

The Equipment at DEMA

I'm not trading in my old gear yet

While manufacturers always hope for major breakthroughs at the DEMA convention, I saw little this year that would make me want to replace my trusted gear. Last year's all-black James Bond style has already begun to fade, thanks to photographers who don't think that black-on-black makes much of a shot. And BCs and wetsuits are reappearing in photogenic colors: dusky purple and teal were everywhere.

Diving or Climbing, Go for the Burn

The hardware-laden tech BCs that offered divers the opportunity to look like a body-piercing artist while simultaneously increasing their drag in the water have given way to sleeker, smaller models. Only a few manufacturers were pushing BCs covered with stainless-steel D-rings, carabiners, and clips for those who don't understand the relationships between drag, swimming effort, and air consumption.

This Is Your Wallet on Nitrox

Nitrox (pardon me, "Enriched Air Nitrox" or "EAN") is THE trend of the year: yellow and green stickers and cylinders were everywhere. Many regulator manufacturers have stopped using silicone grease in the pit and started filling their regulators with Krytox so that they can push Nitrox-safe setups. Nitrox computers are also being promoted in the hope that people who complete Nitrox courses will dump their old dive computers — and perhaps their regulators, even if they're

working perfectly — to buy Nitrox capability. For the most part, the move to Nitrox has begun to look like a great opportunity to sell more equipment, training, and tee-shirts. (This is your brain underwater [picture of a fried egg], and this is your brain on Nitrox [picture of a brain.]")

Smaller, Cheaper, Better

In general, high-end dive computers are getting smaller. Bridgetown — a division of the Japanese tire company — displayed a mockup/demo of a watch-sized dive computer. And the long-heralded Suunto Spyder with downloadable memory, full deco capabilities, and Solution-class electronics was already on sale.

Of course, you can get a good computer for less money. A USD Matrix with decent decompression diving capabilities and a clear, simple display is an excellent low-price model. I took a Matrix Master (the luminescent version of the Matrix) on a dive trip after DEMA, and I liked it a lot. Its display was clear and intelligent; it had backlighting that worked perfectly, allowing me to read the numbers down deep at night; it had user-changeable batteries lodged behind a decent bore seal; and its dive log played me summaries of the last dozen dives while I was sitting disconsolately on the plane back to Miami. The playback made sense, too. It showed the most recent dive of each day with the highest number, counting

Should the Government Investigate BCs?

surface and requesting their "views on how to address this potential hazard."

We called Roy Deppa of the CPSC Directorate for Engineering Sciences to discuss these concerns. He said that "over the years we have been approached about this problem and had to take a look at it. We looked for any increases in surface drownings that would indicate there was a problem but did not find any indications of an increase in surface drownings. So we felt that perhaps we should look further into the matter to see if there really is an issue we should be involved with."

Deppa described himself as a diver who had been around a while and knew the difference between those old horse collars and jackets. He also had a friend who owned a dive shop and was an instructor, so he went out to see what was presently available on the market and how it worked. He then asked for responses from the training agencies about how they train their students.

After his investigation, Deppa concluded that "their answers, coupled with the information from the accident databases, indicate there is no evidence that the present BCs are a potential problem."

back to the first dive of the day, and then rolled over to previous days. Anyone who has tried to reconstruct a series of dives from a computer log will appreciate this common-sense approach.

Less Weight, More Money

Atomic titanium regulators were selling fast. While you can buy any number of sweet-breathing regulators that pass all the relevant standards (US Navy Class A, CEN, etc.) for \$500, it's hard to fathom why anyone would pay more than a grand for a regulator whose primary draw is its light weight. It seems like a manufacturer has found a product that hardly anyone needs, but a lot of people want, which seemed to me like a perfectly good reason to give one a go.

The Atomic did everything it was supposed to do. I saved about three-fourths of a pound in my carry-on — but is that really a big deal? — and inspired awe whenever I asked other divers to heft the thing. Responses were pretty much the same: “Is that thing made out of plastic?” “Why is it so light?”

Underwater, the Atomic was smooth and easy-breathing at all test depths. It was resistant to free-flow, even when dragged into a current as a safe second on my pony bottle. Its self-adjusting venturi vane made the second stage reluctant to gush near the surface but quick to supply air at depth. Its cracking pressure was slightly higher than I get from my Scubapro D400 when it's in tune (which is definitely not a given between dive trips), but overall the Atomic was linear and fine. That's not surprising, considering that the engineers behind the Atomic were responsible for many of Scubapro's finest products.

When you put down a nonrefundable deposit on a trip and don't go, you usually expect to lose it. But what happens if you just want to go later?

Undercurrent subscriber John Cohen (Evanston IL) and his wife and another couple put down \$2000 in April, 1996, with the travel agency Landfall Productions for a March, 1998, trip to the Galapagos aboard the Lammer Law. In December, when it looked like El Nino might foul both the weather and the diving, Cohen asked Landfall to change their reservations to March, 1999. Cohen told us that “we knew it was beyond the sixty-day time limit they had set for cancellation, but we asked them to apply the deposit to a trip a year later.” After discussions with both

Landfall Productions and Duncan Muirhead, owner of the Lammer Law, Cohen was told that they must either go on the trip or forfeit their deposit. Cohen still plans to go to the Galapagos in 1999, but “it now appears we will be on a competing vessel.”

While *Undercurrent* understands why a no-refund policy

exists — trying to fill spots on a Galapagos trip three months before departure would be tough indeed — we wondered whether a little mediation on our part might help. We called Dennis Zabo of Landfall Productions, who told us that “Dr. Cohen's attempt to change his trip was made well after the stipulated sixty-day notice period spelled out in all of our literature.” Muirhead said “Dr. Cohen decided to cancel just three months from the start of the trip — 21 months from the date of his reservation. A trip to the Galapagos is not a spur of the moment decision to most people, so filling spaces in a three-month period is difficult.”

Landfall and the Lammer Law have persuasive arguments, and they're well within their rights. Although they could get full payment from the Cohen party the following year, they decided to stick with their business decision and policy. And the Cohen party, though out \$500 per person, will probably be able to duck El Nino — which may also prove to be a good business decision.

But they'd better not wait too long. Fishing is taking such a toll that Galapagos Island residents, authorities, tourist operators, and environmentalists declared March 4 a day of mourning for the archipelago, saying it is jeopardized by large-scale fishing activity. To recognize what they dubbed a “Black Monday” for the environment, participants dressed in black and marched through the streets of San Cristobal and Santa Isabel, and flags over public buildings were flown at half-mast.

Atomic claims a lower-than-normal maintenance requirement (first service at two years) and a tendency to stay in tune throughout the intervals between service due to a complete lack of corrosion and seats that unload themselves from their orifices when not in use. I doubt that anybody who can afford a \$1200 regulator cares much

about spending a few bucks on routine maintenance, but the latter is significant for somebody who is in the water a lot.

For the Shooters

For underwater photographers, one of the more intriguing products was a potential replacement for the now-discontinued Nikon 35-mm underwater single-

Undercurrent *the Ombudsman*

— *Big deposit, no return, but can I use it next year?*

lens-reflex camera. Heavy, extremely expensive, and costly to service and repair, the SLR never lived up to its advance billing. But a couple of guys from Switzerland were showing a hand-machined watertight camera body about the size of an ordinary SLR! The body houses a film transport mechanism, electronics, viewfinder, and shutter, and can accept standard 35-mm cassettes or bulk-loaded long rolls. On the front of the body is a standard autofocus Nikon lens mount surrounded by a fitting that mates with several flat and dome ports. The seals are between the body and the port, just as in a housing, which means you can attach ordinary topside lenses to the body. It will be a real coup if these guys manage to bring this product to market at a reasonable price.

Mom, Please... Not Now! I'm DIVING, for Chrissake

The Bellaqua BOB, a "Breathing Observation Bubble," looked like a little motor scooter with a seat, a steering wheel, an instrument console, and a clear bubble for your head. You sit on the seat, put your head in the bubble, turn on the tank, and motor around the reef. You could even get one for your mom, and she could follow you around the reef and bring you a snack in the middle of a dive.... Now doesn't that sound great? BOB is available singly or with a 40' catamaran that holds 10 BOBs for rental operations.

As I finished a long day of walking the aisles and was headed out the exit, I ran into a salesman preaching the merits of pre-made orthotics to improve the way your feet worked. Since by this time my feet had started to scream for mercy, I

Within 20 minutes of surfacing from an 18-minute dive to 85 feet, a diver in Indonesia experienced unusual sensations "like electrical shocks." Over the next hour, the symptoms extended to involuntary muscle contractions, pins and needles in the hands and feet, and general overall pain and nausea. He was put on oxygen and transported to the hyperbaric facility at Surabaya Naval Hospital.

His dive was routine, with normal ascent and descent rates, although he complained of a minor jellyfish sting. The sting was painful and caused a small welt on his lip, but disappeared when he treated it with vinegar.

At the hyperbaric chamber, he was decompressed to 60 feet and felt better, but the sensation of "electrical shock" was still present. On ascent to 30 feet all the symptoms returned, so treatment was continued.

Two days after the incident, his diving supervisor, Australian Russ Gately, made the same dive and was stung on his hand and forearm by jellyfish tentacles entangled around a line. In the *Journal of the South Pacific Underwater Medical Society*, he described the pain as "a red hot wire being pressed against the skin." On the surface he used vinegar and the pain and welts disappeared in 30 minutes. Soon, however, he experienced intermittent shocks from "my fingers and toes, which progressed to violent muscle spasms, chest pain, visual disturbances, and generally feeling like I had insulted Mike Tyson."

He also was transported to the Naval Hospital, where his treatment consisted of large amounts of intravenous fluids, infused antihistamines, and cortisone injections with pethidine for the pain. Says Gately: "Our divers now know that hyperbaric treatment of jellyfish stings is not appropriate. Our first aid kit now contains injectable antihistamine and corticosteroid." The species of jellyfish causing the sting has not been identified.

Put in a Chamber by a Jellyfish

was a sitting duck for this guy's pitch. When he offered to let me slump into a chair while he measured my feet (totally flat, size 14), I surrendered and was drawn in. Oh, the orthotics were about \$200, and no, I didn't buy a pair, because they looked as if they had come out of a cereal box as a free prize.

Now why was this guy at a wholesale diving trade show? Because anyone who thinks he can find a market can buy space. And it's odd products like these that add just enough fun to the

show to make it interesting, even if there are no breakthroughs.

Delmar Mesa

Our longtime equipment editor, Delmar Mesa, who has been on sabbatical from Undercurrent, will once again be sharing his invaluable tests and opinions of new dive equipment in upcoming issues.

www.Undercurrent.org

Look for *Undercurrent's* new web site coming this month.