
eggs, always cheese; lunch and dinner, a variety of Indonesian mixtures of fish, pork, or mutton in soup, or casserole combinations with known and unknown vegetables. Rice in large quantities accompanied all meals.

Bottom Line

I have mixed feelings about the *Serenade*, mainly because of the inadequate dive leadership and decision making. Perhaps that will be remedied; Dr. Batuna was at the January DEMA show, where he was earnestly attempting to learn from the experts what improvements would benefit his operation.

As for the lovely Murex, I wish I had more time to spend there. On our first-day, warmup shore dive, I photographed at leisure a pugnacious mantis shrimp and several cuttlefish. Both lionfish and a vivid yellow version of a local tunicate turned out to be common local phenomena. On our last day we transferred to a day boat out of the Murex for a couple of dives around the island of Bunaken, a national park. I saw giant clams and schools of barracuda and walls as beautiful as anything we had seen in our sojourn through the islands. For many people, ending their journey here rather than boarding the *Serenade* will be a better choice.

Y.A.

There are two other dive centres in Manado: Nusantara, which is much larger than the family-style Murex, and nearby Barracuda, which has individual cottages. For more information, call Maluku Adventures, 800-566-2585. Maluku also books the *Pendito*, another Indonesian live-aboard that has been catering mainly to the European market. The large, deluxe boat in the area, is the *Cehili*. Call Island Dreams, 800-346-6116, or Tropical Adventures, 800-247-3483, for information.

J. Q.

Beating Your Money There

Readers and resort owners complain; Sea Safaris responds

Imagine your worst travel nightmare.

It couldn't be much worse than what happened to Steve and Beth Green of Colton, California, who showed up last July in the Solomon Islands carrying two prepaid vouchers for the *Bilikiki* live-aboard. They had booked the trip through Sea Safaris, a Manhattan Beach, California, travel agency, to whom they had prepaid \$5,920.

Rick Belmare, owner of the *Bilikiki*, refused to let them board. While he knew they were arriving, he told them that Sea Safaris had not responded to his many

requests for payment. The Greens, he said, could board only if they paid him.

Shocked, the Greens faxed Sea Safaris but received no response. Rather than forgoing their trip, they provided Belmare with credit-card imprints, hoping Sea Safaris' money would arrive before they completed their two-week cruise. It didn't.

Not until the Greens returned home were they able to talk to someone at Sea Safaris, but their claim wasn't satisfied. Finally, after filing a lawsuit and serving Sea Safaris, they got paid — but only in part, they said. On March 11,

Beth Green said Sea Safaris still owed her more than \$1,500.

Deb and Al Kulhawik (Hamden, Connecticut) had a similar experience the week before. They had dealt with Sea Safaris owners Bob and Nancy Ackerman French for years and, Deb told me, considered them friends. Nonetheless, the payment from Sea Safaris didn't arrive at the *Bilikiki* office until they were at sea. Deb said Sea Safaris still owed them for vouchers that were unacceptable to the local dive shop and hotel. "In January," she said, "I was told the money was in accounting." When I talked to her

in March she still hadn't been paid.

Last December, *In Depth* editor John Q. contacted Bob French, who told him that "our business has grown from a small company into a large one. It's not like it used to be when we could do everything ourselves. We have had some problems with book-keeping. Do you know how many people we send on trips in a year? Thousands. And most of them are happy. We had problems; that has been taken care of now."

Of the Greens, French said, "As soon as they returned from their trip and told me there had been a problem, I sent them a check." Beth Green disagreed, having spent nearly \$3,000 in legal fees and still counting.

These instances occurred last August; we have since received complaints from *In Depth* subscribers who have had problems with Sea Safaris travel arrangements to Fiji, Little Cayman, Palau, Turks and Caicos Islands, Bonaire, and Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. To dig deeper into the charges and countercharges, three of my *In Depth* colleagues and I conducted scores of interviews at DEMA and by telephone, with both businesses and travelers, and collected reams of documents, many between Sea Safaris and those issuing complaints.

I called Bob French in late March to ask what was happening. French said they're doing plenty of business and that a few complaints were to be expected when they run thousands of trips a year. But, he said, he is a victim of a "12-month orchestrated and paid-for slander campaign as a result of the politics of dive-magazine advertising." He said that certain magazines are upset that he has pulled his ads. When I asked him to be specific, he said that it is

already a legal issue and he couldn't talk about it. (Representatives of three dive magazines told us that because of past problems they no longer accept Sea Safaris ads.) But problems with travelers he could discuss.

We talked with Dave and Linda Hall of Lincoln, Nebraska, who wanted to get their family together for Christmas in Cabo San Lucas. On March 4, 1994, they made a down payment of \$3,400 and paid an additional \$8,231 in December. They used their dive shop as the retailer and received vouchers from Sea Safaris for their trip.

At the first hotel, Dave Hall told me, he was required to put the room charges on their credit card because, he was told, Sea Safaris had not paid. After several days of faxes, the hotel said the payment had arrived. The same

French said he is a victim of a "12-month orchestrated and paid-for slander campaign as a result of the politics of dive-magazine advertising."

thing happened at the second hotel, but this time the hotel said it hadn't been paid. A month later it charged Hall's credit card \$2,765, meaning the Halls paid twice for their room. Hall is considering legal action. French told me that it was "an accounting issue with the hotel."

Craggie Succop (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) told me she had sent a check to Sea Safaris for her January Bonaire trip. Then, when the price went up \$200, she

authorized the entire trip to be put on her credit card and asked that her check be marked void and returned. When it didn't show, she was told that it had "inadvertently" been deposited. It took nearly two months to get her double payment refunded by Sea Safaris, she said, long after she had returned from Bonaire.

Karinne Bauer of Sacramento, California, booked a group on the *Bilikiki* for June 1995. Everyone made a \$629 deposit with Sea Safaris, she said. But when a call came from Rick Belmare at the *Bilikiki* saying that he was no longer accepting bookings from Sea Safaris, she called Sea Safaris to cancel the trip and get the deposits. Sea Safaris refused, she said, and group members had to go to their credit-card companies to cancel the transactions. "I have dealt with them for years," Bauer told me, "and never had a problem. I'm extremely disappointed."

Louis Zurlo, a member of the group, said he still hadn't gotten his \$629 deposit back; MasterCard wanted him to resolve it with Sea Safaris, he said, but no one at Sea Safaris would return his calls. French told me that as far as he knew everyone had been paid back. When I asked him why Sea Safaris didn't handle the refunds but required individuals to go to their credit-card companies, he said it was because he had sent the down payment to the *Bilikiki*. Belmare denied receiving any money for this group from Sea Safaris.

In another conversation, French told me, "I am not a bank. Do you know how easy it is in this country to go to your credit-card company and get your money back?" He said he had a person who handled credit-card issues nearly full time, and "I'd be surprised if there are any outstanding problems." When I asked who was in his accounting depart-

ment, he told me Nancy French and Eric Ackerman, among others.

I told French that I was surprised by the number of complaints, since Sea Safaris has had an excellent reputation, but that in the last 12 months things had changed. "Isn't it curious," he said. "The last 12 months. See what I mean?" He talked again about the defamation campaign, which he had described in the winter edition of his newsletter to dive stores. To quote:

"The slander started about two years ago. We became aware that certain individuals in the dive industry were disseminating information regarding Sea Safaris which was defamatory. Initially we were advised that this was being done in an attempt to stop us from 'setting a bad example.'

"This year we continued to encounter a number of situations wherein representations were made regarding Sea Safaris that were and are simply not true. In fact we are aware of one occasion where a mailing went out to a number of people in the industry which indicated that Sea Safaris had left people stranded on a beach in Micronesia. Never happened. But then you probably already knew the definition of slander and libel is the attempt to damage a reputation by spreading falsehood. The key here is falsehood.

"We have actually had a dive store which owns its own travel agency use the slander as a tool to try to bolster their own travel business. . . ."

Defamatory campaign or not, our investigation revealed that nearly all cases we reviewed had similar elements: When the traveler presents his voucher, the hotel says it has not been paid and requires a credit-card imprint. The traveler has to track down someone at Sea Safaris by

phone or fax, often on weekends or several time zones away. If he gets a response, Sea Safaris claims it has paid or the check is on the way. But the traveler is caught in the middle. Sometimes payment arrives or is located while the traveler is still there. But in many cases, the traveler arrives home having paid twice.

French's response was that many hotels were illegally billing

What's unfortunate about this, said Moody, is that "guests leave hating Fiji and hating the resort. When they come for a week or two, they deserve better."

his people a second time. He named three that he believed followed this practice. In every case I cited to him, he explained how it had been settled or how the problem resided outside Sea Safaris' control.

But many hotels and live-aboards will no longer work with Sea Safaris. Divi hotels — Flamingo Beach in Bonaire and Tiara Beach on Cayman Brac — no longer accept Sea Safaris clients, claiming a past-due total of \$20,000. Divi representative David Sommerville told me that they have turned to an attorney for collection. He said too many people arrived with prepaid vouchers but with no money from Sea Safaris.

"I personally tried to work it out in a manner acceptable to both sides, but received nothing but excuses," Sommerville told me. "So we advised them they that if we didn't receive money in advance, we would have to charge

guests on arrival, and did that four times. We could no longer do business with them because they were damaging our reputation and hurting our clients."

I asked French about this. He said, "Their accounting system is a mess. We will not sell them."

Captain Don's Habitat isn't owed any money, but representative Richard Mitsoda said they no longer accepted bookings from Sea Safaris. "We gave them every latitude for a year and three quarters, but when it took us 20 to 30 phone calls and faxes to get one payment, it became too much. We lost money dealing with them because the cost of using labor to go after the payments was too great. People would leave and we still were unpaid."

The day after I talked with Mitsoda, French told me he could book the Habitat "right now. In fact, we booked a group in there this morning."

Palau Pacific Hotel's representative Lui Wody said they had not accepted bookings from Sea Safaris for six months, though people who booked before still arrive. She said that eight couples in the last few months had arrived with prepaid vouchers for which the hotel had not been paid and had to charge them again. "They send faxes to Sea Safaris," she said, "but don't get answers."

French won't book Palau Pacific any more, he said, because of the "new management," and said he had enough complaints "to paper a wall." When one of my researchers called Sea Safaris on March 22, she was told that the hotel was dirty and they wouldn't book them. *In Depth* has received no reader complaints about Palau Pacific recently, and a major dive travel agent I talked with said he's had plenty of people return recently with no complaints.

Bryan Sheedy, who owns the Mount Pleasant Guest House in the Turks and Caicos, had an exclusive relationship with Sea Safaris until last May. Now, he told me, “they owe me \$27,000. I really need this money. I’m a small operation and this is a hell of a blow. What’s so disgusting is that all the divers Sea Safaris sent had a great time.”

What’s more, Sheedy said, Sea Safaris collected the 18 percent government tax, then never paid the government. “I had to pay that out of my own pocket,” he told me. French told me this wasn’t true. Sheedy wanted reimbursement for unauthorized ads, French said, and he wasn’t about to pay him.

Sheedy called that “malarkey.” He acknowledged that \$11,000 of the \$27,000 was for ads but said it was based on an agreement that Sea Safaris would pay 20 percent of his ads in return for a 20 percent commission on the business he generated for them in an exclusive booking arrangement. Sheedy said Sea Safaris kept taking the 20 percent commission but never paid for their 20 percent share of the ad.

In a second conversation, French said, “The ads in *Skin Diver* were butt-ugly, cost a fortune,” and were ineffective. “There are only three bookings in question,” he said. Sheedy has retained an attorney.

Fiji’s Garden Island Resort, according to manager Maureen Prior, is owed \$22,500. They haven’t cut off Sea Safaris because they hope by working with them they can get paid off eventually.

Drs. Steve and Mindy Frankel, two Garden Island guests earlier this year, advanced Sea Safaris \$5,034. They had no problem at the first hotel, but when they arrived on December 31 at the

Garden Island, they said, Prior told them that Sea Safaris had not prepaid. She required a credit-card imprint and faxed Sea Safaris to get payment. Frankel said that payment never arrived, so his VISA card was charged. He has tried to get this resolved but said Sea Safaris had told him that they had paid their bills. Prior told me that she had not been paid by Sea Safaris. Frankel is trying to get a refund through VISA.

Other Fijian resorts claim that Sea Safaris owes them money. I

“I am not a bank,” French told me. “Do you know how easy it is in this country to go to your credit-card company and get your money back?”

asked Bob French why they seemed up in arms. He replied that an individual (whom I don’t think would be prudent to name) had falsely told the Fijian operators, airline representatives, and others in October that Sea Safaris had filed for bankruptcy, “even giving them the date.” The unnamed individual denied to me that he had made such a statement. Neither Maureen Prior nor Joan Moody, proprietor of Moody’s Namenalala, also in Fiji, had heard about that or recalled anyone ever telling them of a Sea Safaris bankruptcy. French told me he has not filed for bankruptcy.

Moody has had her own problems with Sea Safaris. She received guests last August with vouchers that hadn’t been paid,

then got a series of “check’s in the mail” responses. When I asked French about the \$800 she was owed, he said he didn’t owe it because the guests had left early.

Moody told me she had credited them for early departure and that “the material I sent to you shows that.” What’s unfortunate about this, she said, is that “guests leave hating Fiji and hating the resort. When they come for a week or two, they deserve better.” Moody said she was surprised when she saw the large booth Sea Safaris had taken at the January DEMA convention to sell business.

French clings to his belief that “powerful people with a lot of money” are orchestrating the campaign against him. But as one dive operator told us, if there is any conspiracy it’s among the scores of resorts that have talked to each other and learned of their common difficulties.

So what’s a traveler to do?

I talked with Jill Brock of the Cyprus, California, Better Business Bureau, who said they have had five complaints against Sea Safaris in the past 15 months. Sea Safaris satisfied the customer in one; in two it did not, and Sea Safaris failed to respond to the other two. If Sea Safaris were a member of the Better Business Bureau — and they were not, she said — they would be required to answer all complaints.

While the Better Business Bureau does not “endorse, recommend, or disapprove of any company, product, or service,” their report on Sea Safaris states: “We urge consumers to verify all arrangements prior to departure on any trip.”

Ben Davison
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