

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Reef's End Lodge, Tobacco Caye, Belize

rustic and remote, but better diving than up north

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Dear Fellow Diver:

Years ago, my favorite Belizean diving was at Ambergris Caye. But no more. As we reported in the February issue of Undercurrent, San Pedro has gone upscale -- herbal wraps at high-priced resorts are replacing post-dive chats on the porch at inexpensive inns -- and the diving has diminished. To get to the Turneffe and Lighthouse atolls, you now pay a fortune and spend 2.5 hours in transit each way. Who needs the headaches and high prices? I wanted a relaxed place with good diving and easy access to the atolls, so I headed south to find a better alternative to Ambergris's overtouristed and overrated dive sites.

Tobacco Caye is 14 miles off Dangriga, perched on top of the reef. There is no fast lane, or even a slow lane. Just sand and palms among the six small inns, all with rooms to spare in late January when I was there. I walked the length of the island in less than 10 minutes. I chose Reef's End Lodge because it has Tobacco's only dive shop and I could negotiate a package deal via e-mail. It offers three zinc-roofed wood cabañas, eight basic rooms and an airy restaurant perched on stilts over the water at the island's tip. It's nowhere near the luxury of Hamanasi or Turneffe Lodge, but it got me away from the crowds and closer to better Belizean diving for far less money. Divers who appreciate good value and don't mind rustic accommodations will enjoy it most.

After the Continental flight to Belize City landed at 4 p.m., I hurried over to Maya Air for the 15-minute flight to the Dangriga airstrip. Reef's End had a taxi waiting to take



Reef's End dive shop



me to the dock for the boat ride to Tobacco Caye. The boat was late -- out fishing -- but Reef's End owner "Saint" Nolan was waiting at the dock with cold Belikin beers to ease the wait. After a half-hour ride on calm waters, I arrived and had a dinner of fried conch and more Belikins for US\$2.50 each, then retired to my cabaña at water's edge with plans to dive at 9 a.m.

Tobacco Caye diving didn't bowl me over -- few big food fish but colorful aquarium dives with some interesting critters -- but it's in a marine preserve and far less pressured from runoff by development than Ambergris. And diving the barrier reef was easy: a quick boat ride often with just me, my dive buddy and our divemaster Eric Vasquez. He and captain Lloyd Lopez know the water, the sites and each other very well. Reef's End does all drift dives. At Barrel Sponge, I backrolled into the 81-degree water and descended to a sloping wall at 60 feet. I followed striped goatfish rooting for morsels up a sand chute, while a school of blue-striped grunts poured over the ridge. A white-lined toadfish, endemic to Belize, was half out of its hole, while above me passed a pair

of big orange filefish. Eric borrowed my buddy's magnifying glass and signaled "T" for tunicate. As I headed up to the safety stop, I looked down on a fat eight-foot nurse shark with two remoras attached. Eric was relaxed and always slowed down to look at interesting reef life; I often ran ahead of him, which is uncommon in my experience with often-jaded divemasters. By week's end, Eric had shown me a variety of tunicates, slugs, and mystery life forms.

The tiny dive shop at the end of the pier has a decent supply of rental gear, and the aluminum 80s were consistently filled to 3,000 psi (no Nitrox here). Every day there was a three-tank dive, with the morning interval on the island and lunch at the lodge before the third dive. I could do my own profiles; the only restriction was to signal Eric at 700 psi. The 28-foot, wide-beam panga has a Bimini top, twin 85-hp Yamahas, and ferry-type seating, like tiny church pews, with life-preserver cushions. Not great for tank storage, but adequate. At dive's end, I handed up my gear to Lloyd and climbed a ladder positioned right at my seat. There was no radio on the boat, but Eric's cell phone had service nearly everywhere we dived. He said a DAN O2 kit was on board, although I never saw it, and if DCS hit, a chopper would be used for the 50-mile trip to the chamber on Ambergris. I had a beef with the lack of rinse tanks, so at day's end I carried some gear to my cabaña to rinse in the shower, and Eric washed gear at the end of the week.

My cabaña was plain but comfortable, with two double beds, a table and fan, and drinkable rainwater in the tap but no hot water in the shower. When I ran out of toilet paper, I had to go ask for more. From the porch hammock, I got a clear view of ospreys in their nest atop the dive shop. A Belizean boat captain and his family were on vacation in the cabaña next door but on many days, there were no other guests. Meals at Reef's End were basic but good enough for hungry divers who like local cuisine. When I booked the trip, the online form asked about food preferences so I requested fresh seafood and Belizean dishes. Ms. D -- co-owner, cook and manager -- served up snapper and conch with occasional chicken. Coconut rice, red beans, yucca and other root vegetables, followed by homemade pie or cake, were standard. Breakfasts included eggs, meat and fry bread or tortillas. Sometimes there was fresh juice but often there was only some type of Kool-Aid. I requested brewed coffee instead of the instant they typically served, and got a pot each morning.

For the dive at Shark Cave, a smaller and darker version of the Blue Hole, we left the dock at 10:30 a.m. so the sun would provide a light shaft into the cave. A smooth inside-the-reef ride put us there in 20 minutes. A turtle swam by as I descended to the 55-foot bottom, where I entered a black entrance the size of a conference table.

Two small sharks flew by me as soon as I passed inside, but that report later drew a laugh from my buddy, who informed me they were actually cobia. I descended 115 feet to a sand mound built up over the centuries. I followed a horizontal line to the side, then cruised slowly up to check out the giant dome. At 100 feet, Eric's light flashed wildly, signaling a shark, but it eluded my eyes. The cave is a few hundred feet across at the base with some three-foot stalactites punctuating the limestone dome, none as big as the giants in the Blue Hole. Still, it's an eerie space; a couple of times I looked over my shoulder to make sure that light shaft was still there. When it came to shark sightings, I was skunked. Eric says he sees a variety of shark species but has fewer sightings due to pressure from Guatemalan fishermen.

Each afternoon I left the dive dock with a "See you at happy hour" to Eric and Lloyd. And I usually did see them, at Mark's bar, a tiny outdoor joint at the opposite end of the island from Reef's End. I'd supply the beer or rum, and they and other Belizeans would supply stories about diving, fishing, and local politics. A good mix of travelers mingle on Tobacco Caye, as chartered yachts and day boats come and go. The Raggamuffin, a wooden sailboat that offers a three-day trip from Caye Caulker south to Placencia, overnights on Tobacco, setting up tents for guests and filling the island's two bars. One night, there was a wonderful bonfire concert performed by a drumming trio from the nearby village of Gales Point. Captain Lloyd was half of the warm-up drumming act. I think every single person on the island - plus its three dogs - attended. It's that kind of place.

When a norther kicked up the water, I took a day off from diving and hired a local guide to snorkel at Man-o-War Caye, a mangrove outpost bursting with roosting frigates, males with red mating balloons, and brown boobies. I also snorkeled near the mangroves. There is decent shore snorkeling off Reef's End, but for better snorkeling, a guide will take you to South Water Cay, seven miles south of Tobacco.

Reef's End charges more to dive the walls at South Water Caye. I had a 15-dive

Reef's End Lodge, Tobacco Caye, Belize

Diving (<i>experienced</i>)	★★★
<i>(add one star for South Water Caye and two for Glover's Reef)</i>	
Diving (<i>beginners</i>)	★★★★
Snorkeling	★★★
Accommodations	★★
Food	★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale

The Frequent-Flyer Diver

On the plane home from a diving trip, I'm not only reliving the best dives but dreaming of my next trip. But for me, this is more than dreaming. I start planning most dive trips long in advance. That's about the only way you can effectively use your frequent-flyer miles anymore. The good news is that if you can plan 10 to 11 months in advance, the major airlines will actually let you use those miles.

We've all noticed how the airlines have ridiculously limited the number of seats they'll allocate for free tickets, often making it virtually impossible to use them for international travel, or at least requiring you to use double the standard amount of miles. The only way around it is to do some advance planning.

Most airlines open up frequent flyer reservations about 330 days in advance. I use Northwest miles, which also work on Continental and Delta, two airlines with lots of Caribbean and Latin American flights. American is another. Another tip: When I fly Continental or Delta, I put the miles on my Northwest account so they are concentrated in one pot.

By booking close to that opening gate, I've been able to get the exact or approximate dates to the locations I want in the Caribbean, using 35,000 miles. If I have to cancel or change a trip, Northwest charges \$50 to get my miles back. Not a bad penalty to risk. Other airlines have different rules on cancellations. By doing my booking way ahead, I haven't paid for a ticket to the Caribbean in years.

-- M.A.

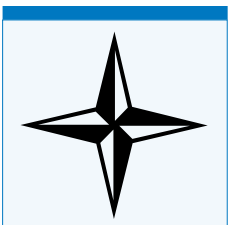
package, so I suggested trading a three-dive day at Tobacco for a two-dive day at South Water. At Carrie Bow Wall, I weaved among four-foot barrel sponges on a healthy coral wall. My buddy pointed at a round one with a tiny slit at the top and a side hole that made it resemble a 1960s space capsule. There were loads of cleaning stations on the wall, where creole wrasse were groomed by juvenile bluehead wrasse. An abundant variety of parrotfish added more color to the reef. I aimed my light into a hole and found a juvenile jackknife fish with golden trim, while my buddy found a gorgonian with a bunch of miniature flamingo tongues. South Water has more big fish: snappers, ceros, hogfish, and tiger, Nassau and black groupers.

I was worried that Reef's End wouldn't spend the \$5-per-gallon gas to go to Glover's Reef without at least four divers. The only divers in sight were drop-ins off sailboats and a young Aussie who didn't want to spring the extra money. After plying Eric with beer, I begged to go to Glover's, just the three of us. He called his boss in Dangriga, who gave the OK. So we headed for Glover's in choppy seas but still got there in 60 minutes. On the first dive at Middle Caye Wall, my thought as I descended was "more." More fish, more variety, more schools, more formations. A school of hundreds of creole wrasse and bogas parted for a five-foot barracuda. A school of black durgons followed me along the wall. I didn't break 60 feet because there was so much action near the top of the wall. The huge tube sponges reminded me of saguaro cactus. As a bonus, the visibility was at least 100 feet that day.

At Gorgonian Gardens, I entered the water with bottlenose dolphins playing near the boat, but they disappeared the instant I went in. An aggregation of large saucer-eye porgys circled a coral head, while a loose cluster of 30 barracuda eased over us. Twice I saw a big barracuda break off to be cleaned, darkening and blotching more than usual. My buddy headed out into the blue for a close look at an eagle ray, which circled back to fly right past me. A few lobsters were active on the reef in the afternoon, evidence that the marine reserve is having some effect. Two resort managers on Glover's Reef and South Water told me enforcement is improving. I stayed near the top of the wall at 45 feet because I didn't want the dive to end, but after 65 minutes I had to come up for air. To ease the pain, Eric took me to the Marisol resort on Southwest Caye for more Belikins before the 40-minute ride back to Tobacco.

For good Belizean diving, south is the direction to head, but it's tricky finding a central location to enjoy all the good dive sites. Placencia is too far away and it's also going the overdeveloped route of Ambergris. International Zoological Expeditions is the main place to stay on South Water Caye but now contracts their diving to Hamanasi resort on the mainland. Despite its rusticity, Little Tobacco Caye has the closest access to the best reefs with inexpensive dive packages. Because the immediate diving there is nothing amazing, in retrospect, I would have spent more days diving at Glover's and South Water. But at the end of the day, with Belikins, a hammock and a lovely view of the Caribbean, rustic can be satisfying.

-- M.A.



Diver's Compass: I paid \$1,265 for seven nights in a beachfront cabaña, all meals, transfers from the mainland, and 15 local dives; a three-tank day trip to Glover's Reef is \$185 . . . Owner "Saint" Nolan was prompt and helpful via e-mail . . . To save more money, negotiate a dive package in advance with Reef's End, then choose an inn when you get to Tobacco; they charge \$35 to \$40 per day, double occupancy, with meals included . . . Flights to Belize City cost approximately \$550, and the Maya Air round-trip flight to Dangriga cost \$109 . . . Lana's Guest House is praised for its meals, and

Paradise also has cabañas over the water . . . In Dangriga, I stayed at the nice Chaleanor Hotel (www.toucantrail.com/Chaleanor-Hotel.html); its best room with A/C is \$60, with a 10 percent discount if you stay more than one night . . . I rented a car through Habet hardware store (dangrigaautorental@gmail.com) for \$100 per day (expensive, but the cheapest available) but you can get to the Cockscomb Jaguar Reserve and Mayflower Park rainforest with a local driver; ask at Chaleanor . . . U.S. dollars are accepted everywhere in Belize and \$1 equals BZ\$2 . . . Many places don't accept credit

cards or they add a surcharge for their use, so it's wise to take cash or traveler's checks. Reef's End Web site: www.reefsendlodge.com.

Malapascua and Panglao, Philippines

inexpensive diving on diverse reefs

Dear Reader:

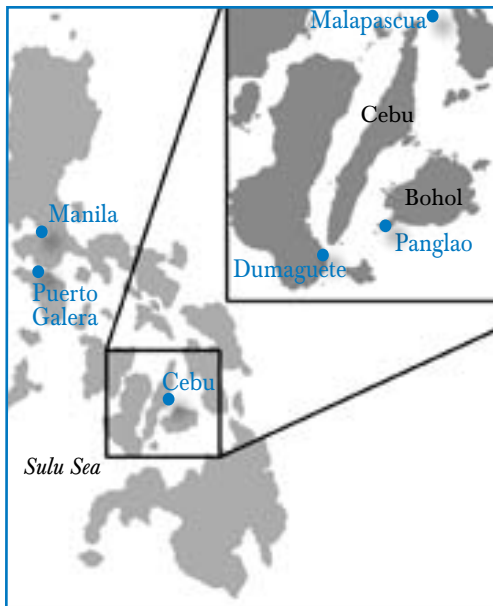
Now that the U.S. dollar is in freefall, the Philippines should be on every diver's radar screen. One can get a week or more of good diving and accommodations for under \$1,000 (airfare from Los Angeles is another \$1,000). That's less than many Caribbean venues, though considerably more rustic. Furthermore, the reefs are among the world's most diverse, supporting more than 2,000 species of fish. English is widely spoken -- and the people like Americans.

One reason I went was to see thresher sharks near Malapascua, where they can be seen regularly, or so they say. The latter half of my nine-day trip was at Panglao, attached to the island of Bohol east of Cebu. After arriving in Manila, I flew to the port city of Cebu and had a 6 a.m. pickup by private car, arranged by Divelink, a Cebu-based operation. A three-hour drive north on a narrow coastal road led me to a small private boat for the half-hour cruise to the small island of Malapascua.

While self-appointed beachside valets schlepped my bags to Sunsplash Resort, my divemaster, Danny, a chubby, fiftyish, barefoot local, escorted me along the powdery beach to the dive shop. We passed small resorts serving breakfast al fresco, while masseuses oiled down European tourists on beach towels. There are no streets or cars on Malapascua, only motorbikes pattering down sandy paths. At Divelink's shop, a small, two-story mahogany building under construction, Danny announced we would start with a 5 a.m. dive at Monad Shoals to see thresher sharks. If we didn't see them then, we'd go again at the 2 p.m. dive, then a sunset dive at the Lighthouse for mandarin fish.

At the resort, Filipino desk clerk Jackie opened the door to my spotless, white-painted room with a mosquito-netted, king-size bed flanked by tiny bedside stands, a desk with TV and DVD player, a stocked mini-fridge, cubicles with hangers, a combination safe and a bathroom with cold-water shower. Then she pointed to the AC. "Sorry, the electricity is off from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m." A sweltering, unventilated room didn't bode well for post-dive afternoon naps. James, Danny's twentysomething son, hauled my gear away to have it ready for the morning dive. Divelink rinsed, dried and locked it up every night.

At 4:45 a.m., the crew's flashlights and cigarettes lit the path across the tide flats to the waiting canoe, Sea Saw. It hauled me, my dive buddy and our gear a few yards farther to the Princess of Malapascua, a 60-foot outrigger banca with life jackets, oxygen, cell phone, marine head and capacity for 20 divers but no dedicated camera area. By flashlight, Danny and James helped us set up gear, then offered hot coffee while Captain Fredo sped us a half-hour to Monad Shoals. The sun was fully up when Princess tied into a mooring line and Danny got out his whiteboard. "We giant stride off the bow, follow the line to 70 feet and wait on the edge of the depth zone for the thresher sharks. There are four cleaning stations. We stay down until you reach 750 psi. We do two safety stops, the first at 30 feet for five minutes and the second at 15 feet for five minutes." I dropped into the 78-degree water with my aluminum 80 as two more boats tied up and disgorged a dozen divers. No threshers appeared. However, along the sea star- and sea urchin-filled reef, I enjoyed unicorn fish, raccoon butterfly fish, Moorish idols, a school of mackerel, trunkfish, and spine-cheek anemone fish cavorting in Merten's anemones. Because the ladder didn't extend into the water, I had to hand my weight belt, BC and fins to Fredo, who hauled me up. Afterward, I sat at Sunsplash's shaded outdoor restaurant and inhaled its complimentary breakfast buffet: sausages, hot dogs, bacon, eggs, banana pancakes, Thai fried noodles, muesli, corn flakes, baguettes, mangoes, juice, instant coffee and tea.



My logbook shows ditto marks for the next two dives, averaging 60 feet, at Monad Shoals. Fortunately, there's more to Malapascua diving than thresher sightings. On the sunset dive at Lighthouse, three minutes from the shop, I descended 25 feet to a floor littered with coral residue. Danny pointed to a four-inch iridescent turquoise and orange male mandarin fish and his harem of four females, less than half his size. As they swam only a foot from my mask, I clearly saw their triangular faces and smile-like mouths. One female snuggled up to the male. They swam side by side straight up, then separated like Blue Angel pilots performing a fleur-de-lis, leaving the evidence of their mating floating above. The male darted back into the coral, then emerged to court another female. I left the lovers and followed Danny to see seahorses, rock lobster, octopus and a pink frogfish. On board, Danny told me that mandarin fish mate every sunset. No wonder they smile.

Between dives, I lounged in the resort's palm-treed courtyard, or waited behind German and Russian tourists checking email at the nearby Floating Island Japanese Restaurant and Internet Cafe. While Floating Island offered sushi, and beachside buffets abounded, I ate dinners at Sunsplash. The \$12 buffet offered oily Filipino meats and veggies, overcooked schnitzels and pepper steaks (the owner is German), but cold San Miguel beer was \$1, and the mango- and chocolate-filled crepe pleased my sweet tooth.

At Gatos Island, an hour's boat ride, I cavern-dived at 40 feet to see sleeping white-tip reef sharks, then played with a white stonefish, a cuttlefish as big as a housecat and two ornate ghost pipefish. Danny caught a four-foot-long banded sea snake behind its head and let it twine around his arm. Gatos Island's hard and soft corals appeared healthier than those nearer Malapascua. At Lapus Lapus, on a gorgonian sea fan 72 feet down, Danny isolated a pygmy seahorse as small as a pinky fingernail that was the color of the sea fan's tendrils it clutched. Between dives, I lunched on steamed white rice, dried fish, and canned corned beef eaten with my fingers, local-style.

I was prepared to leave Malapascua thresher-less but happy. Danny consoled me. "Tomorrow, we try again. Maybe last day is lucky." So after another early bedtime, I dropped into the sea, avoiding sea urchins and fire coral. Danny rotated his converted butter knife, but no shark responded to the reflection. Watching a long-nosed butterfly fish root on a brain coral, I heard Danny grunt and looked up. A 12-foot-long silver bullet swam 50 feet away. The thresher turned, revealing a dark tail half the length of its body, flicked it and disappeared. My only sighting lasted two seconds.

More Philippine Dive Resort Picks

The two well-known Atlantis Resorts in Puerto Galera and Dumaguete offer diving comparable to or better than the Caribbean and at bargain prices. Atlantis recently quoted us a seven-night package with taxes (but not transfer charges) for \$1,555 at Puerto Galera and \$1,613 at Dumaguete.

Full reviews of the two resorts appeared in our September 2006 issue. But we've had some recent reader reports about them since then. "Staff will go out of their way to make your stay fun and comfortable," says Steve Woerner (Huffman, TX) of his January trip to Atlantis Puerto Galera. "Brilliant colors, soft corals and world-class muck diving." Kriss Kirchoff (Boise, ID), who went in November, says the high-

light is a day trip to Verde Island, 90 minutes away, for good wall diving with thousands of reef fish and 150-foot visibility.

"The Atlantis Dumaguete staff, from the front office to the guys hauling gear to the boat, were kind and helpful," says Pec Indman (San Jose, CA), who visited last April. Robert Ayets (San Jose, CA), who went last February, says the muck diving is spectacular. "Many frogfish, crocodilefish, leaf scorpionfish, and ornate ghost pipefish everywhere, and the DMs find them for you."

You can read the September 2006 travel story and the full reader reports at www.undercurrent.org.

I returned to Cebu for the 2 p.m. ferry to Bohol. Alona Divers met me at the pier with a private car for the ride past farms of rice and coconut to tiny Panglao, connected by bridge to Bohol's southwestern tip. There I met with Alona Divers manager Maritess, while porters delivered my luggage next door to Trudis' Place. Dozens of resorts, restaurants, bars, souvenir stands, Internet cafes and dive shops are strung along Alona Beach's white sand. At Trudis' Place, my second-floor room had a queen bed, closet and shelves, small desk, cable TV, AC, and bathroom with intermittent hot water. I draped my gear across the balcony railing that overlooked a garbage dump and shut the door against crowing roosters and the aroma of burning trash. At least the electricity stayed on 24/7 and the price included breakfast of eggs, meat, bread or rice, fruit, juice and hot drink.

Malapascua and Panglao Islands, Philippines	
Diving (<i>experienced</i>)	★★★★
Diving (<i>beginners</i>)	★★★
Snorkeling	★★★★
Accommodations	★★★
Food	★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★
★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent	
<i>Worldwide Scale</i>	

My young divemaster, Zaldy, conducted thorough briefings in excellent English for me and a typical batch of Germans, Danes, Slovenians, Russians, Taiwanese, Japanese and a Turk, all of whom smoked whenever regulators weren't in their mouths. As on Malapascua, Bohol water temperatures were in the high 70s. The sites delivered on critter diversity. At Rudy's Reef, jewel and red-cheeked basslets, purple anthias and blue chromis met me in the shallows lined with plump pink sea stars covered by chocolate chip-like projections. Along the fan- and crinoid-lined wall, golden basslets decorated pine green tubastria. Zaldy spotted a black frogfish in the shadows of a sea fan, and five grim-faced stonefish on identically colored rocks. Lionfish waved feathery fans like Las Vegas showgirls. A pair of batfish swam with us, poking expectantly at Zaldy's empty hands. A wide-angle lens worked well on a vista of Emperor and blue-faced angelfish, harlequin and spotted sweetlips, fans and feather stars of all colors.

Unlike Malapascua, Panglao diving is reef and wall diving, at both Alona Beach and the Balicasag Island marine sanctuary an hour away. Three dives a day followed a similar profile: a 20-foot free descent to a sandy slope, then a short swim to a wall that drops 80 feet to the sandy bottom. A miniscule current required so little effort that I invariably ascended after a 50-minute dive with my aluminum 80 still half full. That was especially frustrating on one dive when Zaldy surfaced the group after only 25 minutes because one diver, a petite but heavy-smoking female, ran out of air. I did four dives from a 25-diver capacity boat with three divemasters escorting only two or three divers or snorkelers. The boat carried oxygen, life jackets, a radio, a marine head, a cell phone and a statuette of El Santo Niño, but no area for cameras. Divemasters offered instant coffee or tea but I had to bring my own water and snacks. Cheerful young men hauled my gear on and off the boats.

At Balicasag Island Marine Sanctuary, I swam among healthy soft cup and leather corals, and hard table, plate, brain, lettuce, staghorn and elkhorn corals in large, hearty formations. A green turtle nestled beneath a beer keg-shaped barrel sponge. Panglao diving reminds me of that in Palau and Pohnpei without the stiff currents; however, the reefs, especially those near the beach, were not in as good shape as in Micronesia. It hit me daily because vendors sold shells everywhere. Alona Beach is good for snorkelers; the house reef, 300 feet offshore, stretches along the entire beach.

Alona's night scene revolves around BBQ grills that sizzle up and down the beach. At Trudis', I sampled garlic grilled prawns for \$3.50 while my buddy opted for salad, spaghetti Bolognese, garlic bread and dessert -- for \$3.75. My final evening started with an Aussie meat pie washed down with pineapple and mango shakes at Powder Keg Bar & Restaurant, followed by cappuccinos at Kamalag's Italian trattoria, all for less than

\$10, including tip. With all this talk about recession, price is more important. When it comes to dive trips, I seldom add extras after I've paid the package price, but the ones I bought on this trip were great values. For veteran divers who've been around the block a few times, the central Philippines is a delight due to its inexpensive, warm-water diving with fish that could pose for an ID book. Tally it all up, and that's hard to beat for a dive destination anywhere.

-- N.M.



Diver's Compass: Total land costs were \$1,305 for both Malapascua and Bohol, including all transfers except the ferry . . . ActiVentures, a Philippine dive travel agency with offices in San Francisco, California, and Cebu, created a custom package for me . . . Neither Divelink nor Alona Divers offers Nitrox . . . Sunsplash rooms are \$60 to \$70, while at Trudis' Place rates are \$48 to \$80 and include free wireless Internet . . . Change money before leaving Manila for better exchange rates . . . My international ticket allowed two checked bags of 50 pounds each, but my domestic flight allowed only 44 pounds

total, so I had to pay 37 cents per pound above that; credit cards are OK. US citizens need a passport valid for six months and can stay for 21 days without a visa . . . On Bohol, Alona Divers and Trudis' took plastic, but on Malapascua they only took cash, preferably pesos, and money changers won't convert pesos back to dollars . . . At piers and airports, uniformed baggage handlers grab your luggage even without your permission, so if you want to handle your own, order them to stop or they will demand a tip; when I wanted my bags carried, I tipped \$1 per bag . . . Electricity was 220 volts; expect sparks when you plug in and use an adaptor with built-in surge protector . . . Activentures: www.activenturespi.com; Divelink: www.divelinkcebu.com; Sunsplash Resort: www.malapascua.info; Alona Divers: www.alona-divers.com; Trudis' Place: www.trudis-place.com.

Why Divers Die: Part III

tragically dumb mistakes that turned into fatal errors

This is *Undercurrent's* third report on diving deaths compiled by the Diver's Alert Network (DAN). Our first two reports focused on fatalities caused by panic and entrapment, and fatal problems that happened on the water's surface either before or after the dive. Now we'll address bad, irrational, even dumb mistakes dead divers made, from overweighting and diving without enough air to jumping in the water with poorly assembled or improper gear. Some of the deaths that DAN recorded from 2005 will leave many of you, as they did us, scratching your head and asking, "What were they thinking?"

Here's a good example of multiple mistakes. A 30-year-old man with minimal diving experience made a solo dive from a boat down to 18 feet to attach a chain to a buoy. He wasn't wearing fins, his equipment did not meet inspection standards and in poor repair, and BCD's power inflator was not connected. When he didn't come up at an expected time, someone in the boat jumped in to find him but couldn't. A rescue diver pulled him from the bottom, where he had drowned.

Watch Your Weight

A common problem among divers is determining the right amount of weight to wear. If you change from freshwater to saltwater, add or subtract rubber, lose or gain weight, your weighting requirement changes. A 40-year-old man making his first-ever ocean dive using an underwater scooter didn't determine what he needed for neutral buoyancy to fin around on his own. He had a buoyancy problem and returned to the boat with his buddy to get more weights. After beginning a second dive with the scooters, he still felt too buoyant, and the two divers headed back to the boat again for more weights. But this time he may have become overweighted, because when swimming ahead of his buddy, the man called out for help before dropping below the surface and drowning.

When in trouble on the surface, like choppy waters hitting you head on, inflate your BC. If still floundering, drop your weights. Many dead divers might have lived had they maintained their buoyancy on the surface. A 44-year-old technical diver was making a wreck dive in rough seas with three

Freak Wave Capsizes Shark Boat, Kills Three Divers

Three divers, two of them Americans, drowned on April 14 after a South African shark-diving boat was hit by a freak wave and capsized near a shark-cage dive site near Gansbaai.

The 36-foot catamaran *Shark Team*, operated by the White Shark Project, did a standard morning shark-cage dive with 10 divers and nine crew. Waters were calm, with a six-foot swell and a southeasterly wind of 10 to 15 knots. A British survivor interviewed by the *Cape Times* said the boat was returning to shore around 10 a.m. when he saw a huge, “tsunami-like” wave 300 feet away. He watched another shark boat ride over it but as the wave approached them, the captain realized the boat was in trouble and asked passengers to grab hold of something. The wave hit *Shark Team* broadside, causing the boat to roll and capsize. South Africa’s National Sea Rescue Institute says the wave must have been at least 13 feet high to capsize the boat.

Because eight shark-diving companies operate in the same area, other boats were nearby when the wave hit and rescued the *Shark Team* passengers. Two divers were seriously injured, one with a broken foot and another with a shoulder injury, and a number were treated for shock.

But it is believed that the three drowned divers – Cassey Scott Lajeunesse, 35, from Biddeford, Maine, Christopher Tallman, 34, from San Francisco, California, and Kenneth Roque, 37, from Moss, Norway – were sucked under the boat after it capsized. Tallman was found still trapped underneath the vessel. He had a weak pulse when brought ashore but couldn’t be resuscitated and was pronounced dead in the ambulance. Lajeunesse’s and Roque’s bodies were found in the water, drowned. None of the bodies had any injuries or physical marks from sharks.

buddies. He went off on his own, ran low on air and made a rapid ascent. He surfaced ahead of his buddies into choppy waves and grabbed onto a buoy but did not drop his weights. The effort of holding on tired him out and he let go, drifting away from the boat and disappearing after struggling on the surface. His body was found two hours later, and his death was ruled a drowning due to an air embolism from his rapid ascent.

This 52-year-old female with only 10 lifetime dives set the stage for her death by putting 30 pounds in her weight belt. When her divemaster told her to drop some weight, she removed six pounds but then put them in her BC jacket pocket. When she surfaced from the dive, she missed the tag line, couldn’t inflate her BC because she had exhausted her air supply, and did not drop her weights. She sank below the surface and drowned. Her body was recovered two hours later at 60 feet with all 30 pounds of weight still in place.

A 49-year-old certified male diver and a member of the sheriff’s local dive team made a solo dive from a boat to determine how to salvage a sunken boat from the bottom while a friend waited topside. He was using a drysuit and was overweighted. He surfaced after 30 minutes at 50 feet, tried to say something to his friend, but lost consciousness and sank. A gear examination revealed that his tank was empty. The medical examiner ruled a heart attack, but DAN says his dive profile and empty tank made an embolism likely.

Got Air?

Plenty of cases involve experienced divers who jump in the water with too little air, stay too long underwater, or wear their breathing gear improperly. Another danger is that divers running out of air can cause problems for their buddies, who try to assist but are instead caught in a fatal trap. A 49-year-old man was diving with a buddy to 90 feet to look at the *Mackenzie*, a

Canadian Navy wreck off the coast of Gooch Island in British Columbia. When his buddy ran out of air, he offered to share air but the buddy, in a panic, pulled the hose off the man’s regulator. The two rushed to the surface. The man lost consciousness on the surface and died of an air embolism while the buddy was treated for severe injuries but survived.

A 62-year-old male with 26 dives was diving with a buddy from a liveaboard and exhausted his air supply. He and his buddy shared air during the ascent but they came up too fast, and the man lost consciousness on the way up. His death was listed as a heart attack on the report but DAN says that given the circumstances, it was more likely due to an air embolism.

This 34-year-old experienced male diver didn’t have a cave diving certification but made a shore dive with three buddies into a complex cave system. While all three had spare gas bottles, he left his at the safety stop. When he ran out of air at 184 feet, one buddy gave him a spare, but he still didn’t make it back to the safety stop. His body was recovered later that day, still in a cave.

Jason Allen Waight, a 29-year-old diver with fewer than 25 dives, made a solo shore dive in poor visibility at Lake Travis in Austin, Texas. A diver found him unconscious on the surface. A check of his gear found that Waight had exhausted his air, and his tank was mounted backward. His dive computer showed that he had descended to 163 feet for a bottom time of 25 minutes, then made an extremely rapid ascent, omitting at least four minutes of needed decompression time.

Zak Jones, a 30-year-old dive instructor with multiple specialty certifications, worked for Fort Lauderdale’s Pro Diver when he went spearfishing with six co-workers off the dive shop’s boat *Pro Diver II*. Jones used a rebreather gig and separated from his buddy at 190 feet to explore a reef. The next

Proper Liveboard Hygiene

What can be more upsetting than to spend big money traveling halfway around the world, only to come up sick in the middle of a trip and have to miss dives? We get many reports from liveboard divers who note that their trip begins with one person sick and ends with nearly everyone, including the crew, with a cold or the flu. While most of us don't spend our days worrying about catching a bug, it pays to be cautious in the close quarters of a liveboard boat. In a warm, moist, tropical environment, where everyone is holding on to the same handrails and turning the same door-knobs, the chance that one sick patron will infect a host of others is quite high.

Although viruses require live hosts to multiply and spread, they can live on inanimate surfaces for up to two hours, giving them a convenient window of opportunity to be picked up by unsuspecting divers. Chlorine bleach is a good germ-buster, says Ernest Campbell, M.D., a blogger for ScubaDoc.com. "A quarter cup of regular laundry bleach in a gallon of cool water is an effective all-purpose disinfectant and can also kill common food pathogens like salmonella and E. coli." If hygiene is lacking on your liveboard, suggest the crew use that mixture. You can also carry a chlorine bleach solution in a spray bottle to wipe down railings and doorknobs as you go. Here are some other problem areas:

The mask-rinsing bucket. It's the perfect collecting and breeding environment for viruses. When everyone is rinsing their masks in the same bucket, they're not only sharing their crud but also collecting everyone else's. Avoid that by rinsing your mask in seawater. It's going to end up there anyway. If you do keep it in the dive deck's rinse buckets, Campbell says a small amount of chlorine bleach will reduce the bacteria count.

Cups of water. On many liveboards, water is handed out in cups that are simply rinsed, not sanitized, in a tub of water. And since all cups look alike, it's easy to confuse one person's cup with another's. To prevent cross contamination and relieve crew from having to distribute glasses and collect

them for rinsing and refilling, some liveboards now give passengers their own water bottles, with names written on them. Bring your own bottle anyway, just in case you're on a liveboard that doesn't do this.

The dining room. Most liveboards don't have a sink or hand sanitizer station in the dining room. After contaminating their hands on handrails and doorknobs, guests in the dining room have no way of cleaning or sanitizing them, so it's unwashed hands passing dishes and eating their own food. Installing a sink is expensive, but hand-sanitizing liquid dispensers cost as little as \$10.

But the jury is split on the effectiveness of hand sanitizers. Popular ones like Purell and Germ-X contain about 60 percent ethyl alcohol, which strips away the skin's outer layer of oil, preventing bacteria present in the body from coming to the surface of the hand. Studies done at the Children's Hospital in Boston and Colorado State University found that alcohol-based sanitizers were better at reducing germs on human hands and reducing gastrointestinal illnesses. But a Purdue University study concluded that while alcohol-based hand sanitizers may kill more germs than plain soap and water, they are killing off the bacteria normally present in the body, not the kinds that make one sick. And another study by French researchers found that the chlorhexidine-based hand sanitizer Nanochlorex was better than Purell at reducing bacterial levels.

If hand sanitizer is on board, by all means use it. But don't make that the only way you clean your hands. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends that hand sanitizers only be used as an adjunct to soap and water, not a replacement. "Nothing has been conclusively found to be as effective as good old soap and hot water," says Campbell.

So while you may not wish to go through life like a hypochondriac with an unwarranted fear of germs, a few precautions in the close quarters of a liveboard – or resort – in the tropics could be good insurance against getting a bug that will knock you out of the water for a few days.

– Kent Roorda and Vanessa Richardson

time his buddy saw Jones, he was at 160 feet, struggling as if entangled in his air lines, then falling unconscious. Despite CPR, Jones died on the boat. His primary gas source had been exhausted, and his bailout bottle was not configured in a usable way, plus there was no regulator attached to it. His death was ruled a drowning due to lack of air.

Bad Buddies

You can't control the actions of your dive buddy, but you don't have to follow him down a bad path. Choosing whom to dive with is often the most important decision you'll make. In some DAN cases, the diver who helped the buddy in trouble

was the one who ended up dead. A 42-year-old female diver, certified for seven years, and her buddy jumped from their boat into water with strong current and poor visibility. Her buddy immediately had mask, fin and BCD problems. She tried to help but he struggled, losing a fin. As she went after the fin, she struggled in the current and drifted away, her regulator dropping from her mouth. Her body was recovered 10 days later, miles from the boat, and her death was ruled a drowning.

Even divemasters and dive instructors can make big mistakes, but they shouldn't be making reckless ones while with students. Steven Donathan, a 49-year-old dive instructor

from San Diego, was diving off Mission Beach with a large group when he took his advanced open-water student, Joseph Danglemaier, 46, down to the *Yukon*, a Canadian warship wreck lying at 105 feet. Donathan had earlier told friends that he was going to do a “wreck interior problem exercise at 80 feet” that would have Danglemaier’s air turned off and his mask dislodged. Despite poor visibility, they entered a restricted area of the wreck by opening a hatch that had been welded shut. The two entered the confined space without a line. At 25 minutes into their dive, Donathan went through a tight passageway that Danglemaier could not fit through. He tried to signal to Donathan that he couldn’t go any farther, but Donathan continued on. Danglemaier searched briefly for Donathan, then exited the ship, waited outside for 15 minutes and ascended to the surface. Donathan was recovered two days later entangled in pipes in the ship’s boiler room, off limits to divers. All of the several tanks he had with him were empty, and he had run out of air 74 minutes into the dive. Investigators believe Donathan became disoriented after his movements inside the silt-filled room caused zero-visibility conditions.

Don’t Drink and Dive

While *Undercurrent* readers certainly know not to impair their diving judgment with booze, DAN reports fatalities of drunk divers every year. A 45-year-old man with unknown diving experience made a solo dive from a boat and was found unconscious at 68 feet by other divers. He had attempted to ditch his gear but didn’t drop his weights. It didn’t help that he had been drinking before diving. Toxicology revealed a blood

ethanol concentration of 122 milligrams per liter; 80 milligrams can result in a DUI charge.

This 54-year-old man had “a couple of drinks” with his buddy, then entered the water alone from the boat, while his buddy changed his mind. After 30 minutes, he returned to the boat in distress, tried to get back into the boat on his own but fell back in the water. His buddy, dressed in regular clothes, jumped into the water to save him but failed. Rescue divers eventually brought the drowned man to shore. He had a blood ethanol concentration of 138 milligrams per liter, and the examiner called him “acutely intoxicated.”

On a Positive Note

Not all potentially fatal dives end up badly. Last December, British diver Abi March, a 27-year-old with 60 dives, was taken for dead while diving with a group in a North Wales quarry. She panicked after descending rapidly to 60 feet and held onto a wall to stop from dropping farther. Her buddy tried to bring her back to the surface but lost his grip, and March fell to 90 feet, unconscious with her regulator out of her mouth. A technical diver ascending from a deep dive found her and, assuming that March was dead, removed her weight belt and inflated her BCD to send her body to the surface. Other divers saw her body and carried out CPR, but after eight minutes, March was still totally white, with blue lips and no heartbeat. They were about to give up when she started to breathe again and regained consciousness. She was treated for secondary drowning and made a full recovery.

-- Ben Davison

Dive Computer Watches

eight to consider wearing on your wrist

While some divers still like to sport big, expensive dive watches, diving computers are largely superseding watches. It’s possible, however, to buy a diving computer that doubles as a watch, and although the digital face is a bit passé for the classy dresser, some have casings and straps suitable for casual wear.

Only four computer manufacturers make dive computer watches: Suunto, a subcontractor of Mares in Switzerland, Seiko in Japan, and a company that is part of Oceanic. All are calendar chronometers and allow you to keep track of time at home when in a different geographic time zone. In diving mode, they are suitable for use with Nitrox, although some have an “air-only” setting left over from the days when some retailers thought Nitrox to be a “devil gas” (put them in Nitrox mode and set 21 percent when using air).

Every computer here has a bar graph to indicate nitrogen loading and another to indicate oxygen loading. All feature a

log book and history mode, employ small lithium batteries, and have a PC interface available. The Suuntos are manually set for diving at altitude, whereas the others automatically sense ambient air pressure. The Japanese-made computers can be set manually for fresh or saltwater for accurate depth displays, although this does not affect decompression or no-stop time calculations. They tend to default to a worst-case scenario of 99 percent O₂ overnight, so this can catch you out on a dive at first light if you don’t remember to reset.

Here are the ones I tested, from least expensive to priciest (all prices are list prices).

Oceanic Geo. Very popular with American leisure divers, this desirable-looking item is available in four different colors with a legible display and a user-replaceable battery. It sent me into paroxysms of frustration during the setting-up process because the buttons did not always do what the instruction



Oceanic Geo

plus a choice of personal safety levels. Its maximum ascent rate varies according to depth, with an automatic prompt. An oxygen toxicity warning and nitrogen loading graphic are included in the alternate displays operated by push-button. Besides Nitrox and Air, it has Gauge and Free-diving modes. The battery is easy to change. I liked the display but not the fact that you need to push buttons to see all the information during a dive. \$350; www.oceanicworldwide.com.

Mares Nemo Sport. Made in Japan, this looks like it is made of metal but is actually a lightweight chromed-finish plastic (it also comes in matte black). It was a pity that, like the other computer watches from the Far East, its manual was difficult to follow. A call to the Mares representative unlocked the secrets of setting it up. It can be set for Nitrox up to 99 percent O₂, with a choice of two safety factors, and sampling rates of every 15 or 30 seconds. It displays a three-minute safety stop at 20 feet during an ascent. Changing the battery involves four screws, so that job might be best left to your dealer. It is probably the best-valued computer watch available, although it feels cheap. \$450; www.mares.com.

Apeks Pulse. Unique among the Seiko-made computer watches tested here, the Pulse allows you to switch Nitrox mixes during a dive so you can carry two gases and speed up decompression. The sampling rate can be adjusted to either 15- or 30-second-intervals. You adjust the degree of caution in the deco calculations.



Apeks Pulse

There are warnings for such things as exceeded ppO₂, deco-stop violations, oxygen toxicity and out-of-range. A safety stop of three minutes is displayed once the diver ascends to 20 feet. In Gauge mode it becomes a basic depth gauge and timer. The battery is not user-replaceable. It's the least expensive way for a twin-tank diver to get a computer watch that will calculate accelerated deco with a second richer mix of Nitrox. \$504; www.apeks.co.uk.

Mares Nemo Excel. It has a feeling of quality derived from its weightier metal construction. If it hadn't been for sticking

booklet promised. It uses a Rogers/Powell DSAT algorithm that may show quite different deco and no-stop times than those used in the other computer watches. It can be set for uNitrox mixes up to 50 percent oxygen, and has a safety-stop adjustable for time and depth,

buttons, it would have been easy to set up because it was quite intuitive to understand. It uses the Mares/Wienke RGBM algorithm that accounts for the possible effects of repeat diving, and has a sampling rate of every 20 seconds when in Nitrox mode or every four seconds when set for free-diving. Its maximum ascent-rate indicator varies between 40 feet per minute and 10 feet per minute, according to the actual depth. The Nemo Excel can be set for a choice of maximum ppO₂ between 1.2 and 1.6 bar. A safety stop of three minutes is indicated as soon as the diver returns to 20 feet. The battery can be changed by the user but involves removing four small screws. The modern Italian case design was a little too avant-garde for my taste. \$600; www.mares.com.

Suunto D4. Intended to be just as useful for freedivers as for scuba divers, the D4 has sampling rates adjustable between every single second, 10, 20, 30 seconds or every minute. In freediving mode, it also programmed to capture depth readings three times a second. It is made from a mixture of metal and composite plastic and uses the Suunto/Wienke RGBM50 or RGBM100. The iterative deep-stop option is interchangeable with an automatic safety-stop display. It can be set with any Nitrox mix up to 50 percent O₂. It has a graphic that indicates ascent rate and another that indicates consumed bottom time (or decreasing no-stop time). Like the Mosquito it replaces, the D4 employs a Suunto user-installed battery kit. It looks good but feels a lot cheaper than the other Suunto computer watches. However, it is easily the best option if you are into freediving. \$649; www.suunto.com/diving.

Suunto Stinger. Derived from the original computer watch, the Suunto Spyder, the stainless-steel Stinger is a firm favorite with divers. It is intuitive to set up and can work with mixes up to Nitrox50. It has the loudest alarm for surface use, and comes with either a useful strap extension or a stainless-steel bracelet that extends itself to go over a wetsuit sleeve. Popular with many technical divers as a gauge, in free-diving mode it displays only depth and duration together with water temperature, and makes no deco calculations. It employs the original Suunto/Wienke RGBM100 algorithm that kicks in to provide extra caution for second and further repetitive dives. Owners are denied the chance to change the battery themselves. It's an all-time classic design, although it's starting to look a bit dated. \$830 (with rubber strap option); www.suunto.com/diving.

Suunto D6. The nicest looking of all the digital computer watches tested here, it has a stainless-steel case with a rubber strap or a stainless-steel bracelet. It is quite intuitive to set up, although the audible alarms are rather muted, so don't expect this to wake you for that early morning dive. It can be set for two mixes of Nitrox for gas-switching during a dive and can be set to encompass iterative deep-stops or a clearly displayed three-minute safety stop that is automatically displayed at 15 feet. The D6 uses a unique Suunto/Wienke algorithm that can be set from two versions and takes into account repetitive dives. You can set your own limit for ppO₂ (from 1.2 to 1.6 bars with a display for actual ppO₂ due to



Suunto D6

depth up to 3.0 bars) and there are three possible personal adjustments for caution. Otherwise, it can be set to gauge mode for use as a depth gauge and timer. It also has a unique-to-Suunto built-in electronic digital compass. Only an expert can change the battery. \$885; www.suunto.com/diving.

Suunto D9. With all the functions of the D6 and more, the more chunky and clunky D9 is constructed from matte-finish titanium and has the option of a matching user-changeable titanium strap for dress use. It can be set for up to three different Nitrox mixes per dive and is uniquely integrated via a transmitter with the gas of the primary supply, thereby giving a prognosis of how long your gas supply will last based on your usage prior to that, the depth you're at and the remaining pressure in your tank. The D9 also displays tank pressure. It can't do this all on one display, so it offers the most crucial-at-the-time information first and you can get the rest by pressing a button. It

offers deep stops as an alternative to the automatic Safety Stop display and uses the Suunto/Wienke RGBM algorithm. In common with the D4 and D6, the D9 has a nice graphic profile of each dive stored alongside other details in its logbook memory. Together with its electronic compass, it gives all the information a diver needs in one single compact unit. If cost is no object, it's obviously the best option as a dive computer. No battery change by the user is possible with the wrist unit, although the tank pressure transmitter does allow it. \$1,925 (with rubber strap option and transmitter); www.suunto.com/diving.

Bottom line: Because the Mares and Suunto computers use a Wienke RGBM algorithm very similar to that in the Seiko-made computers, there is little to choose between them when it comes to core function as diving computers. The Oceanic uses an algorithm that has proved to be very popular. The Apeks allows gas switching, as do the more expensive D6 and D9. When it comes to choosing what's right for you, it merely comes down to the dive computer's appearance as a watch. The D6 is easily the winner, unless you prefer the styling of the Nemo Excel. The others look more Swatch than Rolex.

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

Tipping on Dive Trips: Part I

how much do you tip, and to whom?

If there is a topic that engenders more passion and diversity among divers than how much to tip, we don't know what it is. Do you tip no matter what? Do you tip individuals or put it in a community pot? Do you tip at all? The variables are endless, but think of the people who serve you.

On day boats, you've got a boat captain, a dive guide, the people who fill and tote the tanks, and the guy who washes out your wetsuit. At resorts, you've got another tier to deal with -- bartenders and waitstaff, room cleaners, bellhops, etc. And, to complicate matters, if you're at a dive resort or on a liveaboard, diving, eating and accommodations are all part of the same operation and you've probably paid a fixed fee for your stay.

If you're diving in Florida or Hawaii, you might think differently about tipping than if you're in Indonesia, for example. No American in that crew is going to work for Indonesian wages, so there is a pay disparity. And if you're not from a tip-happy country like the U.S., you may not think about tipping it at all.

The Purpose of a Tip

The primary purpose of tipping is to give a reward for a job well done, as evidenced by the e-mails from more than a hundred divers who responded to our request for comments about their tipping practices. A good example comes from

Undercurrent subscriber James Heimer (Houston, TX). "My wife and I dived with Ed Robinson Dive Adventures last fall. While diving the Molokini crater, my wife was frustrated because she was dragging her photo rig around and not able to get any good shots. The next day, she said she would sit out the first dive. The boat captain quizzed her to find out exactly what she was looking for -- moderate depth, no current, moored dive boat -- then he went to an inshore location first to check on visibility, then went over to the crater and checked three locations until he found one that was perfect. We had the best dive of our vacation, and it was the crew's interest and patience that made it possible." The Heimers tipped

But how much should one reward for good service? And to whom? How do you make sure everyone gets their fair share? Subscriber Pete Dudley (Albuquerque, NM) put us on the spot: "There are a lot of unspoken expectations involved with tipping, so hopefully *Undercurrent* can help define correct practices so we feel good about our dive trips, even after settling up."

I wish we could, but truth is, Pete, there is no correct practice. At best, there are things to keep in mind. At the end of this two-part series, I will see if we can't come up with some reasonable approach.

The Yes, Maybe and No Tipping Camps

When it comes to tipping, divers are in three camps: those who do it willingly, those who do it reluctantly, and those who refuse to tip at all (and yes, they are American).

“I think of a dive trip as like going to a fine restaurant,” says one diver.

“I tend to think of a dive trip as like going to a fine restaurant,” says Michael Hofman (San Francisco, CA). “I look at a 10 percent tip as reasonable. The employees don’t make very much and usually they provide superior service. Of course, when the service is below par, I don’t tip as much. But if you return to a destination, it’s likely that your good tips for a job well done will be remembered.”

Daniel Benson (Klamath Falls, OR) is one tipper unhappy with the practice. “I want the staff to feel appreciated, yet I don’t think it’s right for the crew to be completely dependent on tips for their livelihood.”

“By the time I pay for a very overinflated trip and all the incidentals that go with it, especially the fuel surcharge, I am about moneyed out,” says Jack Hart (Hickory, NC). “Dive operators need to charge what they think they need to get for the trip. Then I can choose to go or not. Don’t just demand a huge tip at the end.”

Some people don’t tip at all. “My feeling is that people should always do their best at their jobs,” says Ron Jyring (Bismarck, ND). “That is simply part of being a professional. We don’t tip dentists or plumbers, so why dive ‘professionals’? Don’t ask me to supplement the crew’s salary – that’s the owner’s responsibility.”

Even some dive professionals (although most won’t say it publicly) agree with Jyring. Bruce Bowker, who owns Bonaire’s Carib Inn, is an outspoken one. “When I was younger and doing more resort scuba instruction, I remember when I got my first tip. It was a bit surprising, as I was getting paid for what I was doing. It was my job. It soon became apparent that it was more or less common to tip the scuba teacher. Thinking back, I never tipped my teachers at school.”

Rude Crews

Before we look at strategies, let’s first dispose of rude dive crews who should never be tipped.

“I only refused to tip on one trip,” says Tammy Hauk (Grandview, MO). “I came down with a sinus condition in Cozumel, and the divemaster was trying to push me into diving though I told him I could not clear my ears above water. After my final refusal, he turned back and pantomimed ‘chicken’ to the other divers in our group. Because I was taught that the safety of divers should be a divemaster’s first concern, this guy lost out on getting a tip from me.”

When Pete Dudley was diving with Deep Blue in Cozumel, he told the proprietors he would tip everyone at the end, and they said no problem. “I mentioned this to the crew, but they began to make rude remarks about my tipping after the second day. They did it in Spanish, but my wife understood what they said. We cancelled the other eight days. With the next operator, I tipped every day and had no problems.”

What Percentage Do Your Fellow Divers Tip?

While the results to our survey aren’t statistically significant, more than half say they tip 10 percent of the dive costs, whether it’s a liveaboard or shore-based operation. Mike Bowden (London, England) urges tipping divers keep it at no more than that. “Otherwise too tempting for boats to start cutting wages and bumping up tips.” An additional 38 percent of divers view 15 percent as the norm, while 8 percent use 20 percent. Only 3 percent say they never tip.

“By the time I pay for an overinflated trip and all the incidentals, I am moneyed out,” says another.

A few divers try reaching a happy medium by tipping in goods. “At my job, I had plenty of giveaway items like T-shirts and caps,” says Pat Aderman (Irving, TX). “I would pack six to 12 of them and give them to dive guides and boat crews. They were always well appreciated.” “I do tip in cash, but I also prefer to take my divemaster out to dinner on our last night on or after a night dive,” says Sharon Hawkins (Houston, TX). “I also bring my free gift-with-purchase cosmetics – lipsticks, lotions, soaps, shampoos – and leave that for the housekeeping staff.”

How to Tip

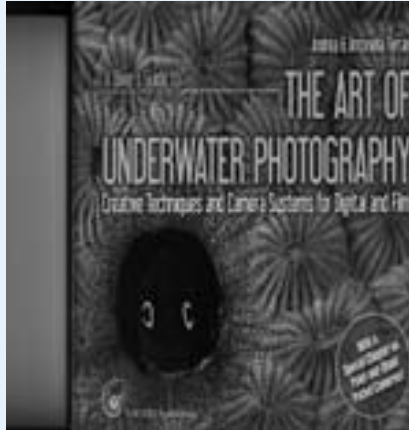
Many divers like the tip box concept because they can drop in what they want and it gets spread around. “It’s a good policy because the whole staff gets a share,” says Barbara Shiveley (La Plata, MD). “However, every trip has a few individuals, like a divemaster or boat captain, who went the extra yard, and I recognize this by giving them an extra \$5 or \$10 personally.”

Others are fine with giving tips to the owner to take care of the staff. “There are too many people involved to figure out how to tip everyone,” says David Dornbusch (Berkeley, CA). “I think the dive operator understands to what degree crew depend on tips, so I let it distribute them.”

Some divers go out of their way to seek out specific crew who gave them extra attention. “I want the specific people who took care of me during the week to benefit,” says Liz Pyzik (Sterling Heights, MI). “I keep track of captain, dive guides and other crew on the boats and at the end of the week, I tip each \$5 per day of diving. I give the money in an envelope addressed to the person and write notes thanking them for their help through the week. For the housekeeping staff and kitchen crew, I tip \$10 per day, giving it to the person in charge

The Art of Underwater Photography

This is clearly the best and most beautiful “how-to” book ever produced. Andrea and Antonella Ferrari have created stunning images with accompanying text that will help any underwater photographer discover and develop his inner artist. From the 360 spectacular, image-filled pages, you can



learn about rigorously field-tested digital techniques and the hidden techniques behind imaginative framing and lighting to achieve striking results. From wide-angle and fish-eye to macro photography, from basic point-and-shoot

digital pocket cameras to complex housed professional DSLR systems, from blue-water encounters to coral reef diving and muck critter hunting, and from daily maintenance to the choice of the right lens, it's all here in a readable, technically accessible, step-by-step guide.

John Bantin, technical editor for the British magazine *Diver*, says, “With an enviable reputation for authoring fine books on underwater photography, the Ferraris have laced the pages of their new book with juicy pictures. There is none of the pseudo-art talk that often ruins otherwise beautiful books of photographs. The pictures do the talking. This 360-page volume doesn't have a weak page in it.”

Andrea and Antonella Ferrari are also the authors of *A Diver's Guide to Underwater Malaysia Macrolife* and *A Diver's Guide to Reef Life* (2006). Purchase any of these books at www.undercurrent.org and the commission we receive from Amazon.com will go directly to projects to save coral reefs.

of the kitchen and asking that the money be distributed.”

Who to Tip

Some divers count the people who helped them with their dives – the divemaster, the panga driver, the tank filler – and come up with a proper sum for each based on how many dives they did. Fifty-five percent of divers said they tip \$5 per tank, 20 percent give \$10 and 14 percent give \$15. A few divers give \$20 to \$25 for a day's worth of good diving.

Don't forget the non-dive crew – housekeeping staffs at dive resorts are also relying on tips. The respondents who addressed this say they usually leave between \$2 and \$5 per person on the bed for housekeeping. If the resort has a tip box for the office staff, divers leave a per diem of \$5 to \$10.

Others consider that they paid through the nose already and follow the modified European method, which is to tip only those who go far beyond their duties to serve – and that may not be anyone. “Since I save for one big trip each year and don't have much extra money, I generally keep my dive trip tips between \$100 and 200,” says Fred Turoff (Philadelphia, PA). “The higher amount is given when I feel the crew made my trip more enjoyable than expected, cared for my gear and led me to interesting creatures. I know that much behind-the-scenes work is done by the others, so in addition to contributing to the tip pool, I try to thank each crew member personally. Knowing that my income, however limited it is, is probably much greater than any of the crew, makes it easier for me to give them a tip – for a good trip, that is.”

Pushy Crew

Many divers complain that some dive operations are too

pushy about tips. “On Mike Ball's *Spoilsport* in the Coral Sea a decade ago, I was asked to tip 20 percent,” says Henry Jakubiak (Potomac, MD). “Coming in at \$1,000 on top of \$5,000 for the trip, that strikes me as quite a reach. Both the *Kona Aggressor* and the *Galapagos Aggressor* suggested tips between 10 and 20 percent. The audacity of these requests took my breath away.”

One Canadian subscriber said a Nekton liveaboard trip in Belize last summer soured his view on tipping. “When I booked the trip, I was clearly informed about a customary 10 to 15 percent tip, and I should bring cash as there were no ATMs on board. During the trip, I was reminded daily of the tip. At trip's end, I got a thank-you letter requesting a 15 to 20 percent tip that could be paid on deck the following morning. There were no divemasters in the water. No shark dive occurred. We dove the same sites three to four times. The meals were self-serve. A somber crowd ponied up the extra \$720 per couple for a six-day dive.”

Some dive operations aren't democratic about splitting tips among staff, so some crew get aggressive in getting them from divers. At CocoView in Roatan, Mark Buckley (Pearland, TX) came across some tank fillers who were relentless in their pursuit of a tip. “Towards the end of the week, they saw me gearing up for a dive and the inevitable ‘don't forget me’ always came up. It got so I avoided them and quickly got on the boat or walked out front and made a shore dive.”

-- Ben Davison

Next month, we'll discuss how dive operations pool and distribute tips, and how tipping should be handled in Third World countries.

Flotsam & Jetsam

Watch Out for Speedboats. Divers being struck and killed by powerboats is an ever present issue. The latest victims were Polish divers Jona Kasic, 45, and Wizo Kasic, 43, who were run over by a fast-moving powerboat near the Red Sea resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh on April 11 and died instantly. Besides the Red Sea, Cozumel and the Florida Keys are other high-traffic areas for speedboats. The most high-profile death was that of British pop singer Kirsty MacColl in 2000. She was diving in Cozumel waters where watercraft were prohibited but was struck and killed instantly by a speeding powerboat.

Ripoff for Fiji's Coral Harvesters. Some Fiji villagers make a living harvesting coral used in home aquariums, but they're being shortchanged by middlemen who reap the profits. According to the *Fiji Times*, exporters pay villagers \$150 to \$200 for coral, but they're recording up to \$2 million in annual profits. Some export companies are only operated by four or five people, and all they have to pay the Fiji government is \$30 for a

permit. Coral is shipped to the U.S. and Japan and sold for around \$2.50 per kilogram.

A New Fish Encyclopedia. *Undercurrent* reader Ken Paff (Detroit, MI) alerted us to the Encyclopedia of Life (www.eol.org), in which fish are the first species to be categorized. The Web site, which launched in March, is the brainchild of Pulitzer Prize-winning biologist E.O. Wilson. "The long-term goal is to centralize all available info and research – from taxonomy to ecology to DNA sequencing – for each of the 1.8 million species of life," says Paff. "That may take decades, but the good news is that fish have jumped the line and are the first class of animals – all 30,000 species of them – headed for inclusion."

Banning Plastic Bags to Protect Reefs. American Samoa's government is debating a bill to ban plastic shopping bags from the territory. Its Marine and Wildlife Resources Department says 60 percent of corals in the territory have been damaged or destroyed due to runoff and plastic bags, and fish ingesting plastic litter die from starvation because their digestive tracts are blocked. The bill has widespread support from Samoan government officials and residents.

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