

Swirls and Surges in the California Kelp

Catalina, Farnsworth Bank, and the Channel Islands

If you're the right age and in the mood, put your favorite Jimi Hendrix CD on the headphones and read on.

We'll watch the sun rise from the bottom of the sea..

I'm hanging onto the top of a seamount at about 80 feet, and around me the terrain quickly drops off well beyond the limits of my 75-foot visibility. I'm hanging on because a medium-strong current wants to take me where it's going, while ten meters away the current is going in the opposite direction. Directly behind me, a mildly unsettling downdraft is sliding over the wall and down into infinity.

Overhead a wall of silvery baitfish blocks out the sun, and another, slightly smaller, school of different fish swims past. A dozen or so jacks cruise through the scene looking for a quick meal. A 40-lb. tuna passes by, waiting for one of the baitfish to zig when it should zag, while a barracuda swims lazily through the mix, all business. When I stop to peer into the reef, a gorgeous purple and orange aeolid nudibranch parked next to a scorpion fish beckons for my attention.

Palau? Papua New Guinea? Welcome to Farnsworth Bank, a few miles from Santa Catalina Island, off the coast of southern California. If you think of Bonaire as a Mozart quartet, easy on the soul, and Cozumel as Vivaldi, bouncing along in the gentle current, then California diving, especially in the Channel Islands, is Hendrix, with complex forms swirling all around. The kelp is the guitar, demanding

Caribbean Hurricane Planning

Planning a dive trip to the Caribbean this summer? Expect the hurricane season, which runs from June 1 to November 30, to be just as active as last year's deadly season, says Colorado State University hurricane expert Professor William Gray.

According to the Associated Press, Gray and his colleagues are predicting fourteen storms, nine of them hurricanes and four major hurricanes, in the Atlantic, Caribbean, and Gulf of Mexico.

When comparing the coming season with long-term averages, Gray suggests the U.S. Atlantic coast has twice the chance of being hit by a major storm with winds of 111 mph or higher than might be expected in an average year. He also foresees more storms that will begin in lower latitudes and therefore have a greater chance of affecting the Caribbean.

"We expect a season nearly as active as last year's. Of particular importance is our prediction that four intense hurricanes will form." Gray underestimated last year's 14 named storms, nine of which were hurricanes and three of which became intense hurricanes; he predicted 10 named storms, six of them hurricanes and two intense hurricanes.

Of course, even armed with that information, it's still a crap shoot. While the Caribbean rainy season can affect diving all summer and early fall, it's still the time of fewer tourists, generally better prices, and summer fun. And early summer travel isn't likely to coincide with storms: 87% of minor storms and a full 96% of intense storms occur during the months of August through October.

Also keep in mind that the farther south you go in the Caribbean, the more likely you are to avoid the big storm. Early season storms often begin in the Gulf of Mexico or within the Caribbean itself, but in July and August the areas of origin shift eastward. Often the fiercest storms are spawned off the western coast of North Africa as "easterly waves" that travel west along the lower trade wind flow across the Atlantic Ocean, growing in intensity as they develop. Though these storms eventually turn north and pick up speed, the farther south you are, the more likely you are to find yourself to the south of a storm approaching along the "hurricane belt." Bonaire, Tobago, and Aruba, for example, are considered outside the "hurricane belt."

your attention, but you're also aware of the surge's rhythm keeping time, the pulsing backbeat.

There must be some kinda way outa here...

The trip began at the Santa Barbara Yacht Harbor, where I spent the first night aboard the *Vision*, an 80-foot long (26-foot beam) boat that can theoretically sleep 46 divers, but generally takes about 30-35 out. If you're used to tropical live-aboards, this seems like a lot of people, and it is. But the boat is well laid out, and getting in and out of the water never seems to be a problem. The only time you may feel at somewhat close quarters is when you're sharing the bunkroom with the rest of the passengers.

At midnight, the boat pulled out and made the long run to Catalina--plan to have some seasickness meds in your bloodstream by then. When I awoke around 6:30 a.m., we were cruising the backside of Catalina, the cooks were fixing breakfast, and people were suiting up for the first dive.

The first dive at Bird Rock was representative of the three-day trip. The crew, taking their first chance to show off their talents, parked the boat just a few yards from the large guano-covered rock and anchored it bow and stern. A quick step off one of the side gates three or four feet above the surface, and I was in the water. (Six- to eight-foot entries off the bow are more exciting.) Theoretically, you're expected to have a buddy, but if you seem competent, nobody will say anything if you dive solo. Visibility was 60-plus feet, and sunlight poured down through the kelp, which grows down to a depth of about 70-80 feet. Sardines, senoritas, and rockfish played in the kelp, and my buddy yelled into his reg to point out a bat ray winging its way past. Poking our lights into the rocks, we found lobsters, nudibranchs, and octopi.

I could spend entire dives just watching the garibaldi. Their bright orange color provides a delightful contrast to the muted tones of most temperate water fish. And their typical damsel aggressiveness means that you can get a macro framer right around their faces. But, oh, the juveniles--now here's a fish that the guitar master himself would appreciate. They're the same orange shade as the adults but speckled with stunning iridescent blue spots, rivaling anything the South Pacific has to offer.

Kelp diving is like a walk in a red-wood forest--sunlight dappling through the canopy. Small fish flit around near the surface, and the larger and ground-based animals populate the reef below. My buddy got to see his first horn shark on this trip, carefully tucked, as is their wont, into a rock crevice. Other divers found a huge school of Pacific sardines and played in the school for an entire safety stop. (Don't expect weighted lines for safety stops; California divers are used to making their safety stops on kelp.)

Not all night dives were good; I ended one after only 15 minutes. The urchins, which hide in the rocks during the day, come out at night, and, as is common, we were dealing with surge. Urchins and surge simply don't mix.

Frightened Fish

Do fish show emotions? Rufus Wells of New Zealand's University of Auckland says indeed they do. Writing in *New Scientist*, he says that "rather than regulating their cardiac output by varying heart rate like mammals, they change the stroke volume of their hearts.... The primary endocrine responses to stress in fish are a surge of catecholamines, followed by a sustained release of cortisol — precisely the same mechanism as in humans. The concentrations of adrenaline and cortisol that occur in fish exposed to such mild stresses as a person walking into the viewing gallery of an aquarium suggest that fishes are sensitive souls indeed."

— From *New Scientist*, June 6, 1998

the captain makes a 30-second, mostly-intelligible announcement about the location over the P.A., and then the gates are open. Depending on how much people like the site, the weather, etc., the gates may stay open for up to two hours. While they're open, you can do as many dives as your computer permits, assuming you can get your tank filled quickly enough by the on-board compressors. During slack times on the boat you can usually be back in the water in a matter of minutes, nitrogen permitting.

The *Vision* and all the other Truth Aquatics boats leave from the Santa Barbara Yacht Harbor, a beautiful two-hour drive north of Los Angeles. That puts them very close to the northern Channel Islands (Santa Cruz and Anacapa), but, as described above, it makes for a long trip to Catalina. Other boats leave out of the San Pedro Harbor in Los Angeles and San Diego. From there, they also have access to southern sites such as San Clemente and the Coronado Islands. The *Vision* maintains a "no wetsuits below" rule, so the group bunkroom stays clean and dry. Bunks were nothing fancy, just privacy-curtained berths with vinyl-covered sleep mats, about half of them singles and half doubles. But it was perfectly comfortable for the three night trip.

Two hard-working cooks prepare the food, and, while it's not gourmet cuisine, it is delicious and filling. We had fish one night and steak the other. Lunches were sandwiches and roll-your-own burritos. Breakfast was cooked-to-order, but most divers found that sticking to bagels and the like helped the food stay down when the boat rocked. Snacks such as cookies or chips with salsa and cream cheese are always available to satisfy the dive-induced munchies. Sodas, juice, tea, and coffee are complimentary and always available, and, although no alcohol is offered, divers are welcome to BYOB. Seating was informal: there are half a dozen tables seating six in the galley, and you sit wherever you plop down.

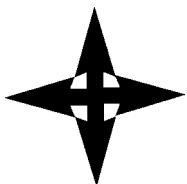
Weather is always a factor in California diving, so don't count on any particular dive site. It was pleasant weather during my trip with temperatures in the 70s, but rough weather is common, and open-ocean locations such as Farnsworth Bank and Cortes Bank off San Clemente Island are particularly susceptible to getting blown out, although they make up for it with retina-searing diving when you can get there.

The crossing to and from Santa Barbara is over a major marine mammal thoroughfare; those trips are often interrupted by gray (and occasionally blue) whale sightings. If you knew Truth Aquatics many years ago, you recall boats filled with underwater hunters carrying weapons of destruction and chests full of dead fish being carried off the boat. While that has not altogether ceased, the emphasis is much more on taking pictures--a welcome change.

But first, are you experienced?

If not, I'd encourage you not to make this your first dive trip after getting your c-card in the Florida Keys. Have some California diving experience under your weightbelt before you do the Channel Islands; you'll have more fun.

— K.L.



Diver's Compass: Contact Truth Aquatics at 805-962-1127, fax 805-564-6754. They're on the web at <http://www.truthaquatics.com>. Truth Aquatics has a few open boats, but most are chartered by dive shops and dive clubs (they'll give you the name of the shop that's reselling the boat)...My three-day trip on the *Vision* cost \$400, including all food and airfills...There's a full-service dive shop on the dock that has some rental gear...no Nitrox is available...In Santa Barbara, consider staying at West Beach Inn, 805-963-4277; El Patio/Best Western, 805-963-9772; or Fess Parker's Double Tree Resort, 805-564-4333.