

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Topdive, Bora Bora and Rangiroa, French Polynesia

fantastic diving - - if you can afford it

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Dear Diver,

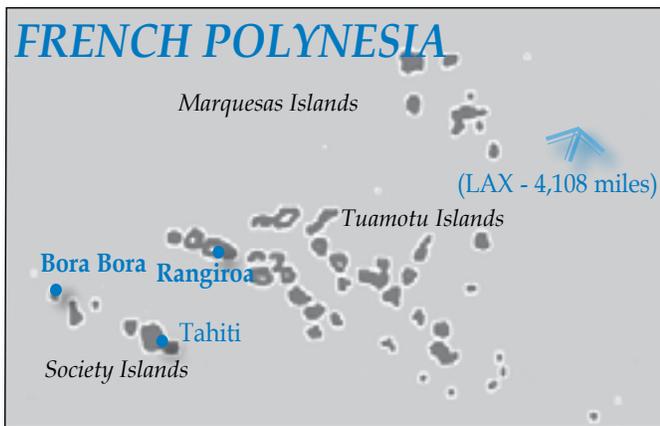
It was as if I'd just been dumped into a huge tropical aquarium. My first day's diving at Bora Bora's Anau and Tapu dive sites was exhilarating. A dozen giant mantas with wing spans of 10 feet languidly glided before me as I descended in 79-degree water with visibility up to 80 feet. Lemon sharks 10 feet long cruised within 15 feet of me, curious but not menacing. As I moved along a reef somewhat chewed up by a recent typhoon, smaller blacktip sharks circled above me, alternating between a leisurely cruising speed and frenetic dashes for no apparent reason.

The variety of large pelagics and smaller species at the same dive sites was an experience I could not recall in more than 700 logged dives over the last 14 years. Crammed into these waters was a greater variety of sea life than there are cars on Los Angeles's 405 freeway at rush hour. A sample: Picasso, titan and yellow margin triggerfish; teardrop, threadfin and red-fin butterflyfish; blue-fin trevally; common and spotfin Lionfish; large schools of black surgeonfish; pennant and long-fin bannerfish; and swarms of fire dartfish hugging the ocean floor. It seemed most of what you see in Paul Humann's book Reef Fish Identification-Tropical Pacific was on hand during my first day's diving last September.

I'd purchased a hotel/meals/dive package through the dive travel agency Deep Blue Adventures, knowing that French Polynesia is unaccommodating to a diver on a budget. My 10-dive package with Topdive-Bathy's, two companies that have combined, cost a hefty \$750, but allowed me to allocate the 10



Intercontinental Le Moana, Bora Bora



dives between Bora Bora and Rangiroa. I had brought my own dive equipment, but Topdive supplied my two dive buddies with near-new Seaquest BCs. They provided basic dive briefings aboard their 27-foot-long, awning-covered, inboard dive boat, which held a dozen filled tanks for the second dive. Delphine, our capable dive guide, let us dive our own profiles, and only asked that we signal her when we were down to 1,500 psi, and to surface with 500 psi. These rules were not strictly enforced, but all the divers seemed experienced anyhow. Entry was by giant stride off the stern, where a ladder hung for reboarding. Interestingly, Delphine acted as both boat

driver and dive guide. No one remained aboard the anchored boat during our first day's dives. The boat lacked rinse/soak tanks, but the shop has fresh water showers and dunk tanks. I stored my gear at the shop overnight, but took my regulator and computers back to my room.

After a nine-hour flight from LAX to Tahiti, and a midnight arrival, I marinated the next day in comfort -- gym, spa, pool, black sand beach, spacious living room/bedroom suite with two bathrooms -- at the Radisson Plaza outside Papeete. I wandered about Papeete for three hours, which was two hours longer than the seedy, humid city deserved. The Marche Municipal (central market) was entertaining -- lots of wares and bustle, including parrotfish embedded in crushed ice for about \$6 per fish. Then I took an Air Tahiti bi-turbo prop for the one-hour flight to Bora Bora. Air Tahiti grants divers a 55-pound maximum for checked luggage without charge (show your C-card to get this perk), whereas nondivers must do with 44 pounds. I was about three pounds overweight on all three flights, but airline personnel overlooked my venal sin.

Home for my four-night stay in Bora Bora was the Intercontinental Le Moana. This resort had nearly everything my jaded tastes could want -- a broad white sand beach in front of my clean and spacious hut, fine food and beverages and an attentive staff, but no gym or spa. My two dive buddies opted for an over-the-water hut on a pier with its

Cheaper Ways to Dive French Polynesia

While our writer indulged his champagne tastes and caviar dreams, there are ways to dive French Polynesia much less expensively.

Caradonna Dive Adventures is a big U.S. dive travel agency that offers dive packages in the area. Currently, it has a double-occupancy deal at the Hotel Kia Ora that offers six nights in a beach bungalow (that includes two free nights), 11 dives with Topdive, breakfast and dinner daily, and airport transfers starting at \$2,293 per person. The deal is valid through May 31, and you must book it by March 31 (www.caradonna.com).

Another of our writers visited Rangiroa (see our article in the June 2007 issue) and stayed at Pension Bounty, which charges approximately \$130 per night (based on mid-December Euro rates) for a double with

breakfast and dinner included (www.pension-bounty.com). Topdive was also his choice of dive shops, which partners with e-Tahiti Travel to offer dive packages (www.etahititravel.com). A seven-night, double-occupancy package with three nights each in Bora Bora and Rangiroa, airfare from LAX, interisland flights and transfers ranges from \$3,732 per person for two-star accommodations to \$4,372 for four-star accommodation. (It only includes eight dives, so you'll have to pay extra for more).

For straightforward advice on what you'll get for your money, we like Dive Tahiti Blue, founded by Laurel and James Samuela, a California divemaster and a Tahitian native, who give their honest opinions about Tahitian lodging, and prefer smaller family pensions over the luxury resorts. On Bora Bora, they recommend the Pearl Beach Resort on the top end, and Novotel Bora Bora Beach Resort and Hotel Matira as bargain finds. They'll book dive packages catering to whatever your budget (www.divetahitiblue.com).

own ladder to enter the ocean below, which could be viewed from a glass viewing box. It was essentially like live TV coverage of what was swimming below the hut.

Delphine picked us up the next day at 8 a.m. for the 15-minute ride to the dive shop. The wind made for a lot of chop that rocked the boat on its way to the sites. Black-tips and gray reef sharks were everywhere. At Muri Muri, an eight-foot lemon hung at the bottom during my safety stop. Delphine had hung the hind end of a large tuna from a stern line just before we ascended for the first of our two dives. Black-tips went into a frenzy, darting in, grabbing the carcass in their jaws, then thrashing their bodies wildly to separate flesh from bone. Black triggers circled outside the crazed black-tips, snatching meat scraps that floated free while the sharks feasted. All this inspired me to do a five-minute safety stop although my max depth on the dive was only 68 feet. Boarding the boat after each dive was dicey as the boat bucked in the waves, threatening amputation to any wayward finger slipping between the ladder and the hull.

The second dive at Toopua started with poorer visibility (around 45 feet, while the rest of my Bora Bora dives averaged 80 feet). My two dive buddies and I lay in the sand as a dozen spotted eagle rays approached, but our chance to get an up-close view was sabotaged by novice divers from another boat. Like paparazzi chasing Lady Gaga, they rushed the rays in the silly belief they'd get close enough for good pictures. The rays immediately disappeared. At dive's end, I wandered about for 20 minutes at 15 feet. For lack of a more evocative word, a phantasmagoria of sea life swam about. I saw at least nine varieties of butterflyfish (vagabond, threadfin, yellowback, tear-drop, raccoon, saddled, lined, big longnose and Pacific double saddle); three types of angelfish (lemonpeel, flame and regal); four different triggerfish (titan, yellow margin, orange-lined and Picasso); six wrasse types (yellow-breasted, three-spot, bird, ringtail, sunset and sixbar). A host of others included clearfin lizardfish, Pacific sailfin tang, blue-patch and red-lip parrotfish, striped large-eye bream, white-cheek surgeonfish, fire dartfish, spotted toby, scissor-tail sergeants, and varieties I could not identify even with the help of Delphine and Paul Humann.

Back at the hotel, food was plentiful. Breakfasts were excessive: made-to-order crepes, omelets, pancakes, French toast, waffles, kiwi, papaya, mangoes, prunes, breads, sweet rolls, yogurts, meats, cereals, and chafers filled with scrambled eggs, sausage, bacon and potatoes. Dinners on the meal plan allowed a first course, entree and dessert. Mahi Mahi, swordfish and other fresh fish grilled with various sauces, chicken in spinach, pork in a curry sauce, pasta and beef were among the offerings. I found the beef challenging; after two bites and a good deal of futile mastication, I gave up. One night, the resort put on a Tahitian dance exhibition coupled with a buffet dinner featuring black mussels, shrimp, oysters, smoked salmon, tuna, chicken and beef. Local and foreign beers averaged \$7.50 a bottle, and wine by the glass ranged from \$12 to \$19. Bottled wines ran from \$30 to over \$100 -- wines are heavily taxed in French Polynesia, making them, as the French would say, *très cher*. The maître d' touted what he considered an irresistible bargain: a 2005 Château Domeyne Bordeaux from the St. Estephe Commune for around \$79, versus its normal reputed resort price of \$113 (it's available online in the U.S. for \$35). It was unmemorable.

Avis rented me a four-door, air-conditioned Hyundai for four hours -- and \$139 -- to tour the island, which was mildly interesting. It is about 19 miles in circumference and has craggy mountains. The world-famous Bloody Mary's restaurant/bar is worth a peek. A large sign lists the many celebrities who have allegedly visited, from Roman Polanski to Kim Kardashian.

My next stop was Rangiroa, where I spent five nights at Le Maitai Rangiroa resort, and did my remaining six dives over three days with Topdive. Rangiroa is the largest atoll of the Tuamotu Island group (Bora Bora and the main island of Tahiti are part



Le Maitai, Rangiroa

Le Moana, Bora Bora

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

Le Maitai, Rangiroa

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

World Scale

of French Polynesia's Society Islands group). It is sparsely populated (about 2,530 inhabitants versus Bora Bora's 5,800) and 140 miles in circumference. Rangiroa is more primitive, and I found less English spoken there than in either Tahiti or Bora Bora.

Le Maitai Lagoon resort consists of a collection of huts, a few (including mine) facing the ocean. The water wasn't potable, but one can buy bottled water from Le Maitai's bar or collect the bottled water from your table at lunch and dinner. The air-conditioned huts were clean and serviced daily. Each had a TV with CNN as the lone English language channel. The resort lacked a swimming pool and a sandy beach. To take a swim, I either had to risk shredding my feet when climbing over razor-sharp volcanic rock to get into the ocean, or climb down a ladder at the end of a 25-yard long pier. Le Maitai rented a collection of shabby, well-used bicycles with no gears and very narrow seats. I rode one about 10 miles to visit Tiputa Pass and check out the KiaOra resort. Afterwards, my inner thighs felt like they had been worked over at Abu Ghraib prison. I should have rented a motor scooter.

Rangiroa is an oblong-shaped atoll island with but two passes -- Tiputa and Avatoru -- through which currents go from inner lagoon to open ocean or vice-versa, depending on which way the tide

is running. Rangiroa's signature drift dive had me catapulting in five-knot currents from the open ocean through Tiputa Pass and into an inner lagoon. My first four dives with Topdive were in the morning, when the current runs from the open ocean through Tiputa Pass and into the lagoon. My final two dives started in the afternoon. Topdive supplied me with a 100 cu-ft. aluminum tank, and set up my tank and regulator so it awaited me when I slid off the dock into the 16-foot, single outboard Zodiac.

The wind blew fiercely, creating heavy chop in the lagoon and heavier chop as we rode through Tiputa Pass into open ocean. I cradled my tank and attached BC/regulator between my legs, and held onto a line along the Zodiac's interior to avoid being thrown overboard as the boat muscled through the chop. Entry was by backroll. We entered the water and descended and ascended in groups. The Zodiac driver then fetched the group once he sighted us. Getting back on board was a challenge. The Zodiac, unanchored, thrashed about like a stallion in heat as I handed my weight belt, BC and attached tank to the driver. I then finned my way half way up the Zodiac's tube side (no portable ladder here, but with this chop, one would be useless), then was hauled in by the driver like a gaffed albacore. They changed tanks at the shop after each dive.

Stephanie, our dive guide, gave her dive briefings at the shop with the use of a large map of the lagoon and outer ocean. These briefings were more extensive than those in Bora Bora. The shop provided rinse tanks for dive gear and fresh water showers. My one disappointment with Topdive here is it never took us to Avatoru Pass to dive, even though one of my dive companions requested a dive there.

Like Bora Bora, Rangiroa dishes up a galaxy of large and small creatures. Four-foot-long Napoleon wrasses were common. A green moray with a circumference rivaling the

biceps of Detroit Lions defensive lineman Ndamukong Suh peeked out of its hole just after I had swooshed through Tiputa Pass into the relatively calm lagoon. Hordes of raccoon butterflyfish hovered at the mouth of small caves as the current shot me along the ocean side of the atoll. Gloves come in handy, since you need to get a solid grip on the reef if you want to arrest your forward motion to look at something, and you don't have a lot of time to select what you grab. Once through Tiputa Pass, you're then out of the current and can more leisurely view the endless life living here. I watched Stephanie play Mother Nature, lifting coral as a hawksbill turtle followed her like a pet dog, knowing that tasty sponge awaited it once Stephanie moved the coral. Rangiroa had a similar variety and amount of sea life to what I had seen in Bora Bora.

On my last Rangiroa dive, two bottlenose dolphins approached me as I hung in the open ocean 50 yards off the reef. They came within 10 feet of me and did a series of somersaults and twists. Each allowed me to pet its stomach and then its back, and they hung around when other divers joined me for the aquatic petting session. By then it was late in the afternoon and getting dark, with reduced visibility. Ubiquitous porcupinefish had left the reef for the water column, and sharks were moving from the blue in closer to the reef.

With all this action, I ate well. My American meal plan provided all three meals, including a local beer, soft drink or glass of wine with lunch and dinner. Breakfast offered eggs, sausage, bacon and fried potatoes. From the buffet tables, you can fetch a variety of fresh fruit, as well as yogurts, dry cereal, various meats, bread and sweet rolls. Lunch off the menu included ham and cheese paninis, burgers, black mussels, pasta and a salad bar. An unwelcome addition to breakfast and lunch was an impressive collection of black flies hovering about the fruit and salad bar (the flies apparently had an early bedtime, as they did not join us for dinner). Dinners featured fresh, grilled mahi-mahi, ahi, shrimp and an unidentified but tasty "lagoon fish," all in a variety of sauces. Pastas, chicken and beef were also on the menu. Le Maitai offered some very good wines by the bottle (e.g., a 2003 Ruppert and Rothschild Cabernet Sauvignon from South Africa, and a 2001 Louis Latour Pinot Noir), but with some wallet pain (\$90 to \$140 for the top red wines). The selection of mixed drinks and liqueurs was also good.

My Rangiroa land excursions were minimal. The first was Gauguin's Pearl operation. Its guide showed how the oysters are raised and seeded to generate pearls of various sizes, shapes and colors. The ride there was free, but you're encouraged to part with big bucks at Gauguin's air-conditioned shop with lots of pearl baubles for sale. The second was in Vin de Tahiti, a winery about 10 miles from Le Maitai. It is closed to the public, but I cajoled its French manager/winemaker Sebastien Thépénier to give me a tour, explaining that I own a vineyard near Paso Robles, California. His go-to wine grape is Carignane, which, along with a bit of Muscat and Italia grape, he makes a very drinkable white Blanc de Corail, as well as a rosé. I am frankly mystified how he grows in Rangiroa's coral/calcareous soil and a climate lacking the hot, dry days and cold nights in which wine grapes thrive.

To sum up, these two French Polynesian islands offer the rare combination of large pelagics and smaller ocean creature, and tons of both. I am somewhat addicted to my creature comforts, so I made few efforts to rein in expenses beyond using a travel agent to get better prices and buying meal plans. Of course, there are lower prices, and the sidebar we offer gives you more information about those. If you can work French Polynesia into your travel plans, especially if you have a bit of the French language still in your subconscious from school, you'll find the diving quite remarkable.

-- J.D.



Divers Compass: Round trip from LAX to Papeete on Air Tahiti Nui runs about \$1,100 coach and \$3,200 business class, while Air Tahiti's intransland airfares cost me \$835 . . . Four nights at the Le Moana ran \$3,750 for lodging, modified meal plan, taxes and airport transportation; five nights at Le Maitai with full meal plan, air transportation and taxes ran around \$4,650 . . . For a trip similar to the one I did, I recommend booking with the dive travel agency Deep

Blue Adventures (deepblueadventures.com) to handle the bookings . . . Topdive's price includes nitrox and tanks with DIN valves fitted with yoke converters; I could not fill my spare air because the adapter would not mate with the too-large DIN valve . . . Take a dive repair kit, as it is very difficult and expensive to buy any extra parts; one buddy lost his gloves on Rangiroa and there were no dive gloves for sale anywhere on the island, while I had to replace a hose for mega-bucks . . . Most restaurants on Bora Bora will transport you to and from your resort for free, and tips not expected for this service) . . . French Polynesia is famous for its cultivation of black pearls, but never buy at the stated price until you first haggle to get a better price; Gauguin's Pearl operation in Rangiroa gave me a "certificate of authenticity" setting forth the shape, size and quality of the purchased pearls . . . I found few inhabitants on Rangiroa who spoke English, save at the hotels and other tourist-focused businesses, so visitors might find a small French-English dictionary useful; Topdive shop personnel at both Bora Bora and Rangiroa spoke passable to very good English. Websites: Topdive (www.topdive.com); Intercontinental Le Moana Bora Bora (www.ichotelsgroup.com); Le Maitai Rangiroa (www.pacificbeachcomber.com)

Bonaire, Caymans, China. . .

a dangerous Baja dive shop, and what, no octopus for your buddy?

Bonaire Crime Cautions. As idyllic as Bonaire seems, it has had crime problems for more than two decades, more so than any other Caribbean dive destination we report on. Reader Mark Kimmey (New York, NY) tells us that "when picking up a compact pickup, the rental car companies will warn you not to leave valuables in your car and not to lock your doors. They will push you to take the extra collision damage waiver (CDW) insurance, but be aware that it doesn't cover glass. Apparently, they know that thieves will break the vehicle's glass to take whatever's inside. We were hit while diving The Invisibles south of Salt Pier, as was the truck parked next to us. We did not have valuables in the cab, but that didn't stop the thieves from taking our (resort) beach towels, shirts, hats and prescription glasses. We tried to laugh it off, but were a little unhappy when Captain Don's charged us \$20 for each of the towels because we didn't file a police report. Who is going to drive into town in their wetsuit to report stolen towels? Another reason to take the CDW option from the rental company: Your credit card may not cover trucks under any sort of rental car insurance they offer. Our truck was hit in the parking lot, but we had declined the CDW, believing that our credit card would cover any damage. We were charged \$365 for a small ding in the rear fender when we returned the vehicle, and when we got home, MasterCard told us they wouldn't cover it because it was a truck!"

Cayman Aggressor Caveat. While many divers are drawn to the Cayman Aggressor because of an itinerary that includes Grand Cayman, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac, keep in mind, as we have occasionally cautioned, that weather can keep the *Aggressor* from crossing to Cayman Brac and Little Cayman, so you'll spend the entire week only at Grand Cayman. Jim Garren (Boynton Beach, FL), there in November, certainly had no complaints about the boat. "Excellent, and only improved as the week progressed." But he adds, "Wind was one factor that contributed to disappointment with the trip. Seas were about one to two feet, with some larger swells on a couple of days. The captain insisted the wind was wrong for visiting Little Cayman or Cayman Brac. While I would not disagree with a professional responsible for the safety of those onboard, I was surprised by the decision to remain entirely on the south and west sides of Grand Cayman. We often dive in four- to six-foot waves back in south Florida aboard dayboats in the 30-foot class, while the *Cayman Aggressor* is a 110-foot vessel. Certainly, a run to the other islands might have resulted in some passenger discomfort, but our group consisted of experienced divers who came for first-class diving. Captains of similar-sized boats in Australia and the Red Sea were not intimidated by rough conditions in

order to reach the best dive sites. I can only hope the *Cayman Aggressor* captain truly made his decision to stay on Grand Cayman based on his assessment of conditions and not due to the economic pressure of having less than a full complement of divers the week we visited." The *Aggressor* couldn't make the 65-mile trip during the first week of December either, and Stephen Kouri (Lacey, WA) says, "Some people were very disappointed; however, I've been to Little Cayman, and the wall diving on the east side of Grand Cayman is comparable to the Bloody Bay wall. The shallow dive sites of Grand Cayman lack the giant barrel sponges and abundant life of the Little Cayman sites."

And, while we're writing about the *Cayman Aggressor*, Cynthia L. Cook (Fort Worth, TX) has happily dived on several Aggressors, but during a trip in early November, she says, "Captain Alan was never willing to be flexible on any of his schedules, diving or dining, even though the weather was perfect. We wanted to dive a twilight dive at the Wreck, but his response was, 'I don't do dawn dives at the Wreck,' even though at least 10 of us wanted to get up before light to dive it."

Hainan Island, China. In the extreme south of China, close to Vietnam, Hainan is heavily promoted for tourism, but the main challenge is to dive when not a word of English is written or spoken, says Bernard Dubois, (Barrington, NH), who dived there in October. "It's only Chinese ... and more for tourists than real divers. The dive shops are training 500 people a day; \$110 for 15 to 20 minutes underwater. A maximum of 40 feet for a first dive, no fins, one teacher per student, who stays behind the diver, holds the tank and tunes the BC for flotation. They did not care about my certification card, but respected my Rolex. I rented fins, and was able to dive without being held. In my group, six customers and eight instructors in a 20-foot boat. Small fish, few corals. Equipment was very basic Scubapro, \$3 extra for a new mouthpiece. It is a good idea, but it would be better if the mouthpiece would stay on -- mine came out at 60 feet deep. I signaled my 'instructor,' who had no octopus (none on my tank either), and I aimed toward the surface. With 500 dives on my belt, this is still a first for me. The diving entertainment is more above water looking at the excitement of the Chinese 'divers' than below."

Eco Divers Resort, Lembeh, Indonesia. Just a tip: My experience is that divers get enough time in the water, so whether there is a beach at their doorstep is often immaterial. However, one of our readers from Thousand Oaks, CA, was pretty disappointed when he found out that the cottages at this resort were a 15-minute drive to the water and Eco Divers boats, though "transportation to and from is in clean and well-cared-for vans with air-conditioning. Service at both at the boat and cottages was simply outstanding." (www.eco-divers.com)

Does High-Fat Fast Food Mean a Lower Risk of DCS?

Will downing a Big Mac or a bucket of extra-crispy KFC before a dive reduce your chances of getting bent?

Research suggests that both the uptake and elimination of nitrogen are increased by increased amounts of fat (lipids) in circulating blood. Also, a high-fat meal temporarily escalates heart output pressure. A short report recently published in the July issue of *Aviation, Space, and Environmental Medicine* investigated the hypothesis that since nitrogen is five times more soluble in fat than water, fatty blood circulating at increased pressure might speed the rate of nitrogen off-gassing.

A group of 10 young, healthy men were allowed nothing but water after midnight the day before the

experiment, then they were randomly given a low-fat control meal and a high-fat experimental meal, at least a week apart. The latter meal contained three to five times the amount of fat consumed by Americans in an average meal, upping the triglyceride level in the blood by about 250 percent% over that for the low-fat meal.

Nitrogen washout, which was measured about three hours after each meal, did not differ significantly between the low-fat and high-fat meals. Cardiac output increases did not result in significantly increased blood flow in the calves.

The conclusion: It's very likely eating a greasy meal prior to a dive won't reduce your DCS risk, but it still may allow you to enjoy the taste of it multiple times over the course of a dive.

-- Doc Vikingo

Club Cantamar, La Paz, Mexico. I dived with them a few years back, and while I liked the big boats and the diving, I felt there was an accident waiting to happen. Many divers who have subsequently written to me agree. Now comes word from Dan Clements (Everett, WA), who was there in October. "There were no oxygen analyzers on any boats . . . There were no safety briefings regarding where the life preservers, oxygen and first-aid kit were located . . . The port engine on the boat *Uno Mas* kept cutting out, and finally died. Water from rinse buckets was used to replace evaporated radiator water. The next day, we experienced similar problems, compounded by a small electrical fire. I could not find a fire extinguisher, so fire was extinguished with water . . . One day several divers started coughing during their dives. When they surfaced, their air appeared bad. The next day, we checked air prior to departing, and there was a nauseatingly strong organic smell and taste. It appeared compressor oil had leaked past the filters into all tanks. Since we had 30 divers, this was a major issue, with dives cancelled and folks hacking for several

Scubapro Nixes its "Free Parts for Life" Program

Johnson Outdoors, Scubapro's owner, seems to be thinking about costs far more than it does about customer service. Until now, if you forgot to have your Scubapro gear serviced on an annual basis, you could pay for the parts and get back into the lifetime-warranty program for free parts the following year. But Scubapro recently announced it will only give free parts if the regulator is serviced every year, on time, without interruption.

Scubapro spokesperson Gabriel Gilman told *Undercurrent*, "As long as customers provide documentation of their warranty program and service within the last 13 months, they're good to go. If you miss service, you're out of the program. The intent is to keep the 'parts for life' program viable." And, we presume, to help its local dealers stay afloat by being able to charge you labor costs for annual servicing, even if the only diving you've done in the past year is a week in the Caribbean.

Another wrinkle: this new policy only applies to regulators that were sold in 2011 or before. After January 1 of this year, you'll only be eligible for the free-parts-for-life program if you buy a full equipment package all at once. That means a primary regulator system, alternate air source, dive computer and BCD. The regulators must be Scubapro brand, while the computer and BCD can be a Subgear brand.

Even if you are a long-time customer who has lived up to the annual-servicing rules, you may still receive a bill charging you for the parts. That's what happened to reader Mike Matlosz (Port Murray, NJ). After yearly service on his two Scubapro regulators last month, he got an invoice charging \$120 for parts, and a note that Scubapro had denied the free parts under the lifetime warranty. Matlosz called his dive shop, and the owner said that Scubapro had recently been migrating warranty info electronically, denying free parts to his other customers, and even himself. Matlosz protested to Scubapro, which apologized and quickly shipped the free-of-charge parts to his dive shop. Scubapro's Gilman said, "We're moving our system online to make it easier for dealers to confirm ownership of regulators, so there has been some transition of documentations and updates."

So don't throw away that receipt, or any of your paperwork, for that matter. Scubapro now requires customers to bring in original proof of purchase and your last service showing free warranty parts. "The dive shop where I first purchased my gear told me to hold onto the proof of service for warranty just in case there was ever an issue, and I'm glad I did," says Matlosz. I also have all my invoices for equipment purchased and serviced over the years."

Scubapro currently doesn't sell parts directly -- you must order them through your dive shop when it does your servicing -- and this annoys many divers fed up with Scubapro's requirements. "I could have chosen regulators from another manufacturer at a lesser price but I paid a premium for Scubapro equipment because of the warranty and local service," Matlosz wrote in his letter to Scubapro. "You and I know the parts charged by the dive shop are probably marked up 10 times or more from what you buy them for."

But now that Scubapro has agreed to sell gear online, maybe it will have an equal change of heart on direct sales of parts and. Zac Kelly (Santa Rosa, CA) chose Edge and HOG regulators over Scubapro specifically for the reason that their parts are available to the end user. "If Scubapro and their local dive shops were smart, they would offer parts kits legitimately to customers. Not everybody services their own regulators but for the ones that do, at least the dive shops will make some money on the kits, and Scubapro will gain by being a company that is willing to adapt with the times and benefit from having a forward-thinking attitude."

hours . . . My group of divers has traveled extensively around the globe. This could have been tragic or fatal with less-experienced divers. Had the engine fire been more severe, it could have been fatal for divers on *Uno Mas*."

Clipperton Island. I've never heard of this island, which is 587 miles southeast of Socorro Island in Mexico's Revillagigedo Archipelago, 7.5 miles in circumference and ruled by the French, but a California diver named Steven Robinson has heard of the ring-shaped atoll -- and certainly won't forget it. Robinson, 58, was sentenced to 45 days in prison for bringing home 52 Clipperton angelfish, a rare species that some aquarists will pay up to \$10,000 each to have as their own. Claiming they were more common species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife got involved and nailed Robinson. He was fined \$2,000 as well.

Wakatobi, Indonesia. One of our readers wrote that his checkout dive at this resort was "like none that I have experienced. We were required to pretend our buddy was out of air and share air. My rig has no alternate air source or octopus, and in my 40 years of diving, I have never had one or had to use one. Guess I am lucky. So I was a little taken aback when I was made fun of, and an octopus was put on my gear without my asking." And I, too, am taken aback, because the issue is not about whether our reader ever had to use an alternate air source. An alternate air source is there to aid another out-of-air diver, not you. Furthermore, panicking buddies have been known to rip the regulator out of a diver's mouth who can't offer air. Forty years ago, when you worshipped Mike Nelson, there was no such thing as an alternate air source. Buddy breathing was it. And there were no power inflators or computers, either. Maybe you don't dive with them either, but get an alternate air source for your buddy's sake. End of lecture. I promise not to do it again.

-- Ben Davison

This Year's Batch of Dive Gizmos

my picks and pans of the annual DEMA show

The Dive Equipment and Marketing Association (DEMA) held its annual trade show in Orlando. As has become the rule, it was open only to businesses that have something to sell, and dive stores and instructors who want to buy. I suppose it's a good thing it's not open to run-of-the mill divers, because every afternoon between 3 and 4 p.m.. a few exhibitors started passing out free beer or rum punch and the lines grew long quickly. You wouldn't want a bunch of non-buying, thirsty sport divers clogging the queues.

At times, the lines were even longer at Go Pro, where people were buying up the HD Hero2, a 1,080 video and 11-megapixel photo camera (10 shots per second) for \$299, with a 170-degree, wide-angle lens and a depth rating of 60 meters. The size of a Marlboro pack, it can be mounted on hood or helmet, or strapped to one's forehead. While perhaps more applicable to surfers or bikers, the remarkable hi-def footage display enticed hundreds of divers to pull out their credit cards to get one just for themselves.

Liquid Image puts its camera right into the mask (\$399), and is soon coming out with a 1,080, depth rated to 130 feet, with LED mode readouts visible inside the mask, and crosshairs on the mask lens to help you line up shots. It's a unique product, but the versatility of Go Pro and the pizzazz of its booth gained most of the attention.

Nearly 50 other booths offered cameras, housings and accessories, illustrating that, second only to travel, underwater photography is driving the scuba business. In the last decade, film, filters and leaking Nikonos cameras have been replaced with digital equipment producing brilliant images that can be easily photoshopped, letting every rank amateur produce proud images. No more toting 40 canisters of \$8-a-roll Ektachrome through X-ray machines, thank goodness. Today, if you have a camera and an eye,

there is no such thing as a boring dive. When you come to realize what might just look like a squiggle of snot on the sand is something quite the contrary, you can shoot the bizarre little critter and show your spouse. And if you prefer photography-lite, Sea Shell produces a case for under \$300 that it claims will fit 800 different digital cameras, so you can fiddle around with your existing camera before you spring for bigger bucks.

Scuba Diving magazine has even introduced a new print publication, *The Advanced Guide for Underwater Photographers*, which makes me wonder what they think they know, given the host of similar publications -- *Fathoms*, *Wet Pixel*, etc. -- that are dead and buried.

Speaking of shooters of a different ilk, the nasty introduction of lionfish into the Caribbean has created a new hunting industry, with Lion Fish Busters, Lion Fish Eradicator, Lion Fish Paralyzer and the Eliminate Lionfish tool offered to all the ecologically-minded divers who couldn't bear to spear fish, but now have a free conscience to kill in the name of saving the reefs.

For my money, the emphasis on environmental issues relative to divers never gets enough attention at DEMA. I'd go so far as to say it's shameful, given this is an industry that makes it's living from nature. The effort to give back is nearly negligible. But one booth caught my eye. The Roddenberry Dive Team - - and Trekkie fans, they're for you -- sponsors a "trashy diver" contest, giving away some nifty prizes for divers who pick up underwater trash. NAUI, TUSA and the Oahu tourism bureau support them. Join in by going to www.roddeberrdiveteam.com.

Diver Dies in Sinking Boat Near Key Largo

Perhaps a diver's worse nightmare is being trapped inside a sinking dive boat. Sadly, that happened on December 18, as a diver named Aimee Rhoads died while trapped inside the cabin of *Get Wet*, a boat owned by Key Largo Scuba Shack, when it sank in choppy seas. Rhoads, 36, had come from Washington State for some Florida Keys diving, and she was one of Scuba Shack's six passengers that day for a two-tank trip at Molasses Reef. The weather started out calm, but the winds picked up and the seas got choppier as the day progressed. According to Bobby Dube, spokesman for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, *Get Wet* was en route to the second dive spot on the reef around 3:15 p.m. when it quickly began taking on water. Winds were at least 15 mph., and waves were three to four feet high. Witnesses aboard the nearby dive boat *Visibility* estimated that *Get Wet* sank in "about two minutes."

Rhoads and 27-year-old Amit Rampurkarl from New York were in the cabin of the 30-foot Burpee when it started sinking, and were both unconscious when John Nathaniel, the boat's captain, dove into the cabin to retrieve them. They were put on *Visibility* and given CPR en route to Key Largo. Rhoads was pronounced dead after emergency workers could not revive her. Rampurkarl survived and was taken to a nearby hospital in critical condition. The other six people aboard, including Nathaniel and another crew member, had no major injuries. A commercial salvage boat worked the day after the incident to bring *Get Wet* back to the surface and pump the water out, but it sank again.

"Right now it's a mystery why it sank, with more questions than answers," Dube told the *Miami Herald*. "It also is unclear why the two passengers were trapped in the cabin. "Even with just two minutes, they should have had time to get out. "Maybe they went back to retrieve personal items. We don't know."

Scuba Shack, which opened in August 2010, stated on its web site that it only takes out a maximum of six divers. Mike Schechter, an investor in the Scuba Shack, told the *Miami Herald* that *Get Wet* is authorized for more than six passengers. "I believe it's 14," he said. Scuba Shack owners Chris Jones and Alison Gracey were in the Bahamas opening up the Bimini Scuba Shack at the time of the incident.

The Coast Guard is now conducting its investigation into the incident. Legally, commercial vessels that carry six or fewer passengers for hire are not required to be inspected. (Those that carry more than six must have an annual safety inspection and a haul-out hull inspection every two years.)

Scuba Shack's web site says it's closed until further notice, and it sent e-mails to divers scheduled for upcoming trips that the shop is closed indefinitely and all trips are being cancelled "due to a very unfortunate accident."

Overall, the show was understated, the booths smaller, the money spent for displays reduced, and even the number of resorts displaying was down. I uncovered no new resorts or liveboards that struck me as candidates for my bucket list. As I walked past booths from Indonesia, I noticed they were all heavily illustrated with photographs of fish and reefs and critters. When I walked down the Honduras aisle, dominated by Roatan, the booths mainly featured photographs of resorts and beaches, which is perhaps how one has to sell the Bay Islands these days, give the dwindling number of fish.

At DEMA, one always finds marginal products hoping to catch on, but most would really have to sell by the busloads to be profitable. A couple I noticed:

* VizSecure is a dive mask retainer you attach to your mask strap and BC so you won't lose your mask. Good, I suppose, for going through surf, maybe in a current, but it's one more strap for sport divers.

* The Vindicator is a replacement hand wheel for your tank. On the market for nearly two years, it is color-coded so you know your tank valve is turned on when green shows, and it's off when red shows. I've not seen one on a dive boat, but I suppose it would make sense to have knobs like these at resorts like Sandals, where scores of newbies jump into the water one after the other, sometimes with their air turned off.

Of course, one gets a chance to see the big names in the diving industry, some of whom have gained celebrity status only because their photos appear in their ads. Actually, I've only met a couple, since I've spent my life in the shadows so that I can travel anonymously. Some who I passed by: Stuart Cove, smartly dressed in a neck brace, healing from an injury and surgery; the always nattily-dressed Jean-Michel Cousteau, signing books for the few who patiently waited; Paul Humann, the king of marine ID photographers, who was willing to talk about his palm garden as he was about diving; Neil Watson, who looks like he could still swim a mile underwater, which he once did; John Bantin, who has written more honest equipment reviews than anyone in the history of diving (this I know, because he writes for me), and was always in serious conversation with representatives of any new product.

And then there was me, Ben, a noncelebrity, wearing a badge with my real, unidentifiable name instead of my nom de plume, snooping around as usual, and recognized by no one. Which meant I could end the day by going to the hotel lobby bar, read the *New York Times* and sip a beer, undisturbed.

- - Ben Davison

Insurance for Your Next Dive Trip

why you probably shouldn't leave home without it

A while back, *Undercurrent* subscriber John S. Wilson (Boulder, CO) planned a Christmas dive trip to Little Cayman with his daughter and son-in-law, paying a deposit of \$3,500 each on the trip package in advance. Because he was the "senior citizen" on the trip, Wilson and the other two purchased Travel Guard trip insurance just in case he had some illness or age-related condition that would result in trip cancellation. Ironically, it was his son-in-law who experienced the problem - - he found he had a serious heart problem before the trip and needed immediate open-heart surgery. After receiving documentation from the doctor and the travel agent, Travel Guard refunded all the money they paid for the trip, saving the Wilsons more than \$10,000, minus a few hundred dollars each for the insurance premium.

You aren't likely to need trip cancellation insurance if you're just getting into the car and driving 50 miles to the beach. But if you're planning a major dive trip that requires a good deal of money and flight time (especially abroad), it's something to consider, especially now that overseas travel plans have a

greater chance of being affected than ever before, due to shaky economies, job layoffs, and dive operators closing shop.

Of course, the need for trip insurance depends on what type of trip you're taking, and what the insurance will and won't reimburse you for. If you're flying to the Florida Keys for a few days of diving, there is less need for it because if you cancel your flight and don't hold a refundable ticket, you can usually apply all but \$100 of your ticket to another domestic flight. But if you are making a nonrefundable deposit on a remote liveaboard trip a few months ahead of time, and you can only reach home port on a weekly flight, that is another story.

Age-Based Trip Issues

Trip cancellation and trip interruption insurance can cost between 5 percent and 8 percent of your trip's price. Policy pricing is age-based and there is a penalty for seniors: The cost can run up to 12 percent for travelers 70 and older. "Insurers realize the older you are, the more likely you are to cancel or file a claim for health reasons, so their policy prices are based on that," says Steve Dasseos, president of Trip Insurance Store (www.TripInsuranceStore.com). One exception is Travel Guard trip insurance offered by Diver Alert Network (DAN). It says its rates are not-age based, so every diver's policy costs around 6.3 percent of his trip's travel price.

A New Lionfish Hazard to Worry About

For a couple of years, conservationists have been saying that one way to reduce the population of the destructive renegade lionfish on Caribbean reefs is to spear it and eat it. Maybe not. Conservationists in St. Maarten are warning islanders not to eat lionfish after November tests found a naturally-occurring toxin in its flesh. Those findings deal a blow to the island's efforts to contain the spread of the venomous predator.

Following the lead of other Caribbean islands, St. Maarten had hoped to promote the species as battered or grilled entrees to slow their spread. But Tadzio Bervoets, chief of St. Maarten's Nature Foundation, said nearly half the football-sized lionfish captured in local waters were found to have a biotoxin that can lead to ciguatera poisoning, which has serious symptoms.

Ciguatera poisoning is caused by eating some subtropical and tropical fish predators, including grouper, snapper and barracuda, which live by reefs and accumulate the toxin in their flesh from eating smaller fish that graze on poisonous algae. Human symptoms are abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea, tingling and numbness. Most patients recover in a few days. Some never recover. The worst-case scenarios are paralysis or death.

No one has become sick from eating lionfish in St. Maarten, but more than a dozen cases of ciguatera

poisoning are reported each year from people eating barracuda and jacks. St. Maarten's waters have long suffered from high levels of ciguatoxin, so Bervoets said the test results on lionfish were not a complete surprise. Nonetheless, "this means that we cannot safely promote lionfish as an edible species" in St. Maarten.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration have had no official reports of illness associated with the consumption of lionfish. "But in endemic areas of ciguatera, toxins have been detected at levels exceeding FDA guidance, and could cause illness if consumed," said FDA spokesman Douglas Karas. "The Virgin Islands is one of those areas." In recent months, the U.S. agency has collected more than 186 lionfish from the waters around the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. Of these, scientists have tested 74 fish to date, with 26 percent confirmed to contain ciguatoxins at levels exceeding FDA guidance.

William Coles, chief of environmental education with the U.S. Virgin Islands Division of Fish and Wildlife, said fishermen there know well where ciguatoxins accumulate, and avoid catching fish in those areas. "So we have about the same level of concern with lionfish that we do with any other fish, but it's still a major concern."

Across the Caribbean, it remains to be seen exactly how much impact fishing and marketing of lionfish can have. For now, it's the only hope in sight. "They are definitely multiplying," said Bervoets. "That's why it's such a shame we can't eat them here."

The majority of trip insurance policies offer medical coverage, important to divers over age 65 since Medicare does not cover them outside the U.S. (though some supplemental plans provide foreign coverage). Some travel insurance plans pay coverage for Medicare or Medigap, while others won't. Call your health insurance company and ask about the policy limits.

Choose Your Travel Supplier Quickly - - and Wisely

Trip protection plans generally don't cover you if the travel agency planning your trip financially defaults or goes out of business, says Dasseos. Ideally, the travel agency uses an escrow account to store clients' funds while the money is in their possession. You are not covered for financial default for money the travel agency had failed to pay to the travel suppliers. We've seen three major travel agencies default on divers in the past two decades, the largest of which was Carl Roessler's See and Sea Travel.

Scrutinize the "financial default" or similar clauses when it comes to travel suppliers and carriers. Some, like Travel Guard and Travel Insured, cover you for Supplier Financial Default if you buy your trip directly from the travel supplier and/or if you use a travel agent. On the other hand, Travelex and Travel Safe only cover you for Supplier Financial Default if you book through a travel agent or an online travel supplier, not if you book directly. Many insurers exclude companies in Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

"We weren't covered by trip insurance because we hadn't bought it within a seven-day window of booking our trip."

When it comes to Travel Guard, timing is everything when you buy a policy from them. Kimberly Krebs (Manchester, MD) found out the hard way. "My husband and I booked a trip to Raja Ampat on the *Archipelago Adventurer II* for January 2011. We booked the trip in August 2009 and debated on the trip insurance, finally getting it 10 months after booking the trip. When it came time to be reimbursed for the fact that the ship hit a reef and then the company went under, we were not covered by trip insurance because we hadn't purchased the trip insurance within a seven-day window of booking the trip, despite the fact that we bought the insurance months before the incident." Out of pocket and out of luck.

It's also wise to research visas, fees and travel issues to your travel supplier, because you may not be covered by trip insurance if they make a mistake that affects your travel plans. Jonathan Blake (Los Angeles, CA) used the travel agency Classic Blue Destinations in San Jose, CA, to make his travel arrangements to the Andaman Islands for a February liveaboard trip and buy his Travel Guard insurance. After flying into Bangkok, Blake was stopped by a Thai Airlines agent from boarding his flight to India because he didn't have the visas needed to fly into India and his final destination. "The manager explained that my travel agent should have processed paperwork for me to obtain a visa to India. He also explained that Thai Airlines was at fault because they should never have let me board the flight in Los Angeles when they checked my passport and issued my boarding passes." Blake missed his flight and therefore his Andaman liveaboard trip. "I later received a text message from the travel agents, saying they were sorry. It was the first time they had booked a flight to India and didn't know about the two visa requirements. They included a phone number to call Travel Guard and my policy number. When I returned home, I contacted Travel Guard and spoke to customer service about the flight interruption. They denied the claim on the basis that it was a documentation error."

Robert Lipka (Cedars, PA) purchased DAN's Travel Guard policy for a summer dive trip to St. Vincent but had to cancel due to illness. When he called Travel Guard, they said his policy number was invalid. "I purchased the \$540 policy via the Internet and charged the amount to my credit card. This was all done in January and the burden of proof was on me. I had to contact my credit card and provide proof of payment. My claim is still not resolved. DAN told me the last time I had a policy with them was in 2008, so somehow I got lost in the scuffle."

Lipka tells *Undercurrent* he bought the policy directly through TravelGuard's website. So when we called Travel Guard to ask what happened, their spokesperson got back to us in a few days, saying, "Our claims department was in contact with Dr. Lipka earlier this week, and it's my understanding that he'll be reviewing his claims forms when he has an opportunity to do so. We stand by, ready to assist him through this process."

That's why it's important to save any confirmation number or online receipt you receive when you buy an insurance policy via the Internet. You can always challenge the credit-card charges if services are not delivered, and your card company may refund the money.

What if You Lose Your Job?

Travel Guard has upgraded insurance coverage for its four levels and one of the new features includes a provision for layoffs and job loss. Other companies are following suit. Expect to pay about 5 percent for that coverage, depending on the policy and trip.

The Shark Massacre at Malpelo

Sandra Bessudo, Colombia's top government advisor on environmental issues, didn't believe the initial report when she first received it in October. She called it "unbelievable." But after getting the initial e-mail from a team of scientific divers and seeing their video of shark bodies lining the ocean floor, she had to investigate for herself. Taking a boat to Malpelo Island, a wildlife sanctuary located 300 miles off of Colombia's Pacific coast and a famous site for liveboard divers, Bessudo unfortunately had to confirm it was true -- invaders from another country had slaughtered as many as 2,000 hammerhead, Galápagos and silky sharks just for their fins.

Russian scientists, who chartered the *MV Yemaya* to study the sharks at Malpelo, saw 10 fishing trawlers flying the Costa Rican flag entering the zone illegally on October 3 and staying for two to three days. Then on their dives, the scientists started finding a large number of sharks without their fins lying at the bottom, none of them alive.

German Soler, executive director of the nonprofit Malpelo Foundation, says that these trawlers drop lines that stretch as far as two miles and carry up to 250 hooks. "In March 2010, we caught the boat *Capi One*, and one of its line had over 100 sharks attached to it. So there was a lot of damage done in Malpelo in just a couple of days."

The Malpelo sanctuary covers 5,325 square miles of water for threatened marine species, and sharks in particular. Colombia's navy sporadically patrols the waters and maintains a small outpost on the island, which is 36 hours from the nearest port. (At the time of the reported shark finnings, the two navy boats in charge of surveillance were being repaired at port.) But once the report of the finnings made news worldwide, the navy dispatched a ship to the area and quickly reported the seizure of an Ecuadorian fishing boat, caught with an illegal catch of 660 pounds, including sharks. Since then, Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos has ordered a constant navy presence in Malpelo. He also took up the issue with the Costa Rican government, which said it "energetically condemns" the reported finning, and vowed to co-operate to help stop the practice by ships registered under its flag.

The good news, says Soler, is that there still are sharks at Malpelo. "I just got back from a scientific expedition there in mid-December, and was glad to find up to 250 hammerheads at a time, and schools of Galapagos sharks. That made us very happy, because we were afraid we weren't going to find anything." Otmar Hanser, owner of the *MV Yemaya*, agrees. He visited around the same time, and said, "We had schools of hammerheads totaling up to 300. The sharks are still there in the same numbers as before the incident."

The bad news is that there's no direct way divers can help ensure that Malpelo sharks there remain safe, other than to keep putting pressure on the countries that benefit from killing them for their fins. "Massive numbers of sharks are being fished every day in the Golden Triangle of the Galapagos, Malpelo and Cocos islands, with little or no attention drawn to it," says Shawn Heinrichs, director of the nonprofit group Shark Savers (www.sharksavers.org). "Fisheries and governments adjoining this triangle are profiting from this mass slaughter. Corruption and greed are at the heart of the issue. Only when this corruption is addressed might we see change. Until then, periodically we will be 'shocked' by this sad news, which is really the tip of the iceberg, a passing reflection of what happens every day."

Typically, these policies return trip deposits if you get laid off but it depends on the policy as well as on your job situation. If you're a company owner, freelance or self-employed, the picture is murkier. And there is more paperwork - - Travelex wants an official note from your human resources department, such as a termination letter.

The Best Trip Insurance in Troubled Times

Most dive sites are safe, but potential terrorist threats and labor strikes could be possibilities. Most insurers say they will reimburse you if a labor strike against airlines, buses or other transit keeps you from embarking on your trip, delays you along the

way or forces you to cut your trip short. If a terrorist attack occurs in a place that is on your itinerary, most policies will reimburse you for the pro-rated part of your trip that you don't use, plus expenses you incur to get home. If an attack occurs there within a month before you're scheduled to visit, you may be entitled to cancel your vacation and get your trip deposits back if you have insurance.

But if you're just worried that an attack might occur in your destination, you generally can't cancel and expect to collect. Most underwriters don't want the risk of insuring against such anxiety, says Peter Evans, executive vice president of online travel insurance agency InsureMyTrip.com. "With more than 30 countries recently under State Department travel warnings, the result could be "catastrophic loss." he said. One option for nervous travelers is a "cancel-for-any-reason" rider, which allows you to cancel trips for any reason, or no reason, and receive some money back. But expect to pay up to 50 percent more for that rider.

Randy Brook (Seattle, WA) says Travel Guard reimbursed him for a cut-short trip even though it didn't fit its general reimbursement profile. "During a rail strike in Mexico, my tour operator had to charter a bus to continue the tour, at a cost of several hundred dollars extra per person. Travel Guard's policy covered strikes if they were formal labor protest but not if they were random or wildcat strikes. My only evidence of the strike was a local newspaper report. Travel Guard accepted the claim and reimbursed me for the extra costs."

But if you're in the middle of a travel crisis that is affecting multitudes of travelers at once, don't expect to get service from your insurer right away, says Chrisanda Button and Rickie Sterne (Elkins, AR). "In April 2010, we were among the thousands of travelers stranded mid-journey by the eruption of that unpronounceable volcano in Iceland. When we got off the flight from Denpasar, we expected to be in Singapore for about five hours. We stayed six days. We tried to contact Travel Guard for trip interruption assistance, only to discover its 800 number could not be dialed from a pay phone in Singapore, and our cell phone didn't work there. The Travel Guard telephone menu ate up three minutes of a five-minute calling card. When we did manage to speak to a human being, the agent said he could not help because we did not have a phone number at which he could call us back. To be fair, they were overwhelmed with other customers in our situation. However, Travel Guard brushed off my complaints when we finally got back to the U.S., no thanks to them."

When Your Dive Trip Goes Bad

Divers usually have two big questions about bad-case scenarios on dive trips. What happens if my plane arrives late and the liveaboard has left? And what happens if bad weather wipes out my dive trip?

Before you buy a policy, you need to be clear on what will trigger the plan's coverage for your protection. For example, most of Travel Guard's trip cancellation/interruption policies typically cover flight cancellations due to bad weather conditions, labor strikes and airlines' financial default, but not carrier-caused mechanical problems. That is something to keep in mind if you are going to exotic locales like Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. The more remote the dive site, the less frequently planes fly there.

"We tried to call Travel Guard for assistance, but its 800 number couldn't be dialed from a pay phone in Singapore."

Those local airlines are not very predictable and schedules are erratic and sometimes ignored. Insurance is a good idea because if you miss the flight to pick up a liveaboard in the Galapagos or Costa Rica, you're out of luck - - they won't wait for you. And don't expect refunds from the liveaboard if a missed, late or canceled plane leaves you in the lurch.

Trip cancellation or interruption for bad weather doesn't cover rainy days in Cozumel when you can't dive. You won't have much fun, but unless the bad weather prevents you from getting there, you won't have a valid claim. Also important: If you see a hurricane bearing down on your destination, you can't cancel your trip and expect insurance to cover it. Your airline or travel supplier has to be who cancels it. However, if your destination is under an official hurricane warning, you are usually covered if you cancel within 24 hours of departure.

Now say you go on your scheduled dive trip to the Turks & Caicos or the Caymans after the storm hit. If the dive resort is inhabitable but isn't what you expected or there are damaged facilities, travel insurance won't cover you. It's the responsibility of the travel supplier to make any adjustments.

Think Before You Buy

Before you purchase trip insurance, write down the situations for which you may need it. If you think you might have to leave a trip early to care for an ailing family member, make sure that's included. If you're concerned that a dive operator may not be financially solvent, book through a travel agent who is on top of things. Get trip insurance through your travel agent, or online through InsureMyTrip.com or TripInsuranceStore.com to ensure you are dealing with a reputable company. All insurance companies have a toll-free number you can call to ask as many questions as you need with. Do that to make sure your butt is fully covered in case the worst happens before you leave, or during your trip.

-- Vanessa Richardson

A Brighter Side of Underwater Photography

how Lembeh resorts are turning their guests into better divers

Even I was surprised by all the comments that my July 2009 blog post, "The Ugly Side of Underwater Photography" produced (go to www.undercurrent.org/blog to read it). Since then, I've wanted to write a sequel focusing on the good things about underwater photography, but I got busy on other projects and a lot of time passed. Then I heard about another ugly event related to underwater photography, and it pissed me off so much I wrote a very short, very angry blog. I held off publishing it, wondering if the situation would change and I could report on some good news for a change. Here's the history and how it all played out.

Several months ago, my wife, Maurine, and I were visiting friends who work in the Lembeh Strait. The dive sites nestled against Lembeh's black sand shores are probably some of the most vulnerable to bad diver behavior, especially among photographers and dive guides. Of course, I've seen this sort of "breathe through a regulator, lose your mind" type of behavior elsewhere, but Lembeh seems particularly susceptible because of the terrain and the overwhelming critter count. I still think it is odd that people travel halfway around the world, then lose all sense of respect for the marine life that brought them there in the first place. Like the unforgettable woman who, during one of our first trips to the strait, was caught standing on the bottom calmly holding a crinoid, picking off its arms one by one so she could get a clear shot of the commensal crab that had probably died of fright several minutes before. I watched as Lembeh pioneer Larry Smith swam over and gave her the ascend signal. By the time the rest of us got on the boat, the crinoid molester was on her way to the airport.

Unfortunately Larry isn't around any more, but people who care about Lembeh are carrying on his good work. Our friends told us about a meeting they attended recently where the agenda was aimed specifically at setting up rules and regulations about marine life interactions in Lembeh. At the meeting, dive staff and managers from various resorts were polled. Interestingly, their attitudes ranged from "always put the animal first" to "we really don't care because getting clients their shots means guides get better tips." At resorts where low salaries are the norm, generous tips means keeping better dive guides.

This is when I had my little freak-out. I couldn't believe there were actually people out there who tip guides to harass animals so they can get the shot. Furthermore, I couldn't believe that resorts would condone such behavior so that guests would over-tip their guides! Even though I know the vast majority of you don't endorse animal torture so you can take pictures of them yawning, showing off their eggs, or performing other tricks, I started wondering how any of us could shout "Save the sharks" or pretend to be concerned about the oceans while at the same time condoning harassment or forced feeding. I can only hope that even in the white-hot frenzy of watching nudibranchs mate, you say to yourself, "Slow down, breathe and don't touch those nudis!" As a professional, I can truly say the shot is just not that important.

Now how does this relate to a kinder, more beautiful side of underwater photography? Well, the folks at Lembeh Resort are serious about stopping animal persecution, but they also want every marine life photographer who travels to every resort in the strait (and beyond) to understand how to dive at critter sites, how to interact with marine creatures in order to get great shots, how guides can help and when they should stop stressing the animals. Underwater photography to the rescue! Steve Fish, the masterful photo pro at Lembeh Resort, has put together a very informative and instructive video about how to dive in muck, how to photograph those unusual critters and what to expect from your dive guide. The best part is that all the resorts in Lembeh have supported this video and have copies of it, which they are free to use to improve dive guide, diver and critter interactions at their own operations. More than 6,000 people have watched this very informative piece. You can and absolutely should watch it, too. <http://youtu.be/2oJODUOoWgc>.

Burt Jones, along with his wife Maurine Shimlock, is an underwater photographer and author of two books about Raja Ampat, the latest being Diving Indonesia's Bird's Head Seascape. See their work at www.secretseavisions.com

Showdown in Cabo Pulmo

In one corner are the villagers of this tiny Baja California village near Cabo San Lucas, and an international coalition of environmentalists. In the other are Spanish developers of a mammoth resort planned for the edge of Cabo Pulmo's coral reef, a crucial fisheries breeding ground and a favorite of *Undercurrent* divers (see our February 2010 travel story).

Since Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park was created 16 years ago, the once-depleted waters are now home to vast schools of spawning big-eyed jacks, huge groupers, tiger sharks and nesting turtles. In August, scientists reported that the biomass of fish in the no-take marine reserve had increased by an unprecedented 463 percent in 10 years. But if the resort is built a few miles to the north, all that good news could disappear, say ecologists, with pollution destroying the reef and its sea life.

The developers argue that Cabo Cortes - - where they envision a 490-berth marina, golf courses, and 30,000

bedrooms in hotels, condominiums and villas - - will bring eco-friendly jobs and tourist dollars to a backwater in need of both.

While financiers usually prevailed in past such skirmishes, this time the fish might have a chance. Mexican officials, who approved Cabo Cortes four years ago, might be reconsidering. And Hansa Urbana, the financially-strapped Spanish developer, has lost control of the project to its lender, which in turn has been taken over by Spain's central bank. No one knows what a new owner of the project can or will do, so opponents are pouring the pressure on President Felipe Calderon, who prides himself on environmental sensibilities.

As divers and tourists, you too can put the pressure on Mexican officials to keep Cabo Pulmo pristine and free of mega-resorts. Sign petitions at the websites for Cabo Pulmo Vivo (www.cabopulmovivo.org) and WildCoast (www.wildcoast.net/take-action/petitions/3) to help the locals and environmentalists keep the big developers at bay.

Flotsam & Jetsam

Beware of Cape York Crocodiles. A decision to stop for a spearfishing break near Australia's Cape York proved fatal for David Fordson. A coroner confirmed that the barge skipper from Cairns was attacked and killed by a large saltwater crocodile while spearfishing off Bushie Island on December 5. Fordson, 49, was motoring the *Torres Star* to Thursday Island but because they were ahead of schedule, the crew stopped for some spearfishing around noon. The alarm was raised when Fordson failed to return to the boat, and his body was found early the next day. Though he was diving in a shipping channel, crocodiles are all over northern Australia. As a local commercial diver told the *Torres News*, "You need to know where you can dive, and when to dive, because of the risk of crocodiles around Cape York."

Why David Swain Was Released. As we reported in Flotsam last October, David Swain, the dive shop owner convicted of killing his wife during a British Virgin Islands dive trip, was freed from a Tortola jail after serving two years of a 25-year sentence because his verdict was overturned. In a newly written explanation, the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court of Appeal excoriates Swain for his "reprehensible" conduct but says the evidence "falls short" of the heavy burden of proof to sustain a murder conviction. It also stated that the trial judge erred in her instructions to the jury, prejudicing the defense, and that it would be unfair to retry Swain.

Will a Balloon Ban Save the Turtles? What happens to all those balloons released into the air at football games, county fairs and other outdoor events? Lyndie Malan from Australia's Great Keppel Island, says they eventually come down, drift into the sea and become lethal food for turtles. After seeing 17 turtles perish from eating balloons over the past decade, she wants to end the carnage by calling for a

ban on hydrogen-filled balloons along the Capricorn Coast. She already got the town of Noosa to ban balloons at all its functions, and one of its council members said she would press for a widespread ban in Queensland." As Malan told the *Morning Herald*, "Once we are alerted to these serious events, we have a duty of care to do something constructive to prevent future injury and death." Why not a ban everywhere?

Putting Out Fires? Use Your Scuba Gear. Peter Fabrisi of Margaret River, Australia, was caught by surprise when a November bushfire was headed straight for his home, so he reached for his scuba gear as protection to put out spot fires. "I went to the shed adjacent to our carport and made up a basic breathing apparatus with one of my tanks," Fabrisi told his local radio station. "I put on my goggles, doused myself in water, fully saturated my clothing, and pulled the hood over my head. Wherever I went, that tank went with me." Once the blaze got too hot, Fabrisi jumped into the swimming pool and sat at the bottom until fire crews came. He's convinced his tank, wetsuit and mask helped save his life and lower the fire damage.

Diver Finally Found After 26 Years. Peter Devoe was 29 when he went for a dive with family at North Vancouver's Cates Park in 1985 and failed to resurface. He was finally found last October in the Burrard Inlet by a pair of fishermen. Coroners identified his remains by the jewelry he wore and marks on his bones from a car accident. Devoe's corpse was surprisingly well-preserved within his wetsuit, and his weights and gear kept him floating in the inlet just west of where he disappeared for 26 years. Devoe had founded a wheelchair scuba diving club in 1983, helping others like him with disabilities discover diving as a way to enjoy life, and the Peter Devoe Memorial Award and scholarship fund was established the same year he went missing.

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