

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Nai'a, Tonga and Fiji

two trips for seeking whales and diving Fiji's reefs

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Note from Ben: The Nai'a is a popular liveaboard among our readers, so this month we have two reviewers traveling on different itineraries -- one scouting whales in Tonga, the other diving reefs in Fiji. Here are their reports.

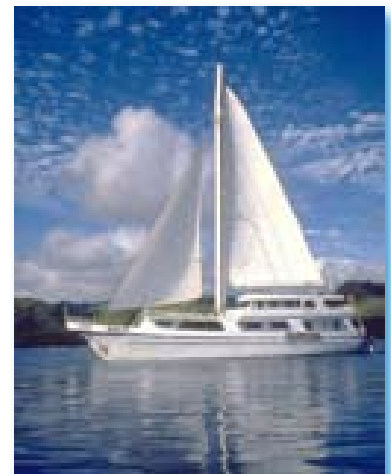
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Dear Fellow Diver:

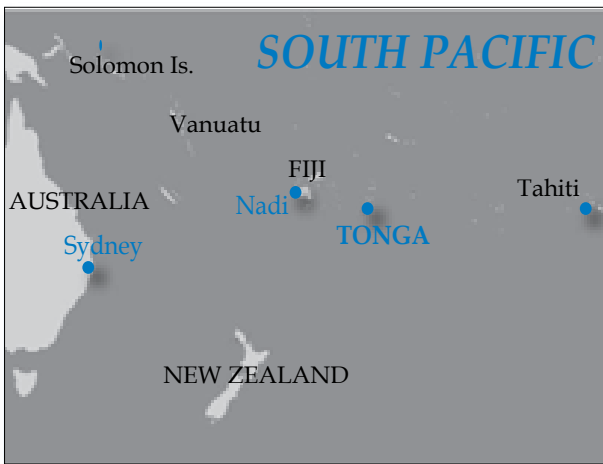
I was finning 20 feet above two 40-foot, 40-ton adult humpback whales cavorting and interacting with each other, and permitting me to photograph them up close. I was thrilled! But I was also cold -- the adrenaline produced by the excitement kept me in the water, but it wasn't keeping me warm.

In 2010, I read an Undercurrent story about a humpback whale-watching trip to Silver Bank in the Dominican Republic, in which four people extolled their experiences swimming with humpbacks in Tonga compared with Silver Bank. I had been thinking about that ever since, and finally booked the Tonga whale trip with Nai'a.

During August and September, humpbacks from Antarctica arrive in Tonga's waters to mate, give birth and wean their young. Nai'a, a Fiji-based liveaboard, travels to Tonga for 10-day trips focused on whale watching and swimming with whales, with a few afternoon dives on local reefs if the whales have disappeared. Mornings were spent looking for blows and trying to get close enough to determine if any whales would stick around long enough for snorkelers to get into the water with them. If they did, everyone jumped in. The crew was constantly searching, but



Nai'a



the real directors were the whales themselves, whose whereabouts and willingness to play are what sets Nai'a's course. If you book this trip, you must be willing to dedicate 10 days to almost nothing other than searching for and snorkeling with humpbacks. Alternative activities aren't planned, but the crew on my trip accommodated guests who tired of whales 24/7.

Seventeen passengers of the 19 booked arrived in Nuku'alofa, on the island of Tongatapu, at 6 p.m. the day before the boat sailed -- but half their bags didn't. Panic turned to anger when a Fiji Airways representative explained that the turbo prop was overweighted so the ground crew

in Fiji had unloaded bags randomly. Somebody called Nai'a's co-owner, Alexx Edwards, in Fiji, who saw to it that the bags reached the Nai'a before passengers boarded at 2 p.m.

After spending the night in Nuku'alofa and hiring a taxi to drive me around the next morning, I boarded Nai'a to be greeted by Captain Jonathan, who has been with Nai'a for nine of the past 12 years, and cruise directors Amanda and Joshua, both with Nai'a just 11 months after coming from a dive resort in Zanzibar. Joshua speaks four languages, which came in handy because 11 whale watchers were European. Also on board were Wanda from Shanghai, Aurelia, a Mexican woman working in Australia, and three generations of an American family, including precocious Alex, 12, and Carolina, 11, who charmed us by becoming the "cookie delivery system" after every lunch. The Europeans -- mainly Germans, but also an Austrian couple and a Swiss photographer -- had individually booked through a German travel agency. They understood English but understandably preferred to speak German, and pretty much stuck together. One woman had obviously studied the pre-trip information -- she was the only one who always had the right clothes for the cool weather, while I bemoaned my failure to do the same and keep warm.

As Nai'a got underway toward the Ha'apai group of islands, we were served an excellent dinner of grilled salmon on a bed of spinach with couscous. Chef Mita's meals were impressive and tasty, but sometimes there was a disconnect, like the morning I was expecting a Spanish omelet and received an egg pancake covered with olives. What the heck -- most everything tasted fine. Then it was off to my tight cabin, made so by beds that could be converted to kings. My dive buddy and I were always squeezing by each other (politely, of course). Regardless, I appreciated the cleanliness, ample drawer space, updated plumbing fixtures, and amenities such as shampoo and fluffed towels daily.

At orientation, Joshua and Amanda explained that everybody on the two skiffs (each held nine) was to enter the water head-first on the driver's count, avoid splashing, stay together, follow the cruise director, and stop when we saw whales below. After breakfast the first morning, Nai'a cruised around looking for blows. At 11:30 a.m., Joshua spotted some groups and we got into the skiffs. After 10 minutes heading toward one group and getting close, we entered the water with Amanda in the lead, swam with our eyes peeled below and came upon a couple of two-ton, two-year-old juveniles right under us! They interacted with each other, surfaced with spyhops, and stayed with us for almost two hours. Wanda, who was so taken with the massive creatures, could not help herself from screeching loudly as she snorkeled. Her (subconscious?) carrying-on not only annoyed the rest of us, but may have been what finally drove the whales away. There needs to be a pledge not to harass the whales or other guests.

I was cold, tired, hungry, and ready for lunch (stir-fry beef with cashews), which was served at 2:30 p.m. Later, a male escorting a female

and her four-week-old, 11-foot baby -- which already weighed 3,000 pounds -- appeared, so we spent another hour in the water, watching mom teach her uncoordinated calf how to breach until her male escort led them away. That first day spoiled us all, creating expectations of daily multiple close encounters for the duration. It didn't happen.

Nai'a is a 120-foot-long, steel-hulled motor-sailer that was built in the mid-70s. Edwards and her brother, Rob Barrel, purchased it in 1992 and refitted it as a liveaboard. In 2010, when the Nai'a was in dry dock for maintenance, an explosion occurred that killed two workers. The nine cabins below deck were demolished, so they were rebuilt and updated. The salon is also the dining room, so with lots of inside time due to cool weather while the captain was searching for humpbacks, it was crowded with passengers fooling around with cameras, editing photos, reading or playing cards and games. The two kids brought homework. Stuff had to be cleared before every meal. The only other options were to hang out at the bow or on the upper sun deck watching for blows, or head for one's bunk.

Breakfast had two hot choices, plus fresh fruit and muffins, and three choices of entrées for lunch and dinner. Suliana, a Fiji native who's been with Nai'a 15 years, managed meal service with efficiency and grace, but it was rush, rush, rush. She brought out breakfast as soon as I arrived for my wake-up coffee, and often started clearing dishes before my tablemates and I were finished eating. There's a fancy Swiss coffee machine in the salon that turns out wonderful cappuccinos, but too often it hadn't been replenished with beans and water (simple enough to correct, for sure). Three-course dinners included soup, salad or appetizer, entrée and dessert. Vegetarian selections were offered daily, and the kitchen accommodated dietary issues. Tea, coffee, hot chocolate, soft drinks, fresh fruit and packaged cookies were on hand all day; popcorn and cookies, cake, or brownies were served in the afternoon.

Although there were sightings daily, the whales didn't hang around, and some days we spent uncomfortable hours on the skiffs or in the water with no encounters. On Day 6, we started looking for whales as usual at 8 a.m. At 11:30, Jonathan and Koi, our Tongan whale guide, spotted a few. We got into the skiffs but as we approached, they dove. We fruitlessly bounced around for another 75 minutes, finally returning to Nai'a for a late lunch. At 2:30, three humpbacks stayed close for 50 minutes, tail and pec slapping, head standing, breaching and

Will You Join Sylvia Earle and Not Eat Fish?

As the renowned oceanographer Sylvia Earle sets out to promote her Netflix documentary *Mission Blue* and establish "hope spots," national parks in the ocean to protect marine life, she is also vocal about her decision not to eat seafood. As she told the *Guardian* newspaper in the U.K., it has been 40 years since she has eaten fish. "I think it was just getting acquainted with creatures on their own terms and seeing them as something other than pieces of meat on a plate, swimming in lemon slices and butter."

Other reasons for her skipping fish are obvious ones. There are just too many people on earth and not enough fish in the sea for their meals. The ocean is filled with toxic chemicals that contaminate the fish. And overfishing often takes out fish that aren't large enough

to reproduce. But Earle is also against eating smaller, more plentiful fish that many seafood arbiters consider sustainable. "I think those little fish people are being attracted to consume, like herring and capelin, I think that's disastrous. In principle, it does make sense, but we're not starting from a healthy intact ocean. The large fish have to eat the small fish. We have choices; they do not. If we want to encourage the recovery of cod, tuna, swordfish, halibut, then we should not be taking their food. I challenge those who recommend eating those little fish. I think we shouldn't eat the big ones either, but the little ones are of value. Think of them as wildlife, first and foremost. . . . We have hundreds of other ways of feeding ourselves."

As divers, should we be eating fish we swim with? Or eating wild fish at all? Let me know your thoughts -- shoot me an e-mail at BenDEditor@undercurrent.org.

showing off tail breaches called peduncle throws. I didn't need to get in the water to catch the breathtaking show.

Although there were whale sightings daily, some days we spent uncomfortable hours on the skiffs or in the water with no whale encounters.

Whether they were maneuvering to get in front of the whales or helping divers don tanks to back roll into the water, skiff drivers Joji and Koroi were competent and accommodating. While trying to swim with the whales, we could be in and out of the skiffs half a dozen times or more, but they never tired of plucking us out of the water or running a tired snorkeler back to Nai'a.

Despite my 4-mil wetsuit and hooded vest, I was constantly cold, whether in the water, on a skiff or aboard Nai'a. While pre-trip information made it clear that winter in Tonga can be cool and windy, I wrongly presumed air and water temperatures would be in the 80s. After all, I was going to a tropical country, right? But it was mostly cloudy and windy, with highs in the mid-to-high 60s, even when the sun came through, and the water stayed at 73 degrees.

We made five afternoon scuba dives, the first on Day 3 at The Patch. Joshua told us that, years ago, while divers were on a reef at about 40 feet, three whales spent 35 minutes with them. (It's illegal to use scuba gear to approach whales in Tonga, but there's no prohibition about whales approaching divers.) While no whales showed up, I appreciated the reef's beauty -- large, healthy patches of lettuce coral plus small stuff such as crabs, nudibranchs and plenty of black and yellow pennantfishes. Visibility wasn't more than 20 feet, and I never got below 70 feet. The next dive came on Day 5 at Unoku, a shallow site with several giant clams and beds of lettuce coral. Although night diving was offered, Aurelia was the only person who did them, and she said they were "nothing special."

We made two dives at Palako's Reef, featuring three pinnacles covered with patches of lettuce coral, and lots of action at 50 to 70 feet -- reef sharks, large tuna and tons of fusiliers. Our last dive was at Nakulei Reef, which was healthy but shallow and offered little to see. Maybe it was the cold water, exhaustion from swimming with the whales, or bouncing in the skiffs for several hours, but there wasn't much enthusiasm for diving. On one of the few sunny afternoons when a dive was offered, many passengers opted for a few hours on an uninhabited island beach.

On the morning of Day 8, boredom was setting in, even though the sun was bright and there was less wind. We spent three hours in the skiff following a female with a calf until it became clear that mom didn't want us anywhere near her baby. That afternoon, we visited the village of Ha'afeva, where we observed a family preparing a funeral feast, toured the village school and medical clinic, and watched boys playing rugby with some of the Nai'a crew.

Nai'a's large dive-preparation deck has plenty of room to store gear in individual tubs, hang wetsuits and gear up. There's also sufficient bench area for dive briefings and hanging out with the crew on a couple of nights when they sang and played ukuleles and guitars. One evening, they hosted a kava party, which was the reason, perhaps, that many of us appeared late for breakfast the next morning. The spacious photo room, adjacent to the dive-prep deck, had sufficient charging stations and ample shelf space for all photographers on board.

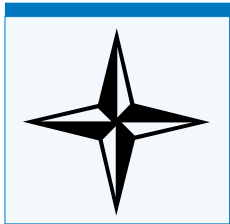


Scouting for Whales (photo by Sue Bradley)

All in all, it was a good trip, despite the cooler-than-expected water and weather. The quality and competence of the Nai'a crew, their willingness to accommodate passenger needs and preferences, the excellent food, outstanding service and comfortable cabins far outweighed any minor annoyances or inconveniences. The passengers were a congenial group despite being unable to freely communicate with each other. However, if you're not passionate about searching for humpbacks, this may not be the trip for you. But I would do it again -- just as soon as winter in the Southern Hemisphere gets warmer.

. -- S.M.

<i>Nai'a, Tonga</i>	
Diving (experienced)	★★
Diving (beginner)	★★★
Whale Snorkeling	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Food	★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★
★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent <i>World Scale</i>	



Divers Compass: A 10-day Tonga whale trip costs \$5,500 per person, double occupancy, plus a fuel surcharge; that price is roughly the same for 10 days diving on Fiji reefs, while a seven-day trip runs about \$3,500 . . . Nitrox is \$7.50 per fill, though unnecessary for the dives offered. . . . Soft drinks are complimentary, as are beer and wine with dinner; there's hard stuff on board as well . . . Tips were expected, but no specific amount or percentage was suggested; crew members share equally in the tip pool and tipping individuals was discouraged, and on-board charges (including tips) can be settled in cash or by credit card . . . While one changes planes in Nadi, Fiji's international airport, to get to Tonga, the Nai'a docks just a short ride away from it for its Fiji trips . . . Fiji Airways, a partner of American Airlines for mileage purposes, flies to Tonga from LAX with a connection in Nadi for under \$1,400 . . . Website: www.naia.com.fj

* * * * *

Dear Fellow Diver:

Several years ago, I cruised the waters of Tonga on the Nai'a and had an incredible experience swimming with humpback whales, so I was looking forward to returning to the liveboard, this time to dive Fiji's splendid reefs. I arrived at the dock on a warm spring day in October, a few weeks after the previous reviewer was in Tonga. As I boarded the boat and met the crew, I was pleased to find several of them remembered me from my previous trip. My experiences on the boat were like the other reviewer's -- including excellent food and too much of it -- although I found the new foam mattresses to be hard and uncomfortable. So I'll focus on the diving . . . and one angry passenger who made my diving miserable.

Upon arrival, I set up my gear, and that afternoon, we did our checkout dive at Samu Reef, not far from the port of Lautoka, on the western side of Viti Levu. With lots of particulate matter causing poor visibility, this was not a signature dive, but I found lots to occupy my time. Scattered bommies -- what the Aussies call coral heads -- rose from the bottom, as they did at most sites. Dozens of shrimp goby pairs were excavating and guarding their shared burrows. Anemones hosted at least two species of anemonefish. A scattering of reef fish, including Moorish idols and damselfish, completed the scene.

Our "real" diving began the following day after motoring overnight to Mount Mutiny, a pinnacle rising from 3,000 feet down. Sheer walls were covered in hard and soft corals, including leather, cup and gorgonians in a rainbow of colors. Some brain corals were more than a meter wide. Pink- and orange-finned

anemonefish nestled into purple-tipped and bubble anemones, schools of anthias, lunar fusiliers, and Moorish idols (one as big as both my hands with fingers outstretched) surrounded me, and three white-tip reef sharks lazily patrolled the area. A second dive here yielded a school of blackfin barracuda, a grey reef shark, a spotted eagle ray and a small hawksbill turtle. These fine dives were typical of what I experienced for the remainder of the cruise.

At Nigali Passage, I twice rode the incoming tide down the sandy channel through the barrier reef. Schools of big-eye barracuda watched us fly past until we stopped at a rocky outcropping named The Bleachers. I settled onto the rocks and watched two dozen female grey reef sharks (and a sole male) move effortlessly about. After 10 minutes, I let the current take me around the corner and into the lagoon, to a vast field of pristine lettuce coral where scissortail sergeants poked in and out of the "leaves."

Dive sites were typically either bommies, both large and small, or walls. Lovely corals were at most sites, although some sites tended toward either hard or soft corals, depending on the conditions. While my dives were fishy, I rarely saw immense schools, which is disturbingly common these days. At various sites, I encountered iconic creatures like banded kraits (sea snakes), a blue ribbon eel and even slingjaw wrasses fully extending their jaws. Interestingly, I saw fewer lionfish here, where they belong, than I have in the Caribbean.

My last dive was at Gomo, off the coast of Vatu-i-Ra. I descended to 69 feet and landed on a rocky area near a huge bommie, using all my strength to keep the current from ripping me away. I had the foresight to leave my camera rig behind, as I would have had great difficulty handling it here. Divemaster Amanda had us wait five minutes to see the grey reef sharks that love this current, but seeing only two was not worth the unpleasant conditions. When I let go, I sped past spectacular soft corals covering the wall, but it was impossible to pause and get a good look. The group and I rose to the top of the bommie, where I was able to get purchase with my reef hook and perform my

British Report on Dive Deaths: The Aging Diver Is at Risk

While the Divers Alert Network has stopped publishing its annual report of U.S. dive deaths and accidents, the British Sub-Aqua Club (BSAC), its counterpart in the U.K., still does so. Its Annual Diving Incident Report for 2014 records a total of 216 incidents between October 1, 2013 and September 30, 2014. While the number of reported accidents has increased during the past three years, the number of dive-related deaths has not. DCS cases totaled just 57 in 2014, compared to 91 in 2013, and there were 16 deaths. Besides the usual causes -- rapid ascents, buoyancy control, out of air, etc. -- there was also an increase in the number of cases in which inflation or dump valves on BCDs or drysuits malfunctioned.

One death involved a solo snorkeler, another involved a diver who died by breathing poisonous gas in a dry passage in a partially flooded mine. Four cases involved a buddy separation of some kind. Six cases involved divers diving in a group of three; in two of these cases, the casualties became separated from their buddies in low visibility conditions.

Five confirmed cases involved divers who suffered heart attacks while in the water -- the average age of these divers was 60. BSAC was frank in its concern about aging divers, stating, "There are now three times as many divers over 50, compared to the population 15 years ago. Viewed in this light, it is perhaps no surprise that we have seen increased fatalities of the 'older diver' . . . In the last two years, all nine fatalities attributed to medical causes were of divers aged 50 or over; this number is significantly higher than the average age of non-medical fatalities, which is 42 years.

"Older divers are advised to take account of the increased likelihood of a medical event when considering the type of diving in which they engage, and those diving with them should be more aware of the increased risk. Currently it is not possible to screen for latent medical problems that may predispose older divers to in-water medical events. Accurate and honest reporting in the medical declaration form . . . is the correct approach." Of course it is, but until divers actually follow that, the number of dive-related deaths probably won't drop significantly.

safety stop. Even with many hundreds of dives under my weight belt, this was one of the most difficult.

The Nai'a schedules between four and five dives a day, with no time limit on day dives (night dives were limited to one hour of bottom time). Twenty-three of my 31 dives were more than an hour long, and that was a lot of diving. I actually sat out the entire last day when rain and winds made conditions less than ideal.

While I enjoyed the diving and Nai'a's Fijian crew, I can't say the same for a certain guest. One American -- let me call him Mac -- was oblivious of his poor buoyancy control, but he seemed to think his large camera rig and expensive gear made him a good diver. I, as well as several other guests, complained repeatedly to Joshua, our cruise director and divemaster, after we watched Mac thrash about and destroy coral on nearly every dive. Regrettably, Joshua's reply was simply, "This guy has been diving since the '70s, and you just can't talk to a guy like that." I find this unacceptable. A divemaster's duties include stewardship of the reef, and by his not confronting this man, the reef was being destroyed, fin kick by fin kick.

I pushed him firmly away, but Mac turned, took a swing and hit my hand, then flipped me off and yelled its meaning into his regulator.

The situation got personal. Once I was calmly observing an animal when he swam over, grabbed my BC and gave me a sharp jerk. Back on the boat, I asked him why he did this, and he said, "Oh, I wanted to show you something." I let him know that was not the way to get someone's attention. I later discovered that Joshua saw this happen, but said nothing to the man. Toward week's end, when I was hovering in the water waiting for the divemaster, Mac swam under me, close enough for me to feel his bubbles, and then lurched up, slamming his tank into my body. Startled, I pushed him firmly away, but Mac turned, took a swing and hit my hand, then flipped me off and yelled its meaning into his regulator. Back on the boat, he came up to me immediately and began calling me names. Again, I complained to Joshua, and although he didn't talk to Mac, he accepted my suggestion and moved him to the other skiff so we would no longer be diving together.

I am a female diver. Mac did not acknowledge me as a capable diver, but rather asserted his "authority" by always assuming he was correct and I was wrong, without having a discussion with me. Not wanting to play his power game, I tried to ignore him. Having been on many liveboards, I know the importance of getting along with the other passengers in close quarters. For this reason, I did not escalate the situation by going around and discussing my experiences with the others guests, but now I wonder if other women on that trip, or other liveboards, have likewise swallowed poor treatment in the name of appearing affable. Sexism does exist within the recreational diving community, which is all the more reason for cruise directors and divemasters to speak to divers about whom they have received such complaints.

While the Nai'a is generally a fine boat offering excellent diving, my trip -- and that of the other travelers -- was marred by an extremely rude and inept diver. Sadly, the cruise director refused to address that diver, apparently not wanting to offend him, but the Nai'a may have lost my business.

-- S.M.

A comment from Ben: Mac behaved like a bully. Our writer had a GoPro video of the underwater incident shot from behind, and it's clear Mac is an oblivious photographer -- he shoots with his fins on the reef, breaks off a hunk of coral and is unaware there is a diver above him. When he finishes shooting, he rises from below and slightly behind our writer -- without looking up -- then bumps hard into her. She gives him a firm push. He turns and takes a swing at her, hitting her hand, then gives her the finger and you can hear him yell "F.U."

His overreaction was inappropriate, out of control, even threatening. Underwater is no place for hitting people and flipping them off. This man needs anger management training.

While the crew has no excuse for tolerating such behavior, it's unlikely they have much training in how to handle such things. After all, Mac was a long-time diver, a successful man who pays big bucks for dive travel and a candidate for a big tip and return business. In the middle of a dive trip, how does one tell him straight on that he's a bully and to back off? Separating him from our writer was a wise step, but the crew cannot ignore complaints. They must also set limits, explain that such behavior on board -- coral breaking and bullying -- is forbidden, and ground the diver if it continues. The other passengers would let out a thankful sigh of relief.

Bas Harts Diving and Go West, Curacao

dive by land or by sea: which is best on this island?

Dear Fellow Diver:

In 2004, I retired from the corporate world to work at the things I enjoy -- diving and flying. Still not able to fully retire, I have to wait for my bride of 34 years to finish her career. (I gave her the ring down 45 feet on Palancar Reef, in Cozumel, and I didn't have a lot of money back then, so the fact that the diamond looked 30 percent larger underwater may have helped seal the deal.) In addition to dive trips to old favorites, we try different Caribbean destinations annually, such as Aruba and St. Maarten. In 2013, it was Curacao for shore diving, where my non-diving traveling companions would find plenty to do. Bas Harts Diving specializes in Curacao shore diving, and after a fine experience last year -- as well as falling in love with Curacao -- we broke tradition and returned this past December. Wondering whether shore diving really was the better way to go, I also booked a two-tank boat dive.

With 150,000 residents, Curacao is one of the three islands in the Dutch Antilles, between Aruba and Bonaire and not far from the Venezuelan coast. The airport is near Willemstad, the charming capital, with narrow buildings, each painted a vivid color -- bright yellow next to purple, next to bright orange, next to green and so on. A reef surrounds the island and is accessible for shore diving on the western side, where there seems to be endless named sites just a stone's throw away from others, so you can actually dive two or three sites on one dive.

I arrived Saturday afternoon and settled in my Coral Estates villa. Sunday morning, right on time, Bas knocked on the door. We grabbed a cup of coffee and sat on the veranda. Bas, a hard-working, customer-oriented Dutchman in his early 30s, has lived in Curacao for nine years, building a business as a private instructor and guide specializing in shore diving. Small groups of four or less are his bread and butter. He has a good sense of humor . . . considering he's Dutch. After finding out that Bas was going to become a father any minute, we got down to business.

"So what do you want to do today?" he asked. I told him I had both a new macro lens and a new fisheye lens that needed to be put to the test. (Score one point for shore diving: it was my schedule and plan.) We loaded up his four-wheel-drive truck, and 10 minutes later we were driving down a jeep trail that emerged from the jungle-like undergrowth on secluded No Name Beach. While Bas said we were about to try something different than last year, the site had a similar look to it. Then I spotted a tree with a hole through its trunk 40 feet up the beach. "Hey, Bas, we were here last year," I said. His reply: Last year,



we had parked by that tree, and that dive site is Lagun. Today we were at a different dive site called No Name. (That's why there are so many named dive sites on Curacao.) Bas threw out his mats and we sat on the tailgate and suited up. (One more point for shore diving: no rushing.)

We worked our way across the coral beach and into the light surf for our 50-foot swim to the reef. (One point for boat diving: no surf entries.) The reef was healthy and loaded with the gamut of reef fish -- soldierfish, trumpetfish, butterflies, angels, drum, boxfish, tangs, wrasses, lionfish, morays, turtles and all kinds of corals, sponges and gorgonians, but nary a big fish. That's Curacao.

Nonetheless, the 82-degree water was blue and clear, with visibility upward to 100 feet. My dive to 65 feet lasted 68 minutes. (One point for shore diving: it's your dive.) Next came a major decision: Head for dive two, or go grab a burger and cold drink, then dive? The burger plan won.

Over a great burger under the palapa at Porto Marie, we planned our next dive based on the macro lens I wanted to use, then headed to Piscado, a small harbor that is home to small fishing boats. We geared up and swam out 100 feet, then descended to swim underneath the boats, listening for other boats coming or going. In less than 100 yards, we dropped down to the reef at 30 feet and behold: Pederson cleaner shrimp, banded coral shrimp, spotted cleaner shrimp, bearded and orange fire worms and lettuce sea slugs. A macro photographer's fantasyland.

My group rented a fine four-bedroom villa in Coral Estates, which is near Willebrordus (the locals call it Wille), 20 minutes northwest of Willemstad. We did a lot of our cooking and grilling outside, getting our food from the excellent but very expensive Centrum Supermarket, which has several locations on Curacao. We also bought fresh fish at Piscado, when the fishermen come in, around 11 a.m. Curacao has many fine restaurants, especially in Willemstad. De Gouverneur is an excellent steak house on the harbor, and the superb Fishalicious in Punda is pricey (\$75 to \$100 per person, with wine), but well worth it.

A couple of days before my boat dive, Bas and I stopped by Go West Diving's shop, which was close to Coral Estates. From the parking lot, the 24 very steep steps down to the shop could be a concern for some. On Bas's advice, I booked the Thursday trip, which was going to Black Coral and Watamula, sites that can only be reached by boat (one point to boat diving: access to more sites). I was to be there at 8 a.m., as the boat departed at 8:30 and would return at 12:30 (one point for boat diving: a schedule), which meant I could actually tell my companions what time I could meet for lunch.

That Thursday, I made two trips down those stairs, first with my gear and then with my camera. After checking in with the friendly, professional staff, I boarded their nice 38-foot Delta Custom named Sea Lion, set up to handle 18 divers. I set up my gear and quickly made new friends with a group of Pennsylvania guys who spun stories about Atlantic wreck diving (one point for boat diving: meeting new diving friends).



The Sea Lion

Irene and Paulene, our two Dutch divemasters who knew what they were doing, divided us into two groups. I got Paulene, who briefed us on each dive and gave the rules about max depth, safety stop, etc. Sliding along at the site Black Coral, I saw the typical trumpets, drums, soldiers, boxfish and barracuda among the plentiful corals and sponges. Paulene let us do our own thing while keeping the dive moving along. From the front of the group, I would get and return the OK sign from her, but never felt I was being rushed during our 58-minute dive, as I lagged behind, stopping to shoot pictures.

Bas told me they were not capable of getting their advanced course done. It was a lot of money to refund, but he said he would have to let them know and do it gently.

Back on the boat, we snacked on orange slices and raisin rolls as we moved to Watamula. My camera bobbed around in a rinse tank with several other cameras and lights, which made me a little nervous (one point for shore diving: personal space). On the way, we stopped at the shop's dock to pick up another diver who couldn't make the 8:30 departure. It was less than a five-minute delay, but demonstrated Go West's flex-

ibility and customer service. Irene did a quick current check (it was barely noticeable) to determine which direction we would go and where the boat would moor for pickup. The dive went from 25 feet to 60 feet, and the entire bottom was covered with small coral mountains and valleys that we glided through. Star, plate, brain and soft corals were plentiful, as were typical reef fish. Spotted morays cowered in the crevices formed by the abundant coral growth. A beautiful dive that I wished would not end. In total, I logged 113 minutes on two boat dives. I have been on too many boats that want you to head up at 30 minutes, 45 tops. It was nice to dive the whole dive. On shore, Go West had large rinsing tanks and freshwater showers, then it was three trips up and down the steps, with wet gear weighing a lot more than the dry gear I brought down.

I finished the week making more shore dives with Bas, including one at the Superior Producer, an open wreck in the Willemstad harbor. A 200-foot-long supply boat that sank in 1977, she sits upright at 107 feet and is the home to many fish, including a large green moray that made its home underneath the deck stairs amidships. Shore diving is tricky, unless you have someone like Bas to show you where the "steps" are.

On one day I had reserved dives with Bas, he also had a couple booked for their advanced openwater training, so he didn't charge me. The couple had just received their openwater certification the week before. While we were gearing, Bas asked the woman, who was 5'3" and maybe 125 pounds, how much weight she needed. She asked for 18 pounds. Bas in all his best Dutch etiquette said, "No way in hell am I putting 18 pounds of weights on you!" That was the first sign that maybe their openwater course had left much to be desired. After their first dive, Bas told me they were not capable of getting their advanced course done and done correctly before they left the island. It was a lot of money to refund, but he said he would have to let them know and do it gently. As we walked back to the truck, the man asked Bas, "How did we do?" Bas replied, "I can tell you that you won't be getting your advanced openwater from me." So much for gentle. He said if they wanted to do the next dive and two dives the next day, he would guarantee they

Curacao, Lesser Antilles

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

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

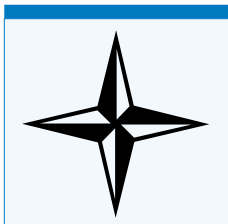
would leave Curacao better divers and would have some of their advanced requirements signed off. They agreed and thanked Bas for his concern and honesty. He not only kept the money they paid, but got a nice tip as well.

So, boat dive or shore dive in Curacao? It appears that the score is tied at three points each. When I thought about writing this, I was sure shore diving would outscore boat diving by two to one. I was wrong. I guess that it comes down to personal preference. If you're there to spend the day diving places not many people go to, and doing what you want to do, then Bas Harts is the ticket, at least for a couple of days to get the lay of the land before you go it alone. If you want to make a couple of morning dives before spending the afternoon doing something else, then Go West Diving is a good choice. Either way, you will find diving Curacao well worth your time.

Oh, and Curacao also offers a lot to nondivers. There are two nice golf courses and a couple of upscale casinos that would like to see your money. I visited several great art galleries, my favorite being Nina Sanchez's, who paints island people and places using all the brilliant island colors. Of course, there are plenty of shopping opportunities around the Old Fort in Willemstad; afterwards, I crossed the floating bridge to Punda to enjoy the outdoor cafes.

I left after a week, filled with good Caribbean diving, good food and plenty of activity. The next day, Bas's wife gave birth to a baby boy, Nade Harts. Congrats!

-- J.P.W.



Divers Compass: Bas charges based on the number of divers in a group, but estimate \$130 per person for two tanks, including pickup (www.bashartsdiving.com) . . . There are small beach shops at many dive sites that rent tanks within 100 yards from the entry point; you'll pay about \$9 per tank, plus \$6 for a fill . . . Most of the free Curacao tourist guides found at the airport and hotels have a map of the dive sites, but my favorite is a \$9 waterproof map with all the sites, fish ID and other useful info (www.frankosmaps.com) . . . For boat diving, Go West (www.gowestdiving.com) and Ocean Encounters (www.oceanencounters.com) are the most popular . . . My Coral Estates villa had four bedrooms with AC, four bathrooms, a large kitchen and private pool in a gated community on the water for \$2,800 per week (www.coralestatevillas.com) . . . D&D Car Rental met my group at the airport, with a second car and driver to help us transport our luggage to pick up our SUV (www.ddcarrental.com); we paid \$500 (cash only) for the week.

Turning Oil Rigs into Diveable Reefs

It's cheap, and good for fish -- so why do some enviros oppose it?

When an offshore well stops producing oil, what should be done with the rig? One option is to haul it ashore, break it up and recycle it. That's expensive, costing up to \$200 million just to remove one deep-water oil platform. But there is an alternative: Just leave it where it is. Of course, that's what you'd expect a greedy oil firm to do, right? Dirty the ocean to save the expense. But surprise: The cheap option -- leaving it there -- may actually be the environmentally-friendly one, an option supported by nearly all divers who have had the chance to dive oil rigs. And some environmentalists, but not all, agree.

For starters, it takes a lot of energy to move an oil rig. The ships needed to shift one would emit an average of 29,400 tons of carbon dioxide. And moving a rig disturbs the organisms that have attached themselves to its underside, or jacket. Far better to turn old rigs into reefs -- where fish congregate in great

numbers and coral sprouts -- and that's what the federal government is telling many coastal states with offshore oil rigs to do.

"Reefing" involves bringing a platform's above-water parts ashore and cropping the lower parts to leave at least 85 feet of clearance (a good depth for divers) -- deep enough for ships to pass over, shallow enough for photosynthesis to nourish organisms on its upper reaches. Oil-rig reefs may shelter and feed up to eight tons of fish. In 2009, Shell moved a jacket in the Gulf of Mexico six miles away. The fish followed.

More than 490 platforms in U.S. waters have become reefs in the past 30 years, and some are now excellent big-fish dive sites (see *Undercurrent's* September feature on *MV Spree* liveaboard diving in the Texas Flower Gardens Marine Preserve). The Federal Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement created a "Rigs-to-Reefs" policy to convince states to issue reefing permits. The big benefit for states: Oil firms typically hand over half the money they save by reefing. Mississippi pocketed an average of \$625,000 for each of the 12 permits it has issued. Louisiana's take has averaged \$270,000 per reefing -- and the state has issued 336 permits.

Currently, less than a tenth of America's decommissioned oil and gas platforms are reefed, but that share is likely to grow. Quenton Dokken, CEO of the nonprofit Gulf of Mexico Foundation, believes that within

The Battle Over Miss Scuba

At last, an American has been crowned Miss Scuba International. What, you didn't know there was such a title? Indeed, this beauty pageant, run by a Malaysian company named Scubastar (its owner, Robert Lo, also owns the Sipadan Mabul Resort and Mabul Water Bungalows) has been going since 2011. This is not just any beauty pageant, though. As it says on the Miss Scuba website (www.misscuba.com), "It is time that an event such as this is produced to celebrate, not only the inner beauty and courage of today's modern women, but also to simultaneously advocate worldwide marine conservation." The 2014 winner was Tabitha Lipkin, a Fox Sports reporter in San Diego who got her openwater certification four years ago. Lipkin, 24, beat out 13 contestants (the runners-up were from Thailand and Ireland) and also walked away with the Miss Congeniality subsidiary title.

But, there's trouble brewing. We received an e-mail titled "ALERT: Miss Scuba Trademark Infringement Notice" from Szilvia Gogh, the owner of Miss Scuba in Redondo Beach, CA. Her website is www.miss-scuba.com, an online dive travel resource for women. She said the e-mail to us was "to prevent any issues in the future in case Tabitha Lipkin contacts you."

Gogh attached a letter she was sending to promoters and sponsors of the Miss Scuba beauty pageant, stating, "I own the registered trademark to Miss Scuba in the United States. Any use of Miss Scuba (or variation of it) is trademark infringement . . . Tabitha Lipkin contacted me to inquire about my ownership of the trademark. I informed her I am very vigilant about protecting my intellectual property . . . The designation "Miss Scuba" is identical to the MISS SCUBA® registered trademark, and Scubastar's "beauty pageant" services are highly similar to our scuba-related travel and entertainment event services . . . your use of the designation "Miss Scuba" is likely to cause confusion, mistake, or to deceive consumers and the trade as to the . . . sponsorship or approval of Scubastar's services."

Gogh told us that, "After a long process, they officially withdrew their application from the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. They own trademark rights to Miss Scuba in several countries, but *not* in the USA. However, it did not stop Scubastar to try and go around me."

Nevertheless, Scubastar is promoting Miss Scuba International worldwide. It is having Lipkin do a year of ocean conservation campaigns, and as the Miss Scuba website says, "the pageant will also offer her a unique and comprehensive platform to launch her career and personal development." The next pageant will be in Malaysia on November 28.

Is there a contest for a Miss Football, a Miss Soccer, a Miss Downhill Skiing, a Miss Ping Pong? This just seems like another chance for a bathing suit contest. We're not sure how much Miss Scuba will do to save the oceans. But we'll certainly try not to get it mixed up with Miss Scuba USA.

five years, oil firms will be reefing one of every four offshore rigs. “Gulf states, particularly Louisiana and Texas, are making a big push to streamline the permitting process.”

Enter the Environmentalists

And then there’s California. Big savings are possible in its deep waters offshore. In 2010, California’s then-governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a law allowing reefing, with estimates that reefing the state’s 27 platforms could save \$2 billion. The California Ocean Science Trust advised state lawmakers that platforms increase marine life and should not all be removed.

Enter the environmentalists. In four years, not one platform off California has been reefed, and the odds look bleak, due to major public opposition. The Environmental Defense Center in Santa Barbara, a group that files anti-development lawsuits, advocates the complete removal of oil platforms. Linda Krop, its chief counsel, says that abandoned structures might damage anchors, rob natural reefs of fish and even leach poisons. However, she does acknowledge the environmental damage associated with complete rig removal.

A Greenpeace exec concedes that in some locations, platforms may increase marine life. “But they should be banned anyway, because they save the oil firms money.”

Greenpeace makes a different argument. John Hocesvar, its head of ocean campaigns, concedes that in some locations reefed platforms, if non-toxic, may increase marine life. “But they should be banned anyway, because they save the oil firms money, and, therefore, encourage them to drill more.” That’s bizarre logic, we think, unlikely to convince many.

Hocesvar is one of 25 people who recently launched a campaign to stop rigs-to-reef programs in the Gulf of Mexico. The diverse group, which includes representatives of the Sierra Club, the Ocean Foundation, the Sea Turtle Conservancy and the United Commercial Fisherman’s Association, submitted a letter to U.S. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell in July, asking her to require oil companies to remove rigs rather than convert them to reefs.

Their campaign coincides with the publication of a new book titled *Bring Back the Gulf* by Richard Charter, a senior fellow of the Ocean Foundation, and Dee Von Quirolo, a marine conservation consultant in Florida. They argue that there is no scientific consensus that reefed platforms and jackets contribute to maintaining fish stocks “or otherwise achieve overarching fisheries management goals.” Instead, they write, “these artificial underwater structures aggregate fish, thereby contributing to over-fishing. It also is apparent that they fail to equal or rival natural coral reefs in biological diversity.”

The July letter, which Charter and Quirolo also signed, urges Jewell to require the Department of Interior to stick to its policy of “requiring full decommissioning of spent oil and gas structures at the end of their useful economic life.” The letter stated that the rigs’ deteriorating metal structures “invites more ecosystem damage rather than restoring it as originally envisioned.”

In *Bring Back the Gulf*, the authors consider the corals, sponges and sea life clinging to the structures to be biofouling communities of organisms that encourage the proliferation of nonnative invasive species and aggregation of fish, which leads to overfishing. They say there is adequate structure in the Gulf to support fish populations and that because existing rigs already make up five percent of all gulf habitat, there is no need to create more.

But Greg Stunz, professor of marine biology at Texas A&M University in Corpus Christi, disagrees, saying there is much science, including his own research, that clearly shows rigs are productive islands on an otherwise barren gulf floor. “They also support higher biomass than natural reefs, he told the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*. “And we’ve found that fish grow much faster on artificial reefs.

We've compared the performance of natural versus artificial, and we've found that artificial reefs provide recruitment for young snappers as well as anglers."

The Interior Department had said earlier last summer that it would be reviewing regulations about the decommissioning and related liability issues of old offshore oil infrastructure.

Meanwhile, the debate is likely to intensify. In the Gulf of Mexico, some 400 platforms are now being decommissioned every year. Divers and many fishermen want more to be reefed. On the flip side, shrimpers complain that reefs prevent them from dragging nets across the ocean floor (which, we think, may be a good thing, given the destruction from such practices). In California, oil companies must decide soon if they wish to turn redundant rigs into reefs. Until 2017, they can keep 45 percent of the savings. After that, the figure falls to 35 percent until 2023, when it drops to just 20 percent.

Richer than South Pacific Reefs

Perhaps a new study, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, will change opponents' minds. Apparently fish are turning the underwater portions of rigs into the equivalent of apartment towers. Biology researcher Jeremy Claisse of Occidental College led a team that surveyed 16 rigs annually over a 15-year period and found that they hosted 10 times the amount of fish as other natural marine environments around the world, such as reefs and estuaries. (Divers who have ever finned around a decommissioned rig are always astonished at the big fish and schools they encounter.) The California rigs even had seven times the aquatic population of the rich ecosystems in reefs in the South Pacific.

The main reason: Because the rig superstructures stretch all the way from the surface to the sea floor, they provide a huge area that becomes the undersea equivalent of a tall building. That allows it to attract fish that prefer habitats at a wide variety of depths. "The platform structures support a diverse community of invertebrates that, along with floating resources like plankton, provide the base of the food web supporting fish associated with the platform," Claisse says.

What Divers Can Do

More information about the federal government's Rigs to Reefs program is at www.bsee.gov/Exploration-and-Production/Decommissioning/Rigs-to-Reefs, with links to state-specific programs in Texas, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana (the link to California's program is currently broken).

Other than contacting your state legislature, there are not many ways for divers to lend verbal or financial support for Rigs to Reefs. But the not-for-profit Coastal Conservation Association, with chapters in 17 coastal states, campaigns and seeks funding for the building of artificial reefs, including rig-to-reef projects. (www.joincca.org/about)

Two researchers at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography started the Rigs-to-Reefs project, diving oil platforms off the California coast and in the Gulf of Mexico to document (with GoPro Hero 3+ cameras) the ecosystems that grow on and around the platforms, and using the information they gather to help the public make informed and responsible decisions about oil rigs in the ocean. You can see their photos and support their project at www.rig2reefexploration.org.

His team counted the fish and recorded their size, then calculated the weight of fish that were supported by each square meter of sea floor in the area of the rig. They compared the data to similar surveys of seven rocky reefs, and to studies on fish abundance in other natural habitats. But even the natural habitat with the greatest fish density -- a coral reef in French Polynesia -- was nowhere near as populated as the oil rigs. Then the team tried to compensate by only counting things near the ocean floor, but even then, the oil rigs were more productive than natural habitats, though not by such an extreme margin.

The vertical structure may also give the oil rigs' appeal to many species of rockfish. As they age, these fish tend to move to greater depths, but in the case of many oil rigs, they can do so without ever leaving the habitat. Combined with lower levels of predators than what was observed at natural reefs in the same area, this makes the environment

around a rig very appealing for many species of fish. Claisse told *New Scientist* that the study shows that man-made structures actually can enhance natural habitats. But it's not necessary for them to be oil rigs. "In the future, it might be a good idea to figure out what features help fish to flourish, and then build them into renewable energy installations, such as wind and wave energy stations."

So while reefing is a new policy, it seems to be eco-friendly, and it pays for itself. How novel, especially these days, for something that so many disparate groups -- from oil companies and state legislatures to divers and marine life -- could agree on and benefit from.

-- Vanessa Richardson

How Is Your Dive Insurance in an Emergency?

advice to consider when you're diving far from home

Have you ever had to contact Divers Alert Network (DAN), or other dive insurance providers, for medical information or treatment? Have you been on a dive trip where someone else needed to? We recently asked subscribers to our mid-monthly e-newsletter for their experiences.

For the most part, our respondents had DAN as their insurance provider, and for the most part, they had favorable experiences in their time of need. But a few had situations and suggestions that divers should keep in mind when they're taking a dive trip far from home -- and out of their primary health insurer's network coverage.

Mickey Rosenberg (Providence, RI) says any delay in medical treatment can mean the difference between a full recovery and permanent damage. He and his wife, Jayne, were hiking up a mountain in Virgin Gorda two years ago when she suddenly came down with a vision issue that seemed like a possible detachment of the retina. Rosenberg says, "I'm a doctor but I didn't feel I could make a firm diagnosis, so I called DAN, who connected me with a retina specialist in West Palm Beach. He too was unsure, but because a delay could lead to permanent visual loss, we jetted there from Beef Island and took a taxi to his office. Fortunately it was a posterior vitreous detachment [a common change in the eye that doesn't cause vision loss], and needed no specific treatment. DAN, which had arranged everything but the hotel and flight changes, followed up the next day."

While Rosenberg was happy with the outcome, he hesitates about booking another overseas dive trip. "Now that my wife and I are in our 60s, we wonder about being so far from medical services, as you've discussed in recent articles. While in a remote part of Fiji last May, we had another potential medical misadventure that resolved on its own with time, but we were a much longer way from decent medical care. Getting old sucks."

No matter where you experience medical issues, get short-term care immediately, but then get to your primary doctor as soon as you can. Jeff Janak (Dallas, TX) suffered barotrauma to his right ear while diving in 20-foot shallows in the Florida Keys. "After 90 minutes, my ear had had enough, and I had vertigo. After I returned to my hotel, I called DAN, even though I don't have insurance with them. The person I talked with nailed my diagnosis and treatment, but he qualified that he was *not* my doctor and could not officially confirm those. He advised that I should see my personal doctor ASAP. While my doctor is not a diving specialist, he was able to talk with DAN as well in order to administer my treatment properly. DAN didn't charge for their service, either."

Even if DAN doesn't know the answer, it will do what it can to get divers the right treatment. When Peter Jones (New York City) had a non-emergency medical question while diving in Tortola, DAN set

up a conference call between the local ER physician, the DAN doctor, and a physician in the U.S. Virgin Islands. When Thomas Lopatin (Lake Hopatcong, NJ) backed his hand into a spiny black sea urchin on his

Yes, Let's Scrap the Lifetime C-Card

Bret Gilliam's article, "Should Dive Certification Last Forever?" got some feedback from our readers. Here are a couple of comments, and a question for Bret, which he answers at the bottom.

* * * * *

Bret Gilliam's article on the lifetime C-card is spot-on. Think of how many other industries require regular training, re-certification or refresher training on a regular basis: nurses, doctors, teachers, mechanics . . . the list goes on. And for good reason: skills degrade and procedures change. Diving is a series of physical skills (not just one or even a few), and those skills degrade without regular practice. Bret mentions the issue of logbooks. I've been certified to dive for over 25 years, but I had two big breaks from the sport. At no time has anyone checked my logbooks. Even when I was training to become a PADI instructor, nobody checked my logs, including the PADI folks.

Diving takes place in an environment in which we cannot communicate well. That alone should justify regular practice and training. C-cards should be issued with some kind of expiration or "refresher training required by" date. PADI's new Reactive program is a good start, because instead of requiring a full slate of skill review, the diver can choose the ones he or she is weak on. Refresher training can do the same thing. Divers who have a Rescue certification should absolutely be required to demonstrate recovering a non-responsive diver. It's a great confidence boost, a hard skill to master, and an easier one to forget.

As a diver and an instructor, I don't want divers who haven't stayed current to hurt themselves, me or my loved ones because they can't stay buoyant or because they panic or because they lied to me or the shop. In this day and age, the C-card should absolutely have some kind of requirement for currency or an expiration date in lieu thereof. We'd all benefit.

Chip Wright -- Hebron, KY

* * * * *

The articles on recertification and older divers last month struck home. I was an active diver for a number of years, then became an occasional diver due to work and family obligations. Now, living in Florida, my diving opportunities have increased. I've taken a scuba refresher course and completely agree with Bret Gilliam's view that certification shouldn't be forever. Also, as an older diver (age 74), safety and competence are paramount.

Bruce Butterfield -- Sarasota, FL

* * * * *

I would like to see some statistics to back up the statement in this article that diving "accident rates are up dramatically." If that single statement cannot be substantiated, then the basis for the entire article goes away.

Robert Speir -- Falls Church, VA

Bret's reply: Robert, it is factual. There are fewer divers participating, and the number of accidents has risen. It's basic math. You can argue about the denominator since there is no way to quantifying the actual number of dives made annually by all the active divers. But it is unarguable that the number of participants -- and thus, the number of dives made -- are far less than what they were in 2000.

I am on the inside of most significant diving injury and fatality litigation in North America, as well as a lot of cases internationally. I work both defense and plaintiff's files, going back to 1973. A huge majority of diving litigation cases are settled before trial and then cloaked in confidentiality agreements. So neither the public nor anyone in the dive industry can get at the actual facts. Reality is a bitch -- Bret Gilliam

last dive at Cocos Island, one of the spines penetrated the joint of his left thumb, which swelled and didn't resolve itself upon his return to land. "I called DAN and the doctor didn't know what to suggest, but he gave out the number of Paul Auerbach, an emergency medicine doctor at Stanford who wrote a book on hazardous marine life. I called and left a voicemail. He called back within a couple hours and told me what to tell my doctor by way of treatment. Everything worked out fine (except the remnants of the urchin spine is encapsulated in the joint)."

Because dive medical insurance is not always your primary medical insurance, there may be snags when it comes to how much you pay and who will reimburse you. Carol Schoelch (St. Louis, MO) felt pain in her right side during a dive in Cozumel and knew she had the bends. "I went to the chamber on the island, was diagnosed with stage 2 decompression sickness, and spent the next four days there. I called DAN and they told me to call my primary group health provider as they were only secondary insurance. My primary denied it as it was 'out of network,' and they did not understand the urgency of my need for treatment. I then called DAN back, and they said I would have to work with my primary to get them to pay, and they would pay what the primary did not. I had to write a check for \$12,000 for chamber costs before I could leave the island. It took nearly six months to get my primary group health to accept the claim. Then they only paid half, and then DAN finally paid the balance."

When her scuba club did a presentation on the different types of dive insurance, and how they paid, Schoelch decided Dive Assure was the best choice. "It was primary coverage, so they would pay immediately, without you having to go through primary health insurance and it was comparable in price. And they pay for your plane ticket home so you don't have to."

And a final tip. Some primary policies, Medicare included, do not cover accidents on foreign soil. Check your coverage and know what you're on the hook for -- before you travel.

-- Vanessa Richardson

The Aftermath of a Fatal Dive Accident

John Bantin tries to save a life but still gets attacked in court

When someone dies in a diving accident, the aftermath can even embroil those who were only doing their best to help. Although I wrote about this dive death, which happened 10 years ago, in my book, *Amazing Dive Stories*, I have never publicly disclosed the repercussions regarding the way the dead diver's employer -- and his dependents -- sought someone to blame for his death. Because I had been involved in his failed rescue, it seemed I was fair game, as were others. It still rankles that in trying to do my best, I got caught up in the legal repercussions.

David Graves died during a simple leisure dive in the Bahamas. He was on a press trip with other British journalists to write a travel piece featuring scuba diving. Originally, the Bahamas tourist office had planned for them to dive the famous Blue Holes, but their host, Jeff Birch, owner of the Small Hope Bay Lodge on Andros Island, decided none of the journalists had the proficiency to handle those overhead environments, so he took them on a check-out dive. Graves was seen to run low on air and bolt toward the surface before being successfully intercepted by an attentive dive guide. That afternoon, they all went to watch a shark feed underwater.

I had attached myself to them when I discovered that my flight to Bimini, where I had intended to go, was over-booked. The press trip to Andros had been arranged by *DIVER*, for which I was its Technical Editor. During this second dive, there were 10 people in the water. I witnessed Graves swimming off from the group alone, while the two dive guides looking after the journalists were distracted -- one

diver appeared to be losing her weight belt, with the possibility of a sudden and uncontrolled ascent, and needed the two guides to sort it out. Graves made a series of errors, probably due to overconfidence combined with a lack of motor skills he would have attained if he had gained more experience as a diver. He should not have gone off alone; he never made it back to the boat. Sadly, he paid for these mistakes with his life.

When his lifeless body was recovered, it fell to me and one of the dive guides to attempt to resuscitate him while the other drove the boat back to land. Some of the divers surprised me by complaining that this had ruined their vacation. However, our skilled yet ineffective efforts during the journey to the U.S. naval base on Andros Island failed, and medics pronounced him dead.

At times, the procedure bordered on farce, when the lawyer asked questions like, "What did you and the dive shop owner talk about while you were underwater?"

I decided the right thing to do was return to the U.K. immediately to tell his family what had happened. I went to a London suburb where his wife and two young sons lived, and went through the painful procedure of explaining why their beloved husband and father would not be returning home. Soon, reports of the incident appeared in the British newspapers, including the *Daily Telegraph*, for which

Graves had worked. Their reports did not ring true to me. Whether some of the journalists were suffering guilt for staying on and completing "their vacation," I cannot say, but they seemed to be looking for someone to blame for the death of their colleague. I was surprised at a call I got from a senior executive at the *Daily Telegraph*, who told me the dive shop was going to be punished.

In my mind, I went over that day's awful events. I had become bored during that crucial second dive and had returned to wait horizontally at 20 feet, watching the group below me gathered together by the two guides and led up the anchor line. I was surprised to see Graves swim off purposefully and alone. I intended to caution him against that sort of action when he got back in the boat. Sadly, I never got that chance.

My involvement did mean I was an important material witness, and I returned to the Bahamas to be a defense witness for the two dive guides and the dive shop. Some of the other journalists also attended the trial but each seemed to be working to an agenda rather than the true events I had seen unfold. The *Daily Telegraph* sent one of its senior reporters, a hard-drinking, heavy-smoking man -- he seemed giddy that the dive guides and the dive shop owner were heading towards a manslaughter charge.

The *Daily Telegraph* hired a local trial lawyer who would seek to discredit the evidence of someone who is perceived to be a hostile witness. Appearing in the witness box can be a daunting prospect, but if you are sure of the truth, it is easy to stick by it, despite attempts of lawyers to discredit you. Those with agendas gave testimony that was soon discounted. I withstood six hours of intense cross-examination, but the lawyer ostensibly representing the widow had not bothered to do his homework and knew little about diving. At times, the procedure bordered on farce when he asked questions like, "What did you and Mr. Birch (the dive shop owner) talk about while you were underwater during the first dive?"

Of course, under court rules, one may only answer the question and not offer any extra information. My answer was that we didn't talk.

"How long were you and Mr. Birch under water together during that first dive?"

"About 45 minutes."

"And you are trying to tell the court that you were together for 45 minutes and said nothing to each other?"

"Yes."

The questioning would go on, trying to make me look as if I had something to hide. Eventually, the lawyer made the error of asking me why we did not speak to each other during the dive.

“You cannot talk under water,” I said.

It would have been farcical if it had not been for the obvious anguish of Graves’ widow. Why the *Daily Telegraph* chose to put her through this was a mystery. Nobody wants to hear that a loved one lost his life through a simple, stupid mistake.

Just Drop It!

It’s my belief that David Graves left the escorted group of divers he was with during the last moments of the dive and went off on his own to take one final photograph. Sadly, it was to be his last. He ran out of air and, at 60 feet deep, he struck out for the surface. The Suunto computer he was wearing did not record the time he spent between five feet and the surface, but it recorded everything else. Whether he made it to the surface or not, he dropped and drowned for sure. Graves was a recently certified diver who had made a previous dive trip to Malaysia, so he was not totally inexperienced, but why did he drop? When we recovered his body, all his equipment was still in place, including his weight belt. If he had thought to drop that, he would still be alive today.

I admit that there have been times when, distracted by an underwater photography subject, I have cut it very fine and arrived at the surface without enough pressure in my tank to inflate my BC, so I inflated it orally instead. If Graves had reached the surface, he could have done that, but I am inclined to think that by this point, he had got into a panic and might have lost all sense of reason. He might have tried to use the direct-feed control, but of course, it would not have worked if his tank were empty.

So think about dropping your weight belt in an emergency. You should not have to do this if you are correctly weighted to be neutrally buoyant to swim up to the surface, but you might need to do it once you are there. Of course, dropping your belt has the effect of making you buoyant, so you don’t really want to do it at depth and enjoy an out-of-control ascent. You must also be careful not to drop it on divers who may be below you, and for this reason, practicing this act is discouraged at crowded dive sites.

Before BCs were invented, dropping the weight belt was enshrined in diver training. It was the only way to make it to the surface during an emergency. Correct use of a BC allows for neutral buoyancy at any depth, and one only has to swim up a little for the gas within the BC to expand and start to become positively buoyant. You then need to jettison some air for reasons of controlling the speed of ascent. For this reason, the teaching of dropping the weight belt tends to be glossed over.

Not only that, people are reluctant to risk losing their weight belts, understandably so. I was once in the far reaches of Indonesia and using a brand-new BC. I left the dive boat and headed down to the seabed around 40 feet below, where I injected a little air into my BC, but to my horror, the corrugated hose parted from the direct-feed control. I was not overweighted, so I swiftly headed back to the surface, only to see the dive boat speeding away, with the crew totally oblivious to my waving and unable to hear my shouts over the noise of the boat’s engine. What to do? I could have dropped my belt, but in such a remote place, I knew we’d have trouble getting more lead to replace it. I couldn’t keep the BC inflated. Any air I blew in through the now-exposed end of the corrugated hose simply siphoned out again as soon as I submerged. I was near a small island, so I opted to go back to the bottom and walk to its beach, rather like the pirates in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Once the dive boat returned later, a couple of cable ties and a coating of “After Sun” lotion proved to be a solution.

So how to drop a weight belt? It used to be the last thing you put on in the old days. That was so that it was never fouled by other straps passing over it. Today, it’s often put on before the BC and tank. It is not sufficient to simply flip the buckle and let it fall. You need to be sure it falls away cleanly from you without snagging. Think about dropping your weight belt and its ramifications. Avoid being over-weighted so that you can be neutrally buoyant at any depth, but know that you can always drop your belt once you are near the surface. Unhitch it and swing it away from you, and once it is clear, drop it! It could be a matter of life and death.

-- John Bantin

I had the nagging fear that the lawyers' wigs and gowns (the Bahamas uses a British-style court), rather than the evidence, might impress the coroner. I had taken the precaution of wearing a computer on my wrist identical to the one Graves wore, and frequently added to my answers that the information was all on the computer that Graves wore "identical to this one." Eventually the coroner cottoned on and asked if Graves had been wearing a diving computer. The other side begrudgingly admitted he was. When the coroner asked for a print-out from it, they huddled before declaring it would take several months. I found this strange, because I had gone through the dive profile on Graves' computer while his lifeless body was still wearing it. I'd examined the pictures taken on his digital camera that were complete with time code. I'd done all this within a few minutes of getting to the naval base on that terrible day. I'd also taken the precaution of getting the downloaded data from the fateful dive printed out for myself, but I could hardly admit that I had it in my pocket right there while in the witness box, because I was not sure how legal it was to be in my possession. Of course, nobody had the wit to ask me, although I had informed the lawyer representing Small Hope Bay Lodge and its dive guides that I had it. He seemed to think it was not necessary.

There was something else. The *Daily Telegraph* had hired an expert witness who had been to the site, examined the evidence and concluded that Graves had gone off alone, run out of air and shot to the surface but had been unable to stay there because he neither added air by mouth to his BC nor dropped his weight belt. What the people at the *Daily Telegraph* failed to appreciate is that the professional diving world is very small. I knew their expert had told them this because by coincidence I shared an office desk with him and couldn't help listening to the telephone conversations. Evidently it wasn't what they wanted to hear, and his services were terminated.

How could a fit 50-year-old man die while underwater? Despite direction from the coroner, the Bahamian jurors knew the answer -- he drowned. The case made front-page stories in the *Daily Telegraph* and other U.K. newspapers. A few days later, I got a phone call from a journalist at *Private Eye*, a British satirical magazine. She asked me if I would withdraw the evidence I had given in court. I told her I was under oath at the time and took that seriously. "In which case I am going to destroy you," she announced.

What a shame these journalists never bothered to do their homework, nor let the truth get in the way of a good story. This is part of what *Private Eye*, printed in its September 19, 2003 issue, in which it reported the event and also made attacks on PADI. The article was titled "PADI Whacked." The reporter wrote, "The *Eye* also spoke to John Bantin, Technical Editor of *DIVER*, whose sister organization, The

Bahamas Shark Attacks Snorkeler

A woman from Dallas, TX, is recovering after a shark bit off 10 pounds of flesh from her back while she was snorkeling in the Bahamas last month. Lacey Webb, 34, was in the water near the Abaco Islands with her husband, Britt, when she was attacked. While filming a stingray underwater, she saw a shark swim by, but continued to shoot.

She told the press. "The stingray abruptly left, and as I went to the surface, and was vertical to the water column, the shark hit me from behind. I knew immediately that it was a shark bite . . . I knew I had to communicate what had happened to get my husband out of the water. Then I had to get my face back in the water so I could swim for the boat."

Britt said, "It happened so fast, but she was so calm until she pulled herself up to the swimming platform. I thought she was joking, but when she started pulling herself up, I saw the severity of the situation. I immediately jumped on the boat and just started grabbing towels, and realized we had to think quickly and to work quickly 'cause a life-or-death situation was happening."

Webb was flown by air ambulance to Memorial Regional Hospital, where she has undergone several operations. The shark left a tooth in her back, which she is planning to have made into a necklace to remind her of the ordeal and her bravery. Webb said she refuses to be cowed by the accident, and plans to go snorkeling again soon.

Can Jennifer Lawrence Turn Freediving Into a Blockbuster ?

The Oscar-winning actress is reportedly set to star in *The Dive*, a film produced by James Cameron about a husband-and-wife team of free divers, their record-breaking dives, and the tragedy that ended it all. Lawrence, 24, will star as Audrey Mestre, a French marine biologist and scuba diving enthusiast who became interested in free diving in the mid-'90s. She trained under, and later married, the legendary free diver Francisco "Pipín" Ferreras. In November 2002, while attempting to break the world-record dive of 531 feet set earlier by her husband, Mestre encountered an issue with a lift balloon during her ascent off Bayahibe Beach in the Dominican Republic. Pulled from the water nine minutes later, efforts to resuscitate her were unsuccessful. She was 28.

Two books have since emerged in the wake of the tragedy. One is by Carlos Serra, co-organizer of Mestre's fatal dive, called *The Last Attempt*, which faults Ferreras for Mestre's death. The other is by Ferreras himself, called *The Dive: A Story of Love and Obsession*, which details Mestre's life. While it's unclear which story the film will adapt, the fact that Cameron filmed Ferreras' record-breaking tribute dive to Mestre in 2003 favors the latter.

Cameron had been working on the film for years, but he won't direct it himself due to his commitments to Avatar sequels. So while he'll stay on as producer, he passed directing responsibilities to Francis Lawrence -- who helmed the last two installments of *The Hunger Games* franchise, which made Jennifer Lawrence a star. Filming is reported to start at the end of this year.

Dive Show, was one of the organizers of the press trip. Bantin was on the trip taking photos for The Dive Show, and he had told the coroner he had suggested to Birch that the divers should be escorted as a group and not be in buddy pairs because he believed they were not experienced enough to help each other. He said he had seen David Graves rush to the surface on the first morning dive, leaving his buddy behind. Asked whether, in the light of the coroner's findings and the apparent failure of the group dive, Bantin now believed the buddy training system should have been reinforced rather than abandoned, he was unrepentant . . ."

This probably precipitated a barrage of letters from PADI diving instructors, because *Private Eye* printed this example from a Mark Papp in the following issue. It adequately sums up the perspective from someone informed about diving: "David Graves' death was a very sad event . . . Your article, however, misses a few points. Graves wasn't forced into going on the press junket. He wasn't forced to dive. He wasn't forced to ignore his training and stray from the group. He wasn't forced to ignore his training by ignoring his air cylinder's contents gauge. Despite the apparent lack of attention from the divemasters, there has to be a concept of personal responsibility somewhere down the line. Graves was a qualified diver. His training warned him of the dangers of scuba diving, so why didn't he apply common sense, obey his training and, in a hostile alien environment with only a limited duration life support apparatus, check his air frequently?

"That he had a close call on his first dive and yet apparently failed to check his limited supply of air on the second beggars belief. Why do you, and some divers, assume that no matter what happens under water, somebody else will bail you out? You seem . . . to imply that the 'gross negligence manslaughter' verdict offered might have been more appropriate, despite your history of highlighting coroners pressuring jurors to return verdicts they are unhappy with. Also, have you lost your attitude towards personal responsibility?

"I'm deeply sorry for Graves' family's loss, but also want to stem the rapidly increasing flow of liability litigation, which seems based on the inability of anybody to accept personal risk, even when voluntarily in obviously hazardous situations."

I think Papp's letter sums it up well.

John Bantin is the former technical editor of DIVER magazine in the United Kingdom. For 20 years, he used and reviewed virtually every piece of equipment available in the U.K. and the U.S., and made around 300 dives per year for that purpose. He is also a professional underwater photographer, and most recently the author of Amazing Diving Stories, available at www.undercurrent.org

Flotsam & Jetsam

Have You Submitted Your Underwater Photos

Anywhere? Have you ever sent one of your photographs in to a contest, submitted one to a magazine, online publication or any type of professional organization? Did you get paid? Did you not get paid? Did your photo show up elsewhere . . . and did you know about it beforehand? Let me know your experience -- I may use it in a story we're considering about the financial pros and cons of underwater photography. Write me at BenDEditor@undercurrent.org

Tom Cruise, Openwater Diving Student. Looks like there will be some scuba diving scenes taking place in the next *Mission Impossible* movie. Tom Cruise, who likes to do his own stunts, surprised Cayman vacationers last month by turning up for their dive certification course as a fellow student. We don't know which dive operator he used (can anyone tell us?), but one of the other divers told British newspaper *The Sun* that Cruise, 52, was a good sport and took the dive crew's joking in good stride. "The instructor was obviously a huge fan, as he was wearing a *Top Gun* cap. During his briefing, he poked fun at Tom by saying what speed they were 'cruising' at, and Tom laughed it all off."

See Sharks Without Getting Wet. It just became a lot easier to get face-to-face with a great white shark. Adventure Bay Charters in Port Lincoln, Australia, has launched a new boat, *Shark Warrior*, which features an underwater glass viewing platform at the rear that can hold up to six wetsuit-free guests -- you can also bring beverages while you enjoy the view. Adventure Bay sales and marketing manager Andrew McKinnon said the platform is the first in the world specifically designed for shark viewing, and crew uses music instead of chum to attract the great whites. In the

past, they used AC/DC to get the sharks' attention, but it seems their tastes might be changing. "They seem to really like the Hilltop Hoods' new album this year, but anything with low frequencies will work," McKinnon said.

Diver Discovers Ancient Underwater Forest. Dawn Watson was diving in the North Sea off England's Norfolk coast when she made the unexpected discovery of a 10,000-year-old forest that once connected Great Britain with continental Europe. After being forced off her normal course by rough water, she was eventually swimming in the middle of large oak trees, some with branches measuring 25 feet long, lying on the sea floor. Watson, whose tank was nearing empty, had to turn around very quickly, and she told the BBC she was very lucky to make the find: "If I'd been three or four metres to the right we'd never have seen it at all." Watson co-founded a marine conservation program called Seasearch to map the various types of sea bed found on Great Britain's shores, and she believes the forest likely became exposed after a big storm hit the coast in December 2013. The forest is believed to be part of an ancient land mass known as Doggerland, which disappeared under rising sea levels about 6,000 years ago. Once thought to be uninhabited, it is now suspected that Doggerland was settled by Mesolithic hunter-gatherers, and was one of the richest areas for hunting, fishing and fowling in Europe. Now it has evolved into a type of natural reef and is home to multiple types of marine life.

This Guy Gives Divers a Bad Name. Why would a man in a wetsuit and dive mask be assaulting old ladies near bathrooms -- and be doing it so far away from the water, too? Just a few days before Christmas, a man in this get-up was hanging out on the Yakima Greenway, a bike/hike trail running through Union Gap, WA, when he assaulted an elderly woman on the path near the bathroom, and asked her a lewd question. She fought him off and called police, but he got away by fleeing on a bike, still wearing his scuba gear. The woman was unhurt, but God knows what she thinks about divers now.

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