

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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From San Diego to San Benito, Mexico

Spearfishing and scuba aboard the Horizon

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Dear Fellow Diver:

I'd spent nearly three and a half hours floating on the surface with a cocked spear gun, waiting for a worthy target. Occasionally I'd drop down to hunt, but nothing had caught my fancy. For the most part, I'd watch the tens of thousands shimmering baitfish, swimming at random, feeding on plankton. At times, they would quickly ball up, sensing danger, then, they would slide in one direction and I'd look the other way to watch the hunters arrive. Sometimes it was sea lions. Occasionally schools of 30 or more barracuda came to hunt. Several times I dropped down to be surrounded by hundreds of eight- to ten-pound yellowtails. I still waited.

The water was chilly, even in August. I needed a full 7mm wetsuit to keep me warm on the 68-degree surface. Below, I'd frequently hit a thermocline, where the water dropped below 60. The visibility ranged from a murky 15 feet to 70 feet, which is where it was today.

The trick is to drop down and wait. I don't use a flotation device. I weight myself to be neutrally buoyant at 20 feet, so I become negative as I go deeper, making the descent effortless. If I were to get into trouble, I'd drop my weight belt and my buoyancy would carry me to the surface. The goal is to relax, rid oneself of anxiety, make no unnecessary movement, conserve every molecule of air. The experts stay down a couple of minutes. As a scuba diver who does ab diving, I could last 45 seconds, getting as deep as 50 feet, with the aid of my long Cressi fins.

There again a bait ball formed. I kicked down among several small yellowtails. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a larger shape, perhaps a small seal, but no, this time



a plump yellow tail, several times the size of others. Stay cool, let the fish come to you, don't make a futile effort chasing it. Still, I became anxious, excited, and kicked once, twice and again, directly at the fish, my arm extending the gun, my left hand on the butt, so the recoil wouldn't crush my mask. Intent on feeding, the yellow tail ignored my advance. I pulled the trigger and instantaneously my spear pierced the fish behind its gills. Whoa, the shot line became entangled in the rubber bands that power the six-foot shaft. I had to fight my fish with only 20 feet of line and did he take me on a ride, in fact several rides to the bottom. Several times I kicked to the

surface for a gulp of air only to be dragged down again. Once at the surface I waved wildly for the boat crew. In moments the inflatable arrived and Ron, the captain helped me untangle the line. Finally, I was able to fight my fish from the surface. Gradually, I brought in my fish. When I slid my hand into the gills, the fish was mine. Thirty-seven pounds of yellowtail, destined for sushi and barbecue.

Now, before you cast aspersions on spear fishing, let me have a word with you. First, please recognize this is about spearing food fish; not elegant angelfish or beautiful triggerfish, or fish that hand feeding has tamed. This is about the fish you order in restaurants or buy at the supermarket. It's about the method of catching fish for food. It's not about spearing fish for contests, piling them up in front for photos and leaving them to rot in the sun. It's not about net fishing, where for every food fish taken, pounds of bycatch, are thrown overboard, dead. The demand for the firm white flesh of the halibut results in a bycatch of sea birds and sea otters. Dolphins, sea lions and even whales get hung up in fishing nets, so we can feast on mahi-mahi or snapper. It's not about longline fishing, where you don't know what ends up on a hook. The Hawaiian longline industry, filling the demand created by fine restaurants and sushi bars for ahi, inadvertently hook as many as 100,000 sharks a year, and a countless number of turtles, most of which are thrown back dead. Spearfishing is about singling out a specific fish that can feed a family. While the oceans are being raped, spearing is the least intrusive fishing method of all. Unlike a bear or deer shot in the wild by a hunter, if the fish doesn't die on the end of a spear, it may very well end up on someone's plate, thanks to other fishing techniques. Even commercial pen-raised salmon creates problems, as they pollute the waters they're raised in and, when they escape, ruin the gene pool of wild salmon.



Still, you don't have to be a spearfisher to enjoy the waters of San Benito Island, 280 miles south of San Diego, and 50 miles off Mexico's Baja Coast. Of the 20 passengers aboard the *Horizon*, seven were scuba-only divers, here to see the maelstrom of life where the cold pacific waters are pushed up the ridges to meet with the southern sun. Life flourishes, as it once did off California's islands many years ago. Here, plankton to predators thrive. Guadeloupe fur seals constantly greeted me to dive, roll, blow bubbles with and make it painfully obvious how well suited they are for their environment. I had an advantage over scuba divers, because

the seals moved in closer and were less frenetic than with divers blowing exhaust. California sea lions and elephant seals share the island. Among the thick kelp beds, their stocks gently swaying in the surge, are brilliant orange Garibaldi, sheepshead, wrasse, grand daddy kelp bass, as well as colorful nudibranchs and flat worms. Kicking out of the sunlit kelp beds, I saw hordes of pelagic fish in blue water, attracted by schools of sardine and pacific mackerel. The life and death energy is storybook. The smaller fish hunting in packs, the lunkers hunting as singles and pairs, the sea lions hunting the bait fish as well as the pelagics. Though I saw not a shark, one can assume that each is hunter and hunted.

The *Horizon*, which sails out of San Diego for these one-week summer trips, is 80-feet long with a 25-foot beam. This is no luxury craft, not an Aggressor nor a member of the Hughes fleet. It's outfitted for divers who seek adventure, not indulgence. Cruising between nine to ten knots, the trip to the islands takes a full day, and two nights and a day and a half coming back. With fairly calm seas each way, the captain kept the boat at a comfortable angle to the seas. Two compressors on the upper deck made sunbathing a noisy event, but weren't a disturbance in the salon or cabins. Navy showers were the rule (turn off the water while you lather) in the two private showers and the single on the deck. There is a dryer for wet towels and clothing and wet-suits were dried overnight in the engine room. The heads were kept clean and well stocked. The awkward-positioned mirrors created a daily paranoia of dropping a contact lens into marine head.

Eight staterooms on the sides of the boat have two bunks, a dresser, clothes hooks, and ample storage under the lower bunk. Outside the staterooms is a cluster of public bunks. Double bunks are barely sufficient for two small people; on my trip, no one shared a double. Each bunk has a good reading light. While they provide sheets, blankets, and pillows, my sheets slipped right off the vinyl mattress. A sleeping bag might have been more comfortable. The engines are audible during transit, but I slept well, especially since air conditioning kept belowdecks com-

Blast fishing Slim pickings, yet major damage

A week-long, international gathering of coral reef experts in Bali in October drew 1,500 scientists from 54 countries to discuss the condition of coral reefs, 25 percent of which have already been destroyed. The Environmental News Network reported that as the conference went on, blast fishermen across Indonesia set out every day in small boats with homemade bombs, fashioned from beer bottles and filled with fertilizer, kerosene and a simple fuse. They continued their regular practice of bombing shallow water above coral reefs and scooping up the fish that floated to the surface. Each bomb left a car-sized patch of flattened coral rubble, often in world-class dive sites. They knew that many environmental watchdogs who help rangers track down the bombers, would be away at the coral reef symposium.

In Indonesia, where blast fishing has degraded 75 percent of the reefs, laws are most often enforced when outside organizations help rangers and police. In Sulawesi, dive operators collect a voluntary \$5/diver to fund reef patrols. Says marine biologist Mark Erdmann, who works as an adviser to the national park and with the North Sulawesi Watersports Association, "We pay approximately \$200 to \$300 for a two-day patrol and have gotten two big busts for bomb fishing. The local community actually supports it."

Wondering how destructive illegal blast fishing actually is, two years ago scientists monitored two bomb fishermen in North Sulawesi. They collected all fish killed by two blasts, each from a kerosene-fertilizer bomb in a glass soda bottle. The fishermen threw one bomb into a school of fusiliers they could see 25 feet down. They threw the other at random over a reef slope nearly 100 feet deep.

The targeted blast killed 165 lbs. of fish (2,153 individuals), of which 154 lbs. were tiny fusiliers. The remaining 11 lbs. included parrotfish, bream, triggerfish, and squirrelfish. Less than 3 lbs. of the fish floated. While the two fishermen only made a profit of US \$8.35, it was more than five times the average worker's daily salary in Indonesia.

The random blast yielded 24 lbs. of fish (971 individuals). Less than 20 percent was marketable, so the fishermen lost about \$4 after subtracting the cost of the bomb. Most of the fish were damsels (776 individuals weighing 13 lbs.) — and fusiliers (43 weighing 4.6 lbs.). Fifty or fewer wrasse, squirrelfish, triggerfish, butterflyfish, Moorish idols, bigeyes, and groupers were also killed. Most of the fish killed sank. Blast fishermen, who mainly free dive, can only collect a few.

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San Benito via the Horizon

Beginning Scuba divers	don't go
Experienced Scuba divers	★★★★★
Spearfishers	★★★★
Accommodations	★★1/2
Food	★★★1/2
Money's worth	★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent
(Eastern Pacific scale)

fortable. At St. Benito (which regulars call St. "Bent") the boat moved during the hours most people were awake. The back deck had plenty of room for suiting up, however if everyone were on scuba it would get crowded. And if the boat had a full complement of 32, it would be a mess, from bow to stern.

The four dive crew served me well, running a safe and satisfying trip. They set up tanks and BC's for the duration. Filled to 3,300 PSI, the tanks were ready whenever a diver was. Fins, masks, and wetsuits were stored along the gunnels in gear bags or ice chests. One can enter the water with a giant stride through

side gates or off the swim step with ladders to get on board. Three inflatables take divers to distant sites and when divers were in the water, there was always one boat in communication with the divemaster by radio. When a scuba diver surfaced, they dispatched the inflatable for pick up. Free divers raised their spearguns to beckon the inflatable, either for a move to another site or to hand over a fish. Each anchorage generally allowed a couple of options for diving, depending on the conditions and animals one wanted to see. Though some sites on open pinnacles had ripping currents, protected areas could easily be found for scuba divers and photographers. The depths for scuba were generally moderate, while spearfishers hunted the edges of the blue water, where the bottom may drop to miles below.

Photography, especially wide angle, was terrific, with great shots in kelp with sea lions passing through sun drenched fronds, rocky cliffs with white water, schools of fish, etc. The curious and playful sea lions and fur seals provided endless opportunities for terrific portraits. An array of nudibranchs, and small jellyfish make for other interesting photos. While free diving, all my shots were with black and white film in available light, a long lost underwater technique back in vogue. The *Horizon* is photographer-friendly; there's a rinse tank only for cameras, an area outside for cameras ready to go and one inside for extra cameras, lenses, and camera bags. The first couple of dives there was some scorn directed by photographers toward the spearfishers and some rumblings from the scuba divers that the trip was focused on spearfishing. However, after some exploration and finding the clear water, everyone lightened up and some even gave spearfishing a try.

Blue-water hunting requires a spear gun powerful enough to penetrate and hold a large fish at 20 feet. I use a Riffe Islander rigged with four 9/16' diameter rubber bands, generating 360 pounds of thrust. Connecting the spear to the gun is a stainless steel shotline that is also connected to a floating line attached to a float. After a large fish is hit, the shot line breaks away from the gun. As the fish runs, the diver can surface and fight the fish from the surface. A good sharp dagger, inserted into the brain, is ideal for the coup de grace. Some divers use larger guns, treating San Bent as a warm up for tuna and wahoo blue-water hunting later trips. Their guns can generate 600 pounds of thrust. A new spear fisher was not prepared for the kick when he fired his gun for the first time; he ended with a blow to his cheek. The recoil can shatter a mask, or break a nose. A good set of gloves protects against sharp fish spines and frays on the steel cable. Note: pneumatic spearguns are against the law in Mexico and one is forbidden from taking lobster or abalone.

While I generally find scuba diving effortless, free diving is effortless in its ideal, but it is much more active than scuba. With hours in the water you can

Atomic Regulator Recall

The possibility of a failing first-stage spring has prompted regulator manufacturer Atomic Aquatics to announce a voluntary recall of all models.

Atomic President Dean Garraffa, told *Undercurrent* that although there had been no reported incidents of in water failure or diver injury, three regulators undergoing routine servicing were discovered to have cracked springs, which can result in a free flow. The company contacted the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission for advice in launching the recall, which covers about 3,500 T1, B1 & Z1 regulators manufactured between May 11, 1999 and October 27, 1999 and carrying serial numbers A07751-A11276.

Owners may determine the serial number of their regulator by removing the mouthpiece. The number is prominently displayed on the top of the second-stage body where the piece attaches. You may return a regulator falling within the recall range to the nearest dealer for free replacement of the spring. Alternatively, the owner may call Atomic at 1-888-270-8595 or 714 375-1433 to arrange for factory servicing. The website is www.atomicaquatics.com

Jeff Allen, a senior technician at Atomic, told *Undercurrent* that the company will cover shipping charges in both directions. He said the regulators can be turned around in 1-3 days.

imagine what a hunger it kicks up. Breakfasts included eggs any style as well as omelets with a variety of ingredients, French toast, pancakes, cereal, coffee, juice, muffins, served with bacon, sausage, or ham. Before lunch and dinner we typically had hamachi (raw yellowtail with Japanese horseradish and soy sauce) for an appetizer. Other times it was ceviche Mexican or Australian style (seven parts white vinegar, one part olive oil, onions, capers, salt and pepper), even seared ahi might appear. This was followed by a variety of hearty meals comprising fish, beef and chicken, usually grilled on a Weber. Lunch varied from hot-cooked meals to cold-cut sandwiches, along with hot soup. Portions were ample but not extravagant. The in-between-dive snacks were sparse. After diving was done beer was available for \$2-\$3.50 a bottle. Coffee, bottled water and soda were on the house. A couple of the crew had side businesses going; Mark

served up rum and tequila and sold premium coffee at 75 cents/cup. Wine was available but many brought their own favorite.

I spent the evenings telling lies to my companions, watching videos, playing cards, or watching the moon. There is no stereotype for spearfishers: they are men and women, ranging in ages from 20-60. Some were novice, others very experienced, with two-minute bottom time not unusual. One fellow with long scruffy hair, rolled up in kelp like an otter; it was a kick watching baby fur seals looking to suckle. Another lost his spear tip in 100 feet of water and free dived until he found it. I watched him on an evening dive go poke around at 50 feet, where on one breath he saw lobster, a horned shark and a ray. Another, a retired dentist, was often in the galley with needle and thread, magnifiers on, stitching up someone's sliced finger or punctured calf -- his precise needlework always closed the wound. Sharp knives, spear points honed to a needle point, fish hooks, etc., give him plenty of work. When done, he dropped off to dives to 60 feet to nail a white Seabass, a wily adversary. People tell stories of losing fish to sharks in the Socorro islands. Or at nearby Guadeloupe Island, seeing big tuna, wahoo and the ultimate predator: White sharks. Testosterone and good-natured competition abound. Yet, if someone had a problem with gear, there was always several people ready to help. Experienced divers shared tips, tricks, and techniques. Between everyone, it was genuine goodwill.

Of course, on such a long trip there's a lot of transit time, which you can pass fishing (you need a rod with a 6/0 reel with 50-pound test, a few live-bait hooks in sizes 2 and 1, a few Salas type jigs). The tackle shops at the landing can help you out. You might be able to borrow a rod from someone on board, as there are only five trolling spots, which rotate when a fish is caught. It's a fast troll at nine knots. Get lures that are designed for this speed.

Jerry, the divemaster, the one who puts the trip together (through Marin Skin Diving in San Rafael, CA) is also a fine brewmaster who got the friendship rolling by bringing along a few kegs of his favorite beer and a keg of root beer. There is

nothing like the open ocean, calm seas, cold beer, and the frenzy of a wild bite on tuna to start the stories rolling.

So, getting a bit bored with tame fish, group dives, and the same old, same old? Get the adrenaline flowing by leaving the tanks behind and heading out on the *Horizon*, where you can be a hunter and perhaps even hunted.

-- P.I.



Divers Compass: The *Horizon* runs trips to Mexico's Islands from June to November. For seven days figure \$150/days; because of reduced passengers, our trip was \$1,400. The *Horizon* offers 1-3 to California destinations for \$100-\$120/day (food included)... The 10 trips to Mexico this summer have been chartered by various groups, including dive stores; call 858-277-7823 or go to www.horizoncharters.com to see bunk layouts, prices, schedule, biographies of crew, as well as

photos of the boat. The *Horizon* is based in the San Diego harbor, five minutes from the San Diego airport ... they arrange Mexican fishing licenses; its boat does not land in Mexico so passports are not required ... they did check c-cards. Bring all your gear, with backups; including a weightbelt. Nothing but tanks are available on board. Daytime temps were mid 70s, the nights are cool, so long pants, sweat pants, a sweater, a lined windbreaker, even a wool-watch cap can be helpful if the Pacific fog comes in. If you want to bring fish home bring a large ice chest. They freeze the fish on board, and ice and dry ice is available at the landing. You can exchange your fish on the dock for smoked fish (and a fee). Expect to catch albacore, yellowfin and blue-fin tuna, yellowtail, and dorado.

Marine Parks, Arrogant Management, Seven-Mile Beach

Important updates in land-based operations

Changes are ever occurring at diving destinations worldwide. Since we completed the 2001 *Chapbook* we've learned about a few new diving possibilities and changes in operations that might affect your plans. Here's the latest:

The Yap of Luxury

On Yap, located in Micronesia, the new hotel Traders' Ridge is getting great reviews. Teryl and Keith McLane, there in October said, "Traders' Ridge was a million times nicer than Palau Pacific. We were absolutely spoiled and it cost less than Palau's PPR. Our dive buddies got booked into the Manta Ray Bay Hotel and were depressed after they saw where we were staying. Everyone was incredibly nice. When you get back to your room at night not only has your brand new, king-sized bed been turned down, but there are fresh flowers scattered over the bed-

spread." Kirk Faryniasz, Yigo, Guam, says "Traders' Ridge is marvelous and the food fantastic. Wonderful chef. Beyond the Reef is a small

"One night down the road, the festival boomed music so loud that we felt the bass in our beds until 2:40 a.m."

operation but gets you to some of the best dive sites." Less than PPR, but still expensive at \$175/room/night an up. www.tradersridge.com.

Statia Marine Park

When we reviewed the Caribbean's St. Eustatius years ago, we found the diving mediocre, but reports of a rebound of fish, thanks to a protected marine park, ought to merit a revisit. Statia is a small Dutch island between Saba and St. Kitts a

30-minute flight from St. Martin. Terry and Karen Plaxton (W. Bloomfield, MI) there in September stayed at The Old Gin House. "Fourteen rooms, AC, very nice private pool, great dining room and bar, directly across the street from the waterfront. Lots of good healthy coral, fairly good tropicals, tons of lobster and rays. No sharks. Some turtles. Most diving is within the Marine Park so there are large filefish, queen and French angelfish goldentail and spotted morays, flying gumards, spotted drums. Golden Rock Dive Center is very 'user friendly' and a lot of fun. Dive the Blue Bead Hole — if you find a blue bead it's a real treasure and keepsake." www.oldginhouse.com

Bad Deal in Dominica

Two recent comments would surely make me avoid the Castaways Hotel in Dominica. Dave Kasper (Ann Arbor, MI) took a group of