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THE PRIVATE, EXCLUSIVE GUIDE FOR SERIOUS DIVERS

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The Ghazala I: Red Sea

-- Some Things Change, Some Things Never Change

Dear Reader:

Ten years ago, when I last dived the Red Sea, all dive boats were based in Israel, at either Elat or at the closest port to the best diving, Sharm el Sheikh, on the Sinai peninsula. One couldn't fly directly from Egypt to Israel, or vice versa, for political reasons. Instead, one had to first fly to Athens to change planes. Today, there are no restrictions, as Sharm el Sheikh is no longer Israeli territory. It's Egyptian and one can fly from Cairo to, say, Sharm el Sheikh in less than an hour.

I remember my very first dive in the Red Sea, stepping off the edge of the rugged Sinai desert, into an explosion of color. I gasped at the incredible sight. For a moment I thought I would have to surface, for I could neither catch my breath nor believe my eyes! Those are pretty heady memories. What would ten years and intervening politics bring?

My assignment was to review the liveaboard *Ghazala I*, launched in November 1987. Driving down from Elat in late October and crossing the border with relative ease, I arrived at Sharm el Sheikh late in the day. After being welcomed aboard by Captain Udo Fischer, I checked out the 80 foot craft and found her much to my liking: modern, deluxe and very comfortable. Each of the six 9 x 10 ft. cabins, spacious by liveaboard standards, has portholes for fresh air, plus its own air conditioner. Four have three bunks each, and the others have two bunks; plus lots of usable storage space, two mirrors, several hooks and reading lights, and two 220v outlets in each cabin. (Bring a stepdown converter for 110v.) On the same deck are four tiled wetrooms with hot water showers, three of which have

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large sinks and marine heads. The boat holds 16 divers, but only 12 joined this journey, leaving my upper bunks for luggage and cameras -- and affording couples more privacy. The Ghazala I carries 2000 gallons of fresh water, plus a desalinator, which is a true luxury at sea. She boasts two 430 hp diesel engines, two generators, and two compressors with a bank of cylinders so tanks can be filled in minutes.

With many passengers arriving late, there was only time for a dusk dive in Na'ama Bay, at Sharm el Sheikh. Like many bays, it was a bit murky, but wow, what I saw just under the boat! A brilliant Emperor Angel, a large, blue-spotted ray, soft corals and lots of brilliant tropicals. Not a bad orientation dive to check out cameras and weights -- and due to the Red Sea's high salinity, we all needed up to four extra pounds of lead. The water was chilly: 77° to 79° in October and as low as 73° during the winter and spring. I was comfortable in a 1/8" shortie, but most of the divers on board preferred heavier coverage. (June through September it warms to 80° to 82°.)

The next morning we headed to the Straits of Tiran to dive the vertical wall at Jackson Reef. It was covered with small female orange-gold coralfish interspersed with occasional magenta males. Before my eyes had time to adjust to the darting brilliance, a school of unicorn fish swam by, almost within arm's reach! A hundred feet away, two divers were concentrating their shots on one spot, so I swam over. Clinging to the wall were five flaming red lionfish. Soon two swam away, fully spreading their translucent white "plumes."

Many powerful currents rush through the Red Sea, but thanks to Ghazala I's eight-person Zodiac, I rarely had to fight them -- Captain Udo was invariably accurate in discerning their strength and direction. The Zodiac would zip my partner and me beyond the selected site so we could drift dive back towards the mother craft. A few times the current shifted mid-dive and she and I struggled back to the anchor line. Smarter divers surfaced and waved for the Zodiac.

My favorite site in the Straits was Thomas Reef, where I swam through gardens of swaying soft corals . . . pink, violet, ocher, green, white . . . and all imaginable colors and types of coral and fish. As I was photographing a school of blue and gold fusilliers, my favorite underwater jester swam by: the Picasso triggerfish, so aptly named, with its stark, silvery-white body and surrealistic bright blue, yellow and black designs across the eye and face. There were lots of Emperor Angels, arguably the world's most beautiful fish, with its electric blue and gold stripes and velvety black markings. What a place. The technicolor soft corals. Brilliant patchwork quilt of fluorescing hard corals. The myriad colorful and unique fish. The 100-foot to 150-foot visibility. Nowhere in the world have I found such a combination. It is a very alluring destination.

Yet, wonderful as the trip was, all was NOT harmonious in paradise! As other dive boats sometimes moored nearby, the cry on board was, "Hey! We paid for a liveboard so we could get to virgin sites; not dive where other boats gather!" Not accustomed to having his authority challenged, Udo, in the best

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Germanic style, would snap: "What the hell, you want the whole Red Sea to yourselves? The area for diving here is relatively small. The best sites are around the tip of the Sinai Peninsula. I cannot prevent others from coming!"

Udo did get us to all the dive sites early enough in the mornings for us to make one or two dives before any other boats arrived. Also, with four other liveboards in the area, how could we claim exclusivity? Furthermore, many of the best sites can also be reached by day boats. On the other hand, Udo seemed reluctant to travel too far afield. To save fuel? Unfamiliarity with more distant areas? He blamed it on ominous weather signals and predictions of poorer diving beyond the "prescribed range." However, we had clear, calm days, and only occasionally some morning and midday wind, creating small whitecaps.

Unhappy with Udo's explanations, some divers "demanded" that we sail into the nearby Gulf of Suez. Udo was not to be swayed, insisting that the best sites were close by, and that he "must have safe overnight anchorages." It seemed ironic for a captain so capable to be so overcautious. But eventually we compromised. Udo took us to Shag Rock and Shab Mahmud in the southern Gulf of Suez. It was lovely, colorful, clear, and without other dive boats -- but not much better than Ras Muhammad and the Tiran reefs, and with even stronger currents. On one dive I would have been swept right past the boat and unable to get back without the Zodiac, had Udo not thrown out a 30 ft. safety line.

Our young Egyptian divemaster, Magued, was pleasant and willing to help, but unless he was asked directly, he was likely to sit smoking a cigarette and watch 12 divers struggle with gear. He rarely dove with us, perhaps because we all had buddies and were experienced. Or perhaps because he had more to learn about the sites and currents. Several times he gave us erroneous information directly opposed to Udo's briefing. The captain expected more from Magued -- and Magued resented Udo's requirements, officiousness and flaring temper. That temper was demonstrated when one diver surfaced with a dead shell. Before she got up the ladder, Udo yanked the shell from her hand, threw it back, and screamed, "What do we have to do to keep you people from bringing anything up. It's against the law, even if it is dead!" But he quickly apologized. Hesham, the first mate, helped with Zodiac, moorings, etc. He was quiet, helpful, eager to learn and to please.

Chantal (French Canadian) and Kaja (German) rounded out the crew as hostesses and cooks. We had a wonderful Indian curry dinner replete with all the condiments, and a delicious Middle Eastern dinner, but generally the quality of the meals was unpredictable, too heavy and often just not up to snuff. I suppose

Diving The Red Sea

There are several ways to dive the Red Sea. I booked directly with the *Ghazala I* at the good price of \$110/day. Many American firms represent boats, usually at a higher price, but hopefully with greater assurance that the operation, food especially, satisfies American tastes. You may also stay at one of Sharm el Sheikh's hotels (the Marina Sharm, the Ghazala Hotel, the new Fayrouz Hilton, and Aquamarine), and dive from day boats, which reached virtually all the sites I dived.

For the adventurous, drive down the Sinai Peninsula, along the Gulf of Aqaba, from Eilat, staying in various settlements or villages, overnight. See the desert, the people, the villages and the country itself. And drive your car near the edge of the sea, gear up and fall in. The *Red Sea Diver's Guide* shows the best sites and the easiest entrances and exits. An American travel organization which offers such trips is International Diving Expeditions, 11265 Knott Ave., Cypress, CA 90630.

Some other boat possibilities: See and Sea Travel, 50 Francisco St., Suite 205, San Francisco, CA 94133 (415/434-3400; 800/DIV-XPRT); Fantasea through La Mer Travel, 823 United Nations Plaza, #817, New York, NY 10017 (800/348-3669; 212/599-0886) or directly: POB 234, Hofit, Israel, 40295 (053-666482).

J.K.

that fresh produce is scarce on the South Sinai, so much of the food was canned. Except for one meal of spaghetti with fresh calamari sauce, and two meals with canned tuna, we never had a bite of seafood! One lunch we were served thick, overcooked hamburgers, and for dinner that evening it was thick, overcooked filet mignon! Heavy food doesn't sit well underwater, and I'm here to spread the word that many of us have transcended daily meat-and-potatoes, often preferring fresh fish, fowl and lighter fare. Three vegetarians who had indicated their preferences ahead of time occasionally fared better with Middle Eastern substitutes for meats.

The group could arrange special meal times, but otherwise breakfast was served around 10:30, after a dive or two; lunch about 2:30 and dinner at 9:00, after night diving. Complimentary Egyptian wine accompanied dinner. Don't expect Mouton de Rothschild! It is young and a bit sour. Aside from soft drinks, "Stella," the Egyptian beer, was the only other beverage available. One diver compared it to camel urine (where had he sampled that!). I found it no worse than slightly stale and heavily diluted lite beer. Never mind! It was cold and wet after a day of diving! If you want anything else, bring your own.

Captain Udo did a good job of running the superb craft and giving us the maximum diving time with a flexible schedule. Since none of the dive sites we visited were more than two hours from Sharm el Sheikh, we lost no dive time traveling. (We went back to Sharm once, in our 11 days aboard, to re-provision the boat.) I made up to five dives every day. To my eye, most of the best diving, and nearly all of the brilliant colors, were above 60 feet. However, deep diving is certainly available at nearly every site, for deep freaks!

Because the autumn sun sets about 5:00 PM over the Sinai desert, we were able to make two night dives whenever we wished. I did so nearly every night --- largely because of the fascinating "flashlight fish" which look like stars darting about the nighttime reef! Our overnight anchorages were calm and peaceful, and there is something quite mystical about sunsets and darkness over the mountains of the Sinai desert. We all felt it. The nights were cool and breezy. The flying bridge is a very large sun deck, carpeted, with canvas sunshades that easily furl away. There are lots of comfortable foam mats for bronzing, or even sleeping on deck at night.

Star Chart:

Diving for Experienced	★ ★ ★ ★ ½
Diving for Beginners	start elsewhere
Boat Accommodations	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Boat Food	
some days	★ ★ ★ ★
other days	★ ★
Moneysworth	★ ★ ★ ★
★ poor, ★★ fair, ★★★ average, ★★★★ good, ★★★★★ excellent	

But, alas, with all the abundant beauty, I must report that the diving thrills I had experienced a decade ago were nowhere to be found! I saw none of the big fish I had seen on my two previous trips, except for the ubiquitous, huge Napoleon wrasses. I saw no sharks, which used to be "regulars" at Ras Muhammad . . . and none of the myriad species of sharks at the so-called "Shark Observatory." Nor enormous, swirling schools of ocean jacks and snappers. Have they disappeared altogether? Have they moved on to quieter, less dived waters? Or is it just a temporary condition? From my interviews of other divers, including Israelis who had grown up in the Red Sea area, I was not alone in my observations -- no matter what time of the year.

And gone is "George," perhaps the world's largest Napoleon wrasse, who would eat hard-boiled eggs out of divers' hands -- or even mouth-to-mouth. George got

too many hard-boiled eggs: 30 or 40 a day, during high summer season! He was last seen three or four years ago, lying on the bottom, barely alive. A victim of too many divers feeding fish unnaturally? Or just nature taking its course? Will we divers ever learn to co-exist with nature, without having to dominate, tame or destroy it?

I remember "The Temple" near Ras Um Sid, a huge underwater pinnacle, full of caves, wondrous cuts covered with live coral and swarming with fish. Traffic has taken its toll. It is now much dived, with no less than five moorings nearby. Much of the coral is dead, and I saw little of the brilliance and pulsing life that I then recorded in my log. Ras Nusrani, however, was as lovely as ever, and it was a joy to swim over acres and acres of beautiful underwater structures, unspoiled and covered with living corals.

Surely, diving the Red Sea can be a superlative experience. The weather is usually superb from April through October, and good during some winter months. And the diving is beautiful! While the Ghazala I is a fine and luxurious dive boat, my trip had its problems. But Captain Udo is leaving to command an even newer liveaboard. Another captain may be at the helm of this excellent craft as you read this. Whether that rectifies the problems, only time will tell. Before signing up, one should seek information whether the Ghazala I -- indeed, any boat -- stays in the vicinity of Sharm or ventures farther from home base -- perhaps well up into the Gulf of Suez, or further south to Sudan.

Aside from the changes underwater, I was surprised how little else had changed now that the Sinai is under Egyptian rule. Sure, there was more development at Sharm than ten years ago: two new resorts, a market, and a few shops. Howard Rosenstein and the Red Sea Divers are now based at Elat, although his liveaboard, Fantasea, still cruises the same areas. The faces are different and the sound of the Egyptian language falls differently on the ears. But the Sinai is much as it has been for aeons, and certainly similar enough to leave me reminiscing about my two previous trips when the Red Sea was a virgin dive area. Though I heard some people refer to it as "Europe's Cozumel," for those who have never dived there before . . . and don't remember "way back when" . . . it may still very well seem virgin. Indeed, the diving can be spectacular.

Divers Compass: Visas are required for Egypt. . . . You can book the Ghazala I or arrange land diving through Sinai Divers: Ghazala Hotel; Sharm El Sheikh, South Sinai, Egypt 62-70217, FAX. . . . Extend your trip to see the pyramids of Egypt, or experience the biblical history of Jerusalem. . . . In Cairo Sinai Travel has first rate guides: Mr. M. El Bahy, South Sinai Travel, 79 Merghany St., Heliopolis, Cairo, Egypt; telephone 664013.

J.K.

Reports From Our Readers: Part V

FLORIDA: Along with ocean diving, Florida has fresh water possibilities. Well, maybe. Dive at Crystal River and stay at the Day's Inn, says Peter Woloschinowski (Winnipeg), "if you want to possibly spot manatee. Otherwise, give it a wide berth. The only interesting thing was at King's Spring, where I buddied with an instructor interested in fossils. We fanned the silt and found petrified sand dollars, snails, flint, and fish vertebrae in the caverns. Chances of seeing manatee are remote. Snorkeling is your best bet. People snorkeled with a group of manatees for 45 minutes not 100 yards from us."

Chris Augeris (Hinsdale, IL) says Fort Lauderdale "cannot compare to Cozumel in fish and coral, but the wrecks -- The Mercedes, Joy Scutti and Rebill -- are remarkable." Of his February diving with Pro Dive, Steve Perlstein (Santa Fe) says, "Everyone was treated as experienced. Visibility was great and the fish, especially the 8-foot barracuda schools and the moray swimming freely, were a delight. Dives were better than expected." . . . Nearby, in Palm Beach, Norine Rouse operates her "club" where tourists are welcome. The Adlers (Smithtown, NY) were there last year: "One tank drift dives. They love to go deep and so we have little bottom time but staff points out fish, lobsters, turtles, sharks. Be careful about dive tables; they push it. They all use the Edge & stay down longer than I am comfortable with. But no problem to come up when I am ready. A very good dive operation for the more experienced or confident diver."

Most people head for the Keys, where there are more dive shops per square island, I would imagine, than anywhere in the world. But the quality can vary substantially. In Islamorada last year, Peter Woloschininiwsky had "two crappy dives. The store scrutinized my log book, but allowed an elderly inexperienced fellow to sneak through without a log book. On the wreck of the Eagle (for advanced only and a strong current that day), his rented BCV inflator stuck open and I had to bring the wide-eyed gentleman up from 80 feet. He was incapable of self-rescue and had not an experienced diver been with him, he'd have been history. Total bottom time? 4 minutes! (I later received a \$25 refund.) I had to release the boat from the mooring buoy -- the divemaster wouldn't get in the water. The Captain apologized for the problems and as a reward, would take us to a reef so secret it had no name (so secret that Lady Cyana's boat was already there). Anchoring difficulties had us twice drifting on a collision course. On descent, I watched both boat anchors tear the coral in a long slow trail. They should be heavily fined for this sort of destruction! The dive? Nothing but a flat field of sea whips and few fish." . . . Anthony Barcia (NY) listened to us. "Undercurrent was right on the money with Treasure Divers. They understand the experienced diver as well as the novice. Safety is achieved without sacrificing enjoyment. Operation is first-class. Ledges & Dropoffs (90 feet) plus some very exciting moray feeding. The Ocean 80 hotel was luxurious, yet divers can feel comfortable."

Key Largo is homeport for Pennekamp Park, an underwater preserve that is feeling the pressure from divers. Says Shelby Cook (Englewood, CO), "Capt. Chambers runs a great boat -- never more than eight and will go out with only two divers on board. All equipment you need is available. Tries to give divers what they want. The best in the Keys." . . . Peter Woloschininiwsky (again) stayed at Howard Johnson's. "Pennekamp Park is going to hell in a handbasket. Diver pressure has taken a terrible toll on the corals. The only good thing about the popular reefs is still the abundance and variety of fish. I'd bypass Key Largo and go straight to Looe Key. A couple of snarly burnt-out divemasters had indifferent attitudes -- no enthusiasm at all. One rule was if you came up with less than 500 psi on the first dive, you'd be snorkeling on the second. Watch for speeding boats overhead -- Florida boaters are maniacs." . . . James Works (Worcester, MA) stayed at the Anchorage Resort in March. "American Diving Headquarters was very helpful, taking care of all problems as they came up, ranging from accommodations to readjusting for a night dive. Accommodations were spacious. Each room had a living room and kitchen. The dive guides knew the reefs quite well and did a fine job directing to points of interest." (800/634-8464; 305/461-0037) . . . The Adlers (Smithtown, NY) say, "Quiescence is the only shop we would consider -- 6-pack boats and good service -- very accommodating. Don't seek out Keys diving if you are experienced or if you have other options open." (305/451-2440)

Deep Meditation: Spacing Out At Sixty Feet

When Amos Nachoum, the owner of La Mer Sea Safari's, plummets beneath the ocean's surface these days, he is not always searching for exotic sea life. Nachoum's quest often is to explore the inner workings of his own psyche.

"For me, meditation is more powerful in the water," he explains. "I usually drop down 40 or 50 feet and sit on the reef or hover in the water. It's just like being in the womb."

Nachoum, whose everyday states of consciousness normally are spent leading La Mer dive expeditions, is not the only diver getting off his zafu and meditating underwater. A small but dedicated number of fellow explorers have made the same discovery: when it comes to clearing the mind and gaining personal insight, they say, the ocean's weightlessness, virtual silence, and diffused light make it a near-perfect environment. Says Marian Rivman, a New York sport diver and meditator: "The peace and energy that I might feel after an hour of meditating on land I can accomplish in just ten minutes underwater."

Some veteran divers question the wisdom of "spacing out" underwater. They note that a self-induced trance could dull a diver's response time in an emergency, make it difficult to communicate with a diving partner, and hinder the monitoring of air consumption and depth.

Nachoum, who often dives and meditates alone at night, acknowledges that he is courting danger but says that after years of diving he knows what he's doing. Rivman is more cautious. "Never go into a state of meditation without first planning it beforehand with your buddy on the surface," she advises.

Such precautions seem particularly wise in light of the profound experiences many underwater

meditators report. Although no scientific studies have explored why the dream-like alpha state may be intensified while diving, several researchers hypothesize that the reduction of sensory input allows divers to concentrate more fully on their inner experiences. In essence, they say, the ocean becomes the ultimate flotation tank.

John Turner, a physiologist and flotation tank researcher at the Medical College of Ohio, points out that the ocean's silent, near-buoyant environment, coupled with the diver's insulating wetsuit, eliminates a great deal of distracting sensory stimulation. "When that sensory input is decreased," Turner says, "our body and thoughts become more prominent. That helps us to develop a greater focus on ourselves." Turner also theorizes that the rhythmic, echoing sound of the diver's air regulator acts as a form of biofeedback, relaxing a diver as he or she becomes keenly aware of breathing.

Nitrogen narcosis, a stupor-like condition that occurs underwater as blood nitrogen levels rise, also may contribute to the meditator's underwater euphoria, according to Bruce Bassett, a San Antonio, Texas, dive physiologist. Most divers notice the "rapture of the deep" beginning at 80 to 100 feet, he says, but nitrogen levels increase to a certain degree at lesser depths as well.

Rivman, however, has a more philosophical theory about the appeal of deep-water meditation: "The ocean is one big hug, and there is a great sense of trust," she says. "You know that it will always catch you -- you will never fall. I feel the quintessential in underwater, a cell in a vast universe."

This article, by Robert Applebaum, originally appeared in the New Age Journal.

Key West has good shops, bars and restaurants and more square tourists per block than San Francisco. If you're serious about diving, don't bother. Clay MacConnell (Huntsville, AL) stayed at Pelican Landing and says he "enjoyed Key West itself -- diving would be greatly improved if reefs were protected. Spearfishing has eliminated the larger fish. My wife was a first-time diver and the experience was very good. Depths only 15-20. Dive shop used steel 72's -- had to beg to get aluminum 80s." Anthony Barcia (Staten Island) went with Pro Dive last December: "Dives were extremely shallow (15 feet). Visibility was poor (25-30 feet). Dive shop & hotel had a great location but the dive shop was structured for novice divers and the crew was more interested in rules than in our enjoyment." (800/426-0707; 305/296-3832)

Peter Woloschinowski isn't all that sour about the Keys. "Looe Key has the prettiest reef in the whole island chain. It must be what Pennekamp looked

like years ago. Followed by large barracuda and petted a large stingray. Some interesting cleaner fish and an inquisitive lobster came out of his hole to check me out. Divemaster limited 35 foot dives to one hour -- I'm good for at least 90 minutes. Sugarloaf Lodge is for sailors with bucks, not divers."

In Marathon, says one reader, Hall's Dive Shop "is great for certification. Nice friendly staff who care!" (800/331-4255; 305/743-5929) The Plantation Harbour Yacht Club, say Clay & Wendy MacConnell (Huntsville, AL), is "good for novice divers. Special arrangements can be made for deep dives and wreck dives."

In June, we published unflattering comments from a reader who took a group aboard the More Bottom Time. The captain asked several of his good customers to protest. Typical of the letters we received was this one from Stan Strickland (Panama City): "I had the opportunity to dive with Mick Michels many times over the past couple of years and while he can be a stern taskmaster with regard to safety, I found him to be thoroughly professional and a great host. He has made my diving experiences and those of the people with me much more interesting because of his thorough knowledge of the dive sites. He makes it clear that his boat is for serious divers. He'll pack as many dives into a day as possible, feed you great food, and tuck you in so tired you'll think your bunk is the Taj Mahal. And, to top it off, it's the best buy on the market." For trips in various Florida waters, including the Dry Tortugas, write Michels at 9633 Davenport Ave., Youngstown, FL 32466.

GALAPAGOS ISLANDS: The only way to dive these islands is by liveaboard, and those lucky few who do come back crowing about diving experiences of their lifetime, where everyone reports seeing the "big stuff." Dave Cassavant of Medfield, MA took the Beagle III last February and reports that she was "clean and comfortable with a friendly and helpful crew," but the food wasn't to his liking. He says "every dive an adventure -- 5-foot turtles, dozens of eagle rays, black/white tip/gray Galapagos sharks, hammerheads, mantas, sea lions (everywhere), large morays, schools of pelagics where you can't see water and all this on one dive. Vis: 50-90 feet; temp: 75°. The amenities aren't there, but this has to be the best diving there is." . . . E.H. Ruiz of Hato Rey Station, Puerto Rico went aboard the Y Encantada, had the same sort of diving: "Combination with land explorations provides an excellent 'balanced' adventure. Do not expect great visibility (plankton abundant) nor warm water. A perfect combination for underwater and land naturalists." . . . H. Von Ohlsen (Avon, Colorado) was scheduled on the Bartholome, but the Tip Top was substituted. "It's a 'tourist' boat. It had only one compressor -- was pushed for two dives. It could only do 5 to 7 knots, hence we only got to one good dive site, Cousins. No air conditioning, no hot water, pump toilets (toilet paper in a bucket or out the window), sink didn't even hold water. Dive guide was poor -- had us swimming against current half the time and bagged slipper lobster under scuba. He would not take us to the good pelagic sites."

GUAM: In a word, we can report what M. Brooks (Missoula, MT) who is at the Naval Air station there told us about the diving last year. "Lousy."

RED SEA: Holger Behrndt (Mainz, West Germany) dived Hurghada last December at El Samaka. "Not crowded (10 divers per boat). Hurghada diving like Sharm el Sheikh used to be; uncommon cold and strong wind all the time -- will be better in spring and summer. Big and plentiful moray eels. Lots of Napoleons and big groupers, some rays (no manta) and turtles. Fish life better than Caribbean. Wall good, but more exciting in Grand Turk and Belize." Bernd Reif (Karlshure, R.F.A.) says of the Subex Diving Center, "Swiss diveguides try to satisfy. 50-foot dive boat -- very good. Two-tank dive only because dive spots are so far

out. Often windy -- seasickness might be a problem to some. Diving excellent but ashore everything is Third World. Only for people who just want to dive and nothing else. E6 processing overnight." . . . T.A. O'Rourke (Dhahran, Saudi Arabia) has stayed several times in the Yanbu Area, staying at the Holiday Inn. "All beach dives. To dive area must have Red Sea Dive Club card. If not local authorities will give you major hassles! Photography permits required as this is a highly sensitive port area. Photography of installations prohibited. You will go to jail for a long time."

Tom Graham of Portland, OR, tripped on the Fantasea to Ras Muhammad in March. "Too much silt in water -- large areas of dead coral. Limited dive sites -- used some sites 2-3 times, partially due to strong wind and anchoring problems. Overloading small Zodiac with divers, cameras, and gear. Must have 1/4" wetsuits min. this time of year. Water 72°, wind 35 mps, air temp. 65°. Everyone had head colds. Hoods a must! Big + tamest tropical and big fish I've ever seen. Great for 15mm wide angle close-ups." . . . We've gotten mixed reviews on the Lady Jenny. First a con, then a pro. Says Jerry Alter (Cliff, NM) of last year's trip, after having prepaid: "I did not have a cabin for 3 days, and had to sleep on the floor. Captain said that Europeans were his principal clients, and that Americans came along only now and then. Therefore, he wasn't going to give me a bunk if it meant displacing a European from his. Only two dives per day were permitted, plus an occasional night dive. Quality of food served on this trip was the worst I've ever seen on any live-aboard boat: huge platters of bread and potatoes with very little else for most of the trip. No divemasters to assist the divers out of the water at the completion of the dive. Beds were never made, sheets were never changed, and cabins were never cleaned." Alice Yoakus (Lakeville, CT) reports otherwise on her trip six months later. "Great fish, superb visibility, warm water, and friendly, helpful and efficient crew made this a marvelous trip. (Also because our group was eager, experienced, and very knowledgeable about diving and marine life.)"

Buying Photo Gear By Mail

-- Prices And Pitfalls

Diver interest in underwater photography grows by leaps and bounds. When it looked like everyone who could carry a Nikonos had one, along came camcorders. Many divers now have more invested in photo gear than dive gear.

This growth has spawned sales of underwater camera equipment by mail order. With the discounts some of the mail order houses offer, sales through retail camera stores and dive shops have decreased proportionately. From reputable mail order firms, you do get low prices. If you want to find out how to make the damn thing work or what you did wrong, you must turn elsewhere.

Lower prices via the gray market

When the dollar was strong, the direct mail camera market was dominated by "gray market," which are products initially distributed in Europe, South America, or the Far East and subsequently purchased by U.S. mail order firms. Even after being shipped

from abroad, the prices were still lower than obtainable within the U.S. American manufacturers of photo equipment and subsidiaries of Japanese firms such as Nikon USA lost business. Retail firms that weren't large enough or savvy enough to buy from foreign markets had difficulty competing.

Today, with a weak American dollar, most equipment sold in this country is manufactured here or intended to be sold here by the manufacturer. However, if and when the dollar strengthens, the gray market may not return. Some people in the loop are out to stop it.

According to Reid Risner, Service Manager for Nikon USA, "Nikon now gives different model numbers for the cameras they allocate to each country. If you buy a camera in Europe and need repairs in the U.S., the repairs will be covered by Nikon's worldwide warranty." But, he added, "you will have to send in your purchase receipt to prove that you bought it outside the U.S. If you buy a 'gray market' product, Nikon USA is not bound to provide warran-

ty service."

To keep the gray market open and protect their customers, some mail order houses and others who buy internationally have instituted service contracts. For a few additional dollars, you are issued a service contract and the mail order house will get your camera repaired. Some, such as Reitz Camera, have set up a camera repair departments to take care of their service contracts. The customer gets service and the mail order firm gets an additional source of revenue. For \$29.95, 47th Street Photo sells a seven-year warranty on most new cameras, which includes parts and labor.

With the dollar weak, the U.S. creates the gray market for other countries. Paul Schutt, Helix president, told *Undercurrent* that "we sell a lot of gear to Hong Kong and Australia. Apparently it is even faster for them to send their equipment back to the U.S. for repair."

Dive Shops Lose Camera Business

For all but the largest dive stores to make a go of it, most of their products need to be marked up nearly 100% most of the time. They can maintain substantial margins because of limited geographic and mail order competition for specific brands. Years ago, when the interest in underwater photography was in its infancy, dive shops made money selling underwater cameras and accessories because camera stores didn't. When volume in the underwater camera business became possible, the dive shops were driven out.

A good margin in the camera business is 20%, but as one industry representative told us, "most retailers don't get that. When you buy from a normal camera shop, they may make \$20 to \$30 on the deal but they will also sell you filters, books, tripods and other accessories at full markup. A dive store can sell you the camera and strobe," he said, "but loses out on the accessory sales. So they have to charge more and therefore lose customers to the mail order houses." Many dive stores have gone out of the photography business entirely, while others sell only cases, o-rings and ancillary items.

Paul Schutt says that Helix works on a margin of "only 5% to 10% for new equipment. We don't get any better deal than a dive shop. Nikon has prices for one, three or six cameras; after that, there is no discount. But we do buy in large quantities when we anticipate price increases. We sell about 2500 Nikonos cameras a year. When we heard that the price of the Nikonos was going to increase, we bought a thousand. We could sell that camera at less than what Nikon offered."

One dive shop owner told us he tried to get a 20% markup and still could not compete with mail order houses. "But that wasn't our only problem. When we tried to order from some of the manufacturers, we would find out that they didn't have the items in stock and we would have to back order. Our

customer would then go to the direct mail houses and get what he wanted before we could get the goods into our shop."

Some dive stores beat the problem by using Helix or 47th Street as their supplier, paying the same prices as the consumer who shops by mail. Schutt says many shops order from Helix and sell the equipment for \$30 or \$40 over what they charge and don't need to carry an inventory. "They have a satisfied customer and make \$30 to \$40 with their money only being tied up for three or four days. That \$30-\$40 extra won't make the customer feel that he has been ripped off when he sees ads with a lower price." Especially if he gets a few tips from the dive store on how to use the camera.

But over-the-counter assistance takes time. And time costs money. One dive store owner told us that he loses money selling photo gear. "Most customers who buy photographic gear from us expect instruction as part of the package. We can't afford that."

Manufacturers have an additional story to tell. Ike Brigham of Ikelite told us that for years he tried to keep Ikelite products out of discount operations. "We own a dive shop and know how hard it is to make a buck, so we wanted our dealers to get a margin. But I was sued by the State of Alaska, threatened by the State of Indiana, and was contacted by the Federal Trade Commission about price fixing because no one could find us discounted. Finally I had to write my dealers and tell them that they could do with our products what they wanted."

Ike said he had other problems as well. "Dive shops didn't support us. They do not keep up on new products and they do not stock an adequate inventory."

The improvement of the Nikonos has also altered the market. In the '70s, demand for housings for single lens reflex cameras and strobes was much greater and were a profitable line for dive shops. The shops didn't sell the cameras, but they were the only source for housings. As the Nikonos improved, the demand for single lens reflex housings declined. Mail order businesses got on the Nikonos bandwagon and the dive stores lost their market.

Buying by Mail

Should a buyer beware when purchasing photographic equipment through the mail? Yes, indeed. The hottest ripoff today is product stripping.

Suppose you order a Nikon SB103 strobe for a great price. When it arrives, you would expect to hook it up and head for the islands. But if you haven't shopped carefully, you may only get the strobe head without the pan, arm, cord or brackets. Helix's Schutt told *Undercurrent* that "New York State has sued a couple of mail order houses for just doing that. Nikon says that anyone who stripped products would be dropped."

One safeguard for the consumer is that some com-

panies print the contents of the package right on the box. Schutt says this has helped to cut down on strip-pers. "If you know what should be in the box and it isn't, you should raise Cain."

What can a customer do to protect himself when buying from a mail order house?

First, order only from established companies. Just because a company runs an ad in a magazine or operates out of a store front doesn't mean it's established.

Second, use a credit card. If you have a valid complaint, you can get the charge nullified. Trying to get a refund after a check is cashed may be impossible.

Third, if the order doesn't arrive when it's due, call to check on it. Use the 800 number.

Fourth, if something has been added or subtracted from the order or the shipping costs seem high, immediately call the mail order house to explain the problem and establish a satisfactory period in which to resolve the problem -- say ten days.

Fifth, if you do not have satisfactory resolution within ten days, write a letter specifying the problem. Send a copy of the letter and the list of things ordered to your credit card company and tell them you are disputing certain items on the bill.

"The hottest ripoff today is product stripping."

Finally, if you order from advertisements in the magazine *Popular Photography*, let the magazine go bat for you. They list 24 "check-rated" stores with whom they will deal if you find that you can't resolve your problems directly.

What about the "strippers"? If you don't get satisfactory resolution from the company, Schutt says to send a copy of the ad and a list of what you purchased and received to the attorney general's office in the state where the company is located. Send copies of your own attorney general's office as well.

Don't expect overnight action. State attorney general's offices don't look into every complaint. But if similar complaints are on file, it could be your complaint that launches an investigation.

Where to Shop

Two mail order firms, Helix and 47th Street Photo, seem quite reputable. *Undercurrent* staffers have used them both with satisfaction in the past six months, placing complicated orders which were delivered correctly. In two cases we asked for Federal Express shipping and the goods arrived the next day.

Helix has the most complete line of underwater photography gear and advertises regularly in *Skin Diver*. They give price quotes by telephone and will send you a catalogue upon request. Helix, 310 South Racine Avenue, Chicago, Ill. 60607. 312/421-6000; 800/33-HELIX. FAX: 312/421-6000.

The venerable 47th Street Photo is reputed to have

Mail Order Ripoff?

Dear *Undercurrent*:

In June, I placed a telephone order with Adorama for \$675.57 worth of underwater camera equipment. This was charged to my AMEX card.

When I received the equipment, it was not the brand name I had requested over the phone so I called Adorama and spoke to a man named Claude. He instructed me to return the equipment, along with a letter explaining why I was sending it back. He reassured me that my AMEX account would be credited with the \$675.57. I mailed the equipment by regular mail service.

On July 9 I noticed that no credit had appeared, so I called Claude. He said he would check it out and call me back. After two weeks went by, I called him again and he said I needed to speak to a "Sal." Sal promised to check it out and call me back.

The last time I spoke to Sal, he said there was nothing he could do to help me and had the attitude that he couldn't care less about it.

Jack McDonald
Ormond Beach, FL

Dear Jack:

We called Adorama and spoke with Claude. After explaining who we were and explaining the problem he transferred us to Sal.

Sal claims he has no record of the equipment being returned or of the correspondence. He tells us that if you forward him your records he will rectify the problem.

Please do so, then call him ten days later to see that he's acted.

The hooker here, however, is that if you used regular mail, you will have no receipt providing delivery -- a key bit of information required to settle the dispute. The gear you returned could have disappeared deep in the bowels of the post office, which is not Adorama's responsibility, or arrived at Adorama and been subsequently lost -- another reason they may have no record. But you can't do much about that either.

If you have further problems, please let us know and we'll help out. And consider contacting *Popular Photography* (see main article) since Adorama is part of their check rated program. You can pick up a copy at any newsstand to learn of their consumer protection program.

Ben Davison

the largest camera and supply inventory in the business, as well as a decent selection of underwater gear. They advertise every Sunday in *The New York Times* and monthly in major photography

magazines. They give price quotes by telephone and will send you a catalogue upon request. 47th St. Photo, 36 East 19th St., New York, NY 10003, 212/608-6934; 800/221-7774.

20/20: ABC Has Lucid View Of Industry-Wide Myopia

After 30 years of escaping national press scrutiny, the dive industry caught the critical eye of ABC's *20/20* on December 29. The reaction has been angry and ignorant.

Hugh Downs kicked off the show by talking about new information on the risks of diving, adding that there are "those concerned with promoting scuba diving who may not want that bad news to get out." The program charged that some people say that PADI is "deliberately not telling the extent of the risks involved." (In May, *Undercurrent* reported that a panel of arbitrators concluded that PADI manuals did not provide sufficient warning to a diver who was bent following PADI's tables. They ordered PADI to pay \$175,000; PADI will appeal.) In the *20/20* piece, PADI vice president, Al Hornsby was asked why specific information about the risks of bends is not provided to beginning divers. Hornsby responded that PADI tells people to "dive conservatively and well within the limits." PADI was accused of pushing equipment sales by having instructors double as salesmen and of not providing specific information about the risks of diving because beginners had yet "to purchase hundreds of dollars worth of equipment." DAN and NOAA physicians spoke about the risks of diving and the potential long-term effects that we know little about.

Regardless of the response, the *20/20* piece was not about whether diving is safe or PADI is deceptive (that issue is up for grabs in other lawsuits: see *Undercurrent*, September 1988). It was about whether the industry makes an aggressive effort to give us divers the information we need to make conscious decisions about our own safety. Some examples from the *Undercurrent* point of view:

Anyone should be able to see that the industry is reluctant to talk "negatively" (that's the industry word for talking about deaths, accidents, faulty products, or resorts that fail to deliver what they advertise) about the sport. In this industry, the emphasis is on selling and supporting the sport, not analyzing it. Sure, that's good for instructors, manufacturers and agencies, but it's not worth a hoot to the individual sport diver.

Undercurrent has published several articles about the possible long-term effects of diving, about why divers die, about a variety of medical problems. We are unaware that any training organization has ever distributed those articles

-- or any like them -- to instructors or trainees. Our October 1987 article by Dr. William Shane on the possible long-term effects of sport diving should be discussed far and wide.

A year ago, *Undercurrent* published a two-part piece suggesting that the figures on the number of active divers are overinflated and that the death and accident rate is far higher than the industry claims. Prior to publication, a draft of that paper reached PADI and shortly thereafter we received a letter from PADI's attorneys threatening to sue us if we proceeded to publish the paper.

The PADI Journal (and NASDS's as well) focuses on selling and marketing; there are articles about instruction safety, but little about diver safety once training is complete.

The director of NUADC, John McAniff, tells *Undercurrent* that no training agencies have cooperate with his effort to conduct a census of diver deaths and to determine the causes behind the accidents.

Regulator manufacturers seldom discuss how their regulators work under heavy workloads or with low tank pressure. Most ignore the information that divers really ought to know, substituting a bunch of technical malarky.

Time and again while researching articles on equipment problems, whether about inflator valves or dive computers, we uncover serious accidents after company spokespeople have denied any accidents occurred.

Surely many individuals in the industry work hard to see that divers get what they need for safe diving. But when it comes to research and information dissemination on "negative" topics, the industry as an institution is passive, not active. DAN receives only small sums from a few manufacturers or agencies to help it perform its role. NUADC gets help only from PADI and DEMA.

If you want to keep up with developments in diver health and safety, you cannot rely on the agencies. With the exception of NAUI, which sponsors an annual get-together where more than marketing is discussed, most don't even keep their instructors informed of major developments in diving health and welfare. Instead, read *Undercurrent* -- or watch *20/20*. Together with DAN and NUADC, they seem to be the only diver-oriented sources regularly willing to make statements more profound than "don't push the tables."