

undercurrent

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Pedasi, Isla Coiba and Bocas del Toro, Panama *a whirlwind dive trip, with great surface intervals*

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Note from Ben: Years ago, while ensconced at Laguna Beach Diving Resort on Utila, Honduras, my dive buddy and I took the resort boat into town nearly every day to walk about and soak in a little local culture. I thought it odd that no other divers cared to motor in and explore. However, having since traveled to endless other dive destinations, I've concluded that most divers are solely dive tourists, not travelers. They head directly to their destination, dive and go home. To suggest that they skip a day of diving -- or even an afternoon dive -- to see the countryside is often met with indifference. I guess most of my fellow divers have such a deep love of diving, they can't bear to miss a single minute underwater.

I'm a little different. I've always allocated extra days or extra time to understand more about where I visit. For example, I hiked three days in Papua New Guinea, staying in mountain villages, hiked to Boiling Lake in Dominica and had dinner in town several nights, and spent three days bird watching on Trinidad before heading to Tobago. None of these is a big deal, but I did see a lot and learned a lot, and the side trips made my travels much richer. So I present this Panama diving story, where our writer not only tells us the good and the bad about several dive operations, but shares his first-hand look at the countryside as he drove from destination to destination.

* * * * *

Dear Fellow Diver:

Being within spitting distance of retirement, I've become focused on how to manage the present and future



Koko Resort in Bocas del Toro



by controlling expenses, rather than obeying financial advisers who suggest I need 80% of my current income to enjoy retirement. As well as diving, my wife and I love to travel the countryside, seeing small villages and eating in restaurants locals frequent. Which set the stage for our latest "whirlwind tour" of Panama, and experiencing my favorite palindrome: a man, a plan, Panama!

The Panama Canal got me in hot water with a high school history teacher who insisted it went east to west because it connected the Atlantic and the Pacific. I disagreed, arguing that it went north

to south, which I finally observed first-hand last October. My journey began in Panama City, where I stayed in a refurbished 350-year-old colonial house in the Casco Viejo district. Casco Viejo became the center of government in 1671, after Henry Morgan (whose rum brand representation looks a lot nicer than the original) sacked the original capital city. It is about 40 minutes from the airport, and a 10-minute cab ride from the skyscraper-laden downtown. Reasonably priced at \$130 per night, I took a modern studio with a kitchen and free internet. Our host gave a quick overview, complete with a map and instructions to go only during daylight to the bustling Avenida Centrales, a more "real" Panama City than the tonier Casco Viejo, and a district reminiscent of what I saw in Havana 15 years ago. My Spanish is passable, but the 100-plus years of American presence means that enough people speak English so a gringo can navigate without Spanish. After a visit to the Miraflores Locks, the last and westernmost three enormous locks on the canal, I headed south toward Pedasi to get wet.

It took us five hours of interesting driving to reach Pedasi, a quiet little town on Panama's Pacific Coast. The roads are pretty good, but navigation was troublesome indeed. Along the way, after an hour of driving in circles ("didn't we just drive past here?"), we realized there were not one, not two, but three small towns in a 30-mile radius with the same name. The Pedasi we were looking for has one main drag, a few restaurants, and is close to Playa Venao, a beautiful Endless Summer-type surf beach, where surfers, mostly Americans, elegantly ride the waves but then treat the local hotel bar like the back of a truck, bringing in their dogs, clothes and everything else. The drinks cost me twice what the surfers paid, a variation on the "locals' price" you get in Hawaii. I pointed this out to the bartender, who just shrugged.

The next morning we arrived for a two-tank dive with Pacific Paradise Dive Shop, run by Texas expat Kerri Lusk-Barnes. Having brought only computers and masks, I was pleased with Kerri's top-notch rental gear. Soon, the two of us walked through the surf to board her 26-foot panga for the 30-minute ride to Isla Iguana, a wildlife refuge. Kerri and the captain, Yamedi, were the only others onboard. On my first dive, I spotted a number of turtles, several green morays, many kinds and colors of puffer and porcupinefish, and an old stingray which had lost half its tail somewhere -- we named him Bob. Water temperature was 84 degrees on both dives, visibility ranged from 30 to 70 feet, we wore 3-mil shorties and it was very comfortable.

Isla Iguana made for a nice surface interval. Instead of having squirrels interested in your food (Casita Maragarita, our lodging, prepared us a sack lunch), it's



Pacific Paradise's Panga at Pedasi

iguanas and hermit crabs. But here and there was a Central American stereotype, Panamanian security forces in full gear with automatic weapons. But they were friendly and waved, even taking pictures of themselves, which led me to surmise they were more hanging out than on any dark mission.

The second dive was Los Hongos (The Mushrooms), a beautiful coral bed of purple pillar coral, at least 10 acres wide. A few small white-tip reef sharks swam about, and many eels protruded from holes. We saw large schools of brown chromis and blueheads, hundreds at a time, and a crocodile needlefish (which I called a houndfish) four feet long. On both dives, the depth was around 30 feet, so the sun brought out the coral colors, and we had plenty of bottom time to explore. I regret not slotting more time for Pedasi.

Casita Margarita was a pleasant retreat for two nights, but like the old tropics, the bathroom and shower smelled a bit musty and only freshened up with the door open and the A/C on for an hour. An upstairs room would have been preferable; our downstairs room was near the eating area, which got noisy when the breakfast prep started. The owners are friendly Americans, and several expats with stories to tell were hanging around having coffee or beers on the veranda. The room, about \$90 per night, included a bacon and eggs breakfast with fresh local fruit; a roasted chicken dinner ran \$10. The "mi casa es su casa" policy meant we could help ourselves to wine or beer (\$1.50 a bottle), logging what we took and paying when we left. Very friendly and great service. Other restaurant options were limited -- we had some grim Chinese food, also about \$10 for dinner. Except for Panama City and later Boquette, most restaurant food was basic -- chicken, rice, some vegetables, fruit.

The next day we made the three-hour drive to Santa Catalina, known for its surf break (yes, more surfers), and its proximity to Isla Coiba National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site, often called the "Galapagos of Panama." I joined Coiba Dive Center (CDC) in Santa Margarita for a day-long, three-tank trip requiring a three-hour round-trip in their 32-foot boat (I'd call it a "super panga") with canvas awning. There were six experienced divers, one new diver doing his checkout dives, two divemasters, a captain and his mate. Once in the water, which was about 82 degrees, visibility went to 50 feet, but 30 feet was more common.

CDC's motto is "sharks guaranteed," and they indeed delivered on that promise. After pointing out my 15th white-tip, my buddy shrugged in a "yeah, they're

Typhoon Wrecks Truk Liveboards

On March 29, the eye of Typhoon Masak hit Micronesia. In Truk, it killed five people and destroyed homes and businesses. Two liveboards, the *Odyssey* and the *Siren*, were driven onto the reef and seriously damaged. The *Odyssey* has been freed and is headed to the Philippines for repairs, and won't be back in operation earlier than July, if then.

The *Siren*, which local looters cleaned out, wasn't so lucky. In a Facebook posting on April 14, owner Frank Van Der Linde wrote, "I left Truk lagoon last week with our beloved *Siren* still on the reef, and we were waiting for the insurance to decide what the next step would be. Apparently, the looters didn't have the same idea and decided to destroy all the evidence of the looting and vandalism, and totally senselessly, put the boat on fire and burned her down to the ground. There is nothing, but really nothing, left of this once so amazing beautiful vessel."

Many divers with reservations on the two craft have been able to preserve the flight reservations and secure trips on either the *Thorfinn*, which survived intact, the Truk Stop Hotel or the Blue Lagoon resort. But not everyone can be accommodated.

Odyssey Adventures wants to help its crew, many of whom are homeless and don't have money to rebuild their houses, so it has launched a fundraising effort at GoFundMe to get crew money for building and food supplies, and "the family who protected Odyssey Adventures during and after the storm will also be included in this fundraiser." So far, they've raised \$5,000 more than their initial goal of \$7,500 (www.gofundme.com/odysseycrewrelief).

everywhere" sort of way. The dives were all good, with some moments of brilliance. Schools of smaller fish were significant, several hundred of any given species -- chromis, juvenile Creole wrasse and about every shape, size, and color of pufferfish you could imagine. The puffers were literally everywhere. At one point, we all hovered for several minutes as about a thousand (no exaggeration) blue-fin trevally swam by. Later, they proceeded to harass a five-foot white-tip that was minding his own business trying to rest. A few trevally left the school, nipped at the shark, and when it started to swim off, more trevally joined the "fun" and chased the shark.

Our divemaster didn't give a briefing for the second or third dives -- he was busy with his camera and disappeared into the 20-foot visibility.

Another dive, over largely rocky terrain with some coral, revealed four large sea-horses, then a six-inch frogfish. A fellow diver took a great video of Senor Frog while he scarfed up a two-inch wrasse that strayed too close. Watching the video later, I saw a second frogfish, about half the size of Senor Frog, wedged just beneath him. Our surface interval at the ranger station on Isla Coiba included a quick tour of the visitor center with basic, mostly graphic displays describ-

ing the island's history, the original people living there, its use as a prison from 1919 to 2004, and stories about the prisoners who lived on "Panama's Devil's Island." A white-faced monkey and an agouti or two strolled by on the lawn, but the resident croc was apparently on vacation, alas. (Undercurrent published a complete review of Coiba diving four years ago, and because it's a protected park, the diving remains the same: www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/dive_magazine/2011/PanamaNationalPark201102.html)

CDC's super panga was serviceable; however, seat cushions with cracked covers and no real padding were a squishy, soggy, unpadded mess, leading to a butt-painful rough ride through choppy water. While the staff was friendly and helpful, our divemaster, a local guy in his mid-30s, was a disinterested exception. His too-brief briefing on the first dive (with none on the second or third) was negligent for those of us diving for the first time in those waters. On our third dive, he was busy with his camera and disappeared (in 20 feet of visibility, even seeing bubbles was tough). Without guidelines from his briefing, I wondered if we should follow the normal protocol of searching for one to two minutes, then surface and regroup. After an awkward three minutes, we swam in the direction we had seen him go. When we caught up with him, he appeared to have no idea we had been "lost." When we got to the air level that he indicated in his only briefing, we rose to make a safety stop, but he kept swimming around at 35 feet taking pictures. Back on the surface, I munched the sandwich I had made from the white bread and peanut butter purchased at the local bodega, while the crew sliced up fresh pineapples for themselves.

Our digs, the rustic La Buena Vida, provided a small casita with a comic gecko theme -- mosaics (which are all over the property), windows cut in the shape of a gecko, even a four-foot-long painted gecko on the wall above the bed, whose eyes were the reading lights. Because of the tropical grounds, we were advised to shake out shoes and clothes for lizards, scorpions, etc., before dressing. At \$90 per night, it was not much of a value, but housing choices were limited; walking around town, it appeared that most options were hostel-like. The small restaurant at La Buena Vida, as were other nearby restaurants, was closed for the October off-season (this was becoming a recurring theme),



La Buga Dive Shop, Bocas del Toro

and the only grocery options were water, soda, beer and salty snacks at tiny bodegas. I lost a few pounds eating only our backup energy bars for meals. Even so, retirement homes for gringos priced at half a million overlooked the beach.

Next stop on our Panama ramble was the mountain town of Boquete, at a 4,500-foot elevation in a famous coffee-growing region, but with so many birds and butterflies, it felt like a land-based reef. After roughing it the day before, the Boquete Garden Inn seemed luxurious. Then on to Bocas del Toro, on the Caribbean side of the isthmus. We dropped off our rental car in David because our plan was to depart from Bocas del Toro's airport back to Panama City for the trip home. From Boquete, we took a \$30 shuttle over the mountains to Almirante to catch a water taxi to Bocas del Toro on the Caribbean side. Along the way, we stopped at a roadside watering hole, populated with indigenous people in bright colors and interesting hats, reminiscent of Ecuador. One family was transporting their dog in the back of a truck; he was in a rice sack with his head sticking out, so he couldn't jump from the truck. Perro in Bolsa instead of Cat in the Hat.

Bordering on Costa Rica, the province of Bocas del Toro has nine beautiful Caribbean islands and a protected marine park. With its basic tourist infrastructure, it has a delightful, laid-back Caribbean feel that's different from the rest of Panama, a destination one could settle into. We did two pleasant dives with La Buga Dive and Surf in water that was 86 degrees, but the visibility was low, averaging 25 feet. After a five-minute boat ride, we dived White House Wall, at a max depth of 65 feet. While it was not a prolific reef, I did see spotted eels, arrow crabs, Pedersen shrimp, brittle stars and a mantis shrimp in a cranny; I've heard these shrimp can break an aquarium wall, so I kept my distance. At the end of the dive, we took a long swim at 30 feet, past reef squid and lots of rope and viscous sponges, even barrel sponges, some up to three feet tall and two feet wide. The second dive at Pandora had a lot of varied sponges (barrel, rope, tube) and coral (plate, lettuce, and boulder). The fish were small, many small hovering balls of tiny fish near the reef. Certainly not stunning, but nice. Other reviews I had read of Bocas diving were at best lukewarm, and while this is not Dominica, it definitely looked like it was making a comeback of a sort, but my observation is based on limited diving.

Pedasi, Panama

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

Isla Coiba, Panama

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

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

Bocas del Toro, Panama

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

Caribbean Scale

Leave the Nautilus Alone

The nautilus is an amazing creature, roaming the Indo-Pacific water for the past 500 million years. But if a dive boat you're on pulls one out of the water to show passengers, tell them to throw it back. While the nautilus has adapted to everything from asteroid collisions to climate change, this living fossil is dying off in zoos and aquariums around the world, and exhibiting them on dive boats is not helping.

A team of scientists in Washington D.C. wanted to know why the nautilus can live 15 years or more in its natural habitat but only up to three years in captivity, so it studied captive mollusks from the city's National Zoo. In a study published in Zoo Biology, they state that once the nautilus is removed from its natural environment, a thick, rough, black substance develops on a portion of its smooth white shell. The substance is a heavy protein that leads to excess amounts of copper, which can be harmful to shell formation. Researchers think it's caused by environmental stress from being in captivity.

In the wild, overfishing has slashed nautilus numbers by as much as 80 percent in once-rich areas like Australia's Great Barrier Reef and the Philippines' Bohol Strait. With virtually no international sanctions limiting the capture and trade of the nautilus, shells can sell for several hundred dollars. The United States alone imports 100,000 nautilus shells each year. But for the nautilus's sake, divers and dive boats should just leave them alone -- and untouched -- in their natural habitat.

La Buga Dive and Surf had decent gear and a 26-foot fiberglass boat with awning that was comfortable for six divers. Afterwards, the guy in the shop who set us up said there was "proper diving" nearby that cost more, \$85 for two tanks instead of their \$70; one wonders why. At La Buga restaurant, next to the dive shop, the quesadillas were especially good, and they give divers a 10 percent discount. Nearby I had a good \$3 Cuba Libre at the unique local bar named Riptide, literally a boat tied up, back transom open to the bay. At Tom's, down the street from Riptide, there are \$5 lunches, nice views and \$2 beers. We visited the Wine Bar, hoping to find something other than cheap Chilean Malbec, but that is exactly what they poured.

At Koko Resort, we stayed in one of six over-the-water cabins on stilts (\$140), with a pass-through bar leading to the kitchen, bath and shower, sleeping loft and an awesome deck with chairs and hammock. Sitting there over the water, with cold beer, watching a stingray muddle past below, staring at the water and

the coastline, watching pelicans glide -- memories are made of this! The cabin was not luxurious, but clean, functional and rather spacious for two people. The place is literally right in a local neighborhood, so we walked past the locals' houses and watched kids play soccer on a sawdust-covered lot. Lee and Jack, two retired Americans with a million good stories, run Bahia del Sol, the B&B next door where we went for breakfast (included). Lee was a college professor at Ohio State, and Jack a real estate developer in Ohio (note the Ohio State Buckeye flag on the wall). He's one of those larger-than-life expats I enjoy meeting in out-of-the-way places -- opinionated for sure but helpful to a fault, semi-gruff exterior notwithstanding (for instance, he and Lee persuaded the local sawmill to donate the soccer field sawdust). They are kind people who have a low tolerance for prima donnas expecting a W Hotel, and they spin good tales about people expecting a luxury resort.

While I discovered some unique diving as well as pleasant but unsurprising Caribbean diving, I also discovered a country with fine people, an easy pace of living and a beautiful tropical environment. Next time you go diving, I hope you take a few days to see what you can discover..

-- S.F.



Divers Compass: No nitrox was available anywhere we went . . . The whole Casco Viejo area in Panama City is rich with historical significance . . . If you haven't yet, read The Path Between the Seas by David McCullough to put Panama's names and places in context. . . Websites: Pacific Paradise Dive Shop - [6](http://www.pacific-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

paradisepedasi.com; Casita Margarita - www.pedasihotel.com; Coiba Dive Center - <http://coibadivecenter.com>; La Buena Vida - <http://labuenavidahotel.com>; La Buga Dive & Surf Center - www.labugapanama.com; Koko Resort - <http://kokoresort.com>; Bahia del Sol B&B - www.bocasbahiadelsol.com

Fiji, Iceland, Maldives, Raja Ampat

trouble in Cozumel, a bad critter-handling policy in Kauai

A Raja Ampat Liveaboard Bargain. With luxury Raja Ampat liveaboards running as much as \$7,000 for 10 days (outrageous in Indonesia, a place where American go to retire because it is dirt-cheap), and booked a year in advance, too many divers have been priced out. So the new and more than adequate Aussie-managed, French-owned *Calico Jack* is a welcome addition -- how about 11 nights in Raja Ampat for \$2,200 to \$2,800, or five nights diving Komodo for \$1,450? Joanne Pannell (Geraldton, WA) was aboard in January and says, "This is a budget boat, cold showers (though in Raja Ampat, this isn't a problem) but spacious cabins, ensuite bathrooms and one hot shower on deck. It has a lovely, knowledgeable French cruise director who speaks fluent English and an excellent, French-trained chef who cooks Indonesian and European cuisine . . . There is a maximum of 10 guests. The dive deck is well laid out and functional . . . Usually four dives a day, with good surface intervals . . . The itinerary runs from Misool in the south to Waigeo in the north. All the dive gear is new. No Nitrox and no dedicated photography table; if more than half the guests were photographers, lack of space could be an issue." Pannell saw everything one expects to see -- great schools of fish, sharks (wobbegongs and black-tip reef sharks), mantas, devil rays, pygmy seahorses, and nudibranchs. Non-diving activities include kayaking, bird watching, trekking and village visits. *Calico Jack's* fees are in Euros, so the prices will fluctuate accordingly. (www.wallacea-divecruise.com)

Coiba, Panama. While the reviewer in our Panama travel story found fault with the dive leaders at Coiba Dive Center, Jennifer Widom (Stanford, CA) dived with Scuba Coiba in January and reports that she was happy with their operation. "Our family took the standard three-day, nine-dive trip to Coiba Island. While the diving doesn't match up to Socorro or Cocos, it was pretty darn good. While some dives had periods of little activity, and not every dive site has pretty reefs, we saw a great deal: ever-present white-tip sharks, two giant manta rays, stingrays, eagle rays, fleets of mobula rays, turtles, seahorses, frogfish, eels, schools of barracuda, and innumerable schooling fish. Apparently, everything is highly seasonal -- water temperature, visibility and underwater life. Our friendly guide, Nicholas, did a good job managing the expedition; he largely just showed the way and kept an eye out for the good stuff. Accommodations are in ranger-run bunkhouses with five to six beds and private bathrooms. The island has its own interesting wildlife and a few hiking trails." (<http://scubacoiba.com>)

You Say You've Been Everywhere? Probably Not Iceland, I Bet. Kris Kraman (Red Bank, NJ) was there in February, diving in 40-degree water with 300-foot visibility in Silfra Spring. "A unique diving experience. No animal life, just incredible visibility. The better your tolerance for cold water diving and drysuit familiarity, the more enjoyable your experience. Typically, you take the dive as part of a general Iceland tour. The dive shop supplied all the gear. Brand-new drysuits were very comfortable." (www.dive.is)

Matava Eco Resort, Fiji. Sean Bruner (Tucson, AZ) has done some serious diving in Fiji, so he has a good basis for comparison, but his trip to Matava Eco Resort, followed by Tuvalu in Kadavu, didn't start well. "The boat ride to the Matava resort was horrible -- one hour over rough seas in a panga with an outboard motor and no shade. I was badly sunburned because my sunscreen was packed away, and I got abrasions on my butt from bouncing on the hard wooden bench. Other guests were ferried on the dive boats in relative comfort . . . Our bure (bungalow) was high on the hill, an energetic climb, from which

we had a commanding view of the ocean. Run on solar power, this is an “eco resort,” which translates as “few amenities.” There is no fan above the bed, so it can be uncomfortably hot in the afternoon. They have no generator, and the lights are a joke: one for the bedroom and one for the bathroom, very dim. Luckily, we brought headlamps. The food is basic but good and plentiful. The diving is conducted from two aluminum boats. Although the crew tries to be helpful and accommodating, they put our regulators on the tanks upside-down and took the top weights out of my integrated BC but didn’t replace them, something I failed to discover until it was too late, so I had to scrub that dive. There is also this inexplicable hurry to get everyone suited up and off the boat, usually due to surface current, but it makes for unnecessary stress and could easily lead to mishaps with less experienced divers. The dive guides for the most part were attentive and the dives were all good, with a couple being exceptional. Kadavu Island is inside the Astrolabe reef and the coral, mainly hard, is in good shape, pristine in places, and staggering in abundance and variety. The fish action was somewhat disappointing. We made a long boat ride to see mantas, but visibility was poor because the water is cloudy with the krill and plankton. We saw a sea krait, two turtles, white-tip reef sharks which came in close on a night dive, a hammerhead, razorfish, titan triggerfish and a Picasso triggerfish, an eagle ray while snorkeling on the house reef, as well as tons of anthias, butterflyfish, grouper, lionfish, anemonefish, angelfish and moray eels. Its isolation, while a hassle, is also a blessing. No cars, tranquility and great diving among super-friendly people.” (www.matava.com)

Chaos in Dive Paradise. Jacques Tanguay (Oshawa, ON) joined a group of 26 for a week in Cozumel, and while the diving was Cozumel-great and his guides were top-notch, the Dive Paradise infrastructure and organization wasn’t up to snuff. His boat, the *Aries*, “broke down, and though repaired on the spot, the

Readers Weigh in About Turning Rigs into Reefs

In our February issue, we wrote about turning oil rigs into diveable reefs, and why, even though leaving rigs in the water is the cheapest and often cleanest option, some environmentalists are clashing with coastal state governments about keeping them in the water. The opposition also carried over into our readership -- we got a few letters showing that some readers also stand on one side of the fence or the other.

Kevin McCarter (Aurora, IL) thinks the anti-reef environmentalists are hypocrites. “It seems to me this segment of the environmentalist crowd is among the most pig-headed, stubborn, emotionally driven people on the planet. They’re not open to true, data-driven science or common sense. There’s simply no balance in their world view. To them, it’s all about politics and money . . . Your quote from the Greenpeace “executive” that fighting reefing is still the right thing to do because the oil companies don’t like it is a rare bit of honesty that completely exposes their approach. Unfortunately, their top priority is *not* the environment. Don’t get me wrong - - I don’t automatically hate environmentalists. Aren’t we all really environmentalists? I want to see the oceans and other parts of the planet protected against human activity, but I just want to see some common sense, balance and true scientific principles consistently applied.”

Mary Wicksten (Bryan, TX) says our article is off base and advises us to read Richard Rezak’s book *Reefs and Banks of the Northwestern Gulf of Mexico*. “By doing so, you’ll find that many of the Gulf’s ‘natural reefs’ are less than 10 feet high, silt covered and/or too deep for divers. For fish that prefer to get out of the silt, the platforms are a blessing. But comparisons with true coral reefs are useless. The platforms are shaded, which discourages coral growth. They also are made of metal parts that will not last hundreds of years. What this all boils down to is that one is comparing the biology on a metal vertical structure with that of a muddy sea floor or a natural reef. Is the biota of a platform ‘good’ or ‘bad?’ This is largely a matter of opinion, not science.”

Here’s another option to consider: turning old oil rigs into posh hotels. That’s what happened with the Seaventures Dive Rig Resort on Malaysia’s southeastern coast, between the islands of Mabul and Kapalai. The resort features 25 rooms, from four-bed dormitories to twin and double rooms, and on-site amenities include a movie room, karaoke lounge and bar (the dive instructors moonlight as the house band, the Sea Gypsies), and conference facilities. No dive boat needed: An elevator takes divers all the way down to the house reef, or you can get off at the Rig Jump platform and jump right in. Book your rooms at <http://seaventuresdive.com>).

divers were suited up waiting to go. It gets hot sitting there. The boat spewed a lot of exhaust fumes for the next couple of days. The ladders were the worst -- bent in and you had to use a knotted rope to pull yourself up. The dive storage lockers are tiled, locked enclosures, with no drainage or ventilation. After a week of my gear sitting in a quarter-inch of water, opening the locker door in the morning was a shock to the nose. We had to report at the dive shop at 8 a.m. every morning, but the boats would show up in no order. If someone was late, the boat would back out and wait. Then the next boat would come in and load up. Don't know why they couldn't schedule them, and if you're late, it's your loss."

Michael J. Millet (Dublin, CA), also there in February, says, "This was my sixth time diving with Dive Paradise and the operation seemed to be overwhelmed by the large number of divers at the Hotel Cozumel Resort. It seemed like every morning and afternoon, there was confusion regarding what dive boat we were on and what time it was leaving. It was usually late. Twice I was switched from the dive boat I was already on with my gear to another dive boat so that the manager could max out the number of divers on the boat. On more than one dive, there were delays and extra stops due to snafus with rental gear. Our dive guides, Juan and Santos, did a great job of finding critters, and divers with varying degrees of diving experience were entertained and satisfied." (www.diveparadise.com)

Maldives Aggressor. Mike Szathmary (Cincinnati, OH) spent good time and money traveling to the Maldives, but came back disappointed. "The boat is nice and the crew was excellent, with two exceptions. The trip leader and the assumed lead divemaster were aloof and did not seem at all sincere -- in a word, corporate. The trip leader put the hard sell on us to take nitrox for the week by misrepresenting the type of dives we would be doing for the week. The divemaster had a rock-star attitude. The dives in several cases did not match the briefing as to conditions. They did a horrible job of keeping the group together, and divers surfaced hundreds of yards from one another. On one dive, we surfaced a mile from the boat. Another boat told us they would go tell our boat where we were, but it took 18 minutes to get to us. We had to deploy our safety sausage on several dives because the dhoni was so far away, so we had quite a few long waits. Either the dhoni is not terribly maneuverable or the crew just enjoyed watching us do long surface swims. Once we surfaced at a shallow part of the reef, the dhoni crew instructed us to swim to the adjacent deep area, but after we did, but the dhoni made no effort to pick us up. So we faced a long, unnecessary surface swim -- even though I'm fit, that swim wiped me out and pissed me off. The diving: disappointing. If your idea of a great dive is hooking onto a reef in ripping currents to see a few sharks in lousy visibility, this destination is for you. Granted, there were some bright spots; a couple of reef dives and the manta dive were great. But the corals in general were dead or on life support, which was disappointing. Many of the dives look just like the one before it -- just not much diversity."

"Either the dhoni is not terribly maneuverable, or the crew just enjoyed watching us do long surface swims."

Leave the Critters Alone. Don Gensler (Umpqua, OR) went out with Seasport Divers on Kauai in March, and while it was generally a professional operation, what "got him hot" was a divemaster named Matt and his behavior with a free-swimming small octopus. "When the octopus jetted to a crevice, Matt repeatedly and deliberately fingered the crack until it inked. Topside, I challenged this practice but I was informed that it's legal in Hawaii, management knows about it, divers approve. I don't approve. I used to raise cattle. Every minute a cow is chased by dogs, ATVs, etc., is a minute that it isn't producing milk or gaining weight for the butcher. An octopus uses metabolic energy to produce ink. Each inking depletes some reserves that can limit its reproductive potential, necessary metabolic needs and ink production for predator defense. I'm not a PETA guy; I raised and butchered livestock for half my life. But these are not livestock. The shallow glory of an inking does nothing toward educating my fellow divers, and hardly rises to a signal event in our diving experience. It was worthless to us, and potentially debilitating to the octopus." Amen.

But, obviously, Seasport management does not give a hoot about mauling critters. Here's what we wrote in February 2008: "Subscriber Susan Goudge (Lake Zurich, IL) had an octopus experience while diving with Kauai's Seasport Divers on a trip to Niihau. "Our divemaster, Luke, took an octopus from its crevice and held his hand up so that each time the octopus tried to escape, it swam into Luke's palm. There was ink everywhere, and a great photo op of an octopus with tentacles extended, but it seemed more like a bully-in-the-playground situation. Seasport owner Marvin Otsuji told us he has heard that complaint often, but says he can't do much. He told me, 'I can't be there on a day-to-day basis. We don't have an official policy about touching, but I do tell the crew to be 100 percent professional.' He says divers can sometimes be the problem, as many are overeager and do similar grabs. 'We try to say don't touch as best we can, but we can't constantly tell people not to without making them upset,' Otsuji said. It's a cop-out for businesses to say they don't have a policy and can't control their employees. Having no policy about pulling critters from crevices means that it's ok to do it. And it's another cop-out to place blame on divers and make employees solely responsible when many are failing to set good examples of marine life interaction." And this is why our readers who visit Kauai prefer Bubbles Below. (www.bubblesbelowkauai.com)

-- Ben Davison

Heart Health in Older Divers

are stress tests and defibrillators really that helpful?

When subscriber Ted Doering (Jupiter, FL) spotted one of his fellow divers -- a chubby 65-year-old who said he had 400 dives under his belt but looked like he rarely exercised -- he sensed trouble. Doering, a pediatric oncologist, and his wife were on a May cruise that had stopped in the Galapagos, and had booked a two-tank dive. They got in a dive boat with the chubby diver, and the captain, who didn't speak English, took them offshore for the first dive. The divemaster had only two weeks' experience in the Galapagos and had no medical background. To make sure they had the right gear and had buoyancy, she wanted her divers to test their gear on the surface before descending. The chubby diver immediately jumped in, but shocked by the cold water, he tried to climb up the ladder. He couldn't do it unaided, and after a struggle, he fell back into the water, unconscious.

"The divemaster said, 'Oh my God, he's not breathing,' and the boat captain was also useless," Doering says. Doering got the diver on the boat and started pulmonary respiration but couldn't get a pulse. Within 10 minutes, the diver's pupils were dilated. The boat had oxygen but no automated external defibrillator (AED), an electronic device used to treat a person in cardiac arrest. The diver died due to a blocked blood flow in a coronary artery. "The man had no idea that he had heart disease," Doering says. "I asked his wife about his heart condition and she said, 'He never went to the doctor. He hadn't seen one in 20 years.'"

That Galapagos trip was six years ago, but Doering treated it as a wakeup call. When he returned home, he vowed to take a heart stress test every two years. "I was 65 years old (I'm 71 now), and I hadn't had one yet. The trip got me thinking, 'That dead diver hadn't had an EKG in years, and the dive boat didn't have an EKG, which could have helped to save his life.' These kinds of deaths need further evaluation, so that old folks like me can have a better idea of what we need to do to make our diving safe, or safer. Can *Undercurrent* do a story on whether older divers need routine stress tests, and what are the criteria for stress test abnormalities and high-risk indicators?"

In our research, we learned that there are no clear guidelines for whether older divers should have regular stress tests, and no mandates for dive boats to have AEDs onboard. In fact, the medical juries are still out on whether either of those options is helpful, as we'll explain.

The Concern over Stress Tests

According to statistics gathered by Divers Alert Network, one-third of all diving fatalities are associated with an acute cardiac event. In a recent study of DAN members, the incidence of diving-related deaths was 16 per 100,000 divers per year, and the deaths due to cardiac causes were nearly a third of that number, so five per 100,000 divers annually. The risk of cardiac-related death while diving is 10 times higher in divers over age 50, and the study of DAN members showed a continuous increase in risk with increasing age. The dead diver on Doering's Galapagos trip was far from uncommon -- diving, or simply immersion, can provoke disturbances of the heart's rhythm, which can thus result in sudden death, especially in older divers.

Petar DeNoble, vice president of mission for DAN, says his organization refers to the American Heart Association's guidelines when it comes to fitness for exercise, screening for cardiac risk factors and testing for specific conditions. On its website, DAN says older divers and those who have a family history of heart attacks, especially at an early age, should get the appropriate evaluations to detect early signs of coronary artery disease.

For divers who've suffered heart attacks, DAN recommends a six- to 12-month hiatus from diving. Then they should have a thorough cardiovascular evaluation, including an exercise stress test, which requires a fairly brisk level of exercise, equal to progressively running faster until you reach a pace slightly faster than an eight-minute mile (for a very brief time period, that is). Performance at that level without symptoms or EKG changes indicates normal exercise tolerance, and a passing grade.

"An incident will likely happen while diving or on the surface after waiting for pickup. This means getting the patient to the AED will take some time."

Alfred Bove, past president of the American College of Cardiology and professor emeritus at Temple University (as well as a diver), recommends that divers be able to swim continuously for 15 to 20 minutes to avoid a risky diving situation that may arise unpredictably. "This level of exercise can be tested on a treadmill with cardiac monitoring to be sure the diver is capable of this exercise level without showing evidence of cardiac problems like inadequate blood flow to the heart, abnormal heart rhythms or severe shortness of breath that would induce panic."

While Bove doesn't generally recommend routine exercise testing for screening in asymptomatic individuals, for older individuals doing sports requiring increased exercise levels, safety dictates that they have a stress test. He also says an assessment of cardiovascular risk factors, such as blood pressure, cholesterol levels and diabetes status should be calculated, and then intermediate- or high-risk individuals should have further testing to ensure diving is safe.

However, in March, the American College of Physicians published guidelines in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* stating that routine cardiac testing of adults without symptoms hasn't been shown to improve patient outcomes, and it can actually lead to potential harms. They say there is no evidence that stress tests or electrocardiograms have any advantages over routine risk assessment in asymptomatic people. All the tests commonly produce false positives that lead to further unnecessary, and costly, testing.

However, DAN supports the American College of Physicians' new guidelines, even though divers predictably go under significant stress in water, and stress tests could determine if older divers' hearts can handle that stress. Says DeNoble, "We believe [the guidelines are] evidence-based and we follow them."

The Shocker about Defibrilators

Doering says the diver he tried to resuscitate in the Galapagos might well still be alive had there been an AED on the dive boat. "The average cost of one is \$1,500, and every golf course and tennis court in Florida has an AED within two minutes of any player. This is common sense as well as a liability issue, and a case

The Dive Hood, Your Head and Heat Loss

After reading last month's article about a dive hood on the head as being the best way to prevent hypothermia, subscriber Harvey Cohen (New York, NY) wrote to suggest that we should get our heads examined for stating that. "If you leave significant body surface area exposed, that's where you'll lose heat. For equivalent area, heat loss is about the same, whether it's your head, your thighs, etc. Of course, divers are more likely to expose their heads than other areas, but a full wetsuit and bare head doesn't lose more heat than a shorty wetsuit and hood."

While our story's source, Steve Muscat, chief diving medical officer for the government of Malta, stands behind the fact that most of the hypothermia problems he sees in divers are usually due to heat loss from the uncovered head in cold water, Cohen has it right, too: The amount of heat released by any part of the body depends largely on its surface area, and in a cold envi-

ronment, you would lose more heat through an exposed leg or arm than a bare head.

Dr. Daniel I. Sessler, an anesthesiologist at the Cleveland Clinic, said the popular myth that most heat escapes from the head stemmed from military experiments done 50 years ago. Researchers dressed subjects in Arctic survival suits and exposed them to frigid conditions. But the suits only covered the subjects from the neck down, so naturally most of their body heat escaped through their heads. But Sessler says that's not a fair comparison. "If you did the same experiment with someone wearing a swimsuit, only about 10 percent of the heat loss would come from the head."

The face, head, and upper chest are up to five times as sensitive to changes in temperature as other areas, says Sessler. "This creates the illusion that covering up those areas traps in more heat, but clothing another part of the body does just as much to reduce overall heat loss." While the body does not lose most of its heat through the head, you'll be a lot warmer if you pair a hood along with your dive gloves and wetsuit.

could be made for not having an AED on dive boats with seniors as a serious legal liability. This should be a DAN goal."

DeNoble says DAN sells AEDs and provides training for their use, "but we cannot mandate all operators to have it." *Undercurrent* published a story on AEDs, "A Shock to Divers' Hearts," in March 2012, and we found that while AEDs are common in U.S.-based dive boats, they become less common as a diver travels farther overseas. That's still the case, Bove says. "Most dive boats in the Caribbean carry AEDs on board, and many of the organized programs that serve U.S. divers have them, but I don't think there are any regulations that require it. In remote locations like the South Pacific, I don't think they would be found on many dive boats."

The need for AEDs is rare, and they may not work in standard dive conditions. DeNoble says older divers should keep in mind that application of AED within three to five minutes saves about 10 percent of those who suffer cardiac arrest outside of the hospital. "Our ability to predict who will suffer an arrest is quite weak and does not provide practical information," he says.

Peter Hughes, who these days runs the *M/V Galapagos Sky*, described the shortcomings of an AED in his operation. "Like all Galapagos liveaboards, we conduct 100 percent of our diving activities from small, inflatable pangas. There is no safe, secure, dry storage easily available aboard the pangas, so our AED is stored safely and under the watchful eye of our captain -- on the bridge of the liveaboard! An incident will likely happen while diving, or on the surface after waiting for pickup. This means getting the patient to the AED will take some time -- getting the diver aboard the panga, figuring out what to do with the other divers, transporting the diver to the mother ship and using the AED as required. The time lapse and moving the diver to the liveaboard takes time, and creates hardship for the patient. So the question about whether portable AEDs should be common on dive boats is not easy to answer with a simple yes or no."

Still, there's certainly no harm in having an AED stored on the dive boat, but because there's no regulation in any country to do so, DeNoble says the pressure for that to happen needs to come from us divers. "Customers need to regularly press the boat owner to invest in more safety in general, including having

AEDs available. In the meantime, people with heart disease or with a high risk of sudden cardiac arrest may consider avoiding travel to remote areas.”

-- Vanessa Richardson

That Dream Trip Can Be Reality

finding reasonably priced places with less-stressful travel

If you're a North American diver fantasizing about that big time diving in the South Pacific, you may have been stymied because of the time, cost and stress factors of such distant travel. So you stick to the Caribbean, Mexico or Hawaii. Think again, says subscriber Jim Willoughby of Bend, OR.

He leads groups of friends on several dive trips a year, and after comparing receipts of trips to the Caribbean (Dominica) and the Pacific (Cebu, Philippines), he told us that divers, at least those west of the Mississippi, should head west rather than south for the better deals. “For the Dominica trip, airfare from Oregon was \$1,400. I got to Cebu for \$900. The package deal I negotiated with Dominica’s Castle Comfort Lodge was \$999 for the week, which included the room, breakfast and two dives a day. At Cebu’s Eagle Point Resort, I paid that same amount for two weeks and that included all meals and unlimited diving. As another example, I am going to NAD Lembeh at Indonesia’s Lembeh Strait in Indonesia this month, and my airfare is \$1,085, and the all-inclusive resort with three tanks a day is \$1,045 per week.”

Willoughby’s research has worked well for him, so we asked a few travel experts who book and lead dive trips worldwide for their tips. Depending on where you live, how many travel hassles you can handle -- and the potential economic ups and downs in 2015 -- you might be surprised at their answers.

“The Days of Cheap Deals May Be Coming to An End”

“There was a time when travel to Cozumel, the Cayman Islands, and Roatan were very good dollar values,” says Ken Knezick, owner of Island Dream Travel in Houston (www.divetrip.com). “These days, the resorts remain competitively priced, but airfares from the U.S. to such Caribbean destinations have increased considerably due to a lack of competition.” He says this was a calculated scheme on the part of certain airlines, such as American Airlines, which now has a dominant share of Caribbean air travel. “They moved in with low pricing and destroyed the domestic carriers. After the competition was removed, they have been able to charge much higher fares. Fortunately, air travel to Pacific destinations still includes more competition, and air fares can look quite attractive when compared with travel to the Caribbean.”

Ken Kurtis, the owner of the Reef Seekers dive shop in Beverly Hills, CA (www.reefseekers.com), who routinely takes divers on group trips worldwide, says, “The Caribbean has gotten more expensive in the past five to 10 years, and the days of finding \$300 airfare deals are long gone. For a trip to Bonaire last May, I got airfares around \$850, but for a trip next month, airfares are averaging \$1,300. I just got a rate sheet from a company I deal with regularly in the Asia-Pacific area, and their room prices increased 28 percent, and three-tank daily dive rates went up 49 percent. So the days of cheap deals in Indo-Pacific may also be coming to an end.”

One area that’s seeing consistently inexpensive airfare is the Philippines, under \$1,000 for a West Coast flight. Kurtis says it’s because the government is currently underwriting part of the airfares for Philippine Airlines to get the tourism dollars. “Fiji did that five years ago, with \$500 nonstop deals on Fiji Air from LAX. But now, an LAX flight to Nadi for two weeks in August is around \$1,350, and some have stops in Honolulu or Auckland first.”

Indonesia has some low price points these days, but the problem is having to take a lot of short, connecting flights within Indonesia. That means you’ll have to change planes, maybe more than once, after having

to change planes already on the way to Tokyo, Taipei, Hong Kong or Singapore. For last-minute long weekend trips to Hawaii, Mexico or the Caribbean, you may luck out and get a good deal, but that's harder to do these days, thanks to airlines' "dynamic pricing," in which prices vary greatly from day to day depending upon empty seats and demand. If last-minute demand is high, the prices will be too.

What's Your Travel Tolerance for Times vs. Pain?

Besides the price of flying, what about the ease of flying? Well, this is where Asia-Pacific falls short. If you've flown to, say, Raja Ampat, you know what this means. That's why you should weigh the time and physical discomfort of travel, as well as the financial cost of it, says Knezick. "A long-awaited trip to an Indo-Pacific diver's haven can require 24 or more hours of flying time, plus additional overnights in transit. This consumes limited vacation time and takes a physical toll. Divers need to derive a formula that takes into account money, time and pain."

Also factor in where you live. To reach Caribbean diving, if you live near a major airport, like JFK or Dallas, you have an advantage in lower costs and more direct flights. West coast divers will be changing planes, sometimes twice, and overnighing between flights somewhere unless they take a dreaded red-eye.

How Any Diver Can Negotiate Group Dive Discounts

In the main story, *Undercurrent* subscriber Jim Willoughby compares the costs of booking group trips to various locations. He doesn't do it for a living, he just gets a group of his diver friends together and handles the bookings, negotiating discounts with dive resorts and liveaboards.

"Joe Diver can negotiate," he says. "It depends on the size of your group, and on the flexibility of the resort. But if I am bringing 10 divers, I often either pay for just eight of them, or negotiate a 20 percent discount. What I save, I spread among the group."

Subscriber Guy Charlebois (Laval, Quebec) is another non-travel-professional who regularly negotiates dive group trip discounts. While his wife is a travel agent and handles the flights and hotels, Charlebois researches dive operators and asks what they can do for him. When his group of 12 divers wanted to go to Cozumel last December, he e-mailed four dive operators and asked what they could offer. He chose Dressel Divers as it offered a 20 percent discount off its "Gorilla" package (eight reef dives, one night dive and two cenote dives) if he paid in advance. "For other trips, I usually get 10 to 20 percent off the regular price if I have a group of 10 or more."

Ann Louise Tuke of the dive travel agency Caradonna Adventures says some resorts offer free spots for groups with as few as five or six paying divers. While some resorts do require a group to be formally organized through a travel agent or dive shop, there are plenty, especially smaller ones, that offer reduced

rates to personally organized groups. Tuke says it's easier to get discounts when it's not high season. "And it doesn't hurt to call a travel agency and ask for help in getting discounts. Caradonna tells divers where to go for discounts, even if it won't get a booking commission. "If someone calls us asking, "How many people do I need to get a free space,' we have that information and pass it on to groups, whether it's a formal group or a bunch of friends," Tuke says.

Willoughby says the Philippines seems to be most amenable to giving a package deal. Indonesia hasn't been as flexible. The Caribbean is more flexible, but he says their standard rates can be much more expensive. "Like at Anthony's Key in Roatan, the rate is considerably more than a comparable package almost anywhere else, so negotiating doesn't bring it down to an attractive price."

To get the best deal, Willoughby recommends researching and booking early. "I start a year out. I'll research a liveaboard or resort's rack rates online, and then I reach out with questions like 'I want to bring some friends, do you offer a group rate? What kind of arrangements should we make?' They get back with an offer and generally it's pretty good. If I counter-offer, sometimes they come back with a different program, or sometimes they say 'No thanks.'" Willoughby is proud of the "killer deal" he got when booking a Raja Ampat liveaboard for 2016. "They gave me this current year's rate, plus a discount to that, so a 12-day, all-inclusive trip that would cost \$4,600 per person is only costing my group \$3,100 each."

“Once you’re in the Caribbean, there are affordable dive resort packages,” says Ann Louise Tuke, of the dive travel agency Caradonna Adventures in Longwood, FL (www.caradonna.com). “But people from the West Coast will have to pay that extra cost to get to a Caribbean-focused hub, and that could add several hundred dollars to a round-trip ticket.” If you take a daytime flight to Miami or Houston from the West Coast, you will probably arrive too late to get a Caribbean-bound flight that same day, so that means it could turn into an overnight at a hotel en route. But same thing goes for East Coasters who want to dive in the Pacific, Tuke says. “You’re going to be on a red-eye at some point, unless you overnight somewhere. It’s a matter of personal preference and tolerance for flight schedules.” From New York City to Yap takes 28 hours, not including a hotel overnight, so you may say the heck with it and just fly to the Caymans.

No matter what region, if you want to go to a smaller, more remote island, you’re probably going to have to deal with small planes and the accompanying hassles. While Tuke says San Juan, Puerto Rico is a good hub between major U.S. cities and flights to the Lesser Antilles, Ken Kurtis isn’t so sure. “There are more flights and better prices between airlines flying to the Caymans, Cancun and San Juan. But Dominica or Saba -- how do you get there? Once you get to Puerto Rico, your options are limited, and you’re probably dealing with a regional carrier. Airfare will be higher or less stable. And if it’s a small jet, how much luggage will they take? If my bag doesn’t make it, the next flight could be three days later.”

For this surprising dive deal, “it’s just an eight-hour nonstop flight from Los Angeles, and it’s a lot more affordable than people think.”

Where the Deals Are

In both regions, some countries offer more of a deal than others. While Caribbean dive resorts’ prices have stayed pretty stable, Tuke says the bargains are in Cozumel, Belize, Roatan and Central America. “They’re less expensive because Houston flights go there regularly, and that hub is easy to reach for both West and East Coasters.”

In Asia-Pacific, the Philippines is the big bargain because of subsidized airfares, abundant nonstop flights, and the lower cost of living. Knezick says, “If one chooses with care, the quality of diving can compare favorably to almost any other Pacific hot spot.” Nonstop flights to Fiji from Los Angeles also make that an easy-to-reach destination.

A surprising dive deal: Tahiti. “While prices aren’t as low as Fiji or the Philippines, it is just an eight-hour nonstop flight from Los Angeles,” says Tuke. “And while you still need a connecting flight to the Tuamotus, that’s just another hour. It’s a lot more affordable than people think.”

A place that’s no longer a deal: Indonesia. “For resorts, Indonesia was once a very affordable dive destination, but due to high demand from international travelers, this may no longer always be the case,” says Knezick. Same for Pacific-based liveboards, he adds. “It seems they are competing to see who can offer the most luxury, but also who can charge the most, with some pricing in excess of \$650 per person per night. Certain land-based operations are attempting to follow that same trend. You will find much more affordable lodging and diving services in almost all Caribbean dive destinations.”

But with the way things are going in the global economy these days -- cheaper oil, a flailing Euro -- that could all change in an instant. And indeed, some dive destinations that were off your list in the past should be looked at again. Take Australia. A couple of years ago, its dollar was higher than the U.S. dollar. Now, US\$1 equals AUD\$1.28.

Tuke says there are now good prices in countries that base their currency on the Euro, which has been plummeting compared to the dollar. “Tahiti is Euro-based so its rates have really come down. Same with the Fiji dollar.” But when other currencies weaken against the dollar, foreign operations often change to quoting only in dollars, and while Americans gain no advantage, Europeans are being priced out. One

way around this is to contact foreign travel agents who may have prices suited to their own clientele. Or look for resorts or boats that continue to quote in Euros or their local currency. As for fuel surcharges, with crashing oil prices, there should be none, but don't count on it. Fuel prices have dropped in the past, but many liveaboards maintained their surcharges.

So if you're planning a future trip, keep an eye on currency fluctuations. "If the dollar tanks when your final payment is due months from now, that payment will not be what you thought when you originally booked that charter," says Tuke.

Yes, it's a dive traveler's jungle out there. But with good research and a good travel agent, you can minimize the prices, travel time and hassles you face to put together a trip that suits you just fine.

-- Vanessa Richardson

Petit Mustique Diving Lodge

ultimately, the joke was on me

A jet boat whisking divers 60 miles out to sea to dive, where one fins with swordfish, mola molas and loggerhead turtles. A private island with the world's top chefs developing dishes, and Sir Richard Branson subsidizing your stay. Mangrove nurseries filled with miniature fish, some perhaps only found in the Indian Ocean. All spinning in the windmills of my mind.

I sure had fun writing the special April 1 issue of *Undercurrent*, and most of our readers (not all, mind you) had just as much fun reading it. A few even remembered a similar mind-heist I pulled off a few years back. Here is what a few had to say about this year's missive.

"Congratulations on the Petit Mustique article. You almost had me until I realized it was April 1 and you never travel as Mr. Davison. I have been a subscriber for 30 years. Keep up the great work!" -- William King

"My bags were packed. That was going to be my retirement trip!" -- Bob Gerzoff

"Davison, you are SO off my Christmas card list!" -- Mark Kimmey

"That was a cruel joke. I had my phone in my hand ready to call and make a reservation. Shame on you for playing with our diver minds like that. It sounded like the Oasis of diving!" -- Jeremy Ansel

"I was halfway through the article with my drooling jaw resting on the keyboard while thinking, 'This is just too good to be true,' when it occurred to this guppy what day it was. You've done it again, I swallowed the whole thing. Great tale." -- Clem Clapp

"You are so bad! Had me totally. I did not fall for your last fictional bit about the model and her dive site, etc. [April May Precious was her name, another April Fool's Fantasy] a number of years ago. Well done." -- Owen Babcock

"Damn Ben...You got me again! I was packing my gear and looking at my calendar! This one was your best yet!" -- Thomas Lopatin

"Cruel! Can't believe I fell for it again!" -- Jennifer Calder

"I am not amused! I was ready to make reservations, cancel my existing reservations for next week at Young Island Resort, and count on photographing a Mola Mola. *How could you do this?!?"* -- Lionel Olmer

"You can be mean sometimes. But because I have been a subscriber for so many years (I still have the 'Swiss army knife' you sent subscribers many years ago), I should have realized it was a joke." -- Wayne Joseph [That was 1998, Wayne.]

Where Are the Replacement O-Rings?

Hi Ben,

I own a Sony underwater housing (MPK-AS3) for the Sony Action Cam (AS100V). Per the instructions, replacement O-rings are required. However, after contacting Sony customer support and the electronics store to which they referred me, as well as various large dive stores and underwater photography retailers, I have learned that Sony does not distribute or sell replacement O-rings. This presents a troubling issue: whether I'll be unable to get replacement O-rings or have to purchase another underwater housing when the O-rings wear out or are damaged. At \$40, the housing isn't expensive, but replacement O-rings at a fraction of the price should be

available. -- Bruce Drucker, South Wellfleet, MA

Yes, Bruce, it is a troubling issue, and it appears Sony offers little in the way of after-sale support. The shop that sold you the housing should have informed you. However, Sony is not alone in its neglect; that is something we must expect with many inexpensive proprietary housings. While a failed housing can ruin a camera, our society has emerged into one where we no longer can repair inexpensive items. When they fail, we just toss them. While one might find replacement O-rings for a few, but not all, inexpensive housings, once the model is off the market, O-rings may no longer be available. So if you buy another housing, first make sure you can get O-rings and then stock up.

-- Ben Davison

"Ben, you are an evil, evil, evil man! Loved it!" -- Deb Berglund

"Having traveled the Grenadines, I was surprised that there was a 'new' island I had not heard of. However, I was so excited by the description of the diving, I was seriously thinking about a trip there by the time I got near the end of the article. Congratulations, you are the first to April Fool me in quite a while!" -- Bob Symington

"Even if your April Fools article had not been so delicious, we would have renewed! Thanks for a wonderful laugh and a big 'if only!' Thanks for years of amazing reports -- you are a wonderful read and a blessing to the dive community!" -- Barbara Soucy

But some people were entirely buffaloed and needed my help. Now, it would be unkind of me to disclose their names, but here is what they wrote to me:

"How do we go about making reservations at the facility referenced? Looking to schedule for 2016 and put together a small group of divers from our midwest dive shop. Will need to know when connecting flights via Barbados are scheduled as well" . . . "Read your article on Petit Mustique Divers Lodge. Too bad, there is no info on the web or website for the lodge" . . . "Too many travel plans already in the works for this year but next summer looks good for Petit Mustique. What do I do with the *Undercurrent* code to make a booking, and can I take a non-diver, my ladylove?" . . . "I am a long time subscriber and diver. The article was excellent and I am interested but was unable to find out any information about accommodations online, nor the '*Undercurrent* code' needed" . . . "Hello, I am interested in travel to this destination and it appears I need a code from you to look into reservations. How do I receive a code and who do I contact after I have it?" . . . "We just read the Davison story on the Petit Mustique Divers Lodge. We are excited to contact this lodge but can find no address (email, phone, etc.). Can you help?"

I responded to these folks, explaining the spoof, and one responded, "I was sort of hoping you would not find my email, but unfortunately now you know me for the fool I am! I was fascinated you were seeing fish previously unknown to the Caribbean and wanted to get in on that ASAP. Happy diving! Very funny."

And while most people were good-natured when I wrote back to inform them that I sent this on April 1, a couple were not amused. For example: "I suggest you do not do this again. I have little time to read anything, away from materials regarding everyday global, business and other issues, due to a rigorous seven-day schedule, other than when on vacation. However, this article intrigued me, as you do not send anything out (twice a month and only on special notification,) that is not important, thus I took the time to read it. I had been to Mustique in 2000 and knew that Petit had then been uninhabited, but your article made me

think that it was now a functional and beautiful retreat. Not happy when I found the April Fool's joke. A waste of valuable time -- if I want a joke I will go to someone who does it for a living." What? He had been to Petit Mustique?

Then came another, more friendly response. "I run a marine biology education program aboard a sailing catamaran operating in the Windward Islands and have been diving the Grenadines extensively since 1998. I have dived all the islands of the Grenadines, including Petit Mustique, Sail Rock, Isle Quatre, Tobago Cays, Saline Island, the Big Blue, Bequia, all along St Vincent, Battowa and Balioux, and more. If there is an oceanic whitetip or a mola mola to be seen in these waters, I would have seen it. I have tried to anchor off the completely uninhabited island of Petit Mustique but could not find suitable shelter (there certainly was no sugar-soft sand beach!). I just could not believe what I was reading, none of it made sense! There are only small blackfin tuna to be found here. So you got me. April Fools, good job!" -- Jason Buchheim

Oh dear, I must admit that even though I too have sailed and dived the Grenadines and certainly knew of Petit St. Vincent, Petit Mustique had escaped me. This "worldly traveler" had fooled himself.

Finally, one of our good readers, Steve Cohen, got me back with this response:

Yet again, *Undercurrent* has found an out-of-the-way jewel not to be missed.
Once I got through the first paragraph, I was ready to pack and be on my way.
Undercurrent never fails to get my full attention when it arrives in my inbox.
But unfortunately, Petit Mustique will have to stay on my radar for the future.
Assuming the rising oceans don't make it disappear, of course.
Sailfish, marlin, giant tuna, pygmy seahorses, leatherback turtles, Mola Mola. . .
Too much good fortune for one place!
Assuming prices don't rise a lot, I'm looking at 2017 to book.
Reasonable prices, great diving, great food, who could ask for more?
Despite my ultimate disappointment, *Undercurrent* is still my choice for dive travel info!
Until next time....

-- Ben Davison

The Latest Hope for Fighting Caribbean Lionfish?

It's Caribbean reef sharks, and the desire that they'll start to hunt the invasive lionfish on their own without human help. Underwater photographer Simon Morley was diving at Split Rock, a shark hangout in Grand Cayman's East End, and snapped a picture right when a lionfish swam by and was snatched up into a reef shark's jaws right before his eyes. Several sharks then tussled over the catch, and as Morley told local news station Cayman 27, the behaviors he witnessed had no human interference at all. "From what I saw of the lionfish, it wasn't injured or in distress or anything like that. It appeared to be perfectly healthy, so from the looks of it, the sharks were in and actively hunting and pursuing the lionfish."

A bright light in the battle against the lionfish invasion? Not so fast, says Lad Akins, of the marine conservation nonprofit REEF. Predators eat things, even a

lionfish from time to time, "but there is absolutely no evidence that this is increasing in frequency or occurring at a level that will control lionfish populations."

However, Akins warns that divers and snorkelers shouldn't become too carried away in killing lionfish. Also last month, Cayman's Department of Environment publicly warned that feeding fish is against the law, even if the meal is the invasive lionfish. It came after a new video making the rounds on social media shows a grouper snatching a lionfish right out of a diver's hand. Divers had captured the lionfish in a plastic bag, and were looking for a grouper to feed it to when one came out of nowhere, repeatedly going for the snack until the diver eventually freed the lionfish from the bag.

Feeding marine life conditions them to associate divers with food, and cullers should only take lionfish if they have a proper container to store the fish. If the grouper had ingested the plastic bag, it could have been killed. "Due to actions like that, feeding predators is not an activity we want to encourage," says Akins.

Molesting Dive Instructor Sees It as “Just Playing” with Female Divers

In 1980, I was in Akumal, Mexico, diving with my business partner, who had only completed a few dives. One divemaster said he would look after her, so while her husband and I went off with another guide, she and her guide went in another direction. After the dive, she didn't have much to say, but that night confessed to her husband that the guide had groped her repeatedly. Too inexperienced underwater to know what to do, she was afraid to get away from him and head to the surface.

The next day we reported it to the American dive store operator, who didn't seem to believe her story, and basically said that all he would do was to talk to the guide, though I wonder if he even did that. (This story is published in our book, *There is a Cockroach in my Regulator*). In the '80s, I reported on two similar incidents, both as disgusting, and with little or no action taken by the dive business owner. Thankfully, times have changed. Denial and inaction are no longer the outcome, as you shall see.

Earlier this year, a woman diver in India reported in a blog that her divemaster had molested her underwater. On January 26, Kavya Raman, 23, traveled with friends to join a training course at in Udupi with Dreamz Diving School. Their divemaster was Dharendra Rawat, 46. On the blog Youth Ki Awaaz, Raman wrote that she had to suffer Rawat's molestation for about 40 minutes underwater. "The excitement of my first dive diverted my attention from the wrong that was happening to me for the first few minutes . . . The monster had my breathing equipment in his control and my tank in his hands. As we swam across the corals . . . his hands were no longer on my diving equipment. First one hand, then the other and finally both. I cringed in shock. I tried to shake his hands away from my body but in vain. The shock slowly turned to fright when his hands began to move across my body. I looked in his direction in despair but couldn't see him. After all, he was right behind me with both his hands groping me. I was aghast and tried to think fast. I tried to break free but the grasp was too tight. He then signaled, asking me if I was okay. I signaled with an 'OK'. Forty feet below sea level, with my breathing equipment under this monster's control, I didn't dare show any fear."

Back on the beach, Raman confronted Rawat. "I turned to the monster, in front of his crew and in front of my friends and asked him why he did what he did to me . . . By this time, my friends lost their cool and began questioning him too . . . I asked him to admit to his act and tell me that it wasn't just a mistake but an intentional act of molestation. He did so without any hesitation." Raman then filed a complaint with the police against Rawat, and found out that he had harassed women on previous occasions. "We were informed by one of the officers that this was the second such report against him in the last one-and-a-half month," she wrote in her blog. "We found many such unreported cases against the same man for the same crime. It was appalling."

The first incident happened in November, when two couples were taken by four divemasters for dive training near Udupi. One of the foursome told *The Times of India*, "Rawat slowly took Meena [name changed] far away and got her isolated. She didn't know swimming, so she was at his mercy. We finished diving in about 30 minutes and after more than an hour, Rawat came along with Meena. In the room, she broke down and narrated what had happened. Rawat had groped her. When we confronted him, he admitted to it, saying 'I was playing with her'." They called police, but Meena backed out from filing a complaint, fearing it would affect her future. In the second incident, in December, he targeted a doctor. She lodged a complaint with police, who arrested Rawat in January. He spent 15 days in custody till he was granted bail.

When *The Times* called up a dive shop in Goa that hires Rawat as a dive instructor, a spokesperson said, "Tell me which corporate entity doesn't have cases against it?" When the molestation cases were pointed out, the person taken aback and said management would review Rawat's services.

Regarding the latest charge against him, Rawat was arrested and later released on bail. A police officer told the *Indian Express* that his trial will start this month. Police also cancelled Dreamz Scuba Diving's business license, and issued a press release stating that if any person had suffered in such a case, they should immediately inform the authorities.

-- Ben Davison

Flotsam & Jetsam

Leonardo DiCaprio's New Eco-Resort in Belize.

The actor and avid environmentalist first visited Belize in 2005 for a dive trip and fell in love. Now he plans to build an eco-conscious resort on Blackadore Caye, a 104-acre island that's a 15-minute boat ride from San Pedro on Ambergris Caye. DiCaprio is partnering with a New York real estate firm to build 68 guest villas and 48 private houses according to the Living Building Challenge, a very tough green-building standard. Besides setting aside 45 percent of the island for conservation, DiCaprio wants to support a manatee conservation area, replant mangroves and build an artificial reef to slow erosion. Guests will have to follow a strict set of eco-guidelines (no plastic water bottles) and go through an ecology orientation program on arrival. Hotel room prices haven't been announced, but the private homes' price tags range from \$5 million to \$15 million.

Yes, You Still Can Dive Naval Shipwrecks. There was a big hoopla last spring when a Federal Register notice was published about giving permission for divers to access "sunken military vessels." The dive industry was concerned that changes to the Sunken Military Craft Act of 2004 had the potential to prohibit sport diving on former military ships, such as the *Spiegel Grove* off Key Largo and the *Vandenberg* off Key West. Fear not, divers, the U.S. Navy won't stand in your way. In response to a concerned query by the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association, J.B. Thomas, Jr., of the Naval History and Heritage Command, said it does not intend to restrict access to military craft purposefully sunk to create artificial reefs. Because ownership of those retired ships was signed over to local governments, they're exempt from any prohibition. "The diving and snorkeling

communities have served as effective ambassadors for the protection and preservation of underwater resources, including sunken military craft," Thomas wrote. However, no touching or taking: By law, divers can't remove any artifacts from the naval wrecks.

Even Empty Tanks Are Lethal Weapons. Subscriber Sheila Meadows (Hollywood Beach, FL) wrote in to tell us she just read our 2011 article "Scuba Tanks as Lethal Weapons" (about a filled scuba tank that fell over and blew up in the garage, severely injuring two people), and how the timing was uncanny. "On March 27th, I went to storage with my diver husband and he had seven tanks standing unsecured right in front. We pulled a chair out and BAM! One of his largest tanks fell onto my left foot, crushing and splitting open my third toe. The force was so bad, it tore the nail off and split the toe down through my shoe. My bones on the tip were crushed into confetti. I had emergency surgery and bone removed. Still recovering. I sent that article to my husband just now and will be sure that he secures those tanks forever more. Empty tanks are no joke!"

Scuba Divers as Drug Mules. Oh, those drug cartels will try anything to get their wares across the U.S.-Mexico border, even having their mules wear scuba gear and swim through sewage canals to get to the other side. The Mexican army discovered a new route on April 26 in Mexicali, a tunnel that began in the garage of a house and led to the All-American canal. Traffickers would don scuba gear, fin through the muck, then climb down into another tunnel (230 feet in length, four feet high and four feet wide, with lighting and ventilation) that led to a house in Calexico, CA. Border Patrol agents intercepted four men trying to cross the canal with 69 pounds of methamphetamine worth \$694,000. On the Mexican side, police caught the fourth man, a 27-year-old from Honduras, in the canal with a wetsuit and scuba gear. He was carrying 25 packages of an unnamed synthetic drug.

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