

undercurrent



A Decade of

LIVEABOARD LOSSES



A 2024 Undercurrent Report

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

A Decade of Liveaboard Losses

An Undercurrent Report

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Liveboard dive boats are rarely subject to any regulation, such as SOLAS requirements. They tend to be licensed locally and, consequently, are subject to more frequent loss than other passenger vessels. Most commonly, they suffer that fate after running aground or, more dramatically, catching fire.

* * *

The bad luck started in 2009 for the Siren Fleet when its first vessel, the *Sumpa Jumpa*, sunk after apparently being struck from the rear by a freighter during a night crossing. One crew member died. The larger *Sumpa Jumpa Lagi* was renamed *Siren*.

M/Y Mandarin Siren, January 2012, **Indonesia**

Just before New Year's, five passengers aboard the *Mandarin Siren* were diving in Raja Ampat when they surfaced to find thick smoke coming from the liveboard.



M/Y Mandarin Siren

Everyone was picked up by the sister ship *Indo Siren*, but the *Mandarin Siren* went down in flames. WWDAS says the fire was due to the electrical fault of the tumble dryer in the laundry room and mandated that operating dryers would no longer be left unattended, and lint filters would be cleaned after every cruise instead of every six months.

M/Y Oriental Siren, May 2012, **Indonesia**

Five months later, the *Oriental Siren* had a rough crossing from the Indonesian island of Layang Layang to the Malaysian island of Labuan. The Captain decided

to return to Layang Layang on another dive trip. The crew visually inspected the hull at the dock and thought it looked fine, but en route, the boat took on water overnight through a cracked hull, and at dawn, the call was made to abandon ship. Everyone got on dinghies and headed into 15-foot seas, limping into Layang Layan an hour later. No one was hurt, but the *Oriental Siren* was declared a total wreck and unsalvageable. The breach in the hull was below the waterline (thus invisible to visual inspections) and probably due to a collision with a cargo container or submerged debris.

M/Y Truk Siren, March 2015, **Micronesia**

Typhoon Masak hit the *Truk Siren*, driving it onto a reef, as was the *Truk Odyssey*. But while the *Odyssey* was freed and repaired, the *Siren* was hit by looters, who then burned it (WWDAS planned to replace it with a new boat the following spring).

Only three of the Siren Fleet's original eight boats were sailing by the end of 2015. While some of these incidents may be chalked up to bad luck (certainly the *Truk Siren*), it seems crew errors played a role in the other incidents.

Fires can be a hotbed for rumor, and the rumor mill went into action, suggesting the vessel had been torched on the instruction of the owners in order to claim a total loss on the insurance.

Vessel owners do not destroy their livelihoods intentionally, nor do they ever wish their passengers to come to harm. Nor are insurance companies' beneficent uncles waiting to pay out on a whim. They employ investigators.

It was only when we heard the boat's owner discussing the difficulty he had with his insurers with another boat owner that we decided to find out what really happened to the *Truk Siren* and put the record straight. This is what we were told:

The typhoon's high winds and rough seas drove *Truk Siren* and other liveboards up on the reef. There were

no passengers on board, but the crew decided to abandon ship for their own safety and left it just before darkness arrived. Local young men watched them come



M/Y Indo Siren

ashore and paddled out to the vessel to see if there was anything worth taking. They found the alcohol and partied furiously, consuming in one night the entire ship's supply. Then, presumably completely drunk, they vandalized the vessel, smashing everything they could, including all the television monitors, before defecating in the cabins. They made one mistake – they drew graffiti everywhere and proudly tagged it!

When the crew returned in daylight, they were horrified to see the destruction and reported the incident to the police. An investigation ensued. Since the local youths had proudly tagged their own graffiti with names, it would be easy to identify the perpetrators. However, the vessel then mysteriously caught fire, destroying all such evidence. Case closed.

M/Y Palau Siren, August 3, 2015, **Palau**

While anchored in Wonder Channel, which leads to Jellyfish Lake, the *Palau Siren* struck a reef due to strong waves and rough seas and was severely flooded. Mik Jennings, marketing manager for Worldwide Dive and Sail (WWDAS), which owns and operates the Siren liveaboards, told us half the divers were on a night dive when the *Palau Siren* dragged anchor and was pushed onto a submerged reef.

“As one group of divers were diving at the time, we had only one skiff to try to pull the boat away from the reef.” One couldn't do the job in a tough current, and by the time the second skiff returned, the Siren was stuck fast against the reef.

“Unfortunately, this happened on a spring tide,” says Jennings. “As the tide dropped overnight and the wind speed increased, the boat began to list in the shallows, so as the tide rose again, she began to take on water. By

daybreak, she had become partially flooded and immobilized.”

All the guests were evacuated to Koror. WWDAS is working to right the boat, pump her out, and move her back to Koror for an inspection and eventual refurbishing so that she can be back in service early the following year.

But questions remain. If strong winds, rough seas and rushing tides were the cause, should not the Captain have been prepared, knowing that the anchor can't hold the heavy boat? Or should he have anchored far away from harm's way or not dive the area at all?

WWDAS does a good job responding to people's questions, ours included, and it was quick to correct errors in a Palau newspaper article about the incident (no, the boat didn't sink) and reply to people's concerns on online forums, claiming “In regard to previous incidents, our insurer has sent out an investigating surveyor on each occasion and felt that they were isolated, unrelated incidents in which the crew followed correct company procedure.” We can't verify that claim.

M/Y Overseas, May 2017, **Egypt**

According to Ben Low, a British guest aboard the vessel *MV Overseas*, the boat had been chartered with a crew of eight from a company called Port Ghalib Divers and departed from Hurghada, Egypt. The 23 divers included French, Indian, Russian, and Turkish divers and their own Egyptian dive guide.

“Next thing we knew,” said Low, “the smoke was thick and black, and flames had engulfed the galley and were coming out of the windows – it seemed that water had been thrown onto a cooking-oil fire.”

Ben Low told *Undercurrent* that 45 minutes from the home port, he saw “light white smoke coming from the galley towards the bow, and smelled burning cooking oil. None of the crew spoke to us – they just disappeared with a tiny water extinguisher and a bucket of water. Things got worse, but we passengers were told nothing.

“The captain shut off one engine and steered into the wind, causing the fire and thick smoke to be channeled through the boat towards where we were at the stern.”

Low tried to go below to warn a friend asleep in his cabin, but choking smoke made him retreat. Another British guest, Simon Marsden, managed to check the cabins and wake him, and he had to shout to the crew to persuade them to launch the dive inflatables and evacuate the boat.

Low said that none of the crew tried to check the cabins or ensure everyone was present. There had been

no safety briefing before departure, and he saw no fire-safety equipment other than the single extinguisher.

Most of the guests were wearing nothing but swimwear, and only three managed to recover their bags with passports, cash, cell phones, and other valuables. A fishing boat quickly picked up everyone, and a naval vessel transported them to its base in Hurghada. Low said a fireboat tried to extinguish the fire but soon gave up. “It might have been too dangerous or intense.”

At the naval base, the group was given no information, but kept in a room with only “a couple of chairs and limited water and some dates to eat.” Eventually, a representative from the British consulate took them to a hotel, assuring them that the boat operator would pay for accommodations and reimburse them. “It was a run-down building with no toiletries including paper, towels, lights, or air-conditioning,” said Low. “We had to find our own food and water for the first night with the limited funds saved from the three bags.” The company did not contact them.

After the dive guide had complained to the operator, the divers were eventually moved to a better hotel, and a woman who was on the boat donated clothes and shoes from her store in Hurghada.

The *Overseas* was towed back to Hurghada and grounded on a sandbank. Another boat moored alongside the wreck, and their divers scavenged it. A few days later, when the guests were taken to the boat, they found opened bags and only a few waterlogged and broken items. Only two passengers recovered their passports, but money and other valuables were missing. The Egyptian dive guide who later dived the wreck in search of property found all the cabins empty. With missing papers, it took the guests up to a week to clear immigration and return home.

Apparently, the operator of the liveaboard, Ibrahim Ahmed Galal, has promised the group to compensate them for the lost trip “but only if they signed a contract to release him from any liability,” which they refused to do.

***M/Y WAOW*, January 2018, Indonesia**

Michel and Julia Deville, the Swiss owners of *WAOW*, wanted the finest liveaboard that money could buy. It was a beautiful vessel. However, boats are at the mercy of the elements, and on the night of January 31, it dragged anchor during a violent storm near Manokwari, on the northeast side of the Bird’s Head peninsula in Indonesia’s West Papua. During hasty attempts to start the engine, an electrical short caused an engine-room fire that quickly spread through this wooden vessel, fully



M/Y WAOW

destroying it. Thankfully, no passengers were on board, and all crew members were safe.

***M/Y Fiji Siren*, January 2018, Fiji**

After being driven aground by Cyclone Winston and successfully recovered in February 2016, two years later the *M/Y Fiji Siren* struck an unseen object in the early hours while under way in Fiji in the Bligh Channel, close to the Namena Reserve, between Vanua Levu and the island of Nakodu.

When it occurred, it evidently didn’t sound or feel too serious. Passenger Ross Hoek from Michigan told the *Fiji Sun* that he was awoken at 1:30 a.m. by the sound of an impact, a single hit, “maybe like a log in the propeller would feel . . . the impact felt small to me.” Unconcerned, he went back to sleep.

In fact, the wooden hull was breached near the engine room. Members of the crew grabbed tanks and immediately dived under the hull in an attempt to stem the flow of water into the hull using epoxy resin. Above, the crew pumped out close to four tons of seawater per minute, but they made no real headway against the water flooding in. The captain turned the vessel toward land while making emergency calls from the boat’s marine VHF, but they went unanswered.

After an hour, it became clear that the pumps could not remove the water faster than it was pouring in, so the passengers were ordered to abandon ship. Simon, the cruise director, asked them to muster in lifejackets with only their passports and any medications they required. The passengers and nonessential crew boarded diving skiffs and reached Namena Island (once Moody’s Namena), where they found shelter.

The remaining crew worked feverishly to save the boat. Four-and-a-half hours after the initial impact, the main water pump failed because of water in the engine room, but the fire pumps still functioned at full power, thanks to staff from the Namena Divers, who delivered additional fuel. They and other members of *Fiji Siren's* crew continued to work underwater to block the hole, but it proved impossible to seal the breach. At 7:15 a.m., all but the captain and the cruise director evacuated. It had become apparent that it was impossible to save the vessel, which slipped beneath the waves around 10:00 a.m., nine hours after the initial impact – a total loss but at least everyone was safe.

Dive and Travel Adventures had a group on board and posted on their Facebook page: “Could this really be happening, or [is it] just a dream? No, this was real. Captain Jack sincerely apologized and, with a heavy heart, gave the order to abandon the *Fiji Siren* on our dive tenders. No water was in our cabins yet, but it was still coming below. Our wonderful tender drivers, Sy and Mo, took us to the nearby island of Namena. There was an abandoned resort there that had been hit by Cyclone Winston. This resort would be our shelter. There were a few construction workers on the island to assist when we arrived, along with two *Fiji Siren* crew per tender. Thankfully, everyone was evacuated safely. No one was injured.”

M/Y Conception, September 2019, **California**

The Labor Day sinking of the 75-foot liveaboard dive boat *M/Y Conception* off California's Santa Cruz Island killed 33 divers and one crew member sleeping belowdecks, making it the nation's deadliest maritime disaster in the past 30 years.

Conception, owned by the Santa Barbara dive operator Truth Aquatics, slept up to 46 passengers in a single large bunkroom below decks, with only one stairway up to the main deck and a small, out-of-the-way hatch to escape a cabin densely packed with people sleeping in the dark. When fire quickly engulfed the passageway exit, the passengers were unable to escape and died of smoke inhalation.

Five crew members were asleep on the deck above the galley. When awakened by the fire, they were unable to use a ladder that was on fire, so they jumped to the main deck. Concluding they could not rescue the passengers, they escaped the inferno by jumping into the water.

How the fire started and the failure of the crew to put it out or alert the passengers has left serious questions.

Initially, investigators believed the fire had electrical origins and seemed to have started in or near the gal-

ley and not in the engine room. Passengers were in the habit of charging batteries for their cameras – video, digital, GoPros – strobes, light rigs, cell phones, computers, even underwater scooters, close to the galley. Nearly everyone aboard surely had at least one of these devices, and many had two or more. Some people speculate that a lithium-ion battery that was being charged may have exploded, causing the fire. Or perhaps a mismatched or faulty charger or a frayed electrical cord was the culprit. Others speculated that the sheer number of devices being charged overwhelmed the electrical system. Or perhaps the electrical system itself somehow failed and started the fire. It was later surmised that the fire had started in a waste bin.

Lance Zimmer, a previous passenger, told KABC-TV in Los Angeles, “We didn't all have our own personal stations where we could charge stuff, so there were kind of central areas with power strips. And they were a bit of a mess. Many of the electronics were charged near the galley, close to the stairs [out] and the only access [to and from] below deck.”

The potential danger of lithium batteries is well advertised, especially for airplane passengers; the FAA has reported 265 lithium battery incidents in cargo or baggage. Since the *Conception* disaster, the U.S. Coast Guard has recommended that owners of passenger vessels immediately urge crews to “reduce potential fire hazards and consider limiting the unsupervised charging of lithium-ion batteries and extensive use of power cords.”

However, investigators have concluded that the deadly fire started in a 23-gallon Rubbermaid Slim Jim garbage bin that sat beneath the stairs of the main deck. The ATF said the cause remains “undetermined as investigators cannot rule out discarded smoking material, the open flame ignition of combustible materials such as paper towels located with the garbage container, or an event unknown to investigators.”

Captain Jerry Boylan smoked cigarettes but said he threw them overboard. Two crew members also tested positive for marijuana but denied smoking onboard. A birthday celebration with candles occurred the day before the fire, but survivors said the candles were all extinguished.

A crew member emptied four smaller trash bins into the 23-gallon receptacle about 2:35 a.m. the night of the fire. He was awakened about 3:12 a.m. by a popping sound and saw a glow from the middle deck.

The NTSB reported in 2020 that there were polyethylene trash cans made by Rubbermaid throughout the *Conception* that were “highly combustible.” At the time, such bins were forbidden in all vessels' sleeping areas and banned from all compartments

The National Transportation Safety Board, investigating the disaster, has issued a preliminary report and has determined that no crew member was awake or on watch, a violation of U.S. Coastguard procedures, not to say common sense. It was a tragic error.

Commercial vessels are required to have a crew member on watch at night, even when a vessel is at anchor. Anchors can drag, and wind direction can change. Unexpected waves can dislodge and topple anything not fastened down. An alert crew member can catch a gas leak, an electrical fire, or any other problem



M/Y Conception

and stop it or at least mitigate it, and certainly roust the other crew members and passengers. These days, the danger of charging batteries while everyone is asleep is another reason why a watchman is essential.

[When I was a dive guide on a liveaboard, night watch was certainly one of my duties, and that included routinely inspecting the galley and engine room. *Conception* had no one on duty at night, though one crew member was awake about a half-hour before the tragedy. The crew members slept on the top deck, above the galley; one crew member was asleep below decks with the passengers and perished with them.]

Apparently, after hearing a noise, one crew member above woke up and saw flames erupting from the galley/salon area and awoke the other crew members, who jumped down to the main deck but were unable to do anything to help the passengers and eventually jumped into the water below.

Why was no one on watch? Did the Captain not enforce the rule? Did a crew member just blow it off or inadvertently fall asleep?

Ultimately, the responsibility falls on the Captain of a vessel, Jerry Boylan, who had been piloting boats for more than 30 years and had a solid reputation among those who had worked or dived with him. His lawyer, Michael Lipman, has said his client was “emotionally devastated.”

Even without a watchman, one would hope that smoke and heat detectors would provide an early warning, but it is unclear whether they were working. If functional, they would have emitted an ear-shattering screech and woken the passengers, presumably in time to escape.

The *Conception* was required to have smoke alarms, however, and it did pass an annual Coast Guard inspection five months before the fire. But, the fire seems to have spread so quickly that even if the passengers were warned, escaping up the stairway in what must have been an extraordinary panic may have been impossible.

So far, no evidence suggests that anyone attempted to escape through the bunkroom’s single, small emergency hatch, which was located above a bunk. Had the divers been told about it in the briefing? We divers know that it’s not uncommon for such items to be glossed over in dive boat safety briefings and that divers fail to pay attention during the safety briefing instead of fiddling with their cameras and gear or chatting with friends.

Chris Connelly, a former captain for Truth Aquatics, told Sacramento news station KXTV that after the sinking, he was shocked when his wife, who had been on board the *Conception* many times, told him she was unaware of the escape hatch in the sleeping quarters. Other divers have told us the same.

The location of the escape hatch would make it difficult to locate and use, as Jennifer Homendy, a member of the National Transportation and Safety Board, confirmed in looking at the *Conception*’s sister ship, the *M/Y Vision*.

Furthermore, the narrow staircase was no easy exit, especially if 34 passengers rushed to climb it. And for those bedding down toward the stern of the boat, it would be a struggle to reach the stairway with 20 or more passengers ahead trying to exit in a panic.

John McDevitt, a former assistant fire chief and chairman of a National Fire Protection Association committee on boat protection, said the *Conception*’s design was flawed, telling the *Los Angeles Times*, “It was a compliant fire trap.” He questioned why both egress points – the stairwell and the escape hatch – deposited passengers into the galley and adjacent dining area. “When you put two exits into the same common area, you are not providing two means of egress; it’s still only one. If they built that boat today, they could do more. When you put people down there in that dungeon, it’s got to be [safe].”

Undercurrent subscriber Wendy Filener (Grand Junction, CO) wrote to us after the disaster about her experience on California dive boats, including the *Conception*. “All of the dive boats in Southern California are similar in design, with a large bunkroom below decks, usually pitch black with no windows, and only one truly useful escape route.

“I am familiar with the tiny – and highly difficult to locate in the dark – secondary hatch of the *Conception*. It required a contortionist to first locate the highest bunk at the stern, climb up there, squeeze around by feel in the very back of it to locate the tiny escape shaft on its roof, then wriggle four feet or so straight up, all the while in pitch-blackness, and haul yourself out. There would be no possible way that more than a handful, if any, of the 30 people would have had a chance to locate and maybe make their way out of that black tomb in any reasonable amount of time.”

Chris Barry, chair of the Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers’ small craft technical and research committee, agreed that the *Conception*’s structure and cramped sleeping quarters were not unusual.

He told the *Los Angeles Times*, “These aren’t luxury staterooms. All [the passengers] want to do is crash and sleep. They don’t need a lot of luxury, and there’s obviously a trade-off between the amount of space per person and the cost.”

But even though *Conception*’s layout was compliant with outdated Coast Guard standards, when the escape hatch is difficult to reach, generally invisible to passengers, and maybe even unknown, it is not a route of escape.

On September 5, three days after the deadly inferno, Truth Aquatics Inc. filed suit in Los Angeles federal court under a pre-Civil War maritime law provision allowing it to limit its liability. Anyone filing a claim against the company would be served with notice that the firm was asserting it was not liable for damages, and victims would have a limited time to challenge that claim.

Such laws originated in 18th-century England and were designed to encourage the shipping business. This time-tested legal maneuver has been successfully employed by owners of the *Titanic* and countless other crafts where passengers have lost their lives.

The suit said the company and owners, Glen and Dana Fritzler, “used reasonable care to make the *Conception* seaworthy, and she was, at all relevant times, tight, staunch, and strong, fully and properly manned, equipped and supplied and in all respects seaworthy and fit for the service in which she was engaged.”

A week after the fire, a criminal investigation was officially launched into the fire, with the FBI, Coast Guard, and U.S. attorney in Los Angeles overseeing the proceedings.

The diving community and maritime professionals have generally praised Truth Aquatics, stating that the long-running operation and crew have regularly been professional, safety-conscious, and maintained top-notch

facilities. Truth Aquatics owner Glen Fritzler is well-regarded in the diving community, and the previous May was presented the California Scuba Service Award at the Long Beach scuba show. Clearly devastated by the tragedy, he has been cooperating with authorities who are looking into a wide range of safety issues, including whether the crew had adequate training to handle a major emergency on the vessel.

If charges are brought, prosecutors are likely to apply an obscure federal law known as the Seaman’s Manslaughter Statute, which predates the Civil War and was enacted to punish negligent captains, engineers, and pilots for deadly steamboat accidents that killed thousands. It sets a low bar for prosecutors, who only need to prove simple negligence or misconduct on the part of the Captain or crew.

The law can also be extended to a boat owner or charterer who engages in “fraud, neglect, connivance, misconduct, or violation of law” that takes a life. That is harder to prove and used less frequently, according to attorney Kierstan Carlson, who told *USA Today* that she advises maritime clients to expect a criminal investigation in the case of deaths.

Carlson says a ship captain could be convicted if found not to have proper fire-fighting or safety equipment aboard or failing to have someone keeping watch. “That means somebody in charge of the vessel, in charge of major operations. There are some cases where a captain will put a junior person who is not sufficiently experienced in charge. That would also be a breach of the standard of care.”

On September 12, 2019, the Coast Guard raised the burned remains of the *Conception* from 65 feet of water off Santa Cruz Island, where it was anchored the night of the fire. The middle deck and the wheelhouse had been completely ravaged, and a large part of the hull was burned or charred black. Officials transported the wreckage by barge to Port Hueneme naval facility.

With so many fatalities, Truth Aquatics’ insurance coverage (probably around \$5 million) is bound to be inadequate. Even including all the company’s assets, the funds available won’t amount to much when divided in so many ways. Plaintiffs in any filed suits will be looking for secondary defendants, such as the manufacturers of onboard equipment and the manufacturers of lithium-ion batteries and chargers.

Ryan Sims, employed as a steward aboard *Conception* for only three weeks, filed a lawsuit against the owners, alleging that they were “negligent in their failure to properly train crew members, give adequate safety and medical equipment and provide safety rules,” among other claims. Given the significance of the fire and the layout of the vessel, the suit said, Sims “was required to

jump from the top deck of the vessel to avoid fire,” fracturing his leg in three places and injuring his back. Sims was one of five crew asleep on the top deck of the *Conception* at the time. His suit names Truth Aquatics, the Fritzlter Family Trust (the Fritzlter’s own Truth Aquatics), and World Wide Diving Adventures, a family business that had chartered the boat. One of the family members, Kristy Finstead of Santa Cruz, died in the fire.

“This Labor Day disaster may well spark changes in regulations of commercial dive boats and related vessels,” Kyle McAvoy, a retired Coast Guard captain and current marine safety expert with Robson Forensics, told CNN. “A lot of regulatory, policy, and safety initiatives are driven by tragic events such as this. The expression is that a lot of regulations are written in blood.”

On May 2, 2024, Captain Jerry Boylan, 69, was found guilty of one count of misconduct or neglect of a ship officer, commonly called “seaman’s manslaughter,” and was sentenced to four years in prison and three years’ supervised release for criminal negligence. He is the only person to face criminal charges in connection to the tragedy, which led to changes in maritime regulations, congressional reform, and multiple ongoing civil lawsuits.

***Red Sea Aggressor I*, November 2019, Egypt**

No night watch, no active smoke detectors, the whole crew asleep, and a blocked emergency escape hatch – you couldn’t make it up!

In light of the tragic *Conception* fire that caused so many deaths, everyone in the diving world has become very conscious of the precautions required to operate a liveaboard safely. So, just two months after the *Conception* fire, killing 34 souls, we were shocked to hear of the November 1 fire aboard *M/Y Suzanna* – owned independently of the Aggressor Fleet, but operating as the *Red Sea Aggressor I*. One diver died, an American woman who was an attorney with the U.S. State Department in Tanzania.

We emailed Anne Hasson and Jay Roberts at Aggressor Adventures for details; we received no response to our request. We also tried to meet with Aggressor Adventures owner Wayne Brown at the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association meeting in Orlando a little more than two weeks after the fire but received no response. (The Aggressor Fleet did not own the *Red Sea Aggressor I*; it only had the Aggressor name so it could be marketed as such). So, we put together this story based on interviews with survivors, web postings, and other sources.

The Aggressor Fleet issued a statement about the fire, which did little to get within the good graces of the survivors. It read:

“Greetings from Aggressor Adventures. Unfortunately, yesterday, the *Red Sea Aggressor I* suffered a fire. After everyone was accounted for at the muster station and the order to evacuate was given, one guest apparently decided to return to their room during the evacuation to retrieve something and is missing. All other guests are safe.

“The yacht owners are working on a replacement vessel for all the next trips and will confirm as soon as we have the details. Please know that we are working around the clock to take care of your guests.”

Those who survived the fire faced several difficult days afterward. A passenger (we’ll call her Sue) told *Undercurrent* her experience.

She first posted information on Facebook, saying that although passengers had been told that the crew maintained a 24-hour fire watch during the initial boat briefing, it didn’t seem to be true. The surviving passengers were woken past midnight by the suffocating smell of smoke – not by fire alarms, which she said didn’t work – and made their way to the emergency exit hatch on their own.

Sue said that the crew’s only rescue attempt was to pick up the passengers from the sea after people on a nearby boat, the *Emperor Asmaa*, called to them to jump overboard for their lives. Soon, scuba tanks on deck started exploding from the fire’s heat.

Sue was a roommate of the woman, Trish Kessler, 54, a mother of two, who died, and she was disgusted at how the company attempted to take the spotlight off their responsibility by claiming she had returned to her cabin for her laptop.

Once off the boat, they were held for interviews with the local police, who allowed the local manager for the *Aggressor I* to be present. She said he repeatedly attempted to twist and mistranslate what they said to the



Red Sea Aggressor I

Egyptian police via a translator, again taking responsibility off the *Aggressor*. Next stop, a hotel, where things did not go well.

“Despite promising us clothing and toiletries upon arrival at the hotel hours after [the *Emperor Asmaa*] docking and the following police interviews, they left us in wet clothes and towels and shoeless for 15 hours after the fire. A generous Egyptian hotel shop owner, Ramen Marco, [eventually] took pity on us and offered us a free choice of shoes and clothing. *Emperor Asmaa*’s crew and guests also gave us towels and some of their own dry clothes, plus emotional support. Charlotte Smuthwaite from the Sunrise Marina Resort guest services did everything she could to make things more bearable, and a German guest in the hotel dining room found three pieces of his own clothing for a shirtless male passenger because he was almost denied entry to eat.

“When a British guest, Derek Gale, heard me on the hotel lobby phone, begging the *Aggressor* to give us more than the \$123, they finally supplied each passenger with at 3 p.m. after the fire so that we could buy a cell phone and make the international calls to loved ones to make arrangements, buy some underwear, change of clothing and medication, he returned with hundreds of British Pounds he had collected.” They and the USA embassy in Cairo provided all the necessities.

Michael Houben, a journalist working for a German TV station and another passenger on the boat, contacted *Undercurrent* to corroborate Sue’s story. He describes how he and his cabin mate, Helmut, woke to someone calling Fire! Fire! When they opened their cabin door, they smelled acrid smoke. Within 30 seconds, they were out of the cabin and tried the normal stairway exit route but were forced back by the heat and smoke from the fire.

They both retreated to the emergency escape hatch toward the forward part of the boat, where they climbed through to the crew quarters after waking the man sleeping on top of it. The smoke and fire were quickly spreading. Had they waited another 30 seconds, they would not have made it. The smell of burning PVC-covered cable revealed chlorine gas, which would have impeded their escape. Within 15 minutes, the boat was on fire from stern to bow, and they had to jump for their lives.

Those passengers accommodated on the upper deck were able to hurry to the dive deck and swim platform, where a crew member had launched a dinghy. Patric Lengacher, a Swiss national, with his girlfriend, Gaby Ochoa, describes their escape:

“I woke up . . . and smelled smoke. I jumped up so quickly that my girlfriend woke up, too. Only smelling and seeing smoke but not hearing an alarm, my first

thought was that there must be a boat on fire in the vicinity and we must go and help . . . I reached back in to grab a pair of shorts, but the smoke increased so quickly that I could not see anything. Thinking that our A.C. unit had a problem, I turned it off and . . . I thought about the passports, but the smoke was so intense and burning in my eyes I couldn’t even feel around for them. I could barely breathe and had to get out of the cabin.

“We ran to the stern of the boat and . . . went downstairs, where we met with my girlfriend’s dad, who was looking for her. We realized the fire was in the salon, and we stepped down on the dive deck. We saw smoke coming out everywhere; one could already feel the heat.

“One of the crew, wearing a protective dive mask and carrying a fire extinguisher, opened the salon door, presumably in an attempt to fight the smoldering fire, but . . . the fresh supply of oxygen from the air caused it to instantly burst into blazing flames.”

Patric continues, “There was no yelling from the crew, no bells ringing, no alarms going. We never got any instructions, not to count or say our names, no question if we had our cabin partner, no instructions to go to the muster station, and no words about the life jackets. One Zodiac was ready, and my girlfriend and her dad jumped into it. At that same moment, the outside roof of the main deck burst into flames. It must have gotten enough heat to finally ignite outside as well. A crew member next to me jumped immediately into the sea without saying a word. The flames were not far from where the tanks for the nitrox compressor stood, and being scared of a big fireball, I jumped into the sea.

“I swam away diagonally; the stern was already in full fire. I saw many people on the bow and realized that since the bow is a lot narrower than the stern, they could not see the fire. I started yelling as loud as I could: ‘Get off the boat! Get off the boat!’ . . . I was still scared that the . . . tanks would explode. At the third time yelling, the first person slowly climbed over the rail and jumped, then everybody jumped.”

Another liveaboard, the *Emperor Asmaa*, was moored nearby. Its crew launched an inflatable to pick up survivors. By this point, they were aware that Trish was missing, and they spent half an hour orbiting the wreck in case she was in the water.

Patric says, during the boat briefing, the rules were very clear: “There was a charging station inside the salon, and nobody was allowed to charge anything without watching it. If you wanted to charge things while sleeping, you had to bring them to the charging station because someone from the crew would be present in the salon 24 hours a day.”

A passenger from a previous trip, Fletcher Forbes (Los Angeles, CA), in the light of concerns about lithium-ion batteries, had earlier forebodings about the facilities for charging batteries and even took photographs of the charging table and its shelves. Was this the seat of the fire? It has yet to be determined.

Sue told us, “The dedicated battery-charging table was [on the port side] inside the salon. Guests also charged computers and cells at [other] outlets opposite the coffee station inside the salon. Aft deck survivors have stated it was on the side of the coffee station [the opposite side to the charging station] where they saw the fire when they first attempted to egress through the primary salon exit.”

A Canadian passenger, Ginny Seaborn, who had the presence of mind to take her passport with her when she abandoned ship, told *Undercurrent* in a telephone interview that there was a lot of anger among the traumatized passengers. She said that many of them failed to understand that they were in a Third World country that was also a police state. She said it was a great shame because the trip up to the point of the disaster had “been fabulous.”

Ginny said it took time to get permission from the police to move people without passports to Cairo and that the *Red Sea Aggressor* general manager was probably initially using his own money to give each of the 17 passengers the local equivalent of \$100 – quite a lot for someone on Egyptian wages.

Another passenger who does not want to be named said that the *Undercurrent* article about the *Conception* probably saved her life as she was reading it that very same evening. Unfortunately, she says she has been so traumatized by events she needs psychological help before she can tell her whole story.

We contacted the *Red Sea Aggressor* general manager, Ahmed Fadel, who told us the police instructed him to say nothing until their investigation was complete, although he confessed he was under a lot of stress.

Gaby Ochoa, a U.S. citizen living in Roatan who was on the craft that night, wrote to confirm there was no night watch or functioning fire alarms. She thought that the crew was poorly trained. After the event, she said, the passengers were not asked if they needed medication or medical attention. In Cairo, she witnessed the owner of the destroyed vessel lose his temper with passengers on multiple occasions. During this time, another passenger appeared to have a nervous breakdown.

She says that the second payment (of 100 Euros) was insufficient to buy a jacket, even though she was flying to Frankfurt, where it was only 53°F. It was 66 hours after the incident that the women survivors finally were able

to get underwear. No women were ever asked if they needed any hygiene articles.

The passengers saw no smoke alarms, and no fire alarms sounded. There was no night watch. There was no accounting for passengers at any muster station on the craft, and the passengers believe that Trish Keppler was unable to escape the lower deck through the emergency hatch, despite the crew claiming that she had been at the non-existent muster station but returned below decks.

Belatedly, *Aggressor* put a message on its website mentioning “Unfortunate events that took place in the Red Sea, resulting in the loss of a diver’s life.”

A week after the fire, Wayne Brown, CEO of *Aggressor Adventures*, made this statement: “After the recent *Conception* fire, we directed every destination to ensure that no [battery] charging was done unattended and that all lithium charging was done outside at the designated charging areas. We also had them review their emergency exit plans, fire escapes and smoke detectors for proper working order and that their fire-fighting gear was operational.

“Also, in regards to a passenger’s comments that he did not hear a smoke detector – and some research showing smoke detectors having a history of testing OK with a test button but not activating with actual smoke – we will start requiring the testing of our smoke detectors with cans of fake smoke to ensure proper operation.”

He explained the delay in dealing with the predicament of passengers without money or clothes:

“[*Aggressor* staff] also spent a day and a half working with tourist police, gaining approval for us to relocate [the passengers] to Cairo. Egypt does not allow tourists to relocate without prior approvals that usually occur behind the scenes.”

M/Y Scuba Scene, April 2022, **Egypt**

Fire aboard a vessel at sea is a terrifying experience, as Ahmed Fadel, former manager of the *MY Suzanna* (also known as a *Red Sea Aggressor*), knows only too well. He remembers the tragic circumstances in 2020 when that vessel went down in a nighttime blaze.

Fadel is one of the more knowledgeable Red Sea dive guides and has written guide books, and he learned from the experience of the fire. When he teamed up with Dr. Elke Bojanowski, an expert on oceanic white-tip sharks, to manage a liveaboard venture, fire prevention and emergency drills were uppermost in his mind.

The steel-hulled *M/Y Scuba Scene* had been rebuilt and refitted. It was like a brand-new vessel, promising

the utmost luxury for its passengers. The team of Fadel and Bojanowski promised the best Red Sea diving, so the trips were fully booked right from the beginning. Fadel instigated fire safety and emergency evacuation drills as soon as the vessel left port. He wasn't going to have a repeat of the tragedy he had witnessed on *M/Y Suzanna*.

On the morning of April 19, 2022, *Scuba Scene* departed Hurghada with a full complement of passengers. As usual, all passengers were required to partici-



M/Y Scuba Scene

pate in an emergency fire safety drill before breakfast.

Passenger Bob Latif (London, UK) was among them. He wrote to *Undercurrent*, “I noticed some smoke coming from the engine room, below decks. Initially, I was not worried. Many a boat spews diesel from cold engines, and it was a windy day, so I thought the wind was blowing back the exhaust. During the practice fire drill, we jokingly commented how the crew had made it extra-realistic with the smoke.”

But an engine room fire had actually broken out during that fire drill. There was some confusion about whether it was still a drill or for real.

Latif continued, “When the muster bell rang, I headed down to my cabin to get life vests for myself and my cabin buddy. There was already a lot of smoke in the passageways and cabin. Choking, I quickly grabbed the vest and headed back up to muster on the bow as previously instructed.”

He noted that none of the smoke detectors had been activated. (Anyone with any experience with Egyptian maintenance might not have been surprised.)

Robert Offenhartz, who was leading a group from Planet Scuba (Castle Rock, CO), pointed out in an email to *Undercurrent*, “It is important to note that not a single smoke detector on the ship worked. Some might tell you they heard a bell, but it was a crew member ringing a handheld bell. We have 11 statements that were given [later] to the police regarding the smoke detectors. Had this incident happened at night, we would be dealing

with condolences rather than congratulations for safely evacuating the ship.”

Fire spreads fast on a burning ship, and evidently, not all the passengers had been successfully alerted, and some may not have even taken part in the fire drill.

Another passenger, Darrell Ratliff (Nashville, TN), told *Undercurrent*, “When I opened the door [of our cabin], the entire hallway was filled with heavy smoke. I told [my cabin mate] to grab his life vest immediately as this was not a drill. We exited into the smoky hallway and worked our way up the stairs. Everyone else had already been evacuated to the front of the vessel, but neither of us had heard an alarm or bell or a smoke detector at any time. And no one came looking for us. It was just by chance I decided to see why [the vessel] had stopped.”

“Smoke was coming in all around us from every vent and area on top. Yet still, no alarms of any kind were going off.” Latif confirmed this. “Not a single smoke detector went off even though the boat was full of noxious fumes, and most passengers struggled to put on those life jackets by themselves. Passing the gangway on the starboard side, I had to pass through an open bay door spewing out thick black smoke. I held my breath and went through the smoke to meet everyone on the bow. I have done lots of interesting things in my life, but jumping off of a burning boat had thankfully evaded me until now.”

The passengers were instructed to evacuate the boat. They hurried down the gangway to the stern, where they quickly boarded the dive dinghies. There was an element of panic. In her haste, one passenger missed her step and almost went into the water.

As is usual for the Red Sea, a desert wind was blowing and fanning the flames. The fire had firmly taken hold, and flames were fully visible, with black smoke billowing out on the vessel's starboard side.

Ratliff and his buddy were less lucky. “We had to slide down the front of the boat to board Zodiacs as the aft stairs were no longer accessible. The entire thing all happened so fast – it seemed like a dream.

“Soon, the fire engulfed the entire boat. The dive tanks started exploding, sounding like bombs blasting across the bay. Thank God we were not further out to sea or asleep. It could have been far more tragic. We all got off alive.”

The crew had decided that fighting the fire was a lost cause and abandoned ship. The *Scuba Scene* was a total loss.

Brought safely back to land, most passengers had little more than the clothes they wore. Fadel's previ-

ous experience with emergency evacuations had taught him to take all the passengers' passports for safekeeping before departure, and they were not lost.

Johann and Ingrid Wessels (Saskatchewan, Canada) told *Undercurrent*, "It was a daunting experience and will not easily be forgotten. It was an eerie, unreal feeling seeing the once majestic boat with all our belongings burn before our eyes.

"The dive company did well trying to identify the people needing the most support and help them get flights changed, transport, etc. We were very well treated by All-Star, the managers and crew, and the Egyptian people in general. We salute Elke, Ahmed [Fadel], Hamu, and every crew member, for going above and beyond for us while they all lost a lot as well.

"They assured us that there was insurance and everybody would be looked after if their own insurance did not pay or if they did not have insurance.

"Unfortunately, some of the group were very aggressive and tried to get commitments from the company regarding compensation for dive gear, and so on. This took up so much time and attention from those who needed more assistance."

When *Undercurrent* interviewed Fadel, he alleged that one passenger demanded an immediate compensation payment of \$25,000. Of course, that was not forthcoming.

The rescued passengers then had to deal with Egyptian officials who retained their passports while conducting an impromptu inquiry. This is inevitably time-consuming and frustrating, even in First-World countries.

Passenger Darrell Ratliff told *Undercurrent*, "They held our passports while doing an investigation and questioned each one of us individually. It took them several hours. And then they wanted us all to sign [what looked like] a liability release written in Arabic. After we all refused, someone called the U.S. embassy, and they released our passports to us. They gave us approximately \$270 and were going to put us in a local hotel. After much negotiation with Ahmed Fadel, we were sent to the Marriott, where we had stayed the night before.

"I didn't get as much as an apology. I was coughing uncontrollably and left after sitting in a hotel doing nothing and having to share a room with someone. I had to buy my tickets back home, where I saw a doctor who told me I was likely suffering from smoke inhalation and was given medication for 21 days."

Dealing with the aftermath of a traumatic event can be as challenging as the event itself. There will always be recriminations from some who suffered a ruined vacation and lost valuables.

Jeremy Smith (Cambridge, UK), who was on a repeat trip on *Scuba Scene*, was supportive of the crew and said Ahmed Fadel was a fantastic boat manager. "All guests were allowed to make international phone calls from the hotel's telephone room, and the telephone receptionist assisted with connection (phones are not great in Egypt). Emergency toiletries were provided by the hotel, like shaving kits, toothbrushes, etc.

"The boat management (who had also just suffered a great loss) were there at all times, although it was difficult to get to speak to them due to a couple of constant aggressive guests who seemed intent on making matters worse than they already were. I don't think there was anything more the staff and management of *Scuba Scene* could have done to make the aftermath of the disaster any more comfortable."

Smith lost almost \$20,000 worth of dive gear, camera, and computer equipment. Richard Kovach (Scottsdale, AZ) told *Undercurrent* that he had the harrowing experience of a similar fire in 2017 on the *Scuba Scene*. The Egyptian Navy took 24 hours to tow the hulk back to port while the passengers huddled on the top deck. That fire was caused by a leaking fuel line above a hot exhaust, continually feeding the blaze and making it impossible to control.

He told *Undercurrent*, "As the Captain was radioing the SOS to the Egyptian Navy, our group was mentally preparing to jump from the 35-foot-high top deck into the dark ocean. The crew was focused and very professional, as one can be in such a panic situation, but you could eventually see the fear in their eyes.

"The fire burned for a least two hours before the crew could stop it. I suspect we were very close to having the vessel totally engulfed and burned to the water as it did in last April's disaster."

That fire was caused by a design and construction fault in the engine room. *Undercurrent* asked Ahmed Fadel and Dr. Elke Bojanowski if they thought the second fire could have had the same root cause. They said the boat had a different owner and had been completely rebuilt, and the engine room had an entirely different layout. The steel hull had been refitted and refurbished.

Nevertheless, the engine room's inert gas fire-fighting system had failed to contain or control the fire and its destructive nature. A thorough investigation is almost impossible because the vessel is now lying inverted on the 130-foot deep sea bed.

All of us who travel on liveaboard dive boats presume that the owner and crew have done everything possible to preserve our safety. What other liveaboards have hidden yet fatal flaws that threaten our well-being?

M/Y Pacific Vortex, May 2022, Mexico

The luxurious liveaboard, the Pacific Fleet's *Vortex*, an ex-Canadian Coast Guard vessel, ran into the shallows of a remote island at cruising speed during the night of May 9. It was packed with sleeping divers. An *Undercurrent* subscriber, Marissa Eckert, who runs Hidden Worlds Diving in Tulum, was onboard the *Vortex* and told *Undercurrent* what happened.

"We were crossing from Roca Partida to Socorro Island overnight. The Captain had the boat on autopilot. One crew member was on watch from 10–12 p.m., and he told us all several times that no one came to relieve him, so he just went to bed.

"The Captain was supposed to relieve him but was



M/Y Pacific Vortex

apparently asleep. It was the crew member's first time on the *Vortex* working, and he went to bed at midnight and left the boat cruising at 16 knots straight toward Socorro. No one was awake.

"At 1:58 a.m., we crashed head-first into a very tall rock wall on the side of the island, throwing us all from our beds. It trapped at least one couple in their room on the lower deck. Then the current, strong tides and winds turned the boat and started bashing it into the rocks. We lost power because the lower deck was flooded in less than 30 minutes. All 25 of us abandoned the ship into one life raft and continued to be bashed into rocks in the life raft until the Mexican Navy saved us."

What an extraordinary ordeal for the passengers. The vessel is a complete loss, as are the valuables of those onboard. Thankfully, nobody paid for this error with their lives, and those rescued were full of praise for the exemplary conduct of the crew after the impact.

So, just how safe are you on a liveaboard?

We've reported the tragic results of fires aboard vessels that were thought to be safely moored, and crews were sleeping. The *Conception* tragedy of 2019 was a case in point.

Hopefully, this has led to liveaboards having a roving watch when moored at night today. But who's driving the boat when it's underway and you're sleeping?

Without impugning the professionalism of most boat crews, but bearing in mind the long layoffs due to the pandemic leading to possibly hiring less-than-experienced crews, maybe astute groups of passengers should instigate and rotate their own independent watch at night? Unattended helms should never happen.

Passengers book on liveaboard dive vessels just as they book into hotels, assuming that everything is being done to assure their safety. That assumption may be misplaced.

M/Y Felo, October 2022, Egypt

The great circular reef at Sha'ab Abus Nuhas near the entrance to the Gulf of Suez in Egypt's Red Sea has seen many ships come to grief over the centuries. One of the oldest wrecks is the *S.S. Carnatic*, a steam sailing ship from the 19th Century, the *MV Chrisoula K*, and one of the more recent, *MV Giannis D*, a Greek freighter that grounded in the 1980s. As such, it is a magnet for dive boats and divers.

Alas, Sha'ab Abu Nuhas still claims victims, the most recent being Seawolf Diving Safari's *M/Y Felo*, which ran aground on the reef at 2 a.m. on October 31. The vessel was on a night crossing to an Abu Nuhas dive site with 22 members of two Bremen, Germany, dive clubs and the 10-member crew. The *Felo* was evacuated, and six guests and three crew members incurred minor injuries. The wooden hull liveaboard had major damage and was later declared unfit for repair.

Seawolf Diving Safari posted details on their Facebook page, which included an accident report created by the German divers. They introduced the report in part by saying, "Today, we would like to show you the accident report from the victims' point of view. Representation and sensations of the guests involved often differ from those of the crew and dive guides. Seawolf takes the representation of guests more seriously because it allows us to learn, recognize our mistakes, change, and deepen actions in emergency situations." [Kudos to Seawolf for the effort toward full transparency; however, they have not responded to questions we sent via two emails.]

The report raised several safety concerns, primarily why it was traveling at full speed in an area known for



M/Y Felo

many shallow reefs and what navigational precautions the crew was using. The report questioned the crew's emergency training and emergency plans. They did not use signal flares or other lights. The report claims the evacuation was delayed and became an emergency, with the crew telling some guests to jump into the water, which led to injuries. Some passengers' life jackets were not fully functional, and the crew members were not wearing life jackets.

While the Seawolf website states that their vessels have two life rafts, each capable of carrying 24 passengers, the report states that they were not used. Instead, the guests and crew (the Captain stayed onboard) climbed into the two inflatables, each designed for eight people but loaded with 15. The boats did not have emergency supplies, communication devices, navigational equipment, or lights. When the inflatables left the *Felo*, they were just given a general direction to travel and eventually saw the lights of another liveaboard, the *M/Y Aphrodite*.

Egyptian-built liveaboards might look sleek in their recent paint jobs, but most are of cheap timber construction. As such, they do not survive contact with a reef. The Red Sea is covered with reefs, most visible just below the surface. Admiralty charts tell mariners to stay in the main shipping lanes. But dive boats want to get close to the reefs. Combine that with the tendency for crews to navigate by eye and rely on "inshallah," and you can understand why there are casualties every year. Bearing that in mind, it does beg the question, what were they doing driving *M/Y Felo* at full speed after the midnight hours?

There are so many registered liveaboards in Egypt (around 175) that if a boat has problems, another vessel will likely be close enough to rescue passengers and crew. Because the Egyptian hulls are wood, wrecks tend to sit high and dry (until eventually destroyed by the waves), allowing passengers to collect valuables if they are timely. Bedouin fishermen will strip a wreck bare almost overnight if it is left unguarded.

M/Y Carlton Queen, April 2023, Egypt

Imagine what it must be like to be enjoying yourself in a liveaboard salon or being comfortable below decks when suddenly your whole world is turned upside down. The windows become the floor, and the door, your only means of escape, is above your head and out of reach. Divers assume that any liveaboard they book must undoubtedly be seaworthy; however in April, within days of each other, two liveaboards – one in the Philippines, the *M/Y Dream Keeper* and the other in the Red Sea, the *Carlton Queen* – capsized (see *Undercurrent* May 2023).

Everyone survived the sinking of the *M/Y Carlton Queen*, but when the *M/Y Dream Keeper* turned turtle and sank; it took four unsuspecting people to the depths. There are international regulations for vessels that travel beyond immediate territorial waters; however, most diving liveaboards are licensed to go no more than a few miles from their coast. In territories administered by the U.S., the Coast Guard can demand specific standards of seaworthiness. Indeed, back in the '90s, *M/Y Sundancer*, operating in Palau, failed a U.S. Coast Guard inspection due to stability issues. The owners modified it with extra buoyancy tanks, then moved it to PNG, where regulations were less demanding. They replaced it with the more seaworthy *M/Y Sundancer II* in Palau. Luckily, there were no repercussions.

Not so with the Egyptian *M/Y Carlton Queen*. Built two decades ago, it was recently refitted with a larger superstructure, and the hull was altered. When completed in 2022, it was marketed as a new liveaboard. On its second outing, it turned over in calm seas and sank near Sha'ab Abu Nuhas, a great circular reef in the Gulf of Suez, littered with the wrecks of vessels that have run into it over the years. It's a magnet for scuba divers, and now there is another wreck to dive. Christian Hanson, a British diver, and PADI IDC staff instructor, was among the passengers aboard and wrote to *Undercurrent* to give us a first-hand account of his experience on the vessel. He says, "I've been on quite a few liveaboards. The boat safety briefing is pretty much the same, boat to boat. But do you really know what they're telling you? 'There's a life vest under the bed; there's an escape hatch in cabin eight below deck which allows you to reach the outer hull; there are two life rafts on the upper flybridge,' and so on. The usual. Did you take note? Your life may depend on it, but only if those things are true."

Christian says, "The vessel heeled over and started to sink in around 30 seconds. A minute later, the boat tipped more. I was in the salon off the dive deck with Helen, a divemaster, and Rob, a master instructor. As the vessel capsized, everything tipped, and the tables and

four buffet stools flew at us. The boat capsized, throwing us backward onto the windows. Water jetted through the cracks around the windows. I could see the boat still powering through the water with the engines running. Bubbles were washing past the windows. I couldn't believe it. I told the dive guide earlier that I hoped the Captain would take the crossing easy, given the strange listing issue the boat was experiencing, and now we were in trouble.



M/Y Carlton Queen

“The salon door was now 12 feet above my head. The slippery wood laminate floor was an almost vertical climb, and the boat could turn over at any moment. The salon doors opened outward, but the surge from the seawater forced them shut. My only option was to smash the tempered glass while there was still some air on both sides.

“I could see the fixed sofa above our heads shaking and moving. Eventually, it fell free onto Rob and Helen, knocking them back onto the salon window.

“Meanwhile, we could hear screams from below decks from David Taylor and his son Christian, who had been in their cabin. There were sounds of crashing and smashing coming from all quarters. There was nothing we could do to help those people. Access to the stairs was now more than 20 feet above our heads. Unbeknownst to us, Fernando was also in his cabin.

“We received our first stroke of good fortune; the sofa landed in such a way that I now had a platform for climbing. I rammed my foot into the corner, gripping it with my fingernails, and heaved, pulling myself up over the arm onto the top eye level with the glass door, a good six feet away. I jumped from the sofa onto the side of the cupboard adjacent to the door, the side now being the top.

“Rob threw a metal-footed stool up to me, which I used to smash the glass doors. By now, the boat was tipping bow forward. Rob grabbed my leg, and I pulled him up after he stood on Helen's leg, and we then man-

aged to drag her up, too. There was nothing we could do about David and his son, so we set off swimming for our lives.

“I was relieved to see my wife was already in a RIB dive tender with other passengers. I was dragged into an adjacent life raft and was surprised to see the Carlton Queen's Captain already there. Entrusted with our passports in case of emergency, he failed to take them with him when he abandoned ship.”

Fernando Suarez Mella, another passenger, was also below decks when the boat heeled over. He told us: “I went down to my cabin, and after getting inside, I was pushed toward the cabin's windows by the boat's tilt. I remember thinking, if it goes just a little farther, it's not coming back! In the next seconds, the boat capsized; the cabin windows looked toward the bottom of the sea, and water poured in. The cabin door was on the ceiling and impossible to reach. I managed to use the bathroom door to step up and get out to the corridor. David and his son Christian were screaming for help. I went to them and tried to calm them. I still wonder how I could think straight and keep calm.

“The stairs were impossible to climb, and there were no handrails that could be used to monkey our way out. The engines stopped, and the lights went off. I told David and Christian that we needed to get to the most forward cabin to use the emergency escape hatch. Reluctantly, they followed me into the now dark corridor toward the bow as I checked all cabins to make sure no one else was there. Once I got to the forward cabin door, I jumped into the water, which was now at knee level, and asked them to wait. Although the escape hatch was labeled, it had no handle. I tried pushing and pulling, but there was nowhere to grip it, and I couldn't open it.

“We needed to get back to the hall of the stairs. I got out of that cabin with great effort, and we followed back the corridor and stayed in the hall. I asked David to press himself toward the hall ceiling (now a wall for us) and asked Christian to climb above me and his father and try to reach the opening of the stairs. He did and hung from this opening on top of his father when I raised my arm and offered him yet another 'step' to reach farther and be able to get out.

“Once Christian was up, I asked David to use my body like a stair. I grabbed the space in the ceiling where the LED lights were and offered him my leg and two arms to climb. He was able to grab the upstairs rail, and I pushed his feet up, helping him out.

“Now, they were both in the salon, but the distance between us was too long, and even with their arms fully extended, they could not reach down for me. I asked them to leave the boat. 'Better one than three!' I could

clearly see the tremendous stress on David, confronted with saving his kid and abandoning me.

“Christian grabbed a diving tank with a regulator that had floated into the salon, and David threw it to me. Unable to reach up and now alone, the water, mixed with sewage and fuel, started to flood the corridor and the hall where I was.

“I waited for the water to rise, and little by little, I could float, hanging on to the dive tank. There was 100 bar of air in it, which gave me enough confidence to know that if it really came to the worst, I could still breathe and try to find my way out. I focussed only on the route I needed to get out of the boat. When the water was high enough, and I could grab the rail, I pulled myself up to the salon that was, by then, fully flooded.

“Chairs and other materials were floating all around. Daylight came from the submerged door to the stern. I took a deep breath and dived into the water, swimming under it until I reached the stern. A tremendous amount of debris was floating, and I did not want to be trapped in it.

“Once out in the sea, I was shocked to see that there was no one to help me out of the water. I thought of swimming toward the life rafts, but they were very far away. I swam toward the boat’s bow, and I held on. I’m sure they assumed I’d drowned.

“A huge cargo ship was hove to no more than 300 yards from our sinking boat, and I could see men onboard making signs to me. I indicated that I was OK, and the boat started its sirens. After a few minutes, a Zodiac, I believe from the liveaboard *VIP Shrouq*, helped me out of the water and took me to safety.”

David Taylor reflected on Fernando’s heroism: “Fernando was clearly the best man to have in this situation. Without a doubt, we would have perished if it wasn’t for his help. Fernando selflessly ordered me to leave him in the stairwell. It was the hardest thing I have done, which still haunts me. Christian went outside the salon onto a flooding dive deck, shouting for a rope, and when one wasn’t provided or found, came back inside, despite shouts not to by crew members, with a rigged tank, which we dropped to Fernando.

“Our exit from a flooding salon was problematic. The water surging into the salon carried debris, and I was hit on the head by a loose scuba cylinder, which forced me under the water. When I came up, I was under a floating sofa. My son saw this and stopped me from going any farther by grabbing my legs. Together, we made our way through the surge and out the doors by timing our exit between surges. We finally made it into the open ocean. I was extremely tired, and my son swam off and brought me a buoy. My relief when I saw Fernando had been

rescued was immense. I am grateful for our lives to this man and also to my son. Both of us needed hospitalization as a result of minor injuries.”

The *Carlton Queen* had been listing both to port and starboard as soon as it left port, indicating a severe stability problem. When the passengers queried about this, they were met with silly answers such as the vessel was new and the timbers along the keel needed to get fully wet, its desalination tank was still filling, or people had showered – emptying the water tanks on one side. Christian Hanson reckoned it had a 30-degree list to starboard while it was moored overnight and a list to port while it was underway. That indicates a shockingly poor ship design, leading to fatal instability. Nobody died, but their problems weren’t over because all their possessions, including passports and money, had gone down with the boat. How the vessel operators failed to meet their obligations regarding that is another story.

M/Y Dream Keeper, April 2023, Philippines

In the early hours of April 30, at the remote Tubbataha Reef in the Philippines, the liveaboard *M/Y Dream Keeper*, with 32 people on board, capsized and sank. Surviving passengers and crew were picked up by *M/Y Discovery Palawan*, which was nearby. Four people are still missing and thought to be trapped inside the sunken vessel. The yacht carried 15 crew, five dive guides, and 12 Chinese passengers. Those still missing were reported to be the liveaboard’s owner, one female divemaster, and two guests. The nearest land is the island of Palawan, 80 nautical miles west of Tubbataha.

The multi-role response vessel *BRP Melchora Aquino* was dispatched to the scene at 6:50. Several dive boats, including *Atlantis Azores*, *Stella Maris*, *Solitude One*, *Resolute*, *Philippine Siren*, and *Palau Sport*, searched the area for other possible survivors. Those rescued were taken by a coastguard patrol vessel to Palawan for medical evaluation. The boat had embarked in Cebu. (Sources: *AFP/Manila Bulletin/Straits Times*)

M/Y New Dream, June 2023, Egypt

Formerly the *M/Y Orion*, the *New Dream*, was making night passage to Marsa Alam because one of its passengers showed symptoms of decompression sickness. At about 1.00 a.m., she struck a reef and, severely damaged, settled down to the depth of her upper deck within a few minutes. None of the passengers was immediately aware of what had happened. No distress radio call was made, neither were any distress rockets activated. Both passengers and crew took to the inflatable diving pick-up boats and waited until 5.00 a.m. when another



M/Y New Dream

liveaboard, the *M/Y Enjoy*, passed by and saw the SOS signals generated by some *divers'* lights. The rescued passengers returned to the *New Dream* to recover personal belongings. According to crew members, this was partly successful. The crew of the *Enjoy* only learned of the alleged decompression accident in passing, with the indication that the symptoms had subsided. Fortunately, no further treatment was necessary. The *Enjoy* then started the return journey to Marsa Alam with everyone involved. (*taucher.net*)

M/Y Hurricane, June 2023, **Egypt**

It was early Sunday morning, about 6:30 a.m., June 11. The liveaboard *M/Y Hurricane* was moored near Elphinstone Reef, a popular dive site in Egypt's Red Sea. The passengers had gathered in the main salon to be briefed for their first dive on the last day of their week-long trip. Two passengers had decided to sleep in.

And then the fire came. It apparently started in the engine room and almost instantly turned into an inferno, quickly engulfing the aft deck of the 125-foot vessel in flames. Those two passengers who had skipped the first dive perished in their cabins. Apparently, the third person who died had heroically gone below to find them and perished, too. It was a tragedy.

In light of this fire, the recent capsizing of another liveaboard in the Red Sea and several vessels that recently ran onto reefs begs the question, "Is it safe to go diving in Egypt?"

The Red Sea has never been a top destination for American divers, not only because it's 17 hours from New York but also because many see the Middle East as unsafe (Egyptian ports are not dangerous.) However, the diving industry there is larger than any other in the world, thanks to its high-quality diving, the water clarity, and its proximity to European cities, roughly five hours away by air. In the last three decades, it has become a popular vacation hotspot. Still, they've had their share of liveaboard disasters.

While accidents happen too often, given the number of liveaboard vessels (about 175) registered in Egypt, sta-

tistically, it may be no riskier than anywhere else.

M/Y Hurricane, winner of *Diver Magazine's* Liveaboard of the Year award four years in a row, had been a favorite with British divers for more than two decades. No expenses were spared in its construction. It had a steel hull (unusual in Egyptian-built vessels, which typically have wooden hulls) and modern safety equipment, including inert gas fire suppression in the engine room.

The COVID pandemic led to cutbacks in most liveaboards, as the over-capacity of the Egyptian diving industry made it harder to be profitable at the low prices divers had become used to. Many liveaboard owners cut whatever corners they could to survive, perhaps reducing their crafts' safety. Add to that inexpensive lithium-ion batteries from dubious sources, and the addition of onboard oxygen tanks to serve increased popularity of closed-circuit rebreathers – including the lack of understanding of the risk oxygen is to fires – and you can see how safety can easily be impaired.

The exact cause of the *Hurricane* fire may never be determined. It became an inferno so quickly that those awake had no alternative but to either jump into the tenders tied to the stern or prow of the vessel or jump overboard. An escape hatch from the cabins below decks opened at the foredeck, but the three dead passengers were undoubtedly overcome by smoke or heat before they could get to it. It was probably impossible for a would-be rescuer to open the escape hatch from the deck outside. It could be imagined some crew members would have desperately tried to pry it open before leaping into the water to save themselves from the encroaching flames. One could not begin to think of the horror if



M/Y Hurricane

such a fire had started just an hour or two earlier when everyone was sleeping.

The Hurricane was so quickly engulfed in flames that something was fueling the fire. Was it oxygen carried for rebreather divers? Gasoline stored for the dive tenders? Or something else? We'll probably never know.

The 14 crew and 12 surviving passengers from the *Hurricane* were ferried over to a nearby liveboard in that boat's dive tenders, from where Mohammed Kaddah's video published by the *BBC* (see below) was shot. Later in the day, the smoldering hulk of the steel-hulled vessel was towed into port. The survivors were accommodated at a resort in Marsa Shagra and questioned by investigators. The remains of the three deceased British passengers were later recovered.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-65871310>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCKKCSFSXrY>

***M/Y Emperor Echo*, October 2023, Egypt**

More than 175 liveboards are licensed to operate in the Egyptian Red Sea, and, as such, the Egyptian diving industry is unprecedented in its sheer volume. However, accidents continue to happen in an area with more coral reefs abutting deep water than anywhere in the world.

Emperor Divers recently announced: "In the late hours of Saturday, October 28, *Emperor Echo* was moored at Fury Shoals when, unfortunately, a lightning storm with strong winds forced the vessel to snag its mooring and get blown onto the reef, resulting in irreversible damage to the vessel's [wooden] hull.

"Emperor Divers are grateful to our dedicated and effective crew who, along with the guests onboard, smoothly executed evacuation procedures which ensured all got off the vessel unharmed. All guests and crew are safely ashore and on their way to Port Ghalib."

***M/Y Indo Siren*, November 2023 Indonesia**

Nobody is more aware of the risks of a liveboard



M/Y Indo Siren

fire than the owners of the Siren Fleet, but during the early hours, a suspected electrical fault set the *Indo Siren* ablaze off the islands of Raja Ampat while 17 guests

and a guide were diving. Three other passengers and ten crew were aboard. The crew attempted to fight the blaze, but the fire spread quickly, and the captain and crew evacuated everyone using lifeboats and several local boats from a nearby village. Nobody was hurt, but passengers lost possessions and passports. The wooden-hulled, 130-foot-long phinisi-rigged vessel, built in 2010 and refitted in 2019, was a total loss.

***M/Y Reggae Queen*, December 2023, Thailand**

Strong winds and three-meter swells capsized a small scuba diving liveboard, the *Reggae Queen*, in the Andaman Sea on December 22. The high-superstructure liveboard with 13 divers and five crew sank 30 miles from the mainland.

It was reported that the Captain decided to abandon the ship, and while 16 passengers were rescued, the vessel's cook and a 57-year-old British woman diver were missing. The search widened to 60 miles from the incident, but after an empty life raft was found on December 28, searchers focused on the wreck 200 feet below.

***M/Y Sea Legend*, February 2024, Egypt**

The Red Sea liveboard *M/Y Sea Legend* sank after a fire on February 22 near the town of El Quseir. The vessel became engulfed in flames around 4:00 a.m. after a fire started, apparently in the galley.

Sea Legend was fully occupied with 17 passengers, 12 crew members, and two dive guides. They abandoned ship within 10 minutes after being awakened.

In the prevailing darkness and rough seas, all but one person were evacuated by the liveboard's inflatables, despite one of the boats having no working motor and needing towing by the other.

Only the functioning inflatable made it close to shore, leaving its passengers to swim the last 500 yards. The other was left to drift before it was recovered with its passengers by the Egyptian Navy. Those who swam ashore suffered cuts and abrasions crossing the coral in shallow water at first light.

Several passengers claimed the fire alarms malfunctioned, smoke detectors failed to work, fire extinguishers were no longer functioning, and there were no proper emergency protocols - a disturbing image of the vessel's preparedness for an emergency.

As is often the case in Egypt, the survivors were coerced into signing documents written in Arabic without any translation. The chance of being reim-

bursed through legal action in Egypt is negligible. (*Undercurrent* July 2023)

Tragically, one German woman guest remains unaccounted for. The *M/Y Sea Legend* was the vessel that replaced *M/Y Scuba Scene* after that liveaboard burned and sank two years previously.

***M/Y Oceanic*, March 2024, Indonesia**

And another burns and sinks. This time it was the liveaboard *M/Y Oceanic* in Raja Ampat on March 1. It was the result of a galley fire, and nobody was reported hurt.

***M/Y Sea World I*, April 2024, Thailand**

In what seems to be a regular occurrence, another



M/Y Sea World I

liveaboard dive boat, *M/Y Sea World I*, was consumed in a blazing inferno near the Thap Lamu pier in the Phang Nga province of southern Thailand on April 2. Officials reported that the boat caught fire while anchored at the pier with no passengers onboard. Someone on board was seen jumping into the water to escape the flames. The vessel formerly visited dive sites in Myanmar.

***M/Y Sea Safari VII*, May 2024, Indonesia**

On May 2, *M/Y Sea Safari VII* was making passage between Komodo and Rinca Islands when the vessel caught fire and all aboard were forced to hastily abandon ship. Based in Labuan Bajo, with 14 en-suite air-conditioned cabins, she was the biggest phinisi-rigged vessel in the Sea Safari fleet, constructed of ironwood and accommodating up to 28 guests, providing comfortable living areas for diving and leisure.

British passenger Mike Day, a trained firefighter and experienced search and rescue helicopter pilot, and consequently a diver well-versed in emergency situations, photographed the burning vessel from the safety of a life



M/Y Sea Safari VII

raft. He told *divernet.com* “The standard of firefighting equipment, command, leadership, training and competence among the boat’s staff as extremely low to non-existent.” This was countered by the Sea Safari Cruises Team who stated, “It’s important to note that the situation unfolded rapidly, causing panic among passengers and crew. All in all, the evacuation process took roughly 19 minutes in total and it was completed in a collective effort.”

None of the 26 passengers were hurt, and one crew member among seven received the only (minor) injury.

– John Bantin, Author

– Ben Davision, Editor

P.S.: Although the *Wave Dancer* tragedy in Belize occurred in 2001, its story should be added to this collection. It is a tragic story second only to the Conception fire; 20 people lost their lives when the *Wave Dancer* was struck by a hurricane, although at anchor in what was presumed a safe and secure hurricane hole. Seventeen members of a Richmond, Virginia, dive club and three crew members perished.

***Wave Dancer*, October 2001, Belize**

The tragic loss of 20 lives on October 8, 2001, when Peter Hughes’ *Wave Dancer* capsized while moored in Big Creek, Belize, during Hurricane Iris, will long be remembered by divers. Both the *Wave Dancer* and the *Belize Aggressor* sought shelter from the hurricane by motoring a mile upstream to the Port of Big Creek, about 75 miles south of Belize City.

During the night, the full force of Hurricane Iris’ 150-mph winds struck the port. The *Wave Dancer* broke away from its moorings, colliding with the *Aggressor*

before capsizing. Seventeen divers from the Richmond, Virginia, dive club and three crew members died, while three guests and five crew members survived.

In January, more than three years after the accident, the International Merchant Marine Registry of Belize (IMMARBE) The *Wave Dancer* Tragedy — Belize published the findings of their official investigation.

While some of the circumstances of the accident remain a mystery, a few key points of the report follow.

A Horrifying Scene

The chilling accounts of the survivors and the report's findings evoke a terrifying picture of the disaster:

“Due to the very short time between the vessel breaking free from the dock and rolling over, those guests who were still in the salon were thrown from the starboard to the port side. Due to the element of surprise, disorientation, and flooding coupled with a sensation of entrapment, death as the result of asphyxiation due to drowning would have ensued in less than two minutes.” Divemaster Bart Stanley noted that guests in the salon “were thrown violently.” Many of the deceased had head injuries.

Stanley was trapped, but thanks to his knowledge of the boat, he swam out, exiting from the “starboard exit door facing the wheelhouse.” He dived back down to try to open the salon door but couldn't. Head diving instructor Thomas Baechtold stated that after the vessel capsized, he “came out near the propellers, which were moving. I was blown out of the water by a tornado-like gust onto the mangrove,” about 100 meters.

When 2nd Captain Wouters felt the mooring rope break, he raced to the wheelhouse and tried to gain control of the ship. “The vessel was free and out of control. I made a futile attempt to obtain some sort of control with the engines but to no avail. . . I then felt that we had gone aground and had heeled to port, which accelerated into capsizing the vessel. I found myself . . . still in the wheelhouse underwater. I swam through the wheelhouse door.”

After the boat rolled over, the life rafts were afloat but still attached to the boat. Captain Philip Martin ordered several people into the life rafts and pushed them clear of the boat. He then swam across the 400-ft. channel to the *Aggressor*, took their tender, and returned to the *Wave Dancer*. Meanwhile, 2nd Captain Wouters, who was on a

life raft, started banging on the hull and yelling to get a response from anyone trapped survivors into the life raft.

Report Findings

IMMARBE noted that the *Wave Dancer* was adequately staffed by a qualified crew, though neither the Captain nor the 2nd Captain had significant experience sailing in Belizean waters during hurricane season. Hughes had hired Martin in February, 2001, then promoted him to captain in May. This was the first commercial vessel he had commanded.

Friday, October 5, Captain Martin received clear instructions by phone and e-mail from Peter Hughes Diving to monitor the storm. The *Wave Dancer* departed port the following day, October 6, and headed for Lighthouse Reef. The report finds that Martin failed to follow the boat's Hurricane Plan, which required him to contact the shore managers and monitor the storm. According to the report, “neither the Captain nor the 2nd Captain listened to the local Belize radio stations

themselves and were apparently satisfied with receiving morsels of such information from their catering staff.”

The next day, Sunday, October 7, with Hurricane Iris headed toward Belize, Martin decided to remain at Lighthouse Reef, a decision based on his mistaken belief that Iris' landfall was still projected for the northern Yucatan. Wouters said that he told Martin “it was best to go to Belize City immediately. I attempted to persuade him that we

could drop off the passengers at a hotel and we could take the boat to an area deep in the mangrove with just a skeleton crew. He rejected the idea. I returned twice more. Each time, the discussion became more heated until we were both shouting. This is the argument I believe several other people heard:

The report faults Martin's decision, noting that his passengers should have had the opportunity to get off the boat, part of the boat's Hurricane Plan. Martin had polled the guests, but the report notes that their view “could not have been based on any better knowledge of the weather situation than that which the Captain and/or 2nd Captain possessed . . . furthermore, voting by guests is nothing more than an indication of their preferences, but no means by which a Captain arrives at his decision with regard to safety matters.” With the storm approaching, the only alternative was to steam to Big Creek, where he tied the boat alongside the *Aggressor*.



Wave Dancer

The guests remained on board at Big Creek rather than seeking shelter on shore. While the Hurricane Plan stated “where possible disembark guests,” the report says that the decision “was a considered one . . . in our view, both remaining onboard the *Wave Dancer* as well as moving to the shore entailed risks . . . “ But it does note that none of the local residents who took refuge in the local bank building was injured.

The report also dismisses the rumors that there had been excessive drinking by passengers or crew. But it does note that Martin failed to supply guests with, among other things, flashlights and to instruct them to remain with life jackets and remain on the floor in accordance with the plan.” And, “despite the extreme weather conditions, the Captain failed to order the engines to be started and for the wheelhouse to be manned either by himself or the 2nd Captain.”

The report raises questions about how the boat was positioned when moored, with the bow extending 30 feet past the dock, “exposing the section of the vessel to the hurricane winds,” and how the mix of nylon and polypropylene mooring lines may have contributed to the disaster. (Because polypropylene stretches more than nylon, the nylon alone had to bear the entire strain, which suggests that the polypropylene was useless.) However, it concluded that the extreme weather conditions and “tornado-like gusts” prevailing at the storm’s peak were the chief cause of the loss of the *Wave Dancer*.

Captain Philip Martin’s status is under further review, though he is currently banned from serving on any vessel registered in Belize. Second Captain Frank Wouters is prohibited from serving on any vessel registered in Belize for five years.

Recommendations

The report issued a list of recommendations intended to prevent future tragedies:

- Passenger-carrying recreational craft operating in Belizean waters should return to port whenever a hurricane watch is issued
- Every live-aboard passenger vessel operating in Belize should have at least one navigating officer with experience navigating Belizean waters
- Vessels not use mixed mooring ropes, opting instead for all polypropylene or all nylon
- Belizean nationals serving on live-aboard passenger vessels are to have written employment contracts to provide the right to disembark in case of a hurricane, as well as providing insurance if there is death or injury. (Belizean crew members on *Wave Dancer* had no contracts and were allegedly told they would lose their jobs if they disembarked before the storm. One crew member did opt to leave and survived the storm.)

Editor’s comments:

We addressed our concerns about live-aboard safety in articles in May and June 2003. Those articles are available on our website to online members. The complete Belize report is available free at *Undercurrent*.

P.S.: DAN insurance covered none of the deceased divers. The tragedy was not a diving accident. Hughes was insured for only \$5,000,000, and after raising the *Wave Dancer*, less than \$4,000,000 was distributed among the relatives of the twenty dead.

And one important thing to keep in mind: when a serious issue of safety comes smack up against your desire to get in one more dive, let safety rule. Support the captain who makes the call.

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