

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

April 2008

Vol. 23, No. 4

## Small Hope Bay Lodge, Andros Island

### IN THIS ISSUE:

Small Hope Bay Lodge, Andros Island.....	1
It's Sea Lice Season Again...	3
<i>Oceanic Wilderness</i> .....	4
<i>The Eric</i> , Galapagos Islands ...	5
Aquatic Encounters Is Taking a Sabbatical.....	6
Get Published in the 2009 Chapbook .....	8
Travel Report Form .....	9
Dealing with "Difficult" Divers.....	10
Considering Deep Profiles..	10
Death of a Shark Diver.....	11
Help Keep Hawaiian Fish Out of Aquariums .....	12
Readers' Dive Tips.....	13
Oh, Did We Mention the Fuel Surcharge? .....	14
Thumbs Down: Coiba National Park and Scuba Coiba ...	14
Flotsam & Jetsam .....	15

[www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)

### Editorial Office:

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

## *Bahamas diving with one big happy family*

Dear Fellow Diver:

I surfaced from my first-ever shark dive, ending a day that began at an ancient sandy shoreline 185 feet below the surface. The sun was shining, but wouldn't be for long. Still, I had beaten Mother Nature by doing twelve dives in four dramatically different undersea environments before she could slam the door shut on diving for the remaining three days of my trip with a cold front and high winds. The sunny Bahamas is a risky winter vacation venue because the weather and temperature can literally change overnight. But Small Hope Bay's way of arranging dives helped me dive a blue hole and make a shark observation dive, four deep wall dives, and five coral garden dives in just four days.

Despite its price and limited coverage in dive publications, I tried Small Hope Bay Lodge on Andros Island based on its rave review in 1000 Places To See Before You Die. Andros is the Bahamas' largest island, dominated by thick bush and mangrove swamp - perfect for divers like me who don't want to share the waters with cruise ships and concrete resort compounds. The lodge is the Bahamas' oldest dive resort, founded in the 60s by deep-sea diving pioneer Dick Birch. Because there are only 21 coral-walled, pine-roofed cottages around a central compound, I booked eight months in advance to ensure a New Year's week stay.

Though a week's dive package was almost double the rate of Caribbean dive spots like Cozumel, diverse diving made Small Hope Bay worth the expense,



Small Hope Bay's main lodge



at least once. The lodge sits on the edge of the 140-mile-long Andros Reef (the third largest barrier reef in the world) so trips to most dive sites were only a 15-minute boat ride. The reef drops into a 6,000-foot trench known as the "Tongue of the Ocean" and because this canyon is so close to shore, access to deep wall dives was a breeze. The expansive system of caves makes for 178 freshwater blue holes on the island and 50 along the reef.

Dick Birch has passed, but his family still runs Small Hope Bay Lodge. While not sleeping or diving, I spent my time on comfy couches by the main lodge's fireplace, chatting with guests and locals over Bahama Mamas at the bar, and playing ping-

pong in the game room. Birches and their staff mingled at all meals. Kids and pets are welcome. I felt pampered even before I arrived. By phone and e-mail, office staff Anastasia, Tracy and Bhruna communicated promptly and in friendly tones. When I asked whether the bar stocked my favorite gin, they said no but would be happy to fly it in -- at no extra charge.

Jacques Cousteau gave a thumbs-up to Andros's Great Blue Hole, and I have to agree. Fresh water from the island exits through a narrow, cavern-like opening. I swam into its darkness and through slimy white strands, the byproduct of detritus-eating bacteria floating like webs in a Halloween spook house. My Andros born-and-bred divemaster Skeebo, who claims to have made nearly 9,000 dives, led us down to 104 feet. After we lined up single-file into a crevice-like entrance, visibility was too bad to continue so we turned around to exit. Skeebo led us into the "sky-light room," a more spacious cavern. Below me, the hole extended down to 320 feet. Visibility was still not great so I didn't get the full experience of this former dry-land waterfall and its swim-throughs, but I was glad I brought my light to inspect crevices.

Shallow reefs, wrecks and cavern dives categories are among the 40 dive sites crew regularly visits. The lodge offers custom specialty dives to openwater sites, coral caverns and more blue holes but they're pricey at \$140 for one person, \$100 for two or more. I did shell out extra for the shark observation dive, but I saw everything else on my package-allotted sites. Visibility averaged 55 feet; sunshine boosted it to 80 feet while the lack thereof dropped it to 30. No remarkable current but 50-minute dives in the winter season's 78-degree water became chilly fast. I wish I had traded in my 3-mil wetsuit for a 5-mil. My spouse snorkeled while I dove and reported that the trips, led separately, were to equally beautiful coral gardens. A Lodge favorite was 12-foot-deep Red Hill, named for the rusty-colored Elkhorn coral in which French and blue-striped grunts hang.

I took giant strides off the dive boats, large and stable pontoons, and removed fins before climbing up sturdy side ladders. No more than 10 divers were on board though capacity was double that. Mask and camera buckets were refilled daily. Aluminum 80 tanks ranged between 2800 and 3200 psi. Crew gave thorough briefings and suspended safety tanks and regulators on all dives. Two large rinsing tanks and a hose were dockside. At the dive center next to the docks, each cottage was assigned a bin to stow small gear and a space to hang the rest. However, bring a save-your-dive kit, because despite rental gear and computers, this was no full-service dive shop.

While diving didn't compare to Bonaire, and the rather plain coral gardens didn't hold the drama of Grand Cayman's Japanese Gardens, I counted up to 40 fish species at most coral garden sites. I've never seen such a concentration of redbellied parrotfish, harlequin bass, barred hamlet and Nassau grouper. I also spotted seven invasive lionfish, which are now spreading into Caribbean waters. To my photo

album, I added rare shots of a Black Jack and a male quillfin blenny. At Brad's Mountain, I snapped a pair of queen triggerfish and a yellowtail grouper while two reef sharks circled at the edge of visibility.

I liked that dives were not follow-the-leader style except on deeper walls and the Blue Hole. Divemasters were always close but not enough to point out anything unless asked. The laid-back dive schedule was ideal for divers wanting to sleep in: Two tanks at 9:30 a.m., another at 2 p.m., and I was back in my room by 4:30 to clean up for drinks and dinner. They offer night dives twice weekly but with six people needed, I never got a chance.

Given what I was paying, I was put off by the drive up to the unimpressive entrance, past a gasoline tank and maintenance yard. My smallish room had no bathtub to dry gear, just a small stand-up shower. But all cottages sit on a lovely private beach facing east, and sun lovers can go au natural in a private screened-off area. Still, this is not a place to loll about in your suite - no phones or TVs, and only half the cottages have air-conditioning. Thanks to three dives a day and a hearty dinner, I fell into my rock-hard, king-sized bed too tired to care when offshore breezes blew in odors from the mangrove shallows.

Small Hope Bay Lodge is the Caribbean version of family camp. Rubbing elbows with lodge owner Jeff Birch, son of Dick, and his staff was an everyday occurrence. At one breakfast, we got a wakeup call from batik-clad conga drummers emerging from the kitchen, led by Jeff. After one dinner, Skeebo stood on a chair handing out awards for adventures and mishaps experienced by each departing guest. Dives were arranged over drinks every night. I've never interacted so much with staff at any place, and it was never to complain about service. Many have worked

## It's Sea Lice Season in the Caribbean Again

Have you ever emerged from a great dive in Caribbean waters with more than the itch to dive again? It could be a burning physical itch that ruins your mood, your day and even the rest of your dive trip.

This burning itch, known as "sea lice," is found in popular dive spots in Florida and the Caribbean. Common symptoms are itchy skin eruptions and dime-sized blisters. They're found primarily on body parts covered by swimwear but lesions can also appear on arms, legs and the neck. Symptoms will appear within 24 hours after exposure to sea lice and will persist for several days, although there have been some cases lasting several weeks. Symptoms can include fever, chills, headaches, nausea and vomiting.

The term "sea lice" is a misnomer since the primary offenders in Florida and Caribbean waters are the larvae of the thimble jellyfish. Only half a millimeter in length, they can find their way into bathing suits, become trapped against the skin and sting. Since many sea lice symptoms are mild or consistent with other illnesses, diagnosis is sometimes difficult unless the doctor knows of a diver's exposure to contaminated water.

April through July are the months when sea lice are most prevalent. The larvae are most concentrated in shallow waters, between the surface and depths of 10 to 15

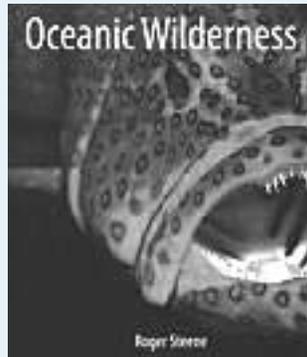
feet. If you're diving during sea lice season, ask the dive operator if there have been any recent encounters. If so, make a quick descent once you enter the water and, on the way back, make your shallow water stop around 20 feet instead of 10. The best prevention method is protection by wetsuit or skinsuit. A product called Sea Safe, formulated to prevent jellyfish stings, has also been reported as an excellent preventive.

If you're diving or swimming in sea lice-infested waters, remove your wetsuit, dive skin or bathing suit before showering because fresh water may discharge the larvae trapped in the fabric. Even so, sea lice may remain in clothing; Divers Alert Network has reported cases of sea lice recurring when the same bathing suit is worn again.

If you do start feeling the burn, immediately apply a mixture of isopropyl alcohol and vinegar. Lacking that, try pure vinegar or even Windex. Next, apply a hydrocortisone cream or lotion twice a day. As with most allergic skin reactions, a dose of oral antihistamine like Benadryl or Claritin can help, but factor in how side effects like drowsiness could affect your diving. Sometimes rashes will clear spontaneously, but others may need antihistamines and antipruritic (anti-itching) agents, and severe cases may require cortisone tablets or injections. So if sea lice stings go beyond mild to moderate symptoms, it's time to find a physician.

## *Oceanic Wilderness: Mysteries of the Silent Deep*

This new book by Australian Roger Steene is among the best books of underwater photographs ever published. He has captured unique behaviors of unique creatures -- like a harlequin shrimp devouring a sea star -- with an unprecedented level of color and camouflage. Steene, considered one of the world's best fish photographers, has a scientific eye that goes far beyond most professional



photographers, which results in an endless array of surprising and stunning shots. More than 500 colorful images fill the 340 pages of this oversized coffee-table book. It's a must for your library. 13 x 11 inches, hardcover. Avoid paying the \$60 list price by ordering it for much less at our Web site [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org) (scroll down to "Editor's Picks" at the bottom). All profits will go to save coral reefs.

there for years, and many guests have been returning annually for a decade or more. The make-yourself-at-home feel applied to complimentary bicycles, kayaks, small sailboats and hot tub to use whenever I wanted. The unstaffed gift shop ran by an honor system; I could bring what I liked back to the room and just fill out a chit for what I took. When I walked along the road, passing cars would wave or honk in greeting. But my walks also took me past a lot of roadside litter.

Buffet-style meals were plentiful and varied, and seafood was especially tasty. I went back for seconds of herb-encrusted grouper and blackened snapper, followed by desserts like whiskey bread with butter pudding or pecan pie. If I didn't want the daily Bahamian breakfast dish like stewed mackerel or boiled bologna, I could order eggs, an omelet, pancakes or french toast, and sample oatmeal, fruit, and cold cereals. Lunches were leftovers, but that still meant a surface interval feast of salmon with citrus-herb butter. Even the locals came here to eat. Booze and beer were on the house, so I also went back for seconds of Bahama Mamas.

On New Year's Day, I put myself into Skeebo's capable hands for the "Over the Edge of the Wall" dive, as the lodge allows qualified divers to explore below 100 feet on certain guided dives. Whip wire and other small coral lined the wall as I sank to my destination, a ledge of sandy beach at 185 feet, with just six minutes below 100 feet and a slow 30-minute no-deco ascent. The second dive at Peter's Mystery Special, a 25-foot-deep coral garden, was followed by lunch, pan-seared wahoo with fruit rum reduction eaten under thatched umbrellas at the seaside bar.

My third dive that day was the shark observation dive at Shark Emporium. Knowing that the cold front and high winds would make diving iffy going forward,

Jeff scheduled it for me and two others. Following a no-handfeeding policy, crew suspended a frozen "chumsicle" 40 feet below the surface. My spouse snorkeled overhead, getting a great view of my buddy and me kneeling on the bottom while a dozen reef sharks attacked the frozen chum ball just 20 feet above our heads. Afterward I searched the sand for shark's teeth while the sharks did after-dinner circles; some approached me within a couple of feet, staring at me with cold, unblinking eyes.

Dive sites were not marked on the surface but boatdriver/divemasters Skeebo and Moose, Jeff's thirty-something nephew and native Androsian, navigated unerringly without GPS. With

### **Small Hope Bay Lodge, Andros Island**

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★1/2
Diving ( <i>beginners</i> )	★★★★
Snorkeling	★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Food	★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★

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

no mooring balls, boats relied on heavy anchors, which divemasters hoisted by filling an inverted pail attached to the anchor chain with air to boost lift. No one stayed topside with the boat. A large grappling hook was suspended 10 feet off the bottom on all dives. Skeebo told me that in the very unlikely event that the anchor line parted with no one on board, the hook would "eventually" catch. That made me ponder, but nothing happened during my stay.

When the cold front hit, overnight temperatures plummeted from the low 80s into the 60's and logs were thrown into the fireplace. On one night, we visited the local batik factory. It was a hoot dipping tropical-themed molds into hot wax to make unique patterns onto white sheets that would later become blue batik fabric. Another night after dinner, notable underwater cave diver Brian Kakuk presented a PowerPoint slideshow about the geographical, archeological and technical diving aspects of his explorations. Another day, Skeebo took us at no charge on a guided nature tour of Captain Bill's Blue Hole, then to Staniard Creek, where he introduced us to his mother and family home.

My week at Small Hope Bay Lodge was worth the hefty price, despite the nasty weather, maybe even because of it -- I don't know where else I could have packed so many unique dive experiences within such a tight time frame. The best time for the Bahamas is May through August, when the water is warmer, the days hot, the nights not so cool. As summer progresses, hurricanes become more likely and there can be frequent but short-lived rain squalls. Luxurious it's not, but Small Hope Bay Lodge's family-hug feeling makes it feel like a second home. It's a great place to bring the kids and get them excited about diving and marine wonders. Life is too short to miss out on the good diving just off the Lodge's doorstep, weather notwithstanding.

-- S.P.



**Diver's Compass:** An eight-day, all-inclusive dive package during low season (April 27 to December 19) is \$1,945, then increases to \$2,083, while the all-inclusive daily rate for snorkelers is \$235 during low season and \$254 in peak season . . . Nitrox fills are extra at \$10 . . . My weekly bill for two adults, 12 dives, three snorkel trips, four percent gratuity and dive staff tips was \$4,054 . . . U.S. dollars accepted, but little cash is needed since all fees, including tips, can be charged . . . If you want A/C, request it in advance . . . Small children eat dinner separately under complimentary supervision; babysitting is available . . . Flights to Andros Town on Continental puddle-jumpers leave from Fort Lauderdale four days a week and cost approximately \$300, but the Lodge also helps arrange charter flights . . . I checked four bags, each less than 50 pounds, with no problems from Continental . . . Taxi to and from the airport is \$10 per person one way; no need for rental cars and the Lodge arranges land excursions . . . Web site: [www.smallhope.com](http://www.smallhope.com).

---

## *The Eric, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador*

### *the "dive lite" version with energetic surface intervals*

Dear Fellow Diver:

Whenever you hear about Galapagos diving, the discussion always focuses on Wolf and Darwin Islands, home to hammerheads, mantas, whale sharks and other big critters. These rocky outcrops at the northern end of the archipelago are only visited by dedicated dive boats, which are restricted by Galapagos National Park (GNP) regulations to just a few land excursions - for now. Per our article in the October 2007 issue of Undercurrent, the GNP temporarily suspended all dive boat

## Aquatic Encounters Is Taking a Sabbatical

Planning a dive trip to the Galapagos, readers Susanne and Thomas Webb (Playa Del Rey, CA) were thinking about the *Reina Silvia* and contacted Aquatic Encounters, one of the top dive agencies specializing in Galapagos travel. But its Web site wasn't functioning, and neither e-mails nor telephone calls were returned.

We tracked down Aquatic Encounters owner Marc Bernardi at his Colorado home. He says the travel agency is taking a sabbatical, partly because both he and his wife have had health issues and partly because the screwy situation regarding dive boats' permits and itineraries (see our October 2007 issue for details) has been immensely frustrating for him to keep track of and advise clients where to book.

Bernardi didn't tell us when he expects to open Aquatic Encounters up for business again, but he did say that anyone who has questions about Galapagos bookings can e-mail him at [aquatenctr@aol.com](mailto:aquatenctr@aol.com), as he will still be tracking the latest news about dive boats in the region.

operations, then required the boats to apply for new permits, so the situation is always changing.

I toured the islands in January with a group that was more into boobies and tortoises than sharks and rays, so I found myself on a live-aboard that offered the usual range of land excursions and snorkeling, plus an optional package of four dives during the seven-day cruise. The *Eric* is one of three identical 20-passenger motor yachts operated by a local company, Ecoventura. The boats specialize in "active departures," that include longer hikes, daily snorkeling and optional kayaking and diving. They're best for divers who want more vigorous surface intervals in their itinerary. To boost the local economy, diving is conducted by shore-based operators, so it is restricted to islands with towns that support dive shops.

My original itinerary called for me to dive different sides of Santa Cruz Island on Tuesday and again on Friday. Runway repairs caused my plane to fly to a military air base

on the island of Baltra rather than the commercial airport on San Cristobal. As a result of that switcheroo, my diving was rescheduled for Thursday and Saturday. The lesson is clear: When planning a Galapagos trip, flexibility is key, because conditions or GNP regulations can change at any time.

After boarding, unpacking and a buffet lunch, the *Eric* motored to nearby Isla Mosquera for snorkeling. I suited up on the fantail, then climbed down a ladder to a swim step where the crew helped divers into two inflatable pangas. Splitting the group in two minimized our impact on the environment - and each other. Nearing the beach, I was introduced to the unique fauna of the islands: sea lions and marine iguanas paddled around the panga, bright orange Sally Lightfoot crabs decorated the rocks like Christmas ornaments, and frigate birds, yellow-crowned night herons, and blue-footed boobies circled overhead. While admiring the view, my guide Karina described several endemic animals, birds and plants that had inspired Charles Darwin's theories of evolution in his book Origin of The Species.

In the water, I saw plenty of sea lions but was disappointed in not spotting marine iguanas beneath the surface. Later snorkeling trips featured tiny Galapagos penguins (although I didn't see any underwater), and semi-tropical fish such as Moorish idols, brilliant king angels, several species of parrotfish and giant damselfish with c-shaped tails. While snorkeling through a crevice between two rocks at Darwin Bay on Genovesa, I almost ran into a five-foot, white-tip reef shark coming straight at me. I threw up my hands to brake my forward progress while he executed a nifty flip turn and split. I'm not sure who was more startled.



One of Ecoventura's expedition yachts

My upper-level room was just big enough for a double bed, chest with one drawer, and built-in nightstand with another small drawer. Electrical outlets were 110VAC. I hung clothing in a half closet and the rest on hooks behind the door and on various walls. Two bags could fit on a shelf over the bed. The full bathroom had a stall shower and one shelf for toiletries; the sink had no hot water and my toilet flushed successfully about one in four tries. Cabins were air-conditioned but on the first night's crossing to Genovesa, my A/C cut off when the boat finally anchored. From then on, I slept better with my large picture windows open and A/C off. Rooms on the lower decks had smaller windows or portholes, and passengers had to put up with engine noise. Seas were calm, and our passages were very smooth. No one had even the slightest queasiness throughout the voyage.

<b><i>The Eric, Galapagos Islands</i></b>	
Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★
Diving ( <i>beginners</i> )	★★
Snorkeling	★★★★
Land Excursions	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★★
Food	★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★
★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent	
<i>Worldwide Scale</i>	

A Massachusetts couple joined me for diving on Thursday. We were met at 8 a.m. by Rafael Gallardo, divemaster from the SubAqua dive center. He and a deckhand helped us aboard a six-pack dive boat where we met two other divers from one of our sister ships. The covered SubAqua boat included a head and plenty of dry storage in the cabin. On the way to the island of Santa Fe, forty minutes southwest of Puerto Ayora, I unpacked my gear. My nearly new XS Scuba 6-mil wetsuits fit much better than the tatty, 3-mil snorkeling suits supplied by the Eric. I had brought my own regulator and console, but the others were issued Scubapro regs and pressure gauges, but no computers. Crew set up the regs and less-than-new Scubapro Pilot BCDs on aluminum 80 tanks, then helped us into them. After a brief, shallow check-out, I proceeded to a site called the Caves, where a friendly sea lion guided me through a low-ceilinged swim-through and steered around a stingray in the sand. I emerged into a strong current so I turned sideways to slow my drift. In the 40-foot visibility, I saw three eagle rays but no fish I hadn't already seen snorkeling. Water temperature dropped to 64 degrees as I descended through a combination halocline/thermocline at 52 feet, so I appreciated the hood and boots SubAqua had provided me. After the dive I handed up my weights, fins, and tanks, then climbed a short, open-sided ladder into the stern. During the surface interval, Rafael handed out dry towels and set out a tray of cold cuts, hot dog buns and Oreos, plus water and soft drinks.

By noon, I was back in the water on the other side of Santa Fe. Visibility here was closer to 90 feet. Two playful sea lions hung with us for half the dive, and I also spied blue chin parrots, white spotted sand bass and harlequin wrasse so brightly colored they looked like giant koi. The terrain was primarily lava rock. Vegetation was not particularly colorful, and the small stands of coral I saw were all bleached so the fish were the exotic attractions. Rafael had us back on the Eric by 1:30, so I joined the afternoon excursion to Puerto Ayora and the Darwin Center where giant tortoises and land iguanas basked in the sun.

Each morning, the intercom in my room played gentle wake-up music at 6:45 a.m. A buffet breakfast served from 7 to 8 a.m. was hearty, bland and high in carbs. Tasteless omelets, fried eggs congealing in a steam table compartment, and lukewarm coffee prevailed. There was plenty of fresh fruit, a different variety of exotic juices, and do-it-yourself raisin toast. At lunch and dinner, we were served delicious soups, then went to the buffet line for salads, entrees and desserts. There was something fried at every meal, often in empanadas. Each time I returned from snorkeling or a shore excursion, I was served fresh juice or water, and snacks

such as cheese puffs or Oreos. The one vegetarian aboard seemed happy with her special dishes. Booths seated four to six, but one nice touch was being invited to dine at the Captain's table. Each night, the affable Captain Peter regaled everyone with stories of his days in the Ecuadorian Coast Guard and treated us to Chilean wine. Before dinner, people gathered in the main salon to read, watch natural history presentations on a LCD TV, or enjoy drinks from the no-host bar and complimentary hors d'oeuvres. On our last night, Captain Peter and crew presented us with maps showing our itinerary for the week and certificates authenticating our adventure. Karina showed photos she had taken of our group throughout the week, then gave each of us a complimentary CD of the slide show - an extraordinary gesture, in my liveaboard experience.

My new dive buddies and I discussed the wisdom of diving on Saturday when our flight out was due to leave at 10:30 the following morning. We had been promised a trip with a different dive operator to Kicker Rock off San Cristobal, considered the primo site in the Central Islands, with a chance to see hammerheads and Galapagos sharks. Eventually we decided to scratch the dive and join our shipmates to go souvenir-shopping in Puerto Bacouerizo Moreno. At the airport the next day, someone who made the dive told me that instead of hammers, they encountered ripping currents and an upsurge that took one couple 60 feet to the surface. Looks like our decision was the right one after all.

The Galapagos exceeded expectations in every way, except for the diving. The optional dive package ran \$360 for four dives. Expensive, but we were treated to true valet service on a very comfortable boat. However, with such good snorkeling and land excursions, next time I'd pack only my mask and snorkel, and leave the diving to the dedicated dive boats.

-- D.L.



**Diver's Compass:** American Airlines serves Quito from Miami and Continental flies in from Houston; recent flights were \$560 from Miami and \$825 from Houston . . . My double room on the Eric's highest deck, with two picture windows, ran \$3,250 per person for a seven-night cruise; less expensive rooms are available on the two lower decks . . . Daytime air temperatures were in the mid-80's . . . I booked my Galapagos trip with dive travel agency Reef & Rainforest (800-794-9767; [www.reefrainforest.com](http://www.reefrainforest.com)), which booked a fascinating side trip for me to La Selva Lodge in Ecuador's Amazon rainforest ([www.laselvajunglelodge.com](http://www.laselvajunglelodge.com)) . . . After my cruise, I enjoyed a driving excursion around Quito, Otavalo and other market towns, plus the cloud forest in the western highlands, which I booked through Lost World Adventures (800-999-0558; [www.lostworldadventures.com](http://www.lostworldadventures.com)) . . . Ecoventura ([www.ecoventura.com](http://www.ecoventura.com)) also operates the dive boat Sky Dancer as a Peter Hughes franchisee; Sub-Aqua is the oldest dive center in the Galapagos ([www.galapagos-sub-aqua.com](http://www.galapagos-sub-aqua.com)).

## Get Published in the 2009 Chapbook!

We need your travel reviews for the 2009 Travelin' Divers Chapbook, sent to subscribers at the end of this year. Here are three easy ways to send them in:

1. Complete the online form at our Web site: [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org). There are "Submit a Reader Report" links in both the Subscribers' and Online Members' areas. (While you're there, sign up for your free online membership, and you can search a decade of chapbooks and *Undercurrent* issues.)
2. Send your report in an e-mail or as an attachment to us at [ReaderRpt@undercurrent.org](mailto:ReaderRpt@undercurrent.org). Don't forget to put your name on the report.
3. Fill out the form on the opposite page (it is double-sided so you can fill out two trips) and mail it to: Undercurrent, 3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102, Sausalito, CA, 94965; or fax it to us at (415) 289-0137.

# Travel Report Form



Fill out online at [www.undercurrent.org/members/UCnow/ma\\_rdrprt.php](http://www.undercurrent.org/members/UCnow/ma_rdrprt.php)

## DIVER INFORMATION

Your name \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
 E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_ May we publish your e-mail address?  yes  no  
 How many dives have you logged? \_\_\_\_\_ Where else have you been diving? \_\_\_\_\_

## TRIP INFORMATION

Name of resort or liveboard \_\_\_\_\_ Name of dive operation \_\_\_\_\_  
 Location (e.g., island, country) \_\_\_\_\_ Date of visit (month/year) \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Circle one or more of the following that best describes the overall water conditions during your trip.

- calm and flat     choppy     surge     strong currents     no currents

Water temperature was \_\_\_\_° to \_\_\_\_° F.    Wetsuit  yes  no \_\_\_\_\_mm    Water visibility was \_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ft.

Could you dive your own profile?  yes  no    What restrictions were enforced while diving? (depth limits, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_

Select the words that best describe what you encountered on your trip.

- Sharks:**     none     1 or 2     schools    **Turtles:**     none     1 or 2     more than 2  
**Mantas:**     none     1 or 2     squadrons    **Dolphins:**     none     1 or 2     schools

Rate the following by circling a number. (*Five is best and one is worst.*)

Corals.....	1	2	3	4	5	Diving for experienced .....	1	2	3	4	5
Tropical fish.....	1	2	3	4	5	Condition of accommodations ..	1	2	3	4	5
Large fish.....	1	2	3	4	5	Level of service.....	1	2	3	4	5
Pelagics .....	1	2	3	4	5	Quality of the food.....	1	2	3	4	5
Small critters.....	1	2	3	4	5	Dive operations .....	1	2	3	4	5
Overall diving for beginners.....	1	2	3	4	5	Shore diving .....	1	2	3	4	5

**COMMENTS** Please tell us the good, the bad, and what you wish you had known before you left home.

Return to *Undercurrent* · 3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102, Sausalito, CA 94965  
 Fax to: 415-289-0137 · E-mail to [bendavison@undercurrent.org](mailto:bendavison@undercurrent.org)

# Dealing with “Difficult” Divers

## *a former liveaboard captain’s perspective on customer service*

*We are always on the side of the traveling diver, but we’ll always listen when Bob Halstead, a dive legend who introduced Papua New Guinea diving, offers his perspective as owner and captain of the live-aboard Telita, which he sold just a few years ago. As you’ll notice, Halstead isn’t worried about being politically incorrect. After all, he’s an Aussie.*

It is said that there is one on every cruise. The diver who does not fit in, behaves selfishly, and generally spoils the cruise for the other guests. When operating the *Telita*, I would take the offending character aside for a friendly private chat to point out that I was getting complaints about his behavior and ask if he could perhaps be a little more considerate. That was when I still had patience.

Evolution transformed my private chat into a public dining-room story along the lines of how, if a guest was being particularly annoying – eyeballing the particular guest at this point – and making the cruise unpleasant for my other guests, I would get the passenger and all his belongings and dump them on the nearest island. I pointed out that I was operating in PNG, where it was impossible for foreigners to sue, and that

I would become a hero in the dive travel industry. The resultant publicity would encourage hordes of frustrated divers to book with me.

However, *Undercurrent*, reviewing *Telita* and my hand at the helm, called me “opinionated and irascible.” Me! Personally, I think it was a misprint and meant to be “knowledgeable and irresistible.” Anyway I got quite angry about it, told them exactly what I thought, and thumped the table a few times.

I must admit to growling at clients when they came to visit me in the wheelhouse in the middle of a particularly tricky bit of maneuvering, perhaps negotiating a narrow reef passage or coming alongside a wharf with tide and wind doing nasty stuff. Completely oblivious to my obvious concentration on the task, they would ask, “Tell me, Bob, how high is that mountain over there?” or perhaps, “How many kinds of parrots are there in this area?”

But I do know all about winning friends and influencing people. For example, if divers were a bit reluctant to get in the water, I would promise a practice session on one of the several musical instruments I have failed to learn to play over the years.

## When Considering Deep Stops, Profiles Rule

The concept of deep stops has been around for a long time. Yet it remains to be fully embraced by the diving community and likely won’t be until typical recreational divers know the details.

Deep stops have advocates in the science of dive physiology. Several published studies indicate that deep stops decrease bubbles detected over the heart, and can also reduce tensions in tissue compartments. The dive organization NAUI recommends that a deep stop should be done for recreational dives deeper than 40 feet, with a one-minute stop incorporated at half of a dive’s max depth, followed by a two-minute safety stop at the 15- to 20-foot level.

However, there is evidence suggesting that certain types of technical dive profiles may be inappropriate for deep stops. A study from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, using pigs as subjects in simulated dives, found that deep stops significantly reduced vascular bubbles in a long, shallow dive (100 feet for 70 minutes), but dramatically increased them in a short, very deep dive (20 minutes at 215 feet).

A U. S. Navy Experimental Diving Unit study with volunteers making training-tank tech dives to 170 feet on

surface-supplied air also raised cautions regarding such stops on deep deco dives involving exercise. It reported that those who made deep stops had an increased incidence of DCS compared to those who didn’t. Researchers theorized that slower off-gassing, continued gas loading, or both, may offset the benefits of reduced bubble growth from deep stops.

Clearly research on deep stops needs to be conducted in the actual recreational dive environment before meaningful conclusions can be drawn. If, how, and under what conditions deep stops may be of significant benefit are yet to be finally determined. In the meantime, the expert opinions and limited findings to date are of strong interest because they suggest that performing deep stops during routine recreational dives may reduce DCS risk. At the least, as PADI has stated, deep stops in typical recreational diving, “...probably won’t hurt anything.”

Until the multiple, complex issues of deep stops are being further clarified, recreational divers can feel secure by following the usual recommendations for reducing DCS. Do short and shallow profiles and slow ascents. Take long safety stops and surface intervals, and use the EAN-to-air tables.

- Doc Vikingo

That got them in the water, particularly the trumpet, and they thanked me later.

Empathy is my middle name when chatting up my clients. I explained to a man my age who was a gynecologist how lucky we both were. “How come?” he asked. “Well, we both managed to turn our hobby into our profession,” I replied. I still do not understand why he was offended.

Another guest introduced himself. “I’m from Texas, call me Tex.” “No, you are not,” I proclaimed, as sensitive as ever. “Texans are three feet wide and ten feet tall. I think you are from Mississippi.” He did not even speak to me for the rest of the cruise.

One diver flooded his Nikonos V camera and asked me what he should do about it. “Throw it away and buy a new one,” was my sound advice. He then went on to tell me that last time he went diving, the very same camera flooded and the photo pro had spent two hours taking it apart and “fixing” it for him. He had not bothered to get it serviced since but expected me to do the same. I laid my hand across it, closed my eyes and muttered an incantation. “Best I can do,” I explained.

I miss the power of being a dive boat captain. I like being in charge. I honestly did try to take note of my guest’s interests, but when incompatible people booked on the boat, it was impossible to please everybody. So I made sure I pleased myself. Arguments would develop until some nincompoop would demand a vote on where we dived next. This would get

me going. “Hold fast! This is not a democracy, we do not vote on this boat. I, the Captain, decide!” And I did exactly what I wanted to do. If I fancied muck diving that is what it would be, or whatever. Vote! Hah! Of course this all changed if Dinah was on board. Then I would proclaim, “I am the captain of this boat and I will do exactly as my wife tells me.”

However, one thing I always insisted on was if any female clients wanted to do any topless sunbathing that they always use the foredeck. This saved me from getting a twisted neck. Inevitably some of the “Earth Mother” types, overcome with the splendor of PNG landscapes, would insist on taking off all their clothes to be one with nature.

One lovely insisted on snorkeling undressed and it was amusing watching the male divers rotate from watching the corals to swimming upside down watching the surface. She told me she intended to go to England and walk from the easternmost to the westernmost part of the country. In empathy mode, I told her I was very worried about her obsession with extremes and why didn’t she just walk from the middle of somewhere to the middle of somewhere else? This really messed with her brain, and she would come up to me at various times during the trip and say, “I’ve been thinking about what you said, do you really think ....?”

And still the guests keep coming back. One told me recently that she hoped I would not be too polite, she had preferred me when I was rude. It is enough to make me repent..

---

## The Death of A Shark Diver

### *will it affect shark dive trips in the Bahamas?*

The latest diving shocker happened on February 24, when Austrian diver Markus Groh died from a shark bite while diving from the *MV Shear Water* in the Bahamas. Rumors, hearsay and theories abound about what actually happened but, as in most matters involving police investigations and potential litigation, no one is officially talking.

Here are the facts we can determine so far. Groh, a 49-year-old attorney from Vienna, signed up for a shark dive trip with Jim Abernethy’s Scuba Adventures in Riviera Beach, Florida. The dive would be a cageless one and the goal would be to swim with hammerhead and tiger sharks. The boat left West Palm Beach and entered Bahama waters. Crew found sharks, and passengers went diving. Groh was bitten by a shark and brought up, bleeding. Crew called the Coast Guard, which sent a helicopter to take Groh to a Miami hospital. Groh died after he left the boat. The Miami-Dade County medical examiner’s office concluded that loss of blood killed Groh, and ruled the death an accident.

As soon as the news hit, rumors started. Groh was bit in

the calf. His leg was ripped off. It was a tiger shark, no, a bull shark. Scuba Adventures was reckless. No, they followed procedures, it was medical error. Because no one on the boat is talking, per orders by Abernethy’s lawyers, it can’t be publicly determined exactly what happened, so everyone in the dive community is forming their own conclusions. They’re also taking sides – some say it was just a matter of time and that cageless dives should be banned, while Abernethy defenders say it was a freak accident and shark dives are the best way to save the marine predators. Either way, Groh’s death emphasizes the divides between divers, businesses and government.

*Undercurrent* contacted many sources to research this story. Several declined to comment, so we relied on unattributed sources and opinions from those not on the boat, and our own speculation. But we do know that Groh’s death is promoting closer scrutiny of Bahamas shark dives.

A source close to Abernethy, who was not on the trip, says, “No one on the trip has come forward and won’t. But Groh was not the target of an attack. A bull shark apparently pushed the

## Help Keep Hawaiian Fish Out of Aquariums

Fish life in Hawaiian waters is disappearing. One reason: It's legal to capture fish for the aquarium trade, so marine species are ending up in exotic aquariums.

Rene Umberger, co-owner of Maui dive shop Octopus Reef, contacted *Undercurrent* about Save Hawaiian Reefs, a statewide initiative by dive businesses and environmental groups to enact laws against the aquarium trade. "Fish collectors can take unlimited amounts of fish from Hawaii's reefs as long as they do it outside protected areas. Up to 10 million fish a year are shipped to the U.S. and around the world, and up to 65 percent of wild-caught tropical fish die before reaching the 'marketplace.' Most of the rest starve to death or die from stress-related disease within weeks to months. A Hawaiian yellow tang is lucky to survive that long in a tank in someone's home, but it can live for 30 years in the wild."

The goal is to pass a fish version of the Wild Bird Conservation Act that Congress passed in 1992 to protect wild-caught birds from similar exploitation. The bill introduced in January passed Hawaii's Senate unanimously but is waiting for a hearing in the House of Representatives. Umberger says the fishing industry's big muscle is dampening the bill's progress but supporters argue that keeping live fish on the reefs is key to the state's biggest industry – tourism. "The dive and snorkel business is huge," Umberger says. "We generate \$800 million a year for the state, hotels and dining included, because people come here for water activities. The aquarium industry is only worth \$3 million."

For details about the bill and its status, go to [www.savehawaiianreefs.org](http://www.savehawaiianreefs.org). If you have relevant comments about Hawaiian reef fish, click on the "Send Testimony" link.

baitbox on the bottom into him. It bit his calf, mistaking it for the baitbox. Bite and release, no tearing of flesh. Groh eventually went into shock and respiratory arrest. Although the bleeding was stopped and he was resuscitated, he did not make it to Miami alive on the Coast Guard helicopter."

### "Everyone Should Know What They're Getting Into"

Abernethy has been making Bahamas shark dives for five years and takes big names in marine biology and underwater photography to "secret locations" on secluded Bahamian reefs frequented by various sharks. His Web site states that divers are recommended to have Advanced Open Water certification with drift and deep diving experience, although the minimum requirement for the trip was only Open Water certification with "the necessary experience." It's not clear what Groh's dive experience was, but it's surmised that Abernethy's passengers had plenty. Past guests say he gave two-hour-long briefings and sent divers off the boat if he felt they weren't up to par.

Past *Shear Water* divers are bonding to defend Abernethy. [Wetpixel.com](http://Wetpixel.com) has a page for testimonials from former guests. So far, 147 people, many underwater photographers, have praised his operation. The nonprofit group Shark Savers is creating a petition in support of Abernethy and shark diving, and sending it to the Bahamas Diving Association urging them not to change current policies. It had 1,097 signatures in late March. We recently called Scuba Adventures to ask about shark dive bookings and were referred to two Bay Area underwater photographers trying to round up divers for trips in May and June – they now had seven open slots because some divers' spouses had heard about Groh's death and forbade them to go.

It's understandable why shark-diving advocates are defensive. Major media outlets highlighted the story, some playing up

the *Jaws* aspect. Even the diving Web site Cyber Diver News Network had a grotesque photo of a man in a bathing suit with a bloody stump of a leg accompanying its story on Groh. NBC's *Today Show* host Meredith Vieira looked skeptical as filmmaker Rob Stewart, who filmed his documentary *Sharkwater* on Abernethy's boat, defended shark diving.

Some *Undercurrent* readers also voiced strong opinions to us. "What are we turning into, the nanny society?" asks Mary Chipman (West Palm Beach, FL). "Anytime you suit up and jump in the ocean, any number of things can go wrong and you can die. Is it always someone else's fault? In cases where the operator was clearly negligent, then yes. But this is not one of those cases. Add up how many people die in any given year from true dive-operator negligence, then compare it to people who died from being bitten by a shark in the entire history of shark diving. Abernethy is quite clear on his Web site, everyone knows what they're getting into."

"One of the only reasons why the Bahamas shark population is so healthy is because shark-diving operations convinced the government that it's more profitable to attract shark divers than it is to sell rights to Asian shark-finning operations to decimate them, as they have in other parts of the world," says reader and *Shear Water* guest Bruce Yates (Seattle, WA). "I've never met a boat captain more conscientious about safety and more passionate about sea animals than Abernethy."

But Abernethy is also a businessman, trying to set himself apart from competitors by doing cageless shark dives -- and the only ones with major predators. That draws more customers, but still they're hanging out with sharks drawn toward bait. Scuba Adventure's Web site says, "We will be chumming the water with fish and fish parts." Some dive customers told us he doesn't throw bait or blood but sets out sealed milk crates filled with fish carcasses. But another diver claiming to know

Abernethy's trip details says he was starting to push it with hand feeding. "Divers were getting really close to the fish box."

### **"Sharks Are Turning Into Underwater Circus Animals"**

Even if food was dangled in a bait box, sharks expect to eat once they reach the scent. If they don't get food from the bait box, won't they get frustrated and start poking around? "Frustration is a human emotion, but sharks do demonstrate they're in an agitated condition when there is an olfactory sense in the water," says George Burgess, director of Florida Program for Shark Research at the University of Florida. "If you merely tease them with food, it's like waving candy in front of a baby."

Burgess credits Abernethy for doing trips away from civilization, but he thinks divers claiming to do shark dives to protect sharks are off-base. "What you're getting is trained animals used to humans being in the water and used to being fed. We know they're trained because they arrive before any food is put out. Some boats rev their engines and say, 'We're calling in our babies'. Sharks are attracted to the sound, just like Pavlov's dog, that dinner is coming. They're the equivalent of underwater circus animals. Their activities are not the behavior of wild sharks but trained sharks."

In the Bahamas and the Caribbean, unassisted shark sightings by divers are becoming rare because sharks are disappearing. Sharks also have a natural concern over unfamiliar things, especially those near their own size. "Encountering humans is an unusual event for them, so there's a natural distance out of concern, or respect," says Burgess. "Once that natural behavior is modified, it's lost and that's where problems begin. It's akin to problems with bears. But dive operators want to keep a lot of sharks in one place for predictability – and deliver a product for paying customers. However, divers are seeing an underwater Disneyland rather than a natural world."

### **"An Accident Waiting to Happen"**

Groh's death stokes a feeding frenzy among shark-diving operations. Shark dives used to be done in Florida until the state banned them in 2001. Although still officially based in Florida, Abernethy immediately moved his shark dives to the Bahamas. That must have irked rivals doing openwater dives with more sedate reef sharks, feeling Abernethy was stealing customers. In a letter last year to local dive companies, the Bahamas Diving Association (BDA) told them to cease and desist openwater, non-cage diving with potentially dangerous sharks. Neal Watson, BDA president, confirmed the letter was specifically targeted at Scuba Adventures, and was quoted in the media saying Groh's death was an "accident waiting to happen." But, as Abernethy defenders point out, Watson owns Neal Watson's Undersea Adventures in Fort Lauderdale and so is a shark-dive competitor. Watson now refrains from media comments, but an employee told us in late March that he was meeting with the Bahamian government to talk about shark dives in the Groh aftermath.

Michael Braynen, the Bahamas' director of marine

resources, told the *Miami Herald* that none of his government's agencies restrict any form of diving and he hadn't heard of any effort to change that. "It was an unfortunate accident, but it's not the first time someone has been attacked in the Bahamas or in Florida." Still, neither Braynen nor the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism returned our calls. Sources close to Abernethy think the BDA is trying to ban liveboards in the Bahamas as a work-around to banning shark feeds altogether, although that's doubtful as they're also profitable for land-based dive operators. Stuart Cove of Stuart Cove's Dive Bahamas and BDA vice-president wouldn't comment on discussions, only saying that the Bahamian government would be issuing a statement shortly.

### **"If You're a Facilitator, Are You Also a Co-Conspirator?"**

The Coast Guard and Miami police are investigating Groh's death, and there's speculation that Groh's family may sue Abernethy. While sources in the press said Groh died en route to Miami, another source says Abernethy recently told him Groh died in the trauma center, and there is a suggestion that medical malpractice may have led to Groh's death. (Is this the foundation for defense in a potential liability case?) But like any dive operator, Abernethy had divers sign waivers, and according to legal sources we talked to, they'll hold up in court. Florida typically holds that waivers signed by those doing high-risk activity are valid because they are knowingly engaging in the risky activity.

## **Readers' Dive Tips**

Sy Halberg (Cranberry Lake, NY) says, "When gearing up, my wife Corky and I always thoroughly wet the tank bands on our BCDs before tightening them. If this is not done, the band could loosen when the diver enters the water. Once I witnessed a diver's tank slip out from his BCD underwater and another diver lose her tank while exiting from a shore dive." This is an especially good tip to follow when your gear has been stored for a while and completely dried out, because dried tank bands will expand when wet and can cause tanks to slip.

To protect the glass faces of dive computers, gauges and consoles, Don Gensler (White Salmon, WA) recommends two-inch transparent shipping tape. "This gives excellent protection against boat and coral scrapes for well over 100 dives. Use a sharp knife or razor to trim the edge where display meets frame, then your finger to work the bubbles out.." To remove glass scratches and haze, Gensler takes a diamond whetstone and dampens it with water and a drop of detergent.

We publish good tips when we get them, so keep them coming to [EditorBenD@undercurrent.org](mailto:EditorBenD@undercurrent.org).

“Even though it basically says, ‘I give you permission to be negligent toward me,’ courts will usually uphold waivers in cases involving any kind of recreational enterprise,” says Andrew McClurg, a tort law professor at the University of Memphis. “It’s not a necessary service like medical care or education. You can take it or leave it, you don’t have to go.”

However, he adds, courts only uphold these agreements for ordinary negligence, not for gross negligence or reckless conduct like leaving divers behind or filling tanks with bad air. “It could be alleged that putting someone with sharks, blood and chum is gross negligence, but it can’t be determined until the court says what it is.”

Rick Lesser, an attorney specializing in dive cases, thinks there could be litigation even though divers did sign releases. He wouldn’t give details because he does work for Abernethy’s insurer and may be asked to represent him, but says there are shades of gray on either side of a high-risk sport outing. “People do stupid things but if you’re a facilitator, are you also a co-conspirator? If you take willing hikers to a mountaintop in a helicopter and then say, ‘Oh, it’s steep’ and the passengers fall off the side, who’s at fault? They’re providing the mode but the guests are signing a liability.”

We’ve long griped about PADI’s liability waiver and how it makes divers literally sign their lives away. But McClurg says small-business dive shops wouldn’t be able to survive without putting exculpatory clauses absolving them of negligence charges. “Some insurance companies give lower premiums to high-risk businesses using exculpatory clauses, but businesses have more interest in running safe operations so they don’t lose business or be perceived as unsafe. Waivers just serve as protection if things do go wrong.”

*Undercurrent* will follow any changes to Bahamas shark diving and whether legal action is brought against Abernethy. In the meantime, shark dives are still open for business in the Bahamas. Groh may have been the only diver to have ever died in a shark interactive feed, but he is not the only victim, says Burgess. “There are ramifications that go beyond a diver’s rights to see the shark. The dive industry and the Bahamas are now under scrutiny. But the shark ends up being the biggest victim in the end because this case underscores the erroneous misperception of shark as killer. The blame should be on the humans who attract them and provoke this type of incident.”

-- Vanessa Richardson

---

## Oh, Did We Mention the Fuel Surcharge? *and can divers do anything about it, even if they paid in full?*

*Undercurrent* subscriber Gari Sisk (Anchorage, AK) had been booked on a January 15 trip on the Thailand liveaboard *Ocean Rover* for more than a year. It wasn’t until January 7 when she got the e-mail stating she would be charged an additional \$120 fuel surcharge.

Angry at the short notice, Sisk searched *Ocean Rover*’s Web site but saw no mention of a policy for increasing trip costs at a late date. Then she wrote a letter to Ocean Rover Cruises managing director Jeroen Deknatel. “I have been paid in full since mid-November and received no mention of a surcharge until now. Fuel prices didn’t change overnight, so why the late notice?”

Deknatel said, “Some time ago, we decided to review our options on January 1, 2008 and base our decision on the situation of that date.” Crude oil passing the \$100 mark and the dollar’s plunge had an immediate effect, pushing Thai prices higher for companies selling in U.S. currency, he added. “This isn’t a case of trying to increase profit, it’s a case of reducing operational losses.”

While we too would be angry about *Ocean Rover*’s too-short notice, it’s not the only liveaboard adding or increasing fuel surcharges. Sisk’s situation is unfair but it’s becoming the

norm, says Ed Perkins, contributing editor at SmarterTravel.com. He says that travel operators are in their rights to do that, though those rights should be fully disclosed before you make your purchase. However, you can “definitely expect some modest increases over previously published rates.”

Airlines add surcharges either by increasing the base fare or adding an additional fuel tax but as long as the total fare is advertised, it’s legal. At least they don’t charge retroactively, like *Ocean Rover*. Several Florida-based cruise lines started assessing retroactive fuel surcharges, even on cruises where passengers made deposits or paid in full, but the state’s Attorney General made them rescind that decision. Going forward, cruises are charging an average \$5 per day with a cap of \$70 per person.

As for liveaboards, some are eating the costs, while others are making divers pay a share. Divers booking January trips will have the most last-minute shocks because many dive boats officially announce increases at year’s end. Peter Hughes gave 14-day notice to divers about surcharge increases effective January 1. However, those who already paid in full didn’t have to pay it. Divers who paid in full by December 20 only paid the old fuel surcharge, while those paying after the 20th paid

the new one. Aggressor president Wayne Hasson says, "Our surcharge is fixed, now we're eating it."

Dive boats are in a bind because they book customers years in advance but don't know what fuel prices will be then. "We're already pricing 2010 trips, so that's why we keep charter fees and fuel surcharges listed separately," says Peter Hughes vice president Larry Speaker. Hughes' Web site always carries a caveat that fuel surcharges "are subject to change or may be added in any destination up until the date of travel."

It's not just the price of oil, it's the taxes many countries add to it, says Speaker. "Galapagos put a new tax on diesel price – it just changed one day with no notice. When governments change taxes with zero notice, that makes things unpredictable."

Many travel operators carry a caveat in the fine print, such as, "We reserve the right to increase rates to compensate for unusual expenses." But for Third World operators hiking prices with no warning, there's little you can do. "Going to

small-claims court against a Thai company won't work," says Perkins. "However, if your package trip was put together by a U.S. tour operator, then you may have some redress if their foreign subcontractors raise rates." Some divers say they will refuse to pay tips to staff, but that just penalizes the wrong people.

Peter Hughes and Aggressor don't intend to change or shorten itineraries. Instead, they're finding little ways to lower fuel usage. Hasson says lowering a boat's cruising speed from 18 to 16 r.p.m. during non-diving time can save 200 gallons of fuel. Peter Hughes is using one generator instead of two at night and reconfiguring engines to save fuel efficiency. "Conservation is on all dive operators' minds, but little things can go a long way," says Speaker.

As for *Ocean Rover's* effort to avoid a financial loss by sticking the people who had already paid up front, they'll now have to factor in the loss of good will.

## Thumbs Down: Scuba Coiba and Coiba National Park, Panama



In our May 2007 issue, we reviewed Panama's Isla Coiba and the Santa Catalina-based dive shop Scuba Coiba's three-day trips there. But *Undercurrent* readers who went there recently said park officials demand thousands of dollars for underwater photographers to use their video gear, either below or above the water.

Chad and Loretta Engler (Broken Arrow, OK) brought two videocameras with them while diving with Scuba Coiba last November. When police became aware of their videocameras, they decided to enforce a law requiring them to buy a permit for US\$3,000 per half hour of filming. The law is supposed to only apply to commercial video, but the officials said they don't know how the video will be used so they enforce this law for all video. The Englers were allowed to keep the videos they had already made without paying any fees, but police said the charge would be applied for dives going forward and apparently, they don't take check or credit card. "They demanded \$10,000 per day, in cash – and it was not a joke," says Chad. When the couple refused, they ushered the Scuba Coiba to the edge of the park. "We were escorted out of the area by patrol boat like a group of criminals," says Loretta. "They also carried guns, which was nerve-racking."

The Englers say that the law isn't mentioned anywhere in print, or on Scuba Coiba's Web site, and Scuba Coiba never mentioned this to them while arranging the trip from the U.S. "We were not told of this extortion

until we were getting on the boat to go over to the island," says Richard Pittman (Tulsa, OK), who accompanied the Englers on the trip.

We contacted Scuba Coiba owner Herbie Sink who admitted that the legislation is unclear. "The 'manual' says that for 'commercial film productions,' you need a permit form from Panama's environmental agency, and the fee can be as high as US\$1,000 per minute. What the manual doesn't say is that personal video filming also requires a permit and a fee, but the rate isn't specified. The decision is left to the Coiba's park guides and as long nobody tells them otherwise, they charge the highest possible fee."

Sink says he now warns potential customers about the fees, but there is no mention of the fees on its Web site, and Sink sounds nonchalant. "For non-professional filmmakers, it usually is no problem. In the worst case, if their filming equipment is categorized as 'professional,' they just refrain from filming the remaining dives." That doesn't sound like an ideal scenario any diver with a videocamera would happily accept.

Sink e-mailed us back a few days later, stating that Panama would "soon be implementing" a no-fee policy for personal video use. But based on the Englers' tale about park rangers determining what is professional filming and what is not, it's unclear how well the policy will be put into place.

# Flotsam & Jetsam

**A Batch of Corrections.** We need a better map -- some astute readers caught two geographic errors we made in the March issue. In "Why Divers Die," we incorrectly stated that a female diver died while diving in Yakima, WA. Actually, she was from Yakima, a land-locked town, and drowned in Puget Sound. In Flotsam & Jetsam, the Northern Marianas' successful spearfishing ban is in Saipan, not Sipadan, the Malaysian island. And in "Backup Lights for Divers," reviewer John Bantin found out after the issue went to press that the sample Aquastar 3 lamp he was given for testing has only one O-ring while retail models actually have two. "That is probably why it leaked slightly during my test dives."

**When Is a Passport Full?** Make sure you have plenty of empty passport pages before your next international dive trip. While en route to an Indonesian liveboard last fall, *Undercurrent* reader Eldon Okazaki (Sunnyvale, CA) was stopped at the Manado airport because he was told his passport was full, even though the last two pages

were empty. "The customs officer said when you get to the last four pages, it is considered full. I had to pay a 'fee' to get through." After his trip, Okazaki's local passport agency confirmed it was true. The State Department says it's prepared to fulfill passport requests within four weeks but if you need it earlier, it will do overnight delivery for an additional \$60. Get the details online at <http://travel.state.gov>.

**Even Royals Lose Rings Underwater.** Princess Mary of Denmark is probably not amused -- her husband, Crown Prince Frederik, lost his wedding ring, designed from the first gold nugget mined in Greenland, while diving near Key West in January. While the average Joe Diver would have given up by his flight departure time, Prince Frederik merited a team of divers searching the reef for his ring even though he couldn't remember where he lost it. Dive instructor Steve Tropp, who accompanied Prince Frederik on the dive, says it's hopeless. "We have a lot of barracudas that fancy shiny objects so I think the ring likely ended up in one's belly. Perhaps it will end up on a dinner table one day."



**The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers**

3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102  
Sausalito, CA 94965

Periodicals  
Postage PAID  
Sausalito, CA  
and Additional  
Mailing Offices

*Undercurrent* is the consumer newsletter for sport divers that reviews scuba destinations and equipment. We accept no advertising. Subscriptions in the U.S. and Canada are \$99 a year (addresses in Mexico, add \$20; all other foreign addresses, add \$35).

*Undercurrent* (ISSN 1095-1555, USPS 001-198) is published monthly by Undercurrent, 3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102, Sausalito, CA 94965, with the November/December issue being the annual book-sized *Travelin' Diver's Chapbook*. Periodicals rates paid at Sausalito, CA, and additional mailing offices.

**POSTMASTER:**

Send address changes to 3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102 Sausalito, CA 94965

**Letters to the Editor/  
Submissions**

**Undercurrent**

3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102  
Sausalito, CA 94965  
Fax 415-289-0137

[undercurrenteditor@undercurrent.org](mailto:undercurrenteditor@undercurrent.org)

**Subscriptions/Address  
Changes**

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](mailto: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](mailto:BenDavison@undercurrent.org)

[www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)

Printed on recycled paper



April 2008 Vol. 23, No. 4