

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## Dive St. Vincent, St. Vincent & The Grenadines *the Caribbean capital of muck diving*

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[www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)

#### Editorial Office:

Ben Davison  
Publisher and Editor  
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102  
Sausalito, CA 94965  
EditorBenD@undercurrent.org

Dear Fellow Diver:

"Muck diving" was a term coined by Bob Halstead when he piloted his liveaboard *Telita* in Papua New Guinea. Some say by advocating for the unique critters in the shallows, he didn't have to burn fuel to motor to beautiful reefs. Of course, Halstead would disagree. Regardless, muck diving caught on and now there's an entire industry in PNG and Indonesia devoted to photographing tiny and unusual critters, many of which live in otherwise boring environs. But you don't have to travel half a world away for critter diving. On St. Vincent lives the sharpest-eyed guide in the Caribbean, Bill Tewes (pronounced "twos"), who just happened to cut his teeth guiding divers at Jais Aben Resort in PNG nearly 30 years ago, before coming to St. Vincent.

Bill's a character, a curmudgeon who can rub people the wrong way. He snapped at me because I peered into his personal Pelican box to take a look at his Paul Humann critter book without asking permission. But he does know his critters, everything about their habits and where they live. And he runs an excellent dive operation - he and his divemasters are eager to point out anything and everything of interest. They take great pride in "their" island.

I am a nudibranch nut, so Bill took me to Bottle Reef, where I went face-to-face with some uncommon spotted sea hares, some of them coupling, and several inch-long leech headshield slugs. A mostly black headshield slug one diver found was not mentioned in any fish ID book at the dive shop. Among the common lettuce sea slugs was a tiny green nudibranch that had Bill and me baffled. Even though he has dived every nook and cranny around



Dive St. Vincent Owner Bill Tewes



St. Vincent countless times, Bill says that weekly he finds something new or rare. On another day, he showed me a black, spindly crab that lives in black hydras it picks apart to decorate its body for camouflage. It wasn't in any of the fish ID books, so we named it a "hydra crab."

This is not your typical Caribbean dive trip, cruising the corals and swimming with reef fish. An array of the unusual, the bizarre and the unidentified are a recurring experience on nearly every dive. Yes, there are lots of fish (about 260 have been identified) but large schools are lacking.

This is where the little stuff is, goodies for those with the patience and keen eyes to find them. Unlike muck diving in some of the Indo-Pacific, the sandy bottom here is not black and critters don't hide in trash. Of the 30 dive sites, 10 are strictly for seeking rare critters found in Paul Humann's fish ID books -- and lots that haven't made it into the books yet. Speaking of Paul Humann, he brings a REEF group to dive with Bill Tewes at least once a year and invariably makes new discoveries. Occasionally, visiting divers have the same good luck. On my first trip to St. Vincent six years ago, I got to brag about seeing six new species of crabs.

I went for nine days in late August, in the middle of hurricane season, but while storms were churning a few hundred miles away, here it was partly cloudy and the seas stayed calm. St. Vincent and the Grenadines are in the southern edge of the hurricane belt, and the last time they got a direct hit was in 1955. Most of the diving is in protected coves, anyhow. St. Vincent is the largest of 30 mostly uninhabited islands in an archipelago north of Grenada, with a population of 25,000, but that's hard to believe because everyone lives tucked away in its lush mountains. Flying in was a breeze. I took Delta to San Juan and had no problems with my LIAT connection to St. Vincent. I was able to check my two bags all the way through and they both arrived when I did. And Bill's man Paul, the "new guy" with three years at the dive shop, was waiting for me at the gate.

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I booked my trip with Dive St. Vincent, which offers various packages at different hotels. I picked the 20-room Mariners Hotel, whitewashed with verandahs facing the yachts anchored in Villa Bay. My room's view was across a palmed garden and a pool to the open water. It was not luxurious, but roomy and comfortable enough and, most importantly, air-conditioned. A couple of miles away, the small capital of Kingston, a bit grubby, offers a foot tour of 19th-century buildings built with bricks brought to the island as ballast in vessels that would voyage back to Europe filled with sugar and molasses. St. Vincent has no high-rises and the largest hotels have about 30 rooms.

The Mariners Hotel's breakfast was the usual island fare: fresh fruits, excellent coffee, a delicious cinnamon toast resembling johnny cakes. Its restaurant, the French Verandah, is a popular gathering place. While the French-born chef offers escargot in garlic butter and beef tenderloin with Roquefort sauce, the meals were

mediocre (entrees come with French fries) but thanks to the 20-percent meal discount from Bill's dive package, the food was a good buy. The waterfront restaurants are all within a short walk from the hotel. The Seafarers Inn has a large menu with hearty American fare, from fish and pizza to burgers and steaks. In the opposite direction, a couple of doors along the quay, the Lemon Tree has uneven service but pretty good seafood. Farther along is a modest place specializing in curried mutton and goat -- the best I've eaten in the Caribbean. Right next to the dive shop is an open-air pavilion serving only basics like hamburgers and hot dogs, with the best beer prices around. Everywhere on St. Vincent, I found nothing but friendliness, warm hellos and handshakes. One night, I savored a Scottish stout at the pavilion while watching locals perform karaoke.

Bill's three boats take a maximum of eight divers (a group of six is guaranteed its own boat) but there were usually only two or three on my dives, which were done

## Diver Drifts 12 Hours in Somosomo Strait

Few divers have ever had as challenging a first day of openwater diving as Thomas Holz. In late October, after surfacing far from his boat from his second dive on Rainbow Reef at the Fijian island Vanua Levu, the 40-year-old German spent 12 hours battling currents in the Somosomo Strait overnight and swam nearly six miles before reaching land. *Undercurrent* got both sides of the story from Holz and the dive shop, Jewel Divers, and found that both contributed to a problem many new divers experience – lack of knowledge about dive rescue devices.

Before his first dive trip to Fiji, Holz completed his PADI openwater and advanced openwater courses within two months, but his experience consisted of only nine lake dives in Germany. Holz says he stressed his novice skills to Jewel Bubble. “In my e-mail requests, I told them that I’m a ‘fresh diver.’ During registration at the dive shop, I repeated that I was a beginner, and the manager said, ‘Don’t worry, no problem.’”

Holz enjoyed his first ocean dive but the divemaster sent him up early because he was running through his air quickly. The second dive started around 4:30 p.m. “Rainbow Reef was known for its currents so during the briefing, the divemaster said the group had to descend fast and keep together. Further instructions were not given.” Holz had no problem until 20 minutes into the dive when he again was low on air.

Jewel Divers owner Qiolele Morisio told *Undercurrent* that his staff knew Holz was a new diver and treated him as such. The divemaster ascended with him both times to the safety stops, assuring he reached the surface before joining the other three divers. The main problem was that Holz was unaware his rental gear had a safety sausage in his BC pocket, and a whistle attached to the BC, and Jewel Divers didn't verbally tell him the rescue gear was included. “Because PADI instructors don't teach the use of a safety sausage, most divers don't know how to use one so when it's mentioned during dive briefings, they then ask to be shown how it is

used,” Morisio said. “Should they not ask, then we take it that the divers understand how it is used.”

Holz says his gear didn't have a whistle or sausage, but that's because he was unaware of it. He denies that the divemaster mentioned anything about a safety sausage during the Rainbow Reef briefing. “When I came up, the boat was 100 yards away. I could see it only at the horizon. It was in a northerly direction but unfortunately the currents came from the same direction. I tried to swim, but there was no chance to reduce the distance.” Because Holz didn't know he had a safety sausage, he couldn't signal the boat nor see where the other divers ascended. For the next hour, the boat moved back and forth along the horizon, obviously looking for him, and then headed for shore when it got dark.

Vanua Levu was a mile away but its coastline was dark, while Tavenui, five miles away, had more lights, so Holz decided to swim there. Luckily he was in good physical condition, and he switched swimming strokes while fighting the currents. (Anyone who has dived the Somosomo Strait knows just how tough the currents can be.) “When I hit land at 4:30 a.m., I cried for help, and the nice Fijian couple who owned the property helped me immediately.” Holz was in good condition and he immediately left for his already-planned land tour of Fiji, not waiting to be interviewed by police investigating the matter.

Morisio says he is now purchasing Dive Alert air horns to add to the rescue devices on his gear rentals. “We have also started the process of instructing all divers unaware of the safety sausages about how to use one.”

That's information that should have been offered a long time ago. The simple question “Do you know how to use a safety sausage?” could have saved Holz from a six-mile swim. It's also imperative that divers renting gear also ask the question: “What rescue devices do you offer, and can you show me how to use them?”

## Dive St. Vincent, St. Vincent

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★★
Diving ( <i>beginners</i> )	★★★
Snorkeling	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★★
Food	★★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent

*Caribbean Scale*

from the recently overhauled 28-foot cabin cruiser that holds enough gear for two dives. It was a friendly crew, careful with camera gear (but there was no rinse tank or camera table). I back-flipped off and got back onboard via a short ladder climb after doffing my fins. Most dive sites were a half-hour boat ride from the dive shop, and the twin 200HP outboards got us there pronto. Two speedboats, a 28-foot speedboat with twin 200-hp motors and a 32-foot speedboat with twin 250s, have folding canopies and are put into service as the volume of divers requires.

After picking up divers at Young Island across the narrow strait, we shoved off for the first dive around 9:30 a.m. Crew switched over the steel

tanks, filled to 2500 p.s.i., during on-board surface intervals. Bill doesn't offer Nitrox but because dive sites average 30 feet maximum, my bottom time with air typically exceeded 100 minutes. The two morning dives were back-to-back, so it was easy to be out for five or six hours. Most dive sites were in small coves and bays along the southwest coast. There are some coral heads and small reef structures on the coastal rocks but most of the terrain is sandy with grassy areas sloping away from shore. Water averaged 83 degrees, compared to the late August heat and humidity, and visibility ranged from 60 to 75 feet. Dive gear excluding wetsuits and booties was stowed in net bags back at the dive shop so that it was set up in the morning for the first dive.

Bill usually takes the two morning dives, while one of his expert divemasters will do a late afternoon and/or night dive if someone requests it, even if it's just one diver. I was the only one aboard for one night dive and I heard no carping from Bill, and this was when fuel prices were at their highest. I was fortunate to do night dives with Callie, who was careful, knowledgeable, and as good a spotter as his boss (sorry, Bill). At Bottle Reef, the night critters were all out for after-hours cavorting. Many octopuses scoured the bottom, and massive clusters of lobsters looked like they were having orgies. Lots of reef fish and several morays were out, but one highlight was coming across a field of Magnificent sea urchins. They're normally deep-water creatures, so it's rare to see even one. But the same peculiar environmental conditions that make diving St. Vincent so special also lead to the migration of these denizens of the depth to shallower waters at night.

For a few days, I dived with a couple and their 12-year-old son who had been there five times before. The boy was uncanny at finding small stuff. He located a yellow frogfish resting on top of, what else, a yellow tube sponge, while everyone else had passed right over it. It was his mom, however, who found the "algae crab," a recent discovery named by another of Bill's divers the week before. She was looking for sea-horses at 20 feet when she noticed a small, leafy algae plant starting to move sideways, and not from wave action. A closer look with the magnifying glass revealed a piece of the "algae" walking across a leaf and then jumping to another. Paul Humann was excited when the photos were e-mailed to him.

Then there was the couple who became my dive buddies later in the week. The man was a new diver with lousy buoyancy control. His tiny wife had better skills but was reluctant to make any changes and chattered incessantly. Bill scowled; I'm sure he tires of trying to teach divers who should know better, and it doesn't take much to stretch his patience. Even underwater, her talking never ceased -- the indistinct moans from her regulator must have puzzled the fish to no end. Usually it was to point out an obvious critter everyone had already seen.

Common reef inhabitants had to do something amazing to grab the attention of muck-focused divers. I saw the Caribbean reef octopus on nearly every dive, and at New

Guinea Reef one had a lively fight with a gold-spotted eel. The octopus managed to retreat into an opening in a coral shelf but the eel was determined. It always backed out, looking bewildered, but then went in for more punishment. The eel finally gave up and stuck its head into another hole looking for an easier meal. An uncommon broad-banded moray wandered around with me on a morning dive, while a chain moray would only come halfway out of its hiding place. A viper moray and purple-mouth moray were anti-social, extending only their heads from the reef.

Most dive areas in St. Vincent are nurseries swarming with multi-colored juveniles and small reef fish. Pipefish, in particular, thrive here. At New Guinea Reef, I saw whitenose pipefish, a shortfin pipefish and two rare pipefish horses, a sort of transition species between a pipefish and a seahorse that goes unlisted in the fish ID books. Flying gurnards, similar to sea robins, were on nearly every dive and in large numbers, either "walking" on the bottom looking for tidbits in the sand, or "flying" above the sea floor looking for mates. The terminal males couldn't care less about being photographed head-on, a nearly impossible pose to get elsewhere.

Regarding those crabs I helped "discover" six years ago, I was happy to see that they were still there, at Turtle Bay, and now included a tiny swimming crab an inch and a half around that burrowed into the sand if disturbed. Scattered among huge slabs of volcanic rock that had tumbled from the cliff were an enormous clinging crab, anemone crabs, a southern teardrop crab and a rare sculptured slipper lobster. I got my dose of crustacean. Diving at other Caribbean islands no longer holds any appeal for me. Give me rarities like the nearly invisible algae fish, flying gunnards and the black brotula that bears live young. What makes a diver appreciate marine life more than when he has to seek it out with patience and good eyesight?

If you've got a passion for critters or you're looking for a macro photography paradise, not only will Bill Tewes and Dive St. Vincent fulfill your requirements, they'll spoil you for any other Caribbean diving. And St. Vincent has a lot more to offer above sea level. Lush rainforests, a climb up the 4,000-foot volcano Mt. Soufriere (Bill can arrange a guide), interesting Botanical Gardens, and that old-fashioned island culture. If you don't like hanging out on the funky but very charming main island, there's always posh Young Island, a free, five-minute boat ride away. And Bill will pick you up there.

-- W.K.



**Diver's Compass:** Dive St. Vincent offers seven-night dive packages at seven different hotels, with 10 dives, airport transfers, all dive equipment; prices range from \$772 at the Fitness Quest Apartment/Hotel to \$2,800 at Young Island Resort, on its own island with complimentary water taxi and all meals included . . . My Mariners Inn package, which also offered full breakfast and 20 percent off all dinners, was \$1,150 . . . LIAT is the only airline serving St. Vincent, and the prop jets have no baggage weight restrictions . . . Connections with

## Easing Back Pain While Diving

Lifting and carrying heavy dive gear is an obvious cause of lower back pain, but a second major cause is often overlooked. While swimming or finning through the water, many divers arch their lower back, like they're face down in a hammock. A small inward curve is okay in the lower back but when you increase that curve, you're over-arching, a symptom called hyperlordosis. Divers doing this will usually notice the pain after a dive.

According to Dr. Jolie Bookspan, author of *Diving Physiology in Plain English*, over-arching pinches the joints of the vertebrae and surrounding tissues. "The fulcrum of the kick becomes the facets instead of the ab and hip muscles." Even when the back pain progresses, often nothing shows up on x-rays. The cause is often unrecognized and patients are told they have sacroiliac, joint dysfunction, or nonspecific back pain. "Eventually, this exaggerated curve of the spine can damage structures enough to show. Until then, it just aches a great deal."

To get rid of the pain, you don't need medicine, physical therapy or surgery, says Bookspan. "All you need to do is to stop over-arching and maintain a neutral spine when diving, walking or swimming."

international flights are in Barbados, Grenada, San Juan and Trinidad; round-trip airfare from San Juan is around \$400 . . . July to November is rainy season, with showers expected on most days . . . English is the official language, and the Eastern Caribbean Dollar is \$2.60 to US\$1 . . . The water is safe to drink . . . Web sites: Dive St. Vincent: [www.divestvincent.com](http://www.divestvincent.com); Mariners Hotel: [www.marinershotel.com](http://www.marinershotel.com)

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# Moorea, French Polynesia

## *a South Pacific dive gem, or paradise lost?*

Dear Fellow Diver:

"This moray is my friend. I will introduce you." That's how Laurent, my Scuba Piti divemaster, briefed my dive at Taotoi. From inquisitive lemon sharks the size of bull sharks to turtles that begged for coral chunks like dogs begging for a bone, the underwater locals had proved to be as friendly as the human ones on land. However, I find it unethical to touch all the marine life. Was it worth the bucks to watch divemasters try to tame it? Now 60 feet under, I debated as a green moray, its head the size of a soccer ball, stretched out of its hole. While wriggling cleaner wrasses swam through the moray's gills, Laurent stroked its neck. The moray made no offensive move, merely swayed slowly like an underwater cobra. One by one, every diver but I extended a hand toward the eel. Ethics and safety battled with curiosity, but I refrained.

I had already dived and snorkeled with sharks in the French Polynesian isles of Bora Bora, Huahine and Fakarava, and I was debating whether to head back to the U.S. or find another local dive paradise. In my book, its great viz, healthy corals, several shark species on every dive, abundance of and variety of fish, including many endemic species, puts French Polynesia far ahead of the Caribbean, Fiji, the Red Sea and the Philippines. It's pricey, not only for recession-plagued tourists but the locals as well. However, a decrease in passengers is making Air Tahiti Nui offer discounted airfares from Los Angeles, an eight-hour trip, for "long weekend" stays. A round-trip fare to Papeete in December was \$765, about 25 percent less than the previous lowest fare. From Papeete's airport, I went to the ferry dock and I stared at Moorea, a 45-minute ferry ride away for \$12.50. Should I invest more francs to dive another island?

I fingered my well-worn ATM card and recalled James Michener's first lines from Tales of the South Pacific (it's rumored he based his mythical island Bali Hai on Moorea). "I wish I could tell you about the South Pacific. The way it actually was. The endless ocean. The infinite specks of coral we call islands. Coconut palms nodding gracefully toward the ocean. Reefs upon which waves broke into spray, and inner lagoons, lovely beyond description."

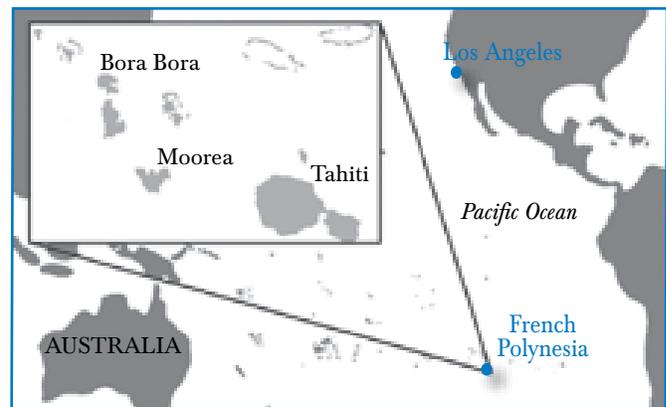
That was all I needed. "Passage pour une," I said to the ferry agent and handed over my francs.

Unlike populous Tahiti, Moorea (Tahitian for "yellow lizard") is rural and has more of the classic South Pacific get-away-from-it-all ambiance. Multi-hued lagoons are surrounded by jagged, emerald mountains that reach into the clouds. The two-lane paved road circling the 52-square-mile island hugs a white sand coast lined with small communities and the occasional luxury hotel. No trash litters the roadside or beach. Non-French speakers will have no worries. Locals spoke at least some English and were friendly even if using hand signals, and unlike many dive-tourism sites, they don't press tourists for tips.



One of the *farés* at Hotel Hibiscus

Silvie, the multilingual Hotel Hibiscus desk clerk, smiled as she checked me into one of the 29 farés, thatch-roofed beachfront bungalows on the edge of a manicured lawn replete with flamboyant and vibrant hibiscus. The beachfront restaurant started serving breakfast at 7 a.m. but because Scuba Piti would be picking divers up at 7:30, I had to stock my simple kitchenette with breakfast items besides the free tea and coffee, plus buy potable water. I walked 200 yards down the road to the Little Tourist Village, a shopping area with ATM and a small grocery, checking out lunch and dinner menus in French and English for the half-dozen outdoor restaurants along the way.



I spent a fitful night on a sagging mattress, then roosters started crowing at 4 a.m. Luckily, my dive buddy and I were ready on time because Daniel, Scuba Piti's 30-ish, multilingual manager, picked us up promptly. It was a five-minute ride to the dive shop, located on the beach of Hotel Les Tipaniers's quiet lagoon. A dozen local divers chatted in French while assembling their gear on the shaded outdoor concrete platform next to the shop's small building. Laurent, the other 30-ish, multilingual instructor, offered me a choice of a long or short steel tank. "If you're used to diving with aluminum, take two kilos off your weight belt," he advised.

Wearing our gear, we trekked 50 yards across a sturdy boardwalk to the dive boat, a 28-foot motor launch with shade canopy and space for 20 tanks but no head. Ten minutes later, Daniel tied the boat on a mooring line just inside the breakwater. Divers were split into French- and English-speaking groups; the latter consisted of me, my dive buddy and three Australians. Laurent briefed us, "This is Tiki-Pa, Tahitian for 'nursery.' We go to a little cave with baby gray sharks. Depth is 70 feet, but not for long. Tell me when you're low on air; otherwise, we plan a 45-minute dive." Since none of the English speakers had dived here before, I had expected a check-out dive, but Laurent said nothing, just back-rolled into the 80-degree waters.

## Serious Diver Impact on the Red Sea

Reefs in the northern Red Sea are being threatened by intensive recreational diving and the dive tourism trade. According to a study published in the *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, sites with high levels of recreational diving had significantly lower levels of coral cover than undived areas. The study examined the reefs of Dahab, South Sinai and Egypt that include dive sites with over 30,000 dives per year, and compared them to sites with little or no diving. Areas subject to intensive diving showed significantly higher levels of broken and damaged corals, and reduced coral cover.

The coral communities of the reef crest areas were significantly more affected than the reef slope dive sites, with 95 percent of the branching corals broken. Diving didn't appear to have had an effect on the abundance of coral-eating or herbivorous fishes, but the authors believe fish too may be at risk if coral cover decline continues. There were also problems with sedimentation on some sites, an indication that bottom detritus was being regularly stirred up by divers.

*This is excerpted from the article "Diving down the reefs? Intensive diving tourism threatens the reefs of the northern Red Sea" by H. Hasler and J.A. Ott in the August 2008 issue of the Marine Pollution Bulletin.*

I descended along the mooring line into a countless swirl of black tip reef sharks. Two eight-foot-long lemon sharks elbowed their way in. I followed Laurent over coral rubble and white sand to a plate coral shelf where he mimed rocking a baby. Under the shelf lay four baby gray sharks. For the remainder of the dive, I reveled in the 150-foot visibility and schools of orange and purple anthias, pennant bannerfish, striped grunts, snapper, lunate-tailed triggerfish and black durgon. Even the usually skittish raccoon butterflyfish and cornetfish allowed photographers within four feet before flitting away. Then a green turtle swam toward Laurent, who broke off a chunk of coral and held it out. Every time the turtle

reached for the coral, Laurent teasingly backed away. When the turtle finally got to crunch the coral, photographers lit him with strobe flashes. Apparently, coral-breaking and turtle-teasing was a common practice for this dive crew. I found it ironic because during the dive shop briefing, we were told not to step on coral, tease or touch any marine life.

We surfaced 50 minutes later. Two single-foot ladders jutted into the water. Some divers hauled up the ladder completely geared. I took off my fins, tossed them in, then attempted to climb the ladder, only to find the rungs spaced too far apart. A hand shot out, grabbing my first stage and dragging me aboard. "Next time, give me your gear, then climb up," said Daniel. Telling me after the fact was definitely a black mark.

## Sipadan's Dive Permit System Keeps Some Divers Out of Its Waters

Jacques Cousteau called the Malaysian island of Sipadan "an untouched piece of art." The government's new permit system of restricting divers to a maximum of 120 per day is preventing many divers, who paid thousands of dollars and traveled for days, from ever setting fin in the waters surrounding this diving mecca.

Susie Hills (Sausalito, CA) warns divers intending to go to Sipadan to first check with their travel agent and dive operator about how the permit system will affect their dive itinerary. She and her two dive buddies stayed at the Sipadan-Mabul Resort (SMART) for a week in October but were only able to dive Sipadan for one day. "Before booking in May, we had heard about the new permit system, but we had no idea the extent to which it would limit the diving, and the inequality of the process. The rest of our dive days were spent diving around Mabul and Siamil Island and while those are good dive sites, we did not fly halfway around the world and spend thousands of dollars to dive Mabul.

"There are 12 resorts and one liveaboard attempting to land the 120 golden permits to dive Sipadan. At SMART, there were 101 divers. It appears some resorts get more permits allotted each day than others, and the allotment appears random and circumspect. Borneo Divers was getting 22 to 25 permits a day while SMART only got 10 to 12 permits a day. The stress to find out if you would 'win' the trip to Sipadan the next day was ridiculous. SMART has a giant board, where each diver is assigned to a dive boat and dive site for the following day. Imagine trying to enjoy lunch as everyone prayed their name would be assigned the Sipadan dive boat! To add fuel to the fire, the SMART manager made a huge production of plugging names in and erasing others."

Jon Hoffman (Atlanta, GA), who stayed at SMART in November, says the lottery is a farce and favors divers that the resort staff likes. "We were the only group of Americans there and interacted with the staff and locals, compared to the predominantly Russian clientele, who were rude in general and complained loudly and incessantly. We were told that it was luck in the 'lottery' that our names were drawn to go to Sipadan three times in six days while the Russian groups only

got drawn once in seven days. Of course, that only led to them complaining even more rudely and loudly – and even worse luck in the 'lottery.' If you were 'lucky' enough to get your name drawn, you did five dives in one day at Sipadan beginning at 5:30 a.m. Given that your package includes three boat dives a day, the day following a Sipadan excursion was limited to a single boat dive for the next two days."

Even if you get to Sipadan, the entry process is a shady one, says Jonathan Blake (LaVerne, CA), who stayed at Sipadan Water Village Resort in September. "To visit Sipadan and Kapalai, we needed to get permission from the military guards stationed on the island. It was a joke. The Divemaster would have a list of guest names from the resort on his sign-up sheet. Each diver would be assigned a name and we had to sign it! It was hilarious to see Americans and Europeans signing Japanese or Russian names."

Patty Shales (Los Angeles, CA), who dived Sipadan and Mabul in November, says it's not the divers affecting the ecosystem, it's the fishermen. "On every dive, we were terrified by one or two loud bursts of dynamite. Having visited the area last January, I noticed a big decrease in the numbers of fish. Certain species have all but disappeared, including the clown frogfish, the ghost pipefish, flamboyant cuttlefish and many nudibranchs. The reefs lack the fresh vibrant colors; they seem dead and covered with sand."

No one at SMART replied to *Undercurrent's* emails requesting details. Jenny Collister, president of the dive travel agency Reef & Rainforest, says the permit system is a huge problem with no solution in sight. "We did not get great results when trying to get refunds for our customers, nor were we informed of the permit change until October 14." She was able to give the heads-up to a dive group leaving on October 30 and they managed to do six dives in six dive days. "It's my guess that the resorts do give preferential treatment to some guests over others. The group I had was led by a pro photographer for the third year in a row who volunteers his time there for photo week, so I would assume that he got special treatment. We are strongly warning people about what to expect."

Back at the dock, divers hauled their own gear to the shop to change tanks. Laurent served hot tea from a thermos, while one of the local divers passed around huge chunks of tiramisu made by his wife. During the 90-minute surface interval, the local divers, all of whom spoke excellent English, engaged us tourists in conversation, as curious about us as we were about their lives. I learned more about French politics as they griped about their current president Sarkozy.

A 10-minute boat ride brought us to Coma, another site just outside of the lagoon's breakwater. It was touted as more of a geography dive because the coral ridges are more interesting than

animal life. "There may be surge, so watch your gauge," Laurent warned. He wasn't kidding. Intent on checking out the little pufferfish, lemon peel angelfish and squirrelfish hiding in the plate coral shelves six feet wide, I followed the sea bottom. Minutes later, I looked up from hawkfish perching on Acropora clusters in my viewfinder to see Laurent and the group swimming 20 feet above me. My gauge read 101 feet. For the rest of the 55-minute dive, I stayed well above Laurent. I noticed that healthy coral was being overwhelmed by rubble and foot-wide crowns-of-thorn starfish. "They're bad here," Laurent acknowledged, when I asked topside, adding, "Storms wrecked the reefs, too." I kept my mouth shut about his breaking off coral to feed the turtle -- and his failure to prevent divers from trodding on the coral to photograph it.

On the drive back to Hibiscus, Daniel dropped me off at the Little Tourist Village. I checked out boutiques filled with pareos, bikinis and black pearls before picking up fruit, an unwrapped, yard-long baguette and a whole roasted poulet stuffed with onions and garlic. At \$12, the chicken fed two hungry divers, and with the vibrant lagoon view from our porch, it felt like a four-star feast.

My faré was roomy and the tiled bathroom had a double sink and hot-water shower, but no TV or towel hooks. I hung my gear on a clothesline on the covered, wooden-floored porch, where I also ate meals at the picnic table. The bungalow was air-conditioned but too cold for my sinuses; however, the ocean breezes and whirring ceiling fan were fine substitutes. Kids splashing in the pool a few feet away and chirping birds didn't disturb my naps, but damn those roosters. The kitchenette carried only essential eating gear -- no oven or microwave, but a two-burner gas stove and mini-fridge.

At the hotel's beachside, thatch-roofed Sunset Restaurant and Bar, I sat at a picnic table and sampled one of the least expensive offerings: a 14-inch veggie pizza with paper-thin crust, a thinner layer of tomato sauce, a few canned artichoke hearts and mushrooms, and no cheese; it cost \$18.75. Salads started at \$15; bottled beer and sodas were \$10 and \$6. I passed up desserts that started at \$10 for two scoops of ice cream. After a 15-minute walk from Hibiscus, I discovered Chez Olive, a converted VW bus with built-in kitchen that served heartier, cheaper pizza for \$16. As for those outdoor restaurant menus on the way to the grocery, fish and chicken entrees averaged \$25 and beef ranged from \$30 to \$50. Groceries weren't cheap either, but \$25 bought me a few breakfasts' worth of baguette, fruit, a quarter-pound each of cheese and ham, six eggs and a six-pack of water bottles. I ignored the cheapest wine, at \$30 a bottle. Saturday nightlife on the island consisted of two restaurant-bars with live music -- a couple of guitars and vocals playing contemporary rock and American country-western. During the week, streets were deserted, but a twilight beach stroll followed by a candlelit dinner was enough to call it a good day.

After two nearly hour-long morning dives on perfect 80-degree days, Daniel would drop me back at the hotel. Scuba Piti devoted afternoons to dive classes, and they didn't offer night dives. Five of my six dives were inside the breakwater within sight

## Moorea, French Polynesia

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★★
Diving ( <i>beginners</i> )	★★★★
Snorkeling	★★★
Accommodations	★★★
Food	★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent

*World Scale*

of shore; they started around 70 feet and stair-stepped up to 30 feet. When I asked what the boat carried for emergency gear, I was told oxygen and a cell phone instead of a radio.

My dive log reads like ad copy for a tourist brochure. Inquisitive lemon, gray reef, black-tip and white-tip sharks flocked to me on every dive, while remoras latched onto my shark-like, black-clad dive buddy. At La Virgule, tons of triggerfish, surgeonfish and tangs frolicked through a semi-circular coral garden. I found Moorea diving definitely worth the francs, and the tropical-isle views were priceless. While I found the Scuba Piti crew friendly and charming, I don't like their nonchalant view toward the coral and marine life. However, as a guest in friendly French Polynesia, I felt awkward to chastise them. As a lone, yard-long barracuda joined me on my safety stop, I couldn't help but feel it was eyeing me reproachingly.

Moorea is for divers who want an easily accessible South Pacific paradise; unlike Truk or the Solomons, Moorea only takes a direct, eight-hour LAX-to-Papeete flight, then a short ferry ride over. By watching my converted francs, I paid no more than I would have at an overcrowded Caribbean resort where Americans outnumber the locals, and I got a more gorgeous locale where I didn't see another dive boat around for my three days of diving. The only con was the cavalier attitude toward the underwater wildlife, so be sure to speak your mind when diving there.

--N.M.



**Diver's Compass:** To reach Moorea, take Air Tahiti Nui to Tahiti's Faa'a Airport, then either a 10-minute flight to Moorea, or cab five minutes to Papeete's ferry dock and take Aremiti's 45-minute ferry (\$25 round trip, no luggage charge); to Moorea hotels, it's a 45-minute ride by taxi or private van, or a 90-minute public bus ride for \$3 . . . A six-dive package at Scuba Piti cost \$400 and includes equipment, but they took 10 percent off for those needing only tanks and weights; no Nitrox . . . Hotel Hibiscus's prices range from \$175

per night for a garden-view fare to \$340 for a five-person studio, not including 20 percent in hotel taxes . . . Internet at Hibiscus is \$4.50 for 15 minutes but it's half that at Photo Magic in the Little Tourist Village . . . Tipping is not expected, although I did slip the guys a few bills for schlepping my steel tanks . . . The nearest decompression chamber is on Papeete at Mamao General Hospital . . . The favorite souvenir is cultured Tahitian pearls, and they're a deal here; pay \$100 for simple stud earrings that cost \$600 in the U.S. . . . Web sites: Scuba Piti ([www.scubapiti.com](http://www.scubapiti.com)); Hotel Hibiscus ([www.hotel-hibiscus.pf](http://www.hotel-hibiscus.pf))

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## Have to Replace Your Mask?

### *downward vision is a distinguishing feature*

When your old mask starts leaking, you have to replace it. The primary criteria to use is the same as when choosing a pair of shoes: Get something you feel comfortable with. While there are scores of masks to choose from, many are made in the same factories in the Far East, with only the brand names being different.

For this story, I collected a number of unique masks and had my team of divers try to distinguish the main differences between them. I tried all the masks on adults and my young daughters, including an eight-year-old. All but two worked successfully with the smallest face. I myself sport an untidy moustache but never encountered any problems.

As an experienced diver, you don't need the basics of mask replacement, but I can offer a few tips -- and one very important consideration. First, swiveling buckles can make the strap more comfortable, especially for those with longer hair. The smaller the interior volume, the easier it is to clear a flooded mask. (My team filled each mask with fine sand, shaping it to fill the sides of the skirt, then weighed the sand to get a comparison figure for each mask. The results are in ounces, an arithmetical figure that can be compared directly mask for mask).

Black silicone skirts give a better view than clear silicone in low-contrast lighting conditions, but clear silicone feels less

claustrophobic and helps a diver see what's coming up alongside. The refraction of the light as it passes from the water to the pocket of air in your mask magnifies the view and makes it narrower. Some people claim a larger faceplate gives a wider field-of-view but this is nonsense. It's like looking out any window – the closer your eyes are to the glass, the more you see. Same with side-windows – because the front glass must be farther from the eyes to accommodate them, they can actually narrow the view. Compact masks are often just as good as those resembling goldfish bowls. Masks with deep lenses that are tilted downward usually offer a better view of chest-mounted items. Underwater, we compared the angle-of-vision in each.

Those needing prescription lenses can usually have them fitted to any twin-glass mask. (Ask your local dive store.) Minus-dioptre lenses for short-sighted divers are often off-the-rack, whereas plus-dioptre lenses for the far-sighted are often bonded to the existing plane-parallel glass. Sometimes, lenses are available as replacements for the regular glass but they can make the mask heavy if fitted in strengths of more than two dioptres.

Fogging is often a problem with a new mask. It's a result of the glass becoming contaminated with a fine layer of silicone during the manufacturing process, attracting tiny, clinging globules of condensation. Scrub it off with a fine abrasive, like toothpaste, even though it can be time-consuming.



#### Atomic ARC Subframe

**Atomic ARC Subframe** (11.6 ounces of internal volume) Coated with layers of metal oxide for a clearer, sharper view, this twin-lens mask didn't fog up. You need to take care to protect its coating from abrasion. The highest-priced mask we tested, it was a favorite -- unobtrusive to use with good all-round

vision. (List price: \$150; [www.atomicaquatics.com](http://www.atomicaquatics.com))

**Cressi Matrix** (10 oz.) Its teardrop-shaped twin lenses are tilted to aid downward vision. Fixed buckles have a push-clip. Of all masks listed here, it had the best view of the chest area. (\$67; [www.cressi-sub.it](http://www.cressi-sub.it))

**Cressi Occhio Plus** (7.6 oz.) It's stylish but gives you a surprised expression. (Should you care?) Though of low internal volume, it has a generous nose pocket, and the strap buckles swivel in three dimensions. It gave a good view of the chest area and was unobtrusive, apart from the Cressi brand marked on the glass that made me feel like I was looking past a pair of eyebrows. (\$74; [www.cressi-sub.it](http://www.cressi-sub.it))

**IST Dynasty** (16.7 oz.) This popular mask has an automatic purge valve – and it needs it because of the huge internal volume and massive single faceplate, which sat much too far from my eyes. Strap buckles are rigidly fixed in place. Underwater, the purge valve was as obvious as the silver lady to a Rolls Royce driver – it always pointed wherever I looked. (\$40; [www.istsports.com](http://www.istsports.com))

**IST Pro Ear** (9.7 oz.) You may field unkind jibes from fellow divers but if you suffer ear problems underwater, this low-volume mask is a godsend. It encloses the ears in the same airspace as the eyes, keeping them from getting flooded.

If the worst happens, flexible tubes with valves mean flooded earpieces won't flood the mask. However, the heavy frame intruded into my line of sight, and downward vision was restricted. (\$100; [www.istsports.com](http://www.istsports.com))



#### IST Pro Ear

**Mares Star LiquidSkin** (7.4 oz.) It may leave you looking like a superhero from *The Incredibles*, but Mares' new low-volume mask has a comfortable opalescent skirt. Those with narrower faces will especially like it, and it resisted fogging well. It gave a fair to moderate field of vision with a good downward view, but everything was surrounded in a disconcerting bright circle caused by the colored frame and skirt. (\$80; [www.mares.com](http://www.mares.com))

**Mares X-Vision Liquid Skin** (8.5 oz.) The multi-silicone "LiquidSkin" skirt and flexible strap buckles mean extra comfort. It has plenty of downward vision for seeing anything chest-mounted. Excellent all-around vision underwater but the bright-colored sidepieces were too distracting. (\$90; [www.mares.com](http://www.mares.com))

**Oceanic Pioneer** (10.4 oz.) This retro-design, twin-lens mask with a black rubber skirt evokes the over-engineered style of diving equipment used by WWII frogmen. But underwater, we were surprised to find it unobtrusive and giving a wide field of view area, including the chest. Another favorite. (\$110; [www.oceanicworldwide.com](http://www.oceanicworldwide.com))



#### Oceanic Pioneer

**Scubapro Scout** (8.8 oz.) Narrow-faced divers will appreciate this low-volume mask with twin glasses. Strap buckles are adjusted by pinch-releases attached to the black silicone skirt. The field-of-view was more restricted than expected, and the skirt was obtrusive at the sides. (\$79; [www.scubapro.com](http://www.scubapro.com))

**Scubapro Spectra** (10.4oz.) It offers a good downward view of the chest area. The strap is adjusted by pinching two parts together. Underwater, the clear plastic frame intrudes into the field of view. (\$93; [www.scubapro.com](http://www.scubapro.com))

**Seac sub Italica** (11.8 oz.) This unusual-looking mask has a rigid plastic frame and you'll need some muscle to operate the single button to release the strap. Big, deep twin lenses in a vertical oval format promise a good view of anything mounted on the user's chest, but underwater we found it not so great. (\$54; [www.seacsub.it](http://www.seacsub.it))

**Seac sub Libera** (10 oz.) This mask has a single faceplate that includes the strap buckles at the sides. A firm press was needed at the single button to release and adjust the strap. Underwater, the frame edges, especially the part over the bridge of the nose, were obviously in our field of view, and the

downward view was restricted when it came to seeing even our weight belts. (\$47; [www.seacsub.it](http://www.seacsub.it))

**TUSA Geminus** (11.3 oz) Wider than other low-volume masks, this one has swiveling strap buckles easily adjusted by pinching the release. Underwater, we discovered the field of view was narrow overall, with a poor view toward the chest area. (Price \$70; [www.tusa.com](http://www.tusa.com))

**TUSA Visio Tri-Ex** (18 oz.) This boxy single-plate mask has odd-looking, bubble side-windows that give a little extra (though distorted) peripheral view. Its internal volume is large, although

the nose pocket may be small for some divers. Underwater, the side bubbles certainly alerted me to what was alongside, and vision was good all round, at the expense of a goldfish-bowl effect. (\$75; [www.tusa.com](http://www.tusa.com))

*John Bantin is the technical editor of DIVER magazine in the United Kingdom. For 20 years, he has used and received virtually every piece of equipment available in the UK and the U.S., and makes around 300 dives per year for that purpose. He is also a professional underwater photographer. For this story, Bantin was aided and abetted by Colin MacAndrias.*

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## When Bad Air is Pumped into Your Tank

### *a recent study states it happens more often than you think*

The risk of getting bad air is low, but it exists and can be fatal. One still finds occasional cases of faulty air compressors that suck in contaminants like engine exhaust, paint fumes and solvent vapors, resulting in a lethal mix. That's what happened aboard the Maldives liveaboard *Baani Adventurer* last May. A Russian diver died, two dive instructors were hospitalized and eight other divers had to be treated for carbon monoxide poisoning in their tanks. The police investigation found that a crack in the air pipe leading to the boat's Bauer compressor was poorly mended with duct tape, allowing contamination in the form of engine exhaust to enter (read the details in our July 2008 article "The *Baani Adventurer's* Lethal Air Compressor" online at [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)).

After a chance meeting on a dive trip, Ian Millar, director of hyperbaric medicine at the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne, and Peter Mouldey, M.D., of Southdown Medical Centre in Mississauga, Canada, agreed there was a widespread lack of knowledge about the potential of contamination within the compression process, and the limitations and failure risks of commonly used filtration systems. There's little evidence of a widespread problem related to compressor production of carbon monoxide or volatile hydrocarbons. However, after studying unrecognized, unreported deaths by compressed-air contamination, Millar and Mouldey believe that the dive industry could be missing a wider problem, and that there's a higher potential for these types of fatalities than previously thought.

There's the cave-diving incident in Florida, a near-miss due to toluene contamination, with the diver initially becoming disoriented and swimming in an agitated fashion before becoming lethargic and requiring a rescue. Then there's a case involving an air compressor at a Canadian fire department station, which often produced carbon monoxide. The contamination disappeared after a full overhaul and filter change, only to recur shortly afterwards. It appears to have been due to a poor installation location that allowed hot exhaust air to recirculate, result-

ing in compressor overheating, with consequent oil breakdown contaminating the breathing air.

#### **Even Low Levels of CO Can Kill Divers**

After diving deaths, air is often untested or insufficiently tested with techniques that would detect low levels of carbon monoxide or volatile hydrocarbons. This is important, because levels that don't cause loss of consciousness may still pre-dispose the diver to cardiac arrhythmia or underwater impairment of judgment that can lead to fatal error.

In the Divers Alert Network (DAN) data of diver fatalities between 1995 and 2000, 145 fatalities were recorded as a result of drowning or near-drowning, with the initial injury or problem labeled as "unknown." It seems reasonable to speculate that gas contamination may have contributed to some of these deaths. A DAN review of 451 fatalities over a five-year period suggests that only 15 percent of the divers had a carboxyhaemoglobin (COHb) measurement (the amount of the body's hemoglobin mixed with carbon monoxide instead of oxygen) taken at the time of death. Of those sampled, 3 percent had a fatal concentration of COHb at the time of measurement.

In 2006, the United Kingdom's Health and Safety Executive reported on an examination of diving equipment implicated in 54 accidents and incidents of all types. While only five involved a suspected "bad fill," 41 of the 54 tested air samples failed the moisture content standard. The Swedish Consumer Agency sampled air from nine dive suppliers in 1996, finding one case of oil contamination. In 2007, five of 20 failed, two due to excess carbon dioxide and three due to moisture. In parts of the U.S. where lab analysis of the air is required rather than simple detector tube sampling, rates of failure to meet acceptable carbon-monoxide levels have been as high as 3 percent in recreational dive air (10 parts per million is the limit). The U.S. Navy has encountered similar problems at a frequency of 2.5 percent using a carbon-monoxide specification of 20 parts per million.

While this doesn't confirm there is a specific problem with volatile hydrocarbon contamination produced within compressors, it does suggest there is probably a systematic deficiency in the quality and performance of compressor installations.

### What About Nitrox?

With the rapid increase in the use of Nitrox, there are many instances of conventional air compressors being used with oxygen-enrichment systems feeding the intake to provide Nitrox fills. Makeshift arrangements are of concern with respect to the risk of fire as well as contamination of breathing air. The increased oxygen concentration passing through Nitrox compressors degrades the compressor oil more rapidly than normal, which may generate toxic byproducts, shorten the compressor and filter life, and increase the risk of contaminated breathing air.

High-quality synthetic oils should, in theory, be less susceptible to thermal and oxidative degradation than mineral oils. Even so, evolving recommendations suggest oil changes may be needed after only 25 percent of the time usually allowed.

### How Divers Can Ensure a Clean Tank

Millar and Mouldley believe it's clear that air quality is an important issue that has been inadequately addressed. They suggest divers ask questions, look for certificates of compliance

with appropriate standards or codes of practice, and investigate standards of air-quality control at dive destinations, before traveling there if possible. Particular caution should be applied for hot, humid locations, especially if compressors are installed near walls in small rooms, or if they're run in the heat of the day.

The most sensitive analytic method for hydrocarbons is to get into the habit of smelling tank air well before you dive. If you don't have a clear nose and intact sense of smell, ask someone else to do it. Many contaminants have a significantly oily, rubbery or solvent type of smell. A musty smell may indicate excessive moisture is present. Being odorless, carbon monoxide won't be detected by smell, but CO analyzers have become significantly cheaper and could well be used alongside the oxygen analyzers that are routine for Nitrox divers. If one notes CO or an unusual odor, abort the dive.

Finally, it would be useful if the dive industry, consumer agencies and researchers conducted regular surveys of air quality to provide a clearer picture of how often low-level contamination is happening.

*This is a synopsis of the article "Compressed Breathing Air: The Potential for Evil from Within" by Ian Millar and Peter Mouldley. It was published in the journal Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine, September 2008. Undercurrent accepts full responsibility for any errors due to editing.*

## Diver Loses Fingers on the Dive Ladder

If you've dived for a number of years, you're probably very familiar with dive boat ladders swinging freely in the water. There may have been a time when you got your BCD, mask or even your finger stuck or squeezed underneath the ladder when the swells came up. But consider yourself lucky if you just felt a pinch. Ron Lussier (Sausalito, CA) told us about his June trip to Fiji's Beqa Lagoon Resort, where Linda Rollins, a woman in his dive group, had severe damage done to her fingers by a free-swinging boat ladder.

"We were doing a shark-feed dive in Beqa Lagoon, taking a giant stride off the back or rolling off the sides to enter the water, then climbing one of the two free-swinging ladders back onboard. At the end of the second dive, a two-foot swell had developed. Because everyone came up at once, there were a dozen divers floating off the back, surrounded by lampreys, waiting to board. When it was Linda's turn, she grabbed the ladder from the back just as the boat's stern rode up on a swell. The ladder swung down hard against the aluminum stern plate and severed two of Linda's fingers. A third finger was hanging by a flap of skin.

"Linda, to her credit, didn't panic, aside from saying an understandable expletive. The crew got her back on board, laid her down, and applied pressure to the wounded fingers. (The tips weren't recoverable, thanks to the lampreys.) Luckily for Linda, another diver on board was a medical doctor who stabilized her hand. The boat headed to Pacific Harbor, where a van was waiting to take Linda to the nearest hospital, a two-hour drive."

Beqa Lagoon Resort has a modified version of the story, which they filed in an incident report to PADI. "The sea was rough [as] she stood on the ladder and passed her digital camera to the captain and deckhand. They were on the swim platform helping divers out of the water at the same time a wave hit the boat. She tried to hold onto the ladder rails but instead held the ladder run. When this hit the back of the dive platform, her fingers were severed... After meeting with the doctors she went to surgery. She returned to the resort on Saturday afternoon and left with the group on Sunday." After the incident, the hotel tied and locked down all of their dive boat ladders.

When *Undercurrent* contacted Linda Rollins in Oakland, CA, her e-mail reply was, "I would be very happy to speak with you about this incident and what should be done about swinging dive ladders. However, I am not at liberty to speak about this at the present time." Sounds to us like a lawsuit may be in the works.

# What You'll Pay on Your Next Dive Trip

## *the latest on trip pricing and "hidden" fees*

More so than ever before, divers are scrutinizing every cost associated with dive travel. With their income and portfolios down, some are planning to dive closer to home or not at all. Those who are planning trips are not about to spend money foolishly. Today is much different from a year, even six months, ago. While you have less money in your pocket, the dollar's value is on the rise, oil prices are heading downward and the election has gained America more respect abroad - - one may not necessarily feel like the "ugly American" anymore.

Regardless, we divers are not about to cotton to unnecessary charges and hidden fees, especially when they can add up to 30 percent of the total bill. To avoid these, pay careful attention to dive trip costs - - and ask the right questions about them - - before you reach for your checkbook. In the April 2007 issue of *Undercurrent*, we covered several hidden costs of travel; that article is available online to all subscribers (go to [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org) and click on "Back Issues.") Here are some financial aspects to consider as you plan your next trip.

### **Trip Prices**

An impressive rise in the value of the U.S. dollar is making it more affordable for American divers to travel abroad. For example, bookings on Red Sea liveaboards that charge in Euros will be nearly 20 percent less than if you booked last year. Divers can also get more for their money in Mexico, too. You can get nearly 13 pesos for \$1, compared with 10 pesos over the summer.

There are still some regions where the dollar hasn't made significant gains, like Asia, the Caribbean and Central America. But the biggest bargain is Australia, where the American dollar is worth 35 percent more than it was last summer. Now Mike Ball's seven-night "Coral Sea Safari" will only cost around \$1875 instead of \$2750 last year.

Unfortunately, this doesn't mean dive packages will be discounted across the board. Says Ken Knezick, president of Island Dreams Travel in Houston, Texas, "Dive travel pricing is demand-based instead of economy-based." That means don't expect deluxe resorts like Tawali in Papua New Guinea and Wakatobi in Indonesia to cut their prices by much, if at all. "I'm seeing that higher-priced trips are still being purchased, so wealthy divers are still able to travel."

Knezick says that also applies to liveaboards, which typically price their trips two to three years in advance. That means 2009 trips were priced long ago, so they don't reflect the boat fleets' take on economic conditions right now. It's not a sense of eliteness keeping liveaboard prices steady or rising, it's the constantly upward increase of costs to run the boats,

says Knezick. "Besides fuel, there are other expenses like manpower and food that are increasing. That's what I have to keep telling angry people calling us asking why they're not lowering prices. No dive operator is going to give its trips away. They have to evaluate what makes sense to stay in business."

*Undercurrent* contacted the Peter Hughes, Aggressor and Explorer Ventures fleets to get their current take on trip pricing, but none of them responded by press time. In December, all three had a few discounts for specific boats on their Web sites, but Explorer was unique in creating a new "5-5-5 Loyalty Program," a type of layaway plan that let any past passenger book a trip by putting down a 5 percent trip deposit and paying monthly payments of 5 percent, and receiving a 5 percent discount off the total in return. (The deal applied to all past guests until December 31, but starting in January it is only applicable for divers who book within five weeks of their most recent Explorer trip.)

So to find the good deals and discounts, you still need to do your due diligence or work with a travel agent. For example, find a dive resort or liveaboard that charges in its own currency instead of the U.S. dollar. The American-friendly Philippines has great dive deals. For example, at Southern Leyte Divers on the island of Leyte, an air-conditioned beachfront cottage goes for \$34, a two-tank dive is \$50, and dinner with a beer will only set you back \$5. Readers rave about Grand Komodo Tours in Indonesia, not just for their great services but their low liveaboard prices. Because they calculate prices in Indonesian rupiah, you're typically diving for \$1,500 less per person than other Raja Ampat boats. 2009 prices for a double cabin on their five boats range from \$190 to \$285 per night.

### **Currency Charges**

Other annoying fees come from using plastic. Currency conversion fees can add up, as Phil Hampton (Orlando, FL) found out last summer aboard the *Belize Aggressor*. "I put my payment for fuel surcharge, port charge and tip on my Citicard. My charge was \$820. Aggressor converted that to \$1,640 Belize. Citicard uses a different conversion than Interbank and converted it back to \$837, a \$17 overcharge. It then added a 3 percent foreign-transaction fee, which was \$25. Thus it cost me an extra \$42 to pay by credit card. The Aggressor states that most credit-card companies will remove these superfluous charges with a phone call, but that was not true for Citicard. Next trip I'll take cash, unless the dive operator accepts Discover."

Indeed, Discover and Capital One are the only cards that don't charge a dime in currency-exchange fees; Capital One doesn't even pass on the 1 percent fee charged by Visa and

MasterCard. Neither do credit unions nor most community banks. American Express doesn't charge a foreign-transaction fee but it does carry a 2 percent currency-conversion fee. Besides Citibank, those that charge 3 percent include Bank of America, Chase and Wells Fargo. Don't think you can get away from fees by using your debit card - - fees of 2 to 3 percent are the norm.

### Resort Fees

Unless you have asked a lot of questions and read the fine print, you may not learn of extra fees until you receive your bill, as reader Allan Ripple (West Bend, WI) found out when booking at the Wyndham Hotel in Nassau. "We contacted the Wyndham's corporate sales department and were quoted a very attractive room rate. But at check-in, not only were we not given that quoted rate, we were also charged a resort fee of \$15 per day, per person, \$105 a week." The resort "fee" is sneaky. And it's an addition to the often unmentioned resort taxes, which can run up to 15 percent. Also watch out for added airport transfer fees.

Regarding the diving expenses, two add-ons to watch for are marine park fees and special dive trips. When doing a day trip at Belize's Blue Hole, Adam Feinstein (Sterling Heights, MI) didn't know about the US\$40 park fee to enter. "I had

\$100 to give to the crew as tip and 80 ended going for the park fees." Randy Brook (Seattle, WA) went to Belize's Isla Marisol resort for its whale shark dives but, he says, "you have to go deep on its website to find that there is an extra charge. A two-dive trip in the whale shark area cost an additional \$175 per person. When I arrived at the resort, the chalkboard announcing whale shark trips made no mention of the extra charge. A family of four divers was shocked when they found \$700 was added to their bill at checkout, because they thought the whale shark dive was just part of the package."

Most travel agents will charge you the total price with fees included, or at least break them down and put them in writing for you. But if you're booking it yourself, Knezick says it's important that you ask the resort lots of questions directly. "Is tax included? What transfers are included, and what cost extra? Are there boat fuel charges involved and what's the amount? Are there chamber and marine park fees to pay? What is the cost of Nitrox? What beverages are and aren't included? Credible travel suppliers will be very transparent and as clear as possible about their pricing."

What about fuel surcharges? Are they going away? We'll cover that, plus tips and the cost of missed dives, next issue.

## The Aggressor and Peter Hughes Fleets: Now Under One Owner

In case you missed it, Wayne Brown purchased Peter Hughes Diving, Inc. and related companies last March. What makes that particularly newsworthy is that Brown had purchased the Aggressor business the year before. It doesn't mean that he owns all the boats - - many have business partners - - but it does mean that it's now all one fleet.

Brown, an avid diver who once paid to take his own liveaboard trips, had owned 60 Taco Bell restaurants but bailed out in 2006, just a week before the 2006 E. coli scare. He purchased the Aggressor company in April 2007, then bought the London-based luxury travel service Latitude International, and has several other businesses as well.

While Brown is CEO, Peter Hughes has been retained as president of the Hughes division, and Wayne Haddon as president of the Aggressor. We asked Hughes whether the fact that the two fleets were under one roof would stifle competition. "No way, dude," he said. "We very much intend to maintain our separate identities, e.g., Carnival Cruise Lines, Holland America, Cunard, etc. - - all owned by one parent but all separate, operated independently and very much in competition with each other! Same for us - - my goal remains that Peter Hughes and the Dancer Fleet will always be recognized as the best in the world!"

Hughes' new boss echoed his remarks in a phone interview with *Undercurrent*. "They're staying separate and staying distinct, like Ford and Lincoln, because they each have very loyal customers. Peter and Wayne will continue to run operations until they decide they don't want to." Brown plans to put more money into each fleet's sales and guest-services departments but otherwise, the only way he sees the two fleets coming together is when he can use them as leverage with suppliers. "I'll get a better deal on savings when I buy 200 tanks instead of 100 tanks."

Brown prefers to be known as the silent owner. He bought the Peter Hughes company because of its loyal customer base, which he says will keep it going during this tanking economy. "Many dive resorts and day boats were created to be jobs rather than businesses and those will never sustain themselves in normal times, much less tough times. There will be shrinkage in this industry, but that's a good thing. The people running businesses, who realize customer service and operations go side by side, will come out even stronger."

That these two liveaboard fleets now have the same owner raises the question about whether there will be price competition between them. The answer is probably that the price of a dive trip with either fleet isn't going to go down.

# Flotsam & Jetsam

**Order the Flag We Recommended.** In our September 2008 story “Rescue Devices for Saving our Bacon,” writer John Bantin said his favorite rescue device was a big fluorescent yellow flag on an extension pole he straps onto his tank. It was hard to find but subscriber Harvey Cohen (New Brunswick, NJ) just told us about [www.TheDiveFlag.com](http://www.TheDiveFlag.com), where it retails for \$50, plus \$5 shipping. Florida Underwater Sports in Sarasota can also order yellow, orange or yellow/orange flags for you. Contact them at 941-870-4461 or [www.floridaunderwatersports.com](http://www.floridaunderwatersports.com).

**Electronic Dive Buddy.** Your new dive buddy could soon be a computer strapped to your BC that controls whether you sink too deep or surface too quickly. Two engineering students from the University of Auckland have designed a system that monitors a diver’s depth, speed of ascent or descent, and automatically adjusts his BC’s buoyancy if he gets into trouble. It also has a cruise-control feature, allowing divers to automatically maintain a desired depth. Anatoly Kudryashov, one of the inventors, says testing shows the Electronic Dive Buddy works to at least 100 feet. “Further developments could allow it to be built into a diver’s wetsuit, but of course it all depends on financial backing.”

**Big Dive Publishing Change.** Bonnier Corporation, which publishes PADI’s *Sport Diving*, has just purchased *Scuba Diving* magazine from F+W Publications, bringing both major U.S. dive publications under one roof. In a prepared statement, Bonnier CEO Terry Snow said “We serve the enthusiast market better than anyone in the business, so adding *Scuba Diving* to our existing *Sport Diver* title will only enhance our relationship with the dive industry and its passionate audience.” What changes will be made remain to be seen, but publishing is a perilous business these days. The well-regarded *Fathoms* closed a year ago, when the new publisher couldn’t make a go of it after purchasing it from founder Bret Gilliam.

**Diving Ruined for Emma Thompson.** The British actress from *Sense and Sensibility* learned how to dive a decade ago in Zanzibar, then did trips to Dominica and the Seychelles, but her work on the 2005 film *Nanny MacPhee* ruined diving for her. As she told *Readers Digest*, “I had to have a prosthetic nose made for me [to play the role], and while I was inside the mask as it was hardening, I had a panic attack. And interestingly, the next time I went scuba diving, I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t breathe through my nose.”

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## Letters to the Editor/ Submissions

**Undercurrent**  
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102  
Sausalito, CA 94965  
Fax 415-289-0137  
[EditorBenD@undercurrent.org](mailto:EditorBenD@undercurrent.org)

## Subscriptions/Address Changes

To subscribe, renew, change address, or order back issues, call 800-326-1896 or 415-289-0501, Mon.–Fri., 9–5 Pacific Time  
E-mail: [pete@undercurrent.org](mailto:pete@undercurrent.org) or write:

**Undercurrent**  
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102  
Sausalito, CA 94965

**Editorial Office**  
Ben Davison, Publisher and Editor  
Vanessa Richardson, Senior Editor  
E-mail:  
[EditorBenD@undercurrent.org](mailto:EditorBenD@undercurrent.org)

[www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)

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