

each case, we had to talk to administrative people to get a specific interpretation of Ed's case. Customer service reps at the firms' toll-free numbers couldn't handle this hot potato.

What else can you do to avoid getting into a jam like Ed's? First, read and understand the cancellation policy of any resort or live-aboard before you send money. If you have questions or concerns, demand answers in writing, by e-mail or fax, and be sure to keep copies for future reference. Oral understandings, in the words of Samuel Goldwyn, "aren't worth the paper they're printed on."

Most live-aboard operators also recommend that you give yourself an extra day or two at the port of embarkation both before and after the boat trip. With airline delays and rescheduling becoming almost epidemic, more travelers are building in this kind of cushion. Given an extra 24 hours or so, you can also adjust to time and climate changes before putting out to sea. And in case your luggage gets lost, you increase your chances of retrieving it before

departure, since about 98 percent of lost bags are returned within a few hours, according to *Consumer Reports*. You might also determine in advance whether the live-aboard has contingency plans to pick up stragglers, or if it calls at any ports where you could catch up via local puddle jumper.

An opposite strategy is just not to book so far in advance. When you're ready to go, phone around or check the Internet to see what's available, and make your plans accordingly. Two weeks notice should be sufficient to book reasonable airfare, and there's less time for something to go wrong before your departure date. You might even save some money. If a resort or live-aboard has cancellations within their no-refund period, they often offer those accommodations at reduced rates, just to fill the empty slots.

But perhaps the most important lesson, one that repeats itself over and over in travel disputes, is this: Get every promise in writing, clearly and unequivocally. In Ed's case as well as most others we

hear about, the root cause of disputes is a misunderstanding between the resort, or carrier, and the client. Sometimes intentional, sometimes not, but either way the results are the same: a major waste of time, effort and often money spent trying to resolve the dispute after the fact.

Ordering Trip Insurance

Coverage and premiums vary significantly by carrier, so it's wise to comparison shop.

Major carriers include:

Access America, 800-284-8300,

www.accessamerica.com

Travel Guard, 800-826-1300,

www.travelguard.com

CSA Plan, 800-348-9505,

www.travelsecure.com

Travelex, 888-457-4602,

www.travelex-insurance.com

Travel Insured, 800-243-3174,

www.travelinsured.com

You can get premium quotes over the phone or online, and be sure to compare the terms and conditions, but don't be shy about calling or e-mailing with additional questions. And get all replies in writing.

High Art or Abysmal Hype?

There's been a bit of rout over a recent advertisement placed by Abysmal Diving, a technical diving company located in Boulder, Colo. The ad, which depicts a forlorn teen-age boy kneeling beside a gravestone, with the headline: "Because You Keep Your Promises" — was pulled from future issues of *Dive Trade International*, a UK based trade magazine, after the publisher reportedly received scores of reader communiques protesting

what some deemed a pestiferous display.

The fact that Abysmal's ad would anger some people whose business depends on attracting consumers to diving, comes as no surprise. As one dive veteran suggested, "They might as well run a picture of the grim reaper with a dive flag flying from his sickle." Indeed, the company's shock jocks, founder and president Chris Parrett and vice president Joel Silverstein, told me that they

Equipment to die for

hoped the ad would stir up controversy. Of course, in this regard, censorship is usually its own reward. Thank you *Dive Trade*.

"They might as well run a picture of the grim reaper with a dive flag flying from his sickle."

Whether the ad has some kind of redeeming social value — that it could be deemed high art masquerading as commerce, and therefore could justify its continuing presence in the august publication — is irrelevant. For example, this ad doesn't touch the level of advertising for "the United Colors of Benetton." So we're left with the question that every advertiser must ultimately ask itself: Will it sell it more gear? In this case: the oxygen analyzer, regulator and mixed-gas computer were highlighted in the ad. And at what price?

Promise Keepers

I, for one, was at first confused by the ad's premise. As the copy explains, Abysmal makes gear to help you keep your promises. And what promises would those be: "I swear I'm going to bring back some first-class china or die

trying"? How about, "If you join that rival agency I am never going to speak to you again"? No, but now I get it. The creators meant to imply that the poor stiff used the wrong (and deadly) dive gear — so that consumers will be dying to try Abysmal gear, and keep their promise just to return home from the dive.

Unfortunately, this is a sore point in a diminutive, yet vital industry that can't afford to lose any customers. All joking aside, every time a diver dies diving we all lose a little. Of course, diving will never be risk-free. And that's the rub. For a long time, the industry tried to paper over the dangers, believing that by pretending that diving was as safe as bowling, they would attract more customers.

Then came technical diving, which is downright dangerous.

According to Divers Alert Network (DAN), technical-level diving accounted for 28 US deaths in 1998 and 1999, out of a total of 161 US diving fatalities. That's 17 percent of the total, although certified techies represent less than 1.5 percent of the overall diving population. As a result, the dive industry, has been forced to present a more realistic picture of the risks — to do otherwise would be negligent, not to mention irresponsible.

The Right Stuff

However, to imply that experienced divers are more likely to be scotched from the gene pool if they're not diving Abysmal gear, is a fine bit of hubris. It even pushes the limits set by the Woodville Karst Plains Project's director and world record holder George Irving who once described the 50-odd group of Florida cave divers as the "silver back gorillas of the sport." Their video "The Right Stuff" describes the ONLY correct way of rigging dive equipment — no exceptions. At least they're not selling anything!

Equipment failures don't kill experienced divers — well-trained divers plan for the possibility. Attitudinal failures do kill divers. That includes attempting dives beyond one's experience level, complacency, panicking in an emergency, and the lack of a healthy sense of fear.

Perhaps that's what bothers me about the ad. I'm afraid that some deep diving wannabe will be emboldened by the company's haughty claims and make a promise they aren't skilled enough to keep. For my money, that would be an abysmal shame.

Michael Menduno was the founder and ex-publisher of the now defunct technical diving magazine aquaCorps (1990-1996), once described as the "sea geek's bible." He also coined the term "technical diving." Check out his website: www.menduno.com.

Abysmal Diving

Because You Keep Your Promises . . .

Don't kid yourself. Diving "IS" deadly serious. When your life's on the line, there is no room to cut corners. At Abysmal Diving we make the tools that help you keep the promises you make.

Since 1993 our tools have taken more explorers and adventures into the deepest shipwrecks and longest cave systems in the world.

We can show you how to get there and back again . . . safely.

- Computers
- Values
- Deco Software
- Drysuits
- Regulators
- Thermalware
- Gauges
- MID Lighting
- Backplates
- DrySPY®
- Wings
- Argon Inflation
- Cylinders
- Publications

Abysmal Oxygen Analyzer
 Abysmal Regulator
 Abysmal Dive Computer

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