

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

November 2013

Vol. 28, No. 11

Cane Bay Dive Shop, St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands

easy diving, easy vacation

IN THIS ISSUE:

Cane Bay Dive Shop, St. Croix. 1

R/V *Conal Reef II*, Bahamas ... 5

Experienced Divers Aren't
Excited by Artificial Reefs ... 7

Some Dive Operators Need to
Change Their Rules ... 8

How Long Will Your Dive
Computer Last? ... 10

Warranty Questions to Ask ... 12

Buy a *Cockroach* for Christmas 13

Travel Tips for Long Flights ... 14

Good News about Lionfish
Culling in the Caribbean ... 16

The Fight to Stop Seahorse
Photography ... 17

Why Divers Should Be Excited
About *The Wace* ... 19

Flotsam & Jetsam ... 20

www.undercurrent.org

Editorial Office:
Ben Davison, Publisher and Editor
3020 Bridgeway
Sausalito, CA 94965
EditorBenD@undercurrent.org

Dear Fellow Diver:

A cheerful tour guide who called himself "Hollywood" took my dive partner and me in his air-conditioned van to visit the home of St. Croix's "famous" beer-drinking pigs. One pig, actually a boar, crushed the can I put into his mouth, swallowed the beer, and then spit out the can. There are college kids who pull the same stunt, only they would scoff at the O'Doul's the pig drank. They would at least want Bud Light.

Not many college kids find their way to St. Croix, because it's no party place and not even much recognized as a diving place, just an overlooked member of the U.S. Virgin Islands. But Caribbean easy-divers should pay more attention to it, or so I decided as I finned about Cane Bay in July and discovered comfortable diving on decent and fishy reefs. I was impressed with the loads of barrel sponges and large, undamaged sea fans. The usual Caribbean suspects -- porcupine fish, barracuda, parrotfish, trumpetfish, goatfish, and blue tang -- were abundant, and lionfish were few. I was reminded of the diving on Bonaire's eastern side. In 50-foot visibility on my first dive (and most thereafter), I saw half a dozen Caribbean reef sharks looking for lionfish handouts from guides with spear guns. Many spiny lobsters sequestered themselves in reef holes, as did a large green moray, while shrimp, both coral banded and Pederson's, cavorted nearby. I surfaced a happy diver, warm in the calm, 83-degree water.



Cane Bay Dive Shop's *Ibis*



For its convenience, I selected Cane Bay Dive Shop, across the street from Cane Bay, though it has three smaller branches across the island. While I considered staying elsewhere, truth be known, I simply didn't want to deal with the British driving rules in effect on St. Croix. Give me an intersection with a yield-only left-hand turn, and I want to pull into the oncoming traffic lane. Give me a traffic circle, and I want to go around it in the wrong direction. Why the British rules? The French threw out the British in the 17th century. In 1733, the Danes bought it and in 1926, the U.S. paid them off. So why does left-hand driving still rule? Because of my driver dyslexia, my partner and I booked a cottage next

to the Cane Bay Dive Shop, so we could walk to diving and dinner.

As part of the dive package, Hollywood picked us up at the airport, then stopped at a supermarket so we could stock up with breakfast and lunch supplies. While loading our groceries into his van, he told me I would find a bottle of rum waiting for me in the cottage. After checking in with the dive shop, then sipping a pre-dinner rum and walking to dinner, the long day caught up with me and I hit the hay early.

My partner and I were the only boat-diving customers our first day, except for a NOAA intern along to spear lionfish. While the boat of choice for larger groups is the Ibis, a 36-foot Newton kept in Salt River Marina, we dived from the Sea Spider, a 20-foot rigid inflatable boat (RIB). After it was launched from a beach ramp with our gear on board, my buddy and I stepped aboard to join the captain and the divemaster. The Sea Spider was fully equipped with safety gear, and had radio communications to the shop and the Coast Guard (in Puerto Rico). I don't like RIB diving, because too often I have had to kick up over the gunwales only to slip off and roll back into the water until a crewman pulled me in. But this RIB was a surprise. Plywood flooring covered the back two-thirds of the boat, where I sat, while a crewmember unzipped an entry hole in the rubber floor. I dangled my feet in the water, put on my fins, and the crew brought me my rig and helped me slip into it. Then I leaned forward and let gravity do its work. To exit, I swam under the RIB, popped up through the hole, fully protected from splashing waves, and the crew pulled my rig onto the boat. One could kick up or, with crew's hands under armpits, get lifted out. (My wife said she usually expects dinner and drinks before that type of intimacy.) The crew was experienced, mature, and professional - when I got a tank with a bad O-ring, they quickly replaced it. To a person, they were fun to dive with.

We made 10 two-tank morning dives, four from the Sea Spider and six from the Ibis. After the boats moored in 35-foot depths, we divers hit the water and assembled under the boat until the divemaster began the pre-briefed 45- to 50-minute tour, pointing out creatures along the way. Maximum depth was 90 feet. After the tour, we were free to dive unescorted until ready to surface. I arrived at my cottage between 1 and 2 p.m., had lunch there or at Eat@Cane Bay (great burgers), then lolled away the afternoon. Many divers rent tanks and shore dive (the wall is about 400 feet out) both day and night.

Midweek, we reported to the dive shop at 8:30 a.m., climbed into a van, and divemaster Christine drove us to Frederiksted's cruise ship pier (only one ship a month in the summer) to join the Ibis. Offshore, the sea bottom comprised featureless sand flats, with garden eels swaying in the light current.

Our first dive was on purposely-sunk small wrecks, all festooned with coral and alive with critters. It was a fun hour-long dive, averaging only 37 feet in depth. We then motored to the pier for an outstanding critter and macro dive. With Christine leading the way, I entered the long passage between the pier pilings, where the variety of sea life was remarkable. Of course, my camera battery died before I could record the frogfish, any of the three octopi, a young scorpionfish and the huge barracuda. Our dive took almost 80 minutes, enabled by the average depth of 26 feet. I would have stayed down longer except we ran out of pier. This dive reminded me of Bonaire's Salt Pier, but with more life. After I climbed back onto the boat, another diver came up carrying a gun she found under the pier. Though only a pellet gun, it added a frisson of danger to this fine dive.

One night, my partner and I walked to Off the Wall, where to get food and drink service, we needed to join in the community Bingo game. While we arrived 30 minutes early, most of the 100 seats were already occupied. We each bought a \$5 card and found a spot at a table with two local ladies, each of whom was playing several Bingo cards. The game was humorously conducted as if Garrison Keillor had written the script, each beginning with an announced prize: a Thermos, beach chairs, a couple of bottles of wine which were described as "red" and "white." To win the first game, a player had to get Bingo in a vertical line. Each progressive game required more matches than the previous one. At some point, servers brought everyone a small cup of rum punch, a "sunset shot," to toast the sunset. I didn't see any green flashes, although I might have if I had had a few more shots. My dinner finally arrived with round five of Bingo, which required the winner to cover all the squares on the card. Two players did just that, and split \$1,000 cash.

At 22 miles long, St Croix is the largest of the American Virgins. The most heavily developed portion is between Frederiksted and Christiansted, where you can find Wendy's and Kmart. Along the southern shore are two rum factories, one of which was reported to be discharging toxic material into the ocean as late as the 1990s, leaving behind a five-mile-long benthic dead zone -- forget diving here. East of Christiansted, there are low mountains, generally rocky and arid. Extending from this area is a shelf supporting a rich reef community, now a national marine preserve. The offshore wall, which begins a few hundred feet from shore, falls quickly to the depths and contains a narrow band of barrier reef extending from the marine preserve into Cane Bay.

I loved the convenience of staying and diving at Cane Bay. We were within walking distance of several restaurants, including the delicious but somewhat pricey Eat @ Cane Bay, across the parking lot from my cottage (prices were about 20 percent higher than the mainland). I dined on "Lazy Lobster," grilled and chopped into bite-sized pieces, flavored with spices and butter, and placed into lobster half shells. I drank a very good French Columbelle with it, then finished with vanilla ice cream served with chocolate sauce. We also enjoyed a good dinner at Rowdy Joe's, a two-mile walk from the cottage. The owner graciously gave us a ride back, as it wasn't possible to call a taxi.

The cottage made for comfortable living. Measuring around 900 square feet, it had a nicely equipped kitchen, including a microwave, stove, and fridge; a dining area; a comfortable living room with a TV and DVD player; and bedroom with a queen-sized bed and a single bath. The deck, with a barbecue, served well for drying dive gear. My request to fix one of the ceiling fans was answered promptly. However, the single AC unit, even with three ceiling fans, was inadequate to cool the entire cottage, given the 90-plus temperatures that prevailed in



One of Cane Bay Dive Shop's Cottages

Cane Bay Dive Shop, St. Croix

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

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

late July, and affected my sleep each night (I was told conditions were hotter than normal). The humidity was high, though an active breeze helped.

The number of boat divers varied daily, with most coming from California, which is quite a trip. Among the divers was a 12-year-old boy, certified two years earlier, diving with his father. While I have concerns about the ability of children to handle diving, this conscientious young guy carefully monitored his depth and air consumption, and his father stepped in to signal the divemaster when the boy was running low on air.

There was more to land excursions than seeing beer-drinking pigs. Hollywood drove us through the rainfor-

est, replete with mahogany and kapok trees. We had lunch by the water at Rum Runner's in Christiansted, where the National Park Service has done a super job preserving this 18th century seaside town.

All too soon, I was diving the last dive, always a bittersweet experience. We shared the Sea Spider with an underwater photography professional working at another shop who told us she loved to dive Cane Bay on her days off. We drove to a mooring directly in front of the dive shop, perhaps 500 feet off shore. Unlike on my earlier dives, the water was choppy, so the boat rocked and rolled, and all of us hung on tightly. My partner even got seasick. Just past the end of the sandy flat area extending out from shore, the coral reef dropped off steeply into the depths. I passed "the world's biggest seahorse," a small statue that resembled a carousel horse, and was greeted by several reef sharks, one of which attacked a lionfish still on the divemaster's spear. As usual, small schools of the usual reef fish flitted about, and several spotted morays peered from holes. A large female lobster waddled on the sand, her tail's underside loaded with eggs. A small hawksbill turtle munched at sponges, and I saw a sizeable Southern stingray on a sandy ravine plunging through the coral. Perhaps nothing remarkable, but surely a well-rounded, fitting end to an enjoyable week of diving.

The variety and abundance of fish life here approaches that of Bonaire, which I've been visiting annually for a decade, with large trumpetfish, drumfish, trunkfish, large lobsters, peacock flounder, moray eels, snapper in abundance and occasional turtles. And like Bonaire, St. Croix is a fine one-week vacation venue with easy, not-so-adventurous diving. It's American, the dollar is the currency, there are good restaurants, and enough to do and see to fill up afternoons if you get tired of kicking back or decide not to take a third dive. A fun and friendly island, it will be on my list next summer. But I doubt I'll visit the pig again.

-- J.N.F.



Divers Compass: The price is right: \$2,300 for two included five days of boat diving, unlimited shore diving, our cottage, and transfers to/from the airport . . . Cane Bay Dive Shop charges \$115 for a standard two-tank boat dive and rents Cressi equipment . . . Electric voltage in the Cane Bay Cottages is the same as the mainland U.S.; maid service isn't offered . . . Ask your airport-transfer driver to stop at the Extra Grocery Store on your way to the cottage so you have the widest (and least

expensive) grocery options to stock up on . . . Cruzan Run is the homegrown favorite drink of choice . . . Website: www.canebayscuba.com

R/V Coral Reef II, Bahamas

on the hunt for 1,337 fish to stock the New England Aquarium

Dear Diver:

The New England Aquarium, on Boston's Central Wharf, needed a lot of fish. It was enlarging its Giant Ocean Tank, and to capture the fish needed, it had organized three one-week collecting expeditions to the Bahamas. Last year, I only made the waiting list, but this year, I had my choice and selected the third and last expedition, which sailed out of Miami in mid-March.

All the Aquarium's expeditions (and those of many other aquariums and researchers) use the R/V Coral Reef II, an 80-foot, custom-built research and collection ship designed and owned by Chicago's Shedd Aquarium. While the living facilities -- a single lounge area -- were simple but adequate, I knew I was on an expedition when I shared a bathroom with three other cabins (each one had two bunks, a washbasin and closet).

I was the first guest to board the ship at the Jones Boatyard, along the Miami River, on Saturday afternoon. The rest of the guests drifted in later. After an introduction and dinner, I climbed into my bunk. It would be a pre-dawn departure, under several raised drawbridges and past cargo terminals with their huge cranes. Once out of the river, it was a calm (unusually so, some said) five-hour crossing to Bimini in the Bahamas. At Bimini, a fisherman on the dock was fileting wahoos and tossing the entrails to bull sharks feasting below. A kid about age three was near the edge of the dock, his parents unconcerned. One of the bulls rammed into the dock pylons, and the teetering kid almost fell into the water.

The aim of the expedition was clear: We had a wish list of 75 species, 1,337 fish in total, and we were given the number and size of each desired specimen. For example, one goal was to collect 30 sergeant majors, each about the size of a quarter. Other species included cowfish, four-eye butterflyfish, cottonwick slippery dick, yellow goatfish, puddingwife, queen angel, highhat, beaugregory, and sargassum triggerfish. Once collected, we had to pack them into proper containers, and airfreight them to Boston. Since this was the last expedition, we joked that only the wiliest fish would be left. I came to believe this.

The crew consisted of Lou and Dave, the captains, and Chris, the cook. This was Captain Dave's first trip on this ship, hence the two-captain crew, but there was no engineer or first mate. We also had four aquarium staff members and eight volunteers, ranging from 22 to 69 years of age and including a retired lawyer, a retired applied mathematics researcher, an insurance agent, a New Zealand native and a student hoping to work with the aquarium. John, the expedition leader, was the boat's previous captain who had just retired. All but two of the volunteers had been on a collecting expedition before; I was one of the newbies.

Our first briefing covered how to use the equipment and how to hunt. Basically, each diver would carry two butterfly-like



R/V Coral Reef II

New England Aquarium Expedition

Diving (experienced)	★★★★
Diving (beginner)	★
Accommodations	★★★
Food	★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★

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

nets with solid plastic or nylon netting, plus a catch bag to hold the fish while he continued hunting. Once I caught a fish, I had to transfer it to my catch bag (being careful not to lose it in the transfer) and carry on with my hunt. It all seemed straightforward at the start. (Aquarists prefer the term "fish collecting" over "fish hunting" because the latter could imply that the fish were killed, and of course, that's not the goal. Each fish is treated with great care because the aim is to maximize the number of fish that make it back to the aquarium). Observing on the first dive, I followed the aquarists and noted their techniques. I quickly learned that netting fish is trickier and different from catching butterflies. Fish are so fast

you cannot snatch them in mid-water. And you can't do it alone -- the aquarists tended to hunt in groups of four.

Next dive, I tried my hand. I had many close calls, but I was unable to catch a single fish. For the remaining dives, I partnered with the aquarists, and then I started to catch fish. Even when I was hunting with another diver, the fish found unlimited ways to escape. The best collecting method required having at least three divers with five nets to cover four sides and the top. Regardless, clever fish found ways to dash between the nets, or found a hole to hide in.

I found it frustrating not to catch fish, as if I were not doing my share -- even though I paid \$3,200 to join the trip. Dives (we made 18) tended to be less than 20 feet, requiring patience to stalk fish slowly. With dives lasting around an hour in water temperatures hovering in the low 70s, the lack of movement meant a chill set in, making it even more difficult. (I can still hear Captain John repeating over and over, "go slow, very slow.") The hunt for a rock beauty was typical. Three of us had been trying to catch her (I'm guessing at the sex), but she had escaped several times. Finally, she hid under an isolated rock. We approached slowly and covered all exits. Was she still there? I then saw her in one of the holes. We tried to coax her out. She got scared and tried to escape -- fortunately, into my net.

At the end of each dive, I transferred my few fish from my catch bag to a barrel hanging at 20 feet. A crewmember raised the barrel five feet every 20 minutes before the ship changed sites. Once the barrel was on deck, crew transferred the fish to storage tanks, separating aggressive and passive fish, and keeping grunts in their own tank. They fed and monitored the fish, and treated them, if needed, in a miniature pressure chamber! Clearly, tending the fish was a major operation, handled well by the aquarists -- and I was happy to have them do it.

Fish-hunting techniques varied depending on the sites. We needed 300 or so grunts, so at one site John stampeded them down a narrow canyon while we waited with nets. To catch them as they swam by. At another site, we dropped a weighted Seine net with floats at the top. After it was deployed, parallel to the shore in shallow water, we volunteers splashed water as the aquarists slowly moved the net toward the shore. Just as the Polynesians once did, we chased the fish into the center of the net; the aquarists raised the bottom and trapped needlefish and small barracuda.

Our wish list changed daily. Some fish were delisted because we caught our quota, while others were added. At mid-week, it was still long, with chromis, black durgon, highhat and jacknifes standing out. Dive sites were selected for specific fish populations, so many are not lush or attractive.

The most interesting is the partially sunk the Sapona, part of a WWI fleet built with concrete (steel was scarce then). While she never served in WWI, the Sapona was used for WWII target practice. With most of the superstructure still visible, the Sapona is memorable.

Tasks were shared by everyone, especially at meal service. Each volunteer helped serve on two days, a task more fun than I had imagined). We set the tables and brought the drinks (beer, wine, sodas) and food. Dinner started only when Chef Chris chef sat down so we could all eat together. Once dinner was done, we cleared the tables and placed dishes in the dishwasher. Just like home. Meals were excellent. Lunch might be a turkey salad sandwich on a croissant, smoked trout dip was one snack, and coffee-crusting filet mignon with asparagus and baked potato for dinner was followed by chocolate ice cream truffles.

There were fish tanks all over the ship so there was little room to move about -- and little down time. What there was of it, I used to study fish ID books so I would collect the right critters. We stashed diving gear on the floor under tables, where possible. Staff filled the tanks, but we volunteers hooked up our own gear. No one is assigned to help divers, so you need to have a reasonable level of diving proficiency to come on board.

We headed back to Miami on Saturday. Once we cleared Customs (yes, fish need to clear it just like people), we began packing fish into plastic bags, one fish per bag. We carried five barrels of Bahamas seawater, and had to carefully measure the amount placed in each bag, because it depended on the size of the fish. We added oxygen, then sealed each bag with a tool that placed a thick rubber band around the top. Finally, we put them in foam containers that fit in packing boxes, ensuring none exceeded 50 pounds. With more than 400 fish on board, it was a major undertaking, requiring close attention and coordination. It was nearly midnight Saturday before we finished the first shipment, then we awoke again at 4 a.m. to pack the rest, finally finishing at 8 a.m., in time to get all the fish to their 10 a.m. flight. Once our 427 fish arrived in Boston, an aquarium crew took them to their facility in Quincy, MA, where they were inspected and quarantined, before finally being placed in their new home, the Aquarium's Giant Ocean Tank.

Experienced Divers Aren't Excited by Artificial Reefs

Coral reefs in warm waters are probably what lured you into getting scuba certified, but the damage done to them by climate change and pollution run-off is also damaging the dive industry. What's a way to relieve pressure on the reefs, and still lure people into diving? Artificial reefs are often considered the way to do both.

Three marine science researchers from the University of Hull in the U.K. wanted to see what divers, new and veteran, thought about diving on artificial reefs versus the real thing. Over two years, they asked 200 divers who visited Barbados (which has natural reefs, shipwrecks and reef balls around the island) about their dive preferences. Most expressed a clear preference for large shipwrecks or sunken boats as their top artificial reef types; no one liked diving reef balls or rubber tires. Broken down by dive experience, those who liked diving artificial reefs were novices; satisfaction declined with increased dive experience, as experienced divers overwhelmingly preferred natural reefs.

For been-around-the-block divers, artificial reefs are ho-hum (well, maybe not those in Yap Lagoon) but to attract new divers, they may just be the thing. A sunken ship starting to blossom with coral offers photo opps and just enough of a challenging dive to interest novices and keep them wanting more. The U.K. scientists suggest that dive shops put all their introductory courses and training dives on artificial reef sites, and give them more education about the environmental benefits of artificial reefs. Besides, the more interest in diving artificial reefs may mean more of a restful time-out for the natural ones.

It's a shame what reef diving has become.

A.E. Kirkbride-Smith, P.M. Wheeler and M.L. Johnson, "The Relationship between Diver Experience Levels and Perceptions of Attractiveness of Artificial Reefs - Examination of a Potential Management Tool," 2013, PLoS ONE 8(7): e68899. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0068899

This was such a rewarding trip, especially when compared to my normal dive travel. What a great way to help educate people to the beauty and fragility of tropical reefs. One day I hope to travel from my Chicago home to visit my fish friends in Boston, hoping to recognize a few that I myself netted for their new home.

-- J.J.M.



Divers Compass: If you are interested in this kind of adventure, the New England Aquarium's next expedition is March 22-30 (www.neaq.org); most aquariums have similar programs, so you may want to look into them . . . \$1,167 of my \$3,200 fee was tax-deductible . . . I had to pay for and arrange my own flights, and my taxis to and from the boat . . . you must bring all your own dive gear, and be sure to carry a valid passport.

Maldives, Hawaii, Indonesia . . .

some dive operators who need to change their rules

This is our last regular issue for 2013. The next thing you'll receive is our 2014 *Travelin' Divers Chapbook* which can be downloaded, read online, printed out or even ordered as a book for \$19.95 (go to www.undercurrent.org for more details). However, there are a few items from the latest batch of reader reports about their dive trips that we wanted to draw your attention to.

MV Maldives Princess. This 147-footer is surely a luxury yacht, but David Bader (Norwood, NC), onboard in September, says she is not a dive boat. Keeping with traditional Maldivian diving, diving was conducted from a second 65-foot craft, but still all did not go well. "All dives were guided but I use that term loosely. We generally lost the guides within the first 10 minutes of the dive. One day, the dive guide told us it would be a 40-minute boat ride to the dive site, which defeats the purpose of a liveaboard. Once a site was located, the dive boat would circle two or three times to get in position for the drop. However, each time, we would be in the blue and 100 to 150 feet from the reef. On one wreck dive, the dive boat captain couldn't find the wreck, and we wasted a dive looking for it. Dive time was generally 45 minutes, including safety stop, and depth was limited to 100 feet. The elaborate dive briefings never seemed to match the dive site, so we requested that dive briefings be held after they checked the dive site and conditions. We wasted numerous dives in deep water looking for whale sharks, hammerheads, and mantas, but had only two encounters with mantas. We asked to stop wasting time looking for something that isn't there and to be taken to shallower reefs for corals and macro stuff. Due to the strong currents, the reefs below 30 feet are nothing but dead coral." The *Maldives Princess's* website (www.arkroyalmaldives.com) is offering "huge discounts" at \$375 per, per person, with only six people required for departure, but that's still a long way to travel for such spotty diving.

This is our last regular issue for 2013. The next thing you'll receive is our 2014 *Travelin' Divers Chapbook* which can be downloaded, read online, printed out, or even ordered as a book for \$19.95 (go to www.undercurrent.org for more details). However, there were a few items from the latest batch of reader reports about their trips that we wanted to draw your attention to.

Little Cayman Beach "Party" Resort. A word to management: Sure, most everybody has a great time with the good staff and good diving, but that cloud of cigar smoke enveloping the bar grosses out a few of your customers. Then when they try catch a good night's sleep on Karaoke Night, instead of the 10 p.m. closing, the leftover bar party can go on past midnight . . . well, it gets to be a bit much, don't you think?

Kona Aggressor. Peggy Goldberg (Citra, FL), aboard in May, laments the changes in Hawaii diving and wonders what, if anything, can be done. To be fair, she had a good week overall. "The night manta dive was a hoot -- we saw dozens at once, zooming over and around us, with their mouths wide open, feeding. The other great dive was the night drift dive three

"I asked, 'What if I have an issue and have to come up sooner?' The answer was, 'You need to come up with the group, as it's too dangerous for us to pick up one diver.'"

miles offshore in 4,000 feet of water, hanging on a line at 40 feet, waiting for the night creatures to come up from the deep. Our lights shone on incredible things, many unseen before, some 15 feet long, and some larval critters." However, it's the new rules that raised serious doubts. "This was my third trip on this boat, the first ones being in 1993 and 1998. I was saddened by the terrible changes in the reef and lack of fish life -- instead of schools of many species, I would see a few of a few species. No bigger fish . . . I am a captain of my own charters, and when I explain how we do things, I expect people to understand and listen. So when a captain or crewmember tells me how they run things, I follow instructions -- doesn't mean I have to like it though. The captain decided to find new dive sites and do dives where you had to jump in as a group, follow the guide and come up as a group. The boat would be drifting. This could be fun and adventurous, but moving a few hundred yards from the old dive sites did not mean they were any different. I did ask, "What if I have an issue with my camera and had to come up sooner, or what if a diver has an issue?" The answer was, "You need to come up with the group, as the boat will find it too dangerous to pick up one diver." That did not sit well with me at all. I have over 3,000 dives, and take liveboards because of their freedom to do my photography and to dive my own profiles. I am responsible for myself, and have redundant rescue systems on me. In the old days, we could dive whenever we wanted; the boats would stay over a dive site for at least two dives, and we just had to be back before they moved. Now even though the company line is you can dive on your own, they made it clear we had to dive at the time they said, so if I wanted to take a nap after lunch and do a mid-afternoon dive as opposed to one right after lunch, I couldn't. They would have two divemasters -- one guiding, the other running drag, watching stragglers. I ended up doing fewer dives, as I wanted to dive after resting, when the light was best. I could not sit in one place and photograph much, as the group would be out of sight in a few seconds, and I had to hustle to catch up. I had done a couple of Peter Hughes boats in the past and did not like its structured, hand-held diving, so I had been sticking with the Aggressors over the years because they used to have a lot more freedom. I guess things have changed in this day and age; with liability, we have all lost our own sense of responsibility."

Tambora, Indonesia. Ann McGrath (Alexandria, VA) was aboard the *Tambora* in October to dive the Lembeh Straits, and while she found the diving and crew exceptional, she raises enough questions about the liveboard for serious divers to consider other crafts. While the cabins are large and comfortable with plenty of storage, and the bathrooms good sized, "there is a terrible mold smell in the cabins, so bring an air purifier. The bed linens had a bad smell, so I used a shirt over the pillow. Do not drink water from the faucets! It caused me to spend 24 hours in bed (and the bathroom), and lose two days of diving. Bring water purification drops. Also bring something for diarrhea; most people had that at various times throughout the cruise . . . Although there is a designated area in the back of the boat for smoking, the crew smokes everywhere. There are plastic bags hanging from the ceiling in the cabins, in case the boat leaks. (It's a wood boat, and you just never know when it will leak.) Some portholes leak, which means your bed will be wet . . . The divemasters want everyone to get in the water at the same time. This means that if the boat driver takes too long to get you your camera, the group will have started without you, especially in a current, and you may have to find them. If the boat owner is diving with you, he'll be the last person ready, so you'll be waiting for him. I found the owner's wife to be great at spotting things, better than the divemaster sometimes! Some divemasters terrorize the animals to show them to you, so ask them not to do that . . . The skiffs have no

shade and they don't follow the divers' bubbles, meaning you may be waiting on the surface for a while. Stay with a divemaster, and bring a safety sausage. For some unknown reason, the ship sometimes dropped anchor far away from the dive sites, making for long skiff rides . . . There is no dive deck. The tanks are stored along the port aisle. There is a small room for gear storage and rinse tanks, which is at the opposite end of the boat from where wetsuits are hung to dry . . . The stairs are extremely steep and far apart, like a ladder, difficult to climb . . . The boat, a monohull, moves a lot with water movement, and the crossings can be ugly, with cabinet doors banging and the room chair sliding around. The boat was just out of dry dock on our trip, but it was loud. The boat manager/owner's rules are strict and arbitrary. When you first arrive, he will lecture for at least an hour. He does not want to deviate from the way he does things, because 'that's the way we do it.' We did get him to start earlier one day so that we could get the dive site we wanted and would have more time between dives. One 'rule' of the owner's is that dives are at 8, 11, 3 and 6:30. He claims everyone does that. (That was news to all of us.) . . . On several dives, the owner took us into a stiff current, and we needed to stay together, so we burned through our air quickly and for no reason. Take a reef hook, and wear gloves."

-- Ben Davison

How Long Will Your Dive Computer Last? *and will that warranty really help you?*

Remember that term "lifetime warranty?" Back in the 90s, Uwatec computers were covered under a warranty for life. If something went wrong, the company would repair or replace it for free. This even included management of the computer's battery systems, which had a life between seven and 10 years. Take the Uwatec Aladin series -- a change of batteries cost \$15 and it was done the dive shop.

Cut to today. Uwatec is now under the arm of Scubapro, which itself is owned by Johnson Outdoors. Battery replacements aren't the same. One *Undercurrent* correspondent took his Aladin computer into his dive shop for a battery replacement and was told it had to be shipped back to Scubapro for that - and for a \$250 charge. To make it worse, the new battery stopped working a year later.

Laptops and smart phones have a quick obsolescence rate; the next model comes out just as the latest one is still gaining traction. That seems to be a similar path for dive computers -- instead of lifetime warranties, most dive computers now have a two-year warranty and may last just a few years after that. Instead of repairing a computer under warranty, manufacturers are more likely to offer a diver a newer model. While many divers hope -- perhaps even expect -- to keep an old computer running just as they might keep a favorite old car running, it's not going to happen.

Tom Kittredge (Sacramento, CA) took his trusty six-year-old Suunto Mosquito and his stalwart Uwatec Aladin Tec to his dive shop to repair the plastic function buttons. The dive shop sent them off to Suunto and Scubapro respectively for repair, then sent Kittredge this e-mail: "The Mosquito is a 2007 serial number and was discontinued several years ago. The only parts not yet discontinued are the battery kits. The Aladin Tec is also discontinued and according to Scubapro, not fixable. Almost all the scuba companies only have a two year warranty on the computers and don't seem to support the old technology when new ones come out, unfortunately." Kittredge says he did not see any information on his sales receipt that these products would be unserviceable after the two-year warranty expiration, but of course that kind of confession would never be included.

A Tucson subscriber is upset at the effort it took to get his Uwatec Air Z Nitrox computer replaced. "The battery is sealed in goop, making it impossible for anyone but the factory to swap it out. The dive

shop sent it off and Uwatec said that the sensors must be upgraded -- \$300 for something which cost \$1,000 in the first place. It has lasted another five years, and the batteries are still going at 70 percent, but what's going to happen when the batteries go out again? I am afraid they will tell me that they cannot be swapped out, but now we're talking gear that is over 10 years old. It should work fine and be maintainable -- I have lots of other gear that is 25 years old, but a computer is not a gear bag or pair of fins."

While we would like our dive computers -- and our Blackberries -- to run forever, we can't have the same expectation for mass-market electronics as we do for rubber. John Bantin, an *Undercurrent* editor and former technical editor of *Diver* magazine in the U.K., remembers when he

"When we consider the less-expensive end of the range, such as the Suunto Mosquito, it is almost a throwaway item."

visited Uwatec's Swiss factory few years ago, where they built oil-filled computers at a tremendous cost. "There was an economic shadow looming over the Swiss gnomes working in the factory. It was the rise of cheaply-sourced electronic components from the Far East, and even simple devices like toasters now sport them. Many computers are assembled cheaply in Indonesia, for probably just a few dollars. It's the research and development costs that are reflected in the price we pay. Manufacturers can honor a one- or two-year warranty more efficiently by replacing a faulty diving computer than attempting to repair it. We now live in a world of throwaway electronics. When we consider the less expensive end of the range such as the Suunto Mosquito, it is almost a throwaway item."

Keep in mind: If a diver makes a single dive on a computer, the computer keeps computing tables for as long as 24 hours afterward. So if someone dives an hour a day with his computer, the computer is still runs up to 300 days.

What's a Warranty Worth?

Even if it is cheaper for a dive computer to be replaced than to be repaired, manufacturers must still offer warranties in many countries where they're bought. But few divers consider the warranty when buying gear, and fewer still read it -- at least until the computer fails. Lawrence Schnabel, a Los Angeles-based attorney and NAUI-certified divemaster, states that divers should understand the difference between the "express" warranty, the manufacturer's written promise, and the "implied" warranty, what the law gives the purchaser.

The express warranty comes in writing, promising that the equipment is defect-free at the time of purchase; it will be limited to repair or replacement at the manufacturer's discretion, and often requires you to purchase the product from a manufacturer's authorized dealer. Many U.S. states give an implied warranty of merchantability when you buy a product from a dealer. To be "merchantable," the product must be fit for the ordinary purposes for which it's used or for which the seller recommends.

Ken Kurtis, owner of the dive shop Reef Seekers in Beverly Hills, CA, has many people bring him malfunctioning gear years after they bought it, and he has to remind them about the express warranty." He uses Kittredge's seven-year-old Mosquito repair issue as an example. "This isn't a computer that was bought new in October 2011, stopped working on October 21, 2013, and now the owner is being told he's out of luck. Now whether or not Suunto should still be repairing these things is a different matter."

One reason why manufacturers may not make repairs after the warranty expires relates back to -- again -- the way products are made, says Mark Derrick, owner of Dive Gear Express in Pompano Beach, FL. "Dive computers have many high-tech components that have relatively short manufacturing life cycles and are too cheap to repair cost-effectively. Manufacturers will repair and support their dive computers as long as they have spares, but eventually it becomes impossible when their spares are depleted."

Is there any legal requirement mandating that companies offer parts or repair computers after a certain number of years, asks James Wasser (Los Angeles, CA). "There are laws related to service of products; cars need to have spare parts available for at least 10 years." But not for dive computers. The way warranties are written, we're pretty much stuck with them. In addition, some manufacturers won't honor a warranty, even within the two-year mark, unless one offers proof you had the owner lived up to the service agreement or only had it repaired at an authorized dealer.

And many dive computer vendors don't actually make their own dive computers, says Kurtis. "Oceanic's ProPlus II and Sherwood Wisdom have the same guts -- they're both made by Pelagic. So when you send your computer back, you may be sending it to someone who's not really the manufacturer, and all they can do is say, 'I will replace it with a refurbishment for this much.'" So many times, it's a question of luck if the manufacturer can repair your dive computer.

Who's Good, Who's Not, at Repairs and Replacements

We asked readers for what companies did well with repairs and customer service, and who didn't.

Uwatec/Scubapro received mixed reviews. When Maxine Barrett (Las Vegas, NV) sent in her flooded Aladin, "it was marked as 'unfixable,' and no discount was possible for a replacement." She switched to an Atomic Cobalt. It took three months for Gregory Oppenhuizen (Holland, MI) to get his two Uwatecs returned from repair. Uwatec had replaced the battery, but missed something Oppenhuizen had told them to repair. That took three more months.

Bruce Sawyer (Monterey, CA), who recently sold his dive shop, was a dealer for Suunto, Sherwood and Uwatec/Scubapro. "I twice had the experience that Kittredge described with my own Suunto computers, and it infuriated me. One of them, a Cobra, was less than five years old, and still they refused to repair it for any price. As a dealer, Sherwood service was spotty at best, though not as bad as Suunto, but the Scubapro/UWatec warranty service was outstanding. As long as the person who brought the computer in for service was the original owner and the computer had been properly registered, there was never a problem. There were a few old models, meaning well over 20 years old, which they could not service. In that case, they gave a huge discount towards the purchase of a new computer."

Warranties: What to Look at, What to Ask

While warranties may be useful or not if your dive computer fails, you can protect yourself by using common sense and doing due diligence before buying. Attorney Lawrence Schnabel, who writes for *Undercurrent* frequently about legal issues, recommends these questions to ask (which apply to any type of dive gear):

Which competitive model gives the longest warranty? Does the warranty have a longer life on some computers, and a shorter life on others?

Is the seller of the dive computer an authorized dealer? If not, does this void the express warranty? If it does, is the seller giving you an equivalent express warranty?

If someone other than the manufacturer or authorized dealer services your computer, does this void any warranties? Does the express warranty require that you service the product regularly?

If you make a warranty claim, what are you entitled to -- refund, repair or replacement? If a manufacturer agrees to replace a defective computer, will it pro-rate the replacement? How long is the warranty on the replacement -- is it a new term or just the amount of time left on the original product?

What is the procedure for getting warranty repairs? Who does them, and how long does it typically take?

How reputable, knowledgeable and experienced is the dealer? Does he acknowledge his implied warranty obligations versus telling you that your sole remedy for defects is with the manufacturer?

When Andrew Bernat (Arlington, VA) tried to repair his Cobra, “Suunto wanted the price of a new Cobra to repair a dead Cobra and would give nothing off on a new one. Oceanic wouldn’t repair a dead computer but offered a 50 percent-off deal on their new model.”

Undercurrent contributor Bret Gilliam (and former Uwatec CEO before the company was sold to Johnson Outdoors), says, “I switched to an Oceanic computer this year simply because I knew I will get good service. Its founder, Bob Hollis, is still very involved in running the company, though he recently passed the reins to his son, Mike. They both understand what customers expect and they live up to it.” He also cites Atomic as one of the best-run companies when it comes to customer service.

Aeris, a subsidiary of Oceanic, also gets thumbs up. Glenn Gracom (New Smyrna, FL) sent his out-of-warranty Aeris Atmos Pro back without a glitch. “The computer had to be at least 10 years old. The repair wasn’t cheap but it was much less expensive than buying a new one.” Ron Herman (St. Petersburg, FL) had a similar situation with his old Atmos AI. “I called Aeris and told them my story, and they sent me a new computer, lens cover and battery in my old housing for \$170, including shipping.”

Don’t think that your plight is the only issue in the company’s decision on how to handle your out-of-warranty computer. A big factor is the relationship it has with the dealer. This is where “support your local dive shop” really makes a difference, says Kurtis. “I have a customer with a 10-year-old ProPlusII with a pressure transducer that is not reading air pressure correctly. Oceanic is giving that diver a brand new ProPlus3 for a pittance. They’re going above and beyond, and I think some of that goes back to their relationship with us.”

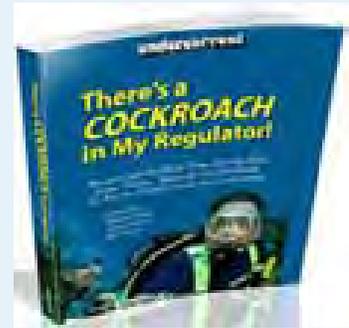
Kurtis also says smaller companies may be more likely to offer bigger deals and better customer service. “Scubapro/Uwatec may be hard-nosed, but you’re dealing with layers of bureaucracy, and the person you’re talking to might not have authority. But with Atomic, I can talk directly with owners Doug Toth or Dean Garafa and can plead my customer’s case.”

If you buy your computer online, will your warranty be honored? Many divers have had the same experience as Rick Tavan (Saratoga, CA). “I’ve been denied repair service by the manufacturer several times, even something as routine as replacement of a battery, because I bought a unit from an unauthorized retail channel.”

There is not much one can do about that. However, an online seller may establish its own warranty for buyer’s protection. LeisurePro in New York City, one of the largest online sellers, does just that. Its warranty states that “the equipment will be free from defects in materials and workmanship for the same period offered by the manufacturer.” In the past several years, readers reporting to *Undercurrent* say LeisurePro keeps its word. Reader Mac Lysett (Ten Mile, TN) wrote, “after only 30 dives, my Oceanic Geo computer malfunctioned at night in my Cayman Brac hotel room, with lights flashing and sirens warning that I needed a deco stop at 45 feet. I had to pile towels on top of the computer and shut it in the bathroom to get back to sleep. When I returned home, I contacted LeisurePro and it instructed me to return the computer to Oceanic. Within a week, a brand new Geo arrived and I’ve experienced no trouble with it. Both LeisurePro and Oceanic were terrific.”

Buy a *Cockroach* for Christmas

Our 240-page book is the best of the unusual, entertaining and jaw-dropping true stories *Undercurrent* has published during the past 35 years -- like the stingray that gave a diver a hickey, an exploding tank that yielded \$150,000 of cannabis, and what happens



when buddy couples fighting with each other. The perfect gift for a dive buddy with a dry sense of humor. We'll send yours in time for Christmas if you order by December 15. Go to <https://www.undercurrent.org/secure/UCnow/BestUCBookOrder1.php> for details and to order online.

Software Obsolescence

Upgrading dive computer software is a significant problem. Jeff Garrison (Christiansted, St. Croix) bought a Scubapro Xtender watch/dive computer in 2006, plus a download cradle and cord so he could keep a dive log on his laptop. "My computer ran Windows XP. Everything worked beautifully until I got a new computer that ran Windows 7. The Xtender was no longer in production, and there was no software update available. I ended up having to print my Xtender dives on 5x8 cards to keep a safe record of them."

Desktop software for dive computers has often been a headache. "I would love to see an industry standard that would allow any dive computer to communicate with the consumer's choice of desktop software, but that is not the case," says Derrick. "There are some bright spots. Because Oceanic has a very broad, long-lived line of dive computers, they have used a standard interface and desktop software that has been kept current for Windows releases. But realistically, a consumer should expect any dive computer they purchase to be tied to the desktop environment that supports it at the time of purchase -- and pretty much frozen there."

The Bottom Line

Gilliam argues that dive computer makers should honor their customers with repairs when needed, and bring back longer warranties, especially for the more expensive models. "Top-of-the-line dive computers can sell for up to \$1,400. If you spend that amount, you have every good expectation that you can use it for a while, for more than two years. The dive industry needs to support its computers and act in good faith."

Or an alternative is to rent one, he says. "Why spend \$700 to \$1200 on buying a unit when you can rent one for a tiny fraction of the cost? And the trend in many resorts and high-end liveaboards is to supply gear as part of the trip price. For example, Dive Damai in Indonesia does that, and more than 60 percent of their guests now take advantage of the program." But that's bad news for computer manufacturers, because they will ultimately sell far fewer units.

For those divers who want to hold on to their own computers, they need to reset their expectations. "I think there may be a disconnect between expectations for dive computers versus other dive equipment," says Derrick. "Plenty of us have regulators that are 20 years old, still in service and still easily maintained. However, regulators are mechanical devices, not electronic, and thus have a different life cycle. A more realistic expectation for a dive computer life cycle is probably something between a desktop computer and a cell phone, say five years. Instead of thinking of a dive computer like your other mechanical diving equipment, you should think of it more like a smartphone. That means your dive computer has a relatively steep learning curve and a relatively short life cycle."

-- Vanessa Richardson

Travel Tips for Long-Haul Flights

how to spend less on -- and survive -- grueling dive trips overseas

In last month's article "Are You Diving Less These Days," many readers said one reason why they answered "yes" is because of the cost, length and hassle of flying overseas, especially when stuck in coach. We got some good advice from travel pros about how to make it a not-so-bad or actually-good experience.

Before the Flight

When he has a dive destination in mind, *Undercurrent* contributor Doc Vikingo says he does his best to **accumulate enough frequent-flier miles to get a business-class seat**. "I accrue them largely

through churning co-branded airline credit cards with fat sign-up bonuses, but also make even my smallest purchases using a card that earns miles on a carrier(s) I am interested in for international travel." Also keep an eye out for periodic specials on purchasing miles. For example, US Airways offers a 100 percent bonus on purchased miles once or twice a year. You can keep abreast of this activity by regularly checking travel sites like Million Mile Secrets (<http://millionmilesecrets.com>) and The Points Guy (<http://thepointsguy.com>).

Is there actually a best day of the week to buy your ticket? FareCompare says yes. After doing a study of its airfare database, it pinpointed the best time to buy airline tickets and shop for fares is Tuesday -- at 3 p.m. Eastern, to boot. Don't wait too much longer if you're looking for a deal -- most of the discounted airfare are pulled on Thursdays, so you're probably paying too much if buying on the weekends. However, CheapAir.com did another study on exact timing for buying the right-priced ticket and found that the best time to buy a ticket for non-holiday domestic travel is 49 days before departure; for international flights, 81 days is the sweet spot.

Before you buy a long-haul ticket, research what type of aircraft options are on the route. "That info will come in handy not only when choosing seats, but in choosing competing airlines on the same route."

Choose your aircraft wisely. Before you purchase a long-haul ticket, Ed Hewitt, contributing editor at the online guide Independent Traveler, says to research what type of aircraft options are on the route. "Look at how they have configured the aircraft, both the seating setup, and other important factors like seat-back screens versus overhead screens. This information will come in handy not only when choosing your seats immediately after your purchase, but in choosing between competing airlines on the same route." For example, a plane with a 3 - 3 configuration is typically more grueling than a 3 - 5 - 3 configuration, mainly because the one aisle will have you competing for space not only with other passengers, but also especially with flight staff as they do drink and meal services. These days, passengers are expected to stay seated during these times -- and on a long flight, this can be tough. Use the website SeatGuru (www.seatguru.com) to see what seats on the flights you're considering recline, have windows, and lack foot traffic and foot area obstructions. That makes a difference over the course of 15 hours as opposed to five. Make sure your aircraft and your specific seats do not show any yellow or red flags.

Get to your hub city as early as you can. "Since delays stack up as the day progresses, it's smart to book the first flight you can into a hub [if you have a connecting flight]," says David Martin, a Delta passenger-service specialist. And select your seats ASAP, he adds. "If you have a disability and need a premium seat in the bulkhead, tell the agent when you make your reservation rather than at the airport." Other passengers might be able to nab those seats 24 hours before the flight, when they're made available to everyone through the airline's website.

Double-check foreign document requirements. Some countries, like Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, require that your visa be valid for at least six months following the date of your arrival. Other countries, like South Africa, won't allow entrance unless your passport contains at least two blank, unstamped pages. You need to be aware of such requirements before you make your flight reservations or else you could get stuck stateside. For a complete list of entrance regulations, visit travel.state.gov.

Nothing's worse than an airport delay, but they happen more than you want them to, so to be safe, **pre-program your cell phone**, Hewitt says. Before your flight, plug in the local contact numbers for your airline (use the frequent flier program phone number if you have elite status of any kind), reservation sites, car rental companies that permit drop-offs near you. "And your travel agent if you have ever used one," Hewitt says. "Even if the agent didn't book you into your current jam, he or she might be able to get you out of it."

Good News about Lionfish Culling in the Caribbean

Undercurrent subscriber Russ Knapp (St. George Island, FL) just returned from Grand Turk and reports that the native fish population is the healthiest he has seen it in years, thanks to several years of divers spearing lionfish there. "Groupers have been eating the speared ones," he says. "However, if you go outside the park where they aren't being culled, lionfish are everywhere."

Knapp's commentary seems to be backed up by science. Two years of field studies at Little Cayman shows that lionfish hunters are having a dramatic impact in protecting reef fish from the voracious predators. Researchers from the Central Caribbean Marine Institute (CCMI) found that dive sites, between 50 and 90 feet deep, where lionfish were systematically culled had 70 percent more native fish compared to nearby sites

where lionfish populations weren't touched. A previous study the CCMI did with the University of Florida also showed that lionfish density was consistently lower on sites where cullers were active.

Final results from the ongoing research project, will be published in a scientific journal at a future date, but the initial findings add weight to the thought that removal of lionfish by divers is the most effective way to control lionfish in specific areas. So far, researchers haven't found any evidence that marine predators like groupers could learn to feed on lionfish.

Even with the successful program, the Cayman Islands Department of Environment said it is not issuing new spears to divers until it has reviewed the current volunteer culling program. Department spokesman Bradley told the *Caymanian Compass* that while the effectiveness of culling was not in question, the department wanted to "pause and review" before expanding any further. Whatever that means.

During the Flight

If you're flying coach, try to get at least one layover en route, says Doc Vikingo. "On really long flights to places like Indonesia, I try to spend a night in Tokyo, Singapore or Jakarta. You can find reasonably priced hotels/motels close to those airports with free shuttles by searching TripAdvisor (www.tripadvisor.com). Also, do what you can to maximize coach seat comfort, such as reading this article "How Am I Going To Survive 21 Hours In Coach?" (<http://thepointsguy.com/2013/09/how-am-i-going-to-survive-21-hours-in-coach/>)

If you have an iPad or Kindle, Hewitt recommends tricking it out before you go aboard. "If you are going to rely on a tablet to get you through two 17-hour flights coming and going, you are going to need new, fresh and absolutely compelling stuff on it to get you through," he says. "We are talking at least a couple of movies -- and these should be bucket-list movies that will absolutely absorb you, not just whatever you have sitting around in your movie queue. Then add at least a couple of books in digital format, of different genres, so if you tire of a long novel, you can read about indigenous local plants at your destination."

Ken Kurtis, owner of Reef Seekers dive shop in Beverly Hills (<http://reefseekers.com>), says one of the constant issues he faces when he travels is **whether or not he'll get Wi-Fi at the airport**. "Sometimes the airport provides it; sometimes you can sneak onto an airline club signal by loitering outside the entrance to their club. (This works great in Honolulu and Guam outside the United Club.) Now Airfare Watchdog has done the research for you for both domestic and some major international airports." View the list at www.airfarewatchdog.com/blog/15775436/introducing-our-airport-wifi-access-chart

To bag jet lag, follow this flight attendant's tips. Jo Darwel-Taylor, a flight service manager for Virgin Airways, says that when flying east, you should adjust your internal clock by wearing sunglasses or an eye mask to block daylight until about 10 a.m. on the morning you arrive. Get on your destination's local time ASAP, or even before you leave home, if possible. And if you absolutely must nap, sleep no more than three hours.

After You Land

Kurtis mentions **an interesting gizmo to track luggage**. "If you want to know exactly where your bag is when you're traveling, there's a new gadget out called Trakdot, recently approved by the FAA

(www.trakdot.com). It's essentially a little GPS tracking device you pair up with a cell phone, activate and toss in your bag, and it will transmit the location of your bag to your phone anytime you're both on the ground. The unit costs \$50, works (allegedly) with any cell phone anywhere in the world, plus a \$9 activation fee and a \$13 annual service fee. When you consider the inconvenience of having the airlines lose a bag of dive gear or photo gear, it sounds like it's worth it. And, if you arrive at your resort only to find out too late that someone walked out of baggage claim by mistake with your bag in tow, think how easy this will make it to reunite you."

Magellan's Retriever Tags require no technology to use, so they're simple enough to work. The vinyl tag has instructions in eight languages (English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, French and German) that tell baggage agents to check the itinerary inside your bag and send your luggage to your next destination, as opposed to shipping it back to your home address while you're en route to Bali. Buy it at www.magellans.com for \$10.50.

If you're a heavy internet user on overseas dive trips, **you could save money by renting a mobile hotspot** that connects directly to a local cellular network, and avoid expensive data-usage charges. The devices are tiny and light enough to sit in your pocket. After you initiate a connection, the hotspot automatically re-broadcasts the cellular signals from local mobile networks as wi-fi connections. Hotspots have an approximate four-hour battery life and come with local charging cables. XCom Global MiFi seems to have the broadest coverage -- its hotspots work in Fiji, Indonesia, Australia and the Caribbean. The flat rate for unlimited data is \$15 a day for the first two countries you visit, with a \$30 charge for each additional country. So far, the only pick-up spots are a counter at Los Angeles International Airport and a travel agency near Grand Central Station in New York City, so most customers will need to pay \$30 for round-trip FedEx shipping to receive and return the device (www.xcomglobal.com).

Finally, download business-travel writer Joe Brancatelli's app JoeSentMe.com, which has a list of essential travelers links -- flight delays, airport hotels, currency converters, mileage converters, Wi-Fi access, security waits. Better yet, become a member of Brancatelli's website for \$70 a year and you'll get all kinds of tips on frequent flyer deals, special unpublished business-class fares and more (www.joesentme.com).

-- Ben Davison and Vanessa Richardson

The Fight to Stop Seahorse Photography

but it's not the strobe, it's the manhandling

It was only a few years ago that the boss of a big diving company based in Egypt's Red Sea region asked my advice regarding the intrusion by photographers on animals underwater. His guides had hit upon the idea of banning the use of strobes by underwater photographers because it did the animals harm, but this was causing customer divers to be upset and losing him a lot of future business.

Although I am not a scientist, my own long experience photographing skittish animals while using vast quantities of studio strobe lighting had never appeared to cause any distress to the animals concerned. This was despite the fact that the amount of energy discharged for each picture was 500 times more than from the most powerful underwater photographic strobe, making a 'pop' that certainly would make an unsuspecting human bystander jump. That was because in those days we were shooting on big sheet-film cameras that needed a huge amount of light. I photographed animals as disparate as chickens and chameleons, dogs and ducks, horses and toucans for use in various big advertising campaigns. The reaction times of animals are so much faster than that of man that they are not startled.

When a larger marine animal like a turtle or a shark is focused on feeding, no photographer is likely to put it off its stride. With smaller animals, it is merely the sheer bulk of the photographer that causes alarm, because in the marine world it's normally the small that get preyed on by the larger predator. That said, the sight of a huge group of underwater photographers surrounding a little hairy frogfish at Lembeh Strait must cause the casual viewer to wonder if, with all the photographers' strobes popping off at frequent intervals, the little animal is not being harmed in some way. It must be so much worse for pygmy seahorses.

Studland Bay, on Great Britain's Dorset's coast, is a well-known haunt of larger seahorses, where underwater photographers are required to apply for a license, and underwater strobes are strictly banned. In May 2011, the use of flash photography was banned on seahorses within the U.K. by the Marine Management Organization (MMO). This month's issue of *Diver* magazine printed an impassioned opinion by Neil Garrick-Maidment, executive director of the Seahorse Trust, that categorically stated that photographers' flashes (strobe) killed seahorses.

It has been illegal since 2008 in the U.K. to disturb seahorses in their place of shelter. Divers require a license if they dive with the intention of carrying out an activity that is likely to disturb seahorses, such as photography, filming or surveys. The MMO website states, "We are no longer issuing licenses that permit flash photography on seahorses due to the potential impact of flash photography. This follows advice from our statutory advisors, and is on a precautionary basis while we develop our evidence base on potential impacts."

Studland Bay is a popular destination during the summer months for pleasure craft mainly coming from nearby Poole Harbour. They each drop an anchor, many leak diesel or other hydrocarbons, and often sewage is pumped from their heads. Add to that the run-off of chemical fertilizers from Dorset County's heavily farmed land, and we can agree that none of it is very good for the marine life. It's no surprise to hear that the seahorse population in Studland Bay is declining.

Garrick-Maidment lays the blame squarely at the feet of underwater photographers. His annual report and recommendations are based on observations and anecdotal evidence. He even mentions that when one of his tagged study seahorses went missing, the mystery was solved when a well-known photographer published online a picture of the animal in a highly stressed state. He makes no mention of the actual effect of physically tagging a seahorse.

On the other side of the world, in Australia, the only known study of the effects of photographers' strobes on pigmy seahorses has taken place, conducted by David Harasti of Aquatic Eco Systems. His results of his quantitative research were published this year in the *Journal of Fish Biology* in a document titled "Does Underwater Flash Photography Affect the Behavior, Movement and Site Persistence of Seahorses?" The abstract for the document is quoted here (by permission of Harasti):

"The effect of flash (strobe) photography on seahorse species has never been tested. An experiment was established to test the effect of flash photography and the handling of *Hippocampus whitei*, a medium-sized seahorse species endemic to Australia, on their behavioural responses, movements and site persistence. A total of 24 *H. whitei* were utilized in the experiment with eight in each of the three treatments (flash photography, handling and control). The effect of underwater flash photography on *H. whitei* movements was not significant; however, the effect of handling *H. whitei* to take a photograph had a significant effect on their short-term behavioural responses to the photographer.

"The Kaplan-Meier log-rank test revealed that there was no significant difference in site persistence of *H. whitei* from each of the three treatments, and that flash photography had no long-term effects on their site persistence. It is concluded that the use of flash photography by divers is a safe and viable technique with *H. whitei*, particularly if photographs can be used for individual identification purposes."

So it seems that it is not the light effect but the inappropriate handling of the seahorses that does the damage. Seeing Indonesian dive guides at work with long pointing sticks, maneuvering these tiny animals

around on their host gorgonia, for the benefit of guest underwater photographers for example, must obviously be stressful for the animal.

However, has the British Seahorse Trust got it wrong regarding the flashes of light from underwater photographers' equipment? It's an emotive subject and the debate continues. In the meantime, as I pointed out to the boss of that Red Sea diving center, if he was really worried about any of the marine life, he should remove all his divers from the water and take those polluting diesel-driven boats with them.

John Bantin is the former technical editor of DIVER magazine in the United Kingdom. For 20 years, he used and reviewed virtually every piece of equipment available in the U.K. and the U.S., and made around 300 dives per year for that purpose. He is also a professional underwater photographer, and author of Amazing Diving Stories, available at www.undercurrent.org

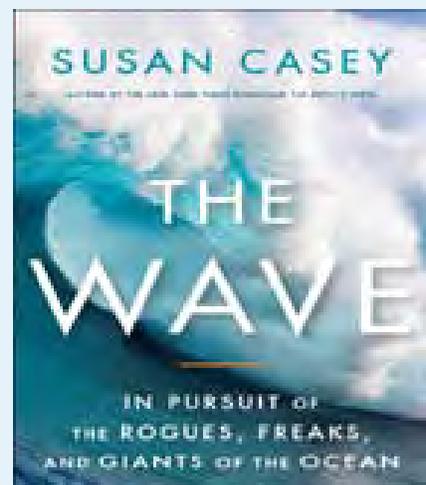
Why Divers Should Be Excited about *The Wave*

As a diver, you know what it's like to be tossed around by waves. If they're higher than three feet, you can get bounced off a boat hull or even rocks, lose a mask and easily lose sight of your boat. While 60-foot waves can sink a 500-foot container ship in minutes, the boldest surfers seek 100-foot waves just for the thrill. *The Wave*, a 408-page best-seller by Susan Casey published in 2011 (yes, I'm late reading it, because I doubted I'd be absorbed by a treatise on waves, but how wrong I was), takes you on a ride with tankers, sailors and super-human surfers like you'll never forget. You will surely remember these stories the next time you're bobbing around waiting for your dive boat.

While *The Wave* is both a white-knuckle tale of the tallest and most forbidding waves, and a unique look at the science behind monster waves and tsunamis and what goes on below, it's more about the skill, bravery and bravado of the world's top surfers -- people whose love of the water make them kin to us divers but living on an edge I can't imagine. My toughest underwater challenge was working out of a severe and unexpected downcurrent in the Grenadines; these guys and gals work their way out of downcurrents every time they take a spill and the wave crushes them. And they've got no air tank to buy them time. Aside from an exciting read, we divers can take away a few lessons. For example, we know panic kills divers, but panic is a surfer's worst enemy as well. Super surfer Brett Lickle describes his response to panic to Casey:

"A famous saying in big-wave surfing, Lickle says, was 'Everything's okay until it isn't. When things go wrong on a 70-foot wave you've got issues. The key is not to freak out. You freak out, you expend your resources.' Personally, I found it hard to imagine relaxing in the middle of an underwater bomb blast, but apparently this was the trick to survival. If you kept your cool, you had a far easier time down there. Most of the time during a big-wave wipeout, I'd been told . . . the experience unfolded in a frightening but fairly predictable way. Once a rider had weathered the wave's impact, shaken like a rat in a dog's mouth for 15 or 20 seconds, the energy eventually released him and he could make his way to the surface. The important phrase, however, was 'most of the time.' While some waves were forgiving, others seemed to have a distinct malicious streak. 'It's the one-in-a-hundred wave you've got to watch out for,' Lickle said. 'The one that pins you on the bottom, stuffs you in a cave, and tells you, 'Son, here's a little lesson.' Every big swell offered a chance to learn humility, to understand that what allowed a rider to go home with his spine in one piece was an easily blown cocktail of fate, skill, and attitude, with a twist of luck. Dave Kalama had summed this up in the most straightforward way: 'There is no guarantee that you'll be fine. You are completely at the mercy of the wave.'"

Susan Casey, whose previous book was the best-selling *The Devil's Teeth*, takes you on a trip you won't forget. She follows the surfers as they seek out monsters in Hawaii, Tahiti, California and Alaska (where a 1,740-foot wave scalped a forest in 1958) and you ride along with them, vicariously sharing both their supreme fears and their extraordinary adrenaline rushes. I couldn't put this book down. You can order it, as well as *The Devil's Teeth*, at www.undercurrent.org. All profits we earn on any sales through Amazon.com go to support coral reef preservation.



Flotsam & Jetsam

Want to Buy a Dive Shop? DiveShopsForSale.com touts itself as the the first website dedicated to the sale of them, and says 70 percent of its customers are first-time buyers, largely out of corporate America. Now there's the old joke about buying a scuba shop (How do you make a million dollars in the dive industry? Start with two million.), but the DiveShopsForSale founders (who don't list their names on the site) say they'll offer prospective owners a training and support program to help get financing, negotiate with vendors and compete with internet retailers. A Central Florida dive shop, "one of the most profitable dive stores," is priced at \$275,000; a 70-foot liveaboard in Honduras is going for \$395,000. Still interested? Details are at www.diveshopsforsale.com.

GoPro's Newest Camera. John Bantin just wrote about the GoPro Hero3 in last month's issue, and lo and behold, GoPro launched a new model a few days after the article came out -- the GoPro Hero3+. There are not many changes to it, but according to DiverWire writer Bobby Johnson, they are welcome ones. It boasts a slimmer frame, a 12-megapixel camera, and video recording at 30 frames-per-second, in addition to new shooting modes and built-in WiFi. That doesn't mean you'll have to buy all new accessories; anything that fits the Hero3 will continue to work with the Hero3+. "The reduction in size and weight makes the camera even better suited for wearing on a helmet or a dive mask," says Johnson. "The buttons on the underwater housing have also increased in size, making it easier to snap a shot even through thick gloves." Pricing starts at \$300; details are at www.gopro.com.

Why Do You Dive? Joanne Edney, a Ph.D. candidate at Charles Sturt University in Australia is doing research on scuba divers and their motivations, so we're publishing her request here. "Do you dive

because you like seeing marine life, exploring shipwrecks, relaxing, photography, or something else? I would like you to tell me a bit about yourself and why you like to go diving by participating in an online survey I have just launched for recreational divers to participate in. Your level of dive experience isn't important, it is your perspective about diving that is. Access the survey at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/JTZSYKT>. If you would like to know more about what I am doing, check out my website <http://wreckexperience.net>, which contains details about the study.

The New "Dead Sea." Ivan MacFadyen, a yachtsman who sailed from Melbourne, Australia to Osaka, Japan 10 years ago, was shocked by how little marine wildlife he saw on the journey this year, describing parts of the Pacific Ocean as "dead." "In 2003, I caught a fish every day," he told the *Guardian Australia*. "Ten years later to the day, sailing almost exactly the same course, I caught nothing. Normally when you are sailing a yacht, there are one or two pods of dolphins playing by the boat, or sharks, turtles or whales. There are usually birds feeding by the boat. But there was none of that." MacFadyen was also shocked by the amount of trash in the water. At times he had to take care that his yacht wasn't damaged by clumps of garbage he said were as large as a house. "We wouldn't motor the boat at night due to fear of something wrapping around the propeller; we'd only do that during the day. When you stood on the deck and looked down, you'd see the rubbish shimmering in the depths below, up to 65 feet under the water."

Philippines Bans Coral-Destroying Nets. Kudos to the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, which just banned the "Danish seine" fishing nets after small fishermen and coastal communities complained about big fishing boats using them to trawl the seabed. "The nets have weights attached to them, it drags on the ocean floor, it hits the corals and damages the marine life," said Bureau head Asis Perez. The ban takes effect in mid-March to give fishing boats time to switch their equipment. Here's hoping it leads to improvement -- and more diver enjoyment -- of the Philippine reefs.

Undercurrent is the online consumer newsletter for sport divers that reviews scuba destinations and equipment. We accept no advertising, and have published monthly since 1975.

Letters to the Editor/Submissions
EditorBenD@undercurrent.org

Editorial Staff
Ben Davison, Publisher and Editor
Vanessa Richardson, Senior Editor
Dave Eagleray, Webmaster

Contact Us
Call: 415-289-0501
Go to: www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/contact.shtml
or write:

Undercurrent
3020 Bridgeway
Sausalito, CA 94965

undercurrent

November 2013 Vol. 28, No. 11

www.undercurrent.org