

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Wananavu Beach Resort, Fiji

great diving, although Kai Viti Divers closes its doors

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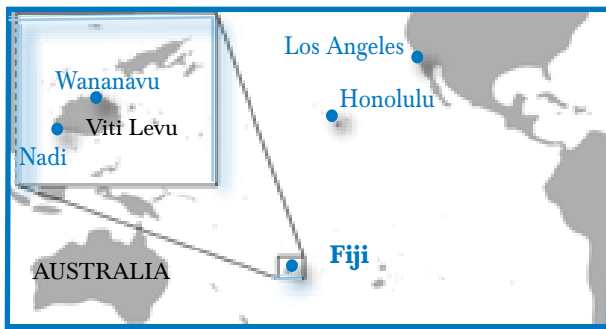
Dear Fellow Diver:

Fiji's government has been overthrown four times in the past two decades. About the most significant effect these coups have had on travelers is that a road gets closed so divers must take a detour, or a flight might be delayed. On the three-hour drive to Wananavu in February, I asked my driver what he thought of Commodore Frank Bainimarama, the military ruler who toppled the civilian government -- for the second time -- in December 2006. At the time, he had refused to hold elections until a new constitution is written, and because he is the guy writing said document, he's in no hurry to finish it. My driver loved him. "I love what he has done to quash corruption in the government," he said. There are no scowling soldiers, no acts of martial law, no outward signs of political disruption. Just splendid scenery above -- lush green hills interspersed with sugarcane fields running down to the azure ocean, coastal mangrove forests with passing horses, goats, and cows grazing placidly along the roadside. And splendid scenery below the waves.

Take the dive site Purple Haze, for instance. Even Jimi Hendrix would have been in awe at the huge wall of lush purple soft coral as far as the eye could see. Mixed in were an abundance of sea fans and black sun coral. A light current made it an easy ride along the wall without expending any energy. In the labyrinth-cut canyon, I counted a mass of 30 hump-head bannerfish; I've never seen more than three in a group. I flew under overhangs filled with clusters of furry yellow sponges that reminded me of the "tribbles" in old episodes of Star Trek. The overhang lifted and I was in the sun again. This was a 62-foot dive in as many catch-your-breath



Wananavu's Hillside Bures



minutes and luckily the most thrills I experienced in a coup-ridden country.

At the turn-off to Wananavu, it was 15 minutes of bumpy agony down a rocky road to the resort, a cluster of 31 bures, South Pacific-style wooden bungalows either set into the lush or perched on the water's edge. I had to climb the hill to check in at the reception office/dining area, but the queen bed in my air-conditioned bungalow downhill was worth collapsing onto afterwards. The wood floors gleamed and the tiled bathroom had plenty of

hot water. The bedroom had roomy closets, fridge and minibar, but my patio with table and two chairs only had a close-up view of "jungle."

While I didn't have to worry about Bainimarama's army, I did fear for my life regarding dives with Kai Viti Divers, which has an on-site shop at Wananavu. That is, had an onsite shop. While it was once a first-rate operation, Kai Viti closed in May, with Ra Divers replacing them as Wananavu's dive shop. Good thing. I didn't dive for two days due to lung congestion, but others who did dive with Kai Viti complained of bad air in their tanks. Amazingly, the staff simply marked tanks reputed to have it and kept using the same compressor! The next day, everyone on the boat had symptoms including burning in their lungs, foul taste in their mouth and a nagging cough. When I asked the dive shop manager how the problem would be fixed, he told me the staff had finally sidelined the compressor after examination of the filter revealed a mix of oil and water. Divers were lucky not to get sick, though one man's cough lasted for two more days. With Kai Viti having only one operating dive boat to handle two large groups, some of us were shunted off to Ra Divers, which was a blessing in disguise. Captain Bob and Divemaster Jimmy were perfect gentlemen, coming to pick us up for a ride to their shop at nearby Voli Voli Resort and helping those needing rental gear. Ra cared about its divers, divemasters were professional and its air was thankfully clean. While its boat was small, seating just eight divers, this made for a better, more intimate diving experience. However, Ben Plummer, Wananavu's general manager, told Undercurrent later that "we have just taken delivery of a 33-foot, 315-hp aluminum dive boat for 16 passengers and four crew. It will really up the comfort level of diving the Bligh Waters."

The Bligh Waters are north of the main island of Viti Levu. Great dive sites are within 15 minutes from the dock while the more elaborate, dramatic dive sites, often washed with fairly strong currents, are 45 minutes out. Both Kai Viti and Ra Divers made two trips during my stay to Vatu-I-Ra Passage with several fantastic dive sites. Both operations dive locally for two tanks, or make going to the Passage a three-tank day, with a surcharge for the third tank.

Powered by spotless twin 200hp outboards, Ra Divers' sturdy boat ran swiftly during the 15-minute ride to Breathtaker. The large aluminum hull with canopy is comfortable on the long ride to the pinnacle site Vatu-I-Ra Passage when it isn't bumpy. While Kai Viti allowed a giant stride entry off the back, Ra's boat was sufficiently low to the water for easy backrolls into the 84-degree water. Visibility was not good, as the northwestern part of the island had experienced horrendous rains a few weeks before, causing massive flooding. The current was almost one knot but Jimmy headed off across coral canyons into the murky waters like a man on a mission, so we four divers followed diligently. This business of bucking current was for the birds but just when I was really starting to resent this marathon swim, Jimmy slowed, then stopped at 78 feet. He motioned me to a ledge where the reef dropped steeply and indicated I hang on to some dead coral there. Catching my breath, I looked into the blue. There were at least six sharks, a school of yardstick-long trevally, a Napoleon wrasse and masses of different fusiliers. Flashy orange and pink anthias swarmed in a huge cloud, while countless fish of all sizes, colors and groupings moved together in one huge entity. It was the Technicolor display of notes in a Mozart symphony played underwater. I would have been slack-jawed if I didn't need to keep my regulator in my mouth. Breathtaker would have been more overwhelming if the visibility had been the typical 100-foot range instead of that day's 60 feet. Jimmy directed us back to the boat, over and through the coral

canyons. Imagine Cozumel's swimthroughs and canyons, then quintuple them and stretch them to 50 feet high. It was like exploring a lavishly decorated castle, finding riches around every corner of bommies covered with branching corals, or through tunnels covered with sea fans and soft coral. Several sharks lazed nearby, a turtle came over to check us out, and a hefty cod snacked on small fish. During our hour of offgassing in the Bligh Waters, we had cookies and Milo, the Australian version of Ovaltine.

Because Wananavu is set on a hillside, there are plenty of stairs and concrete pathways, but for most folks, crossing from the dining area down the hill to the beach and back is easy. The pool is 20 feet below the dining area; it's lovely but the water was too warm to be refreshing and a lack of trees and shade meant I had to keep slathering on sunscreen. The dining area is partly covered and has an open deck with an expansive ocean view, perfect for sunset dinners. The meal plan includes a continental breakfast of pineapple, banana, papaya, passionfruit, and oranges alongside cereal, juices and toast. For hungrier days, I could order eggs, pancakes and French toast. Lunch and dinner are also ordered from a menu and have the added benefit of live Fijian music on guitar, ukulele and lali drums. At dinnertime, the musicians host a kava bowl (the Fijian national intoxicant, it offers but a slight buzz). The food is delicious and generous, though it was US\$5 for a beer or dessert and \$8 for wine. The staff, mostly locals managed by Australian couple Rachel and Ben, learned my name and what I liked to drink. Non-divers won't be bored. Wananavu offers daily activities like snorkeling and visiting neighboring islands and villages. Evaloni, Wananavu's wise patriarch-in-residence, mans the activities booth. Besides teaching me to play pet-anque, a distant cousin of horseshoes, he also gave a great class about the medicinal use of Fijian plants. I took more dive time off to go with Evaloni on a half-day tour to the town of Raki Raki, with a stop at the grave of Fiji's last cannibal king.

Back on the boat, another backroll led me down to Wedding Chapel. Compared to Breathtaker, it was like entering a movie theatre on a Wednesday afternoon. Fish were conspicuously absent, as if we were in a different ocean, but I started looking patiently for smaller stuff. Sure enough, what Wedding Chapel lacked in fish life it more than made up for in legions of healthy Acropora and Sarcophyton species of coral along the canyon floor at 56 feet. Not to be outdone, the canyon walls were decorated with a rainbow's array of sea fans, whip corals, black sun coral, and stony Turbinaria species. I'd never seen so many hard corals with polyps actively deployed and fanning the current-driven water for lunch.

Other sites also lacked hordes of fish, but that made it easier to focus on more delicate sea life. I liked to examine crinoids to find tiny crabs that sometimes live

Is This Ascent Rate Alarm Useful?

New on the market is the Miniature Ascent Rate Alarm (MARA), a small, yellow electronic gizmo designed to monitor your ascent rate and reduce your risk of decompression sickness. It attaches to your mask strap and beeps if you ascend at more than 30 feet per minute. It beeps again to provide a safety stop at 15 feet. But is it worth 90 bucks?

John Bantin, equipment editor for the British magazine *Diver* and a frequent *Undercurrent* contributor, tried out MARA for us. "I found the squawks useful, in that they sounded more urgent as I broke the ascent-rate rules more determinedly. Once I reached the 15-foot mark, I certainly knew it was the place to make the safety stop. Unfortunately, ascending in blue water without any data, I really needed something that would tell me if I unknowingly sank deeper

again. This the MARA does not do. This explains why my five-minute safety stops, counted down on my computer and constantly restarted as I regained the 15-foot mark, always seemed to take more than 10 minutes. Whether you need a MARA or not depends on what you normally do during an ascent after a dive."

"For the experienced diver, MARA is probably of little use, but for the novice or perhaps when diving in very low visibility or at night, it could be an aid for getting your ascent rate right," says Charles Hood, gear tester for British magazine *DIVE*. "I heard it through a 5-mil neoprene hood. It can't be heard by nearby divers, as it transmits the sounds inwards and not all around you."

MARA's maker says it's guaranteed to last for up to five years or 1,000 dives, but it has a non-replaceable battery. (www.masterunderwatertech.com)

Wananavu Beach Resort, Fiji

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Worldwide Scale

in the center where their arms meet. At Wedding Chapel, I found a pair of one-inch green commensal shrimp instead. The Bligh Waters featured a mass of crinoids in many colors. At Wedding Chapel, an 18-inch fan coral had eight large ones on its top edge, strategically placed to catch grub coming their way on the current.

Another bonus is that every site has reefs close enough to the surface so that safety stops could be spent getting last looks at the colorful coral communities. I was efficient on air so after 80-minute dives, Jimmy let me stay under the boat after the others had surfaced to enjoy the uppermost peaks of bommies in solitude. Then I surfaced at the stern and handed up my

weight belt, BC and fins. Ra Divers had a helpful "hand hold" between the outboard motors at the top of the ladder. Mounted on the transom, it gave me something more to grasp than just the ladder itself, making that last pull up to the rear platform very easy.

By the way, Bainimarama's reign as Prime Minister briefly came to a halt in mid-April when Fijian judges determined his regime illegal, but a day later, Fiji's president sacked the judges and reinstalled Bainimarama. The coups are as peaceful as the dives but Fiji is indeed in flux. While my driver is a native Fijian, the Indian residents, who run most of the businesses and make up 38 percent of the population, are being hassled. Australia and New Zealand are threatening trade sanctions if democracy isn't restored. Still, if the locals don't seem bothered about who's handling government, visiting divers don't need to be either.

-- V.B.H.

A Diver's Tale of Somali Piracy and the Seychelles Army

Last month, we reported on the Indian Ocean Explorer and how it was captured with crew on board (but no passengers) by Somali pirates, and will probably be docked in Somalia for a few months. After reading the story, reader David Hill (Hamilton, MA) e-mailed us that he was on another liveaboard in the same area when the Explorer was seized. Here's his tale:

I was on board the *Sea Bird* in the Aldabra Group in early April. We were diving Astove Island, 80 miles away from Assumption Island, on the same day the *Explorer* was taken. We were warned immediately. It was an interesting 24 hours that followed.

We had to go back to Assumption Island the next day, as that has the only airport in the Aldabras, and from there, we were to fly back to Mahe. To make matters more interesting, the *Sea Bird* is Israeli-owned, with the captain and the engineer both Israelis who had no intention of surrendering

meekly to Muslim pirates. We sailed at dark and made the crossing overnight with the ship blacked out and double watches standing.

At Assumption the next day, things got even wackier. We passengers went ashore, along with the three female crew members who were being evacuated on our plane. The twin-engine Beechcraft was supposed to be bringing the next set of divers for our ship but instead brought 12 Seychelles army soldiers. When the pilot landed, he called to the fuel shed and got no answer. Fearing the pirates had taken the island, he taxied the plane to our end of the runway and out came the soldiers, expecting a firefight instead of a group of puzzled-looking divers. Some soldiers were to stay on Assumption to guard the fuel depot while the rest were to board the *Sea Bird* and escort it back to Mahe.

Our group apparently has the dubious distinction of being the last to dive the Aldabra Group for some time, as all dive trips there have been canceled. Anyway, the diving was great, except for the alarming lack of sharks, which have been heavily fished almost to extinction in the area.



Diver's Compass: A seven-night package, all food included, with five two-tank dive days on Ra Divers' boat is running around US\$975 . . . The dive trip to Vatu-I-Ra Passage is a 45-minute ride and costs \$75 extra but involves three dives instead of two . . . Direct flights on Fiji's main carrier Air Pacific (www.airpacific.com) from Los Angeles currently cost \$1,200 to leave Saturday evening and arrive in Nadi two days later at 5 a.m.; you can also fly Air New Zealand, Qantas or Virgin Australia . . . Wananavu can arrange transfers from Nadi to the resort, but be prepared for a ride of up to three hours . . . You can

make trip arrangements, or you could book directly with George at the resort for the best savings . . . Wananavu Resort: www.wananavu.com

Indonesia, St. Lucia, Vietnam, Hawaii . . .

blah Caribbean and Nam dives, great ones with sharks and seals

This month we've got a couple of short reviews from our regular reviewers, plus some travel tips from a lot of readers including this first item, a caution to every diver who visits resorts that do it all for you.

Wakatobi Resort, Sulawesi. One of our readers visited Wakatobi before Christmas and while he thought the diving, food and accommodations were superb, he noted that the tendency of the staff to do everything for the diver was a bit annoying and, in one case, problematic. It's the sort of problem that can occur at any busy resort.

"My wife and I used air-integrated Suunto Cobra computers but with different color identification to avoid confusing them. After surfacing from one dive, I noticed my wife's computer and regulator had been installed on my rig and mine on hers. Just as this was coming to light, one of the crew began moving my wife's gear to a fresh tank. When he was about to do the same with my gear, he was called away to help bring in divers who had surfaced. I decided to move my gear to the new tank myself, but became distracted and neglected to turn on the new tank and read the pressure.

"Consequently, on the next dive, preoccupied with the video image on the camcorder monitor and losing sight of my partner, my computer suddenly showed zero air pressure, and I could not pull another breath. I made an emergency ascent from 45 feet. According to my computer, the tank pressure had been 460 psi at the start of the dive and 68 psi at the end. I had been down 11 minutes. I subsequently learned that when tanks on the boat are rotated 45 degrees, that means they are empty. None of the valves had caps and no one had mentioned the tank rotation custom. After that we did not leave our regulators in the equipment shed to be managed by the boat crew.

"It is every diver's responsibility to check tank pressure when setting up gear. However, the Wakatobi commitment to service is strong. They want to do everything for you, a practice that is contrary to both our dive training and good common sense. My dive buddy and I are accustomed to setting up our

gear ourselves together. That way we watch each other and make sure no steps are left out. It is noteworthy that during the first few days of our trip, two other divers experienced out-of-air emergencies, one being our dive guide. She said it was because there was a lot of confusion on the boat and breaking in of new people. Whatever the reason(s), no boat crews will be setting up our equipment in the future."

Good points. However, I'm not so sure the problem comes with the crew setting up gear. In this case, if the diver carefully checked his own equipment after the crew set it up, turned on his tank, then checked his air and functioning computer, there would be no problem. If the crew sets up your gear, carefully check it before you strap it on.

Anse Chastenet, St. Lucia. Even before receiving a room key, S.P., one of our regular travel reviewers, reports that he got a butler while checking in to this upscale resort.

* * * * *

The receptionist handed me a Firefly telephone to summon my butler. No kidding. Vito is a young, pleasant St. Lucian, a professional English butler, and his services were included in my two-day unexpected upgrade to Jade Mountain, the new, \$1100-a-night sister resort uphill from Anse Chastenet, where my room wasn't yet available.

Oh, you're wondering why I'm taking a pricey dive trip while the economy is hurting. You see, a year ago St. Lucia was listed in a major dive magazine as in the Top 10 of Caribbean sites for macro life, so I committed then to the \$900 double-occupancy, high-season room rate. Sure, I felt like a king for a few days, but I ended up feeling like a chump with empty pockets and few good macro shots. I got a million-dollar view from my balcony, but its dive sites are only Caribbean average. I could have gotten better diving in the Caymans or Bonaire for a third of the bill. Its dive sites are only Caribbean average and not worth extra luggage fees for my camera equipment.

Vito drove me down to Scuba St. Lucia's beachfront shop, where I suited up for the 80-degree water and the mandatory checkout dive off the beach with Bernita, a friendly young local. Surge limited visibility to 40 feet, but it was easy to see yellow and spotted goatfish rooting in the sand. Black bar soldierfish hung under a ledge; a bearded fireworm crawled beneath them. A blue male sergeant major guarded an egg patch. Bernita alerted us to an octopus hiding in a crevice. Another diver pointed out a spotted scorpionfish, camouflaged on a ledge. My spouse says the snorkeling was just as good.

Aussie Liveboard Gives Divers a Wild Ride

A cook who made bad food went ballistic, punched the skipper and had to be tied down by the crew of Cairns-based liveboard *Taka* in February. Then his father ran the boat onto a reef. Cairns travel agent Lucy Elliott and her boyfriend, commercial diver Shane Ashwell, told two Australian newspapers the voyage was a "trip from hell" but *Taka's* marketing manager John Brown told *Undercurrent* the two were just taking revenge because his company refused to comp Ashwell's flight from Perth after already giving Elliott a free trip.

Elliott and Ashwell said the 41-year-old temporary cook served meager meals and after the guests complained, the captain gave him a dressing down. In reply, the cook knocked the skipper unconscious in the wheelhouse. He then allegedly threatened the crew with a knife but they got him tied to the deck for five hours as the *Taka* headed to Cooktown, where the cook was handed over to the police. Brown says it's true the cook hit the captain but the image of a knife-wielding cook breaking several of the captain's ribs is false.

The saga continued when the cook's father, *Taka's* engineer and relief skipper who had recommended his son as a stand-in cook, replaced the injured captain. Just as things were calming down, the boat got caught in a squall, ran onto a reef and was stuck for five hours. The *Taka* again returned to port to report the grounding. Brown denies Elliott and Ashwell's claims that the boat hit the reef at full speed, saying a swell came from behind as the *Taka* was pulling up anchor and put the bow on the reef. The Maritime Safety closed the case, and *Taka* suffered no damage. Brown says, "We offered Elliott and Ashwell a full refund and they chose not to take it, deciding to talk to the press instead. But they did 14 dives on the trip, and everyone else wrote on their comment cards that they had a good time."

As for the cook, he was charged with assault occasioning bodily harm, possession of a knife and creating a public nuisance. However, when he failed to appear at court a few days later, a warrant was issued for his arrest.

Except for one wreck dive, the rest of the week was filled with similar, pleasant yet unadventurous drift dives. Typical reef fish like chromis, yellowhead wrasse, trumpetfish, barracuda and bicolor damselfish were present but not prolific or in schools. I saw many peppermint gobies, spaghetti worms, feather sea stars, harlequin bass, and glasseye snappers. I snapped photos of shy hamlet, red lizardfish and magnificent feather duster coral. But this is not a macro heaven like St. Vincent, nor does it have big fish or dramatic coral. The young guides made little effort to point out things, so I got the novice-diver experience. For the money I spent, I should have been more take-charge and, if done politely, I think Scuba St. Lucia would honor that approach. Even so, Top Ten in Macro? Well.....

Dives were up to a 15-minute ride from Anse Chastenet's two small, sandy beaches. The two roomy, covered dive boats hold 40 tanks but the most divers I went with were 12, while the other boat held snorkelers. I saw few other experienced divers, probably because they had wisely read *Undercurrent's* online archives before booking, something I failed to do this time. Most divers came from cheaper hotels for a day's diving. Scuba St. Lucia seems mostly geared toward honeymooning snorkelers; owner Bernd Rac doubles as a wedding photographer and offers plenty of rental gear, but not full-service. The only safety briefing was to signal you're ready to ascend when you have 700psi, and don't go deeper than 60 feet unless you have a computer. I often came up last with 900 psi left. On the upside, crew checked tanks to make sure air was on and that no diver would be left behind. I had to initial my name twice, upon boarding and then returning from the dive. After my one-tank dives at 8:30 a.m., 10:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. (there's a night dive only twice weekly), I returned for water, ice and fresh fruit set on a table outside the shop.

While Vito served me breakfast in bed, little things were awry in a resort charging so much. Though Jade Mountain stocked the bar with complimentary beer, champagne and sodas, there was no ice. In front of my room lay an empty beer bottle and leftover building supplies. When I moved into my Anse Chastenet room, the size of a modest house, I got a secluded balcony with a stunning view of the Gros and Petit Pitons -- the mountains are an emerald version of the Matterhorn. Meals were at the Treehouse, a terrace restaurant in the hillside forest. A substantial breakfast buffet came with a chef to make pancakes and omelets. For lunch, I had fresh grilled mahi mahi or red snapper. Simple dinner entrees like seared pork and grilled shrimp were tasty but others with fancy gourmet names weren't noteworthy. However, one night we had one of our best meals ever -- heavenly goat's cheese and herb mousse, a king prawn spring roll with coconut and lemon salsa, succulent kingfish and lamb chops. Overall, meals for two hit \$250 a day, and you'll get soaked on the final bill with beverage charges.

“Diving St. Lucia once is enough. Breaking up the monotonous drift dives, I explored the *Lesleen M*, a 165-foot cargo vessel sunk to 65 feet. An eagle ray glided by at 40 feet. The wreck was bristling with sharp encrustations but easy to enter and explore. Keither, the sharp-eyed divemaster, pointed out a batfish. A sea turtle nestled among sponges atop the stack. The wreck carried the largest schools of fish I’d seen at St. Lucia, like blackbar soldierfish and smallmouth grunts.

“A hardcore diver will feel as out of place at Anse Chastenet as a fish out of water, especially if he’s loaded with camera gear for macro-spotting. But if you insist, you can get a deal off-season and risk the rains, maybe hurricanes. Scuba St. Lucia offers a seven-night, double-occupancy dive package at Anse Chastenet for \$1,860/person between June 1 and October 31.” (Anse Chastenet: www.ansechastenet.com; Scuba St. Lucia: www.scubastlucia.com)

Nha Trang, Vietnam. J.D., another regular *Undercurrent* contributor, had found nothing about Vietnam diving in dive magazines, nor in our *Travelin’ Divers’ Chapbooks*, so he decided to make the exploratory dives in March.

* * * * *

Rainbow Divers’ bus was to fetch me at 7:15 a.m. from the Ana Mandara Hotel but it never arrived. Turns out an unpublicized but highly disruptive marathon held that March morning prevented motor vehicle access to the hotel. Rainbow had to send a young girl on a motor scooter to whisk me to Nha Trang’s harbor. The ride was 15 minutes of pure terror as she threaded her way through and around lorries and cars, horns honking everywhere. Good morning, Vietnam!

Nha Trang is Vietnam’s version of Waikiki Beach. It is 270 miles north of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and has a population of 300,000. Nha Trang is honeycombed with dive shops, mostly PADI or SSI affiliated. A majority of its dive sites are in a marine park adjacent to the Hon Mun Islands. Double-decker dive boats (converted fishing vessels) 60 feet long and accommodating 30 divers reach these islands in an hour. Outboard speedboats 25 feet long cut the time in half. Diving starts around 8 a.m. and ends at noon, by which time the morning’s glass smooth sea has turned to chop as winds pick up. Two-tank dives average \$60 on the slow boats, around \$150 by speedboat. There also is a \$2.50 daily marine park fee. Traveling divers can take solace in the presence of a decompression chamber just north of Nha Trang.

I opted for speed boats, powered by Yamaha 140- or 200-hp outboards for my two days of diving (at age 67, time can’t be wasted). I signed a standard release for Rainbow but no health questionnaire. Rainbow provided me with a 3-mil wetsuit (no hood), an Aqualung Calypso reg, Sherwood steel 72 cu ft tanks, full foot fins, a non-weight integrated BC and a BARS-calibrated SPG. I provided my own mask and computer. Anh Nguyen, my dive guide, was a PADI assistant instructor who told me he’d been originally taught by U.S. Navy divers. Anh

was adept at pointing out various marine park inhabitants but less adept at identifying them by name.

The Lighthouse in Hon Mun Marine Park is a large rock jutting out of the sea. Visibility was 25 feet, with the water a green hue. At 98 feet, I encountered numerous nudibranchs in combinations of blue, yellow, orange and red. A small, shy octopus peeked out from a crevice at the Lighthouse’s base. Various thermoclines hit me here and at subsequent dive sites. The 80-degree water was suddenly 75 degrees, chilly for me in my hoodless 3-mil, and I was struck by the dearth of fish.

Perhaps this first dive’s most remarkable moment was reboarding the speedboat via a portable stern ladder. Its lowest rung was a foot above the water line. Even after shedding my BC, tank and weights I couldn’t hoist myself aboard without Anh pushing me up while the boat operator pulled me onto the stern deck. This ladder would challenge an Olympic gymnast. The speedboat for the second day’s diving had a stern ladder with a bottom rung at water level, thereby providing me a fighting chance of reboarding unassisted.

“Reboarding the speedboat via its portable stern ladder would challenge even an Olympic gymnast.”

Visibility improved noticeably for the other two dives that first day and for my two dives on the next. All these were in the marine park: Debbie’s Beach, Rainbow Reef, Madonna Rock and Mama Hahn Beach. The dives averaged 40 minutes and I was left to dive my profiles as I wished. The water appears jade green as you look at it from the boat. All the dive sites abound in hard coral, staghorn being one of the abundant types. Among the denizens I saw on these dives: trumpetfish in shades of blue, green and yellow; clown and pink skunk anemonefish; common lionfish; various butterflyfish (including orange face, spot-banded, needle nose and raccoon), Moorish idols; blue-striped snapper; banded sweetlips, sergeant majors and black-tail damselfish. A school of pickhandle barracuda languidly wandered by me at 30 feet at Madonna Rock. White feather stars and bright blue Christmas tree worms were abundant.

The only fish of any size I encountered were two Malabar grouper at Madonna Rock, around 20 pounds each. Nah Trang dive shop photo albums and web sites advertise white- and black-tip sharks, stingrays and turtles lurking somewhere in the marine park but I saw none of these. Rainbow instructor Chris told me the park’s larger sea life was essentially fished out.

While Vietnam dive web sites advertise a number of locations, I chose Hon Mun Park due to my time limitations. So how does Hon Mun stack up against notable dive sites like the Great Barrier Reef, the Solomons, Palau or the Andaman Sea? In my opinion, it doesn’t. The corals

were less colorful and fish life, especially large pelagics, less abundant. Based on the limited diving I did, then, I don't recommend the 18-hour flight it will take from the West Coast if all you're looking for is diving. But for a land trip to Vietnam, diving is worth a shot here or maybe you'll discover another, better place. The people are uncommonly friendly and polite. Half the population was born after the U.S. left Vietnam. I encountered no anti-American attitudes. Food and accommodations are inexpensive unless you insist on the most luxurious five-star accommodations. Look into anti-malarial medication and Hepatitis A and B shots if you plan to wander Vietnam's more remote regions." (Rainbow Divers: www.divevietnam.com)

New Divers Need to Reduce Their Weights

Dear *Undercurrent*,

Regarding part two of "Why Divers Die" about overweighting in the April 2009 issue, I believe dive operators are partly responsible for overweighting divers. Their goal is to get divers down by adding weight. They do not explain that you should fully exhale, then breathe from the lower part of your lungs to break the surface. No, it's "add weight, get them down." This is why we see so many divers swimming at a 45-degree angle, pushing water as they go and using up air. They have too much weight on their hips so they need air in the BCD, which is on their upper body and causing the upright swim. But the dive-master got them down anyway.

I started diving 18 years ago and I've been a PADI-certified divemaster since 1998. I play ice hockey twice a week, lift weights and do aerobic activity four times a week, so at 62, I am above average in fitness. Here is the kicker. From the South Pacific to the Atlantic, the dive-masters will ask me how many pounds I need. I wear a 2- to 3-mil shorty suit, and I reply, "Oh, two to three." They usually hand me a weight belt with three or four pounds.

"I said two to three," I repeat. The comeback: "You need more than that." Now after 900 dives and divemaster training, don't you think I would know? At this point I hand back the weight belt, say "See you at the bottom," and over I go. As long as I breathe with my lungs not full of air, no weight is needed. However, I do like to carry weight to assist divers who need weight at safety stops.

My point: Let's spend more time teaching divers peak buoyancy and to breathe out of an exhaled lung. Let them swim horizontally, use less air and descend in a controlled manner. Let's give 'em less weight, not more.

- - *Craig Condron, Spokane, WA*

Cayman Brac Reef Beach Resort. After Hurricane Paloma devastated the Brac last November, the family-run resort had to shut its doors. But it's being remodeled and renovated and, pending government approval, should reopen in September. The resort's PR department says there's a waiting list of 50 divers. (www.bracreef.com)

Hawaii Specialty Dives. We got two good reader reports recently about special dives around the Hawaiian islands. Dennis Jacobson (Lakewood, CO) tells us that Lahaina Divers on Maui offers a specialty trip for advanced divers to Molokai to search for hammerheads. "It is a bit pricey (\$199 per person for 2 tanks) but worth it, as we saw a large school and some isolated hammerhead sharks. It is an open blue water dive, and on the March day we went, we had 25-knot winds, 12-foot seas and a strong current. We were forewarned about all of these and have no complaints. However, there were divers on the trip who should not have been allowed, certainly not under the conditions we encountered, and those conditions were known days in advance. Poor divers cost us bottom time, as of necessity all divers had to descend and ascend together (open seas, boat pick up, and challenging conditions). We were led to believe there is a more thorough screening of divers than there actually was, so if you go, ask about who you will be diving with. The sharks are deep, the current can be strong and the weakest diver in each group will set the bottom time and depth limits. You should be a competent diver in good shape." (www.lahainadivers.com)

Among the most spectacular dives in Hawaii, maybe just about anywhere, is to see monk seals around Ni'ihau island, a difficult schlep in only the best of summer/fall weather. The operation that gets you there is Bubbles Below, based in Kauai. Danny & Doreen Scott, who live on the Big Island of Hawaii, made it to Ni'ihau last September and tell what you might expect if you're lucky enough to make it this year. "Linda, owner of Bubbles Below, is a very warm, friendly gal who took good care of everyone. We took her boat to 'The Forbidden Island' (so named because its small native population forbids you to step foot on the island, but you can dive next to it). On our first dive, we were able to get very close to several very large monk seals. They purr like cats underwater, and their sounds are loud and pleasant. One seal was asleep underwater on its back, a fabulous sight! The divemaster also knew exactly where to take us to see yellow anthias. The crew were fun, upbeat and made the experience wonderful. Lunch was a gourmet pizza, kept warm by being carried on the boat's engine, and a fabulous salad. The ride back to Kauai is challenging. It was over an hour of extremely rough chop – and we're highly experienced with rough boat crossings. Not recommended for those prone to seasickness. Nearly everyone on the boat was lying down to avoid being bounced around. It was a real endurance test. If only there were a more comfortable return ride." (www.bubblesbelowkauai.com)

Kona's Missing Fish. Ben Glick (Williamstown, MA), who has logged over 1000 dives, writes, "I have dived with

Dive Makai for more than 20 years. Over that time, the dive operation has been wonderful and still is. The problem is with the fish life on the reefs. In eight dives, we saw very little and because the coral in Hawaii is minimal, there was little to see. The dive guide tried hard but was unsuccessful. Even our three-dive adventure was pretty much a bust. What a difference from the past when fish of all types were common. The only exception was the manta ray night dive, with many mantas, and coming up close for the whole dive.”

Coconut Tree Divers, Roatan. Last issue we reported on the undiscovered Royal Playa Resort on Roatan, and David Shirley (Minneapolis, MN), who has logged a thousand dives, tells us of a popular dive operator there that does more for experienced divers than most. “In the years of diving with Coconut Tree Divers, I have never found the service, professionalism or quality of the operation to be lacking. Although at times the volume of activity at the operation’s West End facility is trying, the overall experience has been one of the more

satisfying this professional dive instructor has encountered in decades of travel throughout the Caribbean and Pacific. The staff is first rate and efforts to ensure customer satisfaction and diving nirvana are exemplary. With two boats now serving their customers, the benefits of segmenting divers based on experience and dive objectives are proving to work well. Dive guides’ attention to detail on pointing out smaller, often missed sealife during dives has been a humbling experience for someone who often claims he has seen nearly everything the seas have to offer. To give divers expanded opportunities for unique underwater experiences, Coconut Tree will, based on weather conditions and customer interest, offer trips to Barbaretta and the Cayos Cochinos, where the fish life is nearly unaffected by the last decade of increased pressure to feed inhabitants and tourists. The staff was helpful in suggesting everything from great, inexpensive meal venues to arranging one of the best shark dives I have ever experienced.” (www.coconuttreedivers.com)

-- Ben Davison

Four Solid, Inexpensive Regulators

well-suited for all but the most demanding divers

If a diver buying a regulator in the U.S. wants to be assured that it will deliver air under extreme circumstances, he must rely on the manufacturer’s word. There is no independent standard, and divers have no access to independent tests. Yet in the European Union, regulators must pass certain breathing safety standards to be legally sold. A European consumer can be assured he is buying a regulator that will supply air when needed, while an American diver has to trust the manufacturer, the advertisements and the manual.

In the late 1980s, ANSTI Test Systems in the U.K. developed a machine to scientifically test regulator performance. Under hyperbaric pressure at prescribed depths, the regulator is attached to a breathing machine. The work of inhalation and exhalation is measured and a computer readout of the breathing cycle is provided. A regulator must be able to deliver air to a diver at depth having to breathe hard with low tank pressure. Some regulators fail at that. This machine also measures the drop in pressure and effectiveness of the recovery by the performance of the first stage during the breathing process. Manufacturers have widely adopted the ANSTI machine for the purpose of designing regulators to meet the criteria.

Many regulators that pass EU standards are sold in the U.S. Three of us recently tested a number of inexpensive regulators available here that pass these ANSTI tests. George Brown, a working diver in the Scottish Highlands, is a BSAC National Instructor. Colin MacAndrias is a PADI Master Instructor. I have instructor certifications with both those agencies. Going off the beach at the Aqua-Sport International diving center at

the Taba Hilton in Egypt, we took the regulators diving in a side-by-side comparison to see the differences.

A European diver is assured by the European Union he’s buying a regulator that will supply air when needed, while an American diver has to trust the manufacturer.

We tried to beat the regulators by breathing as hard as we could. We inverted them to replicate a panicking diver who might stuff someone else’s regulator in his mouth upside-down. (Inevitably, small amounts of water will enter when the port opens to release exhaled air. The question is whether this water has somewhere to drain or whether it interferes with breathing.) We checked how easy it was to activate the purge valve, and whether there was a tendency to free-flow uncontrollably when a second stage was dropped from the mouth. We considered the overall breathing experience. We got to know how each stacked up against the others. The tests were briefly interrupted at times: A giant green, free-swimming frogfish decided to perch on my head.

As a rule of thumb, piston-type regulators tend to give bigger gas flows and a faster response, while diaphragm-type regulators are less inclined to develop operating faults in very cold conditions. Many had only one high-pressure

Bahamas Bull Shark Bites Back at Irked Spearfisher

Luis Hernandez, 48, spent two weeks in a Miami hospital after getting his right forearm mangled by a bull shark near the Exuma Islands. But that's a real possibility if you're poking at the animal with a spear.

Hernandez and his wife, Marlene, 46, traveled from Deerfield Beach, FL, for a romantic getaway. On May 6, the second day of their trip, Hernandez decided to do some spearfishing while Marlene waited in the rented fishing boat. He had just speared a grouper when he spotted the seven-foot shark.

"The first thing I thought was, 'Wow, nice shark!'" he told reporters from his hospital bed. "So I swam a little closer and thought about spearing it but decided to let it go. I just poked it so it would get out of my way." That's when the shark sunk its teeth into his arm. After a struggle, the shark let go, taking a large chunk of Hernandez' forearm with it. Marlene pulled her husband out of the water, crafted a tourniquet and got the boat back to land.

Carl Luer, senior scientist at Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota, FL, told the *Miami Herald* that the shark was probably startled by the encounter with Hernandez, and the grouper spearing may have led to the attack. Hernandez poking at it could also have been a reason.

Now Hernandez says he wants to return to the reef one day with his brother to hunt down the shark. We know who we're rooting for.

port, which might make you disinclined to employ a gas-integrated computer with it. Some had knobs that allow you to increase the amount of effort needed to draw open the demand valve. Some had Venturi controls that enable you to reduce the chance of an exponential free-flow at the surface that is caused by cleanly flowing air passing the back of the pressure-sensing diaphragm of the second stage. A couple were designed for trouble-free use in very cold freshwater.

Apeks ATX40 DS4 (list price: \$595; www.aqualung.com) One of the few diaphragm-type regulators we tested (and cold-water rated), it has a dry-sealed first stage with four medium-pressure ports conveniently positioned. The one high-pressure port was positioned well away from the others so that there was room to fit a computer transmitter. The second stage has a Venturi control.

GB: It proved a good breather and very comfortable. It gave lots of gas on demand but when inverted, it was almost unusable because it was so wet. I can't believe the price!

JB: The air came in a broad flow into my mouth. I couldn't beat it no matter how hard I breathed it. Inverted, it was damp the first time I tried it, but I managed to still use it; if it free-flowed first, then it was almost totally dry. I felt it was always on the edge of free-flowing and when it did, the flow of gas was massive. The Venturi switch should be set to 'minus' before you take it out of your mouth at any depth.

CM: It seemed to be very efficient at delivering air no matter how deeply I breathed. The purge button gave a very soft blow of air. It's very sensitive to demand but you pay for that because it tends to free-flow immediately if you take it out of your mouth.

AquaLung Calypso (\$275; www.aqualung.com) This regulator has a simple piston-type first stage with a single high-pressure port and four medium-pressure ports arranged around its barrel so that hoses fanned out around it. The second stage has a Venturi control.

GB: This is an excellent regulator. When really breathing heavily, I detected a fine mist of water, yet when inverted it was perfectly dry.

JB: A pleasant breathing experience; there was a voluble flow of gas that diffused nicely in the mouth. The purge was strong but the flow of air was equally diffuse too. It was perfectly dry while breathing from it inverted.

CM: There was very little resistance to inhalation. It gave a crisp breathe every time. There was never any sign of a free-flow. Inverted, it gave a minute spray of water. The purge was very effective but not a tonsil blaster.

Cressi Ellipse Black MC5 (\$309; www.cressisubusa.com) A compact diaphragm-type first stage and an oval shaped second stage distinguish this regulator. There are a single high-pressure port and only three medium-pressure ports but well-spaced for a good hose routes. The neat second stage has a narrow exhaust-T that could lead to exhaust bubbles interfering with vision. It has a Venturi control.

GB: Very good, if delicately tuned. It would easily free-flow when dropped out of my mouth. The purge was easily controlled and proved reasonably dry once fully inverted.

JB: It delivered more than enough air but in a narrow cone. I felt that it was quite a damp breath when the regulator was sideways with the hose side downwards, but once fully inverted, it was reasonably dry. The purge took a hard push to activate and the effect was not very strong.

CM: Air delivery was good but it hissed a bit with deep inhalations. Inverted, it became wet. The purge was very weak.

Mares Rover 12 (\$300; www.mares.com) This new regulator has a diaphragm-type first stage with an overly large barrel that affords good spacing for the two high-pressure and four medium-pressure ports. It has a marked port for the primary second-stage hose. The second stage had no visible metal parts but it included the bypass tube that obviates the need for a Venturi control.

GB: I got a comfortable and uniform supply of air across the whole breathing cycle even when I worked hard. When inverted, only a slight mist of water was detectable. The purge was extremely effective.

JB: There were masses of breathing gas available. It was an eye-opener in comparison to other regulators I still thought were good. The purge control was a little hard to push but the purge was very effective. Inverted, it was a little damp but eminently usable.

CM: An excellent regulator that gave gas with little effort. There was no splash whatsoever when inverted. The purge needed a heavy press but once done it had a powerful effect.

Oceanic Alpha8 SP5 (\$350; www.oceanicworldwide.com) This regulator has a piston-type first stage, with one high-pressure and four medium-pressure ports arranged around its narrow barrel. The last medium-pressure hose fitted always ended

up in an awkward spot. The neat-looking second stage has no knobs and the mechanism is easily accessed for removal of grit.

GB: This regulator performed perfectly. It gave an excellent breathe from the surface all the way to 120 feet with an even supply of gas at all times. There were loads of air and no effort. Inverted, it was quite useful despite a fine spray of water.

JB: It answered the call when I really tried to beat it by heaving on it hard. It was not too wet for comfort when inverted and the purge was easy and effective.

CM: It gave a very good breathing rate with each inhalation very crisp. It was good at all angles and even when inverted it was wet but very manageable. The purge gave a sharp full thrust of air.

Scubapro MK2 Plus/R295 (\$285; www.scubapro.com) A piston-type first stage with water-flow holes big enough for quick response. It has four medium-pressure ports arranged

Divers Survive 24 Hours in Open Waters of Gulf of Mexico

After drifting helplessly in the Gulf of Mexico for more than a full day, a Florida couple had to face a grim truth: If they weren't rescued soon, they'd end up like the couple in *Open Water*, the film about two divers who are left behind by their dive boat and end up as shark bait.

After being caught in a current during a dive that separated them from their own boat, the pair had drifted in increasing desperation, suffering from hypothermia and dehydration, with hallucinations playing tricks with their eyes. Finally, they saw an anchored boat they thought they could get to. "I told my husband this is our last chance. If we don't do it, we're going to die," Paula Allen, 48, told *Today* show host Meredith Vieira.

The Allens had been diving for two years. On May 9, they set out alone in their 24-foot boat in the Gulf of Mexico. But Timothy Allen, 52, admitted they violated two basic safety rules: They didn't bring someone to man the boat while they were underwater, and they didn't file a dive plan or tell anyone on shore where they were going. "I'm a police officer and we preach not to become complacent," Allen told Vieira. Yet that is exactly what he did.

When the Allens surfaced after their dive, they saw that a current had pulled them away from their boat, and they couldn't fight their way back. They watched at least four boats pass by, too far to be able to see two divers bobbing in the swells. But one passed within 50 feet and the Allens could see a woman and a child with their backs to them.

Although they never saw a shark, the thought of an attack was always with them, and Paula clutched a spear gun

through the night -- her security blanket. By morning, both were suffering from their long exposure in the water. But Timothy, who was wearing two wetsuits, was not as cold as his wife, who had worn only one. Finally, Timothy thought he saw a boat tie up to a buoy and put up a dive flag about six miles away. "I started hallucinating and seeing things that weren't there," he said, but when his wife confirmed there was a boat, they were determined to swim to it. The current they were riding was running about three miles an hour. He figured that if the boaters were doing two dives, that would give them two hours to cover the distance -- just enough time.

The boat belonged to Patrick Pinder, who had gone out for a dive with his sons, Patrick Jr., 18, and Garrett, 17. While the boys tended the boat and snorkeled, Patrick Sr. was underwater. The Allens had swum to within 150 yards of the Pinders' boat when the boys spotted them, untied the boat and motored over to help them. Paula Allen was too weak to do anything. She looked at the boys and said, "Oh my God, you saved my life."

The Allens were aboard and safe by the time Patrick Sr. surfaced. He called the Coast Guard, which came to transport the Allens to a hospital. Timothy was in decent shape, but his wife was kept for several days to recover. The Allens' said they will continue diving -- although they would not go out again without backup, nor without telling people on shore where they were going and when they expected to return.

-- by Mike Celizic, *TODAYShow.com* contributor

close together and a single high-pressure port spaced apart from them. The nice second stage has no knobs.

GB: I gave this full marks in all categories except when inverted, when I detected a fine spray of water.

JB: It gave a slightly tighter breathe than some of the better regulators. It also gave a lower frequency sound, probably indicating the air path was broader. At depth, when I really breathed hard, it seemed a bit asthmatic, and it squawked at times. The purge was very progressive, which was nice, but when it was inverted, I choked on a fine spray of water.

CM: This was a very effective regulator with a delivery of gas that was nicely diffused in the mouth. I felt no spray of

water when it was inverted and the purge control gave a full effective blast.

Conclusion: Although each of us had our own favorites, none really stood out above the others. We'd be happy to use any on future dives. If pushed, we'd single out, in no particular order, the Oceanic, the Mares and the Apeks (though it is almost twice the price of the others) as slightly more satisfying in performance than the AquaLung, Cressi and Scubapro.

John Bantin is the technical editor of DIVER magazine in the United Kingdom. For 20 years, he has used and received virtually every piece of equipment available in the U.S. and the U.K., and makes around 300 divers per year for that purpose.

Bacterial Contamination in Rinse Tanks

a new study says don't dip your mask and regulator

Recreational divers typically rinse their equipment in "communal" tanks filled with fresh water after completing dives. Often all the equipment (wetsuits, booties, fins, BCDs, regulators with mouthpieces and masks) is rinsed in common tanks. In some facilities, a separate tank is provided for rinsing regulators. Masks are often rinsed and even stored in a common tank on boats before a dive.

Few studies have addressed the possibility that these communal rinse tanks may harbor pathogens and transmit disease. We first reported that communal rinse tanks at a dive facility in Roatan indeed contained significant levels of many types of microorganisms (*Microbe*, December 2007, p. 577). However, because that dive facility did not allow us to sample the water entering rinse tanks, we were unable to determine if the microorganisms originated from the water used to fill tanks or from equipment that was rinsed in the tanks.

Recently, a report documented the spread of conjunctivitis among divers using two dive boats off of Fiji's Vitu Levu Island (*Undersea and Hyperbaric Medicine*, 2008 vol. 35, p. 169). Among 29 divers, 14 cases (almost 50 percent) of conjunctivitis were ultimately documented. The pattern by which conjunctivitis was spread among divers and between boats was consistent with the outbreak arising from the divemaster, a Fijian resident, who reported having an eye infection prior to the outbreak and who placed his own mask in the communal mask container (*Undersea and Hyperbaric Medicine*, 2008 vol. 35, p. 169). This study established that disease can be transmitted among scuba divers via communal tanks. (Read our interview with the study's author in our September 2008 issue.)

In October 2007, we investigated the extent to which bacteria were introduced into communal rinse tanks, via water used to fill tanks and via dive equipment rinsed in them, and whether cleaning a rinse tank with bleach once a day reduced

the subsequent bacterial population. A dive facility in Bonaire cooperated in this study but wished not to be identified.

Samples from boats returning from afternoon dives showed very high levels of many types of bacteria.

The facility had two rinse tanks for general equipment and one tank for regulators. Each morning for three days, at 7:30 a.m., one equipment rinse tank, designated "A" was emptied, scrubbed using undiluted bleach, then rinsed several times and filled with fresh water from a hose. The other equipment rinse tank, "B," was emptied, rinsed several times with water and filled with water from the same hose but was not bleached. We did not empty, clean or fill the regulator rinse tank. During the day, dive staff would occasionally drain and refill equipment and regulator rinse tanks. Water samples were obtained from the three tanks three times daily: 8 a.m., 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. The samples were placed in a refrigerator until the day of departure, then put in a suitcase, placed in a refrigerator 12 hours later, and finally examined for colonies and photographed. Pictures of plates can be viewed as a PowerPoint presentation at <http://www.hsc.wvu.edu/som/bmp/miller.asp> - - click the "Bonaire 2007" link under the topic "Research."

No bacterial colonies were observed from water samples filling the rinse tanks. The 8 a.m. water samples, immediately after equipment tanks were cleaned with bleach (A) or not cleaned with bleach (B) and filled with water, did not give rise to any colonies on all three days.

In contrast, 8 a.m. water samples in the regulator rinse tank contained a high level of bacteria on all days tested. Presumably

the regulator rinse tank had been used to rinse regulators the previous day and after night dives. At 1 p.m. and 5 p.m., rinse tanks A, B and the regulator rinse tank usually showed high levels of bacterial contamination. Cleaning tank A with bleach did not reduce the subsequent bacterial level. In several instances, water samples showed low levels of bacteria – this was apparently because the tanks had been recently drained and refilled. It was only possible to obtain water samples from two mask rinse tanks, both at 4 p.m., as boats were returning from afternoon dives. Both of these samples showed very high levels of contamination by many types of bacteria.

Our studies show that bacterial contamination of divers' rinse tanks at this Bonaire facility was introduced by rinsing equipment, not by water used to fill tanks. Presumably, other potential pathogens, like viruses, are also introduced into

the rinse tanks. If divers with a communicable illness (like conjunctivitis, the “common cold,” infectious mononucleosis, diphtheria and streptococcal infections) rinse equipment in a tank, people who rinse after them may pick up the transmitting microorganism and become infected.

We conclude that, if possible, scuba equipment, especially mouthpieces and masks, should be rinsed well with fresh water or alcohol swabs rather than in communal tanks, to reduce the potential of spreading or contracting disease. Studies are now in progress to identify the bacteria that inhabit the rinse tanks.

Michael R. Miller is a professor of biochemistry at West Virginia University, and Tammy S. Miller is senior office administrator of the department of microbiology and immunology at West Virginia University.

Why You Need Trip Insurance Now

dive companies closing, job layoffs, flu pandemics -- what's next?

Planning a dive trip soon? Today's tough times mean you should cover your butt if you're going to spend significant money. With travel operators on shaky economic ground, job layoffs right and left, and now the threat of influenza pandemics, your overseas travel plans have a greater chance of being affected than ever before.

Many dive travelers think “Cancel for any reason” policies are the best these days for travel protection.

Of course, the need for trip insurance depends on what type of trip you're taking, and what the insurance will and won't reimburse you for. If you're flying to the Florida Keys for a few days of diving, there is less need for it because major airlines offer refundable tickets. If you cancel your flight, you can usually apply all but \$100 of your ticket to another domestic flight. But if you are making a nonrefundable deposit on a remote liveaboard trip a few months ahead of time, and you can only reach home port on a weekly flight, that is another story.

Age-Based Trip Issues

Trip cancellation and trip interruption insurance can cost between 5 percent and 8 percent of your trip's price. Policy pricing is age-based and there is a penalty for seniors: The cost can run up to 12 percent for travelers 70 and older. Steve Dasseos, president of Trip Insurance Store (www.TripInsuranceStore.com), told *Undercurrent* that “Insurers realize the older you are, the more likely you are to cancel or file

a claim for health reasons, so their policy prices are based on that.” One exception is Travel Guard trip insurance offered by Diver Alert Network (DAN). It says its rates are not-age based, so every diver's policy costs around 6.3 percent of his trip's travel price.

The majority of trip insurance policies offer medical coverage, important to divers over age 65 since Medicare does not cover them outside the U.S. (though some supplemental plans provide foreign coverage). Some travel insurance plans pay coverage for Medicare or Medigap, while others won't. Call your insurance company and ask about the policy limits.

What If the Company Shuts Down?

The problem with buying trip protection plans from any trip company you're traveling with is that these plans generally don't cover you if the company quits operating. This scenario can happen, say, if you're using a travel agency to book your dive trip details and it suddenly goes out of business. According to Dasseos, travel insurance doesn't cover a travel agency's financial default or ceasing operations. Supplier Financial Default does not cover you if the travel agency goes out of business. Ideally, the travel agency uses an escrow account to store clients' funds while the money is in their possession. You are not covered for financial default for money the travel agency had not paid to the travel suppliers.

Scrutinize the “financial default” or similar clauses when it comes to travel suppliers and carriers. Some, like Travel Guard and Travel Insured, cover you for Supplier Financial Default if you buy your trip directly from the travel supplier and/or if you use a travel agent. On the other hand, Travelex and Travel Safe only cover you for Supplier Financial Default if you book

through a travel agent or an online travel supplier, not if you book directly. Many insurers exclude companies in Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

Travel Insured International will cover your airline tickets if your travel supplier cancels its portion, but you have to insure 100 percent of your prepaid non-refundable trip cost. DAN's Travel Guard policies do provide coverage for financial default of airline, cruise line, or tour operator, if the insurance is purchased within 15 calendar days of the initial trip payment (but there is other fine print).

Also, pay by credit card. You can always challenge charges if services are not delivered, and your card company is likely to refund the money, especially if you have a higher-end card.

Will Corporate Bankruptcy Affect Your Policy?

A few divers have asked *Undercurrent* whether the status of the crumbling giant insurance company AIG would affect its travel-insurance arm, Travel Guard, which is DAN's carrier. Experts say no. Insurance companies and their subsidiaries

must keep their finances separately, says Dasseos, and set aside financial reserves. "AIG can't go to Travel Guard and take its money. I don't think there is any fear for buying its insurance."

DAN has no plans to fire Travel Guard as its policy agent, says its marketing director Christine McTaggart. "We have been assured that Travel Guard remains stable, and that they have enough resources at hand to continue to serve DAN members in the manner to which they are accustomed, and to fulfill the terms of policies issued."

What If You Lose Your Job?

Travel Guard has upgraded insurance coverage for its four levels and one of the new features includes a provision for layoffs and job loss. Other companies are following suit. Expect to pay about 5 percent for that coverage, depending on the policy and trip.

Typically, these policies return trip deposits if you get laid off but it depends on the policy as well as on your job situation. If you're a company owner, freelance or self-employed, the picture is murkier. And there is more paperwork - - Travelex wants an official note from your human resources department, such as a termination letter.

Health Hazards, Outbreaks and Pandemics

Luckily, the "swine flu" H1N1 strain is subsiding. However, experts are concerned that it may return later this year. Reader Steve Maguire (Columbus, OH) has a trip booked to dive the Sea of Cortez on the *Don Jose* in August and wrote *Undercurrent*, "With all the talk of swine flu lately, I was wondering if trip insurance would pay if I have to cancel the trip because of the disease. There are no travel restrictions so far, but we don't know what may happen." Maguire called the Web site InsureMyTrip.com and was told insurance will not cover cancellation for the swine flu. "The representative said you can purchase 'cancel for any reason' insurance, but it has to be done within two weeks of making your first payment for the trip."

With the exception of Travelex and Travel Guard, once an outbreak is officially declared to be an epidemic or pandemic, then coverage from insurance firms won't provide benefits, as there are specific exclusions for epidemics and pandemics in their policies.

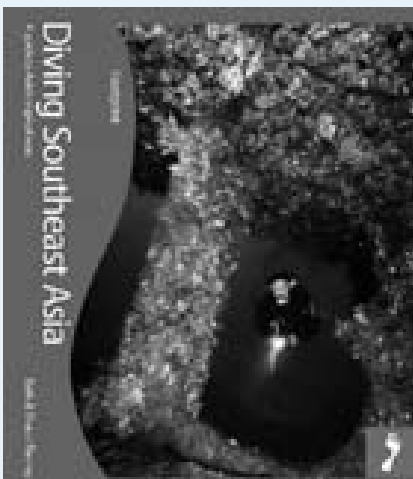
If you purchased a policy then contract a disease, you can be covered for trip cancellation if your doctor advises you against traveling. If you are traveling and contract the disease, you're covered up to the plan limits for medical expenses, subject to the plan provisions and exclusions. In either case, you need documentation. But if you want to stay at home because an epidemic is raging at your destination, you won't be covered unless you have a "cancel for any reason plan."

The Best Trip Insurance in Troubled Times

Many dive travelers think "Cancel for any reason" policies are the best these days. It can be purchased as a stand-alone policy or an optional upgrade to a regular policy. With some

Diving Southeast Asia

This just-published, 302-page, soft-bound guide by Beth and Shaun Tierney, who previously authored *Diving the World*, is a must for anyone contemplating diving in Indonesia, Malaysia or Thailand. Where is Sipadan? Raja Ampat? Komodo? Richelieu Rock? Maps make it easy to pinpoint dive destinations and travel routes. Destination and 250 dive site descriptions (with tables on depth, visibility and currents) help you determine whether you'll see big fish in the blue or pygmy seahorses in the muck. From the isolated Spice Islands in Indonesia to the bargain lovers' Puerto Galera in the Philippines, there are sites to suit every diver's price range and budget.



The Tierneys also list personal opinions and anecdotes of the area from experts and other divers, and they give a lot of supplemental information such as travel advice, health tips, topside attractions, and resort and liveaboard descriptions. 336

pages, paperback, 8 x 7 inches, \$30 list price. Order at www.undercurrent.org, get the best price Amazon has to offer and our profit will go to preserving coral reefs.

exceptions, it covers most any eventuality, including job loss. It costs 40 to 50 percent more than a standard trip policy, and you may only get refunded up to 75 percent of your trip cost but if anything goes awry, you are better protected.

Travel Guard, Travel Insured and TravelSafe have deadlines of within 14 days of the date you made your initial trip deposit or payment (the CSA Freestyle Luxe's policy deadline is no later than 24 hours after your initial trip payment). The plans also require that you insure all prepaid trip costs subject to cancellation penalties or restrictions, and also insure within seven days of the payment the cost of any subsequent arrangements added to your trip. "If you insure an amount less than your total pre-paid trip costs that are subject to cancellation penalties or restriction, there will be no coverage available as a 'cancel for any reason' benefit," says Dasseos. Also, you must cancel your trip more than 48 hours prior to your scheduled departure date.

When Your Dive Trip Goes Bad

Divers usually have two big questions about bad-case scenarios on dive trips. What happens if my plane arrives late and the liveboard has left? And what happens if bad weather wipes out my dive trip?

Before you buy a policy, you need to be clear on what will trigger the plan's coverage for your protection. For example, most of Travel Guard's trip cancellation/interruption policies typically cover flight cancellations due to bad weather conditions, labor strikes and airlines' financial default, but not carrier-caused mechanical problems. That is something to keep in mind if you are going to exotic locales like Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. The more remote the dive site, the less frequently planes fly there. Those local airlines are not very predictable and schedules are erratic and sometimes ignored. Insurance is a good idea because if you miss the flight to pick up a liveboard in the Galapagos or Costa Rica, you're out of luck -- they won't wait for you. And don't expect refunds from the liveboard if a missed, late or canceled plane leaves you in the lurch. Peter Hughes' standard policy, for example, is that cancellations inside of 60 days, including no-shows, are non-refundable.

Trip cancellation or interruption for bad weather doesn't cover rainy days in Cozumel when you can't dive. You won't have much fun, but unless the bad weather prevents you from

getting there, you won't have a valid claim. Also important: If you see a hurricane bearing down on your destination, you can't cancel your trip and expect insurance to cover it. Your airline or travel supplier has to be who cancels it. However, if your destination is under an official hurricane warning, you are usually covered if you cancel within 24 hours of departure.

Now say you go on your scheduled dive trip to the Turks & Caicos or the Caymans after the storm hit. If the dive resort is inhabitable but isn't what you expected or there are damaged facilities, travel insurance won't cover you. It's the responsibility of the travel supplier to make any adjustments.

Think Before You Buy

There are a few diver-specific trip insurance policies to check out. Dan's Travel Guard plan covers 100 percent of tour costs for trip cancellations, 150 percent of the costs for trip interruption, \$20,000 for medical expenses but no emergency evacuation. PADI's Travel Protection plan covers trip cancellation/interruption costs up to \$10,000 per person, \$10,000 in medical costs and \$50,000 for emergency evacuation. DiveAssure offers Gold, Platinum and Diamond packages that combine dive-accident coverage with trip insurance, but it's only the Diamond that offers good coverage for travel cancellations and interruptions. It pays up to \$25,000 for cancellations, \$37,500 for interruptions and up to \$1 million for medical expenses and evacuations.

Before you purchase trip insurance, write down the situations for which you may need it. If you think you might have to leave a trip early to care for an ailing family member, make sure that's included. If you're concerned that a dive operator may not be financially solvent, book through a travel agent who is on top of things. Get trip insurance through your travel agent, or online through InsureMyTrip.com or TripInsuranceStore.com to ensure you are dealing with a reputable company. All insurance companies have a toll-free number you can call to ask staff representatives as many questions as you need with. Do that to make sure your butt is fully covered in case the worst happens before you leave or during your trip.

- - Vanessa Richardson

Flotsam & Jetsam

Undercurrent Blogs and Bulletin Board. We've started running blogs on our Web site, and more will come. You can read original pieces by the likes of Burt Jones and Maurine Shimlock, Bret Gilliam, John Bantin, Doc Vikingo, even me, Ben Davison. Or go to our online bulletin board, post your questions, advise others, run a commentary. Take advantage of the *Undercurrent* community at www.undercurrent.org.

Far-Reaching Lawsuit Against The Aggressor Fleet. In May 2003, two divers disappeared on a dive from the *Okeanos*

Aggressor off Costa Rica's Cocos Island. They were never found. This April, a lawsuit by the family of one missing diver, citing negligence among other things, was heard in New Orleans. The *Aggressor Fleet* prevailed on all charges but one. The jury hung on that one, and it will be retried in August. When the final verdict is in, we will provide a full report.

Karuru Dive Voyage Owner Dies. Tragically, Sascha Dambach, the fellow who owned the *Cheng Ho* along with his wife, Lisa, died in a motorbike accident in Bali on March 21. In Dive Karuru's monthly newsletter, Lisa says the team she and Sascha built will continue to run cruises. We hear general



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manager Stein Zahl is now in charge of diving operations.

Seven-Foot Octopus in 14-Inch Box.

Staff at the New England Aquarium were stunned when Truman, an 18-month-old octopus, squeezed himself into a 14-inch square box in March. He pushed his 30 pounds of mass through a two-inch hole on the locked box, which contained a smaller box filled with crabs. Because Truman usually unlocks box latches to free his food, his caretaker gives him boxes within boxes to keep him active and challenged but apparently Truman got impatient. He stayed inside the box for 30 minutes without penetrating the food box, although he often saves food for nighttime.

How Long Have They Got? While the Maldive Islands has some of the world's best diving, a future generation of divers will need to take a liveaboard from India to reach the area. A NASA model estimates that global sea levels have a rise of up to 80 feet by 2100, assuming that feedback mechanisms will accelerate melting in Greenland and Antarctica. Conservative scientists predict only a rise of 4.5 feet by 2100, still enough to put most of the island country underwater.

Shy Diver. On an Indonesia liveaboard trip, reader Wilt Nelson (Leesburg, FL) recalls a diver in his 40s who was very finicky. "On the dinghy return trip from a dive, he

complained of having to urinate and wished we would hurry back to the mother ship. He said he had never urinated in his wetsuit but would need to now as we were still 10 minutes from the big boat; could we put him in the water? So we stopped and he dropped into the water. After five minutes of difficulty in 'starting,' he asked us not to watch him or he couldn't go. We turned our heads but that still wasn't 'satisfactory,' so we had to motor 100 yards away and not look at him. Finally, he accomplished his task and we resumed the return trip. Lucky there were no other boats in the area or he would still be in the water trying to go."

Caymans' 11 Deaths in 16 Months. The Caymans get top marks for Caribbean diving but has more than its share of dive-related deaths. In 2008, eight divers and snorkelers died. This year, it has been two snorkelers and a diver. The most recent death was Brendan Neilson, 58, from Colorado Springs, CO. He was on a Divers Down boat on April 28 with four other divers and disappeared during the dive. The 911 center got a call from a fishing boat, reporting it had found a diver floating off Dolphin Pointe, West Bay. Moments later, 911 got a call from Divers Down reporting Neilson as missing. CPR was unsuccessful, and Neilson was pronounced dead at the hospital. All the divers and snorkelers who died so far in 2008 and 2009 were over age 45.

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 \$78 a year (addresses in Mexico, add \$20; all other foreign addresses, add \$35).

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