

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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NAD-Lembeh Resort, Indonesia

great critters, great people, great prices

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Dear Fellow Diver:

When going to the ends of the dive world -- and Indonesia is -- I make sure I travel to the best dive facility with the best guides. Having visited Bali, Komodo and Raja Ampat on extended prior trips, I would start this trip in Lembeh (pronounced "Lem-bay"), about a 90-minute drive from the Manado airport, followed by a short boat ride. I was in search of muck diving and Lembeh, with a well-protected, narrow channel between it and the mainland, has world-renowned critter diving. It would take me 43 real hours to get there and almost two kilobucks in airfare, so I researched the 13 dive resorts in the Lembeh Straits and finally selected NAD-Lembeh Resort, priced at \$150 a night, including diving.

I arrived late afternoon and hadn't even unpacked when I was asked by other guests to join a night dive -- some had just arrived from 30-plus hour trips, so why not? Stanley, the "top" guide (whom I requested in advance), helped me get my equipment ready. After a five-minute ride on the fast wooden skiff, we reached the AER Parang I dive site. I backrolled into 82-degree water and descended with Stanley. Within 60 seconds, I was staring at a coconut octopus. Then Stanley pointed out a bobtail squid. Then a bright red reef octopus. Then a six-inch umbrella shell nudibranch. And a juvenile scorpionfish, a cluster of squid eggs inside a coconut shell, a small frogfish waiving its bait. And so it continued. Whenever I looked up from my current critter, Stanley had another wait- ing: a small yellow



One of NAD-Lembeh Resort's Dive Boats



frogfish, two flounders playing (mating?) in the sand, a foot-long, free-swimming banded pipefish, a seemingly unafraid golden jawfish, a crocodile flathead, and shrimp everywhere. For the entire 70-minute dive, I never waited more than a minute to discover or be directed to something unique. Then, an easy climb up the sturdy ladder, and I was met with a dry towel and hot tea and snacks.

Before I arrived, I thought I would be diving an underwater garbage dump that had unusual

critters because nothing else could live there. True, there is some trash from the villages and commercial ships in Lembeh straits, but the trash serves as critter housing and was not a distraction. And there were healthy coral reefs at many sites -- 100 feet of lettuce coral, small walls filled with soft corals, sea fans with pigmy seahorses, barrel sponges big enough to crawl inside, schools of juvenile fish -- but a shortage of big fish.

The next morning, four Taiwanese divers with their guide joined Stenley, me, and my new dive buddy, Andreas, whom I had met the night before. This young German not only carried a great camera setup, but also knew how to find critters. I was traveling by myself, so I felt lucky to find such an experienced dive buddy. After another short ride, I backrolled into the water and descended 70 feet to a cockatoo flounder. After easing away, I saw the Taiwanese photographing other critters without stirring a speck of sediment. They were so sharp-eyed that many times they pointed out "finds" to their guide as well as to us fellow divers. I usually end a dive with plenty of air to spare, but these guys were so good, I switched to a 100 cu-ft. tank to log dives as long as 85 minutes without worrying I might miss something if I ran low on air.

NAD-Lembah provided a guide for every four people (I was by myself or with one or two others for all of my 24 dives), and separated dive groups in order to minimize the wait to see the latest "find" and hold down the silt. Nearly every diver had a housed SLR camera with video and red modeling lights to frame the critters. NAD limited each diver to three minutes viewing or five photographs -- a great idea because too often I've seen photographers take dozens of shots of the same critter, oblivious to all around them, then stir up silt when they chase after the next critter. Having photographed for 35 years, I recently downsized (literally) to a housed Olympus Pen Mini and shot videos and a few stills. I missed my macro capabilities -- if you're a serious photographer, you will need a true macro lens.

While I had requested and been promised Stenley for my guide, a professional photographer arrived at the resort on my third day, so Stenley joined the professional and I was assigned to a good but less-experienced guide. I've noticed that at many places, the more money your photography gear is worth, the better the guide you're assigned. After a few days, I requested they make good on their promise, but oddly, they "solved" the problem by taking Stenley off all dives (rest time) and leaving me with my guide. Regardless, my guide spent every minute of every dive looking for critters, so what's to complain about?

NAD-Lembah resort is beautifully set in a small cove at the foot of a steep hill. There are 10 motel-style beachfront rooms and four hillside bungalows. Simon, a German who's lived in Indonesia for years, and his wife, Zee, a native Indonesian, bought the resort five years ago. They added a camera room with 10 individual booths plus counters, rebuilt the outdoor dining area (with a beautiful view of the bay and mainland volcanic mountains), refurbished the rooms and

added the four bungalows. With improvements still ongoing, they're on their way to creating the best facility and dive operation in Lembeh. My private hillside bungalow was just a short walk, had a great view and was a steal at only a couple of hundred dollars a week more than the smaller beach rooms. A wooden front deck led into my spacious room with a king-sized bed with mosquito netting, an armoire, a desk and a large private bath. Room #10 and bungalow #1 have the best views. Sheets and towels were changed every two days, or daily if I asked.

Tea, ice and coffee or espresso from a Krups grinder and coffee machine were available 24 hours. Breakfast was eggs any way I liked, served with fresh homemade bread, meat and cereal. Lunch and dinner usually had fish, a meat, veggies, bread, juice and a light desert. Indonesian and Asian preparations as well as "western" cuisine were options at all meals. I especially enjoyed the Indonesian dishes, but with six weeks' total travel in Indonesia, I didn't let a good hamburger go uneaten when it was offered. Vegetarians were easily accommodated. Good food in the open-air dining room with a beautiful view, mild temperatures and great staff and fellow guests made meals something to look forward to.

Sergio, the resort manager, always delivered, whether I asked him for a fish ID or noted a burned-out light bulb. Both Simon and Sergio are excellent professional photographers and eager to share photo tips and fix equipment. They and Zee always ate with us, often asking if everything was OK. I can't imagine that anyone could leave NAD with an unresolved complaint.

The four dive boats had 12 slots each. On my third day, exactly 12 guests were diving, but the resort still took two boats, four guides and six crew. We rarely saw another dive boat. The crew took care of all the equipment and tank changes, and helped divers climb aboard. Shore dives are reportedly "not bad," but with three dives and a night dive, I was already getting five hours underwater daily, so I didn't test those waters. Indonesia law mandates that all employees below top management must be Indonesians, so language limitations meant briefings were limited and almost always the same: Dive to rubble or sand at 60 to 90 feet, move to rubble or sand slope at 30 to 60 feet and coral above 30 feet (unless in a harbor). I never dove below 100 feet -- it just wasn't necessary -- but those who chose to dive their own profile or solo did so without scolding.

I often saw mimic, long-arm and wonderpus octopuses on the same dive, and even blue-ring octopuses. I eventually quit videoing them to enjoy just watching the mimic mimic the wonderpus, a cuttlefish or even a flounder. Color changes were remarkable. On one dive, I saw an eel slither tail-first into a hole and come out with a big worm -- maybe a ribbon eel -- in its mouth. Small cuttlefish were on every dive, and porcupinefish were everywhere. Various anemones were everywhere, too, home to several different kinds of anemonefish, many aggressively protecting their recently-laid eggs. Dive days

NAD-Lembeh Resort, Indonesia

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

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



One of the Hillside Bungalows

Are Lionfish Hunts Making It Harder to Kill Them?

Given the Caribbean and Atlantic invasion by the Indo-Pacific lionfish, dive operators generally consider it a good idea to hunt down and kill this serious predator to preserve indigenous creatures. However, what if those repeated hunts are actually influencing lionfish behavior, making the species harder to find and kill off? Research published in the online journal *PLOS One* in April suggests just that.

Researchers at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia compared how lionfish act if they lived in an area where spear-based culling had occurred to lionfish living in areas where no such hunts had taken place. The 16 coral reef patches were all in the Bahamas. On eight of those patches, divers had been culling the lionfish with three-prong pole spears every three or six months for two years. On culled reefs, a lower proportion of the fish were active during the day, and they hid themselves much more carefully as well. The investigators assigned a "hiding score" to the fish based on certain behaviors; half of the lionfish on culled reefs achieved the highest such score, compared to only 19 percent of those on the uncultured reefs. This suggests, of course, that if a lionfish survives a cull, it becomes more likely to survive the next one as well. It is, in a sense, a very rapid form of natural selection.

Of course, any animal hunted by humans presumably might alter its behavior to avoid being killed. However, this study does have implications for how to control invasives. Culls sometimes set goals of a certain percentage of the species, but if we intentionally leave 30 percent of an animal, it may make it that much harder to get back to 30 percent the next time we give it a shot. This also backs up those invasive species-control programs that aim for total annihilation. For example, the leader of an attempt to kill off the invasive brown rat in the sub-Antarctic Island of South Georgia said last year that "killing 99.999 percent is a failure. If we don't get every last one, we may as well not have gone there in the first place."

With the lionfish, this study just adds fuel to the idea that aiming for eradication is likely the best approach. In one Bahamas study from 2012, an increase in lionfish abundance coincided with a 65 percent drop in the total biomass of the 42 types of fish that it eats. It is likely not possible to completely eradicate the invasive lionfish from the Atlantic at this point, but plans for individual culls may have to consider marine life's ability to adapt in order to keep this problem fish's population down.

"What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Wary? Effect of Repeated Culling on the Behavior of an Invasive Predator," by IM Cote, ES Darling, L Malpica-Cruz et al; PLOS One, 9 (4) e94248. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0094248

at a special Mandarinfish site with uncharacteristically brave Mandarinfish are rotated among the 13 resorts. There was virtually no current, and I had 82-degree water temperatures and 30- to 70-foot visibility on every dive (it's better in the non-rainy season). The warm waters may predispose some divers to external ear canal infections. I wore a thin hood, more to protect my ears from the bubbles constantly "washing" out my protective ear wax than for warmth.

For divers staying longer, there are two excellent wreck dives in the channel, one at 80 feet and a WWII freighter at 100 feet. At both ends of Lembeh Strait are reportedly excellent reef dives with even richer coral, schools of larger fish, pelagics, etc. But muck diving is the draw, as characterized by one couple who have been coming for two months each year for five years and have only done muck dives.

I've made about 1,400 dives worldwide, and compared to the other divers there, I was roughly in the middle of the pack in terms of experience. One of the NAD "regulars" was a retired, 75-year-old doctor who, while physically limited, had a mind and memory so sharp that I found myself seeking him out for my unknown critter IDs. One recommendation is that you might be wise to save Lembeh until you've done a fair amount of Pacific diving. It's not about coral, reefs or fish, at least not big fish. It's about critters. It takes a special diver -- one with a good camera -- to appreciate just how special this place is.

-- P.R.

Divers Compass: Two morning dives, an afternoon dive and all meals were included in my \$1,260, eight-night package . . . My



airfare was just under \$2,000, and direct flights to Manado are available on international carriers; NAD arranged my pickup at the Manado airport in a private car for \$18 each way . . . Flying outbound, I had a six-hour stay at the Singapore Ambassador Transit Hotel -- within the airport, so you don't have to spend hours going through customs -- which cost me under \$50 (www.harilelahospitality.com), and I had a stopover in Japan on the return trip . . . There was a \$25 pay-on-arrival Indonesian visa charge, and each flight in Indonesia had a \$5 to 25 airport tax added at the departure gate, payable only in Indonesian rupiah, so change \$100 in the Singapore, Hong Kong or Tokyo airports . . . Nitrox, at 30 to 32 percent, is a steep \$20 a day, regardless of the number of dives . . . A five-liter oxygen bottle and mask are on every boat; the nearest hyperbaric chamber is in Manado . . . Best times to go are June through October, when the new batch from critter nurseries has grown a bit; the low season is January to March -- more rain and the critters tend to be deeper -- but I went in late February and had no problems or regrets . . . A 22-ounce Bintang beer was \$4, soft drinks were \$1- \$2, and other drinks were available, although many brought their own hard liquor . . . Massages were available, and free Wi-Fi is in the common area/restaurant . . . Malaria is rare, though I still took generic Malarone, but European divers who lived in southeast Asia, and the European owners/staff never took anti-malarial meds . . . This area of Indonesia is mostly Christian, at 70 percent of total population, with 30 percent relatively recent Muslim "immigrants" from other parts of Indonesia; while Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of any country, it has virtually no religious strife . . . Website: www.nad-lembeh.com

Costa Rica, Montserrat, St. Eustatius . . .

hidden gems, bad air and the jerk of the month

Our reader reports, emails and letters sent to me, plus my conversations with divers, have yielded a trove of information. From time to time, I think it's wise to share unusual items with you, in hopes that you will be able to find enticing new experiences, while avoiding nasty problems that you might learn about only when you arrive. Diving isn't cheap -- no, it is damn expensive -- and if I can save you from a bad trip, I'm doing my job. Here are a few tips.

The Maldives Aggressor. "Of the 22 liveaboards I've done, this was one of the three most beautiful," writes longtime *Undercurrent* correspondent Pat Wikstrom (Warne, NC). But larger-than-average divers should be forewarned, he writes. "I was surprised at how small the cabins were . . . My cabin mate and I took turns standing up to access the closet, bathroom or sink. I was assigned one of two 'value twin' cabins in the bow, along with the vessel's owner, a big, burly Italian businessman known as George O. The forward cabins have the narrowest bunks, at 28 inches, with the top one having a minimal amount of head space. No way could you sit up on that bed. I was unable to hold a hardbound book on my chest without it contacting the ceiling. There was a reasonable amount of headspace in the lower bunk, but George O. had laid claim to it before my arrival. Other cabins had larger bunks, and the deluxe cabins had wide lower bunks so that couples could sleep in one and use the upper for storage." Regardless, "the mostly Maldivian and Sri Lankan crew of 10 was service-oriented, friendly and genuinely interested in our having good dives and a pleasant trip. Their Ari Atoll and North and South Male itineraries provided a great mix of dive sites within the 21 dives they served up." (P.S. Go to the website -- www.aggressor.com/maldives.php -- to look at cabin configuration so you can pick the proper cabin for you and your buddy).

Other Aggressors. The Aggressor fleet is a collection of liveaboards owned by individual investors, and not all are keeping their crafts up to Aggressor's standards. Last year, we had reports of the poor condition of the *Thailand Aggressor*, and in April, Elizabeth Russell (West Mifflin, PA), who had just returned from the

South Andaman Sea itinerary, wrote, "We booked cabin 1 and ended up in cabin 9 due to lack of air-conditioning in cabin 1. The sewer backed up several inches into our shower room. We had a sporadic water supply for two days."

"On the first dive, my wife suffered from carbon dioxide poisoning -- disorientation, hyperventilation and nausea, and she nearly lost consciousness at depth."

Word is that the *Fiji Aggressor* needs some TLC as well. Cheryl S. (Hendersonville, TN), aboard in May, says, "The boat was decent, but we had no hot water in the shower or sink. No Nitrox. Light bulbs burned out and were not replaced, the dive deck was in deplorable condition, so attention to details and maintenance is not a priority for the boat owner, whom-ever that is . . . This boat is giving Aggressor Fleet a bad name and reputation." She adds that they took

"a contrived visit to a village that was way far out of the way . . . meaning there were limited dives the next day because the boat had to travel for six hours to get back to Suva."

When Peter Hughes ran the *Dancer* fleet, he was a serious competitor for the *Aggressor* fleet, but now that they are under the same ownership, the lack of Fiji and Thailand competition give divers fewer choices, and doesn't put pressure on individual owners to keep their boats up to snuff.

Bad Air in Honduras. Now here's a report that concerns me. Larry A. Malato (Woodinville, WA), who went out with Coconut Tree Divers on Roatan in May, writes, "The compressor had to be shut down every time the neighbors had a fire to 'roast beans.' A hole had worn in the intake line inside the dark, dusty, oily-smelling compressor shed. On the first dive, my wife suffered from carbon dioxide poisoning -- extreme confusion, disorientation, hyperventilation, nausea, and she nearly lost consciousness at depth. The shop could never get our nitrox percentage correct. We canceled planned normoxic dives. We made a wreck dive down a line that went to a 150-foot. bottom with no wreck in site. The shop did not know which buoy went to the wreck. The boat was tiny and would nearly capsize when we tried to get our doubles on board at the end of a dive. The boat crew were incompetent kids. The owner and lead instructor smoked constantly. Divers Alert Network has been informed, and we are now seeing DAN doctors to determine if my wife has any long-term issues as a result of the carbon dioxide poisoning. She has no memory of the events underwater on that first dive. This was an extreme event."

Dividing in the Post-Typhoon Philippines. An unfortunate share of the Philippines got beaten up badly by typhoons last year, but many dive travel agents argued that divers should not cancel trips in order to support the operations that got harmed and help the locals. Jim Willoughby (Bend, OR) was one of those divers who decided to stick it out and proceed with his March group trip to dive with thresher sharks at Tepanee Beach Resort on Malapascua Island. He writes, "Although we were well aware that Malapascua had suffered from significant damage after Typhoon Yolanda, we were led to believe [by the dive operator] that there was little to no damage to the reef system, and that the dive operation was back to normal, as was the resort. We were not told that the restaurant furnishing our meals for our nine days there was completely destroyed by the typhoon. We ate under a tarp out in the weather for every meal . . . The reef system was either completely destroyed by the typhoon or was never in good condition. I feel compassion for the people of Malapascua; however, we had a group of 21 people who spent several thousand dollars on a very disappointing dive trip . . . No real complaints about the resort other than one of the specific requirements of our booking was that we have Internet access, as many of us were on a 'working,' vacation, but the Internet was nonexistent for the entire stay. When talking with the owner of the resort, I only got excuses."

I should add, however, that Mario Mizrahi (Mexico City) dived Malapascua in March with the Sea Explorers, stayed at the Ocean Vida Hotel and had no problems whatsoever. He says, "One has to be understanding. Perhaps living in a third world country [as he does] gives us a more relaxed point of view." That said, my own rule of thumb is that if a disaster hits a dive resort area, I don't listen to the representatives or

the agencies that urge us to continue our trips to “support the people.” They want their commission, but I want a good dive vacation. I’ve changed such trips to ensure my good vacation, but showed my support instead with a healthy financial contribution to relief agencies that have boots on the ground.

Below are tips on four interesting venues that get little publicity, but our readers found pretty good diving and lots of other things to do as well.

Montserrat. A short flight from Antigua, Montserrat was covered in ash in 1996 after its volcano blew, making life miserable for residents (only 4,000 or so remain, about a quarter of the previous population). I dived there a month before the eruption and found pretty reefs but endless fish traps and few fish. For the past 18 years, fishing pressure has been reduced, as has the affect of agriculture and sewage on the reef. Mark Magers (Oakland, CA) says it’s a good place for a unique vacation. He and his wife dived with Scuba Montserrat last November, and he reports, “We spent five days diving with Emmy and Andrew of Scuba Montserrat and saw a good underwater environment. With the exception of some algae, it compares favorably with Dominica for the variety and health of coral and fish. Lots of healthy soft corals, gorgonians and barrel sponges. Lots of juvenile fish of many species. I saw thousands of scad (guess that is why they call them scad?) about five inches long on a shore dive; they were being hunted, so the action was incredible. We did most of our surface intervals at an isolated beach with lots of turtle nests and fresh turtle tracks, like monster-truck tires, from the previous night. Scuba Montserrat shares a small, open boat with a couple of local fishermen. We were the only two diving, with the exception of one day when we had a ‘full boat’ of four divers. Emmy and Andrew also run the Montserrat Reef Ball project, and to date have placed nearly 200 concrete reef balls on a large sandy expanse in 15- to 40-foot depths. We toured the area and saw a lot of juveniles, an octopus living in one ball, and a school of about 30 reef squid that followed us for the entire dive. Above water, there is plenty to do if you like the outdoors -- hiking, kayaking, exploring. Drinking Carib beers at Pont’s Place after the diving is a good way to end the day.” (www.scubamontserrat.com)

When Your Sausage Fails

While diving in the Coral Sea during the first week of April, our irascible Aussie contributor, Bob Halstead, ended up a great distance from the Golden Dawn with a failed safety sausage. He used a simple solution to get spotted.

“We had a splendid time with the sharks at Picasso Pass, and I swam further down the pass, keeping my left shoulder to the slope. After a while, I was a bit concerned when the others had not caught up. I had found a hot spot with thousands of jacks, barracuda and other fish milling around. Truly spectacular! But the others missed it all. I found out later that they had taken a shortcut back to the boat. I was surprised no one else was around, so before I entirely ran out of nitrox (I also had a full pony bottle), I decided to do my stop in the shallows, then surface.

“Whoops! When I surfaced, I could not see anything, because the swells had picked up and the seas were confused. I slowly circled and looked out as I reached the top of a swell. After a couple of quarter turns, I spotted the boat a long way away. I could have gone down again and made my way at least partly back,

but because I thought they might be looking for me, I decided to inflate my safety sausage, then return to the surface. I can swim all day with fins on.

“The idea was to inflate my BC, turn on my back, use a cloud beyond my fins for approximate direction, and swim to the boat with my orange sausage flying bravely above the waves. Great plan except my new but, alas, untested sausage (silly me) had a faulty seal at the far end and leaked every breath I blew in.

“I wrapped the erectile dysfunctional sausage around my shoulders and swam, still on my back. Every few kicks, I cupped a handful of ocean with my right hand and tossed it in the air. Yes, I pretended to be a whale!

“Throwing water in the air really works, and within a couple of minutes, Engineer Ben spotted me, and that was the end of the story. Shame was I returned with far too much nitrox still in my tank. Good to remember that the useful buddy is the one looking out for you on the boat!”

We’ve put Bob’s full story on our website. To read the rest of it, go to our blog page (www.undercurrent.org/blog), then click on “When Your Sausage Fails.”

Costa Rica's Pacific Coast. You can get have some great dive experiences in 80-degree water off Costa Rica's Pacific side, but I'm surprised how few of our readers do. Christopher Watt (Needham, MA) went out with Aqua Rica in January while staying at the Hotel Diria in Tamarindo, and reports, "We were on a one-week family trip with our teenage kids, looking for a mix of adventure activities with some diving. Costa Rica certainly delivered -- volcano watching, a zip-line canopy tour, whitewater rafting, surfing . . . We chose Tamarindo as we were looking to find some surfing, scuba, snorkeling and a beachfront hotel with some 'action' for the teens. Lots of restaurants, a small shopping mall, many surf shops, and a beautiful beach with waves that were quite steady . . . Hotel Tamarindo Diria is in the middle of the town and on the beach; Agua Rica is a five-minute walk down the beach from the Diria. . . . they ferried us from the beach to their six-pack-sized dive boat to dive the Catalina Islands, a 45-minute boat ride away. The boat was manned by a captain and one or two divemasters, dependent upon the number of customers. Dives ranged from 45 to 60 feet deep, visibility was 20 to 45 feet. On one day of significant current, our group of five surfaced 500 yards from the boat. I inflated my six-foot sausage and the boat immediately headed our way. I really enjoyed the diving. Highlights: nearly a dozen white-tipped reef sharks, three spotted eagle rays underwater (I also saw many rays jumping out of the water on the surface), a large school of Pacific barracuda, countless green and jeweled morays, a snake eel, Spanish dancers, scorpionfish, countless butterflyfish, king angelfish, and on the surface, bottlenose dolphins and humpback whales. Some great stuff." (www.tamarindodiria.com; www.aguarica.net)

When he spotted a whale shark, he decided to become king of the ocean and jumped in to grab its fin and hitch a ride.

Dive Grenada. Grenada is one of the more beautiful and interesting Caribbean islands, and for divers, it has a great wreck dive and nice reefs in the protected area. Ken New (Emery, SD) went out with Dive Grenada in March and found it a "well-run operation, both professional and friendly. Very safety-conscious. Divemasters worked hard to show us interesting stuff and took good

care of novice divers with us on two dives. When we requested to dive the *Bianca C.*, a deeper wreck, they arranged it . . . Marine life is fairly prolific in the protected marine conservation area, not so much elsewhere, as this is a subsistence-fishing economy. We got lucky and followed four whales on the way to one dive -- there's a site on the Atlantic side with reliable views of nurse sharks and occasional sightings reef sharks; we saw lobsters and free-swimming eels as well. Hotel Flamboyant is super-convenient, as the dive shop is on its grounds. (www.divegrenada.com)

Golden Rock Dive Center, St. Eustatius. Finally, off-the-beaten-track St. Eustatius is one of my favorite "old Caribbean" spots, where cruise ships don't visit, restaurants are small and local, and the people are charming. Mark Ward (Beaverton, OR) dived with Golden Rock Dive Center in March and reports "all dives are a short boat trip away. On all but one dive, there were two guides and four divers. Staff is fun, smart, totally into the diving, safe but not excessively so. Golden Rock normally goes out for a dive at 9 a.m. and another at 11:30 a.m., and they can do afternoon or night dives by request. The coral is in beautiful shape -- it has great color and variety, which attracts nice fish life. We saw turtles, lobsters (big ones!), tons of stingrays, a few sharks, and pufferfish. There are a few interesting wrecks, some as shallow as 60 feet. The Old Gin House sits on the shore, with large rooms cleaned daily. The staff was always friendly and helpful. On the day we hiked up the volcano, they actually offered to make us a breakfast that we could pick up the evening before." (www.goldenrockdive.com; www.oldginhouse.com)

Jerk of the Month. Jamie Bostwick runs Aristakat Charters, a small dive boat out of Venice, Florida. In early June, when he spotted a whale shark, he decided to become king of the ocean and jumped in to grab its fin and hitch a ride. To him, he accomplished the number-one item on his bucket list and posted it on his Facebook page. To us, he ignored the norms of any good dive boat captain and turned the whale shark into a circus ride. As it turns out, it's not illegal to do such a thing in Florida, it's just that we divers expect our dive boat captains -- especially in the good old US of A -- to keep their hands off the wildlife.

Another Review of the *Damai's* Food. Regarding our June review of the *Damai I*, where our reporter didn't think much of the food on that very pricey vessel, Linda Rutherford (Montara, CA) responded, "Our travel agent had written in advance to request certain food items such as Zero Coke, avocados, etc . . . and they were provided. The staff provided a general menu for the day, and one could say, 'Yes, I want that menu,' or 'No, I would like XYZ instead.' One person was a vegetarian, and she got a special meal. Another person did not eat fish ((he said, 'Fish are my friends'), so he got chicken or beef. And the list went on. Everyone who wanted something special, got something special. The three times I have been there, the food has been very good."

Thanks for your comments, Linda. Our writer was not part of a group and had no dietary needs, so made no requests in advance -- he didn't think it would be necessary on this luxury trip. His concern was mainly that the food was bland and not particularly interesting. He was paying \$600 a night in a country where a dollar goes a very long way, and had better meals at \$10-a-dinner restaurants. Regardless, tastes differ, and food may differ from cruise to cruise. No doubt the *Damai* folks have read our article. Let us know how the food is next time you go.

Enough already. Enjoy your Fourth of July, whether you're underwater or above.

-- Ben Davison

Other Dive Travel Groups

specialized dive trips for those who don't want the norm

The standard dive club's travel outing is not for everyone. Say you prefer early nights but every other diver wants to party. Or you're a single diver but everyone else is coupled up. Or you'd like to do other things besides diving on your trip -- posh spa treatments or volunteer work -- and you don't know of any other diver who wants to join you.

Last month, we had an article about why it's worth signing up for dive trips organized by dive shops -- let someone else do the heavy-duty travel planning for you. But there are other, more specialized dive organizations that serve single divers, female divers, gay divers, Christian divers and others. Sure, diving is diving, but when they're not in the water, some divers want to hang out with those who share their interests and lifestyle. Even if none of these groups are right for you, you may know a fellow diver who finds one of these groups a perfect fit for his or her next overseas dive trip.

Diving Divas

Lana McGlynn worked at the Pentagon and had an out-of-office meeting on September 11, 2001, when a plane crashed into the building and killed many of her co-workers. After dealing with the grief and guilt, her sister told her, "Think of something you want to go do, and do it." So at age 52, McGlynn decided to learn to dive. But the experience wasn't great. "Doing my checkout dive in a lake in a 7-mil suit with hood and gloves, I wasn't comfortable, and my instructor wasn't friendly to older women." Then on her first dive trip, she went with a mixed group that had a lot of young divers and a lot of partying. "I was at an age at which that didn't interest me." But McGlynn didn't throw in the towel. She started looking for dive buddies, became a dive instructor and started the online group Diving Divas. "I was sure there were other women like me who wanted to dive but just didn't know how to connect with fellow divers."

Twelve years later, she runs two to three dive trips a year for women divers, with ages typically ranging from mid-30s to mid-60s, but McGlynn says no one is too old to go, "as long as your knees get you up the ladder." No single guys allowed, but husbands are. The spring 2014 trip to Utila

included a veterinarian from Minnesota, a psychologist from Montana, an IT professional from Oklahoma and an assistant Secretary of State. "The women are all professionals, with interesting backgrounds, and they have stuff to talk about beyond diving," says McGlynn. "Some have come into the sport after their kids are raised, may be widowed or divorced, they're in a new phase of life, and they want to have someone to share that adventure with. They won't get that on the local dive shop outing." Besides the diving, McGlynn plans fun surface intervals. During a Bonaire trip last year, she planned a beach BBQ, a private dinner on the pier at Divi Flamingo, and a watercolor class with a local artist. "We're serious divers, but we want nice amenities and we enjoy having the spa treatments."

Trips fill up fast -- there's a wait list for the November trip aboard the *Tropic Dancer* in Palau, and three spots left for Little Cayman in February. The trip after that is the *Sun Dancer* in Belize next July. All experience levels are welcome, although some liveaboard trips, like the Palau one, require nitrox certifications. But McGlynn says all divers on her trips form quick bonds. "It's a leap of faith to come by yourself, you're not sure who you'll be rooming with, you just trust it will all work out. And because of that, we watch out for each other on dives, and loan each other gear. Being women, there's just that sense of sisterhood." (www.divingdivas.com)

National Association of Black Divers

NABS, as it's commonly known, is the oldest dive-specific group of this bunch. It was formed in Washington D.C in 1959 when African-Americans, even those who served in the military's aquatic divisions, encountered dive clubs that resisted allowing them to join. Besides forming their own organization so they could keep diving, the founders wanted to serve a demographic that had been ignored by the dive community. Even as society changed its views on race, NABS keeps flourishing, says Zel Head, its marketing director. "NABS is neither an organization that advocates segregation, nor does it discourage non

Divemasters Wanted: You Pay Us to Work Here

It seems that to get a solid job in a major industry -- law, investment banking, even in environmental organizations or on Capitol Hill -- young folks have to serve as unpaid interns between school terms, or even for a year after graduation. But there's no job guaranteed at the end of it. No wonder there's a move afoot to recognize that this is a sly way for big employers to get unpaid help from talented people with enough financial resources to volunteer. Ross Perlin, author of *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy*, calls it "a racket, not an opportunity."

Interesting that it has come to the dive industry as well. In Costa Rica, Rocket Frog Divers offers a divemaster internship program that "prepares our interns for a life full of fun and adventure working in the diving industry. We do much more than teach you to dive . . . We introduce our interns to dealing with customers in the shop, on the boat and in the water. You will also learn a lot about working on the boat, in the pool, around the shop and at the compressor. All things that will make you highly employable when you start searching for your first job."

Their first intern, Jonnie Rowe (they call him Shaggy), stuck around to develop the program, which, he says, has had "pretty much an even mix of Americans, Canadians, Brits and two local Costa Ricans. Interns actually pay us in the range of \$700, depending on their current PADI certification. We don't offer room and board, but we arrange it at a very reasonable rate of around \$200 per month. And they live with only other interns. They always love it and get a whole lot of experience in the water, on the boat, in the shop and in the bar most of the time . . ."

Exploitation? Sure, in that interns pay for their certifications while busting their humps schlepping tanks, scrubbing down the pool and sweeping out the heads, hopefully learning a few things about divemastering and customer service along the way. And good for Rocket Frog. They don't have to hire any local kids who could really use the money.

Nonetheless, for divemaster trainees from the First World, you can bet it's a lot more fun than trying to keep their heads above water interning in a Wall Street derivatives department, though it's unlikely that was an option they had considered. So, you want to send your kid or grandkid? Here's the application (www.scuba-dive-costa-rica.com/divemaster-internship)

African-Americans from participating in its dive activities. The NABS identity happens to be a reflection of its past of which members are extremely proud.”

NABS has various chapters nationwide, plus two in Africa, that run their own specific dive trips, but headquarters manages a big annual summit. With 150-plus members typically attending every year, NABS often books an entire dive resort (non-diving activities are offered for non-diving spouses). This year, the summit is in Cozumel November 8-15. A typical day includes a two-tank dive, with night dives an option, plus other evening events such as theme parties, talent shows and speakers from the scientific community talking about marine-specific topics. Besides diving, NABS does community outreach to benefit the local population, so members volunteer in food kitchens, provide labor and materials to fix orphanages, do environmental cleanups and buy supplies for local schools. “Our goal is that when we leave a region, it’s left a better place than when we arrived,” says Head. (www.nabsdivers.org)

Single Divers

Kamala Shadduck started SingleDivers.com on a bet. She regularly ran wreck and shark dives off Morehead City, NC, and her clients were male divers, who bet her she couldn’t get “girls” to go diving. But she convinced 13 women and 13 men to go on a dive trip together to Cozumel in January 2004, and when she got calls afterwards from other divers asking whether she was planning more dives for “singles groups,” she realized there was a bigger group of divers she could cater to.

“Many solo divers booking on a group trip end up being leftovers, and they get the insta-buddy or insta-roomie from hell . . . In our group, solo divers are prime time.”

But this is not a swingin’ singles’ diver group, it’s a group for solo divers, regardless of marital status, to travel together. “Many solo divers booking on a group trip end up being leftovers, or the third or fifth wheel,” says Shadduck. “They get the insta-buddy or insta-roomie from hell, or the worst, they get stuck rooming with a member of the opposite sex to avoid paying a single supplement. In our group, solo divers are prime time. Rooming is a breeze because there are 20 potential roommate options, not just one. For dive buddy options, someone is bound to be a good fit when you have a pool of many versus a pool of few.”

Each dive trip offers three boat dives, and night dives and extra dives are set up in advance -- and they actually happen, Shadduck promises. “When those dives are left till the last minute, people often change their minds or lose interest, and then the minimum number of divers isn’t met. By planning early, we make it part of the agenda, and it’s almost always likely we’ll have enough people to offer a large slate of activities and extra dives.”

SingleDivers never cancels a trip, no matter how few people are on it. A same-gender roommate is guaranteed (a detailed rooming survey is done in advance) or else the single supplement is free. Everyone has a chance to mingle, via meet-and-greets, group meals, contests and social events. “You are never required to participate, but it’s there to partake of,” Shadduck says. “We are totally inclusive, and we never have cliques.”

SingleDivers runs 18 trips a year, and Shadduck tries to mix it up by diving skills, price point and travelers’ interests. Upcoming 2014 trips include diving North Carolina’s Cooper River for prehistoric fossils July 31 to August 5, two trips to Roatan in October, and three trips to the Galapagos aboard the *Humboldt Explorer* in December (one is a New Year’s Eve trip).

Shadduck says SingleDivers is great for divers who worry they won’t have fun if they go it alone on a dive trip. “If you are not a social butterfly able to talk to anyone, then having the structure that a group like mine does can be the difference between a fantastic vacation and a so-so dive trip.” (www.singledivers.com)

Undersea Expeditions for Gay Divers

Chris Winkle is an avid diver, but as a gay man, he experienced homophobia on different dive trips, which put a damper on his vacations. He thought, "If I can get a group of gay men together, I'll feel comfortable with my fellow divers, and if I can verify dive operators ahead of time, then I'll know upfront whether they're fine with us." With that idea, Winkle started the dive travel business Undersea Expeditions in 1991. Greg Hamman started traveling on Winkle's trips in 2001 and purchased the business in 2004. Homophobia is less of an issue today, he says, "But many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender divers still experience some uncomfortable moments and disapproval when traveling alone, so they join us simply because they have more fun traveling with us. We have a repeat-guest rate of 85 percent, so we're like a big group of friends traveling together and reconnecting on every trip."

Undersea Expeditions offers 12 dive trips, ranging from the Caribbean for younger new divers on a budget, to trips-of-a-lifetime in Raja Ampat and the Galapagos for more experienced divers. The next trip is to San Salvador Island in the Bahamas on October 11-18. The rest of the 2014 trips (liveboards in Belize, Socorro Island and Maldives) are sold out, but Undersea Expeditions is taking reservations for 2015 trips to Tubataha in the Philippines and Cuba's Gardens of the Queen.

The diving itinerary is similar to any group dive trip's, but Undersea Expeditions focuses on offering gay-friendly hotels and land excursions. "We use a gay-friendly tour operator and guides," Hamman says. "We don't go with large, standardized chain hotels. There's a gay esthetic -- they want to feel closer to the culture without giving up any comfort. And it has to feel safe. No one wants to go on vacation

Help a Wounded Warrior Learn How to Dive

This organization is for an exclusive group of divers, and while you probably can't dive with them, you may be more than happy to help them go on their future dive trips.

National Guard veteran John W. Thompson started Soldiers Undertaking Disabled Scuba (SUDS), soon after he walked into Walter Reed Army Medical Center Hospital to have lunch with his wife. "As soon as you walk in, you see some pretty heavy stuff . . . and it hit me hard. I knew I had to get involved but I really didn't know what attributes I had to offer these guys."

He then went to the American Red Cross office at Walter Reed and asked to be a volunteer. He was placed in the aquatics department and started helping wounded soldiers. It was there Thompson realized he could help even even more with their rehabilitation. "Here's a pool and I'm a certified diving instructor, so why don't we use scuba diving to help with the rehab process?" In 2007, he started SUDS, which focuses on improving the lives of injured servicemen and women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Every winter, Thompson brings one veteran each week to dive with him in Rincon, Puerto Rico. Taino Divers takes them to dive at the small island of

Desecheo. "They have gone through multiple surgeries, and to see the joy and excitement when we come up from the dive is amazing," Thompson says. "They are away from all that stuff at home, and here they can relax and have an enjoyable time," he added.

One of his recent guests was former U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Juan Andres Arredondo. He suffered multiple injuries to his legs and right arm, and his left hand was severed when his vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb in Iraq in 2005. For Arredondo, 34, the scuba training has been a rewarding experience. "It is very important to have recreational therapy and sports like diving because it gets you in the mindset that you can still operate and do what you want to do," he said. Diving at Desecheo was also his first time on a boat. "And on my first dive, I got to see a whale shark."

SUDS runs about 12 dive trips for veterans a year to places like Hawaii, Curacao, Cuba's Guantanamo Bay and the Gulf Coast. It trains divers with disabilities through TDI/SDI's Scubility program (any instructor who wants to volunteer services must be certified through TDI/SDI and carry professional liability insurance). You can help out SUDS, a nonprofit organization, and its students by donating money, which will go to cover training and students' certification trips, including airfare, lodging, meals and diving; there is no cost to the service members. For more information, go to www.sudsdiving.org.

and have someone wince when they're introduced as the same-gender husband or wife." Because there are so many repeat travelers, Hamman often plans special trips for their anniversaries, "and they often bring their straight best friends on the trips. There's also plenty of 'gal pals,' single women who feel at ease in our group and often feel safer joining our trips."

Like any dive club, Undersea Expeditions is a close-knit dive community that stays in touch between trips. "Immediately after a trip, a lot of photos and video are shared, and we stay in touch on Facebook. We don't need to advertise much." (www.underseax.com; for a listing of gay scuba clubs in the U.S. by state, go to www.divingforlife.org/scubaclubs.html)

Worldwide Christian Scuba Divers Association

Jim Mustoe from Pennsylvania is a Christian and a scuba diver who believes in the motto "Jesus is the regulator of my life." He enjoys overseas dive trips, but he wanted to do more to help others while visiting the typically Third World countries he visited. So in 2009, he started the Worldwide Christian Scuba Divers Organization (WCSDO) for divers from all different churches, backgrounds, beliefs and world views to join. What they have in common: "We get to do great diving around the world and help people in the places we plan our dive trips," says Gary Mace, director of the WCSDO and owner of Conch Republic Divers in Key Largo, FL.

WCSDO has 500-plus members and chapters nationwide. It hosts four overseas dive trips annually, with 25 to 30 divers at a time staying in all-inclusive dive resorts. After a two- to three- tank dive day, they do mission work in the area. "You walk out of the resort and you see a lot of need outside the front gates," says Mace. In Roatan last year, WCSDO divers gathered money and purchased supplies for a church that needed a new roof, then helped church members put it on. In the Bahamas, they painted the inside of a church and built a new sign for it. In Roatan last year, divers brought food, water and clothing to families who live near the dump, children at the orphanage and inmates at the local jail. Eyeglass ministry happens on every trip -- members buy eye-glasses with certain diopters, do eye tests on locals who come by and give them glasses free of charge. Mace remembers one woman in Roatan whose eyes tested horrendously. "After we gave her glasses with -5 diopters, she looked at us and started crying because she said she could finally read."

The next WCSDO trip is to Bonaire in February. Members pay their own way, but most trips are all-inclusive. As a non-profit organization, WCSDO puts all its donations towards mission projects, and local chapters do their own dive trips and missions, too. Mace is planning mission-training workshops at his dive shop so members can learn how to lead missions on future overseas dive trips. "To enjoy the underwater world and then help the people who live near it, that's a blessing," he says. "I guarantee that going on one of our trips will be a life-changing experience."

-- Vanessa Richardson

Why Divers Die: Part II

overweighted and overwhelmed, "same ocean" buddies

While *Undercurrent* is written for traveling scuba divers (and those of you switching to rebreathers to enhance your photography), some of our readers have been doing more free diving, even taking classes to increase one's time and depth limits. Of course, free diving is neither snorkeling nor scuba diving; it comes with its own unique risks. Here are a couple of unique fatality cases to highlight those risks.

An experienced 31-year-old diver and underwater photographer was alone in a public swimming pool practicing free diving techniques to extend his breath-hold capability. He wore a mask and fins,

and carried a four-pound, dumbbell-style weight. About four minutes after he was last seen swimming, a witness noticed him motionless, face-down on the bottom, a plume of bloody fluid coming from his mouth and nose. He was pulled onto the pool deck, unconscious, not breathing and with no pulse. When paramedics arrived five minutes later, they did CPR for 30 minutes, but he died shortly afterwards. One might surmise that shallow-water blackout, a buildup of carbon dioxide from breath holding, was the starting point of this death. Had a friend been watching him practice, he would most likely be alive.

Those who use the "same ocean" buddy system must recognize that they are on their own if something goes wrong during a dive.

Another fit and healthy guy, just 20 years old, joined a five-day spearfishing trip on a Great Barrier Reef liveaboard. On the second day, one of his two buddies noticed he would lie on the seabed at 22 feet for up to two minutes, waiting for fish to swim by, spending little time on the surface between dives. On the third day, the man mentioned he had sore ears from equalization problems the day before, but

joined the other two in their dinghy. In the water, the trio drifted in the current in depths between 30 and 45 feet; at times, they were up to 300 feet apart. After three hours, the two other divers boarded the dinghy and saw the man's float 200 feet away. One diver re-entered the water and saw him lying on the bottom at 45 feet, and 30 feet away from his spear, which was embedded in the reef. She surfaced and radioed for help before diving down to release his weight belt and bring him to the surface. A plume of blood came from his mouth. On the liveaboard, CPR and supplemental oxygen continued for at least an hour, until medical authorities reached by phone said efforts should be stopped, given the man's submersion for at least eight minutes. His dive computer showed he had done 68 breath-hold dives that day. The final dive was to 50 feet for more than eight minutes. He began to ascend but after reaching six feet, he sunk to the bottom at 45 feet and remained there for almost six minutes before being rescued. With all the breath-holding, coupled with exertion from trying to retrieve the spear, he succumbed to low oxygen levels before he could reach the surface.

Had many now-deceased divers stayed in visual contact and close together with their buddies during a dive, it's possible that their buddies could have witnessed the incident and might have been able to assist. In this case, visual contact may or may not have altered the outcome, but those who use the "same ocean" buddy system must recognize that they are on their own if something goes wrong during a dive.

In another case, this 31-year-old experienced spearfisherman dived in a buddy pair, with each diver about 150 feet from another, although sometimes as far as 300 feet. After two hours, the man's buddy exited, presuming he was fine -- he had last spoken to the man 30 minutes earlier, comparing their catches. But he became concerned when the diver's float, nearly a half-mile from shore, had not moved for some time. He alerted a jet skier, who could see the spear gun on the seabed but no sign of the diver. Later, the man's spear was found embedded in an eight-foot wobbegong shark. His body was found the next day, lying face-up on the seabed at 40 feet. One can only speculate that he fought the fish until he passed out and drowned.

Being Overweighted -- and Overwhelmed

While being substantially overweight can be a risk factor while diving -- it puts a great deal of stress on the heart -- experienced divers know that being overweighed is a concern for divers with little experience or diving in conditions they are unprepared for. Failing to ditch weights or inflate a BCD can be a fatal error.

This 17-year-old male had logged just four hours' diving since being certified two years earlier. Diving for abalone with a friend in a small bay, he wore full dive gear, including a weight belt with 17

pounds. There was a three-foot swell, some surge, and visibility was 32 feet. They descended to 26 feet when he noticed he had lost his knife. He signaled to his buddy to surface, but then they decided to descend again. Towing a flagged float, he swam closely behind his buddy, who was unable to see him a short time later. The buddy surfaced and found the float 160 feet away, but the diver wasn't there. After 15 minutes, the buddy located him under a rocky ledge at 20 feet, lying face-down. He was unconscious, his mask full of bloody water and his regulator out of his mouth. The buddy inflated his BCD and brought him to the surface. Two bystanders began CPR, but he did not survive. His dive computer showed that on his 15-foot ascent four minutes into the dive, the "fast ascent" warning was activated, indicating he had exceeded the recommended 30 feet-per-minute. He then descended slowly over 9 minutes to a maximum depth of 80 feet before ascending directly, possibly at a 50- to 65-foot rate. He remained on the surface for about a minute before descending rapidly to 20 feet, where he remained

Florida Court Rules: Divers Must Sign the Right Waiver

To many sport divers, nothing is more grating than having to sign a waiver before diving, effectively eliminating any responsibility by your dive operation, no matter how negligent it is. But if we must sign a waiver, then the operator better get it right, according to a Florida appellate court. In May, it ruled in favor of a widower who sued Key Dives in Islamorada, FL, after his wife drowned, citing the shop's failure to have the woman sign a specific waiver.

* * * * *

Aviva Diodato, 51, of Surprise, AZ, died on April 15, 2010 while diving near the *Eagle* wreck off Islamorada at the beginning of what was to be "an advanced openwater dive," according to court records. Her husband, Dominic Diodato, then filed a civil wrongful death lawsuit against Key Dives and others associated with the business.

In a summary judgment, Circuit Judge Luis Garcia in Plantation Key ruled in favor of Key Dives, based on printed releases signed by both Mr. and Mrs. Diodato during a prior visit in 2009, and again for a shallow reef dive the day before the tragedy. Lawyers for Diodato argued that the business "failed to follow their own standard practice of procuring a different form of release for the more advanced dive and the boat trip to be undertaken on the day of the tragedy," records state.

Now the Third District Court of Appeals has ruled that Diodato's lawyers were correct. In its 15-page ruling, the court noted that Key Dives did intend for the Diodatos to sign a more specific release form relating to the more advanced dive, but did not do so because the couple was 20 minutes late arriving at the dock, there were others waiting, and the paperwork process can take upwards of 30 minutes. "The scope and term of one hazardous activity may naturally vary significantly in the level of risk assumed by releasor when compared to another hazardous activity," the court wrote. "A pre-printed release signed for an introductory scuba certification class in shallow water would ordinarily have a different scope, level of risk, and cost than a deep water cave dive or off-shore wreck, for example."

Aviva Diodato's fatal dive on April 15 was to be a qualifying dive for the higher-level advanced openwater PADI certification, records state. "Had the April 15, 2010, dive been a continuation of the basic openwater instruction contracted by the Diodatos in 2009 ... the scope and term (because of the one-year clause) of the 2009 release would apply," the court wrote. It later wrote that "because the defendants' prescribed form was not presented or signed, we will never know whether Ms. Diodato might have inquired about diver accident insurance, or obtained it, as contemplated by the separate PADI form."

According to reports of the incident, an instructor off the *Giant Stride* was taking a group under for the first dive of the day when Diodato indicated she wanted to surface. The instructor helped her surface, then went back to the group. Diodato reportedly got to the stern of the boat and was removing gear when she began drifting away. Crew members got the other divers up and went after her. They found her 15 minutes later, floating on the surface and not breathing. She was pulled onto the boat, they began CPR and were met on shore by medics, who pronounced her dead.

The Court of Appeals has remanded the case back for further proceedings, but it remains to be seen if the case will be retried or settled out of court.

- - Adam Linhardt, KeysNews.com

motionless for 75 minutes before being found by his buddy. It's evident that he surfaced for a short time before becoming unconscious, probably due to an embolism, and then sank. Presuming that he then became unconscious, the subsequent rate of descent indicates he was likely overweighted.

This 33-year-old jumped into conditions over his head, both figuratively and literally. Having been certified two months earlier, he had just three dives under his belt before going diving with three friends, two of whom were also inexperienced. The group dived from rocks in a calm bay, but although their entry point was sheltered from the wind and looked calm from their vantage point, there was a strong wind gusting up to 25 knots, a six-foot swell and strong current on the other side of the rocks, some 300 feet distant. After their dive, they surfaced on the seaward side of the rocks where, unable to access their pre-determined exit point, they swam 20 minutes toward the nearest rocks. Two divers managed to scramble onto the rocks, while the victim and a friend struggled against the breaking waves and strong current. The man managed to climb onto the rocks but while attempting to stand, was knocked over by a breaking wave and fell backwards into the water. Coughing and struggling, he called for help. One diver told him to put his regulator back in his mouth, which he did, before disappearing under the waves without his mask on. A diver tried to jump in to help but was smashed against the rocks by the waves and retreated. The deceased was eventually found lying face-up at 35 feet; his mask was missing and his regulator out of his mouth.

I feel confident that none of our readers would make errors like those in the four cases cited here, but you may know divers who might. We have a responsibility to mentor others who may make serious mistakes. Keep an eye out for them.

-- Ben Davison

Drop the Dive Weight: Part I

shed the pounds -- and costs -- of lugging your dive gear abroad

Luggage fees: the bane of the traveling diver. You may be the best bargain hunter when it comes to scoring airfare deals to Indonesia, but if you don't know how to cut down on dive gear, photo equipment and personal items, your savings will be eaten up in excess baggage costs. These days, finding an affordable flight to a dive destination is only half the battle. We asked our *Undercurrent* contributors -- heavy-duty travelers -- as well as our readers for their tips on saving money and shedding weight to hedge the cost of flying.

Cutting Costs for Checked and Carry-on Luggage

When checking in for the domestic part of your trip on a major carrier like United, Delta or American Airlines, you probably know the drill: \$25 for the first checked bag, \$35 for the second checked bag and 50 pounds maximum for each one bag. If you're flying overseas and taking a second bag, the rates can range from \$40 to \$100. If you want to take a third bag, no problem, but expect to pay between \$100 and \$200 to check it. But did you know that some airlines, both domestic and international, now have a maximum weight for your carry-on bag? According to Ken Kurtis, owner of the dive shop Reef Seekers in Beverly Hills, CA, who routinely leads dive trips worldwide, "if your plan was to pack all the heavy stuff into your carry-on and stow it above your seat, you may be in for a rude awakening when you check in and your carry-on suddenly becomes your \$100 third checked bag. Some airlines have a buried-in-the-fine-print weight limitation on your personal bag as well, which may be as low as 20 pounds."

One easy -- though not necessarily cost-effective -- way to get around that is to fly first or business class. "Many airlines allow customers riding up front a weight allowance of 70 pounds per bag, and they check

up to three bags at no charge,” says Kurtis. Dan Shepherd (Clifton Hill, MO) is a believer. “I’ve done about everything that can be done to cut bag weight but now, I always check the business-class fares, as sometimes they’re cheaper or just a few dollars more than paying extra bag fees. You get the perks of business-class check-in and short security lines, and after a long flight, you are one of the first off the plane and don’t have to stand in line at immigration for hours.

If you want to use miles to convert to a first or business class ticket, you can do so starting 330 days before your desired flight leaves, but Gary Luff, who writes the blog *A View from the Wing*, says you don’t have to book on that exact day. “The best availability tends to be between six and nine months out. Two months out is tough -- the seats that open up early are long gone.” Still, keep checking. Some seats may become available later, though often at higher mileage costs.

If you don’t want to buy a first-class ticket for a Caribbean dive trip, the long-term saving option is to join the rewards program of the airlines you regularly travel with. You can get, say, a Delta Visa card or United MasterCard that will give your first bag checked for free, advance boarding privileges, and accelerate your level of status faster. Henry Schwarzberg (Mobile, AL) uses an American Express Platinum card (the annual fee is \$450), “because it provides up to \$200 in reimbursement for excess baggage fees.” The card earns miles on Delta and several international airlines. Many airline-branded credit cards offer baggage deals, so it’s worth looking into these if you want more benefits for your long-haul dive trips.

Stuff to Soothe Your Soul During a Hellish Trip

Here are some products and services we like that help make dealing with airports, airlines and the contraptions they call “seats” on airplanes a little less stressful for your next dive trip.

AirCare. Although travel insurance and government regulations will cover you for some air travel mishaps -- missed connections to your international flights, lost bags at LAX that didn’t make it on your Air Fiji flight, etc. -- some incidents come with loopholes that deny you any compensation. AirCare, offered by Berkshire Hathaway Travel Protection, is a fixed-benefit flight protection plan (currently it applies only to domestic flights) that aims to cover snafus not covered elsewhere with minimal effort on your part. For \$25 per trip, AirCare will pay you \$1,000 if you’re stuck in the plane for more than two hours, or your luggage is lost or stolen; and \$500 if a flight delay causes you to miss a connecting flight, or your checked luggage is delayed more than 12 hours. Compensation is in addition to whatever you might eventually collect from your travel insurance claim or by complaining to the airline. Lost or delayed baggage payment is immediate upon providing an airline claim form. International coverage is planned soon, but for now, it doesn’t cover you if your Indonesian puddle jumper leaves your bags behind while you’re headed back to stateside. (<https://www.bhtp.com/travel-protection/aircare>)

Airport Transit Guide. When business-travel blogger Joe Brancatelli switched from a BlackBerry to a smartphone, the first app he bought was the Airport Transit Guide, a \$5 app for iPhone/iPad and Android smartphones and tablets. Quickly find and compare all of your transit options, from taxis and trains to car rentals and parking rates, for getting from the airport to your destination quickly and cheaply. The guide gives you prices, schedules, travel times, tipping advice, safety alerts, and more. More than 460 airports, including many in divers’ favorite Caribbean and Asia-Pacific destinations, are covered worldwide. (<http://salkinternational.com>)

Knee Defender. If you hate having your scarce legroom invaded by reclining seats, instead of asking fellow passengers to remain upright, you can just force them to do so. The Knee Defender is a gadget that uses two small pieces of plastic to clip onto the arms holding up your tray table. Place them snugly against the seat back, and that seat is blocked from reclining, keeping the users’ knees safe. It does not violate any FAA regulations, but airlines have the right to forbid its use -- Northwest, American, and Continental Airlines have done so. If you’re flying another airline, pick up the Knee Defender for \$20 and you’ll have a little more peace on that long-haul flight (www.gadgetduck.com/goods/kneedefender.html)

If you're changing airlines while in transit on a dive trip, the weight limits for the first airline might not be the same as the second, so you may need to pack based on the more restrictive weights. That's a common occurrence in Indonesia, where its domestic carriers often have strict luggage limits, plus separate allowances for sports equipment. Fly Garuda Indonesia, says underwater photographer and *Undercurrent* contributor Maurine Shimlock. "Garuda allows 66 pounds per person."

What Dive Gear Should You Schlep?

You may decide to skip the 5-mm wetsuit if you're going to the Caribbean in July, but otherwise, readers have different opinions on what gear to bring on an overseas flights. Some go to great expense -- maybe a couple grand -- to switch from their perfectly serviceable gear to new lightweight gear, so hopefully they make enough dive trips to amortize the cost. Take Joel Snyder (Tucson, AZ), for example, who tired of schlepping 35 pounds of dive equipment. "My first move was to switch to the Scubapro Titanium regulator -- this saves more than a pound if you don't have a DIN regulator. Add an integrated octopus into the inflator (dropping a hose and a heavier regulator) and an air-integrated computer, and you're five pounds lighter. Miflex or similar hoses help lighten the load. I also traded in the heavy Scubapro fins for Force Fins. They're lighter, smaller and have more than enough power. In my 'save a dive' kit, no individual tools. Multitools, yes. Dives lights are similarly optimized: I swapped out a 4D light for a 3C LED light, and got more light and a longer burn time. My wife and I use two REI duffel bags, adding up to 50 pounds for the both of us, including neoprene. I have not given up any safety or compromised the gear in any way."

While on a puddle-jumper to Raja Ampat, a woman boarded the plane wearing her BC as a travel vest. "She got away with it."

Jim Reilly (Lafayette Hill, PA) focused on lightening his BC. "First I replaced my comfortable, thickly-padded BC harness with a DIR-style rigging made from a single belt of material. It digs into my shoulders above water, but I don't notice it underwater. I replaced the chrome belt buckle with one of high-impact plastic. I also eliminated the neat-looking

but unused D rings, leaving only those absolutely needed for diving. I also replaced my BC bladder with a smaller, lighter one and replaced my stainless-steel backplate with one of aluminum. Overall, I saved about five pounds."

John Woolley (Olympia, WA) uses a regulator bag as his all-purpose shoulder bag. "It will hold my regulator, prescription mask, dive computer, I-Pad, camera, and passport. Because it is my 'personal item,' it escapes eagle-eyed airline employees who have started weighing carry-on bags. It also guarantees that the most important dive items stay at my side."

Why not just rent it all, says regular *Undercurrent* contributor Bret Gilliam. "Many excellent resorts and liveaboards offer complete equipment packages for a low rental cost, or they include it in your trip fee. The *Damai* liveaboard in Indonesia includes all gear, wetsuits and even dive computers in their fare. All you need to do is show up with a carry-on bag with your lightweight tropical clothes."

Kurtis also favors renting gear, except he brings his dive computer and hoods. "You're already used to your own computer, and you know how it displays and looks. I also bring two hoods for a variety of water temperatures."

But if you want to bring your own trustworthy dive gear, there's no reason to fret about the cost, says Shimlock. "People need to *not* freak out about paying overweight fees in foreign locations, especially if they keep their luggage weight reasonable. When you add up daily rental fees for complete sets of gear, it could well be more than the overweight baggage fee you pay. When I purchase domestic tickets for dive photo trips, I tell my guests that it includes X amount of overweight, and that the charge for extra gear is X. We also check in as groups, which spreads the luggage weight to a per-person average. Some people come with

just a carry-on, others with 100 pounds of luggage, but it usually evens out, and often there is no extra charge for anyone."

Or you can get creative in getting your dive gear on without paying for it. Fred Turoff (Philadelphia, PA) says, "Back in the days of carting around rolls of film and batteries, I bought a many-pocketed vest to load with heavy stuff to wear on planes. I've never been asked to get on a scale before boarding, so this allowed me to take items that otherwise would have produced an overweight-luggage charge."

While on a puddle-jumper on the last leg to Sorong for a Raja Ampat trip, Bill Gleason (Kentfield, CA) saw a woman boarding the plane wearing her BC as a travel vest. "She got away with it."

Next month: What clothes you really need to pack (and not), and paring down your photography gear.

-- Vanessa Richardson

What's the Price of an Air Fill? Pretty Cheap

There's a considerable cost to dive shops for providing air, but they price it all over the place, based on different marketing strategies. To update the air-fill prices they researched back in 2007, *Dive Center Business* recently surveyed dive shops nationwide and received answers from 397 of them. They found that what one dive shop in Seattle charges may be drastically higher than what another one in Sarasota charges.

The average price for a standard air fill is \$6.75, and a standard nitrox fill averages \$12.75. Hawaii dive shops charge the least for air fills, a cheap \$4.68. In the Continental U.S., dive shops in the Southeast typically charge the lowest for air and Nitrox fills, at \$6.06 and \$11.14, respectively, while those next door, in the South Central area (New Mexico to Louisiana), have the highest average cost for both, at \$7.42 and \$13.72, respectively. Overall, the typical U.S. dive shop fills 2,195 tanks per year, with 19 percent of those being Nitrox fills.

The price has changed slightly over the past decade, but not much, and when adjusted for inflation, it's actually less. Most dive shops know that, but apparently they feel their hands are tied when it comes to raising prices. Here are a few comments that dive shops gave to *Dive Center Business*.

"Here's what's not funny. I remember this survey from 2007 because I remember telling myself it was time to raise the price from \$5. What is that? Seven years ago? I'm still at \$5. What a dumbass. Seven years at an extra \$3 for the number of tanks I fill, and I would have an additional \$38,000 in the bank. Wake up and smell the check-book, scuba whores."

"Pricing airfills has always been a problem in the scuba industry. All of us in the industry allow the clients to set the pricing of our fills -- a bad policy. Airfills cost less than the average craft beer and can be enjoyed longer (a half-hour dive), but yet clients scream about our "outrageous" pricing."

"We charge all fills by the cubic foot, i.e., an aluminum 80 that has 1500 psi in it is only charged for 40 cubic feet after being filled."

"I firmly believe that airfills should be around \$12 to \$15 to make a small profit, considering that I pay my staff between \$9.50 and \$15 per hour."

"I find it funny that paint ballers find it cheaper to get airfills at the dive shop."

"People in this business have used airfills as a loss leader without thought to maintenance, filter costs, electricity or wear and tear on their compressors. Airfills should be up around \$15 and enriched air should be \$25 to make money on fills. Store owners drive this profit center into a loss center."

"We know of a shop that gives free airfills for life when you buy a cylinder from them. Then people come to us and think they should get free air. Some customers think that if they only need 1000 psi to top off their cylinders, they shouldn't have to pay for it or pay the standard price."

"The Internet does not fill tanks! It's the last commodity we have; even education is online."

So enjoy those cheap fills. If the "scuba whores" played tough, you'd be paying double what you pay now. But dive shops are staying quiet, keeping this potential profit center as a big loss leader -- just to keep your business.

Flotsam & Jetsam

Hyperbaric Chambers Are Also Good for Amputated Penises. A 22-year-old man in Dallas, TX, cut off his penis with a knife (why, we can only surmise), then sought treatment three hours later at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. After sewing the penis back on, using vein grafts, surgeons gave the patient 10 milligrams daily of Cialis, and several days of chamber treatment. The guy can urinate normally again, but was still waiting on a return of sensation in his private parts.

Chivalry or Chauvinism? We received a lot of reader comments to help us put together our story in the May issue "Are Some Male Divers Too 'Helpful?'" Ken Kurtis, owner of Reef Seekers dive shop in Beverly Hills, CA, sent us this note from his Bonaire group dive trip in May. "I'm standing on the dock at Buddy Dive, waiting to load up for the 8:10 a.m. boat. Among the 16 divers is a husband/wife team, and all I hear is her saying, 'I don't need any help. I can put it on the boat myself.' And he simply ignores her and grabs her bag. She goes, 'Really . . . I . . . can . . . do . . . it . . . myself. Or not.' So I walk over and say to her, 'There's this article in this month's *Undercurrent* that I think you should read because it describes *exactly* what just happened here.' She laughed. I told him about it later too, and he basically said, 'I never thought of it that way. I thought I was just being chivalrous. I'll file it away way.' So maybe you *can* teach an old dog new tricks."

Forget the Poor Mexicans, Go After the Big Hotel Chain. We've written about the fatal dive of Ronda Cross in March 2012 while diving off Cabo San Lucas with her cousin, Roxanne Amundson. Cross didn't surface, and her body was later found floating nearby. Her husband believed she was overcome

by carbon monoxide in her tank, and he filed a lawsuit against PADI late last year. Now Roxanne Amundson has filed her own suit for "personal injuries and emotional distress," naming the dive operation that filled the tanks -- and the tenant that leases space to the dive shop, the Wyndham Cabo San Lucas Resort, because it "supervised, controlled, advertised, endorsed, recommended, employed and contracted with [the dive shop] to provide said excursions." Wyndham Hotels and Resorts moved to dismiss the suit, filed in U.S. District Court in San Diego, CA, because "Mexican law provides adequate alternative forum to hear Amundson's claims." Her lawyers replied, among other things, that Mexico has a very limited system of damages, and Amundson would have no meaningful remedy, whereas the U.S. courts do provide for liability for defendants. The court ruled that Wyndham failed to show Mexico as an adequate forum for the lawsuit and denied its motion to dismiss, so Amundson's case moves onward. And, of course, of all the potential defendants, Wyndham has the deepest pockets.

Mom Fights for Diving Son Jailed in Honduras. Rosemary Carroll of Doyletown, PA, is fighting for the safe return of her son, Devon Butler, after he and five other divers were unfairly imprisoned during a dive expedition in Honduras. Butler, 27, is the lead diver for the Florida-based ocean salvaging company Aqua Quest, and he and his team went to Honduras on May 1 to take mahogany logs from the bottom of a river to help with flooding, and also to teach Honduran lobster divers how to dive properly. To protect themselves from pirates, Butler's team was carrying five guns on their 65-foot boat, but their boat was intercepted in the town of Ahuas and the men were arrested and charged with smuggling weapons. Carroll told the *Philadelphia Daily News* that the guns were legally in compliance with international maritime law. She has called upon lawyers and lawmakers to get the men back home, and her Congressman, Mike Fitzpatrick, says he is working with U.S. officials and has reached out to the Honduran ambassador for help.

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