

# Undercurrent®

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## Sipadan Island Dive Lodge, Borneo, Malaysia

*—Paradise At A Price*

Dear Reader,

At 37,000 feet, with 11 hours of flying behind and another 18 ahead of me, the question is obvious. Is this worth it? A bit of reverie brought me back to my conversation with my buddy - "We've got to go to Sipadan. The new 'in' spot!"

My buddy is still, I'm afraid, a confirmed yuppie. The newest toy, the most expensive toy, the most difficult toy to obtain - he's got to have it. Just as those who must collect T-shirts from the Coral Sea, the Red Sea and Fiji, my buddy had to add Sipadan Island to his list of underwater conquests. I tagged along due to his persuasive description of the purported great diving and suggestions that soon "crowds would ruin it." Besides, I, too, wanted one of those T-shirts.

The travel times required from the East coast of the USA are expensive dues to pay for unpredictable views. Even the hype referred to unremarkable water visibility. So, was the travel time worth it? Consider these flights: East coast to Los Angeles: 5 1/2 hours. Los Angeles to Honolulu: 5 1/2 hours. Honolulu to Taipei: 10 1/2 hours. Taipei to Kuala Lumpur, northwest of Singapore: 4 1/2 hours.

Then back track from Kuala Lumpur to Kota Kinabalu on northern Borneo: 2 1/2 hours. Kota Kinabalu, south, to Tawau: 1/2 hour. Then, by bus from Tawau to Semporna: 2 hours. And, by boat from Semporna to Sipadan: 3 hours. That's 34 hours in planes, buses and boats. Add the airport layovers and, if there are no missed connections, you've got two straight days of travel. This, my friends, is a trying toll for one's soul.

We added even more time, by overnighting at a Hyatt on Kuala Lumpur and in Semporna in the quaint 2nd Dragon Inn, a wooden hotel on stilts over the ocean bay. It had air conditioning, a TV that didn't work, outside toilet and shower facilities, clean linen, and a good restaurant. After the grueling trip, it was paradise. Indeed, compared to the city itself, it was quiet, cooler, and certainly smelled better. (Be sure not to miss the city market in the morning!)

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After a breakfast of Indian cuisine, we boarded Borneo Diver's large boat for the crossing to Sipadan Island. Because there were 16 new guests, Borneo Divers' used their larger and slower boat for the three hour trip. (Those susceptible to mal-de-mer should consider appropriate preventive medicine.) Speedboats ferry smaller groups in half the time. The trip through the harbor and estuaries was like a journey with National Geographic, past entire communities of stilt-supported wooden villages, each with ornate mosques.

As the boat approached Sipadan, I could see the green foliage atop bright white sand beaches, surrounded by a narrow band of turquoise shallows engulfed by the expanse of the cobalt sea. Upon disembarking, the staff unloaded our luggage and we assembled at the main "hut" for an orientation. Head divemaster, Harris, explained the general profile of the reefs, meal times, dive rules (hang 3 at 15 feet, dive with a buddy - all reasonable), and told us that Sipadan was a protected bird and marine sanctuary. What he didn't explain was that the voltage in the huts was 220, not 110, and I burned out my charger. Harris was miffed that I had arrived with no dive gear (Malaysian Airlines brought it 36 hours late), and I hadn't informed an "authorized" representative of Borneo Divers' that I needed rental gear. We got off to a bad start, but eventually, I had no complaints about the friendly, hardworking, and creative staff. Malaysians Gwen and Adeline and Filipinos Wesley and Harris were competent guides; the boatmen were helpful, and careful; the housekeeping staff was trustworthy and neat; and the chef and his staff did a good job.

Sipadan Island Dive Lodge has 21 two-person thatched huts, a dive shop hut, a bar/restaurant hut, and one hut for the staff, all on the beach. In the morning, a pier jutting over the dropoff was a perfect setting for sipping coffee and watching the resident lionfish hunt. In the evening, we'd gaze at the myriad stars above and the hundreds of flashlight fish below.

The huts, each with two single bunks and on stilts, were, well, huts. My thatched roof kept me dry during the nightly rains. The mosquito netting kept the nasty critters away (there were few to contend with), but interrupted the air flow of the ceiling fans (it was hot and humid!). And the walk, especially during dark nights, to the remote toilet and shower facilities was an unwelcome experience. The huts had no shelves, reading lights, air conditioning, sink, clothes' hooks or soap. However, they did have an occasional rat wandering around looking for something to eat. So, hide your snacks - and even soap that you bring - in cans with metal lids.

Now, before you balk at reading further, let me share just a few notes from the logbook:

Check-out beach dive: Saw three turtles—one with two remoras along for the free ride, several blue-faced angels, and black and soft corals in abundance.

Coral Gardens: fast drift dive; three white tips, turtles, flame anemone, beautiful soft corals, reminiscent of Fiji.

Mid-reef: turtles everywhere, 12 foot wide manta ray, two green morays, all types of corals.

Hanging Gardens: vertical wall with lush soft corals in many colors including red, orange, purple, pink, white, all in vast profusion.

South Point: hundreds of barracudas, dozens of white tip sharks and a couple of lemon

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sharks, blue-faced angels, gold scrawled box fish and turtles galore.

Sipadan and its surrounding reefs are shaped like an angel fish, with a 2,000 foot vertical wall starting at five feet just a few kicks from the shore. (Most other beaches at Sipadan are edged by extensive reef flats.) Walking along the 10-30 foot wide beach, you can circumnavigate the 30 acre island in 45 minutes. Birds, monitor lizards (including at least one five-footer!) and spiders inhabit the interior, which you can visit only with the resident park ranger. Walks to observe the sea turtles laying eggs are limited to a few persons each evening and are controlled so as not to disturb the turtles. If, however, a turtle decides to dig its nest under your hut, you'll have a free show as long as you can duck the flying sand.

One boat dive each morning and another each afternoon traveled to sites no more than ten minutes away. Four boats each carried a maximum of 10 divers comfortably, even when most carted camera equipment. The routine was simple: suit up with your tank at the dive hut, get on the boat, back roll at the site, dive, surface and wait for the boat to fetch you, hand up your weight belt and tank, and climb a ladder. Each boat dive was "guided" by a dive master who outlined what her or his multi-level profile would be; each buddy pair could plan their own dive (with 130 foot limit). One hour dives were the rule. Most of the time, it was easy drift diving along the wall. However, changing currents were unpredictable, sometimes strong and down-pulling.

Sipadan reminds me of Devil's Tower National Monument in Wyoming. (Remember Close Encounters of the Third Kind?) This massive mountain with an island atop seems to compel sea life from miles around to make a pilgrimage there. Turtles must number a thousand. Green and hawksbill turtles (and a few leatherbacks) infest the water and land. Turtles were swimming, sleeping on ledges, feeding, ceding divers, mating, and laying eggs at night. On two dives, I encountered two score or more; on one 55 minute dive, I saw 35 turtles! Never thought I'd OD on turtle encounters, but by the end of my two weeks, they bored me.

The dive shack was a short walk from the huts. It contained ample bins for gear stowage, a compressor building, a strobe charging area, three large fresh water tanks to rinse cameras and regulators, and two large camera tables. 80 cubic foot tanks filled to 3200 psi were available between 7:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. for shore dives. The best beach dive in front of the resort probably was better than any Caribbean dive and certainly rivaled those remote spots in the Pacific.

Every dive - yes, every dive - was filled with a plethora of sea life. I swam with white tip sharks on all dives. Massive bumphead parrotfish plowed their way through the shallows ignoring the clumsy flapping divers around them. A school of hundreds of pacific barracudas - Barracuda Point was my favorite dive

## Population Boom

On either side of the Sipadan Island Dive Lodge are two new retreats: Sipadan Dive Center and the Pulau Sipadan Resort. The general layout of each resort is the same (and certainly the diving around the small 30 acre island is the same). But, Sipadan Dive Center was encumbered during low tides (divers had to portage their gear to deeper waters) and Pulau Sipadan Resort has a strong current at its beach front (however, it did have the advantage of shoreside cooling tradewinds).

Sipadan Island Dive Lodge was the first. During my stay, the divers were American, Austrian, Finnish, Italian and Japanese. The clientele at the other resorts seemed mainly Japanese. The resorts are in stiff competition for the island's limited resources, and there is no love or even co-operation between them. In fact, Harris even encouraged us not to mix with the patrons of the other resorts. Indeed, paradise still has snakes of all colors, shapes and avarices.

Still, it's not overcrowded. Divers disperse underwater and only once was there another boat at one of the sites. I saw no reef damage, but, I suppose, with all those fins a kickin', damage is inevitable. Yet, these are experienced divers and, hopefully, Sipadan virginity will survive for some time to come.

G.P.

- and a school of hammerhead sharks claim Sipadan as their residence. Dozens of lionfish pirouetted unabashedly in front of the one-eyed camera monsters. Leopard sharks allowed some diver intimacy. Anemone fish flitted about like butterflies on the wall's crest. Then, there were the angel fish, butterfly fish, surgeon fish, banner fish, unicorn fish, sweetlips, jacks, file fish, and bat fish. Not to mention, leaf, crocodile and clown triggers. Moray eels populated holes not already home to octopi. Gorgeous, delicate nudibranchs abounded. I dived every site, most of them twice. And every dive excelled.

If you've logged cavern or wreck, a guided tour at "Turtle Tombs," a cavern in front of the resort, is unique. A maximum of six divers is allowed and each must have two dive lights. It is a dark, eerie dive starting at the cavern's mouth at 70 feet and rising to 25 feet within the last chamber. One porpoise and two turtle skeletons graphically remind one that they'd best be careful on this dive. The sterile cave dive is in sharp contrast to the rest of the diving.

**SIPADAN ISLAND DIVE LODGE,  
BORNEO, MALAYSIA**

Diving for Beginners	don't go
Diving for Experienced	★★★★★
Accommodations	★ 1/2
Food	★★★
Ambiance	★★★★ 1/2
Money's worth	★★★★★

★ poor, ★★ fair, ★★★ average, ★★★★ good, ★★★★★ excellent

To demonstrate that contrast, here's an excerpt from my logbook: "Dive #572, viz 75 feet, max depth 80 ft, time 5 minutes from dock, nine white tips 4-6 feet long, some resting - some swimming; sleeping turtles; at least 12 lionfish out in the open, numerous nudibranchs including those hitching a ride on a sea cucumber. Drifted effortlessly through a beautiful valley studded with coral heads. Saw zillions of anthius goldfish at the top of the 60 foot deep ridge. Garden eels warily studied my

approach, while three foot hawksbill turtles swam down and began to feed in front of us. My buddy picked up food scraps the turtle was eating and offered them to the unafraid animal. It calmly and gently took the food from her hand. It was an almost zen-like experience to witness the exchange. The turtle was so calm and trusting and the human was (uncharacteristically) benign. I later wrote on my logbook, "the best dive of my life."

With such extraordinary unlimited diving, the only spare time I had was reserved for meals. The buffet meals were plentiful, mostly Chinese, and fairly well balanced. Breakfasts were varied (fried and boiled eggs, French toast, noodles, fried rice, grilled hot dogs, cereal, fresh fruit). Lunches included baked fresh fish, beef stew, chicken (chopped up bones and all, Chinese style), goat curry, collard greens, bok choy, fried rice, potatoes, cauliflower, fresh salad and fruit. The shrimp was cooked with the shells and heads on, even in sauce, which made for messy eating. Dinners occasionally featured fresh tuna sashimi, then sweet and sour pork, Mongolian beef, fried calamari, bean sprouts, green beans, carrots. Bread and butter, jelly and peanut butter were always available. But no desserts. Instant coffee, tea, fruit drink, beer and bottled water were always there. The meals were served in the main hut that also had a small bar. Although Malaysia is predominantly Moslem, nonbelievers may imbibe, but drug trafficking is punishable by death.

The two weeks zipped by and I was soon winging home. Midflight, I asked myself again. Was it worth all the time and money? Well, do divers pee in their wetsuits? And damn is that T-shirt gonna look good back home.

G.P.

Divers Compass: Tropical Adventures (800-247-3483; 206/441-3483 in WA) put the trip together for us; they did a great job and included land itinerary of Orangutan watching and up-river exploring; it's possible for long-distance

arrangements to fall apart (my buddies missed out on some whitewater rafting) -- so be prepared to be flexible; modest dress is essential off the island. . . . Make sure all legs of air travel are re-confirmed. . . . Slight malaria and typhoid fever are real risks, so take prophylactic medication and check recommendations from the Center for Disease Control or International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (716/754-4883). Visas are issued upon arrival. Bring all of your dive gear because rental equipment is limited; don't forget your C-card. . . . My three week trip, including air fare from the west coast, all hotels and transfers, and all food and diving on Sipadan totaled \$3500. . . . Bring a few multi-outlets for your 220/110 volt converter, a clothesline, a flashlight and raincoat. DEET would be handy. . . . tee shirts, bathing suits, and bare feet are the norm. Sea Safaris also runs trips: 800/821-6670; in CA 213/546-2464; FAX 213/545-1672.

## ***The M.V. Oceanus, Chinchorro Banks, Mexico*** ***—The Great Chinchorro Fishing Excursion***

Exhausted from radiation treatment, my father thought a liveboard dive trip would be a relaxing vacation. My sister and I hoped it would be a low-key way for him to test his new limitations, having recently been diagnosed with incurable cancer. When not on nurse duty, she (newly certified) and I planned to dive to the max, taking advantage of the unlimited diving liveboards usually offer. "Dive 'til you puke" was our motto, but unfortunately we puked too soon.

Faced with two liveboards diving Mexico's Chinchorro Bank in August, Dad chose the Oceanus, which had been chartered by Sonex, a travel association specializing in adventurous dive travel. There are a lot of Mexican Navy restrictions about diving Chinchorro, and the Wave Dancer, also planning trips, was having problems getting clearance. We assumed Oceanus' influential Mexican owner, Juan Barbachano, could cut through the red tape. Sonex's Peter Tattersfield (absent on my trip), brothers Anthony, Michael, and father Anthony Sr. had run Chinchorro expeditions several times from Oceanus, so I presumed we would be in for a good ride.

We reached the boat from Cancun by private bus, stopping at the Mayan ruin of Tulum, followed by a trip to a sea turtle farm, then a tasty lunch, and an invigorating swim in an icy clear cenote. Three hours later, we pulled into the "dive resort" of Majahual, consisting of a few ramshackle huts, tents, and the all-important bar. Fishing boats ferried the 12 of us to the Oceanus, but we boarded too late to weigh anchor that night, and spent it heaving offshore in 4-6 foot swells. My sister and another diver heaved in their cabins.

Unfortunately, Oceanus is nothing like the Wave Dancer. The "lounge" is furnished with a vinyl-covered bench, a table with a padded backless bench and a few portable plastic chairs. The TV/VCR cabinet leans against the railing of the galley stairs. On the outer deck are two slatted wood tables and benches for eating, and a two-shelved camera/miscellaneous table. The railing along the sides of the boat was only a foot high, and for an eight-foot stretch, there was no railing at all. That worried me with the large swells -- especially when I was hauling gear back and forth to the tank rack at night. There were two tank racks with storage benches. To the rear were two huge cranes, which I was told were for "shark cages." To enter the water, divers either took a giant stride off the side or descended the ladder to the rear dive platform.

On the first night, I asked the captain about emergency procedure. After a blank look, he told me where the lifejackets were stored, saying he would grab

the radio before boarding the lifeboat. This was the same radio that turned out to be unable to contact Cozumel all week. There were other problems. We were low on fresh water and towels. The two toilets were broken. They flushed when water was poured in, but the buckets were too heavy to lift, and I gave up after my dad strained his back trying. The showers were hot and powerful, but the bathrooms had an oily carpet scrap on the floor and smelled of clogged toilet. Our two-bunk cabin had a sink, large beds, and plenty of cabinet space, mostly occupied by German cockroaches. They were also fond of our beds. There were no portholes in the seven cabins, which made it hard to tell when it was morning.

Oceanus' dive guide, Carlos, didn't trust computers or dive tables, preferring to plan dives in his head. Three dives a day - the 8 AM dive usually hit the water by 9 AM - was the limit, fit in between two-three hour surface intervals. Clutching his ever-present speargun, he gave no-brainer briefings: "Okay we gonna go to 50 feet, we gonna stay there for 25 minutes, and we gonna make a safety stop at 15 feet for 5 minutes. When I say go, everybody go in the water at the same time. And I'm gonna be fishing, so don't nobody get ahead of me, okay?" The best I could do was ignore him once I hit the water - he didn't seem interested in enforcement. But I had no control over the interminable surface intervals.

**THE M.V. OCEANUS,  
CHINCHORRO BANKS, MEXICO**

Diving for Experienced	
Fish	★★
Coral	★★★★
Diving for Beginners	don't go
Boat	★★
Food	★★★(★)
Money's worth	★★(★)

★ poor. ★★ fair. ★★★ average. ★★★★ good. ★★★★★ excellent

Because of strong currents, we mainly did drift dives. Oceanus anchored (without a thought to coral damage) and we jumped off. Two smaller fishing boats followed our bubbles until we surfaced. Then, we climbed into the smaller boats and rode back to the Oceanus.

Sonex people knew about my dad's condition and were anxious to help. But, the large swells made getting in and out of all these boats a little tricky. By

the time he had suited up, crawled down the stairs, made the dive, climbed into the fishing boat, and fought the surge jumping on the dive platform, Dad was exhausted. Then, we had to sort our gear out on deck and set up fresh tanks. The captain's logic decreed that the air conditioning be off during the boiling days but blast away each night. The heat, sticky plastic chairs, and relentless rocking of the shallow-hulled boat were mercilessly uncomfortable. Dad spent his surface time sweating below in the relative comfort of his bed.

On previous trips, Sonex had logged Chinchorro's explored dive sites in the ship's Loran, so most of our dives were in known areas. The first dive was at a sunken galleon site called "40 Cannons," where I saw a southern stingray so large I at first took it for a manta. I was the only diver who didn't see any cannons, probably because most are heavily encrusted with coral. Or, maybe it was because the visibility wasn't great-Chinchorro averaged 60 feet.

At "The Zoo", a short, slanted "wall" starts at about 70 feet and hits a sandy bottom at around 90. In each coral head was at least one bright little puffer fish. Among the purple fans and finger coral were a 3-ft green sea turtle, a hogfish, triggers, and several trumpet fish. At Cayo Norte, I saw a mismatched pair of mottled filefish, large spotted cow and trunkfish, queen and French angels, grunts, schools of blue chromis with no beginning or end, and more lush coral life. Along the wall, perfectly curved purple fans waved in the surge, and brain coral glowed blue, yellow, and orange.

At Cayo Centro, a night dive turned up both a juvenile and adult spotted

drum in adjoining coral heads. I played with a huge drowsy hogfish and small-spotted moray. Scattered over the site were about 12 female crabs - each over a foot from tip to tip - munching the night away. In daylight, the corals were even more spectacular - soft, spongy finger coral, gobie-filled tube sponges, flat multi-colored star corals. These fertile coral gardens were the most varied and vivid of the trip. Some divers discovered two large anchors apparently from an old galleon wreck. Sonex didn't have this site charted, and divers salvaged copper plating and several copper rods using underwater metal detectors.

At the southern tip of Chinchorro, we anchored at the islands of Cayo Lobos. On our first dive, we hit bottom at 80 feet among coral canyons with walls about 20 feet high. I floated through the canyons, followed by a small barracuda - the only one I saw in Chinchorro. The walls were crammed with yellow sponges and waving purple fans. Cayo Lobos is home to several shipwrecks, only one of which we dove. Our first attempt to find the Firestar was led by a local fisherman. We bounced around in two small fishing boats in 5-foot swells for 20 minutes, and then dragged Michael Tattersfield behind the boat to search for the site. We finally gave up and made a shallow dive, but by then my dad was exhausted, and my sister was ready to heave again. A baby nurse shark is all I remember seeing.

On our second attempt for the Firestar, I swam through a narrow canyon, turning a corner to find a staggering elkhorn coral formation. About 8 feet across, it was such a geometrically perfect series of "V"s that I mistook it for part of the wreck. Behind it, among the 15-ft high canyon walls, lay the Firestar. The strong surge, however, had beaten it to a pile of huge metal plates and pipes, inhabited by schools of yellow-tail jacks. The wreck reached up to 15 feet, where the surge was so bad I had to pull myself along a metal pipe to keep from slamming into the steel plates. The combination of the spooky wreck and spectacular canyon walls made for one of the best dives of the trip.

Is Mexico's Chinchorro Bank untouched, virgin diving territory teeming with marine life as some advertisements claim? Hardly. Years of local fishing have taken their toll. I only saw a few grouper and hogfish. The edible fish population is pretty cleaned out. The real story is the lush, almost pristine coral life. With one or two exceptions, each polyp, each web, each stem was intact. A night dive at Cayo Lobos turned up a forest of elkhorn coral heads up to 6 feet high. On most dives, I saw healthy, spreading trees of coral over 6 feet long, thickly-veined vase sponges large enough for me to fit inside, multi-colored brain coral, and purple fans covered with flamingo's tongues.

Carlos, usually accompanied by Michael and one or two other divers, spearfished most dives, telling us if they didn't hunt, we wouldn't eat.

## Reason Number 279 I Didn't Vote the Ticket

To preserve their family values, Danny and Marilyn Quayle and their three children learned to scuba dive in 1989. Trouble is, reported the *Houston Chronicle*, you and I picked up the tab.

Federal employees purchased wet suits, dive watches (at \$1529) and 10 nice monogrammed warmup suits (at \$977). The Quayles received their initial lessons in a Washington-area swimming pool under the leadership of National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration staff. They then underwent open-water training off the beaches of Florida and Hawaii.

A Quayle spokesman said that the Secret Service would not allow the family to take commercial lessons and demanded that the equipment be purchased by the government to avoid possible tampering. However, while the Quayles reimbursed the government for ski-lift tickets and some other vacation expenses, they did not pay for the scuba diving because they had no choice in how to go about the training.

Part of the tab was a \$566 bill to fix a trainer's underwater Rolex watch that was damaged when it became ensnared with the vice president's gear, the newspaper said.

Ben Davison

The first day I watched a grouper die on the end of Carlos' speargun, thrashing fiercely in the coral. I stopped diving with Carlos, and after a few other complaints, Sonex divided us into loose groups. Hunters followed Carlos. The rest of us swam with the photographers or alone.

The trip seemed to be a fishing excursion for the crew, who hunted conch, lobster, hogfish, grouper, and crab, and line fished before, during, and after dives, even reeling in a few squirrelfish. One afternoon, they gathered 70 conch, to be divided up among the crew to take home. They bagged at least 50 lbs. of fish daily, which the crew butchered in front of us during meals. I suspect much of it was headed to market.

The food was excellent. Omar the cook created varied meals of Mexican-style fish, huevos rancheros, sandwiches, clam chowder, conch ceviche, and fresh salads. On the last day, we had a grilled lobster feast, but by then I had lost my appetite for freshly killed fish.

The Sonex crew was conscientious and helpful. Michael and Anthony Sr. kept close tabs on my sister, dad, and another novice diver on board. Michael made almost every dive buddied with my sister, and Anthony monitored everyone's health. If I were looking for adventure diving, I would happily dive with Sonex again. But, I'd ask a lot of questions about the ship and crew. And, I wouldn't bring my Dad.

Although the underwater landscape was great in Chinchorro, the endless fishing left me with the feeling that I'd just vacationed on a farm, watching cows and chickens butchered daily for my evening steak or giblets.

P.E.

Diver's Compass: Sonex: 2809 Bird Avenue, Miami, FL 33133, 305-669-8810; their phone service has been disrupted since the hurricane. . . .Sonex is planning several adventure trips this year; assume nothing - ask a lot of questions about the boat and equipment. . . .The Sonex crew was well prepared for minor medical needs like diarrhea, motion sickness, headaches, and sinus congestion. They had wrenches and some spare o-rings, but no hoses or mouthpieces - both of which some divers needed on my trip. . . .The Oceanus, which is based in Cozumel, takes divers to Palancar on overnight trips (011-529-872 0100; Fax 011 529-872-0288); Chinchorro charters for groups up to 12 are \$5500/week; they provide boat, crew, fuel, tanks, weights, the compressor and water for showers; you provide drinking water, towels, food, and beverages.

## Crystal River, Florida

### *—Slaughter of an Endangered Species*

Imagine floating in fresh, clear water, as a group of highly endangered West Indian manatees (most larger than your sofa) accept your presence while they graze in the shallow water. A curious juvenile manatee swims over and playfully investigates your dive gear, inviting you to stroke his rough gray skin.

Every year, from November 15 to March 15, Crystal River, Florida, is about the only place in the world where you can reliably dive with manatees in the wild. When winter comes, the water temperature in the coastal Gulf of Mexico drops to the low 60's. Florida's 1800 manatees congregate in warmer water, like those of Crystal River's springs - 72° F., year round.

Over the years, I've spent many winter weekends at Crystal River. Since I



live in Tampa, I drive there on the day of the dive rather than stay at one of the small hotels, which are typical Florida tourist habitats. Plantation Inn is one of the more popular of the dive operations. For this trip, I made reservations in advance for gear for my friends, but, when we got there, we waited several minutes while they scrounged around to come up with the needed items. Most of the gear was full of holes and leaks, and some equipment was nearly nonfunctional. The dive shop (as with the other dive shops I have patronized at Crystal River) failed a more critical test: the employees failed to pass on even the most basic information about how to behave in this winter home of the manatees.

Because of their endangered species status, manatees are protected by a myriad of State and Federal laws. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officers patrol the area, issuing citations and fines to visitors who fail to observe the endangered species and refuge laws. They even have the authority to haul violators to jail for their crimes. Harassment of a manatee can be any action that interferes with its natural lifestyle. Floating markers set aside areas for manatees only (No Entry Zones), where humans may not boat or swim.

Having reserved a small john boat - you need a boat to dive with the manatees - we loaded our gear and motored slowly away from the dock. Much of the manatee area has strict speed restrictions. "Idle" and "Slow" do not mean the same thing, and uninformed visitors get tagged for their ignorance. When we were a few hundred yards down the channel, the outboard motor died. After begging a tow from a passing boat, we waited for another rental boat to be returned. As we transferred all our gear, I overheard the guy in charge say, "I didn't think that one would work."

As we prepared to dive in the main spring, the boat kept drifting in the stiff breeze. The anchor line was so short that our chunk of standard-issue concrete dangled in mid-water like an unappealing fish bait. I had to paddle to the shallows and wrap the line around an underwater rock to hold the boat. Shortly after the first wave of students

## A "Unique" New Mask?

So far as I'm concerned, masks are masks. But, the Sea Vision mask, produced by Optical Consultants in St. Petersburg, Florida, is indeed different.

The lenses are orange. Just like those bizarre sun glasses you see advertised on late night TV.

The promotion claims that the lenses are "unique color correcting filters never before used in the manufacturing of dive masks. This unique process removes selected wavelengths of light in order to improve color discrimination in blue water. . . .

"At a depth of 25 feet, red light is no longer visible with the naked eye. At a depth of 75 feet, yellow looks more greenish-blue because the yellow light has been absorbed by the water. . . .

"Sea Vision allows color discrimination never before obtainable for divers and underwater photographs. Experienced divers will especially appreciate the fact that reds and yellows will once again become visible. . . ."

When in Belize, I showed the mask to one of the guides. "Hey, this might make sense," he said. He wore it on a dive and handed it to me as soon as he came out of the water. He shook his head. "Well, it seemed like a good idea," he said. "Try it. But, take along your own mask as well. I didn't and suffered."

I stuck my mask in my BCD pocket just in case.

The Sea Vision fit just fine, but it turned the world both above and below water a burnt orange. Yes, red looked a little more red, and yellow looked a little more yellow. And everything else looked a lot more orange.

I used it for 30 minutes at varying depths. The orange world was unpleasant. Like you might expect during a nuclear holocaust.

Feeling disoriented by the unreal and odd coloration, I took off the Sea Vision mask, stuffed it in my BC pocket, and put on my own mask. What a relief.

Ten minutes later, I decided I'd try it again. But, I couldn't find it. In my haste to switch masks, I apparently hadn't secured the Sea Vision in my BC pocket. I had lost it.

Now, I hadn't swum very far, but then again this was a nice dive and I didn't want to waste my time looking for the damn mask. So, I left the Sea Vision somewhere on the reef, figuring that another diver will find it and perhaps put it to better use than I.

C.C. travel editor

using the springs for certification hit the bottom, a cloud of detritus got stirred up and visibility sharply decreased. While I've previously found visibility of 70-80 feet, on occasion it has dropped to 20-30 feet after the students land. The only manatee we saw was the small metal one on the statue on the bottom.

As the spring fills with divers, the manatees scatter downriver or retreat into the No Entry Zones. On an average weekend, as many as 600 people dive Kings Bay and the main part of the spring, the only area with much depth and a clear bottom. It is no more than 30 yards wide and 30 feet deep. Because we got there early - it was after 10 AM, we had the dubious pleasure of seeing business as usual. There were so many boats we could have walked to the dive site, stepping from boat to boat. I saw divers layered three and four deep. A long line of divers waited to enter a small cave near the main spring. A carelessly cast anchor dropped on the head of an unwitting diver below. I watched the dive gear fly in all directions when divers collided at high speed while chasing manatees underwater. Excitement ran high and so did tempers when a rented pontoon boat began to tip as all aboard flocked to one side to see a surfacing manatee--which turned out to be a log. I got kicked by several unskilled divers and one individual was so out of control that he rammed right into me, unable to stop. A diver tried repeatedly to surface through the bottom of our metal boat as we were about to leave. These presumably certified divers had yet to learn basic skills.

Since my friends were anxious to see manatees, we climbed back into the boat (no easy task since it didn't have a ladder) and headed to the channel near Banana Island. Within minutes, I sighted a couple of manatees coming up for air. You have to watch carefully to see them: the tip of their nose above the water looks like a floating coconut. We cut the motor and coasted up to the seawall to repeat our unusual but effective anchoring process.

After entering the water, we drifted to where I had spotted the manatees. Although the visibility wasn't great, I could make out the shapes of three manatees munching happily on the seagrass about 12 feet beneath me. As we quietly watched, they were joined by half a dozen more - adults, juveniles, and one small calf. Ranging from three feet to 11 feet in length, they floated within inches of us each time they came up for another breath.

All but the calf had the awful white scars from boat collisions, which, by the way, cause more manatee deaths than any other known cause. And the deaths are rising. In 1991, more than twice as many manatees - 53 - were killed by boats than in 1981. By mid-October of 1992, 30 more had been killed. Some received such severe slices from boat propellers that they bled to death. Others were mutilated to such an extent that they died lingering deaths from infection and weakened resistance to disease. Nearly as many were crushed to death by large or fast boats. In the last 10 years, more than 350 manatees have died in boat collisions. Furthermore, refuge manager Cameron Shaw says that just the presence of people may drive manatees away from the warm water. "We have no idea how many are forced into colder waters and die from exposure," he says.

## That Computer of Yours

We want to know about it. How you use it. How it works. What problems you have had.

Please complete the questionnaire on the adjacent pages and send it back to us in the next 10 days.

Then, look for our report.

Before you get the false impression that manatees are too stupid or too slow to get out of harm's way, remember what it sounded like the last time you were submerged and heard a boat pass overhead. The animals' hearing is quite good and

# DIVE COMPUTER QUESTIONNAIRE

We need your experiences. Computers are becoming more important in recreational diving and your experiences with computers, both good and bad, will help us define problems and alert manufacturers to these problems. Please take a few minutes to complete this questionnaire and return it to us within 10 days. If you need more room to answer a question, please attach an additional page to this questionnaire.

1. What brand and model is your primary dive computer? (Write in)

Brand or Company name \_\_\_\_\_ Model or computer name \_\_\_\_\_

2. When did you purchase your primary computer? (Circle the year) 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992

3. Did you purchase it (Check one) New [  ] or Used [  ]

4. Approximately how many dives have you made with your primary computer?

(Circle appropriate category below)

1-10, 11-50, 51-100, 101-500, 501-1000, 1001 or more

5. What feature do you like BEST about your primary computer? (Write in)

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6. What, if anything, do you NOT LIKE about your primary computer? (Write in)

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7. Have you had any problems with your primary computer? Yes [  ] No [  ]

8. If you have had battery problems, or if the battery life has not been as long as advertised, please discuss.

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What year was that? \_\_\_\_\_

9. Please discuss any other problems you have had.

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What year was that? \_\_\_\_\_

10. Have you sent your computer to the manufacturer for servicing or repair? Yes [  ] No [  ]

11. If "Yes," please discuss the quality of that service.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ What year was that? \_\_\_\_\_

12. Have you been "bent" using your primary computer? Yes [ ] No [ ]

13. If "Yes," please describe what happened.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ What Year? \_\_\_\_\_

14. What, if anything, do you use to backup your primary computer? (Circle below)

Nothing, Tables (which tables) \_\_\_\_\_, Watch, Bottom Timer, Depth Gauge, Another computer

15. If "another computer," what is/are the brand(s) and model(s) of this/these computer(s)?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

16. Why did you select that/those computer(s) for backup? (Be as specific as possible)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

17. Would you recommend your primary computer to a friend? Yes [ ] No [ ]

18. Why is that? (Be as specific as possible).

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

19. If you had to replace your primary computer, what brand and model would you purchase? (Write In)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

20. Why is that? (Be as specific as possible)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime Phone # \_\_\_\_\_ Evening Phone # \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this questionnaire to: Undercurrent, P.O. Box 1658, Sausalito, CA 94966

they are fast swimmers when frightened. But, when a number of boats are traveling in various directions, the animal may not be able to discern which ones pose a threat, especially if they're traveling at high speeds.

We then motored to the canals near Three Sisters spring, where you can often find manatees when the main areas are mobbed. The canal was 25 feet deep with walls of vegetation growing on either side. Soon after we slipped in, we saw a pair grazing and playing on the bottom. My dive partner got a real shock when he had to fend off a manatee calf. It snuck up from behind and kept pressing its face against his mask, looking in. It also tried to teethe on his regulator hose. He got lots of "high-touch" contact, gently shooing the baby away.

Be especially careful when calves are around. Divers have gotten between mothers and calves, at times separating manatee babies from their mothers in all the confusion. When a calf gets separated, it usually dies of starvation - eating sticks and mud until it can survive no longer.

Experts have told me that about 10 percent of the manatees at Crystal River like direct human interaction, 10 percent are very uncomfortable around humans, and the other 80 percent aren't concerned either way. If diver activity bothers a manatee, it can't simply leave the area - it must remain in the warm water to stay alive. No animal likes to be pestered or chased. Unfortunately, there have been cases of manatees chased out of their warm water habitat by those who wanted to touch or ride them, cases that may have resulted in cold stress deaths.

Finally, chilled to the bone, we headed back to the dock. Discarded styrofoam, plastic bags and film containers floated in the water. Any of these items can be deadly to manatees, who love to mouth objects to investigate them. Although strictly vegetarians, as they gobble up hydrilla from the bottom of the river, manatees ingest everything caught in the plants, including bits of plastic. Furthermore, ropes and nets can entangle manatees, which need air to breathe. If caught and unable to surface, they will drown.

When turning in our rental gear, I pointed out the many equipment problems. The shop employee seemed apologetic, but I got the feeling the stuff was placed right back on the rental rack without any repair. We got cleaned up, as well as one can in bathrooms without showers, and then headed home.

All winter long, this is what goes. Many manatee enthusiasts are not content to sit back and let these animals be treated in such a manner. A growing number of groups favor restricting diver access. They claim that the activities

## Something Big Found in Loch Ness

The most comprehensive survey of Scotland's murky Loch Ness, completed this autumn, discovered a strange object moving through the water but no hard proof of a mythical monster.

"Before I worked on the lake, I certainly did not believe in the Loch Ness monster," said Bob Manson, who works for the sonar company. "But now that I've been there and seen the strange animals living in the lake, I have a very open mind."

A ship equipped with four types of sophisticated sonar took more than 7 million scans of the long, narrow lake and found that it is 846 feet deep, 92 feet more than scientists believed.

The biggest excitement came when one sonar — a type used by the military to track submarines — latched onto a large, unidentified object and followed it for two minutes.

"It wasn't a school of fish, because there aren't any there, and it definitely wasn't a technical fault with the sonar," Manson said. "Quite frankly, we don't know what it was."

But the survey found the lake had no deep-water valleys or caves where popular myth says the monster, affectionately known as "Nessie," lives.

There have been two recorded sightings of Nessie this year alone, one a blurred photograph showing a dinosaurlike head and neck rising from the water, the other a video of an indistinct object leaving a broad slipstream as it moved across the lake.

Reuters News Service

that many divers engage in should be considered harassment. They are concerned that the disruptive presence of humans in the area may force the manatees to try to go elsewhere - and there may be no other safe place.

Advocacy groups have proposed everything from limiting access to the first few dozen people who arrive, to a system in which a limited number of admission passes are issued before the season begins, to closing the area to recreational use entirely. As you might imagine, the dive community is incensed by these proposals, trying to protect their own economic interests, adamantly claiming that divers are not causing a problem at Crystal River.

To date, there has been no resolution. Public hearings have been held, impact studies performed, and divers continue to dive. Three No Entry Zones have been set aside. Boat speed restrictions are in place. It may not be enough. The animals are seriously endangered and more are dying each year. I fear that before long, enough evidence will be gathered to convince lawmakers that recreational diving is disruptive and should be classified as manatee harassment.

Perhaps that would be for the best. I hate to see one of the last refuges of the manatee turned into the seasonal circus that it has become. Sound environmental policy won't be approved by the majority of divers and diver-dependent businesses. It's upsetting to see how selfishness and greed have played such a strong role in determining what is acceptable in this manatee area. I suspect that to do the right thing at Crystal River, we divers will have to sacrifice our "right" to cohabitate with the manatees.

L.P.

**Divers Compass:** Make your reservations well in advance and confirm them the week before you come; get the name of the person you deal with. . . . Plantation Inn Resort (904/795-4211) and Dive Shop (904/795-5797); Port Paradise Resort (904/795-3111) and Dive Shop (904/795-7234). . . . Week days, shortly after day break, you're more likely to see manatees. . . . Dive flags are the law; bring your own gear, including a dive knife; the same debris that threatens to entangle a manatee can grab divers. . . . Surface slowly, after listening for approaching boats; not all boat operators check the water before revving up the engine and moving. . . . Current policy is that it's OK to touch - not grab - a manatee that comes to you. . . . Some people have illegally fed manatees from boats, teaching them to look for handouts, further increasing the likelihood of boat injuries. . . . Winter air temperature can drop to 40 degrees; keeping warm can be difficult in an open boat. . . . Keep an eye out for deer, otters, snakes and alligators.

## Our Diver's Speak Out

### —Runs, Rats, and Run Down Boats

The all new 1993 *Diver's Speak Out*, containing hundreds of reviews from you, our readers, is at the printer. We'll begin mailing it in a few weeks, as a gift for your renewal.

After spending hundreds of hours getting the damn thing in shape, I want to present a few of the more important entries to give you a head start in planning your 1993 trips.

**Fiji:** The newly crafted *Marlin*

*Bay Resort* gets good marks from those who make the journey, realizing that even with airfare, it's no more expensive than some of the pricey Cayman spas. Enthuses Steve Giampaoli (Westminster, CA), who was there in April: "Some of the diving is spectacular! Expect moderate currents on sites at entrances to the lagoon. Large sharks almost every dive. Good hard coral dives, more soft coral than we saw at Matagi!"

Les and Val Sadler (Campbell, CA), there in May, says: "The cleanest and most beautiful place we have been. Staff delightfully kind and helpful. Delicious food — extra helpings — fabulous desserts! Bures are really 750 square foot suites with fantastic closet and storage space!" And Neil Parker (Los Angeles) adds: "Food is great. Chef is grad of Culinary Institute. Fish is fresh, bought three times a week. Large portions. Diving is first-class and sites 10 to

30 minutes away." (Marlin Bay 679-304-042; Fax: 679-304-028)

**Palau:** The famous little live-aboard, the *Sun Tamarin*, is getting old and will no doubt face stiff competition from the *Palau Aggressor*, which will arrive in January. Robert & Claire Gadbois (Chicago, IL) adds: "Our advice to anyone planning a trip to Palau aboard the *Sun Tamarin* through See & Sea travel service-- **don't!** We just came off a trip in October that was not at all pleasant. The *Sun Tamarin* was in such a bad state of disrepair, and has been for some time, that it could do no more than act as a floating hotel at anchor. Meanwhile, we were forced to use Palau's land-based speedboats and hours of traveling to make only 3 dives a day, all at live-aboard, unlimited diving prices.

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***"The Sun Tamarin was in such a bad state of disrepair...that it could do no more than act as a floating hotel"***

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"The reason for the disrepair of the *Sun Tamarin* (broken steering chain and leaky half-broken transmission) is that the owner is unwilling to invest the maintenance money to keep his old boat operating. Meanwhile See & Sea continues to book the *Sun Tamarin*, a surprisingly bad way to do business by the "World Leader in Dive Travel."

Claude Koprowski, M.D., (Lighthouse Point, FL) says that "the *Sun Tamarin* is getting old and unreliable. Air-conditioning does not cool properly. Captain states owner does not maintain boat. Difficult to board with full gear." And, William W. King, (Kailua-Kona, HI) says, "Boat is old and showing it. Generator capacity too small. Air-conditioning must be shut down when compressor is used or galley is in operation. Boarding ladder is a killer, six vertical steps while wearing full gear is a lot to ask of some people. An excellent crew trying to

make the best of a tired boat."

By the way, the new *Palau Aggressor* is the old *Kona Aggressor*, which is being replaced on the Big Island by a 10 passenger power catamaran-style liveaboard with five staterooms with queen size beds and private heads. The *Kona Aggressor II* will offer four, five and seven day charters. (*Aggressor Fleet*, 800/348 2628; FAX 504/384-08170.)

**Utila:** The last "undiscovered" Honduras Bay Island, Utila has, perhaps, the best diving of them all. (Actually, we gave it a full review in 1982!). Says D. Johnson (Miami, FL), "Great facilities at new Bill Evans' Utila Lodge. Aimed at fishing, but takes divers. Lots of eagle rays, great coral and sponges, lots of medium trunk, scrawled file, puffer, turtles. Good add-on trip to Mayan ruins at Copan. Tom and Shirley work hard to make you feel at home — but stay out of the way. Beach snorkeling is great nearby — not at resort. Utila is still not easy to get to — but it's worth it. Laid-back island and resort." (Utila Lodge: Fax and phone: 504-453-143; 800/282-8932)

Robert V. Beck (Harahan, LA) visited *Bell Caye*, off Utila, last October: "Large Bed & Breakfast. \$75 per day included room, all meals and all diving with Troy Bodden. Few divers, old shipwrecks, mountain-tops, walls, reefs in excellent shape. Best deal anywhere! For a group of six or more, you get the place to yourselves. Your own captain, cook, maid, etc. Plus your own island (the help lives there, too). Plantation-style house, six bedrooms, five baths—beautiful!" (Troy Bodden: 504 453156/504 453154)

**Anthony's Key:** About half the people who write us about Anthony's have nothing but complaints; the other half love it. Personally, I'd head elsewhere. Susan and Bill Musa (Ocean Springs, MS) write of their October, 1991 trip: "The snorkeling was excellent in the cove. Overall, the diving was great, with excellent visibility. Swam with dolphins and walked the nature trail. Meals were excellent and served in an open-air restaurant with an abundance of food. Staff

were accommodating. Value for the dollar was excellent." Hugh and Julie Connolly (Orangevale, CA), there a month later writes: "A nice week, Cabin-type accommodations are wonderful, but stay on the cay. Food is the pits, and bring something for the runs. Everybody got that to some degree."

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***"Where else have you stayed where you had to request a new toilet seat?"***

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Carl Corning, (Choctaw, OK), says, "If you're looking to lie back, relax and soak up the tropics, this is it. Averaged four dives per day, with large parrot fish and 20-pound groupers nearly every dive. Huge Jewfish in the DC-3 wreck. I'd go back any time!" But, T. Bert (Cranston, RI), says: "Like a vacation in hell. Food unidentifiable and inedible. Resort rat-infested and filthy. Rats running freely in the kitchen. Rooms bare wood, no furniture, mildewed mattresses, linens, showers. Toilet seats cracked and splintering. Staff rude and hostile. Dive operation — no 10- to 15-foot stops, four people per one dive light at night allowed, unsecured ladders hitting divers with waves. The worst of camping in the jungle of Honduras. We got a refund."

Jerry and Velda Finley (Nashville, TN), there in April, say: "Food was varied, with different seafood, well-prepared every day. The chef went out of his way to please my picky wife. Every meal was top-notch. The wooden hutches on the Key are the way to go. Cost more but worth it (#28-31 are the most romantic). The dive operation was first-rate. The divemasters suffer from burnout and are tired of seeing novice divers destroy their reefs. They were professional, though. Saw mantas, rays, lobsters, turtles, large morays, a few groupers. We were impressed. Good value!"

There in May, the Arroyos (Lafayette, CA) report: "Bungalows

were dumpy, dark and dirty. 'Furnishings' consisted of a lumpy, mildewed, thin mattress and a wooden table. Our deck 'furniture' was a broken chair. Also a hammock with a hole in the center. Forget clean towels and sheets. And our toilet was adorned with half a seat, which was blackened, cracked and splintered. Where else have you stayed where you had to request a new toilet seat? Cockroaches crawled on you when you were in bed, flying red ants, mosquitoes, lizards, and an occasional rat in the rafters. Broken room fans did nothing to relieve the heat, and there were no sea breezes. Got sick from food (as did others). Rats in dining

room and kitchen. Highlight of AKR is Salva Vida beer (translated, 'Life Saver,' and appropriately so).

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### *"The 'Black Wall' rivals wall diving anywhere in the Caribbean"*

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...Diving was spectacular. Beautiful corals, sponges, walls, crevices, and lots of critters (morays, octopi, lobsters, barracudas, mantas)."

**Puerto Rico:** Now here's a

sleeper, not dived much by tourists. Kay Lasley (Princeton, NJ), a long time *Undercurrent* correspondent who has dived just about everywhere, rates *Gene Thomas* as "an excellent leader, careful and caring." He operates from the island of Culebra, 18 miles east of Puerto Rico's main island, where there are "gorgeous beaches and views of mountains, hillsides, and St. Thomas in the distance. Fields of gorgonians, sea fans, and sponges with reef fish darting among them. *Geniquit*: Dropped to 50 feet; eight tarpon, four feet long, swam above us. There were caves and tunnels amid surges and swells. As we entered, masses of grassy sweepers, schools of jacks and ma-

## Whither DEMA?

For more than a decade, the Diving Equipment Manufacturer's Association (DEMA) trade show has been the premier conclave for the diving industry. Row after row of booths are manned by manufacturers as large as U.S. Divers and as small as t-shirt printers, by scores of resorts and liveboard boats, and an endless number of participants such as dinghy manufacturers and greeting card designers. The purpose of the show is to sell.

Much of the credit for the success of the DEMA show has been attributed to the DEMA executive director, Bob Gray, whose lucrative contract gave him a percentage of the show's take, in addition to his salary. So successful has he been that one DEMA member told us, "Bob was probably the highest paid person in diving."

DEMA has 56 regular voting members. Not all equipment manufacturers are regular members; for example, Orca and Apollo are not. These regular members elect a Board of Directors that hires an Executive Director who is, presumably, not tied to any of the members. The current board includes Michael Chapman (US Divers); Tim Peloza (Sherwood); Betsy Royal-Edmund (Henderson Aquatics); Gordon Shearer (formally with Dacor); Cindi Walters (Scapro); and Jerry Zel (Wenoka).

Last May, the DEMA board dismissed Gray, who had ten months yet to run on his contract. Repeated efforts to discuss the firing with DEMA Board members or Bob Gray received only "no comment" responses."

Gray filed a suit alleging breach of contract and his wife, a DEMA employee, filed an action for wrongful discharge. Subsequently, PADI (who's CEO John Cronin is a Director Emeritus because of his past efforts for DEMA when he was president of U.S. Divers) and Sea Tech (who's president Harry Ruscigno is also a Director Emeritus) filed suits. They had supplied proprietary sales and marketing information to Gray, in his capacity as Executive Director, and were concerned that

this information was no longer being treated confidentially. After a special meeting of all the regular members, both PADI and Sea Tech withdrew their suits; however, neither seems satisfied with the results.

PADI and Gray have decided to take on DEMA head to head and have announced a new trade show — The Pro Show — to be held October 1993 in Las Vegas. Some insiders speculate that it's an effort by PADI to strengthen its travel and training operations while, of course, making a profit from the show. With PADI's extensive international dealer, instructor, travel and resort networks, the show could be successful with just PADI affiliated attendees.

Representatives of several manufacturers and travel related businesses told us that they cannot afford to support two major trade shows. Which show the dealers support may be the key to success. As one manufacturer told us, "my dealers tell me where to exhibit. If there are 50 of my dealers at a show, I have to be there too. I may feel and think that such a show should be put on by DEMA, but if I want to do business, I have to go where my dealers go."

And with all those PADI stores out there, The Pro Show could be it.

Ben Davison

PS: The worst time to go diving in tropical areas in 1993 will be the days around the DEMA convention, which is being held in Orlando on January 18 to 22. Most every operation in the Caribbean and many in the South Pacific have their owners, managers and senior staff manning booths or tromping around the floor selling business.

So if you're off to a well publicized place, you may end up diving with trainees, rookies, and those not personable enough to send to DEMA. With management not around to look over the staff, you may likely get the short shrift on service.



ture gray angels surrounded us. *Amberjack Hole*: Teemed with French Angels, grunts, triggers and other reef fish. A turtle appeared to be asleep until a diver pulled him in his arms. His panic quickly subsided as he was stroked under his chin and he became docile and closed his eyes. A school of maybe 30 spadefish followed a barracuda back and forth as he watched us from a distance. An octopus pulled shells into his home, oblivious to a diver who teasingly took some shells away. Another diver gathered the octopus onto his hand and arm. He shot ink twice until he calmed and accepted being petted and stroked. He sat there contented until he was put back in his hole, where he immediately started to collect shells again as if there had been no interruption. . . . The 23-foot dive boat, with a sun canvas, takes six divers. Gene is working on his 50-foot Fiesta. Fly to San Juan, and take a 35-minute small plane flight from Isla Grande Airport, or the ferry which leaves from Fajardo, a town one hour east of San Juan by car." *Gene Thomas Culebra*, 809/742-3555, FAX 809/742-0036.)

Larry "Harris" Taylor (Ann Arbor, MI) says that Parguera is "probably one of the best unknown dive sites. Parguera Divers is a quality operation run by knowledgeable, friendly, and safety-minded people. Owner Efra Figueroa epitomizes the best in diving. His training in marine sciences, his multitude of diving certifications, coupled with over 20 years of diving experience, provide a

solid operational foundation. The waves are typically two to three feet and the diving is from a 25-foot boat. The 'Black Wall' rivals wall diving anywhere in the Caribbean, with an abundance of large (4-6 foot) black gorgonia teeming with critters. The wall begins around 60 feet and drops deeper than I will ever go. 'The Forest' was a maze of coral canyons filled with schools of reef fish. Efra and his staff would stop and point out some feature or unique critter. . . . Travel time from San Juan to Las Jas is 2.5 hours." (*Parguera Divers*, La Jas, 809/899-4171; 800/234-7282; FAX 809-899-4171.)

**Bonaire:** Where better to develop underwater photography skills? The only thing missing for serious shooters are pelagic fish. In addition to reefs filled with a proliferation of hard and soft coral, typical reef fish and even unique critters such as sea horses, Bonaire is served by serious underwater photo shops which can rent lenses, repair equipment, process film over night, and even provide instruction. And the real key is that the best of Bonaire diving is accessible from the beach, in many cases from your hotel, but surely by rented car.

If you want to rent tanks and go at it all day long, *Bonaire Beach Bungalows* is the spot. As Jean Timberlake (Mechanicville, VA) reports: "The Bungalows are away from the maddening crowd and commercialized resorts. Clean and simply decorated, the Bungalows offer six apartments with full kitchen

and two air-conditioned bedrooms, and two separate private bungalows with piers jutting out into the fish filled waters." (*Bonaire Beach Bungalows*, 011-599-78581; 717/586-9230; FAX: 717/586-7819.)

Other beach divers like the still-healthy reefs fronting *Captain Don's Habitat*. Maryellen and Randy Harper (Ellicott City, MD) say, "There is great diving off the docks, where 'hunting' with the tarpon at night using your flashlight beam is a real treat. My snorkeling-only wife identified over 35 different fish right in front of the hotel. The villas rank as luxury for dive lodgings." (*Captain Don's Habitat*, 011 599-7-8290; 800/327-6709; 212/535-9530; FAX 011-599-7-8240.)

*Bruce Bowker's Caribe Inn* is the favorite hangout of Roy Barker, (Eugene, OR), together with a lot of other divers. "You can shore dive every day for months, and each dive could be from a different shore entry with a new underwater vista! We rented tanks from Bruce Bowker, who is an intense, enthusiastic caretaker of the reefs. They have the healthiest reefs I've ever seen, if you dive the northwest coast far away from the towns. . . . During a night dive, a 4-5 foot tarpon was following me around and would gobble up any fish that was unfortunate enough to swim into the beam of my dive light! It was an easy supper for the tarpon and a death sentence for the high-lighted fish." (*Caribe Inn*, 011-599-78819; FAX 011-599-75295.)

*Next Issue: Screwups by divemasters*

## Is the Nikonos RS for You?

### —How deep are your pockets?

You're a decent underwater photographer — or want to be one. You probably have a Nikonos system, but have contemplated putting your single lens reflex into a housing to get the advantages of through the lens framing, zoom lenses and perhaps even autofocus.

Then, along comes the new Nikonos, a motorized single lens autofocus, auto-exposure camera, begging to become to underwater photographers what the Nikon F4 is to professional above-water photographers.

Is it for you? The answer is a resounding "maybe". IF you want to move up from a Nikonos V, or IF you are considering housing a good topside camera, and IF you can afford it.

I've given the RS a good underwater workout and have found that it offers excellent underwater viewing, with its four-mode auto-focus system, giving a big assist to those whose vision is less than perfect with its four-mode auto-focus system. Designed for a maximum depth

of 328 feet, it also sports:

- motor drive
- dependable exposure control with matrix or center-weighted based TTL flash auto exposure
- high-quality macro, zoom and normal lenses
- and a powerful, multi-purpose strobe.

There are a couple of "buts," though. The camera is so heavy that you need extra wrist muscles to hold it in one hand while waiting for the fish to move into place. And the whir of its focusing motors sometimes frightens tiny skittish animals.

And it is very expensive.

The current street price of the camera body and basic 28mm f/2.8 lens is \$3,360.

Add the dedicated SB-104 Speedlite, and your wallet is \$4,555 lighter.

For the whole system - camera, speedlite, and three lenses - expect to pay about \$9,000.

That's not the suggested list price, which is \$11,612. Plus tax. Where I live, sales tax alone is enough to buy a Nikonos V and 28mm lens.

So why would anyone buy a camera that costs about the same as a new compact automobile (which is large enough to hold a bunch of RS's - plus the underwater photographers to use them)? Let us see.

### Up Close with the Nikonos V: No Contest

If you already own a Nikonos V and are a serious underwater photographer, you have probably dreamed of this day. Every Nikonos model that Nikon has introduced since 1963 has been little more than a black box with good lenses. With the Nikonos RS, you will exit the dark ages of underwater photography.

The viewing system on the Nikonos RS will tempt many to leave behind their Nikonos V Galilean type finder. As an SLR, the RS reflex finder sees what the lens photographs (well, Nikon says it sees 92 percent of the scene to be photographed), and the image it presents is bright enough to see in dim water. The entire image, plus finder information, can be viewed through a mask more than two inches away.

The finder for the Nikonos V works differently. Although it is big, users recognize that the Nikonos V finder is not optically connected to the lens, so there is a small distance between the points of view of the lens and finder. This distance between lens and finder can result in parallax error, so that the image "seen" by the lens and the image the photographer sees through the viewfinder are different.

Parallax error is not a problem when subjects are photographed a few feet away. But, when the subject is closer than three feet, the photographer with a Nikonos V must estimate the difference between the finder's point of view and that of the lens to compose the subject the way he or she intends. Otherwise, the dreaded parallax error

may cut off the lower part of a fish - or worse, the chin of your photographic model.

Distance between finder and lens increases if one attaches an accessory finder to the shoe on top of the Nikonos V. Result: even with guides or dials to help you, more correction is necessary to compose your shot correctly.

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### *"So why would anyone buy a camera that costs about the same as a new compact automobile?"*

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Certainly, for anything closer than three feet, the direct through-the-lens viewing of tiny ocean dwellers makes the Nikonos RS a winner over the Nikonos V. Nikonos V extension tubes let you take brilliant and impressive macro shots as close as three inches in front of the lens. But, composing a tiny subject in this macro world requires the use of a wire framer attached to the extension tube. If you have photographed with a framer, you know that enticing a basslet, hamlet, tobaccofish, or the toothy grin of a moray eel between the framer's goal posts seems next to impossible. More than one photographer has breathed his tank dry trying to get a good macro shot of a swimming animal.

Those days are over, if you spring for the new 50mm f/2.8 R-UW AF Micro-Nikkor lens with the Nikonos RS. For many, this lens alone will be worth the price of the camera. Because the 50mm Micro-Nikkor can take pictures of life-size objects (a blenny, full size, for example), and because you see nearly all of what the Micro-Nikkor sees, composition is as good as you want it to be.

### Getting In To Focus:

Time itself is an enemy of pre-RS Nikonos users. Wait for the Moorish idol to swim into the old Nikonos' field of focus, double-check your strobe's aim -and the fish has swum out of focus. Reset focus for a new distance, and the Moorish idol may have moved again. All you can do is preset the focus and wait for the fish to swim into it -- again. And if it doesn't? There's a chance your subject will return tomorrow.

The Nikonos RS has changed all that. Four separate focusing modes make taking laser-sharp pictures almost foolproof. In fact, single servo autofocus won't let the camera fire unless the subject is in focus. Depress the shutter release half way, and a super-sensitive detector (Nikon calls it the AM200) zeroes in on the subject, even in light so low your eyes can't focus well. (For techies, that's EV -1.) Then, when the subject is focused, a servo motor freezes focus as long as the shutter release button is held half-way down. With this tool, the photographer focuses on a subject, then composes it anywhere in the frame.

For fast-moving subjects, continuous-servo autofocus may be the ticket. I used this mode to keep a young whale shark in focus as he swam by me and I raced to keep up. Even in poor visibility in the Sea of Cortez, the RS with its 20-35mm zoom snapped the shark's spots into sharp focus every time.

If the autofocus seems to have trouble zeroing in on a tiny subject, you can focus manually with a power focus lever. Once focus is approximate, switch to single servo, and the subject snaps into sharp relief. (The photographer may need to move the camera back and forth to keep the subject sharp.)

If the tiny subject is really difficult to capture, there is a freeze focus mode that makes the shutter fire when the little critter swims into focus. Composition may not be right, but focus is bound to be sharp.

### Water and Light:

For years, automatic exposure has led photographers down the garden path of high expectations and modest results. With the auto system of the Nikonos V and a TTL strobe, we assumed that light values always would turn out just as we imagined. Instead, we discovered that lighting must be just right, or the system wouldn't work.

For a camera to automatically reflect a scene's light values, reflected illumination must be gauged once it enters the camera. Then, the camera adjusts the light for the best exposure. But since a strobe is used ninety percent of the time underwater, its artificial light must be integrated with the sun's.

Trouble is, underwater lighting rarely is "average"; the subject often turns out overexposed, because it requires less light than the background.

Matrix metering, one of two methods for evaluating light in the Nikonos RS, gets around this problem. It measures light not just where the subject usually is, but in four additional segments of the scene. With its built-in computer, the RS compares the light in each segment with programmed information and relates it to the Speedlite's illumination. Result: a "thinking camera's" exposure, one that a good photographer could work out manually, but in much more time.

Matrix metering in the RS represents a big improvement over the Nikonos V. No more trying to outguess an old-fashioned auto exposure system. Make the auto settings ahead of time, then let the RS "think" for you.

For unusual situations, for instance where only exposure of the subject is important, the Nikonos RS incorporates a heavily biased center-weighted meter that blends with the Speedlite's TTL capability. Plenty of information is available in the finder to make an intelligent choice.

### Lenses:

Nikonos owners lament that they cannot change lenses underwater. Everything is going great as the photographer pops away at a couple of angelfish. Sud-

denly, your buddy signals and points to a southern stingray waiting in the sand a few feet away. (Or maybe it's a shark, or dolphin, or manta.) If you are using the Nikonos V 35mm f/2.5, your pictures will be no more than adequate, because the large subject forces you to back away to get it all in. And, if you pop to the surface to change lenses, you risk a decompression problem. Besides, your subject will be gone when you return.

You need a zoom, exactly what Nikon provides as an option with the RS, the 20-35mm f/2.8 R-UW Zoom Nikkor. From one close position, this single lens can capture a tight head shot of the ray and a full body shot from wingtip to wingtip. Just turn the zoom's single knob, and compose normal-to-wide angle pictures until you run out of film.

### Were You Thinking of Housing Your SLR?

Housing owners benefit from reflex viewing that lets them "see what they get," plus a choice of lenses for any purpose. But the tinker-toy approach needed to maintain the system makes its choice less than ideal.

Above all, camera and housing require more attention than a submersible camera. While other divers socialize in the evening, the owner of a housing retires to his cabin with a giant toolbox, a tube of silicon grease, and extra o-rings. Instructions are spread on the bed, and a spare parts box is open so that a missing screw can be replaced on one of the control levers.

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By choosing the Nikonos RS instead, the features of a topside SLR are adapted for underwater use, and then combined with the portability of a submersible camera. The possibility of leaks is reduced, because housing and camera meld into one unit. A die-cast aluminum alloy shell is molded directly over the body of a sophisticated topside SLR. To get to the film, first open the aluminum alloy back, and then another door that covers the camera inside. The inner door is light tight, an extra protection when the outer door is open.

Lenses with no external controls reduce the possibility of leaks, too. Except for a knob to adjust focal length on the 20-35mm zoom, the outside of each of the three lenses is smooth: no knobs, dials, or rings to invite leaks. Electric contacts transfer information and commands between camera and lens.

If you operated a housing with all its levers and knobs, you know that controls are undependable. A focusing ring may slip off the lens, making it impossible to focus; or the lever that depresses the shutter release may slip out of adjustment. With the RS, three easy-to-grasp

knobs on the camera's top operate most functions: f-stop, shutter speed, exposure mode, ISO adjustment, and exposure bias. A knob on the side of the finder switches among the four focusing modes, and a lever in front of the shutter release powers the lens' focus when you need manual control.

Care of the RS is much easier than that of a housing. As in the Nikonos V, a single, large o-ring fits in a groove around the edge of the aluminum alloy back. Because the o-ring is bright orange, you can tell at a glance if it is not in place. A nice touch is the scalloped edge along the camera's back edge that allows water droplets that cling to the o-ring to drip away from the delicate camera inside.



**Nikonos RS**

When it comes to price, a housing still beats the Nikonos RS - but not by much for a top-of-the-line system. Street price of an Aquatica housing plus Nikon F4 with similar lenses comes in at \$6,100, or about \$1,300 less than the RS with all its lenses.

If you are on a budget (and who isn't?), Ikelite's housing for the 8008s offers most of the features of the RS - except oversize finder. Its street price, including 8008s and lenses, is just under \$2,000. There are real savings here: almost \$5,400 less than the RS with all lenses.

### **A Work in Progress:**

Nikon calls the Nikonos RS "a work in progress," and I wouldn't be surprised if a 105mm macro lens and maybe a fisheye lens were in the works. Eventually, I expect the RS to follow the path of topside cameras, with a lens for every purpose.

The biggest handling problem that Nikon needs to solve is how a photographer can hold the two-pound-plus camera in one hand, while hand-holding the strobe

in the other.

Although the RS is larger than a normal 35mm SLR, it is not as bulky as a housing. Its underwater weight is greater than the average housing and camera. The body alone weighs two pounds, and a lens adds more. The SB-104 Speedlite is slightly positive.

The extension just released by Nikon helps solve the problem of wrist fatigue when holding the Speedlite in one hand, the camera in the other. It attaches with an elbow joint to the speedlite's standard arm and acts as a surrogate arm for the photographer.

### **How Much Did You Say It Was?**

So should you get this camera that is worthy of moving us towards the 21st century? If you have a few thousand-dollar bills, there is no choice.

You can save money by using an SB-102 or SB-103 Speedlite instead of the SB-104. Exposure methods are the same, although power is less and batteries are not included with the earlier models.

Earlier Speedlites do not offer a nifty feature that allows photographers to get shots that were previously impossible. Nikon calls the feature "cordless remote photography". Set up the RS and SB-104 to shoot a subject that won't let you approach. Then take a second strobe unit and move up to thirty feet away. When the shy subject appears, fire the second strobe at the SB-104, and the SB-104 will flash while tripping the shutter on the Nikonos RS. It is remote control magic.

For more normal remote control, the Nikonos RS has a special port that will accept a remote cable attachment. The cable is not available yet, but when it is, you should be able to photograph remote subjects in situations where cordless remote photography won't work.

Another RS feature is rear curtain shutter. It gives you a tool to shoot a moving subject so that it stands out in sharp relief at the end of its blurred motion.

With all these extra gadgets, it is easy to see that the Nikonos RS is just plain fun to use.

If you can afford it.

The author of this article, Dick Jacoby, used to slip sheets of 4" x 5" film in and out of a Speed Graphic. He has dreamed of this day since he first got his hands on a Nikonos in 1967. He bought the RS through a Chicago camera store this summer. Jacoby teaches underwater photography and video for the Shedd Aquarium. For information about his classes, many of which he holds on liveboard boats in tropical water, contact Shedd Aquarium, Education Department, 1200 Lakeshore Drive, Chicago, Ill 60605 (312/939-2426).

### **NEW HOLIDAY OFFERINGS**

With the holiday season fast approaching, we'd like to call your attention to some very exciting new offerings from *Undercurrent*. These offerings make perfect gifts for your hard-to-shop-for diving friends and relatives.

- (1) **New Books and Calendars For 1993** -- Including the "must have" *Reef Coral ID*, the third and last volume of Paul Humann's Reef Set. Each of the 4 calendars is simply spectacular (see enclosed inserts).
- (2) **Undercurrent T-Shirts** -- Designed exclusively for *Undercurrent* by artist Jennifer Nidao, these all-cotton, heavyweight T-Shirts are guaranteed to turn heads on all your upcoming dive trips (see enclosed T-shirt flyer).