

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Sea Saba, Juliana's Hotel, Saba, Caribbean unexpected gems on King Kong's island

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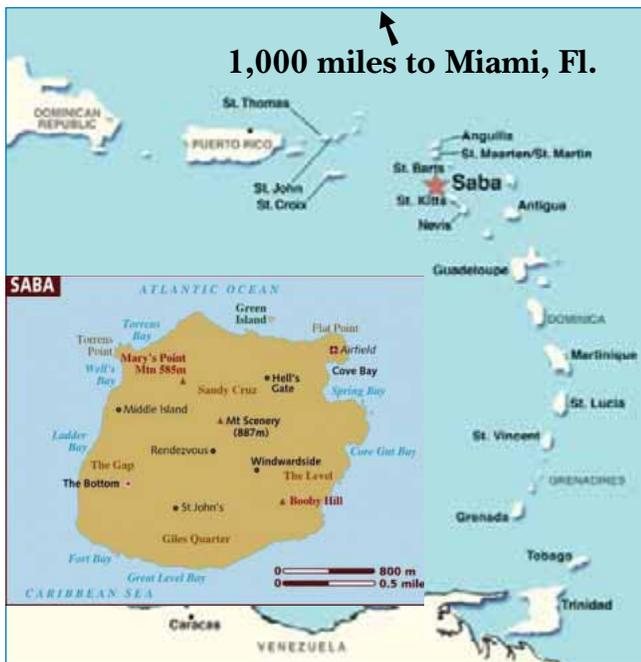
Dear Fellow Diver:

My expectations were modest as I slowly descended on my first dive off Saba. We'd been briefed that, like other volcanic islands, Saba's underwater geology was primarily algae-covered volcanic rock. Coral would be scarce. Furthermore, this checkout dive at Babylon allowed Dick and Briar to assess us in an unchallenging environment. But frankly, the issue for me was more technical: Would my new Nikon D7000 in its Aquatica housing work as I hoped?

So I didn't care that the first fishes I saw and snapped were a familiar yellow-tailed damsel, a little blue chromis and a coney. The pressure to take perfect pictures of rare fish was off. I stalked yellowhead jawfish rising from their holes in the sand and shot banded butterfly fish, blackbar soldierfish, redband parrotfish, black durgon, blue tang, honeycomb cowfish, bar jack -- all in the first 10 minutes. And I also experienced the unexpected: a bubbling, golden, warm, sandy bottom heated by Saba's somewhat dormant but active volcanic foundations. My all-purpose 60mm macro lens was fine for the reef fish and flamingo tongues, but couldn't capture the nurse shark and large sponges. I didn't need my Sub-Sea 10x diopter. Surfacing after more than an hour in the 81-degree water, we went on to our second dive, where it was much the same, yet my



Juliana's Hotel



impressions were positive, in the manner of a nice vanilla ice cream cone. Better still, Sea Saba was true to its word about letting experienced divers dive their own profiles.

An unexpected new chapter on Saba began that night. My partner dined at Eden, where tables overlooked the lush outdoors which was lit by torches. My first surprise occurred when I asked what dark ales they served, expecting a Negra Modelo or some such. Instead, our waitress brought a bottle of Leffe Brune Dark Abbey from Belgium, a bittersweet, toffee-colored, malt brew from heaven. By night's end, we had split a wonderful grilled fish in a wine-based lobster sauce, a side of delightful sauerkraut mixed with grilled bacon and apple bits, and enjoyed more Leffe Brune. I was not shocked that the bill was about \$110 with tip, considering what the food's trans-

portation costs must have been.

For years, I've relished the idea of going to Saba, population 2,000 -- inspired by images of a remote, mountainous, cloud-enshrouded home to the original King Kong and a listing in the book, "1,000 Places to go Before You Die." My local dive shop hosted this April trip, which from the Midwest took less than a day. During the long layover in St. Maarten, I stood on the beach as landing passenger jets passed only 100 feet or so directly overhead. The second bit of fun was landing on Saba in a WinAir Twin Otter. The runway is less than 400 meters long, bounded by sheer dropoffs into the sea at either end. Think landing on the deck of an aircraft carrier moored alongside a mountain. You can find videos of this on YouTube.

Big, smiling ex-Londoner John Magor, co-owner of Sea Saba, met us on arrival. He packed us into a van for the winding trip up the only main road to Juliana's Hotel, nestled quaintly against the backdrop of cloud-covered Mt. Scenery in the little town of Windwardside. Its restaurant, pool and Jacuzzi overlooked the ocean. During the week, I came to appreciate the tasty breakfasts at its Tropics restaurant, and later its happy hours, a fun, happening local scene.

After I settled into my modest but clean, air-conditioned, ocean-view room, John briefed my group on the routine. Our gear would remain on board, and the crew would tend it. A van would pick us up daily at 8:45 a.m. We'd make two dives and return in the early afternoon. We could dive our own profiles. Snorkeling was not worth exploring at the sites we'd dive. There were no beaches, so no shore diving. This was not going to be a 24-7 dive camp, like a Buddy Dive on Bonaire or CoCoView on Roatan. The afternoons and evenings were going to be topside-oriented, like it or lump it. (It is possible to arrange three tanks a day.) Our daily 20-minute drive to and from the harbor provided a mini-tour of the island. The red-tiled roofs and white walls of buildings reminded me of a European alpine village set in the Caribbean. The last quarter mile down steep, goat-populated switchbacks rivaling San Francisco's Lombard Street was always a hoot.

Our boat, Giant Stride, was tied up about halfway down the 200-foot-long pier. It was a twin-screw 38-footer with ample shelter and safety gear, a flying bridge and small cabin with enclosed marine head. Although it was outfitted for 25 divers, we dove with about half that number. I exited off the stern platform,

re-entering via a T-bar ladder. They gave a thorough briefing before each dive. Our non-Saban crew was primarily from the U.S. Our skipper, thirty-something Nick, was from Wisconsin. Dick, a world-class Ironman winner in his mid-70s, was from upstate New York; Lisa from North Carolina and Briar, a Kiwi, looked in their 20s.

Tent Wall and Man O'War, the second pair of sites, were beautiful. At Tent Wall, I dove over and along a ledge that provided easy navigational clues. A wide-angle lens paid off, because much of what I was looking at seemed King Kong-sized, from barrel sponges as big as garbage cans to purple gorgonians wide enough to hide behind. A nurse shark was resting on a ledge as I began the dive. Typical reef fish swam by: gray and French angelfish, four-eyed and banded butterflyfish, a dancing juvenile spotted drum, blue tang, parrotfish, coney, even a soapfish. A foot-long Caribbean lobster faced off with another photographer in our group, caught in the open on a sandy bottom but unwilling to back down.

This tableau was set against the backdrop of other volcanic island bottoms: Boulders and rubble painted with colorful dashes of yellow, red and purple, separated by stretches of sand without much hard-coral-encrusted reef. At Man O'War, I came across six tarpon which hung in the water column, hovering as I approached -- a brief moment of haunting beauty.

On my third day, the weather required us to stick closer to lee shores. I contented myself with more experimentation with my new wide-angle zoom lens. With a 1.4 teleconverter, I was able to get some unexpected close-ups of a roving conch and a yellow-face pike blenny poking its head out of its sheltering tube.

Thankfully, Saba's afternoon and evening topside highlights complemented my ration of diving. I trooped a block up the steep streets to the local town center. Far from being a sleepy little village, restaurants were bustling, and people were walking and talking as if on a scaled-down Rush Street in downtown Chicago. The corner grocery reminded me of the canteen at a large campground: lots of goodies and treats in the middle of nowhere. Most of the restaurants were so small that Sea Saba booked us ahead to ensure they would be open for business and could seat more than 10 people at a time. At Saba's Treasure, dining at a simple, checkerboard-painted table with plastic lawn chairs, the red snapper was tasty, and paired with a simple pizza and Caribe beer, it ran \$50 for two. My ribeye with mushroom sauce at Tropics Café Wednesday's "Grill Night" was one of the best steaks I'd ever had. The Thursday night special prime-rib dinner at Brigadoon was outstanding, the Mackeson Triple XXX Milk Stout it served was incredible.

Get Your Kicks from Textured Iridescent Surfaces? Give Me a Break

From a July 26 press release: "Jade Mountain, St Lucia has just announced that, for the first time, it is now possible for guests to experience their first taste of scuba diving within the privacy of their own sanctuaries with private infinity pools. In suite divers will be provided with custom made, rubber protected tanks to enable them to be taken into these sublime pools surfaced entirely in one-of-a-kind glass tiles, specifically designed for Jade Mountain.

"The pools' textured iridescent surface creates a magical underwater environment that lulls divers into a state of relaxation and introduces guests to the charm of diving gently. Our new in suite diving at Jade Mountain is the ultimate beginner experience. It allows guests to sample the serenity that comes with deep water diving and the thrill of being under water surrounded by no one else but your trusty instructor, without even leaving your sanctuary. . . a trained scuba diving instructor comes directly to the guest's sanctuary to guide clients through the basics of diving, with a step by step program carried out from the comfort of their very own private pool."

The release doesn't say whether a PADI certification will be offered.

– Ben Davison

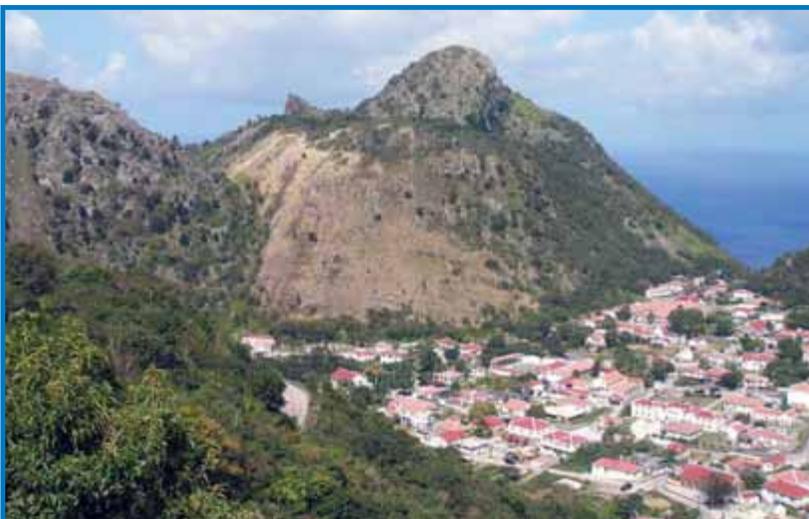
Entertainment ranged from the intellectual to the slightly bawdy. Before dinner at the EcoLodge, biologist Tom van't Hof delivered a fast-paced, fact-filled slide presentation covering the ecosystems on Saba. Tom helped establish the Saba Marine Park, and was founder of the EcoLodge. Trish Chaamma, high-spirited co-owner of the Brigadoon, was decidedly more risqué. She decided, after dinner over a complementary special nightcap of her own concoction (rum, vanilla, ginger and cinnamon) that our group was mature enough to be treated to her line of adult humor -- one sex-laced joke after another. Early in the week, Becca from Sea Saba guided us through a slide presentation about Saba, its history and diving. A walk uphill to JoBean's glass bead shop provided a cultural education in itself. As our tour arranger, Sea Saba expertly suggested sundry diversions during the week, including hiking and guided sightseeing.

On the fourth day, Lady Luck smiled: Both weather and Sea Saba were thumbs-up for a morning dive on Twilight Zone, one of Saba's famous pinnacles. I was in high spirits finning against the current to the mooring line. The group hung like pennants in a breeze. The current vanished as I dropped to 104 feet, where a nurse shark lounging on the bottom greeted me. I made my way around one of the twin pinnacles, then the other, the wide-angle lens well suited for capturing divers headed toward the peaks in the 100-foot visibility. I'd been on other seamounts on different islands, but always in visibility that made it difficult to appreciate and take in the entire formations from a distance. Here, I could take in the entire pinnacle, from bottom to top. The geology wasn't the only feature of interest. Large, colorful fans and corals created foregrounds for magazine-perfect "modeling opportunities." My time at depth was 37 minutes well spent. I surfaced feeling a calm but exhilarated dive afterglow. Back on board, talk was of the King of Qatar, who tipped a local divemaster \$1,000 on a recent dive trip aboard Katara, the king's 400-plus-foot mega yacht -- for a single (canceled) dive.

On our second dive, at Lou's Ladder, I experienced my second big buzz of the day when I hung out with another group of laid-back tarpon for more than 20 minutes. They were so unaffected by our presence, possibly due to the area's status as a protected marine park, that one of them literally rested against my head. One came so close that I could not resist reaching out to touch its muscular body. It didn't dart away, just casually distanced itself, but remained very close. There was a definite feeling of magic about the experience.

I was still keyed up from the earlier dives when I jumped in for our night dive at Tent Wall's white buoy. This formation was easy to follow out and back from the mooring. Giant basket stars unfolded their arms wide, and cardinal-

fish played in the safety of recesses in the reef's folds. A black durgon hid in another crevice, only showing its pearly whites against the beautiful spiraling pattern of yellow and red diamonds that surrounded its mouth, "sleeping" in the manner of a parrotfish. A sponge crab, whose carapace may have measured a foot across, backed away from my lights. I almost spit out my regulator when an unabashed octopus came to rest on another diver's head.



The Village of Windwardside

My last two dives of the week were pleasant, condensed versions of our previ-

ous dives. Tedran Wall offered outcrops, mini-pinnacles and more fantastic sponges, fans, and soft coral of the sort that make for great wide-angle photo opportunities you see in magazines. On a sandy slope where I spotted two white and blue tentacles of an unusual segmented worm sticking out of the sand, and definitely "not in the book" (Humann and DeLoach's creature ID guide). We hit Tent Wall Canyon for our last dive of the week. Here, a shallow canyon some 45 feet deep passes between two 20-foot-high walls covered in yellow, red, pink and green sponges, hydroids and algae. Familiar reef fish such as spotted trunkfish, a French angelfish, stoplight parrotfish, French and Caesar grunts, black bar soldierfish, mahogany snapper, white spotted filefish, coney, bluehead, red-lipped blenny and trumpetfish were there, though not in great numbers. But there was another first for me: a very busy dark mantis shrimp, camouflaged well against its backdrop. Toward the end of the dive, I admired the garden-like quality of the yellow sea fans, brown soft coral, and yellow tube sponges on the top, flat shelf of the wall near the mooring. I watched as the divemasters peered intently at a brain coral. A pair of emblemariopsis blennies nestled into adjacent parallel grooves of the coral. Anthropomorphizing, they actually looked, well, happy.

Saba is crisscrossed by well-marked hiking trails, most of them up and down the mountainside. My wife felt completely safe walking them alone. On our last day, I climbed Mount Scenery through four eco-zones, ending in cloud forest at the 2877-foot peak. Though enshrouded by clouds much of the time, the views of the airport and neighboring islands that day were stunning. That afternoon, we took a driving tour to Hell's Gate, passing a beautiful church, government buildings and the medical university, and stopping at many pretty overlooks. A previous afternoon's visit to the local museum helped explain why the island's geography made it inhospitable to settlement.

The last morning included some sightseeing, as we hiked down to the tidal pools below the runway before the flight. Looking at the mountainside while taking off, I left with the pleasant thought that the unexpected gems I found on Saba made it worth following the road less traveled.
--M.S.



Diver's Compass: My seven-night stay with bundled airfare from the Midwest, airport transfers, daily breakfast, two dinners, totaled about \$3,700 for a diver/non-diver package . . . there was a \$36 Saba Marine Park fee, \$60 for nitrox for the week, and a \$75 add-on for the night dive . . . we tipped our captain and dive master \$5 each per tank . . . Sea Saba will handle all your on-island reservations and itinerary . . . Contrary to the stated six-pound carry-on restriction, we were allowed as much weight as we wanted on the WinAir flight to Saba, as long as it would fit into one carryon; and they could care less about the duty-free booze we stocked up on in St. Maarten (at very reasonable prices) . . . Saba is subject to hurricanes from June through November, but only averages about 40 inches of rain annually . . . After climbing Mount Scenery, get a free Certificate of Achievement at Saba's Tourist Bureau . . . U.S. dollars and credit cards were generally accepted, but using cash will save you the foreign transaction fees . . . AC current is same as in the U.S. . . . Web site: Sea Saba - www.seasaba.com; Juliana's Hotel - www.julianas-hotel.com.

Juliana's Hotel, Saba

Diving	★★★★
Snorkeling	★
Accommodations	★★★
Food	★★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent
Caribbean scale

The Trials and Tribulations of Dive Travel

and a couple sweet Bonaire B&B's

Bonaire: If you're going to rent a car and shore dive, you don't have to stay in a big dive hotel to enjoy it. Richard Guay (Quebec City) prefers the Villa Safir, in a residential area, a few minutes from the town center. "Villa Safir is a three-room B&B with a pool and sundeck right at your doorstep. You can see the best sunset from the deck while sipping on a beer. You wake-up in the morning to the sound of nearby birds. Bianca and Peter are the hosts and they will do just about anything to make your diving vacation magical, from Bianca's wonderful breakfast to Peter's diving advice. Peter is a diving instructor and Bianca is a divemaster. They know what they are talking about. Going there is like going home with family." They offer a 7-night package that includes a truck and tank for \$1770 for two people or a more expensive package with boat dives. (www.villasafir.com). . . . Deep Blue View is the choice of Steven Skiba (Rockaway, NJ) "The Deep Blue View is a five-room B&B with attached dive operation. They have their own air filling station (and Nitrox), a 36' Newton dive boat, rental gear if needed. All dive facilities and equipment are very well maintained. The B&B is clean and comfortable and a great place to relax at days end. Owner operators Menno and Esther are always available to provide advice on the best dive sites, dive conditions, places to eat... The resort is well run and relaxed and with full tanks always available you can dive anytime." Their shore dive package is \$1660, but you rent your own vehicle (www.deepblueview.com).

Ningaloo Reef, Western Australia, a cautionary note. A couple decades ago, when one wanted to see whale sharks, this was the destination. Spotter planes would track them down. It's a long and expensive trip, but Angela Gostling (London, UK) gave it a go in June. "We undertook a lot of research in terms of timing and water conditions. We were travelling in the whale shark season and optimised the timing to enhance our chances of also seeing humpback whales, spinner dolphins and manta rays. Unfortunately, when we arrived in Exmouth the conditions were unusually windy and boats were not out whale watching. The dive team did everything they could to get us diving but weather conditions meant that we could not visit the best sites and spotter plans were unable to see the creatures. The windy conditions brought the surface temperature down significantly - from about 26 degrees Celsius to more like 21 degrees, with water temperatures at around 24 degrees. Despite wearing a skin and full 5mm wetsuit after 15 minutes in the water I was chilly and couldn't dive more than a couple of times each day. The windy conditions were whipping up the water, so the visibility wasn't great, but we expected this — well it was whale shark and manta season, so we anticipated plankton anyway. We didn't get to see whale sharks or mantas but did see some humpbacks when on the surface. However, we did see the enormous turtles and some fascinating sea snakes — as well as the usual suspects but not a lot of them."

Same problems can happen to people chasing whale sharks in Belize in the late spring. Best bet is late June/July/early August, north of Cancun or southeast of Holbox.

No Refunds, Sorry. We don't understand why some dive operators just won't refund prepaid dives when a diver has a problem. Terry J. Stigall (Napa, CA) who has logged more than 1000 dives, was diving with Ocean Encounters in Curacao when on the first day, he reports, "my wife was injured when she fell on the boat in full gear. The boat was rocking in very choppy water. The boat captain assisted her at the ladder then let go of her before she reached another handhold. The boat rocked and she went down. Because of the conditions, the captain should have made sure she was secure before letting her go. The owners of Ocean Encounters did arrange for a doctor to examine her (we paid) and then arranged for one of their employees to take her to the hospital to be examined the next day (we paid). They refused to reduce the prepaid charge for a week of diving for her even though she was unable to dive the remainder of the week. Their response when asked: "We took her to the hospital."

We're Not Going To Let You Dive and Here's Your Money Back: Yet other operators do their best to respond to a bad situation. For example, a long time subscriber went to Nakia Dive Resort to dive with Taveuni Ocean Sports in June. He reports: "I am 74 years old, a certified diver for 17 years with 699 dives. I was bent in April 2010 and treated at the San Pedro Belize hyperbaric chamber where the doctor released me to fly in three days and dive in six months. I went to Belize for one-week dive trips in December 2010 and May 2011 with no ill effects. I mentioned to Julie Kelly, Taveuni Ocean Sports owner, that I had been bent and she said that she would have to get a recommendation from DAN before she would take me diving. She called DAN Asia and got a recommendation of 60 feet maximum depth and 20 maximum time. I did not hear what she told DAN and I was unable to talk to DAN due to a bad telephone connection and my poor hearing. Robin told me they had to follow this recommendation or face losing their PADI license. Next morning I went to Garden Island Resort, explained the situation and the dive manager said he

would take me diving. An hour after telling Robin that I would be diving with Garden Island, she told me that she had talked to the manager at Garden Island and that I would have to follow the 60-foot and 20-minute recommendation. I called DAN USA and explained the situation to Marty McCafferty, medical information specialist, and he recommended recreational diving limits for me. Robin too talked to Marty. Next Aaron calls DAN USA, talks to John and gets a recommendation of no diving without a letter from a doctor. (Marty told me later that the only reason they made the “letter from a doctor” recommendation was due to the reluctance of the dive operator to accept their original recommendation of diving within recreational limits.) We left Nakia and I had five good days of diving at another resort. To this day, I do not know why these people harassed me so much.”

Julie Kelly wrote to tell us her side. “As the owner of Taveuni Ocean Sports, safety is always our #1 priority. “Taveuni

“Getting bent once – especially for a septuagenarian – means you must get a physical examination after the incident and get clearance to dive.”

diving is considered intermediate to advanced with some of the strongest currents in the South Pacific and has no recompression chamber — the closest is in Suva. This diver was in his mid-70’s with a chronic injury to one of his legs. During my dive briefing on the morning of our first dive, I discovered he had been bent within the last year. Not only had he been bent but treatment in Belize had been delayed before he was put in the chamber — an additional and significant risk factor. When asked whether he had written medical clearance or advice from a hyperbaric doctor to continue diving activities, he replied ‘no’. When asked what type of decompression sickness he had suffered from—Type I, II,

or III—all of which can have substantially different repercussions, he claimed not to know.

“Taveuni Ocean Sports follows PADI standards as well as standards and guidelines set forth by DAN. I informed the diver that, for his own safety, we would need to call DAN and speak with a hyperbaric doctor. The DAN doctor told me he was very surprised that this diver was planning to resume diving without getting a clearance or any recommendations. Based upon the diver’s age and the strength of the currents on Taveuni (considered strenuous diving which can contribute to decompression sickness), the hyperbaric doctor recommended that he dive no deeper than 60 feet for 20 minutes with adequate hydration and thermal protection. Just to clarify, the restrictions imposed on this diver came from DAN, not Taveuni Ocean Sports. After receiving the advice from the hyperbaric doctor, the diver became extremely upset and said he wanted to leave immediately. I gave him a full refund for diving and, after spending three hours on the phone changing flights for him and his wife, we got them on the next available flight back to the U.S.. We gave the diver very clear choices: he could dive to 60 feet for 20 minutes, per DAN recommendations, or he could get a clearance letter from a hyperbaric doctor and resume unrestricted diving. He chose to do neither, but instead to leave. Nakia Resort & Dive informs prospective guests of our cancellation and refund policy in our first e-mail response. We don’t offer cash refunds for on-the-spot cancellations. Instead, we will re-schedule the booking at no additional cost to the guest for one year. Despite this policy, we wanted to be more than fair in this instance, so we refunded all diving and meal costs. Unfortunately, I couldn’t please this diver and I assumed he would write a bad review. But I would not change my response to this situation. Reviews are trivial compared to someone’s life and safety.”

While *Undercurrent* serves to represent individual divers, we must side with Julie on this one. Getting bent once – especially for a septuagenarian – means you must get a physical examination after the incident and get clearance to dive. One’s own physical condition and physical conditioning can greatly increase the chances of a recurrence. Conceivably, if one has a heart condition called a PFO that will clearly increase the risk of DCS. Getting bent on a dive may put other divers in the water at risk if the bent diver must be attended to. Completing gentle dives in Belize after getting bent is not an indication one is good to go. I must say to my fellow diver, think not about yourself, but about your family and the people you dive with, then get a proper exam or stop diving.

Galapagos Sky: Last year, Peter Hughes walked from Peter Hughes Diving, which he had sold a few years previously to Wayne Brown, and got back into the business partnering with the *Galapagos Sky*. His move led Hal Shanis (Bryn Mawr, PA) and two buddies to cancel reservations with the old company and rebook with *Galapagos Sky*. That’s where the headaches began. “We reserved almost a year in advance. With two weeks to go, we still had not heard about our promised hotel reservation, though we reminded them at least five times. We could not get in contact with anyone by email or telephone, despite leaving many messages. Since we had to make our own hotel reservations, we feared that they would not be able to contact us about our airline reservations (they were supposed to leave information about the local airline arrangement at our hotel, but the airlines had no record of us). We decided not to go, but two days before our departure date but then we heard from the saleswoman who assured us that everything was fine. So we decided to go, only to hear the next day that the boat would not be available; they would refund our money or give us an alternative week. The boat was in dry dock for routine maintenance and had been delayed. We went the following week. We received some financial compensation for the airline rescheduling, but we were not given the rooms that we had

booked a year in advance. The boat felt like it was still in dry dock. Throughout the week, they painted the boat while we were on the deck. The refrigerator was turned on a day after we arrived. So it was a while before they could use it. I was stung by a wasp. There was no ice available to apply to the sting. The compressor did not work. They had to use the backup 'mini compressor.' They had promise free Nitrox, but they had none. They filled the tanks with the intake right next to the exhaust of the boat. We had to demand that they empty the tanks and fill them again. The divemasters did not talk to anyone, inform us of the safety procedures, let alone tell us about the wildlife. To me this is the worst offense on a dive trip, especially in the Galapagos. We repeated several of the same dive sites for no understandable reason. The good news was that we had a terrific international group of highly experienced, intelligent, considerate and interesting divers on the boat. They were very demanding, which had some effect on the captain. The food was actually pretty good."

Peter Hughes is essentially operating a booking service, Divencounters Alliance, which has been joined by the *MV Orion* in the Maldives, the *Solmar V* in Mexico's Pacific, and the Sea Hunter group in Costa Rica. Of course, he has far more influence over these craft than a typical travel agent, however, it's unlikely he can control when a boat sails from dry dock or whether there's ice onboard. However, Peter's name carries a lot of street cred and he represents top of the line boats with top of the line prices, so we divers have a right to expect near-perfection and our emails and calls returned. www.divencounters.com.

– Ben Davison

The Raja Ampat Explained

what you must know before you go

There were so many fishes around me in the water, at times I had trouble getting a clear view. There were no neat schools, just thousands of fishes positioned chaotically and darting. I had difficulty concentrating my camera on anything in particular. Profusion had become confusion. I felt like a predator distracted by too much prey.

I headed up to the shallows. Instantly, I was grabbed by an unseen force that sent me hurtling onward, past great herds of grazing bumphead parrotfish and other animals I might have liked to have stopped and photographed, if only

I could. All I could do was control my depth but even this took serious legwork. We surfaced in a calm sea, which betrayed the speed with which it was moving. Welcome hands reached down to help me up the ladder of our little boat.

In the north, nutrients rushing past in the current can cause an unsharp effect so pictures can be disappointing.

This experience was typical of diving in the Dampier Strait. The Raja Ampat or the *Four Kingdoms* form a group of islands west of the Bird's Head Peninsula of West Papua, formerly known as Irianjiya.

In the last decade, the Raja Ampat was discovered by adventurous divers after world-famous Australian ichthyologist Gerry Allen and famous underwater photographers Denise and Larry Tackett revealed it to have the richest reefs in the world. More species of coral and more species of fishes have been identified at the dive site Cape Kri that in any other part of the world. Cape Kri is a reef that runs alongside Kri island, home to diving pioneer Max Ammer.

Max went to Indonesia as a young Dutchman looking for war relics. He became a major source of parts for WWII Willys Jeeps after discovering where the U.S. Army at its withdrawal dumped hundreds of brand new jeeps after the Pacific War. He made West Papua his home and was soon running diving charters from Sorong. Eventually he settled on Kri Island in the Dampier Strait, believing this to be the epicentre of good diving in the area, and built an eco-resort, employing local labor and materials. His friendship with Allen, the Tacketts, Roger Steene and famous dive guide Larry Smith put Raja Ampat on the world diving map. More recently, he has been using his micro-light to explore the hinterland of West Papua and has encountered a number of villages with populations that have never had any exposure to modern society. On seeing him, they simply run away.

The Kri Eco Resort is still available to hardy divers on a budget, but Max has built a more luxurious resort, still using only local materials and labor, providing a standard more acceptable to us soft Westerners.

What makes these reefs luxuriate in so much life? The ocean currents from the Pacific combine with tides that force water up through the Dampier Strait where Kri Island acts as a foil to its flow. The currents and nutrients carried on the cold oceanic upwellings are what give the area its fabulous and prolific underwater flora and fauna. Be warned though that the currents at Cape Kri can send the unprepared diver whirling downward and bottoming out at 40m deep before he is released and spat out into the ocean.

One site, known as Mike's Point in honor of Max's young son, is at an island that has such strong currents around it that during the war U.S. Army reconnaissance spotters saw the wake produced by it and assumed it to be a Japanese warship heavily camouflaged with bushes. It was bombed to smithereens but now, more than half-a-century later, the broken rocks are covered in soft corals and home to countless fishes.

Between Kri and the much larger island of Waigeo, the channel is peppered with reefs causing ripping currents and over-falls. At the far end, at "Manta Sandy," you drop in, drop down, hook onto something secure and watch as the mantas dance in the flow. Once you've selected your position, it's nigh on impossible to swim to another, the cur-

rent can be so strong. You just have to be patient and wait for the mantas to come to you. Sometimes the sand is whipped up in the current like an underwater sand-storm leaving your photographs unsharp and disappointing but if there is no current there will be no mantas. I dived it in slack water and photographed a number of large wobbegongs or 'carpet sharks' and a deadly poisonous enigmatic devilfish instead.

Sardines Reef is so called because the fishes are densely packed. It's essential to get in the water up-current, away from the reef and head across the sandy seabed to the point where the current splits and it's calm enough to allow you time to take pictures. Once you move away, the stream of water hurtles you over the shallow reef top. There is nothing you can do to stop yourself. You travel at an alarming speed at the mercy of the elements.

Kri Eco Resort and Sorido Bay are so well-placed for all the spectacular dive sites of the Dampier Strait it makes sense to dive them by small boat, returning to the jetty for meals at either of the resorts, which you can consider just permanently anchored liveaboards.

Around the Dampier Strait, it's different every time you get into the water. I could dive Sardines Reef every day and never get tired of it but I know others have different tastes. The vast quantities of nutrients in the water can also disappoint the underwater photographer looking to produce that "clean" shot.

A huge number of liveaboards have moved into the area, and they all operate out of Sorong, the nearest town with an airport. Because most of us who travel so far to experience such diving normally expect to take underwater pictures, these liveboard operators have ear-marked dive sites further south that are less demanding of a diver-photographer, but of course they are often less spectacular too. The reefs are covered with colorful gorgonia fan corals that are home to countless different types of pigmy seahorse.

Some of these liveboard vessels are huge pinisi-rigged schooners, which means there are sometime a lot of divers on one site although that site itself may be seldom visited. All liveboard operations tend to be divided between Northern charters and Southern charters and

Bahamas' Shark Mauls a Diver's Arm in Chumming Area

A diver in Grand Bahama almost had his arm bitten off by a shark after another boat began dumping chum into the water.

Rescue workers received a distress call from crew onboard the *Lady Joe* around noon on July 12. According to reports, the victim was diving from the *Lady Joe* at Shark Junction, a spot near Our Lucaya hotel that is designated for shark feedings, when a glass-bottom boat came over them. Reportedly, it was the *Ocean View*, run by Lucaya Watersports out of the the Flamingo Bay Hotel Marina. Although the *Lady Joe* crew had the proper dive flag erected, it was reported that *Ocean View*, did not heed the flag or the crew's verbal warnings. The boat's crew then threw blood and fish guts into the water, and a diver finning below was bitten by one of the sharks, leaving his arm nearly severed. He was stabilized and taken to a hospital by ambulance.

Ten years ago, Krishna Thompson, a Wall Street banker, lost part of his leg in a shark attack near Our Lucaya Hotel and sued for \$25 million, which was later settled. Shark feeding was temporarily stopped. At that time, an industry insider told us that "Once Johnny Cochran got hold of the case, it was on NBC Dateline and the victim said – to an international audience – that if he had known they were feeding sharks right off the beach he would not have gone in the water. The Bahamas government has a half-billion dollar investment in that resort, and I suspect they laid down the (as yet unwritten) law to the shark feeders who were, after all, American-owned and -run businesses."

Once again, as we have seen many times over, where sharks that normally don't attack people are fed to entertain tourists, humans become fair game.

it's important to book on the one that's right for you. Some longer duration charters incorporate both areas but inevitably leave the diving in the Dampier Strait until last so that their passengers are well dived-up before attempting the more difficult sites. There is no point in frightening off your passengers at the beginning of a charter.

Typically, on leaving Sorong, they'll head for Batanta Island and some relaxing muck-diving. Then they'll head south to Boo Rocks with its caverns and famous window, and the Fiabacet Islands including the Misool Island Resort, another new eco-resort. The islands around Misool are jagged peaks recently thrown up, in geological terms, by volcanic activity and very spectacular above the water. The Misool Island Resort has eco-friendly bungalows built around a small bay on such an island. Close by are three sites – Small rock, Nudi Rock and Tank which sit in view of the resort and provide some stunning coral growth. Photographers at the resort can be shuttled back and forth at their heart's desire and the currents seem to be entirely manageable. Those on liveaboards tend to press on after a few dives, ever looking for something better.

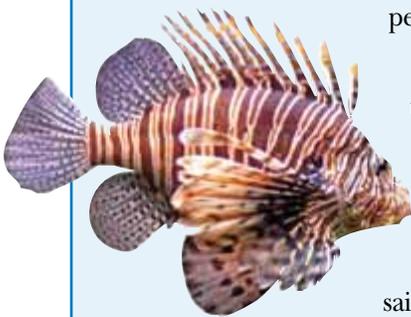
Further north there are unique blue-water mangroves. Here you'll find gorgonia growing close to the surface in association with the mangrove roots and the insect-eating archer fish and cardinal fish that live among them. You might encounter a saltwater crocodile too if you're very unlucky.

Curbing the Lionfish Invasion: A Futile Fight

Divers and dive resorts are well-intentioned when it comes to spearing lionfish in the Atlantic and Caribbean, but their efforts to eradicate them is equivalent to trying to eradicate the world's population of ants. Consider any Caribbean island. Miles and miles and miles of coastline and at best, a few dozen dive sites scattered hither and yon, usually only on the lee side. Good luck. Tragically, lionfish are causing big problems for plenty of other fish, including food fish like groupers and snappers.

A new University of Florida study finds that lionfish reproduce too quickly to be wiped out by short-term harvesting, said Andrew Barbour, the study's lead author. So lionfish will likely continue gobbling up juvenile grouper, snapper and other economically important species, he said, unless better control strategies are found. Derbies have resulted in up to 1,400 lionfish being harvested in a day, but a single lionfish can produce as many as 200,000 eggs per month, easily replenishing the population's numbers.

The researchers used mathematical modeling programs to show that 35 to 65 percent of the lionfish would have to be taken from an area every year to keep them in check. And that's not likely to happen, said Mike Allen, a UF professor of fisheries ecology and one of the study's authors.



Lionfish populations are able to rebound easily from harvesting efforts because they reach maturity quickly, have eggs and larvae that can be spread over large geographical areas by ocean currents, and thus far, have no natural predators to help keep them in check, said Tom Frazer, a UF professor of aquatic ecology and another author of the study. The UF scientists said it might be possible for those looking to dent the lionfish numbers to do so with intensive spearfishing in small geographic areas – such as coral reefs frequented by scuba diving tourists, Barbour said. But those efforts will have to be sustained. “You’d have to fish them hard, and over a long period of time,” Frazer said.

There are several theories about what caused lionfish to become established in the Western Hemisphere, Frazer said. Some blame irresponsible aquarium enthusiasts for simply releasing the fish into the wild. Others suggest wind and waves from Hurricane Andrew could have freed the fish from South Florida aquariums and swept them into the Atlantic Ocean. Another theory holds that the fish were accidentally transported in seawater used as ship ballast.

From a story in the University of Florida News. The quoted study was published in May in the online journal PLoS ONE.

The Raja Ampat is at zero degrees latitude and nowhere in the world is more tropical. The islands are truly in the Doldrums and strong winds with rough seas are rare. Temperatures vary between extremely hot and quite cool and can change almost moment-to-moment. Clouds continually roll across the sky obscuring the sun and it rains in biblical proportions, sometimes for days. This means that the light underwater lacks that contrast encountered in the Mediterranean or Red Sea, for example.

With ordinary ISO settings on my camera, I've often found I needed quite long exposures to get the background light in balance with my camera's flash. Down deep there is precious little natural light. In the north, nutrients rushing past in the current can cause an unsharp effect so pictures can be disappointing. That said, there's always plenty to photograph. In the southern area, things are easier but visibly and dramatically less dynamic. Remember, the stronger the current the more high-voltage the diving.

So, whether you opt to be island-based or travel by liveaboard, the Dampier Strait is good for adventurous diving and the southern area around Misool is better for more sedate underwater photography with plenty of macro subjects.

Divers' Compass: Travel to Sorong via Singapore and Manado or via Jakarta and Makassar (not recommended). Private boat transfer to the island resorts . . . Sorido Bay Resort at Kri/Dampier Strait. www.papuadiving.com. Misool Island Resort near Misool. Papua is a malaria area. Malarone is recommended. Cash is king. Indonesian Rufia or clean recently printed U.S. Dollar bills in low denominations. Euros may be accepted. There is an ATM machine in Sorong . . . Go anytime between November and May.

Shed Your Lycra Inhibitions

slinky Lavacore suits help keep you warm and keep out jellyfish

Lycra skins afford no thermal gain but give a degree of protection against coral scrapes and the killer irukandji jellyfish in warm water. I've noticed that many of our overweight friends in the U.S. like the ease with which they can don a Lycra skin, and don't seem to care that they look like Mr. Potato Head while wearing it. No, for myself I'd rather stick with the cosmetic effect of a thin layer of neoprene. I've got my pride to think of.

So it was with a certain amount of trepidation that I agreed to try out a new Lavacore suit. It's said to be the latest thing in lightweight suit solutions, with the insulation equivalent of 2mm in neoprene. It was designed in cooperation between the Aussies of Oceanic Australia and the Kiwis of Pinnacle Aquatics, is made in China, and was spurred on and marketed by Oceanic in the USA.

At first glance, it looked very much like a dreaded Lycra suit. "Lavacore is a technically advanced fabric, constructed and engineered exclusively for water sports requiring the ultimate in thermal control and superior comfort." Well, that's what they told me. They claim that although it looks and feels like a Lycra rash vest and provides as much stretch and comfort, it also has the insulation properties of a traditional neoprene wetsuit.

So What's it Made of?

The outer layer is Lycra, treated with a water-repellent effect to ensure fast water runoff and a reduction in wind chill. That may be so but I noticed that even in tropical Raja Ampat, I got quite chilled after a dive and driving back to base in an open boat, more than I did for comparison in a 3.5mm neoprene suit. Call me a wimp but those of you with more "natural bioprene" might not be so affected.

The middle layer is an impermeable breathable microporous high-stretch polyurethane film, which is windproof and breathable, allowing perspiration to be drawn away. Standing around on the jetty at Raja Ampat's Sorido Bay Resort, it certainly felt very warm and not at all sweaty. The inner layer is a sort-of-fleece that retains any water against your skin and thus is heated up by it, giving you the heat-insulating properties. The effect of this was that when I first dived into the water, I felt initially chilled but I soon forgot about it.

In the Water

A men's XL proved a little short in the body for me. The stretch factor allowed me to wear it comfortably, although this left a tantalising gap between the neckline and my own hood, ideal for a marauding killer irukandjii. Luckily, I

didn't encounter one but I could have used the Lavacore hood instead, which has a long collar that covers the neck well.

The ankle straps made sure the legs didn't ride up, and a double layer of material was a thoughtful design addition that stopped any tendency for my computer to slip down my wrist.

With water surface temperatures of 87 degrees Fahrenheit and a chilling (I joke) 82 degrees at depth, the Lavacore suit certainly felt plenty warm enough. Beside the claim that it is equivalent to the insulation of about 2mm of neoprene, it is supposedly equivalent to as much as an additional 3mm when worn under a conventional suit. One benefit was that I hardly needed more lead than if I had been diving in the nude. It was refreshing to find that even I, with all the material needed to cover my voluminous water-displacing body, could get away with as little as four pounds of lead weights, even when using an aluminium tank.

The Look of Lycra

The suit also comes with socks of the same material and these work well when using full-foot, slipper-style fins. The whole effect is to cover the body well but wearing the whole ensemble tends to make you look like a diving Ninja. It seems the Aussies have taken the threat of the irukandji seriously. I can't tell you what I looked like in it. I was in the company of loyal friends and they would certainly not have ridiculed my appearance. Full suits come in six sizes for men (S – 2X) and women (S – XL) and list price is \$200; www.lavacoreinternational.com

– John Bantin

The Equipment Insurers Side of the Story

DEPP defends itself to complaints published in Undercurrent

In our April article “How to Insure Your Dive Equipment,” we reported complaints about Dive Equipment Protection Plan (DEPP) and its slow, shoddy handling of complaints. Deane W. Lehrmitt, CEO of Innovation Programs Group, Inc., broker for the DEPP program, contacted us to explain specific claim problems. Regardless, the complaints keep coming in to us from *Undercurrent* readers.

Linda Rutherford (Montara, CA) has had to re-submit information about her flooded camera twice after DEPP belatedly found her e-mail with the specific details in its spam inbox. Robert O'Donnell (San Diego, CA) says DEPP lost a certified letter he had sent them pertaining to a claim. “They eventually approved my claim, but have never sent me reimbursement checks for the equipment I lost. Moreover, they are not responding to my emails or phone calls. They also double-billed my credit card.”

Lehrmitt then sent us a detailed letter to explain why DEPP was having issues, what it was doing to correct them – and how some of its customers are the real problems.

Lehrmitt says tech glitches and moves to new offices have caused problems like those affecting Rutherford and O'Donnell. “We implemented an automated phone system to record incoming calls and route them to the appropriate department. Regrettably, the system has not worked to our satisfaction. The company that installed the system has disbanded, so we are having some difficulty correcting these issues. Then we moved our headquarters in January. We purged some IP addresses that we rarely used. Unbeknownst to me, emails that were supposed to go to me were being kicked back to the sender as undeliverable, making it appear as though we were no longer available. Please address all email to me at dwl@ipginsurance.com.”

The second problem DEPP has is the rising cost of covering insurance and claims. “Over the past three years, we have seen our loss ratio (losses versus premiums) jump. Some of the causes are customers insuring only their higher-valued items, which has caused the average claim cost to rise, and a significant increase in the number of airline losses (with the TSA restricting locking devices on luggage, thieves have an open season on dive gear located in checked baggage.)”

So how to reverse those trends? Lehrmitt says DEPP polled its customers to ask if a rate increase or limit in coverage would be accepted. Of course, a majority of people said no. So, “if the customer base would not assist in helping con-

Why Amazing Corals Spawn Simultaneously

When corals spawn, they cast millions of sperm and eggs into the sea, where they drift up to the ocean surface, collide, form larvae and float away to form new coral reefs. The coral polyps will “blow” their eggs and sperm simultaneously in quick frenzies for just one, or maybe a few, consecutive nights a year – usually shortly after sunset on evenings closely following a full moon. A reef generally picks one day during a full moon in summer to blow, for 20 minutes or so, during the twilight hours. Although scientists have yet to agree on how corals know which month to spawn, Alison Sweeney, an evolutionary biologist at the University of California at Santa Barbara, chose a narrower question: How do corals select the precise moment to blow?

Sweeney suspected that a hue shift in the twilight sky away from red, toward blue, was the polyps’ cue. Prior to a full moon, the moon reaches the sky before sunset and, reflecting the ruddy light of the setting sun, makes the whole sky slightly redder. Just after a full moon, when sunset precedes moonrise, the moon is no longer there to reflect the pinkish tint, so twilight turns bluer.

Sweeney led a research team to the Virgin Islands in August 2009. They observed elkhorn coral for six evenings. Nearby they suspended an optical cable to reef depth, about eight feet below the surface, from a floating spectrometer. They noted shifts in the ocean’s color each twilight. Consistently, it reflected the sky’s color. The coral spawned during twilights of radiant blue: the third and fourth nights after a full moon, between 9:20 p.m. and about 9:50 p.m.

Sweeney, whose team reported its results in the February *Journal of Experimental Biology*, believes that like sea urchins, which link reproduction to lunar cycles, elkhorn “see” color shifts through their skin, which contains photo receptors of the kind found in human retinas. She is unsure why they prefer blue hues to red. However, when the receptors recognize the right color, a biochemical reaction probably ripples through the entire reef.

– Rebecca Coffey, *Scientific American*, May 2011

trol the increasing losses, then it falls upon us to implement corrective actions.” DEPP notified every DEPP customer back in August 2010 that it would have to investigate more claims and require additional information, so the claim turnaround time may be extended.

Lehrmitt said that DEPP customers who don’t follow instructions cause many headaches. “We receive claim descriptions saying such things as, ‘Flooded my camera’ or ‘Lost a lens,’ with no further details. Our underwriter will not accept that generalization, and we are forced to go back to the customer, seek additional information and the process gets longer, and the customer grows more impatient.”

DEPP policy states that one must submit claims within 60 days of the incident. “One customer had a claim in February 2010, put us ‘on notice’ in July 2010 saying only that he had a claim in February. When we requested specifics, he said he would get it to us when he got around to it. He got around to it in December 2010. We had no choice but to deny the claim.

“In addition, many customers send their damaged (especially flooded) items to a repair facility before reporting the incident to us. That is in violation of the policy. We try to work with the customers on this, but we have to seek an exception to the policy and that, too, elongates the process.

Add to that customers who file too many claims. “We have one customer who recently incurred a fifth loss in less than three years. Obviously something is amiss. Is this an incredibly long run of ‘bad luck,’ or is this simply a careless individual?

Then there are customers who try to slip in a claim for an uncovered item. “One person flooded a dive computer. He has 12 items insured and requested flood coverage on six of those, but not the dive computer. He wants us to ignore the terms and conditions of the policy and cover his claim.”

Lehrmitt says DEPP understands customers’ frustration, but customers need to follow the rules on the policy they signed. “Without raising rates or restricting coverage, the only productive method available to us is to manage the claim process more closely.”

The End of the Wild Food

As a diver, my interest in the sea extends far beyond what I experience underwater. I'm deeply concerned about the impact we humans are having on our oceans. Our thirst for carbon-based fuels heats the ocean beyond its tolerance, increases its acidification to the point when seawater slowly dissolves some crustacean and mollusk shells, and melts our icecaps too quickly – a hundred years is a split second in our planet's history – so island nations and our coastal cities may be flooded before the next century.

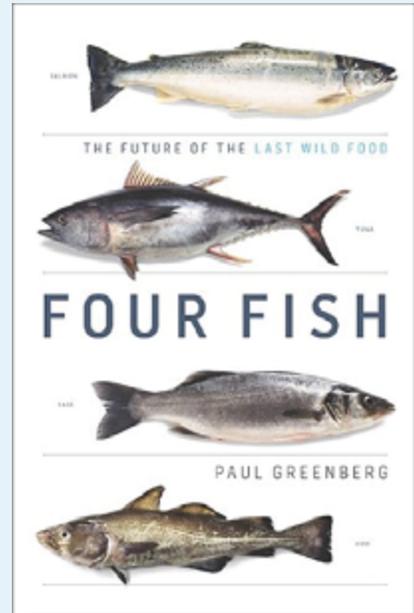
These disasters seem almost surreal. What isn't surreal is the decline and collapse of the populations of food fish. We're eating our way through prime species, moving down the ladder to catch fish a mile deep, struggling to make tilapia and even jellyfish palatable. To compensate, we're turning ocean coves and fjords into factory farms, polluting them with farmed fish waste just as we have polluted our rivers and lakes with pig farm manure.

That's why I think *Four Fish, the Future of the Last Wild Food*, by Paul Greenberg, ought to be on every diver's reading list. In his highly readable book, Greenberg details the decline in salmon, cod, tuna and sea bass, the dangers of wholesale fish farming, and just what we might do to ensure a sustainable supply. This is one smart book.

The eminent marine biologist Dr. Sylvia Earle will eat no fish, given her love for the oceans. Yet, many divers feast on grouper caught near or in marine parks on many Caribbean islands. We feed our cats and dogs herring that salmon or seals should be eating, take fish oil pills that deplete the stocks of wild fish, and keep our roses healthy with fish fertilizer. For our personal pleasure, we're wiping out fish eaten by porpoises and whales. Yet we complain loudly – and rightfully – when the Japanese bludgeon a dolphin or harpoon a whale.

Four Fish helped me get a much greater sense of the demise of our food fish and the impact of fish farming, but it also showed me a twinkle of hope. This thoughtful and fascinating book will help you understand what's happening to the oceans and what you, in your own way, may do to help. You can order the paperback version at <http://www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/booklist.shtml>

– Ben Davison



Gabe Watson Did Not Kill His Wife

Dr. Carl Edmonds says the evidence supports his innocence

Dr. Carl Edmonds, who co-wrote *Diving Medicine for Scuba Divers* and has written specialist journal articles on more than 100 diving deaths, is considered an expert in scuba matters. So when he goes against popular thought and says a “grave injustice” has been done in a notable murder trial, his opinion is worth listening to.

Edmonds, an Australian, believes Tina Watson, an American whose death at the Great Barrier Reef wreck of the *SS Yongala* in 2003 sparked a controversial murder case, was the victim of a simple diving accident. The “grave injustice” Edmonds refers to is the conviction of her husband of 11 days, Gabe Watson. He was charged with her murder by a Queensland coroner after a month-long inquest concluded that while diving from one of Mike Ball's boats, he had turned off his wife's air and left her to drown. In the court hearing, however, the issue of turning off her air was not brought up, but he was charged with not coming to her aid. After pleading guilty to manslaughter, he served 18 months in an Australian prison. However, authorities in his home state think he is guilty of murder and now Watson, who was

deported to Alabama, is fighting those charges. (See our coverage of the case in the August 2007, July 2008 and July 2009 issues).

Edmonds told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Watson's account to police of the events underwater, "all fits together very reasonably in a simple, straightforward diving accident." Tina Watson had a slim build and was "grossly overweighted" with 20 pounds of weights for her first ocean dive, more than twice what she needed with the equipment she was using. After analyzing her husband's statements to police, together with other medical evidence and equipment reports given during the inquest, Edmonds believes Tina didn't inflate her BCD while descending, which meant that when she reached the bottom of the descent line, Tina would have been "very, very negatively buoyant, like really, really heavy" and would have begun to sink – and panic. A short press of the inflator button, as Gabe Watson told police he had seen her do, would not have been adequate at that depth unless depressed for a considerable time. In her ensuing panic, Tina had probably over-breathed her regulator. This led to an intake of water, loss of consciousness and drowning, while her regulator remained in her mouth.

After studying Gabe Watson's dive computer data printouts, Edmonds said that Watson's perceived slow ascent to the surface, in what was an emergency situation, could be explained. He had not ascended vertically, as did the divemaster who found Tina on the ocean floor several minutes later, and got her to the surface from 90 feet in 90 seconds. Watson, who had already drifted away from the wreck and the descent line, had ascended at an angle towards the line – as well as against the current – to shout for help. The 6-foot, 3-inch and bulky Watson "probably did very well to get to the surface in the time he did," which was estimated at the inquest to be about two minutes.

In several statements he gave to police, Watson said he had let go of Tina because she had dislodged his mask as he towed her, against the current, to the descent line. By the time he replaced the mask, he claimed she had sunk up to 10 feet below him. He gave differing versions of why he left her and went to the surface. But "If you listen to Gabe's story, it is very consistent with a really straightforward, panicking diving accident," Edmonds said. "It's all very plausible. In fact, it's like so many other diving accidents."

He says the emphasis by authorities on Watson's certification as a rescue diver meant "nothing," unless he had been trained to rescue overweighted divers in an environment similar to the ocean currents of the Great Barrier Reef. With its changing currents, the *Yongala* was an unpredictable "difficult, often dangerous dive." Watson had learned to dive in a quarry in Birmingham, AL, and had received his rescue certificate four years before his wife died.

Edmonds' textbook *Diving and Subaquatic Medicine* was cited several times during the inquest in Queensland. He was contacted by investigators during inquiries into Tina's death, but was not called as an expert witness. He suspects this may be due to preferences for local Queenslanders, and for financial reasons. Instead, when initially contacted by investigators, Edmonds "simply answered questions of fact saying what should happen, not what did happen" in relation to issues including ascent rates in emergencies. He now believes they "may have misinterpreted what I have said and applied it to [Watson], when it really didn't apply."

Two months ago, Col McKenzie, a veteran diver and executive officer of Queensland's Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators publicly retracted what he initially told police as an expert witness. McKenzie now thinks Watson was incompetent and inept but not a murderer. He had been presented with certificates and diver logs, not shown to him by police, which revealed Watson had little ocean diving experience.

Watson was deported last November, but only after the U.S. gave assurances to the Australian government that he would not face the death penalty if convicted of the two counts of capital murder, with which he has since been charged. Prosecutors allege that Watson planned Tina's murder for financial gain from insurance policies, and took her to Australia for a honeymoon without revealing he intended to kill her. Watson is now scheduled to go on trial in February.

DUI Recalls Weight Systems

Diving Unlimited International (DUI) in San Diego is recalling two of its weight systems – the DUI Weight & Trim System Classic, and the DUI Weight & Trim System II. Manufacturing defects in the lanyard connecting the handle to the pocket, or the cable securing the pocket to the harness, can prevent the weight pockets from easily detaching from the harness and releasing the weights when the handle is pulled, thus posing a drowning hazard (no dive accidents or injuries have been reported).

The weight systems, made in China, were sold between July 2010 and April 2011, and DUI wants to recall 1,454 of them in the U.S., and 46 in Canada. If you have either of these weight systems, call DUI at 800-325-8439 Monday thru Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. PST, or e-mail CustomerService@DUI-Online.com to receive a free repair of the system.

Vanessa Richardson

Flotsam & Jetsam

Next Time, Check Your Bags: Darrell Lapp and his son had just finished a Boy Scout diving trip and were headed home to Liberty, MO, when Bahamas airport screeners found an old bullet in a fanny pack, and immediately put him in a Freeport slammer. “There are bare walls with a bench,” he reported, “no restroom, nothing.” Lapp says the bullet was left over from a hunting trip. He was told he could face up to 10 years in prison and a \$10,000 fine, but a lawyer and the U.S. Embassy got him back home with all charges dismissed. Now how did that bullet get past TSA screeners on his outbound flight? A spokesman told Fox News that loose ammunition is prohibited, but a single bullet is unlikely to cause catastrophic damage.

Unbelievable Adventure: Sir Richard Branson, 61, has done it all, but I wonder about this. Says his lordship. “I was swimming around one of these gentle giants off Cancun in Mexico – and then, suddenly, I realized I had managed to get myself right inside it,” he told the Telegraph’s Tim Walker. “Whale sharks have got enormous mouths and this one just literally puffed me out. They are gigantic, but gentle. I think the story of Jonah most likely came from a whale shark. I can’t really think of anything else living in the sea that could swallow you without also killing you.” Yup, unbelievable.

Make the Coral Kickers Pay. The Australian government is increasing its “reef tax” on Great Barrier Reef tourists. While the increase is insignificant – tax on a one-day trip to the reef will go up 50 cents to \$6 – some struggling dive operators say the increase comes when the industry is having its worst period in 25 years. The tax hike doesn’t go into effect until April, but companies are already building the increase into their prices. The revenue goes to the Marine Park Authority, which protects and manages the reef. Since the customers on these one-day dive and snorkeling boats are usually the inexperienced ones who kick the coral, we think they ought to be paying for the damage they do. Complaining over half-a-buck they pass on seems frivolous.

Missing Diver Swims Four-Miles to Shore. Just after a massive search and rescue operation off England’s Dorset Coast for a diver separated from his dive boat was called off, the guy showed up on shore after swimming four miles. Apparently, he was a scallop diver and simply drifted with the tide. As he swam, he watched the helicopters overhead searching for him. Four hours later, he stumbled ashore and climbed to the top of the cliffs, where he managed to alert authorities. He told the British coast guard that he was unable to attract their attention – probably because he wasn’t carrying any safety devices with his dive gear.

A Power Snorkel? Just the Thing a Traveling Diver Needs. The Power Snorkel, which is touted as a compromise between snorkeling and scuba diving. A 20-foot hose leads from a floating air tank to a Y-divider below, where it splits off into two additional 20-foot hoses that end in regulators for two people. You can go for dives averaging 60 minutes on a single full charge, and it comes with a dive flag sticking out of the top. And it’s only \$2,495. Maybe if you live in Dubai, you’d buy such a thing.

Takes Americans Less Time to Make a Baby. Italian free divers Mike Maric and Ilaria Bonin set the new world record for the longest underwater kiss. Holding their breath, they made out for three minutes and eight seconds in an oceanic tank at the Gardaland Sea Life Aquarium in northern Italy.

Want to Have Dinner with Dr. Eugenie Clark? Or how about Amos Nachoum, Valerie Taylor, Richard Ellis or any one of the more than 50 shark experts? Then cast your winning bid in the silent auction being offered by the Shark Research Institute’s conservation programs. For details, go to www.sharks.org. Two hitches: you have to travel to the experts’ locale and you’re buying dinner, but it’s ok to bring friends. (Flimmakers Tom Campbell and David Shiffman will also be taking their bidders out to sea on their boats to meet sharks face-to-face. Auction ends August 10.

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