

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

July 2010

Vol. 25, No. 7

Aqua Cat, The Bahamas

algae-free dive sites far from the crowds

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Dear Fellow Diver:

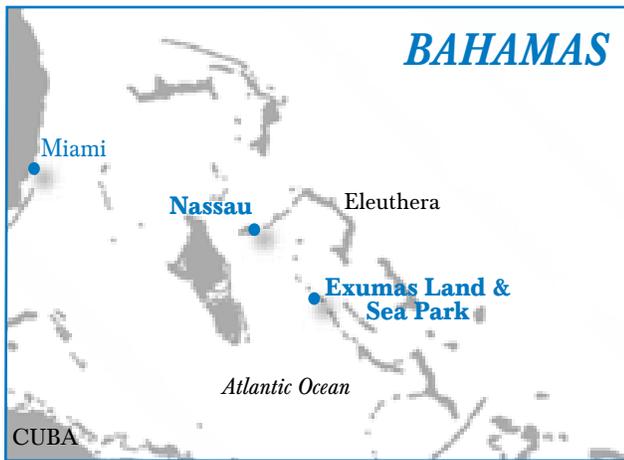
During decades of diving, I have traveled on some of the "scows" of the liveaboard world. There was cockroach-ridden *Lady of the Sea*, a Philippines liveaboard which, I am happy to say, did not sink until after my trip. I have other memories of double- and triple-stack bunk beds with a head on an upper deck, and a Cocos boat with steering problems that caused it to zigzag for the 48-hour plus voyage. When its air-conditioning broke, we all slept on the top deck.

I was taken aback by the spiffy Aqua Cat. A real window, plenty of storage, no engine noise. Speedy at 14 knots, the 102-foot catamaran is about as good as a liveaboard gets. And no matter where in the lower 48 you reside, you can most likely arrive at her Bahamas homeport of Nassau the same day you leave home. She cruises the mostly uninhabited, remote Exumas Land and Sea Park, 30 miles from Nassau. (*Fodor's Travel Guide* says, "Strict laws prohibit fishing and removing coral, plants or even shells as souvenirs. The area has essentially never been fished, and shows what the ocean looked like before humanity.") If sea conditions and weather permit, she'll cruise to Eleuthera and Little San Salvador (Half Moon Caye).

However, our checkout dive at Flat Rock, a descriptive name indeed, was a bust. With a depth of 20 feet and rubble, its only purpose was a buoyancy check. Without distinguishing landmarks, our dive-master, Mr. Experience here, had to surface to locate the boat. On our first real dive, an eagle ray swam



The Aqua Cat



gracefully along Exuma's Pillar Wall, which, with many caves and crevices, starts at 30 feet and slopes to 50 feet before dropping to 5,000 feet. A good omen, I hoped, for a great diving week.

Eleuthera's walls are stunning. Corals and sponges are healthy. There are numerous swim-throughs, an occasional reef shark, turtle and Southern stingray but I missed the lone hammerhead other divers filmed. We made several drift dives: "10-9 . . . jump, jump." Into the water we went for a drift in a four-knot current, passing coral gardens surrounded by white sand. All in preparation for the big drift: the highly touted "Washing Machine." In a channel running between two cayes, a five-knot current som-

ersaults divers into and spits them out of an underwater sinkhole. I made a wide pass to avoid being tumbled in the current but realized later it wasn't as bad as the macho divemasters had described. Next time, I'd take the tumble. The exit from the water was hairy. Those at the end of the hang line (yes, I was one of them) were swept between the twin bows of the catamaran's hull. Two new divers in front of me froze, while the divemaster behind me yelled, "Oh, no!" I took the regulator from my mouth and shouted at the two, "Move!" In the strong current, it took all my strength to pull myself along the sinking rope up the hull, make my way to the side of the boat and then inch to the stern ladder. There was no backup plan. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

The Aqua Cat visits remote sites where they have established moorings, which means they avoid the algae-plagued reefs found throughout the Bahamas. At one stop, several dozen Caribbean reef sharks have been Pavlov-conditioned to greet the boat. Once down, we kneeled in the sand around a pinnacle as the crew lowered a "chumsicle" and the frenzy began, with amberjacks, grouper and snapper joining in. Shark baiting doesn't jibe with my ecological philosophy; I prefer to have them come and go naturally. This may mean I won't see as many but those I do see are in the ocean's real world, not one altered by humans giving handouts. That said, having never been on an orchestrated shark dive, I joined in and put another tick on my bucket list. As for other dives, one could dive alone, or hook up with two divemasters.

While the specific reefs we dived were healthy, schools of tropicals were generally missing. The typical Caribbean sightings of snapper, grunts and amberjack remain, along with a few turtles, Southern stingrays, and a mind-boggling proliferation of lionfish. The Bahamian government is trying to establish a commercial fishery but the lionfish's small filets and bland taste have not encouraged sales.

The Aqua Cat offers 11 spacious twin-bed cabins (some twins can be configured into double beds) with ocean-view windows and individually controlled air-conditioners. Each ensuite bathroom has a full shower, mirrored vanity and hair dryer. There is a tiny fridge for storing snacks you bring. All faucets have potable water. Carina, the "house mouse," did an excellent housekeeping job, providing fresh towels on request.

On the first-rate dive deck, 21 of us (the boat can hold a maximum of 26) set up our dive gear. Four benches are lined with a variety of tanks (50, 80, 100's) and beneath each is a plastic storage bin. There was a camera table

Aqua Cat, Bahamas

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale

with air hose, Nitrox analyzer, rinse tanks, mask defogger holders, a flushing head with sink, and two hot water showers. From each side of the catamaran, steps lead to a small dive platform where Christmas tree ladders extended into the water. (You can also stride off one of the two side gates, a six-foot-plus jump.) Under the stern at 15 feet hangs a deco bar with an emergency regulator. The large camera table includes an air hose. For head counting, each of us had a board nametag to move back and forth to an in- or out-of-the-water position. Our only other responsibility was to remove or attach our first stage to a green (Nitrox) or pink-topped (air) tank. It was one snazzy setup. Not so perfect was the March water temperature. It ranged between a chilly 68 to 72 degrees. I wore a lycra suit, fleece hood and gloves, and rented a 3mm wetsuit, the warmest suit Aqua Cat had available. I envied the diver smart enough to bring and wear a dry suit. Most divers wore every garment they brought.

Captain Mark Bailey, who is both personable and charming, has been at the helm since 2001. Dave Valencia, the head instructor, had two assistants, Hila Shimon and Alex Bartnicka, who spent much of their time underwater capturing divers on film. In terms of his dive briefings (which are presented on the deck, where divers sit at three tables), leading and pointing out critters, Dave is one of the best. Rather than saying the "reef is to your right or left," he uses compass headings. Being one of the few divers without a compass, I had to ask for explicit left/right directions. Sites were nicely drawn and well explained. (Dives were scheduled at 8:30 a.m, 10 a.m., 2 p.m. and 4 p.m., with three 7:30 p.m. night dives; only two dives on Friday.)

Announcements of briefings, meals and land activities were made over a loudspeaker that broadcast inside the cabins. If you are willing to give up a dive, there is beachcombing, hiking pirate trails, snorkeling, kayaking, fishing, even exploring the haunts of bootleggers. Most activities are guided by First Mate Jeremy Hill in the 28-foot launch *Sea Dog*. I took one excursion to Allen's Cay, where I fed red grapes to indigenous Bahamian rock iguanas.

The dining and salon area seats several dozen at two large tables surrounded by cushioned cane-style chairs. Soft drinks and water, an icemaker and on-tap beer are readily available, as is hot water for tea or hot chocolate. Three comfortable lounge areas surround a television (VCRs and DVDs), a video editing area and two photo light tables. On a bookshelf are T-shirts, caps and oversized mugs for sale. The top sundeck has 10 loungers and even an iPod docking station. After diving is done, the crew mixed complimentary rum drinks and poured Bahamian microbrews for those who chose to skip the night dive.

The Aqua Cat claims to offer gourmet meals, and while I enjoyed the meals, a better tag is "hearty." Served buffet-style, lunches and dinners were plentiful, typically meat, vegetarian and casserole choices. Breakfast was eggs, cereal and juice. Presentation was lacking, just plates or casseroles. Chef Kirk Bell honored special requests. There was always fruit, muffins, cookies and snacks. The table was set for dinner with a tablecloth and silverware. Wine was offered along with the tap beer. Each night, a lionfish appetizer was offered with a brie cheese pie. At the Thursday night Captain's party, it was a bland lionfish sushi appetizer. Dinner was more formal and included Captain Mark's freshly speared lobster and tenderloin.

While most of the passengers were Yankees, two divers from Ontario were on board, along

Keep the Bugs at Bay

Are you one of those divers who finds himself eaten alive by mosquitoes or no-see-ums as you walk to dinner, while your buddy is unscathed? Then heed *Consumer Reports'* new tests of insect repellents. Testers bared their arms in mosquito-filled cages, recording how long it took for two common types of mosquitoes to start biting -- and for deer ticks to decide it was safe to crawl over treated areas.

"The six top choices worked for at least seven hours: Off! Deep Woods Sportsmen II, Cutter Backwoods Unscented, Off! FamilyCare Smooth & Dry; 3M Ultrathon Insect Repellent 8, Repel Plant Based Lemon Eucalyptus, and Natrapel 8-hour with picaridin. The first four contain DEET in varying levels. The EPA judges DEET safe when used as directed . . . *Consumer Reports* thinks that no one needs a repellent with more than 30 percent DEET."

Skin So Soft Bug Guard had a much shorter life, and Burt's Bees Natural Repellent finished dead last.

with two others from Italy and Belgium who had Googled to find this trip. Most were experienced, a few were beginners, and none was a serious photographer. Those who did shoot could anonymously submit one image, and by popular vote, the winner was entered into a free trip drawing. A slide and video show followed.

In the middle of our last night at sea, our mooring line broke in rough seas. Captain Mark decided to forgo dives at Nassau's Lost Blue Hole and Periwinkle Reef to return to Nassau. So two pretty lousy dives concluded the trip, but that's the way of the sea.

The *Aqua Cat* is one of the nicest dive boats I've experienced. Yes, it is Caribbean diving, and the beginning and ending dives were disappointing, but as experienced as many of the divers were, only two, besides me, had dived internationally. So if you want to get your liveaboard feet wet close to home, you can't beat the *Aqua Cat*.

-- M.S.



Diver's Compass: The eight-day, seven-night trip (with five-and-one-half dive days) is \$2,295 per person, double occupancy; third and fourth person in a cabin with fold-down berths are \$1,395 per person . . . The price includes beverages (soda, rum drinks, beer and wine) and Saturday transfers to and from the Nassau airport; additional fees include port and fuel surcharges at \$90 per person and a \$10 park fee . . . Board after 6 p.m. on Saturday; early arrivals may drop off bags at the boat . . . *Aqua Cat* returns to Nassau Friday afternoon, and divers are responsible for that evening's dinner ashore; disembark at 9 a.m.

on Saturday but luggage can be left onboard if you have a late flight . . . The airport shuttle departs three hours prior to a flight; Nassau's airport requires hours of waiting for immigration and multiple security checks . . . Nitrox (and certification) is \$150 per week, openwater checkout dives are available by prior arrangement for \$125 and night dives require a dive light and cyalume stick (or substitute); arrange rental gear before you arrive . . . Website: www.aquacatcruises.com

Saipan, Statia, Lake Malawi, Key Largo...

reports from the back of beyond from "undercover" readers

A couple of years after our introductory issue in October 1975, a close friend offered to travel on his own dollar to Micronesia and provide reviews. While I knew he worked for the CIA, he was headed off on vacation and assured me he would remain anonymous and tell no one he was writing for *Undercurrent*. Months later, I learned he had printed up business cards and traveled as an *Undercurrent* writer, which became his cover. During the middle of his dive trip, he disappeared for a month, only to resurface in Saipan as an *Undercurrent* writer. While he did write honestly and frankly about the diving, he broke my rules for anonymity, never copped to it and never would tell me what secret mission he tackled during the month he evaporated. We have not written much about Saipan since, so I was pleased to get this report from long-time *Undercurrent* subscriber, James Hansen of Weeki Wachee, FL, who has assured me he is not a CIA operative, at least no longer.

Saipan's WWII Wrecks and Reefs. "Occasionally travelers and divers need to rediscover a place that has been out of our sights for a long while, and Saipan is just such a place.



The Fiesta Resort and Spa in Saipan

Part of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Saipan is 120 miles north of Guam, the hub for reaching Palau, Yap and Chuuk (Truk) Lagoon. Like Truk, it was the site of a tremendous World War II battle. Wrecks include a 407-foot-long freighter (alternately called the *Chinsen* or the *Shoan Maru*) and a smaller subchaser. Typical aircraft sites include the so-called *B-29*, actually a large Japanese flying boat, and the *Zero* wreck, more likely a small seaplane. All are on the west side of the island, near the capital of Garapan, and all are in 35 feet or less of water -- fine for snorkelers as well as divers. If you take the five-mile journey to Tinian, you'll see the remains of land vehicles scattered at Dump Cove, some 60 feet deep at most.



One of Saipan's Plane Wrecks

“Saipan also hosts dazzling marine life typical of the western Pacific. On the first half of the trip alone, I saw an extraordinary array: bannerfish, anemonefish, blue-streaked gobies, lionfish, scorpionfish, Picassofish, Moorish idols, various butterflyfish, a six-foot moray eel, a snowflake moray, whitetip reef sharks, arceye hawkfish perched on corals, angelfish, surgeonfish, yellow tangs, turtles, octopuses with spans up to three feet, Achilles tangs, garden eels, and crabs about half the size of my little fingernail. Two premier dive sites, Dimple and Ice Cream, are seamounts. The first is down to some 120 feet with a top 40 feet below the surface, while the latter is about 60 feet deep and has a top only 18 feet deep. Both have extensive marine life. Another popular site is Grotto (north-east Saipan), a huge cavern with three exit holes leading to the open sea. I hooked up with Global Ocean Divers, located at the Fiesta Resort and Spa in Garapan (<http://godivers.net>). General Manager Kazuhiro Nakamura and marketing manager Eva McKinney are both highly professional and helpful dive guides. They operate two small boats that cover all the dive sites in Saipan and in neighboring Tinian.

“For WWII buffs, land tours include Suicide Cliff and Banzai Cliff, sites of mass suicides in the 1944 battle. Other attractions include the last Japanese command post, plus Japanese-built buildings such as the jail, hospital and lighthouse. Don't miss picturesque Bird Island. There is a vibrant “entertainment” industry and lots of “poker rooms,” not to mention the cockfight arena with the handicapped parking sign! Restaurants feature Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Thai cuisine, although American food can be found. A taxi or rental car is necessary to visit the various beaches and towns scattered around the island, measuring about 13 by 7 miles.

“It is a long plane ride via Continental, some 6,000 miles west of San Francisco and 3,200 miles beyond Honolulu. As a commonwealth of the U.S. and one that was liberated by U.S. troops, Saipan is a friendly destination for Americans. English and Japanese are the paramount languages, although Japanese tourists far outnumber U.S. tourists. The U.S. dollar is the local currency. For most people, a visit of a week to 10 days would be plenty. While the wrecks are less intact and spectacular than those in Truk Lagoon, and the marine life in Palau is more stunning and varied, it's the perfect destination to get both wrecks and reefs. The water temperature during my June visit last year was a comfortable 84 degrees, with visibility of 80 to 120 feet on most dives.”

Ocean Rover, Indonesia. For years, *Undercurrent* readers have had high regard for this liveaboard while she was plying the seas off Thailand and Burma. Now under new owners, she is diving Indonesia and still getting kudos. William and Carol Bynum (Midland, TX) were aboard in May and were half the passenger load on a craft that can hold 16. “Great trip around North Sulawesi. Crew attention and accommodations were superb. Upper deck cabins are doubles, which were plenty large for two of us. Lower deck has two doubles and two single share cabins. We loved the owner/manager, Roman, and his outstanding crew. This was an exploratory cruise to Talaud. Some dives were so-so but on an exploratory trip, you go with the information that's available. Having a personal dive guide and only two divers per dinghy made for wonderful critter finding and photography. North Sulawesi does not have the soft corals of Raja Ampat. Many underwater volcanoes are interesting but have sparse growth. Found two interesting wrecks. Spent the last dive day in Lembeh Straits.

Gulf Coast Dive Shop Files Lawsuit Against BP

Beasley, Allen, Crow, Methvin, Portis & Miles, P.C. has filed a lawsuit against BP and several other companies with ties to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The firm represents the dive shop Adventure Sports II in Birmingham, AL, which does significant business in the Gulf of Mexico and seeks damages related to the oil spill disaster, including loss of profits, business income and earning capacity. The suit alleges negligence and wanton misconduct.

Current estimates say between 40.7 and 114.5 million gallons of oil have already spilled into the Gulf of Mexico since the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded on April 20, and oil continues to spew from the undersea well every day. Beaches up and down the Gulf Coast have been closed to swimmers, and visitors who are ordinarily drawn to the area are canceling plans. But even in areas where waters are open

and diving is safe, travelers are staying away out of fear about oil contamination.

“The dive business is taking a double hit, impacted by actual oil spill damages, and the fear that surrounds reports of the leak’s effect on the Gulf of Mexico,” said Rhon Jones, head of Beasley Allen’s environmental section. “Even when the water is clean and safe and dive sites are open, many travelers are still avoiding the Gulf Coast because of misconceptions about where the oil is now, and fears about where it might spread in the coming weeks and months.”

You can read Beasley Allen’s press release and download a PDF of the complaint it filed at: <http://www.beasley-allen.com/news/Beasley-Allen-files-lawsuit-on-behalf-of-SCUBA-diving-business/>

Ocean Rover does Raja Ampat cruises, and we would book this boat again and again. Lots of space for photographers to set up and work on rigs, and lots of 110- and 220-volt outlets.” (www.ocean-rover.com)

Captain Slate’s Atlantis Dive Center, Key Largo. One downside for experienced divers looking to get wet in the Florida Keys is the hordes of beginner divers. Most shops cater to them, so some dives are dumbed down; if you’re trying to get to exotic sites like the wrecks, you might be diverted if too many newbies show up. So we are pleased to note JoAn Ferguson’s (Herndon, VA) experience. “We planned to dive with Captain Slate’s for 10 dives, including the *Spiegel Grove* and the *Duane*. They had mostly beginner divers who didn’t want to ‘go deep’ and so they arranged for us to dive the wrecks with other shops. This allowed us to pay the ‘bundled’ price for the dives and got us where we wanted to go.” Keep Slate’s in mind if wrecks are your goal. (www.captainslate.com)

Bonaire’s Annoyances. For Caribbean diving, Bonaire is hard to beat, especially with access to so many reefs from the beach. But we must call the government to task for its inability to handle petty crime. Its impact on divers is pointed out very succinctly by George Lock Jr. (West Grove, PA) who was there in March. “The petty crime frequently reported on Bonaire does affect the way one behaves. Everything must be locked up. Nothing can be left in unattended vehicles, so all of your dive and photo gear must be locked up. While that doesn’t sound so bad, it necessitates a lot more hauling around, from dive lockers and rooms to and from the boats. Contrast that with Little Cayman, where one can leave gear hanging in the open and cameras soaking in unattended rinse tanks right at the dock, with no fear of problems. Why the local community and businesses allow this problem to persist on Bonaire is a mystery, because it does affect the logistics and ease of diving.”

St. Eustatius, Netherlands Antilles. I reviewed this little island for *Undercurrent* a few years back and not only was I pleased with the quality of its reefs but also the simple and uncomplicated ways that made the island a pleasant place to visit. So I feel compelled to provide an update, as seen through the eyes of Lynn M. Thorne (Raleigh, NC) who visited in March. “Virtually no commercialism or gimmicky trappings of so many vacation destinations. The St. Eustatius people are friendly and courteous. The island is also almost completely crime-free, so exploring anywhere feels safe. The small village located on a bluff 150 vertical feet above our hotel and dive operation has an endless amount of beautiful tropical vistas overlooking a blue Caribbean Sea. (Hint: Visit the numerous mom & pop bakeries.) Our 14 Gypsy Divers from Raleigh, NC, stayed at The Old Gin House. The rooms were clean and roomy, with large showers and enough hot water. The grounds are tropical with an old-world charm. Most of our group has been to dive operations all over the Caribbean, and we all felt the Golden Rock Dive Center ranks very high in attention to customer service, safety, flexibility and professionalism. Owners Glen and Michelle could not have been more attentive. The experienced divemasters, Matt and Stephen, both pointed out interesting items

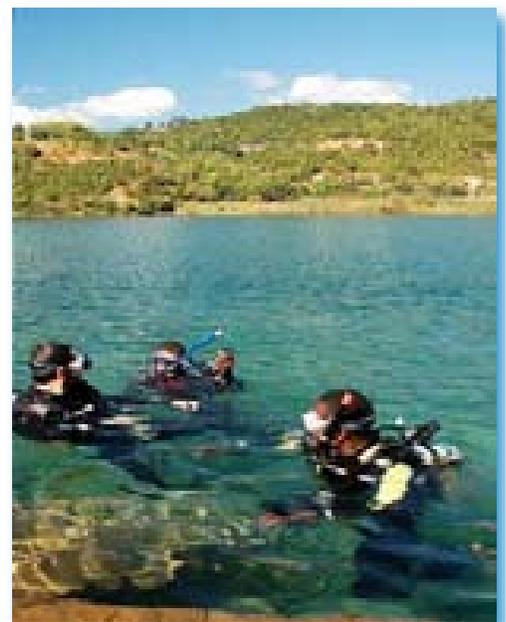
underwater without being overbearing. They have two boats; we used their large pontoon boat with six exits for an easy giant stride into the calm blue waters. The dive sites varied, with many cool wrecks to beautiful coral-encrusted lava formations. The diving is an easy, slow pace. Underwater life is abundant with all the usual Caribbean beauties, including curious turtles, rays and huge aggressive lobsters. Visibility topped 80 feet all week. To see my video of Statia, go to www.vimeo.com/10167831 and www.vimeo.com/10161258.”(www.goldenrockdive.com)

Diving with Mouth Breeders in Lake Malawi, East Africa. What has always made *Undercurrent* unique is that by not carrying advertising, we can devote space to any diving destination in the world. We do not use that old dive publication rule: Run an ad if you want us to write about you (and if you do, we will surely speak kindly). We try to cover every place our readers visit so that information is in our online archives for others. The latest far-reaching place is Lake Malawi, located between Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania. It’s a place you’d probably only go if you were on an African safari. Nonetheless, last year Londoner Jonny Newton, who now lives in Pretoria, South Africa dived Lake Malawi last year as a PADI instructor working at Aqua Africa (www.aquaafrica.co.uk). We asked him to fill in our readers on what to expect.

“Malawi is a small, landlocked nation where you can drop your guard and not worry about being hassled by the multitude of hawkers who pop up at tourist destinations elsewhere. Malawi has more of a chilled-out Caribbean feel, which is only enhanced when you reach the shores of its eponymous Lake Malawi, the size of Wales. At an altitude of 540 feet, a diver must switch his computer to its correct altitude setting or add 10 percent to the depth, whilst working out nitrogen levels and ascending twice as slow as at sea level. Water varies from 75 degrees in June to 86 degrees in December. Along the northern lakeshore, visibility can peak at 65 feet in May. Dive schools stretched from Nkhata Bay in the north to Cape Maclear in the south, making accessibility and equipment rentals no problem. Most clients are backpackers attracted to the laid-back lifestyle of dusty Nkhata Bay. Accommodations suit all tastes and budgets.

“What makes Malawi diving beautiful isn’t just the stunning rock formations that are an underwater continuation of the escarpment, but also the more than 1,000 different types of fiercely territorial cyclids that vary remarkably between different locations; some of the fish you swim with cannot be found anywhere else in the world. Some aquarium enthusiasts pay hundreds of dollars for one rare specimen. Fish of deep blue and purple shimmer through the translucent waters, complemented by others of bright yellows and whites. They graze on rock algae, each species developing different lip formations so as not to compete over the same food source. Some have even evolved to spend their entire existence upside-down to monopolize the underside of subterranean slabs. I couldn’t go on a dive without seeing mouthbreeders. Females lay their eggs and then scoop them in their mouths for protection, where they are fertilized and hatched. On safe ground, mothers release their brood of up to 100 and keep a watchful eye for predators while they feed and the young take their first tentative fin movements. If a mother feels threatened, she will swim up to the brood, open her mouth and in two or three sweeps, all the young form a tight clump and swim back in. Nearby, the male will be tidying his crater in order to attract another egg-laying female to it.

“Dolphinfish have learnt to utilize the regular night divers’ flashlights to make their hunts more effective. Leaving the Aqua Africa jetty at sundown, we motored the five minutes to Playground Point. The shrills of cicadas on land were strangely complemented by the cacophony of dubious African pop filtering from various drinking dens in town. We followed the anchor line to a sandy patch surrounded by red rocks. As if on cue, a dozen dolphinfish were ducking and diving between us, revving themselves up at the promise of



Lake Malawi

a good feed. The name 'dolphins' is a misnomer. I'd have named them 'eel-like uglyfish.' Reaching three feet in length, with small eyes and a snarly snout, they rely on electric sensors to track their prey - - unless, of course, there is a flashlight-wielding diver at hand. Following the dive group like a pack of hungry dogs for the entire 40 minutes, the predators would sidle up to any unfortunate cichlid mesmerized by the artificial light. Arching their spines in preparation for a quick lunge and snap, they audibly clamped their jaws on dinner. The elusive Kampango catfish with its shark-like dorsal fin often appears, as do freshwater crabs scavenging the bottom. Back at the sandy patch for our safety stop, we turn our flashlights off. Silent but for our breaths, we stare at the clean night sky from 16 feet below.

"Diving in the northern part of the lake is sheltered by a natural harbor, so there is usually protection from the easterly August winds. Tropical rains start by mid-November and continue with a range of intensity till April, though never enough to stop a dive!"

-- Ben Davison

At What Cost For a Third Dive?

not so charming at Sharm El-Sheikh

Dear *Undercurrent*:

My wife and I have just returned from Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, after an absence of eight years. I first went to Sharm in 1984 and my wife in 1979. She was an original member of one of the first liveaboards in the area. We've seen a lot of changes in Sharm over the years but this time the changes were startling and shocking. I'm not talking just about on land. I'm referring to El-Sheikh, underwater.

No sooner than arrival at Ras Nasrani airport, you're herded into a scrum at Immigration (with three other charter 747 planes arriving at the same time), and that pretty much continues until you return home. Sharm El Moya, Ras Mohammed, Ras Umm Sidd, Tiran Straits and, of course, *S.S. Thistlegorm* were packed with divers and boats. The practice of slipping the moorings and doing a drift dive (in non-drift conditions) was only for the convenience of boats and crews rather than for divers, making entry and pickups a dangerous affair. It really won't be long before a diver is run over and their head ripped off - - if indeed it hasn't happened already. Boats and skippers were far too relaxed about driving over divers underneath and on top of dive sites. Even the Egyptian Navy roared over Ras Umm Sidd Wall with no regard to divers underneath. The noise underwater of hordes of divers, their bells and horn signals and a dozen boats circling overhead was incredible. What the fish thought of it all, God knows! Certainly pelagic fish were rare when once normal.

But what was really worrying was the introduction of a third dive as standard practice on day boats. In the old days, you were offered two dives per day and occasionally a third dive. Multiple diving is not ideal for daily dive boats, especially if your first dive is at 100 feet. We were offered a second dive after only 45 minutes. Possible, yes, but is it wise for an unfit amateur? The boats and dive centers have turned themselves into cash tills, only interested, it seemed, in squeezing every last dollar out of the customer. Dive, pay and go! And do a course while you're at it. Multitasking.

That we were limited to 45-minute dives with a three-gallon tank, returning with nearly a half tank each time, was rather annoying. Our dive guide would herd us round the dive site and make sure we surfaced together with the rest of the divers so boats could pick everyone up at the same time. The whole dive and the whole day became one long queue following the leader, however good or bad they are. Not a relaxed affair, and it's the third dive mainly to blame. It means a rushed day onboard. People can't relax even if they elect not to do a second dive. The boat moves, the crew works (rather than serve a decent lunch), the snorkelers can't snorkel and sunbathing is a bumpy affair, with horns blasting and crews screaming and divemasters and instructors ordering.

But in the end, it's the reefs themselves that suffer the most. The pressure on the Ras Mohammed and Sinai reefs nowadays is intense. The fact that all boats offer a third dive increases diving by 33 percent everyday -- for an extra fee of US\$43 per diver. But is it worth it? Who wins? Certainly not the reefs and their inhabitants. Not the divers, as two decent dives per day comes to the same bottom time as three rushed dives. Safety of divers is decreased. The chances of boat accidents increase. Decompression problems also must have increased substantially. And boat skippers, what qualifications do they actually hold? Are they divers themselves? Do they know what divers actually need and what safety is required? Maybe they should be made more aware with proper training like divers themselves. Certainly all dive propeller boats should be made by law to have prop guards.

Everyone talks green, everyone advertises green, so give the reefs a chance and back off one dive per day. It will make diving in Sharm a whole lot better experience for everyone: for the fish, divers, snorkelers, sunbathers on the beach overlooking the circus of boats at sea, even the compressor boy filling the tanks and crews loading the extra tanks will all be much happier! And in the end, Sharm El-Sheikh might be again one day a more relaxed diving destination.

-- David Wright, Gloucestershire, England

Look, Ma, No Hands Underwater

a DPV that's easy to maneuver and not too pricey

The remote control was gripped firmly between the handle of my big camera housing and my hand. I held my other camera housing handle and looked through the viewfinder. Things didn't look promising. I'd been hoping to try the Pegasus Thruster by sweeping majestically round the wreck of the *Spiegel Grove* in the Florida Keys. High winds had made diving there impossible so I was reduced to immersing myself in a Florida creek with lousy visibility. However, I had come a long way and, with a retreat back to the U.K. impossible thanks to a plume of volcanic ash over Europe, I was going to make the best of a bad job. I pressed the big "go" button and, after the electronics checked out that everything was technically okay, I was off, silently, travelling effortlessly, chasing Dean Vitale, equally equipped, through the murk to get some pictures.

What was unique about our transport was that I was totally hands-free and able to use my camera, unlike other Diver Propulsion Vehicles (DPVs) that require you to either hold on with two hands or be towed by a lanyard, steering by rotating the DPV with one hand. But with the Pegasus Thruster, I was hands-free and merely had to turn my torso a little to control my direction of travel. If I wanted to stop, I simply released the magnetic switch in the remote control, and the effect was immediate. I looked where I was going, pressed the button and that is where I went. It was so easy and simple. And, for a serious diver, not prohibitively expensive at \$2,350 for the basic unit.

They're Getting Popular

I had previously met Vitale at Pinewood Studios in the U.K., where he was testing a Thruster with an underwater cameraman. Since then, they have come up with ways for using the Thruster with a remotely operated camera. Vitale had originally conceived the Thruster for use by disabled divers, and continues to work with the Wounded Warriors organization. It's ideal for them, but others also recognize that you can do a lot more work underwater if your air consumption is not being taken up by your effort to produce kicking power.

Security services have found that with the Pegasus Thruster, they need less manpower to conduct under-hull inspection of



The Pegasus Thruster

ships entering Miami Harbor. The U.S. military is experimenting with it, and Vitale will soon demonstrate it to the Seabees (U.S. Navy construction divers). Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution has purchased units, as have Florida's Department of Transportation bridge inspection teams. Even British security services in charge of the 2012 Olympics in London have noted that they can inspect more underwater structures, such as the bridges over the Thames, if their divers are equipped with these devices. The future looks bright for the Pegasus Thruster.

I first saw a prototype Thruster a couple of years ago at a DEMA show but it was not until Vitale got the commercial backing of Miami businessman Patrick Gleber that he was able to get it into production. The concept was to produce a sleek device that could be mounted on a scuba tank and BC, and be easily controlled - - even by someone who had no use of his hands, for example, by squeezing the control under the chin. The remote control at the end of its lead uses a magnetic switch that will avoid wear by employing repelling properties caused by the reversed polarity of two magnets. The motor was developed from a well-known, high-torque, electric motor normally used for heavy-duty power drills. However, unlike a drill that might be used to attack concrete, all the Thruster's motor has to do is cope with the viscosity of water. It promises a long life.



The power to the propeller goes via a gearbox with a clutch mechanism that prevents damage if the propeller gets fouled. The 12-volt NiMH battery gives enough "current draw" for its application without being unstable, particularly important when seawater is in the vicinity. Vitale says, "It gives enough grunt!"

The unit includes sensors that disconnect the motor when the voltage gets low, and there is an automatic clutch release. All the circuit boards are laminated in silicone. Overall, it gives more than 15 grams of thrust, which I appreciated during the times that I held on to Vitale's ankle and he dragged me around while I made close-up pictures of the big whirling propeller and its shroud of the Thruster that he was using.

The unit is mounted via a bracket and camband attached low down on the tank to give clearance for the propeller. This is a quick-connect device and when you are ready to dive, the whole Thruster is simply snapped into place. After a dive, you remove it in a moment by pulling a pin and unhitching it, and you can sit down. It's very convenient. The cable of the remote control is connected via a wet connector and, very unusually, the battery pack can also be connected or disconnected from the drive while still underwater. This gives the option of extending the 45-minute duration by changing batteries during the dive. (A second battery is \$600.) The battery pack and power-train snap together to form a slim, torpedo-like shape, more slim than even the most lightweight DPV.

Vitale manufactures and hand-assembles the Thruster in a small facility in Florida. It's beautifully crafted in anodized aluminium with a high-impact plastic shroud and propeller. Like so many good ideas, the basic concept is so obvious, one wonders why no one else has thought of it. By mounting the unit on the tank, it becomes not at all intrusive, and if you want to fin without its assistance, you certainly don't notice it being there. I found it was perfect for stopping, resorting to conventional finning while taking a picture, then moving on again.

Circling The Spiegel Grove on One Tank

After a week of waiting, the weather cleared. Vitale took me out in Gleber's fast (40 knots) fishing boat to dive both the *Spiegel Grove* and the *Duane*. The *Spiegel Grove* is a vast wreck (it was a military hovercraft transport ship) but it took no time to zip round the whole thing, pausing at times to take pictures. I didn't go deeper than 105 feet but stayed a long time at that depth and found that the Nitrox in my 80 cu. ft tank easily lasted the dive. We startled a couple of giant groupers that weren't expecting us to approach so quickly and hurtled through thick shoals of Atlantic spadefish and pompano jacks. As we made our way back to our up-line, a huge school of silvery barracuda came flooding into the wreck. It was nice to know that the up-line was never far away in terms of time. A little pressure on the remote control sent me zooming back the way I'd come.

The *Duane* is a deep wreck and I limited myself to 120 feet. It is full of fish including a couple of big grouper and lots of toothy barracuda that I could get really close to. Fish here are not used to divers zipping so quickly over to them, and it's easy to hold your breath while you are doing it. This wreck is often swept by strong currents, which could lead to some anxiety about getting back to the mooring line -- but not with a Thruster mounted on my tank. As soon as I wanted to go back, I went, and when I say "I went," I really went. Because it was unnecessary to avoid the current by being close to the deck of the wreck, I could travel through blue water and complete a slow ascent as I went. The 45-minute run-time proved adequate for the dive, considering that I didn't run the Thruster while I took pictures. (45 minutes is the typical battery life before recharging, which takes 2.5 hours.) Of course, actual speeds and run times vary depending on the amount of drag. With a wetsuit and single tank, I found it certainly sped me along but not so quickly that I would be worried about the water-tightness of my camera housing. Maximum speed is about two knots, or 165 feet per minute.

You can fit one Thruster to twin tanks or you can fit twin Thrusters, in which case it is possible to use ones with counter-rotating propellers so there is no pronounced torque-effect that would make it easier to turn one way than the other. With the single unit, I noticed no such effect and found I could go easily in any direction including downwards. Because it is hands-free, I could easily pinch my nose to clear my ears as I descended, too. (You must take care not to ascend too quickly with any DPV.)

The whole thing measures less than two feet long and the widest part, the shroud, is about 8.5 inches in diameter. It weighs 12 pounds and is 5.5 pounds negatively buoyant in seawater. The Thruster Diver Bundle includes a Pelican case with two battery packs, the tank-bracket assembly, tank strap, battery-charger and the remote control with its magnetic switch. It retails for \$3,275.

Finally, I must say that using a DPV on small dive boats is often an imposition to other divers, as *Undercurrent* has noted in the past. But not the Thruster. It even fits into a typical tank rack. Tell me of another DPV that does that! For more information, go to www.pegasusthruster.com

P.S. After Ben reviewed my article, he suggested I was too positive about the Thruster. "Aren't there more shortcomings?" he asked. My answer: "Ben, you know that I am very critical when I need to be but I can assure you that, price aside, I don't have a bit of fault with this. I want one!"

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.

DAN's Fatality Workshop

and the presentation that was censored

In our May issue, John Bisnar, an attorney from Irvine, CA, who was a guest aboard the *Galapagos Aggressor II* for a February 2010 trip, wrote the account of a diving death of a passenger, a PADI divemaster on her first dive of the trip. His account raised several interesting and thought-provoking issues about current industry practice, diver qualifications and whether some fundamental changes might be in order.

The circumstances that precipitated the diver's death had been specifically identified in advance as potential accident issues by *Undercurrent* contributor Bret Gilliam, who had provided input to Divers Alert Network (DAN) eight months in advance of its fatality workshop conference, held in early April. Gilliam's prescient preamble to his paper was rejected, ostensibly for fear that his comments could raise the ire of some industry attendees.

DAN's workshop was two months after the *Galapagos Aggressor II* death. The workshop's mission was to provide a forum to identify and discuss why divers are getting injured and dying, with a goal of adopting revisions to

some practices if necessary. Panels with speakers on accident investigation, medical considerations, legal ramifications and risk management, insurance coverage and underwriting, and training agency standards and practices were to be on the program, suggesting an opportunity for informed discussion and objective practical conclusions.

But several attendees and speakers believed those goals were not accomplished. One speaker, who asked to remain anonymous, noted the presentations were disproportionately stacked with PADI senior management, employees and lawyers. Other agencies were represented by a single spokesperson, and NAUI didn't even have a person there. Another said attendance was slight. "It looked like the majority of the audience was from government or academia and had someone else pick up their \$350 tab. I doubt if total attendance was even 100 persons."

"Your Candor Could Be Embarrassing"

Gilliam was initially asked to present a paper and become a panelist. Gilliam, a 40-year veteran of the diving industry, founded the TDI/SDI training agencies, for which he crafted their standards and procedures for instructors and students, training manuals and operational protocols for their facilities, including resorts and liveaboards. He had served as chairman of the NAUI board and has been a litigation consultant and expert witness in more than 230 lawsuits. He wrote the article "Anatomy of a Diving Lawsuit" that appeared as a two-part feature in our September and October 2009 issues.

Gilliam told us that "I was asked to be a presenter on risk management, litigation issues and how the industry should address ways to reduce the accident/fatality rate. At my suggestion, Peter Meyer of Willis North America Inc. was added to address concerns from the insurance industry. Meyer is a principal brokers for Lloyd's of London underwriting syndicates and handles diving policies for resorts, retailers, training agencies, instructors,

A Dive Camera that Floated 1,000 Miles and Still Works

Talk about an endorsement for Ikelite. Its waterproof camera housing stayed buoyant and unscathed, protecting the Nikon camera inside, for a 1,000-mile float across the Caribbean. And kudos to the U.S. Coast Guard criminal investigator who decided to solve the mystery of where the camera traveled from and who it belonged to.

On May 16, Paul Shultz found a red Nikon camera washing up against the rocks of a Key West marina, covered in six months' worth of sea growth. At first, Shultz thought it was a rotting tomato. Looking closely, he saw the camera was totally undamaged, but the latest image on its memory card was dated November 11, 2009, six months prior.

Shultz found photos of two men preparing to dive, a family sitting on a sofa, and a mysterious relic on the sea floor. There was also a short video of splashing water and a brief glimpse of what looked like a fin, with the camera thrashing around under the control of something clearly not human. Nothing on the camera identified the owner but Shultz put the images on ScubaBoard.com to get divers' help.

ScubaBoard users identified the location as Aruba, based on a shot of a school poster in Dutch, and another showing a plane's tail number that, after a computer search, identified the aircraft on the island the day that photo was taken.

Close examination of the mysterious video shows an encounter with a sea turtle, who mistook the camera for a meal and inadvertently switched it on. The date is January, two months after the camera was lost. The best guess is that the encounter happened off the coast of Honduras.

Shultz then posted the pictures on travel websites CruiseCritic.co.uk and Aruba.com. Two days later, a local woman contacted him to say she recognized the kids in the photos as her son's classmates. They belonged to Dick de Bruin, a Royal Dutch Navy sergeant who saw his camera float away while exploring the USS Powell wreck at Eagle Beach. He now has his camera back and says it's working just fine.

Shultz said he owes the happy ending to members of the online boards he used. "This case shows what can happen when people come together in an Internet forum and work to achieve a positive goal," Shultz told CruiseCritic.co.uk. "People tend to be a bit nasty on forums, but this is an example of the goodwill that exists in most."

To see the the images the turtle took of itself, click here: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/centralamericaandthecaribbean/aruba/7827274/Scuba-diver-reunited-with-camera-lost-six-months-ago-and-1000-miles-away.html>

dive boats and liveboards. We both prepared papers that would accompany our presentations. The problems started when I submitted mine.”

Gilliam’s paper was a 35-page, four-part treatise on examples of divers exceeding their capabilities and expertise, the trial analysis of the New Orleans case he had outlined for the *Undercurrent* article, and a detailed explanation of risk management realities for diving professionals (including the use of waivers and releases). His opening preamble, called “Elemental Issues of Accident Causation,” cited 13 areas he believed needed reform. Although only two pages long, Gilliam said it proved to be a major matter of contention to DAN’s workshop organizers.

“I got a call from a senior DAN official who told me my candor could prove embarrassing to some of the training agencies and operators that would be attending and also presenting. I was asked to delete that section to avoid ruffling their feathers. I pointed out that I had made no reference to any particular training agency, operator or business. My comments were directed at the industry as a whole. I have nothing but respect for DAN and think they do a good job of trying to address safety issues and provide hotline response to accident calls with competent medical staff available. I told their representative a fatality workshop was exactly what the industry needed, and urged DAN not to limit the input for politically correct reasons. It would defeat the purpose.

“But they had read Peter’s paper as well and said we both needed to soften our message. Rather than dilute our opinions, which were fact-based, we decided to withdraw from the conference, though we did help them with other matters for the workshop. My frustration is not directed so much at DAN, whose intentions were conceptually good . . . but at the industry in general and specifically at those that wanted DAN to stifle an unbridled commentary to help implement needed changes to improve safety.”

Peter Meyer said, “We both have access to details of fatalities no one else does, due to our hands-on involvement in litigation. But like Bret, I wasn’t comfortable with being censored in advance. So I opted out of attending as well.”

“A Well-documented History of Avoidance”

Brian Carney, President and CEO of International Training Inc. (owner of TDI/SDI and its public-safety training division ERDI) was on the panel of presenters about training issues. “It seemed every time a question was posed to the legal or insurance panel, no one wanted to make a definitive statement. None of the panelists could agree on anything. No one seemed willing to go on record about what things needed change. Even those audience members who offered spirited critical input were looked at as if they were intruding on private company policies instead of framing the debate along known problems that have to be addressed.”

Meyer says, “Our industry has a well-documented history of avoidance. We hide from what we all know (or should know) about the real risks and responsibilities of what we choose to do and continually try to shift our responsibility to others, whether or not they are able or competent to accept it. The operators, instructors and training agencies need to be more proactive, reasonable and prudent. And then they just might be able to avoid accidents from the start.

Nude Snorkeling Peters Out

While somebody in Australia figured hundreds of people would love to get into the Guinness Book of World Records by setting the record for the largest nude snorkeling feat ever, not many people were willing to take the bait ... or dangle theirs.

That somebody, Ben Schultz, organized the mid-June effort at Nelly Bay on Magnetic Island, near the Great Barrier Reef, but only 23 snorkelers bared their bums.

Schultz told *The Sun* those who did take part steered clear of a feeding station for sergeant major reef fish just down the beach. He said: “They get pretty hungry this time of year.”



Base Magnetic Island/AFP/Getty Images

“It’s a no-brainer. Spend huge sums on your defense in litigation, or act obviously responsible enough so that nobody wants to sue you? It should be a sobering look at the real perception the public has of our industry, and it should prompt some serious self-evaluation and change.”

Carney said DAN did not have the training agency sessions recorded for later transcription and inclusion in any proceedings’ document. He says it’s hard not to conclude that this was not due to concerns over future lawsuits.

Undercurrent has obtained Gilliam’s preamble to his paper; which follows. Truth is, there’s nothing in it *Undercurrent* divers don’t know already. Seems like the industry is afraid of its own shadow.

Elemental Issues of Accident Causation

1. Some scuba training agency programs lead divers to believe they are more qualified than they are, with ratings like “Advanced Diver” with as few as 10 total dives, “Master Diver” ratings with less than 50 dives, and “Rescue” courses that are so simplistic as to be largely impractical in actual emergencies, etc.
2. Divers can qualify for instructor ratings with as few as 50 dives in some agencies.
3. No effective oversight is made within some agencies to interdict and restrict instructors with consistent standards breaches and accident records.
4. Courses tend to be abbreviated for the sake of “moving the student” through the system instead of ensuring skills and knowledge are fully learned and mastered. One agency claimed to use a “performance based” standard of qualification but in one lawsuit’s discovery disclosures, that premise was proved to be totally misstated. For example, if a student was asked to clear a mask two dozen times and finally got it right on the 24th time, he was “passed” in spite of the fact that this clearly did not demonstrate the “mastery” and “repeatability” of the skill ... only that the student had successfully cleared his mask once! This hardly meets a standard wherein the skill can be repeated as needed with competence and confidence by the participant, no matter how many certification cards he may have in his wallet or patches sown on his windbreaker.
5. Students need the opportunity to make mistakes under direct supervision, then have them corrected by the

observing instructor who turns the process into a positive learning experience instead of a lesson in survival when it occurs in the field with no outside help.

6. The number of divers entering the sport has historically been vastly overstated for marketing purposes. Recent DEMA census reporting has confirmed this. When the database of divers is not accurate, it skews the ratio of participants’ accident incident rates and makes forecasting risk predictability and actuarial insurance ratings impossible to determine and assess.

7. Additionally, the dropout rate for divers and instructors is at a historic high. This is particularly significant for instructor and other “leadership” level ratings, as it tends to then replace existing “professionals” with those even less qualified. This is due mostly to employment conditions and lack of financial compensation. Although touted as a “career” path by many agencies, the majority of instructors find they lack the means to obtain a position that will pay them a living wage unless their ratings are supplemented

A New Twist on Divers and Drugs

Forget the speedboat for smuggling drugs. Now trafficking rings are using divers to get their stashes across international lines. A bust in June that nabbed eight traffickers and a ton of hashish on Spain’s Costa del Sol uncovered the new method.

A group aiming to import drugs into southern Spain from Morocco brought waterproofed drug bundles by boat to positions near the coastal town of Estepona and dropped them to the seabed. The bundles were placed at pre-arranged spots, usually in 65 feet of water, and buoyed. When they got the all-clear to recover the bundles, teams of divers with jetskis went out to the sites. The divers descended and brought the bundles to the surface, and the drugs were taken aboard the jetskis for landing. When Spanish authorities caught on and made the arrests, 1,500 pounds of hashish still lay on the seabed off Estepona’s Saladillo beach, awaiting retrieval.

with legitimate extra credentials like EMS training, maritime licenses, or specific expertise in such fields as photographic training to supplement their value in a retail, resort or liveaboard position.

8. Since diving has experienced a decline in participation within the last decade, there has been a corresponding decline in experienced mentors for new instructors and divemasters for “on the job” or “in the field” training in actual scenarios. This has contributed to accident rates and the failure to identify early identification of behavior patterns that would have been recognized as potentially dangerous by more veteran diving supervisors.

9. As a general observation from a review of lawsuits and accident reporting, we are seeing more causation of accidents resulting from a simple lack of common sense, maritime experience, etc., because little of this specific training and assessment is incorporated in many agency curricula.

10. There is also a need for enhanced training in evacuation, field assessment and treatment, and perhaps most importantly, disqualification of divers from some activities due to lack of experience before being allowed in more challenging conditions. For example, the September 2009 issue of *Undercurrent* reported the celebration of a diver’s 25th logged dive... aboard a liveaboard at Cocos Island, a site notorious for the need for more advanced diving skills and the ability to dive independently. How such a diver was even accepted as a customer defies all prudent logic.

11. The role of the remaining (and rapidly shrinking) diving press in print media is not helping either. Just take a casual review of photos showing dangling gear, “octopus” emergency second stages dragging on the bottom, unsuitable equipment, overweighted divers, etc.

12. The tragic record of “diver error” rebreather accidents and fatalities, “expedition” trips led by less than qualified “leaders” with associated fatalities, lack of pre-qualification protocols, failure for a designated overall qualified “supervisor” on specialized equipment, deep or penetration dive programs is rampant.

13. Finally, while most training agencies do a credible job of developing worthy standards and procedures for training, many resorts and liveaboard operations lack even rudimentary operations manuals that address “field condition” protocols for more advanced medical assessment, search and rescue, adequate evacuation methods, procedures for site treatment of decompression sickness with adequate oxygen and delivery equipment along with in-water treatment table procedures, or even sufficient supplies of oxygen with demand masks for surface breathing first aid.

To summarize the preamble to this paper, our goal obviously is to identify and recognize the precipitating events that cause accidents so they can be prevented and reduced. But a secondary consideration is the effect of increased accident/fatality incident ratios on the availability of professional insurance coverages and premium rates for all aspects of the diving business.

Finally, if the insurance business is not sustainable as a business model due to losses versus premium incomes, the underwriters will simply decline to insure the risk and exit the market. This would result in catastrophic impacts to the diving industry, as virtually none of the segments are capable of self-insuring their risk.

As I have often been quoted, “Safety is good business.” We are seeing a departure from that axiom and it could well come back to haunt this generation of diving. The diving industry is at a crucial crossroads of evolution at this time. Without some fundamental changes in paradigms as noted in the above narratives, there are very real consequences that will materialize and further limit growth and profits as accidents/fatalities escalate and the insurance market contracts.

Increased litigation costs from unnecessary breaches of duty by insureds will only increase underwriters’ reluctance to participate in this risk and eventually exit the market or result in costs that may prove unaffordable. Lawsuits will only increase and the costs of defense, settlement, or verdict awards escalate to unacceptable levels.

One thing is certain: Litigation is recession-proof. Understand your opponent and adapt to combat the threat or simply prove the Rule of Darwinism as it applies to business -- just as in the natural world of species evolution.

-- Bret Gilliam

Flotsam & Jetsam

Don't Tattle On Your Buddies. Jason Carey, a British scuba instructor, was too tired on June 6 to get out of bed and answer a late-night knock on his door. It was Derrick Bird, a pissed-off member of his dive club. According to the *London Telegraph*, when Carey didn't come to the door, Bird walked into the street and shot and killed two strangers. His resentment towards Carey started when Carey reported him for taking a fellow diver too deep. A friend of Bird said that when Carey learned Bird took someone diving deeper than 150 feet, which he was not supposed to do, "Jason went straight to the [British Sub Aqua Club] diving officer in charge and told him. It niggled at Derrick a lot." So much, in fact, that he killed 11 more people and injured 10 others before turning the gun on himself.

Underwater Blackout. If you free dive, we trust you know the risk of hyperventilating before submerging. Karl Ng, a neurologist in Sydney, Australia, says that hyperventilating suppresses your natural reflexes, and you won't feel "the severe urge to breathe." You'll lack oxygen but you'll falsely believe you can stay down longer, so you black out and drown. Ng told the *Sydney Morning Herald* about two medical students who hyperventilated, then tried to see who could swim the furthest underwater. "One went just over a pool length and the other went farther, but both blacked out and had to be rescued." A few years ago, an Aussie dive guide on a day boat drowned after hyperventilating and free diving between guided dives.

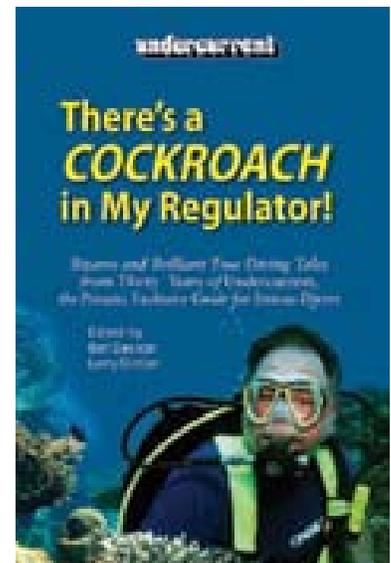
Mantas on the Menu. The falling shark population is prompting Asian chefs to look for manta rays and

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mobula rays to meet the voracious demand for shark fin soup, reports the *London Times*. Until recently, they have been hunted only by subsistence fishermen, who harpoon them. But in the eastern Indonesian port of Lamakera, catches of manta have rocketed from a few hundred to about 1,500 a year. "Mantas and mobulas are being used as shark fin soup filler," said Tim Clark, a marine biologist at the University of Hawaii. The cartilage is being mixed with low-grade shark fins in cheap versions of the soup. So divers, next time you're in Indonesia, raise a little hell about manta fishing.

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Undercurrent is the online consumer newsletter for sport divers that reviews scuba destinations and equipment. We accept no advertising. Subscriptions in the U.S. and Canada are \$39 a year.

Undercurrent (ISSN 1095-1555, USPS 001-198) is published monthly by Undercurrent, 3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102, Sausalito, CA 94965.

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July 2010 Vol. 25, No. 7