

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## Cozumel and Akumal, Mexico

*two unique dive trips in seven days*

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Dear Fellow Diver:

For more than half a century, divers have flocked to the reefs of Cozumel, so famous for drift dives along coral walls that some consider it a diving cliché. Yet most of those visitors overlook a truly unique diving experience right across on the mainland -- the freshwater cenotes of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. In January, I and others from my dive club joined a trip organized by my local dive shop to dive both locations in one short visit. It was like having two dive trips in one.

It was one of those trips where I made no decisions at all; I didn't pick the hotel, the dive shop, my flight or even the departure day. Having made endless trips with one buddy or another where my fingers did the walking (leaving me to sweat over details, connections and dive arrangements), there's a lot to be said about joining someone else's group: just pack your gear and show up. Sure, you may not get the best of the best, but it's stress-free from beginning to end. And the price can be attractive -- for 10 nights, double-occupancy, all diving and meals, my tab was \$1,814.

We first booked into Casa del Mar, a clean, cozy resort about 2.5 miles south of San Miguel de Cozumel, the island's main town. The resort, with 98 rooms plus eight cabanas, is located on the inland side of the Malecon, from which I took a footbridge over the busy thoroughfare to access a pier with three different dive operators. I and eight others from my dive



The Dock at Casa del Mar



club had been pre-assigned to Cozumel Marine World, which provided good, attentive service through four days of diving.

On our first dive, at Palancar Cave under gray skies, I was struck by the drab corals and sparse fish life. In the April 2005 issue of Undercurrent, I described a nearby site as "a glorious jumble of hard and soft corals, studded by a rainbow of sponges and faceted by grottoes, tunnels, and overhangs." This time, the corals looked like sepia-tone photos of themselves, albeit under a cloudy sky.

A brilliant exception was Punta Dalila, a shallower reef just north of Palancar, where we did a second dive the following day. At 59 feet, with visibility well over 80 feet, I was greeted by an eight-foot moray out prowling in the morning sunlight, keeping company with a silvery grouper. A bodacious green turtle stood on its hind flippers, munching at the underside of a coral ledge. A smaller turtle dove directly beneath me. Since Dalila is a preserve, like virtually all Cozumel dive sites, lobsters were fearless and huge. One brute had feelers the size of Alaskan king crab legs. On my safety stop, an eagle ray passed majestically below me. So, all was not lost.

They split us into two groups: photographers and non-photographers. This worked for a couple of days, but the cinematographers found themselves crowding up and competing for close-up shots, and soon the groups were re-arranged. But I learned a valuable lesson: Reef colors still pop under strobes and bright flashlights, so I would suggest carrying a dive light even on day dives. Besides, we navigated a bunch of intriguing tunnels and swim-throughs where those with lights were able to spot reclusive critters (like the splendid toadfish) in the cracks and crevices.

Gentle currents abounded at the sites our guides chose (the two mentioned above plus Cathedral, Cedral Pass, Palancar Gardens, La Francesca, Santa Rosa Wall and Yucab). Years ago here, I had a hard time "braking" sufficiently to stay behind my dive guide. While currents normally run parallel to the shore, springtime "down drafts" have been known to push divers well past the 100-foot mark before they can adjust buoyancy and ascend. Occasionally, a diver has failed the task and disappears into the depths.

I fell into a comfortable routine with diving. I was on board our boat, Maniti, by 8 a.m. each morning for two dives, then back to the resort for lunch. Afternoons were for relaxing or tinkering with dive gear. One optional night dive was offered, right off the dock, which I declined. They offered no other dives, probably due to the winds that picked up every afternoon. The 45-foot Maniti, a monohull diesel, wasn't the fastest boat in the fleet, but made smooth work of the hour-long rides to the most popular reefs. Glassy out, splashy back was the order of the day. With 42 tank wells, the boat's max capacity would be 21 divers per two-tank trip. My group was often joined by other divers with their own guide, but we never had more than 12 guests aboard. More would have turned it into a cattle boat. I noticed a DAN oxygen kit, PFDs and fire extinguishers in dry storage forward, but we had no safety briefing. The two-shelf camera table doubled as a snack buffet (cookies, sliced fruit) between dives, but at least there were separate rinse buckets for cameras and masks. We all shared a unisex marine head but there were no towels on board. Snorkelers were welcome aboard the Maniti at no extra charge, but those who tried were disappointed because the reef tops were 40 feet below them.

After divemaster Paulino helped me gear up on the fantail, he jumped in first to await the other divers. We descended as a group, and when the first diver hit 700 psi, Paulino released a surface marker buoy and navigated to shallow waters, generally no deeper than 40 feet. Those with better air consumption continued exploring while the others completed their safety stops and then waited

## Let Someone Else Plan Your Dive Trip for You

Our Cozumel reviewer is forthright about his highs and lows of booking travel through his dive shop. There are plenty of benefits of using a dive shop to book your next dive trip overseas. You don't have to use the one down the road -- many dive shops welcome divers from anywhere to sign up.

Ken Kurtis, owner of Reef Seekers in Beverly Hills, CA ([www.reefseekers.com](http://www.reefseekers.com)), who books overseas dive trips regularly (next up is Manado, Indonesia in July and snorkeling with whale sharks at Isla Mujeres in August), says the biggest benefit of using a dive shop owner is ease of travel. "I take care of all the details, except for booking plane fare (which is too much of a pain in the butt, although I do tell you the preferred flights). For my Reef Seekers trips, I include everything: diving, hotel or boat, transfers, rental car if needed, crew tips, and stuff like that. I have a saying that all you need to do is get yourself to the airport, and then (within reason) you can turn your brain off from there. I'll deal with logistics." And there's power in numbers. A dive group has more clout than a solo diver, whether it's at the resort, on the boat, or at the airport.

The costs aren't necessarily cheaper. You could book the same trip yourself for a few hundred bucks less, but Kurtis says you won't get more bang for your buck. "You won't get a boat to yourself to run your own schedule and sites, you won't know how to get the best rooms or cabins, and other "insider tips" you won't know about. Case in point: I booked a trip to Australia in November 2012 to see a total solar eclipse. We booked half of one of Mike Ball's liveaboards and made sure we were going to be exactly on the centerline of the eclipse. It took them far from their normal dive path, but they were willing to do it. On your own, there's no way you could have made that happen."

There's no one "group dive travel" website to search for, say, group dives to CoCo View in November, but the best way to find a group trip heading to a destination you want to go to is by calling dive shops in your local area or elsewhere, or viewing their websites to see if they offer trips. Even if they don't, the shop owner often can refer you to a shop that does. PADI has a "Find a Dive Shop" page on its website ([www.padi.com/SCUBA/locate-a-padi-dive-shop/default.aspx](http://www.padi.com/SCUBA/locate-a-padi-dive-shop/default.aspx)), and here are a few shops across the U.S. offering some good trips this year.

**West Coast:** Besides Ken Kurtis's Reef Seekers in Los Angeles, consider trips by Bamboo Reef in San Francisco and Monterey, CA; its next trip is to Kungkungan Bay Resort in Indonesia's Lembah Strait July 23-August 2, and it runs frequent trips to the Channel Island, the next being July 29-August 2 ([www.bambooreef.com](http://www.bambooreef.com)).

**Central:** Ocean First Divers in Boulder, CO, offers an array of trips, from a week's diving with Aldora Divers in Cozumel (June 21-28 and October 4-11), to off-the-beaten-path diving on the *Nautilus Swell* in Alaska July 22-August 1, and a dive/safari expedition in Tanzania September 22-October 7 ([www.oceanfirstdivers.com](http://www.oceanfirstdivers.com)). Midwest Aquatics in Overland Park, KS, is focusing on the Caribbean this year, with trips to Saba in July and St. Lucia in September, but its first 2015 trip is to Antarctica in March ([www.midwestaquatics.com](http://www.midwestaquatics.com))

**Northeast:** Sharon Corcoran coordinates group trips for Aquatic Adventures in North Syracuse, NY, and her upcoming 2014 trips are Anthony's Key Resort in Roatan and Bonaire's Divi Flamingo in early August, Cuba's Gardens of the Queen August 14 - 24, and St. Lucia's Anse Chastanet for the week before Thanksgiving ([www.aquatic-world.com](http://www.aquatic-world.com)). The Dive Shop in Fairfax, VA, is also Caribbean-focused this year, with trips to Roatan's CoCo View in early July, Bonaire's Buddy Dive in mid-August and Scuba Club Cozumel in mid-October ([www.thediveshop-va.com](http://www.thediveshop-va.com)).

**South:** Just in July alone, Sea Sports Scuba in Houston has trips planned to Cozumel's Casa del Mar, Bonaire's Buddy Dive and Small Hope Bay Lodge on the Bahamas' Andros Island. It also books two-day dive trips to the Flower Gardens aboard the *M/V Fling* until early October ([www.seasportsscuba.com](http://www.seasportsscuba.com)). Scubaland Adventures in Austin, TX, sells out fast with regular trips to Caribbean and Indo-Pacific dive sites, but there are a few spots left for Kasawari Resort in Lembah Strait on August 8-16, and more space for its Socorro Island trip on the *Nautilus Explorer* in January ([www.scubaland.com](http://www.scubaland.com))

on the surface for the Maniti to find us. Sometimes the two groups got separated so one group might have a five- to 10-minute float while waiting for others to get aboard, but in calm, 80-degree water, that wasn't much of an inconvenience.

*"Can you believe no hot sauce? One diver had to venture to a convenience store to bring in a bottle."*

The crew of the Maniti was very friendly, even treating us to a salsa-dancing exhibition after one dive, but were a bit challenged when identifying fish. This was partially due to the language barrier, but also they just didn't always seem that knowledgeable, so I resorted to leafing through the badly-worn fish guidebook on board to identify any unique fish I had spotted.

Joining a dive shop's travel group had its dividends. Silas, an employee of Marin Diving Center, served as tour guide, and was an invaluable problem-solver even though this was his first tropical dive trip. When my computer battery died, he magically produced a backup computer, which I used for the rest of the trip at no charge. That's an advantage of traveling with a dive shop; yet on the other hand, I wondered why the battery hadn't been replaced when I took it into that shop for a pre-trip tune up. Remember the old axiom: Most things that go wrong with your equipment occur right after you have it serviced.

My deluxe room had two double beds, a TV with almost all Spanish channels, and a dark closet with a safe. Every day the maid folded my fresh towels in the shape of different animals -- a nice artsy touch. A postage-stamp-sized balcony with bench was just big enough for drying dive gear. Casa del Mar is an all-inclusive resort, which has its plusses and minuses. Our group, which started as two separate cliques, soon bonded over meals and cocktails. It also made life easier for Silas to keep us all herded together. However, the food at the Palapa restaurant was crashingly mediocre, pretty much the worst of Mexican and American cuisine. Can you believe no hot sauce? One of my buddies had to venture out to a convenience store to bring in a bottle. The most authentic thing about the restaurant was the incomprehensible accents of the waiters. By the time I left, I had tried most of the selections on the menu, and was ready for a change. Similarly, the bar had a very limited selection (no Scotch, for instance), and mixed drinks were weak. In retrospect, we should have tried more local restaurants. But travelers with packages get hung up when they prepay. "Damn, I already paid for that thing, so I'm gonna eat it." One night, a couple of us ventured into town for a fresh shrimp dinner, which was well worth the extra \$20.

On our last morning, we were shuttled into town to board a ferry for a 50-minute ride to Playa del Carmen, where we were to be met by vehicles from our next destination, Villas DeRosa in Akumal. But none showed, and after much too long baking on a sidewalk, one of my fellow divers had had enough and hailed a taxi for half our group. The remainder waited with Silas until he finally was able to phone the resort and arrange for a van. Acknowledging the snafu, Villas DeRosa reimbursed the cab fare.



**Villas DeRosa's Beachfront Rooms**

I had visited Villas DeRosa 2002, and not much has changed, even the bone-rattling rutted road leading in from the highway. Villas DeRosa faces the sea, on a beach between private residences and large luxury resorts. My well-kept room, a few steps up from the pool, had white tile floors and stucco walls, a rough-hewn wood desk, two chairs and a small closet. A sunburst was painted over the twin beds that were combined into a king-width (not length) bed. One curtained window looked out on another tiny balcony. The flat-

screen TV set into the wall pulled in several American channels, including commercial-free movies. After 80-degree days, nights were cool enough so I didn't need the A/C.

This remote beachfront resort also offers American-plan dining -- a necessity because there are no other restaurants or stores in the vicinity. The difference from Casa del Mar was that Villas DeRosa has no menu. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are all chef's choice, served family style, with a few concessions to those with dietary restrictions. Lunches featured extra crispy fried grouper, tortilla soup, chili rellenos or a burger. At dinner, we shared fajitas, chili rellenos, or rolled chicken breasts with savory glaze, rice and veggies. Everyone enjoyed the soups, potato cheese and puréed broccoli especially, but the group favorite was pulled mystery meat in a mystery sauce. Unrecognizable, but tasty. The meals were zestier than at Casa del Mar, but having no options, it got old quickly. There is a very cute Bikini Beach Bar on the sand, but they wouldn't charge drinks to our rooms and insisted on cash, so most of us took a 10-minute cab ride into tiny Akumal to stock up on necessities. I don't know why the bar would maintain such a self-defeating policy.

The entire Yucatan peninsula had once been a coral reef. The rise and fall of ocean levels over the millennia had created a series of underground caverns, complete with limestone stalagmites and stalactites, in some cases. Eventually these caverns, called cenotes, filled with gin-clear fresh water. Each day, Aquatech Dive Center, which has a small office with rental gear and locked storage at Villas DeRosa, took us by air-conditioned van to a variety of cenotes. Each was unique. At Dos Ojos, I spied a Mayan goby in the sand, and other small fish followed my light, casting oversize shadows on the limestone formations called "decorations" by locals. Halfway into the dive, my group surfaced in a dome with a small shaft of light. I could see tree roots dangling down, festooned with bats that use the light shaft to come and go at night. My dive light drove them into a flying frenzy. These were all guided dives, requiring only an openwater certification. I did swim through several dark overhead chambers, but always followed guidelines and a very competent dive leader.

Most cenotes are on private property, with parking and rudimentary gift shops. Admission charges were included in our package, but at Dos Ojos, photographers were charged an extra fee, which our guides negotiated down to \$20 for the group. Water temperatures were in the 70s, so I added a vest to the 3-mil wetsuit I'd been using at Cozumel. On the long walk to the sinkhole, divemaster Sergio carried my tank rig, allowing me to save my back for another day. At Jardin de Eden (which was called Ponderosa the last time I dove it), I encountered a halocline between 30 and 35 feet, where colder freshwater met saltwater seeping in from the ocean. The effect was like swimming through maple syrup, but when I felt disoriented, I cleared my head by inhaling or exhaling. We made

## Cozumel Marine World, Cozumel

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

## Aquatech, Akumal

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

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent

World Scale



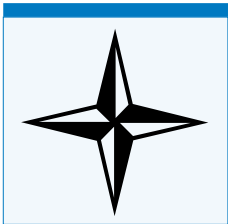
two cenote dives a day, with a buffet lunch made from Villas DeRosa leftovers in between. Chicken and other livestock, plus emaciated dogs and ubiquitous tiny Mayan crows, provided our surface interval entertainment.

A trip to the Yucatan must include at least one tour of Mayan ruins, such as nearby Tulum, preferably before diving cenotes, to grasp the history. Tulum, once a Pre-Columbian walled city, is one of the best-preserved coastal Mayan sites. These sinkholes provided the only access to fresh water for the natives, who considered them holy. (Some deep-cave divers are still recovering skulls and artifacts from sacrifices to the Mayan gods.) This spiritual nature becomes tangible when swimming through cathedral-like chambers.

The eerie isolation of an overhead environment is something some people find appealing and others dread. Some passages were so tight, only one diver could pass through at a time. At Chac Mool, I encountered chambers so vast my light couldn't illuminate the walls. Unfortunately, there were dozens of other divers at this site, so strangers returning along the same line that we were following frequently interrupted my meditations. On our final dive at Chac Mool, the sun came out after four overcast days, and photographers were thrilled with the spectacle of golden "God rays" streaming down through the crystalline waters. I could almost hear the prayers of the ancient Mayans.

Of course, one need not join a group to dive Cozumel or the cenotes. They certainly should be on everyone's must-do Caribbean list. And while as a foodie I can complain about the meals, I certainly can't complain about how easy it is to let someone else handle the details.

-- L.C.



**Divers Compass:** My trip was put together by Marin Diving Center of San Rafael, CA, using the wholesaler Caradonna Dive Adventures; my package, including 10 days of accommodations, meals, diving, transfers, ferry, taxes and service charges, cost \$1,814 . . . I needed Mexican pesos to prepay the Marine Park fee (\$2.50 per day) and a \$15 fuel surcharge for the long ride to Cathedral at Punta Sur Reef . . . Cozumel has a number of recompression chambers (local divemasters are infamous for getting bent after too many repetitive dive days) and the newest is the Costamed Hyberbaric Center, a DAN-preferred provider ([costamed.com.mx](http://costamed.com.mx)); the closest chamber to Akumal is the Playa del Carmen Hyperbaric Chamber and Clinic ([playa@sssnetwork.com](mailto:playa@sssnetwork.com)) . . . Although I had fond recollections of San Miguel de Cozumel years ago as an authentically quaint Mexican village, this time I was annoyed by the incessant barkers for the various restaurants and shops, even after the cruise ship hordes had left for the evening . . . Playa del Carmen, 24 miles up the coast from Akumal, offers a far more active social scene than Akumal and short dives to some of the more popular cenotes . . . Websites: Casa del Mar - [www.casadelmarcozumel.com](http://www.casadelmarcozumel.com); Cozumel Marine World - [www.cozumelmarineworld.com](http://www.cozumelmarineworld.com); Villas DeRosa and Aquatech Dive Center - [www.cenotes.com](http://www.cenotes.com)

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## *Damai I, Raja Ampat, Indonesia*

*luxury at a big, big price*

Dear Fellow Diver:

While diving Kri Island's reef, I was in the midst of a fish "rush hour." Actually, with schools of fish going in every direction, it was more like underwater gridlock. A yellowfin tuna made a left turn, a bumphead Napoleon wrasse appeared to be stalled. Crisscrossing in the mild current were multiple species of fusilier and schools of diagonal-banded and many-spotted sweetlips. Parrotfish

spit exhaustive clouds of chewed reef. Oversize barracuda appeared trapped in a roundabout. A black-tip shark met up with buddies for twilight reef patrol. Angelfish and red snapper went in every direction, while spadefish coasted in neutral. This was just an ordinary dive in Raja Ampat. Its 50,000 square kilometers is considered the heart of the world's marine biodiversity. Scientists have identified more than 1,300 species of reef fish here, swimming among more than 50 percent of the world's soft corals and 70 percent of the world's hard corals. It is breathtaking.

Five years ago at this location near Kri, I spotted two blue-ring octopuses during a night dive. This time, the unusual critters included one of the recently-identified walking, or bamboo, sharks, an unidentified grey nudibranch, and the colorful finned tiny oscillated or Scooter dragonet. Home for these critters, especially around Aljui Bay's Channel Island, included a glorious rainbow-like reef of soft and hard corals.

The route on the luxurious 130-foot, six-cabin Damai I took us from West Papua's city of Sorong to the port of Tual on Kri Island. Captain Iskandar motored the handsome teak and mahogany phinisi south toward West Papua around Bird's Head Peninsula. We usually traveled from one site to the other during the night, while moving in the day only if weather conditions dictated. The Damai I is the real

deal when it comes to "concierge" diving. A crew of 18 cared for 12 divers, and they did everything humanly possible. They helped us suit up and carried our gear. They washed and either hung my gear to dry or folded my skinsuit or 3-mil wetsuit, my preference for the average 83-degree water temperature. Puto, in charge of the dining salon, passed glasses of water on a tray before and after each dive. My only responsibility was carrying my mask to the tender and determining which camera lens to use.

Cruise directors Simon Marsh and Andrina Bindon, two former Peter Hughes trainees who are about the best in the business, commented when I presented my c-cards, "When you spend this much money for a scuba trip, we know you're certified." The same level of trust might be said about the Nitrox fill percentages. I observed them using gauges, and saw the percentage posted on the briefing board (there was no self-analyzing) that also noted our tender order number and buddy assignments, which rotated daily. Simon told me, "We believe in unlimited diving. The amount of time spent underwater on our three daily dives is your discretion; it's the quality, not the quantity of dives. We aren't going to look at the amount of air left in your tank." I normally stayed down 60 to 70 minutes, but one couple regularly averaged two-hour dives. They provided one divemaster for each four guests. Three divemasters were excellent, especially at critter sightings; the fourth appeared more interested in his own underwater photography than serving his divers. He needs to serves his guests, not himself.

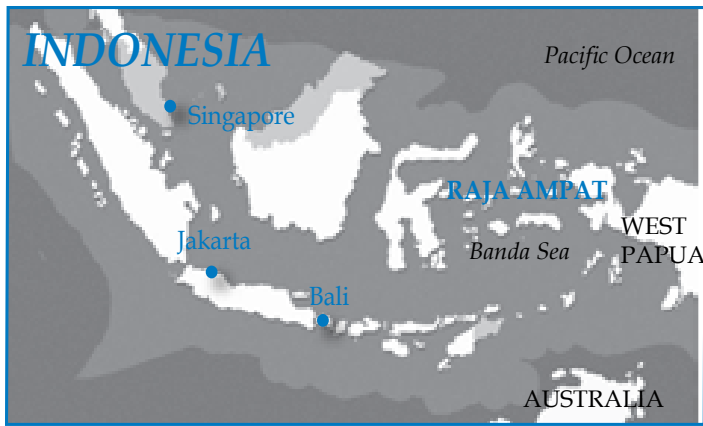
On our first dive (hardly a checkout, more to verify our buoyancy), there were half a dozen tasseled wobbegong, a large 100-pound wahoo, a school of sweetlips puckering in the current, the rare cometfish, a three-foot moray having a ruckus under a boulder with a wobbegong (the eel swam away), tridachna clams large enough to swallow a diver, and even a school of grouper. A yellow symmetrical flatworm was the only loner.

After a unanimous vote, we passed on diving Manta Sandy, a feeding station so popular that with 40 liveboards now

*"A crew of 18 cared for 12 divers, and they did everything humanly possible."*



*Damai I*



operating in Raja Ampat, there are frequently more boats and divers than mantas. (Nearly two decades ago, Undercurrent was the first publication to visit and write about Raja Ampat. There were no liveboards and only one resort, Camp Kri -- now Kri Eco Resort -- built by Dutchman Max Ammer, who subsequently built Sorido Bay.) Our unexpected reward was an unusual encounter at Blue Magic. A graceful 15-foot oceanic manta, displaying its black T-shaped stripe outlined by a white lip, circled for 20 minutes with a reef manta, identified by its spotted underbelly. Also

circling us were schools of barracuda, trevally, silversides, horse-eye jack and one nippy juvenile damsel. There were also the rare orange mantis shrimp, bump-head parrotfish, and schools of red snapper and sweetlips.

After diving Arborek Jetty, we took a stroll around the fishermen's tidy village. Children followed us, singing and dancing. Refreshingly, they were not looking for a handout. During a night dive at Arborek Jetty, before my flashlight went out and my purge valve stuck, I spotted a tiny blue-ring octopus, so small it looked like it had been born that morning. I also spotted a minute pygmy squid, a few popcorn-like squat anemone shrimp, and a juvenile blue lobster, its white feelers giving away its rocky nook hideaway. As we did our safety stop in the darkness of the night, my light illuminated a dark blue bobtail squid scurrying across the sand.

Alblulol's No Contest and Farondi's Three Sisters offered more variety, with bottomless walls, mobula rays and large schools of silversides. Goa Farondi had two caves, one at a depth between 30 and 100 feet, and a second cave with a wide opening that surfaced above the waterline, not unlike a cenote experience. An irascible current required us to descend to the smaller cave, where, as if in a washing machine, we were swept in one direction, then another, while trying to maintain our buoyancy in upward and downward currents. Neptune Fanses's drift dive was milder than the usual current. The edge of the channel, enhanced by perfect sunlight, had mature fans measuring at least 20 square feet, large whips, colorful purple anthias, six-inch garden eels peering out of sandy areas, and even a rare species of red nudibranch.

Misool Eco-Resort controls the area, requiring boats to reserve mooring times. The resort owners were responsible for eliminating shark finning in Raja Ampat (see our article about that in the January 2014 issue). The area is now a nursery for black- and white-tip sharks. Bayangan's Magic Mountain is a shallow reef at 60 feet. While none of the anticipated mantas were sighted, there were many juvenile white-tips, and a large two-foot walking shark sharing a rocky nook with a peacock stingray. The site was so productive, we returned the next morning for a stronger current filled with schooling barracuda and spadefish, plus many more white- and black-tip sharks.

Specifically designed for divers, the Damai I has a large dive deck with individual cubbies and rinse tanks.

## Damai I, Indonesia

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

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent

World Scale



## Anatomy of a Free Flow

It's a common sight. A diver is about to enter the water when suddenly his octopus or even his primary second-stage suddenly does an impression of a jet engine at the end of a runway just prior to take-off. The sudden roar as gas at 1000 psi of pressure rushes out uncontrollably often precipitates the diver to grab the offending item and shake it violently, or even frantically smack it on something hard. All he needs to do is put his thumb over the mouthpiece, but instead, he usually hastily fumbles with the tank valve to solve the problem, even if it means a substantial part of the tank-fill is lost.

Another more serious situation can arise if a second-stage suddenly starts to free-flow during a dive. This is

usually associated with icing of the regulator during a dive in cold freshwater. (Seawater around most coasts rarely gets cold enough.) If the water is less than 50 degrees, there is a risk of freezing, so this can happen at many freshwater sites at almost any time of the year.

For a competent diver, this should represent nothing more than an inconvenience. On the other hand, this often results in a fast or uncontrolled ascent, with all the hazards to health implicated in such an action. But there should be no reason for a diver so affected to panic . . .

*To read the rest of John Bantin's story about how divers can keep control during a free-flow situation, click here to go to our blog page, [www.undercurrent.org/blog](http://www.undercurrent.org/blog), then click on "Anatomy of a Free Flow."*

While there is a camera-drying air hose on the deck, there is also a dedicated camera room off the salon with separate workstations and many outlet choices. The Damai's utilitarian tenders were not much to look at. With no gunwales, a rubber-covered bench with six tank holders, and low to the water, it was easy to back-roll. There was a sturdy, flip-down, potentially finger-pinching ladder. There was always a boat waiting when we surfaced. Prior to dinner, during several sunsets, we took lagoon trips on the tenders. Surrounded by giant tropical plants, we explored the narrow channels with overhanging trees. I spotted a pair of hornbills and a grey cockatoo.

My group was interesting and amiable. There was a New York vet with his wife. A female U.S. government employee, based in Kabul, Afghanistan, was a repeat diver. Her diplomatic U.S. passport, which clearly impressed immigration officials, went on top of the pile when required for customs. Another New York couple both boasted PhDs; he worked for an algorithmic hedge fund. Also onboard was Tadd Frye, a private chef who cooks for the rich and famous, primarily in the Turks and Caicos. He was consulting for the Damai on food preparation -- and as you'll read later, they need it. A Swiss English-speaking couple on their third Damai voyage had a bow cabin on the main deck (#6), with a private balcony, separate toilet and a walk-in shower.

I enjoyed a single cabin with a "real toilet" and plenty of storage space. There were drawers under the bed, a large corner cabinet with hangers and shelves, a desk with drawers and a chair. The large bathroom had a wood-slatted floor with rainfall shower. Included were upscale, Four Seasons-style amenities of soap, lotion, shampoo and moisturizer. My cabin was next to an always-on-four generator that vibrated my comfy bed. In desperate need of sleep when I arrived, I commented about the room to Andrina, "I paid a premium for this?" She replied, "In three days, you won't notice it." She was right. But I did notice rainwater leaking from the salon ceiling into the stairwell.

The main flaw in Damai's luxurious standards is the food preparation. Puto set the table for each meal with cloth napkins and placemats, and we'd sit down for dinner, placing individual orders. Prior to my departure home, I had dinner at a restaurant near my Sanur hotel. At first bite, I realized what the Damai food had lacked: flavor. Indonesia is a land of exotic, flavor-filled meals, yet chef Tadd Frye was onboard to help Chef Wayan Kadek "westernize the food." Overall, the food was overcooked, and heavily salted and peppered. A tuna fillet was well done and tasteless. A nondescript pudding was gelatinous. Unappetizing snacks were offered following the third dive. I was never even tempted. In all fairness, it was the chef's first week on the boat, and I am not sure about the availability of ingredients. His poached eggs were good, the

fresh fruit was delicious. We were served a lovely dinner on the top deck. None of the divers drank. The conversation was so interesting, I don't think anyone cared about the food.

Indonesia food was available on request, but it was primarily rice, noodles or curry, all of which were better than the Western alternative. At Damai's price point, they desperately need Tadd's advice. Each morning when the chef cooked sambal, a spicy chili sauce, the heat of the spice in the air was a throat tickler and forced a mass departure from the salon and 12-seat dining area. (Why didn't he make it while we were underwater?) The shaded upper deck was the perfect escape. Canvas-covered wicker lounge chairs and outdoor beds were located in front of the fully equipped bridge. There was an "off limits" finicky single cup coffee machine, brewing bitter rather than full and robust coffee. They also offered a press as an alternative or a teapot. Frankly, if I'm going to be so decadently spoiled, and they have to make individual cups of coffee, how about a coffee mug with a wakeup call for the 7:30 a.m. dive?

Leaving Raja after six days, we entered the Banda Sea and dive quality diminished. Each village required permission -- and either Coke and cigarettes or money as payment -- to dive its rubble reefs with rusting, snagged fishing lines and nets. Our first stop in the Kurkap area was at Taka Kurkap, a rubble coral seamount. We were on the hunt for hammerheads, but unfortunately, there were only several turtles and an octopus.

Geologically-created, channel-like strong currents tended to split and change directions. Two dives were literally in the "middle of nowhere." Much of the area lacked the visual island beauty of Raja Ampat, and many of the seamounts were damaged by dynamite. At the same time, the Banda Sea had sparkling blue water with great unlimited visibility, sandy white bottoms and many schools of fish. Raja's plankton-rich waters may not enjoy the same visibility (50 to 75 feet), but it surpasses in its beautiful underwater terrain and marine life.

On one exploratory, no-name site, we were distracted by thousands of schooling barracuda swimming circles around us. Using my reef hook to watch them, I suddenly saw an eight-foot gray reef shark coming at us like a torpedo. He veered

away at the last moment and was gone in a blink of the eye. Startled, we kept on diving, hoping the shark was now miles away. At another site, where zebra sharks and cuttlefish had been previously sighted, I saw a cockatoo waspfish, two olive sea snakes that looked like they had swallowed a pufferfish, a hairy crab, Halameda ghost pipefish and fields of hard corals.

Is Raja Ampat worth the time and hassle of the travel required? Flying 30 hours each way, I took a total of 11 different flights with three necessary overnight stays. I paid overweight baggage and multiple "exit" fees. If I just recall the memories of Raja diving, I can overlook the jet-lag ordeal. However, returning home to another day at the office, I just don't know. Raja, according to my current passport, shows that, like childbirth, I forgot the pain of the travel for the beauty of the experience. After all, it is the center of planet Earth's marine diversity, but maybe once, or twice, is enough.

## Let Sleeping Sharks Lie

We divers like to think we do no harm when we descend upon a resting shark, but these guys need their sleep and we may be disrupting it.

So says Mateus Baronio, a scientist at Southern Cross University in Australia, who has spent five years studying grey nurse and leopard sharks around in Byron Bay with a state-of-the-art remotely operated vehicle (ROV). The \$50,000 machine enabled Baronio to quietly get within inches of the fish and observe their breathing habits as they slept.

Unlike most sharks, grey nurse and leopard sharks are able to hover in the same position while resting. But because they sleep during the day, if too many divers converge on their position, they will stir and move away. "As soon as the divers leave the area, the sharks go back to sleep." Baronio told the *Northern Star* newspaper. "... if you have too many divers doing the wrong thing, you're going to have an impact on the sharks."

PS: I made a slide show of the great critters I saw on this trip; you can view them at [www.kizoa.com/slideshow-maker/d10493408k6061070o1/damai-critters](http://www.kizoa.com/slideshow-maker/d10493408k6061070o1/damai-critters). Also, Two of my long-time diving buddies were aboard the Damai two weeks after I was. One told me that even though the boat had just left dry dock, it "leaked live a sieve" in a heavy rainstorm. Rainwater flooded into lower deck rooms, even into her bed. The flooded wooden stairwell was steep, slippery and dangerous; rainwater even poured into the camera room. The other friend, who was in the cabin next to the one I had, slept with his door open because of engine fumes, as did the guest in that cabin during my trip. The price of a Damai trip is too expensive to have to face these problems.

-- N.M.



**Divers Compass:** Preferring Cathay Pacific Airlines, I flew a 20-hour, one-stop flight (Hong Kong) to Bali (most divers flew through Jakarta), I had to overnight both ways in Denpasar, Bali, as well as in Makassar, and I had to take three flights between Tual and Denpasar; most internal flights are in the middle of the night . . . While Damai's booking agent, Wayan, was helpful in securing internal flights and transfers, I found it less expensive to book my hotels through Agoda.com . . . Be sure to get rupiah prior to leaving the airport, as neither U.S. dollars nor credit cards are accepted anywhere . . . Also be prepared for departure taxes and high extra charges for excess baggage; Damai gives you a full kit of gear, gratis, thus a good reason to leave your dive gear at home . . . The nearest recompression chamber is in Manado, which requires the liveaboard to find an airstrip to get evacuation, no easy trick here; therefore, one must dive more conservatively than ever . . . Website: [www.dive-damai.com](http://www.dive-damai.com)

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## An Underwater Attack Makes World Headlines and shows the tension over Hawaii's aquarium fish trade

When she jumped into the waters off the island of Hawaii on May 8, Rene Umberger, a Maui-based divemaster and environmentalist, didn't realize she would come back up with video footage that would get media attention around the globe. Nor did she suspect another diver would threaten her life while underwater. But that filmed underwater confrontation between Umberger, who wants to shut down the aquarium-fish industry in Hawaii, and Jay Lovell, who makes a living collecting fish for the aquarium trade, has put a brighter spotlight on the aquarium-fish industry and the long-running conflict over its practices.

Umberger, who has written for *Undercurrent*, is director of For the Fishes, a marine advocacy group that wants to ban aquarium-fish collecting in Hawaii. She asked Sea Shepherd, famous for its get-tough ways to protect marine life, to help her organization document the conditions on Hawaii's reefs and how fish collecting is affecting them. Sea Shepherd, which runs its aquarium-fish protection initiative, Operation Reed Defense, out of Hawaii, agreed to do so. Together, they chartered a boat from a local dive operator for a two-day mini-expedition to capture video footage of fishermen capturing sea life on the reefs. Umberger was one of three divers, another five were snorkelers.

On the first day, May 7, they filmed a moray eel collector who used giant lobster traps to catch them. "It's completely legal, and there are no limits on how many to catch," Umberger told *Undercurrent*. "And he goes into areas that are closed to the aquarium fishers. He may be selling them to the Asian aquarium trade, because there is a growing demand for eels over there."

On day two, the group cruised along Hawaii's Keawaiki Bay and came across a boat they knew was an aquarium-collecting boat, because someone had taken photos of it earlier in the year doing major damage to pristine coral with its anchor and chain. "We also photographed them crawling through coral, wearing kneepads, to chase and capture fish," Umberger says. "We had an idea of what we were going to see in the water. We had photo images, now we wanted film."

Her group of three divers descended and started looking for bubbles. They found two collectors, at 50 feet, with their backs to them. Umberger saw one man pulling small yellow fish, probably yellow tangs, out of the reef with a slurp gun and into a small net. The other man had his hands full of the yellow fish as he stuffed them into larger holding containers that lay right on top of the coral. Then she started filming.

"We moved toward them, but I never got closer than the moment you see my camera turn on," she says. "The one guy [pulling fish out of the reef] turned, saw us and snapped. With no warning, no gesture, he jammed over to me. I am holding my GoPro in front of me, thinking, 'Surely you see I am filming this.' I didn't think he was going to do anything crazy. I expected him to stop and maybe gesture. It never entered my mind that he would rip my regulator out of my mouth. That was a shock. He never even went for the camera, he went straight for my regulator, then turned and swam away." "

Umberger, who has made thousands of dives, calmly retrieved her regulator and resumed breathing. Then the man picked up one of the six-foot-long sticks used to scare fish out of the reef. "He aggressively gestured and started moving toward us," Umberger says. "I thought, 'Oh, this may not

## Treasure Hunter

When I think of diving for sunken treasure, my imagination usually takes me to the tropics. However, Robert MacKinnon made a career out of salvaging coins, silverware, weapons and other valuable artifacts from sailing ships that met their end in the dangerous shallows off Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island. The "Death Coast" is known for its strong currents, rocky shoals and submerged rocks.

In his book *Treasure Hunter: Diving for Gold on North America's Death Coast*, MacKinnon and co-author Dallas Murphy tell the story of 40 years of exploration. British colonists of the 17th century initially traded wampum (strings of mussel shells) with the natives, but soon demanded hard currency from home, so London launched fleets laden with coins for the New World. Some ships never made it.

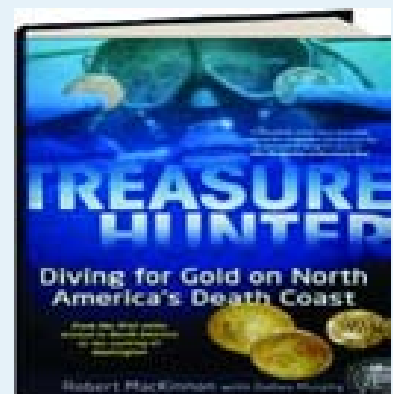
Diving as a teenager in the '60s in 34-degree water wearing just half a wetsuit, MacKinnon began discovering a king's ransom scattered along the inhospitable ocean floor. Once afflicted with "gold fever," MacKinnon started navigating not just these waters, but also the equally icy Nova Scotia bureaucracy for salvage rights. Along the way MacKinnon made some intriguing discoveries, including silverware that may have been looted from Dolly Madison's White House dinner table during the War of 1812.

The authors do a thorough job depicting the challenges of underwater salvage, and telling the stories of the ships and sailors who went down with their treasures. They're just as thorough when describing the hassles that MacKinnon and his partners run into with an alphabet soup's worth of federal and provincial agencies, and they add a laborious appendix covering technical, historical and legal issues, which I might just as well have skipped. Regardless, the book is still a good yarn.

Although MacKinnon recovered millions of dollars' worth of treasure over four decades, the book does not have a happy ending. I'll spare you the details, but suffice it to say that the Nova Scotia government has essentially ended all commercial underwater treasure hunting along its coast.

Buy this 331-page paperback through our website (it's posted on our homepage at [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)), and you'll get Amazon's best price, as well as help us with our efforts to protect coral reefs worldwide.

--Larry Clinton





be over yet.' So we went backwards and started surfacing. We got the heck out of there because we didn't want to have an altercation; these guys were crazy. They followed us up slowly. When they got to the surface and saw they were being filmed, the [non-attacker] guy waved. They later told the press that they were afraid for their lives, but they had no idea who we were."

Umberger called the police as soon as the boat got back to the harbor. But within 10 minutes of taking her statement, Umberger said, investigators started blaming her for the attack. "They asked, 'What were you doing, filming them?' and 'If you didn't have a camera, this wouldn't have

*"They know it's damaging to the industry when its practices are filmed. . . They haven't charged anyone. That guy who attacked me is still out there."*

happened.' What I didn't realize was they had already been alerted. The guys called law enforcement officers to say, 'Expect to get a call from some woman who was harassing us.'"

Umberger doesn't understand why the police turned over her case, which involved someone who tried to cause her bodily harm, to the state Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR), i.e., "the fish police." "It was the wrong thing to do, [however], they are very supportive of the fish collectors," she says.

That same day, the DLNR said they were going to charge Umberger for harassing a fisherman, and would also charge him with reckless endangerment. "Naturally, I was in disbelief that they would charge me, because I don't know how you harass someone from 30 feet away and in under 21 seconds," she says.

She cites a case from three years ago when a divemaster with a group of divers came across an aquarium collector with his anchor chain in coral, took photos of him and the anchor, and posted them on Facebook. The DLNR charged the divemaster for harassing a fisherman, but the court threw out the case because the charge had no merit. "But this is how Hawaii operates," Umberger says. "They use that law to intimidate people. They know it's damaging to the industry when its practices are filmed or photographed. And they haven't charged anyone. That guy who attacked me is still out there."

The DLNR told *Undercurrent* it is investigating "complaints by two parties involved in an incident," but declined to provide details. Spokeswoman Deborah Ward said the fisherman has a state aquarium permit, but she could not confirm whether he also has a West Hawaii aquarium permit. Both are needed to legally take fish from Keawaiki Bay. "Holders of an aquarium permit may only take certain species, and there are daily bag limits for Achilles tang and certain sized kole," she wrote in an email. DLNR wrote to Hawaii news station KHON, "Our investigation is continuing."

Meanwhile, Umberger's group released the video of the incident and identified her attacker as Jay Lovell. He wouldn't talk to the media, but his brother, Jim Lovell, who also collects aquarium fish, said that the activists were harassing divers and provoked an incident with someone just trying to do his job.

You wouldn't think that a fisherman and diver with years of experience would be scared and panicking at the sight of divers with small cameras, but that's what Jim Lovell said his brother was experiencing. "He didn't know what they were doing to his boat up above," he told reporter Tim Sakahara at Hawaii News Now. "There were six or eight people." He says he too has been harassed by people he calls eco-terrorists who have prevented him from working and called his home. "My [daughter] was eight when she listened to the recording that said daddy is a rapist, you're a f----- reef rapist. I shouldn't have to tell an eight year old girl, let alone my daughter, what a rapist is."

He says he fears the Sea Shepherd environmentalists, and so do other fishermen in West Hawaii. "People are afraid, they're afraid for their boats and for their lives in some cases because of the



## The Foolishness of Leaving Your Dive Boat Unmanned

Headed back to Key Largo through rough seas on the late afternoon of May 24, Captain Joe Hall on the *Sailors Choice* didn't believe what he was seeing. A lone diver, frantically waving his arms, bobbed alone among six-foot seas near Pickles Reef off Tavernier, Florida. "Waves were crashing over the bow of our boat," Hall said. "I barely caught a glimpse of him."

They put the ladder down and helped the diver onto the 65-foot fishing boat. "Then [the diver] asked, 'Is everybody else here?' I asked him what he meant." That started an intense rescue effort that found four other divers, scattered from near Molasses Reef to Pickles Reef, about three miles away. The five-diver group from Georgia was diving at Molasses Reef when the anchor line from their unmanned boat snapped.

One of the divers was underwater when he saw the anchor slack. He went to the surface and saw the boat drifting away. They didn't leave anybody topside. The boat owner, tentatively identified as Steve Lunsford, tried to swim after the boat, but strong winds estimated at 25 m.p.h. pushed the vessel away. The *Sailors Choice* started running a search pattern after hearing Lunsford's story. Many of the 18 fishing customers aboard went forward to scan the seas. "Everybody on board helped out," said Hall.

Four Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission patrol boats headed offshore after getting the 5 p.m. call. One of the FWC boats later rescued a diver, who apparently tried to follow Lunsford, near Pickles Reef. The *Sailors Choice* spotted the remaining three divers, who had inflated their BCDs and stayed near Molasses Reef. "By the time we saw them, they were drifting farther offshore," Hall said. "We got on the [loudspeaker] and told them they were going to be OK. Sea Tow went in and scooped them up."

A Key Largo vessel found Lunsford's boat adrift on the shoreward side of Pickles Reef. The divers spent about two hours in the water. After the first diver was found around 5 p.m., the rest were out of the water before 6 p.m. "It was the end of the day, so no other boats were going to be out there," Hall said. "Those guys probably would have spent the night at sea."

reputation Sea Shepherd has," said Bob Hajek, head of the 30-member Big Island Association of Aquarium Fishermen.

But Sea Shepherd founder Paul Watson maintains the divers did nothing wrong. "Yeah, we carry a very dangerous weapon, it's called a camera," he told Hawaii news station KITV. "We were documenting what was happening there, and one of the divers was attacked unprovoked."

Now the situation may escalate. Some reef fisherman said they planned to carry bang sticks and defend themselves, even though they have been the first to get physical. Hajek says he met with a group of reef fishermen the week after the Umberger incident and is trying to keep tensions from boiling over. "We told anyone who had that idea, that is not the way to go, but there are a lot of people coming from different angles on ways to handle this."

The fishermen also plan to get their own underwater cameras, to show their side of any future confrontations. "We would like to just see some separation so that we can feel safe going out and doing our job and going to work in the morning," said Lovell.

According to a 2009 state report, Hawaii's aquarium fish collectors reported catching more than 550,000 specimens worth \$1.1 million that year, but the value of the actual catch may be two to five times that amount. The two most commonly captured species are yellow tang and goldring surgeonfish. Fishermen off the Kona coast, where the incident occurred, account for 75 percent of the aquarium fish caught in Hawaii. Aquarium fish collecting is legal off Kona, but fishermen must avoid certain places and collect only certain species. Collecting is allowed in Keawaiki Bay, where Umberger was attacked.

Environmentalists have spent years lobbying Hawaii lawmakers for legislation to control or ban the aquarium trade, but none of the bills passed. The campaign is now shifting to documentation. Meanwhile, Hawaii says the industry is sustainable. A representative from Governor Neil

Abercrombie's office attended the mid-May meeting with the fishermen, although the administration is just observing the situation and has not taken a position.

Tina Owens, executive director of the Hawaii-based Lost Fish Coalition who has campaigned against overfishing for decades, told the Associated Press that the Umberger incident is not typical of the area. Tensions between environmentalists and fishermen have eased significantly since fishing regulations were established under the West Hawaii Fishery Management Council, she said. Sixteen years ago, "it used to be pretty wild," she said, with collectors threatening tourists, and fishermen threatening to "blow collectors out of the water." "Way back when, I was getting death threats, and now I have lunch with some of these guys."

Nevertheless, ripping a regulator out of a diver's mouth is on the extreme side of confrontation, edging on attempted murder, which the Sea Shepherd group is demanding the police charge Lovell with. In a letter to the editors of *West Hawaii Today*, P. Hansen writes, "As a certified scuba diver, I can't think of anything much scarier or more dangerous than having my regulator pulled from my mouth. How is it possible this man hasn't been arrested for attempted manslaughter? There's no excuse for physically attacking someone just because he or she is observing your activities. It's lucky that Rene Umberger knew what she was doing. A less experienced diver might now be dead."

In the meantime, the DLNR says studies show that the practice of fish collecting is sustainable, and its rules in place for the West Hawaii aquarium fishery are good enough. Owens agrees. "There are people who are trying to make it look like we have a crisis on the reefs in West Hawaii. We don't."

"We showed state enforcement officers my video, and they responded, 'Wow, he really did come at you from a distance,'" says Umberger. "But that did not change their minds, and I doubt any media attention can help [the Hawaii government] do so. What people can do to help is when they see reef fish in tanks, remember that they are wildlife that was captured and harmed in the process. The violence this guy unleashed on me, that's the energy associated with this trade. It's not pretty."

But the Umberger assault is bringing the tension brewing in Hawaii onto a national and world stage. And Lovell, by attacking Umberger, took the bait and did exactly what environmentalists needed to reel in attention to their cause.

-- Vanessa Richardson

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## The Case for Downloading Your Dives *but then again, why bother?*

Reg Valentine, who founded the British Sub-Aqua Club (BSAC), operated a dive center on the Italian island of Giglio in the '60s. There were no dive computers or word processors then, so Reg logged all his dives in minute detail, in a neat calligraphic hand in characteristic turquoise green ink.

Many years later, archeologist Mensun Bound was sitting in his dentist's waiting room in England when he spotted a rare Etruscan vase sitting on a shelf. He asked his dentist where it came from. It seemed that the dentist was a scuba diver and took vacations every year in Giglio. Divers there often dived an ancient wreck site where such vases could be found.

That's how the Giglio wreck came to be put on the map. Dating from about 600 BC, it was the oldest marine archaeological site ever discovered. The problem was that it had been naïvely yet systematically plundered by leisure divers, and many of the valuable artifacts were by then in private hands. If it had not been for Reg's meticulous log-keeping, none of those artifacts would have been

given to the museum where they belonged. In fact, all divers handed over their trophies, apart from the man who retains an important Etruscan soldier's helmet in his bank vault in Germany.

When I started diving, I too kept meticulous records of every dive. When I was a dive guide on a liveboard boat, I reached dive No. 1000 and realized that the second thousand was going to take just as long to do, and I lost interest. I still have those logbooks, but I rarely look at them, and certainly don't spend winter evenings browsing in a self-satisfied way through records of dives.

*"I downloaded his last dive from the computer [the deceased] had been wearing on his wrist, though it was probably illegal for me to do so."*

Today, we all use diving computers, and virtually all of them allow the dives we record to be downloaded to a laptop. The downloaded information includes a time/depth graph, together with things like water temperature, and a graphic representation of the tissue-loading of the token model tissues employed by the computer's algorithm (of course, this is not actually your own specific tissue loading).

In effect, a dive computer acts as the 'black box' of an aircraft.

Unlike most sport divers, technical divers are so engrossed in the technical challenge of doing a deep dive and coming back successfully that when asked, "What did you see while you were down there?" they can only answer with such things as breathing mixes, run times and deco-stop durations. Many of these folks spend hours pouring over dive profiles and marveling at their proficiency at going deep and coming back undamaged. Of course, some do suffer decompression injuries, and the time/depth graph, plus the ancillary information, can go some way to offering an explanation as to what might have happened.

On the other hand, most of us sport divers -- surely most who read *Undercurrent* -- go diving for the experience of encountering what is down there, using our computers to reduce the risk of decompression injury. Most of us have gotten away with it. Some people are less lucky. My good friend Mal Bridgeman was recently on the twelfth dive of a liveboard trip off Egypt's southernmost Red Sea coastline when he realized he was exhibiting signs of decompression sickness. "My mind started evaluating whether I was bent," he said. "I re-ran the profiles in my head and recalled nothing suspicious. I was convinced I had not needed stops beyond the normal safety stops. There had been no rapid ascents. I had been well hydrated. I had slept well. There had been no excessive currents to deal with." It was a long journey back north to get hyperbaric help but at least the downloaded dives from Bridgeman's computer indicated he had done nothing untoward to precipitate the bend, and the recompression chamber doctor was able to successfully treat him accordingly.

More tragically, David Graves, a well-known journalist working for a British newspaper, drowned on the first day of a press trip to the Bahamas. I was present and very much involved in the recovery of his body and the sad, unsuccessful attempts to resuscitate him. Of course, I, among others, was acutely interested to know the circumstances of his untimely demise. I downloaded his last dive from the computer he had been wearing on his wrist, though it was probably illegal for me to do so. Later, the newspaper got involved in an attempt to bring a manslaughter charge against the dive center with which we had both been diving, and I found myself enduring a six-hour cross-examination in the witness box.

It so happened that the newspaper had commissioned a technical expert to investigate what had happened to their man. He too downloaded the profiles of the two dives Graves had made on that solitary first day of diving. I know this because by co-incidence I happened to share an office with the said technical expert. The downloaded dive profile from Graves' computer told the whole story of what had happened. He had swum off alone, run out of air and made a fast ascent to the surface,

where he could have stayed had he dropped his weight belt or orally inflated his BC, but alas, he dropped and drowned.

The newspaper wanted to make more of a meal of it than that. When the coroner asked the lawyer representing Graves' widow for a printout from his computer, he was disingenuously told it would take around three months. It had taken me only minutes to download, but of course, I was unable to reveal I had that information in court since the computer information was not legally mine to possess.

Today, a Bluetooth connection will allow us to download a dive profile from our computer to our mobile device and/or tablet, then send it to the "cloud" for storage or to any interested party almost as soon as we have surfaced. In fact, we can even house our mobile phone in a watertight housing and, with the right app, use it as a diving computer.

Of course, many divers like to write a comprehensive report of every dive in their logbooks. Some enhance their reporting by putting a printout of the dive profile alongside. For most of us, the big question is, do we need to routinely download every dive and examine the dive profile afterwards? My answer would be, "Do it if it makes you happy." As for me, I'm too busy downloading my photographs.

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

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## You're Flippant and Disrespectful, Ben Davison

### *readers' thoughts about dietary issues and diving*

In March's article "The Perils of Dive Travels," I noted that there are "plenty of good reasons for vegetarian and quasi-vegetarian diets . . . there are plenty of vegans who disdain cheese and milk and eggs, and there are serious allergies such as gluten, which affect about one percent of the population. But Americans seem to have developed all sorts of personal food preferences, and many have discovered unreasonable meal expectations, including gluten-free food when they have no need for it, especially in California . . . So can you imagine how hard it is to cook for picky eaters on a boat in Raja Ampat, off the coast of Costa Rica, or at a 32-diver resort in Utila, Honduras?"

In that article, I quoted one of our readers, who had contacted the *AquaCat* ahead of her Bahamas trip to tell them she was wheat- and gluten-intolerant. "I wish I had known that the boat did not have gluten-free flour, as no alternatives were available," she wrote, "So the 'daily cookie parade' was torture! While Kirk, the chef, acknowledged the issue, he was unable to offer alternatives. The food throughout the week was superb, but my choices were sometimes limited as sauces, etc. were made with flour. Kirk did work hard to exclude flour and offer sauce-free versions, but be aware of this if you are wheat- and gluten-intolerant, and take your own flour with you for the chef to use."

Well, perhaps, but if one person carries gluten-free flour, another peanut-free flour and a third can't stomach yeast, I have a hunch a chef on a boat of 16 guests might throw up his hands. Do your best, my friends, but if you have serious food issues, a liveaboard boat may not be a good choice. In fact, many restaurants in island nations -- yes, even those at little dive resorts -- might find it difficult if not impossible to feed you.



The *Undercurrent* reader who took the *AquaCat* trip was none too happy with what I wrote. "Clearly, you do not give a damn about my medical issues. Your flippant and disrespectful comments about my medical-based dietary requirements are upsetting. I have endured multiple surgeries on my spine and I have titanium rods and a titanium cage holding my spine together. Unfortunately, one of those surgeries damaged my digestive system. My dietary restrictions are not a fad, they're a medical necessity . . . Chef Kirk of *AquaCat* has since advised me to take my own rice flour on future trips, as he had not been advised of my dietary restrictions. Your implication that the chef would have 'thrown up his hands' implies that I am an unreasonable customer, yet he's the one who suggested it. How dare you. I lost weight on that liveaboard due to the fact that I could not eat the snacks that were provided, and I could not eat some of the protein-based meals as they were cooked with wheat flour. *AquaCat* is advertised as a 'luxury liveaboard,' and I do not consider having my meals limited a luxury. As diving is an energy-sapping sport, it's important to have enough food. I took a responsible approach and contacted *AquaCat* one year in advance to check that my requirements could be met, and was assured that they would be . . . Despite your comments, I will indeed take some rice flour with me on the next trip, just in case human error leads to the chef not being informed and the provisions not being bought. . . . Your comments that those of us who have dietary restrictions should not consider a liveaboard are inappropriate, disrespectful and unnecessary, particularly when the liveaboard in question is advertised as 'luxury.'"

***Put your order in ahead, check on it,  
and still bring what you might need.  
Don't get pissed off at the chef -- who  
might at best be only a cook -- if he  
can't do much with it.***

Oh dear. It was not my intent to be dismissive, disrespectful or unconcerned about dietary issues. Nor do I believe I was. Though I plead guilty to not emphasizing that certain food allergies are serious, and if a liveaboard says it will address them, then it must.

However, no matter how luxurious a liveaboard, it's a small vessel. Some are able to pick up fruit, vegetables and fish along the way, but typically, whatever staples are onboard cannot not be replaced or replenished. Some liveaboard chefs have chef-like skills, but a preponderance of chef/cooks who sign on won't make it as line cooks in a serious San Francisco restaurant. So if 16 people each have different dietary needs, I'd expect to see a few hands in the kitchen go up (and hear more than just mumbles). Furthermore, we constantly get stories from our readers who say, "I gave the front office my dietary needs, but the chef said no one told him." Perhaps. Or maybe he forgot. Regardless, if you're on board, what are you going to do if you haven't toted your own ingredients? Well, if it's gluten you're dodging, then you'll miss a few desserts, be eating bread-less sandwiches and bowls of pizza and pasta toppings, and having your fish broiled without sauces. Some people eat that way anyhow.

So Ben, what's your point? If you have serious dietary restrictions, think twice about a liveaboard trip, especially in third world countries. If you go, put your order in ahead, check up on it, and still bring what you might need. Don't get pissed off at the chef -- who might at best only be a cook -- if he can't do much with it. And gorge yourself on fruits and vegetables.

But there are indeed life-threatening allergies, and several divers sent me their thoughts. Holly Bent (Kaawa, HI), an emergency nurse, says, "My favorite dive spot in the world is Indonesia, but I have a reaction to peanuts, the staple of the country, and yes, they will cause an anaphylactic reaction and respiratory failure. I am always guaranteed to use my epi pen on these trips. My advice: Do not expect the chefs to understand, because they don't, unless they suffer from the same conditions." However, she gives kudos to the *Palau Aggressor*. "Chef Cameron was absolutely fabulous, paid attention, and did the best he could with my dietary demands. But folks, he's from the U.S. and his primary language is English, so he gets it."

Beth Tierney, a British dive writer and photographer who authored that fine book *Diving the World*, with husband, Shaun, says, "I know two people who are seriously allergic, one to nuts (my husband) and



another to seafood. The chef needs to know about this because if either person comes in touch with these substances, we are talking death. We find that almost every boat or resort chef will do their utmost. We still carry adrenaline; I still taste every dish first. The seafood sufferer has a doctor wife who stands beside every buffet meal to ensure that no one cross-transfers something that will kill her husband. Me? I don't like to eat red meat, but if that's what is on the menu, vegetables are fine. These things need to be put in perspective. If a certain situation doesn't fit, do something different."

As for liveboards, Deb Berglund (Bozeman, MT), rightfully says that most could do a better job giving advance notice of what food they're putting on the table. "On the *Damai* last December, the cruise director was aware of everyone's food issues and went through the choices in the morning for every meal that day, giving a few options for each, and allowing us to choose what we would like to eat. That makes so much sense. I often get sick on a liveboard due to food allergies and miss a day of diving, simply because I did not know what was in a dish. If all boats did the pre-meal talks, that would not happen. It is critical for me to have someone who speaks English to find out what is in the dishes. Often the language barrier is a problem."

And there is hope. Joseph Proctor (Largo, FL) has a dive buddy who needs to avoid gluten because Celiac disease means she has horrendous stomachaches. "But cooks all over the world are understanding on this issue. We have been on resorts and liveboards all over the Caribbean and the world, including the Maldives, Papua New Guinea and Palau. With only one bad exception (*Turks & Caicos Explorer*), we have had excellent service with regard to her dietary needs. We always supply advance notice of her needs, and have always been greeted with kitchen staff making sure she was taken care of. We have learned to take our oatmeal and sometimes bring our own macaroons, which causes some jealousy from other divers."

So, my fellow foodies with dietary restrictions, pack your rice cookies and have a good trip.

-- Ben Davison

## Goodbye, Cap'n Don

Last week, we lost one of diving's truly legendary figures, Cap'n Don Stewart, who not only put Bonaire diving on everyone's wish list, but always bucked convention by thumbing his nose at those who wished to control the sport. He insisted we keep diving fun. I loved his attitude.

The good Captain told me that he used to hang out at the "no-name bar" in Sausalito with hordes of other scruffy sailors, actor Sterling Hayden among them. In 1961, he set sail down the California coast, stopping, scuffling and drinking in endless ports, and when he arrived, "hurricane whipped," in Bonaire, he put on his mask, stuck his face in the water, marveled at the reefs and fish and, well, that was that.

I first dived with Cap'n Don in 1976, when he had a beach shack at the dim Hotel Bonaire, which had been converted from a WWII internment camp. Bruce Bowker was his guide. For guided beach dives, we jumped off cliffs, then used ropes to raise our gear, and ourselves, back up. He wore no depth gauge, just a red

ribbon on his BC that turned shades of blue the deeper we went; he knew our depth in five-foot increments. At the end of my diving week, he pointed up the coast, past oil tanks, to where he was someday going to build his "habitat." I wished the dreamer well.

A marvelous character in his day, Don was witty, cantankerous, irreverent, blustery and, for sure, a top-notch and sensitive instructor whose students became first-class divers. In the days when people were breaking off hunks of coral to take home for their mantels, he guarded the reefs as if they were his private gardens. On Bonaire, and in my heart, his legend will live forever.

-- Ben Davison



# Flotsam & Jetsam

**Can Big Fish Predict Hurricanes?** More than 750 sharks, tarpon, tuna and billfish, fitted with satellite-linked tags, are providing scientists at the University of Miami with data on temperature and salinity in the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean, because they think that info could be used to improve hurricane forecasts. Three years ago, the scientists discovered a remarkable pattern: The fish remained in waters with temperatures around 79 degrees, the minimum required for tropical systems to develop, and many swam into waters around tropical systems, which churned up nutrients and made hunting easier. That's when scientists realized fish could provide accurate ocean temperatures, which could be fed into computer models forecasters use to develop tropical predictions. The National Hurricane Center is noncommittal, saying it does not expect the fish to have "a significant influence on hurricane forecasting." But the Miami scientists say tag data shows many fish swam directly into the paths of storms, including Hurricane Katrina. We'll see how active the fish are this year: Federal forecasters expect a slower-than-usual Atlantic hurricane season.

## Divers Facing Hefty Fines for Wreck Treasures.

Two British divers were hauled into court after failing to declare \$400,000 worth of historic treasure they plundered from shipwrecks. Over the course of 13 years, Edward Huzzey, 55, and David Knight, 52, dived off the Dover coast and used explosives and professional cutting equipment to salvage valuables from nine submerged vessels, including German submarines from WWI, and a ship carrying East India Company cargo in 1807. Their haul contained eight bronze cannons, worth \$20,000 each, three propellers, ingot, copper, lead and zinc. But they failed to inform the Maritime and Coastal Agency's Receiver of Wrecks about their finds. The pair pleaded guilty to 19 charges, and they now face hefty fines, with maximum penalties of \$4,500 for each

undeclared find, or the risk that they must pay the rightful owners twice the value of the items recovered. This is the first time the agency has brought a case to court for divers failing to declare their haul; Huzzey and Knight will be sentenced on July 2.

**The Deepest-Diving Mammal on the Planet Is ...** the Cuvier's beaked whale, which is able to reach a depth of nearly 1.9 miles. In another record-breaker, this type of whale has held its breath for two hours and 17 minutes. Those figures surpass the 1.5-mile and two-hour dives of elephant seals, which had previously held those records among mammals. The results come from 3,700 hours of diving data on eight tagged whales. The creatures' average dives measured almost 0.9 miles, and they usually lasted more than an hour. How do they do it? Their muscles are packed with a protein called myoglobin, which lets them store vast amounts of oxygen. They also have rib cages that can fold down, collapsing the lungs and reducing air pockets. But exactly how Cuvier's beaked whales manage to avoid high-pressure nervous syndrome, a neurological and physiological diving disorder with symptoms ranging from tremors to decreased mental performance, is still unknown.

**Let's Give Memory Cards More Credit.** We curse them for corrupt files and irretrievable photographs, but sometimes they perform above and beyond. Paul Burgoyne's camera went down with the ship while he was sailing from Vancouver to his summer home in Tahsis, B.C., two years ago. Understandably, he never expected to see those photos again. But last month, Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre students discovered the camera while doing research dives off Aguilar Point, B.C. It was in bad shape and covered in multiple marine species, but when the researchers plugged in the now-dry 8GB Lexar Platinum, it worked right away. They posted a photo on Twitter and hoped for the best. A Bamfield coast guard station member who helped rescue Burgoyne two years prior recognized him from the photo and got in touch. After two years in frigid Pacific waters, the card, which included priceless photos of his family scattering his parents' ashes in a Canadian lake, is making its way back to its owner.

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