

aboard they represent goes out of business. However, a lot of dive travel specialists have also dropped by the wayside in years past. How do you avoid disaster? Probably the best single criterion is longevity in the business. But everybody has to start somewhere, and longevity is *not* a guarantee. It's good insurance to check out any travel specialist, new or old, by calling the Better Business Bureau.

Dive travel specialists have sometimes saved me a sizable amount on airfare because of their booked-in-advance spaces; however, on occasion I've found a cheaper fare through a lot of heavy phone work. And while it is true that no one should be able to answer your questions about a resort better than its own representatives, it's also true that dive travel specialists have more reason to

steer you to the resort they think you would like the best.

Either way, it's a close call. If you have time and like the hands-on approach, check out leads and alternatives, then make a decision. Otherwise, concentrate on finding a reputable wholesaler (see box on page seven).

Diving on the Edge

The Last Few Unknown Places

On some dive trips I'm looking for sybaritic relaxation, but most of the time I'm looking for the adventure of diving on the outer reef of tourism.

Christmas Island: It May Have to Be a Present

When I first heard of diving Christmas Island, I was enthusiastic. From the information I collected, the island's image grew to be a Pacific destination with a biomass equivalent to Palau, but without crowds, and only a 3-hour flight south from Hawaii.

A good Pacific destination on the edge of tourism, but only 8 hours from Los Angeles? How do I get there?

I called Frontiers, the travel agent representing Christmas Island. Frontiers' brochure said they specialized in first-quality bird shooting, light-tackle fishing, offshore fishing, and a diving destination. Their package included accommodations at the Captain Cook

Hotel, meals, custom diving (whenever you want), and round-trip air from Honolulu for \$1,995 (add \$120 for the week if you need air conditioning). Throw in the \$870 for my air to Hawaii, add in at least \$200 for two nights in Honolulu (one each way in order to make connections), and my cost circled around the \$3,000 mark for a 5-day dive package.

My enthusiasm waned. I started to compare Christmas with what else was on the market. A trip on the *Fantasea*, leaving from Phuket, Thailand, diving the Burma Bank and the Simalan Islands, could be had for \$2,300 including air from Los Angeles, a cool \$700 less; or, for \$2,590, I could be beach diving off Sipadan Island, Borneo.

I researched more. Last year fewer than 900 people visited Christmas Island, and most of them were bone fisherman. Very few divers have tasted the waters of this region. It was *still* a lure to me. Maybe I could

find a less expensive way of diving the island.

I began by calling Air Nauru, the airline making the hop from Honolulu down to the island. Airfare was \$465 round-trip; a dive package was \$1,995. Ignoring the repeated \$1,995, I thought I was getting somewhere with the airfare. I called dive operator Kim Anderson's number on Christmas Island. A recorded message in English and Kiribati told me that his number was temporarily disconnected. After a week or so of this message, I called the island's consulate in Hawaii. Yes, there was another hotel on the island; Kim Anderson of Dive Kiribati could tell me the name of it. I mentioned that I was unable to reach Kim. "Oh, Kim has been gone for awhile and hasn't paid his phone bill. You'll have to wait until he pays it. Have you tried lately?" Wow! A place where the consulate knows whether you've paid your phone bill. Now I really wanted to go.

Sure enough, the following week I got through to Kim. He told me to call Frontiers. After some reluctance, he admitted that, yes, there was another place to stay, the Mini Hotel. It had four rooms, maybe a bathroom down the hall, and a kitchen. He would have the owner fax me the rates. His

own rates were \$100 a day for the diving — as much as you want and whenever you want it. The new package broke down to this:

Round trip to Hawaii	\$ 870
Round trip to Christmas	465
Six days of diving	600
Accommodations & meals at the Mini Hotel (based on 4 persons)	419
Two nights in Hawaii	200
Total	<hr/> \$2,554

A little cheaper, but still only five days of diving with two overnights in Hawaii. I began to consider a 2-week trip as the answer.

Then I heard of a live-aboard diving Kiribati. The *Machias* leaves from Christmas Island, diving Fanning and Palmyra Islands. The cost of the 14-day trip is \$2,691, including round-trip air from Hawaii to Christmas. The *Machias* is an 84-foot steel staysail schooner (diesel powered) with 24 single bunks in two forward cabins and one double aft. Air conditioning is free.

Worth the trip? I'm considering it. I like diving out on the edge if the diving is good. If someone wants to beat me to it while I spend all my time trying to figure out if it's worth the trip, here's the contact information.

Frontiers: 800-245-1950

Dive Kiribati: 011-686-81-139
(Kim Anderson)

Mini Hotel: fax 011-686-81-201

Machias: 808-947-5351 (in Hawaii)

For far-out adventure in the other direction, Keith Reynolds writes us about a live-aboard that will boldly go where almost no one has gone before.

The Dahlak Archipelago: Far South in the Red Sea

You've probably always wanted to dive the reefs of the Dahlak Archipelago off the Eritrean coast and then cruise down to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait to finish off your diving. Say what?

Searching for the best of the pristine diving, a group of divers (there are a few spots left open) are chartering the *Sea Surveyor*, a 110-foot converted research vessel. Their search is beyond the Sudan. Here's their premise:

The northern Red Sea is renowned for its world-class diving, which is why it attracts several hundred thousand (mostly European) divers every year. The declining quality of those reefs reflects that popularity: numerous day boats and live-aboards visit the most famous sites every day. As you go further south, beyond range of the day boats, to such sites as the Brothers and Daedalus, the quality of the diving becomes markedly better. But the southern Red Sea has for the most part been inaccessible, primarily because there has been (until now) no stable or friendly country from which to base a dive operation. Consequently, the southern Red Sea has remained largely untouched and unexplored to this day. This area is what the northern Red Sea was 20 years ago: no day boats, no live-aboards, no divers, and no reef damage. The few divers who have managed to get as far south as the reefs off Sudan confirm this. But we are going beyond Sudan, much further south.

In May 1993 the 30-year civil war in Ethiopia ended with the creation of a new country, Eritrea. This half-Christian country is now undergoing a

land rush of development as western entrepreneurs race to build hotels and other projects. This will be our departure point for 12 days of exploratory diving in the southern Red Sea. The day-to-day itinerary is ours to choose and modify based upon our preferences and diving conditions.

Our tentative plan is to begin by exploring the outer islands and reefs of the Dahlak Archipelago off the Eritrean coast, including Harmil Island and Saunders Reef. An overnight crossing will take us to the islands and seamounts off the Yemen coast. Finally, we will cruise down to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait at the southern mouth of the Red Sea to dive the Seven Brothers.

Since we will stay beyond the 12-mile international limit, there will be no difficulties with the other governments in the region. In fact, the *Sea Surveyor* dove several islands off the Yemen coast in August 1994 without incident.

For this trip, we are bringing the *Sea Surveyor* down from Elat (Israel). The *Sea Surveyor* began operating in the northern Red Sea in early 1993. It has nine double-bunk, air-conditioned cabins. An onboard watermaker insures an unlimited supply of hot water. It has a full navigational suite, including radar, echo sounder, and GPS, and a crew of seven to run it. The tanks are aluminum 80s. There are 18 individual camera storage cubicles, each with 220/110V electrical outlets.

Both still and video underwater cameras are available for rental. For those who can't wait to see the results, the boat has a video editing machine and an automatic slide developer. Diving equipment, including computers, can be rented. The

boat is set up with nitrox, and an instructor in our group will be offering a nitrox certification course during the trip.

The cost is \$189 per day for 12 days of unlimited diving. Airfare, of course, is extra — at current prices, \$1,250 to \$1,800 from JFK airport in New York. We expect to go aboard the boat on June 16 and return to

port June 28, 1995. This schedule is not yet final and is subject to change, depending on airline connections.

After a 4- to 5-day crossing from Elat, the boat will pick us up at the port of Mits'iwa (Massawa) in Eritrea. We will fly into the capital city, Asmara, then travel by bus to Mits'iwa, a 3-hour trip. Due to airline

connections, an overnight layover is possible on the outbound leg, possibly at Cairo or Asmara, providing an opportunity for extended trips to the pyramids or other sites.

Contact: Keith Reynolds
Evenings: 215-860-1016
Daytime: 908-294-9700
Fax: 908-294-9704

Socorro, South of Cabo

Where the Wild Things Are

About 7 or 8 years ago, I overheard longtime Houston dive travel guru Kenny Young talking to someone at DEMA. Kenny had a T-shirt for every occasion, even one with a tuxedo printed on it for formal wear. This time Kenny was wearing his scuba shirt: tank printed on the back, BC and regulator on the front. He was talking about his recent trip to Socorro Island. Although the schooling hammerheads and large mantas were becoming less predictable on dive trips in Baja, this was an island where the wild things were. It was a bit of a steam south of the Cabo San Lucas to get there (22 hours) and the boats were sleep-on-the-deck types, but the big creatures were there and Kenny was hot to go back. About this time the Okeanos Aggressor moved to Cocos Island, whose big creatures stole Socorro's thunder in this hemisphere. But now a new luxury live-aboard is offering trips to Socorro. Are the wild things still there?

It had been nearly 9 years since I last dived in the lower Sea of Cortez, so when one of my dive buddies said he was interested in diving that area, I decided to look into putting

together a live-aboard dive vacation. My previous trip was aboard the *Baja Explorador*, but since that boat is no longer in service, my first thought was to use the *Don Jose*; like the *Baja Explorador*, it's chartered through Baja Expeditions and sails from La Paz, Mexico.

Then I heard about a luxury boat, based in Cabo San Lucas, that visited the same sites as the *Don Jose* but stopped at a number of far south locations: the *Solmar V*. I booked it.

Dive? Later, I'm Luxuriating

The *Solmar V* is owned by the people who own the luxury Solmar hotel in Cabo. Although designed for long-range sport fishing trips, the 112-foot U.S.-built boat has been used mostly for whale watching and dive trips since it was put in service in 1993.

Spartan it's not. The main salon resembles a fine San Francisco restaurant, with leather seats, brass rails, and

accent lights bordering the table edges. Lighted etched-glass murals of marlins, dorados, and sailfish — commissioned for \$3,000 each — glow softly beneath the ceiling of padded ostrich hide and stained-glass lights. Each of the 12 staterooms, all below deck, has at least one porthole for natural light; each is equipped with one double bed and one single bed, except for rooms 201 and 203, which have two single beds. (The goal was to have two people per room, 24 guests in all; however, the operators decided to limit rooms 201 and 203 to one person each after this trip.) Room 403 is the "crown jewel" — it even has a refrigerator. Each stateroom has a TV and a VCR (nice touch, but it seemed to encourage people to retreat to their cabins after dinner rather than socializing in the salon). It was my first live-aboard with a shower, toilet, and sink in each cabin.

The *Solmar V* was set up for sport fishing; the owners are still learning that divers' needs are a bit different. We had to keep our gear in our dive bags under large benches lining the perimeter of the rear deck. It didn't prove to be much of a problem, as the deck area is large, but I was told that storage bins for equipment are on order. A rack is also being fabricated for drying wetsuits