

Undercurrent

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Playa Chinchorro; Costa de Cocos; Q Roo, Mexico —Don't Bank on the Banks

There it is, right there in the June, 1992 Underwater USA. An ad for Playa Chinchorro Beach and Dive Resort. It's been there for a while.

"Dive the awesome, untouched Chinchorro Bank with the experts.

Undercurrent says '.... dive sites which have never seen fins before.'"

Last fall I saw a small ad touting Playa Chinchorro, several hours south by car from Cancun on the Caribbean Sea. I called its owner/agent, Larry Sloan, who answers the 800 number "American Development Corporation", and tracked down press releases through the Mexican Tourist Office. I was told that Playa Chinchorro had a 12-unit hotel, a 60-foot offshore oil rig service boat that made an overnight trip to Banco Chinchorro every other day, and offered dives off the barrier reef.

Since I had planned to spend six weeks on the Yucatan in search of stories, I finished packing my Mazda four wheeler and began the long drive from Los Angeles.

When I arrived in November, I found that the "hotel" consisted of 12 dilapidated palapas (huts) in various states of disrepair, sitting hard against the jungle where there is no breeze. The palapas had gaping holes around the doors and between the slats, making them havens for mosquitos (that, by all accounts, are impervious to Deet and Avon Skin-So-Soft and Cutter's). The water is not heated, the shower floors are concrete slabs that are sinking through the floors of some palapas, and the beds looked less comfortable than army cots. All this for \$695/week, diving included.

Since I had brought full camping gear so I could hang out where I wanted along the stretch of shoreline between Cancun and Belize, I pitched my tent on the beach, where the strong breeze kept most mosquitos away. The main generator had failed and the operation was running off a small back-up generator. This generator failed, and I spent the next two days without electricity or running

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water, and used my lanterns and flashlights.

The food was minimalist, though intermittently flavorful. It was largely canned, including the vegetables. Breakfast usually consisted of sliced fruit, cold cereal, danish and Nescafe instant coffee. Lunch was sandwiches of processed meat and extras like crackers or cookies. Dinner included rice and beans and fresh fish or lobster caught during the day.

Playa Chinchorro appeared to be little more than an excuse to attract people to try to sell them property in the area. I was constantly quoted land values and prices, and told that this was the last undeveloped beach in the Caribbean. Other divers I met had the same experience. This would also account for the poor state of the accommodations and diving operation.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of diving was that we never made it to the Bank. Captain Rich Hansen managed a different excuse every day. My guess was that the boat is so large that the operation loses money with less than five paying divers. On the other hand, Captain Hansen had just arrived a few weeks earlier, and was trying frantically to put the resort into decent shape.

We dived the barrier reef, which runs along the shore about 1500 yards out, twice in three days - one morning and one night. The night dive was in 12 feet of water just beyond the reef and was nothing but an excuse for Captain Hansen to catch lobster. I ate some good lobster that night, but 30 foot visibility, a strong surge, and little marine life made for an unspectacular dive.

The day dive was more interesting. The back side of the barrier reef runs away from shore in fingers that start at the surface and run down past 100 feet. The water temperature was 80 degrees and the visibility 70-90 feet. Unlike further north, toward Akumal, the reef here was not destroyed by hurricane Gilbert. It is covered by common coral, such as plate, star, and brain coral. The largest fish I saw was a typical Nassau grouper. The most interesting were occasional parrotfish. There were few sponges or any unusual marine life.

If you decide to try Playa Chinchorro, be prepared for an adventure. Don't prepay your stay. You may not make it to the Bank or tolerate the accommodations. Contrary to what the advertisement claims, this is not the place to come to "dive with the experts." And the reasons the fins haven't touched it? Well, the boat doesn't get there. If you are self-equipped, you can survive and Captain Hansen is a master storyteller. If you are not equipped, it could be a living hell.

[Ed. notes: Most Undercurrent readers have found it just that. Errol Stone (Malibu, CA), there a year ago, said: "Beautiful setting, but the wind blew the dirt around so that everything in the 'Mayan' huts always had a film of dirt. . . Never made it to Chinchorro because of high winds and waves. On one dive inside the reef, the anchor broke loose from the line and the 18 foot skiff drifted 300 yards to shore. If this had happened an hour before, when we were diving outside the reef with our guide, the boat could have drifted away empty; we could have

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The Beast that Ate Tabata

Here I am in the middle of a Honduran dive trip and I'll be damned if my TUSA mask doesn't start leaking. It's only a couple of years old.

I paddle through the entire dive, trying to figure out if hair was breaking the seal, if my face had bloated from the beer, or if I just couldn't get it on straight.

Back on board, I discover that the sealing lip had been eaten away in several places, almost as if acid had been dabbed on it. That happened years ago on my rubber mask when I sported a moustache and used Vaseline to make the seal. I switched to silicon jelly, then shaved my moustache.

What's the problem now? I show my mask to the guide. "Cockroaches," he says. "They love silicon."

I'm skeptical. I ask people at two other resorts. Cockroaches are the clear consensus. "You have to keep your mask in the container," explains Gerd Ottehenning of Guanaja's Nautilus Dive Club, "or the cockroaches will eat it away."

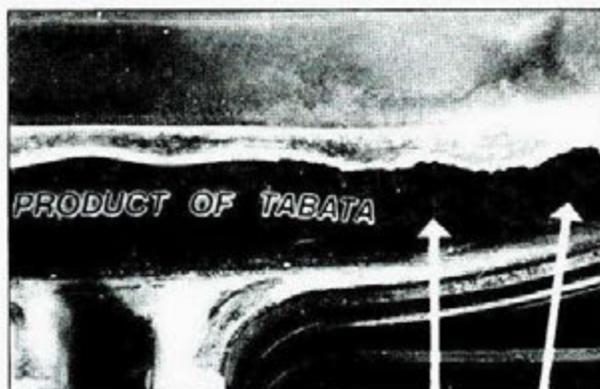
I'm still skeptical. I call Don Frueh, Marketing Director for Scubapro. He laughed when I asked him

about the problem.

Yes, cockroaches love silicone. "And don't forget mice," he said. "Both will nibble away at silicone in any way, shape or form. That is a good reason not to store dive gear in a garage."

Or leave it uncovered in a Guanaja dive locker.

C.C., travel editor



surfaced without any boat in sight. The compressor broke down during our third day. Two regulators without their protective caps were thrown into the water by staff." . . . Jerry W. Courtney (Houston) traveled there last summer: "I've been all over the Caribbean and this is the worst place I've ever seen. Dirt floors, poor ventilation, mongrel dogs running loose. Insufficient food, poor refrigeration. Never went diving! The land operation is a joke." And Marcy Kolton-Crilly (Islip Terrace, NY) reports from a February trip: "I knew that the 'resort' would be primitive and I would have put up with the lack of electricity, hot, warm, or fresh water, sparse food (my husband starved!) if the diving was good. But the big boat they advertised was broken for three weeks (no mention of this when I called the day before I left). Only went to Chinchorro once. The diving may be good there, but we were not in the right spots."]

Costa De Cocos, on the other hand, is more accommodating. The palapas have stone foundations, hardwood floors, tiled bathrooms and comfortable beds, all for the same price as Playa Chinchorro's mosquito pits (approximately \$45 double per night). The resort has more than its share of mosquitos, as well as microscopic no-see-ums that swarm around your ankles and leave painful, itching bites that linger for weeks.

The resort did not offer meals, though the owners had begun construction of a restaurant (which may be completed by now). The tiny village of Xcalac ('Sh-ka-lack') is a half-mile away. Xcalac allegedly has three restaurants, but I only found two, and the second was never open. The one that was open served me lunch one day but refused to the next. At least that was as much as I could get from the owner snoring in a hammock in the middle of the restaurant.

The dive operation at Costa De Cocos is now a year old. They rent a panga (a 25-foot open fishing boat) from a local fisherman as a dive boat. The problem with the panga is that the weather must be absolutely perfect to make the crossing to the Bank. They have a boat under construction (31-foot, 12.5-foot beam, 3208 Cat Diesel, accommodates seven divers), which was scheduled to be completed

about the time of this publication. But, we traveling divers have come to believe in the arrival of new boats only when we see them.

It took a week for the weather to be calm enough to allow us to cross the channel. The day was perfect. The seas had lain down and the water inside the barrier reef was as still as a lake. I boarded the small boat with seven other divers. Captain Vidal, a local fisherman, told us where to sit to distribute the weight. We improvised a mount for the compass by sandwiching a fin between two tanks and wedging the compass in the open heel section. We strapped an extra engine and took about 15 gallons of extra gas for the crossing.

Once outside the reef, the bow crashed over the oncoming swells as we headed against the current. Even on this perfect day, the swells coming toward us were close to two feet. Within five minutes, I was soaked. There was no other place to sit, so I put on my wetsuit. If the ride was this rough on a calm day, I couldn't imagine it in the six foot swells that are common here.

After nearly three hours at sea, we were skirting the southern edge of Chinchorro, marked by an abandoned lighthouse leaning like the Tower of Pisa on the edge of a small sandbar known as Cavo Lobos. Most of the atoll is submerged, and its boundary is only discernible by the calmness of the water inside its perimeter and the lighter color due to the shallower depth.

The first site was called "Uncle Joe's" by Tom, the divemaster, who said he named this site after a 300-pound Jewfish he had seen there. We back-rolled simultaneously to avoid capsizing the panga, then dropped into 40 feet of azure water, 80 degrees, and more than 90 foot visibility. No current, no surge, no other divers. Below, a garden of coral and sponges stretched in all directions.

The patch reef was laid out like a series of 10-15 foot high mounds, each an individual microcosm of coral, sponges, and fish separated by relatively open spaces of sandy bottom. I did not see the large Jewfish, nor any other large fish for that matter. Instead, the beauty was on the smaller scale, the delicate intricacy of a chamber piece as opposed to the full grandeur of a symphony. Brain and star coral were prevalent; intermixed were colonies of finger, leaf, flower, and lettuce coral. Tiny gobies and wrasses dodged into the reef. Yellowtail damsels and butterfly fish would disappear into crevices and peek out until I swam away. Squirrelfish faced the coral, thinking that if they did not look at me, I could not see them. Occasionally, a stoplight parrotfish, either in its vibrant red phase or in electric teal and blue, would swim close-by, then quickly away. Queen and French angels would also take a look and swim to the protection of the reef. Some crevices hid lobster. Occasionally, I would spot a grouper following behind, but careful not to stray too far from the protective reef. Toward the end of the dive, the brain coral gave way to large stands of elkhorn coral, some 30 feet across.

After the dive, we traveled to the southeast of the Bank to free dive a wreck in shallow water. The wreck of the freighter Tropic lay scattered in waters ranging from five feet to 40 feet, with part of the control tower standing 10 feet above the water as a grim warning to other ships. The wreck was not spectacular in any sense. The tanker had come apart and its sections were strewn about like a Cubist painting along the shallow reef.

We motored inside the atoll to eat lunch in the shadow of a leaning lighthouse. A battery of conch shells littered the shore from previous meals of the fishermen who work the Bank. After lunch, we motored through a break in the barrier. When we found what looked like an interesting reef, Tom was dragged behind the boat to look for a site. After passing on three spots, Tom selected one about forty feet deep with forty feet of visibility.

This area was more colorful than the last due to the greater number of yellow, orange, and lilac sponges and large purple sea fans. I saw a file fish floating above the reef, trying to make its long, thin body blend into the coral and plants that surrounded it. I came across a four-foot nurse shark, lying on the sandy bottom. Indeed more colorful, but less interesting than the previous dive.

The return back, running with the current, was much smoother. We hit the barrier reef at Xcalac as the sun disappeared, and by the time we unloaded the boats, it was dark. The waning moon rose later that evening, and, for awhile, we had a full view of the deep black night pierced with thousands of stars.

[Eds. note: About half a mile from Costa de Cocos is Xcalax Divers. Ron Carlo (Garland, TX) visited in October: "Promised far more than they delivered. Looks like they never heard of coral conservation. Wreck trips to Chinchorro Banks never materialized (no boat, bad weather, other plans, etc.). Maybe in a few more years ...". And John Jonson (Madison, WI), there in March said: "The owner, was petty, negative and rude. A know-it-all. The Chinchorro Banks was fabulous virgin diving with great lobster dinners and miles of unexplored walls and coral. Numerous shipwrecks, even a Spanish galleon with 20 cannons. A local named Elloy was the nicest and most informed guide in Xcalax. Ask for him and you'll have a great time."]

Who should come to these resorts? Criminals on the lam, college students with tents, people fascinated with primitive Mexican fishing culture, speculators looking to buy land and make a few bucks twenty years down the pike, and gambling travelers willing to take their chances. For the time being, it's not much of a destination for the serious diver looking for any consistency.

For information on Costa de Cocos, call 1/800-443-1123.

The Bay of Pigs, Cuba

—No need for a second invasion

In retrospect, maybe taking the dive bag painted with the huge United States flag to Cuba was a mistake. I had heard that Cuba was one of the better dive sites in the world, and fresh from a week-long dive fest in Little Cayman, my dive buddy and I were ready for the best.

Because it's illegal for Americans to travel to Cuba, I did what most Americans who want to visit Cuba do - I flew from Canada. For U.S. passports, Cuban customs officials automatically stamp the visa instead of the passport.

The Isle of Youth, off Cuba's southern coast, is supposedly a diving Mecca, with a diving center and scuba vacation packages. I was staying on the north coast in the tourist town of Vardero (about 75 miles east of Havana, as the eagle flies), and took a day trip to the south coast where, I was told, diving was comparable to the Isle of Youth. If the diving were that fabulous, I reckoned, then I'd see about investing more time and money in a trip to the Isle of Youth.

The English speaking, hotel-based tour guide (every hotel has one) directed us to the Barracuda dive shop where we signed up for the next day's Bay of Pigs excursion, and ordered an extra-small BC (I had purposely left my expensive gear at home). The price with equipment was US \$79 for two tanks, the bus trip, and lunch at an alligator farm.

The next morning, I learned that the shop only carried medium and large BCs, but went for it anyway. Our group of 30 included five divemasters, several Cuban dive students (who don't use textbooks during certification courses), and Canadian, Austrian, and German tourists.

The ill-fated 1961 U.S. Bay of Pigs invasion failed partly because it was aimed at the western shore's swampy, mosquito- and alligator-infested marshes. The bay's eastern half is made up of touristy beaches and iron shores, the latter where our dives were based.

After the three-hour bus trip from the north coast, we broke into groups of six, each with a divemaster. There was no attempt to ascertain our experience

levels. When asked about a briefing, a divemaster said, "Don't worry, we'll swim out and take care of that before we go under."

Cuba, Anyone?

With a few very special exceptions, it's illegal for an American to travel to Cuba through a third country, such as Canada. If caught and convicted, the miscreant can be fined up to \$250,000 and spend up to 12 years in prison. Enforcement of this ban resides, strangely enough, with the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control. Clara Davis of the Office told us, "we occasionally catch people traveling to Cuba through a third country," but she could not tell us how many, if any.

Back in the early '80's, such travel was not prohibited and several Florida travel agents ran trips to the Isle of Pines, now renamed the Isle of Youth.

Since our writer didn't visit the Isle of Youth, we returned to our January, 1982 issue in which we reviewed a trip set up by American Airlines. But things did not turn out to be as advertised. The Cubans omitted the two planned tours of Havana, gave two tank dives and no night diving (unless everyone ponied up an additional \$31) as promised. American Airlines ended up refunding \$100 to all trip takers.

For the most part, the dives, our reviewer wrote, were only "typical Caribbean" and shallow in the 25' to 40' range... "fine for beginners but I had heard there were better sites here, especially the wall, and I was disappointed."

"However, the wall dive was 'superior'; beginning at 60 feet, it had all the accoutrements of a fine wall-tube sponges. ...abundant black coral, finger sponges, and plenty of marine life. I located a stone crab, stretching him 20 inches from claw tip to claw tip. Grouper and snapper up to 50 lbs. hung out in crevices." My bet is those fish won't be there today.

If you're just dying to try Cuba, shuffle on through Canada. Here are two agents that can help you.

SC Travel, Rick Taman, 115 Danforth Ave., Suite 301, Toronto M4P1K2, Ontario, Canada: 416/461-2432 Scuba Holidays, Greg Woodworth: 155 York St. London N6A1A8 Ontario, Canada 519/681-1441.

One hundred yards out, our group bobbed around the divemaster, whose briefing was, "Ok, once we're down, stick close together." I descended about 35 feet to the sandy bottom and started drifting slowly to the wall while waiting for the others. The divemaster shot over and shook his finger furiously at me, motioning for me to sit on the bottom. Once we were all together, the divemaster led the way with the group bunched behind.

A little too far behind, it turned out. My dive buddy slipped back to avoid sucking everyone's silt, and the divemaster zipped back to him. After some mysterious hand signals, the divemaster motioned to the rest of us to sit on the bottom. Then he took the errant diver up in a somewhat rapid ascent.

I found out later the divemaster was scolding him for falling back. My buddy pointed out that with 80-foot visibility, there was little likelihood that he'd get lost, and besides, he was very experienced. The divemaster insisted that he stick with the group, because he couldn't prove his experience level and the divemaster had responsibility for all of us.

Although we were in each other's silt and in danger of having our masks kicked off, we weren't missing many visuals. The bay was drastically overfished, and the only fish I saw were one queen angel, a spotted drum, a parrotfish, one trumpetfish, and several squirrelfish. There were two

flame scallops and some medium-sized purple and black tube sponges. Although the divemaster had told us that hammerheads were popular in the area, I didn't see any.

I did see a flamingo tongue as the divemaster ripped it out of a coral head (after bracing himself against it) to hand to one of our group who stowed it in her BC. It didn't surprise me, because both divemasters were all over the coral, kneeling on it, kicking it with their fins, and grabbing it to pose for photos. It wasn't for lack of experience, because both had their buoyancy well under control. Most of the coral we saw was pretty well worn, although still alive.

At the surface interval, our divemasters offered us sodas, beer, and rum. When I told one no thanks, I planned on making the second dive, he said, "Oh, right, of course you can't drink," but he wasn't too convincing. A few of the Cuban students drank beer. I was told they weren't making the second dive.

Then my buddy and I were pulled aside by two divemasters, who scolded us for not staying with the group. I pointed out that they hadn't asked to see our dive logs and certification, and we were perfectly qualified to drift along within eyesight of the group. We were then assigned to a smaller group of four and a different divemaster, who warned that he was going to keep an eye on us, and we'd better behave ourselves this time. I decided not to bring up the coral bashing.

On the second dive, the too large, shifting BC and rental regulator started to bother me. The regulator went into free-flow whenever I tilted my head to the left, and since the wall was to the left, I had to breathe, look quickly at the wall, turn ahead, and breathe again. Every four minutes (by my watch), the divemaster turned back to give each of us an OK sign, halting the entire group until he got responses. Again, marine life was minimal, and consisted mostly of some sponge crabs and tube sponges. Maximum depth: 85 feet.

At the surface, the divemasters were conciliatory, explaining how they had to do their jobs, and lots of their customers were inexperienced divers. I suggested they start checking credentials and logs, and also made some noises about destruction of the coral, which were unanimously ignored.

The disregard for the coral seemed at odds with the government's environmental education campaign. All along roadsides, I saw billboards advocating conservation and protection of nature. A Canadian who had lived in Cuba for years told me that because life is so hard, Cubans will do anything to get ahead. If a divemaster can give a tourist a piece of coral in return for a tip, then he can buy some extra food on the black market. He's not thinking of a bay full of dead coral 20 or 30 years down the road.

Sherwood Source

Some people have all the problems!

Hank Eyster (Melbourne, FL) wrote: "I am now on my third Sherwood Source Computer and wonder if there is something basically wrong with them. My first unit started scrolling on its first dive and never stopped scrolling for six months. I was using it while navigating and never got below 10 feet. I took it back to my shop and they replaced it with another unit.

The second unit went blank during its first dive. I again took it back and now have my third unit. It seems to be working OK."

We called the Sherwood Group and were referred to the computer manufacturer, Pelagic Systems, and customer relations manager Gary Lee.

Lee took the serial numbers we gave him and looked up the paper work. The only way the first problem could have happened, he said, is if the switch clip just below the start button, either stuck or broke.

"On the second, we found that the battery was weak. Since the production of that particular unit we have switched battery manufacturers."

We asked Gary what percentage of these units came back because of problems. "Less than one-half of a percent," he said. "This poor guy just got hit with a couple of strange problems right in a row."

Some people have all the problems. Or, is it some computers?

Because we were tourists, we were well provided for at lunch with delicious roast pork, Cuban black beans and rice, fried plantains, and local (no label) beer at the alligator farm. Then, our bus drove to the swamp's edge to watch the 6- to 10-foot monsters have their own lunch. We wondered if we were the first Americans since 1961 to swim through the Bay of Pigs.

With diving like this, I advise you to make us the last.

P.E.

Cod Hole and Beyond: Reader Reports

As we wrote in the last issue, if you want to get to the best of the Great Barrier Reef, you must find operators who travel to the far reaches: Alby Ziebel (when he gets a replacement for his *Coralita*) and Allan Payard (*Reef Explorer*) are two examples.

At Lizard Island and Cod Hole (several hours from Cairns and Port Douglas) and nearby reefs, there are some options which have been taken by our readers.

The *Taka II* is a 72' steel vessel taking 26 passengers out of Cairns for 4 day/3 night trips to Cod Hole (\$495-\$627/person). She also makes a 5 day/4 night trip (\$750-\$950/person) 100 kms north of Cod Hole to "Coral Sea Drop-Off." (11-61-70-51-8722 (FAX 011-61-70-31-2739).

Says Michele Rae (Southboro, MA) of a trip last September: "Very comfortable sleeping, living, and diving accommodations. The crew was helpful, knowledgeable, and very service-oriented. Food was delicious, varied, and plentiful. Good pre-dive briefings. Coral and fish were outstanding." Austin Randall (Lakewood, CO), there in January, was not quite so enthusiastic. "Good diving, decent crew and food. They go too far in just four days—very tight schedule, rushed itinerary. The crew was concerned with the safety of the reef they oriented us, then the captain ran the boat onto the reef and did major damage to the reef (too bad). Comparable liveboards, nothing to brag about." And Gary York (Gardena, CA) says, "Lots of large fish at Cod Hole only on this trip.

Coral shows considerable damage. Boat interior very nice. Large covered aft deck for gearing up, rinse buckets for cameras. Boat is noisy outside, acceptable inside. Only one double bunk for couples."

Supersport makes a 4 day/3 night trip to Cod Hole (\$507—\$772/person (011-61-70-31-5484; FAX 011-61-70-31-2739). Placido Dos Santos (Tucson) reports that "Mike Ball runs a class operation. *Supersport* is an ergonomically designed liveaboard — outstanding dive arrangements, comfortable and fast. Crew helpful and friendly. Diving on northern portion of Great Barrier Reef is variable. Some sites have lovely hard corals and abundant fish. Others have lots of dead coral and few fish. Cod Hole: about 20 200-pound groupers, two 450-pound Maori wrasse, lots of big morays, including an incredible 12-foot-long giant wait for massive feedings by divemasters. The *Supersport* has a sun deck, a shaded deck, a shaded dive prep area, a wide deck on the bow, and a spacious indoor seating area. 22 passengers and 11 crew members are not crowded and assure attention to every need. Outstanding detailed briefings provided before dives. Virtually all dives were from the vessel — some were from Zodiac. Very nice hard corals at some sites, especially Ribbon Reef #7. The big fish at Cod Hole were fun, but the dive, otherwise, was below average."

Nimrod III is a 65' twin hull taking a maximum of 16 passengers to Cod Hole and environs for 4 days/3 nights (\$570-684/person). Special 7-8 day charters to Outer Coral Sea

and Detached Reefs (August to late November) diving Ribbon Reefs, Cod Hole, Osprey, Bouganville and Shark Reef (\$1402/person.) 011-61-70-31-5566; FAX 011-61-70-31-2431

Says Wendy Mark (Aloha, OR) who was aboard in November, "Really safety-conscious, which was quite comforting. The divemaster would give you a maximum depth and a time, but those with computers (which could be rented aboard) could do their own planning if they wished. The only computer rules were: if you came up over the decom limit, you missed the next dive or dives, depending upon how badly."

The 78 foot *Si Bon*, out of Port Douglas, offers private charters as far north as Raine and Thursday Island with diving all the way back to Port Douglas, on a 12 day basis. 5 day/4 nights to Ribbon Reef and Cod Hole (\$570/person); 7 day/6 nights to Coral Sea, Bouganville Reef, Cod Hole and Ribbon Reef. (\$1285/person) 9 day/8 nights Coral Sea, Osprey, Bouganville Reefs, Cod Hole and Ribbon Reef (\$1710). 011-61-70-98-5195; FAX 011-61-70-99-3299.

Ellen Metcalf (Upper Jay, NY) says she had a good March trip: "Eleven compatible pro divers, friendly crew, abundant and tasty food — all led to a good dive trip. Cod Hole well worth a visit and other great dives (Pine Pinnacle, Clam Beds, Twin Peaks). A couple of dives had poor visibility and one dive was bad. Great abundance of colorful hard corals, good variety of tropicals and nudibranchs, and some wonderful schools of barracuda,

jacks, a few turtles and sharks.”

The *Takaroa* (based in Port Douglas, about an hour's drive north of Cairns) is a 55' steel motor sailer holding 10 passengers. It's up for

charter at \$1140 US/day. 011-61-18-72-2447; FAX 011-61-70-99-5325.

You can get space on any of these boats through most American and Canadian dive travel agents.

Many divers booking directly, however, report bargain prices when booking less than 30 days before departure.

Are Divers Destroying Cod Hole?

—Lessons for popular fish sites

On my trip last October to Cod Hole, four boats were tied to the moorings directly at the hole and four more boats moored outside, as were we. There were more than 100 divers around, more than half of which were in the water at any one time.

There are plenty of giant fish here that get in your face. For that reason, it's fascinating diving. Yet, I personally don't like the artificial nature of such diving. Finding one untamed critter in the wild is worth a score held captive to Cheez Whiz.

While I was in the middle of Cod Hole, in 40 feet of water, I heard the loud whirring of an anchor chain. It sounded suspiciously close. I looked up, then behind me and observed an enormous anchor plunging downward. It landed less than 15 feet away. It was dropped by the dive boat from Lizard Island, the *MV Volare*, which was used in the research conducted by the authors of the following piece.

In 1984, the Cairns international airport was improved to accept flights from Japan and the U.S., bringing increased numbers of divers interested in seeing the Great Barrier Reef. The number of dive boats regularly visiting the reef from Cairns increased from four to 11. Larger, faster boats carrying up to 28 divers were constructed to take people to reefs ever more distant from Cairns.

Cod Hole was discovered in July 1973, by Ron and Valerie Taylor. It is located 150 miles north of Cairns, in a small section of reef about 100 yards long at the northern tip of Number 10 Ribbon Reef. At that time, the site was inhabited by 25 friendly giant groupers (called Potato cod, by the Aussies), schools of sergeant majors, gold lined sweet lips, Maori wrasse and moray eels.

Today, potato cod are the main attraction, ranging up to 5.5 ft. long and weighing 40 to 220 lbs. They are naturally cautious, but inquisitive. To draw the cods close, divemasters feed them food scraps. Initially they only took food floating in the water, but they soon learned to feed directly from divers' hands. Once one species learned how, others followed. Now morays, coral trout, Maori wrasse and snapper wait to be fed.

On one of the Taylors' first encounters with the cod, a diver on their boat killed one of the cod by shooting a spear down its throat. The Taylors were horrified and vowed never to expose these fish to man again. They

steered clear of the Cod Hole for more than six years, never once divulging its secret. It was not until 1979 that they returned to the Cod Hole while shooting underwater footage for a Time Life television special.

As a result of the filming, several skippers in Cairns learned of the location. As the word spread, boat skippers began bringing line and spear fishers to the Cod Hole and by 1981, they had reduced the population to less than 10 fish. The surviving cod either had hooks dangling from their mouths or mouths severely damaged by hooks that had wrenched away chunks of flesh.

“...potato cod are the main attraction, ranging up to 5.5 ft. long and weighing 40 to 220 lbs.”

Concerned that Cod Hole would be wiped out, Valerie Taylor successfully lobbied the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority to protect it. People were encouraged to “look but not take.” Bottom fishing, spearing and collecting were prohibited; trolling was still allowed. The cod were to some degree protected from people fishing, but not from divers.

In 1986, *MV Volare* from the Lizard Island Lodge was the only dive boat regularly visiting Cod Hole, conducting dives amounting to 300-400 hours per annum. By 1990, dive boat and seaplane divers were conducted approximately 7220 diver hours per year, an increase of 1800 percent in human contact hours underwater for the cod in less than four years!

The increased boat frequency scarred large bommies and broke off and damaged smaller colonies. Four mooring blocks were installed, but boats unable to obtain a good mooring still anchor near the Cod Hole, again causing coral damage. The concrete mooring anchors diminish the aesthetic beauty of this wilderness area.

In March 1989, we started a monitoring program with the divemasters of the *MV Volare*. Individual cods, Maori wrasses and moray eels could be identified by

scars, marks in fins, behavior and coloration. Some of the cod were named. One was called Cuddles because it liked to be touched. Another with a piece missing near the dorsal was named Mr. Munchback. The Sheik had a scar on his side and was followed by a school of small golden jacks. Needles had a damaged lip and its teeth visible. A bump was obvious on the head of Bumpy. The biggest maori wrasse was named Mr. Green Jeans. Moray eels were labeled Merlin, Cinderella, and Sneaky.

The numbers of cod present ranged from two to 16. The more boats present, the fewer cod recorded. It is probable that with more boats the cod are dispersed among the boats' dive groups and not seen by the recorders present in the area. At subsequent times, when M.V. Volare was the only boat or only one other boat was present, the numbers of cod increased.

Individual cod were not always present. Cuddles was never observed after June 1989. Mr. Munchback was a common denizen until December 1989, returning in June 1990. Scarface appeared in 53 percent of the samples and Bumpy and Lumpy appeared in June 1989 and were present more than 80 percent of the observations since then. The maori wrasse, Mr. Green Jeans, was seen on 89 percent of dives. The eels were there nearly half the time. The number of Maori wrasse and moray eels significantly increased during the overlapping months of the study.

Although a lot of scrap fish and food wastes entered the water, sharks were only seen on 51 percent of the

Aussie Rules

Many divers joining liveaboards in Australia have complained about the restrictive nature of the diving operations in Australia. Specifically, they have complained about maximum depth limits of 120 feet and only being able to make a maximum of four dives per day. After all, with conservative profiles, computers will permit more than 4 dives, even after dropping below 120 feet.

The rules were promulgated by the Queensland government, the northeastern seaboard state in which most all of the Barrier Reef is located.

Mike Ball, owner and operator of three active liveaboards, serves on the advisory committee to the Queensland government. Ball has told us that new regulations have been agreed upon by the committee and have been submitted to the Queensland government for final approval, which is expected.

The proposed changes would eliminate the four dives per day restriction and extend the maximum depth limit to 140 feet. Ball indicated that greater emphasis is being placed upon encouraging the use of dive computers. None of the proposed changes affect the no drinking and diving rule nor the restriction against any decompression diving. These are retained in the proposed new regulations.

“frequent touching reduces the protection provided by the mucous coating and directly places human-associated bacteria on the fish.”

dives. Black tip reef sharks up to 1.5 m long were the most common. Generally, the sharks were not associated with the cod feeding, but were about 50 m away near a natural gutter between coral formations.

After feeding the cod, most divers want to touch the fish and hold on for a ride. The fish are covered with a mucus that protects them from bacterial infections and fouling organisms. We suspect that frequent touching reduces the protection provided by the mucous coating and directly places human-associated bacteria on the fish. Natural wounds take longer to heal and human induced sores may develop.

In the marlin fishing season, game boats frequently moor at the Cod Hole to entertain their clients. Tying a rope around a bait fish, they tease the cod, causing them to jump out of the water. Frequently, a cod will catch the bait and play tug-of-war with the people fishing. As the line does not contain a hook, it is not illegal. At times, the bait is partly swallowed and cannot easily be released. Abrasive action has worn away part of the lip on Needles. Another favorite activity is to tie off a large fish to the reef and watch the cod fight each other.

Many of the cod have scars or open wounds around the mouth and head. Some have gashes that look like propeller wounds. Other wounds near the mouth look like encounters with small hooks. Boats trolling in nearby waters will sometimes hook a potato cod. Most cut the line and let the cod go. In some cases, this only means damage to the cod's mouth and a hook and line dangling until the hook either rusts or is rejected by the cod. In other cases, the struggle and position of the hook can cause severe damage.

All this activity has changed the fishes behavior. Often the cod become agitated during feeding, bumping divers and fighting each other for food scraps; hands get bitten when they were either grabbed along with the food or were mistaken for food. Several divers have had injuries so severe that they had to be flown to the hospital.

There has been one reported death attributed to the cod, though the evidence of cod involvement is circumstantial. An engineer on a dive boat was snorkeling alone while the rest of the crew and passengers dived. At the end of the dive, he was found dead in 10 m of water. An experienced snorkeler, he was known to snorkel dive to more than 10 m. He had been to the Cod Hole many

times and was familiar with the local conditions and fish. The coroner concluded that he was drowned by a cod, after an autopsy found a bump on his head and small punctures in his skin. (Cod have thousands of minute, needle-sharp teeth.) It was hypothesized that while snorkeling a cod had grabbed him and held him under long enough for him to drown. No motive was given. No arrests were made.

To protect this area, certain restrictions are important:

- 1) The existing levels of diver/cod contact hours are already excessive on some days and should be limited.
- 2) Divers should not touch the fish.
- 3) Feeding should be limited to fish scraps held in rigid containers, not plastic bags. Dumping of kitchen wastes and food scraps should be prohibited.

- 4) Provoking the cod or moray eels using rope tied bait should be prohibited.
- 5) Boats over 10 m should be restricted from the Cod Hole. Larger boats should anchor elsewhere and ferry divers to the Cod Hole.
- 6) The number of dive boats should be limited to the number of moorings available. No additional moorings should be deployed. Anchoring around the Cod Hole should be prohibited.

The Cod Hole is one of the world's best dives. It is imperative that management practices be implemented to preserve this wilderness area for divers in the next century.

This article was written by N.J. Quinn and B.L. Kojis of the Lizard Island Research Station. It was originally published in the Journal of the South Pacific Underwater Medical Society.

Why Divers Die: Part I

In the past, *Undercurrent's* annual series, "Why Divers Die," has been based on studies performed by John McAniff at the National Underwater Accident Data Center.

Recently, McAniff merged his effort with the Divers Alert Network, which has for four years been reporting on recreational scuba accidents. This expanded DAN report is based on information from more than 130 treatment facilities in the United States, the Caribbean, and the Pacific territories.

Undercurrent is pleased to bring you the DAN 1990 Report on Diving Accidents and Fatalities with the belief that by reading these accounts, we will become safer divers.

We take all responsibility for editorial changes and errors.

NUADC has been collecting scuba fatality information for the past twenty years. Since 1989 DAN and NUADC have been collaborating in this effort. This report covers those fatalities which occurred to United States citizens who were recreational divers in U.S. waters and throughout the world in 1990.

NUADC has reviewed studies of diver population and estimates the active diver population in the U. S. to be 2.45 to 3.1 million at the end of 1990. The difficulty of comparing these studies was the lack of a consistent definition for an active diver. Divers may be excluded in one study because they were under 18 years of age or included in another study if they dove more than twice a year. Certification was not necessarily a criteria for being an active diver.

All figures include individuals engaged in training for entry level certification while excluding those taking resort sessions. Technical diving is included in the active

— Triple Fatality in Jamaica

diver population, but is not considered recreational and is discussed separately. Technical diving can be loosely defined as an avocation which uses specialized techniques, equipment, training and skills to advance beyond the present limits of recreational diving.

There are several reasons why a range is used when describing the number of active divers. No reliable numbers are available to determine how many new divers are certified each year. NUADC estimates there could be 550,000 newly certified divers yearly. Not all will remain active after the first year of diving. Drop out continues for several years adding to an unknown cumulative drop out rate. Although 550,000 individuals may have received a first time certification, the total active diver increase in 1990 was between 100-150,000 certified divers due to the overall drop out rate, and that some people re-enter after dropping out.

Deaths:

For 1990, 95 recreational scuba diving fatalities were reported. Four of these deaths were foreign nationals and 91 were U.S. citizens. Eleven victims had not been certified. The fatality rate for 1990 is 2.93 to 3.71 fatalities per 100,000 active divers. Although this is an estimated rate, it suffices to say the rate is very low.

A review of the scuba fatalities since 1970 reveals a decreasing trend in yearly scuba fatalities. The 1970s were by far the worst years for fatalities in recreational scuba diving. Increased training standards and diver awareness are believed to have led to a decrease in fatalities in the 1980s.

The 1970s averaged 130 deaths per year, compared to an average of 90 deaths per year in the 1980s. The first two years of the 1990s have produced an average of 78.5 fatal dive accidents per year. The peak year for scuba fatalities was in 1976 when there were 147 deaths, and

there was a recent peak in 1989 with 114 deaths. There were record lows of 66 scuba deaths in 1988 and 67 in 1991.

According to our estimates, the number of active certified divers is increasing each year, and the number of fatalities is decreasing, representing a dramatic decrease in the fatality rate since the 1970s.

Location of Diving Fatalities

The state of Florida recorded 22 scuba fatalities during 1990, seven in caves. This is a considerable reduction from the 1989 which showed 29 deaths with nine deaths in caves. California had 14 deaths compared to 21 in 1989. Washington state reported four deaths for 1990, while Hawaii, Maine, and New York had three fatalities each. Several states recorded two fatalities: Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin. Nine states recorded one scuba fatality each: Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Montana, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, and Utah. In addition, one death each was noted for Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands during 1990.

“All three were certified instructors who attempted a dive together on compressed air that was to exceed 300 feet. None of the divers returned.”

Twenty three deaths of U.S. citizens occurred in foreign countries or U.S. territories. There were four such deaths in Mexico. Two occurred in the Gulf of California, one off Cozumel, and the fourth in a cave system near the Yucatan Peninsula. The three deaths in the Bahamas occurred at different locations.

Triple fatalities occurred at two foreign locations. The first occurred on the French windward island of Martinique in January, 1990. The victims included two French citizens and a 24-year old American. All three were certified instructors who attempted a dive together on compressed air that was to exceed 300 feet. None of the divers returned.

In Jamaica, two U.S. citizens died while scuba diving with their Jamaican divemaster and six other Americans. The group intended to go no deeper than 70 feet on a drift dive. Missing the intended ledge, the entire dive party reached a depth of 160 feet. Inexperience and nitrogen narcosis resulted in three divers continuing to well over 200 feet. An experienced member of the dive group rescued one diver who had lost consciousness. The other two divers apparently continued to sink and were never recovered. The Jamaican divemaster died, as well.

One double fatality at Lake Garda near Verona, Italy involved two U.S. servicemen doing a recreational scuba dive.

Nine other foreign countries also recorded the deaths of U.S. citizens during 1990. These include Belize, Bermuda, Bequia, Cayman Islands, Egypt (the Red Sea), Honduras, Japan (Okinawa), Micronesia, and Panama.

Next issue: Causes and Cases

HOT OFF THE PRESS! 2 NEW SPECIAL REPORTS!

Special Report #1

Over the years, our stories on “Why Divers Die” have stimulated more interest among *Undercurrent* readers than perhaps any other special feature.

As a result, we've prepared a 40-page “**Why Divers Die**” Special Report, where we've put together many of our dramatic diver fatality stories from the past 5 years. In this report, we explore everything from the most common causes of diver deaths (many causes may surprise you) to the many tragic stories that could have been avoided.

Special Report #2

Our second Special Report entitled “**The Bizarre and Unusual**” is a compilation of some of the strangest, most peculiar stories we've ever covered. Like the 38-year old abandoned diver who swam for 19 hours in waves seven feet high. Oh yes, lightning struck the water a couple of times.

Or, how about a drowning victim who was resuscitated after more than 30 minutes under water...Or, how about some of the most ludicrous laws around the world pertaining to divers--“no kissing, flirting or onion eating.” Or, the man who meditates under water -- 60 feet under water.

To receive these 2 new Special Reports absolutely free, please read the enclosed memo from yours truly.

Ben Davison