

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Costa de Cocos, Xcalak, Mexico

good diving near the Belize border

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www.undercurrent.org

Editorial Office:

Ben Davison
Publisher and Editor
Undercurrent
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102
Sausalito, CA 94965
BenDavison@undercurrent.org

Dear Reader:

In 1999, a past editor of Undercurrent opened the attractive Maya Ha resort near Mahahual, four hours south of Cancun. After a drawn-out battle with the resort's developer, Maya Ha closed and was reopened a couple of years ago as the Maya Palms Dive Resort. I arrived in April for my third visit in several years, and was upset to learn that the staff was "too busy" to take me diving for the next two days. Every employee did the work of three people. The divemaster was also responsible for repairing everything, the chef was the groundskeeper, and everyone was helping with room renovations. Divers were at the bottom of the priority list -- at a so-named "dive resort." After four days of lousy treatment, I checked out of Maya Palms and drove an hour south to Costa De Cocos.

A flat, straight, paved road with Mayan ruins scattered along the way took me through low canopies of jungle full of butterflies smashing into my windshield and vultures eating iguana roadkill. I only had to drive on dirt roads a few miles. One wound through coconut groves to Costa de Cocos, sprawled across limestone beach.

The resort is in the small town of Xcalak, at the southern end of the Yucatan Peninsula and a few miles from the Belize border. The sleepy fishing village is a 21st-century amalgam of clapboard shacks in the town's center and beachfront McMansions built by American baby boomers along the outskirts. Most visitors come for



Beachfront palapas at Costa de Cocos



the bonefishing or to escape the developing coastline farther north. Not that many come to dive -- yet.

It's a bit like Cozumel 30 years ago. The Xcalak National Reef Park has banned fishing since 2000 so as a result, this part of the Great Maya Reef has more grouper, snapper and other large fish than Mahajual up the coast. It's not as fishy as the South Pacific, so pelagic fans may not find enough variety. Another downfall is that some visitors are newly certified and fresh off the cruise ships at Mahajual. Their inexperience often shortened dives and sucked the divemasters' atten-

tion during my week-long stay, so some dives were wasted. However, many sites filled with gigantic tarpon and friendly, curious turtles made it excellent for Caribbean diving. I was lucky to arrive ahead of the rainy season, so I got great visibility. The spur and grove formations, visible for more than 150 feet, looked like rolling hills surrounding underwater valleys with remarkable swim troughs and pristine, colorful bursts of coral. Plus, Xcalak's relaxed atmosphere, other water-based activities and nearby Mayan ruins make a visit worthwhile for mellow divers.

Xcalak has several small resorts and dive shops. The biggest is XTC Dive Center, which I used for my trip to Banco Chinchorro. But Costa de Coco is the only full-service dive resort in town. Most dive sites are just five to 20 minutes from its dock. I set up my gear in the main dive boat, a 33-foot panga with twin 115-horsepower motors and a rack that could hold 10 tanks, all standard steel filled to 3,000 psi. The other boat was a 27-foot Albatross with twin 60-horsepower motors. Both had shade canopies but rides to the sights were only five to 20 minutes, and the surface intervals were back at the resort.

On my first dive at La Poza, a five-minute boat ride from the resort, I dropped through the surface into a large, sandy bowl embedded in the reef. Stark boulders 150 feet apart ringed the bottom at 100 feet. A graceful eagle ray glided over a crack in the rock where a green moray was being cleaned by banded coral shrimp. Suddenly, a tarpon seven feet long approached me. It was the color of tarnished silver, with scales the size of tea saucers. At least 60 of these giants hung motionless or swam in lazy circles. I swam leisurely through them, close enough to touch. La Poza is a notable dive site because of these tarpon that hang out for doses of seafood churned in currents, making it happy hour year-round. My wall-side meandering found lobster holes, morays, schools of small fry and black coral. After ascending, I handed my gear back to the driver before climbing in via a short, narrow ladder hooked over the side.

Costa de Cocos resembles a small tribal village of thatched-roof huts but a bit more upscale, being built with carved stone and glossy tropical wood. The 16 beach-front palapas are set far enough apart to ensure quiet and privacy but are centered about the main lodge with an outdoor bar and restaurant, where diving and fishing guests mingled with full-time expats at day's end. My cabana, set 30 feet from the shore, was sparsely furnished but colorful with a green tile floor and yellow floral wallpaper, and cleaned thoroughly every day. The white-tiled bathroom was sparkling and always provided hot water. A fan and plenty of cross-ventilation made air-conditioning unnecessary. Every palapa offered a safe and a variety of lending books, although my selection was uninspiring. The resort had an on-site desalinization plant using reverse osmosis purification for tap water, and a wind-powered electricity generator ran 24 hours. The main lodge had a computer with free wireless Internet.

Dives lasted 60 minutes and mostly didn't go below 80 feet. Divemasters Steve, an American, and Ramon, a Yucatan native, interviewed divers to place them in the appropriate group. Even in non-drift dives, they made divers stay in a group and decided when to ascend. They were good at pointing out notable marine life and made efforts for everyone to maximize dive times -- Steve took an extra-large tank so the one inexperienced person in my group could breathe from his octopus while the rest of us

Costa de Cocos, Xcalak

Diving (<i>experienced</i>)	★★★
Diving (<i>beginners</i>)	★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Food	★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale

could enjoy the entire dive. Costa de Cocos does not have Nitrox, nor does any other dive resort in the southern Yucatan. Steve told me the resort had no plans to get it anytime soon. However, XTC offers Nitrox for \$12 a fill.

Costa de Cocos' other don't-miss dive site is Chimineas, a large cave with two tubular-shaped holes stretching 80 feet to the surface. These chimneys illuminated La Catedral, a cave abundant with silversides hovering at the bottom, while barracuda and schools of silversides moseyed through the light beams. With no current, I easily descended to 60 feet and entered at the bottom into sheer rock walls encrusted

with soft corals. I swam to the southern end of the cave, crammed with pillars of hard corals, and hovered over some huge black grouper. One four-footer was surrounded by a small city of cleaner fish and remora.

The standard two-tank dive trip was finished by 1 p.m. but I booked some extra dives for the afternoon. Diving was a bit schizophrenic and unpredictable. For example, one morning, I rolled off the boat to encounter a pair of curious turtles that swam within 18 inches and stared me in the face. Then I checked out shoals of snapper and grunts, and the cleaning stations were crowded with creole wrasse. The safety-stop entertainment was a six-foot-wide stingray grazing in the sand below. However, on a one-hour dive the next afternoon, I only saw a dozen fish. But there was also fishing, kayaking and snorkeling to enjoy. One afternoon I drove to Mahajual to buy tourist tchotchkes. It was supposedly a younger, hipper crowd than mellow Xcalak, but dull shopping and restaurants made it a low-end version of Cozumel. Another day, I lounged in a hammock in front of my palapa. The ocean breezes, well-kept grounds and a "mosquito trap" device meant no fear of being eaten alive. The shore is mostly shallow but I could plunge in for a dip off the dock near the main lodge. Both air and water temperatures were in the upper 80s.

Costa de Cocos has the only restaurant and bar in town that is open every day, so it is the center of Xcalak's otherwise nonexistent nightlife. I took many meals with the Randalls and shared cold cervezas at the bar with American expats and fellow divers, many of whom owned second homes there and came down every few months. Continental breakfast was included in the room rate and served as a buffet of fresh fruit, breads with jam, cereal and pancakes. Omelets, French toast and eggs could also be ordered. Lunch portions were gigantic and no item cost more than \$6. The fish tacos were excellent, but I'd stay away from the burger. Fresh lettuce and tomatoes for salads were always in abundance. The dinner menu was not extensive but everything was

Crime in Curacao

While divers complain about theft on Bonaire, let's not overlook Curacao. Here's a report from *Undercurrent* subscriber Monty Chandler (Charlotte, NC), who dived at Habitat Curacao last March.

"At Playa Kalki, I met a couple whose rental car had just been robbed, and the thieves had also jacked up the right side and stolen both the wheels and tires. The next day at Playa Jeremi, I stopped into a snack shop for ice cream and came back out to find thieves had gotten into my truck and stolen my sunglasses and wallet. I forgot to put my stuff in the safe before heading out. I only had \$5 in my wallet, but I had to spend two hours on the phone canceling credit cards."

The experience also cost Chandler an unexpected \$120 -- because his wallet also had his room keys, Habitat had to change the locks and move him to a different room. Fortunately, his wife had separate credit cards to pay the hotel bill, and Chandler was smart enough to leave most of their cash in the room safe.

The Most Likely Time for Your Regulator to Fail

The most common time for a regulator to fail is on your first dive after it is serviced. When 50 feet into his first dive in St. Maarten, *Undercurrent* reader Stephen Moore (Toronto, Ontario) found that his Scubapro G250 regulator failed to give air, even after he adjusted the inhalation pressure. "No air whatsoever flowed from the second stage, and depressing the purge button did nothing." But the regulator had been serviced immediately before his trip. Moore switched to his spare air tank and aborted the dive.

He took the regulator back to the Toronto technician who had serviced it. It turned out the lever that

moves while the purge button is pressed was not properly attached. "The suspicion was that when I turned the inhalation pressure adjustment knob, this never disengaged." The lever was removed and the regulator then worked perfectly. It was returned to Scubapro, which found nothing wrong but replaced all the internal parts except for the diaphragm.

Actually, it is common for problems to appear immediately after a regulator is serviced. Technicians make mistakes, too often, it seems. When you get your regulator back, test it on a tank in the store before you go home. If it's adjustable, test the adjustment while breathing through your regulator. Before your first dive, test it again. And be alert throughout that dive.

delicious. Ilana makes pizza dough from scratch -- the lobster mango pizza is a local favorite but I also liked the pepperoni. All entrées came with Ilana's homemade soup of the day and dessert. Her fresh strawberry shortcake with homemade whipped cream and shortbread crust was a perfect ending to my evening meal. The well-stocked bar featured cocktails like the Caribbean cruiser and mojito with fresh mint, although the wine selection was mediocre.

On my last day of diving, I went to Banco Chinchorro, a mostly submerged coral atoll 300 miles long and 18 miles from the mainland. Wall dives on the outer reef went from 30 to 130 feet. XTC Dive Center was the only dive shop taking divers there but mandated a minimum of four people and calm conditions. It was expensive: \$160 for three dives, lunch and snacks. (Costa de Cocos didn't offer trips there, but their boats are too small to make the long ride a comfortable one anyway).

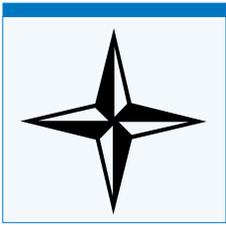
We departed at 7:30 a.m. on the Tzimin-Ha, a custom-built, speedy dive boat. The sea was like a mirror for the 90-minute ride. Unfortunately, I couldn't get away from inexperienced divers ruining a dive. The first dive at Cayo Centro featured six people with varying degrees of experience entering a fast-flowing current to 100-foot depths, so everyone got separated. For 10 minutes, I hovered behind a rock, waiting for Luis, the divemaster, but a shoal of two-foot long amberjacks and a motor-cycle-sized black grouper joined me for the wait. Because the other divers had to be rounded up, the dive lasted only a half-hour.

The second dive was better because we were more sheltered from currents. For the final, and best, dive, I backrolled and headed straight for the sandy bottom at 45 feet. I lay in a field of garden eels writhing in dense clusters, and even saw two of them fighting. As I finned along the edge of the reef, a shoal of huge parrotfish munched mouthfuls of white sand, resembling alien, turquoise-hued goats grazing on an otherworldly landscape. While I swam among them, a gray reef shark did a slow circle above. My safety stop was rife with snapper and grunts. I would have loved to do more at Chinchorro, but the cost was prohibitive. The constant currents bring lots of fish, though it has been heavily fished for decades. Another downside: The variety of shipwrecks from every time period is off-limits to divers, although snorkelers are free to get close.

While XTC was good for my last day's diving, Costa de Cocos was a well-oiled machine that knew what good customer service meant. With an armada of boats, competent boat drivers and divemasters, it can efficiently accommodate both fishers and divers. I liked that I could take advantage of other dive shops nearby and watersports if I so chose. The lack of Nitrox is a drawback, although XTC provides it for Banco Chinchorro trips, where it really counts. If you're a relaxed diver who enjoys diving among healthy, pristine Caribbean coral and likes staying in sleepy, small beachfront villages, Xcalak is your place. It has better marine life, atmo-

sphere, cheaper prices and more opportunity to mingle with locals than the cruise-ship bustle of Mahajual.

--S.V.M.



Diver's Compass: Costa de Cocos charges \$60 nightly for a single room, \$65 for a double through December 15, then rates go to \$70 and \$75; hotel tax is 12 percent . . . Two-tank dives are \$60, an additional dive is \$45 but ask about discounts on multiple dives and dive packages for four or more divers . . . The best time to dive is springtime and early summer, before the rains and hurricane season make visibility at dive sites unpredictable . . . Lunch costs between U.S. \$3 and \$5; four-course dinner entrées range from \$12 (vegetarian) to \$22 (steak and lobster) . . .

For a change of pace, dine at the Leaky Palapa, an upscale restaurant that locals raved about . . . Mayan ruins are within driving distance both north and south of town, and even in Xcalak proper . . . Costa de Cocos and XTC don't take credit cards, only cash or online payments via PayPal . . . Bring lots of cash because there are no ATMs, and the places that do take cards often charge extra, from three to 15 percent . . . Costa de Cocos Web site: www.costadecocos.com; XTC Web site: www.xtcdivecenter.com.

The Pelagian, Wakatobi, Indonesia

mediocre food and few fish aren't worth the high price

Dear Reader:

Diving in Wakatobi offers two alternatives: a land-based operation with 52 guests staying in a holiday-camp atmosphere, or a trip aboard the Pelagian. While the Wakatobi Resort's "house reef" is legendary for its diverse marine life and glorious wall, trips to nearby reefs involve a 45-minute ride with a dozen other divers. I opted for the Pelagian's quieter environs and access to sites the resort's motorboats can't reach.

Wakatobi's service started with a flourish. After flying 13 hours to Tokyo, then eight more to Denpasar, Bali. I was met there by the staff, who sped me through customs and immigration. A twin-propeller beater delivered me three hours later to the remote airstrip on Tomia, a small island 400 miles east of Bali, and from there my boat trip took only 20 minutes. The Pelagian was the first stop. Five of us got off while the rest stayed onboard for the trip to Wakatobi on the island of Onemobaa.

Unfortunately, the trip went steadily downhill. My 11-day trip was marked by repetitive dives at overfished sites, bad food and overpriced drinks. I can't complain about the comfortable accommodations or divemasters' optimistic cheer, but those weren't enough to make me feel I was getting \$350-a-day's worth of enjoyment.

Wakatobi is an acronym for the larger islands -- Wangi, Kaledupa, Tomia, Binongki - in a group southeast of Sulawesi in the Banda Sea. The Pelagian's itinerary included an area 100 miles wide and 200 miles across, mostly in the Tukangbesi National Marine Park, but the area is so overfished, pelagic lovers will be disappointed. Wakatobi made a deal with locals to protect 12 miles of coastline from fishing, but this is tiny in comparison with the Pelagian's range. I came for muck diving, so my expectations weren't deflated, but the lack of reef fish gradually made diving less enjoyable.



After an exhaustive, ill-timed briefing that forced me to assemble equipment and cameras in the dark, the boat motored south to start the next day's diving at Binongki. It was a choice site for a checkout dive, but we spent all day here. Standard dive profiles were thrown to the wind. The first dive on Fish Wall was in 30 feet of water for 70 minutes, the second dive was a drift in 15 feet for an hour. For the third dive, I descended to 135 feet and followed the Cavern Wall, covered in pristine coral, barrel sponges, anemones and nudibranchs. The reefs and walls were in mint

condition, reminding me of Palau and Red Sea reefs in the 1980s. For the night dive, I was dropped onto Pintu Timur at Binongko. Not much to see, and we all agreed it had just been one long checkout day.

Built in 1965 as a private yacht, the Pelagian was formerly the Fantasea, cruising the Red Sea before Wakatobi owners Lorenz Maeder and Erwin Wöber purchased and restored her. She is steady but slow, with a speed of seven knots. I had one of two deluxe cabins, with a double and twin bed. Every cabin had a large dresser and closets with room for suitcases. The air-conditioning was easily adjustable. Plush bathrobes and towels were luxurious touches. Roomy bathrooms had marble sinks and tile, glass-enclosed showers with rainshower heads giving plenty of pressure and hot water, and high-end toiletries. My end-of-day shower was a luxurious joy.

The upper deck could double as a soccer field and offered comfortable seating under a canvas awning or in teak deck chairs. The area afore the cockpit was my favorite reading place -- always a cool breeze and I never encountered another guest there. The main deck's stern was spacious but the dining table was always covered in dripping camera gear. I wouldn't classify the Pelagian as photographer-friendly -- the camera room was too far from the dive deck. Neither of the two large rinse tanks was dedicated to cameras, so booties and masks shared muddy water with \$10,000 camera setups. Despite complaints, the situation never improved. While the camera room could accommodate six photographers, I couldn't imagine the situation if all 12 guests required space. There are dozens of outlets, both 110 and 220 volts, for chargers but no air compressor.

The four daily dives were at 7:30, 10:30, 2:30 and either a dusk dive at 5:30 or a 7:30 night dive after dinner. Aluminum 80s were filled to 3,000 psi. Dive times were limited to 70 minutes, 60 at night, so after paying a substantial premium for 32-percent Nitrox fills, I often came up from a 30-foot dive with a half a tank of air. For every dive, I climbed onto a peppy inflatable powered by two outboards. The two tenders handled six divers each, plus divemaster and pilot. I did rollouts and easily climbed back in on a long, angled ladder. Brom, my driver, who spoke fluent English, retrieved my BC before I boarded and treated camera gear as though it were his own. I used my safety sausages on two occasions, but otherwise the seas were calm and currents gentle.

At the large plateau of Metropolis, I swam along the ridge and finally saw some large fish action -- gray reef and whitetip sharks, a large sea turtle and a huge school of blue fusiliers. Then we motored to Hoga in the Kaledupa Islands to explore the unusual contours of the Inner and Outer Pinnacles. I photographed a school of large chevron barracuda, lionfish, and porcelain crabs posed on mushroom anemones. Expansive fields of pristine table, brain and staghorn coral crowded together like commuters during rush hour. The dusk dive was through a series of pinnacles at Hoga Buoy, with large overhangs at 20 feet. Drifting through the stone reefs, I saw large crabs but little else.

The Italian divemasters, Marco Camorali and Sissi Pagani, were very familiar with dive sites and readily available for questions. The Pelagian strictly enforced the buddy system so being a lone traveler, I was assigned as Marco's buddy. This

Pelagian, Wakatobi

Diving (*experienced*) ★★
(*three stars if you take a seven-day trip*)

Diving (*beginners*) ★★★

Accommodations ★★★★

Service and Attitude ★★★

Food ★

Money's Worth ★★

(*three stars if you take a seven-day trip*)

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Worldwide Scale

didn't work well. I was kicked in the head a dozen times, then admonished for drifting ten yards behind him. But our relationship greatly improved, and I respected his profound interest in the reef flora and fauna. After the third day, the strict buddy rules were abandoned and though dive times were still limited, I was allowed to roam.

Even though I went in June during dry season, it often rained so guests congregated in the salon, tight for 12 divers and two divemasters. Most DVDs were bootlegs and poor copies. Music always played from the boat's iPod but there was seldom agreement on selection or volume. There was a definite segregation between guests and crew. Was it mandated? The front of the boat was off limits to guests, and

the crew never came midsection or aft, so I never learned about their country and customs.

The salon doubled as the dining area. Standard breakfast choices were offered daily, and it was then when I chose my lunch and dinner from three choices. Servers happily accommodated requests and offered some interesting dishes, but overall the food wasn't well prepared. Meals were cold, and vegetables and meats were overcooked. One duck dish had the consistency of last week's pot roast. Though dressed in imaginative sauces, the chicken was inedible. Desserts were rough. At least the salad ingredients were fresh and crisp, with plenty of ripe tomatoes, and delicious Indonesian fried rice and noodle dishes were good alternatives. A bottomless jar filled with delicious homemade cookies didn't last long, nor did the fruit bowl of mangosteens, salak and ripe bananas. Hot water and the espresso machine were always primed, although I grumbled about the drink prices. Local Bintang beer costing 50 cents at market was billed at \$2.30. Sodas were \$1.50. Mediocre wine retailing for \$8 a bottle was sold here for \$8.50 a glass and \$40 to \$60 a bottle. Some passengers racked up several hundred dollars in beverage bills.

Between stops at reefs and walls, the captain motored at night toward the midway point of Butan Bay, a citadel of muck diving. I loaded my macro lens, camping at the bit to get in the mud. The first descent was to Asphalt Pier, a village dumping ground. Critters sheltered in truck tires, engine blocks, thousands of bras and other detritus of an expanding Third World civilization. I photographed Coleman shrimp, ribbon eels, longspine and mombasa lionfish, panda and saddleback anemone fish, and the elusive ghost pipefish, and enjoyed 45 minutes with a stunning juvenile batfish. The visibility was cramped at 50 feet, and the 78-degree water temperature was cooler than the average 84 degrees, but there was no current.

Next, I explored Chicky Beach's sandy slope down to 50 feet and was rewarded with harlequin shrimp, waspfish, gobies, blennies, puffers, and an acre of black spiny sea urchins offering protection for myriad juvenile reef fish I had only seen in field guides. Marco spotted the most expertly camouflaged critters, including a half-inch peacock razorfish tumbling in the gravel. Many photo ops were lost to a current-driven sandstorm but Neptune was forgiven after granting an incredible night dive. During 60 minutes at Magic Pier between two and 25 feet, I photographed mandarin fish and octopuses emerging from shadows, dense masses of shrimpfish and



The Pelagian

A Different Experience at Wakatobi Resort

Undercurrent subscribers who recently stayed at the Wakatobi Resort have no complaints about the resort diving, compared to our reviewer's liveboard trip.

Chrisanda Button and Rickie Sterne (Elkins, AR) went last October and say Wakatobi deserves its reputation as a premier dive resort. "Not only is the diving beautiful, the service excellent, the accommodations comfortable and the food delicious, you get to feel good about being at a resort that works hard to maintain good ecological practices." Dive gear setup is as simple as upon a liveboard. "Take your gear to the shed on the day of your arrival and thereafter it will be moved from shore to boat and back again by the boat crew. They set it up each day, quickly learning just how high each diver liked to carry his tank." They also had no problem with food or the staff. "We felt we had dined in a fine restaurant all week. The Indonesian staff were so attentive that by midweek they were mimicking our Southern speech patterns, saying 'Here's some water, y'all.'"

"Yes, you are paying a slight premium for all of the above, but it is our opinion that it is worth every penny and more," say Phil and Patricia Tobin (Portland, OR), who also went in October. Beach entry 35 feet in front of the resort led to a magnificent wall and drift dive. "On the checkout dive, I spotted a turtle, lionfish, bumphead parrot fish, and more nudibranchs than I can count," says Phil. "From there,

it only got better." Their take on the food: "Not gourmet, but reasonably healthy with a good variety." The only fault: poor lighting in the bungalows. "Bring a headlamp so you can read at night." They're going again this fall and plan to spend a week on the *Pelagian*.

Larry D. Gohl (Antioch, IL) also wasn't disappointed with his May trip. "The dive operation was so well organized that all I was responsible for was analyzing my Nitrox tank." He enjoyed his spotless, breezy beachfront bungalow and the sandy paths around the resort. "After I entered my bungalow for the first time, that was the last time I wore shoes until I left 10 days later." Gohl's group had the same dive guide for his entire stay, "which was nice, because he knew what we were looking for and tailored the dives to satisfy all four of us." Gohl was also impressed by Wakatobi owner Lorenz Maeder. "He worked out an arrangement with the locals where he furnishes electricity and hires them to work at the resort in exchange for their help in protecting the reefs from destructive fishing habits. And when we were getting on the plane back to Bali, he was standing at the bottom of the stairway, shaking our hands and thanking us for coming to Wakatobi. When was the last time you saw that?"

Package prices range from \$1,940 to \$2,940 for seven days, and \$2,640 to \$4,040 for 10 days. A three-hour plane ride from Denpasar, Bali, is an additional \$290.

juvenile catfish, giant hermit crabs and a six-inch decorator crab resembling a ball of mohair yarn.

Despite the interesting life here, there was no reason to dive the same four sites four days in a row. The weather had turned to pea soup and I suffered from cabin fever. Even if guests don't know where to go in an unfamiliar region, why not be given a choice of viable options? The *Pelagian* opted for the easy way out.

The boat navigated back to Wangi Wangi Bay for two days of diving. Apart from pristine corals and sponges, nothing remarkable. I was resentful that I had traveled so far for such tepid diving. I'm the guy who never misses a dive, yet here I skipped several, as did half the other guests. At briefings, I asked, "Will this be the same sort of wall dive?" Marco's impatient response: "No, different wall!" He and Sissi were tireless cheerleaders, but the fever was not contagious. Our night dive at Wangi Wangi was a waste of time. I was beckoned frantically to come see what Marco found. It was a crab. Ten minutes later I was summoned again, to see a lobster. I surfaced after 24 minutes without taking one photograph.

At Blue Mosque, a double reef on Wangi Wangi's northern shore, I had an enjoyable ride at 35 feet past flawless coral gardens and gullies. A resident school of enormous bumphead parrots joined me for a bit, as did a puffer the size of a Labrador retriever. Fisherman worked the reef from dugouts, using crude hooks and handlines. Underwater, I saw freedivers spearfishing. They must be successful -- there are few large fish and no pelagics on these reefs.

After a final, uneventful dive at Table Coral Rock, we were trapped on board for six hours while the *Pelagian*, which boasted a range of 8,000 miles, was using our time to refuel. A greasy wooden scow filled with gasoline rafted alongside us, its fumes filling the boat and ruining the only time I had to relax in the sun

before a grueling trip home. It was more than an imposition, and dangerous. At night, we were ferried to Wakatobi for a barbecue. The food was passable, drinks were expensive at U.S. \$9 apiece, and it was too crowded, although the divers there seemed happy enough.

The Pelagian spreads a five-day itinerary across 10 days. If you go, consider the seven-day trip instead, and insist that your itinerary favor muck diving over walls and reefs. It's too long a way to come for mediocre diving.

-- D.L.



Diver's Compass: For my 11-day trip, I spent \$3,650 for a deluxe cabin; it's \$3,080 for a standard cabin and \$4,050 for the master suite . . . For the seven-night cruise, a standard cabin is \$2,180 . . . I flew with American and Japan Airlines, connecting through Tokyo then Denpasar . . . There's a recompression chamber in Denpasar near the airport . . . It's not considered a malaria hotspot but a series of Malarone can't hurt; I experienced no side effects . . . Since the Bali bombings, there are strict security procedures at airports and hotels, but I felt no threats to my safety . . . Web site:

<http://pelagian.wakatobi.com>.

Is the Travel Info You Need Online?

some dive resorts don't list all your costs on their Web sites

The Internet is a great place for finding information about dive resorts, but you need to dig for the details. Even though remote resorts have Web sites promoting their services, not all have full and accurate information, especially about extra fees and charges. And even if you're booking through a travel agency, don't expect it to have all the details, especially if the resort is a small, obscure place it has never worked with. More than ever, it's up to you to get the answers.

Case in point: *Undercurrent* reader Don Beukers (San Jose, CA) booked his last dive trip through Reef & Rainforest dive travel agency for what he thought would be a pretty inclusive week at the Matana Beach Resort on Kadavu. He got a shock at checkout time. "I had paid for five days of diving, but it turned out I had only paid for five two-tank dives and was charged US\$660 for the additional dives." A waterfall trip he thought was inclusive was \$40 per person, plus tax. "A bar bill for a bottle of wine, beers and a couple of margaritas added an additional US\$430." As at most resorts, there was no market nearby to buy beer or wine. "I wish that all the information was upfront to eliminate the surprise."

Matana Resort's director Cameron Forster puts the blame on Reef & Rainforest, saying it's clearly stated that dive packages are sold in lots of two tanks per day. "Our agents usually tell guests they can pay for any extra diving when they are at the resort." For the special Manta Excursion, guests are told they can swap two of their pre-paid days or pay \$280 Fijian for the full-day excursion. "Dive forms are given to all divers on arrival with diving

costs described, which must be signed and returned before diving starts," says Forster. He also says agents should tell guests they'll need to pay for drinks, which is why both bars have a price list placed on every countertop. "We did everything to state these costs upfront. Travel agents should understand we're a dive resort on a remote island and advise their clients accordingly."

Not so fast, says Beukers. Matana didn't make those charges clear enough to him while he was there. "Reef & Rainforest gave us a good explanation of the costs involved, however, I don't think they knew of the 'extras' and as such, did not advise us of them. I don't like the way Matana led us into situations where 'extras' are needed without a full explanation."

Reef & Rainforest's Jenny Collister, who booked Beukers' trip, says Matana did not provide her with all the details. She had told Beukers about the two-tank days but did not know about the dive trips costing extra. "We give clients the information we are given, and we also give them the resort's Web site address to get more details."

However, Matana does not give many details on its Web site. Its "Rates" page is sparse, listing prices only for two-tank morning excursions but not stating how much extra dives cost. A separate page for the "Manta Encounter" gives a brief description of the three-tank, all-day dive but no price. The Fact Sheet page is "coming soon." That's the same information Collister had on hand when she booked

Got a Medical Emergency? Call DAN Again and Again

Most divers know if they have a medical emergency on a dive trip, the first call should be to Divers' Alert Network. But one phone call may not suffice, especially in a remote area. You may have to call DAN multiple times to get help.

This point is illustrated in a letter from *Undercurrent* reader Judith Paulding (Port Washington, NY). She was finishing the first dive of her Bahamas trip with Blackbeard's Cruises in late April when a male passenger suddenly collapsed. The crew called DAN and was told that transport to a chamber was needed. They ran the boat to Bimini and placed the man in the local clinic, but he was convulsing and going in and out of consciousness.

"We were told LifeNet would transfer, but then we were told it had to transport another diver first," says Paulding. The crew called the U.S. Coast Guard in Miami, but they declined to get involved. "We were tied up at the dock at Bimini all day, but it took eight hours to get transport, and this is in an area with a lot of dive boats."

DAN went through the proper procedures, says Joel Dovenbarger, vice-president of medical services. "Our medical department received one call from a person who was at the scene. We got a history of the case and agreed with their plan to take the patient to the clinic, and call the Coast Guard to evacuate the diver to the hospital. We asked that they call us back if there were problems."

Following its protocol, DAN arranged for the diver to be accepted at the hospital and spoke with its attending

hyperbaric physician. "I'm unsure who called for the commercial evacuation, but DAN was never contacted again," says Dovenbarger. He checked with DAN TravelAssist, but it had no record of the case because it didn't manage the evacuation. "Then I spoke with LifeNet and they couldn't tell me who ordered the evacuation or any problems associated with it. When we are involved in a case and ask for an air evacuation, it is billed directly to DAN TravelAssist, but LifeNet had no information on that so it sent the bill directly to the diver."

Dovenbarger talked to the diver's wife, who also didn't know who called LifeNet but believed most of the communication was via radio. "We could have moved faster but we were not involved except for a single phone call. No one called to ask for additional assistance once it became clear things weren't going to work out."

Lesson learned: DAN members shouldn't hesitate to call if things aren't moving fast enough, and they should make sure the air ambulance and hospital are also speaking to DAN. In this situation, one call was not enough because details may have been overblown or underemphasized as more parties got involved. That diver recovered but in the case of many diver maladies, particularly decompression sickness, any delay can complicate problems severely. Don't hesitate to keep pushing. DAN should be your main contact, and it doesn't mind multiple calls - three people are always on call for medical emergencies, and DAN TravelAssist also offers 24-hour service call coverage.

Matana. She says Reef & Rainforest doesn't recommend Matana to divers that much, mostly because it is miles away from the popular Astrolab Reef - probably why they charge extra to dive it. "If they don't list the extras on the Web site, then we can't be aware of them."

According to Colleen Gleason, owner of dive travel agency Sand Dollar Tours in Fort Collins, CO, 90 percent of dive resorts don't list extra charges on their Web sites. "The more they are off the beaten path, the less information they list."

Undercurrent did a random search of dive resorts around the Internet and found a mixed bag. Some resorts are very detailed. Buddy Dive Resort in Bonaire plasters prices all over its Web site (www.buddydive.com) for dive packages, gear rental, room rates, breakfasts and a la carte diving. Even though it's remote, Sorido Bay Resort in Raja Ampat is very clear on its Web site (www.iriandiving.com), with its "Rates" page listing what is included in a package, what costs extra and the prices for both. Some well-known resorts' Web sites are surprisingly obscure about some or all of their costs. Ramon's Village on San Pedro Island, Belize, doesn't list prices

for anything. Turneffe Island Lodge, also in Belize, does a good job of breaking down the rates for various multi-night packages during high, low and mid-season, but it doesn't describe what is and isn't included in its Fishing, Diving, Beachcomber and Combo packages. It offers no prices for gear rentals or a la carte diving. They mention trips to the Blue Hole, but it's doubtful that is one of the five included dives in a three-night package.

Chances are the "Rates" page you see is the same one travel agents look at before sending clients on trips there. "Some resorts we deal with all the time so they send us all the information, but for other sites, we either find it out from their Web sites or just from client feedback," says Collister.

Lesson learned: It's up to you to take responsibility for getting the information. You can't rely on your travel agent to do all the work anymore. Agencies' commissions are now under 10 percent of a trip's total, so at best they gross \$300 from your \$3,000 Fiji trip. That will probably get you an hour's worth of a travel agent's time, so don't expect them to handle a lot of detailed requests. And if you're not book-

ing your airfare through an agency, which provides much of the commission, it won't pull out the extra stops for you. If it doesn't know the resort well, it probably can't anyway. "We can't spend hours digging around on the Web site to search for the extras," Collister says. "It's up to the resort to let us know extra charges so we can tell clients and put it on their vouchers. That, or put it on their Web sites so it is very clear."

In the Internet age, even dive resorts should know that they need to be more transparent with their pricing. However, there may still be some cost-related issues that you will only discover once you get there - like how many divers going to Saba don't know that its marine park fee is charged per dive instead of per day. If you want a good deal on a dive resort, book through a travel agency specializing in dive travel packages - *Undercurrent* gives a list of good ones in the annual

Chapbook. If you want to travel easy without any price shockers, pick resorts well represented by these agencies so that you can get the lowdown on all extra costs (such as the fact that Roatan's Fantasy Island Resort "free drinks" only covers coffee and tea but not juice, soft drinks or alcohol).

If you do want to try a new resort, the good news is you have a direct line even to the most remote one. Send an e-mail asking for what's included in a package, what is not, and how much those extras cost. Resorts probably aren't withholding information intentionally, they may just not realize their Web pages lack details. In your e-mail, include a request for them to list all their rates and extra charges on their website. You'll be helping them become more professional, and you'll be doing a big favor for other divers planning their next trip.

Eliminating Underwater Terrorists

excruciating sound will drive them from the water

September 11 boosted terror alerts everywhere, including underwater. Now, the FBI is asking the nation's scuba instructors to watch for potential terrorist threats. Its Joint Terrorism Task Force recently alerted dive shops around the country to look out for divers seeking advanced training, including diving in murky water and in sewer pipes. The FBI said the advisory is routine and was not prompted by any threat, but it did ask instructors to be aware of "odd inquiries" inconsistent with recreational diving, such as advanced navigation techniques, deep diving and using underwater vehicles.

You may picture the image of hooded divers with spearguns chasing each other around underwater on self-propelled vehicles, like James Bond in *Thunderball*. But just as Agent 007 was fictional, so is that scenario. Capturing and killing divers by hand only happens in the movies.

The most promising non-lethal diver weapon is a low-frequency sound.

With hundreds of thousands of certified divers out in the water, how can the military differentiate between those intent on carrying out terrorist attacks and those who just innocently stumble into restricted areas? And do they refrain from injuring, even killing, unsuspecting divers unintentionally? The good news is armed forces are developing remarkable non-lethal weapons that separate the good from the bad.

Passive sonar is used to listen for sounds like propellers, motors and marine mammals, but divers are harder to track. Those using open-circuit scuba gear produce periodic noise that can be detected and classified, but divers using rebreathers don't produce the same amounts of noise and so are extremely difficult to locate on a sonar screen.

According to a 2002 report commissioned by the Navy's Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center in San Diego, the most promising long-term solution for a non-lethal diver threat weapon is a low-frequency sound in the 20 to 100 megahertz range. That would be just enough to cause a lot of discomfort to divers' ears and lungs but no physical damage. The report's recommendation was "spark gap sound sources" that store electric charge in a large, high-voltage bank of conductors, then release all the stored energy in an arc across electrodes in the water. This spark discharge creates a high-pressure plasma and vapor bubble in the water that expands and then collapses, making a loud sound similar to those from air guns and underwater explosions.

According to a *New Scientist* article, the U.S. Navy's Anti-Terrorism Afloat program is developing and testing a spark-gap system to deploy from patrol boats or control remotely from the sea floor. Ideally, the device will emit an audible, low-powered warning when an intruder is sighted to make him surface, but also create more severe effects if an intruder persists. But it won't be lethal. This is partly because of the risk of accidentally targeting innocent divers, but also "because you can learn much more from people if they are alive," Tom LaPuzza, a spokesperson for the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center, told *New Scientist*.

Shark Sign Language

If you're going to jump into the sea with sharks, it's good to have some understanding of how they behave. A study of possible threat displays in 23 shark species could make it easier to read their signs. Aidan Martin, a recently deceased shark expert at the University of British Columbia, described 29 different components to threat displays by sharks in his study published last spring in *Marine and Freshwater Behavior and Physiology*. It's the first detailed record of behavior for two-thirds of all species studied.

The most common display – and one that every diver should know about – is downward pointing of the pectoral fin, seen in all of the 23 species Martin studied. The most obvious display is the “hunch,” signaling stress. “In great whites, the hunch lasts only three or four seconds compared with a blatant 30- to 40-second signal of the gray reef shark,” says Martin's widow, fish biologist Anne Martin.

Most of the signals reported by Martin were recorded after he or another diver had rapidly approached a shark without leaving it an escape route, or had pursued it. (Observers left without waiting to see if the shark would carry out its threat.) Fewer displays were recorded when sharks were feeding, suggesting signals are more to do with self-protection rather than defending its resources, but the difficulty of observing sharks in the wild made it difficult

for Martin to draw a conclusion. Jurg Brunnschweiler, a shark ecologist from the University of Zurich in Switzerland, is preparing a PADI course that will cover the threat displays reported by Martin. They include:

The hunch: Nose up, pectoral fins down, back hunched; signals a high degree of stress and common to many species, including great whites.

Pectoral fins down: Nearly universal.

Body shiver: Shark appears to shudder and stall in the water; only found in silvertips.

Jaw gaping: Like a yawn, displaying teeth; seen in many species including tiger, great white and bull sharks.

Flank displaying: Turning sideways to target, slowing swimming; seen in many species, including great white and tiger sharks.

Tail popping: Shotgun-like sounds from exaggerated tail beats; a neutral display in sandtiger sharks.

Laterally exaggerated swimming: Eel-like swimming, folding almost in half; seen in a few species, including Galapagos sharks.

Give way: Swims straight at target but turns away at last moment; typical of great whites.

Gill-pouch bellowing: Seen in Galapagos sharks and sometimes great whites.

Excerpted from the article “This Shark Is Telling You Something” in the magazine New Scientist.

“There's a tremendous emphasis now on underwater terrorism protection,” says Rob Williamson, marketing director for Marine Sonic in White Marsh, Virginia. Marine Sonic's top product is Sea Scan PC, a navigational computer that uses sonar to transmit sound into the water and GPS to let users search, record and locate any objects of interest. Sea Scan PC can also use transducers to let law enforcement scan for moving divers swimming through sonar beams. “They can see divers but the divers can't see them,” Williamson says. Sea Scan only uses low-frequency sonar tuned so low even divers won't hear it. “We certify to the military that the system will not hurt a diver. We'd never use high-frequency because that would turn divers' internal organs into jelly.”

British security company Westminster International has created Enforcer, a sound generator combining high-resolution sonar with powerful loudspeakers that can emit intense bursts of noise to detect divers. If the intruder fails to surface, an Enforcer user switches on a high-power signal that can create panic, sickness and confusion. Westminster says Enforcer was recently used to defend the coastline of a city in the Middle East during an international summit and is under evaluation by the U.S. government as protection for pipelines.

In January, researchers at the Georgia Institute of Technology released a sensor that detects the direction from

which a sound is coming underwater. Francois Guillot, a research engineer who helped devise the sensor, says it could allow the Navy to develop compact scanners that detect quiet underwater divers. “Our sensor detects small sounds over the noise of the ocean and also provides directional information, an important improvement over current technology.”

The sensor uses fiber optics, a technique inspired by how fish hear underwater. A fish's ear has thousands of tiny hairs that move when a sound wave passes through the fish. The hairs communicate with the nerves to allow fish to detect sound and avoid getting eaten.

Currently, the Navy uses expensive hydrophones, long lines towed behind boats using sonar to listen to underwater sound but lacking knowledge about its direction. “The hydrophones are thousands of feet long, making it difficult to maneuver the ship,” says Guillot. “Since we can cut that length by a factor of five, it will cost less money to operate and be easier to handle.” The project was funded by the Office of Naval Research.

But the spread of acoustic weapons underwater concerns marine biologists. There is evidence that sonar can kill or injure whales because it forces them to surface quickly, giving them the equivalent of the bends. Sound can also travel farther underwater than in air, disrupting communications

between animals even hundreds of miles away, which could create huge exclusion zones in the ocean for fish and marine-based animals. Last spring, a group including the National Resources Defense Council and the California Coastal Commission filed lawsuits against the Navy for its intention to use sonar near the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary in Southern California. It's the first time such a lawsuit has been brought by a government agency. LaPuzza says new systems will be thoroughly evaluated for their effects on the marine environment. Each possible site will

be evaluated, deployment will be on a case-by-case basis and they will not be used where there is a risk to sea creatures – or recreational divers.

As technology improves, you can breathe easier that the military is more able to detect and catch that rebreather-wearing diver 30 feet underneath a cruise ship, and less likely to set its sights on you.

-- Vanessa Richardson

Survival Psychology of Divers

how do you react when the worst happens?

Dr. John Leach is an English researcher studying why some people survive while others die in identical life-threatening situations. He theorizes that any emergency situation can be broken down into several phases – pre-impact, impact, recoil, rescue and post-trauma.

Before a disaster occurs, the most common psychological response is “denial,” and the most common action is “inactivity.” Most of us don’t believe a life-threatening diving emergency will ever happen to us. Therefore, we tend to make no preparations for emergency. How will you react when a disaster does occur? Almost all of us would say something like, “I will evaluate the situation, figure out the best course of action from several choices, and follow it.” But in real-life emergencies, very few people are actually capable of doing this.

During the impact phase of an emergency, when you either live or die in the next few seconds or minutes, only 10 to 20 percent of people will remain relatively calm and be able to “think, make decisions and act.” So up to 90 percent of us will *not* be able to think, make decisions or act. Approximately 75 percent of people will “be stunned and bewildered,” writes Leach. “They will not be able to think effectively and will act in a semi-automatic, almost mechanical manner.” The remaining 10 to 15 percent will demonstrate “uncontrolled and inappropriate behavior.”

A rare person will be able to function normally. A few more will be able to think, make decisions and act, but they will not be as sharp and clear-headed as normal. Most people won’t be able to think their way through a problem but they will be able to react without really thinking. The remaining small group of people will panic or do things in other ways that actually increase their chances of dying.

As mentioned, a few divers actually panic. A large number of people demonstrate “paralyzing anxiety.” They can be literally “frozen solid” with all of their muscles rigid, or more com-

monly they will be relaxed but incapable of movement because their thought processes have become “circular” – they think the same things over and over and cannot move. Most people experience perceptual narrowing or tunnel vision, incapable of considering the entire situation but focusing only on one part of it. They cannot think of several responses, they can only think of one. The most common response, even during the diving emergency, is denial: “This can’t be happening to me.”

Up to 90 percent of us won't be able to make decisions, think or act.

Some people will demonstrate “hyperactivity,” appearing to be purposeful and demonstrating leadership so many bewildered survivors will follow them. Unfortunately, they will often not be thinking clearly and the actions they get the group to do are ineffective or inappropriate. They reduce the chance of the group surviving. Many people will demonstrate “stereotypical behavior,” partly denying the situation. They’ll demonstrate will-learned behavior, even if it’s inappropriate to the situation. Others will be irrational, which often reduces chances of survival. Finally, many people will demonstrate anger, some will feel guilt and a few will suffer psychological breakdown during the survival phase. People give up and die or they actively commit suicide.

Therefore, diver training is critical for survival. First, it forces us to think and focus on the various emergency situations we are likely to encounter while diving, and to figure out what we will do. That reduces the chances of us denying the danger and, more importantly, it allows us to do most of the thinking ahead of time so that during the actual life-threatening situation we can simply react. We don’t have to “solve the

problem” because we already did that while training. The second main benefit of training is to practice the response. We can learn the response so that we can perform it without thinking. Knowing that most of us won’t be able to problem-solve

Safety Concerns on Liveboard Boats

On February 14, Sal and Lucille Zammiti, owners of the Bamboo Reef dive shop in San Francisco, started a 10-day dive trip in the Maldives aboard the *M.V. Giulia*, a 100-foot boat only two years old. Sal wrote about his experience in a letter to *California Diving News*

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After boarding and cabin assignments, we made an early-afternoon dive. Then Lu decided to take a nap before dinner, while I went topside to familiarize myself with the boat and crew. At 7:30 p.m., I was near the stern of the boat, talking to the chef, when all the power went out. Then a large ball of fire shot out from the stern’s port side, followed by large amounts of smoke pouring throughout the boat.

I immediately made my way down below to our cabin to help my wife. Smoke was already in the cabin, and belowdecks was in total darkness. I found our cabin and helped Lu back up the stairs to the main deck. There, the crew helped us onto the dive boat, which was tied alongside *Giulia*. When everyone was onboard, 14 guests and 10 crew members, we pulled 100 yards away. The only things we got off were the shirts and shorts we had on. The *Giulia* was now totally engulfed in smoke, and we could see an orange glow in the engine room portholes. Within an hour, the entire boat was engulfed in fire, with flames reaching 50 feet into the air. The boat burned to the waterline and sank at 3:39 a.m.

Thankfully, everyone got off the boat safely but it could have been very bad. There were no smoke detectors or emergency lighting anywhere on the boat. We want to encourage everyone to be aware of safety concerns on liveboard boats. Ask safety questions before you travel: Does the boat have emergency lighting? What type of fire suppression system does it have? Does it have smoke detectors? Smoke detectors are available for travelers; put one outside your cabin door when you arrive on the boat. Keep a small flashlight easily accessible in your cabin. Ask that the safety briefing be giving as soon as possible, not after the first dinner.

Hopefully, if divers are aware of boat safety and begin asking these questions, we can make operators more aware as well so they will add these safety features.

during the emergency reinforces the importance of practicing emergency drills.

Before the dive, especially a high-risk one, I sit down and think through all the likely emergencies, and plan how I’ll respond to them. This determines what equipment I wear during the dive, and reminds me to keep gear as simple as possible. I plan what I’ll do if any piece of gear fails during the dive. If you dive long enough, virtually every piece of gear you wear will fail during a dive sometime.

At the beginning of the dive, preferably after I’ve entered the water, I touch every piece of equipment I’m wearing and think about what I’ll use it for. This ensures I can actually reach it, and reinforces my memory of what gear I’m wearing and where it’s located on my body. (I wear several completely different gear configurations depending on the dive, ranging from single-tank open circuit, to seven tanks and regulators, to a closed circuit rebreather with up to four emergency bottles. All these may be with or without a scooter, camera, survey gear, line reels, etc.) As much as possible, you want to wear one equipment configuration all the time to simplify your response during an emergency.

Simply based on their psychological response to stress, 10 to 15 percent of the population should not start diving. Most people can take up diving but many will be unable to think at all during an emergency. However, they will be able to react with a previously well-learned behavior. If it is appropriate for the emergency, they’ll survive. If it’s not, they’ll die. These people should restrict their diving to single-tank open circuit, no decompression and shallow water less than 100 feet – “easy” diving. In this scenario, there is really only one emergency response: exhale and make a controlled ascent to the surface.

Some divers will be able to function minimally during an emergency, so it’s reasonable for them to undertake slightly more complex diving. This group includes advanced open-water divers. Obviously, everyone who takes a basic scuba course should not move on to advanced diving, but they should periodically take refresher courses.

As the diving becomes more complex, more complex responses are required during an emergency. Ideally, only the 10 to 20 percent of the population capable of active problem-solving during an emergency should take up cave and technical diving. One of the most dangerous situations I see is divers moving into more advanced diving for all the wrong reasons; they are trying to “keep up with their friends” or they are trying to “prove themselves.” In cave and technical diving, I often see divers who are trying to “prove they aren’t afraid” when in reality they’re terrified. Limit your diving to what is reasonable for you, take more training and practice your emergency drills frequently to stay safe underwater.

David Sawatzky, M.D., is a diving medical specialist and has written a diving medical column in the Canadian magazine Diver for the past 10 years. A version of this article appeared in a recent issue of Diver.

Yongala Victim's Husband Denies Murder, Sues Insurer

The husband of scuba diving victim Tina Watson, who drowned at the Australian wreck *Yongala* during her honeymoon in 2003, is locked in a courtroom battle that could see him receive hundreds of thousands of dollars from her death. Gabe Watson, 30, from Hoover, Alabama, is fighting for a travel insurance payout boosted by compensation for "mental anguish" suffered after witnessing his wife's death. But the Australian police consider him a murder suspect.

Watson denied killing his wife, saying it was a tragic accident and she was swept away from him by strong currents. In a deposition for his insurance lawsuit, he testified that he and Tina were taken out in a dinghy with four other people for the first dive of their week-long trip on Mike Ball's *Spoil Sport*. The couple descended on their own, following a permanent anchor rope. They were only allowed 55 feet down because Tina was still a beginner. They had just started their drift toward the wreck when Tina indicated she wanted to go back to the rope.

Watson said he grabbed at his wife's BC, motioning for her to inflate it, but she indicated it wasn't working. He started dragging her by her vest "because she obviously couldn't swim against the current." He said his mask and regulator got knocked off so he had to let go. "By the time I got [them]...she was five or 10 feet below me, sinking down toward the bottom. When I realized I wasn't going to catch her, I hauled to the surface for help." A guide found her on the bottom with mask and regulator still on.

Watson says he doesn't know what caused his wife to react the way she did but that Mike Ball's company should take responsibility for the death. "I believe they started with a too-difficult dive, especially for someone that was a beginner diver." However, e-mails between Watson and Mike Ball show that when he was planning the trip in spring of 2003, the *Yongala* wreck was high on his agenda for his honeymoon trip, but corporate representative Shelley McLaughlin told him the dive might be unsuitable for his wife. "Should

we visit the *Yongala* wreck, Tina may need to sit out the first/second dive if she has not done enough dives to qualify her," she wrote.

Watson is suing the Birmingham, Alabama, travel agency that arranged the trip and his travel insurers, Old Republic Insurance and Travelex Insurance Services. He contacted the latter five days after his wife's death, but it refused to make a payout because its policy's fine print said diving losses were not covered. Watson argued that his travel agent had told him the \$480 policy would cover diving for his \$10,000 trip.

The insurers are trying to delay the case while police investigations continue, arguing they aren't required to pay policyholders suspected of a crime. Last April, two Queensland detectives, in conjunction with the FBI, made a surprise raid on Watson's home in Hoover, Alabama, seizing his computer and other material. Watson is officially referred to as a witness but an Australian police sergeant e-mailed the insurance companies that he is suspected in his wife's death. "It is beyond doubt that the plaintiff is a suspect in – and implicated by – the investigation into the death of the insured," the insurers say in documents filed last December.

The police investigation is supposed to be wrapping up this summer, when the case is also set for trial in Alabama's Jefferson County. Watson is seeking damages for accidental death, trip interruption, medical expenses, phone calls, taxi fares, fees for extra credit card statements, and compensation for mental and emotional anguish aggravated by the insurer's refusal to pay him. He is also seeking punitive damages relating to the insurers' failure to disclose that the policy did not cover scuba diving accidents and failure to pay out on the policy.

Watson's lawyers say that the criminal investigation has no impact on the insurance claim. Alabama is one of the most litigious states in the country and if Watson is successful, jurors could grant him a multimillion-dollar payout.

Flotsam and Jetsam

Sorry, Solo Divers. *Undercurrent* reader Bob Ayers caught a mistake we made in the July article "When You Decide To Go It Alone." We wrote that Peter Hughes charges 65 percent of the total cabin price for single divers who want their own room. But because most liveaboards charge by per-person occupancy, we should have fully explained that a diver will pay full price for one bed and 65 percent of the other unoccupied bed. However, Peter Hughes does offer specials at

times giving, single divers their own room for \$100 over the per-person occupancy rate. Those deals are advertised on the company's Web site and monthly e-mail newsletter.

The *Thorfinn* Sinks. Lance Higgs, who has been serving divers in the Truk Lagoon on his funky liveaboard, *Thorfinn*, for 26 years, ran the boat aground in Pohnpei on June 8. It's unlikely to serve again as a dive boat. Higgs said the *Thorfinn* began taking on water and he had to put it on the reef to avoid sinking in the channel, but it contained gallons of oil. Amid the complex legal wrangling over salvage of the craft, oil leaks, moving it from the reef and preventing sinking,

Thorfinn does not carry pollution or indemnity insurance. To read the full story, go to www.stpns.net and type "Thorfinn" in the Search box.

Chamber Closes. St. Mary's Medical Center in West Palm Beach, Florida discontinued emergency hyperbaric chamber services July 1, so anyone bent in nearby waters will have to be transported to Miami or Orlando. The chamber was not economically viable since many divers it treated had no insurance and the physicians overseeing the hyperbaric services did not like being on call without being paid by the hospital.

Snorkeler Shooter Sentenced. A man who shot a snorkeler after mistaking him for a water rodent has been sentenced to two years in prison. William Roderick, 60, was standing along the Smith River near Eugene, Oregon when he thought he saw a nutria, a cross between a beaver and a muskrat, in the river, and shot it with a .22-caliber rifle. His target turned out to be John Cheesman, 44, a snorkeler looking at fish. The bullet struck him in front of the ear but did not penetrate his skull. Roderick, who immediately went to Cheesman's aid, pleaded guilty to illegal possession of a firearm, marijuana and methamphetamine.

Senior Discounts Overseas. Many foreign airlines take 10 percent off most non-promotional fares on flights to and from the U.S. for travelers 60 or 62 and older. Sometimes they do it for a younger companion, too. Senior-friendly airlines include Austrian Airlines, Cathay Pacific, El Al, Lufthansa, Mexicana, SAS and Virgin Atlantic. You must request the discount by telephone.

Missing Buoyancy Skills. According to the British Sub-Aqua Club (BSAC), poor buoyancy skills are to blame for the dramatic increase of dive-related incidents it recorded last year. In BSAC's 2006 Diving Incidents Report, Brian Cumming said ascent-related incidents were the highest ever recorded, a total of 99, of which five were fatal. "Typically, these incidents involved a rapid ascent, often including missed decompression stops. Retaining buoyancy is critical, because it could have potentially saved three of the five lives lost." The final ascent is often the most critical part. Be properly weighted, he says, so that when your tank gets down to 500 psi, you can safely maintain a safety stop at 10 feet with minimal air in your BC.

Dive Books. Order yours at our Web site (www.undercurrent.org) and all profits get donated to save coral reefs.

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Letters to the Editor/ Submissions

Undercurrent
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102
Sausalito, CA 94965
Fax 415-289-0137
undercurrenteditor@undercurrent.org

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To subscribe, renew, change address, or order back issues, call 800-326-1896 or 415-289-0501, Mon.-Fri., 9-5 Pacific Time
E-mail: pete@undercurrent.org
or write:

Undercurrent
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102
Sausalito, CA 94965

Editorial Office
Ben Davison, Publisher and Editor

E-mail:
BenDavison@undercurrent.org

www.undercurrent.org

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