

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Diving From Costa Rica's Mainland

hit or miss magic on the Bat and Catalina Islands

IN THIS ISSUE:

Costa Rica: Rich Coast Diving	1
Equipment Tip: BCs	2
Kangaroo Island	4
Travel Tip: Fiji & New Zealand ..	5
<i>Andrea Doria</i>	6
Books	7-10
Travel Tip: Curaçao	11
Why Divers Die: Part III Lack of Physical Fitness	12
Diet for the Bends	13
All-Season Wetsuit ...	14
Testing Dive Computers	15
Malaria Awareness: At Risk Even in Honduras	17
Taking Lariam?	17
DEET	18
Self-Test for the Bends	18
Local Chamber Fees: Do They Help?	19
Flotsam & Jetsam	20

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Dear Fellow Divers:

I'm sure they named it "Rainbow" for the colors: white gorgonian coral; anemones from palest lemon to deepest saffron; octopi turning pistachio green, then ice blue; volcanic rock deepening from dark, rusty red to ebony. Of course, I didn't know that before I backrolled into the water off Costa Rica's Catalina Islands. I just bobbed there like an apple in a bucket, waiting till all the divers had splashed in. Steve, the dive instructor taking out divers from Rich Coast Diving, led us in a languorous descent through the 85° water, past the top of the wall at 40', through a thermocline at 70', and down into the chillier 68° to 70° water. We stopped at 85', though the wall itself stretched down past the limits of the 40' visibility. At the base of some rocks, two 10' black tip reef sharks lay on a sand patch. Since there was no coral to damage, I stretched out on the rocks and watched them. They were motionless except for the occasional lazy circle. After 5 minutes a colossal 12' southern stingray swooped in, making a beeline for the sharks. It dive-bombed the duo, slapping at them, then circled for another pass. The big fellows never budged.

Continuing past the corner of a rocky point, a stronger current pulled me past a stretch of rock garnished with orange and yellow sea anemones. Nearby, an octopus spotted me and flushed mint green. I moved again, and he darkened to ice-blue before swimming off. In the distance, a murky shape slowly came into focus: a 15' manta at 30', so slow it reminded me of a big grazing cow. Steve used his octopus to give its belly a bubble massage. It slowed, luxuriating in the bubbles till Steve's declining air finally forced us to 15' for our safety stop.

Hardly sounds like a budget dive vacation, does it? Yet this junket to Costa Rica's Playa del Coco, an inviting, horseshoe-shaped bay pinched between two rocky points, was a belt-tightening trip on the cheap: a bare-bones, cold-water room at the 6-unit Cabinas de Catarino ran a measly \$5.50 a day. It had the basics, like clean sheets, ceiling fans, and private bath, though the shower was a pipe sticking out of the wall, the windows empty squares that had never seen glass, and the walls concrete blocks with holes, backed by netting to keep out bugs. For more dinero I could have had some ambiance: rooms at Luna Tica and Anexo Luna Tica, right on the beach, were \$8-12/night. They weren't bad: hardwood floors, walls all the same color, tile baths, and hot water. Coughing up \$30-\$90 gets a/c, television, and a swimming pool at Puerta del Sol and other Playa hotels. Undercurrent subscribers with more upscale tastes often bed at the El Ocotal Beach Resort, just up the beach at Playa Ocotal, which oozes all the luxury-resort amenities from restaurants to nightclubs to adventure and ecotour excursions.

Pinching pennies at dinnertime hardly meant bread and water. I ate great seafood, Italian, and Mexican nightly. A true gourmet, Louisianian Bob Williams is culinary artist-in-residence at Papagayo Seafood, a local eatery where \$7 garnered me grilled yellowfin tuna with pineapple-rum sauce, pesto pasta, zucchini, and Caesar salad. Inexpensive breakfasts were offered up and down the main drag (or I should say the only drag, since the road you'll take if you drive or take the bus into town widens into the main street). At night there are a few dance spots and lots of beachside bars for studying the sunset. While it's helpful to speak Spanish, English gets you by just fine, and Costa Rica's so safe and friendly that I never felt uncomfortable wandering back to my room at night.

The one place I wasn't skimping was on diving. I did as much as I could squeeze in with Carol and Skyler Chapman's Rich Coast Diving, a first-rate operation run by a couple whose dive history runs back past their underwater wedding. Jokes fly here, and there's an informal, family atmosphere. Sunburnt Skyler has blond hair, a blondish mustache, and a super-friendly disposition. Brown-haired, blue-eyed Carol is just as outgoing. Dive instructors Steve and Keelie, a couple of Victoria, B.C., expats in their early 20s, round out the staff. Steve's serious but lively (that black goatee gives him a dignified air), while Keelie's reserved and laid back. Most of the divemasters are locals, often former hookah-diving fishermen who grew up on local sites. After years spent combing sites at the end of an air hose and compressor, they know them like the back of their hand.

EQUIPMENT TIP — BCs: I like my integrated BC, and, generally speaking, the concept of slipping weights inside the BC's attached, Velcro-fastened pockets works just fine. The guy who has to heft it back on the dive boat may not appreciate it as much, although in tropical waters I only add six pounds of weight to my U.S. Diver Alcyone BC's specially designed pockets, which allow a diver to ditch weight in an emergency by pulling a cord.

While it's never been a big problem, I have lost lead from these pouches when an exceptionally high giant stride loosened the Velcro holding the weights in. For reader Dave Guccione, however, losing weights has become a big problem: not only do the weights fall out of his Genesis Phantom BC with giant strides from 6 feet or higher, but they've also fallen out at depth when he's been swimming horizontally.

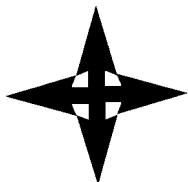
Guccione spent some time discussing his problem with Genesis' sales rep. When we heard from Guccione, he had a few tips that may help those of you who use integrated BCs.

- Use soft weights in integrated weight pouches. Hard lead weights slide around in the pouches, weakening the grip of the Velcro.
- Make a pouch check part of the buddy check before entering the water.
- Check your weight pouches often during a dive to see if they have slipped or been pulled loose when you brushed up against some object or person.
- Be judicious about the amount of weight inserted into the pouch.
- Don't put all your eggs in one basket: distribute weights among the pouches. That way, if you do lose one at depth, there is less chance that the loss will precipitate an out-of-control ascent.

— John Q. Trigger

and windy with rougher seas. If you hit it right you're in for a diving treat. And if you hit it wrong? Well, Costa Rica is an incredible ecotour destination. The surfing, sailing, and snorkeling's good at Playa del Coco, and Costa Rica's hot springs, volcanoes, and white-water rivers are only a couple hours away. If you miss out underwater, you're bound to score topside.

— P. G.



Diver's Compass: Rich Coast Diving: 506-670-0176, 506-391-4980; fax 506-670-0176; e-mail dive@richcoastdiving.com; website www.richcoastdiving.com. El Ocotal Resort reservations: 506-670-0321; fax 506-670-0083; e-mail elocotal@sol.racsa.co.cr; website www.tourism.co.cr/hotels/ocotal/index.html. Rooms from \$62 US/std. room low season to \$186 US/ocean suite peak season; meals \$25 US/day MAP; \$52 US/day FAP; dive packages available. Puerta del Sol: phone 506-670-0650; e-mail

hotelsol@racsa.co.cr; website www.lapuertadelsol.com...Delta and Continental have direct flights into San Jose, 4 hours away by car, or take a commuter flight to Liberia, 45 min. away...good side trip for trips to Malpelo or Cocos...c-cards checked, log books not...aluminum 80s, 3000+ psi, Nitrox available...oxygen, first-aid equipment on board...well-maintained rental equipment available, no camera or video rentals, some repairs possible...E-6 processing in Liberia (45 min. drive), camera table in shop...air temps 85° day, 70° night...few bugs...often moderate currents, some drift dives offered...air temps between 60° and 85° year-round...

Kangaroos and LSD

Looking for leafy sea dragons in Australia



At one time or another most serious divers make a trip to Australia's Great Barrier Reef or Coral Sea. For those of you who wouldn't let a little cold water stand between you and some excellent diving with bizarre creatures, our travel correspondent has found an offbeat destination that may be just the add-on for that big trip.

Dear Fellow Divers:

I'd expected some exciting diving, but I hadn't expect the excitement to start till I got in the water. Instead the adrenaline kicked in a short way down the road to where the boat was moored, a 45-minute route aptly named White Knuckle. Here we were: an ancient army transport bouncing through verdant hills populated with exotic echidnas, glossy black cockatoos, and wedge-tailed eagles, then snaking down a thousand-foot drop along a precipitous dirt track to the shore of South Australia's Kangaroo Island.

The 20-minute run to the sites was much smoother. Soon Jim Thiselton, our guide and the only dive operator on this coast of Kangaroo Island, was dropping anchor at a spot sheltered by the island cliffs, a site drolly named Pissyboy Rock for its nearby blowhole. New Zealand fur seals stretched lazily as they watched us gear up and stride into the cool water. As we began our descent, we wondered if this 58° water really could be Australia? There was no hard coral to