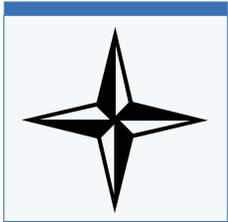


Department and the courts, in a seemingly endless litigation over the relocation of the Bikinians and the polluting of their home. Today, the 3,470 islanders share in the profit from the dive program., Last year each got an equal share of the \$100,000 profits (about \$29/person), and another \$100,000 provided supplemental food for displaced islanders living on nearby islands.

Besides increasing costs, another reason to make Bikini plans is that the wrecks will not last forever. We saw some hull buckling on the Saratoga. These ships will be there for a while yet, but not in their current condition.

--T.D.



Divers Compass: Our rome in the Majuro hotel, Robert Reimers (www.rreinc.com) was Spartan and reeked of cigarettes, so we moved to a nice bungalow facing the lagoon. The Marshall Islands Resort (www.marshallislandsresort.com) is the usual hotel for an overnight . . . Air Marshall Islands charges \$3/lb, outward bound only, for checked luggage more than 40 lbs . . . Bikini Atoll Divers conducts no training on-site . . . If you show up without proper insurance, you will not be allowed to dive . . . There is no rental gear; you must bring everything you will need, including save-a-dive

kits, extra batteries, insect repellent, all medicine, snacks, and liquor. You will be in the water for 3-4 hours daily. A 3mm wet suit is the minimum requirement . . . Power is 120 VAC. Currency is the US dollar. . . There are six rental Dive Rite Ni-Tek computers available at \$65 for the week . . . www.bikiniatoll.com for more information . . . Several dive travel agencies offer trips to Bikini. CEN PAC Dive Travel Services, 1-800-846-3483, cenpacdive.com, has the most experience on Bikini. Also Mad Dog Tours, 212-744-6763, info@mad-dog.net, or East Coast Divers 1-800-649-3483, travel@ecdivers.com. . . All flights go through Majuro, and Honolulu is the hub. Majuro to Bikini on Air Marshall Islands departs Wednesday at 8:00 a.m.-- arrives 11:00 a.m. The following Wednesday -- Bikini to Majuro 12 noon -- arrive Majuro 3:30 pm. Majuro to Honolulu -- departs Wednesday 7:30 am - - arrives Wednesday 2:00 a.m. The airport is closed at this hour. You will need a hotel or you will spend the night on a bench outside the terminal.

Post-Hurricane Cozumel

the reefs? well, they're different

Last year was a rough one for Cozumel. On July 18, Hurricane Emily blew gusts over 150 mph. Then on Oct 19, Hurricane Wilma, at one point the most intense Atlantic storm in recorded history, pounded and drenched the island for days.

While many hotels and homes were seriously damaged, topside the island has bounced back like a champ. All but a few resorts are open and in good condition. A number have taken the hurricane opportunity to renovate and look better than ever. However, El Presidente, one of the hardest hit, has just begun rebuilding and Sol Cabañas del Caribe may never reopen. Some shops downtown have closed permanently, but the good cantinas still serve up tasty meals and potent margaritas.

Nearly every diver pick up pier was destroyed or dam-

aged, but they're nearly all operational now. I stopped in about 20 shops of the nearly 90 dive operations on the island and business was slow. Several, including two big-name operations, told me I could have a boat to myself the following day.

Many small dive operations are struggling, as Dean Knudson (Golden Valley, MN) reports of Pacual's Scuba Center. "His boat was flipped upside down and sunk. Both engines were submerged. He lost his gauges, most weights, and his Bimini top. In February the boat was functional; it had been painted, the fiberglass was new, though he still does not have gauges. Pascual asked us to take a taxi each day to the Caleta Marina, instead of meeting us with the boat at our condominium. This was annoying, but understandable, given his fragile financial condi-

tion. It would save him money on gas, a major expense. One day the boat was crowded with 10 divers. It was difficult to fault him for booking so many, as he had had little to no business since the hurricane and was struggling financially. He managed to lead an interesting dive, even for the more experienced participants.”

Contrary to what some people who make their money off divers say, there is no debate that the underwater environment has been significantly rearranged forever. Even to a 32-year Cozumel veteran, many of the 20 or so sites I surveyed in February were unrecognizable.

Shallower sites bore the brunt of the damage, and some are covered with sand or badly denuded. Bill Allen (Melbourne Beach, FL) found in February that “Tormentos and Paradise are now effectively buried under sand, sometimes feet of sand. Santa Rosa and Punta Sur (deeper reefs) have a good dusting of sand. The underwater scene recovery is already taking place. When the current is running, you can watch the sand being blown off the reef structure. Cozumel has changed, and it’s not all bad. It is all new.”

The more delicate life, such as long tube sponges; sea fans, bushes, and rods; finger, pencil, and thin lettuce leaf corals; and leaved algae were all but obliterated. Hardier growth such as sheet, boulder, brain and star corals and

low profile branching tube, elephant ear, and encrusting sponges, have fared better. However, silt may yet choke existing sponges, and corals that are not easily cleansed by the current. While some readers report fish life is as good as ever, others don’t see it that way. Surveys by volunteer divers from REEF show a reduction in numbers of many species, especially the sand dwellers

I was especially upset at San Juan up north and Dalila in the mid south. San Juan provided its customary high-speed ride, but hawksbills and free-swimming eels were nowhere to be seen (though I did see two monsters below overhangs), nor were the verdant gardens of water-cress, hanging vine and other leafy algae. Piles of broken finger coral littered its expanse. Oddly, it even sounded different — quieter. Dalila, once a rolling plain of coral and Gorgonians, looked more like a lunar landscape than a dive site.

On the brighter side, the storms revealed and created delightful new chasms, caverns, and swim-throughs. At Punta Francesa, Columbia Deep, and Palancar Bricks I could stay inside one or another of these tunnels for much of the dive. Moreover, close inspection revealed new life: tiny sprigs of fresh finger coral and sea fan here, a pregnant Sargassum triggerfish and silver-dollar-sized peacock flounder there,

Some mid-depth sites such as Palancar Bricks and the upper reaches of the Santa Rosa Wall, although silted, are better preserved. At the former site, the hurricane uncovered many unusually shaped bricks said to be from a load that went down in transit from the mainland. The bricks appeared to have been arranged by divers, but nonetheless added an interesting aspect to the dive.

Not surprisingly, the more southerly deep reefs survived better. Maracaibo Deep, which takes the diver below recreational limits, continues to exhibit handsome arrays of sea fans, rods, bushes, and healthy tube sponge. I spotted two juvenile nurse sharks — my only shark sightings. Bill Allen of Melbourne, Florida, also noted a paucity of fish in February: “Noticeable by their absence are the large green eels and large grouper. I saw only one green moray and maybe a half dozen medium-sized grouper.”

The Devil’s Throat, entered at ~90’ and exited at ~125’, remains open, though the walls were scoured by sand. Finning north to the Cathedral, you’ll find that the landmark cross-shaped sponge on the ceiling has been torn away save for a nubbin.

There is still scuba to enjoy. To access outstanding deeper sites such as Garganta del Diablo with its northward add-ons, Maracaibo Deep, and the Wall of the Widows, Maya Gate/Labyrinth, and Devil’s Other

“. . . the underwater environment has been significantly rearranged and changed forever.”



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DIVER INFORMATION

Your name _____ Telephone (_____) _____
 Address _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
 E-mail address _____ May we publish your e-mail address? yes no
 How many dives have you logged? _____ Where else have you been diving? _____

TRIP INFORMATION

Name of resort or live-aboard _____ Name of dive operation _____
 Location (e.g., island, country) _____ Date of visit (month/year) _____ / _____

Circle one or more of the following that best describes the overall weather conditions during your trip.

sunny **windy** **rainy** **cloudy** **dry**

Circle one or more of the following that best describes the overall water conditions during your trip.

calm & flat **choppy** **surge** **strong currents** **no currents**

Water temperature was ___° to ___° F. Wet suit yes no _____ mm Water visibility was ___ to ___ ft.

Could you dive your own profile? yes no What restrictions were enforced diving? (depth limits, etc.) _____

Circle the words that best describe what you encountered on your trip.

Sharks: none 1 or 2 schools **Turtles:** none 1 or 2 more than 2
Mantas: none 1 or 2 squadrons **Dolphins:** none 1 or 2 schools

Rate the following by circling a number. (*Five is best and one is worst.*)

Corals.....	1	2	3	4	5	Diving for experienced	1	2	3	4	5
Tropical fish.....	1	2	3	4	5	Condition of accommodations .	1	2	3	4	5
Large fish.....	1	2	3	4	5	Level of service	1	2	3	4	5
Pelagics	1	2	3	4	5	Quality of food	1	2	3	4	5
Small critters	1	2	3	4	5	Dive operations	1	2	3	4	5
Overall diving for beginners	1	2	3	4	5	Shore diving	1	2	3	4	5

COMMENTS

Please tell us the good, the bad, and what you wish you had known before you left home.

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Could you dive your own profile? yes no What restrictions were enforced diving? (depth limits, etc.) _____

Circle the words that best describe what you encountered on your trip.

Sharks:	none	1 or 2	schools	Turtles:	none	1 or 2	more than 2
Mantas:	none	1 or 2	squadrons	Dolphins:	none	1 or 2	schools

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Putting Spring in Your Kick

After replacing broken buckles on both my TUSA Imprex and Scubapro Twin Jets, I finally popped for a set of spring straps. It is one of my best purchases ever. I'd first seen these unique after-market straps on California dive boats and realized that their sleek design, attaching directly to the fin with no buckles, would be resistant to catching on kelp. Then I discovered added bonuses.



Wearing my tank, BCD, and weight belt, supporting myself at the exit gate with one hand and pulling on each fin with the other was tough. (I'm not one of those silly people who walk across a dive boat deck with my fins on and I'm sure you're not either.) However, my spring straps slide on and off with little effort. Because they compensate for the compression of boots at depth, they keep my fins secure and comfortable whether I'm wearing 7-mil boots or tropical slippers. Unbreakable springs mean you won't lose a fin to a snapped strap. And a protective sleeve around the coiled steel keeps them from chafing.

John Bantin, technical editor of Britain's *Diver Magazine*, found another advantage while testing Apollo Spring Straps. "During finning the pressure of the springs pushed my boots further into the foot-pocket

of the fins, so that they really felt like extensions of my legs." That fit, plus added stability and reduced drag, makes some divers feel that spring straps improve the performance of their fins. I can't vouch for that, but for comfort and convenience, they're a winner.

There are several brands on the market, and many, like the XS scuba line, can fit a wide range of fins. Be sure they fit your fins and feet. Some models feature pull loops or grips, rubber or nylon spring covers, heel pads (some in a choice of colors), or quick release buckles (if you think you need them).

Expect to spend from \$65 to \$95 a pair. That's steep, but these straps will probably outlast your fins. Many models are challenging to install, so it makes sense to buy them from a dive store that can attach them. Fin marketers Apollo and Scubapro have their own lines of straps. For comparison shopping, go to Leisure Pro's selection at www.leisurepro.com and search for "spring straps." Most manufacturers have their own websites with more information and local dealer listings.

Do-it-yourselfers can get instructions for making their own at:

www.cisatlantic.com/trimix/fins/sprstrps.htm
www.scubase.net/pers/FinStraps.html

- Larry Clinton

End trio, only the rare gas sipper will be able to safely and comfortably descend on a standard 80 cu ft. tank. Choose an operation such as Liquid Blue, Aldora, Living Underwater, or Deep Exposure. They have thorough knowledge of the reefs, tanks that provide an opportunity to dive deep for extended times, and a willingness to visit more advanced sites for better post-Wilma diving.

If you don't pick the better dive operations, you can be in for trouble. In January, one of our readers went out with a cattle boat and reports: "The first day our captain took a while to find us drifting because he was too busy fishing. The second day we had to endure him vomiting from a hang over. The third day he left us drifting at sea for 45 minutes. Finally after kicking 1.5 miles, we reached another dive boat . . . Blue Bubbles never offered an apology — only a new captain the next day. They felt it was not a big deal. Drifting in a 6-knot current for 45 minutes in 3,000 feet of water is a big deal!"

Marjorie Griffing (Shoreview, MN) went out with Dive Paradise in February. "During the morning dives, the operation did a good job of grouping divers of like experience. In the afternoon, however, there was no attempt at grouping people appropriately. They sent out

as few boats with as many people as possible. While we enjoyed looking at the fish doing their own thing, other divers seemed to enjoy swimming headlong into a school of fish on purpose to scatter them. I suspect they lit bugs on fire with a magnifying glass as kids! One afternoon, we objected to diving Villa Blanca wall again and it seemed they punished us. They dropped us over sand with virtually nothing to see. It was at least four minutes into the dive before we saw anything living."

But, our favorite operations always seem to get good comments.

In December, Wayne Whittier (New Braunfels, TX) went out with Liquid Blue Divers owned by Roberto and Michaela. "Their attention to detail is first class; rinsing and cleaning your gear nightly, towels and jackets on the boat, intervals at a beach restaurant, and providing 120cf steel tanks that allow longer bottom times at greater depths. We were always the first boat to the dive site each morning, giving Roberto the opportunity to point out many creature sightings that would hide once all the other boats would arrive."

And, in November, Peter and Sandy Oemichen

(Oregon, WI) said that “Deep Blue did a fine job of accommodating divers under less than ideal circumstances, providing transportation, and handling our gear. They were eager to please. (The captain even took my suggestion to approach divers with the motors downwind so divers waiting to board didn’t have to breathe exhaust fumes). Our last day, we dove with Living Underwater and Jeremy Anshel. I was impressed with his new steel tanks and the service.”

Tom Day, there in March, said “my heart continued to sink on dive after dive seeing how the reefs were scrubbed of their corals. It also looks like a fresh layer of snow has fallen on most of the reefs. Tuniche was scrubbed, but along the wall fared better, deeper down 80-100 there were still corals and sponges and lots of large grouper, and sharks, and I saw a large mating pair of puffer fish.

Barracuda . . . current was as fast as I have seen in 15 years. San Juan the same. Tuniche had upwellings along the wall except one large pass that usually has a downwelling. Barracuda had its typical downwellings . . . Aldora Divers was fantastic, can-do-will-do attitude, groups of like experience together, top notch office and dive staff. Equipment repair? Done! Dive site request? Done!”

So, pick the right dive operators, keep your expectations in line, and go have a dive and a cold cerveza. Cozumel is still a lot of fun. But don’t expect to find any bargains. Prices at hotels, dive ops and eateries were much as they were on my pre-Wilma trip.

– Doc Vikingo

Aldora Divers, www.aldoradivers.com

Deep Exposure: www.deepexposedivecenter.com

Liquid Blue Divers, www.liquidbluedivers.com

The Yellow Fin in the Sand

the case of the dive store owner and his dead wife

In 1999, 43-year-old David Swain, the owner of Ocean State Scuba in Jamestown, RI, and his 46-year-old wife of nearly seven years, Shelley Tyre, chartered a sailboat in the British Virgin Islands with friends Christian and Bernice Thwaites and their son. The last day they were to dive, they moored off Cooper’s Island to dive two tugboat wrecks.

The couples had agreed that two adults would remain on the boat to watch the Thwaites’ boy, so Tyre and Swain went into the water. Swain returned to the boat alone 35 minutes later, saying he was chilled. Christian Thwaites dropped into the water for his dive.

Moments later Thwaites spotted one of Shelley Tyre’s yellow swim fins and looked for Tyre, figuring she would be grateful that he had found her fin. Instead, he found her lying on her back on the sandy bottom with her eyes and mouth open. Thwaites took Tyre to the surface, where he tried to perform CPR. Swain, who had been an emergency medical technician, helped lift his wife aboard, but did not try to resuscitate her. She was dead.

James Philip Brown, who runs Aquaventure in Tortola, thought the death was suspicious. Tyre and the Thwaites had visited his shop to rent gear and discuss where to dive. A day after Tyre died, Brown dived the wrecks looking for something that might explain the death. Brown found one of Tyre’s fins embedded toe first in three inches of sand. He found her snorkel, sans mouthpiece, and her mask. On one side of the mask, the strap hung loose off its anchoring pin.

Brown locked Tyre’s scuba gear in his office to await

inspection by Tortola police. Two days later, Swain told him that he could get rid of the equipment, give it to a local diver or use it in the rental business. Brown refused. Swain fretted that the medical examiner was taking a long time to do an autopsy and asked if he knew anyone who might “expedite the process.” Swain said that “the medical examiner might not know about diving accidents,” and he wanted to talk to him before the autopsy. Swain’s remarks seemed irregular to Brown, enough for him to approach Tortola police. But no charges were brought.

Shelley Tyre’s parents asked Swain for an explanation of the death, but did not find him forthcoming. As more information came to light, and Swain continued to stonewall, they brought a wrongful death suit against him, which was heard over nine days in February 2006.



David Swain

A violent struggle

During the trial, Bill Oliver, a mechanical engineer who designs diving equipment and is product manager for Sherwood, presented videos of tests he conducted. He showed how Shelley Tyre’s fin would have simply sunk, heel first, under normal conditions, and how the strap of her mask could have pulled free if it had been yanked from behind. When Brown found Tyre’s fin, the heel strap was still fastened tight. Oliver testified that only a strong “external force” could have pulled the fin off.

Dr. Thomas Neuman, a diving medicine specialist