
willing to take the risk because I love Belize so much. I figured if I were going to die trying, it may as well be in Paradise. I didn't have to die. I spent some time with Fred and his assistant Fran at the end of the dock learning skills, and within ten minutes of getting wet I was no longer terrified. But the real joy came in the first dive. Before I had time to think about terror, claustrophobia, or where my next breath was coming from, Fred was pointing out the critters,

the coral formations, the odd patterns on the sandy bottom — whatever looked fascinating. I couldn't stand to do anything but pay attention. He was right with me all the way, pointing, praising, gently testing at just the moment when my confidence was high. . . . The accommodations, food, company (when I wasn't too tired to notice) were the best I've had in Belize."

Finally, two other good possibilities, both of which I've

visited. To dive the Blue Hole and excellent outer reefs, there is **Lighthouse Caye**. It's easy to reach by a short hop by plane. From **Turneffe Lodge**, another long boat ride, you can dive the Elbow, about as close as you can come to a South Pacific fish life experience in the Caribbean.

Ben Davison

*Next month: a look at
Grand Cayman*

The Sad Saga of Sea Safaris

The end of the road for a rip-off . . . or is it?

Never have so many travelers been screwed by so few travel agents. The sorry history of Sea Safaris' treatment of divers, dive operators, and resort owners over the last 18 months is a saga with twists and turns but apparently without end.

Owned and operated by Bob and Nancy Ackerman French in Manhattan Beach since 1981, Sea Safaris sent thousands of divers off happily to hundreds of destinations. I was one of them. But something went awry, and some time in 1994 the Frenches apparently stopped forwarding some of the money to the resorts they booked. Divers would arrive at their destinations and discover that their reservations had not been paid. One industry insider estimates that Sea Safaris may have siphoned off a million dollars.

At first, resorts let the divers stay and trusted Sea Safaris to make good. But after it became obvious that Sea Safaris was not

going to pay, business owners had no choice but to tell divers that their Sea Safaris vouchers were worthless and require them to pay again for their accommodations and diving.

In October 1993, *In Depth* became the first publication to break the story. Readers Steve and Beth Green informed us that they had paid Sea Safaris for a trip on the live-aboard *Bilikiki*, only to learn on arrival in the Solomon Islands that Sea Safaris had not paid their passage. After faxes and phone calls failed to get Sea Safaris to forward their payment, they had to pony up again the full amount for a two-week trip. Their attorney was able to get Sea Safaris to refund some, but not all, of their money.

Over the next several months, we heard from scores of divers who had had similar experiences. Several hotels that had been stiffed by Sea Safaris refused to book them any longer. Little hotels like

Fiji's Garden Isle and Mt. Pleasant Guest House in the Turks and Caicos were owed as much as \$20,000. *Skin Diver* magazine, too, was owed money, and publisher Bill Gleason had stopped taking their advertisements.

In March I spoke twice with Bob French. He denied owing anyone anything. When I quoted from letters and other documents written by disgruntled clients, French claimed that the hotels had lousy bookkeeping. What was really happening, he told me, was that certain people, whom he did not name, were orchestrating an industry-wide vendetta against him.

We outlined our investigative findings in our April 1995 issue, citing interviews with several divers who were out thousands of dollars each. That didn't end the problem. People who hadn't read our previous pieces reported the same pattern; they paid Sea Safaris, then had to pay again after traveling halfway around the world.

In September, Nancy French called me. Everyone was out to get her, she said, and we were publishing lies. I said that if she would tell me specifically where we had erred, I would correct it. She could not. When I asked her specifically about individuals who had complained to us, she denied that she and her husband Bob had done anything wrong. She repeated that the industry was out to get her, but could offer no evidence.

Meanwhile, the Sea Safaris charade continued, but got more complicated. Judith Caldwell of Santa Barbara, California, told us that she and her husband and another couple had paid Sea Safaris \$11,374, in two installments, by credit card in May and by check in July, for air fare and accommodations at the Garden Isle and Marlin Bay Resorts in Fiji. In return they received vouchers for accommodations and diving from something called Select Escapes.

In September, both Fijian hotels refused to accept the vouchers. Neither had heard of or been paid by Select Escapes. When Caldwell explained that the vouchers had been provided by Sea Safaris, the hotels explained that Sea Safaris owed them a bundle and they had stopped doing business with them. The Caldwells and their friends paid a second time.

When they returned to Los Angeles, they went directly to the Sea Safaris office in nearby Manhattan Beach. It was closed. Through the window they they could see a few travel posters and cardboard boxes. At home, they opened their credit card statement to learn that in September, without authorization, Sea Safaris had billed their credit card an additional \$4,925 for airfare, for which they had paid with the July check. In effect, they paid twice for the airfare and twice for the land.

While Sea Safaris is no more, the Frenches may still be doing business under other monikers — in particular, Select Escapes, Manhattan Marketing, and Safaris Cayman, and perhaps Express Travel Group and Summit Travel as well.

How they continue to take money from divers while staying a step ahead of the sheriff boggles one's mind. But they do. The Redondo Beach, California, law firm of Hruska and Lesser, which is representing several clients, has received a default judgment — in effect, the Frenches didn't answer — but attorney Gina Schott says it will still take up to two years to conclude the suit. An Illinois collection agency is pursuing the Frenches for business debt. Credit reports show that they have walked from other debts. Rick Lesser says there may not be much to go around when the divers' suit is concluded.

Readers have also told us that the California Attorney General's office is preparing a complaint,

but the AG's office refused to confirm this.

After a lot of wrong turns, I recently found a phone number for Manhattan Marketing in Rolling Hills Estates, where the Frenches reside. Nancy French was more interested in how I got the number than in answering my questions. She wouldn't acknowledge that she was out of business or that they had stiffed or failed to satisfy any of their customers. Instead, she blamed Bill Gleason, the publisher of *Skin Diver*, and attorney Rick Lesser for her troubles. When I asked what they had done, she told me she had said too much already, and hung up.

By alerting our readers to the Sea Safaris ripoff in previous issues, we helped many avoid it. If you feel you've been treated dishonestly by any business associated with the diving industry, please let us know. We'll pursue it, do our best to stop it, and share our findings.

Ben Davison



MARINE SUPER HERO. What makes a mean bowl of soup, fights venereal diseases, and swims like a fish? Sharks, which are already suffering from the pressure of “finning” — cutting off the fin for soup — may now be facing additional demand. At Magainin Pharmaceuticals of Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania, research-

ers are working on a potential antibiotic taken from sharks. The substance, called squalamine, appears to be effective against a variety of sexually transmitted viruses and bacteria, including gonorrhea, herpes, and the AIDS virus. It may also be useful as a spermicidal contraceptive.