

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Compass Point Dive Resort, Grand Cayman

an East End dive resort for serious divers

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Dear Fellow Diver:

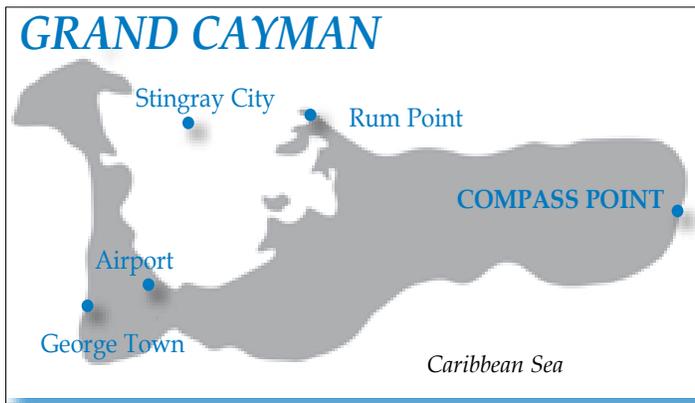
What I like most about diving is the full, 24-hour experience: Being on the boat with a small group of interesting divers, sharing happy-hour stories and travel tales, being awakened by the bright clang of tanks, having a short walk to the dive boat and finding my gear ready to go, being around guides who enjoy their work and their guests, a local area with a little local culture remaining. In reality, more than just the isolated experience underwater.

There was a day when the Caribbean had plenty of those resorts, and the East End of Grand Cayman itself had two. There was Cayman Divers' Lodge, now the site of a for-sale sign, advertising it was once a resort site. The other was the 14-room Tortuga Club, destroyed by Hurricane Gilbert in 1989, the very week I was there (I spent two nights hunkered down in the East End Community Center). But today, there is just one. Compass Point Dive Resort, built by the owners of the Ocean Frontiers dive shop, sports much of the camaraderie of those intimate, little dive resorts but with 28 one-, two- and three-bedroom condos that are up to 21st century standards.

I've probably dived the East End of Cayman more than any other Caribbean venue, so when I was about to leave for a North Carolina hiking trip in mid-October and had a few extra days, I made last-minute reservations and headed south on a two-hour nonstop flight from Charlotte. I've



Eagleray's Upstairs, The Dive Shop Below



always carried my own gear, but with my bag stuffed with hiking boots and fleece jackets, I only had room for my wetsuit and mask. Because many Undercurrent readers now opt not to carry a heavy extra bag and pay stiff baggage fees, I figured I'd travel light, renting gear on the spot. It had been well more than a year since I've been wet, so Ocean Frontiers, the dive shop at COMPASS Point, has a rule for people like me: hire an instructor for your first dive. Being no rule breaker, I would go along with it.

Zara Dyer, a Brit in her late 20s (mostly Brits work there) who got her chops in Malta, Thailand, and Fiji, became my instructor. While I expected to be put through paces such as mask clearing, a hand signal review and God knows what else, there was none of that. She had me verify my nitrox mix, set up my gear and helped me into it, pointed out the basics of my Subgear computer (which gave simple information but seemed pretty useless after that), steadied me as I shuffled up to the side transom in gnarly seas, and jumped in first to save my ass in case I was so overweighted I would plummet to hell. But the eight pounds I had ordered up weren't quite enough, so she handed me another two and down we went. After exchanging OK signs on the bottom, Zara kicked away slowly, pointing out creatures here and there, while navigating like she had dived Lighthouse Wall forever, though she had been on Grand Cayman less than three months.

The sheer wall had plenty of nice hard and soft corals, a fair share of tropicals and a meandering four-foot reef shark. I watched a pair of banded butterflyfish poke at the reef, marveled at the sparkling diamonds on the back of a juvenile yellowtail damsel, and watched a couple basslets dance under a rock cropping, while being eyed by a stoic, blood-red lionfish. A single goby inhabiting a large star coral would have made a fine macro shot had I bothered to pack my camera. It was indeed a pleasant first dive -- 104 feet for 49 minutes. When I returned to the boat, one diver was staring at his computer and shaking his head. He had gone into deco and he was grounded for the next 24 hours, another rule. While going into deco is no big thing -- you do come out of it as you rise, of course -- I suppose the penalty is more to say, "This will teach you to pay attention, pal."

To avoid a surface interval on the choppy seas, we motored back for a short spell, then returned to Playing Fields, a much fishier site, where Creole fish, chubs, chromis, black durgon and sergeant majors swam in loose aggregation. I followed Zara over and between coral mesas, watching sand tilefish hovering over the sand, jawfish tidying up their holes, a spotted moray eyeing me from a crevice, and large conch dragging itself along. Two barracuda sashayed over to size me up. Under a ledge, a lobster ballerina stood en pointe. Near a cluster of three symmetrical yellow tube sponges, a Pederson shrimp danced on the tentacles of a corkscrew anemone. Though the sky was overcast and dark, visibility was about 80 feet.

After a couple of dives, it was lunch above the dive shop at Eagleray's -- burgers, fish and chips, good fries and salads, chicken curry, barbecued ribs -- and while I could have joined the afternoon dive, I typically use the first few days to check out the environs to fill in my story. Because



A View of the Nauticat from my Condo Deck

Compass Point includes a compact Avis car in its dive package, it was easy to do that.

In many ways, Cayman's East End remains the old Cayman, even though at the northeastern point, there's the large, family-oriented Tortuga Club condo complex, with the Reef Resort next door. A few big-buck tourist homes have been built, but the feeling of old Cayman remains -- tourists can join in a Sunday church fish fry or, a few blocks north, partake in a lawn barbecue several days a week. However, be careful to drive on the left-hand side of the road (traffic is minimal here, but horrendous near Georgetown) and avoid the feral chickens and occasional iguanas. A car is important to get to nearby restaurants. Tukka is perhaps the best, with a nice bar boasting an ocean balcony. Owned by an Aussie who also owns Eagleray's (the interchangeable staff is Indian and Filipino), Tukka serves rubbed tuna, big steaks, jerked chicken, mahi mahi, lobster, linguini and burgers. The conch/crocodile burger seemed like a winner -- but it wasn't. Nearby is Vivine's Kitchen, essentially her home, with such local favorites as turtle (raised on Cayman) stew and goat stew. Chopsticks has Chinese fare and pizzas. Down the road are restaurants in the big hotels, a few miles farther are the Lighthouse and Over the Edge. Everyone serves lionfish, a mild and somewhat tasteless but firm whitefish. I had lionfish tacos, lionfish ceviche, and lionfish and chips to do my share for the reefs. For breakfast, one can stock up on cereals, milk, eggs, bread and fruit at Foster's supermarket, a couple miles down the road.

A 3 a.m. thunderstorm didn't bode well for the next morning's diving. While there was no rain, the strong wind made it tough to walk a straight line down the dock. The Nauticat headed south and around the island to High Rock Dropoff, which had heavy wave action. His English accent sometimes impenetrable, Kevin hammed it through the briefing, which was illustrated by hand drawings of the reef, and then led the dive. The rule: Buddy up or follow him, and 25 minutes into the dive, he'll be near the boat and wave good-bye, and you can stay down until you come out, with 500 psi or so.

He led us through two separate swim-throughs. The first, perhaps 80 feet long, was no place for claustrophobes -- my regulator hose twice got hung up on the walls -- and there were few spots one could escape upwards. I eventually exited on the wall, where I rose past a lionfish patiently awaiting an unsuspecting meal. The second cave ended at a manicured sand wall, where I cruised up 10 feet to emerge onto the reef. I watched a French angel and a couple of parrotfish, (there were few of them on the reefs), then moved upward to the reef top, active with tropicals. I was perfectly warm in a 3-mm wetsuit in 83-degree water, but then hit a patch that felt 10 degrees cooler, followed by another warm patch, then a cold patch again, a perplexing pattern that marked the rest of the dive. I followed schooling chubs and chromis, speculating that they might be preferring one temperature over another, but my theory didn't hold. After a climb up one of two good sturdy ladders, I was assisted back to my bench seat to disrobe, and orange slices and lollipops were handed out. I refused the lollipop -- I imagined the bucking boat face-planting me onto the floor and jamming it down my throat. Zara led the second dive, taking my group of seven over spur and groove formations. A large stingray shot from the sand; another diver found a well-camouflaged scorpionfish. I followed a porcupine puffer in and out of hiding

Did You Take a Dive Trip This Year? Send Us Your Reports

We're gearing up for the 2015 edition of the *Travelin' Diver's Chapbook*, so we need your reports to make it as chock-full as we can. Send us reviews of dive operators, liveaboards and resorts you've dived with this year by filling out our online form at www.undercurrent.org/members/UCnow/SubRRTopMA.php. You can also follow the link "File a Report" on the left side of our homepage (www.undercurrent.org ; or after logging in, follow the "Reader Report" link in the top navigation bar.

Please send us your reports ASAP, and thanks for helping us keep up-to-date with the great and the not-so-great dive travel out there.

Regulator-Ripping Diver Is “Not the Criminal Here.” Really?

A February 17 trial date has been set for the year’s most infamous dive. You may recall our June feature article “An Underwater Attack Makes World Headlines,” giving details of an underwater encounter off Hawaii’s Kona coast on May 8 between marine activist Rene Umberger and fish collector Jay Lovell. Umberger, who has written for *Undercurrent* about the bad practices used to collect Hawaii fish for the aquarium trade, and two other divers were using cameras to film fish collectors plying their trade, and when Lovell saw them filming him collecting fish, he finned toward Umberger and pulled the regulator out of her mouth.

Authorities charged Lovell with a misdemeanor of second-degree terroristic threatening, to which he pleaded not guilty in September. Lovell didn’t speak during the brief arraignment, but his attorney, Evans Smith, objected to a media request for extended coverage, which would allow a camera in the courtroom, then requested the case be taken to trial.

After the arraignment, Smith told *West Hawaii Today* that Lovell was actually the one under threat, being surrounded by six strangers, who blocked his route back to the surface, and when he got back on land, he immediately reported the incident to authorities. “He’s not the criminal here,” Smith said.

Oh, really? Who was the only diver down there to rip a regulator out of someone’s mouth?

places until he took up residence near a brittle star. Twice, a large porgy swam up to study me. On the reef top, elkhorn coral stood proud while below, plenty of orange, yellow and red corals provided plenty of color, even under gray skies.

But the wind made it chilly, so a warm shower back in my beachfront one-bedroom condo (they’re privately owned) was very welcome. It was a nice second-floor unit with a small, modestly equipped kitchen, washer/dryer, comfortable couch, chairs and bed, and a flat-screen TV with cable. After I toted my wetsuit to the balcony to dry, I slipped twice on the wet tile floor. I should have accepted the dive shop staff’s offer to rinse out and dry my rubber.

I had paid in advance for four days, expecting to stay even longer, maybe somewhere else, but circumstances required me to cut the trip short. I try to avoid paying in advance, because like so many dive resorts, Compass Point has a no-refund policy. But when I noticed that few units were occupied, I realized I would have had no problem extending, though the rental car might have been an issue. When I checked out, explaining my need for an early departure, I was reminded of the no-refund policy, but was told I wouldn’t be charged for my rental gear.

I think the East End still remains one of the best destinations for Caribbean divers. It has dramatic, unique and interesting topography, with plenty of healthy coral, thanks to limited development. While I didn’t get to see the full range of fish life, given the weather-limited dive sites, I made it a point to talk with other divers who saw some of the bigger stuff. And *Undercurrent* subscriber John Keith (Logan, UT), who was there a few weeks before me, reports that he saw “several nurse and reef sharks, a few turtles, a couple of eagle rays, large groups of tarpon, eels and some good-sized groupers,” typical of what I’ve seen over scores of tanks there and what one what you can expect over a week’s diving, unless you get stuck in bad weather on the south side, typical in November and December.

Compass Point, Grand Cayman

Diving (experienced)	★★★★ 1/2
Diving (beginner)	★★★★★
Snorkelling	★★★
Accommodations	★★★★ 1/2
Food	★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★
Money’s Worth	★★★★

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

Best of all, Compass Point carries that dive resort feeling, though it could use a common room, where divers could gather. The substitute is a small, pre-dinner bar, where a divemaster or two will likely be hanging out, and divers who stay elsewhere or have second homes in the area. (I watched the San Francisco Giants beat up the Royals, jawing a bit with three Kansas City divers who had just arrived). Over a week, there is plenty of dive variety at 53 sites they visit and plenty of opportunity to dive -- two-tank afternoon dives, a three-tank dive on one day, a dive in search of big fish, glow dives, lionfish hunts, a dive on the purposely sunk Kittiwake -- but they've been known to book up, so so cruise the website and plan ahead. It's clear that Ocean Frontiers caters to experienced divers, exercising limited control and letting you do your own thing underwater, with no tut-tutting for staying down a bit too long. And depending upon the time of year and day of the week, there's nonstop service to Grand Cayman from at least 15 American cities, Toronto and London, making it an easy-to-reach destination. With the West End all the way to Bodden Town looking like Miami these days, head to the East End, where there's a real dive resort, and a little bit of old Cayman -- and its friendly people -- lingers.

P.S.: When I arrived home, an old diving buddy asked me how much Cayman had changed. I told him about the time 25 years ago when I was in the old Tortuga Club bar at 9 p.m. and in stumbled five drunk men, one a police officer. They had set out that day to have a drink in every bar on the island (there were 22) and they had achieved their goal -- the Tortuga Club was the last bar on the island, at the end of the road. Today, the road goes all around Grand Cayman, there are more than 22 bars on Seven Mile Beach alone, and those guys would be arrested by a sober policeman long before they drove out of town.

-- Ben Davison



Divers Compass: Compass Point's winter rates are \$1,715 per person for a one-bedroom oceanfront penthouse, double occupancy, with six days of two-tank diving and a rental car (expect to pay about \$100 in additional rental car fees) . . . rush hour traffic means giving yourself an hour minimum to drive to the airport . . . Ocean Frontiers' only rental fins were Mares pocket fins, uncomfortable and difficult to pull off in the water . . . two-tank afternoon trips are \$129; the single-tank Kittiwake dive is \$95 . . . the American dollar is readily usable currency;

prices are a little higher than "home" . . . Websites: www.compasspoint.com; www.oceanfrontiers.com

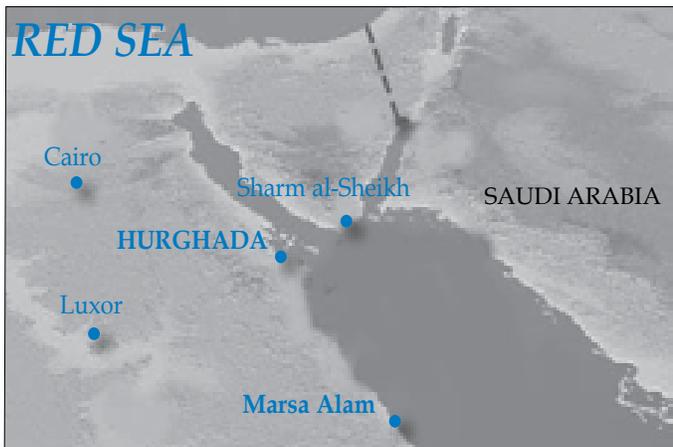
Red Sea Aggressor, Egypt

big critters will give you bang for your buck

Dear Fellow Diver:

The wind blew in from the desert, and its sands settled in the sea. The Red Sea Aggressor rocked and wallowed through six-foot waves as we steamed between Marsa Shouna and Daedalus Reef. The Egyptian crew, sprawled on cushions in the salon and on the sun deck, slept soundly. The passengers -- two Aussies, four Yanks, two Spaniards and a Pole -- did not. Some wondered why their cabins did not look like the elegantly appointed habitats promised on the website. Others recognized the photos as being from a different Aggressor vessel. On the queen-sized bed in our upper-deck master suite, my partner and I took Dramamine and tried to sleep, waiting for the nine-hour passage to end.

At 6 a.m. the next morning, the group assembled for a continental breakfast of toast and sticky buns in the main deck's salon and blearily watched instructor Erin Spencer's briefing, with the reef depicted on a large flat



screen monitor. "Last week, we had 15 hammerheads on this dive," she said in a noticeably British accent. "And the seas were flat." Mmm hmm.

The day before, I had assembled my gear before our checkout dives at Umm Ras. The crew had filled the aluminum 80s to 2800 psi with nitrox (32 percent) from long hoses attached to a compressor well away from any diesel fumes. They helped us divers into wetsuits, turned on our gas, then assisted each of us into the Zodiac. When we returned, they dipped our cameras into a dedicated rinse bucket, put our masks and fins back into the crates beneath

our seats and rinsed our suits. After hot showers on the deck, we were handed warm towels and cold juice. Then it was a short cruise to another coastal reef, Marsa Shouna, for two afternoon dives and the only night dive of the trip. The water was green from the sand blowing off the desert, but the lettuce, honeycomb, fire and dome corals were vibrant and healthy. Blue-spine unicornfish, emperor angels and masked pufferfish shared space with dozens of striped butterflies.

Then off to Daedalus, a 500-yard-wide pinnacle crowned with a dilapidated lighthouse, 52 miles off the Egyptian coast. Its sheer walls descend 90 to 130 feet to a dropoff that plunges more than 1,500 feet down. Visibility on the lee side in the morning was well over 100 feet, but the seas were high. With nine divers, guide and driver crammed into a RIB powered by an 85-horsepower engine, the trip to the reef was a 30-minute ordeal as wave after wave slammed the nose of the crowded boat; it felt like the beach landing at Normandy. No one fed the fish but it was a relieved group that backrolled in and dropped to 50 feet, with instructor Mahmoud Abdela leading the way. I waited in the blue for the hammerheads of dawn. And waited. Maybe they didn't like the wind either. At 13 minutes, we headed toward the reef and descended to 85 feet, where a gentle current propelled us along the wall. The reef was solid coral, hard and soft, predominantly blue and yellow, with magenta and purple soft species here and there. A gray reef shark cruised below. Hordes of red fairy anthias and half-and-half chromis stayed close to the reef, while a Napoleon wrasse eyed me from two feet away. Below, a scalloped hammerhead heading into the current checked me out with one eye.

We gradually ascended along the reef shoulder, and at 48 minutes, were taking the prescribed 15-foot safety stop while pairs of bannerfish and blue-cheek butterflyfish mingled with schools of fusiliers. We had been asked to surface with 500 psi, but no guide ever checked. The dinghy heaved at the surface while I passed up my weights. I kept my fins on my wrists in the plunging sea, climbed the short ladder and flopped aboard. I thought the ladder ill-placed, just abeam of the engine, until I saw the ladderless RIBs other liveboards had, and witnessed fully-gearred divers being pulled into boats by struggling crews. (Seven other ships were moored at the southern end of the reef, producing a parade of inflatables ferrying divers to and fro).

The post-dive breakfast was eggs, chicken or beef sausage, pancakes, toast, fresh fruit, yogurt and cereal, with good Egyptian bread and hummus for the asking. The second dive at 11 a.m. was followed by a buffet lunch, with a cream-based soup and over-dressed salad, then pasta or sautéed fish covered with a heavy sauce, veggies and potato or rice. Fresh cookies or



Red Sea Aggressor

Egypt? Now? Yes!

The July night I left for Cairo, I stood in the departure lounge and watched the events in Gaza unfold on the video monitor, wondering what I had gotten myself into. I may not be an old Middle East hand, but I have lived in Kuwait and traveled to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Bahrain and Dubai. Egypt had been on my bucket list for some time, the new government is more friendly to the United States, the prices were attractive so . . . if not now, when?

I need not have worried. The representatives who met me and my dive buddy on every leg of the trip were prompt, friendly, knowledgeable and spoke excellent English. After our week on the *Aggressor*, we were met at the boat by a Travelways rep, and took a four-hour van ride through the desert to the green lushness of Luxor. At the Luxor Hilton Resort & Spa, we had a Nile view room with balcony for \$197 a day. Our guide met us in the lobby and we set up our schedule for the next three days.

We visited the Temple of Karnak, the Luxor Temple at night, Valley of the Kings, Tombs of the Nobles, the Worker's Village, Colossi of Memnon and the Temple of

Hathor. One evening, we took a horse and buggy ride through old Luxor, past colorful stalls where the average Egyptian shops for bread and an amazing variety of fresh produce. Children shook our hands and shopkeepers asked, "Where from?" When I said America, they always replied, "Welcome, most welcome." At night, we sat in the Diwan at the Hilton, sipping adult beverages and dining on mezze, watching the Nile flow by while the sound- and lightshow illuminated the Valley of the Kings on the opposite bank.

In Cairo, we stayed in the Garden Wing of the Mena House Hotel, and from our balcony, watched the sun warm the Great Pyramid of Cheops. After the requisite tour of the pyramids and the Sphinx, we visited the National Museum, Mosque of Muhammad Ali, the church of Saint Sergio, even the Jewish Temple. No problems.

Admittedly, there is squalor in Egypt, and if your idea of a vacation does not involve hiking in the desert to see wonders of the Old World, you could dash in, do the liveboard and head home -- but you would miss learning about a 5,000-year-old culture from some very warm and dignified people who still like Americans.

-- D.L.

cake followed the 1:30 p.m. dive, and fried calamari, shrimp or mini-pizzas were available after the 4 p.m. dive. The crew served dinner, beginning with a hot appetizer, then chicken, fish or steak in a buttery sauce. It didn't take long for my stomach to rebel at the rich food, and when one menu featured Chicken Kiev, I asked for simple grilled chicken instead. It was served with fresh rosemary and turned out to be my best dinner of the trip. Drink dispensers offered the local version of bug juice in tasty red or yellow that masked the blandness of the desalinated water. Coolers were filled with free Coke, Sprite and beer. Of course, cracking open a frosty Stella or Sakara would end your dive day. Egyptian wine was served with dinner, but mysteriously went untouched, except by the Aussies, who seemed quite willing to drink anything.

Cabins 1 to 7 were downstairs, below the salon. There are no water-tight doors between the sea and the salon, so if the boat took on water aft, these rooms would flood. The only water-tight door on the main deck led to the engine room, but due to the heat, the door was usually open. All cabins had heads and showers, but the water pressure and hot water were better on the dive deck, so I usually took Navy showers there. Speaking about the cabins, were the upscale ones I saw on the Aggressor website before departure from the old Susanna before she was re-outfitted as the Red Sea Aggressor? Was it an honest mistake? Or bait and switch? When asked, cruise director David Patterson simply did not reply. The Red Sea Aggressor is privately owned by Aussie David Home and Egyptians Tarek Abbas and Tarek Hamza. The Aggressor Fleet, as with all its boats, manages the bookings, marketing and website.

Our second dive at Daedalus was closer to the boat, meaning a mercifully shorter RIB ride. The coral was so healthy, my buddy and I stayed around 60 feet to enjoy the colors gleaming in the morning sun. The third dive was led by the taciturn David Patterson (he's since left the boat), who was an excellent photographer, but he paid more attention to his camera than to his charges. With the exception of an American woman who started the trip with 85 dives, the rest

Red Sea Aggressor, Egypt

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

World Scale

of us each had well over 500 dives and could handle ourselves in the water, but the current and upwellings were treacherous and changeable. Any time a dive leader had photo fixation, we knew we were on our own.

The dive started in 84-degree water, perfect for my 3-mil suit, but I swam in and out of vertical thermoclines, where the temperature crashed to what my computer recorded at the mid-70s but felt even colder. One highlight was Nemo City, which began at 10 feet, where anemones harboring Red Sea anemone fish packed the wall to 120 feet. After the dive, I noticed other liveaboards were running their guests over to the lighthouse,

which wasn't on our agenda until we prevailed upon the crew to put us ashore at the pier, where we could climb to the top of the lighthouse or buy a T-shirt from the friendly (and bored) staff.

The first manta of the trip showed up on the fourth dive and had the camp counselor-ish Erin bouncing about in critter heaven. Most crew spoke little English, so Mahmoud served as third-party interpreter. We were deep into month-long Ramadan, and as the days wore on, the crew members, who took no food or water during the day, became more quiet and distant.

At dinner, we learned we would be heading into an increasing wind, making the usual seven-hour crossing to The Brothers a 13-hour bump fest. I took a 24-hour Dramamine and regretted it. I woke at 1 a.m., with the ship plunging into the troughs head-on, and did not get back to sleep. Groggy and dopier than usual, I strode off the dive deck at 7:15 a.m., dropped to 70 feet and clung to the rock at the south end of Big Brother and waited for thresher sharks to appear. None did. I would have waited longer than eight minutes, but Mahmoud signaled us to the east side of the sea mount, and we headed into an easy current to be entertained by Arabian Picassofish and rusty parrotfish, and watch Titan triggers prepare their nests for spawning.

The next three dives were on the Aida and Numidia wrecks. The Aida rests almost vertically and can be entered at the bow, but to see it properly, one needs to drop to 130 feet, and that was below the maximum operating depth dictated by 1.4 atmospheres of nitrox. Returning to the Aggressor, I glimpsed a silver-tip shark zipping below but never saw an oceanic white-tip -- apparently the season is September through April. Still knocked out by the Dramamine, I skipped the Numidia dive. My partner reported 200-foot visibility, and the wreck, encrusted with hard and soft corals, was resplendent in the sun. A school of dog-tooth tuna patrolled back and forth, and gray reef sharks passed by.

After an hour-long trip to Little Brother, we moored close to the southern tip, with the current rushing in from the north, seas thrashing in the wind. Another boat, the Muad'dib, was anchored 50 yards to the west. The Aggressor crew tied a tag line to the reef, dropped a current line astern and we dropped in. We proceeded into the current, and, like the other sites, there were masses of orange and red soft corals, wrasses, trevallys and tunas. After drifting back, we took a stop, then ascended to the tag line. The current, bisected by the reef, rejoined at that precise point, and in an instant, I swept past the line toward the open ocean. My partner and I grabbed the current line and dragged ourselves to the ladders, the sea pulling us sideways, the line tangled in our rigs. Other divers clung to every line in sight and slowly climbed aboard. Once out of our

rigs, I looked over at the Muad'dib. Everyone there was looking at the sea, hands shading eyes. Two of their divers were gone. Apparently they had missed their own current line and been swept south. Our crew instantly had two Zodiacs in the water, the drivers equipped with Nautilus Lifeline radios, and began a zig-zag pattern south of our mooring. The Muad'dib crew added their own RIB to the search. The boats would drop out of sight in the wave trough. Ten minutes passed, then 20. No one on either ship used binoculars. None of the chase boats had them. After 30 minutes, I saw Mahmoud's Zodiac coming home with two black-clad passengers, the boat disappearing and reappearing in the swell until the divers were returned to their ship. The man shook hands with someone. The woman hugged the captain and fell to the deck.

The Muad'dib suspended dive operations for the day and departed for Elphinstone. We welcomed Mahmoud aboard with applause and cheers. He said the lost divers had SMBs deployed, but they were not visible to boats approaching from the north. One of the Aussies on our boat was a certified lifeguard and noted that the search pattern should have been a grid rather than random zig-zags. That afternoon, we returned to the water and headed up the east side of the reef. A manta somersaulted in the undersea wind, feeding on the current-borne bounty. As we hung in the water at our safety stop, a long-awaited thresher shark did figure-eights beneath us.

That night, the wind died and a threatened 15-hour passage to Elphinstone was managed in a mere six. After one uneventful dive, crammed in between four

Tropical Fish Are Heading for the Poles

When marine ecologist Adriana Vergés emerged from a dive in southern Japan's Tosa Bay, she was amazed at what she saw: once-lush kelp forest been stripped bare and replaced by coral. Tosa Bay is hundreds of miles north of the tropics, but now "it feels like a tropical place," said Vergés.

The undersea world is on the move. Climate change is propelling ocean life into what used to be cooler waters, and researchers are finding that the repercussions of tropical fish migration are often devastating. Invading tropical species are stripping kelp forests in Japan, Australia, and the eastern Mediterranean, and chowing down on sea grass in the northern Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic seaboard. "The faunas are mixing, and nobody can see what the outcome will be," said Ken Heck, a marine scientist at the University of South Alabama. But the consequences of that mixing are already trickling up the food chain.

Sea grass beds and kelp forests are the sea's nurseries, because they feed and protect fish larvae and juveniles. But they are being replaced with other warm-water species such as coral that follow the arrival of tropical fish. In a study for the *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* in July, Vergés and her colleagues note that many species clean coral of algae and plants that could otherwise choke the reefs. But when the fish move toward more temperate waters, they often find a bountiful harvest of kelp or sea grass to feed their voracious appetites. Shrimp, crab, and other species that often spend the first year of their lives hiding from predators in the protection of the grasses disappear when their cover is gone, leaving a void for creatures that depend on them. It also has devastating effects on commercial fisheries. In southern Japan, the arrival of rabbitfish and parrotfish destroyed as much as 40 percent of kelp forests there, which were once thick with abalone and spiny lobster, and supported a famed fishery.

In the northern Gulf of Mexico, Heck started seeing unusual species back in 2006 and 2007 near the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, south of Mobile, AL. Comparing the numbers of tropical fish in his team's trawl nets with records from the 1970s, Heck found a 22-fold increase in emerald parrotfish -- a coral cleaner common in the Caribbean -- and new arrivals of snapper, grouper, butterflyfish and surgeonfish. Green sea turtles and manatees have also found northern Gulf waters increasingly comfortable.

Angelfish and damselfish have been found off the Carolinas, and the Chesapeake's blue crabs have been seen as far north as New York. Plants are also on the march: Black mangroves are growing miles farther north along the Florida coast than they were a decade ago. Species on land and in the oceans have always moved around, but now climate change is increasing the speed of this movement, Vergés said. "There's no doubt. The magnitude of the change is so large that it's very obvious."

-- Doug Struck, *National Geographic News*

other boats, we headed off to Port Ghalib. Our last dive was back at Umm Ras, where the captain wedged us into a parking lot of 12 other boats, gently nudging day-boat snorkelers out of his way. I counted 72 bobbing bodies in the water. I knew this had been done to get us back to port early, and I found the ensuing dive disappointing, despite a bird wrasse, black-tail dartfish and the dive watch my partner found on the bottom. The other boats all departed at 12:30, and there was a constant roar underwater as they headed to Port Ghalib at high speed.

That night at the farewell gathering, the crew really relaxed. They had been onboard six months without a break since the boat was re-commissioned for the Aggressor Fleet and were looking forward to some time off.

Except for the oceanic white-tip, my checklist was full, and the reefs were healthy and colorful. Rough seas and no schools of sharks, but dive trips are a roll of the dice. You pays yer money and you takes yer chances.

-- D.L.



Divers Compass: A seven-day trip in a deluxe stateroom with single beds or a bunk bed is \$1,699, and the master cabin goes for \$1,999; all diving, meals, beer and (ahem) wine is included, but the price goes up \$100 next year . . . I waited a while to reserve directly with the Aggressor Fleet and lucked into a \$500 discount for the trip, often offered when their trips don't fill . . . Ten-day trips to the Sudan coast will be \$2,999 and \$3,149, respectively; Nitrox costs \$100 for the week, and Nautilus Lifelines are available for \$35 . . . All of their rental gear

was stuck in Egypt customs, so there were no extra masks, fin straps, surface marker buoys, or even hats or T-shirts, so check ahead if you wish to rent . . . I flew Egypt Air from JFK to Cairo, with a one-hour hop to Hurghada for \$1,148, but upgraded to business class at the airport for \$750 per person . . . My partner and I were met in Cairo and escorted to a currency exchange, where we bought visas for \$25; in Hurghada, we were met at the airport and took a three-hour van ride to Marsa Alam (you can fly straight to Marsa Alam and skip the van ride, but the connections are tricky) . . . We overnighted at the beautiful InterContinental Palace for about \$200, and next day the Aggressor picked us up and took us on a five-minute ride to the boat . . . Websites: [Red Sea Aggressor - http://aggressor.com/redsea.php](http://aggressor.com/redsea.php); InterContinental Palace at Marsa Alam - www.ihg.com/intercontinental/hotels/gb/en/marsa-alam/ptgha/hoteldetail

Cozumel, Roatan, South Africa . . .

dive with a "Shadow Diver," or in a Las Vegas show

Dive with a Best-Selling Author. John Chatterton, the main diver in that best-selling book, *Shadow Divers*, frequently teaches advanced wreck diving at the South Florida Dive Headquarters in Pompano Beach, FL, and Larry A. Malato (Woodinville, WA) and his wife took the classes there in October.

"The captains are very competent, and the crew was helpful and respectful. They are tech-savvy and put us on good wrecks despite some brisk currents. Timing currents was not an option, as this is an advanced course and negotiation of currents is inherent in technical wreck diving. This area is rich in wrecks at recreational, as well as technical, depths, and to have a tech-savvy boat operation is a real find." (www.johnchatterton.com; www.southfloridadiving.com)

Stop the Music! Nothing spoils a good dive vacation more than a little unwanted night music, as Marilyn Walker (Castro Valley, CA) reports of her trip last month to Kasawari Lembah Lodge in Indonesia. She says she was disturbed by at all hours by loud music emanating from fishermen's homes

The Sea of Cortez, Revisited

Dear Ben,

I just returned from a far-north to far-south Sea of Cortez trip on the *Rocio del Mar*, which you covered in your October issue. My impression of the *Rocio del Mar*'s crew is similar to your author's positive experiences. However, my experience with the two dive guides was less impressive: mostly babysitting, with very few critter finds. The *Rocio del Mar* is a very slow boat, reportedly with a top speed of eight knots! The biggest difference between your article and my experience was in the diving. It has been estimated that 95 percent of original fish stocks are gone from the Sea of Cortez. I was the only person who captured even one picture of a hammerhead, something this area used to be famous for. No mantas, no dolphins underwater (very few above), no whales. The few whale sharks we saw were small (only up to 20 feet), and the water in this protected park was so green that most gave up on photography. Yes, we saw an occasional shark as well as a large school of big-eye jacks. Multiple sea lion encounters seemed to "save" the trip for most. Several divers on the trip, as well as the dive guides, commented that there has been a

steady degradation in the quality of diving over the years in the entire Sea of Cortez. Several divers, after visiting often for the past 20 years and experiencing this decline, did not plan to return.

- - Randy Preissig, San Antonio, TX

Our Rocio del Mar writer responds:

Randy is certainly correct about the loss of marine life, not only in the Sea of Cortez, but around the world. However, I paid attention to what was there, not what was missing -- partly because I had not been there before, and partly because philosophically, I think each dive area must be appreciated on its own terms. Also, might not the writer's photographic bent lean him toward looking for dramatic big animals? Heaven knows there were amazing creatures (particularly invertebrates) for those willing to look. But his basic point of the Sea of Cortez not being what it used to be is true worldwide. Thank you to those who seek the prestige of shark fin soup. Perhaps my ignorance of the Sea of Cortez and delight in what I saw made me appreciate its delights more than the jaded diver looking only for the big stuff.

--J.D.

separated from the small resort only by a cinder block wall. "The fishermen have concert-sized speakers that blast music at all hours of the day and night. The resort provides ear plugs . . . The resort itself generates noise, too, from the air compressor and the power generator. Most resorts keep these noise-makers some distance from the sleeping rooms, but this one is too small for that. The whole package was intolerable. Unfortunately, having pre-paid for the room and the diving, I lost my money. There are no refunds for cancellations. I moved to Kungkungan Bay Resort, which is distant from the local village, and where I enjoyed the peaceful environment and good diving." (<http://divekbr.com>)

Wild Rides on Cozumel Dives. We have often mentioned that currents, especially downcurrents, can get the best of Cozumel divers, and Karen Card's (Dana Point, CA) experience in June brings that to mind once again. Diving with Pro Dive, she writes, "My first four days were in such strong current, there wasn't much I could do to slow and see anything, unless in a protected swim-through. Feeling like Superman flying over the reef was fun for a while, but I cut my hand trying to hold onto something I should not have in order to stop and see what the divemaster was trying to show me. We called it Mr. Toad's Wild Ride Dive Tours . . . Packed like sardines on the boats, there was neither enough room to move around nor seats for everyone. Bad O-rings were replaced right and left. One day we were sent out on a fishing boat with a deckhand who had no idea what to do with divers. I slipped upon re-entry, with nothing to hold on to and no assistance. One lost diver was found when he surfaced 200 yards away. His wife was hysterical. Another couple told me of being caught in a downwards whirlpool during their safety stop and dropping to 100 feet before they knew what was happening. The divemaster caught them . . . My partner has been diving since 1972, and has been in Cozumel before, but was blown away by conditions. Honestly, you can't really get left behind because you can see shore and there are lots of dive boats all around, but it was all a little unnerving . . . On one dive, the dropoff was so far from the reef, and the current so strong, I used up nearly 1000 psi just swimming to the reef. That was a short dive!"

Shady Operator Sent to Prison for a Diver's Death

Ever since his youth, Ernest "Mark" Rascon had been a trusting guy. Unfortunately, he trusted a man who didn't reveal that he had a criminal past. It cost Rascon his life. On July 27, 2012, Rascon, 47, was on a boat piloted by Craig Lightner, as both searched the kelp off Catalina Island for the blue-banded goby fish. Rascon, 47, using unfamiliar and unsafe scuba gear, got caught in the kelp and died.

Last month, more than two years after the incident, Lightner was sentenced to four years in prison after pleading guilty to involuntary manslaughter in Rascon's death. The Los Angeles District Attorney's office and sheriff's department assembled a body of evidence to show it was no simple accident. They say that while Lightner had the chance to help Rascon out, he called the Coast Guard instead and stayed put. When Baywatch arrived, the rescuers had to summon him three times before he got off his cellphone. Also, Rascon's family says, Lightner never told Mark that it was illegal to fish around Catalina Island for the goby, popular in aquariums. There were a lot of things that Craig Lightner didn't do that led to Mark's death," says L.A. County Sheriff's Sgt. Dave Carver. "He kind of set Mark up for failure."

Several months prior, Rascon met an engaging, friendly Lightner on a fishing trip in Mexico. Lightner invited him to go fishing for the goby, and would pay him \$3.50 per fish. Rascon's family said he did not know that Lightner had pleaded guilty to smuggling tropical fish into the U.S. six years before. Also, the boat they used was more fitted for the clear waters of the Caribbean than the kelp-covered sea off Catalina Island.

Prosecutors say that Lightner supplied unsafe air hoses and regulators for use during the dive, and failed to show Rascon how to properly use the gear. Officials speculate that kelp snarled around Rascon's regulator. When the Coast Guard arrived, they found Rascon dead at 80 feet. His death was ruled as drowning due to an embolism. Carver says Lightner's story of what happened changed from interview to interview. Maybe most significantly, the investigation showed that a previous employee had warned Lightner that his equipment and his failure to give proper training would kill someone someday.

The sad story had more than one prelude: When Lightner was convicted in 2006 of smuggling Mexican immigrants and rare angelfish into the United States, he was penitent. "I'm sorry for my actions that have brought me to this court," he said at the time. "This situation has truly taught me a lesson, and I will never commit a crime again." Mark Rascon paid the price when Craig Lightner didn't keep his word.

-- Scott Herhold, San Jose Mercury News

Volunteer to Swim with the Great Whites. Long-time subscriber Bill Mashek (Forestville, CA) volunteered for a great white shark study in South Africa last month and shared his story with us. "I spent 15 days as a volunteer for White Shark Projects in Gansbaai. The highest concentration of great whites is found in this area, and it is the best place in the world to observe these aquatic behemoths in their natural habitat. Great White Shark Projects is more than a shark-cage diving company. Besides taking people out on cage dives, they are involved in eco-tourism, education, conservation, community projects and shark research. They take data on individual sharks -- their physical characteristics, size, gender, behavior and specific markings. This information goes to the South African Shark Conservancy for shark research and conservation. As a volunteer, I was trained in white shark biology, research, behavior, conservation, shark attacks, basic seamanship and shark tourism. I learned how to get in and out of the cage, and how to remain secure and safe once inside it. Shark Projects supports South Africa Shark Conservancy (SASC), a shark research organization. I spent two days working with SASC, diving and catching (by hand) cat sharks and small leopard sharks for tagging research. The diving around southern South Africa is very similar to Northern California; its kelp forests are very similar to our bull kelp. Overall, this was a profound experience for me, and I highly recommend it for any diver who has the time and the interest in great white sharks." (www.whitesharkprojects.co.za/projects/volunteer-project.html)

Seagrape Plantation, Roatan. For divers seeking a bargain Caribbean vacation, nothing beats Roatan Island in Honduras, as reader Jonathan Morrow (Gardnerville, NV) points out. He spent a July week at

Seagrape Plantation, and got his room and 14 dives for \$750 per person. "The staff sets up your BC, regulator and weight belt on the boat before you arrive. There are three dives a day at 8:30 a.m., 10:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., and night dives at an additional cost. At the end of diving, the staff takes the BCs, regulators and weights, and washes and hangs them up in the gear room . . . The *El Aguila* wreck at 108 feet is five minutes by boat. Shallow dives generally start on the reef and may move to the wall edge. There are abundant small reef fish on the points where the wall drops off. Nurse sharks are not uncommon. Large morays and big black grouper are seen on most dives. Divers are followed by dogtooth snappers on almost every dive, waiting to be fed lionfish. I spotted eagle rays on five days, and green and hawksbill turtles are common. I watched a large octopus eat a conch. The reef seemed healthy, and some spots can be quite spectacular with sea fans and large barrel sponges. Divemasters are easygoing with experienced divers once they have assessed one's ability. With rooms and bungalows 100 yards from the dive shop, this is one of the easiest places to dive out of." (www.seagraperoatan.com)

But a Word of Caution. The Beach House and Sun Divers were the Roatan choice for Sandra Maruszak (Meredith, NH) last February. She thought highly of both, but shared this caution: "I felt safe, but I would not leave objects out on the beach. People noted that their flip-flops, sunglasses, etc., disappeared when they went swimming. A guest left her room unlocked, and a local boy stole her electronics (witnesses saw him leaving her room but they couldn't recover the items). I kept my room locked at all times and never left anything out of sight, and I was fine, but a local boy did grab my husband's sunglasses and started running before we stopped him, so it's a nuisance." (www.sundiversroatan.com; www.thebeachhouseroatan.com)

A Diver's Dream in Las Vegas. Get a behind-the-scenes underwater view of a Vegas show? Leigh Vinzant (Centennial, NV) did, and so can you. She says, "I did the Diver's Dream at *Le Reve*, a show at the Wynn Las Vegas, and what a magical experience! The Diver's Dream package includes a two-night stay in a suite at the Wynn, the VIP Indulgence treatment at *Le Reve*, a backstage tour, an orientation dive in the Dream Theatre pool and a dive during a live performance of *Le Reve*. We were given a two-hour backstage tour and learned all about the intricate workings that went into production of the aquatic show. Next, we took an orientation dive of the Dream pool. We saw the hydraulics involved in lifting the stage, the energy chains and caissons, the speakers, bubble diffusers and props. We swam through the tunnels the performers use to enter the pool, and watched the dive team get everything in place for the evening performance. That night, we were taken to our private dressing room to prepare for our dive (we wore their all-black equipment) and meet many of the performers. We sat through the pre-show dive briefing, then, hidden from the audience's view, we followed the dive team into the pool. As the lights dimmed and the music started, I could feel the excitement all around us. Performers waved at us as they swam by, and dive team members offered up fist pumps. Watching the show from underwater was incredible. Two hours felt like just a few minutes, and before I knew it, my Diver's Dream experience was over. Before leaving, we were given SDI specialty certifications in 'Dream Diving.'" The price? The equivalent of 10 days in Honduras -- \$2,450 a couple -- but for Vinzant, it was definitely worth it. (www.wynnlasvegas.com/Shows/LeReve/DreamDive)

-- Ben Davison

Stay Clear of Exploding Tanks

how to evaluate tank safety on dive trips overseas

Around 2:30 p.m. on August 26, a loud explosion in Cozumel sent people running for cover. But it wasn't a bomb that went off, it was an exploding scuba tank. Juan Enrique Canché Ku was filling tanks in an outdoor area near Scuba-Cozumel, the on-site dive shop at the Scuba Club Cozumel resort, when one exploded. Dive shop manager Henry Ernesto Zapata López told the local newspaper that when he ran toward the compressor, he found Canché Ku, 34, covered in blood with his right leg torn off. Two hours

later, Canché Ku died; his doctor said death was due to shock, traumatic amputation and extensive lesions in the soft tissues. Tank splinters had pierced and ripped his body too drastically for him to recover.

Unfortunately, tank explosions are not an uncommon occurrence. We've written about several. For example, in our January 2013 issue, we wrote about a staffer at the Amigos Del Mar dive shop on Belize's Ambergris Caye who was fatally disemboweled by the shard of an exploding tank he was filling in the compressor area.

"Well over half of the air tanks we used for shore diving with Scuba Club Cozumel were leaking from the valve stems and showed signs of corrosion."

Scuba Club Cozumel is a popular destination for hard-core divers, but the way they managed their air tanks had been questioned by one of our readers before the explosion. Seth Patterson (Brownsville, TX) stayed there for the first time in July and was concerned about how bad they looked. "We did 22 dives in six days between four of us, so we went through 88 tanks and fills. I

would say well over half of the air tanks we used while shore diving were leaking from the valve stems and showed signs of corrosion. They were very poorly maintained."

Hydrostatic testing, the checking of a scuba tank's strength, is strongly regulated in First World countries -- places like the U.S. (the Department of Transportation writes the rules), Australia and European countries, -- but what about in the developing countries where divers prefer to go? Are they regularly tested? Do government rules exist to regulate that process? And what should divers do -- if they can do anything -- to keep from being caught in the crossfire of an exploding tank?

Of course, it's not fair to blanket all overseas dive shops with the assumption of loose rules and laxness. But dive industry veterans agree that tank-check rules get laxer the farther you go from a First World country. *Undercurrent* contributor Bret Gilliam, who has run multiple dive operations in the past, gives a Caribbean example: "There aren't many problems at U.S. Virgin Islands because they're governed by U.S. law. The British Virgin Islands next door are also pretty good. But the farther you go, the more the rules decline. Roatan, the Bay Islands, forget about it. And once you go to the Asia-Pacific area -- Solomon Islands, Indonesia, Thailand -- there's virtually no control over anything." Without control and oversight, one has to hope that the operators are responsible, because not even the agencies are running a tight ship.

Dive agencies, like PADI and SSI, have tank inspection requirements on the books for their affiliated dive shops and resorts, but according to Mark Gresham, CEO of the cylinder inspection firm PSI-PCI, they could do a much better job enforcing them. "The agencies don't care [about rules and regulations being followed], they only care when there's an accident," he says. "PADI's five-star resorts have no requirements for any of their staff to be trained as an inspector; same for SSI. I have had several conversations over the years with both of them to get a consensus on enforcing tank inspections and tests, but it never seems to catch hold." *Undercurrent* contacted both PADI and SSI for information about their tank inspection and testing rules and enforcement, but we didn't hear back from either. Apparently, they don't like our snooping.

Gresham was in charge of investigating the Amigos del Mar explosion, and he also looked into the Scuba Cozumel explosion. "What frustrates me about the Cozumel incident is that there is a U.S. DOT hydrotester in Cozumel, but that cylinder was not in hydro, nor had it been inspected."

He says testing tanks in the tropics is driven by two things: availability of testing facilities, and a dive shop owner's willingness to pay to send tanks there. "In the Caribbean, you find both ends of that spectrum. I find tanks 10 years out of hydro in some places there, and we're not talking remote. In Belize, for example, they carry both U.S. and European cylinders, but that doesn't mean they always follow the standards for the specific cylinder type. In the Philippines, I've seen dive operators using tanks with air leaking out of the crown, but then I've seen other places using cylinders that are in great condition. The problem

with the dive industry is that you often have a guy who has been testing tanks for 25 years and assumes that because he's been doing it for 25 years, he knows how to do it right."

Of course, good quality dive shops, no matter where they are located, will check their tanks regularly and having them inspected routinely. They recognize the danger, havoc and ultimate cost of a failed tank. We asked some random dive operators in far-flung places how they check tank strength and durability -- however, of the dozen that we asked, only five replied to us.

Kay Wilson, owner of Indigo Divers in St. Vincent, says she pays a pretty penny to ship her tanks to Barbados for routine hydrotesting. "The cost is approximately US\$90 per tank, and the tanks are gone for just under a month. At one point I had 80 tanks, so the average annual cost to keep them maintained was \$1500. The cost of running a dive business is high, and there is always a temptation to cut non-essential expenses. Small islands have it even harder as they are heavily taxed with the additional costs of high import duties and shipping. It is also unlikely that a hydro station will be close at hand, and the governments in most small island nations lack the resources, or understanding of the industry, to ensure compliance. Therefore, dive operators have two choices: use integrity and ensure their tanks are maintained or forgo the testing procedure."

Mike Bartick, general manager of the Crystal Blue Dive Resort in the Philippines, says he regularly keeps his tanks hydrotested, and the country, for the most part, ensures tanks are above par. "The Philippine Commission of Sport Scuba Diving inspects and approves tanks' air quality, and grants a seal of approval yearly to compliant dive operations. Specific tank maintenance varies from place to place, but we inspect tanks often, and our dive compressor staff maintains the tanks by cleaning them, re-lubricating the o-rings, re-seating the valves once or twice a year, depending on tank use, and performing visual inspections of tanks, which are numbered and monitored. For hydrotesting, tanks are sent to Manila. This is a convenience of being in Anilao -- our proximity to Manila is a big help for these types of operations."

Gresham says most dive operators in Indonesia follow Australian rules, which require hydrotesting every year. Dave Van Rooy, *Undercurrent's* Bali-based web master, attests that most dive shops there insist

A Diver with a Camera Gives His Opinion

Dear Ben,

I read your review of the *Rocio del Mar* in last month's issue, and I had to smile. The writer's description of Mr. Hyde, the overzealous underwater photographer, is unfortunately quite common. I agree that liveboards should separate photographers from non-photographers when it is safe and feasible. This would perhaps improve all divers' experiences.

I am an avid underwater photographer, and I clearly agree that there are "sharing" issues under the sea. It is very hard not to rush to get photos when something spectacular arises, yet the best pictures will often come later, when most divers move on to the next turtle, ray or sponge. Many times, we all forget to slow down underwater.

While many divers feel compelled to follow the guide to the point that they only see bubbles and fins, I

usually follow behind and take my time. There are few times when anyone even cares what I am framing. Large animals can be viewed from many different angles, and they often want to leave the crowd anyway. Small critters are different. I have seen divers using magnifying lenses to improve their view. This also has the effect of "staking one's ground," and can deter an unaware photographer from crowding the subject.

Over the years, I have seen too many arguments over sharing, and I now dive solo or nearly solo when I can get away with it. Most good pictures come near the surface and take time to compose. The surface is close and the lighting is better. I now actually look at subjects more when I am alone. A great picture takes time and contemplation, not to mention less backscatter.

I realize that solo diving is often shunned or criticized, but eventually we need to grow up and realize we are responsible for ourselves underwater. It helps to let the crowd move on. I prefer to dive alone, just as I prefer to walk in the woods alone.

-- Mark Etter, Lititz, PA

on regular hydrotesting. "I take my tanks to one place in Denpasar, and yes, they stamp them. As far as I know, all the dive operators supply good tanks. There are places here that might not be so picky, but generally better than you might expect."

Fiji's dive industry is covered by the country's Health and Safety Department's regulations, which require that all tanks be visually inspected at least once a year. Steel tanks should be hydro-tested annually, and aluminum tanks every five years. Fiji has no specific hydrostatic testing requirements, but Mike Agnew, managing director of Viti Water Sports near Nadi, also goes by Australian testing standards (his is the only testing facility in western Fiji). "For hydrostatic tests, we stamp the tanks with our initials and the date, add a visual inspection sticker, and again supply a certificate. Any tanks that fail either the visual or the hydrostatic test are rendered unserviceable; for us, that mean drilling through the neck of the tank. I believe these statements can broadly be applied to the three other main testing facilities in Fiji."

What about on liveboards, where you're closer to the compressor than you would be if doing land-based diving -- and every boat may have a different take on tank maintenance, depending on its owner and the country it's registered in? Wayne Hasson, president of the Aggressor Fleet, says tanks all on his boats get visual inspections annually, are hydro-tested every five years, and get stamped. "Crew are trained to inspect, and every country we operate in has somewhere nearby to hydro-test. In some cases, we have to wait to get tanks returned, sometimes as long as two or three weeks, but that's not a problem, because we only send six tanks off at a time and use extra tanks we have on board."

Peter Hughes, president of DivEncounters Alliance, a group of independently-owned and operated liveboards, says similar methods are used for visual inspections and hydrotesting, although it's a little different for one of the boats, the *M/V Galapagos Sky*, which Hughes co-manages. "We have those tanks visually inspected and cleaned annually, but we replace them every five years rather than hydrostatically testing them. We find this a better path to follow, considering the constant usage of the tanks in our situation."

Smartphone Apps to Add Before the Next Dive Trip

On your next dive trip overseas, chances are you're going to experience a flight delay or cancellation, and you'll be spending some time waiting around in the airport. Ease the anxiety by installing apps on your Android phone or iPad to stay abreast of what you need to know.

Check Your Flight. iPhone and Android users should download FlightStats (www.flightstats.com) and/or FlightAware (www.flightaware.com) for day-of-travel info. Type in your flight number, airport or route to see updated departure and arrival times, gates and whether there's a delay. Business travel columnist Joe Brancantelli (www.joesentme.com) also recommends that you load up on airport-specific apps to see what's happening at the airports you're flying in and out of. For example, Los Angeles airport's official app gives detailed maps of the terminals and parking lots, a list of all flights, restaurants and shopping spots, rental car locations and information on ground transportation options.

Enjoy the Airport. If you have time to kill between flights, it may be worth ponying up money to relax in an airport lounge. LoungeBuddy (www.loungebuddy.com) gives info for airport lounges in more than 500 of the world's busiest airports. Use the app to create a trip, list your home airport, and any elite status, memberships or premium credit cards you have, and the app tells you which lounges you can access for free or a one-time fee. You can even filter by amenities such as shower access. LoungeBuddy will manage your status and memberships for future flights.

Get the News and Weather. Weather patterns change quickly, so to know whether your dive trip will be affected by blowing gusts in Bali or an approaching hurricane in the Caymans, install a weather app, like one from the Weather Channel (www.weather.com/services/mobilesplash.html) or Weather Underground (www.wunderground.com/micro/wundermap). Brancantelli also recommends having a news app, because airports are awful places to find out why your plane is running behind, or if you just can't stand the blaring TV tuned to the talking heads on CNN. Try apps from Reuters (www.reuters.com/tools/mobile) or BBC News (www.bbc.com/news/10628994).

Still, there are precautions any diver can take to check a tank and be less suspicious that it's a ticking time bomb. Ken Kurtis, owner of the Reef Seekers dive shop in Beverly Hills, CA, runs regular group dive trips around the world, and he offers up some suggestions.

First, look at the hydro date. It should be no less than five years old. Ask the dive operator if they do the hydros themselves or send the tanks out to someone? "Do they wait until five years or do them more frequently? Do they have a lot of tanks in play (so it's not a big deal if they need to pull some out), or do they have just barely enough to get by, which might cause them not to pull a tank out of service?" Take a look at their rental area and their compressor area, when they're not filling tanks. Do things look neat and clean? "How they take care of those areas is likely how they take care of the tanks too," says Kurtis.

And take a look at the tank itself, he adds. Is it clean, shiny and does it look well-cared-for, or are there pits and gouges? Is there corrosion on the valve? Does the valve handle turn freely? Bret Gilliam says you should be able to unscrew a scuba valve with sharp blow of your palm or butt of your wrist. "If they're so fixed in place you can't do that, the valve has not been off in years."

No matter where you dive, you don't know the actual viability of any tank at a given moment. So you have to put your faith in the operator and that they're doing things correctly. Most of them, of course, want to keep their customers safe. Gresham says a lot of prudent operations come to classes he offers at the scuba industry's big annual trade show, run by the Dive Equipment and Marketing Association. "Last year, we had dive operators from 21 countries in our tank inspection class."

Some operators, however, will not spend the money to test their tanks. Gresham says he recently consulted a dive operation in Mexico's Mayan Riviera area so that the owner and staff understood how to visually inspect and hydrotest their tanks. "This guy was doing his best to keep his cylinders safe, but he was getting pressure from the other local dive shops [for paying for my services]. They don't want to follow regulations because they don't want to spend the money."

For the traveling diver, perhaps the best advice is to steer clear of tanks when they're being filled, especially if you're in Mexico.

- - Vanessa Richardson

Are You Too Old to Dive?

or do some dive operators just practice age discrimination?

Many *Undercurrent* readers are veteran divers who have been around the block, so to speak, when it comes to diving the world over. But "veteran" could also be code for a "senior" diver. Yes, many of us are Boomer age and above, but then again, most are still plenty fit for diving and rarin' to go to Raja Ampat, Cocos Island and other remote parts of the globe for your underwater fix. But are there some dive operators who think divers over "a certain age" are just too old to dive?

We pondered that question after hearing from subscriber Jon Cheris (Wellsville, PA), who wrote us that the Royal Caribbean cruise line now has a maximum age and body weight for passengers taking dive trips through its vendors. "According to PADI, there are no restrictions; however, the cruise line will not let you book if you are too 'old.' The age limit ranges from 60 to 80, depending upon the country."

While booking a Bahamas cruise with Royal Caribbean, Cheris also wanted to schedule some dives during his trip. Royal Caribbean offered dives through Stuart Cove, but once it found out Cheris was over age 60, they said he couldn't dive. "Royal Caribbean claims it is the dive operator's rules, and I spent quite a while on the phone with them until I hit a dead end months before our sail date. At first, PADI blew me

off, but when I said I would next go to AARP and *Undercurrent*, they quickly got their regional vice president involved, who said it is the cruise line [making the rule]." Cheris just contacted Stuart Cove's and booked a dive with them directly. "I understand the hazards and liability of diving," he says. "I see hung-over young adults who are less fit to dive than I am. Some say there are physiological changes that make diving more challenging on the older diver. However, Divers Alert Network ran an article in *Alert Diver* just before we left that indicated it is safe for older divers. I plan to keep on diving just as long as I feel fit to do so. Arbitrary age limits are ludicrous and discriminatory."

So we asked readers in our mid-monthly e-mail if they had had an experience with a dive boat or resort that made them feel "too old," and whether they encountered dive operators that discriminated, consciously or not, against senior divers.

"I've faced the assumption that anyone over age 55 is out of shape and a candidate for cardiac arrest."

A couple of readers say they, too, have experienced cruise ships' restrictions on divers. When booking a cruise last spring with Holland America, Frank Stile (Canyon Lake, TX) was told the age limit for Bonaire diving was 60. Stile, age 80 ("and still going strong"), called Holland America's home office, then talked to cruise staff while aboard. "They

were sympathetic but non-responsive. Fortunately, I arranged private dives with Wanna Dive prior to the cruise. They were great." Bob Halem (San Jose, CA), who is 70, never experienced the age issue, but he has experienced the weight issue. "I'm over 250 pounds and have seen weight limits on cruise ship diving offerings (never directly from a dive operator). When I checked, it was only because of wetsuit and equipment sizing concerns. When I announced I had all my own gear with me, the issue disappeared."

Some dive shops are asking older divers for letters from their doctors stating they're healthy enough to dive. When Philippe "Fifi" Kunz, who runs the Caicos Adventures shop in Turks & Caicos, found out that subscriber Courtenay Weldon (Indianapolis, IN) was age 72, he required a letter from her doctor or cardiologist that she was fit to dive. "Having read many stories of divers having heart attacks, I thought it was a reasonable request," she says. But what happens to the healthy but aging diver who shows up, only to learn the operator thinks he's too old and wants a letter from a doctor? It's happening. While renting a house in St. Kitts, Nancy Smith (Sherrills Ford, NC) was told by the first dive shop that she needed a doctor's clearance to dive with them. "I was 62 at the time and my dive buddy was 71, and we are both in good health and experienced divers, but getting medical clearance two weeks before a trip was not something we wanted to deal with. Solution: Another dive operation, smaller but excellent service."

If you want to head the medical-letter issue off at the pass, consider sending it to the dive shop ahead of time or bringing it with you on your first day. Richard Floyd (Austin, TX), who is 74, did take that precaution last year of having his cardiologist give him a written statement that he was healthy and clear for diving and other physical activity. "I have not had to use it, but am hoping that if there ever is an issue regarding age, the doctor's statement will help me negotiate a favorable outcome."

Some readers who wrote us are tired of condescending talk from dive operators concerned about their ability to dive. "The kind of discrimination I've faced is the assumption that anyone over 55 is out of shape and a candidate for cardiac arrest," says Mary Wicksten (Bryan, TX). "I do not need to be hand-held. Don't expect me to be the first person back up -- I get great air time because I swim regularly and have excellent neutral buoyancy. I am more than willing to back out of dives that I consider to be dangerous, even when the divemaster insists it's going to be great. But what I really loathe to hear is the line that starts with 'At your age...'"

Age should not be the issue for dive operators -- it should be experience and a steady head. Fit young divers who are ignorant or inept can be more of a death risk than a Boomer diver who know what she or he is doing, says Mary Young (Lexington, TX). I've experienced age discrimination on both sides -- dive

crew assume I am old and know nothing, to being kicked in the face by teenagers with fins who think they are racing and shout while snorkeling. I won't mention the photographers or video people of any age who simply jump ahead of the pack. Diving will be a dying sport, but not because the old divers are going to die. Not enough new ones are being properly trained to replace them."

Karen Vander Ven (Pittsburgh, PA) has had the opposite experience of these divers, saying the older she has gotten, the less discrimination she has faced -- and she chalks that up to just plain experience. "I got my first dive certification at age 55. As I started diving in Florida, often showing up at the dive shop by myself, I would be closely scrutinized. The staff would want to see my log, along with a doctor's letter 'clearing' me to dive. On one trip, when I was in my 60s, all the other divers on the boat, who were obviously younger than I, were chattering with each other, but I could sense them staring at me, and then I 'got it'. They were wondering whether I could get back on the boat. When I came up, most were already back up, seated and staring. I prayed I could get up the ladder without any help at all, and I did. After I had sat down, the climate changed. People started talking to me. 'Did you have a good dive?' 'How long are you here for?' As I moved into my 70s, things changed. I would be paired up with a new diver to help if needed. But with some joint trouble, it actually did get harder to get back on the boat with my heavy BC., so I would ask the crew to let me take my rig off in the water and hand it up to them. No problem! No hint that I shouldn't be diving. On other dive trips, I began requesting help getting rigged up at the stern so I could just roll off into the water. No problem again; everybody was helpful. I am now 77. My diving 'career' may be coming to an end, but my decision is not from any hints or statements from anybody else. I have been warmed by what I've seen as 'anti-age discrimination'. The older I have gotten, the less there has seemed to be."

Randall Price (San Antonio, TX), who is 67, at first decided not to advertise his age, as he sometimes is the oldest person on the boat. "I don't want to be treated 'specially,' and I always want to carry my own weight, at least as long as I feel safe doing so. It is amazing how many offers of help -- carrying your tank, hgetting on the skiff -- that you receive from crew and fellow divers once your age becomes known. This speaks well of our diving community. This used to bother me, probably because it reminded me that the day I would need help was getting closer. But I think I've 'grown up' and now graciously accept any help offered. What can it hurt?"

The good thing about being a "veteran" diver is that you tend to know what wise decisions to make while underwater, and you also know when to call it a day -- or a dive career. Long-time subscriber Dick Jacoby (Willowbrook, IL) came to that conclusion while aboard the *Nai'a* in Fiji last April. "I am was 84, with recent bone surgeries that caused maintaining an even keel on board to be more precarious than I liked. I needed the full width of the staircase, for example, and on occasion I needed both hand rails for up or down trips. Due to my underwater photo business, I had been diving 44 years, and having weathered recent surgeries, I hoped I could still do it. The result: I *could* do it, but the payoff wasn't worth the effort. Currents were only mildly stiff during the week, but enough to keep my stiffer body working harder than I wished. The crew were watchful, without getting in the

The World's Oldest Diver

Undercurrent subscriber Erwin Staller (Hauppauge, NY), age 93, claims to be it. He sent us a certificate he recently received for that honor from Big Blue Unlimited in Turks & Caicos, and wrote, "I just returned from Turks & Caicos, where I am being certified by the Guinness Book of World Records as the oldest diver in the world. I dive with Big Blue Unlimited on a regular basis (I've been diving with them when they started, and I was already 76) and highly recommend them." Congratulations, Erwin, for the honor.



way, and their guidance was never heavy-handed. The trip was among the better ones in my experience - just not for someone with bones like mine."

Someday, it will be time for all of us to hang it up. In the meantime, stay fit, stay alert, and make smart decisions about whether to dive.

-- Vanessa Richardson

Flotsam & Jetsam

Need a Cheap Camera Diffuser Underwater?

Ken Kurtis, owner of the Reef Seekers dive shop in Beverly Hills, CA and a regular *Undercurrent* contributor, has this tip. "Underwater photographers, if you're ever in need of an emergency diffuser, the plastic top of a Pringles can makes a really good one. It spreads the light out a bit and costs you maybe half a stop of exposure. When I was shooting with my old Nikon SB-105s, the Pringles top fit perfectly over the front of the flash -- I just added a little duct tape and was good to go." Any flavor of chips will do.

There's a Sea Snake in My Snorkel. No, that's not the title of our followup book to *There's a Cockroach in my Regulator*, but it could be. That's what New Zealander Gary Furness recently found on his holiday in Fiji at the Castaways. Seems that he and his mates snorkeled in from a boat, left their gear in the sand, then put it back on the boat later. He told the magazine *Dive Pacific* that it was washed and stored in the shop's locker, but the next day, "imagine our surprise when we discovered that a venomous snake [a krait] had made a snorkel its home. It had entered through the mouthpiece and was quite comfortable doubled over in the tube. Fortunately, with the transparency of the snorkel, its presence was discovered in time." And with that, my favorite old black rubber Scubapro snorkel is going in the trash.

More About Batteries on Flights. In last month's issue, we gave advice about how to pack your cameras' lithium ion batteries aboard airplanes in both checked and carry-on bags. Just bring them aboard, says reader Terri Feinblum (Landsowne, MD). "I stupidly placed my electric toothbrush in my checked baggage, and it was taken without a note. You do get a TSA sticker on the outside of the bag. It doesn't matter whether batteries are removable from the device or not---carry them with you onto the plane."

Are You Eating Cleaner Shrimp? According to DNA analyses conducted by the environmental group Oceana, 35 percent of shrimp sold in U.S. grocery stores and restaurants was improperly labeled by species or type. Most commonly, farmed shrimp is passed off as wild or "Gulf caught." In New York City, 43 percent of shrimp samples were improperly labeled. Of the 20 species Oceana identified, eight were not previously known to be on the market for consumption. According to *National Geographic*, these included coral "cleaner" shrimp, "which pick parasites off reefs and are popular in the aquarium trade."

Dive Shows for Divers. Our World-Underwater is putting on three excellent dive-specific shows this winter just for sport divers in Phoenix (December 6-7), Dallas (January 24-25) and Chicago (February 27-March 1). New gear, new travel destinations, demonstrations, film festivals -- they're not-to-be missed get-togethers for sport divers and their friends. More information is at www.ourworldunderwater.com

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