
Hawaii's Dangerous Dives

Tourist's death raises safety concerns

The April issue of Conde Nast Traveler contained an important piece on Hawaii diving by writer Alex Salkever. We are reprinting it here with their permission.

Scuba Diving Operations in Hawaii are scurrying to repair their reputations, which were damaged by the death last August of a novice diver who was inexplicably left behind by her dive boat.

Fatalities are rare, but this case has the Coast Guard and local dive operators calling for changes in the way divers, especially novices, are supervised. It has also underscored that the dive industry is largely self-regulating.

Diving regulations are, for the most part, self-enforced; certification agencies such as PADI and NAUI have no police arm. The Coast Guard has no jurisdiction over dive shops or boats. And in an industry notorious for low profit margins and salaries, instructors and boat captains are often afraid of blowing the whistle on hazardous operators. "It could cost someone his job," one instructor told us, "and Hawaii is a very small place."

The number of recreational diving fatalities in Hawaii is small — there were 11 last year — considering the thousands of dives that take place in the state annually. But it can be difficult for a visitor to determine how safe a particular operator is since there are no statistics on near misses or minor injuries, and a company with a poor record can easily change names and reopen.

Akemi Hoshino apparently picked the wrong operator. On

August 14, 1996, Hoshino, a Japanese tourist, drowned in the waters off Waikiki after her dive boat returned to shore without her. According to Atlantis Reef Divers, the company operating the tour, all divers were believed accounted for, but somehow Hoshino did not return to the boat.

Officials with Atlantis, which has ceased operations, claim that their instructors were experienced and that every precaution was taken. They could not explain, however, why Hoshino was left behind.

A Coast Guard report placed considerable blame on the company and cited "lack of care of dive instructors [and] vessel crew" as the apparent cause. It also noted that the tight timetable of Atlantis's dive expeditions pressured the crew to return to shore as quickly as possible. In the report, the captain of the dive boat, Robert Thomas Yoho, Jr., described the schedule as "fast and furious." On the day of the accident, the boat was almost 30 minutes behind.

Such time pressures, however, are not unusual on what dive instructors call "cattleboats," large operations like Atlantis that, they say, emphasize numbers over safety.

Hoshino's group was on a "Discovery Scuba Dive," a PADI-designed program for people with little or no experience. Participants are given brief instructions on dive procedures and safety, then take a first dive, usually in shallow waters, in the company of a dive instructor. Most dive associations sponsor "resort programs" because they are often

marketed to vacationers with limited time.

According to the Coast Guard, however, such brief training carries inherent dangers. Instructors are unable to fully determine a diver's swimming ability, physical condition, and mental soundness. Moreover, cultural and language barriers can be a problem, as Hoshino's death tragically proved.

According to the report, one of the Atlantis instructors professed to speak Japanese, but Japanese patrons on the tour had difficulty communicating with him. Hoshino's sister, who was also on the boat, tried to tell the crew that her sister was missing as they returned to shore, but she was unable to make herself understood.

In the wake of the accident, Hawaii dive instructors have expressed unease with PADI's maximum of six introductory divers per instructor, saying they would prefer a ratio of two to one. Lieutenant Scott Stewart, the Coast Guard's chief investigating officer on the case, said an instructor told him, "I don't want any more divers than I have hands."

PADI defends its program, pointing out that this has been its only fatality since it was introduced in 1992. Over 65,000 divers have taken the course. The Coast Guard has charged Yoho with negligence and asked PADI to stringently review the case and take appropriate action against instructors and crew. In addition, it has asked the Ocean Recreation Council of Hawaii, a local industry group, to review issues of dive safety in Hawaii. Says Stewart, "If an operation is run like [Atlantis was], there is a definite potential that similar accidents will occur." ■

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