

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

April 2010

Vol. 25, No. 4

Silver Bank, Dominican Republic

swimming with humpbacks: sometimes exciting but worth the boredom?

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Dear Fellow Diver:

Each year between early February and mid-April, up to 5,000 North Atlantic humpback whales migrate to Silver Bank, a 300-square-mile portion of the 1,000-square-mile Marine Mammal Sanctuary in the Dominican Republic. For eight weeks, Conscious Breath Adventures runs whale expeditions, chartering the Peter Hughes Sun Dancer II, which ordinarily operates in Belize.

I was excited last November when I booked my February trip. But when mid-January rolled around, I was not looking forward to going. My reluctance had a lot to do with the devastation in Haiti. Substantial relief was getting to Haiti through the Dominican Republic, and I didn't want to be taking up luggage space on a plane carrying relief supplies. With the adjacent country in dire straits, going to the D.R. for fun just didn't feel right.

Then two weeks out, I received the dreaded waiver and release form from Peter Hughes, with instructions to sign and return immediately. (And if I didn't, then what?) I thought about what I had read in Undercurrent concerning several divers' experience with release forms and considered challenging the negligence clauses. Hmmm. A week later, a second waiver and release arrived from Conscious Breath Adventures, along with its trip information. I knew the whale trip was strictly snorkeling with no scuba offered but the preparation material was written for people who don't even know how to snorkel. That added to my waning interest. Oh well, the trip was paid for, so I left as scheduled but without much enthusiasm.



So Close and Yet So Hard to Snorkel With



As it turned out, my fellow passengers aboard -- four German, one French, two from China and 10 Americans -- were all certified divers who booked directly with Peter Hughes and learned later that Conscious Breath Adventures was in charge. We were welcomed aboard by Captain James and First Officer Marnie, and shown to our cabins. I had been on Sun Dancer II when it was new in the water back in 1996, and it's a very comfortable, sturdy and well-run boat. My cabin was clean but showed signs of deferred maintenance. I had asked for a king-size bed but when the twins were pushed together, the cabin got tight, causing an inconvenient squeeze between bed and bathroom.

We spent the first morning in a lengthy orientation and learning "The Silver Bank Ten Commandments," a combination of the Marine Sanctuary and Conscious Breath's rules for swimming with humpbacks. Do not splash. Keep fins below the water. Swim smoothly and calmly. Follow the guide. Stay together as a group. Don't position yourself over the whales. Breathe gently and become a "jellyfish" to attract the whales' curiosity. Don't get behind the tail flukes. Don't swim directly at a whale. And never reach out and try to touch one. Although it wasn't one of the written commandments, there was an 11th: Stay on the surface, and no free diving.

Then we all got into our wetsuits to practice quiet entries so that Gene Flipse of Conscious Breath Adventures, assisted by Jeff Pantukhoff of The Whaleman Foundation, could test our skills in using a snorkel, clearing a mask and swimming without splashing. Novices often come on these whale trips and orientation is geared to those without experience. Gene then laid out the routine: into the skiffs at 8:15 a.m.; hunting for or in the water with whales until 11:30; return to the boat for lunch at noon; into the skiffs again at 1:15 p.m., searching and swimming with whales until 5:30; then back to the boat for a sundowner at 5:45. I was facing more than three captive hours in the morning and four in the afternoon encased in my wetsuit. That would be okay if most of that time was spent in the water, but it wasn't.

On the first afternoon, the skiffs took us out three miles hunting for whales. We observed plenty of spouts, breaches, flukes and backs, but Gene didn't want us in the water until he determined the situation was right, preferably with a mom and new calf. We were all on the lookout for four hours but never made it into the water. The next morning, it was the same -- looking but no swimming. This was getting boring. Finally, the second afternoon produced an opportunity about three hours into the search: an adult male and female, both more than 40 feet long, sleeping but coming to the surface to breathe. We got in the water for a good look. However, the experience was marred by Roger, a "me firster" with a big camera who pushed the rest of us around in the water. He also ignored the rules against free diving and swimming directly at the whales. Things picked up one afternoon when, after following a mom and calf from in the skiff for an hour, we were able to get in the water with a 50-foot singing humpback. The sound actually vibrated my body, which was exhilarating!

Fellow passengers Bud, Diane, Chuck and Laura had taken several whale trips in Tonga, aboard the Nai'a, and smugly compared them. In Tonga, the mother boat followed a mile or two behind the skiffs so that it was easy to get back to it between whale encounters; at Silver Bank, the mother boat remains at anchorage. In Tonga, upon sighting whales, it was often possible to get in the water from the big boat; that's not an option at Silver Bank. In Tonga, because the big boat was live, it was able to cover many miles of the area in search of whales; at Silver Bank, the skiffs could only manage three or four miles from the big boat. In Tonga, skiffs



Sun Dancer's Skiff

were fast and could get to a sighting quickly; at Silver Bank, speed is limited by Marine Sanctuary rules and skiffs averaged three knots. In Tonga, there were several sightings and opportunities to get in the water each morning; at Silver Bank, we were lucky to get one sighting, and none for four out of nine opportunities. In Tonga, free diving with the whales enhanced photographic opportunities; at Silver Bank, free diving is prohibited. In Tonga, it was also possible to dive local reefs; diving is not permitted on Silver Bank (nor would I want to, as the reefs are dead and there is a paucity of marine life).

Skiff drivers John and CNN were skilled at keeping bumps, chop and spray to a minimum, but three or four hours in the skiff without getting in the water was pretty boring, downright uncomfortable and hard on the bladder, particularly for Chuck and Bud, the only guys in their 70s, who were always lobbying for a "comfort" stop. Even being in the water with whales could be boring. Lying on the surface for half an hour watching sleepers at 60 feet through murky water and waiting for them to surface, only to immediately descend again to sleep, could be classified as "swimming with the whales," I suppose, but it was more accurately "whale observation," not the encounters I was anticipating.

At least we had some fun on the skiffs. Three or more males fighting over one female are called a rowdy group. We weren't going into the water with the rowdies, but were hoping to observe them up close. As we approached one rowdy group, it calmed down so we hung around. Ben suggested hurling whale insults to rile them up again and yelled, "Your mother looks like a dolphin!" The insult worked, but not the way we wanted -- they quickly moved off. We also passed the time telling diving stories. Bud had the most, but Roger won with his tale of being lost in the Maldives and drifting for five hours until rescued.

In the evenings, Gene lectured about humpbacks and their behavior. We learned how the markings distinguish them, that adult males ranging from 49 to 52 feet are smaller than females at 52 to 56 feet, and about Silver Bank and humpback migration. Jeff showed videos of his research on humpback social sounds; he was among those instrumental in preserving San Ignacio Lagoon in Baja as a sanctuary for grey whales.

Chef Jerry prepared outstanding meals, and galley assistant Barbara served them graciously. Dinners were elegant, four-course, sit-down affairs, complete with table linen and wine. I dined on entrees such as pan-seared fish and curried chicken, accompanied by tasty soups, crisp salads, fresh vegetables and just-baked bread. Late afternoon sundowners, complete with creative appetizers, were well attended. At one, Ben consumed a couple of double rums followed by several glasses of wine with dinner. He promptly fell asleep and awoke the next morning with his fingernails and toenails painted iridescent blue. He accused Kathy of having done the deed -- her nails were the same blue--but she swore her polish fell into the hands of Grant, Ben's trip companion. For the rest of the week, Kathy and Grant kept devising new ways to prank each other and it was all pretty funny, especially when Grant put on his booties one morning to find them filled with ripe bananas (retaliation for having sewed Kathy's wet-suit sleeves closed).

Diver Sues After Losing Legs

Is it only a misdemeanor for a boat driver to speed into a dive flag zone, dismember a diver and then desert him? That's the penalty Roger Nicosia, ironically an emergency room doctor, will get. After a year-long investigation of a hit-and-run boating accident that crippled diver Robert Murphy, 26, from Palm Beach Gardens, the Florida State Attorney's Office charged Nicosia, 56, with a second-degree misdemeanor charge for violating navigational rules. He faces a maximum of 60 days in jail and a \$500 fine.

On January 9, 2009, Murphy was spearfishing near Port St. Lucie's Sandsprit Park with friends off the *Dykoke* when he was hit by Nicosia's 38-foot power boat, the propellers cutting up his legs. Murphy was airlifted to the hospital, where doctors amputated both his legs. Nicosia told investigators that his boat had propeller problems but the real problem was that he ignored the "diver down" flag on the *Dykoke* as he boated into its waters and sped away after the incident.

Murphy has filed a civil lawsuit charging that, besides entering the dive flag zone, Nicosia did nothing to render aid after the accident. Murphy dives today by using prosthetics but is still undergoing extensive rehabilitation.

I was anticipating.

Wind Dancer, Silver Bank, D.R.

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale

I didn't have much luck communicating with two of the Germans. Gertrud understood little English but her husband, Edgar, was adept at carrying on two conversations at once, one with me in English and the other with Gertrud, translating what I had just said. Sandra, Marilyn, Kathy, Ben and Grant laughed a lot and loudly at private jokes and their raucous laughter throughout the salon not only kept things lively but always had me wondering what I was missing. Ernest and Lia, from Shanghai, were friendly but while Lia was quiet, Ernest was quite the conversationalist, especially at sundowners when he would light up a big cigar. One day after hours in the skiff without getting in the water, Ben endeared himself to the three ladies

aboard by opining that the lack of action was because women were present. Then on the last afternoon, with Laura and Lia aboard and despite Ben's assessment, we experienced the best encounter of the trip -- a spectacular four minutes in the water with a 55-foot-long female showing off her 20-foot-long baby. Ben insisted his remark was merely droll humor but the women weren't moved.

Although swimming with the whales was managed the only way it can possibly be handled at Silver Bank, and there were moments of exhilaration and a few good photos, I was mostly a bored, uncomfortable captive for hours on the skiff, and rather disappointed with the whole experience. If I ever want to try swimming with humpbacks again, I think I'll book a trip to Tonga.

--S.M.

Note from Ben: We received a reader report from Ted Kern (Dallas, TX) who took the Turks & Caicos Aggressor to Silver Bank in March and reports equally strict rules. "Entry in the water was tightly controlled by the crew, they no longer allow you to free dive with the whales. To have an in-water encounter, there had to be a mother asleep below, with a baby coming up for air. The baby had to even descend back down to Mom before we could enter the water. Several times, we would get close to a couple that were moving slowly and spending lots of time on the surface, but we were not able to get in the water with them. In short, we were on Zodiacs for a total of 36 hours but spent 10 minutes in the water! What a difference from our last trip to Silver Bank in 2003, when we were in the water at every possible opportunity."

Kern believes the changes are due to an incident in 2007, when two snorkelers, also aboard the T&C Aggressor, were struck by a whale's tail after bumping into her calf. A current moved Randy and Gwen Thornton from Utah closer than intended, pushing them right into the whales. One tail flip hit Gwen in the back and sent her sailing 20 feet, the other gave Randy a broken leg. The incident made news after Randy was interviewed on Good Morning America - - and apparently changed the rules at Silver Bank since. "For the price you pay, you might as well go to Hawaii and do a whale-watching tour," says Kern.



Diver's Compass: I spent \$3,145 for the 7-day trip, which did not include transfers to and from the boat, or dinner on the last night . . . We had a couple of partially sunny days but mostly wind, clouds and rain showers, which hampered photography . . . Water temperature was consistently 77 degrees, and air temps ranged from 70 to 80 degrees; visibility was poor, just 15 to 30 feet . . . Continental flies to Puerto Plata through Newark; Delta flies through

Atlanta . . . Three boats have permits to bring passengers to Silver Bank: Sun Dancer II, Turks & Caicos Explorer II and Turks & Caicos Aggressor; all three were there and they remained moored . . . Wine, beer and soft drinks are complimentary; those who wanted hard liquor brought their own . . . The only extra charges are purchases from the boutique and crew tips . . . Website: ConsciousBreathAdventures.com

Oman, Fiji, Hawaii, Bahamas...

need a change of pace? check out these dive sites and operators

Musandam Peninsula, Oman. While European divers have dived forever in the Middle East, Americans are just beginning to have a look. Dan Clements (Everett, WA) spent two weeks in November diving the northern portion of the Musandam Peninsula, which forms the southern side of the Straits of Hormuz. Visibility ran from 30 to 45 feet and the water was 77 to 81 degrees. “My first week was with Extra Divers in Khasab, the second as part of a Reef Check study with Biosphere. After a multi-day check out, I was allowed to solo dive with my photography gear. The crew were exceptional and so was the diving -- lots of endemics, including rays, dolphins, nudis and some of the most pristine coral I have ever seen. There are hundreds of miles of coastline, but just one operator in the area. The only other divers we encountered were on the southeast side of the Peninsula, originating from Dibba. Khasab is an easy three-hour drive from Dubai.” (www.musandam-diving.com; www.reefcheck.org)

Astrolabe Reef, Fiji. First, there was a serious cyclone in March and while we have no reports of significant damage to dive operations, you might check in before you go. That said, for the best combination of value and time spent, Fiji is a good place for Americans to get a serious taste of Indo-Pacific diving. Let us direct you to two operations diving the Astrolabe Reef.

Sandy Falen (Topeka, KS) went with Mai Dive in November, with visibility up to 120 feet and water averaging 74 degrees. “An all-inclusive dive resort on Ono Island, part of the Kadavu group in southern Fiji. After the 11-hour Air Pacific crossing from LAX to Nadi, and a five-hour layover at a nearby hotel, I took a one-hour flight on Pacific Sun, Air Pacific’s affiliate, to Kadavu. Mai Dive picks up its guests at the airport for the 90-minute boat trip to Ono. The bungalows are simple but lovely, with wonderful beds and modern facilities. Food was outstanding, with local dishes and fresh fish, hamburgers and pizza. Service was warm and efficient. Home-baked bread or rolls at every meal. Organic produce is grown on site so there was always fresh fruit and veggies. The Astrolabe Reef surrounds Ono on three sides. Boat trips were generally 10 to 15 minutes. Dive sites included bommies punctuated with stunning swim-throughs, pinnacles and drifts along walls encrusted with gorgeous soft corals. We saw sharks on nearly every dive, sea snakes, Napoleon wrasse, schooling barracuda, giant morays and a wide variety of colorful tropicals such as fire dartfish, anthias, anemone fish, Moorish idols, triggers, and unicornfish. We did a few drift dives but only once was the current ripping. Dive crew were professional and safety-conscious but also good-humored and a lot of fun. I made all of my arrangements via email and fax, with inquiries answered promptly. I’ve spent more on Caribbean trips but for exotic beauty and pristine diving, it’s hard to beat the South Pacific.” (www.maidive.com)

Debbie Pasich (San Diego, CA) dived the Astrolabe Reef with Mad Fish Dive Center at Matava Resort in November. “Dive sites were anywhere from a 10- to 30-minute ride and surface intervals. Outside the reef there was always an ocean swell, between two and three feet. Inside the reef was calm but because the weather was unseasonably windy, we usually had some surface chop. I dove Manta Reef twice, with no less than ten mantas total. At Eagle’s Rock, at least 25 white-tip, black-tip and gray reef sharks of various sizes were schooling together in the reef inlet. Japanese Gardens had a beautiful assortment of soft corals. Besides the largest variety of butterfly fish I’ve ever seen, I saw a dolphin, a Napoleon wrasse, a sea snake, several lionfish, octopus, turtles, giant clams, eels, clownfish and stunning nudibranchs. With traditional thatched bures tucked into the mountainside of Kadavu Island, Matava is a beautiful place to get away from it all.

The Problem with Online Dive Logs

Reader David Wilson (Mundelein, IL) logged his dives online at MyDiveBook.com, but the last time he went to do so earlier this year, he got a shock – the website was no longer there. “I haven’t been able to get any response to my e-mails,” he wrote us. “How do I get my hundreds of dives back?”

When we went to MyDiveBook’s website, it had a message from its host server, iPower, saying the site had been suspended. When we clicked on iPower’s “contact us directly” link, it sent us to a page with a “Past Due” in the URL address. Oops, did MyDiveLog forget to pay its bills? An iPower sales rep told us the account may have been suspended because of billing issues. It’s not because its owner forgot about the website, because a technical rep confirmed he had recently renewed MyDiveBook’s domain name. After digging

a little deeper, we found out MyDiveBook’s administrator is a Chris Steele in Shelby, BC, but he has not returned our calls or e-mails.

So unfortunately, David, those dives you logged may be lost permanently. If you want to find an online substitute, sites that look frequently used by divers are DiveExchange (www.diveexchange.com) and DiveRecord (www.diverecord.com). However, you run the risk of those sites going black, too. DiveLogOnline was a popular site once but now it also is defunct.

If you don’t want to carry a paper log book around, the better bet is to download dive log software onto your computer. Notable ones we found (Windows only, no Mac version) are SharkPoint (\$25; www.dreamdives.org) and Scubase Dive Log (\$49; www.scubase.net). Readers probably will write in with their suggestions. That way, you’re guaranteed to see your dive log every time you turn on the computer.

The newest (honeymoon) bure at the top of the hill (94 stairs of various sizes to climb) has an absolutely spectacular view. It’s an eco-resort and a majority of the power is supplied by solar so leave your hairdryer at home. Maggie, the resort host, has a unique style of hospitality and makes sure that you feel welcome. All the homemade breads were terrific. Lunches were varied and dinners ranged from satisfactory to quite good with excellent flavors. Soups were extraordinary. This close to New Zealand you will likely be served lamb for at least one dinner.” (www.matava.com).

Blue Wilderness, Hawaii. Looking for an alternate operation on the Big Island? Dan Clements (Everett, WA) says, “I’ve dived with 10 different Kona operators and Blue Wilderness is one of the best, especially if you’re staying in the Waikoloa area. It is located in Queen’s Marketplace and launches a few miles north at Paniao. Diving is off a zodiac. I found the coral, fish and invertebrates much better here than at Kailua dive locations. At one point, I was diving lava tubes with whales ‘talking’ 100 yards away. The tubes amplified the sound and it was magical. Turtle cleaning stations, lots to see, good operation.” (www.divebluewilderness.com)

Anguilla. It’s one of those tony Caribbean islands that rarely gets ink about diving. Daniel Spitzer (Piermont, NY) reports, “I have been visiting Anguilla for some 17 years now and have seen the progressive degradation of the entire Caribbean reef system, from Grand Turk in the north to Curacao in the south. That said, if your travels take you to Anguilla, by all means dive with Anguillian Divers. Small, intimate and personal, they have decent equipment and friendly smiles. One of my favorite dives anywhere is Blowing Rock - - amazing underwater topography, variable conditions (crashing waves on one side, calm on the other) and routine sighting of pelagics - - turtles, spotted eagle rays, even 10-plus minutes with a dolphin two years ago. Ask for this dive by name. Another fun dive, especially for newer divers, is the *Osterdeep* wreck, covered with orange cup coral and teeming with barracuda, jacks, large lobsters, etc.” (www.anguilliandiver.com)

Cape Eleuthera Resort, Bahamas. Mark Miller (Dallas, TX) tells us that if you’re an experienced diver grown weary of being told how long to dive or to change your diving profile to accommodate “beginning” divers, try Cape Eleuthera’s dive operation. “Neal Watson has a passion for diving that is reflected in how much freedom he gives his customers. His first question is, ‘What kind of diving do you like?’ From there, the whole process revolves around the diver. The water is beautiful in this area of the Bahamas, with excellent visibility. There are numerous wall dives at 100-plus feet, the top of the reef is perfect for shallower dives. The coral is in good shape and numerous fish abound. The resort is very secluded with luxurious two-bedroom condos and also offers biking, hiking, snorkeling, fishing and tennis.” (www.capeeleuthera.com)

San Carlos, Mexico. Ed Raver (Tijeras, NM) tells us that travel to San Carlos on the Sea of Cortez is now a “hassle-free zone,” the same as travel to Rocky Point farther north. “No visa required all the way to Guaymas. Diving was fine, but visibility was limited unless you went deeper. There, it was 80-plus feet. Lots of very playful sea lions. Water temperature was 74 degrees; I was in a 5-mil and was fine. Turtles, octopus and all the other usual critters. The Mexican people were just great and very hospitable. English is widely spoken. Night dives are available. For dive trips, contact Desert Divers in Tucson, AZ, a five-hour drive away.” (www.desertdivers.com)

-- Ben Davison

Can You Name Your Price for Dive Gear?

it's officially taboo...unless you know how to ask

In an issue last year of the Australian dive magazine *Dive Log Australasia*, Oceanic Australia issued a paid full-page apology for “price fixing.” That’s not a typical ad you’d see in a U.S. dive magazine. What gives? We contacted *Dive Log Australasia* publisher Barry Andrewartha for the details.

“Yes, we did print the ad from Oceanic Australia, under the direction of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC). Under pressure from one of its dive shop dealers, Oceanic Australia had sent an e-mail to a rival dive shop asking it not to sell one of its products below a certain price. When it was brought to its attention that this was illegal, Oceanic immediately re-emailed the dive shop to advise that it could sell the product for whatever price it wanted to. The ACCC got involved and while Oceanic was never charged with an offense, it did have to place a full-page ad in *Dive Log* to advise the diving community about what had happened!”

Andrewartha says divers are at a disadvantage because the gear manufacturers have given dive shops too much power. “The dealers have been able to dictate to the suppliers who they can supply, and how much profit margin they want to make. If another shop is selling a product at a lower price, the dealer will give the supplier a hard time to force the other shop to raise the price or else cut off supply to that shop. This is true not only in Australia, but in the U.S. as well.

“Look at the recent vote by the dive industry whether to allow the public into the big Diving Equipment and Marketing Association (DEMA) show last November. It was OK’d by everyone but the dive shops (guess who won). They don’t want any competition. This does not happen in Asia or Europe.”

Here in the U.S., price fixing and thwarting open competition are forbidden by the Sherman Antitrust Act. Still, dealers are forced to abide by some pricing rules set by dive equipment manufacturers if they want to sell the gear. Bill Gornet, owner of Dive Las Vegas and the Internet gear retailer OnlineScuba.com, told us many manufacturers give their dealers a price sheet with “Manufacturers’ Suggested Retail Price” or MSRP. “It essentially means, ‘Here is the price we suggest, but you can charge what you need for your own profit margin.’” But major brands like Oceanic, Scubapro, Sherwood and TUSA require Minimum Advertised Pricing (MAP), meaning dealers can’t sell an item for any less than that stated price.

Dealers agree to MAP because otherwise the manufacturers and suppliers won’t honor their customers’ warranties. However, the agreement comes with many stipulations. For example, some manufacturers recently announced dealers can’t offer rebates anymore. Gornet had his OnlineScuba site deduct the rebate amount at online checkout, but that is now verboten. “Dive shops can’t even offer coupons because that puts the price below the MAP.”

Dive shops also can’t run ads for gear with sentences like “pricing not shown” or “call for pricing,” because it gives the impression that dealers will negotiate a lower price with customers in person or over the phone – which they often do, usually to the customer’s advantage. “We’re not allowed to advertise it for less but if a customer calls us, what we do on the phone is a whole different story,” says Gornet. “If a customer comes in and asks about the

CSI: Cayman Islands

If you're a fan of the *CSI* shows on CBS, you may want to try putting the skills they use to work underwater. The Central Caribbean Marine Institute (CCMI) on Little Cayman just created a three-day Underwater CSI training course, certainly a first. The debut course was in March and Kate Pellow, CCMI's marketing director, says the next course will be in August.

Damage and death of reefs and marine ecosystems still doesn't get much play in court, so the Underwater CSI course was created to help identify and prosecute those who threaten reefs and marine ecosystems. It's led by Hector Cruz-Lopez, a marine biologist, professor of forensic science at the Palm Beach State College Criminal Justice Institute. Divers learn a set of protocols and techniques for investigating, documenting and analyzing underwater crime scenes.

Pellow says the course is not intended to preach about climate change's effect on the reefs, but to create a more effective way to prosecute bad guys doing damage underwater. "We're not a political organization, we're a research and education facility. The point is to understand potential threats to reefs, identify and measure specific damage to them and report these findings in a proper legal defense. Then measures can be taken to punish the guilty and hopefully prevent repetition of similar damaging actions. Reef damage and the factors attributed to it are clearly issues that need to be introduced to the legal world to ensure they're taken seriously."

If you want to play forensic scientist on an August dive trip, contact CCSI at www.reefresearch.org, or e-mail questions to ccmiapplications@reefresearch.org. The three-day course is \$1,200 and includes accommodations, all meals, airport transfer, boat, tanks and weights (nitrox is extra). A portion of the cost may be tax-deductible. But act soon because the course is limited to just eight divers.

price, we can negotiate from there. However, we do let people know that because we're an authorized dealer of the product, we have to follow the rules so that it comes with a full warranty."

MAP also lets manufacturers have the ultimate say when it's time for their gear to go on sale. The market has shrunk a bit, "so our suppliers contacted us in June and said things like, 'These three regulators are off MAP pricing, so mark them as whatever you want.'" To prevent profits from being hit too hard, manufacturers have been offering freebies or discounted rates for customers who buy more than one of their products. Like this past summer, Oceanic offered a "Bag It" special, giving away a \$200 wheeled duffle bag for free to divers who buy an Oceanic BCD, regulator, octopus and dive computer. Sherwood gave away a free pair of booties for divers who bought a mask, snorkel and fins.

Even with a rocky economy, don't expect to see dive shops offering discounts on brand-name gear – the manufacturers just won't let them, says Gornet. "They see their equipment like Louis Vuitton sees their bags – it's a premium product, and they want Joe Customer to see it as such and be willing to pay for it. They keep the price at a higher level and do everything they can not to deflate it."

There is always the Internet, where operations like LeisurePro go to great lengths to get around MAP pricing -- and get away with it. They buy their price-controlled gear from abroad (gray market gear), or get it from dive shops going out of business, and even get it from a few legitimate shops that order more than they can sell and then resell it to LeisurePro. Some people even claim that some manufacturers have back-door deals with online marketers and turn their back when they ignore the MAP. Regardless, online operators dealing in gray-market gear often offer their own warranty and, as we've reported, either repair or replace faulty equipment without a hassle.

So who has the pricing power here? Manufacturers may want their life-support gear to be as valuable as a Louis Vuitton bag, but that's harder to sustain these days. While dive shops may chafe at the rules they must follow to sell gear, they also flex their muscles as dealers, aiming to be the sole proprietor divers can use, as the smackdown of a DEMA conference "public day" shows. But now that you know how dive manufacturers and dealers work together with MSRPs and MAPs, you can use that knowledge to your advantage to see if the owner is flexible on price and that the warranty is intact (if that's important to you).

One dive shop owner who requested anonymity told us that these days, everything is negotiable. "It's challenging times for dive stores, especially when we're facing pricing pressure from the the Internet, so I for one am more willing to make a deal on equipment than I was a few years ago." He still has to adhere to manufacturers' pricing

policies, but if a product is price-protected, he can still give the customer a bargain through a “custom package” by discounting other products bought at the same time, or throwing in a few accessories.

Jack Kuhn, manager of Harbor Dive Shop in Sausalito, CA, says that from his perspective, the better a customer’s attitude and the bigger the purchase, the better the odds are of getting a deal. “We are more likely to give someone a discount who doesn’t ask for one - - somebody who is excited about an upcoming dive trip and to whom the price of what they need is secondary. We treat everyone who walks through our door the same but if the first thing a customer asks is how much of a discount can he get, or if she goes on her BlackBerry and asks us to match some price she just found online, we just won’t do it. It is discouraging for us to muster up the energy to provide quality service to someone with that kind of attitude, trying to educate someone who doesn’t see any value in our expertise and service.

“Is product price the bottom line here, or is it the reliable and friendly service your local dive store provides?” Kuhn asks. “Besides, where would divers be if they had nowhere to get their scuba tanks filled?”

Clearly, the Internet has given divers more options for buying gear and many dive shops have closed their doors. Those that remain have learned how to compete and are staying alive. At least for now.

- - Vanessa Richardson

Dive Operator Sues ScubaBoard and John Does *she wants \$10 million for libel and slander*

Search a few scuba bulletin boards on the Web and you’re bound to read comments from disgruntled divers who had a bad dive trip, felt they got the runaround from an operator, or had some other complaint to levy. Some are level-headed, others vitriolic. Some divers seem to have a good time lambasting others or reading about it, but then others may not sit still for it.

Gundi Holm, the owner of travel agency Maldives Scuba Diving, is suing Florida-based Internet forum ScubaBoard for \$10 million. A Canadian subscriber (we’ll call him James Blake) was the first to send us word of the lawsuit -- that’s because he is the only other named person Holm is suing. The other defendants are 1 to 100 John Does who wrote comments on ScubaBoard that she didn’t like.

On January 29, Holm filed a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court in Orlando, charging ScubaBoard and its users with defamation, libel, intentional infliction of emotional distress, and intentional interference with her economic relationships. This is definitely a 21st-century case, as there are few precedents of people suing Internet users for libel and defamation. But if Holm wins her case, it could mean the end of ScubaBoard, a website scores of divers use daily.

In the complaint filed by her lawyers, Holm states that for the past year and a half, “defendants have waged a systematic and devastatingly effective war of words” against her and her businesses. The tip of the spear was ScubaBoard. “Defendants have used ScubaBoard.com to lay siege to [Holm’s] good name, casting aspersions and imputing criminal actions without truth or consequences.”

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“The commanding officer of this relentless force is one ‘James Blake’, an officious, mudslinging rumormonger, who apparently has little more to do than dispense vitriol from the safety of his snowbound Canadian fortress. Blake fancies himself a white knight and champion of the truth. In reality, he is a callous debaser, set on nothing less than destroying [Holm’s] reputation and business.” While they don’t know the true names and identities of

the John Does, Holm's lawyers believe each one is a person and responsible by participating in and endorsing the wrongdoing. As a result, Holm has been publicly disgraced and her once-successful business crippled.

“Give This Operator the Widest Possible Berth”

When did this vitriol start? Probably back in January 2008, when Blake took a two-week dive trip on the *Baani Explorer*, the Maldives liveaboard Holm managed, and she was aboard at the time. He wrote a review of his trip for our Reader Reports. While Blake gave five stars for service and attitude, he wrote “we had more problems on this trip than all of our previous liveaboard experiences,” Problems with the compressor meant going back to town and missing five dives. Blake said he was promised those dives would be made up later in the trip but they weren't.

Then the motorboat ran aground and partially sank, and some divers lost equipment. “Gundi offered to pay for items but when we explained what was missing [\$225 in gear], we were requested to provide a revised quote that would represent a depreciated value, and questioned on the exchange-rate difference between Canadian and U.S. dollars. We were floored by the questions in light of the fact that we were told Gundi had insurance on all of this.”

When Blake sent an e-mail to Holm's main office in Austria outlining his concerns, Gundi sent an e-mail “offering compensation of \$25. Even this princely sum has never been sent to us. In her e-mail she states she has no insurance. Who to believe?”

Blake also wrote that on his trip, nine passengers were sick with nausea, headaches and upset stomachs, and he believes that it was from carbon monoxide fumes coming from the generator. “You could see and smell the exhaust rising from the back of the boat. A CO2 detector is missing from the *Baani*.”

So it must have been ironic to him when he saw news reports in May 2008 of one fatality and multiple illnesses due to carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty air compressor on the *Baani Adventure*, another Maldives liveaboard Holm was in charge of. We wrote about it in our July 2008 issue.

“Concrete Booties” Was a Bit Too Much

In her complaint, Holm says that incident is what started the slander against her on ScubaBoard. The John Does she is suing created threads dedicated to the incident and her involvement in it, containing “scurrilous allegations” against her. Here are some, included in the complaint, that offended her most:

ScubaBoard member “Leslie Finnegan,” who had been on the *Baani Explorer* in February 2008 and had issues with the boat, wrote, “Gundi in my books is ultimately responsible. She vets the operations and knows exactly what is going on. Here in Dubai she would be tried for manslaughter. And rightly so.”

“DandyDon” wrote, “Haha, pathetic. When they're killing tourists, no problem. When tourists hurt business, big problem.”

“BrianMered” wrote, “Had Gundi been present during our week on board, she would now be wearing concrete booties, an extra weight belt or two, and be thrown over the side.”

One ScubaBoard user wrote: “Pathetic. When they're killing tourists, no problem. When tourists hurt business, big problem.”

Holm and her lawyers think Blake uses several different user names and posted slanderous e-mails under those names. They also allege that ScubaBoard members “LeslieFinnegan,” “DandyDon” and others are “all agents or employees of Intermedia [ScubaBoard's owner], or made the postings at issue at Intermedia's direction. Therefore Intermedia is responsible...for the creation or development of the false and defamatory content.”

The comments, especially the one linking Holm with tanks filled with bad air, have caused her loss of business, humiliation, mental anguish, and emotional and physical distress. “As a result,” her filing states, “Holm has been labeled a liar, cheat and murderer and has been ostracized by the scuba community within which she once maintained an excellent reputation and standing.”

What's a User and What's an Employee?

We read the ScubaBoard threads Holm is upset about. While much of it is based on speculation about what happened on the *Baani Adventure*, it then turns to questions about how to do air checks on tanks and ensure safe air fills. Elsewhere on ScubaBoard are negative comments about dive trips aboard Holm's boats, not just from Blake, and they were posted before the *Baani Adventure* death in 2008.

If our knowledge of Internet chat boards serves us correctly, people who post their comments online are not officially considered agents or employees of the forum. ScubaBoard is based in Florida, "Leslie Finnegan" and "BrianMered" live in Dubai, and "DandyDon" is based in West Texas. While the members post frequently and on many topics, making them "Veteran Members," does that make them agents for ScubaBoard? Like Blake, "Leslie Finnegan" wrote about taking a bad trip on the *Baani Explorer*, but a year earlier. While he sees his comments as good advice to other divers, Holm sees them as a slam on her business.

"Anytime anyone is called a name, that is a problem. However, we do not try to vet or rule out facts."

And while Holm believes ScubaBoard is out to get her, she lists an interesting example in her filed complaint that would seem to show otherwise. When "BrianMered" wrote his post about Holm in concrete booties, ScubaBoard owner Pete Murray, who writes under the name "NetDoc," erased that post, stating, "We don't allow threats, implied or real on ScubaBoard. I also deleted a thread where you were taunting Gundi. That has no place here."

While Murray can't speak about this case, he confirmed to *Undercurrent* that he is being sued for libel. "We obviously don't agree, otherwise we would not be aggressively defending ourselves." He also told us what ScubaBoard's policy on member posts is. "Anytime anyone is called a name, that is a problem. However, we do not try to vet or rule out facts. If someone presents something as a fact, we allow the other party to give their side of the story. We do not come in between them. We keep things friendly, that's what we've always tried to do."

Holm's lawyer, Colin Hardacre of the Kaufman Law Group in Los Angeles, gave us this statement: "We are confident Ms. Holm's position will be vindicated, and her good name restored, through the judicial process. Hopefully, this lawsuit will also serve as a warning to all those who believe they can cast anonymous aspersions on the Internet with impunity."

Now It's Up to the Courts

There have been two recent cases of someone suing over disparaging comments made via the Internet. Last year, a San Francisco chiropractor sued a patient who wrote on Yelp.com that the doctor's billing practices were dishonest. The chiropractor contended that the patient's comments on Yelp were misstatements of fact and thus libelous. The patient maintained his comments were opinion and therefore constitutionally protected speech. The lawsuit was settled before it went to court and the patient went back to Yelp to write that "a misunderstanding led us to act out of hand. I chose to ignore [the doctor's] initial request to discuss my posting. In hindsight, I should have remained open to his concerns."

In 2006, a Florida woman was awarded \$11.3 million in a defamation lawsuit against a Louisiana woman who posted messages on the Internet accusing her of being a crook, a con artist and a fraud. It was the largest judgment over postings on an Internet blog or message board. The plaintiff pursued the case even though she knew the defendant had no hope of paying the money. She just wanted to make a point to those who unfairly criticize others on the Internet. "People are using the Internet to destroy people they don't like, and you can't do that," she told *USA Today*.

If Holm wins and gets even a portion of the \$10 million she's asking for, ScubaBoard, which operates on a shoe-string budget, will most likely be online no longer. The cost for defending oneself in court is high; the *National Law*

Journal says the average hourly rate for a lawyer in 2009 was \$372. Even if a case goes nowhere, it would cost a defendant tens of thousands of dollars to get it to go nowhere. Unless one has proper liability insurance, that's a lot of out-of-pocket costs. ScubaBoard members have found out about the suit and are rallying behind Murray, creating a legal defense fund (you can e-mail for details to legaldefense@scubaboard.com).

At its best, Internet blogs, forums and chat rooms represent the ultimate in free speech, giving every person a voice. But they're also the modern version of the Wild West, a growing frontier town with no sheriff. In the past, judges have given wide latitude to the type of speech posted on the Internet. They usually have cited the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which protects website owners from being held liable for postings by others. That's good news for ScubaBoard. Yet also under that statute, individuals who post messages are responsible for their content and can be sued for libel. And judges, many of whom may not know what a blog is or even use the Internet, may not think an Internet commentator is entitled to the same sort of free-speech protection as newspaper and TV journalists.

Depending on the outcome, this case could show that it's worth it for Internet users merely voicing their opinions to fight back, or it could have a chilling effect on free speech as more businesses sue - - not just for cash awards but to silence their critics.

-- Vanessa Richardson

Dive Photos: Compact or Full Frame?

our gear expert gives the pros and cons of both camera types

It seemed only yesterday that I did a side-by-side comparison test of a really good digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera against a similar quality film camera for a British magazine and found that the results from the film were so much better. Times change.

Of course there will always be advocates for using film, whatever advances are made on the digital front. One Internet pundit reckons a frame of Fuji Velvia transparency film is equivalent to a 175MB digital file, whereas I can rarely get a native raw-image camera file with more information than maybe 12MB. I can't confirm he is right but I can say that since the time of my original test, digital cameras have progressed to the point that few people now shoot film underwater. The fact of the matter is that digital image gathering has made photography very easy, and easy is what is needed when you are underwater, short of time and with a mind befuddled by breathing gases under pressure.

The ability to shoot raw image files is essential for top-quality pictures because it allows you to make so many photographic decisions on your computer long after you took the picture. That way, you can concentrate on focus, composition and grabbing the moment. High-quality results suitable for reproduction in print are then assured.

I've been using good quality digital cameras for a few years now. I started with a Fuji S2 Pro DSLR and progressed to a Nikon D200, simply for the bigger viewfinder and LCD monitor. Both cameras give excellent results that have been reproduced in endless calendars, books and double-page magazine spreads. So I admit that today's DSLRs are up to the job that maybe the first ones were not.

Spending a lot of time in the company of other divers, I get to see what they are using. Many amateur divers use compacts. I was seduced by a little Canon G9 compact (now there's a G11) and bought one. I had visions of myself checking in at airline counters with my underwater camera in my pocket rather than facing the long arguments about the weight of my DSLR kit. I had visions of swapping seamlessly from wide-angle to macro during a dive, which you can do with a compact digital camera. Though it is a compact, the G9 is a proper camera with a good lens that has full manual controls and can shoot raw files without a very long delay while it writes them.

Self-Rescue Tips from Readers

Our readers are a helpful and resourceful bunch. After publishing two recent stories about dive rescue and safety methods, your tips keep coming about the best ways to flag down help when the dive boat is not waiting at the surface.

Regarding our “Cell Phones as Safety Tool” article in January, Jim Rogers (Silverdale, WA) recommended a McMurdo Dive canister to house a “Come Get Me” kit. “The canister (www.mcmurdo.co.uk) is good down to 500 feet and can mount right on your BC tank strap or be carried in a pouch mounted to your BC or leg. I had mine modified by adding a four-inch section so that my Standard Horizon HX850S Marine Radio (www.standardhorizon.com) will fit inside with the antenna attached. The radio is waterproof, has built-in GPS, emergency strobe and will squawk your position with a press of the emergency button. Personal Locator Beacons are great but once you enable them, you

can't talk to anyone so you don't know when the cavalry is coming. With the radio, at least I get the chance to call the dive boat 200 yards away in the fog without putting the Coast Guard on alert. If need be, the emergency button acts just like a PLB.”

Chuck Tribolet (Morgan Hill, CA) has his own kit for worst-case scenarios. “I dive with a lung-powered Acme Thunderer whistle (www.acmewhistles.co.uk) and a loud, tank-powered Dive Alert whistle (www.divealert.com), both attached to my BC inflator hose. A Solarforce L2 flashlight is secured next to a safety sausage on my BC strap. It has a lithium battery with a five-plus-year shelf life, and its only job is to attract the Coast Guard helicopter after the sun goes down (www.sbfashlights.com). I have two Orion SkyBlazer II boat flares in a UL SL6 flashlight housing to attract a helicopter or boat's attention, even in daylight (www.orionsignals.com). I wouldn't dive without this gear in anything bigger than a duck pond.”

DSLR cameras use a buffer to allow almost continual shooting, whereas most compacts make you wait to take the next shot while the process of recording takes place. In the meantime, you miss the next shooting opportunity. The bigger the file, the longer this takes. Raw files record virtually everything picked up by the camera's image-gathering sensor and with the right software on your computer, you can make a lot of the decisions about technique after the event. The sky's the limit. That suits the under-pressure underwater photographer.

The Canon G9 produces pictures of remarkably high quality. If such a compact had been available when I went over to digital photography, I might well have started with a camera like the Canon G9. It is only spoiled by the typical time lag between pressing the shutter release and getting the picture.

Have you noticed that modern-day compact shooters on land now employ the techniques worthy of Victorian photographers when they take pictures of their friends? Hold it! Then the picture is taken. The spontaneity has gone out of it. I tried taking candid pictures of my kids on a beach but was left with lots of shots of patches of sand where they had been when I pressed the button. This is a problem with all compacts because they need to stop writing to the LCD viewfinder and write to the memory card. It virtually disqualifies it as a camera for photographing fast-moving subjects like fishes. I might have got used to it if I'd persevered but I just got shots of the vacant places where fishes had been when I pressed the button. I still use the G9 for certain surface shots. Hold it! Otherwise, compacts are really good for static subjects and personal snaps only.

You will probably expect me to start talking about megapixels. This is marketing hype manufacturers use to protest that their cameras are better than the competition. It was relevant not so long ago, when a one-megapixel camera was really something. My Canon G9 employs more megapixels than any other camera I use but that doesn't mean it takes higher-quality pictures. My Nikon D200 takes better quality pictures than the G9, and that's considering optical performance, pixilation, digital noise or grain and dynamic range. How come? The compact has a tiny little sensor the size of your pinky nail that it crams all the information out of, resulting in a great deal of digital noise or grain if anything higher than the lowest ISO (light sensitivity) setting is used.

The Nikon D200 is a DX (Digital Index) camera. It has a sensor around the size of an APS-size piece of film. When I first went over to digital image gathering, I used a Fuji S2 Pro, also a DX camera. Because the frame is smaller than a regular 35mm frame of film, I found that I needed DX-rated wide-angle lenses when I first went digital. This is because a 50mm lens on a DX camera has the same angle-of-view as a 75mm lens on a full-frame film camera. This meant added expense. However, DX cameras can use lenses of the highest optical performance, and digital noise is far less of a problem than with a compact unless you need ISO settings higher than, say, ISO400.

I still use DX cameras with their DX-rated wide-angle lenses, and am very happy with the results. Yet, finding myself in the company of other underwater photographers, I started feeling avaricious towards those who used FX (another way of saying full-frame) digital cameras that had a sensor the size of a full frame of film. What were they getting that I was missing? I bit the bullet, raided my retirement fund and splashed out on a Nikon D700 FX camera with a housing to suit.

What did I achieve? Firstly, I need a full-frame fish-eye lens to get the same angle-of-view that I was used to. Full-frame gives a shallower depth-of-field but that was no problem because I simply up-rated the ISO to get the smaller lens opening needed for the same effect.

With DX, I normally use ISO100, whereas with FX, I use ISO400. One thing the full-frame camera allows you to do is increase the ISO to amazingly high light sensitivities, such as ISO4000, without the picture becoming affected by digital noise or grain, and ISO1000 is 10 times more light-sensitive than ISO100. Noise is caused by electrical interference between the pick-ups on the sensor, and it is more apparent when lots of pick-ups are crammed together in a small space. An FX sensor is many times bigger than that of a compact camera and so for the same number of megapixels, it will produce less noise. This means the light-sensitivity levels can be jacked up without grain. You can set an FX camera at ISO 6400 without too much ill effect. Even higher ISO settings are available.

Because of this, I had the delusion that I would be able to dispense with my underwater flashguns and use these very high ISO settings. Conditions underwater are not just about low light levels, though. The color of the light is affected and if I wanted anything more than monochromatic pictures at depth, I found I needed to take some white light (in the form of an underwater flash) with me. Not only that but natural light is always flat and from above, and is not very interesting. I had to dispense with one of my photography skills, that is, the ability to light something in an interesting way.

So I was back to the use of flashguns, or strobe lights, with my FX camera just as I do with the DX setup. For example, I use ISO400. I now have two underwater camera setups that I use in tandem. One uses an APS-size frame (DX) and the other full-frame (FX). The quality, for the majority of underwater shots, is indistinguishable. The FX camera is fantastic in low light conditions, however, with light sensitivity settings like ISO6400. That's 640 times more light-sensitive than ISO100. It really comes into its own when photographing my kid's school play. It's just a pity it costs so much!

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.K. and the U.S., and makes around 300 dives per year for that purpose. He is also a professional underwater photographer.

Risk Factors for Dive Deaths

how older women differ from younger men in dive problems

Among divers, the three top risk factors for diving deaths are running out of air, buoyancy problems and rapid ascents -- and often times, these factors can happen concurrently. But what's the biggest cause for those factors to happen -- the diver, his equipment or the overall dive environment?

To determine which has a greater impact, researchers Richard Vann, Petar Denoble and Richard Dunford of Divers Alert Network, along with Peter Buzzacott of the University of Western Australia, collected data via surveys taken by divers making dives from liveboards, day boats and shore between 1995 and 2004 in the Caribbean, Grand Cayman and Scapa Flow. Overall, they collected data on 452,582 recreational dives with air or nitrox made by 5,046 adults. They published the results in the journal *Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine*.

The three problems -- air, buoyancy and ascent -- were classified as human (diver) or diving (environmental/equipment) factors. Human factors included age, sex and certification level. Diving factors included dive time, maximum depth, air used, boat or shore dive, water temperatures and strenuousness of the dive.

Running out of air was reported by 65 divers (1.4%), 223 divers had buoyancy problems (4.7%) and 235 divers had rapid ascents (7%). Divers who reported running out of air at least once were slightly older than the average age of all divers (42) and more than twice as likely to be female. Divers with buoyancy problems were also likely to be female and slightly older, plus more likely to have just a basic diver certification. On the other hand, divers making rapid ascents were mostly male, slightly younger than the norm and more likely to have advanced certification or specialty training.

Based on diving factors, running out of air happened on slightly deeper, slightly shorter dives (averaging 22 feet for 45 minutes) from liveaboard or charter boats. Dives with buoyancy problems were more likely to have been made from boats, used air instead of nitrox, and were reported as strenuous. Rapid-ascent dives shared all the above factors, except they happened at shallower depths (an average of 21 feet).

If this was an accurate estimate of problems on a dive boat, that makes a total of 201 problems per year, or an average of one event per dive day.

So overall, older women ran out of air and reported buoyancy problems, while younger men had rapid ascents more often. It's curious how the increase in certification status reduced the risk of buoyancy problems but increased the risk of rapid ascents. Researchers think it may be because divers are more attentive when diving deeper, or perhaps more carefree if they can see the surface when they start their final ascent.

The most interesting finding was that all three dive problems were associated with boat dives. The weak but significant association with shorter dive times is likely a consequence of being told when to return to the boat, but strenuous dives were strongly associated with all three dive problems. Perhaps divers are being taken to sites they later discover are more challenging than anticipated, especially older divers and women who, for example, may perceive a moderate current or long surface swim to be harder work than younger men do.

The high prevalence of divers ascending faster than a commonly recommended maximum rate (3.8 %) is cause for concern, especially as the majority of those who ascended too rapidly did not report it. It's noteworthy that few people who reported a rapid ascent actually exceeded 60 feet per minute, and those who actually did rapid ascents later reported it on their survey as a problem. Of the 227 rapid-ascent dives recorded on dive computers, 88 percent were made by divers who were either unaware of their ascent rate, ascended rapidly during the dive at a time other than the final ascent, or may have defined rapid ascent differently from the researchers' criteria. Therefore, at first glance, the prevalence of these problems happening appears relatively low. To put the findings into perspective, if this were an accurate estimate of the prevalence likely to be experienced by a dive boat taking 25 divers out for two dives a day for 200 days of each year, crew could expect divers to run out of air on 18 dives, 77 divers will report buoyancy problems, 63 divers will report rapid ascents and 49 dives will show a recorded rapid ascent on the computer. That makes a total of 201 problems per year, or an average of one event per dive day. So even a low prevalence as reported here should be cause for concern aboard dive boats of all sizes.

Therefore, dive instructors should give greater emphasis during basic training to monitoring gas reserves, effective buoyancy control techniques and the importance of ascending slowly, coupled with practical methods of gauging ascent rate (like monitoring depth-per-minute rather than looking up to the surface). Also, greater emphasis upon ascent rates during training should be used to reduce ascent speeds among future divers. And dive crew should advise divers before each dive to consider the potential for physical stress.

"Dive Problems and Risk Factors for Diving Morbidity" by P. Buzzacott, P. Denoble, R. Dunford and R. Vann; Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine, December 2009, pages 205-9. This article is a condensed version of the study, and Undercurrent accepts responsibility for any errors made during editing.



The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102
Sausalito, CA 94965

Periodicals
Postage PAID
Sausalito, CA
and Additional
Mailing Offices

Undercurrent is the consumer newsletter for sport divers that reviews scuba destinations and equipment. We accept no advertising. Subscriptions in the U.S. and Canada are \$78 a year (addresses in Mexico, add \$20; all other foreign addresses, add \$35).

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

POSTMASTER:

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

**Letters to the Editor/
Submissions**

Undercurrent

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Changes**

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Printed on recycled paper 



April 2010 Vol. 25, No. 4

Flotsam & Jetsam

A Few Corrections. We have a few errors to correct from our March issue. In the *Rocio del Mar* article, our writer swam with seals, not sea lions. In the article "Our Deteriorating Coral Reefs," the resort St. George's Reef is in Belize, not Bonaire. And in the sidebar "Join the Hunt for Lionfish," Blue Magic Scuba is actually in Cozumel, not Cancun. I've been at this too long, it seems.

Contact Any Scuba Manufacturer. In our last issue, we lamented in the article "Where's Your Customer Service, Scubapro?" how some dive gear makers didn't list good contact info for themselves. Ken Kurtis, owner of Reef Seekers Dive in Beverly Hills, CA, told us that info is publicly available. "It's on my website, www.reefseekers.com. Click on the 'Merch & Mfgs' icon, and you get a list of almost every manufacturer with their phone number, fax number and website."

Thumbs Down. For that world-class photographer aboard the *Komodo Siren* last fall who, in the words of our spy, "ran across a pristine coral reef at 80 feet, fins under his arms (with extra weight) so he could position himself to get shots of manta rays passing through as they fed. I also witnessed him,

with a divemaster at his side, scooping up nudibranchs, frogfish and other creatures in a large white plastic bowl. The DM would position the animal in the bowl while he took photos so he could have an all-white background to later Photoshop the picture into any background of his choice."

See This Disney Movie. On April 22, Earth Day, Disney is releasing *Oceans*, a close-up look at marine life worldwide, using the latest film technology (meaning IMAX screens, hopefully, but probably not 3-D). Jacques Perrin and Jacques Cluzaud direct, Pierce Brosnan narrates. See the movie during its opening week, April 22-28, and a portion of your ticket sales goes to the Nature Conservancy's "Adopt a Coral Reef" program.

Pot-Smuggling Diver. A smuggler in scuba gear braved the sewers along the U.S.-Mexico border to bring cannabis into the country. Via infrared camera, Border Patrol agents watched a group approach the border fence near Douglas, AZ, one morning; one man was carrying two bundles. The group ran away when the agents approached but the man was seen in the sewer, wading through waist-high water in scuba mask and tank. He fled back to Mexico but the pot he left behind was valued at \$44,000.