

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Anilao, Puerto Galera and More: The Philippines

unique critters, easy travel, inexpensive dive resorts

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Dear Fellow Diver:

The waters of the Philippines are home to some of the more unique and fascinating underwater critters in the world. It has only been a few years that many traveling American divers have gone to the Philippines, perhaps because it seemed a bit too exotic -- read "unsafe" (it's not) -- perhaps we expect a bit more luxury than Europeans, who have established resorts and brought plenty of business. Flying to the Philippines is less expensive and not quite the hassle of flying to Indonesia or Papua New Guinea. One-stop flights from Los Angeles get you to Manila in 18 hours for under \$1,000, then it's a quick connect and a short hop to an island, then a shuttle ride to any number of resorts.

In this issue, we're carrying a brief review of two stops from A.E.L., one of our regular writers, supplemented with reviews from a number of trusted readers covering other resorts, providing you the opportunity for a lot of options if you put the Philippines on your wish list.

* * * * *

"I only waited 27 years for this," said diver Jan Hanson, speaking of her extraordinary experience. She's a long-time dive buddy of mine on her first trip to the splendid sites of Anilao and Puerto Galera, and -- heaven forbid, without me -- she saw the deadly blue-ring octopus on the wall of Anilao's Kirby Island. That wasn't all that was sighted on our 10-day trip. There were also the



Eagle Point Resort, Anilao (photo by Cameron Azad)

PHILIPPINES



rare wonderpus and mimic octopuses, which imitate lionfish and other critters. Unless you have spent time with your nose in the muck at Raja Ampat, Sulawesi or Papua New Guinea (or in fish ID books), you might not be aware of these critters. Divers rarely see the small blue-ring, the ocean's most dangerous critter, which is usually holed deep into the wall. It only flashes its electric-blue spots defensively, especially if it finds the strobe flash to be threatening.

My first destination was Eagle Point Resort, along the 25-mile coastline known as Anilao in the province of Batangas. After a three-hour shuttle ride, the final mile winds down a narrow, steep road. Divers unload the van to make the journey in the resort's car. Where the resort begins, the road ends. The water's-edge setting of the resort is stunning. The resort is built around two pools, one with a sitting area and bar, while the second, home to a half-dozen small black-tip sharks, is used primarily for dive training. Try that in the U.S.

While Eagle Point is not a dedicated dive resort, its dive center is fully equipped. Each morning, we headed to one of two bancas, the Philippine version of a Mexican panga. We boarded by using a foot-wide "gangplank." Our gear was placed in the middle, and we sat on the gunwales. Bamboo outriggers, extending far enough from the banca for us to make a back roll, stabilized the boat.

While the blue-ring was sighted on Kirby reef near Sombrero Island, Anilao is best known for its muck diving in Secret Bay. Along a rubble ocean bottom, we watched a rare spiny devilfish bury itself in the sand. That's just the start. While Undercurrent has never been much for providing simple lists of critters cited, I'm going to break the mold so you can judge for yourself. Here, and later at Puerto Galera, our sightings included these -- Shrimp: popcorn, mushroom, egg shell, skeleton, harlequin, Coleman, mantis, tiger/slasher, and imperial; Eel: ribbon (yellow, black, blue), garden, convict snake, reptilian, white eye, fimbriated, barred, and the common moray; Crab: porcelain, hermit, soft coral, peppermint, hairy orangutan; Pipefish: mushroom, guilded, harlequin ghost, halameda and filamented; Octopus: blue ring, wonderpus, mimic, bobtail squid, cuttlefish; Nudibranchs: multiple chromodoris, nembrotha, hypselodoris, reticulidia, phylidia, glossodoris, berthela, flabelina. Then there were thorny and pygmy seahorses, slipper lobster, banded sea krait, giant clams, hawksbill turtles, leafish, dwarf lionfish, yellow-lipped jawfish, flying gurnard and sea moths. There were painted, striated and warty frogfish. Stargazers peered from the sand as fingered dragonet made their way.

Since my focus was diving, the hotel was fine. The rooms are basic. Some are up steep, uneven stairs, but others are along the coastline on either side of a paved path. My spacious room was above the dive center in a motel-type building, and had a private balcony directly over the water. There were two comfortable beds and a large bathroom, but the shower lacked hot water and a healthy

Edge and HOG BCDs Pose a Danger

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission and Health Canada, in cooperation with Edge Dive Gear of Macon, FL, announced a recall on May 3 of about 750 BCDs manufactured in China. It affects Edge Freedom and Stealth models, and the HOG 32-pound Wing model. They were sold in the U.S. and Canada from May 2009 through October 2010 for \$199 to \$250. The problem is that the spring in the over-pressure valve can corrode and break, preventing the BCD from retaining air, posing a drowning hazard to divers.

To get the numbers of the recalled jackets, go to www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/prerel/prhtml11/11212.html. If you own one of the recalled devices, stop using it immediately until it's repaired. For additional information, call Chris Robinson at 888-370-3483 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Eastern, Monday through Friday, or visit the company's website at www.edge-gear.com.

stream. The television had some kind of circuit box to turn on. I didn't bother. The dining room and bar have great water views. The food was delicious, but a bit repetitive because we had asked ahead for chicken or fish and no meat. The staff graciously added pizza and pasta. As long as you stayed with the \$2 local beer, alcohol was very reasonable. (www.eaglepointresort.com.ph; daily lodging rates range from \$120 for a room without a view to \$180 for a cottage suite.)

After five days in Anilao, led by divemaster Joey Aristorenas, we took a ferry to Sabang. Located in the small village of Puerto Galera, the Atlantis Resort is an open-air property completely dedicated to divers from around the world. And the food is good. The highlight of the day was the announcement, after two morning dives, that it was "Mongolian" time. A luncheon buffet of vegetables, pork, chicken and raw fish (your selection) was stir-fried with soy or oyster sauce, chili oil, garlic and ginger. (www.atlantishotel.com; the daily rate for two people, including meals and dives, ranges from \$209 for a standard room to \$264 for a suite.)

A small path separates the dive operator and boats from the resort. Each day, we divided into two groups to board small speed boats for three dives plus a night dive. Once again, in the harbor location of Sabang wreck, some of the group saw a second blue-ring during a night dive. The following night, most of the divers staying at Atlantis were diving the wreck, but this time there was no sighting. While most Anilao and Puerto Galera diving features a rubbly underwater landscape, the area does have some magnificent coral reefs, both hard and soft. One of the more beautiful reefs was Beatrice Rock in Anilao.

My group, the Chicken Divers, was celebrating 10 years of diving together. Founded when a group of like-minded divers put a rubber chicken in a bait ball for a shark feed in Papua New Guinea, the international group has expanded to more than 30 divers. As part of our celebration, with the help of Atlantis Resort, who made "Free Hug" signs, we spent several hours standing on the village path giving free hugs to pedestrians. Some doubted the word "free," others made a sharp detour, but one man expressed his "need" for a hug. The event attracted a big crowd, and was enjoyed by the recipients as well as the huggers.

* * * * *

While "free hugs" are not guaranteed on a Philippines visit, you can expect to find an endless number of unique critters and all sorts of dive operations. In fact, let me add what a few of our readers have reported in past months as further evidence that you can get 80 percent of what Indonesia offers, for half the price and hassle.

Richard R. Kimball (Lake Ozark, MO) went to Magic Island Dive Resort in March and noted that the "two-and-a-half-hour drive to the resort made New York City driving seem tame. The house reef was terrific, with lots of weird critters, from giant frogfish to ghost pipefish. The guides would find the small stuff with ease. The baitball of small fish at Pescador Island was fantastic, despite a ripping current.

Eagle Point Resort, Anilao

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

Atlantis Resort, Puerto Galera

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent
World Scale

In Case a Stingray City Denizen Bites off Your Hand

Grand Cayman will build a 2,000-bed healthcare city to target American patients and insurers searching for deeply discounted medical care. The Cayman government agreed to the deal with Dr. Devi Shetty, a low-cost healthcare pioneer renowned as Mother Teresa's heart surgeon. The healthcare city will cost about \$2 billion and encompass a hospital, medical university and assisted-living facility.

Shetty estimates the Cayman facility will draw 50 percent of its patients from the U.S. "It will be much easier for insurance companies to buy an air ticket and ask [patients] to go to the Cayman Islands, get a heart bypass done, have a two-week beach holiday and come back at perhaps less than 50 percent of the cost," he said.

The average cost for a heart bypass is \$144,000 in the United States, five times higher than neighboring Mexico at \$27,000. Even with the higher cost of doing business in the Cayman Islands, Shetty estimates a heart bypass will cost less than \$10,000.

Water was 80 degrees." Tom Reynolds (Pasadena, CA) was there in January, when water temperatures average 83 degrees, and says, "The macro life is amazing, and the guides are expert at finding macro opportunities, in addition to the typical South Pacific macro-critters. You will see a bait ball at Pescador, potentially with large fish feeding, plus lots of turtles and the possibility of a whale shark. Accommodations are excellent, and everything is convenient at this small resort. The best connections from the western U.S. are via Philippines Airlines. You stop in Manila, then continue to Cebu, where the resort picks you up. Overall, a reasonable cost for an excellent experience." (www.magicisland.nl/en/home; you must e-mail them to get room and diving rates)

John Woolley (Olympia, WA) stayed at Liberty's Lodge in December, and says, "Undercurrent readers are upfront and aware of the sorry state of the world's marine environment. So shout out loud when you find a success story like little Apo Island, a community that recognized the reef is their life and stopped its destruction. Well, yes, there is electricity only three times a day for two-hour spurts. And yes, you have to take bucket baths in the room's bathrooms. Those rooms, however, are clean and comfortable. Might it be inconsistent for us to worry about the destruction of reefs, often brought about by local pollution, and then not stay in a place designed to minimize that destruction because of the lack of amenities? I'll answer that: Yes. So go to Apo Island and stay at Liberty's Lodge. But not just because it is the right thing to do, but because you'll find wonderful corals and really nice drift diving, some of which brings you through large schools of jacks. And you'll find an incredibly friendly staff, very knowledgeable divemasters, a yummy but limited menu, visitors from around the world who are really interesting, and a community that welcomes you to their small village. And don't forget to walk through the village and stop at the open-air billiards pub and shoot some pool. If you are lucky, you'll get to dance to some live music (the drummer was one of the divemasters). There are really nice walks around the island, albeit steep walks. Finally, in the open-air boat that takes you to the island (about 30 minutes), it is quite likely you will get wet, so be prepared. But when you step off the boat in your wet shorts, you'll be welcomed into open, friendly arms." (www.apoisland.com; daily double-occupancy rates, including meals, range from \$45 to \$77, dives are \$26 each, and the marine-conservation tax is \$5 per day.)

At Puerto Galera, Ray Villemarette (Vienna, VA), wrote, "El Galleon Resort is one of my favorite places to dive and, except for Australia, sets the standard I use for diving in Asia. It has many opportunities to experience the effects of island tides and covering large distances in a short period of time. It also has 'canyons' where you can sit below the current and watch the sea life above be carried past you. The water clarity can be excellent. The hotel staff is excellent, and while not a five-star hotel, it is more than comfortable. The divemasters try hard to make your dives memorable. The English for some of them can be a bit lacking, but we had no problems communicating. We had one divemaster who decided the dive was his opportunity to take pictures. Since this was a drift dive, my buddy and I were left trying to swim against the current while this guy took pictures. Perhaps because this divemaster was from the U.S., he felt he did not have to provide the same level of service to visiting Americans."

Ken Knezick, who runs the top-notch Island Dreams travel agency (www.islanddream.com), told us he just returned from El Galleon "and their new dive deck is superb, with excellent service all around." (www.asiadivers.com/elgalleon; a seven-night, double-occupancy package with unlimited diving, breakfast and transfers is \$1,017 per person.)

Dumaguete Resort, the sister of Atlantis Resort in Puerto Galera, gets a thumbs up from Dave Reubush (Toano, VA), who was there in February. "All the staff are great. They aim to please and will know your name within the first day. The food is good and there is always plenty of it. The rooms are comfortable, the air-conditioning works. Not luxury, but more than sufficient. The price is also good. You can do up to five dives a day. The diving just off the resort is mainly muck diving; the bottom is dark brown sand and silt. There had been rainstorms the week before we got there, and as a result, the water was full of silt and visibility was typically about 30 feet. There were a number of critters I had never seen before, like spiny tiger shrimp and half-inch-long frogfish. However, there were not huge numbers, so with only six divers, the bottom got stirred up quickly.

"One day, we motored 45 minutes to Apo Island for three dives (two in the morning, a BBQ lunch on the boat, and one after lunch). Apo has beautiful coral gardens and 60-foot visibility, but we didn't see anything special. Another day, we motored an hour to Siquijor Island, which has the same visibility as Apo, coral gardens, interspersed sand flats and a lot of interesting things to see. (I saw two ribbon eels on each of the three dives.) For Apo and Siquijor, I would recommend gloves, even though they say no gloves, as there are typically mild currents and lots of stinging hydroids. While the resort sets your tank and BC on and off the boats, you have to schlep the rest of your gear from the dive shop, down the beach and through the surf line to the boat. While the beach is brown sand, there are rocks at the surf line you have to negotiate, and at high tide, you will often have to wade through chest-deep water to get to the boat ladder. There may or may not be one of the boat guys to help you. If you only had to do this once a day, it wouldn't be too bad, but at times we would change boats from dive to dive, so on those days, you had to bring your stuff back after each dive." (www.atlantishotel.com; daily rate, double-occupancy, with all meals and dives included, ranges from \$227 for a poolside room to \$264 for a suite.)

Finally, let us report on Turtle Bay Dive Resort, which Kimberley Fox and Michael O'Reilly (Los Angeles, CA) visited in March. "A three-hour drive from the Cebu airport, Turtle Bay is one of several dive resorts on Moalboal. Owned by a pleasant couple named Chris and Fe, the resort has accommodations for up to 50 people. Standard schedule includes a two-tank morning dive; destination alternates between nearby tiny Pescador Island and multiple sites (mostly wall dives) on Moalboal's coast. Pescador is 30 minutes by boat; the Moalboal sites are all within 15 minutes. Pescador's signature attraction is a large school of swarming sardines, around which barracuda and hunting jacks are often found. Divers can swim through parting clouds of sardines to appreciate the swarm up close. Pescador has an interesting variety of frogfish and scorpionfish, and an occasional octopus. At the Moalboal sites, over the course of a week, we saw 10 orangutan crabs on bubble coral, a variety of scorpionfish including several species of leaf scorpionfish and probably 100 common pipefish (no ghost pipefish). There is a nearby mandarin fish dive, but the site is small and the resort tries to limit the mandarin dives to only two divers. Our best dive may have been a night dive at Moalboal Bay -- very shallow -- where we saw octopus, many species

"Only in the U.S. Would You Try to Blame the Resort"

Dear Ben,

In the March 2011 issue of *Undercurrent*, there was an article about a woman who had lost several fingers in Fiji after a boat ladder had severed them. She is now taking legal action against the booking agent as her last resort. I feel sorry about her accident. However, after 900 dives, I have many times approached ladders that were bouncing as the boat rocked with the waves. Putting one's hand on the upper part of a bouncing ladder where it may slam against the boat is very poor judgment. Maybe rather than looking for someone else to blame, we need to take responsibility for our own actions. Only in the U.S.A. would you try to blame the resort or booking agent. Come on!

-- Craig Condron, Spokane, WA

of translucent shrimp, a sargassum file fish, unusual decorator crabs and an eel-tailed catfish. The house reef is not so interesting that you will want to do it every day. The boats are bangkas, with little shade and no space dedicated to cameras. At low tide, divers are shuttled to and from the pier by a smaller motorboat. Although the corals seem healthy, the overall volume and diversity of marine life is much lower than anywhere we've been in the Philippines. This may be due to the abundance of line fishing at many of the dive sites. On the last trip to Pescador, I counted 13 fishermen's bangkas lined up nose to nose with dive boats. The impact on the reefs is clear: we spotted almost none of the larger reef fish during a week of diving." (www.turtlebay-diveresort.com; double-occupancy rates, including all meals, range from \$79 per person for a pool-view deluxe to \$92 for a sea-view king.)

So, dear readers, the Philippines has a great variety of diving, endless places to choose from, and it's less of a hassle and less expensive to travel to compared to much of Indonesia. Keep it in mind.

-- Ben Davison

Cocos, Fiji, Roatan, Yucatan

and why you shouldn't rely solely on travel agents

Xcalak and Chinchorro Bank, Mexico. If any diver studies a map of the Yucatan, he has to imagine that the Chinchorro Bank, south of Cozumel, has to be special. I thought so 10 years ago, and was disappointed; my full review is still on our website. Jason Marks (Oakland, CA) gave it a go in March, and reports that nothing has improved at Chinchorro, but dives close to the mainland are just fine. "All diving was with XTC Dive Center, just outside Xcalak. We liked the local diving quite a bit. Hob Na, at the north end of the Xcalak reef, is a beautiful set of deep canyons and ridges, lushly covered with gorgonians and hard corals. While there were only a few snapper of any size, and I saw no grouper, smaller fish - - angels, parrots, wrasses, cowfish, butterflyfish - - abounded. La Poza, a relatively deep wall with side canyons harboring schools of tarpon, jack and snapper, was spectacular, and the entry, from inside the lagoon and over the wall with breakers rolling overhead, was neat. Poza Rica and Dona Nica were tamer sites, but still fun. Chinchorro Bank, on the other hand, was disappointing. The trip out, through swells of five feet and against a strong wind, was rough, and took more than 2.5 hours. (Coming back was easier, at almost two hours.) Everyone got soaked as we hit the reef cut, and despite some sun, it was impossible to get warm in the wind and spray. Punta Isabel and Punta Irlanda's relatively shallow reefs, averaging 50 feet, had apparently been scoured clean of most coral cover by a storm. Only widely scattered sponges and gorgonians survive; very sparse hard corals on the mostly sand-covered reefs, especially at Isabel. That said, there were more moderate-size fish (schools of snapper, several grouper, and a couple of triggerfish) than at the local Xcalak sites, probably reflecting fishing restrictions on this part of the Biosphere Reserve, as well as numerous conchs and garden eels in the sand flats. XTC Dive Center was a well-run operation with good staff, the exception being the divemaster on the Chinchorro trip, who was disengaged almost to the point of uselessness. We liked staying in their apartments next door (a.k.a. the Flying Cloud Hotel), which were comfortable, affordable and so convenient." (www.xtcdivecenter.com)

Wananavu, Ra Divers and Volivoli Beach Resort, Fiji. While Wananavu still promises to have a dive operation in June, details are not forthcoming. Ra Divers has moved on to Volivoli, and it's a fine place, reports Lynn Siebert, who owns Scuba World in Sacramento, CA, and went there in February. Ra, of course, is a good operation, but what about this hotel few have visited? Lynn says, "Around seven years ago, the Darling family from New Zealand (Steve Sr., Gail, Stevie and Nick) bought Ra Divers and 20 acres of surrounding property on the beach and coastline of Bligh Waters at the northern tip of the island of Viti Levu. Their vision was to create a dedicated dive resort that would meet the level of accommodation, food

Traveling Divers Should Consider “Global Entry”

I have just returned from JFK, where I met with a TSA officer. I'm not in trouble, just approved for TSA's new “Global Entry” program. It's like a fast lane for immigration and customs. Instead of waiting in line, you swipe your passport at the Global Entry kiosk, fill out the customs declaration on its touch screen, put down a hand for scanning, and it spits out a card that sweeps you through immigration and customs. As the TSA officer told me, “You will never wait in line again.” For me, that was the hook.

Global Entry requires that you apply online at **www.globaleentry.gov**, filling out an electronic form reflecting the efficiency of TSA (redundant and irritating). You qualify to apply if you meet five requirements:

- * you are a U.S. citizen, lawful permanent resident, or citizen of those countries listed on the site
- * you have never been convicted of a crime anywhere
- * you have never been found violating agricultural, immigration, or customs laws
- * you don't lie on the application
- * you are not being investigated by any state, federal, or local law enforcement agency

You swap some of your privacy and biometric information (all 10 fingerprints and facial recognition) for convenience, as well as giving TSA a non-refundable \$100 for five years of Global Entry. It's not for the paranoid. However, Global Entry kiosks are in virtually every U.S. airport with international flights (including San Juan), and the TSA agent said that they are rolling out an analog for security, as well as working with other countries for Global Entry kiosks in airports around the world.

-- Mel McCombie

and service U.S. divers have come to expect when diving while land-based in Fiji. The grand opening this February of their new hotel wing offering nine hillside, ocean-view, deluxe rooms (best suited for twin-share dive buddies) added to the 10 private, hillside, ocean-view villas best suited for couples. Volivoli and Ra Divers have accomplished their goal: to provide a certain level of resort luxury and cultural activities at an affordable price without sacrificing their focus on diving and dive training in the Bligh Waters and Vatu-I-Ra Passage. The beautiful new restaurant and bar that overlooks the pool, swim-up bar and ocean, served up really good meals cooked fresh to order, which does take a while so don't be in a hurry. And don't expect gourmet presentations, just good, wholesome food of gigantic proportions with a definite New Zealand influence. Try the Volivoli Burger . . . No waiting for divers on the other dive boat to return for the restaurant to open up. The cook and meal-service staff are always there to take your food or drink order with a first-name greeting and a gigantic Fijian smile . . . You can take advantage of the cultural excursions, which include a Rakiraki area tour, native village visit and horseback riding. For our group, Volivoli arranged an Aqua-Trek Pacific Harbor shark dive day on the other side of the island -- a very long day, but it was worth it.” (**www.volivoli.com**)

Sea Hunter, Cocos Island, Costa Rica. Everybody loves the *Sea Hunter*, as did Michael D. Smith (Oklahoma City, OK) on his April trip, where he saw “lots of shark action on every dive, rays in herds, enormous schools of jacks, dozens of octopus, turtles, morays, lobster everywhere, reef fish and smaller critters galore.” However, the news is that “The Deep-See submarine was on board, and about half the guests made a trip. Two options were available, one to 300 feet and another to 500 feet. The cost was \$1,200 and \$1,800, respectively. We didn't make a trip, but ‘unbelievable’ and ‘experience of a lifetime’ were the comments from those who did.” Who says diving is a cheap recreation? (**www.underseahunter.com**)

The responsibility of travel agents – and travelers. We've heard occasional complaints about the service from Aggressor Fleet travel agents, and here is a recent example. A new diver and subscriber from Denver requested a downtown hotel in San Jose, Costa Rica, and was told the Indigo “was within walking distance of the museums and marketplace, in an upscale area of San Jose.” However, she found that “it was in an industrial area, there was a shopping center down the street with basic junk, and cab fare to go downtown was \$75 to \$100 each way. The agent's excuse was she didn't know. She was taking her San Jose agent's word.” Had either the travel agent or the traveler looked at the Indigo website, it would have been clear that the hotel is 3.73 miles from downtown and in a business park. And while a cab driver might have

tried to charge \$75, no savvy traveler would have paid it. You can get to the airport and back, with tips, for that money. Moral of the story: Bum advice from the travel agent, but with the Internet at hand, you should verify everything yourself - - and book it yourself if your travel agent is ignorant.

P.S.: San Jose's Hotel of Choice. Of course, any travel agent should know to book their clients at the Hotel Grano de Oro, clearly my favorite San Jose hacienda. Michael D. Smith adds to his *Sea Hunter* report: "A wonderful old hotel with a fabulous restaurant. We enjoyed a few days after our *Sea Hunter* trip, visiting the countryside around San Jose and doing lots of urban trekking to museums, parks and restaurants. A couple of our favorite eateries were Tin Jo and The Park Grill." (www.granodeoro.com)

Reef Gliders, Roatan. Debra Ferguson (Fergus Falls, MN) wags her own finger at herself for not doing her Internet homework or emailing before traveling to this Honduran island. By not contacting Reef Gliders, she didn't know that all dives included regulators, BCD, wetsuit, fins and masks, which at \$30 per dive, was a bargain - - and she could have shed travel weight, bringing only her mask and computer. "We shared a house in West End, a five-minute walk from Reef Gliders that our friends found online. They paid \$2,400 for a two-bedroom, two-bath house for a month. Reef Gliders kept groups small, three to six divers per guide. Two boats, operating with big motors, carried 12 to 15 passengers each. Most dives were within a five-minute boat ride. The deep dives had pretty healthy corals. Head counts were done at the conclusion of each dive. Most dives were around an hour, and a second guide took up the fast air consumers, leaving us with the lead guide for another 20 minutes of dive time. Even though the reef was close to shore, boat traffic made shore diving unsafe. There are lots of restaurants on the West End, and small grocery stores where you can get basics. Fruit and vegetable vendors sold out of their pickups. Reef Gliders took care of all our equipment, changing tanks and washing up after the dives. The quality and quantity of sea life has deteriorated in Roatan over the past 20 years. P.S.: There were three burglaries in the area during the month our friends were there." (www.reefgliders.com)

- - Ben Davison

Pegasus's New, Cheaper DPV

the leisure model is \$800 less and just as good

You may remember reading my enthusiastic report of the Pegasus Thruster back-mounted DPV (Diver Propulsion Vehicle) in the July 2010 article "Look Ma, No Hands Underwater." At \$2,350 the price was high, but a leisure model is now out for \$1,550, so I decided to try it in the ripping currents of Dampier Strait in eastern Indonesia.

It weighed 26 pounds at airport check-in. It was a pity that Emirates Airlines lost the bag between London and Jakarta; I had to wait six days before it arrived at Kri Island. I only got to use it for one day at the place where I was really going to need it, though I went on to use it as well during a liveaboard trip in the southern area of Raja Ampat, where the currents are less demanding.

The Leisure Unit

Most of my review in the July issue still applies. The Thruster fits onto the diver's tank by means of a specially designed mount, and is held tight by a conventional camband. With a fitted battery section, it looks a little bit like a small missile with a propeller set within a cowling at the rear end. A control cable is fitted via a wet connector at its front end, and has a large on/off switch button positioned at the business end of the control cable. Press to go. Release to stop.

The main difference between the leisure version and the commercial version, besides its anodizing blue color, is that it comes with only one battery pack instead of two, and a rather slower charging unit. With a total run time of 45 minutes and a full charging time of six hours, I thought I was going to need to be selective about which dives each day I was going to use it on.

Considerations in Use

Although the assembled Thruster snaps instantly into place on its mount, helpful dive boat crews displayed an element of difficulty doing this. I ended up fitting it to the tank myself and wearing it for the short inflatable dinghy rides. I was wary of fingers getting caught in whirling propeller blades, so I initially chose not to fit the wet connector of the remote control until I was ready to dive. This was a mistake in that less-than-careful insertion in its female part while in a rocking boat by a less-than-observant boat driver bent the male part wet connector. I had to straighten it later. So I resorted to assembling the whole thing and wearing it before diving, being careful to be aware of its extra dimension added to my tank and the fact that it made an overhang.

When I surfaced, I disconnected the remote control myself and dismantled the Thruster from the tank mount before passing it up into the dinghy, followed by my tank and other diving equipment. Because the mount stayed all week on my tank, along with my BC, it suffered from not being rinsed in fresh water after every dive like the main part. I soon noted a little electrolysis starting between the stainless-steel fittings and the aluminium body of the mount, and eventually cured the problem with a squirt of WD40.

In the Water

My first experience with the Thruster Leisure version was in the ripping currents of Cape Kri. While others hooked in to watch the show, I was able to buzz over to where I wanted to be. It also gave me the confidence to swim down to a mountain of sweetlips on the sand at 130 feet, knowing that I would easily be able to get back to the reef despite the current. I steered by simply pointing my body in the direction I wanted to go.

The Thruster is around four pounds negatively buoyant in the water. Because I was using it with an aluminium tank and very little extra lead (only four pounds), and wearing the latest in neutral buoyancy diving suits, the weight of the Thruster was a little top-heavy on the tank, which took getting used to. Unlike many DPVs, it goes almost silently. In fact, if testing it out of the water before diving but wearing it, you need to get someone else to tell you if the propeller is spinning.

Because all the weight of my diving gear was in the Thruster, it tended to lift the tank a little, and I felt the push applied at my shoulders. A crotch strap would have solved this initial problem. It doesn't happen when used with a steel tank, or with a heavier suit and more lead on the weight belt.

The 45-minute run time was plenty. In fact, using it only when I needed to challenge the prevailing current meant using it about five minutes per dive, and the 45 minutes was good enough for a day's diving.

Later on the trip, once we had left Kri Island and joined our liveaboard, *Mandarin Siren*, I lent the unit to Deidre, the Irish dive guide and boat manager. She happily buzzed about during the whole dive around Boo Rocks in southern Raja Ampat, acting like a sheepdog and obviously enjoying the experience. When I say "buzzed," I really mean that the unit is virtually silent apart from the distant hum of an electric motor, the sort that might power a big electric drill at low speed.

The great thing about the Thruster is that it is unobtrusive during the dive until you need it, and it leaves your hands free to use a camera. I threaded the business end of the remote control through the waistband of my BC so that it readily fell to hand. While propelling forward under power, I became very aware of the poor aquadynamics of my big camera rig, which became quite heavy in the hands after a time.



The Leisure Version of the Pegasus Thruster

So if the Thruster is your ultimate dive toy, keep in mind our article about excessive baggage charges (see below). Carrying this halfway around the world and back may cost you a good percentage of what you paid for the entire unit. **www.pegasusthruster.com**

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 dive equipment available in the U.K. and the U.S., and makes around 300 dives per year for that purpose.

Beating Baggage Fees for Dive Gear

Indo-Pacific dive trips are the worst -- but you can lower costs

Undercurrent reader and underwater photographer Michael Emerson (Eden Prairie, MN) just returned from Papua New Guinea, where he was charged \$565 because his bag was nine kilograms over the 40-kilogram limit on his Air New Guinea flight. “But prior to the flight, I had an e-mail from the airline through my agent which told me how much I could bring. Apparently, they dropped the weight by 10 kilograms between the e-mail and my flight. Nasty.” When other *Undercurrent* subscribers read about his plight in our monthly Dive News e-mail, they sent us their own horror stories about baggage fees.

Trips to Indo-Pacific dive destinations are the worst. Jim Black (Millbrae, CA) is a U.S. airline employee but he no longer receives baggage-fee waivers outside of the U.S., and it’s killing him whenever he travels to Asia. “Philippine Airlines cost me \$221 from Manilla to Bangkok. Express Jet out of Manado to Sorong cost \$300. On Lion Air to Sorong, many times it’s over \$100. While Indonesians with more luggage were not charged. Cathay Pacific in Hong Kong charged me \$75 because my carry-on was overweight by a couple of pounds. I am considering a boycott on diving in Asia any more. It is getting out of hand.”

Raja Ampat-bound divers particularly need to be aware of weight limitations when flying to Sarong to board their liveboards. Frequent traveler Ed Druy (Owings Mills, MD) says, “The various airlines seem to have the same policies. They allow 25 kilograms per passenger for checked luggage (assuming Y class fare), and about 7 kilograms for a carryon. Excess weight over these limits is on the order of \$4.50 per kilogram. So if the average diver has 40 kilograms of checked luggage and 15 kilograms of carry-on, the excess charge would be around \$100. That heavy camera gear adds up fast.”

No Rhyme or Reason

But others readers report varying success on baggage fees in the regions, with fees being waived on one leg of the flight, and hundreds charged for the exact same amount of luggage on the other. “On our last trip to Indonesia, Silk Air flew us, our dive gear and photo equipment from Singapore to Manado for no additional charge,” says Bill Boswell (Houston, TX). “When we were leaving two weeks later, we encountered the same situation Michael Emerson encountered. After much haggling, we settled on \$175 per person.”

Then there’s the strange, varying policies about what can be carryon luggage and what must be checked. Jim Heimer (Houston, TX) has this hair-tearing tale about his trip on Singapore Airlines to Bali last October. “My wife had packed her camera lenses and bodies in a backpack, which met the carry-on size requirements. She had a computer bag to carry her laptop, chargers, and other items. Though it was about half the size of a regular carry-on, she was not allowed to take it on board as a personal item because it had wheels and a handle. She had to unload the contents into a shopping bag, which she was then allowed to carry. Her nearly empty computer bag was then gate checked (no additional charge). I was towing a wheeled roll-aboard with my camera gear. The agent did not check the weight, which was well over the 25-pound limit, so I was allowed to take that on board with my over-the-shoulder computer bag. They seemed very picky about carry-on luggage.”

The same go-figure policy apparently applies to domestic and Caribbean flights now, too. “On Easy Air from Bonaire to Curacao in June, I was charged for excess weight of five kilos,” says Peter Jones (New York, NY). I got to the plane and discovered I was the only passenger. I guess they think all divers are billionaires.”

And be aware that Caribbean-based airlines may have lower baggage weight allowances than U.S.-based 737s that fly you there. Jan Culbertson (Seattle, WA) mentions Insel Airlines as an example. “Its website says each bag can weigh 20 kilos. Well, not exactly. If you are flying one of its large planes then this is true, but the website doesn’t say

that if you are flying a smaller plane, you are allowed only one bag and it can’t weigh over 20 kilos. We had three bags at 18 kilograms each and had to pay \$60 overweight charge from Bonaire to Curacao -- and they wanted cash. So beware of the inter-island flights , and check your plane first.”

How can you beat those baggage fees? We gathered these seven tips, which include some good advice from your fellow divers.

Know the Policy

Being aware of how much the airlines charge for bags is key. Factor in the fees when comparing fares because one airline might have a cheaper ticket but it could be more expensive once you realize how much it charges to check your luggage. FareCompare.com has a good baggage fee chart for domestic airlines (www.farecompare.com/how-to-shop/domestic-baggage-fee-chart.html).

Even if you’re going overseas, consider using Southwest or Jet Blue to connect to the airport with your international flight. Southwest lets you check two bags for free, Jet Blue allows one.

Steve M. Dussault (Dover, NH) recommends calling the airline before every trip to get their current policy. “The policy could change (most likely, it did) since the last time you flew with that airline. For example, Continental Airlines has an interesting baggage policy – the rates are dependent upon your destination. Be sure to bring documentation about the baggage policies so when the ticket agent attempts to overcharge you, you have some ammunition to contest the charges.”

Check the Scales

Having a small luggage scale at the ready can help you beat overweight fees, so weigh your bags before going to the airport. Often, airlines, deliberately or otherwise, have problems with their luggage scales. Ron Ross (Hagerstown, MD) used his small, hand-held luggage scale at home and it read 47 pounds for his bag. “At the airport, the same bag weighed 54 pounds. Okay, maybe my scale was off. But I wonder if US Air made a little extra by weighting the scale. What really got me was the overweight charge was \$75. If I had another bag to move stuff into, the charge would only have been \$25.”

Ask the airline to use another scale to weigh your bags, says John Ware (Dallas, TX). “Last April, before heading to Bonaire on Delta, I weighed my camera box using a calibrated scale and adjusted the contents so it weighed 49 pounds. When the box was weighed at the Delta desk in Baltimore, the digital scale indicated 55 pounds. I asked when their scale was last calibrated and was told, ‘Our scales are accurate,’ and that I was going to be charged \$150 for the overweight, though it was only one pound. After discussion, I asked for the camera box to be weighed on a different scale. Guess what? It read 49 pounds. The agent accepted that weight and I wasn’t charged. I described this incident in a letter to Delta, which sent a form letter with two \$25 discount coupons.”

“On a flight from Bonaire to Curacao, I was charged for excess weight of five kilos . . . even though I was the only passenger.”



**One Way to Lower Baggage Fees:
Wear Your BCD Aboard the Plane**

Get With a Program

Many airlines have frequent-flier programs that offer some sort of baggage fee discounts or waivers for elite or preferred members. When flying on Air Pacific to Fiji, Bill Markley (La Canada, CA) was threatened with a fee for his extra bag of dive gear. "I have American Airlines/Qantas Platinum status, and therefore additional baggage weight allowance because of it, so I booked my Fiji flight through Qantas. and was able to get Air Pacific, which code shares with Qantas, to waive the additional fee. Not so with the round-trip Pacific Sun flight to Nadi. It is owned by Air Pacific, but that flight had been booked by the resort I was staying at, so I couldn't get the fee waived."

Frequent fliers with less than elite status should check with their airlines to see if they have a free-baggage program you can pay for. For a \$349 annual fee, United's Premier Baggage program lets you and up to eight people check two free bags every time you fly together for a year. Also consider using an airline-branded credit card. Continental and Delta offer cards that give you free checked-bags. And check with your hotels -- a number of national chains frequently feature bag-fee reimbursement promotions.

"On the first digital scale, my camera box weighed 55 pounds. I asked for it to be weighed on a different scale. Guess what? It read 49 pounds."

Ask for a Discount

Maurine Jones and Burt Shimlock, our resident Indonesia experts, say the standard allowance on almost all domestic carriers there is 20 kilos per person. "However, if you tell the agent at check-in that you are a diver and your bags contain sporting equipment, you can often get a discount. Garuda will give you an extra 15 kilos for a total of 35, which is downright reasonable! Merpati will give an extra 5 to 10 kilos, depending on the agent's mood. Lion Air will usually give you five kilos extra. Express Air are tough nuts, they get our business as a last resort. But if you don't ask, they are not going to volunteer the discount."

Ship it Instead

Depending on the size and weight of your luggage and how far you're traveling, it might be cheaper to ground-ship your items to and from your destination. Even if it costs a few dollars more, some might find the convenience of not having to lug bags to and from the airport worth the extra expense. Rates and speed of service vary, but rates drop dramatically if you can ship weeks in advance. A couple of shippers that promise quick international delivery cheaper than Federal Express are Luggage Express (www.usxluggageexpress.com) and Luggage Free (www.luggagefree.com).

Buy a Lighter Bag

It could be a long-term investment to pay extra cash for lightweight luggage. While you may not be able to convert them to carry-ons, they can save you pounds of weight, and zero overweight fees. A few *Undercurrent* readers recently wrote on our online forum good reviews for Armor's lightweight bags, Mother Lode's eTech Junior bag and Stahlsac's "Jamaican Smuggler" bags. For details, visit the chat on *Undercurrent's* forum at www.undercurrent.org/diving_forum/index.php/topic,438.0.html

Wear or Rent Your Gear

In past issues, we recommended buying a travel vest to hold your carry-on items and beat airline luggage weight restrictions. And reader Harvey Cohen (Middlefield, NJ) had the cheaper idea of just putting on your BCD over your shirt, wearing it onto the plane, then stowing it in the overhead bin. "I sometimes use the zippered pockets to carry small stuff like snacks or a book. I've never had any comments from airlines or security." To cut the extra bag, consider renting some dive gear at your destination. The cost per day could vastly outweigh what those little airlines want to charge you to bring it on board.

Finally, when it's all said and done, just remember: It ain't cheap to be a diver -- but it's well worth it.

-- Vanessa Richardson

Sharks Under Siege: Part II

and what divers can do to help them out

Whenever anyone falls overboard or is adrift at sea, it's always in "shark-infested waters," the implication being that thousands are lurking below, just waiting to rip a human apart. So it's not easy to convince many non-divers that a healthy shark population is critical to a healthy ocean. According to George Collier, president of the Shark Research Committee, up to 73 million sharks are killed annually just so their fins can be the base of the Asian delicacy, shark fin soup. The shark population has declined by as much as 90 percent as a result. It's not just in environmentally-unprotected Asia where sharks are being killed. DNA from fins purchased in San Francisco indicates that the fins come from sharks all over the world, over half from sharks classified as "vulnerable" species.

The Need for Marine Preserves

On Mexico's Caribbean side, a bull shark population was recently identified near Playa del Carmen, and dive operators started shark dives in the area. But on November 6, a commercial fisherman from Puerto Moreles went to the Porto Real Hotel pier, where bull sharks often congregate, and caught nine of them using longline. When the dive shops found out, they raised hell.

Jorge Correa, director of Phantom Divers in Playa del Carmen, told us, "We contacted the press and coordinated several town hall meetings between the local dive community and local fishing cooperatives, bringing in several experts, including the director of marine parks. We were able to convince the fisherman responsible not to fish there again. We were also able to get nine of the 12 local commercial fishermen with permits to stop fishing for sharks in Playa del Carmen." There's still the fear that the incident will be repeated and threaten a flourishing population of female sharks. The fisherman had a permit, but used an illegal long line. "That entire policy needs to be fixed," says Correa. So he and other local dive operators created an organization called Saving Our Sharks to seek marine protection for Playa del Carmen and its bull sharks. "We can prove that sharks have more economic and natural value for the area alive," the group says in a petition for official protection. Sign the petition at: <http://www.gopetition.com/petition/40698.html>. More details about the nonprofit can be found at www.savingoursharks.org. On the Pacific coast, Wildcoast is supporting the efforts of Isla Guadalupe Biosphere Reserve to protect white sharks. Get details at www.wildcoast.net.

While shark finning is illegal in Mexico, that's not stopping poor fishermen. They can get an average of \$250 per kilo of shark fins from Singaporean, Japanese and other Asian fleets. And with the shark populations declining in their local waters, they're crossing into U.S. waters to hunt them illegally. The Coast Guard is catching Mexican shark fishing boats in the Gulf of Mexico, which annually catch more than 50,000 sharks. Carlos Guerra, a Mexican fisherman, told the *Washington Post* in March, "When we fish here, we catch next to nothing. Little fish and barely any of them. When we cross the border, we catch so much and make a lot of money." The sharks they haul in are dubbed "gringos."

Another area also eyed by shark-finning fishermen is Cocos Island, a diver's favorite. In our March

Nonprofits Against Finning and For Shark Protection

- * Iemanya Oceanica - www.iemanya.org
- * Oceanic Defense - www.oceanicdefense.org
- * Predators in Peril project - www.elasmodiver.com/predatorsinperil.htm
- * Shark Alliance - <http://SharkAlliance.org>
- * Shark Angels - <http://sharkangels.org>
- * The Shark-Free Marina Initiative - <http://shark-freemarinass.com>
- * Shark Safe Network - www.sharksafenetwork.com
- * Shark Savers - www.sharksavers.org
- * WildAid - www.wildaid.org

2009 article, “The Shark Hunt Continues at Cocos Island,” David Leonard wrote about the abundance of illegal finning at Cocos, and rangers’ lack of financial assistance to stop them. The good news is that on March 3, Costa Rica created a new marine-protection area called the Seamounts Marine Management Area, which extends 2.5 million acres around Cocos Island, an area larger than Yellowstone National Park. The new park will have both no- and low-fishing areas, with official protection for the scalloped hammerhead and the leatherback turtle.

The bad news is that Costa Rica overall has not banned shark finning, so it goes on without abatement. Even famous chef Gordon Ramsey, visiting the ports of Puntarenas for his documentary on shark finning, was not safe from shark-fin smugglers. A crew from Taiwan poured gas over him one day, then held him up at gunpoint the next when he tried to film thousands of shark fins on their boats. Police ordered Ramsey out of the country.

Will the World Act Against Shark Finning?

Despite the harrowing news of 70 million sharks being killed annually, there is good news - - more countries are taking action against their slaughter. Last year, Palau and the Maldives created vast marine reserves for sharks surrounding their territories. Honduras followed, prohibiting all commercial fishing of sharks.

Beqa Adventure Divers, which offers shark dives in Fiji, has publicly called for a stop to shark finning in the island nation. Mike Neuman, director of Beqa Adventures Divers, told the Fijian press that sharks play important roles in Fiji’s economy. “As to the value of sharks for dive tourism, we have calculated that a single shark on our shark dive contributes USD\$16,600 to the local economy annually, or \$330,000 during its life-time.” Compare that to a 2009 report by New Zealand agency Pacific Scoop stating that shark fins in Fiji can only fetch \$50. “If we destroy our oceans, we risk losing countless jobs and 55 percent of our GDP,” Neuman said. “This is simply not a risk the country can afford. “

The United States is starting to take action. Hawaii was the first U.S. state to ban the sale, possession and distribution of shark products. It was followed by the Mariana Islands, and Guam, where the governor signed the bill last month. Guam, a long-time fishing port had seen a severe decline in its shark population as the demand for shark fin soup rose but after the U.S. passed the first iteration of its law to ban shark finning, Guam noticed that its shark population began to recover. Oregon and Washington bills banning the illegal trade of shark fins are making their way through their respective legislatures. In February, two California state senators proposed a bill to halt all the state’s trade in shark fins. Paul Fong, one of the senators proposing the bill said in a news conference, “I grew up on shark fin soup, but when I found out the effect it is having on the shark population, I stopped eating it.” Surprisingly, the law is getting considerable opposition, mainly from Chinese-American restaurant and market owners, seafood distributors and fishermen. Leland Yee, a state senator from the Bay Area, is their defender. He spoke out against the bill at a press conference, serving samples of shark fin soup to reporters. “Right now, Costco sells shark steak,” Yee told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. “What are you going to do with the fin from that shark? This is another example in a long line of examples of insensitivity to the culture and traditions of the Asian American community.”

We prefer the logic of Charles Phan, chef at the Slanted Door, a leading Asian restaurant in San Francisco. He told the *Chronicle*: “It’s never easy when you try to tell people what not to eat, but, in my view, the ocean needs protection. You might call it part of Chinese culture, but if you keep it up, shark will disappear. We need to do what’s right for Mother Earth.”

To throw your support behind the California bill, sign these two petitions: **www.thepetitionsite.com/4/ban-shark-finning-in-california** and **www.thepetitionsite.com/164/support-the-bill-to-ban-shark-finning**. To set Senator Leland Yee straight, contact him via his website at **<http://dist08.casen.govoffice.com>**.

- - Vanessa Richardson

Back at You, Dive Guides

one customer replies to a divemaster's rant

After reading J.D.'s article, "A Divemaster's Thoughtful Rant," in the April issue, I think what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, so I've written a similar rant from the dive clients' point of view. I agree with her points, with a couple of exceptions. Sure, you see lots of dive clients come on your boat, both good and bad. You have plenty of fodder for beer-fueled bitch sessions. But divemasters aren't the only party with gripes. Dive clients have their own bitch sessions, and sometimes have plenty to gripe about.

Yes, I know you've been at this dive site a thousand times before, but please slow down. This is our first time here, we're not bored, and we want to take some time to see the small things. I know you can get a good workout swimming fast, and you can run us out of air faster to be back on board and home sooner, but that's not why we paid to be here. Try to see this site through our eyes and take some excitement in it.

Please put the camera away and spend time with us. I know you make extra income from selling me a trip video or CD of photos, but if you're down here as a divemaster, please do your job and make the camera an incidental tool. If you're here to polish your portfolio for *National Geographic*, stop diving as a divemaster. Please show me sites you think I might like, not the ones you want to shoot. And if I've got a camera, please don't shoot until after I'm done. You'll be here again and again. After this one chance to shoot, I likely won't see this site again.

Please don't treat us like children, unless we are. Yes, you probably have way more dive experience than we do, and almost certainly know these dive sites better. And yes, some of us behave stupidly from time to time. But if we're adults, we deserve to be treated that way until proven differently. Treat ignorance with education, not a lecture or derision. If you treat us like unruly kids, we're likely to resent it, or even start acting like kids in response.

Don't limit our dive time because you want to go home. It takes a lot of our time and money to come out to this dive site; please let us get the maximum amount of pleasure out of our dive. Don't impose an artificially short dive time or automatically terminate everyone's dive as soon as the first air-sucking beginner is out of air. Figure out a way to let people with better air get better dive times.

Bret Gilliam Chimes in on an "Inexcusable" Error

The "divemaster rant" article in the April issue is quite good. However, one comment about the diver who surfaced with omitted decompression and the computer had gone into "error" or "missed deco" warnings. This is, basically, inexcusable by the diver. Even if the diver ran out of breathing gas, he should have used the vessel's hang tank or sought out another diver to complete the deco. Many computer models will not tell you how much deco was omitted, leaving the poor divemaster with no real idea of what the magnitude of the omission really was. It could have been a couple of minutes, or maybe much more. This then becomes problematic.

Personally, I would put the diver back in at a depth of 30 feet for 10 minutes, 20 feet for 20 minutes, and 10 feet for 30 minutes. That schedule would almost certainly clear any

protocol for missed stops. Then I'd mask the diver with pure oxygen by demand mask for one hour at the surface, while running a neurological exam and observing for signs and symptoms of decompression sickness. If none was present, I'd sit him down for 24 hours and then let him resume diving when his computer cleared.

If symptoms did manifest (and the diver should be checked every hour for the next four to six hours), I'd continue oxygen administration without interruption, and evacuate to a chamber for evaluation and treatment. If a remote site made evacuation a non-option, I'd use an in-water recompression protocol as long as the diver was conscious and responsive. You also need an in-water tender throughout the process, but the tenders can trade off during the treatment. Post-treatment would then require another two hours of surface oxygen breathing and complete diving shutdown, but no evacuation.

-- Bret Gilliam

Learn something about your dive sites' natural history, and please tell us something about it. We're not asking that you know the scientific name of every creature we encounter, just recite some stories about what animal behavior you've observed (you are watching, aren't you?) and what we might see. It adds meaning to our dives, and might even spice up the dive briefings so we pay close attention.

Please don't check my air unless I'm a beginner, I ask for it, or the dive requires it. I know some dives require us all to stick together, including during the ascent, and I'm happy to keep you informed of my air supply if that's the case. If it's not, and I'm an experienced diver, please respect me enough to let me keep tabs on my own air supply. Don't insult me by grabbing my air gauge and looking at it, and I won't insult you by giving you advice on how to run the boat.

If you're going to be a practical joker, please know your limits. Yes, it's funny to put purple Kool-Aid in a dive sock, or to paint a diver-down flag on a sleeping passenger's toenail, but not all divers like to be in on those kinds of jokes. Learn which of them do before you go at it. And if the tables get turned and the joke's on you, please don't be grumpy about it.

If you're handling my camera, please learn to put the lens cover on and take it off. We're not asking you to be a camera tender, just to help us get our cameras in and out of the water. We depend on you to take our lens covers when we dive because we often lose the covers if we take them with us. It does take a little extra effort to find the lens cover and put it back on when the camera comes up, but without a lens cover, ports worth hundreds or even thousands of dollars can easily be ruined, especially on a crowded boat without good camera facilities.

Please don't force your buddy-diving philosophy on me. I don't believe that diving with a buddy is always safer, especially when I don't know my buddy. Please don't assign me a much-less-experienced diver to be my buddy because you can't conceive of anyone diving without a buddy. Please let me dive alone if I have the experience to do so. And please don't chastise me about staying close to my buddy at all times if we know each other's habits well and are safe solo divers.

Please think about your mood at a dive briefing. Yeah, I know the boat's probably not paying you enough, you didn't get enough sleep last night, we're all behaving like jerks, and the world's just not right. But your attitude at the dive briefing sets the tone for the whole dive, and sometimes for a whole trip. An excited divemaster before a dive leads an exciting dive. A grumpy, lecturing divemaster leads a disappointing dive. If it's too hard to get excited, maybe it's time for a vacation or to look for another line of work.

I have deep appreciation for all the divemasters who have led me on trips, most of whom aren't guilty of my points. But there are the memorable few who stand out for the wrong reason – and I know plenty of *Undercurrent* subscribers reading this who share similar experiences. Just some food for thought for all divemasters before you step foot on your next boat trip.

M.B. has worked as a liveboard videographer and has logged 1200 dives on day boats, liveboards and from shore.

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