

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

September 2014

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## MV Fling, Flower Gardens, Texas

*seven dives in 27 hours for just \$645*

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

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

Dear Fellow Diver:

Ah, Texas -- oil wells, armadillos, Tex-Mex food, cowboys and coral reefs. Yes, coral reefs. The Texas coast starts at Louisiana and curves around to Mexico, and while there are fine beaches, this is not a destination for shore divers. To get to the best diving, you must do as I did the first week of August, and travel 111 miles east/southeast to the Flower Gardens National Marine Sanctuary, which comprises three separate reef systems -- East and West Flower Gardens, and Stetson Bank.

The MV Fling is no Damai, Dancer or Aggressor, but the Gulf of Mexico is no Red Sea, either. Docked in Freeport, TX, about 60 miles south of Houston, she is a 100-foot-long, 22-foot-wide converted crew ship, powered by three 600-hp diesel engines and set up to carry 28 divers and crew. There is a double bed forward, so if a couple shares it, the Fling can handle 30, as was the case on my trip. Because bunk space is first-come, first-serve, my three buddies and I arrived several hours before the 8 p.m. boarding time. After staking my place in line with my gear (they provide tanks and weights), we headed for the On the River restaurant and some great Gulf Coast seafood. Then, back to the line, but only after slathering myself with mosquito repellent. In the harbor at sundown, the Texas-sized saltwater mosquitoes are vicious.

At 7:45, the staff briefed us on procedures, then opened the gates. We veterans (I made this trip last year) took off in a speed walk to claim bunks,



MV Fling



while the newbies stood there wondering what the hell was going on. The preferred spots are below decks -- six four-bunk cabins, with the bunks curtained off from each other (four additional bunks are tucked under the ladder to the main deck, and two more are forward). After claiming a cabin and stowing gear, I headed up to the main deck, where divers were congregating in the large, air-conditioned galley/dining room. Three large tables with two benches run along the port side (each bench handles four nicely), and on the starboard side is a table for four and the galley.

JT, a good-humored, bald fellow in his 30s who has been a Fling divemaster for several years, presented our safety and procedural briefing. One rule: No throwing up in the head. Everyone was issued a DRCD (Disposable Regurgitation Containment Device) -- i.e., a trash bag -- and instructed to "fluff" it out so that it was ready at a moment's notice. Then out came chicken wings, cheese, crackers, celery and carrots, as the Fling cleared the channel and headed out. At 10 p.m., I hit the sack.

About 6 a.m., somewhere in that semi-conscious world of a great sleep induced by droning engines and a rocking boat, I heard the engines shut down. Then at 6:15 came a knock on the cabin door. After fresh fruit, hot cinnamon rolls, coffee and juice, I joined others on the rear deck for a briefing on the West Flower Gardens. JT, who had already been in the water, described the currents and what he saw in the way of marine life. Nitrox divers were told to confirm the 32-percent oxygen mix with an analyzer the crew would provide, then record the mix, the maximum depth allowable for the mix, their tanks' serial numbers, and then sign the book. Penny, the petite deckhand appearing to be in her mid-30s, worked like crazy to see that all 30 tanks, which were lined up behind the roomy bench seats, were promptly filled between dives (she also joined every dive).

After a buddy check, my group of four made our way to the amidships' entry point on the back deck (there's one port and one starboard). I gave my bunk number -- that's how divers are tracked -- to the divemaster, and with a giant stride, I dropped five feet into the 85-degree blue water. I met my buddies at the anchor line, and down we went. Because both JT and the more reserved Michael, the second divemaster, remain on the deck during dives, Fling divers need to know what they are doing.

At the 90-foot bottom, the water dropped to 78 degrees, and there I was, diving on a Texas coral reef. It's mainly brain coral heads and fingers -- there are more than 20 species of coral -- with sand patches. However, something seemed different from last year. Maybe I had been easily impressed then, but this time the fish were fewer and the scene duller, though the visibility was 90 feet. Regardless, if Cozumel were rated 10, this was a strong 7 -- and it's in Texas! The current, though strong at the surface, calmed down. Our buddy plan, which JT had suggested in the briefing, was to kick into the current, swim in a large circle, eventually return to the mooring line with the current at our backs,



**The Dive Deck**

and then finish with a 15-foot safety stop on hanging lines. In and around the coral heads, I found queen, French and juvenile angels, soldierfish, neon wrasse, butterflyfish, parrots, jacks, morays and plenty of barracuda. Here and there, stingrays were buried in the sand. Indeed, a good variety of fish, but not the quantities that I remembered from last year. Unfortunately, lionfish were large and abundant, and their unseemly predation may be affecting the fish population. Because spearfishing is prohibited in the sanctuary, can Flower Gardens still be considered a sanctuary, having been occupied by an army of invaders? Should not the regulations be eased to control this nasty predator?

When I returned to the boat, getting on board was quick and efficient. I hooked my housed Nikon D7100 on a special line and a crew member hauled it onboard. I grabbed a floating line to pull myself in, removed my fins and climbed the stern ladder to the swim platform. I was asked for my number, plus my dive time and depth, which a crew member recorded. Up three more steps to the aft deck for a freshwater rinse, then off came my gear. Inside the head in the main deck/galley area (the Fling has three heads, and waits were always short), I pulled on dry shorts. Then a Texas breakfast of biscuits, gravy, eggs, and toast -- not fancy, but down-home good and plenty of it. Afterwards, with a couple of hours to kill, I took a short snooze on my bunk. Other times, I headed to the spacious sun deck (lounge and beanbag chairs, and tables with seats) to schmooze with some of the 20 other guys and nine women aboard. In the main cabin, some divers watched videos while others edited their photos on laptops.

After a 10:30 a.m. dive at the same spot but in a different direction, I surfaced past 15 or so barracuda hanging under the boat, and climbed aboard, where the crew greeted me by name. "Hi, Jack, how was your dive?" "Nice, thanks." Then it was grilled-cheese sandwiches, homemade soup, chips, veggies and cake for dessert. Dive, eat, rest, dive, eat, rest dive, eat, rest -- see a pattern developing here?

Next up was an offshore oil rig in 300 feet of water, though the Captain claimed the bottom was now only 250 feet down because, he figured, 50 feet of lost gear has piled up over the years from negligent divers. Make sure your gear is secure, he cautioned, because nothing dropped will be recovered. The crew tied off a line at 45 feet on the rig, which I followed down to dive inside the structure, covered with soft coral, barnacles and other growth. It was fish city. Queen and juvenile angels, squirrelfish, butterflies, horse-eyed jacks,

## Watch Out for Lionfish Stings

Divers and others are making enormous efforts to reduce the mass of lionfish in Atlantic and Caribbean waters. In fact, Florida now allows rebreather divers to harvest lionfish, and divers in tournaments and other organized events can spear lionfish in areas where spearfishing is otherwise not allowed. But a can-do attitude and gloves can't prevent lionfish from defending themselves with their painful stings.

At the Undersea and Hyperbaric Medical Society's last conference, Jorge Dario Gomez-Castillo, medical director for the hyperbaric chamber at the Cozumel Medical Center, presented 33 cases of divers stung by lionfish in Cozumel over three years. Twenty-one of them were participating in lionfish culling tournaments and were stung while handling the catch. Seven

were trying to catch the fish, and only five were stung accidentally. All were stung on their hands.

Gomez-Castillo's patients were treated by immersing of the affected hand in a nonscalding hot bath and with nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. All responded well to the hot water and were advised to seek tetanus shots. Apparently, being stung didn't appear to discourage the divers from participating in more lionfish tournaments -- nine were stung more than once.

Divers Alert Network's medical director, Petar DeNoble, says that divers with cardiac conditions or compromised immune systems could suffer more serious results. Stings from lionfish spines cause burning pain that can last for days, and may be accompanied by sweating, respiratory distress and other symptoms including even paralysis.

## MV Fling, Texas

Diving (experienced)	★★★★
Diving (beginner -- don't go)	★
Snorkelling	★
Accommodations	★★★ 1/2
Food	★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★ 1/2

★ = poor    ★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale

barracuda, snapper, tangs and, 40 feet below me, sharks -- silky, white-tip and black-tip -- circled the rig. As I watched them, I was stunned to see an enormous 20-foot whale shark swim within 20 feet of the rig. It made a slow circle, then two more, each time moving farther out. Of course, I had the wrong lens -- how embarrassing that later I had to beg my buddy for copies of his shots.

Late in the afternoon, we arrived at the East Flower Garden Reef. The sun was well past ideal for penetrating light. The dive was similar to those on West Flower Gardens Reef, and I logged 47 minutes, with 450 psi left in my tank. After four dives, I was ready for dinner -- the Saturday night barbecued brisket, one meal that is famous among

Fling divers. When I arrived in the dining salon, however, something was missing. Where was that grand brisket aroma? The potato salad, beans, hot bread and relishes were ready, but chefs Scott and John were huddled around the oven and not looking happy. Turned out the generator went down, and though it was up and running quickly, the ovens had dumped the cooking program and stopped operating. I soon learned that you could put half-done brisket slices in frying pans, add some broth and barbecue sauce, and produce some mighty fine brisket in no time. Some folks had sodas or beers (\$3 and sold until midnight), and I spotted a few flasks coming out to flavor the Coke. Of course, when the drinking starts, the diving stops, so -- presumably -- there was no night dive for the tipplers.

For that 9 p.m. night dive, the crew attached several strobes to lines. Each diver was required to have his own light, and each buddy team a backup. Furthermore, tank lights were required (cyalume sticks were available from the boat's store). Underwater, the activity was again lacking, though the corals were out, as were a new set of players -- a barren circular sand patch I had passed over on the previous dive was now a cleaning station, with barracuda waiting to have their teeth and gills picked free of critters. I grabbed a couple of shots of a four-foot moray cutting in and out of the coral. Back on board and after showering, I polished off hot brownies and Blue Bell ice cream, and headed to my bunk. The last thing I heard was the engines firing up as the Fling prepared to move to the next morning's dive site.

A word about the bunks. They're standard crew boat bunks, plywood construction, each with a foam mattress, clean sheets, pillows, pillowcases, and a blanket. Comfortable unless you like to sprawl out. It takes a little time to learn how to roll in and out of the bottom bunk, and there's not enough room to sit up. Each bunk has its own light, and curtains slide on a wire to offer privacy. If you need to hit the head at night, you get up in the dark and make your way to the ladder to the heads on the main deck.

In the morning at Stetson Bank, 29 miles northwest of the Flower Gardens, we made our last two dives. Before the 7 a.m. dive, the crew checked conditions and laid a bottom line against the slight current to the edge of the reef. Follow the line to the wall, they said, go right or left until you reach your turnaround time based on tank pressure, then return along the wall to the line and the mooring. My three buddies know I shoot lot of pictures, so they moved slowly and pointed out critters for me -- they're used to having the old man with the camera behind them. A squirrelish lying next to a white-and-black sea urchin made a good shot, then a trio of juvenile angelfish, then a gray angel, then a queen, then . . . I was down 40 minutes and I hadn't traveled halfway along the line before I needed to turn back. Diving again after

another Texas-sized breakfast, I made it to the edge of the reef, with my camera firing like a machine gun. Butterflyfish were swimming in pairs, a trio of soldierfish posed nicely. Queen angels darted in and out of the wall. A three-foot moray swam past. The wall was small, maybe 15 to 20 feet before it turned into a sloping sand bottom, but it offered plenty of fish to photograph. I wish the majority of the Fling's dives were on Stetson Bank.

After seven dives in 27 hours, I was tired, but also sad we were headed back, happy that I took a lot of good fish shots, and thankful that there wasn't a single incident during the trip. Oh, and hungry again. So, it was a hearty lunch of lasagna, with plenty of time during the six-hour run back to pack my gear and catch a last nap. While heading home, the crew opened the company store. Funny how beer sales really picked up at the end of dive number seven.

Once home, I let the trip settle in. Yes, I was there last August. And this year too. And no doubt I'll be there next year. Having had the opportunity to dive all over the world, I would say that is a damn good endorsement for coral reefs so close to home.

-- J.P.W.



**Divers Compass:** At \$645 for seven nitrox dives, two nights and eight meals, the price is right . . . All trips are booked through dive shops, or you can call (979)233-4445 . . . A 10- to 15-percent cash deposit in the tip bucket was about normal; all tips are split evenly among the crew . . . As soon as the Fling arrives in port, between 5 and 5:30 p.m., she is fueled, cleaned, provisioned, reloaded and then heads back out; occasionally there are longer trips, but typically the two-night trips are Wednesday-Friday and Friday-Sunday, with three-night

trips Sunday-Wednesday . . . Should a trip be canceled for weather or any other reason, your money is refunded . . . The average age on this trip was considerably younger (mid-30s or so, with one diver on my last trip just 15 years old) than it would be, say, on an Aggressor . . . Nitrox certification is essential for decent bottom times . . . Though seas were calm during the first week of August, if you're prone to seasickness, bring your preferred seasick remedy so you can take home an empty DRCD . . . The Fling's store sells caps, T-shirts, etc., but there is no rental gear, so bring everything you need, including save-a-dive kits . . . Website: [www.flingcharters.com](http://www.flingcharters.com)

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## *Ocean Hunter III, Palau, Micronesia*

### *a rival to Raja Ampat for marine wonders*

Dear Fellow Diver:

If you've never used a reef hook, you will quickly learn how to in the six-knot current in Palau's Ulong Channel. As I finned down the anchor line, I found the current manageable, but once over the wall, I could only relax and go with it until I was able to snag the reef with my hook to steady myself and watch the action. About a dozen seven-foot-long white-tip and gray reef sharks circled, several making close passes, even within touching distance. Schools of tropical fish teased them, and a couple of fish suffered the consequences. When it was time to go, I deflated my BCD, unhooked and careened into rocks before I could balance myself and join the six other divers for the wild ride through the channel. I bounced with down drafts and skirted mini sand tornadoes, soon losing sight of the divers ahead. Then at the end of the channel, the current normalized, the blizzard of sand settled and we quickly regrouped. Surfacing, I spat out my regulator and whooped. "Let's do it again!"



A few days before, I worried I might not be on this trip at all. Because of a flight departure delay, I missed my connection in Honolulu, thereby getting to Koror a day late, nine hours after the noon departure time. However, a rep from the Palau dive shop Fish 'n Fins met me at the airport, whisked me to the office to fill out forms, and then took me by chase boat five minutes out to the Ocean Hunter III, which had remained close in. After being greeted by Captain Kenneth Jolly, Chef Arlee sat me down for a full dinner, including fresh tuna sashimi. I then retired to my air-conditioned deluxe cabin, with a firm king bed and an upper bunk, ample storage space, a desk, chair, private head and fluffy white robes (some divers wore them to breakfast the next

day). I was ready to undertake my second voyage on the Ocean Hunter since 2008, again with the same captain and chef.

When it comes to diving, Palau's Blue Corner gets the most hype. The day after I arrived, I hooked in at 75 feet, near the corner that cascades into the deep, to be entertained by white-tip and gray reef sharks, schools of mid-sized colorful tropicals and five-foot Napoleon wrasse. The slow-moving, bluish-green wrasses, each weighing approximately 300 pounds, cut an impressive picture. Two seemed eager to be stroked by divers, and made passes within six inches, leaning toward divers' hands. Six-foot-long dogtooth and yellow-fin tuna, large mackerel, and schools of bigeye trevally added to the big fish census. While I saw fewer sharks than in 2008, Navot Bornovski, who owns both Fish 'n Fins' and the Ocean Hunter liveaboards, told me by email that shark mating season runs from February to April, during which many nonresident sharks join the party. During my July trip, apparently only local sharks were parading. Novot's wife, Tova, has been conducting research for more than a decade with the Micronesian Shark Foundation, which they founded, and she has not found a significant decline in overall shark population. Since making Palau their home in 1993, the Bornovskis have been leaders in conservation efforts, including establishing a protected shark nursery in the Rock Islands. One of my favorite sightings was at nearby Clarence's -- an 11-foot zebra shark, with its telltale leopard spots and unusually long tail.

Because of the strong currents at several dive sites -- and having met a few divers who had been swept far from the boat -- I brought a \$299 Nautilus Lifeline, which I checked out on my first dive with the captain. (Fish 'n Fins rents them for \$10 a day, with rental applied for purchase, if the diver chooses.) I viewed my new surface-signaling device as a great safety option -- its VHS radio with GPS gives two-way communication with the boat or fellow divers, and its distress signal transmits within an eight-mile radius. While it is kept (presumably) dry in its plastic partial enclosure, mine flooded early in the trip, rendering it useless. Miffed, I returned it to Leisurepro for a replacement when I got home. Of the eight divers on board, three were also disappointed with malfunctions -- they each had new GoPro underwater cameras, which performed erratically at best.



*Ocean Hunter III*

## **“Both Divers Resisted the Natural Instincts of Self-Preservation”**

In our July 2013 issue, we reported on two Navy scuba divers, Ryan Harris and James Reyher, who died on February 26, 2013, while training in a military test pond in Aberdeen, MD. Both died on the bottom after spending 24 minutes underwater, where virtually everything went wrong. Their equipment didn't work right, the communication with sailors on the surface wasn't clear, and debris trapped Reyher about 150 feet underwater.

But there's more to the story. According to a report in *The Virginian-Pilot* last month, Harris, 23, had the option to cut the line connecting him to Reyher, 28, and survive. He refused to do it, though, instead doing everything in his power to free Reyher, 28, until both men died. "Harris exhausted himself in an attempt to save Reyher," a military investigator wrote. "Both divers resisted the natural instincts of self-preservation, in order to expel his last breaths in an effort to save each other."

The men were with a Navy mobile diving and salvage unit. Rescue divers tried twice to save them, but their bodies were lifeless when they were brought to the surface 31 minutes after they started their dive. Navy officials say Harris will posthumously receive the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, which is awarded to service members who demonstrate heroism in an event not involving an armed conflict.

The incident resulted in discipline for at least five personnel, and the commanding officer of the diving unit was removed from his job in May 2013 after an investigation determined that there were problems in his unit. The unit's master diver was found guilty in January 2014 of dereliction of duty for conducting the dive without proper safeguards, and he was reduced one rank.

Dives are conducted from the comfortable 35-foot chase boat, which has cushioned seats atop waterproof bins for dive extras. Its two 140hp outboards swiftly took us to dive sites. Gear stayed onboard, only the tanks were changed. Epi, the driver, operated the nitrox analyzer, checking as I watched. Always with a ready smile and helping hand, Epi handled the boat like it was his second skin. Nitrox was usually 31-32 percent, with tanks topped at 3000 to 3200 psi. After Epi or dive guide Jed helped me with gear, I'd backroll off, grouping with others at the anchor or line before descending. While I like to take my time viewing fish and critter behavior, the other divers seemed to prefer a faster pace. After several dives, Jed eventually became comfortable with my lagging or disappearing into a swim-through. A couple of times, Epi, an excellent spotter, dived with me. I returned to the boat at my own pace, sometimes 15 minutes after the prescribed one-hour dive times. On the surface, the crew hauled up my tank and BCD, and I climbed the ladder into this stable boat. (These days, I don't go on boats without easy boarding ladders. In the Caribbean, my shoulder muscles were torn when I was pulled into a boat by my arm, necessitating three months of physical therapy.) Wherever the mother boat moored, the surface was usually a gleaming mirror, but once when we motored through a channel for 10 minutes to our next dive sites, choppy waters ruled. Only two dives were above 60 feet; the remainder ranged from 60 to 110 feet. The visibility on most dives was over 100 feet. We dived German Channel twice, seeing two mantas on one of the dives. I haven't had much luck with manta viewing here.

Big Drop Off is a vertical wall, heavily encrusted with plentiful gorgonians, including sea whips and sea fans. A huge iron ball and a thick heavy chain remain from when Americans used them in World War II to block the channel to keep Japanese from reinforcing their positions. In one crevice, I spotted a unique marbled shrimp, and later I saw sequestered nudibranchs, and a gigantic moray eel hiding in a hole, while adult and juvenile Oriental sweetlips abounded.

The gleaming wooden floors on the Ocean Hunter's inside stairway to five below-deck cabins marked the attention to detail on the 96-foot vessel. (Above decks are two beautifully appointed master cabins, and another with three single beds.) The comfortable lounge had sofas, a desk with computer to view and edit photos, a large LCD screen, plenty of movies and fish ID books, and a Palau Dive and Snorkel Guide, prepared by Tova and Navot. For relaxing, I often chose the

## Ocean Hunter III, Palau

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

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

covered sundeck on top, with canvas chairs, loungers and two Jacuzzis. (I didn't worry much about the sun because most days were partly cloudy with some rain.) The spacious dive deck, where we suited up before boarding the chase boat, was partially covered, with a large two-tier camera table and dedicated tub, and two showers and two hoses for rinsing. The friendly, professional crew of six worked well as a team. Captain Ken has been an instructor and captain with Fish 'n Fins for over 25 years; Chef Arlee and boat driver Epi have been with the organization for 15 years. Jed claims three months as a dive guide on board. He is a keen observer of his divers, frequently teasing, but never intrusive; he's usually

indulging his betel nut habit, which, I must admit, is a bit gross. Rounding out the crew were a quiet but smiling assistant chef from India and a friendly engineer. The vessel can accommodate 17 divers, but on this trip, there were just eight, representing six different countries.

Each morning, fresh sweet rolls and juice got me out of bed for the 7 a.m. dives, then came a breakfast of eggs, sausage, bacon, toast, pancakes and fruit. Thus it went . . . dives at 10 a.m., 2 p.m., 4:30 p.m. (a dusk dive) and the night dive at 7 p.m. The buffet meals were interspersed with cakes, brownies and fruit smoothies. Dinner was scheduled for 8:30 p.m., but Arlee was most agreeable to serving me early one night, and another time making me a sandwich before the night dive to tide me over. He and his assistant prepared Middle Eastern, Palauan, Italian, Asian, American and French meals, and more simple fare, like fried fish with ginger sauce, just-caught sashimi, sushi, green salad and fresh fruit. Soups, such as tomato or potato-chicken, would kick off a meal. One day, I was happy to devour a hamburger and fries for lunch. Desserts weren't as memorable, but the ice cream always helped.

One awesome moment: At Blue Holes, I dived down a vertical tunnel that opened into a cave at 80 feet. Orange stony cup coral was highlighted by dancing rays of light from tunnels. Blue Holes is also the entry point for the Temple of Doom, well-marked with skull-and-crossbones. It's a huge cavern, at least 300 feet wide, with just one entry, but only for those divers who are cave-certified, which I am not. At Virgin Hole, I made a thrilling descent through a large hole into a cave with a floor at 108 feet. Outside the cave, I finned through canyons and swim-throughs, spotting a stonefish on the underside of a ledge, the adult as well as the illusive juvenile barramundi, and several white-tip sharks, but the best part was the unique topography.

Having been to Palau before, I know that Peleliu's sites, the most distant from Koror, are the highlights. To my disappointment, however, Captain Ken decided not to steam there, noting that it was "swept clean" of corals in 2012 by Super Typhoon Bopha. Moreover, the currents were running very strong, a concern for all but very experienced divers.

Aboard our floating home, it was interesting how the ambience changed as new



The Chase Boat

divers came aboard. For the first few days, there were but four divers: a 30-something California couple, a Fish'n Fins dive instructor on a quasi-holiday, and me. We were experienced divers, and swapped great stories at meals. Then, three more people arrived: a graduate student from Switzerland (who fit right in), and a 50-something fellow with his 20-something lady friend. They shrugged at our dive schedule, she said little, and her companion told her to stay in her room when not diving (which she obeyed upon occasion). This unseemly fellow had requested a private guide. Because the boat was short one dive guide, who was on vacation, Captain Ken, also an instructor with 10,000 logged dives in Palau, pitched in. One morning, the controlling fellow complained that the nitrox label on his tank wasn't new and was difficult to read. Ken replied sarcastically, "Maybe your eyes aren't so good in the morning." The jerk blew up, belligerently yelling that his eyes were fine. It was a 10-minute harangue, and while the captain tried to appease, it was not well accepted. The next day, Ken developed a painful ear problem (probably from the yelling), so Captain Troy of Ocean Hunter I came aboard to become their dive guide, and kept the twosome away from us.

On day five, a 30-year-old fellow from Poland who was living in the Philippines joined us. With 100 dives under his belt in the year since his certification, he took it upon himself to keep an eye on me underwater. At first, I resented it, being the old-salt solo diver that I am, until I realized he wasn't being patronizing, just applying the traditional rules he was taught about buddy diving, so I relaxed and enjoyed his company.

***At Blue Holes, I dived down a vertical tunnel that opened into a cave at 80 feet. It's also the entry point for the Temple of Doom, marked with skull and crossbones.***

Palau Lagoon was a hot spot during WWII, and one can dive several dozen wrecks of ships, Zeros and seaplanes in its waters. My favorite was Iro, a 470-foot-long Japanese fleet oiler, resting at 120 feet, with the deck at 85 feet. I swam through the large torpedo hole, framed by black coral. A school of jacks swirled like a tornado. Many swim-throughs beckoned, but this brought Jed's disapproval. White daisy and bubble corals on the deck provided a striking visual contrast to the mussel encrustation. On the way back to the vessel, Epi drove us around an island, still with rusting Japanese guns protruding, into a small cove to see a dozen banded sea snakes on the rocks, their egg-laying place.

High on Palau's must-do list is snorkeling in Jellyfish Lake, the land-locked saltwater lake with thousands of non-stinging jellyfish. Having done it already, I was hoping instead for a solo dive in the calm waters where the mother boat was anchored. However, Captain Ken said no solo diving, and a guide was not available.

Saies Tunnel, near Ulong Channel, was a spectacular dive. Entering from the wall at 90 feet, I noticed the ceiling was covered with colorful corals, rose stylasters and hydroids. The bottom is at 130 feet. I exited past sea fans and soft corals, a couple of cruising sharks and swarms of colorful anthias. Ascending along the wall, the water exploded with boxfish, unicornfish, flatworms, nudibranch, gobies and blennies. A dusk dive found us at Saies Corner, where the wall was packed with soft and hard corals, and alive with tiny critters, fire dartfish, octopus, moray eels, four-foot-long bumphead parrotfish and courting groupers. In mild current, I hooked in for 20 minutes to watch gray reef sharks cruise by among a lineup of bannerfish, pyramid butterflyfish and yellow-tail barracuda.

The boat remained outside the lagoon of Mandarin Fish Lake, which was a total change of pace. I backrolled into just three feet of water, explored the edges of the encroaching mangroves, and wallowed in the water until I could descend. It was dusk and visibility was poor, but I finally located the two large coral heads in 17 feet of water that the Mandarinfish call home, and where they entertain with their spiraling-up-and-down mating ritual.

With the trip over, and nitrogen depletion on my mind, I stayed in Palau another 40 hours before boarding my flight home. I opted for Ngellil Nature Island Resort, a 25-minute ride by small boat to an uninhabited resort island, with eight traditionally designed guesthouses and reception area manned by three Filipinos. The jungle encroached on three sides, the ocean on the other. I was the only guest. Quiet reigned except for birdcalls. A perfect place to do nothing, unless one decides, as I did, to kayak nearby caves, snorkel, and trek up the jungled hillside to an abandoned Palauan stone quarry. Even the remnants of a typhoon, lashing the island overnight with strong winds and deluge of rain, didn't disturb my tranquil state. Since my plane did not leave until 1:45 a.m., I relaxed on Koror in one of the two rooms in Ocean View, owned by the island resort, and reflected on my trip. Every dive in Palau was outstanding in some way; not one was so-so. In my well-traveled mind, only Raja Ampat competes for my top choice of a superb variety of diving.

-- J.D.



**Divers Compass:** Katie Stoyka and Mike Hoppe of the dive travel agency Reef & Rainforest ([www.reefrainforest.com](http://www.reefrainforest.com)) arranged my trip aboard the Ocean Hunter III with Fish 'n Fins ([www.fishnfins.com](http://www.fishnfins.com)) . . . My cabin cost me \$3415.25; nitrox cost \$199, beer was \$3, soda \$1.50, \$4 for spirits, a whopping \$45 and up for a bottle of wine (which no one sprang for), permits and processing fees totaled \$134 . . . Wi-Fi was available for a charge at the Fish n' Fins dive shop . . . Ngellil Island accommodations were \$150 a night, dinner was \$25, lunch \$15, and their adventure trips cost \$65 . . . A day room at Ocean View in Koror was \$120 (I also had to pay for the night I missed due to United's delay), and airport departure tax was \$50 . . . The U.S. dollar is the currency in Palau . . . Websites: Ocean Hunter - [www.oceanhunter.com](http://www.oceanhunter.com); Ngellil Nature Island Resort - [www.naturegraceresort.com](http://www.naturegraceresort.com)

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## A "Too Exclusive" Island in Indonesia

### *liveaboards banned from a region twice the size of Raja Ampat*

If you've heard of Halmahera, an Indonesian island north of Misool and the Raja Ampat region, and hope to dive there, here's a head's up. *Undercurrent* subscriber Michael Bode (Braunschweig, Germany) sent us this note about his dive trip to Indonesia earlier this summer.

"While sailing along the southwestern coast of Halmahera aboard the *Tambora*, the boat's cruise was confronted with a letter from the Regency of South Halmahera, declaring the 'whole of South Halmahera region off limits for diving.' Now, this area is huge and comprises nearly 5,600 square miles of sea and small islands. Though intensive dynamite fishing has taken place there, South Halmahera still boasts high biodiversity, and there are many amazing dive sites with plenty of marine life.

"To ban liveaboards from diving an entire region is something new in Indonesia. We are not talking a ban against diving the house reef of a resort, which might be understandable. No, we are talking an area about double the size of Raja Ampat! If other regions in Indonesia copy this precedent, it would mean the end of liveaboard diving in this country.

"Interestingly, the government's document -- June 4, 2014 -- mentions two exceptions from the 'no diving' ban. The first one is for the dive liveaboard *Liburan*, owned by a German dive agency. The second exception is for the Halmahera Resort. According to what I've heard, the resort, still in the concept stage, is a joint project of: 1) Rudi Ring, the *Liburan's* former owner; 2) Extra Divers, a dive center and resort management company based in Lichtenstein; and 3) a yet-unknown Indonesian investor. They aim to build a new

## Act Now to Save the Vaquita

The smallest porpoise in the ocean is also the most endangered marine mammal in the world. Living solely in the Gulf of California, vaquitas -- whose name means "sea cow" in Spanish -- are accidentally drowning in the gill nets local fishers deploy for fish and shrimp. Now there are reportedly only 97 of them left, according to a recent report, and unless the Mexican government eliminates gill-net fishing in its only habitat, vaquitas will disappear entirely by 2018.

Even more deadly than fish and shrimping nets are totoaba nets. Totoaba -- another endangered fish hunted in the same area -- are prized for their gall bladders, which are used in traditional Chinese medicine, and fishing season for them starts this month in the Sea of Cortez. "If there is fishing for totoaba this September,

the vaquita might disappear this year," Omar Vidal of the World Wildlife Fund told the Associated Press. "Totoaba nets are the best device to catch vaquitas."

Mexico has worked to police totoaba fishing, placing restrictions in the Colorado River delta, but experts say the financial incentives for fishermen to poach and sell totoaba is too great. "It's a brutal incentive," Lorenzo Rojas, a marine biologist in Mexico, told the *Guardian*. "They can earn in a few catches what they would normally earn in a year."

The Ocean Conservancy believes the U.S. government should work with Mexico to ban the fishing nets that threaten the vaquita's future, and it has created a petition for people to sign to urge both countries to take action. Sign it at [http://act.oceanconservancy.org/site/R?i=N28\\_6ib08xItuEwmX801xA](http://act.oceanconservancy.org/site/R?i=N28_6ib08xItuEwmX801xA)

dive resort on Bacan island in South Halmahera. "Ring established good relations with the local government, and always promoted his trips by stating that the *Liburan* is the only liveaboard in the area to have permission by the sultan of South Halmahera to dive there. The sultan's letter never had the legal power to completely prevent other liveaboards to enter the area, but it nevertheless caused some trouble -- some ships were forcibly kicked out of the area. In 2013, the *Amira* was stopped in the harbor of Labuha on Bacan Island by government officials and the police. They threatened to confiscate the ship, and only after long talks were the *Amira* and its guests were allowed to leave.

"However, the new letter of the South Halmahera Regency is different. Here, for the first time, a regional government acts like the colonial powers did 400 years ago. They try to build a diving monopoly preventing all other competitors from entering this market. In colonial times, these monopolies were defended by canons and gunboats. Nowadays, it is not much different in South Halmahera, with armed policemen and government officials threatening the confiscation of ships.

"Extra Divers reacted quite nervously after I asked them to comment, sending me a lawyer's letter threatening a lawsuit if I continue to convey the impression that it bribed the regional government to get the letter."

We asked some of our Indonesian dive experts whether they had heard of these boat evictions from South Halmahera. It's common knowledge, but no one wants to go on the record about it because the dive community is as small as a village. But one told us, "Rudi Ring has been the source of much trouble at various Indonesian dive sites previously, including Bunaken and Lembeh, where supposedly he had to leave. There seems to be lots of interest in getting this and other such exclusivity overturned . . . he's not on firm legal ground because national law prevails in such matters."

Maurine Shimlock, a regular *Undercurrent* contributor who leads dive photography trips in Indonesia, was personally affected by South Halmahera's closure. "We had to change itineraries for a couple of trips, but nearly all our guests understand the situation. In the larger view, this is a bad precedent for a regional government to set within the larger context of developing tourism in Indonesia. This is the type of thinking that held back progressive, sustainable tourism development in Indonesia for so long. I really thought the country and its tourism operators had finally changed their attitude and wised up to the fact that word-of-mouth is possibly the best advertising. Any resort concession in South Halmahera should be inviting every liveaboard to stop by, have a sunset cocktail on the deck, etc. Every diver would talk about his experience

and recommend the place to their friends who love to dive but don't want to dive from liveboards, and are constantly searching for new resorts situated near good diving. They won't be going to Halmahera, proving the dictum of diminished returns for those who attempt to 'own' the reef."

-- Vanessa Richardson

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## The Dangers Above the Surface

### *don't "take a trip" while on your dive trip*

For a diver, especially an aging diver, the likelihood of falling and injuring yourself on a dive trip is far greater than being injured when in the water. Boat decks are slippery. Liveboard staircases can be treacherous. Beach divers have rocks to negotiate.

Over the years, I've received a number of reader reports from divers who have landed hard, and recent reports have led me to dredge up a few incidents from the last year to cite as reminders for you to be careful -- not only when you're toting 40 pounds of gear and your camera, but even when you are simply walking about. In most cases, the injuries were minor, perhaps resulting in a missed dive or two, but these folks are lucky.

For divers who haven't done much beach diving, or haven't done it in awhile, it may not be that easy. Henry Ziller (Conifer, CO), after beach diving in Bonaire in January, reports, "We did all shore diving and found it takes a little more effort than expected. There are surge, rolling rocks underfoot and slippery surfaces. Most of our group of four fell at least once, and two in our group have been here several times."

And while we might be accustomed to skipping up and down stairs at home, one must pay closer attention abroad. Patricia A. Sinclair (Metairie, LA) took a spill at the Sunset House on Grand Cayman last November. "After breakfast, I picked up my camera, and with my right hand on the railing, proceeded down the stairs. My right foot flew out from under me, I pulled back on the railing and then rolled on my left side, trying to get my arm up to avoid the camera being broken during the fall . . . I did the next two dives, but I sure hurt . . . I sneezed and the pain in my back was like a knife stabbing me. Every deep breath I took hurt." She went to the hospital for X-rays, and nothing was cracked or broken, but the muscle pulls were very bad. She toughed it out through most of her remaining dives.

But it's those slippery boat stairs and decks that trip up most folks. Last year, Bruce Versteegh (McKinney, TX) was aboard the *Ambai* in Indonesia and reports that "there were no towels on the dive deck, and only two towels per room changed every four days or so. As a result, people drip between the dive deck and their cabins, making footing hazardous. I slipped on the stairs leading down to the cabins, and was lucky all I received were bruises."

Mark Kimmey (New York City) was aboard the *Kona Aggressor II* in December and writes "It had just come out of two weeks in dry dock, during which it was completely repainted. Unfortunately, insufficient (or improper, not sure which) non-skid grit was mixed in with the paint meant for decks, so most were slippery, as were the handrails down to the swim step. My buddy and I both took tumbles, and we weren't the only ones. A serious accident waiting to happen and the crew was already looking to do something about it."

Aboard the *M/Y Suzanna* off Sudan last year, Mel Cundiff (Broomfield, CO) noted, "Our two Zodiacs didn't have ladders, and some divers found it uncomfortable to be pulled onto the boat after a dive. The stern part of the lower dive deck on the mother ship was high off the water, and a diver carrying a 90 cubic-foot steel tank needed to take one step down a ladder, step onto the gunnel of the Zodiac, and then take a long step onto the floor. Three divers with their tanks on fell into the Zodiacs;

fortunately, they were not hurt. Later in the trip, the tanks were offered to divers after they had accessed the Zodiacs.”

Ann McGrath (Alexandra, VA), in Indonesia last October, reports, “The layout on the Tambora is poor for divers . . . The stairs are extremely steep and far apart, like a ladder, difficult to climb. The floors are all slippery. I found them safer when I had booties on. At least two of us fell in the gear area, where it is particularly treacherous. Always hold on to something there!”

Too often, I’ve seen divers walk across the decks of rolling boats, dressed in full gear and wearing their flippers, a recipe for disaster. While experienced divers know better, many dive operations push the practice with a “hurry and get in the water” attitude, as one of our readers report on his March trip with the Islamorada Dive Center in the Florida Keys. “A fairly crowded boat. They give the safety and dive briefings, and stress being ready to jump in the water immediately upon arrival at the dive site . . . It’s a long walk in your fins to get to the dive deck. I fell onto one knee before one dive, so be careful.”

So they have divers walking across the boat in their fins, but they then want you to take them off in the water? “At the end of the dive, they have you surface several feet away from the boat, grab the line and remove your fins,” our reader writes. “They’re worried about you getting hit by the boat or ladder in rough

## Hawaii Snorkeler Dies in Rough Water

To a diver, snorkeling is second nature, but during inclement weather, bad things can easily happen. That’s what befell Mark Strickert from Austin, TX, who was on vacation with family in Hawaii and died while snorkeling at Maui’s Molokini Crater on July 20. He was aboard the *Double Scoop*, operated by Scuba Shack, along with 11 other passengers and three crew members on a rainy, windy Sunday morning. Four snorkelers, including Strickert and his son, got stranded in high surf and strong winds on the crater. The Coast Guard was called in to rescue them, and Strickert, 50, was pronounced dead on the scene. Alana Osaki, a 23-year-old crew member who had attempted to rescue the snorkelers, was hospitalized in critical condition. Another snorkeler suffered serious abrasions.

Maui was under a flood advisory that day, and Hawaii was under a flash flood watch due to remnants from storm Wali. But Scuba Shack owner Charley Neal, who was captaining the *Double Scoop*, wrote on Scuba Shack’s Facebook page that weather conditions were calm as he left Kihei Boat Harbor, and a squall line quickly moved in without warning.

“[It] was pretty much like any other day, a dissipating storm had supposedly passed, I checked the radar and it looked like it had passed to the north and had been downgraded. The weather report called for trades, 10-15 mph . . . When we dropped the boat in the water at 6:15 a.m. there was a light wind, 5-10 mph, light chop, a foot and under. We went to Molokini, dropped in the divers, and six snorkelers hopped in the water and floated about; all had wetsuits on, which I insist on for safety.

“After about 30 minutes, what I would call a ‘freak storm’ rolled in and hit like a wall . . . 40 to 60 m.p.h. winds, rain, and the ensuing eight- to 12-foot foot breaking waves . . . The father [Strickert] and young son swam to the island, the boy climbed right up on it . . . We went to find the dad, and unfortunately found him face down and unresponsive, near shore. He was wearing a full wetsuit. Immediately, our brave Alana grabbed a rope, tied it around her waist and dove in. Unfortunately, the rope got caught in the jet and sucked her under the boat, the rope constricted her horribly before it snapped, and the severe squeeze caused internal injuries.

“I would never put anyone’s safety in jeopardy, ever. It was a normal day and a freak storm. We still don’t know what caused the victim to expire, but hopefully we will soon. He had a ‘medical’ issue but also had a doctor’s clearance to dive. And again, he was just snorkeling with full floatation.”

The Hawaii news station KITV says a review of Doppler radar that day appears to corroborate Neal’s story, with a thick line of thunderstorms moving through the Molokini area that morning. And when an experienced boat captain says jump in, most snorkelers will trust that person to know the conditions and will go ahead and jump. Many other dive and snorkeling charter captains had canceled their trips that day due to conditions.

*Undercurrent* readers might be familiar with Neal, because he is the operator who has a “no peeing in wetsuits” rule. For the story we did on him a few years back, go to our April 2007 issue.

weather, which I understand, but . . . On the really calm day, the line became detached, so my wife briefly drifted away with no fins. I think they should re-think this procedure, because an inexperienced diver might have panicked in that situation." A point well made.

And one last tip. Divers Alert Network dive insurance covers you in the water, but not if you plant your face on a slippery deck. It's your own health insurance that covers out-of-water accidents. However, your insurance may not provide overseas medical evacuation coverage. Furthermore, if you are covered by Medicare and do not have secondary supplemental insurance, you are not covered outside the U.S. and its territories. Be prepared.

-- Ben Davison

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## Getting Into *Deep*

*a fascinating read about freediving and big-animal behavior*

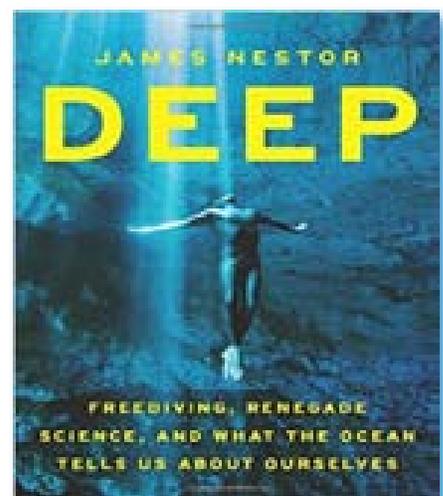
"Scuba diving is like driving a four-by-four through the woods, without your widows up, air conditioning on, music blasting . . . You're not only removed from the environment, you're disrupting it. Animals are scared of you. You're a menace."

When writer James Nestor heard this from a freediving researcher, he didn't disagree. After all, he writes, "The constant gurgle from my scuba regulator scares everything around me; it's like I've gone bird watching with a leaf blower strapped to my back. And the wetsuit, tank and knot of tubes around my body prevent me from even feeling the seawater." With that in mind, Nestor overcame his fear of freediving, learned to go long and deep, and produced a fine new book, *Deep; Freediving, Renegade Science, and What the Oceans Tells Us about Ourselves*, that any active or armchair scuba diver will surely relish.

To tackle his own fear of freediving, Nestor studies under Hanli Prinsloo, the South African national record holder. Freediving, she says, is more than just holding your breath, it's a perception shift -- don't kick down the doorway to the deep, slide into it. By following her techniques, he begins his first day by holding his breath for under a minute and, by the end of the day, for more than three minutes. We follow him to freediving competitions, where, at 40 feet, the ocean begins pulling you downward, at 150 feet you enter a dream state, at 250 feet "the pressure is so extreme your lungs shrink to the size of fists, and your heart beats at less than half its normal rate," and at 436 feet, a diver's chest compresses from 50 inches to 20 inches.

We meet competitive freedivers who disappear during dives, panic and surface unconscious. In addition, we learn firsthand about the Master Switch of Life, "the physiological reflexes in the brain, lung and heart, among other organs, that are triggered the second we put our faces in the water. The deeper we dive, the more pronounced the reflexes become, eventually spurring a physical transformation that protects our organs from imploding under the immense underwater pressure and turns us into efficient deep-sea-diving animals. Freedivers can anticipate these switches and exploit them to dive deeper and longer." It's even triggered when we splash cold water on our faces in the morning.

While the extremes of freediving drive Nestor's book, I was especially taken by his study of deep-diving cetaceans, their behaviors and what seems almost like extraterrestrial talents. Nestor hooks up



## Snafu in the Solomons

For the time being, if you want to fly from North America to dive with the *Bilikiki* or any of the land-based resorts in the Solomon Islands, you must fly through Brisbane, Australia, or Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. The normal route via Nadi, Fiji, to the Solomons' capital city of Honiara has been shut down for a few weeks because of a dispute between the Solomon Islands government and Fiji Airways.

Jenny Collister, owner of Reef & Rainforest Dive and Adventure Travel in Portland, OR, says she has rearranged at least 10 trips for customers who were flying through Fiji. "Most who have been affected

had their tickets already, and those who are traveling in the future hope it will be sorted out." The *Bilikiki* has been picking up passengers late to accommodate their flight changes.

The dispute between the two countries began when the Solomons' Civil Aviation Authority refused a Fiji Airways request for extra flights to Honiara. Fiji Airways retaliated by stopping some flights from the Solomon Islands. Now, all flights between the two countries have stopped. Fiji Airways is refunding canceled flights or making new arrangements, and covering the increased cost of flying from Nadi to Brisbane and on to Honiara.

with a cadre of interesting characters, including Fred Bayle, a photographer and shark conservationist who has dived as deep as 200 feet off Malpelo Island, Colombia, to tag upwards of 150 hammerheads. We learn that smooth dogfish sharks have such acute electrical sensors, they can detect electrical fields five million times weaker than any human can detect. Many scientists believe that the species, which can sense electrical fields in their prey, navigate by sensing the earth's magnetic field. Some scientific experiments have shown that humans also subconsciously navigate by the earth's magnetic field.

Nestor organizes his book by depth, taking us down with dolphins to 1,000 feet, down with sperm whales to 10,000 feet, and eventually down 28,000 feet to the hadalpelagic region, where unique sea life never leaves. To get himself 2,500 feet deep, Nestor visits the west end of Roatan and joins up with Karl Stanley, who operates the *Idabel*, a three-person submarine he designed. He runs the Roatan Institute of Deepsea and, for \$800 a person, takes scientists and tourists to explore the Cayman Trench. Crunched into the observation space with another passenger, Nestor is amazed at the underwater meteor showers, specks of detritus trickling to the sea floor. At 2,550 feet, an enormous comb jellyfish blinks blue, the red, then purple, then yellow, and then all colors flash at once. "Bioluminescent animals use light to startle, distract, lure and communicate," he writes, and describes how squid, anglerfish and other deep-sea critters that never see sunlight use their eyes to pick up the faintest illumination. Giant squid use bioluminescence to communicate with other squid, perhaps using something similar to Morse code. While the *Idabel* creaks and groans, it's a thrilling and sensational trip.

Sperm whales dive to 10,000 feet, and Fabrice Schnöller, an engineer by profession, has spent years freediving and recording their clicks, *credas* and *codas*. Nestor joins him on dives and on one of them, a 35-foot bull sperm charges him head on, then turns away with a "rapid burst of coda clicks so powerful that I could feel them in my chest and skull." Schnöller told him, "That's not coda . . . and he's not talking to you . . . he was looking at you to see if he could eat you."

Schnöller believes a whale's echolocation is so refined that when they echolocate our bodies, "they perceive that we have hair, big lungs, a large brain . . . perhaps they recognize that we're fellow mammals, that we have the potential for intelligence." (That's the rogue science referred to in the subtitle, perhaps more fantasy than science.) However, they can detect a 10-inch squid at more than 1,000 feet, with the most precise and powerful echolocation of any animal; their clicks can be heard several hundred miles away, with a maximum of 236 decibels; and they would blow out eardrums from hundreds of feet away and, scientists speculate, "vibrate a human body to death." Schnöller says he once touched the nose of a sperm whale calf and "felt a sudden shock of heat rush up his arm . . . The energy from the clicks coming out of the calf's nose was enough to paralyze Schnöller's hand for the next few hours." Schnöller theorizes that sperm whale clicks are "more like fax machine transmissions, which work by

sending out microsecond-length tones across phone lines to a receiving machine, which processes those tones into words and pictures . . . human language is analog, sperm whale language may be digital.”

Nestor’s journey also takes him to the Florida Keys to visit scientists stationed in the *Aquarius*, the world’s only underwater laboratory, and to Japan to dive with women in their 60s, 70s and even 80s, who still making a living freediving to net fish.

So, my fellow divers, I can’t imagine that anyone who has had a chance to slip below the surface and marvel at the life there won’t find this a fascinating read. Nestor, a fine journalist (he has written for *Outside*, *Men’s Journal* and the *New York Times*) with a keen eye, has produced the best underwater-focused book since *Shadow Divers* a decade ago. It’s a fine adventure and a thrilling ride all the way from the surface down to 28,000 feet, and back.

*Deep*, 268 pages, is available in hardback or on Amazon Kindle. If you click on *Deep*’s book cover on our “Editor’s Book Picks” web page ([www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/bookpicks.shtml](http://www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/bookpicks.shtml)) to order through Amazon, *Undercurrent* gets about five percent of the sale price, which we then contribute to a good cause: saving our oceans. In fact, if you buy anything from Amazon through *Undercurrent* -- from a vacuum cleaner to a bottle of vitamins -- we’ll get a contribution.

-- Ben Davison

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## Fish-Mauling Divemasters

### *stand up and speak out against divers who harass marine life*

Early last summer, I was hiking in the Rockies and our guide pointed out a wolf den; he thought there might be wolf pups inside. We waited quietly at a distance, our cameras ready, but none emerged, so after several minutes we moved on. If our guide had been a divemaster like some of those our readers and I have encountered, he would have approached the den with a shovel and dug out the pups, picked them up by their scruffy necks, and held them out for us to photograph.

What’s with these dive guides and divers who feel compelled to pull out any creature they find and treat it like so much chopped liver? What is it about the attitude of these people who, once underwater, think the rules of engaging animals on land don’t apply? Would they climb a maple tree and grab a handful of baby robins so the bird watchers they were guiding could get good shots? Of course not. So why is it that for many guides and divers, it’s just fine to pull octopuses from their holes, squeeze and inflate pufferfish, or float an arrow crab, so the photographer can get a shot before a snapper picks it off?

I’m probably preaching to the choir, because most *Undercurrent* readers share my views. However, take this non-subscriber, Zachary Nims, a diver from Dallas, who thinks an octopus is little more than his personal rag doll. Check his charming video from a recent Bonaire dive titled “Octo Hunt” that he posted on his personal Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=456095754536787&set=vb.100004090981275>). Brave Zachary -- the octopus squirted ink!

We posted Nims’ video on *Undercurrent*’s Facebook page to raise a stink, and it received the most comments for one of our Facebook posts so far. A sample of (profanity-free) comments from divers included, “Divers like this need to have their certification revoked, and their picture put in every dive shop and resort in the world so they won’t let him dive again” to “Hopefully, public backlash will make this dude think twice about this *bad* behavior.” Unfortunately, the backlash hasn’t been strong enough -- Nims still has the “Octo Hunt” video on his Facebook page for the world to see. This man remains clueless.

## Divemasters as Dirtbags

What's even more shocking is that professional divemasters are engaging in the same behavior in front of paid customers. Blue McRight (Venice, CA) dived in Kauai last summer with Sea Sport Divers and had a horrible experience with her bald-headed divemaster. "Not only did he rocket along the reef, he found an octopus and harassed the thing relentlessly, causing it to ink four separate times! It was appalling. He was very arrogant when I expressed my concern about that after the dive, and proceeded to do it again on the next dive." Years ago, Kathryn Boucic (San Diego, CA) had a similar experience on the Big Island when the divemaster pulled an octopus out, grabbed it, even as it inked as it tried to swim away. She complained, but the divemaster's rationale was that he was trying to make a good experience for customers. She called it bunk, and moved to another dive operator.

Unfortunately, that marketing stance of "trying to make a good customer experience" has rubbed off on some customers. One *Undercurrent* reader wrote: "I dive in Maui often and have seen divemasters catch the occasional octopus; they always seem to be as interested in the diver as we are with them. I have never seen one harmed in the process . . . I think the divemasters typically know their critters and how they need to be treated." Of course, we disagree -- an octopus in the natural world should not be a diver's personal toy.

Some divers have no problem with fish being fed, but there's plenty of proof that it does change their behavior (and if they're being fed cocktail wieners, hard-boiled eggs or Cheez Wiz, it's changing their innards for the worst). One reader mentions a friendly, 40-pound grouper at Grand Turk named Ales that came to divers when they arrived and swam alongside them. "He occasionally bumped divers' arms or came up under them to receive attention. Divemasters all but wrestled with him, but he seemed to love the interaction with divers." You'd think being wrestled by divemasters would put Ales off mankind for good, but it might be fish feed that kept him coming back. I'm skeptical that he was being "friendly," which I doubt is a word in a grouper's lexicon. On the other hand, I guess I can't object to an occasional chin chucking.

*"He was very arrogant when I expressed my concern about harassing an octopus to ink, and proceeded to do it again on the next dive."*

## The Worst Places for Seeing Bad Behavior

The Philippines are mentioned routinely as a nation where divemasters act unbecomingly. Regina Roberts (Alameda, CA) went to Crystal Bay Resort last year and was appalled by both divemasters and divers harassing sea life. "They were moving, holding and surrounding nudibranchs, octopuses, etc. We were very vocal to the divemasters, resort and our trip leader, which calmed but did not eliminate the problem."

Tim Rock (Tamuning, Guam) says he has seen similar behavior in Indonesia and Malaysia in his 30 years of diving. "They use a macro wand to hit and coerce subjects. They make stargazers pop up out of the sand and do other things that are more harassment than guiding. I think some guides get bored or weren't trained to respect marine life and use the wands wantonly, disturbing marine life or impatiently coaxing a subject into position for a photo. If encouraged by the photographer, then both are complicit. If I mention the behavior to abusive guides, they usually change their actions, at least around me. I also praise, in public, those guides who set up a nice photography shot with care."

Mary Wicksten (Bryan, TX) says the most grabby divemasters she has met are in Belize, "where it seems to be mandatory to chase, poke, grab or otherwise harass any turtle, shark or ray nearby, thereby ruining many a photo not just of the big animals, but also the terrified small fry. Fish feeding is supposed to be confined, but the dive masters did it everywhere, including over the pit of the Blue Hole."

Kristin Farrag (Dundee, IL) has also had bad experiences at Captain Don's Habitat in Bonaire, at Ocean Encounters in Curacao and at Scuba Club in Cozumel. "Mind you, it's not all divemasters there, only some.

I've been to too many places where over-zealous divemasters pick up, move, and otherwise maul the sea life. I take underwater photos and resent when I see someone moving an animal to get a better shot. To me, it's like golf -- shoot it where it lies! Where's the challenge in 'posing' an animal?"

*"To me, it's like golf -- shoot it where it lies! What's the challenge in 'posing' an animal?"*

Moreover, it's happening right here in the good old USA, where people ought to know better. Michael Lewis (Vonore, TN) dived in March with Islamorada Dive Center in the Florida Keys, and chides their bad environmental practices. "The divemasters picked up arrow crabs, conchs and even a scorpionfish to show the patrons. That shouldn't be allowed, anywhere, and especially not where

we dived, since I'm pretty sure it was in a marine sanctuary. I guess they think they'll get bigger tips, but they got much less of a tip than I normally leave."

### What Should Divers Do?

Many readers show their disdain of fish-handling divemasters in different ways. When a divemaster handles reef critters for photo ops, Jeff Robertson (Roseville, CA) backs off and stays away from the crowd. "Twice in San Pedro, Belize (at Amigos Del Mar and Ramon's Village), I've been asked by the divemasters afterwards why I didn't get in to take a photo. I explain that I thought he wouldn't want photo evidence of him handling marine life. That's pretty much a conversation stopper."

Hilary Elder (Seldon, UK) takes a physical and a verbal approach. "I'll remonstrate whilst underwater and make my views clear when above water. I refuse to dive with someone who did not heed me." Kristen Farrag uses a three-strikes approach. "I signal underwater that this is a no-no and then I leave the area. If I see it continue on more than one dive, I will bring it up with the dive operation manager. If I still see it continue, I do not use that dive operator again."

Samuel Johnson (Greensboro, NC) chooses to hit molesting divemasters where it will hurt them most: tips. "I was recently diving with Oasis Divers in Grand Turk. I had one divemaster for five days, then two other divemasters the other two days. I left tips for the two but I stiffed the guy who had been with me for five days because of the way he abused the reef, with his fins as well as with his hands. And he was the senior divemaster who had instructed the other two! I left notes for all three divemasters, explaining what I was doing and why."

However, sometimes fear of ruining their vacation will keep divers from being frank with dive operators. One reader says "I am afraid to say anything to a divemaster for fear of angering him or her, and then having to deal with various forms of pettiness that would ruin my vacation." Carol Keller (Derby, KS) agrees. "I never repeat business with divemasters who handle the marine life, but I do not like to discuss it while I am diving with them, as I fear revenge -- not that they would do something unsafe to me, but that their treatment of me would be affected. But often we have no option to change mid-vacation. Not only are their actions disrespectful to the marine life, they are also teaching new divers to behave wrongly."

And that is why divers need to speak up, when they can. Divemasters who show a lack of respect for marine life are also training new divers to exhibit that same lack of respect. I think experienced divers have a responsibility to call someone on his inappropriate treatment of marine life. Yes, some dive shops will react with pettiness, but most, when confronted by customers with examples of bad behavior from employees, will take steps to change their practices and policies. When we've called attention to such practices in *Undercurrent*, we usually receive a quick mea culpa and an offer to prevent it.

If you don't want to tell the dive operator, tell your travel agent. Dirk Wenber-Lutrop, who owns Diversion Dive Travel in Redlynch, Australia, listens to his customers and changes the way he does business to accommodate. "We have acted numerous times on comments passed on to us by our clients about

underwater misbehavior. Most operators share our beliefs and have acted accordingly with pulling their staff in line. The few that didn't, we no longer support."

Or put it in writing. *Undercurrent* subscriber Greg Yarnik (Palatine, IL) wrote a complaint on his comment card during a stay this spring at Anthony's Key Resort in Roatan. "My wife and I observed divemasters daily feeding and mishandling grouper, turtles, nurse sharks and other species, and it became so annoying, I gave a pointedly critical review on a comment card as we departed." Yarnik was surprised to receive an e-mail from Mandy Wagner, the resort's director of operations, who wrote, "We just had our department head meeting, at which your card was read to the staff. We took your comment seriously about the feeding of fish on the dives. As a result, the practice will be discontinued. The shark dive is an outside operator and we cannot affect that change. [But] thank you for taking the time to give us your observations."

These days, abusive operators and guides are on the decline, but there is still a lot of work to be done to educate Third World countries about harassment -- as well as those dive guides in Florida. You're an experienced diver, and a paying customer. Your trip experience should be as important to the dive operator as it is to you. If they -- or other divers -- are disrespectful of the marine life, speak up.

-- Ben Davison

## Readers' Letters: Bends, Photographers and Scaring Sharks

Dear Ben,

I read with interest the article published in the August issue of *Undercurrent* about my dive shop. I am dismayed that mention of Michael Richards' dive accident was made. Mr. Richards was not employed by me at the time of his DCS accident. He took my boat without my permission (stole it, in other words). I did assist with his first aid and spent time with him in hospital on the day of the accident. He received the best treatment that was available. At the time I was not made aware of the profiles that he had undertaken on the day and in the days that preceded.

-- Kay Wilson, Indigo Divers, St. Vincent

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While I enjoyed your travel article in the March issue about snorkeling with manatees in Homosassa, FL, it reminded me of recent negative developments in nearby Crystal River. I first experienced snorkeling and photographing manatees there in December 2008, and I had a wonderful time and got some great images. But I visited again in March 2012 and was very disappointed. New regulations do not allow snorkelers to wear weight belts! This restriction prevents a photographer from getting a decent image. One of the first rules of underwater photography is "shoot upwards." I do not plan to return. This is an example of why diving is dying in the USA.

-- Jim McKnight, Leominster, MA

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I had to email after reading the article "Why Did This Shark Diver Disappear?" in last month's issue. In his article for the British magazine *Diver*, John Bantin mentions a shark nicknamed Emma that likes swimming off with cameras and Bantin's tank while he was still wearing it. Maybe Emma got a hold of missing diver John Petty's tank, which could explain the gear with unbuckled buckles. Speaking of *Diver*, I am the person described as the "lucky escape" in this crocodile attack article ([www.divernet.com/Marine-Life/392398/crocodile\\_attack.html](http://www.divernet.com/Marine-Life/392398/crocodile_attack.html)). I appreciated having a massive camera rig that I was able to hold at the nose of the crocodile that chased me. If I had a tiger shark interested in me, I would probably try chasing it. All of us who photograph underwater know that most things will swim away when chased. If that didn't work, I would probably take off my tank and try using it to distance myself from the shark.

-- Lauren Greider, Encinitas, CA

# Flotsam & Jetsam

## Compasses and Quick-Connection Mounts

**May Not Mix.** Pony bottle holder kits are handy in emergencies when divers need a quick tank-to-tank move, but Peg Hart (Beaufort, NC) found out they could wreak havoc on a diver's compass. "I got one of those new magnetic pony tank regulator gizmos, but if you dive with a compass, its magnet impacts your compass when the two are closer than 18 inches. My husband and I were headed in from a dive, and he was 90 degrees off my heading. Then we luckily realized what was going on. Don't buy these things if you dive with a compass -- too dangerous." Our veteran dive gear tester, John Bantin, agrees. "Yup, putting a large magnet, as used in some of these quick-disconnection mounts, in close proximity to a magnetic compass will completely negate its usefulness. Even trying to use a compass while diving on a steel wreck will prove it to be inaccurate."

**More Fish Apps.** In last month's issue, we listed some fish ID apps for smartphones and tablets, and here are a couple more to consider. *Undercurrent* subscriber John Hoover (Honolulu, HI) created Fish ID Hawaii for the iPad (\$8), which has full descriptions of 324 Hawaiian reef fish, 300-plus underwater videos of said fish, and recommendations for dive and snorkel sites around the islands ([www.hawaiifishes.com/APPS.htm](http://www.hawaiifishes.com/APPS.htm)). And we'll reiterate our recommendation for Bob Halstead's Coral Sea Fish Guide (\$5), which we wrote about in our April issue. It covers reef fish and critters from the Great Barrier Reef to Vanuatu. It's available for both iPhone and iPad at <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/bob-halsteads-corsea-fish/id809624974?ls=1&mt=8>

**Nothing to Fear from Eating Lionfish.** Back in 2012, we wrote how conservationists in St. Maarten warned

islanders not to eat lionfish after tests found a naturally-occurring toxin in its flesh that can lead to ciguatera poisoning, which has serious symptoms. (Although the FDA added some lionfish species to its watch list for the poisoning risk, as of July, there were no known cases.) Now, a new study in *Environmental Biology of Fishes* states those fish-poisoning fears may be unfounded. Lead author Christie Wilcox of the University of Hawaii thinks the reason why so many lionfish are coming up positive on ciguatoxin tests is because its venom proteins might act as ciguatoxin mimics. They have similar activities, and the proteins can make it through common lipid extraction methods, although in reduced amounts. "If they are making their way into test dishes, there's a chance they're messing up our tests," says Wilcox. But the presence of these proteins in your fillets is nothing to worry about, she says. "Unlike ciguatoxin, lionfish venom degrades at room temperature, let alone with heat, so you have nothing to fear from a lionfish dinner."

**A Couple of Corrections.** In our July issue, we posted a reader report about Roatan's Coconut Tree Divers and how its bad compressor caused one diver to suffer from hyperventilation, nausea and a near loss of consciousness at depth. Her husband said she suffered from carbon dioxide poisoning, but Daniel Vale (Bowmanville, Ontario) writes, "I believe the gentleman was referring to problems with carbon 'monoxide,' not 'dioxide.' His wife needed a hospital for blood gas analysis and perhaps hyperbaric oxygen therapy. She is lucky to have survived that dive." In the same issue, we had a review of the NAD-Lembah Resort in Indonesia, owned by a couple named Simon and Zee. Our writer described Simon as a German who's lived in Indonesia for years, but David McDougall (Newcastle, CA) wrote us, "Having been to that resort and spending some time chatting with Simon, I am pretty sure he would take umbrage at being labeled as a German as he is most certainly English." Mea culpa, our travelin' diver replies, "I had a brain fart and mixed him up with the assistant chief. They often spoke German at dinner but yes, he is British." Sorry, Simon.

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Letters to the Editor/Submissions  
EditorBenD@undercurrent.org

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

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

Undercurrent  
3020 Bridgeway  
Sausalito, CA 94965

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

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