

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

August 2008

Vol. 23, No. 8

CoCo View Resort, Roatan, Honduras

hello Muddah, hello Faddah, here I am at...

IN THIS ISSUE:

CoCo View Resort, Roatan..	1
Malaria on Roatan.....	3
Apeks and AquaLung Recall Regulators	4
Dive Travel Deals	6
Our New Online Forum.....	6
Finest Dive Boat in Papua New Guinea? Not Yet	7
Misuse of Dive Computers... 8	
Cave Diver Gets Electric Shock.....	9
Divers, Sign Your Life Away: Part I.....	10
Are Your Dive Photos Worthy of a Book?	12
<i>Magic Beneath the Seas</i>	13
Rest in Peace, Build a Reef .	14
Cayman Dive Shops Protest Safety Regulations.....	15
Flotsam & Jetsam	16

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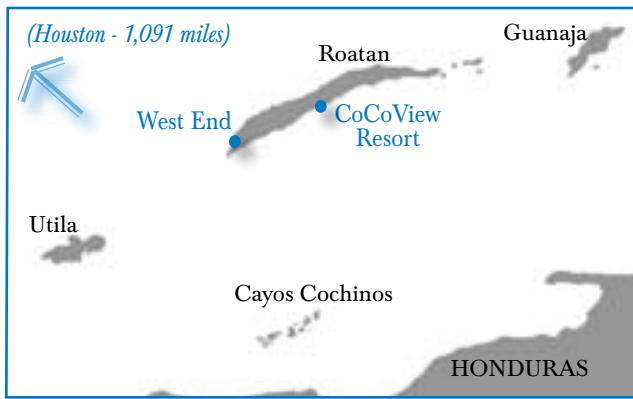
Dear Fellow Diver:

Last spring, I chatted with my local dive shop owner about my upcoming April trip to Roatan. "Ah, CoCo View," he reminisced. "You can really dive your brains out there." Many Undercurrent readers confess to being "CoCo Nuts," picking the dive resort as the one they'd likely return to. Eighteen dives later, I knew what they meant. It's a full-throttle version of summer camp for divers. Every day was packed with boat dives, self-guided dropoffs, meals at the clubhouse and a few extracurricular activities crammed in between. Fellow guests, mostly Americans, were 20 to 50 years past summers at Camp Granada but as energetic and rowdy as kiddie campers. Our campground was bordered by undersea walls and filled with fish and critters -- especially macro life -- concentrated in a small area. I'm talking about Bonaire-level dive quality, but with walls on either side of your doorstep.

No need for "Reveille" on my alarm clock. I woke up at daybreak. A quick breakfast at the main lodge followed by two boat dives, lunch, two more boat dives, shore dive. Dinner back at camp, then a night dive. Instead of s'mores around the fire, I had nightcaps on my seaside porch. "Taps" was the sound of waves lapping against the stilts of my over-the-water bungalow. I didn't pay all this money to have camp counselors plan my day, but CoCo View's dive schedule is as hectic or relaxed as you want it to be. The seven-day packages come with two two-tank boat dives per day, and the ease and freedom of self-guided shore diving in the resort's "Front Porch" meant I could spend the entire day under-water. On a couple of



CoCo View's bungalows on the water



days, I squeezed in onshore sightseeing to keep my non-diving buddy happy.

As a first-timer, I had to submit to a checkout dive. Serious for a twentysomething, Honduran divemaster Mark watched his troop of newbies demonstrate buoyancy control and mask clearing. Then he led us on a shore dive through a narrow cut between grassy shallows to Newman's Wall. Straight ahead at 65 feet was the wreck of 165-foot coastal freighter Prince Albert, with a DC-3 airplane just off its bow. Forty iridescent reef squid hovered over a sandy bowl nearby.

The shallow cut was filled with snappers, grunts, damsel, squirrel and butterflyfish, perfect for snorkelers. On the way back, a pair of spotted eagle rays serenely glided past me, while a large southern stingray skated along the bottom.

The resort is on its own palm-covered island, a 20-minute drive from the airport and a five-minute boat ride from Roatan's southern end. I was ushered there by Nora, CoCo View's friendly head counselor, who had greeted me at the airport. The resort consists of just a few wood-framed buildings, resembling fisherman's boat shanties. Every bungalow, cabana and standard room faces the Caribbean and a small, sandy beach running round the island. I strolled the boardwalk connecting all rooms to the clubhouse, the dockside dive center, and Hawksbill Caye, a smaller island that used to house a turtle farm. Now it holds a thatch-roofed picnic area, the camp's central meeting area where staff grilled up meals and some evening partying took place.

I was happy with my spacious wooden bungalow with high ceilings, good bedside reading lights, two ceiling fans, and French doors framing the ocean view. The balcony had a hammock, two chairs and a little table good for lingering over sundowners. Air temps were in the low 80s and a steady 15 m.p.h. breeze blew the entire week, so no-see-um bites were sparse. I felt lucky when people kayaking over from Fantasy Island resort told me their beach was covered with blood-thirsty mosquitoes. The spartan bathroom had a smallish shower, no tub, and a toilet requiring three flushes to empty. The coffeemaker, fridge and bug bomb were handy. The AC worked fine, and there were 10 pegs for hanging gear. Some details were below par -- my coffeemaking supplies were never replenished, a dresser knob was missing, and bathroom walls were sloppily patched and unpainted. More "roughing it" moments came when the power went out two or three times daily -- I had to reset the A/C in the middle of the night when it went back to its default setting of 78 degrees, and I gave up on resetting the clock.

Those are small issues for the happy campers coming back for return visits. Half of the divers who arrived when I did had stayed there before. My two main dive buddies had visited eight and 15 times respectively. What's camp without a clanging bell? Dive shop staff clanged it at 15, 10 and 5 minutes before sending out the four 50-foot boats at 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. Entry was by giant stride off the sides or back, reboarding was by two stern ladders. The boats, originally built for the U.S. Navy, had a boarding ladder mounted in the center of the keel. The captain swung it down through a large box open at the top to admit returning divers. Excellent for rougher seas because it bucked a lot less than the stern ladders, and I tried it once

CoCo View Resort, Roatan

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale

when the winds whipped up four-foot waves during boat dives. Diving in the shallower reefs meant fighting with surge.

After a briefing accompanied by laminated illustrations, Mark guided 15 of us while Gringo, another twentysomething local divemaster who ironically spoke little English, stayed with the moored boat. Each boat went to a separate site, never repeating any. We were on a fixed menu and no one had input into the tightly choreographed locations -- it would have messed up logistics. When divemasters pointed out something interesting like a long-snout sea-horse or a large-eye toadfish, a long line of divers waited, or if hysteria set in, a mass of bodies crowded in. Annoying, but it didn't happen that much. There was an occasional rare fish or creature, but most dives took place on undramatic reef structures. Calvin's Crack was the most visually memorable. After an unassuming approach, I entered a small, dark tunnel, a narrow crack in the reef. On the outer wall, cathedral-like beams poured in from 60 feet above. Elegant spotted drum danced about the barrel-sized sponges clinging to the wall on the other end. A grumpy, large-eye toadfish squatted on a shallow plateau.

While the first boat dive was an appetizer, the second tank, both morning and afternoon, was a good main course. I'd giant stride into the 80-degree water, either at CoCo View Wall or Newman's Wall, for a leisurely, unguided dive back to CoCo View's beach. My first drop-off was the most exciting because I had no idea how far away from the resort I'd been dropped. As my air supply fell, I wondered whether I could go the distance without a surface swim. After dropping to 50 feet, I gradually glided up to 25 feet. Checking me out along the way were an arrow blenny hugging soft corals, a peppermint goby perched atop a magnificent brain coral, and a raggedy decorator crab clinging to a gorgonian. I stood up in the cut 72 minutes later, welcomed back to the "front porch" by Caribbean reef squid flying in formation. On further dives, I averaged 45 to 60 minutes, photographing cryptic teardrop crabs and secretary blennies at my leisure, with visibility of 75 feet. Still, the boat dives were the only place to see a different cast of fish, varied swim-throughs and stately reef canyons.

The dive setup was well laid out. Ample bins, showers and clotheslines, camera and rinse tanks, were just steps away from the stern of the boat. On each bin, I hung a tag with my room number if I wanted to do a boat dive, so the crew took my gear and set it up on the boat. Whenever I wanted to shore dive, I just took an aluminum 80 from a rack of tanks, all filled to 3000 psi. A full-service dive shop was steps away. I took a photography lesson from award-winning Tim Blanton, who has a photo shop on premises. Patiently and with good humor, Tim taught me how to use ambient light and reduce backscatter from my flash, although he didn't get into the water with me. But after three hours of lessons over two days, I was able to capture shots using a beautiful natural light, making the water virtually disappear from view.

With a strong current flowing one morning, I drifted along the sloping dropoff at Connie's Dream. I never dive openwater without a good safety sausage but noticed few divers here did the same. After working from 75 to 50 feet, I spent the last 25

Malaria on Roatan

There is malaria on the island of Roatan. It's not rampant and many travelers and even local residents take no prophylaxis, but it exists and those who contract it from a mosquito bite get very sick and may be out of commission for weeks. Over the years, *Undercurrent* has reported on cases in traveling divers, one perhaps contracted from a mosquito bite while changing planes on the mainland.

The Centers for Disease Control recommends anti-malaria treatment for people visiting mainland Honduras at areas below 3,200 feet in altitude, as well as Roatan and the other Bay Islands. The drug of choice is chloroquine, taken once weekly in a dosage of 500 milligrams. It should be started one to two weeks before arrival, taken throughout the trip and for four weeks after.

The danger and bother of mosquitoes and no-see-ums can be substantially reduced with some easy precautions like wearing long sleeves and pants, especially at dawn and dusk, treating clothes with the insect repellent permethrin, and liberally applying bug spray with DEET or picaridin. (For more bug-off details, read our story "The Skinny on No-See-Ums" in our September 2007 issue, available online at www.undercurrent.org).

-- Doc Vikingo

Apeks and AquaLung Announce Regulator Recalls

Some Apeks ATX and XTX regulators have incorrectly assembled second stages. The diaphragm cover, a black, silver or yellow ring of plastic that sits on top of the main diaphragm, was left out during the second stage assembly process. A missing cover could allow the diaphragm to become displaced, causing a diver to suck in water instead of air. The recall includes all second stages and octopuses purchased before July 2008 that haven't had the authorized annual service. Take yours to an Apeks dealer for a visual inspection. A technician can do a visual inspection through the front cover, but it's better yet to remove the cover to ensure the diaphragm cover is there and in its proper place. For details, contact Apeks at info@apeks.co.uk

AquaLung has recalled certain Titan/Conshelf DIN connectors, a threaded handwheel that connects the regulator to

the air tank. The problem, according to AquaLung product manager Tom Philipp: "Some dive technicians using too much brawn." The handwheel retainers are weakened during service when they're manually adjusted at torque levels higher than recommended. The recall mostly affects European divers and those who buy European regulators. DIN connectors are sold in Europe while the U.S. uses yoke knobs to tighten regulators. Owners of Titan DIN regulators with a serial number lower than 6062501 or Titan/Conshelf DIN adaptors marked with "300 BAR MAX" can return them to a AquaLung retailer for an upgrade covered under warranty. The correction will be switching out the brass handwheel retainer for a stainless steel one marked "300 BAR MAXI." For details, contact AquaLung at support@aqualung.com, or call (760) 597-5000.

minutes drifting above ridge after ridge of sponges, soft corals, and common reef fish. When my two buddies and I decided to surface, I lent them my safety sausage, which came in handy because it took 10 minutes for the boat to come. Another diver told me that when her group surfaced, there was no boat in sight, as it had left to pick up snorkelers who had drifted away. The divers had a nervous 10 minutes, waiting while trying to keep their heads above four-foot swells.

While there's no shopping or dining district nearby, CoCoView brought in a different local craft merchant every day. I took a half-day island tour on an air-conditioned bus (a bargain at \$25). I hand-fed prehistoric-aged lizards at Arch's Iguana and Marine Park, then strolled three acres of exotic jungle plants at Carambola Garden Center while golden spiders watched me from six-foot-wide webs hanging from the trees. Last stop was West End, a colorful town on Roatan's north side where dive shops, bars, restaurants and European backpackers thronged lumpy dirt roads. I also took a 45-minute ride in an open cockpit float plane (\$125). Sitting behind the pilot in the open cockpit with the wind in my face, we circled Roatan's east end, never going above 700 feet, and got a birds-eye view of the resort- and reef-fringed shoreline.

Buffet meals served in the central hall were all-American comfort food. Plenty of orange juice at breakfast to wash down any-style eggs with bacon or sausage, cereal and fruit. Lunches ranged from cheesy macaroni and roast beef sandwiches to chicken salad and shrimp soup. My favorite dinner entrees were garlic shrimp, calzone, and BBQ chicken and ribs. Sweet, moist Tres Leches cake and coconut bread made fantastic desserts. Except for one free beer, it was \$2 for local beers like Salva Vida and Barena, \$3.50 to \$5 for mixed drinks and \$3.75 for house wine. I kept my tab down by buying duty-free on the way in. My favorite staffer was Rebecca, a buoyant buffet-line server, who piled my plate high with a wink and a smile. While employees were friendly, they didn't mingle with guests and stuck to themselves at meals.

The Caribbean version of campfire took place nightly at Hawksbill Caye. One night, Doc Radawski, who started CoCo View's dive operation, gave an overview of Roatan's history, reefs and marine life. Next was fire twirlers lighting up the dark. Then it was young dancers in local costume doing a series of traditional numbers and pulling people from the audience for a lively spin around the floor. The high point was the limbo contest, fueled by free rum punch, which pretty much got everyone out of their seats. The two-story clubhouse sports ping-pong and pool tables, and its two computers offer free high-speed Internet. A good place for downtime was in the reading room/lecture hall, where rocking chairs on the open-air veranda offered great views.

Midway through my trip, I decided to go for a six-dive day. At 5:50 a.m., I waded into the water with my dive buddy, spotting a brown mantis shrimp scurrying in the shallows plus a mottled jawfish before even reaching the Front Porch. I was clean and washed for breakfast at 7 a.m. Stern-faced divemaster Mark alerted me to a spotted moray and black-spotted nudibranch on the boat dive at Nerlyn Front Porch. I jumped in for the drop-off at Newman's Wall and a mellow 65-minute underwater swim back. On the way, a bridled burrfish the size of a football used my body for cover. After lunch of boiled shrimp and chicken salad, I dropped into Forty Foot Point at 2:16 p.m., where Mark pointed out a longsnout seahorse. Strong wind and four-foot waves swept up a moderate current. A hundred horse-eye jack met me on a hard kick back to the boat. This is when their no-glove policy got annoying because to avoid being swept away at the safety stop, I cut my finger holding onto an encrusted mooring line. On the second drop-off at Newman's Wall, I enjoyed the sight of secretary blennies darting out of their holes on the encrusted rail of Prince Albert's foredeck.

After a dinner of fried calamari, roast beef, and buttered coconut bread I was up for my night dive. They're all self-guided shore dives, (there was one boat dive scheduled during my week for \$35, but rough seas scuttled it). I signed in and out on a numbered log sheet and took a corresponding numbered tag. As the first diver out, I took a bright strobe light (provided by CoCo View) and hung that and my tag on a chain suspended at the end of the cut. Subsequent divers hang their tags and the last to shore returns the strobe. A search is launched if all tags and strobe are not back by 11 p.m. It was already dark when my buddy and I submerged at 8:30 p.m. and headed for CoCoView Wall. A fish the size of a goliath grouper loomed like a big boxcar in the darkness, just out of ID range. Tigertail sea cucumbers roamed, and a tank-like Spanish lobster lumbered across the bottom. On the way back up the cut, the waves foaming in the shallows created a strong, short rip current pouring back out to sea against us. I had to use my knife to anchor and pull my way through the swiftest part. As we left the water and hung up our tags, we shook hands on a great ending to a frantic fun-filled day. No marshmallows nearby to toast, so I settled on a sundowner and deep sleep.

It's obvious why people go cuckoo for CoCo View. It's a fantastic place for hanging underwater with multiple types of reef fish and macro critters for four-plus hours a day. My fellow guests' exuberance made me appreciate the great diving even more. Because of so many repeat visits by fans, reserve one of the 26 rooms at least 12 months ahead of time. When I first called, all of the bungalows and over-the-water cabanas were booked a year in advance by a single dive group. But CoCo View says that if rooms aren't available for all the dates needed, they'll book you into the Playa Miguel Beach Houses next door until a room opens. Sounds like a good deal, getting an oceanfront house for the cost of a hotel room, but not all have A/C and there could be a wait list for those, too. Getting into this dive camp can be as hard as getting the kids into private school, but the payoff is excellent Caribbean wall diving.

-- S.P.



Diver's Compass: A seven-day all-inclusive dive package starts at \$849 during low season, ending January 16 (excluding Thanksgiving and Christmas weeks), then starts at \$1,099; that doesn't include a 16 percent room tax. . . A suggested 15 percent gratuity is spread among the staff, but I tipped my divemaster and captain \$5 each per boat trip . . . Nitrox is \$8 per tank or \$125 per week . . . CoCo View asks to keep guests' passports in their safe, which was fine with me because my room's wooden lockbox was rickety . . . Direct flights to Roatan run through Houston (Continental) and Atlanta (Delta);

November flights were recently priced at \$570 and \$850 respectively . . . Honduras is subject to hurricanes from June through November, and the rainy season is October through February . . . Roatan has two hyperbaric chambers, and CoCo View asks for a voluntary donation of \$2 per day to support them . . . U.S. dollars accepted; but bring small bills if you buy from local vendors because most don't take big bills or credit cards . . . Web site: www.cocoviewresort.com.

A Few Good Deals For Divers

all-inclusive dive weeks starting at \$660

If the U.S. dollar keeps dropping as it has, it'll plummet to depths no record-setting freediver can reach. But it's still possible to stretch your greenbacks far enough for enjoyable diving trips in the Caribbean and the Pacific that won't make you feel short-changed. We asked readers in our monthly e-mail newsletter for their opinions about dive boats and land-based operations that provide outstanding bang for the buck in their respective regions. We also mention some higher-end dive boats that rely on Americans for much of their business and therefore offer regular specials and last-minute deals. And we've listed a few bare-bone boats and resorts that are short on luxury but still offer plenty to see underwater – which is where you intend to spend much of your time anyway, rather than your room.

The Caribbean

Roatan, Honduras. Overall, just about the least expensive diving in the Caribbean, with pretty reefs and an array of tropical fish, but rarely a surprise. While backpackers find cheap hotels and track down independent dive operators, *Undercurrent* readers go for legitimate dive operations, like the one we feature this month, CoCo View. Three other resorts, priced right, get generally high marks as well.

Reef House on the East End got thumbs-up for its all-inclusive packages and decent diving. “Only 12 rooms but because

it's further down the island, you get away from the other resorts' dive boats,” says John Wooley (Olympia, WA). Reef House's boats are slow, old and cough out exhaust fumes but dive crew and locations are praised. “The sites, mostly walls, are great,” reports Marco Accattatis (Jersey City, NJ). “We didn't see another dive boat during the entire week. Not much fish life but a great variety of critters.” The all-inclusive, seven-day package, double occupancy, with four daily boat dives (one at night), is \$895, although Reef House is lowering it to \$799 – or three divers pay \$895 with the fourth diver for free – from September 20 to October 5 (the heart of hurricane season). What's not included is the 16 percent room tax. (www.reefhouseressort.com)

Bay Island Beach Resort has only 15 rooms in a quiet location on the north shore. Divers praise American owners Ted and Cam for being hands-on managers. Says Don Beukers (San Jose, CA), who went last February, “Before the day of our departure, they went to the airport, checked us in and returned with boarding passes. On departure day, Ted drove us to the airport and walked us through the different stations to the final security checkpoint.” Every Thursday is the crab races and pig roast, with meat literally falling off the bone. “There was a full bar and although we had brought our own wine along, we weren't charged a corkage fee.” Bob Ayers (San Jose, CA) says the north shore's reefs, although more prone to storm damage, have more pelagics and less pressure from divers. Dive crew give first-class care and are old-timers. A standard all-inclusive, double-occupancy package for seven nights is \$840 through September 26, then down to \$740 September 27 to December 19, excluding Thanksgiving week. Included are five days of four boat dives (the last is an optional drop-off), the island party with pig roast, and a welcome drink. (www.bibr.com)

Inn of Last Resort is another East End resort with its own private lagoon. “The all-inclusive Inn was a great pleasure and a good deal,” say Paul and Ann Martin (Arlington, MA). Owners Andy and Donna Arcaya remember everyone's names and keep them happy but they're trying to sell the resort. Donna told *Undercurrent* that they're definitely there through the end of September, “maybe forever, because the sale financing has dragged on for over a year.” They've renovated the boats and kept the place in good shape for the transfer. The seven-night package with double occupancy, minus room tax and bar tabs, has been reduced from \$895 to \$695 through October 30. It includes five three-dive days, but Donna says, “many times we give guests a complimentary dive or two on Friday morning” before their Saturday flight departure. The Inn's Web site also advertises a \$75 one-way deal from Fort Lauderdale to San Pedro Sula on Spirit Air, but taxes and the \$100 to \$200 for a flight from the Honduran mainland to Roatan kick up the price. Still, a direct flight from Houston on Continental was

Introducing Our New Online Divers Forum

We have just launched the *Undercurrent* Online Divers' Forum, a new feature on our Web site to help our subscribers obtain the best, most complete and latest diving information. Our free forum offers current print subscribers and online members a means of directly communicating with each other. Members can post questions or replies to others' questions on virtually any aspect of diving. Unlike other diver-focused forums, here you interact only with other *Undercurrent* subscribers and members -- as knowledgeable, well traveled and experienced a group of serious divers as you'll find anywhere.

Current online members and print subscribers who have registered online at www.undercurrent.org can start using the forum immediately. Log in, ask questions and inform others. Thanks.

- - Ben Davison

The Finest Dive Boat in Papua New Guinea? Not Yet

The *Spirit of Niugini*, owned by Oceanic founder Bob Hollis, has been booking plenty of customers for its Papua New Guinea tours, but it hasn't been operable and divers have been passed off to other boats or land-only arrangements – and not happily.

In May, the *Golden Dawn* picked up 15 Russian divers who were transferred by Hollis on short notice because the *Spirit* wasn't operating, but with some cabins already booked, accommodating them all wasn't easy. They weren't happy campers. Worse, 18 divers arrived the following week to find no *Spirit* operating, and they spent more than two very unhappy weeks on land at the Tawali, also a Hollis operation.

The *Spirit* is the old *Aqua One*, and our PNG eyes and ears says that although the claim is it will become the finest dive boat in PNG, “the boat is being fixed in PNG and not being sent to Cairns, which most operators here recognize as the nearest place for professional shipworks. . . the biggest giveaway is that the two main engines are 1,320 hp each. Most vessels of this size run with 550 hp max. This means the boat will have an enormous fuel bill -- the thing that will drive some operators out of the business,” or ensure that it won't travel to distant sites.

Undercurrent talked to Ronda Friend, managing partner at Tawali Adventures. She says the boat was a dud when

the company bought it, even though so-called experts had told her otherwise, but Tawali takes full responsibility. “It was a breach of contract, but we should have caught certain things we didn't. Once we found them, we did everything we could to repair them.”

The boat has undergone three months of major renovations, from engine room and sewer system revampings to new carpeting, and is expected to be operable this month. As for the new engines, Friend says they came with the boat and to take them out is incredibly costly. “That will take a year because we'll have to pull the boat out and cut out one side of the boat. In the meantime, yes, our fuel costs have increased 70 percent.” She says the *Spirit* will not cut back on traveling to remote dive sites. “Even those these suckers can do 22 knots, you only need 10 knots to get to the outer reefs.”

As for sending customers elsewhere, again, no other choice. “We could have sent the boat out and it would have met PNG standards, but we wanted to do what was right in a wrong situation. It cost us \$15,000 per lost charter to place the divers elsewhere, but we were willing to pay that instead of fudge it.” Still, when some divers threatened to sue, Tawali paid them off with the promise that they were not to talk about any trip details or their experiences. Doesn't sound like spirits are high at Tawali right now.

recently priced at \$924 round-trip for September, so Spirit Air may be worth checking out. (www.innoflastresort.com)

The Juliet, Bahamas. John Wooley recommends this three-masted motorsailer he sailed on in June. “A delightful crew, four dives per day, and a menu that pleased my vegetarian palate. Cabins are comfortable and air-conditioned, but not opulent and they have shared toilets. Movement through the boat is tight; if you are very overweight, you won't fit through the passageways. Most of the cruising is motoring at six knots.” The *Juliet* takes 12 divers and offers Nitrox, individual dive stations with large gear holds, and a topside shower with hot and cold water. The seven-day cruise at \$1,390 (a group chartering the entire boat pays \$1,275 per person) doesn't include a \$60 port fee, ground transfers or tips (they suggest 10 to 15 percent). The *Juliet* doesn't offer specials because, says owner John Beltrano, “the Caribbean low season is actually a very busy time for us.” It also makes seven- and 10-day cruises to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. (www.sailjuliet.com).

Blackbeard Cruises, Bahamas. Our March 2007 article about Blackbeard's *Morning Star* sums it up: This cruise is like camping out at sea and best for those who lack a big budget but want a lot of dives, three squares a day, and don't care about

comfort or privacy. Cabins are literally close quarters, but you may sleep better knowing you only paid \$929 for a week. Tall people, prepare to duck a lot, says Bob Cottle (Cicero, IL) who sailed last November. “Being 6'4”, I found the entrances to the sleeping quarters and the dining area to be painfully short, and I banged my head more times than I care to remember. I took the four-day weekend trip (\$667) and overall, it was a good deal. Food was decent, service was good and the crew friendly.”

Blackbeard's three boats *Morning Star*, *Pirate's Lady* and *Sea Explorer* sail each Saturday from Bimini to various Bahamian dive sites based on weather conditions. Extra fees are a \$40 port tax, \$10 underwater park fee and \$40 fuel surcharge (\$20 for the weekend cruises). Blackbeard's is taking \$30 off its seven-day rate to \$899 from September 1 through all of 2009. (www.blackbeard-cruises.com)

Glover's Atoll Resort, Belize. Here's a place we've never been and know nothing about, but if you're looking for Belize on the cheap, have a look at the Web site for Glover's Atoll Resort, in the midst of some of Belize's best diving. You can pitch your own tent (\$12 per person a night) or get a basic tent-sized cabin over the water with cooking supplies and kerosene stove (\$45 per person). If schlepping food over doesn't appeal,

the resort cooks and serves all meals in a thatch-roofed, open-air restaurant. The weekly all-inclusive dive package in a beach-front cabin is \$1,095 with 12 boat dives, one night dive, kayak or dive gear rental, and the 90-mile round-trip boat ride from the mainland. (www.glovers.com.bz) If you go, tell us about it.

Cozumel rentals and in-town rooms. The island has a range of accommodations but small in-town hotels and B&Bs

offer the cheapest deals. Suites Bahia is a diver favorite. "It's spartan but right in the center of town, with a small kitchenette and very well-priced at \$70," says Buzz Waterston (Wallingford, PA), who visited last February. "Fourth-floor rooms are the quietest and have waterfront balconies without the street noise." (www.suitesbahia.com) Steve Belmont (Fairbanks, AK) raves about the bed-and-breakfast Amaranto he stayed at in March.

The Misuse of Dive Computers

While dive computers have evolved considerably, their very complexity can lead to increased human errors in interpreting and using them. Here is a recently published case that shows the risk facing divers who don't master the technology.

Two years before the incident, a 33-year-old female advanced diver learned, while being treated for decompression sickness, that she had a patent foramen ovale (PFO), a small hole in a chamber of the heart that increases the likelihood of DCS. It was surgically closed successfully so she returned to diving and purchased a Suunto Vytec computer, with the view of adjusting its settings to make her decompression management more conservative.

With the Vytec, she completed six dives, two a day, with maximum depths ranging from 52 to 77 feet, total dive times from 50 to 55 minutes, and with surface intervals approximating 2.25 hours. On dive three, she went to 79 feet. The download of that dive from her Suunto Vytec showed that the computer went into decompression mode after 21 minutes; she and her dive buddy had ascended from 79 feet at 42 minutes into the dive, with total dive time of 53 minutes. During ascent, she had two rate warnings – a violation of depth ceiling, and a recording of the computer being switched into compass mode.

Upon surfacing, she had taken incomplete decompression, with the computer locked in the gauge mode (i.e., it displayed depth/time information only) and displaying an error message "Er." She and her buddy were confused about this because her buddy's computer had cleared of any decompression obligation on surfacing. None of the dive party understood the relevance of the "Er" display. She attempted to unlock the computer by hanging it on a shotline during the surface interval. However, the computer remained in gauge mode, so for her subsequent three dives she used a Suunto Gecko computer which had not been used for diving that week.

On the third diving day, two hours after her sixth dive, she reported DCS symptoms and was taken to a hyperbaric chamber. She initially appeared well but later that day she had pain and weakness in her left arm and shoulder, and

her walking and balance were unsteady. Despite three further treatments, she lost more muscle control and was transferred to another hospital for more treatments.

The Suunto Vytec can be operated in air, Nitrox or gauge modes. There is a facility to switch gases, optional wireless pressure transmission, extensive memory functions and a built-in dive simulator. The Vytec employs an adjustable, Suunto-modified reduced gradient bubble model (RGBM). It is programmed with eight diver-adjustable settings that can be altered to produce many levels of added conservatism: three for altitude, three for personal conservatism and either the full capacity of the RGBM (RGB 100) or reduced power (RGB50).

In this case, the download indicated that her computer had been set to an A2 altitude (3200-6400 feet) and remained at the default personal setting of PO. It was, therefore, unsurprising that on the third dive the altered Suunto Vytec had a higher decompression requirement than the dive leader's unmodified computer. The computer had done what it had been programmed to do and produced a more conservative dive profile. However, this was either ignored, not understood, or the consequences of alterations had been forgotten.

The potential to misunderstand outputs from some dive computers, matched possibly by peer pressure, may be a contributing factor in some decompression incidents. This diver was well aware that her previous episodes of DCS, possibly associated with a PFO, meant that to continue diving she needed to dive more conservatively. This she attempted, but then either ignored or forgot about the changed computer settings. Both she and her dive buddy should have been aware of the adjusted levels on the computer and modified their dive practices accordingly. That she then swapped to another unused dive computer with no residual nitrogen loading and possibly no altered conservatism settings could have contributed to her subsequent injury and could easily have been avoided.

This case was taken from the article The Consequences of Misinterpreting Dive Computers, by Martin DJ Sayer, Colin M Wilson, Gerard Laden and Phillip Lonsdale. It was published in Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine, the Journal of the South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society, March 2008. Undercurrent accepts full responsibility for any errors due to editing.

“This was an affordable downtown place that was far away enough from the cruise-ship tourist area but within walking distance so my non-diving wife could shop and explore. We had our own bungalow for \$49 a night, including tax. Jorge the owner was very helpful and friendly, as were the local residents who greeted us with holas wherever we went. The farmers market was a few blocks away, so we had fresh avocados and mangos every day.” (www.cozumel.net/bb/amaranto)

Many divers rent small houses off the beach, getting the same beachfront view as hotels but for less. The two-bedroom Casa Tomas, with a pool and near the waterfront, is rented by Cozumel Vacation Rentals (www.islacozumel.net) for \$855 a week from September to mid-December. That’s \$122 a night, only \$30 per person if split four ways (doesn’t include 12 percent occupancy tax). Another good rental agency is At Home in Cozumel (www.cozumel.tc), offering discounted September and October rates. Contact both for last-minute specials.

Bonaire. Bonaire is a favorite among budget-conscious divers because it has unlimited beach diving and drive-through air at Buddy’s Dive Resort. Forget hotels and try house rentals. As we mentioned in our July issue, some good Web sites for finding houses here are Bonaire Partners (www.bonairepartners.com) and Sun Rentals (www.sunrentalsbonaire.com).

Asia Pacific

The Philippines. We did a big story about the bargains here in our May 2008 issue, but it still must be stressed that this is probably Asia’s value destination for good diving. Martha Mandel (Glendale, CA) raves about her stay last fall at the two Atlantis resorts in Puerto Galera and Dumaguete. “Five-star accommodations, quality service, attentive divemasters, uncrowded boats, good food, and always plenty of hot water in the shower. I spent \$3,000 total for two weeks that included round trip airfare, accommodations, three meals a day, and airport transfers in air-conditioned vans. Diving was like jumping into a well-stocked aquarium with creatures I’ve never seen before.” (www.atlantishotel.com)

Mike Anderson (Irvine, CA) says Southern Leyte Divers on the island of Leyte is a hidden jewel. “This German-owned and managed mini-resort is sitting on something big. Owner Gunter Mosch runs a safe, professional and service-oriented dive operation that delivers great product for a low price. Boat dives cost me \$22 with my own gear. Excellent spots are Napantaw Fish Sanctuary and Limasawa Island. The diving was as good as any I did in Fiji or Chuuk, with big walls, incredible corals and all types of sea life. And crew will take you to any dive site, even if you are the only one diving.” Resort rooms are also a steal, from \$10 a night for a room in the main house to \$40 for the deluxe duplex. For his June trip, Anderson flew Cathay Pacific from Los Angeles to nearby Cebu Island, then took the SuperCat ferry to Maasin, 30 minutes away from the resort, served by bus and “jeepney.” (www.leyte-divers.com/en)

Cave Diver Gets Electric Shock

Taking cover in an underwater cave won’t protect you from electrocution during a thunder or lightning storm. Marc Laukien was diving the caves in Florida’s Madison Blue Springs on May 17, touching a cave wall with his right hand, when he suddenly felt a strong electric shock through his right arm. “We completed the dive without further incident but when we reached the basin, it became clear there was a huge thunderstorm above us,” he wrote on the forum at RebreatherWorld.com.

“Staying in the water wasn’t a good idea, and neither was getting out really, given that we had lots of metal on our backs. Since the thunderstorm could last a long time (and it did), we got out of the water and after dropping our gear, made a run for the bathhouse. Others told us they had seen several lighting strikes close to where the Godzilla room must be located. One of those strikes must have made its way through the cave wall and my right arm.”

To see what you should and shouldn’t do in this situation, read our September 2007 article, “When Lightning Strikes During a Dive.”

Two Fish Divers Resort, North Sulawesi. Indonesia is a bargain if you can nab the occasional airfare deal (e.g., Cathay Pacific’s deal of the month). “Two Fish is my favorite place to see some of the world’s best reef and fish biodiversity at dirt-cheap prices,” says Michael Wood (Seattle, WA), who visited the Bunaken Island resort in February. “I had an economy room with a shared bathroom for 10 nights at \$758. Nice cabins for two are less than \$100 per night, including diving and meals. The only downside is there’s only lukewarm water for showering.” Two Fish has seven divemasters for 22 guests, and dive groups are no more than four divers. A seven-day deal with 14 dives ranges from around \$660 for a superior cottage to \$525 for a budget room, but these packages (priced in euros) can only be booked on their Web site. Two Fish just opened a resort in Lembeh Straits, with rooms for just eight divers. (www.twofishdivers.com) For more deals, check the March 2007 article we did about new Lembeh Strait lodges.

Grand Komodo Tours, Raja Ampat. After reading our Raja Ampat liveaboard review in the June issue, a few readers chided us for not mentioning this inexpensive operator with five boats sailing Raja Ampat, Wakatobi and Komodo. “By using Grand Komodo, you’re diving for \$1,500 less per person than other Raja Ampat boats because you’re paying Indonesian prices,” says Lee Thé (Palo Alto, CA), who sailed on the *Putri Pupua* last November. “Plus, you get an Indonesian boat owned and operated by Indonesians. It ain’t luxurious but I had a full bathroom and decent AC in my reasonably roomy cabin.”

The small boats range from three to seven cabins, but the *Putri Pupua*'s eight-diver capacity had a crew of eight, ensuring lots of personal attention.

"Their facilities and service are as good or better than other boats more often mentioned in dive publications," say Jose and Peggy Duran (Corpus Christi, TX), who've done 14 trips with Grand Komodo. "They have not cancelled their departures, even when they've had only two divers aboard." The English-speaking divemasters know where to find the critters and how to bypass infamous currents. "The boat driver excelled at finding divers," says Thé. "Once I got blown off a reef into the open ocean and he found me right away." 2009 prices for a double cabin range from \$190 per night on the Nusa Tara to \$285 on the Raja Ampat Explorer. Packages don't include soft drinks, beer or marine conservation fee. (www.komodoalordive.com)

Liveboards in General

Luxury liveboards are staggering under fuel costs but because their American clientele is also feeling economic pain, they're still offering frequent specials and last-minute deals. The best way to learn about them is to sign up for a boat operator's monthly e-mail or newsletter on its Web site. Many offer multiple-diver specials.

For example, Explorer Ventures sometimes offers a "pay for seven and two others travel free," special, which knocks 22 percent off each person's tab. The deal is available for *Nimrod*

Explorer on the Great Barrier Reef through October 15, then March 15 to May 15, 2009. It's also available for the *Turks & Caicos Explorer II* through October 15, then again December 15 to February 15. The occasional "Bring a Buddy" special gives repeat clients who bring a new dive buddy for a trip a 20 percent discount for each guest – bring five and your trip is free. Other specials include free cabin upgrades for couples, and private cabins for single divers at the double occupancy rate instead of the industry standard markup of 65 percent. They were recently offered on the two Caribbean Explorer boats, and Explorer Ventures' sales manager Randy Harris says he'll bet money that the *Turks & Caicos Explorer II* will offer them in September and October. (www.explorerverventures.com).

The Aggressor Fleet doesn't offer many specials because, according to CEO Wayne Brown, "We offer the lowest possible rates so guests don't have to wait for a special." Still, Aggressor is offering a "Back to School" special of free unlimited Nitrox for September trips on its Belize, Cayman and Utila boats. On every trip, divers over age 65 get a \$100 discount, and retired and active military personnel, airline crew and dive instructors get 10 percent off their trip. The "Bring a Friend" special lets members bring a friend for half price on select weeks. The next dates are in October for the Turks & Caicos and Cayman boats, and December for the *Utila Aggressor*. (www.aggressor.com)

-- Ben Davison

Divers, Sign Your Life Away: Part I

warning: this release may be harmful to your lawsuit's health

In November 1986, 19-year-old Ken Sulejmanagic drowned during his final openwater certification dive. His parents hired a well-known plaintiffs' personal injury firm in Los Angeles to file a wrongful death action. The YMCA and Ken's dive instructors were accused of negligence in leaving Sulejmanagic to make his own way back to a buoy after he surfaced from the dive.

This lawsuit was short-circuited by the liability release Sulejmanagic had signed before the dive. The defense made what is called a summary judgment motion, arguing that the release extinguished the parents' negligence claim. A summary judgment motion is one where the moving party, usually the party sued, files papers in hopes of convincing the court that no key facts are in dispute and that the law applicable to these key facts dictates a judgment in the moving party's favor. In *Madison v. Superior Court*, the California state appeals court ruled that indeed the release extinguished the parents' negligence claim and ordered judgment entered in the defendants' favor.

In the 22 years since Sulejmanagic's death, the above scenario has occurred repeatedly in both state court and U.S. federal court lawsuits involving scuba diving releases. The defense files a summary judgment motion, arguing that the pre-injury liability release relieves the defendant of legal liability for his own negligence. The trial court examines the facts surrounding the signing of the release and the accident as well as the release's provisions. In most cases, the court interprets the release's language itself rather than giving a jury a role. If the key facts surrounding the release's signing and the accident are not disputed, the trial court is then in a position to dispense with a jury or court trial and decide the matter on the summary judgment motion papers each side files. No trial. Just a judgment in the defendant's favor, with costs tacked on which the suing party (absent reversal or modification of the summary judgment on appeal) is obligated to pay to the defendants.

In a word, a liability release has teeth. An attorney representing claimants in the Peter Hughes' *Wave Dancer* disaster in Belize, where 20 passengers and crew died in 2001, remarked

that one of his main concerns in obtaining a favorable settlement or judgment was the Peter Hughes release.

In this two-part article, I'll describe the main components of a liability release, and which provisions a court will and won't enforce. However, I won't attempt to cover how each state's courts or various federal courts have ruled on a given topic. Rather, I'll discuss how a majority of courts have ruled on an issue. Some court opinions use state law on an issue, while others may use maritime law where an accident meets certain requirements. So if you want in-depth advice on how a specific release will apply to a dive, you should consult an attorney with expertise in such matters.

The Anatomy of a Dive Release

The release typically contains five components. The first is a list of who is released. Some releases will include the dive boat itself because if the lawsuit ends up on the admiralty side of a federal district court, the boat itself can be sued, just as if it were a person, if it's within the court's jurisdiction. An attorney representing an injured diver (or the dead diver's spouse, children or other relatives who by statute can file a wrongful death case) will look carefully at this list to see if some available deep pocket or insured person/entity is omitted. A release protects only those "releasees" named in the release.

The second component is the release or waiver (giving up) of liability language. It usually goes from broad ("any and all claims, suits, etc., relating to or arising out of . . .") to more specific but nonexclusive claims (including but not limited to negligence, bodily injury, wrongful death, property damage, product liability, etc.). This liability waiver seeks to release in advance the released parties' legal liability for injuries and deaths stemming from future misconduct.

The third component is the assumption of risk provision. Somewhere in the release will be a list of risks relating to diving. The legal theory behind the assumption provision is the diver agrees that the released parties owe him no duty to protect him from the described risks. Without a duty owed, there is no potential liability. The end result is the same as with the liability waiver provision – freedom from liability.

The fourth component is a list of acknowledgments, representations and promises by the diver. These tend to cut off any post-accident claims that he didn't understand what he was signing or couldn't foresee that he might be injured. The released parties also gain some assurance that the diver has a certain level of sophistication (the fact of dive certification gives the dive release beneficiaries a leg up on recreational activity providers dealing with novice participants, such as whitewater rafters).

The fifth common component is a "hold harmless" and indemnity provision. Typically, the diver here agrees to defend, indemnify and hold harmless the released parties for any liability or damages arising from his participation in the dive adventure. This defend-indemnify-hold harmless language has

not been extensively discussed in cases involving recreational activity releases.

While liability waiver and assumption of risk clauses deny the injured diver recovery for the dive operator's negligence, the indemnity-hold harmless provision seeks to shift to the diver signing the release responsibility for paying the dive operator's legal expenses and any adverse judgment. If the only party suing the operator is the diver who signed the release, the indemnity clause could conceivably saddle him with the released parties' legal fees if he loses his case.

A plaintiff lawyer in the 2001 Wave Dancer tragedy said a main concern in obtaining a favorable settlement was Peter Hughes' liability release.

But most indemnity situations will involve a lawsuit filed against the operator by a third party. For example, let's say the injured diver's wife joins in the lawsuit, claiming a loss of the injured diver's companionship or services (legally classified as a loss of consortium claim). Or the diver signing the release injures his dive buddy, who then sues the operator. In these hypothetical situations, the dive operator under the indemnity clause could demand that the diver who signed the release pay the operator's defense costs and any adverse judgment arising from the wife's or the dive buddy's suit.

Whether a given "hold harmless" and indemnity provision will protect a dive operator is unpredictable. Much depends on whether the provision's wording is precise enough to trigger where the operator is negligent, and sometimes on whether that negligence is active or passive. Courts are generally reluctant to enforce indemnity clauses where the released party alone is negligent.

When a Dive Release Will Work – And When It Won't

The release will protect the released parties from liability for ordinary negligence if the release clearly indicates that this is its effect. The release's language must clearly tell the average reader that he is giving up his right to sue the released parties should any of these parties later injure him due to their negligence. Most cases don't require the word "negligence" in the release to achieve this but because this is what the released parties seek to achieve, using the word "negligence" is wise. The negligence being released must be reasonably related to the release's purpose. Thus, in one unpublished 2004 California state appeals court opinion, a scuba diving release did not extend to the instructor's negligence in manipulating his student's sore back. The release language needs to be conspicuous (cases have criticized use of 5½- and 6-point type as being too small).

An injured diver confronting a release that clearly covers operator negligence will in most instances get nowhere by

arguing that he didn't read or understand the release's language and effect. The court, in deciding a summary judgment motion, will look to the release's wording to assess what the diver knew, understood and appreciated. Some courts also look at the diver's experience. While one signing a release can, like contracts in general, avoid its impact if he can show he signed it through fraud or duress, that is a rare situation. Many dive operators put their release online to help thwart such avoidance efforts.

I should note that a minority of states appear unwilling to even allow release from ordinary negligence. Courts in Vermont, Connecticut and Virginia have refused to enforce recreational releases of ordinary negligence. New York by statute prohibits releases of negligence by "places of public amusement

or recreation and similar establishments" (but this statute was held inapplicable to a diving course provider using a private pool because the pool involved was used for instruction, not recreation). A Hawaii statute effective since 1997 prohibits scuba and other recreational activity providers from obtaining a release for their future ordinary negligence.

Coming next month: I'll discuss other release provisions that courts will generally enforce, such as one dictating the court in which the diver must sue; and some release provisions that courts will usually reject.

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Are Your Dive Photos Worthy of a Book?

this diver thought so – and published his own

We're used to reviewing underwater photo books from the likes of Roger Steene and Cathy Church, but when we received a preview copy of *Magic Beneath the Seas* by Steve Kovacs, we sat up and took notice. That's because Kovacs is a dental surgeon from Clewiston, Florida (and *Undercurrent* subscriber) who only takes underwater photos as a hobby during dive trips but decided to spend nearly \$30,000 to publish a book of his images.

Plenty of divers picture themselves as the next David Doubilet after reviewing their images post-dive. But self-publishing is costly, not to mention the added costs of marketing and distributing the book. We wondered if Kovacs really aims to sell his book or is it just a vanity publication? Are his photos really that good? Then again, if this guy can do it, why can't you? We interviewed Kovacs to see how he created *Magic*. We're also putting his book for sale on our Web site (www.undercurrent.org).

***Undercurrent:* What made you decide that your photos were worth a whole book?**

Kovacs: I'm sure there's vanity there but isn't every coffee-table photo book a vanity piece in some respect? I felt my photos were as good as many others. I've placed in photo competitions so I've gotten some affirmation. But yes, I wanted to gift myself with my own photographs rather than having them sitting on a hard drive, and share them with other people.

What's your overall photography experience? I bought my first camera in 2001. I had wanted to take photographs ever since I was young, but that was the first time I was able to afford a camera system. I researched what all the pros were shooting, so I bought an Ikelite housing and strobe, and that's what I've stuck with. I never took a class, just studied other people's work to see how they were doing it

How did you come up with the idea? In June 2006, after a trip to Lembeh Strait, my girlfriend Alena turned to me and said, "You should do a book." I laughed and said, "You're crazy." She asked, "Why not? You've always said it's not that difficult to do a book of pictures." So I decided to do it.

Where did you take all the photos? I had been taking them on all my past dive trips to Indonesia, the Solomon Islands, Florida and the Caribbean. So I looked at my portfolio and decided I had enough photos to do the book. I didn't even consider trying to get liveaboard discounts or free camera gear while I was working on the book. As a no-name, I probably wouldn't be too successful. There really wasn't a specific method of choosing photos; I chose pictures that I liked and thought were solid. I'm a perfectionist so I set the bar high.

Why did you go the self-publishing route? After picking the photos, I researched book publishing and conventional versus self-publishing. It's hard to get into an industry dominated by big names, and even then it would take forever to get it published. Whereas, self-publishing took me just shy of two years from idea to finish. Also, I didn't want someone else to have artistic control – I wanted this to be my vision of what my photographs project, not someone else's. So I got a business license to set up a company to become my own publisher. All I needed was the required state and county business and occupational licenses, and I also decided to incorporate.

The next step was to find a printer. I got all the marine life coffee-table books and made a list of those who did a great job. Then I sent out a request for quotes. Some printers ignored us, some came back with quotes so high so that they were openly discouraging us. That's because some printers don't want

to work with small companies or self-publishers. Thomson Press, an India-based printer that did Roger Steene's *Oceanic Wilderness*, impressed me with their quality and they actually came out on top – they were willing to work with us, and the price was reasonable.

What were the biggest challenges putting this together?

One of the biggest was trying to organize the book. Writing chapter introductions was the most difficult – biology is not my specialty. Roger Steene's *Coral Seas* was one of my big inspirations. His *Oceanic Wilderness* came out right when I was doing mine – it was so eerily familiar, it made me a bit nervous.

Using the publishing software Adobe InDesign was another. Converting photos into print-ready images can make or break a photograph, so I didn't want someone with no vested interest doing it haphazardly. I had to do a lot of reading and research to learn the process from scratch, followed by a lot of experimentation. About 90 percent of the pictures weren't a problem once I got the hang of it. The other 10 percent were a challenge and took a lot of time to get accurate. And it's a tiring process physically. I have a full-time job so all the work was done on nights and weekends.

And how much did this cost you again? The whole project was around \$28,000. That's probably the norm. The big obstacle of self-publishing is putting the money up front. I pretty much wiped out my savings. I wasn't out there to make any money. I'm starting with sending review copies to dive Web sites and magazines, so they hopefully do an article to let readers know. I haven't thought much about getting into bookstores because this is such a specialty book, so we're starting with the dive industry. If I make my money back, I may consider another book. But I've already been approached by a couple of people about publishing their own books.

What's your advice to divers who feel their photos are coffee-table worthy? I say go for it, but be prepared for the high financial investment and a tremendous investment in time, not only putting the book together, but also learning the entire process. If the motivation isn't there, then it won't happen or the quality of the finished product won't be up to par. Also, are you sure your photos are of high enough quality to show alongside the big boys? If not, your book won't be well-received. I know a lot of amateur photographers who have stunning work and they could potentially put something amazing together. It's a lot of work, but it's not an impossible dream.

Magic Beneath the Seas: Our Book Review

Steve Kovacs set the bar high. He said, "Roger Steene's *Coral Seas* was one of my big inspirations. His *Oceanic Wilderness* came out right when I was doing mine – it was so eerily familiar, it made me a bit nervous." And it should, because not only will any amateur fall short of that bar, he'll have to face a small market for dive photo books that has limited bookstore space and innumerable, if not insurmountable obstacles, for a self-published book.

Nevertheless, *Magic Beneath the Seas: An Underwater Photographic Journey* holds its own as a coffee table book. It will get plenty of oohs and ahs from all but the most jaded divers. Still, it not a groundbreaker. After all, how many photos of fire dartfish or Bahamian lemon sharks does one have to see before they all start looking the same?

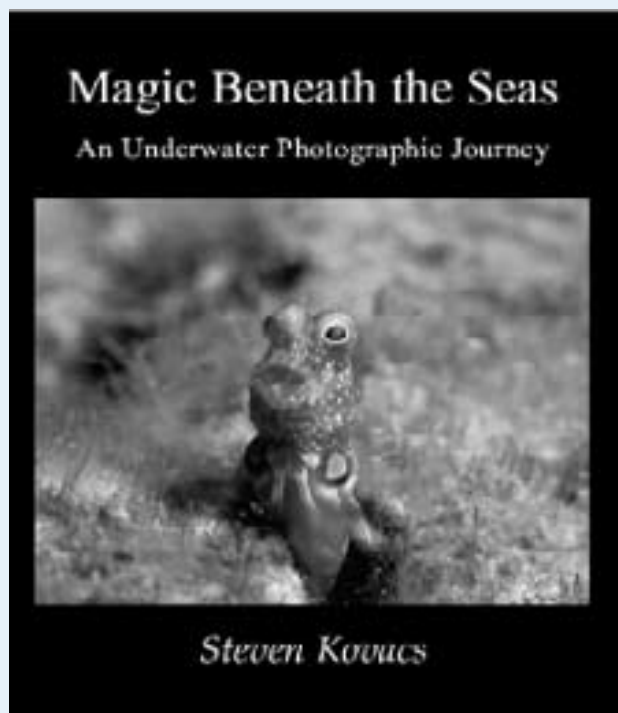
That said, Kovacs has a good eye and demonstrated plenty of patience to capture scores of unique shots of interesting behaviors: mating nudibranchs, a triggerfish in the jaws of a lizardfish, snake eels getting cleaned and endless macro critters. The photos are sharp and clear, in some cases better than the images in Steene's book. The accompanying text is simple and straightforward.

If I had any suggestion, it would have been for Kovacs to shoot another year and replace some of the more common shots he used. Regardless, Kovacs proves that a disciplined amateur with patience and a good eye – and money – can pull together a book of his own underwater

images that he can be proud of. And that the bar set high is within reach.

Hardcover, 240 pages, more than 300 color images, \$44.95. Order through www.undercurrent.org and our profits will go directly to save coral reefs.

-- Ben Davison



Rest in Peace - - Underwater

sleep with the fishes literally - - and help to build a reef

If you're in the Miami area and feel like diving, here's a site to explore. Take a boat from Key Biscayne and set your GPS coordinates to 25.41.412 N, 80.05.445 W. Head 3.25 miles east until you see mooring buoys. Jump out and descend to 45 feet. There you'll find the first phase of the most unusual artificial reef ever sunk in Miami-Dade County waters. It's a half-acre network of concrete pathways and benches, bronze columns and statues that serves as a haven for fish – and a graveyard for people.

Opened last November, the Neptune Memorial Reef is an artistic portrayal of the lost city of Atlantis. Thinly coated with marine growth and guarded by lions, it already has attracted amberjack, mutton and gray snapper, angelfish, grunt, even a scorpionfish pretending to be a statue of itself. The ornate arches and balustrades also serve as final resting places for the cremated remains of several people.

It's one of a number of artificial reefs that also serve as final resting places for divers, fishermen and general water-lovers – and their pets, too. Eternal Reefs, the creator of “reef balls,” pioneered the idea 10 years ago in Florida and is now building memorial reefs along the Eastern Seaboard.

Before you scoff, consider that the family of Caribbean dive pioneer Bert Kilbride thought it a good idea. After the “Last Pirate of the Caribbean” died in January at age 93, his ash remains were mixed with cement designed for underwater use and fitted into a mold. A copper and bronze plaque was installed with his name, date of birth and death, and a memorial message. A diver then placed his mold atop a column of the Neptune Reef's main gate, a place of high honor because of his contributions to the sea. “I think he would feel very honored,” his son Gary Kilbride told the Associated Press. “This is somebody who has been connected to the sea his whole life.”

The Neptune Society, a cremation services company based in Fort Lauderdale, has invested \$2 million in the reef, designed by sculptor Kim Brandell. To pay for the project, the society is selling “placements,” the columns, statues and molds containing cremated remains, priced at an average of \$2,000. The reef's first phase allows for about 850 remains. Project manager Jim Hutslar says that when completed in eight years, the reef will cover 16 acres and have room for 125,000 remains. Molds for remains can be shaped into starfish, seashell and brain coral. Those interested in making this Atlantis their eternal home can get details at www.nmreef.com

Because it's in open waters, living divers can visit too. The Neptune Society has contracted with some local dive shops like Key Divers in Key Biscayne and Tarpon Dive Center in Miami to include it on their dive trips. Stephen Blair of Miami-Dade County's Department of Environmental Resources

Management, which has oversight of the reef, believes it will become a big tourist attraction for divers.

The first person to be officially buried within a reef was Carleton Glen Palmer, father-in-law of Eternal Reefs founder Don Brawley. Brawley had pioneered the concept of “reef balls,” eco-friendly concrete designed for sea life to attach and grow on, and it has become a standard for coral regrowth projects worldwide, but it was Palmer who thought of an alternative use for them. “He came over for dinner in 1998 and asked if I could put his ashes in a reef ball and place them on a reef,” said Brawley. “He said, ‘I can think of nothing better than spending eternity with all that action going on around me - just make sure the location has lots of red snapper and grouper.’” Palmer died a few months later, so Brawley mixed his remains into reef ball concrete and got permission from local officials to place it on an artificial reef he was working on in Sarasota, Florida. Palmer got his wish – the Sarasota reef, now with more than 100 memorial reef balls, is teeming with life. “When I told the story to friends and business associates, they asked, ‘How can I do that, and how much does it cost?’”

When Brawley spoke with *Undercurrent*, it was right after he had placed 17 new memorial balls there in a ceremony attended by 120 people. So far, Eternal Reefs has buried 800 people. “If we could get just two percent of people who decide to be cremated to put their remains in the reef balls, we could build 15,000 to 20,000 reefs a year at no cost to the government.”

There are no official fish counts but Eternal Reefs president Chuck Kizina says that a decade of setting reefs is making an impact. “As soon as we place the reefs, fish move in immediately and start laying eggs. Then come groups of smaller bait fish, crabs start living underneath and corals start bridging the reef placements.”



One of Eternal Reefs' memorial reef balls

Placements range from \$4,995 for an Atlantis memorial reef ball to \$995 for a community reef memorial. Unfortunately, you can't pick your location in advance, because reef-building permits are controlled by the Army Corps of Engineers. Eternal Reefs also doesn't do individual reef placements because it's too inefficient and doesn't build up the reefs. "As soon as five people sign up for burials, we put the dates and schedule out there, and with a little luck, we fill it up," says Brawley.

For people who want to be buried together, Eternal Reefs recommends saving some ashes from the first to go so that a communal memorial can be built with ashes from both parties in the same place. It also offers "Pearl for Pets," a reef ball memorial for house pets up to 150 pounds for \$895, but

Brawley says most pets are mixed in with their masters. And don't have second thoughts – once the reef ball goes in the water, it stays there, and is guaranteed to last for 500 years.

Eternal Reefs now has memorial sites in Miami, Charleston, Ocean City and Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, and Ocean City in New Jersey. The reason for the East Coast prevalence is because each state there has marine fisheries commissions with an artificial reef coordinator that helps Eternal Reefs get the work done. There are no reef coordinators in the Pacific states, which can be red-tape heavy when it comes to anything coast-related, but Brawley hopes to announce West Coast memorial reefs in early 2009. For details, go to www.eternalreefs.com.

- - Vanessa Richardson

Cayman Dive Operators Protest Safety Regulations

Are you comfortable on a guided dive when no one remains on the boat above? Well, Cayman dive operators don't want to foot the extra expense of keeping a lookout topside.

For 25 years, a Port Authority Law regulation has been on the books, stating: "At least one person shall remain on board and act as lookout on any dive boat ... whilst divers there from are down." It had been rarely enforced until dive operators recently announced they wanted to change the rule, calling it outdated. Now marine officials are starting to enforce it, setting up a battle.

Stephen Broadbelt, co-founder of dive shop Ocean Frontiers and chairman of the Cayman Watersports Committee, is leading the protest. He told *Undercurrent* the policy could do more harm than good because it sacrifices in-water supervision. "The Caymans have deep dropoffs very close to shore, requiring supervision. Divemasters would rather be in the water with the divers than sit back on the boat and do nothing. Our customers won't enjoy this great experience as much when unsupervised, and at least half of them need in-water supervision."

To that, the Caymans' Customs Marine Unit said the solution is simple: Hire a lookout. But dive operators like Nancy Easterbrook at Divetech say that's not reasonable. "Take a boat that now has one employee and takes six divers out. If they take two staff on board now, they also have to reduce the diver count to five to comply with boat capacity, thereby reducing revenue by almost 17 percent. Include the doubling of staffing costs, that's unaffordable as no one operates at these kinds of margins. And like everyone else, we are already suffering the high costs of fuel, electricity, etc."

While the U.S. doesn't spell out lookout requirements as specifically as the Cayman Islands, the Coast Guard and dive

boat insurers make it clear they want a trained professional on the boat with divers in the water. Federal regulations for commercial dive operations state: "The person-in-charge shall ensure that: 1) a means of rapid communications with the diving supervisor while the diver is entering, in, or leaving the water is established; and 2) a boat and crew for diver pickup in the event of an emergency is provided." Also, "the person-in-charge shall ensure a boat and crew for diver pickup is provided." In its dive-boat insurance policy brochure, PADI states, "Dive vessel coverage excludes divers while they are in the water and requires an insured professional on board. To best protect the vessel owner, diving accidents in the water should be covered by a professional liability policy carried by professional instructors and divemasters."

Inspector Brad Ebanks of the Caymans' Customs Marine Unit told the *Caymanian Compass* newspaper that the lookout regulation has been enforced because of various accidents recently, such as a dive boat breaking from its mooring and drifting into the reef, causing damage. There had been no lookout on board to bring it back. He also said that when a diver comes to the surface with problems there needs to be someone on board to help if there is no dive buddy with them. "We want to keep this as a safe diving destination. That's the reason the regulation is there."

While the sides debate, Cayman dive operators plan to introduce a GPS system this year that puts geo-tags on all dive boats. When the engine is turned off, a boat's geotag is turned on, and an alarm is triggered if it moves past a stated perimeter.

But while the industry has governed itself, the government says it plans to develop a regulatory regime for commercial dive boats. Dive operators say big changes could put them out of business. "We have a very high standard of safety and very low rates of accidents, decompression sickness and fatalities," says Easterbrook. "By having staff in-water with the divers, we have accomplished this safety record. So why fix something that is not broken?"

Flotsam & Jetsam

Diver, 20, Finds Million-Dollar Cup.

Mike DeMar, the youngest diver at treasure-hunting firm Blue Water Ventures Key West, was only four months into the job when he found a golden chalice estimated to be 400 years old and worth at least \$1 million. While diving off Key West, DeMar found what he first thought was a beer can in 18 feet of water. Even though he's not old enough to drink, DeMar was allowed to drink champagne from the chalice. His find presumably belonged to a passenger on the Spanish galleon *Santa Margarita* that sunk during a storm in 1622, taking down 143 people and a fortune in treasures. So if you're diving the Keys, keep your eye on the sand.

A New Dive Site in Brazil. Scientists have discovered reef structures they believe doubles the size of the Southern Atlantic's largest reef system, the Abrolhos Bank. The newly discovered area is off the southern coast of Brazil's Bahia state and harbors 30 times the density of marine life on the known reefs, some of them being species found only in Brazil. The reefs are in areas ranging from nine to 124 miles off the coast and in depths ranging from 60 to 220 feet. Abrolhos is the only place where humpback whales go to mate and give birth, between July and November,

before returning to Antarctica. For details about Abrolhos diving, check this Web site: www.braziltourism.org/diving_abrolhos.html.

Saddest Photo Wins a Trip to Bonaire.

SeaWeb's Marine Photobank and Project AWARE wants your most compelling shot for its Ocean in Focus photo contest, but it shouldn't be of pretty fish or vibrant corals. They want photos showing "pressing issues detrimental to the health of the oceans." That means subjects like oil spills and coastal development. On the bright side, the grand prize is a week of shore diving at Plaza Resort Bonaire, a \$250 certificate for photo and video gear, and a year's worth of carbon offsets. Deadline is September 30. Details are at www.marinephotobank.org.

Where's Nemo? The clownfish is becoming harder to find, thanks to the 2003 Pixar film *Finding Nemo*. Marine biologists say it's facing extinction because of soaring demand from the pet trade, as parents buy the fish for their kids who loved the movie. Wild specimens are being overharvested because captive breeding programs can't keep up with demand. Areas of the Great Barrier Reef where divers used to come across dozens of clownfish now are host to just a few. Because the timid fish doesn't venture far from its sea anemone home, it's easy prey for collectors.

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

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Printed on recycled paper 

undercurrent

August 2008 Vol. 23, No. 8

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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