

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Hightide Watersports and Gibbs Bay Inn, Barbados

and a word from Ben Davison

IN THIS ISSUE:

Hightide Watersports and Gibbs Bay Inn, Barbados	1
Do You Have Diver's Mouth? 4	
Bonaire, Fiji, Galapagos, Roatan.....	5
American Left Not Far Behind by Aussie Dive Boat.....	6
I Can See Clearly Now-- Underwater.....	8
More Mean Fish	9
Pity the Sea Turtle.....	11
For Lower Baggage Fees, Use a U.S. Dive Travel Agency..	12
Thumbs Down: Wakatobi..	13
An "Asylum" of Divers.....	15
Flotsam and Jetsam	16

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I received an email from Scuba Diving magazine last month that touted the "Planet's Ten Top Shore Diving Destinations." Did you know that Oahu, Orange County and St. Thomas are in the top ten in the whole wide world? Two legit destinations were Indonesia and the Philippines, both of which have infinitely more diveable shorelines than the three I mentioned. To add insult, UNEXSO in the Bahamas is listed as among the world's best diving and resorts, though it's not a resort, and aside from the shark circus they run, diving is pedestrian.

I suppose I should thank Scuba Diving (and for that matter, Sport Diving), because such balderdash has kept Undercurrent in business for nearly 40 years. You see, smart divers recognize the integrity we bring to the table. Financially, it's not easy, but we keep our anonymity when we review resorts by never announcing our purpose. Our writers pay their own airfares, diving and accommodations, and we don't take advertisements in our publication. It's a different story at the magazines, which, in addition to the paid advertising, have their expenses of writers, photographers and toadies covered completely. But that's their business and not ours, so we are grateful to write for the savvy divers who know fact from fiction and stick with us. Truth is, the Undercurrent family takes great pride in slouching around dive operations to prepare truthful and insightful reports on everything from reef quality to dinner quality, from clean galleys to clean heads, from sensible group leaders to insensitive divemasters. We report our full experience, leaving nothing out. It's as if you were there.

One problem is that we can't send someone to every destination. We have a stable of diver/writers who spend their own money, go where they want, and ask if I want a story. I pick and choose from what they offer, and from time to time I fill in the spots they miss. I think we have done a balanced job in covering the planet, especially by supplementing our major reviews with insights from our experienced readers. While a surprising number fly off to Papua New Guinea, Indonesia or the Maldives for weeks at a time, about two-thirds of our



readers stick much closer to home -- the Caribbean, Mexico, Florida and Hawaii, for example. Groups, solo divers and divers with a non-diving spouse, buddy pairs, tech divers, highly experienced divers, some newbies, and families look to us for advice. Quite a wide range to please.

A couple of complaints I received recently comes from divers who are with a group of non-divers and want to go to a true vacation island - and that's not Cayman, Bonaire or Cozumel, unless you're a diver. I've made it a point every couple of years to cover such places, so in this issue we're covering Barbados, where years ago I found some remarkably decent diving (and 19th century bottles) on an island that American divers never give much attention. If it's not your cup of tea, coming in the next few

issues will be liveaboard journeys in Indonesia, land-based trips in the Philippines, and who knows where else. Also, in later pages of this issue, you'll get an update on Wananavu, where diving seemed shaky when Ra Divers departed, and plenty of other distant places with -- believe me -- better shore diving than Orange County or Oahu.

* * * * *

Dear Diver,

The time comes in every diver's life when he must at least once vacation to a non-diving destination to please the family. Barbados, I discovered, fills the bill -- and you can get a few decent dives as well. If the white sand beaches don't impress you, then the palms swaying in the breeze flanked by colorful blooming trees surely will. By Caribbean standards, Barbados is likely one of the better destinations for beginning and intermediate divers, having a large number of small tropical fish, colorful hard corals, and gigantic sea plumes, much black coral, even a big wreck. When I went in July, water was a consistent 83 degrees, and on land, it was usually in the mid 80s.

Even so, diving can be a hassle. Hightide Watersports' 37-foot aluminum catamaran sunk low at the buoy with 24 divers on board. After a detailed briefing, I struggled for space to shrug into my BC in the tight quarters to avoid being bumped around -- divers and tanks were squeezed together like canned sardines. I was one of the first in the water, but it took 10 minutes for everyone else to follow; no problem for me, as I like longer dives. When half the group was at depth, one of the two divemasters headed out for 60 minutes, usually less. Forty-minute dives were the average, timed by the last person entering. When we were in Carlisle Bay, a small shallow area with six partial wrecks positioned near each other, I asked if I could go ahead. "No, you might get lost," was the reply. He was serious! I shrugged and waited another 20 minutes. Indeed, two divers did become disoriented in visibility of about 15 feet.

Brightly colored hard corals were the norm on most dives. Fisherman's Reef was especially pretty, with some of the tallest, standing 10 to 12 feet, and the fullest sea plumes I've encountered, juxtaposed with nearby coral "faerie castles." Juvenile and adult spotted drum added to the drama. Spotted morays peered out as I slowly explored, accompanied by a plethora of small tropicals. Visibility was



Gibbs Bay Inn

a clear 70 feet. The next day we returned to the other side of this reef. Tropical fish were again plentiful, and I spotted a conger eel, many blue and yellow trumpet-fish, and butterflyfish "kissing." I was also rewarded by finding two very old wine bottles (more about that later). The dive-masters claimed that Bright Ledge Reef was the prettiest dive on Barbados, but even with the two turtle sightings, I thought it came in second to Fisherman's.

My group stayed at a charming bed and breakfast, the Gibbs Bay Inn in St. Peters Parish. A beautiful sandy beach was a short walk away, through a "private access" pathway framed by arched wooden doors, where the dive boat picked us up daily at 8:30 a.m. The inn is being refurbished, after years of disuse, by English couple Toby and Karen Syson, who were most accommodating. The somewhat whimsical mansion, with its columns and arches, was remodeled by Oliver Messel, an English architect best known for designing theatre sets, masks and costumes, camouflaging pill boxes in WWII, and designing and remodeling unique homes in Barbados and Mustique. There are many nooks for lounging near the alcoves of the 25 rooms. Sitting around the pool at the end of a day is the epitome of relaxation. An adjacent room held the honor bar -- a refrigerator full of the local Banks beer, water and sodas, and bottles of liquor were set out. Wine was US\$3 -- you pour -- and beer \$2.50. Hearty breakfasts were served on white lace tablecloths in the open-sided gazebo by the pool. Tea was laid at 4 p.m. -- hot tea, finger sandwiches and cookies or cakes. Each day, I would forage under the mango trees along the inn's drive for the sweet yellow fruit. All in all, an infectiously charming place at a reasonable price. There is a heavy British influence in Barbados, as it was a colony from 1625 to 1966, when independence was granted by Queen Elizabeth.

Of the many wrecks off of Barbados' west coast, the 365-foot-long freighter S.S. Stavronikita, resting at 130 feet, was the most impressive. After 30-plus years, under-sea life nearly envelopes her, especially the masts; colorful sponges particularly abound. Kicking along hallways peering into cabins was no problem with a flashlight, and it was never fully dark. Penetration was easy, as the fittings on which divers could get hung up have been stripped. Visibility was around 50 feet. As a safety precaution, boat crew attached one tank to the boat at a depth of 15 feet, and a divemaster carried another.

The current was usually a half-knot at most, hardly noticeable. There were many new divers on board, and two newly certified who had a quick lesson in diving current on Bell Buoy Reef. On board, the divemasters said there might be some surface current that would diminish with depth, but the dive would be treated as a drift dive. I hit the water and immediately lost sight of my dive buddy as I rocketed to the bottom at 54 feet, where the current was still strong. It took me five minutes of swimming into the current to locate my dive buddy, who had a camera with large strobes in tow; he was partially sheltered in a sandy recess between shallow coral heads. We waited another 10 minutes until we spotted a divemaster and other divers. The remaining 20 minutes was spent finning hard into the current, as buddy teams surfaced with low air or exhaustion. Certainly no drift dive.

On several dives with sandy patches, the hunt for 150-year-old wine bottles seemed more important to some divers than the fish. Bumbass Reef, Jolly Roger, Church Point and to a lesser extent, Carlisle Bay, revealed a few each -- not nearly the numbers I've heard were found a couple decades ago. I left the wine bottles I found in the sand, even though the divemasters on the boat shrugged when asked about the policy. In my mind, the few that are discovered these days deserve to be left to delight other

Hightide Watersports and Gibbs Bay Inn, Barbados

Diving (<i>experienced</i>)	★★1/2
Diving (<i>beginner</i>)	★★★★1/2
Snorkelling	★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Food	★★★★1/2
Service and Attitude	★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent
Caribbean Scale



Hightide Watersports Dive Boat

spotted scorpionfish and a dozen turtles of varying sizes. Shore snorkeling was poor, due to heavy algae within the first 300 yards. Fish were scarce in those areas, and visibility was poor.

After the first day when we put gear onto the tanks, Hightide Watersports did the handling, from rinsing back at their shop to setting it up again. Divemasters and the boat captain and were well versed on sea life and the sites, attentive, friendly, and their sense of humor never flagged. One thing they could not control was the hot dogs on jet skis, who reveled in seeing how close they could come to the dive boat, ignoring attempts at waving them off. (It is not safe to snorkel except in the marine parks unless you carry a marker buoy, and I'm not sure how safe that would make you in the eyes of possibly rum-fueled jetskiers).

It is easy and cheap to get around the island, as frequent buses barrel over the two-lane roads and charge US\$1, whether you are going a block or all around the island. Food is expensive, so I ate at the low-end range. My favorite was the East Moon Chinese restaurant, a tricky, 20-minute walk from Gibbs Bay Inn as sidewalks tended to be sparse. The won-ton soup was nicely flavored with four fat wontons. Entrées averaged \$15, with a lunch special for \$7.50. Ramshackle, on the beach, was a divers' favorite.

Barbados is an ideal spot for a family vacation, especially when there are non-divers. It is one of the few Caribbean islands with a large variety of well-developed possibilities, so you don't have to feel guilty about diving. One 20-something

divers, but one in my group coveted his find and returned home with it. This experienced diver is the same one who intentionally agitated a ballonfish until it inflated, and was hands-on with other sea life.

Two small marine parks are marked where there is neither fishing nor speeding boats - tiny areas by most Caribbean dive island standards. In Barbados, fishermen won dominance over marine life. "After all, it's their livelihood," one dive operator told me. As a result, most fish seen on dives are small, but there were plenty of tropical species. (Other species of particular interest to me on several sites were whitenose pipefish, web burrfish,

Do You Have Diver's Mouth?

I recently came across an Internet blurb by Dr. Harold Katz, a dentist who heads the California Breath Clinics and author of the *Bad Breath Bible*. Having been in the dive business forever, I've never encountered a diver with the pariah's affliction called "Diver's Mouth," but perhaps the dive boats' exhaust fumes have prevented me from noticing.

Katz writes: "Some people who take up scuba diving find that, after a few weeks, they suffer from jaw aches and halitosis. What is going on here? Can anything be done about it, short of finding a new hobby? The good news is that no one needs to quit scuba diving just because it gives them bad breath. In fact, there is a name for this condition -- 'diver's mouth syndrome.'

"Several studies appearing in the journal *Dental Update* have addressed diver's mouth. Novice divers choose a mouth-

piece that is too small for their teeth and jaws, researchers say. As new divers swim underwater, they clench their teeth into the rubber of the mouthpiece, both out of excitement and because they're towing an oxygen (sic) regulator with their mouths. Biting into a poorly-fitted mouthpiece can cause jaw aches, and lead to nicks in the gums. These small cuts may get infected, leading to oral odor and gum pain.

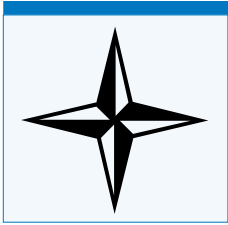
"Besides choosing a better-fitting mouthpiece, individuals with diver's mouth may consider using a specialty breath-freshening rinse that contains no alcohol or sodium lauryl sulfate. Such products kill bacteria without further irritating the gums."

So, whenever you open your mouth on a dive boat, and your fellow divers jump overboard, you, my friend, may have the dreaded Diver's Mouth. Beware.

-- Ben Davison

man from our group, there with his parents, put together a vigorous day of body- and windsurfing on the windward side, then went farther south for kiteboarding. The less energetic strolled through the botanical gardens or visited Harrison's Cave, which is a winner for all ages; a tram makes it an easy view of the stalactites and stalagmites. Another family wanted to zip-line, also popular in Barbados, but after making an appointment the day before and taking a cab there (\$40), they found it closed. White sand beaches just go on and on, welcoming the beachcomber or picnicker. You can find great restaurant and hotels in all price ranges (the legendary Sandy Lane can run you more than \$1,000 a night), but it's a good idea to get accommodations near your activities of choice. Barbados is a big and busy island. Whatever you do, just relax, you cannot push the Caribbean timetable. But why should you want to?

-- J.D.



Divers Compass: Seven nights at Gibbs Bay Inn, five days of two-tank diving with Hightide Watersports and air transportation cost me \$2,024; for the non-divers, it was \$1,649 . . . Rooms at Gibbs Bay Inn did not have TVs or radios, but a kitchen with fridge was available in the alcoves; full kitchens with stoves were available to guests in several areas, as well as a large propane grill near the pool area . . . Hightides has two boats, for 13 and 25 divers, and can provide for the most divers in Barbados ; other dive operations hire out . . . Websites: www.gibbsbayinn.com; www.divehightide.com

Bonaire, Fiji, Galapagos, Roatan

great examples of customer service -- and one resort to avoid

Thumbs up for Explorer Ventures. Hurricane Irene went right over the top of the *Turks & Caicos Explorer II*, but not before Audrey Swales Anderson (Colorado Springs, CO) got in five dives on Sunday, August 21. She says they "were then forced to return to the harbor on the high tide Sunday night, and Explorer decided it best to move us to a motel (we had to pay for this, and also meals) on Monday and Tuesday nights. Irene hit Tuesday night. We were allowed to go back to the boat late Wednesday. Part of the marina dock had broken loose, and was intertwined with the mooring lines from our boat. It took most of Thursday to untangle that mess. The boat went back out Thursday night, so we were able to get in a night dive Thursday, and then the normal dawn and morning dives the boat does on Friday mornings. It was rather like diving in milk for these last three dives until I got down to 70 feet." To her amazement, and without her even contacting the company, there was an e-mail waiting for Anderson on Tuesday morning, letting her know that Explorer was offering her another week on the boat at an 80 percent discount. "They figured we missed about 80 percent of our possible dives, so this is how they arrived at this discount. While my husband and I had decided not to purchase trip insurance, it is exceptionally wonderful that the company is offering us another trip at a discounted price. With this policy, Explorer Ventures has certainly earned a customer for life in me." (www.explorerverventures.com)

Galapagos Sky, Revisited. Last issue, we reported on a *Galapagos Sky* trip that fell short of the high expectations and high prices one pays for such a journey. Things have changed, according to a reader who was aboard the subsequent trip. Chet Moore (San Carlos, CA) writes, "In the interest of full disclosure, I have known Peter Hughes for many years, in both a professional and social context. Indeed, Mr. Shanis's charter did not warrant five stars . . . however, with a change of crew, including the captain, the following charter was more in line with what one would expect from the owner, Peter and DivEncounters.

"*Galapagos Sky* is owned and operated by Ecoventura/Santiago Dunn. There are three other 'identical' boats in the fleet, but *Galapagos Sky* is the only one dedicated to diving. Maximum capacity is 16; we had 12 guests and

11 crew. DivEncounters markets the *Galapagos Sky*. The Ecuadorian government has imposed new conditions on dive operations in the zone -- no more than three dives a day. All dive locations are predetermined and pre-permitted. Liveboards are permitted to the northern islands of Wolf and Darwin. Day boats stay south. Land tours are limited to one -- to see tortoises. Wolf and Darwin have current and surge. Bounce to the bottom, grab a rock and wait. Most dives ended with moving away from the wall and into the water column, with hammerheads below, above and with you. Victor, the captain (they do rotate), was gracious, informative and always on the dive deck assisting his crew. The compressor and nitrox system were fully functioning. There had indeed been issues on the earlier charter, and the not-so-mini compressor was still on board. To that extent, one of the mains had received a questionable rebuild while in the shipyard, and was rebuilt during the change-over at the end of our charter. The ice machine was at full tilt. Although the naturalists (government employees) change from time to time, ours were great -- great knowledge, great personalities and great fun. Evasion and untruthfulness -- not! Yes, you will dive several times at the same sites on Wolf and Darwin. Why? Because that is where the hammerhead, Galapagos, and whale sharks are. We even had a tiger sighting, and a huge mola mola. In our 30 some years of liveboard diving, we have had our share of busted nitrox systems, cranky compressors and yes, even a nonfunctioning ice machine. Dive boats coming out of a shipyard after a major refit, and especially in a Third World environment have issues more often than not; some major, some minor . . . and you just roll with it. Would I go back to the *Galapagos Sky*? In a heartbeat.” (www.galapagossky.com)

Good News at Habitat Bonaire. One of our travel reviewers stopped in during a June trip and loves the “drop-dead gorgeous new ocean suites named for late co-manager Albert Romijn. In addition to the view of the sea and Klein Bonaire, they are equipped luxuriously with king beds, a sofa, small fridge, microwave, coffee maker, granite counters and gorgeous bath that includes a rarity on the island: a bathtub. Of course, it’s the porch with chairs and table overlooking the sea that has me fantasizing about sipping a beer and watching the sunset. The previous dive

American Left Not Far Behind by an Australian Dive Boat

It’s one thing to be left in the ocean by your dive boat treading water with no land in sight, like the cautionary *Open Water* tale of Tom and Eileen Lonergan. It’s quite another when you’re on a snorkeling trip and the boats are never far from shore. But Ian Cole, a tourist from Michigan who visited Australia this summer, doesn’t see the difference -- and he told his “harrowing” tale to multiple media outlets.

While snorkeling Michaelmas Bay near Cairns in late June, Cole lifted his head out of the water and realized his boat, *Passions of Paradise*, had left without him. He told the *Cairns Post* that he panicked at first, taking in water through his snorkel. “But I was able to calm myself a bit, because there was another boat still out there, and I made my way to that vessel. Lucky it was there because, otherwise, I might have drowned. I did not handle the situation well, and I was tired.” The people on the boat told him *Passions of Paradise* had left 15 minutes prior, and radioed for the boat to come back. Apparently, the person responsible for checking off Cole’s name on the manifest had mistakenly done so without seeing him get back aboard.

Cole demanded an apology and a change of procedure from the company so it does not happen again. Instead, he received a form letter with a \$200 gift certificate for fine dining and wines. “I thought that was such an insult,” Cole later told Chicago’s ABC news affiliate. “I actually went to the mayor and asked if she could give it to a local aboriginal family and make sure it got put to good use.”

While it’s not good to leave your passengers behind, Cole wouldn’t be the first diver or snorkeler who had to make an easy swim to shore. (I’ve seen it myself off of Little Cayman.) That’s why Col McKenzie, executive officer of the Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators, says Cole is making a mountain out of a molehill. He told CairnsBlog.net that the tour operator fired the employee who bungled the headcount, but Cole was never at any risk. With other boats and the shoreline close by, his ordeal was no worse than “being left behind at a beach.” “The fact that this guy talked about this shows he’s just seeking self-exposure, and wants to be portrayed as a hero, a survivor,” McKenzie said.

But with *Open Water* drilled into so many Americans’ heads when they hear about divers and the Great Barrier Reef, there remains no excuse for a boat crew failing a headcount and leaving a snorkeler behind -- even if he can kick to the next boat or to shore.

-- Ben Davison

manager, a woman who often polarized guests, has been replaced by the personable and helpful Roger Hauch. Morale is high and divers are smiling. The dive lockers still need some repairs, but the reef looks good despite all we hear about sea changes.” (www.habitatbonaire.com)

New and Improved at Wananavu. When divers’ favorite Fijian resort had Ra Divers depart for another venue, there were concerns about whether a competent operation would replace them. Wayne Joseph (San Mateo, CA), there in July, says, “Wananavu has entered a contract with Reef Safaris, which has 11 other dive locations in Fiji, to provide the dive services.

Managers Jeremy and Kristen had to start from the ground up. A new dive center was built closer to the boats, and there are benches with charging stations and areas to hang up equipment. They take your gear, rinse it and hang it to dry after every dive. They hired Jioji, who used to work for Kai Viti Divers, to help manage and train the crew. He was great when he led the dives, as he could find many interesting critters. Jim and Ken were also great at finding things. We saw a leopard shark and other reef sharks, turtles, dolphins, squid and various nudibranchs. They had only two small boats that could take six divers each. There was a first-aid kit, oxygen and life jackets, and snacks and water were provided. A diver accidentally dropped her small video camera overboard during our surface interval. One of the guides put on his gear, jumped overboard, and found the camera after 15 minutes -- in water with 10-foot visibility. I was disappointed because they weren’t able to take us to the Bligh Water, as the boats were too small and the water too rough, but they took us to dive sites with great soft corals. (Bring an underwater flashlight to be able to see their wonderful colors.) Two days before we left, Ra leased a larger boat that enabled us to go out to Ra Passage. I was told two larger boats that can take 12 to 16 divers are in the process of being readied (but before you go, make sure those boats are in the water)” About Wananavu, Wayne adds, “The food is much improved. There was a specials menu that differs for lunch and dinner; it always had a choice of a meat, fresh fish or vegetarian dish, with soup and desserts. They had a special lovo night, an Indian night, a Mongolian barbeque night that let us pick our choices of meat (lamb, pork, beef and chicken), calamari, veggies and spices, then give it to the chef, who would grill it in front of us. The resort has been ‘spruced up’ with new paint, and the grounds are always immaculate.”

“I can understand don’t drink the water, but mold in the shower and on the walls? Not responding to calls about broken door locks? And towel shortages?”

Another thumbs up for Wananavu comes from Mike Millet (Dublin, CA). “In June, I was in Papua New Guinea, diving with the *Star Dancer*. The plan was to head back to San Francisco via Fiji and spend a week at the Wananavu Resort, which had been prepaid. However, while on the *Star Dancer*, I contracted a terrible eye infection that necessitated a quick return home for medical treatment. With the help of Debbie Messina from Dancer Fleet Travel, the Wananavu Resort has extended me full credit for the trip for one year, which I’ll take in April.” (www.wananavu.com)

Star Dancer, PNG. Besides his eye infection, Millet’s 10 days on the *Star Dancer* were problematic. “We ran out of fresh water twice and had to motor 10 to 12 hours back and forth to Alotau to replenish. This resulted in two rather choppy nights at sea with little sleep. The *Star Dancer* used a chase boat to pick up divers, but for a couple of dives, the motor wasn’t working and it had no back-up motor. So, of course, during these two dives, my dive buddy and I had to deal with a strong current and a dive guide who took off without us. We were led away from the mooring by the dive guide, who then left us while apparently trying to find the boat. With less than 500psi, my buddy and I surfaced to find the chase boat inoperable, and the mother boat about 200 meters away from us in choppy water. In was an unpleasant fin back to the *Star Dancer*. The dive guides were both local divers and Americans. For the most part, they went too fast. It was normal for me to stop to take three or four pictures, to then find the dive guide some 10 meters ahead of me. Nonetheless, the crew was, for the most part, friendly and helpful. The dive conditions also added to the negative experience, with high seas, banging ladders, strong currents and marginal visibility. I have been on about 25 liveaboard dive trips, and I would have to rate this experience in the lower third.”

A Resort to Avoid in Roatan. Henry Morgan was a pirate, which may be reason enough to avoid the Roatan resort that carries his name. While there in July, Celia Liner (Olive Branch, MS) says the diving and

dive operator (TGI Diving) were just fine, but “divers dwindled as people started getting sick with some sort of grunge that was passed around. Besides the voracious no-see-ums that could eat thru DEET, the resort offered ho-hum food, a shortage of liquor and other adult beverages, and guest rooms with bathrooms that should be scrubbed with bleach daily and sprayed for bugs. You can’t drink the water, can’t flush paper in the toilets. Okay, I can live with that, but mold in the shower and on the walls? Not responding to maintenance calls about broken outside door locks? Towel shortages? Those are problems with the property, not the island environment. The front desk refused to take my credit card because they couldn’t get a manual imprint from it. Not a resort I would visit again, but the diving was very good overall, and TGI Diving had terrific experienced divemasters.” (www.tgidiving.com)

-- Ben Davison

I Can See Clearly Now ... Underwater

contacts, lens inserts, prescription mask or magnifying glass?

When it comes to diving, the only one of the five senses that really matters much is sight. Hearing, smell, touch and taste play secondary roles. So why is it that aging divers too often deny their deteriorating vision and go about their dive seeing blurs and unable to read their gauges? Could it be vanity? We know *Undercurrent* readers aren’t victims to that . . . right?

Take Paul Selden (Portage, MI), for example. After realizing the small numbers on his dive computer were getting too fuzzy to read, he invested in one with text on the screen large enough to read within arm’s length. He also realized something important: “This was the first clue that maybe someday I’d need to do something to correct my vision underwater.” For Bill Whitmer (Palo Alto, CA), it was “when my arm and the high-pressure hose finally became too short for me to read my tank pressure.”

As you get older, you may still be able to see the big fish and barrel sponges, but you may be missing an entire macro world, not to mention the broad range of reef subtleties. Errol Duplessis (Rawlings, VA) used to shrug off impaired vision, saying, “I am near-sighted, so my vision underwater is enhanced, not impaired. So I can see details that I cannot see without glasses at the surface.” However, an embarrassing moment with a dive team he was leading made him think otherwise. “We were on the Papoose, out of Beaufort, NC, and there were three or four dive boats anchored when we arrived. By the end of our dive, the number of boats had doubled. When we came to the surface, all the dive boats looked alike to me. It was one big blur. Fortunately, we found a sister boat not far from where we were, and boarded it. I knew the crew, told them the situation, and they pointed out our dive boat, way in the distance. We stayed with them and hitched a ride back to the marina.”

Poor vision can make your dives dangerous. During his openwater certification, far-sighted John Spencer (Garland, TX) faced a bad situation. “I could vaguely read my pressure gauge; I didn’t know when I was down to 500 psi. The only aspect of my computer I could read was the depth, because it was the largest thing on the face. The compass was a total guess; I don’t know how I made it back to square one after three 90-degree turns.”

There are a few things, from cheap to costly, you can do to correct your vision. We asked *Undercurrent* e-mail newsletter subscribers what they do to see clearly underwater.

A few told us they had Lasix surgery to correct their vision, which helped initially, but as they got older, the effect wore off. For some, the solution is simple: a magnifying glass. “I use a little one on a tether,” says Susan Titus (Herndon, VA). “A good, but not great, solution for the small things I want to see in detail.” Linda Anderson (Phoenix, AZ) switched to bifocals in her dive mask, but she still carries a magnifying glass in her BC pocket for miniscule critters. Ken Paff (Detroit, MI) uses a large glass hand lens as “reading glasses.”

More Mean Fish

When we asked subscribers what they thought the meanest fish in the oceans was for an article in our July issue, we got an onslaught of responses that overwhelmingly favored the Titan triggerfish. But there were a few others that readers ranked as equally dangerous.

While diving in Moorea, Eve Ringel (Lambertville, NJ) was bitten not once but twice by a Picasso triggerfish, a lovely “painted version” but just as territorial as the Titan during nesting time.

Robert Levine (Englishtown, NJ) says triggerfish in the Atlantic Ocean, which summer at the New Jersey shore while waters are warm, are “a fighting fish with tough skin, like rough sandpaper and very thick. Their tough little teeth only want to bite you and your wetsuit (I know, I felt it). You have to also watch out for the two little barbs and one big one on top of their backs that are protection against other fish – they will put a good-sized rip in your finger or hand.” But Levine says the fish is great eating. “Pure white meat, no fat. Grill, steam, bake or broil it.”

Joe Kristel (Jacksonville, FL) says his section of the Florida coast has a type of triggerfish that is relatively docile, but when he and another diver were doing a survey of an artificial reef, “we were surrounded by hundreds of these guys in low visibility and getting attacked nonstop.” You can see a video of Kristel’s dive (and get an interesting look at artificial reef building) at www.tisiri.org/st-augustine-andy-king-reef

James Mandelbaum (Redondo Beach, CA) says the standard pufferfish is far more aggressive than the Titan triggerfish. “You can find them almost anywhere in the world, and they’re known to nip at fingers, gear and anything else they can get their ‘beaks’ on. In fact, I lost one of my earlobes to a pufferfish.”

Fish guarding their eggs are generally more aggressive, as Carolyn Kehrein (Woodland, CA) found out. “I was bit by a butterflyfish, as I must have been inadvertently hovering near its eggs. When this small, cute fish swam up to me and bit me, I couldn’t stop laughing, especially when it kept posturing. I didn’t realize there was a wound until I took my glove off on the boat and saw blood coming from my finger. The little fish drew blood through my leather glove! It wasn’t a large wound, but it took a while to heal.”

Dave Hollabaugh (Fulton, MO) says even little remoras can wreak some havoc. When diving the Panther wreck off of Bahamas’ Cat Cay, one of them gave his wife, Elaine, a hickey on her neck. “She was not very pleased with this, and even less pleased with me as I took photos rather than help her disperse the pesky remoras.”

And if you’re planning to enter the water in the U.K., beware of the weever. The *Daily Mail* reports that 1,000 vacationers have been stung this summer by that country’s most poisonous fish. Government scientists have found that weever numbers are on the increase around the southwestern coast. It’s easy to step on the weever, which buries itself in sand during the day, and get the poisonous spines on their dorsal fins and gills stuck in your feet. Lifeguard stations now keep kettles constantly boiling to treat the stings with hot water.

If you want to read how a pufferfish severed a diver’s finger or scores of other fascinating tales about diving, order *There’s a Cockroach in my Regulator*, 240 pages of fascinating and weird tales from past *Undercurrent* issues, going back 35 years. It’s a real page turner. Order at www.undercurrent.org

Contact Lenses

Many respondents said they wear contact lenses and use regular dive masks underwater. Optometrist W. Lee MacKewiz (Bear, DE) wears contacts with a weak prescription and says he could still function underwater if he lost a lens. “But I would recommend having a supply of disposable contact lenses, because salt and fresh water are not sterile or compatible with contact lenses. And I would replace lenses at the end of each day, or better yet, after each dive.” Paula Kamps (Hilbert, WI) wears trifocals, so for underwater dives, she purchased a pair of lenses with the bifocal bottom. “I was willing to purchase prescription lenses if needed, but these cost half the price. It did take a bit of getting used to, but is well worth the effort.”

Two well-known dive photographers told us they wear contact lenses, but both are also presbyopic, meaning they’re losing their ability to focus on close objects. For Doug Perrine (Kailua-Kona, HI), the problem means that now he needs distance vision, both for seeing the seascape and looking through his viewfinder, and close vision for reading his gauges, computer, camera screen and for finding macro critters. “Many eye doctors will caution you against multi-focal or bifocal contacts, because the distance vision is not that great. They may also suggest

monovision, meaning a distance lens in one eye and a close-up lens in the other eye. But monovision makes me nauseous and dizzy. What works well for me is a distance-vision contact in the eye that goes to the viewfinder, and a multifocal contact in the other. The multifocal vision is not stellar, but it's good enough to read gauges, and good enough to see my way around if the distance contact in the other eye gets dislodged."

"Getting optical inserts done professionally is more expensive than buying generics, but it's worth it."

Besides contacts, Mike Boom (Oakland, CA) uses a little +2 diopter lens glued to the lower part of his left mask lens. "It allows me to see both near and far - - outside of the lenses - - underwater. I don't need to keep my mask on out of the water to see what I'm doing." The problem with contacts, Boom says, is

they're not guaranteed to stay on during dives. "On a giant stride from a particularly high California dive boat, entry knocked my mask off. When I put the mask back on, I couldn't focus well. It took me a few minutes to realize the impact had knocked or washed my contacts out. Fortunately, they're disposable lenses, and it wasn't a problem to replace them back on board. But I didn't see much other than my gauges on the dive."

Mask Inserts

Other readers use "magnifying" mask inserts. "You moisten them and stick them on the inside of the mask lens," says Bernie Urbanik (Plano, TX), who also has presbyopia. "I put them low on the glass so I can see my gauges better, but you cannot carelessly rinse your mask off between dives."

Randall Farleigh (Anchorage, AK) uses small spot lenses. "I apply one to the inside lower portion of the left side of my mask, allowing my normal and distant vision to remain unimpaired. However, by looking down through the one lens with my left eye, I am able to clearly read my computer. I find this method avoids the blurry phenomenon associated with a bifocal lens covering too large a part of the mask."

Michael Lampert (West Palm Beach, FL), who uses a mask with prescription lenses attached inside, says the cost is not much more than the lenses and the mask. His optician makes the lenses, glues them onto this mask "and gets the 'tilt' correct. In addition, he measures pupillary distance and tries to adjust for distance from lenses to my eyes. I could drive with my mask."

Mike Boom has used the standard plastic half-moon lenses by DiveOptx, but had problems. "They don't stick and eventually get washed out." Now he uses the Magni-View 2x Mask Magnifying Lens (available online at Amazon and at dive shops) because "it offers a small optical quality glass lens with optical glue that cures in sunlight. It stays in place and provides clear correction."

Prescription Masks

Other divers spring for the cost of getting a made-to-order prescription mask. That's what Doug Perrine actually uses most of the time, "because it avoids the eye irritation I get with contacts. It involves a lot of head tilting to look at little close objects, and obscures part of the seascape when you are viewing wide, but it works pretty well overall." He says SeaVision (www.seavisionusa.com) "makes the best prescription bifocal masks I've ever used - - and at a reasonable rate." Bonaire marine naturalists Scott and Patti Chandler also swear by SeaVision. "They custom grind each lens to your exact prescription - - no glue lines, no separation, and they always look clean. Our optometrist looked at the lens quality using one of his instruments and said the quality is phenomenal."

Doug Roberts (Pompano Beach, FL) says his SeaVision mask gives the best fit ever, and is well worth the money. "I was out of pocket about \$160, and my vision insurer paid about the same, as I was due for new glasses. SeaVision also tossed in a bottle of really good mask defog." Another bonus: "They make a mask that's designed for folks with facial hair," says Lenore Neigeborn (Highland Park, NJ). "My husband has no leaking trouble because of his beard and mustache."

Prescription Dive Masks (www.prescriptiondivemasks.com) is another mask maker that gets raves. Conrad Blickenstorfer (Sacramento, CA), editor of Scuba Diver Info (www.scubadiverinfo.com), loves its prompt service. "With just a week and a half to go before a big dive trip, I sent in my masks, and they were they

Pity the Sea Turtle

While endangered green and loggerhead sea turtles are cherished and protected in some places, they're considered as poachable food and trophies in many countries that divers visit. A roundup of recent incidents showed the highs and lows sea turtles face worldwide.

While a New Zealand woman has made a life's work of saving Tonga's endangered green turtles, Methodist ministers make meals of them. Jo Kupu has rescued 600 turtles in the last decade, buying them at the local market and releasing them. But when fishermen, noted that the arrival of mating turtles coincided with a Wesleyan Church conference last spring, they netted 14 live turtles, shipped them to the conference site to lie in the sun on their backs, awaiting their fate. By the time Kupu came to rescue them, 10 had had been served up in the Methodists' dining room. She rescued the remaining four, but one died soon after being returned to the sea. With breeding programs in Tahiti, Samoa and Vanuatu, green turtles are starting to return to Tonga, but the law is vague over whether they are protected.

Grand Cayman is known for its famous turtle farm, but apparently that doesn't mean turtles have it easier. In May, poachers killed an adult male by deliberately shooting a speargun through its head, but were likely disturbed during the capture and fled the scene, leaving the turtle behind. The police found the 350-pound male turtle, also badly cut by the poachers' boat engine, and rushed it to medical aid but the turtle died en route to the dock.

In mid-May, Philippine authorities seized a major haul of 158 preserved sea turtles, ranging from four to 100 years old, and 124,000 pieces of sea fan and sea whip corals -- all protected species -- at Manila's port before they could be smuggled abroad. The turtles, corals and 209 boxes of shells -- falsely declared as "rubber" -- were hidden inside two huge containers shipped from the southern Philippine city of Cotabato. The corals and shells could be sold overseas for \$47,000, but the environmental damage was far more, as officials believe the poachers destroyed about 7,000 hectares of coral reef, twice the size of Manila, in the Moro Gulf and the Sulu Sea to haul in their booty. The turtle trade has been banned globally since the 1980s.

But there is some good news. On May 13, marine researchers in Maui removed an eight-pound tumor from the face of a green sea turtle named "Hearty." Divers spotted Hearty near Makena Landing, and he was transported to Oahu for the operation. He made a speedy recovery, and was returned to the ocean a week later. Many times, tumor-plagued turtles may be too far past help, but Hearty's tumor was operable, and he had a fully functional eye underneath. Hearty is only the second turtle since the mid-'80s researchers could help by removing a massive tumor. Now Hearty has a microchip on each hind flipper for tracking purposes.

And last month, a 125-pound endangered loggerhead in the Florida Keys made a miraculous recovery after being shot in the head with a high-powered speargun. Father and son Charlie and Nicholas Borg from Michigan were on a fishing trip near Little Palm Island on August 3 when they spotted the turtle floating, flippers in the air, and with a four-foot, steel-shafted spear protruding from its face. They hauled the distressed turtle on board and called the Coast Guard. It wasn't easy for Doug Mader, a reptile veterinarian, to remove the shaft from Sara, the name rescuers chose for the 15-year-old turtle. "If the spear went a quarter-inch in any other direction, she would be dead," Mader said. But Sara healed quickly, and is expected to be released within a month, without any permanent injuries. The reward, gathered by outraged Keys residents, for information leading to arrest and conviction for mutilating an endangered species is now at \$10,750.

If you want to help save sea turtles, support the Sea Turtle Restoration Network, where Todd Steiner and his crew do a good job for little money in standing up to protect these animals worldwide. Visit their website at www.seaturtle.org for more information or to make a donation. Or consider taking a chance on their raffle for a Cocos Island dive trip -- \$100 a ticket (www.seaturtle/raffle).

back with time to spare. The quality was outstanding. Not only did I get much better optics and a larger viewing area than from generic stick-ons, but the company also custom-fitted them to my masks. Getting optical inserts done professionally is more expensive than buying generics, but worth it." John Berschied (Green Oaks, IL) says they have reasonable prices and excellent customer service. "One time I had a lens problem that was no fault of theirs, and they replaced the lens for free."

Greg White (Carbondale, IL) swears by his HydroOptix mask (www.hydrooptix.com). "It uses bubble-shaped lenses and the water's refraction to correct the wearer's vision. It's perfect for people like me who are very near-sighted. A big advantage is that it makes things look more natural underwater, and gives one a much wider field of

vision than regular masks. A disadvantage is that any water that leaks in will pool in the center of the bubble-shaped lenses, exactly where I want to look a lot of the time. Otherwise, I've been happy, and the mask is a good conversation starter when people ask me about it -- as long as I don't mind looking like a giant bug." But a downside of the HydroOptix is that people who aren't near-sighted may have problems seeing clearly. "I had to wear contacts to use it," says Don McCoy (Portland, OR). "They made it difficult to see above the water, so I gave up on that."

Whether you should get a prescription dive mask from your local dive shop is up for debate. Judy Halas (Key Largo, FL) went to Divers Direct and "I could purchase lenses from level 1 through 8 (the strongest, and which turned out to be my prescription), which were formed to fit two popular dive masks and could replace the clear lenses. I had my new mask within 15 minutes, and my vision was perfect underwater. The lenses cost about \$25 each, and the mask was around \$50." However, Tim Corwin (Southampton, NY) had issues with a custom prescription mask that his dive shop talked him into for \$300. "The main lens was for farsightedness, and there were two lower magnifier lenses that the dive shop replaced itself for near vision. While the main lens worked fine, the lower lenses weren't strong enough to make a difference, though the dive shop claimed that they were the strongest available."

Dianne Morris (Delafield, WI) recommends going to a vision center that will grind the prescription glass for your mask. "For several years, I used a mask from a dive shop that it provided through its local supplier, but it stopped being effective. Initially, I was told I had to use a mask with two separate lenses. I have since learned that is not true -- a mask with a single piece of glass works, although two separate prescription pieces will be inserted. For my first few masks, the dive shop staff had me put on the mask, then marked the location of my pupils. More recently, they stopped marking the mask, and told me their supplier said it was not necessary. So now, I go directly to a vision center where they mark the lens and grind the glass themselves. I'm not sure a 'discount' eye center will do dive masks or provide the personal assistance you need. I found a family-owned business that actually provides lenses to dive shops. Thus, they were familiar with the issues of vision, diving and masks. They do not perform the eye exam, but do use the prescription I bring in. The final cost for a tri-focal prescription mask through the vision center was still less than the cost of a bifocal through the dive shop."

Want Lower Baggage Fees? Book Through a U.S. Dive Travel Agency

After reading our May article "Beating Baggage Fees for Dive Gear," reader David Dornbusch (Oakland, CA) was inspired to share his recent story about trying to lower baggage fees for a dive trip to Papua New Guinea. He booked the trip through the Australian agency Diversion Dive Travel.

"When I e-mailed Bettina, my agent, to ask about the very restrictive Air Niugini baggage allowances, she replied that for my flight from Brisbane to Port Moresby, I had an additional checked dive baggage allowance: 44 pounds, plus an additional dive baggage allowance of 33 pounds, for a total of 77 pounds. The cabin baggage allowance was 15 pounds. For the Port Moresby connection on Airlines PNG to and from Tufi, I receive a free checked-baggage allowance of 44 pounds, plus an additional dive baggage allowance of 22 pounds, for a total of 66 pounds." Bettina told Dave that "We have a good working relationship with the two PNG airlines, and . . . our special airfares and baggage allowances are only available if booked entirely through us."

Good work, Dave, but two American travel agents say that they can beat the Aussies hands-down. Jenny Collister, who owns Reef & Rainforest in Portland, OR, says that had Dornbusch purchased the Air Niugini tickets in the U.S., his total checked-baggage allowance on international flights would be 23 pounds more than what he received. Ken Knezick, owner of Island Dreams Travel in Houston, says that for flights within Papua New Guinea on either Air Niugini or Airlines PNG, the normal allowance is only 35 pounds per person. "But if ticketed through the U.S., travelers receive a 70-pound per-person baggage allowance on the domestic flights." Kerry Bird, manager of the U.S. office for PNG Tourism, confirmed the benefits for U.S.-ticketed travelers and added, "you get a lower airfare if you buy in the U.S., and fewer air restrictions."

Collister adds, "We dive travel agents know the tricks to help with baggage fees." One airline she works with lets customers purchase a sports card that will reduce overweight fees and provide extra baggage allowance. Another has lower extra-baggage fees if you pay online, while another has lower fees for checking an extra bag (\$120) instead of an overweight one (\$320). "These are things we put in our final documents to help customers," she says. "It's taken a ton of work to get all of this done, but it's a special perk for our customers."

While it may be pricey to get two prescription masks, it's worth the price, as mask loss and breakage can happen, especially when you're on an overseas dive trip. "I put my very expensive dive mask in my checked baggage, and it was lost enroute to a *Utila Aggressor* trip," says Edie Craddock (Richmond Hill, ON). "A borrowed regular mask allowed me to dive, but I could not see gauges or the camera viewfinder, so I could not see pictures until I was in the ship's lounge two hours later. Moral to the story: Put your dive mask in your carry-on." George Felt (Moultonborough, NH) had his prescription dive mask crushed in transport, which killed his dive trip. "Now I keep two masks ready to go at all times, and put them in plastic boxes that are not easily crushed. "

One downside of aging vision is cataract formation in the lens. Routine divers should be especially aware, as frequent sun exposure often leads to cataracts. The upside is you can correct your vision and keep on diving. "Cataract surgery is a simple procedure, but best done by a board-certified ophthalmologist specializing in cataract surgery," says Larry Schnabel (Templeton, CA), who got implantation of a replacement artificial lens in place of his clouded one. "In my case, surgery gave me 20/20 vision in the eye sporting the implanted lens."

Spotting things underwater is hard enough as it is for a diver with perfect vision. Being able to see perfectly is important from a safety perspective, from doing minor tasks like being able to read your console gauges to seeing the expressions and hand signals of your dive buddy or instructor. Good vision can make the world of a difference in an emergency situation. If you haven't been to the ophthalmologist for an eye exam recently, it's definitely time to go before doing your next dive.

-- Vanessa Richardson

Thumbs Down: Wakatobi's Bad Behavior *and thumbs up for the Aggressor's honorable behavior*

Undercurrent reader Marc Pinto (Denver, CO) had gone all out and reserved the Master Cabin on the *Pelagian*, the liveaboard run by the dive resort, Wakatobi, in southeastern Indonesia. However, it wasn't until he arrived in Bali in late March, a day before the *Pelagian* was to set sail, when Pinto learned from a Wakatobi representative that the boat was still in dry dock -- in Singapore, two sailing days away. Pinto told us, "He then mentioned that the main office knew before I left the U.S. that the boat would not be ready, but they made no attempt to contact me."

Wakatobi manager Imanuel Baldwin offered him full refund of the *Pelagian* charges, or the option to try the land resort for a week, with a money-back guarantee if Pinto didn't enjoy his stay. Because Pinto was already out thousands in airfare, had traveled double-digit hours to dive and had set aside the vacation time, he was really left with no choice other than to stay on land and dive Wakatobi. Apparently, to appease Pinto, Baldwin suggested he have a drink with Valentin Maeder, brother to Wakatobi owner, Lorenz Maeder, and head of Wakatobi's reservations office in Singapore. Pinto was not appeased, as Valentin told him, "how his people were warning him they needed to call the passengers of the subsequent cruise to let them know the boat wasn't yet ready, but he said he 'enjoyed the challenges' and didn't see the need to contact them. Turns out, he got lucky because the boat arrived the morning we left, just in time for the next cruise. But anecdotally, we later heard this was the third time *Pelagian* passengers have gotten to Indonesia, only to find the boat was not available."

Pinto was offered free drinks and massages during his Wakatobi stay, plus a discounted future trip on the *Pelagian*. However, there was a catch: "I had to keep the concessions confidential from the other five affected *Pelagian* passengers. That doesn't seem like the right way to deal with similarly situated guests." At week's end, Pinto, an honorable guy, told Wakatobi it wasn't what he had signed up for, "but it didn't seem right to pay them nothing, so I offered to pay Wakatobi half the going rate for our one-week stay, and asked for a

refund of the rest.” Since Pinto returned to the U.S., he has heard nothing from Wakatobi about getting his money back. “They have ignored the multiple e-mails I sent to its back office and the resort’s manager.

“I tried to do the reasonable thing and split the cost of the land portion with Wakatobi, but now two groups there have ignored me for months.”

“I know things break, and I accept that as part of travelling to remote destinations. But this is different. Wakatobi deceived me into coming down, knowing it didn’t have the boat. Having paid \$14,000 in airfare, we had no practical alternative but to try their land resort (we were going there for a few days after the *Pelagian* anyway). I can only assume it was a deliberate decision not to contact us, after what Valentin told me. They offered

a complete money-back guarantee in writing. I tried to do the reasonable thing and split the cost of the land portion with them, but now two groups within Wakatobi have ignored me for months.” Pinto then decided to contest all the Wakatobi charges he had put on his Visa card.

When we contacted Wakatobi, we got a response from Crispin Jones in Guest Services. “Due to an unforeseen resonance issue affecting the *Pelagian* towards the end of her docking period, and an inability to immediately pinpoint the cause, we were unable to deliver the cruise. Instead, we offered to substitute the *Pelagian* cruise with a package of far greater value at the resort.” But no mention of why Wakatobi didn’t contact Pinto before he left the U.S. to give him a choice of canceling entirely.

Jones said Pinto was to return for a discounted early sail in 2012, and the refund would be credited to that booking. Not true, says Pinto. “In all my e-mails, I said I wanted the refund, as they had agreed on, and then we’d deal with the next trip on its own merits. I would immediately post a deposit once I got home and figure out the best date with our friends. There was never anything remotely close to an understanding about crediting the trip cost.”

Regarding Pinto’s contesting the credit-card payments he made to Wakatobi, Jones says, “even though the figure contested far outstripped the value of the refund Mr. Pinto had agreed on, we decided the gracious path would be to authorize the return of those funds paid rather than refute the claim. This was handled promptly. We were further surprised when we heard word that the perhaps-emboldened Mr. Pinto was now contesting the initial payment.” No mention of why the resort never replied to Pinto’s e-mails, though. (Pinto says Visa’s investigation took several months to resolve the charges.)

Jones says no one else complained, and “agreements were reached with the other parties affected, and two of the five even commented that their vacation far exceeded the high expectations they had when they booked, in spite of not boarding *Pelagian*.” However, we wonder what agreements were reached, and whether they were better than what Pinto got. Besides, trying to paint Pinto as the only dissatisfied customer to cover up their failure to deliver is tacky.

If a resort prides itself on doing everything it can to give customers excellent treatment, this must include giving them bad news - - in advance - so they have time to make the changes that work best for them. It’s clear Wakatobi knew the *Pelagian* would not be sailing before Pinto boarded his plane. Rather than contact him at home so he could cancel if he chose, they waited until he arrived at the airport - out of pocket \$14,000 - - and had a captive guest. The request for Pinto to stay mum on concessions, the lack of equal treatment and openness for the other short-changed *Pelagian* customers, and the lack of response to Pinto’s e-mails, even if it was to disagree with him, are all appalling behavior. While Valentin Maeder may enjoy challenges, it’s unconscionable to withhold booking information to avoid refunds. That’s not a challenge, it’s deceit.

Visa agreed to credit most of the Wakatobi charges, but Pinto’s initial deposit of \$1,400 wasn’t credited, because he paid it more than a year before he returned from Wakatobi, and Visa’s 12-month refund limit had by then expired.

Compare Wakatobi’s customer service to that Pinto got from the Aggressor Fleet. He was scheduled to board the *Turks Aggressor* on August 5. “In a freakish coincidence, the boat got stuck in Miami after scheduled

maintenance, and Tropical Storm Emily was looming. Two days before the trip, Aggressor reached out to us. We, of course, cancelled that trip, and Aggressor immediately reimbursed us without question, grumble, or any hassle for our air-cancellation penalties and hotel deposit. They then offered a full refund of the trip. As an alternate, they were holding two cabins on the *Belize Aggressor* and would have paid to reroute us there. They also gave us each a \$500 coupon for a discount off a future trip. Finally, they were willing to waive the minimum-number-of-guests requirement on another week we were considering. They did all that in a day. That's the way to deal with customers. We know things happen; it's how dive operators deal with things when the chips are down that separates the high-quality ones from the rest of the pack."

- - Vanessa Richardson

An Asylum of Divers

I had the pleasure of photographer Doug Seifert's company a while back when we dived together for an adventurous month on *MV Golden Dawn* in Papua New Guinea. He showed me a splendid article he had published on sharks. In the text, he used the collective noun for sharks, something I did not know, and you may not have heard of either. But it is a beauty - - a "shiver" of sharks.

The authority on collective nouns is James Lipton, whose book *An Exaltation of Larks* was first published in 1968 - - it is still in print today, and it is a fascinating read. For example, if whaling ships meet, they are a "gam" of whalers, but the word is also used to denote a playful group of whales. "Pod" is correct for a small group of whales (never use a "school" of whales) or for a "pod" of seals. Then we have a "bale" of turtles, a "smack" of jellyfish, an "army" of herring, a "scuttle" of crabs, and a "kettle" of fish - - or perhaps a fine kettle of fish when diving Papua New Guinea!

I was charmed by Lipton's account of his hunt for collective nouns, and his invitation to contribute where no present collective noun exists. Then I realized there is no collective noun for divers. Doug and I thought of a few possibilities, then I asked diving friends for their suggestions - - they came up with "gurgle," "compression," "free flow," "bubble" and "float" of divers. Personally, I think "asylum" of divers is totally appropriate - - most landlubbers think we are crazy. Now I am putting it to you. If you have a bright idea, or if any of the ones above are your favorite, please let me know. The diving world depends on us!

I am sure you are familiar with "a swarm of bees," but perhaps not so sure of the difference between swarm and school when applied to fishes. In a school of fish, the fish align themselves in roughly parallel formation, with individuals slightly behind the fish in front. In a swarm of fish, individuals are randomly positioned. Strangely, research has shown that schools are actually led from the rear (as are good armies). A "shoal" means the same, I believe, as a "school," but is usually in shallow water, thus looking like an area of shoaling water. Some fish school only when it is a survival advantage for them to do so, and are termed "facultative" schoolers. Other fish school compulsively - - even if only two fish are together, they will line up with one slightly behind - - and these are known as "obligatory" schoolers. At other times, fish may group together in "aggregations" rather than schools or swarms; hammerheads and mating groupers come to mind.

Because we are all about words today, I will finish with the difference between fish and fishes. "Fish" refers to one fish, or to more than one fish when all the fish are of the same species. "Fishes" is the term used when more than one fish of different species are referred to. At least this is how all the ichthyologists that I have ever met refer to them, and how the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) used to refer to them. But it has all changed.

I know this because I was asked to write a chapter in a book to be called the *The World of Fish*. I complained and said it should be called *The World of Fishes*. They insisted, so I wrote to the OED, expecting confirmation. Alas, OED told me they try not to be proscriptive (say how a word should be used); instead, they are descriptive and say how a word is generally being used today. According to them, people just don't use "fishes" anymore; they use "fish" for everything. Unless you belong to PETA, in which case you use "sea kitten," but that is another story. In other words, they have given in to all the phalcephalites using the word incorrectly! Don't let it be you!

Bob Halstead, considered the father of Papua New Guinea liveaboard diving, is a well-known diving curmudgeon and a frequent contributor to Undercurrent's blog. Read more of his commentaries at www.undercurrent.org/blog.

Flotsam & Jetsam

You Talkin' to Me? I Don't Think So. *Scuba Diving* magazine sent an e-mail questionnaire to its subscribers in August, allegedly asking about the way one travels, and offering a chance to win one of five \$50 credit cards. But it soon became a shill for Mexican interests, probably the government, designed to get opinions about Mexican travel, whether one thinks it's safe, and where one might prefer to buy property. It ended with the usual "what is your income" questions, which these days typically ends with "\$250,000 and above," up from \$100,000 not too many years ago. Well, the folks at *Scuba Diving* added nine more categories, concluding with "\$3.4 million to \$4 million," and the grand finale, "over \$4 million." Of course, they requested one's name, address, phone and e-mail address, so the lucky winners could receive their \$50 credit cards.

You Should Be So Lucky. Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin pulled on a wetsuit last month, his third time ever, and went diving at an ancient Greek site in the Black Sea. According to state news reports, Putin descended just seven feet and "luckily" discovered two ancient urns -- in full presence of the media -- because the water was so clear. Television footage showed two moss-covered vases with ear-like handles sitting neatly next to each other on top of the sandy bottom as Putin swam into view. *Novaya Gazeta* wrote that Putin "immediately found two amphorae that had been waiting for him since the 6th century A.D. He was lucky. In the same place over the past two years, archeologists managed to find only a few pottery shards."

Ouch. John Goldfich of Devon, England, was fishing for mackerel on the beach with friends when he felt a big bite on his line. Reeling in his catch, Goldfich's delight turned to shock when his hook surfaced 50 feet offshore and had a hapless scuba diver on the end. To add injury to insult, the diver's wetsuit had been hooked between his legs. Goldfich, 61, said, "My mates

were falling about laughing. I said, 'Sorry, mate, I didn't see you there.' The diver just said it was very murky down there. His girlfriend then surfaced, helped him remove my tackle from his 'tackle,' then nonchalantly handed the hook back to me and apologized." But seriously, Goldfich says there's a lesson to be learned: "I didn't see the diver because he didn't have a safety buoy, which they're supposed to when underwater."

Snorkelling after Hurricanes. *Undercurrent* reader Helaine Lerner of New York City had this question for us: "How long after a hurricane does it usually take for the water to completely clear for snorkelling? A month? Several months?" Well, Helaine, it depends on runoff from the island, but in some cases, it takes as little as a week to get somewhat back to normal. The flatter the island, the better off you are. And of course, the weaker the hit, the better off you are. Unfortunately, there are no longer many places left where the water will ever be completely clear, thanks to overreaching development everywhere.

The St Hits the Keys.** Researchers from Rollins College and the University of Georgia have identified human sewage as the source of the coral-killing pathogen that causes white pox disease in Caribbean elkhorn coral around the Florida Keys. Once the most common coral in the Caribbean, elkhorn is now on the U.S.'s list of endangered species. The research team collected human samples from a Key West wastewater treatment plant, and samples from other animals, like deer and seagulls. While white pox-causing bacterium was found in all animals, only the strain from human sewage matched that of diseased corals. Says lead researcher Kathryn Sutherland, "It's definitive evidence that humans are the source of pathogens that cause this devastating disease of corals." The good news is that the entire Florida Keys is in the process of upgrading its wastewater treatment plants, and scientists believe that action will eliminate the source of the killer bacterium.

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