

# More Trouble on the *Reef Explorer*

## *the \$3000 Australian cruise from hell*

The *Reef Explorer* is a small and older live-aboard boat, but surely capable of plying the far reaches of Australia's Coral Sea where no other live-aboard would venture. At least it was while it was still operated by Alan and Kim Payard, with whom I journeyed a couple of times when I reviewed the boat for *Undercurrent*.

They called it quits in 1997, selling what was once the mother ship of Ron and Valerie Taylor. The new owners have had nothing but trouble, stranding divers in a dinghy on a reef and having a crew member die due to bad air from a faulty air compressor on board (coupled with his having inadequate training for his rebreather). But the latest adventure was surely crazier than the fictional land of Oz for the six American and two Spanish divers aboard.

The trip began falling apart from the outset. In mid-October, while passengers patiently passed time, the *Reef Explorer* departed Port Douglas seven hours late for its eight-day cruise to Thursday Island. When the trip and the diving finally began, the boat's dinghy leaked, the onboard hoist broke, seals on the winch exploded, and the batteries failed, shutting down the navigation system, running lights, toilets, and cabin lights. The gas stove failed, forcing the passengers to eat cold food for a week. And a crew member with the flu passed it on to most of the passengers. Four dives a day quickly dwindled to one a day.

Several days out, American Dr. Fred Farin told the Australian *Courier Mail* that he noticed something was wrong when the 29-year-old skipper, Troy Dallman,

told him the crew wanted to sink the boat for the insurance money. Two days later, 170 miles south-east of Thursday Island, the skipper started raving that the crew wanted to mutiny. Dallman ordered a crew member to cut the anchor chain with a hacksaw and then uncapped a flare gun and held it to Farin's head.

"It was three feet from my face. Those flare launchers are worse than a gun, because they burn and you can't put them out," he said. The crew and

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### **Rob crash-tackled the Captain off his chair onto the ground, and he and others tied him up with tape.**

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passengers retreated to the stern after Dallman calmed down and discussed using a fire extinguisher to disarm him, then decided to try to calm him down.

Farin said chef Michael Griffin went to the wheel house to offer the skipper some food, and passenger Kati Donohue started massaging the skipper's neck. Then, "he just kind of burst into tears. So I started slowly taking the flare off the console that he had at his fingertips," Dr. Farin said.

During the ordeal, the boat drifted aimlessly and crashed into a reef. Crew member Carl Rickson told a television reporter "You could hear the scrape along the bottom of the boat and that's when I said to (another crewman) Rob, this is it, now. Rob ran

upstairs, I ran straight through the middle of the boat, through the saloon, and up top. Rob crash-tackled him off the (captain's) chair onto the ground," and he and others tied him up with tape.

Rickson said, "When we had him up on the top bunk, he saw a vessel on our starboard and jumped off the bunk and was trying to jump overboard. He was tied so he would not have survived. I grabbed him and pulled him down and that's when we had to really restrain him and hog-tie him. He was under constant surveillance through the night and all through the next day."

The ship was unharmed and the crew guided the boat to Thursday Island, where Dallman was hospitalized.

The guests, after dubbing their trip the "\$3000 cruise from hell," filed legal action against Reef Adventures, the owner of the boat, seeking damages for alleged breach of contract and negligence. Reef Adventures' owner, Dianne Chester, told ABC radio she was "shocked" by the incident and regretted any inconvenience to passengers.

Queensland Premier Peter Beattie subsequently issued a warning about "rogue" dive operators destroying the reputation of North Queensland's dive industry, referring not only to this incident but also to the dive boat *Outer Edge*, which while on a dive trip last January left two Americans in the water to die.

— Ben Davison

This report was prepared from stories in the *Courier Mail*, the *Australian Associate Press*, television and radio transcripts, and communication from our correspondents.