN complained about 20/20 not using all the information on the accidents.

You speak of the industry, and single out PADI. It's not just the industry, it's the instructor. No matter what logo he or she wears, it's how well they teach. We have an instructor in town, and your bra size decides whether you work the skills or not. (sic)

Why not compare PADI, NASDS, and NAUI to one another? You will see they all teach the same basic things. Even the same way.

So when you're talking death rate, are we talking the industry or just PADI? PADI seems to be your pet peeve. Let's talk death rate out in some resort where they could care less if you survive your quickie course.

No one says PADI is perfect, least of all me. It is better than what was around 30 years ago. It does improve with age.

Go snow skiing and see if there is a warning on the lodge door: "All those who enter may break a neck!"

*Vicky McCorkle
Reds Scuba
Fort Smith, AR*

Dear *Undercurrent*,

NASDS agrees that the 20/20 program was one of the most negative segments ever done on the sport and industry of scuba diving. Contrary to the letter circulated by PADI pointing the finger at John Gaffney of NASDS for providing information to 20/20, I would like the diving community to know that I, John Gaffney, did talk to 20/20 three times AFTER the entire program was taped.

This letter is to inform *Undercurrent* that "The Diving Retailer" is just what the name implies, a trade journal for everyone in the diving industry. Each issue contains some material devoted to instruction. However, I will admit it is mostly generic.

As far as safety is concerned, we mail updates and improvements in instruction to the people we service, i.e., our stores and instructors. "SAFE SCUBA," our prompt cards, "SAFE SCUBA PLUS," and our audio visual program have all been completely updated. Our teaching manual, the "GOLD BOOK," has just had 2100 hours of work done to bring it into an updated version. In addition, our logbook has also been updated.

The work we do in these areas is proprietary and might be considered trade secrets which NASDS wants to share only with our instructors and store owners. We are not in the business of doing all the work and then sending it out to our competitors. In

No Handicap Here

Jill Robinson, a certified diver, civil rights attorney, and paraplegic confined to a wheelchair, wanted to become an assistant instructor.

She was denied entry into a NAUI course and brought suit, claiming discrimination. Robinson alleged that "the standards arbitrarily discriminated against persons with physical disabilities because, even though the functions of underwater instruction could be performed, the standards required the performance of physical skills not necessary to those functions." For example, one standard required the trainee to swim 800 yards using their legs only.

She and NAUI settled before the suit went to court. NAUI set up an independent panel to examine the present standards in order to eliminate discrimination in the certification process. The panel's recommendations were adopted by the NAUI Board. Robinson, who was reimbursed for costs, said that not only has "the insult to me has been corrected, but also other disabled persons' enjoyment of the underwater experience will not be marred by discrimination." Robinson has since been certified as an assistant instructor.

Added her attorney, Dan Stormer of Los Angeles: "I applaud the forthrightness and honesty of NAUI."

time they may copy it, but I am not interested in making it easier for them.

In addition, NASDS has an instructor update program, and holds seminars on instruction and sales for instructors who are "mossback" NASDS instructors. If you take the time to watch our 4½ hours of audio visual class material, read the "GOLD BOOK," "SAFE SCUBA" textbook, our prompt cards, or our tables, you will notice that each part of the instructional program clearly outlines the dangers of diving. Students are taught "to follow the rules and use the training you receive from your NASDS instructor." NASDS calls that pointing out the hazards and giving the solution.

It is true that at one time our audio visual program contained scenes of a rat with its eyes blown out from bringing it up from 195 feet in a chamber. However, this was deemed too negative and was dropped from the program. Our intention was (and still is) that you must follow the rules and training you received in order to be a safe diver.

John Gaffney
Executive Director
NASDS INTERNATIONAL
Long Beach, CA

Dear Ben,

I think your story on 20/20 was excellent, factual and unbiased. Keep up the good reporting.

Matilda Davison
Cle Elum, Washington

PS: Your father says hello.

Dear Sirs:

Reading the anguished cries of foul play from Peter Hughes regarding your review of his (actually Divi Hotel's) diving operation in Barbados reminded me of a conversation I had with the manager of the Hotel Kittina in Grand Turk last summer. I'm not sure who brought up the subject of *Undercurrent* first, but I quickly had to listen to a diatribe about how unfair your review of the island had been.

I explained to him that I had read the review and that it was one of the things that convinced me to go to Grand Turk, but he was hearing none of it. Apparently he, like Peter Hughes, would much prefer that the diving press be populated solely by fawning ad salesmen masquerading as journalists whose articles are interchangeable from island to island. If one relies on other publications, one would assume that the tropics are filled with courteous, safety-minded professionals whose only desire is to serve the public -- never mind whether a profit is made.

Fortunately, there are good people out there, but even the good ones have shortcomings, and I like to know about them before I spend several thousand dollars on a trip.

I am sure that most of your subscribers have discerned, as I quickly did, that you are a little on the weird side and we adjust our thinking accordingly when reading one of your reviews.

Please continue your objective reporting.

Ron Weddington
Austin, TX

Dear Sirs:

Further to your recent article on NITROX diving: as Dick Rutkowski notes, NITROX was not designed for basic divers and its use has been prevalent in many circles since the early 1970s.

It is really no surprise to me that some of the national certification agencies do not recognize its validity since it took some of those agencies until the late seventies to officially require the use of submersible pressure gauges and still have not come to grips with the recognition of alternate air sources.

NITROX has a valid role in many applications and we are probably going to use it for our instructor staff in the future aboard OCEAN SPIRIT since the depth parameters we experience are ideally suited. Again, as Rutkowski notes, NITROX requires special training and equipment to insure the proper mixes, but none of this is beyond the budget or capabilities of those facilities with a need for it. Obviously, attention must be paid to the use of NITROX at depth with regard to O₂ toxicity, but this is so patently self-evident that to condemn its use from this argument is rather moot.

Rutkowski is probably one of the world's best recognized authorities on recompression therapy and mixed gas use and certainly is far better qualified to comment knowledgeably on its proper place in the industry than sport diving instructors. As one of hundreds of graduates of his chamber operation and mixed gas programs with over a week of specialized training, I can personally attest to his thoroughness and professionalism. I encourage divers to look at the concept of NITROX diving with an open and informed mind.

Bret C. Gilliam, Director
Diving Operations
Ocean Quest International
New Orleans, LA

Undercurrent encourages reader comment. Those letters we select for publication may be edited to meet our limited space requirements, but we will do our best not to change the tenor and tone of the letter.

The Return Of The Purge Valve

-- Scubapro Scores Well

In our July, 1987 issue, we carried an article by Al Pierce explaining the value of a purge valve mask and urging the industry to produce a workable model. A few months ago Scubapro introduced a new purge valve mask, and we asked Pierce to evaluate it. Here is his report.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The Scubapro Tri-Vent mask is a gallant effort to bring the purge-valve back. They state that, "First we made a better purge valve, then built a mask around it." The result is an efficient valve that is large enough to clear easily, without the contortions that a purgeless mask requires. All you have to do is exhale into it while looking down. The water runs out

easily.

Clearing a purgeless mask is one of the most difficult skills a new diver has to learn. The novice has to look up, exposing the nose to water, press with just the right pressure at just the right spot, and, if the head isn't tilted back far enough, the water still won't run out. Beginning divers who have had trouble learning this skill will now be able to clear a purge-type with ease.

"No need to use your hands to clear this mask, a real advantage if you are carrying camera gear or making a rescue."

No need to use your hands to clear this mask, a real advantage if you are carrying camera gear or making a rescue. A displaced mask, bumped by a struggling victim, can be cleared without endangering your safety.

The Tri-Vent has a unique feature. Most of the bubbles of vented air are deflected to the sides so they don't rise in front of your vision. Occasionally some air escapes toward the front, but that amount is small and inconsequential.

I took the purge valve assembly apart to examine it. (I don't recommend others doing so. It is difficult to fit back together.) Although the mid-front has channel indentations that look like an open vent, it is actually closed. Water and air are normally directed to the sides, but apparently due to the lack of a perfect seal (it is simply hard plastic to hard plastic, with no other type of seal), some air escapes and bubbles forward. The amount is too small to be bothersome. (This front bubbling could easily be overcome by redesigning the mask with some sealant material between the hard plastic layers.)

The purge valve is made of a flexible plastic instead of rubber, so I assume it is not as likely to deteriorate with age or exposure to light, ozone or pool chemicals. The valve, almost a full inch in diameter, is a quarter-inch longer than the largest purge valve previously available. A modified saucer shape, it fits snugly around the housing, probably to keep it from becoming improperly aligned.

Side windows allow better vision for keeping contact with your buddy -- or recognizing some danger at the side that may otherwise be unexpected. That these side windows produce a deflection of images from those seen straight ahead may be confusion at first, but it is easy to get used to. Side windows formerly were more common, but the trend toward low-volume masks has eliminated many models. The main value of a low volume mask is the small amount of air they hold, making them easier to clear. There is less water to displace -- believed an advantage for a breath-hold diver (although breath-hold divers nor-

mally don't have to contend with a mask completely full of water). Clearing a high volume mask is really not a problem for scuba divers who have plenty of air available.

A low-volume mask does give a little more peripheral vision due to the lens being closer to the face. However, the side windows of the Tri-Vent design allow lots more peripheral vision, compensating for the front lens being farther away from the face.

One style of mask does not fit all faces and the Tri-Vent mask I purchased did not fit my face as well as I would like. Accordingly, I had to tighten the strap to make sure that purged water did not leak out from the sides instead of exiting through the valve. A tight strap becomes uncomfortable after awhile. Adjusting the strap, however, is easy, due to the spring-action levers on the sides. Different mask sizes would alleviate the problem.

Although the Tri-Vent Mask is expensive (\$95 list price), I am happy with it. If other manufacturers compete with large purge-valve models, prices may drop and more divers will find masks that will more comfortably fit their faces and their wallets.

Albert Pierce, a YMCA instructor for nearly thirty years and a PADI and NAUI instructor for twenty years, has received innumerable awards from agencies for his exemplary work. He was recently inducted into the Pennsylvania Swimming Hall of Fame, where he joined Ben Franklin, the inventor of swim fins.

