

undercurrent®

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Turneffe Island Lodge, Belize, Central America -- A Trip Back In Time

Dear Reader:

"We are in the Kingdom of Turneffe," said the bearlike, bearded man. "We create our own laws. We can marry people or we can divorce them. We can even levy taxes. So for the remainder of your stay we're going to declare the time here an hour later than it is in Belize City. That means it's now 12:10, not 11:10, and lunch will be served in 20 minutes." And with that pronouncement by the boss of the Kingdom, Hugh Parkey, my short week at Turneffe began.

Turneffe (Tur-neff') Island Lodge, about 30 boat miles to the southeast of Belize City, is located on Caye (Key) Bokel in the Turneffe Atoll, which sits outside Belize's famed Great Barrier Reef ("the second largest in the world," the promoters like to say). Northeast of the 300-square-mile atoll is Lighthouse Reef and south is Glover's Reef. Turneffe might as well be a Kingdom, for my experience was a throwback in time to when Kingdoms did indeed exist. After all, for the full week I never saw or heard an airplane, nor did I even see contrails in the skies.

Arrival in Belize City is just the first step in the journey. I was met at the airport by a porter from the lodge who helped me through customs and past hustling taxi drivers, into the arms of Parkey. He welcomed me and other guests from this Houston flight, introducing us to divers and fishermen and women he had been collecting from flights arriving from New Orleans and Miami. We were loaded into a van and deposited at the ordinary Villa Hotel for the evening. The next morning, promptly at 8 a.m., we climbed aboard the 38 foot Grand Slam, for the 2 1/2 hour voyage to the Kingdom.

As the boat traversed the gentle seas (I have no doubt that at times the passage could be arduous), one begins to understand the difficulty of operating an isolated island lodge. Although this Sunday morning trip was mainly to

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transport guests, there were ancillary functions. Sitting on top of cases of beer and soda were several staff who were returning after a single day at their homes in Belize City. The boat had come in the day before to deposit departing guests and leave a couple of fuel containers for filling. Once guests leave the dock on Sunday, if anything is needed or left behind there's no chance of getting it until the following Wednesday, when the Grand Slam makes another run, this time for food and fuel.

The Sunday noon arrival and a Saturday dawn departure makes the basic stay on Turneffe 5 1/2 days. That means 11 day dives (one at 9 am and one at 3 pm daily) and two night dives (departing after dinner at 9 pm) and plenty of down time. Back at my word processor just 24 hours after leaving Turneffe, I can say that's just not enough time to spend there. I should have extended my stay and ridden the supply boat in on Wednesday.

Extending one's stay is not often possible without advance planning. Turneffe Lodge holds but sixteen guests (there's a 90 percent occupancy rate, I was told), in three two-story buildings whose first stories are free of siding to avoid damage from stormy seas. The simply furnished rooms, cooled only by an overhead fan, are cleaned and tidied each day. One building, the duplex, has larger rooms than the others, but overall it is less desirable. Unlike the other two, it has no screened porch for sitting, but more problematical is its location near the generator shack. Two guests staying in the duplex told me they had trouble sleeping due to round-the-clock drone of the generator, but another told me the drone was music to his ears. "I'm a light sleeper," he said. "I play white noise at home to block out sounds. Here the generator provides the white noise and I'm sleeping like a baby." Unless you need white noise, request rooms 1-6.

By now, perhaps, you're beginning to understand a little about this 12-acre, palm-studded Kingdom by the Sea. It doesn't rain all year round. April is the middle of dry season, so we were politely asked to limit our hot, fresh water showers to one a day, although we could wash off with fresh water after the dive using the water aboard the Grand Slam. Salt water flushes the toilets into a septic system, so sanitary conditions are unhampered by the drought. The dry season meant fewer mosquitoes, I was told, but once I ventured from the mild breezes on the beach, the mosquitoes were quick to attack unless I had lathered up with Avon Skin So Soft -- and even then some of the buggers fought their way past it. (Does that stuff really work, or am I just sucker for a fad?)

This is a diver's retreat from the past, where the waters have been respectfully fished and the coral visited by few divers. It's a fishing camp, where a few fisher folk come to roll out fly lines for bonefish or troll for barracuda. Judged on these standards, not the standards of a Peter Hughes operation, it meets just about every test.

Of course, the most important test of a resort is the quality of the diving and my very first dive set a good standard for the week. Parkey, once a partner

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in a Southern California dive store and later the captain of La Strega, a Belize-based liveboard, provided a thorough brief of the dive site before we entered (as was done each time), in a friendly style colored warmly by his Arkansas upbringing. On the first dive he was assisted by Ned Simpson, who once captained another Belize liveboard, the Coral Bay. (Boy, that's top notch instructor/guide power for a handful of divers; both were always helpful, above and below water.) After requiring each diver to clear his mask and remove his regulator underwater to check basic panic level, we were off swimming. Divers were free to stay with the leaders or go off in pairs on their own. For those without computers, the tables were observed and discussed between dives. On most dives during the week they both joined in, while others they led individually.

On the first dive, about 10 minutes by 25' Privateer from the Lodge, we dropped into an area with a sloping wall and spurs and grooves (a common feature of most diving here although there are some sheer walls dropping to 150 feet or so). Tropicals were abundant. There were plenty of healthy soft and hard corals, and among them were scattered snapper and grouper, perhaps ten to fifteen pounds. Above a school of mackerel passed, and below a large crab threatened me with its pincers. The main features of the dive were two enormous coral-encrusted anchors, which Parkey said were more than two hundred years old. It was a very good start. A chance to go back in time, to a day when the coral had been crushed or the fish speared. And after the dive, the assistant Noel hauled all gear down the hundred-foot dock to the dive shed, washed and dried it. When we were ready to dive again, filled aluminum 80's were always waiting aboard the 25-foot craft, loaded in the center racks, with our BC's and regulators attached to other gear already aboard. Not bad, eh?

Turneffe Island Lodge	
<i>(Rating based on Caribbean Scale)</i>	
Accommodations:	★ ★ ★
Food	★ ★ ★
Diving	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall Ambience	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Boat Snorkeling	★ ★ ★ ★
Moneysworth	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
<small>* poor, ** fair, *** average, **** good, ***** excellent</small>	

In this third week of April, the water temperature stayed at 77°F, the visibility ranged from 50 to maybe 100 feet. Every dive had healthy coral and sponges (there are plenty of baskets here), deepwater gorgonia, and frequently black coral. Most had a french or gray angel or two, a couple of triggers, maybe a filefish, and hordes of common tropicals. Virtually every dive had pelagics.

At Myrtle's Turtles, where we dropped to 85 feet among plenty of snapper and grouper, a school of a hundred or more permit swirled in a silvery upward spiraling corkscrew 'round Ned Simpson. Indeed, a thrilling sight. But the truly thrilling pelagic dives were at the Elbow, where we would be deposited in 80 feet of water to drift along a wall at two knots for thirty minutes. We dived this sight twice and both times I was amazed at the large schools of large (3 ft long) snapper and grouper and mackerel and god knows what else were mixed in that just lazied about as we passed. On one dive a few tuna swam through, while a couple of black tip sharks edged along, about 25 feet away. A great and seemingly unending stream of creole wrasse swam with great single purpose, directly from the depths upward, as if migrating to heaven. At the end of the dive, an enormous school of permit the size of Toyota tires ambled past. And on another dive we found Myrtle the turtle, resting on the bottom. She permitted us to get within six feet of her enormous, barnacle-covered carapace before she flipped us off.

There were five serious flyfishers at the lodge, and to get their attention

all I needed to do was to tell them I swam with a school of permit. Permit, you see, are the trophy fish for flyfishers, virtually impossible to attract and land. While those fishing were getting their share of bonefish, they couldn't get a look from a permit. I seriously considered taking one of their flies and dragging it underwater with me, but common sense prevailed.

The flyfishers were quite a contrast to the divers. They got up at the crack of dawn, fished until noon, returned for lunch, and by 2:00 or so were back on the flats until dusk. They dressed to the nines in their Orvis outfits, carrying hundreds of dollars worth of little trinkets to make their fishing more effective. While they waded the flats, they kept their sleeves rolled down and their hats on their heads. I only caught one fisherman in a hammock catching sun, and when I mentioned how surprised I was to see him without his Orvis uniform, he put on his cap and went fishing. They toted several rods and reels and though they caught plenty of fish, they never kept one. They brought their own bottles for a few nips before dinner, normally sat at their own tables to talk about their day, and when they left they tipped the guides as much as \$200 for the week. Yep, there's quite a difference.

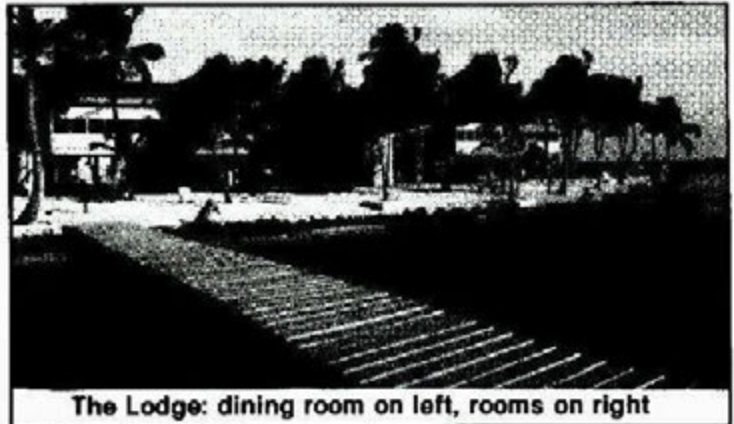
Whenever the folks were about to go fishing, I wished them "good luck." It seemed like a nice thing to say and they seemed to appreciate it. They would say "have a good dive," but those words don't have the ring of adventure as does "good luck." "Have a good dive," is about as stimulating as "have a good day." We divers ought to figure out something better to say to each other.

People who fish go for "grand slams." At Turneffe, a bonefish, a tarpon, and a permit are a grand slam. Catching one of each during a week would be a big deal. In fact, only bonefish were caught on flies during this week. Hugh and Ned have a visual grand slam for divers: a shark, a ray, a turtle, dolphins . . . and I think king mackerel. This could sure be a good way of comparing dive operations. Most places, you'd be lucky to see just one of these creature in a week, let alone all four.

Here at Turneffe, I saw them all. On three or four dives, eagle rays passed by (but none at the Elbow, where another journal proclaimed that rays are present on every dive!). At one site, I was photographing a tube sponge, so long and heavy it dropped like an elephant's trunk. I set the distance on my Nikons to ten feet, only to have an eagle ray bear down on me and turn when an arm's length away. T's Trail was super for fish photography. A funny-looking whitespotted file fish stayed within three feet for several shots, as did a sizeable barracuda who had two dozen tiny black spider-like parasites running around its lips as a blenny handled oral hygiene. A green moray popped in and out of its hole, and a grey angel demanded that I finish a whole roll on her. But not before I got nose to nose with a resting six-foot nurse shark to photograph the remora on her back. She finally shot out of her hole, directly at two observing divers who got an extra beat or two from their hearts in the process.

A while back the Lodge sank its old dive boat, the Savonara. On a night dive there I saw virtually no life. Not a crinoid was out. No lobster. No squirrel fish. I saw one parrot fish, one good sized grouper, a few little inch long mid-water fish. And virtually nothing else. Yet, we had dived there six hours before and although the Savonara had not collected a lot of fish, in the nearby coral there was a great abundance of grouper and parrots and angels and even queen triggers. And plenty of stuff hidden under the coral to show up at night. But none did. In the daytime, this dive provided a special treat. A school of twenty spotted dolphin motored in, clicking, squealing, and swimming back and forth about thirty feet away. But at night . . . barren.

There was always plenty to talk about during cocktail hour, which began about seven in the cozy bar area next to the dining room, upstairs in another building. A couple of cold Belliken beers, especially the stout, got the stories flowing. Uninspired appetizers were offered up (popcorn one night, saltines and a sour cream dip another) and the dinner gong sounded at 7:30. The dinners? If you think about it, you'd probably figure out what to expect. The first night in the Kingdom it was a turkey dinner with all the trimmings, and a butterball turkey, no less. Another night it was barbecued fish, with potatoes, cabbage and beans, another night gazpacho, barbecued chicken, baked potatoes, and another night fish baked with spinach and melted Velveeta, and a birthday cake for one of the guests. Freshly baked rolls were served with every meal. It was all sort of Iowa farm cookin', with a bit of Belize thrown in. Lunches? One day tuna and fresh rolls, accompanied by tomatoes and cucumbers, another day as many Belizean tacos one could eat and spaghetti with meat sauce another day, and another a thin gravy-like sauce with a few hunks of conch for the rice. Breakfast was eggs, pancakes or waffles, bacon or ham. (For political reasons, Belize had put a temporary ban on importing fresh fruits and vegetables from Mexico and the U.S., so there were more canned and frozen food than might otherwise be expected.) To



The Lodge: dining room on left, rooms on right

sum up, the cooking is straightforward, filling . . . and uninspired. And no one complained. Just what you might expect thirty miles from Belize City at a diving and fishing camp. And it's all served up at tables of eight with Hugh and Ned generally holding forth at separate tables to keep the conversation moving.

It all comes together quite well in the Kingdom's happy family atmosphere. Within a day I felt welcome and quite at home. Hugh and Ned were always available to talk diving or talk anything, and Ned's infectious laughter lent an aura of joy to the otherwise quiet retreat. Wives Teresa Parkey and Evelyn Simpson provide management oversight for the full operation and kept the staff humming right along and on time. I would recommend a little more attention to the kitchen. Although Teresa told me that they moved away from the heavy, fried foods prepared not too long ago, plenty of new touches could be added. How about more fresh fish or conch? Get rid of the Velveeta and go for that good Belizean cheese. More fresh fruit at meals, especially breakfast (come to think of it, I bet I could have asked for it) and maybe even a bowl of fruit sitting around for those who get hungry between meals. A good review of the menu with a gentle upgrade in quality and cooking style would go a long way.

And I would go a long way to return to Turneffe. There aren't a lot of these places left in this developing world and I find them very special indeed. The Parkeys, who have been managing Turneffe since owners Jill and Dave Bennett returned to the states 18 months ago, run a warm and friendly operation, at the doorstep of super Caribbean diving. Where else are clouds of grouper and snapper and pelagics lolling about in sixty feet of water? In fact, the diving is so good that the Coral Bay, the Belize Aggressor and other liveboards often spend a few days at Turneffe sites. If you want that fine diving often claimed only to be available from liveboards, with plenty of time to run sand between your toes or swing in a hammock hanging between swaying palms, you may find Turneffe to your liking. Though the big man may tell you to set your watch ahead, you won't be fooled as you travel back in time at the Kingdom of Turneffe.

Divers Compass: The tab is \$1000/person (\$850 summer) for Saturday to Saturday, including diving, Belize City lodging and transfers; Turneffe Island Lodge, POB 24781, Jacksonville, FL 32241; 1/800-338-8149; 904/691-5356); fishing is additional. . . .you can use Wednesday as a day of arrival or departure if space is available; to travel another day, the boat trip is \$200. . . .if you're traveling alone, you might be given a roommate unless agreed to in advance. . . .Parkey says TACA airlines has been behaving fairly well; flights from Houston, New Orleans or Miami run about \$250 rt; Continental and Tan Sahsa also fly from the U.S. . . .There's a horseshoe pit and a volleyball net, but the major activity is Evelyn and Teresa's several lap, aerobic island walk or playing football with the camp dog, Smooty. . . .after dives, the boat returned to the reef with snorkelers. . . .strobes can be charged in rooms. . . .there is a \$1/dive voluntary "insurance" assessment to pay for the Belize recompression chamber. . . .most divers left a \$10-\$20 tip for the dive assistant; a push from management for tips for the kitchen staff seemed inappropriate. . . .several sets of well maintained gear are available for rent; request it ahead of time; although minor gear repairs can be managed, nothing is for sale, batteries included. . . .I learned why watches are set ahead when I heard the 5:15 am door knock on departure day. I would not have been happy to hear it at 4:15 am.

C.C., travel editor

The Sad Saga Of *La Strega*

-- An Undercurrent Investigative Report

Opportunity: Large liveboard dive boats are the future of the dive vacation industry. An established, profitable operation with excellent tax advantages is expanding. Investors wanted -- working partners needed in several fields. Substantial investment required.

This advertisement appears in the February issue of *Underwater USA*. A version of it has regularly appeared there and in other publications during the past few years. Two "profitable operations" are being advertised. The *Tropic Bird* in the British Virgins has been a recent offering. But for three years Tonilla Ltd., whose sole asset is the boat *La Strega*, which operates in Belizean waters, has been the primary property. Several people, many of whom became "working partners" on *La Strega* after investing, have put up as much as \$55,000 each.

Since stock in *La Strega* is still being offered, it would be fair to ask how the original stockholders are doing. In a conversation with *Undercurrent* in December, Lester Netherton, the person selling the stock, claimed that *La Strega* was showing a 20 percent return for its investors. We tracked down and spoke to ten of these investors. What Stewart Williams, a video store owner from North Platte, Nebraska, told us pretty well sums up the beliefs of his fellow shareholders. "I am out \$55,000 that I will

probably never see again." Williams, like many of the investors, not only put up cash, but also left his job to work for the boat at a nominal salary.

To prepare this story, several investors provided us with copies of letters and documents regarding their investment. Three investors wouldn't speak to us, saying either that they didn't wish to jeopardize their relationship with Netherton or that their investments were a private matter. We had several telephone conversations with Netherton, and met with him for two hours in his spartan upstairs office in Ventura, California. Downstairs is his travel agency, American Travel Leisure. Netherton, in his fifties, with white, nearly silver hair, is a tall and seemingly fit man. He answered most of the questions we posed.

La Strega and Lester Netherton

Lester Netherton and his wife Nancy were once the sole owners of *La Strega*, paying \$125,000 for it in early 1980. Netherton told *Undercurrent* that "my wife and I worked on it for over two years getting it into shape." Netherton claims he once sold it for a million dollars and carried the note. The new owner, Netherton says, "drove the boat into the ground and defaulted on the note and we had to take it back. He had run up about a hundred thousand in bad debts

that we had to make good on. And the boat was in need of repair. I never wanted any partners, but we couldn't carry it, so we sold shares."

According to figures provided by investors, by September, 1987, less than two years after the first investors were attracted, *La Strega* was in debt \$257,000.

The November 1, 1985 prospectus shows that Netherton owned 86.6 percent of the 8,250 shares of stock issued by the corporation. Hugh Parkey, then the manager, owned 10 percent and Art Travers, the owner of Poseidon Ventures travel agency, owned \$17,000 worth of stock or 3.4%. Netherton issued the stock based on a valuation of \$500,000 for the boat.

"Netherton has been taking his profit on the original investment by selling his own stock for cash, and thereby transferring ownership of the mounting debt, much of it due Netherton, to the new investors."

In a subsequent document issued on January 26, 1988, Netherton had reduced his holdings to 4,292 shares of stock, and put them into Netherton's 33 LTD, a Cayman corporation. Parkey and six new investors were listed as owning the balance. *La Strega* had not been raising capital by selling shares; the stock that had been sold had been Netherton's privately held stock. It would seem, then, that Netherton has been taking his profit on the original investment by selling his own stock for cash, and thereby transferring ownership of the mounting debt, much of it due Netherton, to the new investors.

Now You See Him, Now You Don't

Art Travers, listed as an initial investor, doesn't appear on the 1988 list. "Netherton removed me arbitrarily," Travers told *Undercurrent*. He gave Netherton \$17,000, but has never received reports on the investment. "I had one meeting with Netherton and told him that I wanted my money back and he told me that he wouldn't do that. We never got together again."

When we first asked Netherton why Travers' name had been dropped, he said, "I don't know why he isn't listed." In a subsequent interview he told us that Travers' \$17,000 was not for stock, so the shares were never issued. "That \$17,000 was a deposit on his guarantee to provide 20 trips per year and he didn't do that so he defaulted."

In the 1985 prospectus, Netherton states that Poseidon Venture Tours "guarantees to provide twenty ten-passenger dive charters for the first year and twenty-four ten-passenger dive charters the se-

cond year." The prospectus uses these figures to project a \$66,000 profit through the end of 12 months ending October, 1986 ("which is a 13.3% return on investment," says the prospectus) and an \$111,000 net profit the next 12 months ("a 22.4% return on investment," states the prospectus.)

Travers says he made no such guarantee; he could not guarantee anything but representation. While they were hung up in negotiation, Travers said, Netherton opened his own travel agency.

Netherton acknowledges that no deal was ever signed, "but we shook hands on it. If Art has a problem, why doesn't he sue me?"

More than one investor wishes he could sue. Bruce Schoch of North Lauderdale, Florida invested \$50,000 and has talked with other investors each of whom, he says, has been "told something different" by Netherton. "I feel that we could sue and win, but none of us is rich enough to take him to court."

Hugh Parkey, now the manager of Turneffe Island resort in Belize, has never received his stock certificates. "I gave Lester \$17,000," he told us, "with an agreement that he would pay me \$1,300/month to manage the boat and I would pay him \$600 to pay off the stock. He ran short of funds," Parkey said, "and couldn't pay me so I couldn't pay for the stock. Next thing I know, he claims I defaulted on my contract."

Keeping *La Strega* Running

The biggest problem with the boat, according to Schoch, is to "keep it running." Several investors told us that each one-week charter needed about \$5,000 to operate properly, but they only got about \$3,500. We asked Netherton if he could explain and he said, "No, that's just the way things happen."

Indeed, nearly every investor who has been aboard *La Strega* reports problems. Pat Savage of Eureka, California, invested \$25,000 before seeing the boat. "I was down there at the end of last year." He said that the boat operated with only one generator, "then it broke down and two charters were cancelled. The engine room has a fire extinguisher but no fire control. The bilge pump system is weak because of old plumbing. There is not enough money being spent to maintain the boat."

Rick Snidtker, 36, of Miami Beach, Florida, invested \$40,000 in March, 1988, for "a five percent share in *La Strega* and five percent of the *Tropic Bird*," another liveboard owned by Netherton. Snidtker, who earned his nest egg as a commercial diver, became Miami operations manager, procuring parts and supplies for the boats. He said that "the boat has been operated in an unsafe condition. It ran for three to four weeks with a bent rudder that was not attached at the bottom. Had it broken loose, the boat would have lost all control. When the boat was sandblasted for painting, the blasting put holes in the hull. It took 30 feet of steel plate to cover the holes."

"In a telephone interview with Netherton on January 6, we asked him about the vessel being unsafe. He said, 'I am not a director so I don't know.'"

Jim Cooper from Castle Rock, Washington, worked as chief engineer during the first part of 1988 (his wife, Paula, was "chief cook, bottlewasher, housekeeper and bookkeeper," she wrote in a letter to friends) because he "wanted to see what it was like before I invested." After seeing the operation and condition of the boat, he decided not to invest.

In a telephone interview with Netherton on January 6, we asked him about the vessel being unsafe. He said, "I am not a director so I don't know." [Eds. note: The British Virgin Islands, where the boat is registered, lists 33 LTD, Netherton's corporation, as the sole director.] Then, in our January 20th meeting with Netherton, he told us that "at the stockholders meeting [two years ago] they told me that I was spending too much money on the upkeep of the boat. They asked me to stop and I did." No investor recalls such a conversation.

Hugh Parkey reported that "Lester only allowed me \$50 a week for maintenance. You can't do much with \$50 a week."

To keep the boat running, several working partners said they had to put up their own cash. Most of the investors who worked on the boat left believing that Netherton owed them money for either out-of-pocket expenses or back wages. Cooper, a marine mechanic, claims that Netherton owes him and his wife \$5,000 for two months wages and out-of-pocket expenses. "When I asked Lester about this he asked, 'Where was the \$40,000 investment?'"

Snidtker says, "I am out of pocket about \$4,000, which includes some salary and some expenses. When Lester and I went over the expenses, we were not in disagreement, but he hasn't paid them."

When *Undercurrent* asked Netherton about these charges, he responded with *ad hominem* attacks, claiming one person was a drunk and another a thief. Many others left the boat under the shroud of being accused of theft.

Several investors who worked on the boat claim that back wages are due. Grover Morris, who served as divemaster from April to December, 1988, told us that after he returned to Oklahoma he found that Netherton had stopped payment on his November paycheck and did not receive his December check. He has called Netherton several times, he said, but is told that he is out of the office.

Who's Selling Shares, Who Pays the Freight?

La Strega (aka Tonilla) issued the original prospectus, giving the general appearance that the corporation itself was selling stock. But it was Netherton, not

the corporation, who was, and still is, selling shares. Money does not reach the corporate account to improve the boat or expand its operation. The boat is left to operate entirely on the income from tourists, less the commission Netherton gets through his travel agency for booking *La Strega* and less the fee he charges *La Strega* for managing the craft. That fee was more than \$50,000 for 21 months ending September, 1987. No financial statements have been issued since then. In addition, Parkey reports that some operating funds sent to Belize for the boat were used personally by Netherton. "I wrote a check to the Belize hospital," he said, "to pay for medical care for Lester's wife."

Netherton told *Undercurrent* that he sold his shares because "marketing the boat took more money than I had. I sold half of it to use the money for marketing." But that doesn't ring true. *La Strega* pays for the marketing.

During those 21 months, *La Strega* spent \$110,000 on promotion and advertising. Where it is customary in the travel business for travel agency's representing the property and getting the commission to foot the advertising bill, *La Strega* pays for the promotion while Netherton's agency gets the commission. He would not disclose to us the size of that commission, but several investors told us it is one-third of sales.

Why People Invested

The financial projections given to investors in the original prospectus claim, without substantiation, that *La Strega* had a profit of \$37,000 through October, 1984. (Although the prospectus doesn't show any figures for 1985, a later statement shows an \$18,000 loss for the last six months of that year). Netherton projected a \$66,000 profit through 12 months ending October, 1986, and \$111,000 for the next 12 months.

It's those kind of rosy figures that led Stewart Williams to invest. Williams said that "the contract I signed states that 'quarterly financial reports will be given to the investors with profits disbursed according to percentage of ownership.' It took over two years and constant harassment from me and the other investors before we were ever given any kind of financial statement. Imagine our surprise when we were told that the operation had lost over \$200,000 between January '86 and September '87. We haven't gotten reports since then."

Others never saw the prospectus. They relied on Netherton's word. Grover Morris, Jr., who was in the airplane parts business in Oklahoma City, read an advertisement in one of the dive magazines in March, 1988. Morris, 42, called Netherton, then flew to Ventura to meet him. Morris said the boat was "represented as being highly profitable. Lester said there was a 24 percent return on investment." He was not given any written figures before he invested his

\$15,000 for 2½ percent of *La Strega*.

What the Financial Statements Show

In Netherton's prospectus, he projects a gross income of \$198,000 (\$145,000 from diving charters) for the fiscal year ending October 1986, relying on his "guarantee" from Art Travers and Poseidon Ventures. According to an unaudited statement, *La Strega* brought in \$134,000 in the calendar year ending December, 1986. He fell about \$54,000 short of his goal if one considers the fiscal and calendar years as roughly comparable.

But it's the spending where *La Strega* runs into problems. Netherton had projected 1986 fiscal year expenses of \$131,000, but his statement shows a whopping \$287,000 in calendar year expenses. He posted a \$152,000 loss that year.

For the fiscal year ending in October, 1987, he projected \$253,000 in income. He did better than that. In only nine months, he reported \$314,000, but where he projected expenses of \$141,000 for twelve months, he actually spent \$401,000 in just nine months. When the year was three-fourths over, he was already \$87,000 in the red. Much of that overage can be attributed to fees taken by Netherton as well as unknown personal expenses, if any.

No Paper Trail?

The few financial records that have been provided to investors are unaudited and without backup. Investors have asked many times for audited statements but none has been forthcoming. On January 6, Netherton told us that "it is impossible to get audited reports" because in Belize we do "most business by cash and they don't give receipts."

Investors had other versions of the business practices. Snidtker said, "We had to pay cash for most of the things we bought for the boat, because the bank account was about \$9,000 overdrawn and the banker would bounce the check. Every so often Lester would put money in to the account and checks could be written again."

Jim Cooper said that when he arrived in Belize in December, 1987, the bank account was overdrawn by \$7,000. "I finally worked things out with the bank and we were able to pay by check for reprovisioning and pay a little back a month at a time. I got receipts for all of the expenses."

Hugh Parkey preceded Cooper and told us that checks bounced all the time although Netherton told Parkey money was being deposited. Parkey showed us copies of records he had sent to Netherton, detailing expenditures to the penny.

"My accountant told me that it was impossible to do an audit and I accept that."

When we told Netherton the contradictory statements, he said, "My accountant told me that it was impossible to do an audit and I accept that. If there is a way to do an audit, all the bills and receipts that I have are in a box and stored in Tortola [British Virgin Islands]." In an earlier interview, Netherton told *Undercurrent*, "If you want to audit the books I have all the receipts here [Ventura] in a box and you can go through them."

"Even with the losses, I couldn't just morally walk away from it."

Regardless, the financial statements received by investors were prepared by Netherton and his accountant, James Bach of Ventura, without independent verification.

Why Continue an Unprofitable Venture?

On February 28, we asked Netherton how he can keep operating such an unprofitable business. "Any business loses money in the first few years of operation," he said, "and I anticipated that. If it continues, then as the bankers say, you have to cut your losses. But it looks like we have made a profit or at least will be in the black for 1988. Even with the losses, I couldn't just morally walk away from it."

Most of the \$257,000 shortfall through October, 1987, has been covered by loans from Netherton. Since he is selling off his shares to investors, he has had the cash coming in to cover the debt by loaning it back to the corporation.

We asked Netherton how proceeds will be divided if the boat is sold. "I think first claim would be for taxes," he answered, "then any salaries, then debtors, and after that whatever is left would be distributed to the investors according to the percentage of the corporation they owned." Assuming that debt has accumulated since that period and the debtors will collect interest, it might require a million dollar price tag for everyone to be made whole.

By converting his stock to loans, Netherton has assured himself of getting paid ahead of the stockholders. Netherton's loans don't make the investors happy. Rick Snidtker realizes that Netherton has a loan against any of the profits. Bruce Schoch told *Undercurrent* that Netherton had assured him that the boat was free and clear of liens when he invested. The purchase agreement that Stewart Williams signed says that *La Strega* is "not subject to any mortgage, pledge, lien, encumbrance, security interest, liability or charge." And the prospectus states that as well.

But debt began accumulating from July 1, 1985, prior to the investors coming on board. That debt is listed in the accounting statements, even though the

prospectus claimed no debt existed. When Snidtker invested in 1988, Netherton told him that "there was some debt," Snidtker said, "but Lester said he didn't remember how much." When Grover Morris invested in March, 1988, he said he was told nothing about the indebtedness. The boat, Morris said, "was represented as being highly profitable. Lester said there was a 24% return on investment."

Stockholders Helpless

The stockholders are angry, not only because they believe they have lost their investment, but also because they find themselves helpless. Many say they have verbal assurances that were not honored. Some say Netherton promised to buy back the stock if they were unhappy. They receive inadequate financial reports, if any at all, and certainly no audited reports using generally accepted accounting principles. Stockholders have talked about taking control of the company. It may be that Netherton no longer owns a majority of the stock, but no one can pin down the actual number of shares outstanding. Neither Travers nor Hugh Parkey were issued shares, although they wrote checks and have been listed as stockholders. For the most part, they are unsophisticated investors, scattered from Florida to Oregon to Belize, keeping their fingers crossed that Netherton will come through.

Even when stockholders complain, Netherton doesn't respond. For example, we have copies of several letters that Williams wrote that he says Netherton has never answered. Netherton told *Undercurrent* he did not recall the letters. Williams says, "All I ever hear about is how busy the boat is and how good things are going. If things are going so damn good, then I should be making some money, shouldn't I?"

Netherton Remains Confident

Through all this, Netherton exudes confidence. He told us on January 5 that in 1988 *La Strega* showed a "10 percent return on investment. However, we are planning a stockholders meeting within the next two months and the boat needs some work done that will run between \$80,000 and \$100,000. So there may not be any profits to show."

As of April 27, the investors had yet to be notified of any meeting. Perhaps at the next meeting, they can have Netherton explain how it is that when a 10 percent return on investment is used to pay for maintenance, it can be considered any profit at all. That's the kind of question Netherton has never answered.

And that's just one of several questions a prudent investor ought to ask before writing a check to Lester Netherton for an investment in *La Strega*. Those who did invest have their own reasons, but Hugh Parkey may have touched on it for everyone. "I was looking

to get to swaying palm trees," he said.

One Last Chance

If you, too, are looking to get into swaying palms, you still have a chance. Netherton is seeking investors in the *Tropic Bird*, a liveaboard boat he operates in the British Virgins. One of our staff called in December to inquire about an advertisement he had seen. Netherton said that for \$25,000 one will get five percent interest in the *Tropic Bird*: \$20,000 would go toward shares and \$5,000 as a loan, at 10 percent, for fixing up the boat. He said that he was selling 50 percent of the boat because he and his wife had found that they just "couldn't run a boat operation by themselves." He had already sold 30 percent of the corporation, he told us, and has 20 percent left to sell.

You'd better hurry. Shares are going fast. You can reach Lester at 805/654-8100. Those swaying palms await you.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

As we were ready to go to press, we made a new discovery and uncovered another development.

The Previous Owner

According to British Virgin Islands records, Tonilla Ltd. is owned entirely by 33 LTD. The other stockholders are not owners of record.

It was not until April 21, 1988, that 33 LTD became the official owner of record. Prior to that, officials in the British Virgin Islands told us, the registration documents show that Tonilla was solely owned by Anna Swift of Arlington, Virginia. Nonetheless, Lester Netherton was selling "his" stock in Tonilla at least three years before he or his corporation was registered as the owner.

We called Anna Swift and she told us that it "is true....I was the sole owner." She signed the papers as the sole owner with Netherton as the guarantor. He put up the initial money and Swift says she received monthly checks from him which she then converted to pay off the boat so that it would appear that she was paying. She didn't know why. She said she has never seen the boat. "Lester wouldn't let me go on it."

About 1985, she said, they still owed \$67,000. She borrowed the money to pay the boat off. It remained in her name. The stock was supposed to be turned over to her because she is the owner of record, but she never got it. She said that she owned all the stock. "Lester didn't own any."

When we told her that other people had bought stock in the boat, she said, "I never understood how people could be putting money in without getting stock. He didn't have any certificates. I never authorized the sale of any stock." We asked if Lester

owned any stock that he could sell. She said, "Not that I know of."

She signed over the boat to Netherton in 1988. When we asked her why she got involved, she replied, "He is married to my daughter. I don't know how I got involved. I don't know how he tricked me. You have to know Lester."

She said she has a note from Netherton for \$100,000. "I don't think I'll ever get it. The agreement is no good. It was never completed. I'll just take whatever they give me. I have to sell my house now. I can't afford to live here. They send me a little money now and then but I don't know when it is going to stop."

The New Owner

About the same time we were talking to Anna Swift, Roger Hubbard of Sacramento was talking with Lester Netherton about buying the remaining stock and controlling interest in *La Strega*. On April 11, the deal closed. Hubbard and a partner agreed to a valuation of \$750,000 and bought out Lester Netherton's ownership for \$216,000, with \$35,000 in cash and the rest due later. They accepted \$326,000 in corporate liabilities, more than half of it due Netherton. Stockholders who claim back wages were not among the liabilities disclosed, although Netherton did turn over the names of the stockholders to Hubbard, minus Parkey and Travers. Two new stockholders had been added.

Shortly after the deal closed, Hubbard traveled to Belize. Upon arrival he learned that the corporate bank account was substantially overdrawn and several debts awaited him that had not been disclosed

at the time of the sale. In addition, Hubbard said, 140 passengers had been booked for future trips for which Netherton had received payment. Prior to the sale, Hubbard believed that a substantial portion of that money was to go to him to cover these trips that he would have to deliver, but after the deal closed, Hubbard told us, he learned from Netherton that the money had already been spent. Hubbard will only say that there was a "misunderstanding."

Before he closed the deal, Hubbard said, "I've never felt like Lester's holding anything back. I don't think he's pulling a scam, unless it's a clever one. Since we will be holding much of his money back and putting up only \$35,000, if he is, he is only creating problems for himself."

Hubbard is committed. As we go to press, he is off to Belize again, this time to begin work on the boat. He plans a major overhaul later this year. He impressed us with his candor and his desire to create a quality liveaboard. He's well aware of the image he has to overcome and insists he can do it.

As for Lester Netherton, we called him three times to get his response to Swift and Hubbard. Although he was in his office, we were told he was in meetings. We explained to his secretary that we needed to get his response to questions to complete our story. On one occasion she got off the phone and returned to tell us that Netherton would call back the next day.

Five days later we were still waiting.

-- The editors of *Undercurrent*

PS: Translated into English, *La Strega* is "The Witch."

The Suunto SME-ML Dive Computer

-- A Solid Contender ... If You Remember To Turn It On

In our last two issues, we provided extensive reports on the Edge and the Skinny Dipper, based upon responses to our questionnaires contained in a past issue of *Undercurrent*. In this issue we cover the Suunto SME-ML, on which 84 readers reported.

Manufactured in Finland, the Suunto produces extended bottom times similar to the Edge and Skinny Dipper. Weighing only four ounces, it is a much smaller device -- its face is about the size of silver dollar -- and is easily worn on the wrist or in a console. Suunto has used the limited space well; the device is only slightly less readable than the large faces of the Skinny Dipper and the Edge. It does most everything the Edge does, including providing the required decompression stop time (which the Dip-

per doesn't). It lacks a temperature readout.

The Suunto users reported general satisfaction with the computer. Only 11 percent said they either would not buy or were uncertain about buying a Suunto again.

On the other hand, 17 percent experienced a malfunction during a dive. To Suunto owners, two major problems stand out: the switch and the dive memory recall feature.

The Switch

Whereas the battery compartments of the Edge and the Skinny Dipper have proven to be their Achilles heel, Suunto has a different yet less difficult

The Lowdown On Dive Computers... -- And All In One Volume

There are but a handful of diving computers on the market, yet the seemingly infinite array of variables between the models makes it difficult if not impossible for the typical sport diver to make careful comparisons. Surely, most computers have different tables. Some permit substantially more bottom time than others. Some are designed for decompression diving and others are not. Additionally, there are varieties of depth limitations, ascent indicators, temperature readouts, warnings about flying before diving, and variations in weight and size, battery life -- and warranty.

Thanks to NAUI Instructors Ken Loyst, who publishes *Discover Diving Magazine*, and Michael Steidley, a *Discover Diving* editor, the comparison is now easy. Their new book, *Diving with Computers*, uses a dozen charts with scores of variables to give a side-by-side comparison of nine computers and their tables.

For people interested in the bottom time each computer provides, the authors have conducted actual dives and recorded the readouts. The results are provided, as well as the authors' analysis of which computers perform more conservatively than the others.

Charts also compare the display features prior, during, and after a dive, the depth limitations, the battery lives, and other data. Each chart is accompanied by description and analysis.

A chapter on guidelines for using the computers is especially useful. As an example of the kind of savvy information provided, the authors offer a procedure for computer failure:

"If the computer fails during the course of the dive, a diver should ascend directly to the surface

being sure not to exceed the manufacturer's maximum recommended rate of ascent. A short safety stop at ten feet adds a margin of safety. If the computer fails during a surface interval, there are two alternatives. A single repetitive dive may be made using the adjusted no decompression limits from the computer if they were recorded following the previous dive and prior to the failure. Alternatively, repetitive dives may be made to depths less than 27 feet."

The authors also note three types of diving conditions presently identified as *not* fitting the mathematical models of computers:

Reverse profile dives: Dives where the diver spends the majority of a dive in shallow depth and then descends to the maximum depth shortly before surfacing.

Consecutive deep dives: Dives where the diver makes a series of multiple dives, all of which exceed the stated no decompression limits.

Repetitive decompression dives: Dives where the diver makes a series of multiple dives, all of which exceed the stated no-decompression limits.

Any divers contemplating buying a computer will be well served by studying this 105-page volume. And any divers who own computers ought to master the facts about their own devices.

Loyst and Steidley provide much clearer information than most manufacturers offer. At last, divers may be able to understand exactly what it is that their computers actually do and don't do.

Diving with Dive Computers is available, postage paid, for \$11.45 from Watersport Publishing, POB 83727, San Diego, CA 92138.

problem: the water-activated switch. Thirty-eight percent of the divers report troubles with it.

Activating the Suunto is a two-step process. First, it must be submerged in water; two contacts on the device are activated and within a few seconds the Startup display appears. Next, the unit must be removed from the water and kept in air for five to ten seconds. Activation should now be complete.

Simple enough, it seems, but not to everyone.

The first general complaint is that it doesn't always turn on properly. In the struggle to gear up and get into the water, many readers admitted that they simply forgot the two-step process. Says Larry D. Muse (Oklahoma City) "My own failure to perform pre-dive check caused the computer to not switch on."

If a diver hasn't checked the computer at the surface, it's necessary to return to the surface to activate it. As Ross Moss, Brandon, Florida, writes: "If you enter the water without first turning it on and immediately descend, it will lock up in its self-testing mode, giving no readouts for the first dive and therefore the data for successive dives is inaccurate." Mike Blalock (Birmingham, AL) writes that "Some dive boats don't have water tanks aboard to start up computer. Once, I rolled in off boat, descended to bottom and realized I had not held computer out of water for initialization. I had to surface with buddy to clear." Faith Wolfson (San Rafael, CA) says: "I just moisten the tips of my thumb and forefinger and press the two nodes; it lights right up."

Another problem is reported by *Undercurrent*

reader Esa Raivin of Helsinki, Finland. "The computer sometimes does not start due to dirt on contacts. Clean the contacts with your fingers." Astrin Tuomas, also of Helsinki, said, "Once it didn't start, but I found out that there was some grease and dirt on the rubber contacts. I have to wash it with sweet water after every use."

Ron Cole is the Suunto products manager at Sequest, the company that distributes Suunto in the United States (Fitzwright is the Canadian distributor). Cole says the problem is exacerbated when divers touch the contacts after touching silicon grease or applying sun block lotion to themselves. The oil attracts dirt as well as repelling water, both of which tend to negate the function of the water-activated contact points.

Divers who carry their Suunto in the console have had some trouble activating it. Says Bill Tucker (Grand Prairie, TX): "Salt deposits build up in the console and cause malfunction, but instructions and factory memo warn against this neglect. Still a hassle to keep clean." One diver reported that she blew air into the openings to clean it out. Steve Dennis (Saratoga, CA) says he has "difficulty getting computer to turn on without popping it out of the console."

"Starting it more than an hour before a dive has caused me to forget to check it at the start of the dive. Invariably I will see the startup display at about 15 feet and have to return to the surface to get the computer into the dive mode."

"The unit is fickle and sometimes hard to start when used in the console and not immediately rinsed on the previous dive," writes Jeff Christiansen (Seattle). "Starting it more than an hour before a dive has caused me to forget to check it at the start of the dive. Invariably I will see the startup display at about 15 feet and have to return to the surface to get the computer into the dive mode. Usually this requires squirting air from my drysuit inflator onto the contacts to break the electrical connection and allow the computer to enter the dive mode. This is an extreme inconvenience, but it is only present in the console version and only occurs when I forget to recheck the computer before entering the water."

Last June, Suunto added extenders to the console; they touched the contact points of the computer so it didn't have to be removed to get it started. But the extenders caused their own problems: a film would quickly form around the metal pieces, keeping them wet and not responsive to the air. At the year's end, Suunto modified the computer's console boot. It now has square holes and rubber coating on the contact points and sells for \$15. The extenders are no

longer available.

The Suunto switch has created another unique problem for some divers. "When it hits air, even for an instant," writes Douglas L. Roberts, Boca Raton, FL, "it will assume you have jumped to the surface. It happened once when I raised my wrist into an air pocket in a wreck, and I believe it happened another time when it was hit by air from my regulator. Neither of these incidents caused a problem, but wasn't on a deep decompression dive at the time."

There was another complaint from a diver who, when he swam to dive sites, took his wrist in and out of the water. Another diver who surfaced in the middle of a dive to check his location reported that his computer began to register a new dive. J. Albert Seidel (Indianapolis) reports that his Suunto "activated itself to a depth of 20 feet and 0 minutes when it was hit with prop wash. It acted confused for a few minutes. Then began scrolling at a reduced bottom time. Another time, during a rinse-off it went into the memory recall mode!"

Cole acknowledged that the Suunto switch will activate in these situations. Wearing it on a console, which stays below the surface even when a diver's arms are in the air, mitigates the problem.

Dr. Alex Pue, San Diego, says that his Suunto recorded "phantom dives," which occurred by "pushing on the metal contacts and wiping out the recorded surface interval." Douglas L. Roberts (Boca Raton, FL) reports that his device is "Overly sensitive to momentary ascents to less than 5 feet and it will assume you are on a new dive (applies only to memory review feature, not to calculation of dive times)." Bob LaMar (Belmont, CA) says it is "not sensitive enough to 10-foot level, causing 'scrolling' function to record more dives than actual. These extra dives being all three minutes at minimum depth."

"A unique Suunto feature is its memory: it can recall any number of repetitive dives conducted during the previous ten hours."

Cole responds that the Suunto measures depth in three-minute intervals and activates the depth measurement at about four feet. "Thus," he says, "if a diver goes to sixty feet for twenty minutes, surfaces to check his position, descends to twenty feet, swims to the boat, surfaces to wait for people to clear the ladder, and then is washed or dipped by a swell, the unit will indicate several surfacing periods, but will have only one dive on the computers. If someone is not aware of this, it will appear that several dives have been made."

Dive Profile Memory

A unique Suunto feature is its memory: it can recall any number of repetitive dives conducted dur-

ing the previous ten hours. Unique, indeed, but difficult to master, as several of our readers report.

"The computer is supposed to scroll through previous dives," writes Thomas H. Lopatin (Lake Hopatcong, NJ), but "the procedure is confusing and even if I follow the instructions, the computer doesn't perform properly." Says Lester K. Sussman (Woodcliff Lake, NJ), the computer is "difficult to interrogate. It usually takes several tries to make the Suunto give the profile information."

Some of the memory recall problem may be related to wet computers. Joy Vanderwerff (Seattle) says "Once in a while I cannot retrieve information as soon as I want -- waiting a short time (while it dries?) seems to solve the problem." Dr. Alex Pue (San Diego) says he has "problems getting it to cycle to recall dives -- especially when wet."

Later this year, Suunto will simplify the procedure for recalling the memory; hopefully, the users of the newer models will have fewer problems interrogating the computer. In addition, the revision will scroll from the last dive backwards; the current model first recalls the initial dive, then runs to the current dive.

Reading the Face

The data on the face is reasonably large and only a couple of divers complained about the readability.

"You have to be aware of where a flashing display such as 'slow' is and means," says Robert Doheny (Ballston Spa, NY), "because it is difficult to read." Danny Rossi (Newark, CA) says the "Bar graph display for maximum depth is difficult to use accurately for deeper depths; at night it is not easy to read with an underwater light." Of course, since the face is not backlit, reading it at night is difficult. Matt Barletta (Culver City, CA) says: "I use a rubber band to strap a cylume stick to my console," he says.

The Battery

Astrin Tuomas (Helsinki) reports having to change batteries "every 100-200 dives." Suunto tests of the battery in cold Canadian water found the battery would last about 1,000 hours or 100 dives. In the Caribbean, a few Suunto's got 3,000 hours or 300 dives out of one battery. They now advertise a minimum of 1,000 hours or 100 dives, Cole told *Undercurrent*.

Additional Comments

Several random comments are worth considering.

Richard Todd (Algonquin, IL) says his Suunto "actually malfunctioned after a dive and registered a maximum depth of 120 feet when I only dove to 80-something feet (Navy table would require me to round up to 90 feet). I prayed! Since the computer made a 'conservative' error, I thought if anything it would give me a shorter next dive. I watched it very carefully." When we broached this comment to

Cole, he said, "If I had been there I would have told him to send the unit back. There is something wrong with it."

J. Albert Seidel (Indianapolis) says "it does not always shut off even when dry for 12 hours between dives. Once it was scrolling for 14+ hours." Cole explains that the Suunto uses tissue times as long as 640 minutes, so if a tissue group is fully saturated it may take as long as 48 hours to clear. "There is no comparison between the 12-hour Navy and the 48-hour Suunto tables."

Robert D. Johnson (Mountain Grove, MO) reported that his Suunto simply failed: "Prior to total failure, it gave erroneous readings." Two other readers reported failure and returned it to Suunto for replacement.

Conclusion

All things considered, complaints about the Suunto are generally minor. Overall, nearly 90 percent of the Suunto users would buy Suunto again. The reasons can best be articulated by the users themselves:

"I like the features, the size, the quality. I've had no problems with it, unlike other friends have had with some other manufacturers." (Mike Blalock, Birmingham)

"I tried several others before I bought the Suunto and I like it best. While I very rarely make decompression dives, I like having the option to do so with my computer. Many other makes do not have this capability." (Ralph Flygare, Van Nuys, CA)

"I can't find any other unit so simple, yet with so much information in such a small package." (Nicholas Ionntiu, Vinyard Haven, MA)

"I feel comfortable with its information and procedures, within reason, of course." (D. Nottingham, Aurora, CO)

"I like the long battery life and not having to change the batteries during trips." (Maxine Berry, Arlington, VA)

"No other computer has the features I like. I made the right choice for me at this time." (Mark Guenther, Jackson, MI)

Addendum

The Suunto SME-ML wrist model retails for \$560. For \$645, it comes with a pressure gauge mounted in a console. For \$685, the console includes a compass. Later this year the computer will be modified to provide the maximum depth of the previous dive while on the surface and the memory recall will be modified.

Suunto is researching a new model, but, Cole says, it is unlikely that it will be introduced within the next two years.

Suunto/Seaquest: 2151 Las Palmas Drive, Carlsbad, CA 92009; 619/438-1101. In Canada, the Suunto is available through Fitzwright.