

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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The Bay of Pigs, Cuba

easy living, easy diving, maybe even for Americans

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Dear Fellow Diver:

The six-lane highway from Havana to the Bahía de los Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) has light traffic as I motor along in a VW rental car, a model I'm not familiar with. There's Cuban salsa on the radio, and crops and open fields along the roadside. Old American cars that give Havana a look of my youth are still in evidence on this two-hour trip. I just left the lively capital, where I heard a lot of music, did a lot of walking and drank too much rum, and am headed for the island's south (Caribbean) side and a much slower pace.

The Bay of Pigs is more famous for the failed 1961 U.S.-sponsored invasion than for its wall diving. My dive group had chosen the spot not for its history but for its coral reef (which, back in 1960, the CIA reportedly interpreted as floating seaweed in its aerial photos, thus losing some of its invading ships to the coral heads). With three friends, I arrive at the little dive shop in Playa Larga, at the head of the long, narrow bay, to make sure we are set for diving the next morning. Not a cloud in the sky, and it will stay that way for most of the next week. Pepe Allejua, who I plan to dive with, is not at the shop but someone says come back at 8:30 am tomorrow, which we do. Minutes after choosing tank sizes, I am told to follow the shop's van in my car to the first site.

At a site called El Tanque, I step off the limestone shore and swim slowly over the sand flats and back reef. The goldspot and bridled blennies scatter, but a pair of spotfin butterflies swims with me, one on each side. A peacock flounder stirs, as striped goatfish



Casa Mesa's Patio, Playa Larga



scavenge the sand, with a bar jack hoping to share their harvest. The shallows at all sites are excellent snorkel areas, and at this site, a busload of tourists arrive during our diving to greet us overhead when we return. (I didn't see any divers or snorkelers at other sites.)

At about 20 feet, the coral slopes to the lip of a vertical wall at 40 feet. I cruise along slowly at 70 feet, enjoying the healthy coral sprouting purple rope sponges. The fish life is sparse, so I focus on the

oysters and occasional lobsters, and find several green tube tunicates. A school of Creole wrasse pours over the wall above me, and Pepe points to a distant barracuda. They are never eaten here, due to ciguatera poison concerns, but are not common. I head up a sand chute to a wrecked fishing boat Pepe had called the "Cuban Titanic" in his 30-second dive briefing. He points to a big black grouper lurking under it. Near the wreck is a field of at least 100 garden eels, neatly spaced and waving gently to nab tiny morsels. I peer into the boat's hold to watch sharpnose puffers paddle aimlessly. Now on the shallow back reef, we angle back to the starting point. I follow a beautiful red-tail parrotfish; why are the terminal males so pretty in these waters? I find my first lionfish of the dive, under a big coral head; they are in evidence on all dives, though Pepe says they only arrived a year ago. I spy a shy hamlet ducking behind a coral. While I found the breadth of fish life to be light in the Bay of Pigs, this was not the only dive in which I spotted five hamlet species, an unusual variety. Back near the shore, moon jellies pulse in six feet of water near the French-speaking snorkelers. I'm done diving for the day at 12:30. Time to stop at the store to restock the mini-fridge on the way to a shower, maybe take a walk, and the 3Rs: relaxing, reading and romance. There's a shower on the patio where I'm staying. Good thing, because most sites have no rinse tank nearby.

I'm staying in Casa Mesa, a "casa particular" (Cuban for bed and breakfast) right on Playa Larga's beach, one of several standing side by side. Casa Mesa is \$25 per person plus a little more for breakfast; good dinners are \$10. It has two simple rooms to rent in the modest home, with the modern amenities of hot water in private bath, A/C and a mini-fridge, as well as nice sitting areas shared by guests. You can also stay at the inexpensive hotels in Playa Larga or Playa Girón, the two towns that book-end the Bay of Pigs. My friends are three houses down from Casa Mesa, and we eat together, alternately at one house then the other. Tonight it's lobster with yucca root in mojo (a lemon-garlic sauce), "cristianos y moros" (black beans in rice), and the inevitable fruit plate. And Bucanero beer for me. This is Cuban home cooking and plenty of it. On mornings, I sip good Cuban coffee in the dining area or on the patio. Mauret brings fresh papaya juice and a fruit plate, and asks how I want my eggs. Roberto gets out a bicycle for two and heads off with his daughter to school. I am asked when we want dinner, with a choice of fish, lobster, pork or chicken. Life is smooth and easy in the slow lane. In my five days here, a few others will pass through, staying in the other room. Only one couple are divers; I spend time sharing rum on the patio with them.

All dives were shore dives with a swim to the wall, 200 to 300 feet out. Some sites have small dive shops with gear and tanks on site, but usually tanks are loaded into a van at the main dive shop at 8:30 a.m. and driven to the site. Although Pepe said we could do three dives per day, their setup is designed for two: You go to the right on the wall, then left, for two dives at each site. The 12- and 15-liter steel tanks were filled from 2,700 to 3,000 psi (12 liters has a little more capacity than an aluminum 80). I chose the whopper but didn't need it;



Divemaster Pepe Allejua at Punta Perdiz

Bay of Pigs, Cuba

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale

tanks. At La Cueva de los Peces, or Fish Cave, you can take a dip in a lovely cenote or buy a refresco at the café. Cenote diving is available and advertised.

At Punta Perdiz, I giant stride off a six-foot drop, and, enjoying the sun, I swim on my back 300 feet to near the wall. I descend in 20 feet of water amidst big coral heads, some almost to the surface. A mottled goatfish lazes next to me. Soon I'm soaring over the wall into blue water. I ease down to the depth of the blackcap basslets, and use my light to check out the holes. At 80 feet, we enter a swim-through, coming out at 110 feet, cruising from the tunnel into the blue. The visibility is excellent and the sun makes the big scenery just right. Another swim-through puts me into a sand chute and past an uninteresting wreck. (One can dive on wrecked landing craft from the 1961 invasion, but I didn't.) I enjoy the shallows with a greater variety of fish life than along the wall. My partner is finding bizarre inverts; she picks up some weird mollusk, which definitely is not in the Paul Humann book. There are plenty of dead staghorn and elkhorn, but a fair amount of live patches and a bright yellow-green finger-shaped coral that I cannot identify. Under one patch, I find three blue-phase sergeant majors chasing away grunts from their egg patches. These proud papas are so agitated they look like nervous wrecks. A four-foot barracuda, the largest fish I've seen, cruises just inches over the sand.

The Bay of Pigs is not the most exciting or fishiest location in Cuba, but it's good Caribbean wall diving in a very nice environment. Most divers come for a couple days as part of a longer vacation, or are bussed in for a day from Varadero, Cuba's big beach resort. Cuba's top-of-the-line diving is at Maria la Gorda in the west or Isla de la Juventud (Isle of Youth) to the south; both are dedicated dive resorts. Isla de Juventud features great formations a la Cozumel and good fish life. Maria la Gorda has a good variety of sites and fish life, and would be my first choice. To get to the Isle of Youth, you take a short-hop flight from Havana. For Maria la Gorda, you can hire a driver for the four-hour ride or rent a car.

-- A.M.

the profile puts you on top of the wall or in the back reef for nearly half the dive time. Although we could stay down well over an hour, my group was usually back in 50 minutes. Currents are negligible, and the water was 80 degrees in February. Pepe, like the Cuban divemasters I have met on other trips, was competent, safety conscious and spoke good English. He gave extra help to an inexperienced diver in our group. However, the briefings were slim and his knowledge of reef life is modest. I met an award-winning underwater photographer named Daniel Perez the following day. As I visited with him and admired his macro shots, I wished he were diving with us for help in spotting unusual critters. We spent intervals at the beach while Pepe and his assistant swapped the

Travel to Cuba

Cuba is a huge destination for Canadians: 900,000 visited Cuba in 2010. For those of you south of the border in the US, it is less common. Approximately 400,000 US citizens visit Cuba per year, mostly those with family on the island. It presently violates US law for most Americans to spend money in Cuba unless you obtain a permit, and is punishable under the Trading with the Enemy Act, a WWI-era law. But the fact is that many Americans, including many divers, do visit Cuba by traveling through Canada, Mexico (often Cancún) or Nassau. Cuban officials do not stamp US passports. The Obama administration has relaxed some restrictions, so the situation is headed in a positive direction. The Moon guidebook reports that only two persons have ever been prosecuted; both ended up fined. Nonetheless, it is illegal for US travelers to spend any money in Cuba, and those who do choose to circumvent US law do so at their own risk, which may count as soft adventure.



Diver's Compass: Most travelers to Cuba go through Havana, the biggest city in the Caribbean, which is definitely worth a few days for its music and culture . . . I stayed in a very nice, down-home "casa particular" called Casa Mercedes González (e-mail mercylupe@hotmail.com) with an excellent location, a lovely balcony, and Mercedes has a wealth of contacts and information; for two people it's \$30 for a room, \$10 more for breakfast . . . At the Bay of Pigs, contact Casa Mesa at casamesa@gmail.com . . . Once in Cuba, I called divemaster Pepe Allejua on his cell (52811816), but you could easily just show up in either Playa Larga or Playa Girón; I paid \$25 per dive with every fifth dive free, so 10 dives cost \$200, plus tip . . . Beer is \$1 in the store and \$1.50 in restaurants . . . Prices are listed in Canadian or US dollars, but you will actually be using Cuban CUC ("kooks"), which are approximately equal to dollars . . . Divemasters, hotel staff and others in the tourist trade can handle English, but rudimentary Spanish is useful if staying in homes and otherwise departing from the main tourist groove . . . Car rental is relatively expensive . . . Credit cards (but not from U.S. banks) are taken at hotels and larger restaurants but it's cash only for casas particulares, private restaurants and diving . . . I took a day off from diving to go see hundreds of flamingos and other bird species in the lagoons of the nearby Ciénaga de Zapata, the Cuban Everglades . . . The Moon guidebook is the best; author Christopher Baker has spent a lot of time in Cuba and written widely on Cuban subjects . . . You can find specific dive information in Mary Peachin's Scuba Caribbean, available in the "Books" section at www.undercurrent.org

Curacao, Fiji, Papua, Maui . . .

dive sites where you can expect the unexpected

Egypt, the Red Sea. We've reported on diving during tsunamis (see our book *There's a Cockroach in My Regulator*, available at www.undercurrent.org), and now one of our good subscribers has reported about diving during a revolution -- and a big loophole in Diver Alert Network's travel insurance. Peter Korn (Oakland, CA) was off to dive with the Red Sea Diving College in Sharm-el Sheikh in February "just at the start of the protests that led to the ouster of President Mubarak and the military takeover of the country. With Internet access down, no ATM machines would function, and the government had ordered the banks closed -- and I hadn't arrived with much cash. The staff at Red Sea Diving College allowed me to overpay by credit card, and then refunded the difference in cash so I could get by. I had planned to dive with them three days before a six-day liveaboard trip with the Torpedo Fleet. However, concerns about a potentially deteriorating security situation (Mubarak had pulled back police in Cairo, Alexandria and Giza, and all but invited looting) and worries about future gasoline deliveries to Sharm led me to cancel the liveaboard and travel to Israel earlier than planned. The U.S. State Department directive to all U.S. citizens to leave Egypt immediately also influenced my decision. I was disappointed to discover that my DAN travel insurance doesn't cover missed trips due to "civil unrest," which meant that the insurance I had taken out was useless to me in attempting to recover my pre-paid liveaboard trip. Unfortunately those funds are gone, and I will avoid pre-paying (and forgo any discounts that provides) in the future."

Cendrawasih Bay, Papua, Indonesia. *Undercurrent* webmaster Dave Eagleray, who lives in Ubud, Bali, tells us that in this remote Papua location, local fisherman feed whale sharks and the area is getting "hot" for divers. See <http://blog.secretseavisions.com/2010/09/cenderawasih-bay-whale-sharks.html>. Many liveaboards are now scheduling trips, so if you want to beat the crowds here, contact Grand Komodo (www.komodoalordive.com), Dive Damai (www.divedamai.com) or Tambora (www.tamboradive.com)

All West Apartments, Curacao. Now that Captain Don's Habitat has shut the doors (they expect to reopen near the end of the year) where does one go on Curacao? We wrote about All West Apartments

in June 2008 and subscriber Paul Selden (Portage, MI) told us he took our advice, stayed at All West in December and had good diving with Ocean Encounters. "All West is clean, very roomy, and with well-equipped kitchens. It's a tremendous bargain, especially for people like me who prefer quiet lodgings with low room counts. My package included unlimited shore dives and a rental car. Ocean Encounters keeps tanks at All West in a dedicated room unlocked by guest keys. Curacao is a large island, with some of the most breathtaking scenery in the world on the one hand, and some of the most picturesque cityscapes on the other. The dining experiences were fantastic. I did four boat dives with the Ocean Encounters' well-stocked shop in Westpunt, just a short drive from All West Apartments. The boat dives were drifts in very mild current. The reefs were recovering from last August when the water temperature hit 88 degrees. The amount of coral bleaching was shocking -- Mushroom Forest indeed resembled a forest of giant (pale white grocery store) mushrooms. I did my shore diving in four areas, all worthwhile. But the shore dives I found myself making again and again were right in front of All West Apartments off their tiny beach, reached via steps that begin just after leaving their dive room." (www.allwestcuracao.com)

Dive Charter Curacao. Elise O. Lovell of Chicago says Dive Charter Curacao owner Niels Jorissen was very responsive to her requests for a December trip. "He was in phone contact the day we landed, and also called repeatedly the next morning until he tracked us down when dive conditions forced a change in launch location. They dive west, north and south, going for more remote locations, although conditions kept us south. Niels uses a RIB. It's an extremely low-key operation that was perfect for us. Lots of stories and jokes, more like diving with friends than a company. Definitely appropriate for more advanced divers. You'll pay a little more with Niels, but the diving is very good to excellent, the day was a blast, everyone on the boat is friendly, and the divers know what they are doing -- a treat." (<http://divechartercuracao.com>)

"DAN travel insurance doesn't cover missed trips due to 'civil unrest' - which meant the insurance was useless in attempting to recover my pre-paid liveaboard trip."

Thumbs Up for Maui's Lahaina Divers. Robert Halem (San Jose, CA) was on Maui in November and booked Lahaina Divers' all-day trip to Molokai, hoping to see hammerheads. "When we boarded the boat, the captain gave a weather briefing where he told us to expect a very wet and wild ride both to and from Molokai, with the possibility that when we got there, we would not be able to dive due to the swell, surge and breaking surf. For those who

Cure Jet Lag Without Drugs

Natural light can cure jet lag? Studies on seasonal affect disorder and on circadian rhythms yielded this useful information for traveling divers: Jet lag can be cured, or your body re-set, simply by using full-spectrum light. It has been codified into something like a slide rule (a free download at www.bodyclock.com), and depends on your preferred wake-up time and the number of time zones you're traveling east or west.

When you get on the plane, set your watch to destination time, and from that point on, follow the schedule of exposure to three hours of full-spectrum light, followed by three hours of no light. On a long trip, say New York to Hong Kong, it means that you need to have full-spectrum light entering your eyes at a time when the cabin is dark. In pre-9/11 days, I would ask if I could sit with the pilots, who were happy to have company. Now you need mechanical help.

I use a full-spectrum light visor that makes me look a little like Geordi La Forge from *Star Trek: Next Generation*, but I'd rather look spacey than feel lousy. During the blocks of no light, I wear a super-dark visor. Trips with more than six or seven time zones crossed require a second day of following the light exposure rules. I buy my light visors from BioBrite (www.biobrite.com), and have used them for years. Even after trips crossing 12 time zones east or west, I have been ready to dive on the second day. The Jet Lag Visor is \$299, but worth it.

For me, the real test is the gut -- not a gut feeling, but what your gut does, if you get my drift. Using light therapy, I stay on schedule. What my dive buddy and I love about the system is first, it really works, and second, there are no drugs involved. I have given my jet lag kit to a colleague who traveled to Tokyo, Paris, then India for a series of talks, and he couldn't believe it. This system really works, folks.

-- Mel McCombie

PADI Stonewalls Dead Diver's Family

Whenever we are working on a story and contact PADI for its feedback, opinion or data, we never get a reply. They don't care much for our independent inquiries, so we're not offended by their lack of response, though it does mean their side of the story doesn't get into print. But being tight-lipped may be offending others, in this case a family suffering the death of a loved one who died while diving with a PADI dive shop.

Amy O'Maley was diving in Fiji's Beqa Lagoon on December 29 with a divemaster from Beqa Adventure Divers. According to O'Maley's boyfriend, Dale Kennedy, the divemaster resurfaced alone to change a tank, leaving O'Maley, 28, alone in a strong current. Kennedy panicked and went to search for O'Maley, finding her 60 feet down.

She was brought to the surface unconscious and, according to witness' statements, it was Kennedy and other divers on the boat who first sprang into action to administer CPR, with the dive crew joining in later as the boat made the 20-minute journey to shore. A van was waiting to take O'Maley to the local hospital because no ambulance was available, but the van was unsuitable for the 10-minute ride to hospital

because there was not enough room for others to continue administering CPR. Instead, Kennedy and others called a taxi and pulled the seats down. Hospital staff was unable to revive O'Maley.

Fijian police say she died of asphyxiation. O'Maley's sister travelled to Fiji to speak with Beqa Adventure Divers but said they have told her exactly what happened. As for PADI, no one there responded to us, nor did Beqa Adventure Divers. The only comment PADI made was to British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, saying that it was also investigating O'Maley's death but it will keep its conclusions confidential, even from her family.

We suppose PADI stays mum for fear whatever is says may be used against them in lawsuits. Fair enough. But dead divers have grieving parents, spouses, significant others and dive buddies who grieve over them. Giving them even a word of condolence and a "So sorry for your loss" goes a lot further than publicly announcing no one will ever hear another word from them about O'Maley's case. If there's no lawsuit in the making, then stonewalling might just change that.

didn't want to go, he offered a full, no-hassle refund. I took the refund. Lahaina Divers gets all five stars for this very customer-friendly policy." (www.lahainadivers.com)

Thumbs Up and Down for the Dancer Fleet (Formerly Peter Hughes' Operation). Judith Kendall of Los Angeles went to Bali's Alam Asmara Dive Resort, and while she reports it was of excellent quality, with fine dining and accommodations and superior staff service, she was not pleased. "The problem existed in calling this a 'diving' resort. It simply was not true. Guests had to be shuttled by van to a sandy beach sometimes as much as one hour away. Then a small Balinese-style skiff motored us to the various dive sites. You had to gear up in the water. This unknown issue made it impossible for me to dive since I am a handicapped diver. The Peter Hughes travel agency booked this resort for us but did not explain the diving logistics. However, they did know I was a handicapped diver. We paid ahead for both our resort stay and diving. Yet the travel agency refused to refund my money or offer me credit for all the days of diving that I could not use."

However, the crew of Peter Hughes' former Paradise Dancer in Raja Ampat showed great compassion for Sharon Dickinson (Bowling Green, KY) last November. "First, Raja Ampat is a location not to be missed on the bucket list of dive destinations. Although it does not get the 'crazy-critters' rating of Lembeh Strait, it definitely offers color, unique fish sightings, and more pygmy seahorses and wobbegongs than you can imagine. And the Paradise Dancer is a gorgeous yacht fit for a queen. However, just a few days into my adventure, I received a call via satellite phone that my father had passed away. We were in the middle of nowhere, four days into our journey. Through calm and rational thinking, Peter Hughes' crew and well-trained staff were able to coordinate my return, and safely and efficiently arrange my transport back to Sarong and on to the U.S. I have encountered on-boat tragic or emergency situations before but never have I experienced such professional, well-coordinated and safe efforts with low impact and low drama. I feel it is important to dive with someone with experience and professionalism - - it's the behind-the-scenes stuff we never see that we are really grateful for. Note: Purchase trip insurance! I got most of my trip package cost back, but not the airfare. Worth the money if there is a problem." (www.dancerfleet.com)

Wananavu Beach Resort, Fiji. A few years ago, Kai Viti Divers precipitously departed Wananavu Beach Resort in Rakiraki (www.wananavu.com), and Ra Divers, who had been working the area for a decade, replaced them. But Ra has just announced it will no longer take divers from Wananavu after May 31 and will be exclusively working with Volivoli Beach (www.volivoli.com). While Wananavu manager Ben Plummer assures us he has a plan, be cautious about making reservations there until you know how diving will be handled. So here is one alternative.

Lalati Resort, Fiji. Our reviewer loved it years ago. Diving is easy and accessible, not spectacular, but with a good range of South Pacific life. Andy Wiessner (Snowmass, CO) was there in December and says, “Lalati Resort is under new ownership, and they are great. The bures are huge and well-appointed, and staff is super friendly. Food is four stars out of five, with some meals surpassing that. We loved the diving on coral heads in Beqa Lagoon. The resort is in a small bay, so kayaking, snorkeling and swimming are excellent. No real beach right at the resort but you can walk to a beautiful one in 10 minutes or kayak to one across the bay. Nice swimming pool and deck. First-class operation in a stunningly beautiful location.” (www.lalatifiji.com)

-- Ben Davison

How to Insure Your Dive Equipment

readers debate: homeowners insurance or a separate policy?

In January, we sent our regular e-mail to subscribers and friends, asking about their experience with dive equipment insurance. We wanted to know if they filed a claim, and if so, whether their insurer had come through for them. We also wanted to know whether they preferred a separate policy for their gear, or were fine insuring it through their homeowners policy. The replies were split. Half the readers relied on their homeowners policy, others sprung for a dive-equipment policy. The majority were happy with the option they chose, while a few had complaints about how their insurer treated them.

“Why Should I Buy Additional Insurance?”

Many *Undercurrent* subscribers who relied on homeowners insurance were happy divers. When a rogue wave in Bonaire picked up Doug Welsch (Fennville, MI) during a shore entry and slammed him into the rocks, his camera and strobe were ruined. “My insurance agent said my equipment was covered, less the \$200 deductible. As long as it is an ‘accident,’ my personal items are covered while I am traveling. This was covered to the tune of \$2,200. With that kind of coverage, why should I buy additional insurance?”

John Dale Kennedy (Springfield, IL) finds scuba gear insurance too expensive. “I went to my homeowners insurer, Cincinnati Insurance Companies, and they added my gear on with an additional premium. I gave them lists of equipment with an estimated replacement cost. We finally settled on \$4,000 worth for \$80 annually. No deductible, no depreciation, and this is replacement cost. I thought this was a pretty good deal.”

We wrote about Eric Ressler (St. Louis, MO) losing his gear aboard the *Belize Aggressor* last year (see the September 2010 article “The Unprofessional Side of Losing Blame”) and he says dealing with his home insurance firm, Travelers, was easier than dealing with the Aggressor people. “Our theft loss came to \$3,700 replacement value. To document ownership of the stolen items, we put together original invoices, reconstructed invoices obtained from our dive shop, and photos taken by us or the liveaboard photo pro showing us using the gear. Our insurance company verified our claim, and reimbursed us promptly for the gear’s depreciated value -- 70 percent of the loss -- minus our deductible. We had replacement value insurance, so when we provided receipts for replacement items, we received the remaining 30 percent, minus the deductible.” Aggressor Fleet president Wayne Hasson refused to reimburse for the deductible, claiming the items could not have been stolen from the *Aggressor* or the boat’s dock.

A few years ago, Scott Addison (Sacramento, CA) compared his home insurer, State Farm, and dive equipment policies offered by Divers Alert Network (DAN) and Dive Equipment Protection Plan (DEPP). He tallied up the value of his scuba gear, more than \$8,000. His DAN quote was more than \$240 a year. “The deductible was \$250 or 10 percent of the total amount, whichever is greater for a flood claim, and \$100 for other losses. The State Farm policy premium was \$97, with no deductible, and covered flooding, theft, lost luggage and accidental damage.” However, Addison had to call two State Farm agents. The first said flooding wasn’t covered, but “the second agent called the underwriter directly who said he could underwrite the policy. If I went with the DAN policy and my \$500 Olympus camera flooded, I would have paid a \$243 premium plus a \$250 deductible -- \$493 for a \$500 claim. It just didn’t seem worth it, only in the event of theft.” As for State Farm, Addison says, “I cannot be sure if I will have problems with any claims, but I am working with a reputable insurance company, so I do not expect any.”

“Just Asking a Question Is Considered a Claim”

Don’t be too sure, other readers warn. “There are perils associated with using your homeowners policy to cover items of much smaller value than your home itself,” says Paul Selden (Portage, MI). “Once you file a claim for anything, red flags go up,” and may result in your homeowner’s insurance being cancelled or put on a ‘watch’ status.”

For years, Dan Clements (Everett, WA) covered \$30,000 of gear on a State Farm homeowners policy. Then someone broke into his car and stole his cell phone and GPS unit. “My \$600 claim resulted in a call from State Farm, asking us to raise our deductible to \$1,000. My agent indicated that after a claim, a flag goes up because State Farm actuaries seem to think a bigger claim is in the works. She said if I submitted a claim for diving or underwater camera gear, my policy would likely be cancelled. As a result, I transferred coverage from State Farm to the DAN policy.”

Homeowners who use their dive gear for professional purposes may be out of luck, advises Jeanne B. Sleeper (Laguna Beach, CA). “Because I sell images, my cameras and dive gear would probably be considered business use, so my insurance company, Farmers, is likely to deny coverage.” She also says many homeowners policies become secondary coverage if there is coverage ahead of them. “And don’t even call and ask if you have coverage on a loss or potential loss, because a call to just to ask a question can be defined as a claim. My \$1,500-per-year policy’s renewal came in at \$2,200. When I called to ask why, my file listed three claims. I have not filed a

It’s Not About the Diving

While the dive industry would like to have a lot more people in their 20s and 30s taking up the sport, the dive travel market is propelled by the older generation, people in their 50s and above with empty nests and disposable income. What kind of copy and images do you create to attract them?

Well, apparently not adventure, thrills or living on the edge. The photo below is from an advertisement placed by



the Aggressor Fleet in *Dive Business*, a monthly periodical targeting dive shops. In this ad, the Aggressor Fleet is selling group travel to dive shops, but clearly they’re not banking on what’s below the surface.

In an accompanying ad for the Dancer Fleet, eight bullet points describe what they call the “luxury liveaboard experience of a lifetime.”

- * warm towels with a back rub after each dive
- * morning beverage service
- * delicious, chef-prepared meals
- * all beverages, including sodas and alcohol
- * digital photo centers with rental cameras and course instructors
- * mid-week linen change
- * nightly turndown service
- * deck safety watch by our crew

Advertising agencies urge their customers to “sell the sizzle, not the steak.” To the Aggressor and Dancer Fleets, that means back rubs, hot tubs and chilled chardonnay. And their customers seem to agree.

claim on any homeowner's policy since 1984, but I did call and ask coverage questions that one year." She too insures her dive gear under DAN.

Jim Morus (Independence, OH) filed a claim after his gear was stolen in Bonaire, and became a tough and shrewd negotiator. "Farmers was reasonable but uneducated on brands and buying locally to obtain warranty service with 'free' parts. They offered me less than 25 percent of the retail cost of acquiring new 'like' equipment. They had priced the cheapest of everything online from LeisurePro. I countered with local dealer pricing for similar gear, and an hour-long discussion about the yearly service, the necessity for it and the ability to talk to a person when there were problems. I showed them dive shop pricing for the 'free' yearly maintenance parts, and told them as long as they were willing to reimburse me yearly for the parts that my local dive shop would make me pay for, I might consider their offer. I reminded them that regulators and dive computers were life-support items, and I would require them to sign a contract that their insistence on our buying generic life-support items would mean that should something fail, they would be liable for damages. Over a two-week negotiation, while they checked into my claims with local dive shops, they relented. We negotiated like adults to attain a satisfactory conclusion."

"If you are shopping for a new homeowners policy, that claim on your dive gear will negatively affect your rates."

"It's Money Wisely Spent"

Other subscribers wrote to say how happy they were with their DAN and DEPP policies. "I have carried DAN equipment insurance on my underwater camera gear and dive computers for several years," says Barbara Shiveley (LA Plata, MD). "Twice I have made claims because of flooding of my camera housings, and I have been completely satisfied with the response. The premiums are well within reason and the service is excellent."

"I have had two claims on my DAN policy, one for a flooded digital camera and one for equipment stolen at the airport after TSA broke off the lock," says Ed Druy (Owings Mills, MD). "For the camera loss, I had to bring the body and lens to a camera repair facility to have them certify it was beyond repair. For the stolen equipment, I sent in a photo of the TSA-certified lock that was broken off and left behind in the bag. In both cases, I had my check within 10 days."

"I've had my equipment insured with DEPP for many years and have found the premiums to be a worthwhile investment," says Gabriel I. Peñagaricano (San Juan, PR). "On the few occasions when I have filed a claim, they have been processed most satisfactorily."

"I Feel Like I've Been Taken for a Ride"

However, we did get complaints about the downsides of dive gear insurance. Raymond E. Moore (Independence, MO) had one a few years back and realized "that if I had other coverage, DEPP would be secondary. Come to find out, my homeowners insurance covered almost all my risk, except for the high deductible, which was covered by the dive equipment insurance. Also, DEPP covered accidental overboard (which was covered by my homeowners) and covered intentionally ditching my gear while in the water (which homeowners did not cover). Frankly, the only item I would ever ditch would be the weights, which are rented and not covered by the dive insurance anyway. Equipment insurance is kind of a rip-off."

Other readers complained about the lack of detail DEPP offers in its online-only insurance application. Robert Kosty (Danvers, MA) had \$18,000 of equipment insured by DEPP for three years. "The policy is obtained strictly through an on-line application, and although I received confirmation of coverage, I do not recall receiving the policy." But Kosty found out the hard way that dive insurance companies don't bend the rules stated in their policies, particularly when it comes to filing deadlines. Last year, he submitted a flooded-camera claim for \$500. "I was not timely in reporting the loss (within 60 days of the incident) but I notified DEPP that I had a loss and would document it at a later date. When I later submitted my claim, I was told it had been closed because documentation had not been timely."

Does Breathing Nitrox Reduce Post-Dive Fatigue?

Nitrox has been claimed to improve blood oxygen circulation, reduce the severity of a barotrauma and reduce feelings of tiredness or fatigue following a dive. These are only anecdotal reports, and one controlled study with simulated dives in a dry chamber showed no measurable difference in fatigue, attention levels or ability to concentrate. A group of European researchers decided to test the hypothesis that post-dive fatigue is somehow related to decompression stress, assuming that it would be less in Nitrox-breathing divers.

The researchers tested 301 fit divers (204 male, 97 female) over a two-month period at the Red Sea resort town of Sharm-El-Sheikh, Egypt. Visually impaired divers had to wear corrective lenses during dives, and those using medications were excluded. Divers were forbidden from drinking alcohol or caffeine before and after dives. Each diver performed a single dive at least 12 hours after any previous dive, breathing either air or EANx32 (a mix of 32 percent oxygen, 68 percent nitrogen). No dive restrictions were imposed except a maximum depth of 100 feet. All divers did multi-level dives -- the Nitrox group ranged from 45 to 95 feet, with dive times between 32 and 69 minutes, while the air group dived between 40 and 90 feet, with dive times between 31 and 71 minutes. Divers followed their own dive computers (Nitrox divers' computers were set for an EANx32 mix) and were most often limited to a single safety stop of five minutes at 15 feet.

Fatigue was assessed before each dive and 30 to 60 minutes after, with each diver asked to evaluate both their energy and tiredness levels on a scale from 0 to 10. Then alertness was tested using critical flicker fusion frequency -- "the frequency at which a stimulus of intermittent light seems to be completely stable to the observer." A waterproof device consisted of a rotating cylinder with a slit that allows the eye to see flickering. As the rotation of the cylinder speeds up, the eye and brain eventually cannot detect the flicker but sees a solid or fused light. The earlier this occurs, the less alertness and the more fatigue the viewer experiences. The test was repeated three times, with the mean value used as the fusion frequency.

The study showed a significant decrease in perceived fatigue in Nitrox divers. The flicker-to-fusion times decreased by 6 percent in the air group but increased 4 percent in the Nitrox group. On the other hand, the difference between breathing pre- and post-dive in Nitrox users was not significant. The critical flicker-fusion frequency measurements showed impairment in air divers but improvement in Nitrox divers. Still, more studies are needed to fully explore the complexity of modifications in the nervous system according to the type of gas used for a dive.

"Evaluation of critical flicker fusion frequency and perceived fatigue in divers after air and enriched air nitrox diving," Pierre Lafere et al., Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine, Vol. 40, No. 3, pages 114-117.

That's because it took him five months to get back to DEPP with the documentation, says Deane W. Lehrmitt, CEO of Innovation Programs Group, Inc., broker for the DEPP program. "The requirement is to file a claim within 60 days of the occurrence, which enables us to mitigate potential losses by possibly being able to repair flooded items before they are declared [unusable]." DEPP also requires customers to send flooded items to their designated repair facility within five days of the occurrence, or DEPP enforces a penalty in the claim adjudication. "The terms and conditions of the policy are filed with the regulatory agency, and we must apply the terms and conditions unilaterally, without bias."

Lehrmitt says every customer is given the opportunity to download the policy with their enrollment confirmation. "If any customer asks for an additional copy of the policy, or failed to download the policy with their enrollment confirmation, we promptly send them one for their review."

One of our readers says she has been waiting for a resolution on her DEPP claim for a damaged camera for more than four months. "They say that the delay is due to their underwriter requiring them to 'manage' the claims, but I feel like I have been taken for a ride." However, we were told by Lehrmitt that she has filed more claims than any customer in the program. "When she filed her latest claim, we advised her we would be investigating the circumstances of that claim, as her claim experience has been extremely adverse. We also wanted to know the extent of the damage to the camera body. We were not provided that information from her camera manufacturer until this February and her claim has been authorized, and we are trying to locate replacement equipment under the terms and conditions of the policy."

Ron Lagerlof (Los Angeles, CA) cc'ed Chartis Insurance, the holder of his DiveAssure policy, on the e-mail he sent to us about its lack of response to his claim for checked dive gear lost during travel from LAX to Bangalore for a Maldives dive trip. He filled out paperwork with Lufthansa at the Bangalore airport and rented gear in the Maldives. "The luggage was never found, but Lufthansa paid out \$1,500, the maximum allowed. I then followed up with Chartis. For being a DiveAssure 'Diamond Member,' I had paid extra for multi-trip travel coverage, which brings with it \$5,000 coverage for 'personal diving equipment.' On January 31, I received a letter from Chartis stating that as the 'airline lost your luggage while in route to your destination, the DiveAssure policy does not provide coverage for this type of loss.' So then what does it provide?" He called Chartis customer service and "their first line of defense was to deny, deny, deny. I was told I must submit a written appeal. Incidentally, DiveAssure claims the policy is 'Primary' and states: 'Primary insurance' means your insurer will reimburse you in full for your payments made by you, disregard any other insurance you may have, which may or may not cover the incident. All DiveAssure programs are primary."

The same day Lagerlof e-mailed us, we both received an e-mail from Roy Pargament, DiveAssure's customer service manager, who said he would look into the matter with Chartis and update Lagerlof on his findings. A few weeks later, DiveAssure and Chartis again denied his claim.

Which Policy Is Better For You?

While a dive-equipment policy may be a better fit than a homeowners policy for dive gear, even insurance agents debate which is better. Insurance broker and *Undercurrent* subscriber Tony Kuhnell (Plano TX), wrote, "You need to weigh the potential affect on your current and future homeowners policy rates. If you have a claim on your homeowners insurance, your rates will potentially go up and if you are shopping for a new policy, that claim on your dive gear will negatively affect your rates. I purchase a separate policy for my camera gear rather than have it attached to my homeowners policy as I wouldn't want rates to increase for something I can cover with a different policy."

Bill Noel (Syosset, NY), also an insurance broker, agrees that reliance on a homeowners policy alone for dive gear coverage is a mistake, but read the fine print of an equipment policy, and call for concrete answers. "Buying an equipment policy generally can provide much better and broader coverage, but it is expensive. Policies vary widely in coverage provided, and some of them border on being criminal."

While it isn't cheap, you can get the "personal articles" floater policy added to your homeowners insurance. You must list the individual equipment and value. "The coverage should be as broad as possible. The cost is lower than equipment policies, and the claims are pre-settled to the dollar amount because the policy has the amounts listed," says Noel. If you don't want to pay out for DEPP or DAN, but you don't want to jeopardize your home policy, "this would be the best way to buy coverage for your gear."

-- Vanessa Richardson

A Divemaster's Thoughtful Rant

What the divemaster is thinking - - and wants you to know, too

As a diver, you surely know that your friendly divemaster often has an internal dialogue going on in his or her head. And it might not be so jovial, depending on your behavior aboard the boat. You might think that you're an experienced diver, and thus, one of the easier clients on the boat. Not necessarily. Sadly, many experienced divers are oblivious to how their actions affect the divemaster and the dive charter. Want to know what divemasters really think and what our beer-fueled bitch sessions sound like? Read on.

Divemasters notice what kind of gear you have. We're not gear snobs, honest, at least not in the way you might think. But if you have a high-end regulator, a \$1,200 dive computer and a full-face dive mask, but no air horn,

safety sausage or even a marine whistle, we've put you in the clueless category. Safety gear should be the first thing you buy, not the last.

And about that fancy dive computer, if you ask us to help you understand it, we're not going to be happy. First, there's a liability issue if I help you and get it wrong. So from a liability standpoint, I really shouldn't help you. Also, there are hundreds of dive computers in use, so why would you think that I have a comprehensive knowledge of yours? Lastly, your computer is making calculations and providing information to keep you from getting decompression sickness or an air embolism, which are life-threatening conditions, yet you didn't take the time to read the manual or get your retailer to teach you how to use it? But on the dive waiver you told me you're an experienced diver with hundreds of dives. Seriously?

If we tell you to use a down line, a tag line or the mooring line, heed our advice. We are familiar with a site's currents, prevailing winds and swells, and asking you to use a down line is not a comment on your dive skills. Drifting off while getting down, or while doing your safety stop, puts you at risk and us in the potential position of swimming you down. And often dive experience does *not* equal dive skill. Coming straight to the boat in pitching seas, when another diver is on the ladder, is dangerous. That's why we want you to use the tag line. Though there are times we'd like to hit you with a scuba tank, watching it happen because you swam under another diver on the ladder doesn't give us the same satisfaction as hitting you ourselves.

You may think violating the deco limits of your dive computer, especially by just a couple of minutes, is no big deal. Wrong. You've just put yourself at risk, and our entire charter at risk. If you show *any* DCS symptoms, no matter how slight, we're going to have to beat feet back to the dock. That ends the dive day for everyone on the boat. And at the very least, if you violate the deco limit of your computer, we're going to follow the standard recommendations and make you sit out for 24 hours. It's a safety and liability issue.

Most divemasters will ask you to notify them when you've used half a tank of air. And let's do the math, shall we? Half a tank isn't 800 or 1,000 PSI. It's 1,500 PSI. And if you tell me you're at half a tank and then just a couple of minutes later you're at 1,000 PSI, in no current, I know you were lying. And on the next dive, no matter how experienced you claim to be, I'm going to swim over to you and read your gauge for myself.

Want a guided dive? Then follow me -- seriously. I gave you the option of doing a guided dive or the ability to just do your own dive in a buddy team. You said you wanted to be guided, but now we're underwater and you and your buddy are long gone. Oh gee, thanks. Now I have no idea if you're doing your own dive, you're lost, or worse,

in trouble. I get to guess and then determine what action I should take. And if I decide there might be a problem, I have to end the guided dive for the rest of the group and look for you and your buddy. So once again, your actions may harm the dive for the rest of the divers.

Listen to my briefings. So you didn't listen to the dive briefing because you think you know how to dive, and perhaps you've even visited this dive site before. But while I'm trying to gear up to begin guiding, you're asking me questions I covered in detail in the briefing. When I slap you with my fin -- accidentally, of course -- I'll apologize, but I won't really mean it.

Flush your wetsuit. Hey, we understand, sometimes nature calls while you're

The Divemaster's Take on Tipping

To tip or not to tip, that is the question on a dive charter. Years ago tipping was unusual; now it's a common practice. Divemasters are not highly paid, so if you feel you received good service, a tip is customary, and is greatly appreciated.

Moreover, if you've required special help -- having the divemaster gear you on the transom and haul your heavy gear out of the water or if the divemaster does a quick repair to your gear on the boat (usually for free) -- you should consider a more generous tip.

Lastly, divemasters are supposed to be guides, not instructors. So if you needed a mini-refresher course in how to get down, manage your buoyancy, clear your ears or other basic scuba skills, you might want to thank the divemaster with a gratuity. And if the divemaster rescued you from yourself -- arrested an uncontrolled ascent or descent or swam you down in a current and got you back to the boat -- proper humility, profuse thanks and a sizeable tip will go a long way toward squaring your scuba karma.

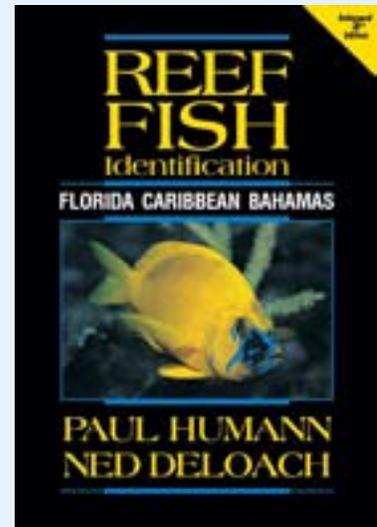
Need a Fish, Coral or Critter ID Book?

Our website is the place to go to buy books from the marine ID masters, Paul Humann and Ned DeLoach. We offer their definitive ID guides, which include exceptional photos and detailed descriptions, at www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/bookpicks.shtml. Here's the list of their books we offer:

- * *The Reef Set*: A three-volume set of Caribbean Reef Fish, Reef Creatures and Reef Corals
- * *Reef Fish Identification: Baja to Panama*
- * *Reef Fish Identification: Tropical Pacific*
- * *Reef Creature Identification: Tropical Pacific*

Even if you have no plans to go diving overseas right

now, you'll get inspired just by thumbing through the pages. Humann and DeLoach's books will give any serious diver, whether on a liveaboard or in an armchair, vicarious thrills for endless hours. Order through *Undercurrent* and you'll get Amazon's best price -- and our profits will go to save coral reefs.



underwater, and warming your wetsuit isn't an option, it's a necessity. But just like in any bathroom, you need to flush. So open up the neck of that wetsuit and let some water run through -- a few times, please. Divemasters and captains have sensitive noses; we know when you've taken a bathroom break on the dive. And at the end of the dive day, if you christened your wetsuit, take it off on the back of the boat and rinse it before you put it into the gear bag that the crew likely will be hauling from the boat for you.

While we're on the topic of gear, please don't treat the boat like your bedroom, spreading your stuff everywhere. Keep it organized and in your designated area. Hanging any gear on a ladder is a safety concern. Draping your gear on the tank next to yours impacts another diver. And don't put anything other than a camera on the camera table or in the camera rinse bucket. Spitting into your mask and then rinsing it in the camera bin ... um, not so nice.

Keep your cameras to yourself. Cameras are a topic unto themselves. Asking us to deliver your monster camera rig in pitching seas while we're trying to get the rest of the divers in the water can be problematic. We generally try to be accommodating, but if you want us to remove the lens cover, wipe the camera down, adjust the strobes, attach a lanyard, or other special assistance, you should be diving with a camera assistant. A divemaster can't do all this and effectively manage his or her dive group.

Don't be an SOB. SOBs, or same ocean buddies, make us crazy, especially if an experienced diver is nowhere near his or her less-experienced buddy. We see this regularly, with husband-and-wife teams, parent-and-child buddy teams, even long-time, highly experienced dive buddy teams. Dive cameras exacerbate the problem. If you're more than a few kicks away from your buddy, if a piece of gear fails or other mishap occurs, you won't be able to give or receive help. If we've allowed you to dive as a buddy with the divemaster, then you need to stay in close proximity to your guide. However, don't be a remora -- please give the divemaster enough space to maneuver.

Give everything some space. While we're on the topic, let's have a little discussion about space, shall we? Overrunning the divemaster or other divers is always a faux pas, no matter how much you spent on that monster camera rig. Overrunning, crowding or chasing a turtle, eel, seahorse or other creature is bad form, and drives divemasters nuts. It also ensures the creature will flee or hide, which means you've kept other divers from a great creature encounter.

Okay, those are the negatives. But there are plenty of divers who are a pleasure to guide, whom we'd welcome on the boat any time. So here are a few words about what makes a good day for a divemaster. We like divers who honestly tell us about physical weaknesses, inexperience or hesitations before the dive. We want you to enjoy the dive, stay safe and become a better diver. If you let us know what you need help with -- in advance -- we will generally do

everything we can to make sure you have a great day. And we love divers who are into critters and get excited when they see something cool, or when a divemaster goes hunting and finds them something cool. We are animal lovers, and we wouldn't be doing this job if we didn't get a charge out of sea creatures, and the more we dive, the more we tend to love the weird stuff. We love a good dive story or tale of a hilarious mishap – we live for that stuff. We like divers who treat the boat like it's their own, with respect and care. And if you take a really good picture or video underwater or on the boat, please share it with us.

J. D. is a divemaster who has worked in Hawaii and the Caribbean. She has experienced every problem noted in this article, and most of these issues come up weekly with “experienced” divers.

Sharks Under Siege: Part I

the connection between shark feeding and shark attacks

In January, sharks attacked three Russians and a Ukrainian swimming at the Egyptian resort area of Sharm el-Sheikh in just two days. It was high season, and the media attention was massive. The local governor closed the beaches for 48 hours, authorities killed two sharks, and beaches were re-opened. But within 24 hours, a German woman standing chest-deep in the water was killed by another shark. Over six more days, five swimmers were attacked by sharks. At least six of those nine incidents are believed to have involved the solitary oceanic whitetip, a species that doesn't usually rank among the top killers.

What made the sharks so aggressive? There was a confirmed sighting of dead sheep illegally jettisoned from a cargo vessel passing through the area a month before the attacks, which could have drawn sharks from far away. The Red Sea is also well known for illegal dumping, fish feeding and overfishing. Red Sea dive operators often flout a no-feeding law by dumping leftovers aboard and having divemasters offer morsels to sharks lure them closer.

Three American scientists flew to Sharm el-Sheikh in January to find answers for the spate of shark attacks. They determined that two of the attacks, including the fatality, were by one oceanic whitetip shark, and two others by a mako shark. Another attack is considered to be another oceanic whitetip, but not conclusive. When the scientists looked at photos of the shark-bite victims, they saw that the two attacks charged to one oceanic whitetip had a couple of things in common -- the victims had their hands bit off, and a large chunk of their buttocks was bitten deep.

Then someone brought them a video clip of divers finning at 20 feet at Five Mile Reef. Ralph S. Collier, president of the Shark Research Committee and one of the three American researchers, explains what they saw: “One diver away from the group, probably the divemaster, had his arm extended. He was holding a fish. As the shark approached, the diver let loose of the fish. The shark chomped down on the bait and started circling the diver. With his right hand, the diver reached behind him. On his butt was a fanny pack, from which he pulled another dead fish. The shark knew where the fish was, because he could smell it, so he reached for this area. Now we could see why it did what it did. One of the Red Sea shark victims was a female diver. When the shark swam to her, she extended her hand to ward off the shark. But the shark bit her hand, then swam behind her and took a massive bite out of her butt, so much that the spinal column was visible.

“So we're looking at a shark habituated to human beings for getting food, and humans had taught the shark where the food was. And this occurred frequently in the Red Sea. With overfishing in the area, sharks have to come up to the reef area to feed, and now associate food with the human form. It's very much like training your family dog. When it sees your hand, it sits up to get a bite of that treat.”

The scientists' recommendation was to kill that shark (along with the video, a photo of the same shark at another attack site marked it as the culprit). “Unfortunately, you can't untrain the shark, so you have to catch and kill it,” says

Collier. “And stop feeding reef fish, because their agitated signals when food comes are picked up by sharks.” Red Sea authorities said they will now energetically enforce the no-feeding law, and any diver caught feeding a shark gets a fine of up to US\$10,000.

Sharks are beautiful, and watching them up close is amazing, as this YouTube video (www.youtube.com/watch_popup?v=WK2LpUoqX6A&vq=medium) of them surrounding shark researcher Cristina Zenato shows. But watch the video and you’ll see close-ups of Zenato feeding the sharks dead fish by hand (albeit wearing chain mail gloves). After all, how else is the film crew going to get these solitary creatures that close to the camera?

In the last few years, we’ve questioned the safety of shark dive when the crew chums the waters or put fish in a bait box to attract sharks to divers. Jim Abernethy, a prominent shark dive operator who takes customers to the Bahamas, has responded that his shark dives are a way to show customers the beauty of these big creatures, and why they should be protected. In 2009, Abernethy told *Undercurrent* that he believes sharks are not inherently dangerous, and compares them to birds. “Feeding the birds is an opportunity for people to get close to these animals so they can see them . . . Birdwatchers feed birds but every now and then, a bird will bite a person as a mistake.” On January 25, Abernethy got bitten on the arm by a reef shark during one of his Bahamas dives. Despite bleeding profusely, he made it to the hospital and after a few stitches, he announced he would be back in the water a few days later.

“ We’re looking at a shark habituated to human beings for getting food, and humans had taught the shark where the food was.”

Abernethy has many notable defenders. Peter Brueggeman, director of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography has been on an Abernethy trip and says, “Jim is not offering near daily shark dives, as are Stuart Cove and others. He is on station feeding sharks, how many days per year? Wouldn’t Jim’s food presentation be then pretty random to a shark’s point of view? The sharks are in the general area, but Jim’s not running a seal rookery with daily food on offer to predators.”

Peter Knights is executive director of WildAid, a nonprofit for ending illegal wildlife trade, and has dived with Abernethy eight times. “I’ve never been on a dive with chumming, which puts fish blood in the water. [Abernethy] puts bait in a suspended crate, which leaves a trail of oil, not blood, so it’s better than chumming. The argument that sharks associate boats with food is silly, because fishing boat throws bits of dead fish off the back, and that industry puts more fish back that way than all dive boats combined.” He sees dive trips like Abernethy’s as a good method for “shark tourism.” “You get people inspired and understand that sharks are not killing machines but wild animals that are sometimes unpredictable and will attack if they’re confused or scared. But humans are not on their list. And if sharks get used to having people in the water, they’ll realize what humans are -- not food and not a threat.”

George Burgess disagrees. He is the director of the Florida Program for Shark Research and director of the International Shark Attack File, and one of the three scientists who investigated the Red Sea shark attacks. He doesn’t see a difference between chumming and feeding. Sharks react primarily to olfactory signals, whether it’s scent or chum. He cites the case of Markus Groh, an Austrian diver who died from a fatal shark bite on one of Abernethy’s dives (see our article “Death of a Diver” in the April 2008 issue). The chum bag was said to have been grabbed by the shark, so it doesn’t matter whether it’s called chum, a chumbag or food -- the animals go after it,” he told *DIVER*, the British magazine. “It’s the equivalent of going to Africa, where a pride of lions are hanging out under a tree, and dumping a bunch of T-bone steaks on the ground. That would be called dumb if you did it with lions, alligators or bears, so why do we think we can do it with the largest and most efficient predators in the ocean?”

Burgess also says the dive industry does its best to keep these incidents quiet. “Most of the cases we have on the International Shark Attack File are leaked to us. These operations are out there to make money. That’s not a sin. They’re trying to offer something one step above the average diving for people looking for thrills and the unusual. I suspect that a lot of the clients who come to these things are less naturalist-divers than people who want to be entertained. Judging by what I see on TV and celebrities who have done this thing, it’s a notch of courage, or something to crow about.”

The education part of shark tourism gets trumped every time there's an attack, says Burgess. The Austrian diver killed by a shark in 2008 on a Jim Abernethy dive boat "probably equates to 10 years of education effort. When that happened, I got hundreds of calls and emails from people questioning whether they should go to the Bahamas. The economic ramifications of these incidents can be huge in terms of the negative effect on tourism."

-- Vanessa Richardson

Flotsam & Jetsam

Were You in The Military? Or know a diver who is or was? Reader Rusty Hubbarth (Austin, TX) shares this story from his buddy, Jim, that could help divers who served save some money on their next dive trip. "Flying back home from South Carolina, I checked in at the American Airlines desk and handed the agent my retired military ID and a credit card to pay the \$100 baggage fees for the two bags my wife and I had. When I asked for the receipt for my bag fees, I was told they were waived as a courtesy, because I was military. So whatever airline you fly, always use your military ID card at check-in -- whether you're active duty, active duty or retired -- and you may just get your bag fees waived."

Don't Scare That Sting Ray. Do anything to put one on the defensive and you may get a world of hurt. The latest diver to feel a sting ray's wrath was a New Zealander looking for crayfish in weeds off Pakatoa Island earlier this year. He finned over the ray without seeing it, but the threatened ray's automatic defense was to flick its tail upward and dispatch its barb, which pierced the diver's abdomen. He had to be airlifted to the hospital to surgically repair a serious injury. Remember, this was how "Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin perished -- he was snorkelling after a swimming bull ray near Port Douglas, Australia, while filming a documentary, and the threatened ray pierced Irwin with a fatal barb to the heart.

Recall of Full-Face Dive Masks. While full-face diving masks are a wave of the future for sport divers, we ought

to note that Ocean Technology Systems has recalled its Guardian full-face dive masks due to a potential drowning hazard. About 1,700 are in use in the U.S., and 80 in Canada. The purge assembly on the mask can disengage from the regulator, resulting in loss of air. This recall involves Guardian masks with serial numbers 9051284 through 100070954; the serial number is printed on the main regulator body. For information, contact Ocean Technology Systems at 877-270-1984, or visit its website at www.otscomm.com

Oil Drilling Near Ningaloo Reef. Shell Oil has lodged a proposal with the Australian government to drill an exploration well 30 miles west of the Ningaloo Reef marine park, Australia's largest fringing coral reef that is famous for its whale sharks. Well drilling would start as early as September. Environmentalists are up in arms but Western Australia Premier Kim Hames replied that there are already other oil rigs in the area. There's an online petition to prevent Shell from drilling at www.thepetitionsite.com/2/stop-shell-oil-from-drilling-near-ningaloo-marine-park/

At Last, FM Flippers for Divers. Jessica Simpson, who, for no rational reason, has developed a \$1 billion fashion businesses, says she is adding a scuba line: blue fins with stiletto heels. If you don't know who she is, you're a winner in our book, but you'll be a loser if you try to walk the dive boat transom wearing them. Anyhow, you can see these very hot flippers at <http://yfrog.com/h093viqj>

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