

undercurrent

The Private, In Depth Guide for Serious Divers

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Worldwide Diving, With an IRS Subsidy

Barracuda watching in PNG

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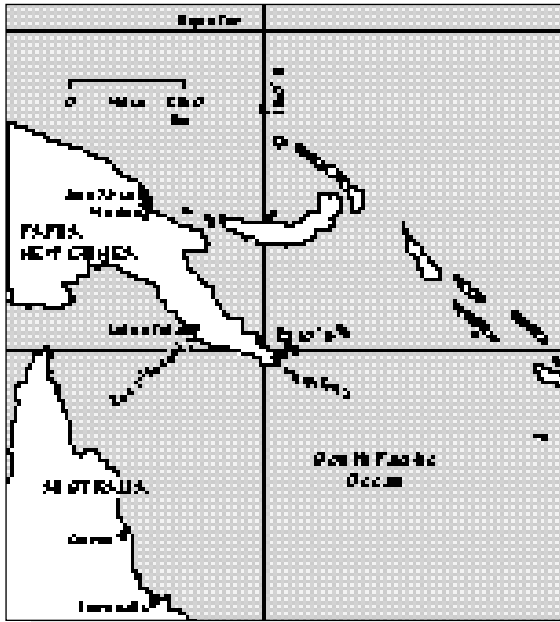
Dear Fellow Diver,

I've learned how to get great diving, save the planet, and, at tax time, deduct everything from the cost of airfare to airfills. Here is my tale, albeit a cautionary one.

Having made several enjoyable diving trips with Earthwatch, I leaped at the chance to join a new project in Papua New Guinea to study barracuda. Earthwatch, based in Watertown, MA, is the largest of many research organizations in which volunteers can participate in the collection of scientific data. You pay your way, but in return you get the satisfaction of functioning as a scientific assistant, experiencing the milieu in which the project is undertaken and deducting all your expenses from your federal and state taxes. You see, this qualifies as a legitimate contribution to a nonprofit, 501 c3 organization, as defined by the Internal Revenue Service.

As anyone familiar with institutionally financed research might guess, living conditions are usually on the primitive side. In PNG, on the picturesque shores of Madang Lagoon, sits the Christensen Research Institute, a collection of buildings with a lab, study facilities, housing units and a large community room/kitchen. The saving grace is that the Institute is next to the lovely Jais Aban diving resort, originally owned by the Christensen family who established the institute "to increase Papua New Guinea knowledge of natural resources."

My partner and I had a large room with comfortable beds, a cold water basin and ample storage space; men and women had separate but equal bathrooms, with toilet and shower facilities. Jais Aban diving facilities were only a few steps from our room. We made periodic shopping trips into Madang for groceries so we could prepare individual meals in the community kitchen. While liquor was forbidden



in the Institute, it was a short walk to the Jais Aben bar and dining-room where, for example, local beer ran about \$2/bottle.

Our team consisted of my partner and me (divers of many years' experience), an enthusiastic and vigorous 17-year-old (The Kid), and a middle-aged couple (The Husband and Wife) with limited experience with resort diving. We had come to help observe "Social Behavior of Sympatric Barracuda Species," and our diving duties were quite simple -- record all barracuda sightings, including the species, number, location, depth, etc. on plastic diving cuffs.

The project was directed by Shane Patterson, the Principal Investigator from the University of Georgia. A genial and delightful conversationalist, his leadership style was fluid, to say the

Papua New Guinea

least, so that he often seemed pervasively resistant to explicit planning and organization. We had to be prepared for sudden and unpredictable changes of plans in ways that could be disconcerting and irritating, but ultimately possible to take in one's stride. After all, it was his research project. His goal is to get the maximum bang -- i.e., data -- for his limited bucks. While it would make sense for the PI to keep the volunteers happy with their lot, his major interest is his own research, rather than entertaining and cossetting of volunteers.

Bye Bye BC

Diving was from a 18-foot open skiff, back rolling into the water and, for egress, bouncing up the side of the boat. We were assisted into the boat by the divemaster, a bright, competent and experienced young American, Cliff Haugan, whose only possible flaw was a tendency not to suffer fools gladly.

Trouble erupted almost immediately. On the checkout dive, the Husband chose to don his equipment in the water. After setting up his tank and BC, he tossed it loftily over the side of the boat. But, he had neglected to inflate his BC. Down it shot, narrowly missing the wreck of the B25 bomber some 85 feet below.

O.K., so accidents happen. The divemaster naturally retrieved it, but the Husband then accused him of having set up the whole incident. Then, the Wife complained that the divemaster had not adequately secured her weight belt. The divemaster was not a happy camper! Things went from bad to worse when the divemaster discovered the Husband attempting to remove portions of the wreck as souvenirs and the Wife sitting on a coral head.

Each participant had been sent a detailed briefing pamphlet containing an abstract of the project, the research plan and the field logistics. So, team members should have a clue about the requirements of an ecologically oriented

project. Nonetheless, the Husband denounced the "insolence" of the Divemaster and swore to make no further dives with the Earthwatch group.

All this was pretty awkward, since seven prepaid days of research diving remained and we were all living in adjacent rooms and, more or less, eating together. The Husband announced that he and his wife would make future dives (and buy future meals) with the resort and for the most part, avoided speaking to the project personnel. Faxes and emails buzzed back and forth to arthwatch, and although the Wife and the divemaster achieved a fragile reconciliation (and the Wife dutifully recorded all her barracuda sightings) we remained separate but equal to the end.

Superb Snorkeling

Meanwhile, my partner and I and the Kid enjoyed the magnificent diving of Madang Lagoon! The Kid was seldom out of the water, snorkeling around during much of our time off and exercising his sharp eyes to discover wonders in the mud. The first day he spotted three seahorses – I threw on a mask and dashed down to join him. Next he discovered a mantis shrimp, then a juvenile stonefish. He found a creature no one could identify, like a cross between a flying gunard and a pipefish. The P.I. took its picture and promised future identification. The shallow coral heads astonished me with a luxuriance and variety of marine life; swarms of blue-green chromis, dozens of rainbow shaded anthias, a variety of colorful damselfish, nine kinds of butterflyfish, four kinds of angelfish ... triggerfish ... pairs of big foxfaces ... solitary great barracuda ... anemone colonies with clownfish. In fact, Madang Lagoon is famous for the number and variety of its anemone-and-clownfish species, and an enormous variety of nudibranchs.

Generally we made two or three dives a day, the first 90-110 feet on the outer edge of the fringing reef, followed by shallower dives, usually in more protected areas. We used aluminum 80's from Jais Aben. Water temperature hovered around 80 degrees F. and visiblility varied on each dive, but averaged 80 feet.

Given the multiple channels, cuts and islands of Madang Lagoon, currents are often a major challenge. Since our goal was to find barracuda, we selected areas with stronger currents. Typically, we would anchor over the reef near a cut through which we could reach the outer side and often we had a struggle to get to the edge, but once down the wall the current would largely disappear. At Sek, Magic and Rasch Passages we found schools of barracuda, a whitetip shark, several blacktips and a variety of large pelagics. At Planet Rock, an open ocean seamount starting at 20 feet, I swam with a bewildering number of reef fish (including bannerfish, omnipresent Moorish Idols, Rock Cods and a coral trout with black splotches, yellow patches and the intriguing name of "Chinese Footballer"), schools of jacks -- and barracuda.

Barracuda Point, a coral

MADANG, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Earthwatch diving projects for:	
Beginners:	Don't go.
Intermediate/advanced:	****
PNG accommodations and food:	**
PNG boat comfort:	*
Moneysworth:	**** with tax deduction
* = poor	**** = excellent

Saving the Reefs with a Government Subsidy

Several nonprofit organizations supply diving volunteers to assist in the research being conducted by noted university professors and researchers -- and all your expenses are fully tax deductible.

But, for those taxpayers who wish to remain conservative, there are cautions. Susan Sammon of CEDAM International says "In theory, the share of cost contributions made to support scientific research projects are tax deductible. However, the IRS takes particular issue with deductions for travel expenses, especially when there is a 'significant amount of personal pleasure.' ... Several CEDAM members have had their expedition donation claims challenged, however, upon review of support material and documentation provided by the participants, their deductions were allowed to stand.

When you volunteer, typically you engage in a wide range of tasks to assist the researcher; collecting specimens, measuring the reef, making and recording observations, and doing basic grunt work. Usually one gets a couple of working dives a day and will get opportunity for several leisure dives. Volunteers come back satisfied that they have made a contribution to helping our planets oceans and critters.

Here our several reputable organizations that conduct trips.

CEDAM has several trips coming up: Volunteers will travel in the Maldives, aboard the Manthiri, to produce photos and videos for local students. Also, aboard the Aggressor fleet, they'll study nudibranchs in Hawaii, survey reefs in the Bahamas, Fiji and the Turks and Caicos. From land, they'll count fish in the Bonaire Marine Park Fish Census.

For more information, send one dollar to CEDAM, One Fox Road, Croton on Hudson, NY, 10520 914/271-5365, fax 914 271-4723. email cedamint@aol.com. Web site: www.cedam.org.

REEF, founded by Paul Humann, has several

field survey project in 1998, most likely all tax deductible, but REEF does not emphasize it. Because the demand is great for their services, more will be added as they get participants. This year they have land-based trips to the Turks and Caicos islands. Bonaire, Grand Cayman, and will survey fish from live-aboards in the Florida Keys, Saba, and the Texas Flower Gardens.

For information about trips and membership contact REEF, PO Box 246, Key Largo, Florida 33037. Phone 305/451-0322; fax 305/451-0028; Web www.reef.org

Earthwatch sends more than 3000 volunteers into the field each year. In 1998 they will study The Dhows of Oman: diving to 35 feet to examine ancient boats, sleeping Arab style, on floor mats, in the desert. And, they will work to save Maui's reefs, counting fish, estimating coral cover, determining the impact of people feeding fish, testing water quality; stay in a research houses with shared bedrooms.

In addition, they offer other marine research programs, some of which involve snorkeling and may permit scuba. Contact: Earthwatch, 680 Mt. Auburn St., Box 403, Watertown, MA 02272. 800/776-0188, fax 617 926-8532; email: info@earthwatch.org. Membership in Earthwatch is \$25/year, which includes a frequent magazine/catalogue describing the trips in detail.

University Research Expeditions frequently has trips for divers, but the 1998 schedule is not yet set; they have a September trip studying the Glowing Squid of Banyuuls Bay in France where snorkeling is useful. URE, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720; 510/642-6586; fax 510 642 6791. email: urep@uclink.berkeley.edu web: www.mip.berkeley.edu/urep.

The Oceanic Society had research diving trips to Belize and Midway Island in 1997 and may offer them again in 1999. Oceanic Society, Fort Mason Center Building E, San Francisco, CA 94123. 415/441-1106; 800 326 7491; fax 415; 474 3395.

point dropping off sharply, turned out to be nearly current-free. I dropped to 50 feet, where an anemone some 25 feet square was home to dozens of pairs of clownfish. A school of sweetlips hung out nearby, but nary a barracuda. We moved to the corner of the point, where a current began to make swimming more laborious. Two two fair-sized blacktip sharks hovered there, but still no barracuda. A dive on the ill-fated B25 Bomber was noteworthy for the number and size of seafans, sponges and brilliant red soft corals. Wreck buffs could enjoy examining the residual guns and ammunition on the plane from which two crew members had originally managed to escape during WW2 only to be executed by the Japanese when they reached the shore. Four batfish drifted in and about the fuselage and a school of pennantfish cruised by.

We chose Pig Bay for our shallow and relaxed later dives. In 15 feet of water I saw swarms of juvenile barracuda, a sort of nursery! I found many lionfish and a patient crocodile fish on the sand allowed himself to be thoroughly videoed. Six dolphins swerved from the ocean, turned on their sides to eye us, then they moved quickly out of camera range. Indeed, diving in Madang Lagoon was as rewarding as I'd hoped for.

If you're not inclined to join the Earthwatch Brigade, Jais Aben resort is a fine place for a diving sojourn. We ate several meals in their dining-room on the edge of the lagoon surrounded by ancient coconut and breadfruit trees. Dinners -- sweet-and-sour pork, mackerel and steak -- were delicious. Also spent one night in a Jais Aben cabin by the water and had no complaints there. The Jais Aben dive operation, unlike our Spartan setup, had a 27-foot, covered boat with both a sunshade and a ladder for climbing up from the water. Divers using the operation spoke well of them. The tariff: room, three meals and two dives a day -- about \$140/per person. A real bargain.

So...Don't do an Earthwatch trip if your goals and expectations are mainly recreational if your tolerance for supervision is threadbare and your humility is scant if you wish for service, luxury and catering.

But if you don't mind roughing it, want to take a shot at saving the planet, and, at tax time, deduct everything from the cost of airfare to airfills, it's indeed a rewarding experience.

Video Battery Catches Fire

- Manufacturer's recall

If you have a Source-12 battery pack for your video, you have a chance for a serious fire.

If water leaks into the battery case, the battery can build up heat, smolder for up to several days, and catch fire. The manufacturer, Light & Motion Industries, received two confirmed reports of fire and a report from a third diver who said he jet-tisoned the light overboard when

the fire began.

The batteries measure 7 inches by 4 and are black with a clear top. They were sold under the names: SeaHawk Pro Package, SeaBlaze Dual EX, SeaBlaze Single EX, SeaBlaze Single Light, and SeaBlaze Specular Film Light. They have been recalled in cooperation with the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission.

If a battery floods, immediately disassemble the retaining ring and bulkhead from the battery, and remove the circuit board -- if necessary, contact the manufacturer for disassembly instructions.

Anyone who purchased a model manufactured between January 1990 and September 1996 should return it for repair.

Light and Motion Industries,
300 Cannery Row, Monterey, CA
93940: 408/645-1525,
fax: 408/375-2517 email:
support@lmindustries.com.



DIVER'S COMPASS: Costs for the Barracuda project (lodging, food, etc.) was \$1,795.00 for an 8-day session; PNG can be reached via Manila, Singapore and Guam, or United, Quantas, and Air New Zealand via Sydney and Air Niugini via Cairns or Brisbane, Flying time is approximately 13 hrs LAX-SYD, then 4-5 hrs, then perhaps an hour to Madang Malaria is prevalent in New Guinea, so seek prophylaxis.

X.A

Anthony's Key, Inn of the Last Resort

-- Bargains in Honduras

Treading water, I reached out and slapped the surface in front of me. Like magic, two dolphins thrust their rostrums (what the unschooled may call a nose) into the palms of my hands. I pushed off from them and they transferred their rostrums to the soles of my feet, propelling me over the top of the water with the explosive force of a human jet ski! It was the fantastic final session of the dolphin specialty course at the Roatan Institute for Marine Sciences at Anthony's Key Resort.

While I'm mainly a fan of more exotic diving than Roatan offers, I was attracted to AKR by their two-for-one rate during early December; \$1060 for 7-days, including all food, lodging, three dives/day and one night dive. Although Honduras is the least expensive dive venue in the Caribbean, \$530/person is dirt cheap – if the weather behaves, which it often doesn't that time of year.

In the last decade, several resorts have sprung up on Roatan – 30+ miles above the Caribbean coast of Honduras – and foreigners are building homes; ocean front land prices have risen 30 percent in one year. AKR is the original resort, and while a few years back readers reported it rundown and unkempt, I was pleased to find its cottages and grounds are now well maintained.

Its unique setting has individual units set in lush tropical foliage, cascading down a cliff to the water. More cottages are a hundred yards offshore on lush Anthony Key, which has the visual allure of a South Seas fantasy. Rap on a dive tank, and an outboard will appear to ferry you to and fro.

My hillside unit was not far from the outdoor dining area and its breath-taking vistas of the bay and islands. Walking to meals was easy, but a trip to the dive area involved three flights of stairs. Meals were enlivened by three brilliant macaws, a parrot, and a cockatoo that perch on the railings; if offered morsels of food, they will grasp them delicately in their claw. The cockatoo sails through the trees in the early morning, then arrives in the rafters above the dining room to entertain guests with a variety of gymnastics.

Don't Drink the Coffee

While meal service was excellent, the meals themselves were less so.