

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Ambergris Caye, Belize

La Isla Bonita goes upscale, but diving has gone downhill

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Dear Fellow Diver:

When I first visited Ambergris Caye ten years ago, every road was either dirt or sand. The biggest post-dive nightlife was the "Chicken Drop," betting what square the chicken would poop on. The island's solitude was most apparent during the October off-season, when my dive buddies and I pretty much had the reefs to ourselves. And what glorious reefs -- every dive featured a rainbow assortment of coral and reef fish.

That was then. Now Ambergris is going upscale. Roads are being paved and more condos are under construction. Two luxury spas charge U.S. prices for herbal wraps. Greek tavernas and tapas bars have sprung up. Real estate starts in the mid-six figures. October was no longer a dead zone -- my flight from Dallas to Belize City was jam-packed.

Still, San Pedro, Ambergris' sole town, retains much of its low-key charm. I don't know why Madonna dreamt of it in her song "La Isla Bonita" for there are more beautiful Caribbean towns, but it could be a good stand-in for Margaritaville. Boys bicycling the island's skinny airstrip ambled aside as the Maya Air puddle-jumper landed. Roads in the heart of downtown are still sandy and lined with simple, whitewashed buildings. American expats mingled easily with natives of African, Spanish and Mayan descent, and I was always greeted with a nod and a smile.

A decade ago, my buddies and I had dived with Amigos Del Mar. We had our own divemaster who motored



Amigos Del Mar dive shop in San Pedro



to sites on a small, covered outboard. For surface intervals, he took us to isolated beaches or waterfront bars up north. He never bothered asking about afternoon dives, just presumed correctly that we would. Now Amigos is a major operation boasting multiple 30-foot fiberglass boats and Miss Mel, a 48-foot cruiser for atoll trips that unfortunately met its demise the day after I dived off of it (more on that later). Minimum numbers were required for every dive. No problem for morning two-tanks with six to 10 divers on every boat (we also ran into other operators' groups on dives) but it was tough to find three others for an afternoon or night dive. And forget beach-bar surface intervals -- Amigos steered

divers back to its dockside shop.

I wish I could say Ambergris diving has retained its charm, but island run-off, hurricanes and multiple divers with reckless fins have damaged the reefs. Long stretches of dead brown coral were brightened sporadically by a purple sea fan or lime-green barrel sponge. Reef fish were fewer but still in respectable numbers. Every dive featured nurse sharks, giant groupers, sea turtles or rays, sometimes all appearing simultaneously. When I jumped in at Victoria Canyons, a school of small black grouper came to greet me, obviously seeking a handout. Parrotfish chomped at coral while four-eyed butterflyfish and damselfish daintily swam about. Smooth trunkfish motored by, on a mission. Curious yellow-tailed snappers followed while I looked for bright coral among the rubble. And they wonder why the marine life is disappearing.

Amigos, like many San Pedro dive operators, had no qualms about feeding -- or touching -- the fish. They did it for divers but it obviously shaped fish behavior. At Esperanza, two nurse sharks quickly swam over but split when they saw no chum. Luis, the day's divemaster, wrestled one to the sand, flipped it over and started rubbing its chest. The shark struggled at first, then relented. When Luis released it, the shark fled, looking notably pissy. Later Luis dug into barrel sponges, pulling out an arrow crab, then a coral-banded shrimp, placing them in divers' hands.

I stayed at Banyan Bay Villas, a white stucco complex sprawled beachside at the southern edge of town. My week's stay was a timeshare gift from friends, but I was still socked with a US \$250 utility surcharge. My tile-floored two-bedroom was spacious, with a huge Jacuzzi tub in the master bathroom, but the tap water loaded with chemicals turned my hair to glue after a shower, and the towels were somewhat tattered. Banyan Bay was renovating but 7 a.m. in the room next door was too early for me. After I complained, housekeeping left fresh flowers to apologize but buzzsaws still started before 8 a.m. Certainly not worth \$325 a night. The well-stocked Hariri's Market was next door (although I had to check if food had passed their expiration dates) so I used my full kitchen often and ate on the shaded patio overlooking the pool.

For dining out, I started upscale at Rico's, Banyan Bay Villas' airy, dome-topped beachfront eatery. However, the kitchen, not the diners, had the ocean view. Waiters were attentive but my whitefish fillet was covered in a too-extreme mustard sauce. The Mayan-marinated shrimp over coconut rice was tasty but too small to be worth a \$27.50 entrée. Café Picasso, a gourmet melding of Spanish, Italian and Caribbean cuisine, had a lovely dining room and garden but the touted mojitos, margaritas and martinis had too little liquor for \$8 to \$15 prices. I preferred the hole-in-the-wall bargains. At Café Cubano, the friendly waiter in crisp black vest and white apron served thick Cuban sandwiches with fries for \$6 and San Pedro's best bargain, chicken stew with rice and beans for \$3.50. Ali Baba's had perfectly seasoned Lebanese chicken with pita and babaghanoush for \$7. A lively spot for tourists and expats was Pedro's Bar and Guesthouse near the airstrip, known for tasty \$20 pizzas and Saturday-night poker tournaments with \$100 buy-in. Pedro is actually Peter Lawrence, a 50ish Englishman with caustic humor but a welcoming attitude. In the air-conditioned bar covered in U.K. football banners, I ate Greek pizza loaded with feta and olives.

Amigos' crew was professional and prompt. During my four days of Ambergris dives, I had divemaster Tony and captain Rene, both mellow locals in their 40s. They always arrived at my hotel dock a few minutes before the 8:30 a.m. pickup. On a windy morning, office manager Chayana called at 7 a.m. to announce dives were canceled, giving me time to plan a day trip through the jungle to Mayan ruins at Lamanai. Dive boats averaged eight passengers, always American. Rene gave good briefings on the sites, bottom times and what to look for. First dives averaged 80 feet, the second 50 feet. Crew stored gear between dives, helped me into it before my backward roll, and held out hands for everything except masks before I climbed the ladder. They didn't do hard sells - when I expressed interest in a night dive, Rene said don't bother because a recent storm was causing poor visibility. Also, he made sure my buddy and I didn't make any repeat dives. Water was on board and sliced fruit was offered during surface intervals at the shop. Cholo's, a concrete slab of a bar with tables scattered in the sand, was in front of Amigos' dock. After morning dives, I ordered the cheapest Belikin beers in town (US\$2) and watched local kids play beach soccer.

Amigos had some flaws regarding equipment. On a morning dive, both tanks were only filled to 2,000 psi. My buddy's tank valve bubbled crazily on a few dives, making him surface earlier than he wanted. Tony was intent on showing me small critters like trumpetfish or yellowhead jawfish, but I cringed when big draws swam by. "Please don't touch the turtle," I silently pleaded when an old green one with a barnacle-encrusted shell approached in Tuffy Canyons. Luckily, Tony just moved in front of him and steered him back to swim in front of divers' cameras, and the turtle patiently acquiesced. But a couple of macho divers took Tony's cue and started grabbing at nurse sharks.

I wanted to go to the Elbow at Turneffe and its fish-attracting currents but when Amigos' 10-person minimum wasn't met, I went next door to Aqua Dives. The first guy at the counter told me if I signed up with the four divers on the waiting list, the Elbow trip was a go for the next morning. When I came later for rental gear, another guy said, "What? There's no trip going there, but we're going to the Blue Hole." Seeing my dirty look, he offered me \$20 off the \$180 price. Disappointed no one shared my interest in Turneffe, I agreed. At 5:30 a.m., I left with 19 divers on Aqua Dives' 52-foot boat. Stony-faced crew threw dive bags onto a ledge above the stairs to the head, and one napped on top of them during the three-hour ride. You'd expect smoked salmon for the \$180 price but breakfast was stale raisin bread. Luckily, seeing spotted dolphins leaping in the boat's wake aided digestion. At Blue Hole, two divemasters helped us into BCDs, herded us into groups of 10 for the step off the back and steered us underwater. Despite the crowded feel, I realized why the fuss about Blue Hole's collapsed cave. I was literally entering the prehistoric age as I sunk down alongside the tapering spikes of massive stalactites to the 130-foot maximum. Looking down, I could see the tips of equally monolithic stalagmites rising from the bottom and shadowy reef sharks circling in the distance.

The outer atolls' glorious diving made me regret being based in San Pedro. Half Moon Cay was a colorful garden of pillar, staghorn, fire and leaf coral. Red squirrelfish hovering behind sea fans stared at me with gigantic black eyes, spiny fins bristling. Tucked under a ledge were

We Want Your Tips About Tipping

We're doing an article on good, bad and just plain unusual tip policies. Do you know a liveaboard, dive resort or scuba operator with such policies?

For example, diver George Coughlin was on an Indonesian liveaboard that had two tip boxes, one for the dive managers and an Indonesian dive guide, and another tip box for the other 25 members of the Indonesian crew. "The dive manager told me the latter wanted it that way. But it just seemed that the crew weren't viewed as important as the others," says Coughlin.

In what situations have you been glad to tip - or outright refused to do so? Furthermore, how much do you tip? To whom, and on what basis? As traveling divers, we need to share this important information because on dive trips running at \$1,000 to \$3,000, tips can become a big hunk of expenses. So how do you tip? Send your comments to EditorBen@undercurrent.org.

Ambergris Caye, Belize

Diving (<i>experienced</i>)	★★★
<i>(add two more stars for day trips to the atolls)</i>	
Diving (<i>beginners</i>)	★★★★
Snorkeling	★★★★
Accommodations	★★★
Food	★★★★
Amigos Del Mar's Service and Attitude	★★★
Aqua Dives' Service and Attitude	★★
Money's Worth	★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent
Caribbean Scale

lemon-finned schoolmasters. Schools of iridescent blue tang shimmered while eating algae on the sea floor. After a lunch of stewed chicken and rice at Half Moon Caye Bird Sanctuary, a lovely isle that costs an extra US\$40 to set foot on, we dropped 50 feet to the aptly named Aquarium. Swarms of juvenile sergeant majors, angelfish, parrotfish and tang flickered through the corals. Visibility was 100 feet, and the sun lit everything like stained glass. The snorkelers said they had equally impressive views. The boat had no shower on board so it was a sticky ride back. After serving rum punch, the crew actually showed some smiles when intoxicated divers started dancing. They were perfunctory at best but I gave them credit for leaving marine life in peace and simply pointing them out.

After disembarking, I got a message from Amigos that an Elbow trip was going the next morning. Another 5:30 a.m. start on Miss Mel, which had more legroom and storage plus cushioned seats and a shower. Breakfast was also better -- fruit and thick cornbread -- divemasters Edgar and George were much friendlier and 12 divers made for smaller groups. The previous night's storm had made the weather windy, overcast and actually chilly but water temperatures still averaged 84 degrees. Unfortunately the Elbow was too murky, but Black Beauty and Tres Amigos were excellent substitutes. A big pufferfish approached, his huge eyes begging me to get the remora off his back. A green moray and a grouper paired together to hunt, moving in tandem down a finger of coral. Edgar was eager to point out critters, exclaiming "Mmph!" into his regulator whenever he saw something interesting. But that also meant disturbing its routine, like forcing a giant crab to crawl on demand and tapping rocks where lobster or frogfish hid. He and George were somewhat redeemed when they pulled out frozen Snickers and served bottomless rum-and-Cokes during the two-hour ride back. That trip was memorable because it was Miss Mel's last complete one. The next day, one of its engines exploded at Lighthouse Caye, burning the ship into the sea. Revenge of the fish gods? Luckily, all divers floated to other boats in their BCDs, and I was told Amigos already had a newer, larger boat en route to San Pedro.

Having time to kill before my puddle jumper left, I did Amigos' snorkel trip to Hol Chan Cut and Shark Ray Alley with Tony, a teenage divemaster in training. Down 12 feet at Hol Chan, spotted eagle rays swam as gracefully as ballerinas, southern rays burrowed in the sand waiting for prey and a loggerhead ambled by with two green eels as escorts. "This was as good as any dive here," said my buddy after surfacing. The fishing ban had kept marine life healthy but dive boats still threw out chum on arrival. Eight nurse sharks were literally leaping at the boat ladder. Tony flipped a young nurse shark over and offered its stomach for me to rub. I knew he meant well but I was sad to see another standard Belizean divemaster in the making.

Who should go to Ambergris Caye? Certainly the young at heart, who aren't demanding about the quality of diving and want to party; families, since there are plenty of condos and a few things to do; people who want an American-like destination with a bit of local color and know not to expect a bargain. I enjoyed San Pedro's lively ambiance and friendly residents but if, like me, you were there years ago and want to relive that romantic dream of isolated island charm, you will be disappointed. In retrospect, I'd base myself on Turneffe or Caye Caulker for quicker access to the best diving in northern Belize. A three-hour boat ride one-way from San Pedro is too far and too pricey.

By the way, Amigos del Mar means friends of the sea, which these guys aren't. It's a PADI shop but PADI ought to get down here pronto and teach them what being a

friend of the sea is, which is not chumming in marine parks and flipping over nurse sharks for belly rubs. These guys, and other dive ops that do this, are as disrespectful as they come. If I did go back, I'd go with Pro Dive, which has several years of good Chapbook reviews. There are still plenty of photo ops in sharks and rays but bad behavior and dying coral are making the diving disintegrate as rapidly as Amigos' Miss Mel on fire.

-- J.V.



Diver's Compass: Amigos Del Mar gave a 10 percent discount after three days of diving, but I still paid a pricey \$267.50 for four two-tank dives at Ambergris Caye sites; the standard two-tank rate is \$75 . . . I paid an additional \$75 for the Hol Chan/Shark Ray snorkel trip, and the three-tank Blue Hole and Turneffe trips were priced at \$250 and \$185 respectively . . . Villas at Banyan Bay charges \$300-\$400 per night for a pool view and \$375-\$475 for beachfront views through April 30 . . . To Belize City, Continental flies twice daily from Houston as does American from Dallas and Miami; recent air-

fares ranged from \$625 on the coasts to \$750 in the Midwest . . . I took Maya Island Air for the 15-minute connection to San Pedro; round-trip fare is \$109 and maximum weight is 70 pounds; Tropic Air also flies to San Pedro . . . Decompression chamber is next to the airstrip . . . Internet connections are widespread, but Pedro's Inn offers free computer access at the bar . . . For food shopping, avoid the big Island Supermarket's high prices and go to SuperBuy on Back Street or Hariri Market next to Banyan Bay Villas . . . Ambergris Caye information: www.ambergriscaye.com; Amigos Del Mar website: www.amigosdive.com; Aqua Dives website: www.aquadives.com

Fire Sinks Amigos Del Mar's Dive Boat

The Blue Hole trip started out normally for the 19 divers on the Pro 48 Custom dive boat. It was after the briefing for the third dive at Half Moon Cay when everyone heard a strange noise coming from the engine room. "It was a bang, like a piston going through the engine," passenger Paul Stone from Silver Lake, Oregon, told *Undercurrent*. "Then grey smoke started coming out, followed by black smoke." The cabin filled with smoke in seconds and the divers rushed to the stern. Then flames started coming out of the side. "The fire started quickly and spread fast."

Another diver, Ross Tullock, told the *San Pedro Sun* there were some issues that remained unexplained.

"I sat on top of the engine compartment, putting on my equipment. I heard the engine noise and saw my divemaster open the engine cover, then promptly close it as there was 'some' smoke. At no time did crew get a fire extinguisher to tackle the smoke. The captain then put both engines in neutral and applied high revs, causing greater oil burn. He verified the steering was still working but what part of his captain's training taught him to check if the steering works when black smoke is appearing? Why would he rev the engine?"

Tullock suggested abandoning ship but the crew said no and told divers to move to the bow of the boat. "Then [when the fire appeared] the crew instructed passengers to move to the rear down the port side on the outer rail to col-

lect a scuba tank, as there were no life jackets to hand. I was shocked to see 18 passengers moving to the back of the boat, where the engine is now fully ablaze and the crew is telling us to collect a pressurized tank of air and jump. Meanwhile, the captain started throwing life jackets to me on the bow of the boat so I either passed them to passengers moving down the port side or threw them into the water for people to collect."

Stone said, "We got out with our BCDs strapped on but hardly anything else." In the waves, divers and the four crew watched the *Miss Mel* burn and sink into the water, eventually resting 15 feet at the bottom, and nothing was recovered. An Aqua Dives boat was nearby and took them to shore.

Tullock said, "It is possible the boat could have been saved had the crew been better trained in dealing with initial signs of engine fire – for they were certainly not focused on passenger safety." Other passengers onboard told the *Sun* that despite smoke everywhere, nobody panicked and the crew did a good job.

Stone says Amigos Del Mar reacted promptly by having divers fill out reports and insurance claim forms the next day. Amigos Del Mar manager Gilmar told *Undercurrent* that the cause of the fire was the capillary engine breaking its case and catching on fire, and that the company's insurance firm is handling further correspondence with the divers.

Blue Lagoon Resort, Truk, Micronesia

WWII wrecks worthy of technical dive training

Dear Fellow Diver:

When it comes to wreck diving, Truk Lagoon (officially Chuuk) in Micronesia is consistently rated the top destination on Earth. Always more of an explorer than a fish gazer, I had put it off because my tall frame dreaded the numerous flights required to get there. Furthermore, while many of my wreck-diving friends had headed for liveboard diving, I preferred the freedom associated with a land-based operation. As it turned out, the Blue Lagoon Resort was just the right choice.

U.S. Operation Hailstone devastated Japanese shipping in February 1944. Scattered across a warm, clear-water, 40-mile-wide lagoon are scores of sunken Japanese warships, submarines and freighters, as well as a few downed American planes. Salvage operations were few, and the graveyard remains intact, slowly deteriorating with the passing of time. You can dive Truk with a basic openwater certification, but it's like visiting the world's best golf course and then only playing nine holes. Because many wrecks are deeper than 130 feet, it's safer to have technical dive training and experience. Although the expense and gear requirements are considerable, I went for the training, which I spaced over several months. Another good choice.

And I knew my trip was worth it when I gazed at the Fujikawa Maru, a 435-foot carrier that is one of the shallowest wrecks, sitting at 110 feet. Gliding into the holds, I discovered infamous Japanese Zero fighters, hundreds of medicine bottles, torpedoes and other ammunition. The engine room came alive with swirling fish that glimmered in my dive light. A side tour brought me into the workshop where abandoned tools have lain scattered since the ship sank. Returning to the engine room, overhead ambient light illuminated a row of massive cylinder heads like pews in a church. The sub-aquatic time capsule was a true testament to the ravages of naval warfare that is obsolete today.

I wasn't so sure Truk would be worth my trouble, after being cramped in several planes for 14 hours and laying over in two airports for hours. But as soon as I arrived, Blue Lagoon staff whisked me away for a 30-minute drive along potholed jungle roads to the self-contained haven. There I found space to stretch out in my cathedral-ceilinged room, with a small fridge. My bathroom measured the same size as most live-aboard cabins, and my balcony had excellent water views and clothes-hanging capacity. Blue Lagoon's tidy grounds featured a large restaurant, activities room and outdoor bar shaded by lush coconut trees, not the confines of a liveboard.

At the dive shop, my buddy and I met our designated dive guide Chenny, an experienced veteran, and our panga driver, Jongky. The shop had an impressive collection of compressors to fill air and nitrox tanks but dive gear and spare parts were sparse, so I was glad I carried extra batteries and essentials. A small fleet of pangas sat ready for the day's dives. They looked rustic with their plywood sun covers, and simple wooden benches served as storage area for cameras and dry goods. But they sped us to the wrecks in 10- to 20-minute commutes. I didn't have to lug my gear back and forth every day because wash tanks and lockers at the neighboring dock made the daily routine simple.

Another diver joined us for the first three days. We had the boat to ourselves the final four. Since our new mate was only a single tank diver, we started off with the shallower wrecks and worked our way deeper. By the



Blue Lagoon Resort



time he left, we were ready to run technical dives with double tanks for more bottom time. Nitrox 50 sling tanks, clipped to my BCD, made decompression times briefer. Because of the kind of diving we did, which meant only two dives a day, the opportunity for more dives from a liveboard would have been wasted.

Shunning GPS, Chenny found the wrecks by dead reckoning. He and Jongky were socially reserved fellows and dive briefings were indeed brief, but Chenny always got us to the best parts of the wreck. He didn't herd us, but his pace was occasionally too quick for my paparazzi-shooting buddy. For technical dives, we determined our own time, depth

and decompression, and for safety an extra tank and hang bar were 15 feet beneath the panga.

After gearing up and taking a back roll, I followed Chenny down the anchor line. Most wrecks were freighters ('Maru' in Japanese) laden with war supplies -- planes, tanks, tractors, torpedoes, ammunition and medical supplies. Large openings on the deck revealed the cargo holds, and I could often fin from one hold to the next. With open skylights above, the engine rooms' nooks and crannies were easy to explore. I made a second trip to the Fujikawa Maru to visit its lower engine room. The chamber was crammed with catwalks, pipes, valves and instrument panels forever frozen in time.

In the following days, I explored the lower engine room in the Rio de Janeiro at 95 feet, which featured a hold of beer bottles, and army tanks on the San Francisco, still fully loaded with cargo at 185 feet. I discovered ornate china cabinets and torpedoes in the Heian, road-building tractors and tow tractors in the Hoki's holds at 150 feet, and the Kansho's galley, whose oven still held its massive wok. My deepest dive was 208 feet to see the Aikoku's propellers. I spent 18 minutes at depth and the entire dive, including decompression, was an hour and 18 minutes. PS: While most human remains had been removed by the Japanese Navy and cremated in the 1990s, I still saw bones in many wrecks.

New Travel Rules for Dive Gear Batteries

Heads up, underwater photographers: The Department of Transportation no longer allows travelers to pack any spare lithium batteries in checked luggage. You must carry them in your hand luggage. However, electronic devices with installed batteries can be in your checked luggage.

The regulations are written according to the weight of lithium in batteries and are difficult to apply, but for the most part, lithium batteries in consumer electronics fall far below the weight threshold.

The main thing a diver needs to know is that you may not pack ANY spare lithium batteries in your checked bags. Those you carry on should be in the original case, or in individual plastic bags with tape over their contacts.

There are additional rules concerning the weight of the lithium in the batteries, but for the most part are of

concern only to professionals toting serious electronics, not cell phones, lap top computers or dive computers. For the detailed information and to track changes, go to <http://safetravel.dot.gov>. You can also call the Department of Transportation's Hazardous Materials info line at 800-467-4922 with specific questions.

PS: These are U.S. regulations. Other countries may have more stringent requirements and inspectors can be arbitrary. Subscriber Curt Whitney told us that "bag checkers in the Bahamas made me throw away eight rechargeable NiMH batteries which were loose in my camera bag. They wouldn't consider being in a plastic bag adequate, only if they were in the device or a semi-sealed container which kept them from touching."

You do what they say, or you won't get on the plane.

Blue Lagoon Resort, Truk

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent
Worldwide Scale

After 60 years, the metallic hulls had spawned living reefs, and encrusting corals fully covered the ships' exteriors. Schools of tiny fish preferred the safety of the ships' interiors while jacks, tangs, wrasses and rays swam the decks. Sergeant majors hung out with me during decompression stops. In August, air temperature (there were tropical downpours daily but they didn't affect diving) and water temperature hovered in the 80's. I wore a 3mm full wetsuit for protection against rusty interiors. Currents were nil, which was the norm, and visibility extended to 70 feet but quickly decreased once a diver finned around in the interior holds or engine rooms. Generally, small pangas mean fewer divers to stir up the silt. We often avoided wrecks recently dived by Odyssey liveboard divers so we could have clear water.

Wreck diving -- ok, all diving -- worked up an appetite. While I might sample the local eggs and fish breakfast (you can order fried Spam, a staple in Micronesia since the GI's arrived), my buddy managed quite well with oatmeal or fried rice. For lunch, the box lunch wouldn't satisfy a hungry diver so I headed to the restaurant, which served a broad blend of local island food, Chinese, Italian, and American -- pork adobo, saimin, spaghetti, fried or baked chicken -- filling, adequate and less than \$10. Seafood -- fish and chips, tuna steak -- was plentiful and my vegetarian dive buddy survived without complaint. Unlike being on a liveboard, I had a full restaurant menu to choose from. The only entertainment was a stack of old videos at the front desk - room TVs didn't work - so bring a thick book.

During a decompression stop far above the Hoki Maru, I discovered my cherished dive light was gone. It had come unclipped from a D-ring in the mangled wreckage 133 feet below. After lunch, I asked to dive again on the Hoki to find my light, a request

Why Technical Training is Worth Your Time

Let's face it, the standard openwater certification has its limitations. Unless you're content gazing at moray eels in a coral reef for the rest of your life, your options to explore wrecks, enter caverns and dive deeper or longer simply are severely limited. Today, courses like advanced nitrox, extended range, advanced wreck, decompression procedures, doubles training, and trimix are plentiful. It's a natural progression to open new doors and tackle new challenges as long as they're within your comfort zone, which you can expand greatly with increased training. I've found that whenever my diving zest ebbs, the remedy is a new certification course.

Cavern and cave courses literally open up a new world of diving. For closer looks at marine life without bubbles getting in the way, take rebreather training. These courses are more expensive than their openwater counterparts, however, and require the purchase of dependable and top-quality equipment you must maintain.

Learning some technical skills is a good idea for any serious diver. If you're not interested in decompression diving, consider taking a wreck diving course. This training will teach you how to get safely inside the wrecks where the real exploration begins. For the deeper wrecks, get your advanced nitrox certification. You'll learn how to sling a decompression bottle on your BCD, and what nitrox mix to use at what depth. A decompression "hang" can be shortened immensely by using nitrox. The next course is called "decompression procedures." Other variations to consider are, depending on the certifying agency, "doubles training" and "extended range." Trimix (basically the addition of helium to further lessen the DCS risk) and advanced trimix courses would complete the curriculum. These courses cost between \$400 and \$1000, even more, but your deep-water welfare is worth the expense.

Technical Diving International lists dive centers worldwide that offer courses from Advanced Wreck to Trimix. Go to www.tdisdi.com and click on "Find a Dive Center" to locate those teaching a specific course in your area.

Charles Ballinger is the author of An American Underwater Odyssey: 50 Dives in 50 States. His website is www.dive50states.com.

-quickly granted because only two of us were assigned to the boat, and, lo and behold, I found my light. I now double-clip it.

Don't avoid Truk if you're not a technical diver; sport divers have been thrilled here for years, especially WWII history buffs. Blue Lagoon, which can handle up to 100 divers and a range of skills, will set up dives to meet your needs. After all, this is where Truk wreck diving began and though the original owner, Kimiuo Aisek who witnessed the attack on Truk, has passed, his son Gradvin runs the diving and daughter Gardenia runs the hotel. But if you have the opportunity, do consider technical training. I found it well worth the time and trouble, as you may have gathered by now.

And my decision to stay on land was the right one. It hit me one night when a group of raucous Brits from the Odyssey came to Blue Lagoon's restaurant for their last night. "Could you imagine being on board with that group for a week?" asked my buddy. No, I couldn't.

-- M.V.



Diver's Compass: Currency is U.S. dollars . . . Blue Lagoon charges \$120 to \$125 per night for single rooms and \$135 to \$140 for doubles . . . The best room for views and privacy is #301 . . . A two-tank dive is \$105 . . . A State Diving Permit of \$30 is required . . . An aluminum 80 of EANX40 is \$32; I was billed \$19 for nitrox 32 . . . \$5 for extra doubles tank . . . Negotiate all dive shop costs; it was worth my while . . . Air was the standard bottom gas because helium/trimix cost a small fortune . . . The dive shop has little gear for rent or sale . . . Truk did have some WW2 sights to explore but the hotel tour was poorly organized . . . A recent Continental flight with stops in Honolulu and Guam was \$2,140. . . If you're only going to Truk, avoid Continental's island-hopper flight because it requires five stops and redundant baggage checks . . . Blue Lagoon Resort's Web site: www.bluelagoondiveresort.com

Why Divers Die: Part I

panic attacks and entanglement are two killers

Every year, *Undercurrent* reports on diving fatalities compiled by the Diver's Alert Network (DAN) in an ongoing effort to draw lifesaving lessons from these tragedies. In the 167 dive-related deaths recorded in 2005, 89 of them were U.S. and Canadian divers (79 male, 10 female). That has basically held steady for the past four years, however many of these deceased divers would still be alive if they had better judgment and common sense.

Panic Attacks

Most divers are calm and collected, but there can often be a kernel of fear lurking inside that can explode if the situation takes a turn. That's known as panic – going from cucumber-cool to out of control. Though new divers are most apt to panic, experienced divers are also at risk of doing the same should a dive go awry.

A study by Dr. William Morgan, director of the Sport Psychology Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, found that more than half of advanced divers

have experienced panic or near-panic while diving. What separates them from those who die from it is the ability to let rationality overcome emotion. Many DAN reports list divers who suddenly bolted for the surface, refused alternative air sources and rescue attempts, and were found dead with functioning equipment, enough air in their tanks and weight belts still in place. A panic attack can make one pass out or, for those with weak tickers, have a heart attack.

Hyperventilation is an early warning sign of panic. Rapid, shallow breathing can cause hypoxia and a buildup of carbon dioxide. The result: you act irrationally, breathe faster, expel your regulator or bolt for the surface. Lemley Lawton Parker, a 27-year-old from Dade City, Florida, with unknown diving experience, was making repetitive bounce dives to 15 feet with a buddy in Florida's Withlacoochee River, searching for fossils. They used ankle weights for the dives. During one of the bounces, Parker separated from his buddy and ascended in a panic. He broke to the surface, shouting that he needed help. A nearby boater threw him

A Major Risk: When the Dive Operator Doesn't Take Plastic

We've often warned about the pitfalls of booking with dive operations that don't accept credit cards. If they go under, your deposit and perhaps your entire payment goes with them. The best protection for any dive trip is to make a deposit with your credit card to afford yourself protection against theft, fraud and in case the company goes out of business.

So, you can imagine what ran through subscriber Mark Freedman's (Milwaukee, WI) mind when he recently considered booking a dive trip on the *Solmar V* in Cabo San Lucas for a group of ten. He was told deposits were only taken in check or money order form, not by credit card. "The owner simply states they don't have a 'merchant account,' and therefore don't accept payment by credit card, but I like the extra protection credit cards provide," Freedman says. "I searched the Chapbook and found no problems with Solmar but it is under new management so their refusal to take credit cards could make one think they're having cash flow problems. Isn't it highly unusual not to accept credit card payment?"

It is, so we talked with Jose Luis Sanches, managing partner of the company that bought Solmar two years ago, and learned that one can only use a credit card to pay in full up front, but if one wants to put down a deposit and pay the balance later, it's strictly through check or money order.

Sanches says it's just like using Expedia or another online travel agent to book a trip. "When you go to that kind of site, you need to pay for it in full. But if people choose to do deposits, we accept them as we have for the past 15 years."

Ken Knezick, president of dive travel agency Island Dreams in Houston, sees no need to worry about their policy. "We've done business with them for years, always paying by check, and have never experienced any difficulties," he says. He took a dive group on the *Solmar V* last November.

"The bottom line is that accepting credit cards costs the merchant from three to five percent in commissions charged by the credit card company," says Knezick. "When operating in a low-margin industry like travel, this can be a very consequential expense. If Solmar is able to run their business without tithing to Mastercard and Visa, I should think more power to them."

The "pay upfront for everything" policy is becoming the way of the web. If you're concerned about the viability of a company, particularly new or obscure or distant, plastic, not cash, offers some insurance. Or, go through a travel agency, such as Island Dreams, to add another layer of protection. If you have booked directly by check or bank transfer with a foreign-owned dive operator who later goes south, it's highly unlikely you'll ever see your money again.

an anchor line but he didn't grab it and sank back below the surface. He was pulled unconscious from the water by his buddy. Parker's tank still contained 1,000 psi and an autopsy ruled his death as a drowning secondary to an air embolism.

We printed "The Irrational Fear of Flashing Computers" in our July 2007 issue about divers flying to the surface as soon as their dive computers go into decompression mode or start flashing. Unfortunately, the result can be fatal, as it was for an experienced 47-year-old male diver with multiple certifications. He and a buddy made a wreck dive to 105 feet for 26 minutes. There were no problems until they ascended and the man's mask flooded at 55 feet. The two divers then went up to the safety stop, where the man's computer ascent violation rang. He panicked and rapidly headed for the surface. On the surface, his buddy offered him air, but he lost consciousness and couldn't be resuscitated.

Some divers are more susceptible to panic than others because they have higher anxiety levels. A 2002 study by dive panic researcher and psychologist David Colvard, M.D., found that 45 percent of men and 57 percent of women with a history of panic attacks reported panicking on one or more dives, compared to 19 percent of men and 33 percent of

women who had never panicked before. They are more likely to panic when faced with a flooded mask, poor visibility or buddy separation. Even experienced divers with hundreds of dives experience panic for no apparent reason, most likely because they lose sight of familiar objects, become disoriented and experience sensory deprivation.

Still, that shouldn't mean losing common sense and assessing your abilities and whereabouts in a situation, especially when close to shore. A 51-year-old diver who had just been certified was reported to be a poor swimmer and prone to panic. He and his wife were doing a shore dive in Rockland, Maine, but after going 20 yards, they decided to abort it because of poor visibility and swim the length of the pier on the return. Soon after starting, the couple separated. The man was found 90 minutes later, unconscious at a depth of 12 feet with weight belt still in place but an uninflated BCD.

Buoyancy problems and low air are major causes of panic, leading divers to refuse assistance that could save their lives. A recently certified 57-year-old diver taking an advanced openwater course was having persistent buoyancy problems during a dive of the *Tiller* wreck in Lake Ontario. When he looked at his tank and saw it was running low on air, he panicked. His instructor tried to share air but he

wouldn't take it. He lost consciousness and couldn't be resuscitated at the surface.

Althea Rhooms, 43, from Ajax, Ontario, was doing a requalification class in a local lake when she panicked during buoyancy control drills and started flailing at 45 feet. Her buddy signaled to surface but couldn't grab hold of Rhooms. The instructor finally took notice and took her up but by then Rhooms had lost consciousness and resuscitation efforts were unsuccessful.

Keeping calm is key underwater and it's easier to do so by breathing slowly and deeply from the diaphragm. One should start doing this well before submerging. Making sure equipment is configured for maximum comfort and efficiency, plus a buddy's once-over of it, will increase confidence. In cold water, getting used to the water before descending by pausing on the surface to acclimate, even snorkeling briefly, is helpful. When underwater in poor conditions like bad visibility, using whatever orientation aids are on hand, like your instruments and your stream of bubbles, can be reassuring.

Tangled Up in the Blue

Panic impedes the ability to solve problems and get to safety when your equipment malfunctions or you're tangled in a line. Dr. Morgan believes panic could also be fueled by heavy physical activity such as trying to break free from entanglement. A thin line of rope can be a diver's undoing, especially when the person is ill-prepared.

Daniel Fisch, a 54-year-old from Carlsbad, California, with three years of diving experience, had made two dives with a buddy near kelp beds off of Point Loma, then entered the water for a third dive alone to retrieve some crab pots. Unfortunately, Fisch began the dive with minimal air in his tank, either forgetting or assuming he wouldn't be down that long. When rescue divers recovered his body four hours later, he was entangled in the pot lines in a manner that prevented him from ditching his weights.

A 49-year-old experienced male diver was collecting lobsters with two other divers on a night dive. When he ran low on air, he left the group to head back to shore. He was later found unconscious and entangled in kelp, with weights that could not be ditched. He was taken to a hyperbaric chamber but pronounced dead on arrival.

A very experienced 28-year-old diver was making a series of solo dives in a river to retrieve an anchor, alone and with no one topside. His dive computer showed his first dive had been short and shallow, and then he had gone in for a second dive. He was found two days later, drowned, entangled in rope and with all of his equipment on. According to the dive computer, he had used little or no air during the second dive, most likely because he had struggled with the rope above water before he drowned.

Bruce J. Switzer from West Yarmouth, Massachusetts, had only had his certification card for six weeks when he

made a solo dive from Town Neck Beach in Cape Cod Bay to look for lobsters. The beach was notorious for currents and Switzer, 42, didn't use a BCD. Rescuers, who had to battle a strong, easterly current, found Switzer entangled in lines attached to lobster pots. It's unclear whether he dropped his weights but his tank still held 2,000 psi.

What could have prevented these four entanglement deaths? Knives or scissors, which divers are too often without. They're definitely a requirement when diving near kelp beds or lobster pots, but even in tropical conditions they are necessary because of the amount of monofilament fishing line floating around that can entangle a tank. It was once customary to strap a knife to the calf like James Bond in *Thunderball*, but now dive knives and scissors are small enough to fit into a BCD pocket.

In all these situations, keeping calm and relaxed is essential as is retaining good judgment. Going through the "Stop, Breathe, Think and Act" process moderates reaction when something unexpected happens. Fixing small problems before they explode into major ones goes a long way to fending off panic. It's a combination of unexpected factors, not just one, that can send a diver over the edge.

-- Ben Davison

Readers' Diving Tips

Thanks to all the subscribers who answered our call in last month's issue to share their tips for better diving. Here are a select few:

George Boscoe (Orinda, CA) offers an inexpensive fix for Oceanic BCDs – your local shoe repair store. "The weight pockets prolapsed out of mine while diving and if it weren't for the velcro and latch, I would have made an uncontrolled ascent from 60 feet." When he called Oceanic, customer service said the battens probably broke but since it was out of warranty, the repair would be \$99. "Phooey," says Boscoe. "The plastic is no good for battens so I bought a piece of stainless steel plate the same size and took it down to a shoe repair shop where they fixed it."

Another repair tip from Gino Dubay (Pigeon Forge, TN): "Everyone should bring a simple 'save-a-dive' kit to spare the consequences of seeing a part fail and aborting a dive. It can be as simple as keeping the replaced parts from a yearly maintenance service. Parts failure has happened more than once on dive boats I've been on but luckily I've been able to help out with nothing more than a spare 'O' ring."

We plan to publish a few reader tips every month, so keep them coming to EditorBen@undercurrent.org. If we publish yours, we'll extend your subscription.

Unusual Scuba Fins, Part II: Force Fins

one thumb up and two down

Bob Evans is really an artist, and a somewhat emotional one at that. Born in Paris' Montmartre district to native Californians who were part of the city's painting fraternity after WWII, he returned to America where he became a sculptor. Polyurethane is his material of choice and his sculptures are his molds. It's a material that is so hardwearing, it is almost indestructible. You can bend it and it has such a good memory that it always regains its original shape. Bob's results are designed to be functional. He makes Force Fins and founded the business.

Force OPS Fins

Last year, I tried Force OPS fins. These were evidently designed for Jean-Michel Cousteau and his Ocean Adventures team, and give the longest, most flexible paddle-style fin you could imagine. First of all, there's the foot-pocket, a sandal-style upper constructed from reinforced ballistic cloth, that wraps around the foot, held tight with Velcro and secured with three straps and pinch-clips. This upper is laced to the polyurethane base, which has a nonslip pad securely attached on the underside. They really could do with an elastic strap at the heel, rather like Force Pro fins have. I found that having to tighten a strap with a pinch-clip and buckle proved less than easy to do in the cramped conditions of a small rubber boat.



Force OPS Fins

By choosing the degree of rotation where the blades are mounted, you can vary the stiffness and scooping effect of the one-piece OPS blade. Not only that, but a ratchet effect allows you to make in-water adjustments to change the efficacy of the fin. The blades are as long as any you will see and I expected their flexibility to reflect a lack of effort in finning, but this was not the case. I really put in hard effort while using these fins but could only just catch another diver with standard-issue, Italian-made fins who was dragging a safety marker buoy and was unaware of the competition from me panting along behind him.

These overlong blades are certainly not suitable for night dives or for use within the confines of a wreck, either.

I suspect they had been made for their visual appearance in the Ocean Adventures programs rather than for their effectiveness in the water. It's not easy to get a pair – Bob told *Undercurrent* he will only sell OPS fins to divers he knows and likes -- but not to the general public.

Foil Force Fins

Another of Bob's ideas is the Foil Force. They afford a rather zany split-fin effect by attaching two separate polyurethane blades to the same sandal-style foot pocket as the OPS fins. Again, by choosing the degree of rotation of each blade you can alter the performance of the fin.



Foil Force Fins

In the water, I found new muscles I didn't know I had. In many ways, they were much more effective than the OPS variant. I could keep up with other divers but had to make twice as many fin strokes in a fast, short flutter kick, which did not suit my long-legged physique. There was certainly no danger of me overtaking anyone! Rotating the blades in their mounts made finning less strenuous and more comfortable but less effective. Perhaps these Force Foil fins really suit divers with short legs and strong thigh muscles. Tellingly, when finning on my back on the surface, I can usually detect some surface disturbance from the water thrust away by my fins. In this case, there was no such telltale turbulence. (Foil Force fins' suggested retail price is \$250; www.forcefin.com)

Excellerating Force Fins

If I was disappointed in the performance of these innovative Foil Force fins, the Excellerators were a different matter. Don't expect them to be conventional, though. They are normally supplied with adjustable "whiskers" and are very effective. However, I tried a pair with new "bat wings," which take a diver from looking avant-garde to outright eccentric. In the water I could really feel the water being thrust behind me in a whoosh as I finned vigorously and powered forward. They were much more appropriate to my

own habitual long-legged finning technique than with whiskers and I felt I could take on the most powerful of head-on currents. However, that was not without some cost in the form of some strain on my ankles.



Excellerating Force Fins

I canvassed a few other opinions. Simon Gardener, a dive guide on the Peter Hughes vessel *MV Royal Evolution* in the Sudan and an avid Force Pro fin fan, confirmed this when he tried them. The other dive-guide, Hesham Ayyad, thought they felt very powerful but were uncomfortable. Fellow passenger Hugo Cariss, a commercial director from New York, said he could feel how effective they were but still didn't like using them at first – until he got used to them, that is. He said later that they were a bit like surgically enhanced breasts in that they didn't look quite right and felt very strange but in the end he appreciated that they would do the job nicely. After a number of dives, he

thought they were very good indeed. It seems they grow on you. Another passenger, Margreet Verberg from Holland, liked them very much though they were too big for her rather small feet. Everyone agreed they really came into their own once they were in a head-on current.

Obviously, you need to get used to them. When all is said and done, it's how a fin performs on the end of your leg that counts. It's obvious they will not be to everyone's taste, but own a pair of these fins and your pals will be envious enough to hate you, simply because of the money you've spent! (They're listed on Force Fin's Web site for a ridiculous \$629 but can be found elsewhere for nearly half that price, which is still a bundle.)

I came to the conclusion that unlike the more commonly encountered Force Fin Pro fins, which take little effort for those able to deliver a consistently fast flutter kick, the Excellerating Force Fins with "batwings" suited those of us with strength in the legs to take advantage of their huge water shifting ability. The same fins with "whiskers" proved slightly less effective, but the innovative Foil Force and Force OPS fins, although making wonderful conversation pieces, fail to deliver the performance in the water I really expected from them.

John Bantin is the Technical Editor for DIVER magazine in the United Kingdom and a professional underwater photographer.

Those Guides Who Manhandle Fish

and why we should avoid them

Undercurrent reader Don Wilson (Caldwell, NJ) was diving with a friend who owned a dive operation on Hawaii's Kona coast, when the latter caught an octopus and held it. The hapless animal depleted its ink reserve. "When my friend finally released the octopus, it darted toward cover, but too late. A fish shot from the sidelines, grabbed the doomed octopus and hauled it away."

Maybe it was the octopus's destiny to become dinner for a fish, but it probably would have had a longer lifespan if a human hadn't played such a part in its death. Wilson hollered at his friend, but what do the rest of us divers do when on trips with dive operators who have no qualms about handling marine life?

Obviously, divers want to dive with lots of fish and interesting marine life all around them. Knowing this, dive businesses do what they can to guarantee that happens, from offering shark feeds to holding creatures up close. They mean well, but they are also changing animals' natural behavior, modifying

their eating habits, and making them more fearful or more aggressive. Can dive operators and divers find a happy balance between seeing lots of fish and letting them be?

"Pretty Much Everyone Here Does It"

It's not an even balance in some popular dive destinations. In our travel story about San Pedro, Belize, in this issue, our writer described how divemasters from Amigos Del Mar grabbed nurse sharks to let divers rub their bellies, and pulled lobsters and crabs out from under rocks to let underwater photographers get better shots. Turns out they're not the only ones. Many *Undercurrent* readers told us about similar experiences while diving with San Pedro dive operators, who seem to delight in manhandling critters.

Subscriber Stu Mapes dived with the Ramon's Village dive operation last fall and was appalled to see divemasters riding nurse sharks, chasing and sometimes catching sea turtles, picking up and passing around various creatures, and handling

coral. “One of the first things stressed to me when I certified was to look, not touch, and I’ve found most divers follow that advice,” he says. “However, in Belize it seems to be the norm.”

“I’d rather photograph fish acting naturally instead of being held in someone’s hands.”

Rick Sutherland, the dive shop manager at Ramon’s, denies that happens and told *Undercurrent* that he tells divemasters not to touch anything. “I don’t want people doing that kind of thing in my home, so why should we do that in theirs?” He says Ramon’s is not an operation that throws out chum in the Blue Hole, and that boats only feed fish at two Ambergris Caye dive sites, Shark Ray Alley and Esmerelda.

Amigos Del Mar confesses to handling fish and feeding shark and grouper, and manager Gilmar Paz is very blasé about it. “I know it’s controversial for the environmentalists but most of our divers like it because the marine life comes to them.” He says Amigos Del Mar has no official fish-touching policy, nor is any mention made in dive briefing. “We leave it up to the divemasters to decide what to do, and we do tell divers that if they don’t like what’s happening, then tell us so. We try to please everyone. But pretty much every dive operator here does it.”

He’s probably right, as *Undercurrent* readers wrote of similar experiences at Ambergris Divers and Patojo’s Dive Center. However, in our Belize story our writer gave Aqua Dives divemasters on the Blue Hole day trip thumbs up for not touching marine life.

“It’s Hard to Play Scuba Cop”

Subscriber Susan Goudge (Lake Zurich, IL) had an octopus experience similar to Don Brown’s while diving with Kauai’s Seasport Divers on a trip to Niihau. “Our divemaster Luke took an octopus from its crevice and held his hand up so that each time the octopus tried to escape, it swam into Luke’s palm. There was ink everywhere, and a great photo op of an octopus with tentacles extended, but it seemed more like a bully-in-the-playground situation.”

Seasport owner Marvin Otsuji told us he has heard that complaint often but says he can’t do much. “I can’t be there on a day-to-day basis. We don’t have an official policy about touching, but I do tell the crew to be 100 percent professional.” He says divers can sometimes be the problem as many are overeager and do similar grabs. “We try to say don’t touch as best we can, but we can’t constantly tell people not to without making them upset.”

It’s a copout for businesses to say they don’t have a policy and can’t control their employees. Having no policy about pulling critters from crevices means that it’s ok to do it. And it’s another copout to place blame on divers and make employees solely responsible when many are failing to set good examples

of marine life interaction.

While diving with Cozumel’s Dive Paradise last spring, subscriber Deborah Brown was one of the few divers with a camera, so a divemaster decided to find her photo subjects. “He managed to find a splendid toadfish tucked under coral, as is customary. I was ecstatic because Cozumel is the only place to find it, so I quickly moved in to snap some shots.” But then the divemaster took a stick and started prodding at the fish, using his other hand to pull it from its hideout so Brown could get a better shot. “I was so irritated that he would go to such lengths that I quickly turned and swam away in hopes he would leave the fish alone. To me, no picture is worth harming the subject. I’d much rather have a shot of a fish acting naturally, even if that means I’ll only get to see part of its body, rather than being held captive in someone’s hands.”

When *Undercurrent* told Dive Paradise owner Renee Applegate about the incident, she was very upset. “He shouldn’t have done that, and all the divemasters here know they’re not supposed to do that. It’s in the briefing for divers. We dive in a marine park and the rules are supposed to be observed.”

“Anything you do to make a fish change direction is something you shouldn’t do.”

You can’t always blame the operator for the actions of one grabby divemaster or diver. But those who see harm being done should speak up and tell the manager who, at the least, should pull aside the offender for an explanation. Subscriber David DeBoer (Dallas, TX) took it further and left after two days of a scheduled dive week with Scuba Mex, south of Cancun. “Both owners and divemasters would bother anything to provide interest for the divers. The grabbing of pufferfish to induce defensive inflation was a favorite. Latching onto turtles and yanking lobsters out of crevices by their antennae were other specialties. It makes no difference whether it’s your neighbor’s cat or a marine invertebrate, it’s animal cruelty.” Scuba Mex did not reply to our calls or e-mails.

Marta Arensberg (Issaquah, WA) was diving last September on the *Palau Aggressor* when she noticed two divers taking underwater photos of a small turtle. They had pinned it against a wall, allowing it no escape. “They kept their lenses less than 18 inches from this little guy for over five minutes, so I motioned to one of the divemasters to stop them. He did nothing, just shrugged his shoulders at me.”

When *Undercurrent* asked Wayne Hasson, president of the *Aggressor* fleet, about that episode, he replied that there was nothing the divemaster could have done just then. “You can’t scold them in front of other people underwater. Who wants to create an embarrassing situation? It’s better to take them aside and say, ‘You’ve harassed turtles and upset divers; do it again and your diving privileges will be revoked.’”

Hasson says all Aggressor boat briefings state no touching, no feeding. “That doesn’t change the fact that people still do. Some can’t help themselves. What do you do?”

“There Is A Right Way to Touch Fish”

Many *Undercurrent* subscribers recommended dive operators who set good examples about not touching coral or disturbing animals. Susan Goudge says Smitty, formerly of Sea Eye Divers in Grand Turk who now has his own shop, keeps divers’ encounters with animals as natural as possible. David DeBoer applauded Saba’s Golden Rock Dive Center and Sea Saba for upholding the marine park’s strict rules. Scott Okhuysen (Stephenson, MI) says Crystal Clear Watersports in the Florida Keys continually stressed the importance of being only observers. “On one dive, it was reported that a diver caught a ride on a turtle. The divemaster very nicely asked this person, who admitted it. Then he not so nicely explained that if the diver did this again, he would never dive with the operation again.”

Many readers have raved about diving with Touch the Sea in Bonaire (www.touchthesea.com). Owner Dee Scarr takes four divers maximum, gives them 45-minute briefings and aims to get them close to anemones, octopuses and cleaner shrimp. Ed Stevens (Austin, TX) describes his memorable experience. “We entered the water a little before sunset under Town Pier and came across a shy octopus in her den. We sat on the bottom and waited quietly. Slowly, the octopus emerged from her cavern and approached me. I slowly put out my bare arm and the octopus, about three feet in diameter, gripped me and climbed up. Then came the unusual part – instead of continuing her climb, she started to tug on my arm and swim back toward her den. I slowly moved with her, not imagining what she was up to. Dee wrote on her whiteboard, ‘She’s taking you home!’ This adorable octopus and I had to split up because I was running low on air. Did we do wrong by socializing with this wild creature? I certainly benefited. Did she?”

Yes, says Scarr. In her opinion, interacting can be done in ways that are educational and respect the animals. “The simplest way to look at it is the wording of the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act,” she says. “Anything you do that makes a fish turn the opposite direction is something you shouldn’t do.”

Even venomous animals can be approached in the right way. Scorpionfish lying on the sea floor raise a dorsal fin to show discomfort. Scarr tries to find one lying low in flat sand so she doesn’t approach it from above. “If it raises the dorsal fin, I back off. If it doesn’t, I position my four divers in positions so that they’re not making a semi-circle around it and the fish sees that if he wants to go, he can. You can’t pen in anything or it will feel uncomfortable.” Scarr reaches out a finger, then raises the dorsal fin a bit. If the scorpionfish hasn’t moved, she brings divers in one by one to pet it in the safe spot behind the fin. “The goal is to make the fish comfortable.”

It’s apparent that too many dive operators let their divemasters manhandle marine life. Some operators encourage it while

others turn their backs. Their goal is to entertain their customers, regardless of the effect on the natural environment. In most cases, they are threatening the security of the animal, forcing it into a defensive mode. Dee Scarr’s approach is not only entertaining, it is also gentle and educational. Others should follow her lead. As it is now, reckless dive operators are another element in the destruction of our reefs and marine life. Divers ought to avoid them.

-- Vanessa Richardson

Next month, we’ll take a look at fish feeding and the diving industry’s overall stance on human interaction with marine life.

Dolphin Speak

A research project has distinguished nearly 200 different whistles that dolphins make, linking some of them to specific behaviors. Liz Hawkins of Southern Cross University in Lismore, Australia, has concluded that their communication is “highly complex and it is contextual, so in a sense, it could be termed a language,” as she told the magazine *New Scientist*.

Hawkins recorded a total of 1,647 whistles from 51 different pods of dolphins living in Byron Bay, just south of Brisbane. She identified 186 different whistle types. Of these, 20 were especially common.

Dolphins use “signature” whistles to identify themselves to others and refer to each other in their whistles, something no other animals are known to do. But they are apparently saying much more. When a pod was traveling, for instance, 57 percent of the whistles were “sine” whistles, rising and falling symmetrically. But when the dolphins were feeding or resting, they made far fewer whistles of this type. And while socializing, they communicated almost exclusively using flat-toned or rising-toned whistles.

The dolphins often made a particular flat-toned whistle when they rode the waves created by Hawkins’s boat, and it’s tempting to speculate that the whistle is the equivalent of a child going “wheeee!” In a group of dolphins living off Queensland, Hawkins identified a whistle often emitted by an animal when it was on its own. “That whistle could definitely mean: ‘I’m here, where is everyone?’” says Hawkins.

Melinda Rekdahl of the University of Queensland found dolphins make more whistles when they’re being hand-fed than those feeding in the wild. “It’s too early to know whether whistles might mean something as specific as ‘hurry up’ or ‘there’s food over here,’” she says. “But it’s possible. Dolphin communication is much more complicated than we thought.”

A review of the science of dolphin communication can be found at <http://acp.eugraph.com>.

Flotsam & Jetsam

Enter the Underwater Photo and Video Competition. March 1 is the deadline to enter the 11th Underwater Images Photo/Video Competition. Categories include "Conservation," "Macro," "Wide Angle," and a new one called "Divers and Marine Creatures." Best of Show and First Prize awards will be dive trips to Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Indonesia, among others. Dive equipment and gift certificates from sponsors like Ikelite and Pinnacle will also be given out. Each submission has a \$10 entry fee, and more than 80 percent of proceeds go to nonprofits supporting marine conservation. To enter the contest, visit www.uwimages.org.

How Diving Helps Business Owners. While running a dive shop in Tonga, Patty Vogel realized that what she knows about diving also applies to running a business. In an article for *Entrepreneur*, she summarized thus: 1) Never stop breathing -- using your breath as a natural stress reducer makes you a better leader; 2) Swimming with the current will make entrepreneurship easier and more enjoyable; and 3) Prepare for your

next adventure by having the boat wait for you at the end of the dive.

The \$23,000 Sharksuit. The Neptunic C Suit made from steel mesh, titanium and hybrid laminates can supposedly withstand shark bites but takes a big chunk from your wallet instead. The suit is a modern version of one tested by shark expert Valerie Taylor in the 1980s (hers, made of butchers' gloves, only cost \$2,000). Neptunic creator Jeremiah Sullivan says he has had no injuries from thousands of shark bites while wearing it, but his Web site states, "We offer no guarantee about the usefulness of this product to protect a wearer from injury of any kind under any circumstances." See the sharksuit at www.neptunic.com.

Tail Shot. The most unique underwater photo placement we've seen is on the enormous tail of a Frontier Airlines Airbus. It's a turtle shot, one flap up, the other down, taken by subscriber Ken Howard (San Anselmo, CA). Frontier offered him their standard \$1,500 fee, which he found insulting but negotiated a substantially better deal. To see the Airbus turtle tail, go to www.seaimages.org. Frontier is currently looking for shots of adult seals and manatees. For information, email jchua@flyfrontier.com.

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