

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## *Komodo Dancer, Flores Sea, Indonesia*

*kaleidoscopic rainbow diving in the Alor Archipelago*

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Dear Fellow Diver:

We were moored in Beang Bay, Pantar, after taking two muck dives in front of a tiny village. Because sanitation doesn't exist in these remote parts, I wondered what other "muck" there might be in the water in addition to the clothing, shoes and a goat burial ground. Black volcanic sand set up the small undersea life for easy spotting. Though the dive sightings were varied and prolific, I was ready for a change of scene -- and got it.

Garry Bevans, in charge of *Komodo Dancer's* dive operations, and Ralph Buck, the intrepid leader of Rainbow Dive Adventures for gay and lesbian divers, were going to explore a new site on the corner of the island. I tagged along. Of all my 32 dives, I came the closest to losing my reg here in slack-jawed awe - - a sloping reef to a steep wall, five-foot-high barrel sponges, and coral outcroppings stretching to 15 feet. The floor of the reef was covered with rippling sea anemones and soft corals in rainbow hues. Hiding there were shortfin and pygmy lionfish, clownfish and bright yellow, beautifully tufted flatworms. Cockerel wrasse seemed to claim it as their own spot. Garry postponed overnight steaming elsewhere to dive here the next day. So my second dive had sightings of a dainty, translucent ghost pipefish dancing in the open near a delicate, light pink coral, colorfully beribboned 18-inch clams, spotted devilfish, octopus, various species of nudis, and strap-weed and diamond filefish. Visibility was well over 100 feet. Garry dubbed his find Rainbow Rock n' Reef, in honor of the dive group on board.

Rainbow Dive Adventures, a Los Angeles tour agency



*Komodo Dancer*



for gay and lesbian divers, chartered the Dancer for 10 days. With straight me along as the gay ally, eight men and four women dived the Flores Sea and the Alor Archipelago. The group lived up to its travel outfitter's name -- many colorful personalities ranging in age from 40 to 70. They included two each of lawyers, psychologists, engineers and nurses, with a horse veterinarian, CPA, actor and producer expanding the mix. After stepping onto the 98-foot wooden schooner, we all settled on the deck with the welcome-aboard iced drink,

greatly appreciated in the 95-degree heat and high humidity. The best times I spent above water were during dinnertime when I got to know this great bunch of divers. We ate alfresco, laughing and joking as the crescent moon mingled with an array of stars, brighter and bigger without lights to compete or contrails to blur.

There was a lot of daytime steaming to get to dive sites, scattered 200 miles along the archipelago, but the distances seemed short as we passed mountainous islands, several with active volcanoes. I kept waiting for the 600 square meters of sails to unfurl but they never did. Except for Garry, an English expat, the crew of 15 is Indonesian. Sebastian painstakingly took breakfast orders, served meals with a flour-ish, and was ready with hot chocolate after a night dive. He would give shoulder massages after dives and arrange an hour-long massage with one of the crew for \$10. He and divemasters Yan and Gede were the only others who spoke English. First Mate Kasim was substituting for the vacationing captain. Evidently, a year ago, another captain fell overboard and was never found. Whether accident or suicide is a question unanswered by the crew but I gathered he was a controversial character who enjoyed his liquor.

Although she was built in 2001, the Dancer, one of Peter Hughes' fleet, looks much older and needs TLC. After dives, the sloped, multipurpose forward deck was slick with

## Did Gabe Watson Get Away With Murder?

In a surprise move, Gabe Watson, 32, the American charged with killing his first wife on a honeymoon dive trip on the Great Barrier Reef in October 2003, returned to Australia on May 13 and pleaded guilty, after years of denying he was a murderer.

Tina Watson was a novice diver and drowned at age 26 while exploring the *Yongala* wreck near Townsville from the Mike Ball liveaboard *Spoilsport*. An inquest was held in Australia last year, and the coroner found it likely that Watson, an experienced diver, killed his wife by turning off her air, holding her underwater and then letting her sink to the bottom. Watson says Tina got into trouble a few minutes into the dive so he surfaced to summon help. (See our coverage of the investigation in the August 2007 and July 2008 issues of *Undercurrent*.) Australia faced an uphill battle to get him extradited from Alabama but Watson, who has since remarried, decided to come back voluntarily to clear his name. Or so it seemed...

During the court hearing on June 5, there was no reference to Tina's air being switched off. Prosecutor Brendan Campbell told the court Tina "became distressed" while

diving, and Watson's wrongdoing was that he did not help her as a dive buddy should have by giving her air from his octopus. Watson's lawyer, Steve Zillman, said his client panicked when he saw his wife was in trouble and though Watson had a search-and-rescue dive certification, it was "just a piece of paper" and he had no confidence to rescue a person in a real emergency situation in open water.

Watson was given a four-and-a-half-year sentence, suspended after he has served 12 months. The suspended sentence is not unusual. The Queensland prosecutor's office is underfunded, its attorneys having to do three times the work of those in other Australian states, so it faces pressure to cut deals to avoid long trials and the possibility of adverse rulings.

But outrage from Tina's family, not to mention the media attention on the ruling, has persuaded Queensland's Attorney General to consider an appeal of the sentence. Alabama's Attorney General Troy King has asked the Queensland court if it can re-sentence Watson to the maximum punishment under Australian laws, which is 10 to 20 years. If that fails, King's office plans to come up with murder charges against Watson if it can find evidence he plotted to kill his wife while they were both in the U.S., and before that fateful dive trip.

water, resulting in at least half of the dozen divers falling. There were some scraped legs and one more serious accident. One woman was sitting in a chair on the sloped deck, which slid, tipping sideways, resulting in a back injury and reduced diving. In Bali, she went to the emergency room for x-rays and Divers Alert Network arranged for her to fly back in business class.

An area covered with an overhead tarp on the main deck includes a long camera counter with air hoses for drying, a huge wooden table seating 16 for meals, benches with basket storage and lines for wetsuits to be hung, mostly in the sun. An indoor salon with quasi-efficient air-conditioning had two large tables for computer-laden divers to

tinker on. Voltage-charging stations were on deck and in the salon, and digital download and burning facilities were available. The napping divers took over the salon's two cushioned bench seats while the livelier ones pulled out cold beverages, including beer, from the fridge and dug into fresh fruit and jars of store-bought ginger cookies. The party got livelier when complimentary liquor was set up for cocktails in the late afternoon. We toasted each other from lounge chairs on the partially covered bridge deck, directly in front of the bridge, but it also doubled as a smoking area for crew.

My dive buddy and I each got our own room, as the Dancer has seven double cabins. My deluxe queen-bed cabin was spacious with plenty of storage, efficient A/C and a porthole. My large bathroom was tiled with stones (for added ballast, Garry said). Sheets were changed midweek, beds made daily, and robes were provided. Besides the other deluxe cabin, the rest had bunk beds and small bathrooms. The upper deck had two owner's cabins, one with a double and one with twin beds. Cabins were kept clean but not entirely bug-free.

Before the first dive, I had fresh sliced fruit and a croissant, and afterwards came a delicious main breakfast of eggs-of-choice, bacon, hot cereal, pancakes or French toast. Other meals usually had an Indonesian flair. Fish was frequently served, which presented a problem for the two non-fish eaters until the chef provided alternatives, usually chicken. Tasty soups were served before the entrée; the Indonesian chicken soup, soto ayam, was served with sliced cabbage, lemon, chili sauce and white noodles. When the chef omitted the thick white sauces in vegetables and meats, food was excellent, especially the fish satay with sauces. Between afternoon dives, he prepared fried bananas and several chocolate to-die-fors.

Service was exemplary, from carefully helping us in and out of tenders to finding misplaced dive gear. Garry was masterful at troubleshooting gear problems so no dives were missed. One diver was a large man whose air disappeared fast. No problem -- a 100-cu-ft steel tank was substituted for the 80-aluminum. On a night dive, one of my integrated weight pouches descended without me. The tender had left after the backroll, but it was a quiet star-lit night with calm seas and no current, so it took less than five minutes to hail them with my dive light. Gede returned the next day, freediving to where he had pinpointed our dive, thanks to GPS. With repetitive diving being the standard, my gas of choice is 32-percent Nitrox but on the second day of diving, the Nitrox generator broke -- a needed part was unavailable. We didn't have to pay for the six Nitrox dives already taken but still, a bummer.

Garry checked currents before each dive but they could change quickly. In the briefings, we were told dives were 60 minutes, but divemasters seemed as enthralled as divers by the sights and thus prolonged dives. Komodo's web site indicates electronic positioning devices would be issued to divers but they are no longer available. We

## *Komodo Dancer, Indonesia*

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★★
Diving ( <i>beginners - currents are too rough</i> )	★
Snorkeling ( <i>ditto</i> )	★
Accommodations	★★★★★
Food	★★★★1/2
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent

*Worldwide Scale*

## Florida's Newest Wreck Dive

At a cost of \$8.6 million, the *General Hoyt S. Vandenberg* has finally been sunk to become the world's second-largest artificial reef. On May 27, the 524-foot-long boat was sent to rest at 140 feet, seven miles south of Key West. The *Vandenberg* was used to transport WWII troops in both the Atlantic and the Pacific, bring postwar refugees from the German concentration camps to New York City, and as a setting for the sci-fi movie *Virus*. The topmost portion of the ship is at 40 feet, making it accessible to divers of all levels.

Contact any Key West dive shop for details about diving. There, you can also buy a scavenger-hunt game created by local diver Ann Lorraine. The waterproof slate poses questions that help you find the answer on the ship. For example, the first clue tells divers to find the ship's "birthdate" and points them to an area on the highest deck of the ship.

extra dive but received an emphatic negative. Entries were backroll and when exiting, BCs and weights were removed and handed up before climbing the ladder. The dives were scheduled for 7:30, 10:30, 2:30 and the night dive at 6:30, but varied depending upon the steaming of the boat.

Slight surge and one- to two-knot currents were present on half of the dives, particularly in the Alor Archipelago. I was excited about Kal's Dream, known for its ripping currents and pelagic life. It was near the new moon, the best time to catch this high-current dive in tamer waters. However, with high tide barely covering the sea mounts, currents were dangerously swift and swirling, thus a no-dive. Except for two days of very light chop, seas were calm and visibility was over 150 feet on most dives. Underwater temperatures varied from 73 degrees in Alor, where there were thermoclines, to 85 degrees. I was comfortable in a new 5mm merino-wool lined wetsuit, but my 3mm with vest would have been ample.

We steamed overnight to arrive at the active volcano of Batu Tara by dawn to see the lava pouring and belches of smoke accompanied by thunderous rolls. The crew ensconced themselves in a cabin, leery of the destruction a volcano can bring but we divers stood in the open, enthralled and photographing the ash filtering down. Garry decided not to try a dive there, so we steamed three hours to the Ledges of Bacatan at Lembata Island, where at 113 feet, we watched the cruising whitetip and blacktip reef sharks. An eagle ray's appearance and giant grouper added to our pelagic sightings.

Rich and I had great fun differentiating between the common and longspine lionfish by counting pectoral fins and identifying the Indian, spotfin, clearfin, kodipungi, gurnard, zebra and pygmy lionfish. My favorite was the lacy scorpionfish. Other odd-shaped fish challenged our ID skills, with frequent spottings of a variety of devil-fish and stonefish. Of the waspfish, the cockatoo was most prevalent. It was the norm to see a variety of fish, many schooling, hard and soft coral, anemone, crinoids, and tunicates joining to create a kaleidoscope of colors. Cuttlefish were more difficult to spot, except for an 18-inch pharaoh at the Pomno Kecil wall dive in Maumere Bay. The brilliant blue and yellow ribbon eel appeared on many dives. Among the many species of ghost pipefish I saw were ornate, velvet, and thin, two-inch adults and juveniles. Clown Valley near the island of Pura lived up to its name. The stunning carpet of multi-hued anemone housed only one species of anemonefish, clownfish of all sizes, and hundreds of them. In the crystal-clear water, I could see the thermocline, which dipped to 73 degrees. This was primarily a small-fish dive trip, with few exceptions. During an interval, we saw whales blowing and breaching a half-mile away. We jumped in the tenders but they had disappeared.

were required to carry safety sausages, airhorns or whistles, and strobes on every dive. At each briefing, we were reminded to stay with our divemasters and buddies, but this was only reinforced at Wodong Japanese Shipwreck, where kicked-up deep silt narrowed viz to five feet. Even in the muck, our DM spotted a pygmy seahorse, the only one we saw on the trip.

Once we set up on deck, we never had to handle gear again until trip's end. Tanks were filled on deck, then put on one of the two 20-foot fiberglass tenders with twin Yamaha 40hp outboards. But I always check my gear when any crew member sets it up, and once my first stage was put on upside down. Filling and repositioning tanks were labor-intensive for crew, perhaps the reason why dives were limited to four per day. I asked about taking an

The most outstanding night dive was at Alor's Mucky Mosque, named for the mosque in the tiny Muslim village. We started down as the muezzin made the sunset call to prayer. Dive lights easily highlighted critters on the volcanic black sand bottom: leaf fish, 10-inch painted frogfish, a half-inch-long white phase frogfish, three-inch thornback cowfish, ornate ghost pipefish floating in the open, several species of nudibranchs, walking pincushions, zebra crab, shrimpfish, bumblebee shrimp and stately, unfurled sea pens. Dozens of schooling razor fish delighted me with their shape shifting.

At trip's end, I was dreading the Air China Flight from Bali to Los Angeles via Taipei. Cramped seats and dreadful food made the two flights, totaling 18 hours, a nightmare. The 90-minute flight from Maumere to Bali on Merpati Air was a breeze in contrast. To prepare for the ordeal, we stopped at Carla's, the streetside massage parlor near the Sofitel in Seminyak. It offers an hour for \$5 or the "special" of facial, body scrub and massage for \$18. Before boarding the flight from hell, we toured the Ubud area, an hour from the airport, staying at the ultra-luxurious Maya Ubud resort, a 25-acre Shangri-la set among rice fields.

Was it worth the money? Indeed, as my write-up extols. Under the Flores Sea is another world, seldom dived, alive and pulsing with kaleidoscopic colors, new species awaiting discovery around the next corner. It's worth missing some Caribbean dive trips to save up and go on just one here. As for the Komodo Dancer, I was impressed with the service, less so with the food, the limit of four dives a day, the failure to have a backup part for the broken Nitrox generator and the deck designed for pratfalls. For Indonesia diving, I would return to the luxury of the well-designed Kararu Voyager.

-- C.P.



**Diver's Compass:** Rainbow Dive Adventures' package, including three nights in Bali, cost me \$5,300 . . . Dancer's rates for a 10-night Alor cruise is \$2,900 for a twin-bunk stateroom, plus a \$90 fuel charge and \$200 for Nitrox; it offers discounts of \$150 for seniors 65+, \$200 for consecutive charters and 10 percent off for active military and dive instructors . . . My China Airlines from LAX to Bali was \$1,000 and Merpati Airlines from Bali to Flores was \$350 . . . Luggage weight limit for Merpati is 44 pounds (carry-on can reach 11 pounds) and if it exceeds that by a lot, there's no guarantee it will arrive at your destination; I wasn't charged an overweight fee to Maumere but on the return flight, it was \$1 per kilo over . . . a \$25 visa is obtained upon entry at Bali, international departure tax from Bali was under \$15, domestic departure tax Maumere to Bali was about 50 cents . . . Komodo Dancer's Web site: [www.komododancer.com](http://www.komododancer.com)

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## La Parguera, Puerto Rico

*an okay dive destination close to home*

Dear Diver:

It might not occur to some hardcore divers that there are plenty of others who are content with just a few dives and a lot of topside exploring. On some vacations, I'm one of those and I recently found that Puerto Rico, a long weekend non-stop trip from many U.S. airports, is a good choice and easy on the budget.

I rented a car at San Juan's airport and after negotiating afternoon rush-hour traffic, it was an easy two-and-a-half-hour drive through lush emerald mountains to Ponce, then alongside the Caribbean until I reached Lajas, a village on the southwestern coast. My pleasant room in the Villa Parguera, the largest and best hotel in town, was \$100 a night, with two queen beds. My little patio was 30 feet of garden



along the sea wall with a view of the bay and the mangroves.

I showed up at Paradise Scuba at 8 a.m., put my gear into their truck and walked a block to the boat dock. By 8:45 a.m., our crowded boat of eight divers was heading out to the wall. The first three miles were protected from the wind and surf by mangroves and barrier islands, but the next three were wet for anyone not under the cover. Black Wall, thickly dotted with shrubs of silvery black coral, is one of La Parguera's signa-

ture sites. I followed the mooring line down through swarms of durgeons hoping for scraps. I went over the lip of the wall into endless blue, then cruised at 85 feet. I checked out a green tube tunicate while Cachi, the divemaster, pointed out a green moray in the open. My partner, upside down peeking into a hole, pantomimed a drumbeat to signal a black drum but it turned out to be a highhat. A large queen angelfish buddied up alongside me. Nice, but it was the largest fish I saw on this dive. The snappers, groupers, jacks, even the big parrots are fished out (not unlike some other Caribbean destinations).

During our one-hour interval, Cachi moved the boat to the next site, then passed around cookies, sandwiches and cold drinks. Then, a giant stride into the water at Forest. After deeper first dives on the Parguera Wall, the second dives are on the patch reef with a sandy bottom at 50 to 60 feet. The water was 80 degrees in March; I used my 3mm jumpsuit and never chilled on the 45-minute dives. Cachi didn't seem interested in leading or even giving a briefing, so my buddy and I eased around the sand channels and over the tongues of coral, where blackbar soldierfish and butter hamlets lived. Tiny ghost feather dusters grew in the sand. The coral cover was half dead on the back reef, a little better on the walls. Cachi told me there was a sustained period of 87-degree water a few years ago, and the reef had suffered. By 1 p.m., I was back at the dock. I hosed down my equipment before loading it on the truck, and hung my wetsuit in the shop.

Because Paradise does only two dives per day, I used my afternoons to explore the nearby towns, parks and beaches. It was a treat to take the 40-minute drive to Guánica, a rare, dry tropical forest with deciduous trees and cacti growing taller than my six-foot self. The park has lots of trails, some running from 500-foot-high hillsides down to the sea. Another afternoon, I drove west to the Cabo Rojo lighthouse at the southwestern tip of Puerto Rico to walk along towering sea cliffs, wade on a nearly-deserted sparkling beach, and enjoy the shorebirds in the salt flats.

## Dive Instructor Jailed for Being Alone With Her Boss

Diving on the Arabian Peninsula won't appeal if you're looking for a little extra attention from the dive staff. Roxanne Hillier, a South African dive instructor who was working in the United Arab Emirates, was jailed for three months after being found guilty of being alone in the same room with her male boss and of having sex out of wedlock. Hillier, 22, had been living and working at a dive operation in Khorfakkan in the Emirate of Sharjah, since November. In mid-May, police raided the operation, arresting Hillier, 22, and her boss on sex-related charges. This happened despite medical tests that showed no sign of sex, and despite Hillier not even being in the same room as the guy at the time of

their arrest. After little more than a kangaroo court hearing, she was sentenced to jail with deportation, while her boss, a local, received a six-month sentence.

Her case is not an isolated one in the UAE. A young, drunk and unmarried British couple was arrested for having sex on a public beach in Dubai last year. A British citizen was jailed after immigration authorities found a few tiny poppy seeds (that's what heroin is made from) stuck to his jacket; he had purchased a bread roll at Heathrow airport to eat on the flight. People have also been jailed for bringing in prescription codeine cough syrup and melatonin, and one unfortunate chap got a four-year prison sentence when a shred of cannabis the size of a sugar grain was detected stuck to the bottom of his shoe.

## Divers, You're Not Using Enough Sunscreen

Used to be that a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 was all you could get. Then the number rose into the 70s, and now Neutrogena has a SPF 100+ sunblock. Well, according to dermatologists, it's only a marketing game.

Sunscreens with sky-high SPFs, or sun protection factor, offer only slightly better protection against sunburn than an SPF 30. While an SPF 100 blocks 99 percent of UVB rays, SPF 30 deflects 96.7 percent.

But that's only if you apply enough, which most people don't. You see, to get the SPF advertised, you must apply at least an ounce, the equivalent to a full shot glass, every time. And because sunscreens rub off or don't stay put, dermatologists advise reapplying every two hours, or after swimming or sweating. Forget about

"waterproof" sunscreen because on divers it all gets rubbed, washed, or sweated off anyway, so it needs to be reapplied often.

Done right, sunscreen can reduce skin cancers. Australian researchers had 800 people apply an SPF 16 sunscreen to their heads, necks and arms every morning, while 800 others applied sunscreen in their usual routine, which often meant not every day. The results: While people in both groups had developed the scaly skin patches that are precursors to skin cancer, those who used sunscreen daily developed 40 percent fewer.

Dermatologists recommend sunscreens with an SPF of at least 15 and UVA-fighting ingredients like avobenzone, Mexoryl SX, titanium dioxide and zinc oxide. A good sunscreen will contain at least one, preferably more, of these ingredients and, contrary to old reports, none of them are considered harmful to coral reefs or marine life when you're in the water

As a bilingual and bicultural island with American influence all over the place, Puerto Rico is gringo-easy, and the prices are generally easy on the wallet. Parguera has the feel of any American beach town. It's a friendly place, with take-out shops, open-air bars with pinball machines and lots of young folks, especially on the week-ends. Effects of the economic downturn were visible, as several restaurants and hotels had closed. Our dinners at the Villa Parguera were either overcooked or underdone, but in the morning I had a simple, cheap breakfast with excellent coffee and a chat with the co-owner at the little diner attached to the Supermercado Perez, a block from the hotel. To skip the crowds, head for San Germán, a 15-mile drive inland. It's the second-oldest town in Puerto Rico, after San Juan. At the end of the long town square is a museum in what's left of a church founded in 1606. It's a world apart from the noisy beach town. On the square, I sampled three restaurants in as many evenings, with the clear winner being the aptly-named Tapas Café.

On my last dive day, I visited Cañones and a gently sloping wall, where I cruised through 15-foot-deep channels. The sun was out, the visibility was at least 80 feet, and the coral was healthier here. Above one coral spur, a school of creole wrasse hurried past me, and I saw many tomtates, an uncommon type of grunt. I followed a trumpetfish, its nose bright purple. When it began its part-of-a-seafan act, its nose lost its color. A diver was set to take a picture of an eight-foot nurse shark snoozing in the sand, but Cachi pulled its tail and chased it off. He had the unconscionable habit of harassing animals, even inflating the puffers, then delivering them to divers. On my final dive at Estrella, I followed a small school of striped goatfish as they dug for morsels. At the end of a coral spur, I found a male hogfish lying on his side; even a close approach didn't stir him from his snooze.

The Paradise dive shop has little to recommend it: no O2 kit, rinse tank or even a mask bucket. The head was broken, the underwater guiding was listless. I tried to book the other dive shop, West Divers, but its boat was full. Based on my visit to their shop, I'd book there next time. They also have afternoon dives.

One afternoon, my buddies and I rented a boat and outboard (\$50 for three hours) to snorkel mangrove islets one mile out to sea. Many divers believe they graduated from snorkeling long ago, but at these mangroves and the nearby turtle grass, one enters a different underwater world - - the reef's nursery, replete with juvenile baby grunts, wrasses, barracuda, and schoolmasters. Hundreds of upside-down jellies abounded, some pulsating along in mid water. All this in less than six feet of water.

I also swam one evening in La Parguera's nearby bioluminescent bay, where a horseshoe lagoon surrounded by mangroves provides a fertile habitat for the one-celled algae that sparkle when you stir water. Even though I've been night diving in bioluminescent waters, I still find a swim in the dark trippy.

After four days in La Parguera, I drove east to El Yunque, the spectacular tropical forest park, for walking, birding and lounging on a little terrace at the beautiful eco-lodge Casa Cubuy. Then on to Old San Juan for a day-long walking tour through history. Indeed, Puerto Rico offered me a fine assortment of activities above and below the surface for a good price.

## La Parguera, Puerto Rico

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★
Diving ( <i>beginners</i> )	★★★
Snorkeling ( <i>near the mangroves</i> )	★★★★
Accommodations ( <i>Villa Parguera</i> )	★★★★
Food ( <i>in San Germán</i> )	★★★★
Service and Attitude ( <i>skip Paradise; use West Divers</i> )	★
Money's Worth	★★★★

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent  
Caribbean Scale

-- M.A.

**P.S.** If you're staying in San Juan, reader Mark Zahorik (Chicago, IL), who dived Puerto Rico in April, recommends a good alternative. "A 45-minute drive to the south-east coast gets you to Palmas Del Mar resort, which has a new dive operation called East Puerto Rico Diving. It was launched by Joe LeRoy, a retired stockbroker turned avid scuba instructor. Basslet Reef, a large reef formation just outside the large harbor, stretches for several miles, and the visibility on the deeper first dives was

## Can Saunas Prevent Decompression Sickness?

By adhering to conservative profiles like slow ascents, extended safety stops and appropriate surface intervals, the healthy, fit diver faces only minuscule risk of decompression sickness (DCS). Still, much has yet to be proven about the exact causes of DCS. According to a recent study, a long sit in a hot sauna may help to prevent it.

In their article published in the journal *Aviation, Space and Environmental Medicine*, researchers from France had 16 military divers take a 30-minute dry sauna heated to 149 degrees Fahrenheit. An hour later, the divers took a simulated dive to 98 feet in a hyperbaric chamber. Then, everyone did the same dive without sitting in the sauna beforehand. Post dive Doppler readings found that circulating bubbles were reduced by about a third in divers who had done the sauna/dive procedure. They also had significant reductions in systolic blood and pulse pressures.

Researchers opine that the decrease in inert gas bubbling may in turn decrease the risk of DCS. Possible reasons include changes in plasma heat shock protein and nitric oxide levels, and sweat dehydration. However, the

findings can only be considered suggestive for the time being.

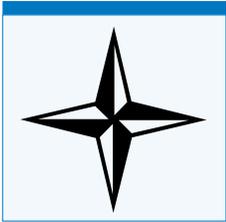
Even if these findings are replicable, various temperature levels will need to be tried to see if lower temperatures can produce similar results. There's really no workable way to subject the body to temperatures in the 150-degree range other than by dry sauna (wet environments at that level would cause burns). If the reported reduction in gas bubbling in fact does require temperatures at or near this extreme, you'd be out of luck if you don't have access to a sauna heated to this temperature range.

As a final caution, it's important not to confuse pre-dive with post-dive sauna, or even with post-dive hot tub, shower or other methods exposing the body to high temperatures. Excessive heat after a dive can accelerate inert gas elimination and increase bubble formation, and so should be avoided. Besides deep stops and slow ascents, spending your first hour of post-dive time in a warm, but not hot, setting is another way to keep DCS at bay.

-- Doc Vikingo

"Pre-dive Sauna and Venous Gas Bubbles Upon Decompression from 400 kPa," by Jean-Eric Blatteau, M.D. et al.; *Aviation, Space and Environmental Medicine*, December 2008.

consistently near 100 feet. The area appears overfished so larger pelagics are infrequent, but I saw turtles and rays on most dives. A bonus with this location is that LeRoy often elects to make the 12-mile trip over to Vieques. There are several shallow reefs off the island that he often visits when the group has newer divers, and they appear healthy and unspoiled by fisherman. The sites near Palmas del Mar are also solid. Moray's Ledge was particularly notable. In addition to getting an up-close view of a six-foot green moray eel, we also had a sea turtle follow us around for five minutes. I saw several lobsters, a spotted eagle ray with remora attached, an octopus along with schools of grunts, spadefish and angelfish, all in 100 feet of visibility." ([www.eastpuertoricodiving.com](http://www.eastpuertoricodiving.com))



**Diver's Compass:** It's easy to fly nonstop from the U.S. to San Juan, and it's also possible to fly direct to Mayaguez on the west coast, a one-hour drive from La Parguera . . . Traveling anywhere in Puerto Rico practically requires a rental car, which I got for cheap through [Priceline.com](http://Priceline.com); Parguera and Rincón, the two areas that attract serious divers, are not near airports (Rincón is also a surfing destination and the surf was especially active during my stay so no dive boats were operating). . . At the Villa Parguera ([www.villaparguera.net](http://www.villaparguera.net); 787-899-7777), get rooms 120 through 125 for the view, or the upstairs oceanside rooms . . . Skip Paradise Scuba and go with West Divers instead ([www.westdiverspr.com](http://www.westdiverspr.com)) . . . The surface interval I most recommend is a trip through El Yunque's rainforest and a stay at Casa Cubuy ([www.casacubuy.com](http://www.casacubuy.com)) . . . No passport or departure tax, as P.R. is a U.S. territory and uses dollars; most people are fluent in English, and most prices in tourist areas are comparable to those in the States.

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## Go Where No Diver Has Gone Before

### *try diving from a kayak*

If you're a diver who complains about crowded sites and longs for tranquility, read on. On a kayak, you're the captain, and you can steer it wherever you please. Many divers use kayaks to extend their range, and there are so many reasons why they're worth the effort.

After launching a kayak from a beach or ramp, a diver can paddle to secluded sites or where shore access is restricted. Entry and exit through surf are generally easier. You can stay warmer and dryer before and after the dive. You're more rested upon reaching the dive site. Kayaks can get through or into tight places. A kayak provides you a way to get out of the water and a platform to rest on between dives and converse with your buddy. You can tote your lunch. You can even take an extra tank or two. They have anchor lines to help your ascent and descent. They can carry sonar, GPS and radios or phones. They're low maintenance; once you own one, it costs nothing to operate. However, kayaking skills are crucial. You must know how to right yourself if you capsize, as well as how to manage currents and rip tides.

For free diving or scuba diving, a sit-on-top kayak is preferred. Look for sealable hatches, which keep personal items

dry (you'll still need a dry sack) and contain them safely should you capsize. A stretchy leash will secure your paddle while you're diving. An open stern will hold tanks and BCDs (secured by straps or bungees).

Some PADI and NAUI instructors offer kayak diving certifications. However, neither agency could supply *Undercurrent* with their locations or contact information, so you need to contact a local PADI or NAUI facility (search online at [www.padi.com](http://www.padi.com) or [www.nauitec.com](http://www.nauitec.com)) to see if instruction is available. Most kayak diving instructors are based on the West Coast. One shop that offers PADI kayak diving certification is Aqua Safaris of Santa Cruz, CA (831-479-4386, [www.aquasafaris.com](http://www.aquasafaris.com)).

KayakDiving.com offers an instructional CD-ROM for \$15. At [TopKayaker.net](http://TopKayaker.net) ([www.sit-on-topkayaking.com](http://www.sit-on-topkayaking.com)), you'll find articles for divers compiled from several sources (click on "Diving"). It also offers basic how-to guidelines and e-tails kayak diving accessories.

Some dive shops such as Sub-Surface Progression in California's Mendocino County ([www.subsurfaceprogression.com](http://www.subsurfaceprogression.com)) rent dive kayaks (they don't require a certification, by the way). Others, such as OEX Dive & Kayak Center in

photo by Ric Miller



La Jolla near San Diego ([www.oexpress.com](http://www.oexpress.com)) offer guided tours.

But many dive shops and resorts specifically forbid diving from rental kayaks. A few resorts, such as Blackbird Caye in Belize, allow guests to snorkel off kayaks but generally

their boats are too small for scuba. Captain Don's Habitat in Bonaire offers kayak scuba diving and certification. But few other tropical dive operators have picked up on the concept. That's a shame, especially because many people believe that the lack of adventure in diving has caused the Gen Y twenty-somethings to seek other sports. Kayak diving can provide that kind of adventure.

P.S.: Kayaks run from \$600 to more than \$1,400. Ocean Kayak makes several popular models; other brands include Necky, Hobie, Cobra and Native Watercraft. Do comparison shopping at outdoor gear retailers Clavey ([www.clavey.com](http://www.clavey.com)) and Dive and Kayak ([www.diveandkayak.com](http://www.diveandkayak.com)). You'll also need a roof rack for your vehicle, or get a buddy with a rack that holds two kayaks.) Beach wheels that fold up and can be stored inside a hatch are helpful for schlepping the kayak from the parking lot. Finally, a very important tip: Get the best seat you can afford, because good back support makes a huge difference when paddling.

-- Larry Clinton

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## Where Have Hawaii's Fish Gone?

### *check home aquariums back on the mainland*

While *Undercurrent* readers report plenty of good snorkeling and diving experiences in Hawaii, it's with increased frequency that they're asking "Where have all the fish gone?" The dramatic decline in reef fish has several causes, but none weighs so heavily as the losses due to commercial collectors gathering reef fish for the home tanks of hobby aquarists. Although some marine aquarium fish and invertebrates are aquacultured by the industry and hobbyists, 90 percent of marine ornamentals are caught in the wild.

Recent studies show population declines from 38 percent to 75 percent in seven of the top 10 collected species, Hawaii's most beautiful, unusual and often rarest fish. Given that the "marine ornamental" trade operators have no limit on the number of fish or species they may collect -- and there are no limits on the numbers of permits issued -- it's no wonder reef fish populations are in serious decline.

Forty-five percent of the top 20 collected species are only found in Hawaii. But for these endemic species, there is no replacement pool. If they are overcollected to the point where they cannot rebound, these unique species could be lost to Hawaii -- and divers and snorkelers -- forever. And because four-fifths of all collected species are herbivores, the loss of those animals affects the algae/coral balance on Hawaii's reefs.

On the Big Island, where the heaviest fish collecting occurs, a management plan established in 2000 set aside 30 percent of the shoreline as no-take zones. Four of the top 10 collected

species are now more abundant within these zones, but the remaining six species (e.g., the multiband butterflyfish and the Hawaiian cleaner wrasse) continue to decline. Along the remaining 70 percent of the Kona coastline where collecting occurs, targeted species are dramatically less abundant. For instance, yellow tang populations average approximately 40 percent of what they were five years ago in the no-take areas, and have sometimes measured less than 25 percent. Clearly, collecting continues to have significant impact on Kona's reefs. Seventy percent of Kona's coastline and 98 percent of those on the other islands are being sacrificed to that industry.

Reef animals die soon after they are captured. In 2007, Hawaii's collectors reported that of the 700,000-plus animals collected, 20,340 animals died before being sold (the true numbers are estimated to be several times higher). This equates to every fish on a Hawaiian reef the size of five football fields being scooped up and tossed in a dumpster. Mortalities continue throughout their journey from wholesalers to the retailers and finally the hobbyists. Many surviving fish are starved, bagged and drugged for shipping. They will die shortly after arriving on the mainland because they are unsuitable for home aquariums; they are either impossible to keep outside their native reef habitat or require expert care that few hobbyists can provide. In fact, 99 percent of all species die within a year in captivity.

Of Hawaii's 20 most collected species, 10 of them are listed by aquarium experts as "unsuitable for captivity." The most

egregious examples of fish sacrificed for brief entertainment in a tank are the Moorish Idol and the Hawaiian cleaner wrasse; both are known to starve within weeks because their preferred foods are not available in captivity.

Recent research in Hawaii shows that yellow tangs are long-lived, surviving on reefs for decades; the oldest found so far is 41. Hundreds of thousands of them are collected on Big Island reefs every year, and though suppliers consider them easy to care for and good for beginners, only a few thousand of them will live beyond a year. The aquarium trade claims the losses are worth it: hobbyists cite their tanks' "educational value" and industry professionals cite the need for livestock to support their lucrative "dry goods" sales of tanks, filters and lights. Common sense says reef animals are fueling a disposable hobby: When the fish die, they are thrown out and replaced, like cut flowers.

This is not just a problem exclusive to Hawaii, excessive catching of wild fish for aquariums happens all over the globe. The majority of the marine aquarium livestock originates from Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and central Pacific Islands (e.g., Hawaii). Others are also imported from the Caribbean and Red Sea regions.

Most of the "live rock" in aquariums, meaning corals and invertebrates, are also collected from the wild and its use has increased drastically, due to the rise in popularity of reef tanks. Collecting or mining of many types of coral often means the use of a hammer and chisel to remove pieces from the reef, generating heaps of dead coral rubble and habitat damage. Fiji and Indonesia are currently the world's largest suppliers of 'live rock' and coral and the U.S., again, is the major importer.

If you believe reef animals are best left on their home reefs, then take action:

\* Ask your local pet stores to stop selling wild-caught marine fish and animals.

\* Ask your local restaurants and businesses with marine aquariums to stop keeping and displaying the animals.

\* Boycott those businesses that ignore your requests.

\* Sign the petition sponsored by the Hawaii Reef Fish Recovery Project at [www.thepetitionsite.com/1/reef-fish-arent-ornaments](http://www.thepetitionsite.com/1/reef-fish-arent-ornaments)

\* Contact the organizations Coral Reef Alliance and Reef Check and ask them to take action to end fish collection off Hawaii shores. (CORAL has no position on fish collection, preferring to have all interested parties, including collectors, get together to work out a compromise.)

\* Spread the word to your fellow divers.

P.S.: In early May, Hawaii's Department of Land and Natural Resources board approved a ban on the taking and feeding of parrotfish, surgeonfish, chubs and sea urchins along a one-mile section of the Maui coast in North Ka'anapali, from Keka'a Point to Honokowai Beach Park. The goal is to protect these species because invasive seaweeds they usually eat are fast overtaking much of the coral along that shoreline. The ban, if approved by Governor Linda Lingle, would mark the first time Hawaii has adopted protections for specific species as a broader strategy for restoring the health of a reef. Both scientists and fishers support the plan. However, many species, including butterflyfish, angelfish, Moorish Idols, eels and hermit crabs, can still be taken in unlimited numbers from those reefs.

*Author Rene Umberger has been a scuba instructor and guide on Maui since 1983. When not underwater she works with the tourism industry creating educational materials, developing environmental standards for marine tourism and organizing underwater cleanup events. She is currently the administrator for the Maui Nui Marine Resource Council.*

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## Death of a Shark Diver, Redux

### *dive ops rely on sharks for business, but it comes at a price*

Shark attacks are happening less often. That's according to George Burgess, curator of the International Shark Attack File. He reports 59 unprovoked attacks by sharks last year, lower than the 71 in 2007 and the all-time high of 79 in 2000. Four of those were fatal. The majority of attacks were in North American waters, 42 last year, with Florida accounting for 32 of them. Luckily, snorkelers and divers were the smallest group affected, totaling only 8 percent of unprovoked attacks.

But that's unprovoked, mind you. Burgess classifies "provoked attacks" as a human initiating physical contact with a shark, usually involving fishers, spearfishers and those feeding sharks. The latter is often what affects divers most as more of them go on shark dives, with boat crew chumming the waters to

get sharks in front of the paying customers – and that can be an accident waiting to happen. Burgess says 19 provoked attacks happened last year.

One of them was Markus Groh, an Austrian diver who died on a shark dive trip in the Bahamas with Jim Abernethy's Scuba Adventures. Groh, 49, was bitten by a bull shark, which apparently mistook his calf for the baitbox that the dive operator puts at the bottom to attract sharks. We did an extensive report on Groh's death in our April 2008 issue.

#### **Comparing Sharks to Birds and Dogs**

Abernethy wasn't talking to the press then but now that there is no threat of a lawsuit, he was willing to talk to *Undercurrent*. He was cleared of wrongful doing by the

Miami-Dade County police 24 hours after the event, and Abernethy, based in Riviera Beach, FL, says he has no plans to change anything about his shark trips, and he is backed by big names in marine biology and underwater photography. “I have a two-hour plus briefing on what needs to be done when in the vicinity of large sharks, and I require the same level of advanced diver or above to dive with us. What happened was an accident that unfortunately happened on my boat. The main reason why I haven’t changed anything is because sharks don’t eat people. Sharks do not seek them out, I’ve never seen a shark being aggressive toward people. The accident with Groh, it was just not a shark attack.” The Bahamas Diving Association, whose members offer openwater dives with more sedate reef sharks, has been trying for some time to get Abernethy to stop his openwater, non-caging dives but he refuses. “[Cage diving] doesn’t follow the way I interact with sharks.”

Critics of Abernethy’s interactions don’t like the idea of turning sharks into trained animals used to humans in the water and being fed. Abernethy replies that he looks at sharks

as the Audubon Society looks at birds. “They’ve been selling bird feeders for years and birdwatchers feed birds but every now and then, a bird will bite a person as a mistake. However, feeding the birds is an opportunity for people to get close to these animals so they can see them.”

Then he tries another comparison: canines. “Sharks are very much like dogs. There are the smaller, speedier ones, like the little dogs that nip and yap. Then there are the big dogs, walking tentatively into the living room trying not to break anything. We see that mix on our Bahamas dives.”

### “It’s the Humans’ Fault, Not the Sharks”

That comparison to household pets is what bothers Burgess, who instead compares feeding sharks to feeding bears in parks. “Encountering humans is an unusual event for sharks, so there’s a natural distance,” he told *Undercurrent*. “Once that natural behavior is modified, it’s lost and that’s where problems begin. Dive operators want to keep a lot of sharks in one place for predictability – and for paying customers. But divers are seeing an underwater Disneyland rather than a natural world.

“If people want to go diving with sharks, that’s their choice. To me, the biggest concern is what happens when you attract sharks to the boat and how it affects their behavior, the reef ecology and the long-term affects to the shark-human relationship. If you’re going to put people and food in the water to attract sharks, fine. But if something happens, it’s the humans’ fault, not the shark’s.”

“If you want to dive, you go with a dive operator but if you want to dive with sharks, you go and learn with a shark expert.” That’s Erich Ritter, who calls himself the only professional shark-human interaction specialist. He runs SharkSchool.org, an organization that teaches one-week courses in the Bahamas, Maldives and the Red Sea for divers about how to interact with sharks. Two-hour classroom sessions and homework are mixed with dives to show students how to learn sharks’ body language and react correctly with their own. “If you can understand why a shark of any species comes closer, you are in the driver’s seat and in charge of the situation. If you don’t understand, you get afraid. We put divers in different scenarios and mentally push them to a point where they must rationalize the situation they’re in.”

This seems rich coming from a man who is a pariah in the dive industry. Ritter, who claims a Ph.D. in “behavioral ecology” from the University of Zurich, says he can intuit shark behavior and read their thoughts just by looking at them. However, Ritter was bitten in the calf, just like Groh, while being filmed for Discovery Channel’s *Shark Week* series in Walker’s Cay back in 2002. Ritter was demonstrating how he could, by controlling his heartbeat, interact safely with a school of sharks, even when food was in the water. But when there were more sharks than usual in the feeding area, dive staffers tried to lure them away from Ritter by throwing a piece of fish into the water 15 feet away from him. A bull shark lunged for it and in doing so, bit directly into Ritter’s

## Scuba and Swimming

I met my wife, Lucia, at a scuba club party years ago and when she heard I had started *Undercurrent*, all she could do was tell me how I had given Lahaina Divers, the Maui dive shop she worked for, a bad review. They deserved it. We went out to dive the submarine south of Lahaina but when we descended the line to 140 feet, there was no sub in sight. Thankfully, she wasn’t on that dive. After certifying hundreds of divers for Lahaina Divers, she went on to other endeavors. When she learned I had e-mailed resorts and instructors asking for their funny experiences, she shared this with me.

-- Ben Davison

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After instructing two non-divers before their first resort course dive, I took them for a shallow dive near Lahaina Harbor. We went through the usual mask clearing and regulator exercises, which they handled easily, so I motioned them to follow me. After I swam 10 feet, I saw they were both just kneeling, looking around in wonderment. I motioned again but I only got a wave from them. They stayed put. After several tries to get them to swim around and have a look, it was apparent they were going nowhere. They didn’t seem frightened but they wouldn’t budge. Eventually I took them up the line, helped them into the boat and out of their gear. “So, how come you guys didn’t follow me?” I asked. “Didn’t you want to swim around and explore the reef?” One looked back at me in amazement and said, “Well, we couldn’t. You see, we don’t know how to swim.”

-- Lucia Wolter Christopher

left calf. The shinbone was so damaged that Ritter's left foot must be permanently supported by a bar. Ritter blames the spotter assigned to keep an eye on the sharks and steer them away but says, "My bite was the best proof that I know what I'm doing."

### **"Dive Operators Should Get Educated"**

Despite his reputation and claims of intuiting shark behavior, Ritter does have some good tips for improving the safety of shark dives. "So we must educate the operators and have them use solid techniques. Don't have a floating milk crate for sharks to push around, attach it to the bottom and don't let divers get too close to these sharks. And always have a second dive guide who is capable of observing sharks' swim patterns. If they get excited, they'll change their swim pattern. For example, if one does a wide-angle approach, it may be a little nervous but not aggressive. If it does a frontal approach, it wants to check you out and get a reaction from you. Dive operators are generally novices and have no clue to the actual behavior of these animals. They should get educated and the standards should be changed. You can't take the dive shop owner's livelihood away but he can indeed change what he can't control."

Their feeding methods are debatable but shark dive operators know what their livelihood is and are stepping up their efforts to protect it, especially now that finning for shark-fin soup is dropping shark numbers precipitously. Beqa Adventure Divers, a notable shark dive operator in Fiji, has been blogging about its efforts to get Discovery Channel to get the *Jaws* references out of its upcoming *Shark Week* series this summer. Andrew Cumming, Beqa's operations manager, wrote on the shop's blog (<http://fijisharkdiving.blogspot.com>) about the shady efforts of one of the network's film teams to hire Beqa to take them to dive sites but then do their own thing. "We were told the group would come with their own safety divers, need a chumsicle and require no further service other than unlimited access to our site." Cumming believed the team leader was going to descend in a specially-designed clear shark cage and conduct experiments like flailing about, floating lifelessly and holding freshly-killed fish to elicit an attack response from the sharks. "After years of trying to establish a safe and mellow routine and to keep the sharks away from the surface, having [them] come and thrash our dive site! We of course declined to enable the shoot." He said another dive shop down the road agreed to take the film crew out. "Money apparently talks much louder than one's professed love of sharks and fake eco-branding. But in the end, it's not our country, not our operation and hopefully, not our reputation, either, that will lose out. Although we'll have to share the negative repercussions, as will Fiji tourism. In the end, the real losers will be the sharks."

Abernethy is also stating his pro-shark stance to the public, becoming active in government actions on coral reefs and shark management. He recently protested a June shark tournament in Fort Myers, helping to get it turned into a no-kill event. On his Web site, he blogged about a seven-foot lemon shark with a rope tied around its neck cutting deep into its skin and gills. It

## **Passport Tips for Traveling Divers**

If you're traveling anywhere outside of the U.S., you need a passport these days. For Mexico, Canada and the Caribbean, you at least have to carry a government-issued photo ID plus proof of citizenship, such as a birth or naturalization certificate. (Cruise passengers are officially exempt, although cruise lines now require photo ID and proof of citizenship.)

If you need a passport fast, pay extra to expedite it. The Feds promise they'll get it expedited within three weeks for \$60, plus overnight delivery costs. Private companies can do it in as little as 24 hours at prices from \$179 up. For trustworthy passport expeditors, get the list at the National Association of Visa and Passport Services' Web site at [www.napvs.info/passport](http://www.napvs.info/passport).

If you have four or fewer blank pages in your passport, have new pages added by going to your local passport agency, or get details about expediting from the State Department's Web site at <http://travel.state.gov>. Divers traveling in Asia with nearly full passports have told us they've been refused entry to a country and forced to fly elsewhere to get pages from an American embassy, which cost them a few days of time and lots of money.

Carry a photocopy of your passport's pages in luggage separate from where you carry your passport. That will save you days trying to replace a lost passport while you're in another country.

swam off before Abernethy could free it. In April, he saw the shark again while taking a charter of photographers and videographers. They all agreed to rescue the shark, tail roping and pulling it aboard. Abernethy restrained the shark while a crew member cut the rope. In just over one minute, the shark was back in the water. "The thought of this beautiful creature dying a slow painful death because of trash discarded in the ocean was too much for me," he wrote. "Many people would think that it's just a shark and not to bother, but I love these creatures and will do anything within my power to save them." Of course, when he saw the lemon shark the next day, Abernethy fed it lots of fish to keep it coming back.

-- Vanessa Richardson

P.S. The latest shark fatality of 2008 happened to a French woman on June 2, when an oceanic whitetip shark attacked her while snorkeling along Egypt's Red Sea shoreline, south of Marsa Alam. The woman, in her 50s, was part of a group aboard the liveaboard *Le Nautile*. About 20 snorkelers were at the dive site Habili Al on the St. John's reef area observing the shark when the woman moved away from the group and duck-dived toward it. According to Egypt's Chamber of Diving and Watersports (CWDS), the woman was bitten on the leg when

she surfaced, and the shark was still biting her as she was pulled onto the boat. She lost consciousness and died soon after.

It was Egypt's first fatal shark attack in five years; the previous one was another snorkeler near the busy Sinai resort of Sharm el-Sheikh in 2004. While such attacks are extremely rare in the Red Sea, this one most likely happened because two safari boats had been feeding sharks in the same area that day. Both the National Park and CDWS are conducting an investigation into the recent incident, CDWS spokeswoman Mary Gleeson told *Undercurrent*. "Shark feeding is illegal here in the Red Sea. It is looking likely that they will face a serious fine and suspension

from operating for a period of time, probably three months."

Ritter, who teaches some of his SharkSchool courses in the Red Sea, says dive boats there routinely flout the no-feeding rules. "The galley staff dump leftovers after the cooking is done, and divers take fish with them after lunch and start feeding sharks. Every boat does this because divers want to push the envelope, so they're forced to increase the thrill. They're competing for the few sharks left but they don't know how to handle an antsy, full-grown oceanic whitetip."

--Vanessa Richardson

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## Dive Gear Warranties: Always Honored?

*generally satisfactory, with some annoying quirks*

Is it true that if you buy a regulator over the Internet, the manufacturer will not warranty the product? That's a question we often receive, most recently asked by subscriber CJ Zulaica (Sacramento, CA).

It can be trickier when you buy dive gear online rather than from a dive shop, but the first question to ask is whether the seller is an authorized dealer of the product. If so, your gear gets the required servicing for a specific period, and you'll be notified by the manufacturer if there is a safety recall. Many online equipment sources are authorized dealers (we know of no source falsely claiming to be an authorized dealer), which will send you an official warranty registration card with a product serial number that matches the one appearing on the product you're buying.

But there is a caveat. Aqua Lung, for example, fights online sales of its products, even by authorized dealers. On its Web site, Aqua Lung states, "Beware of any retailer that offers to sell and ship our products for orders placed by phone or the Internet. These retailers are NOT authorized Aqua Lung Dealers. All authorized dealers must execute an agreement that does not allow the sale of our products except 'in-store.' Many Aqua Lung dealers advertise on the Internet, but they are not allowed to deliver our products other than 'over-the counter.'" If they do, Aqua Lung won't consider your warranty valid.

However the seller may establish its own warranty for buyer's protection. One of the largest online retailers, LeisurePro in New York City, does just that. If a product isn't covered by a manufacturer's warranty, LeisurePro provides its own warranty which, they claim, "offers greater or equal protection." LeisurePro warrants "the equipment will be free from defects in materials and workmanship for the same period offered by the manufacturer." In the past several years, all reports to us indicate LeisurePro keeps its word. Reader Mac Lysett (Ten Mile, TN) told us that "after only 30 dives, my Oceanic Geo computer malfunctioned at night in my Cayman Brac hotel room,

with lights flashing and sirens warning that I needed a deco stop at 45 feet. I had to pile towels on top of the computer and shut it in the bathroom to get back to sleep. When I returned home, I contacted LeisurePro and it gave me an RMA number and instructed me to return the computer to Oceanic. Within a week, a brand new Geo arrived and I've experienced no trouble with it. Both LeisurePro and Oceanic were terrific."

We recently asked our subscribers via our monthly Dive News e-mail for their experiences with dive gear warranties. They replied that manufacturers are honoring them promptly and often going beyond the necessary fixes, like replacing the old product entirely, sometimes with a newer, upgraded model.

Reader Larry Klumb (Lithia, FL) said that "two years ago, the wristband detached from my Mares Nemo stainless-steel computer; the plastic anchor had cracked and was not repairable. I returned it to Mares in anticipation of getting a new band but in fact, I got a new computer. Seems the screws were so small and corroded that they could not be removed, so they replaced it with a new Titanium Nemo computer."

Even if your dive gear is beyond the warranty coverage, some makers will give you a good deal on substitute or replacement models. That's what happened to Steve Thomas (Boulder, CO) when his six-year-old Oceanic Pro Plus 2 dive computer had glitches with the air pressure. "My dive shop couldn't fix the problem and Oceanic confirmed the problem didn't have a fix at a reasonable cost, so it offered to replace the computer with the same model (rebuilt with warranty) for \$150. A new replacement costs around \$700 so I felt that offer was very fair."

### Those Extreme Rules

A few readers shared their "learn from my mistakes" tales. Dan Kopetski (Vancouver, WA) has an "Aqua Lung reg that I lost the lifetime warranty on because I had a friend who owned a dive shop service it. I later learned he was not an authorized dealer. Now I have to pay for all parts and service instead of

getting the free parts and service that come with the regulator under warranty.”

And keep that warranty schedule handy. Mary Martin (Windermere, FL) says “I bought my Mares regulators at Divers Direct three years ago; they told me I had to get them checked every year to keep up the warranty. Unfortunately, I missed getting them serviced within the year. When I did take them back, 14 months after I bought them, it cost me just over \$100 and I now have to pay every year. I would have thought that since the regulators were serviced and there was nothing wrong, I should get the warranty for life back but no. I missed the service because I listened to wrong advice from a fellow diver and it now costs me over \$100 every year.”

### When a Warranty May Not Cover You

While your warranty may be good at your old dive shop, another may blow you off. Richard Moles (Davenport, FL) and his wife bought Oceanic regulators while living in Illinois. Then they moved to Florida. “When I took my regulators to Divers Direct in Orlando last year, I was charged for parts, even though Oceanic’s warranty states they are covered. I had to fight with them but they finally refunded that part of my money. I called several other authorized Oceanic dealers in the Orlando area but none would honor the warranty, as I had not bought them from their store. I called Oceanic to learn that the warranty is voluntary and dealers do not have to honor it. Oceanic would honor the warranty if I shipped my regulators to California and back. By the time I paid the UPS fees, it was about the same as paying for parts.”

We called Oceanic about this policy, and customer service manager Mark Jones says that yes, it’s up to the dealer to

decide whether it wants to service a product bought at another store. “If they do, they’ll service a product every 12 months and charge for labor but not for the annual servicing kit. Some dealers say, ‘I don’t want to run my business that way,’ and decline, and we don’t tell them how to run their business. But we do encourage it as a good marketing sales tool.”

So while some Oceanic dealers bail out of helping a customer, here is a case in which a Scubapro dealer lent that helping hand. Michael Cole (Edwards, CO) said, “Three years ago, I bought a rental Uwatec Air Z Nitrox from a dive shop in Colorado. The computer worked well for the first 50 dives, then the tank pressure readings began to go all wrong. I sent it, via Dive Odyssey in Ft. Pierce, FL, to ScubaPro in California, with the understanding that I would pay for the repair as the computer was purchased used. It was repaired at no cost to me. On my next dive trip, it again failed and I returned the entire unit again. Scubapro replaced the batteries in the transponder on the primary stage, the batteries in the wrist unit and a failed circuit board in the wrist unit – again at no cost to me. Also, Dive Odyssey would not even allow me to pay for the UPS charges even though I had purchased the equipment elsewhere.”

So back to the question about whether online scuba equipment sellers provide warranties. According to our readers, they all seem pretty good about it. As you can see, there are quirks in the warranty system but by and large, a diver can expect that if he has a product he bought under warranty and he returns it to whom he bought it from, the problem will be solved.

But if you have a contrary experience, let us know.

- - Vanessa Richardson

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## Flotsam & Jetsam

**Diver Battles Croc in Raja Ampat.** A British diver is recovering after fighting off a saltwater crocodile. He was bitten on his neck and hand while diving from the *Ondina* live-aboard at a remote dive site in Indonesia. His personal story will appear in an upcoming issue of *Undercurrent*. According to witnesses on the boat, the crocodile appeared from nowhere and began to drag the diver to deep water. Alexander Safonov, the diver’s buddy, tried to fight off the croc by poking it in the eyes, then surfaced to get help. Meanwhile, the diver managed to stab the crocodile in the eye with his knife, and it let him go. Safonov told *Dive* magazine: “It is a miracle that the diver survived, and I attribute it to his bravery and ability to keep calm and disciplined in this extreme situation.”

**How Valuable Are Coral Reefs?** Marine-focused organizations tried to determine how much economic value they create for the world. Their figure: \$29.8 billion a year. Read their explanation in the interesting - - and free - - study “Economic Values of Coral Reefs, Seagrasses and Mangroves: A Global Compilation 2008.” It describes reef-focused tourism’s impact

on the global economy, and what countries will be hit hardest by the oceans’ decline. Contact Giselle Samonte-Tan at [gsamontetan@conservation.org](mailto:gsamontetan@conservation.org) to get a free booklet e-mailed to you.

**A Seahorse’s Incredible Journey.** A long-nosed seahorse floating in the English Channel was scooped up by a seagull and flown, dangling from its beak, three miles inland. She was then dropped from height to land on a lawn in Weymouth, England, patrolled by a hungry cat. Luckily the cat’s owner, Karen Warr, picked up the air-deprived seahorse with a slice of fish, placed her in a bowl of tepid water, and rushed her to the nearby marine center. The staff named the seahorse Pegasus and put her into a dark quarantine tank for 28 days. Pegasus quickly recovered and was apparently returned to sea.

**Scuba Diving and Paintball?** In Quebec, entrepreneurs are launching a nonprofit organization called the Outdoor Alliance, which brings together four businesses: New World Rafting,



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Arnold Paintball, the Canadian Association of Face-First Rappelling and Mountain-Cross, and Total Diving. Its advertising invites “all adventure sport enthusiasts to exceed their limits and to try out new and emerging alternative sports.” See [www.alliancepleinair.com](http://www.alliancepleinair.com) (in French now, with the English version coming soon) to see how the alliance is taking diving away from being a wuss sport that any idiot can do into pure adventure.

**Yanni Gives Up Hair for Diving.** You know Yanni, that lion-maned, Greek-born pianist who lights up PBS screens at pledge time? Well, divers, he’s trimmed his hair and he blames scuba diving. “I was at my house in Greece and I like to scuba dive, but my hair was getting on my nerves because scuba diving and long hair don’t go together very well. Eventually I said, ‘Just cut it all off and forget it. Just enjoy the ocean.’” Apparently, he doesn’t know any of the long-haired lady scuba divers who could have taught him how to keep his hair and enjoy the dive.

**Red Sea’s Dive Shop Shutdown.** Egypt’s Chamber of Diving and Watersports is busy. Not only is it cracking down on dive boats chumming for sharks (see our story on page 11), it recently announced that 23 diving centers in the South Sinai area, including 14 in Sharm El Sheikh, were operating without

an official Ministry of Tourism license. *Dive* magazine reports that although the dive centers were asked to operate legally, they did not comply, so the Chamber ordered them to be shut down as a major step in raising standards throughout the dive industry in Egypt.

**Blowup Over Sulawesi’s Reefs.** The Indonesian island boasts Takabonerate, a top marine park that received an award from the World Ocean Conference in May, but it’s sadly downhill from there. Fishery officials say 55 percent of coral reefs in Sulawesi’s southern waters are damaged due to fishermen’s destructive use of dynamite, even inside the marine park boundaries. The Indonesian Navy had arrested fishermen in South Sulawesi waters for using bombs to catch fish, but the damage has been done -- nearly half of Takabonerate’s reefs are reported to be in bad condition.

**Diver Caught in Freak Wave.** Australian abalone diver Greg Pickering was 36 feet underwater, connected to his boat by a dive hose, when a big, unexpected wave capsized his boat. “Suddenly, I got pulled off the bottom and it just kept pulling. Then the air went off and I came up and the deckhand was sitting on the upside-down boat.” The two men were unharmed and found in a life raft three hours later.

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