

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

February 2014

Vol. 29, No. 2

## Cabo Pulmo, Baja California, Mexico

*a fish-filled marine preserve for divers who like "rustic"*

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Dear Fellow Diver:

A southern wind was blowing steadily through Cabo Pulmo in late October, wreaking havoc on my dives. Of course, the wind, according to many locals, was "stronger than I've seen in a long time," and "it's not usually like this." On my first dive day, it was merely "breezy" when I backrolled over the side at El Bajo, a small reef north of Cabo Pulmo. I went down to 60 feet and had 80-foot visibility, so I forgot about the wind above. There were healthy hard and soft corals standing tall, and some of the usual Baja suspects -- Panamic porkfish, graybar grunts, Cortez rainbow wrasse, guineafowl puffers -- eyed me casually as they made their rounds. The highlight was at the end of the dive, one Cabo Pulmo is famous for. Big-eye jacks, thousands of them, whirled around in a massive school, with a steady line of more jacks moving in and out. Their silvery scales shimmered as they clustered together, 15 feet across and six feet high, hovering just above the sea floor.

But the awe wore off when I ascended into choppy waves. I had to wriggle onto the simple fisherman's panga, which had no ladder. It had three wooden platform seats across, with tanks, weights and fins placed randomly at the bottom. Divers were moved around the gear when Don Roberto, the captain, and Leonardo, the divemaster, needed to get to it. Leonardo always wanted my group of six to surface together. When we did, he pulled himself into



A Bungalow at Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort



the boat first, then took our weights and BCDs one at a time. Then each of us had to haul ourselves in, scissor-kicking our way over the side and making such an ungraceful landing that Don Roberto sometimes couldn't help but chuckle. But no one else was chuckling on that first dive. Vickie, a friendly retiree from Vancouver, was upset there was no ladder, because her husband, Laurie, had a fused ankle, which made it hard for him to climb in. "Believe me, you don't want a ladder in these waves," Leonardo said. Even though waves were only a relatively mellow three- to four-foot height, Leonardo, a thirtysomething Venezuelan who had come to Cabo Pulmo to perfect his underwater photography, was also their victim. The waves changed his angle of entry so

that he smashed his mask on the seat when he came into the boat; safety-glass shards went everywhere. As for me, I looked down to see steady bleeding from just below my kneecap. Seems I had caught the edge of a tank during my jump into the boat. David, a government worker from the San Francisco Bay Area who was my dive buddy for the day, handed me a rag to clean up the blood. "Some pretty rustic diving," he said.

Indeed. Cabo Pulmo is just 60 miles east of Cabo San Lucas, but the East Cape is a world away from the bustle of resorts and cruise ships on the Pacific side. My hour-long drive up Highway 1 from the airport and the supermarket (it's wise to stock up in San Jose del Cabo, as groceries are few and costly in Cabo Pulmo) took me to a six-mile stretch of gravel road that hugged the hilly, cactus-covered coast of the Sea of Cortez. I passed a cow here, a farmer there, some isolated concrete houses and thatched-roof casitas. After 30 minutes, I reached Cabo Pulmo, composed of a few homes, three dive shops and six restaurants, all on a dirt road leading to the beach where dive boats are loaded onto pickup trucks and backed into the sea for launch. Everything runs on solar powers and generators, and the town just got its first cell tower. If you like vacationing in "the middle of nowhere," this is it, but it is a beautiful nowhere.

Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park is the gem. Fishing has taken its toll in the Sea of Cortez, but locals established the park in 1995, banning all fishing inside its borders, and marine life has bounced back. A 2011 study by the Scripps Institution of Oceanography found Cabo Pulmo's biomass (total weight of living species) increased by 463 percent from 1999 to 2009. One of the researchers was quoted saying, "No other marine reserve in the world has shown such a fish recovery." Throngs of sharks, stingrays and huge groupers have been photographed repeatedly here. That was all threatened by the proposal of a mega-resort to be built just outside Cabo Pulmo, but Felipe Calderon wisely nixed the development in 2012 as one of his last actions as president of Mexico. A local told me Calderon has been to Cabo Pulmo a couple of times, , bodyguards in tow, because he loves the place. I can see why.

Based on a previous trip to Baja, I knew October and November were the best months for visibility and water temperatures. I booked lodging at Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort, the largest lodging in the area and featured in the last article Undercurrent did on Cabo Pulmo (in March 2008). In retrospect, I wish I had done more research on the area's private houses and smaller lodgings, but it was too late -- I had already sent the 50-percent deposit required upfront, and I was booking during high season. The resort consists of 30 rooms and cottages of various sizes, laid out on sand-packed streets. My bungalow was in the middle of one street, and it felt like suburbia. Many bungalows had frequent return guests or were owned by part- or full-time U.S. expats. The only place available for my stay was a Deluxe Bungalow, a spacious room

with a vaulted thatched roof and a queen bed draped with mosquito netting. The full kitchen in the corner had everything but a wine opener. The tiled bathroom had a large shower and plenty of hot water. The L-shaped sofa was comfortable for afternoon reading and naps, but a good backup was a hammock on the tiled front patio, surrounded by shrubbed walls for privacy from the bungalows on either side. The resort says its tap water comes from a well and is safe to drink, but I had already bought bottled water at the supermarket, so I stuck with that.

I'm a single woman, but I have no qualms about going solo to Baja California. My first trip, to Loreto (read my travel report in the February 2013 issue), went without a hitch. Same in Cabo Pulmo -- no threats or harassment, everyone was nice and I felt totally safe. Because tourism is Baja California's top source of income, they'll do everything they can to keep it stable, from widening the highways to including English on all menus. And based on the number of sunburned English speakers, and the number of "For Sale" home listings piquing their interest, I am not alone in enjoying this area.

Online reviews were lukewarm on Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort's dive shop, but glowing about Cabo Pulmo Watersports and its owner Ricardo Castro. (Cabo Pulmo Divers, just down the road, is owned by another batch of Castros -- they're all relatives of the original family who settled Cabo Pulmo in 1900 -- and also gets good reviews.) I checked into the dive shop, a concrete block a few steps from the resort, at 8:30 a.m., but it still took a half-hour to get to the beach every day because new divers needing rental gear showed up daily. Charming Ricardo (Don Ricardo, the boat driver, is his father) shows a shiny white smile, but I never got to dive with him, because he either took out the other boat of divers or took the day off. Chris, the office manager, is a friendly, blonde, 50-ish American who answered e-mails quickly. Once the boat was in the water, Don Ricardo told us where to sit for balance, while Leonardo set up the gear. They both helped divers into their BCDs, then on a count of three, we all backrolled in and waited on the surface so Leonardo could ensure we were OK before descending. Aluminum 80s (no Nitrox) were filled to 3,000 psi, but our dives only averaged 45 minutes -- Leonardo said that was a marine park rule. I was skeptical, not having read that on any dive shop's website. However, when I looked online, I saw a 2011 report from underwater photographer and Undercurrent subscriber Mike Boom that there was a policy among the different dive operations that no boat can remain on a site longer than 45 minutes; however, one dive guide told him that it was a Mexican national park policy, while a manager told him it was an agreement among dive operations.

## **Chikungunya-Carrying Mosquitoes in the Caribbean**

What began with just 10 confirmed cases of the chikungunya virus on the French side of St. Martin last month has quickly spiraled into a much larger outbreak, with nearly 300 confirmed cases spanning the Caribbean, from Martinique to the British Virgin Islands. Symptoms of chikungunya include fever, joint and muscle pain, headache and rash -- all of which last for about a week, and begin between four and seven days after the bite of an infected mosquito. In rare cases, some patients experience long-term joint pain.

With more than 200 "probable or confirmed cases," St. Martin remains the epicenter of the outbreak, though there have been cases on Dominica, Martinique, Saint Barts, and Guadeloupe. Affected St. Martin residents had not traveled abroad recently, suggesting that the chikungunya virus was present in island populations of mosquitoes, and being spread locally.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) noted that while there is no vaccine and no specific treatment for the infection, chikungunya is rarely fatal. It is similar to the more common dengue virus, which has historically been a much bigger problem in the Caribbean. CDC advises anyone returning from the Caribbean with the symptoms above to seek immediate medical assistance.

*-- from an article by Mark Johansen, International Business Times*

## Cabo Pulmo, Baja California

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

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

For surface intervals, we returned to the beach for tank exchanges. After the choppy ride at El Bajo, we went back to the same area to dive El Vencedor. The hull of an ancient tuna boat is still there, with pieces scattered around the sand at 40 feet. Visibility had gone down to 45 feet, but two giant schools of burrito grunts welcomed us as we ascended. Huge groupers and bumphead parrotfish cruised through the schools. Two moray eels swam by, and a Cortez stingray buried in the sand flapped off so quickly that I jumped. Lots of rainbow wrasse and Panamic soldierfish hovered around the small reef, and Laurie found what looked to be an enormous leopard grouper lurking under the hull, glowing orange in his dive light. When I sur-

faced, the waves had risen to about six feet. The water was 82 degrees, so I only wore a shortie, but the wind made it feel colder. As I waited my turn to get into the boat, I retched (bottled water only, luckily) because of the constant rolling. The others also had green-tinged faces as they struggled to jump in. Tripping over tanks and BCDs on the boat bottom didn't help. We got back to shore at 1:30 p.m., and the wind and clouds only increased.

I chose Los Caballeros for dinner, because it had an overhead TV in its thatched-roof bar and dining room, and the World Series was playing, albeit on ESPN Desportes. Octavio, the gracious manager, served up two margaritas topped with Cointreau, and a large batch of chips, salsa and superb guacamole for \$18 total. Everything from tacos to steak were on the menu, and the Mexican breakfasts were hearty. Los Caballeros became my haunt, but other restaurants that looked good were Nancy's, a lovely outdoor restaurant run by an 80-year-old American La Palapa, with inexpensive tacos and beer right on the beach, and Alicia's, which got raves for its chile rellenos. Alicia also offers two lovely casitas -- with private patio, hammock, tiled kitchen and walk-in shower -- priced at just \$50 and \$60 per day if you rent from her directly (Cabo Pulmo Watersports offers them as part of its diving/lodging packages but charges \$75 and \$100, respectively); however, Alicia only books them by phone and she only speaks Spanish. There were a few "For Sale" signs in town -- a beachfront compound with two separate houses was asking \$1.2 million, or just the smaller house for \$400,000. So much for inexpensive Mexico.

I dove again with Vickie and Laurie the next day. Leonardo said that because of wind and currents, we were going to repeat yesterday's dives. Vickie and I looked at each other but stayed silent. Don Ricardo, however, saw our look and said something to Leonardo in Spanish that included the words "repeat" and "dives." So Leonardo changed course to head south to the small wall of El Cantil and El Islote, a pinnacle. At the latter, we dropped to 40 feet and circled the pinnacle twice. Dozens of butterflyfish, damsels and surgeonfish were feeding on the current side. I wasn't knocked out by marine life that day, and Leonardo must have read my mind. On the way back, he pointed to a curve of the bay where masses of sharks spawn in shallow water between February and May, so many that divers can't help but bump into them. "That's the best diving here," he said.

The wind was blowing at 15 m.p.h. on my third day, but I went to the dive shop anyway. Then Don Ricardo walked in and announced the marine park was closed and no dive boats were going out. But when I ran into Nancy, the restaurant owner, later, she said, "The park is never closed. Maybe the marinas close the harbors, but the park does not." I noticed later that Cabo Pulmo

Resort was sending out two boats (they had ladders). So I got bullshit from the dive shop a second time, although I was glad not to deal with that wind. I drove south 10 minutes on the gravel road to Los Frailes, a perfect half-moon of a bay, and one of the most beautiful -- and isolated -- beaches I've seen in my extensive travels. On one end were some vacation homes and an abandoned hotel, on the other end was a string of umbrella-like palapa stands. In between was a fisherman's camp, parked right at the edge of the marine reserve's southern border. The beach was protected from wind so I snorkeled along the northern curve of the bay and saw dozens of hawkfish, two big clusters of bluechin parrotfish and two small eagle rays darting into the blue.

Around that curve is a sea lion colony, and I dived there the next day. Bebo, a friendly fisherman, took the captain's chair. We circled around El Cantil twice again, and then at the mouth of Los Frailes, we approached 10 sea lions sleeping on the rocks. At 25 feet depth, the waves acted like a rocking chair, swinging us back and forth, as a couple of female sea lions came and swam around us for a while. Then we finned around the point, back to the area where I snorkeled, through schooling surgeon, butterfly and angelfish. Small juveniles nibbled at my legs, then darted away when I turned.

The wind died down overnight, but it was followed by billowy gray clouds threatening to drop rain. I was heading over to the Pacific side that day, so I went to the dive shop to settle up my bill. On the way there, I met Leonardo walking back from the beach. "Do you want to see the bull sharks?" he asked. "Someone saw six of them at El Vencedor yesterday." I was ready to suit up but before I could form the word "yes," a raindrop landed on the sand, followed by a few more. "Never mind," Leonardo said. "Don Ricardo won't let us go if it rains." There may have been a threat of lightning -- I didn't ask at the time, but I later saw it and heard thunder on my drive back west.

I like big marine life and I enjoy rustic vacations in the middle of nowhere, so I'll be coming back, most likely in the spring when whales and sharks are more commonly seen, and using my fractured Spanish to book a casita with Alicia. Otherwise, diving here is sufficient for a day or two, with the best opportunities for seeing some big schools of fish. However, if you prefer big ladders and assistance to get in and out of the boat, beware. And while Cabo Pulmo Watersports was very respectful of the marine life, this 45-minute-dive limit, no matter who came up with it, means a minimal dive experience, especially for the price charged. Diving in Cabo Pulmo is rustic, like it was many years ago in the Sea of Cortez, when the author of the next story was there.

-- J.V.

**P.S.** While I said I didn't worry about my physical safety, I now know to put extra security around my debit and credit cards on future trips to Mexico. The only place I used my credit card was at the Hertz car rental and the Soriana supermarket near the airport. It ended up being used in an attempt to buy a laptop and electronics at the Best Buy in Laredo, TX. Luckily, my bank (USAA) was on it -- it said someone stole the info off my magnetic stripe. So let your bank know when you're traveling so it can be on the lookout for fraud.



**Divers Compass:** I stopped at San Jose del Cabo for groceries at Supermercado Solario, maybe a mile from the airport, because stores are fewer and costlier between there and Cabo Pulmo . . . My Hertz economy car cost me \$50 a day, and the off-pave-ment roads didn't do anything but cover it in dust and sand . . . Try to bring lots of small change and cash, as there are no ATMs here; the resort charged me three percent extra on my debit card for paying the balance . . . High-season rates at Cabo Pulmo Dive Resort are \$79 for an Eco Bungalow, \$129 for a deluxe bungalow, and \$229 for a beach house; its two-tank dives are \$75; Cabo

Pulmo Watersports charged me \$95 for a two-tank dive, and it does do a third dive, weather permitting; it also offers dive packages with lodging in individual palapas if you don't feel like staying in the town's big resort . . . The marine park fee is \$5 per day . . . Websites: Cabo Pulmo Dive Resort - [www.cabopulmo.com](http://www.cabopulmo.com); Cabo Pulmo Watersports - [www.cabopulmowatersports.com](http://www.cabopulmowatersports.com)

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## Santa Marta, Colombia

*the colonial town is more scenic than the diving*

Dear Fellow Diver:

Back in the good old days, whenever the weekend weather forecast was favorable, four of us loaded our dive gear into my single-engine Cessna Turbo 210 and we'd fly to San Carlos, Mexico, Baja's Punta San Francisquito, or sometimes as far south as Loreto. We'd rent a panga and off we would go: no divemaster, no ladder and no first aid. If I told you that in those days, we were taught to follow our bubbles to the surface, and during our surface time we would down a few beers, would I be dating myself? Dive rules have certainly changed, but what has this got to do with diving in Colombia?

My December trip offered 21st Century basic diving, but with today's rules, at a destination prized by Colombians but unknown to Americans. Santa Marta is a quaint town, located on Colombia's southern Caribbean coast. While it is no place for divers in search of exotic creatures, it brought back fond memories of laid-back diving in the Sea of Cortez, with its multiple boulders blended with patches of soft and hard coral. While I saw no dramatic sea life, there were small schools of batfish, barracuda and squid -- and, unfortunately, an occasional small lionfish, apparently just getting a "fin-hold" there.

Several hours after arriving at my hotel, Diego Ávila, owner of Quimera Divers, arrived to meet with us. He shared his marine conservation philosophy with us, took our dive gear, and said he would send a taxi (\$5 each way) to pick us up at 7:45 a.m. the next morning. Though there are no other operations in Santa Marta, 13 shops in nearby Tayrona National Park, where we did most of our diving, carried scores of divers there daily. Santa Marta's ultra-modern marina is closely guarded with a swinging gate and armed guards. The boat run to the park was 20 minutes (we were required to wear life jackets to and from the marina). Sleek looking, the 25-foot, high-sided fiberglass speed boat with two 95-hp engines had benches on both sides, 20 tank holders in the center and a partial canopy. Diego, who speaks English well, takes no more than four divers, but even that would be a crowd. He offered two morning dives (\$95 per person); afternoon must be siesta time.

At Calichan Isla Aguja, the sandy bottom was surrounded by a fringing reef. During this Colombian version of a muck dive, I spotted a small frogfish, a red-lipped batfish and a "red robin," or small red flying gurnard, not to mention beautiful flamingo tongues, snake and tiger eels, lobsters, sergeant majors, batfish (you don't see these all the time), filefish, arrow crabs, lobster, a seahorse and other Caribbean characters. At El Cantil de Granate, we descended down a 60-foot healthy wall, where I watched a school of sardines in a swim-through so small, my tank banged the ceiling. On one dive, I watched Anhini dig into the sand. Up popped



Quimera Divers' Boat



a snake eel, which slithered to another spot where he buried himself, tail first. After the dives, I would take off my gear in the water and climb the narrow ladder. Diego and Anhini, both in their 20s or early 30s, kicked up and over the six-foot side.

Granate is Tayrona National Park's first bay, which is protected from the winter's northwesterly trade winds. We had at least 50 feet of visibility in the 77-degree water. Between dives, we went to a beach and climbed to the ramada of a private home to relax. Diego brought homemade cookies and mangoes. He showed me how to squeeze the mango to soften it, then bite off the tip to suck out the sweet pulp and juice. He brought water in handy six-

ounce plastic bags.

Truth is, I was perhaps more attracted to the charming town of Santa Marta than I was to the diving. A couple of decades ago, it was infamous for its fields of "Colombia Gold," the finest marijuana, but Mexico is now home of the drug cartels, and Colombia's guerrillas are no longer an issue. So backpackers arrived, now tourists are trickling in and Colombia is becoming a hot new destination, especially for foodies.

I stayed at Casa Verde, a fine old 1920s colonial mansion, with six rooms and a tropical shaded courtyard where guests can lounge on hammocks or take a dip in a small plunge pool. Located in Santa Marta's historical district, it's close to excellent restaurants, nightlife, parks, cathedrals, and the Caribbean is within walking distance. My second-floor room was simple, with a view of the cathedral, which only chimed on Sunday, but then for most of that day. A colorful hammock hung on my wraparound balcony. The pebble-tiled bathroom had a large walk-in shower with low-pressure hot water. The AC was either too warm or cold. No matter. The staff was friendly and the price was right (\$125 a night for two, with breakfast). The front door, like other street-side inns, was barred with a tastefully decorated, wrought-iron gate that remained locked with a padlocked chain, but I never felt unsafe anywhere we walked. Santa Marta doesn't have a level step on any of its rundown streets, yet the architecture and warmth of the residents make it charming. Many restaurants surround Plaza de los Novios (Lovers), serving primarily fish (robalo, or snook, was popular), seafood and beef, all excellently prepared. My favorite dish was ajiaco, a soup brimming with shredded chicken, corn on the cob, golden

## Travel Reviews Coming Up in *Undercurrent*

Since our inception, we have sought out unknown destinations too small to advertise, as well as the tried and true. As you know, our travel writers never announce themselves, they pay their own way and don't disclose the purpose of the trip. We have a very loyal core of well-traveled divers writing for us, and we appreciate their dedication to anonymity and the truth.

Coming up this year are reviews on a relatively new spot in Fiji, a land-based resort in Raja Ampat, perhaps the most-loved dive resort in the Caribbean, manatee diving in Florida, two different takes on Cozumel, liveaboards in Costa Rica, Indonesia, the Philippines, the Caribbean, the Red Sea, and much, much more.

Thanks to subscribers like you, we're able to continue to provide our objective and opinionated reporting - free of the influence of advertisers.

-- Ben Davison

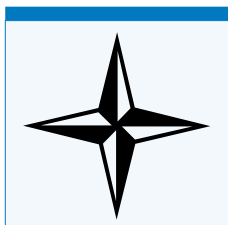
and red potatoes, with capers, heavy cream and avocado to mix in. While someone at each hotel speaks English, you'll be pointing your finger at the menus if you don't know a little Spanish.

To summarize the diving, most of the terrain appeared similar, though on different dives we might do a wall, swim-through or bottom dive. While there was the Caribbean variety of fish and critters, none was in great abundance and there were no surprises. The one unique dive was on a small cargo ship intentionally sunk at 100 feet and protruding 30 feet above the surface. Safety-conscience Diego ran a line to the ship's bow and also hung a tank at 15 feet. Descending at 7 a.m., there was no current. While the boat has no defining features, coral is just beginning to cover it, and it was teeming with schools of small grunts.

While I was exploring with Diego, my spouse flooded his mask on his first dive. He panicked, lost his regulator, and started to bolt to the surface. Anhini was on him in a flash, put his regulator back in his mouth, and took him gradually to the surface. After that, he snorkeled, and stopped giving me grief for lugging my own dive gear.

I admit to being a spoiled diver, with plenty of logged dives in the Indo-Pacific. Yet I enjoyed every minute of this very basic diving with Quimera Divers. It was not easy to book this trip, and my ability to speak Spanish was very helpful. Using a travel agent would be much easier.

-- N.M.



**Diver's Compass:** Getting to Santa Maria requires a plane change in Bogata, and both Copa and Avianca, code share airlines with United, fly the 90-minute leg there; we also flew to Cartagena, which was jammed with cruise ship passengers . . . Unless you are eager to see Simon Bolivar's resting place, visit the coffee-growing village of Minca or go trekking in the mountains, there is nothing to do in Santa Marta but merge into the culture . . . Crazy northwesterly trade winds whip down the Sierra Nevadas from December to mid-February . . . Ironically, Diego asked us to bring medical permission from our physicians but never looked at our certification cards . . . The closest hyperbaric chamber is on San Andrés Island, requiring an air flight . . . I used pesos rather than credit cards, and stopped frequently at ATMs . . . Websites: Quimera Divers -- [www.quimeradivers.com](http://www.quimeradivers.com); Casa Verde - [www.casaverdesantamarta.com](http://www.casaverdesantamarta.com)

## Santa Maria, Colombia

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

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

## Dive Trip Party Poopers

*those include holidays, cold water, smokers and karaoke*

Have smoking crew members or unexpectedly frigid water put a damper on your diving? Have you ever been restless all night and worried about making the morning dive because a bunch of jerks are having a party in the courtyard? And then did you get up early, only to find that it was St. Jack's Day of Ascension and there would be no diving? Read on.



## No Diving Today, Because It's a Holiday. Or a Sunday.

If you're at a resort, you may be surprised when your expected six days of diving gets cut to five because it's an unexpected national holiday, or an obvious one, like Christmas, or even a local election. No one works and you're out of luck, unless you can drum up shore diving. Oops, should have done better pre-trip research.

On some South Pacific islands, the Seventh Day Adventists have shut down all activity on Sunday. At the Nautilus Resort in Kosrae, Micronesia, Holly Bent (Kaawa, HI) found out that every Sunday is a day of rest, and that means no diving.

She and her partner rented a car and "we did find the Seventh Day Adventist village, which did have some activity going on."

*"When I asked the trip leader to work something out with the smokers, he asked why, and then he suggested I do it myself!"*

Years back, I missed a dive on New Year's Day in Honduras because the dive guide, who also drove the boat, was still celebrating New Year's Eve and too hung over to go out. Diving is more professional these days, though I have on occasion noticed a few young bleary-eyed bucks trying to slip a BCD on a tank. But never, of course, a Cayman cowboy, as they have been called.

## Cold Tropical Water

I remember showing up at Small Hope Bay Lodge in the Bahamas one February with a very thin wetsuit, and nearly freezing on my first dive. I had not done my research, and the water was in the low 70s. But that's what one must expect in a Bahamas' winter. And there are plenty of other tropical destinations where a thick wetsuit is in order, especially if you're an aging diver.

Frederick R. Turoff (Philadelphia, PA), diving in Indonesia's Banda Sea last May, writes that the water varied from 73 to 85 degrees. "Once we got underway, we did one dive at the southwestern end of Ambon Harbor, with water at 84 degrees. I was comfortable in my 3mm suit with hood. Heading to Alor, the water got much colder, 73 degrees, so I had to rent a second 3mm suit to wear over mine, which made me just barely comfortable (I'm a thin guy). The next day at South Pantar, the water remained cold, but we [eventually] returned to 84-degree water." Michael J. Millet (Dublin, CA) took an October trip on the Komodo Dancer and writes, "The water temperatures in the southern reefs of Komodo and Rinca really drop off. It is definitely time for a 5mm with a hood." Undercurrent contributor Bret Gilliam told me that he has been in mid-60s water on some Indonesian trips.

And you can get that mid-60s water at Cocos Island, even lower in the Galapagos. Randy Preissig (San Antonio, TX) says, "This is fantastic diving, but it is very cold -- as low as 59 degrees on some dives and never above the low 70s. Bring a 7mm suit with thick boots and gloves, and a thick hood or hooded vest. The 'cold water season' is June through January, with October and November being the coldest. You will see the most pelagics in the coldest water, but this can mean diving in 50- and 60-degree water. You will see the most whale sharks in October and November, but the water is not only frigid but rough. February through April are 'warmer' water, but the big stuff is much less seen."

Hawaii surprises many people. Kira Bacerdo (New York, NY), aboard the Kona Aggressor in June, says, "Leave your wetsuit home. Rent their heavy 5-mm full wetsuits. It can get chilly, especially if you have a long dive profile and go on two-tank dives." Fiji, too, can surprise; My buddy met me there one October, but brought no wetsuit. He had to have one flown in from Nadi.

## Smokers

You need good lungs to dive, especially if you're faced with tough currents or long surface swims, so smokers clearly have a disadvantage diving. Most American nonsmokers are intolerant of secondhand smoke, which puts them at a disadvantage on liveaboards or at resorts that cater to countries like Germany

and Italy that still harbor a lot of smokers. Then there is always that Third World crew that lights up because the boat has no policy or no one enforces it. It's a bitch.

Mary Marshall (San Diego, CA), aboard the *Orion* in the Maldives, said, "We thought the boat was supposed to be smoke-free. One passenger was a heavy smoker and always lit up right before a dive. More than once, I opened the door into the boarding area and inhaled a lungful of smoke. One dive guide also lit up pre-dive. Smoke makes my sinuses clog -- not what you want while diving."

## What SSI's Sale Means to Divers

On December 11, the Italian dive gear manufacturer Mares issued a press release that it was about to acquire the Colorado-based training agency Scuba Schools International (SSI). Actually, Mares is owned by Head, the sporting gear behemoth, which apparently saw a great crossover relationship between its dive gear subsidiary and a dive training agency.

The press release states, "SSI will continue to focus on its current business model. Mares will continue to build high-quality diving equipment . . . SSI will continue to work with all major manufacturers and Mares will maintain relationships with all training agencies. There is no obligation for an SSI dealer to do business with MARES or vice versus . . . Bringing these two companies together represents a huge paradigm shift for the diving industry, and a tremendous growth opportunity."

What kind of paradigm shift does this mean for sport divers? Turns out this type of partnership is nothing new, according to Bret Gilliam, who has, among many hats worn, been a CEO for a dive gear maker (Uwatec) and created dive training agencies from scratch (SDI and TDI). Here are his thoughts on the sale.

"Several training agencies have had historical 'allies' relationships with manufacturers. John Cronin co-founded PADI while he was working for U.S. Divers. PADI didn't get any viable market share until 1975, but Cronin was wise not to let his role at U.S. Divers become a lever to influence dealers. But he had that card in his pocket and used it when he could. Meanwhile, by 1970, Dick Bonin at Scubapro was getting fed up with the bad attitude of NAUI (then the predominant agency in the U.S.) and decided that John Gaffney's NASDS was a perfect match for his dealers. NAUI had an openly-stated policy that their instructors should not be 'ethically challenged' by selling dive equipment. I know, this sounds naive, but it was true. But NAUI was influenced by "weekend warriors" who did training as a hobby, and they were alienating the dive stores.

"I had been a Scubapro franchise dealer for two years when in 1973 Dick Bonin urged me to attend an NASDS instructor program. Afterwards, I told Dick that I (and my staff) would remain with the NAUI training system; he never pushed it. PADI's emergence in 1975 was due in part to its offering stores excellent materials and no-cost instructor crossovers to win most of us over. By 1977, PADI had caught up with NAUI, then left them in the dust to become the dominant agency.

"Fast forward to 1990 . . . I was elected to NAUI's Board of Directors. They still had a bad attitude about how to cooperate with retailers, and I tried to change that when I became Chairman in 1994. Even though we completely redid all the training materials, including new texts, videos and the first computer-based interactive training, the NAUI mentality was still rooted in independent instructors and university-based programs. It was a bad business model. I moved on to found TDI, and followed that three years later with SDI. When I became CEO of Uwatec in 1996, I found that SDI/TDI agencies were the perfect match for the Uwatec dealers, especially since the biggest industry growth was coming from nitrox, dive computers and technical diving. It worked well. We actively got TDI/SDI dealers into Uwatec and vice versa, which proved to a perfect symbiotic match. Both companies benefited from each other.

"I resigned from NAUI's Board in 1997 to concentrate on TDI/SDI. Unfortunately, NAUI later went into a nose dive. NASDS got down to about 20 dive stores and was absorbed into SSI, leaving PADI, SSI and TDI/SDI as the big three.

"The SSI sale to Mares makes sense because SSI has suffered badly in the last few years and needs an infusion of funds. Mares will use it as a supplemental 'product,' but there will be some 'strike back' from Mares dealers who will resist any attempt to force SSI on them unless they want to go that way. The diving industry is in dramatic decline, and only the strong and well-financed agencies will survive."

One would expect the leaders on the boat to manage smokers, but Elliott Zalta (Greenbrae, CA) had a trip leader flip the problem right back to him. When aboard a boat run by Sipalay Easy Diving and Beach Resort in the Philippines, he says, “There were several Europeans who smoked cigarettes often. When I asked the trip leader to work something out with the smokers, he asked why, and then he suggested I do it myself! That alone made me not want to leave a tip, but that would have punished the other crew who worked very hard and were very friendly.”

Walter Brenner (Jackson, GA), also diving in the Philippines, complained by letter to the president of Worldwide Sail & Dive, who responded by “trying to pass on the smoking issue as something for the ship’s ‘tour guide’ to handle. I quickly set him straight that it was an administration problem, and [the trip leader] did her best without a clearly defined smoking policy. He should not pass the buck, but issue specific rules that covered the guests and crew!” “

So what does one do when smokers are blowing you out? In the first place, get the policy in writing before you go, if possible, and bring a copy with you. Try to patiently reason with whatever leadership is available. Presumably, the captain is the ultimate arbitrator in fleets like the Aggressor, but it’s often the representative of the company that brought the divers aboard. Be reasonable, but recognize that it may be impossible for the leadership to work things out with smokers who paid good money to come aboard, believing that they had smoker’s rights.

And keep in mind there may be other surprises for nonsmokers, like in local restaurants. Carl Mintz (Washington, D.C.) notes, “Bonaire is part of the Netherlands, and Europeans still smoke a lot. Restaurants there have no rules about smoking, and there are no non-smoking sections. It is disconcerting to go out for a fine dinner, only to have it spoiled by being seated next to folks who smoke throughout dinner.”

### **Bring Earplugs or, Better Yet, Noise-Cancelling Headphones**

Susan Titus (Herndon, VA) was at Castle Comfort in Dominica last October, and writes “Bring earplugs. Two nights a week, a fairly new local club goes very late and very loud.” I wrote not long ago about karaoke going into the wee hours at Little Cayman Beach Resort. I was awake way every night way past midnight at Young Island in St. Vincent years ago because of party time across the water.

Once upon a time, I relied on earplugs to drown out night noises, but a few years ago, in a second-floor room in New York City, the roaring streets drove me nuts. Then I pulled out my Bose noise-cancelling headphones and slept the night away. They’re neither easy to sleep in nor perfect at silencing sound, but I’ve used them many times since to overcome city traffic, chatter in the next room, or even the distant beat of a bass guitar.

More comments, complaints, advice, etc., to come next month . . .

-- Ben Davison

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## **DEMA Trade Show Follow-up**

### *the latest innovations in rebreathers*

While some sport divers, especially photographers, have switched from open-circuit scuba to rebreathers, their bulk and complexity make them a difficult choice for most traveling divers. They are not the sort of devices one can rent wherever one goes, so the travel hassle alone makes them unpractical for many.

That said, rebreather displays are still a significant element of the DEMA show, and the star of the show had to be the Poseidon Se7en. While not replacing the Poseidon Discovery MkVI, which continues on, this next-generation, closed-circuit rebreather (CCR) from the Swedish manufacturer looks more highly



**Poseidon Se7en**

finished than its predecessor, with its works now enclosed in a smart casing with a carrying handle and lighting rails. That's just the icing on this cake.

Its new electronics, with entirely new firmware, is claimed to make the Se7en faster to set up, more flexible and more reliable. It can be configured as a limited recreational rebreather to 130 feet, or for deco diving to 130 feet, for trimix to 160 feet, for technical diving to 200 feet deep or even as a fully fledged 325-foot depth-limited CCR, simply by installing the appropriate color-coded battery, each with its own in-built electronics. Dive logs can be downloaded in seconds or settings updated as quickly, thanks to Bluetooth connectivity. Bluetooth also allows for faster and more convenient use of Poseidon's technical support. and detachable displays and sensors.

The mouthpiece that allows instant switching from CCR to OC has been upgraded, and the heads-up display features a green continuous function light, added to the red warning light familiar to those diving the MkVI. The Se7en can be combined with either a wing or standard style BC, and the technical counter-lungs have manual O2 and diluent addition valves.

I caught Bill Stone, the famous Florida cave explorer who originally came up with the concept for the Poseidon CCR, taking a coffee with equally famous deep diving ichthyologist Richard Pyle, who is known to be a proponent of the Poseidon. They both looked pretty pleased with themselves.

## Buddy Dive Shut Down in the Galapagos

We got a couple of e-mails from readers asking why their Galapagos dive trips aboard the Buddy Dive liveboards, *M.Y. Wolf Buddy* and *M.Y. Darwin Buddy*, were cancelled. Bob Speir (Falls Church, VA) wrote, "My wife and I had a May trip arranged on Buddy Dive out of San Cristobal. However, we just got notice from the travel agent at Caradonna that Buddy Dive has lost its permits there and may not get them back through April or later. Got any idea what has happened?"

Kayla Koeber (St. George, UT) had trips scheduled for mid-December but then got an e-mail from Buddy Dive that it was forced by the Galapagos National Park Service (GNPS) to stop operations for reasons unknown. "Our lawyers informed us that this action is illegal, but unfortunately, the Park has the power to stop any operation or ship at any time." The Park was going to have a hearing on December 11, and according to Buddy Dive's note, "We expect that our operations will be back to normal. As, of course, this is depending on their decision, we can't give any guarantees our ships will cruise."

Koeber got to go on her trip, but she was on the final voyage. On December 24, the GNPS suspended the operations of Buddy Dive liveboards in the marine

reserve for not having complied with the provisions of their operating license. In a press release, the GNPS stated that the operators had not submitted semiannual reports on their performance regarding GNPS's environmental management plan, they had not presented environmental compliance audits, and they had not paid a required annual fee to the park.

When we inquired with Paul Coolen, Buddy Dive's general manager in Bonaire, he blamed the Park for yo-yo decisions about his company, and his frustration was obvious. "It seems that our efforts so far are not leading to a permanent solution. First they suspend us, the week after, they let us operate and the week after that, they suspend us again? It's very strange . . . and our clients are suffering from this decision."

Then on January 29, Buddy Dive officially announced it was shutting down operations in the Galapagos. Coolen told us he couldn't give the reasons why at the present time.

There are still three Galapagos liveboards – the *Galapagos Sky*, *Humboldt Explorer* and the *Galapagos Aggressor* – but now the number of slots for divers every week has gone down from 112 to 48. That means if you want to dive the Galapagos, the earliest you'll get the chance isn't until 2016.

APD revealed a simple device that allows the Inspiration or Evolution user to validate the cells at 1.3 bar pressure in a unit. It has been introduced in the hope of avoiding any further unfortunate accidents in which people were tempted to dive with O2 sensing cells that were too old or otherwise not up to the job.

Of course, all the other established rebreather companies exhibited, including Inner Space Systems, KISS, JJ, and Hollis, with its semi-closed Explorer Sport and fully-closed Prism2. The Explorer Sport now has a vibrating warning device should the visual alarm not be responded to.

Many CCR manufacturers employ a Shearwater computer, such as the Petrel. Now, the complete computer information, notably more legible with both the Petrel and its predecessor, the Predator, is available as a true head-up display that for any diver with two good eyes appears transposed on the surrounding scene. Thanks to the optics employed, there is no need to refocus on a close-up image. Your eyes see the image as it would on a 32-inch television screen 15 feet distant. The display is unobtrusive, disappearing from view when you look past it.

Although the display part is obviously designed to fit on the breathing hose of a CCR close to the mouthpiece, it is available to conventional open-circuit divers too, and removes a lot of task-loading on difficult dives. The main electronics mount out of the way, behind the diver's head. I wasn't taken by the name though -- it's called the Shearwater NERD. It's expected to sell for \$2,500. Again, this electronic marvel is Bluetooth-enabled, Shearwater desktop software is available for both PC and Mac, and a VPM algorithm is offered as an option.

PS: I got invited to the product launch of the Nikon 1 Awi, billed as "the first truly underwater interchangeable-lens compact digital camera that can operate down to 49 feet." Priced at \$800 and with 11-27.5mm f/3.5-5.6 lens, I thought this would be a digital Nikonos but alas, it is really an all-weather action sports camera that lacks a really wide-angle lens and has a depth-restriction of 49 feet. It is not really applicable to diving. A great disappointment.

*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 most recently the author of Amazing Diving Stories, available at [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)*

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## Divers Who Get Lost at Sea

*some tales are "non-stories," others are good warnings*

The couple most famous for disappearing on a dive is Tom and Eileen Lonergan, who were left behind on a Great Barrier Reef dive trip in 1998 when the crew failed to take an accurate headcount. They were never found, and their tale was memorialized in the box-office hit *Open Water* a decade ago, a film that was made because the writer/director, Chris Kentis, and his wife, producer Laura Lau, first read their story in *Undercurrent*. Since then, it's commonplace to see stories about divers left to drift at sea pop up in the media.

Take Jake and Lexa Mendenhall from Mesa, AZ, who celebrated their openwater certifications with a Thailand trip in November. The press was all over their story about how they surfaced from their second dive to find their boat gone (apparently, the captain had engine trouble and sped off to shore for a quick repair). Luckily, they were with two divemasters, who inflated a safety sausage that attracted a snorkeling boat. Back home, the Mendenhalls gave an interview to their local ABC news station. Lexa told how, exhausted and freezing, she climbed into the rescue boat and collapsed, splitting her chin open. "When we were bobbing, I knew there were sharks," she said. "I saw them all

around this reef, and here I am just bait on the top." Total time the couple estimates they spent "lost at sea" -- 30 to 45 minutes.

Then there are St. John and Claire Neilson, a British couple who went to San Pedro, Belize last spring for a Blue Hole day trip with Aqua Scuba. During the lunch break on Halfmoon Caye, they wandered off to see the red-footed boobies and returned to the dock 16 minutes late, only to see the boat disappearing into the distance. A ranger on the island put them on another dive boat, and when the Neilsons returned to San Pedro, they reported the incident to the authorities as well as to the media. Belize's Channel 5 News filmed them talking about how they were scared to be on the island alone, and how the owner of Aqua Scuba refused to give them an apology. "Whether you are late or not -- 10 minutes late or half an hour late -- you do not leave people behind," Claire said. "If we were in the water, it could have been a much worse scenario."

Claire is right. It could have been worse. But why on earth did the Neilsons and the Mendhalls merit such media coverage for their experiences -- anxiety-causing for sure, but not much more? They weren't in much jeopardy, especially the Neilsons, who were on dry land with a ranger to rescue them. Folks, these are non-stories.

However, these non-stories provide allow us to share some stories from *Undercurrent* readers who answered our request for their own bobbing-at-sea stories, their explanations for why it happened, and their advice for other divers on how not to end up drifting away into the open.

## The Strange Case of a Missing Diver in the Caymans

Even though 28 people searched for David Byles after he tragically disappeared during a Cayman dive on January 19, police stated that he was extremely unlikely to be found alive. Even though he was diving with a group, and his tank, BCD and an item of clothing were found at the dive site, no one has any idea what happened to him -- his body has not been found.

Byles, 57, of Pinehurst, NC, was diving with Sunset Divers at Barracuda Wall when he disappeared. He was last seen surfacing with his wife and swimming toward the boat, roughly 100 yards away. Keith Sahn, Sunset Divers' general manager, told the *Cayman Compass* that Byles had shown no signs of distress after reaching the surface. He said Byles' wife thought Byles had boarded the boat ahead of her, and only raised the alarm when she realized it wasn't the case.

When I read this, my journalistic senses started tingling. It's hard to imagine the guy pulling off his gear, given the dive boat wasn't that far away. He's in calm Cayman waters, and there were other divers in the water, especially his wife, so why wasn't he found? I'm reminded of a couple past *Undercurrent* stories about divers who staged a disappearance; one was found years later relaxing in the Maldives.

To get a level-headed opinion, I asked our Bret Gilliam, who has been hired as an expert witness in 269 diving lawsuits, for his view. Nothing strange about it, he says. "It sounds to me like a fairly typical inexperienced diver panicking on the surface. This manifests in initial stressors usually caused by getting splashed in the face while swimming, interruption of the breathing cycle, failure to inflate BCD, increased panic scenarios . . . then jettisoning gear and attempting to stay on the surface. Frequently, this triggers other idiosyncratic medical events, such as heart attack or stroke. Diver sinks and disappears. Such a scenario is consistent with the victim's age. More divers now die from heart-related incidents than any other single factor. It's an aging demographic, and one that does not have much physical conditioning. Diving is also promoted widely as something for everyone and as you know, the industry tends to influence relatively inexperienced divers to think they are 'advanced' or 'master' divers."

However, Gilliam, too, is surprised that Byles' body never showed up. "There is usually no problem in finding and retrieving it. Unless the body went over the dropoff wall, it would end up prostrate on the bottom. There is little current in that area, and the dive staff should have found him. The average customers for Cayman dive operators are not exactly Navy SEALs. None of this really surprises me except for no one being able to find the body."

So some mystery, at least, still remains . . .

## Play It Smart

Randall Rothenberg (New York City, NY) learned his lesson about getting separated from his group, but he came out fine because he stayed calm and trusted his instincts. During his final dive on a Cozumel trip, he made a giant stride entry, only to find his regulator freefloating. “The group was waiting for me, but I waved them on and returned to the boat. One of the crew gave my regulator a good whack, and it stopped free-flowing. He motioned for me to go back in, but I couldn’t see my team. ‘They will be for you beneath the boat,’ he said. Well, they weren’t. Everyone was from another group.” Since it was a drift dive, Rothenberg knew his boat would be gone if he surfaced. “I had no choice but to drift along the reef to the end, making sure to keep in proximity to other dive groups. After a 40-minute drift, I saw a group surfacing, and decided it would be smarter to surface rather than risk drifting to a place where there might not be any boats. So I ascended with this group, explained my predicament, and the divemaster said in a French accent, ‘Ah, I see your boat there!’ He radioed to them, and they picked me up. It wasn’t my boat, but it was from my resort.” Rothenberg said he learned some lessons for serious current diving. “First, don’t listen to the guy on the boat; don’t go in unless you are with your buddy or your group. Sacrifice the dive, not yourself. Second, when all else fails, keep others in sight, and prepare to depend on the kindness of strangers.”

*“Don’t listen to the guy on the boat; don’t go in unless you are with your buddy or your group. Sacrifice the dive, not yourself.”*

Years ago, Randy Shuman (Seattle, WA) took his family to the Galapagos for a land/dive trip and they all learned a lesson in staying calm. On that notable dive, they went with the boat owner to a rocky reef in open sea, with a few islands nearby. “We were taken there in an inflatable, driven by a young crew member. He was instructed to follow our bubbles and retrieve us at the end of the dive. Our goal was to find and photograph sharks in rock caves. After successfully doing so, we returned to the surface to find no inflatable in sight. We inflated an orange rescue sausage, blew whistles, and waited for 30 minutes. With still no boat in sight, we decided our best option was to swim to a nearby island, as we were slowly drifting away from it. After swimming for 30 minutes, we came ashore, and hauling our bulky camera gear, climbed to the top of the island. From the 65-foot height, we could spot the inflatable. He either saw us or heard our shouts and came to the island. My understanding is he was fired for not following our bubbles, but he was inexperienced, and the waves were significant. Having two crew members to follow the bubbles, a GPS on the inflatable and a loud signal horn for the divers might have helped. Also, the dive-capable VHF radios now available would have allowed us to contact the main vessel.”

## Consider Who You’re Diving With

If you’re diving in less-than-First-World locations, remember that some operations’ approach to safety may be lax, at best, and your fellow divers may be ill-prepared. Timothy Corwin (Southampton, NY) learned about that last year during a reef dive at Belize’s Ambergris Cay. “There were five divers and two divemasters, and the captain and first mate stayed on the boat. The dive ended too soon and we ascended, only to find the one- to two-foot chop was now three to five. The dive boat had lost sight of us in the rough conditions and was just a speck in the distance. The ill-prepared divemasters waved their arms and shot up streams of water with their regulators, trying to attract the boat, but the crew had no idea where we were. I was the only one in the group carrying a safety sausage (I never dive openwater without one). I calmly inflated it, held it up and waved it for maybe 30 seconds before the boat headed our way. The whole group applauded, and the divemasters promised to each invest in a sausage before their next trip out.”

Also in those less-than-First-World countries, be wary when your dive shop changes the boat for you: It may not be a dive boat with a competent captain. This happened to Douglas Peterson (Elk Grove,

IL) on his third day of diving at Costa Rica's Playa del Coco. "The shop had assigned my wife and me to a different boat than usual. The captain headed straight out into the Pacific for about 50 minutes, to an uninhabited island with no other dive boats to be seen. Drifting in large swells on the island's east side, Arnault, the divemaster, told the captain we would go either north or south, depending on the current once we got down. We dropped to 70 feet and the visibility was poor, but we saw Arnault and Mark, a new diver, turn north before we lost them in the haze. We kept the wall to our right and after 45 minutes, decided we should head up to find them. At the surface, we heard Arnault's screaming,

## The Shark-Riding Trend -- or Dumb Divers Looking Dumber

Apparently, there's a new trend in social media: videos of people having hands-on encounters with sharks. Within this trend, there's an increase in the number of videos showing people engaging in the practice of "shark riding," grabbing a shark by its dorsal fin and having it pull them through the water. Shark Riding has become so prevalent that the blog Shark Attack News recently added the tag "riding a shark" to its article keywords list.

So how did this trend start? According to Dawn Williams, founder of Shark Attack News, the early shark-riding videos were primarily released by conservationists who were trying to drive home the message that sharks are not mindless killers that continually roam the oceans seeking out humans for their next meal. One example is Ocean Ramsey, model, dive instructor and so-called "shark whisperer" whose video of her riding a 15-foot great white shark got a lot of viral attention ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=DEpTAlm6sw8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=DEpTAlm6sw8)).

"Whether you agree with their tactics, the sight of these petite women holding onto the dorsal fins of large apex predators, often two to three times their size, is absolutely extraordinary and thought-provoking," Williams wrote in an essay for the New Zealand news website Stuff. "These interactions are calculated. These conservationists have many years of experience dealing with sharks, and they have a level of comfort around sharks that most people do not. They did not engage in this activity without preparation, and they acknowledge that there are risks involved.

Perhaps. But some of these folks are the same conservationists who try to tell us not to touch animals in the wild. And now, ordinary folks are jumping onto sharks' backs. While in Bora Bora last fall, Grant Murdock filmed people swimming at the surface while several lemon sharks swim below. Then one man swims down and grabs a shark's dorsal fin. After riding it for several seconds, he then swings below the shark, gives it a bear hug and hangs on belly to belly. His head is precariously located just below the shark's mouth and he hangs on for several seconds before finally letting it go. On its part, the shark barely reacted to the swimmer hitching a ride, and keeps moving slowly through the water until its passenger let go.

When he posted his video on Facebook and YouTube, Murdock wrote that the sharks "were gentle and accepting of our advances. They didn't seem to mind at all that we were riding for free. It was as close to an out-of-body experience as I have ever felt." Most people did not agree, and some left one-word comments like "idiot," "deplorable," "crazy" and "dumb." Murdoch's video is no longer on YouTube.

We know divers like you know better. But for people like Murdock, shark riding is just fun and games -- until a shark bites back. Then it's bad news for everyone. "Since many of these interactions are videotaped, I'm guessing we'll have a new gruesome video making the rounds, and sharks will once again be vilified," Williams writes. "Either way, it's a dangerous game that will most certainly end badly for some unfortunate soul down the road."

New Age shark whisperers and their copycats remind me of an incident we wrote about in 2002, when Erich Ritter, who said he is a professor at Hofstra University and received his doctorate in behavioral ecology at the University of Zurich, told the press that he can keep sharks away by modifying his heart rate. He told the Florida newspaper *Sun Sentinel* that he had never so much as been even nipped by a shark, attributing that largely to his ability to understand sharks' body language. Not long after that, Ritter was in waist-deep water with four students at Walker's Cay in the Bahamas when a big lemon shark bit off a large portion of his left calf. "That was an accident waiting to happen," said University of Miami professor Samuel Gruber. "Erich takes certain chances based on what he thinks he knows about shark behavior, but there is no evidence to support his theories. He's more like a philosopher than a scientist."

To those who persist with their romantic notions about shark behavior, preferring to cotton to philosophers rather than scientists, we offer the words of Keats: "In the dull catalogue of common things, Philosophy will clip an angel's wings."



“Over here!” There was no boat. Our diving had taken us around the north point to the island’s west side, and the swells were crashing hard on the island’s jagged walls. We deployed our large safety floats and kicked regularly in the three-foot swells to stay within swimming distance of the sharp rocks, figuring that in a worse-case scenario we could risk getting onto them if dark came. We continued to hear Arnault screaming for the boat, but he and Mark disappeared from view quickly because they had no safety floats. After 30 minutes of kicking, we saw the little skiff rounding the north point. The captain saw our floats, and 10 minutes later, we were aboard. I pointed him out to the ocean, and we found Arnault and Mark 20 minutes later. Arnault started cussing out the captain in French-laced Spanish, but I suggested that he calm down and get in the boat first, and then he could share his feelings. It turns out the dive shop had overbooked that day and just hired a fishing boat to take the four of us out. The ‘captain’ had no idea how to follow diver bubbles, and had also fallen asleep.”

### The Right Stuff

Many readers wrote in to say what safety gear they’re never without on a dive. For Ken Walsh (San Diego, CA), it’s his regulator-driven horn and giant safety sausage. On a trip aboard the *Undersea Hunter* to Cocos years ago, two groups and two pangas dived Bajo Alcyone in moderate seas. Unbeknownst to Walsh’s group,

which descended first, a diver in the second group was swept away by the current, and his group’s panga went to retrieve him. “Thus we drifted from the site, and our panga was not there to follow our bubbles. When we surfaced from our drifting safety stop, it wasn’t waiting for us. The *Undersea Hunter* provided all divers with safety sausages, but these were nowhere near the length of mine. I also had my horn. We saw the panga motoring past more than once but not spotting us. After 30 minutes, we were recovered, and the driver said it was because he could hear my horn, which kept his search area bounded. He never spotted the provided shorter sausages, and it was my giant one that he finally saw.”

These days, you can go beyond just safety sausages, as does Rodney Wooten, who dives in his native North Carolina, where Atlantic waves and low visibility can get serious. “I dive with an ACR personal locator beacon in a depth-rated case. I carry a Nautilus Lifeline radio as well. I have never had to use either of them but I feel much better having them.”

Carrying a mirror makes sense to signal planes if there is an air rescue, and Ben Dugger (Pell City, AL) notes that use your mask to signal a boat or aircraft. “While wearing the mask, put the reflection of the sun on the tip of one finger. Then using the finger like the front sight of a rifle and keeping the reflection on the finger point, aim it at the rescuer. Then you can signal the international signal of distress -- dot, dot, dot, dash, dash, dash, dot, dot, dot spells out SOS in Morse code. The reason this distress was chosen was that it was easy to remember -- three dots, three dashes and three dots.”

Besides a safety sausage, David Haas (Stow, OH) carries “a sturdy lanyard with signal mirror, an indestructible storm whistle tucked into my pocket, a small LED flashlight that’ll burn 10 hours on one set of batteries, a knife, and a plain-Jane ‘J’ snorkel tucked behind my back-mounted BC. In the Galapagos, I deduced air horns were worthless unless you’re within 100 yards of the boat with no wind or waves. That’s when I went to the whistle.”

Haas also says that being healthy and fit is a key factor in staying alive in a lost-at-sea situation. “I’m not trying to sound cocky, but 99 percent of divers I see have way too much gear and would be better served gaining some fitness. Most couldn’t likely swim 400 yards, much less a mile. Terrible physical condition is a stress on the body most don’t acknowledge.” And when that stress involves being alone miles from shore, a well-conditioned body will last longer.

*“I dive with an ACR personal locator beacon and a Nautilus Lifeline radio. I’ve never had to use either of them, but I feel much better having them.”*

Or you can just take an example from Ron Wilson (Noblesville, IN) and give the dive crew a financial incentive to keep an eye on you when you're out of the boat. "I always introduce myself to the skipper and tell him the only way I will leave a tip is if I hear him say, 'Where in the hell is Wilson?' If he doesn't hear me reply, then he should take another headcount. So far, so good . . . and for those reasons, I don't mind giving the tip."

- - Vanessa Richardson

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# Lionfish: The Caribbean Endgame

## *thirty years and counting*

I'm sure you know by now that lionfish, which were introduced sometime in the 80s to the southern Atlantic and Caribbean (probably by aquarists who found the fish too big for their tanks), are an extraordinary threat to scores of native species throughout that region. At the Diving Equipment & Marketing Association's convention in November, Lad Akins, head of research nonprofit REEF, noted that lionfish in their natural habitat Indo-Pacific reach about 12 inches in length. But thanks to their prolific hunting in the new habitat they're invading, they are now reaching 20 inches in length, with a lifespan of eight to 10 years.

By tagging the fish, scientists have found that lionfish tend to hang out in one area; 90 percent of the tagged fish stuck around their environs. While that means spearfishers might keep a marine park fairly clear of them, large populations have been found at 200 feet, and a few have been found as deep as 1,000 feet. So spearfishing won't make a dent in their population, and because they are not inclined to take bait, line-fishing is of no help. There are at least 90,000 lionfish in Florida waters (the first sighting was in 1985), and because a female produces as many as two million fertilized eggs a year, we have a Malthusian nightmare.

Divers at many Caribbean resorts have been issued spearguns with the request, "Shoot the lionfish and feed the fish." That soon will become taboo, because sharks, morays and all the other fish being fed are associating the humans with food, and that is not going well. For example, David L Maislen (Arroyo Grande, CA) who was on Belize's Turneffe Island in December, writes, "The eels have been fed so often that they are all out free swimming. I was taking a picture of a lobster in a hole and a large green moray swam right between my legs into the hole. Triggerfish, groupers and the morays follow divers to feed on lionfish that are killed." So training agencies and resorts will soon have new rules: If you are going to spear a lionfish, you will have to take it with you.

And while lionfish are tasty, humans will never eat enough to reduce the population, nor will any species below the surface help out. In the Caribbean, there seem to be no reports of any fish attacking and eating a lionfish on its own. In the Indo-Pacific, coronetfish occasionally eat lionfish, and *Undercurrent's* John Bantin observed frogfish eating lionfish in the Red Sea, but those specific species do not exist in our waters. In fact, put a lionfish in a tank with hungry groupers and the groupers will ignore them

According to Akins, scientists have found as many as 64 juvenile fish in a lionfish's belly, and more than 30 species have been discovered in dissected lionfish. One had 21 juvenile drums. They are particularly prolific at picking off fish that eat algae, especially juvenile parrotfish. At one Bahamas reef, lionfish had reduced the biomass by up to 95 percent in just two years. Even if their food supply runs low, they are superb survivors. For three months, researchers fed nothing to lionfish they kept in a tank. None died.

People have speculated that while the preyed-upon Caribbean reef fish are naïve about this new predator, once they move through a few generations, they'll begin to recognize the lionfish as a predator and slip away. Darwinian theory at its best, right? Unfortunately, a new study seems to put that to rest. Researchers

at the James Cook University in Queensland, Australia have found that a lionfish's success lies in the power of camouflage -- they are virtually undetectable by small fish. "For over a decade, scientists have tried to understand how these predators can wreak such havoc on their invaded ecosystem," lead researcher Mark McCormick told the press. Now, McCormick and his team have a clue. They observed that lionfish are undetectable by prey, as if they were ghosts able to feed on anything without being discovered. One likely possibility: a chemical camouflage, where the lionfish gives off a scent that labels it as non-threatening.

"We tested the response of small prey fish to three different predators, one of them the lionfish," says James Cook University scientist Oona Lönnstedt. "Surprisingly, the common prey fish -- juvenile chromis -- were unable to learn that lionfish represented a threat, which was very different to their response to two other fish predators. Lionfish were able to sneak up on their prey and capture every single one, while the other predators had much lower feeding success." This ability to bypass a very well-studied learning mechanism commonly used by prey to learn new risks is a first, and has in part led to the astounding success of lionfish in the Caribbean. Without any natural enemies in their new system and no problem catching food, the lionfish are practically unstoppable. (The study is available online at [www.plosone.org](http://www.plosone.org))

Yet some control may be possible. A recent study in the journal *Ecological Applications* by scientists using computer models and 18 months of field tests reports that reducing lionfish in a specific area by 75 to 95 percent will allow a rapid recovery of native fish biomass in the area, and it may aid larger ecosystem recovery as well. At 24 coral reefs near Eleuthera Island in the Bahamas, researchers removed the necessary amount of lionfish to reach this threshold, then monitored recovery of the ecosystem. On reefs where lionfish were kept below threshold densities, native prey fish, like Nassau grouper and yellowtail snapper, increased by 50 to 70 percent in 18 months. Where no intervention was made, native species continued to decline and disappear. Stephanie Green, a marine ecologist at Oregon State University and lead author on the study, says, "It shows that by creating safe havens -- small pockets of reef where lionfish numbers are kept low -- we can help native species recover. And we don't have to catch every lionfish to do it."

The problem, of course, is this is a labor-intensive strategy that depends on legions of divers catching lionfish, probably now and forever. Green noted that in specific areas, the first 75 percent of the fish are easier to catch, but after that, it is diminishing returns. Many divers spend about 30 percent of their time trying to get those last few individuals. "That time is better spent moving to a new site and starting over," she says. She hopes that conservationists, fishermen and divers will band together to create a few pockets of almost-lionfish-free zones, where native reef dwellers such as parrotfish, grouper and snapper can be replenished.

The ultimate problem is that Caribbean and Atlantic reefs cover an enormous amount of territory, and the lionfish, tragically, have settled into them. It's impossible to imagine that, without significant economic incentives, there will be never be enough divers to keep more than a few marine parks in heavily populated areas relatively free of lionfish.

-- Ben Davison

## One Small Idea for Lionfish Eradication

Aquarists import about 60,000 lionfish a year from the Indo-Pacific. They're all caught by local divers, using a number of simple techniques. Suppose these imports from the Philippines, Indonesia, Hawaii and elsewhere were outlawed, with only lionfish caught in Florida (or an expanded region) being allowed for sale to aquarists. That would not only reduce the Florida population considerably, but also provide quite a few local jobs. Politically, it would be a complicated task, and trying to get the Feds to act would be a monumental effort -- though officials are wringing their hands at the potential destruction of the Florida food fish industry, not to mention the health of the reefs. Perhaps it would be easier to find a way to get the states involved. Nonetheless, I'm floating the idea, hoping some environmental group or policy expert will give it their attention. Given the destruction this fish has brought in the last decade, we don't have much time.

## Flotsam & Jetsam

**A Shark Movie for Idiots.** While the film *Sharknado* is about as ridiculous as they come, we learned recently of a movie released last summer that must be the all-time worst shark movie, if not the all-time worst movie of any genre. In *Avalanche Sharks*, these puppies swim under the snow, with their dorsal fins aimed directly at skiers and snow bunnies in the hot tub. See the trailer at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sotQoOngYno](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sotQoOngYno). (Thanks to Ken Kurtis, owner of Reef Seekers in Beverly Hills, for the tip.)

**Careless Divers Putting Coral at Risk.** It's no secret that careless divers, especially those with cameras, can harm coral. A new study out of Hong Kong shows just how serious that harm can be. Chung Shan-shan, a professor of biology at Baptist University, found that more than 70 percent of divers came into contact with coral, potentially causing irreversible damage. Her study surveyed and observed 80 divers at dive sites near Hong Kong, and found that each touched coral 14.7 times on average in each dive. The majority of those were inexperienced or carrying cameras; contact was unintentional and mostly caused by their hands and fins. Nearly 40 percent of divers said they made contact with coral because they lost control of their buoyancy; 8.6 percent said they were taking pictures; and 6.2 percent just found the coral convenient to hold on to. Camera-carrying divers made contact an average of 23.8 times per dive, compared with 11.6 times for others.

**Keep an Eye on Those Mantis Shrimp.** In all likelihood, these crustaceans will have spotted you first. Their eyes are on stalks and can dart around. Humans use similar rapid eye movements to lock onto new objects and track them as they move. "But it was not clear whether the shrimp eye movements were anything to do with acquiring objects, or just repositioning the eyes," Justin Marshall of the University of Queensland in Australia told *New Scientist*. To find out,

his team placed mantis shrimp in a perspex tube inside an aquarium, and suddenly introduced a small colored disc into their line of sight. A camera outside the aquarium filmed their eyes. The shrimp's fovea, the part of the eye with the highest resolution, focused on the disc, just like a primate. But while humans' rapid eye movements can sweep through a field of view at a rate of 250 degrees per second, the mantis shrimp's eyes are moving at up to twice that speed.

**Freediver Hit-and-Run.** Florida Fish and Wildlife investigators are looking into an boating hit-and-run incident about a mile off Palm Beach that left a freediver in serious condition. Jorge Caba had his dive flag and his properly-marked buoys deployed when he jumped off a boat to free dive near the Breakers in mid-January, but a boater ran him over near the surface and then took off. Caba had to have surgery for a broken pelvis and a gash on his leg. Jonathan Dickinson of the group Florida Freedivers told news station WPTV that freedivers need to keep an eye out for boaters, even if they are following all the rules. "When you are freediving, you don't have as much time. You are coming back to the surface because you are out of air. You don't always have time to stop, look, listen and wait."

**The Wolf of Wall Street Can't Swim with the Sharks.** While promoting his latest film, Leonardo DiCaprio says he is terrified of sharks after getting stuck in a cage with one. He told Ellen DeGeneres that a "gigantic great white" tried to attack him when a shark cage diving expedition went awry in South Africa in 2006, while he was on a break from filming *Blood Diamond*. "They actually said in 30 years this has never happened, but the tuna kind of got stuck on the top of the cage, and the great white leapt out and tried to bite it and went into the cage with me," he said. "Half of its body was in and out, and I flattened down at the bottom, and it chomped a few times but I survived it." He was invited on the expedition by a nonprofit devoted to shark protection, but he admitted it left him mentally scarred. "I don't want to discount their work because they're doing great stuff. But it was absolutely terrifying."

*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.

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February 2014 Vol. 29, No. 2

[www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)