

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Arenui, Alor Archipelago, Indonesia

a unique critter haven, but a notch below luxury

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Dear Fellow Diver:

A whopping 13 Rhinopias sightings broke Arenui's record, besting the previous eight seen on a trip to Alor. Now, this may mean nothing if you haven't been to the Indo-Pacific, but the Rhinopias, a member of the scorpionfish family, is among the must-sees for divers seeking the exotic -- and why divers take out second mortgages to make these expensive trips. Rhinopias, camouflaged loners with limited range, walk about on their fins, an exotic sight. And to view the load of macro critters in these waters, I put my magnifying glass to a lot of use, especially to peer at the half-inch pygmy seahorses, the more common pink with red warts (it was first named in 2008 as Pontohi), white with yellow patches, and Denise's yellowish-brown one. I also ogled an ornate ghost pipefish, exotic in its spiked appearance when contrasted with the halimeda, which looks like a segmented green leaf with a long snout.

Yes indeed, this April dive trip was designed to find unusual and fascinating critters, but they often live in not-so-beautiful places, so magnificent coral sites were at a premium, by choice of the tour directors. When I dived this area aboard the Komodo Dancer six years ago, we covered many more colorful coral sites, but then I saw far fewer exotic macro critters. Generally, the terrain varied from sloping walls to coral bommies, and mostly black-sand rubble with lots of hiding places for the critters and tiny fish. With water varying from



The Arenui



77 degrees in the south to 83 degrees along the northern route, diving was generally quite pleasant, though occasional thermo-clines made it seem much chillier.

When I arrived in Maumere, Flores, to board the Arenui, the traditional Phinisi design tickled my senses. Built in 2009 from 70 percent recycled local wood, she is 140 feet long, with an ironwood hull. Her massive sails are only cosmetic, because they provide insufficient power. Once I boarded, I had to wait in the hot and humid dining area (no air-conditioning!) while the

two cruise directors escorted guests by pairs to their rooms for a prolonged briefing. A cool drink was no consolation for the stultifying half-hour wait, but I was then pleased by my AC-cooled cabin, twice the size of cabins on other liveaboards I've traveled. One of four on the main deck, it had a large window, a desk and chair, wardrobe, twin beds kitty-corner to each other, colorful linens and even choice bed pillows. In the ensuite bathroom, the shower drained through wooden lattices, but it was not vented, so I needed to hang my towels in the cabin to dry. One deposited toilet paper (oh, those marine heads) into a lidded container which was, thankfully, emptied twice daily.

We began our voyage with a nine-hour night crossing, filled with loud cracks, bangs and knocks, not the gentle creaking I've found aboard other liveaboards. It was one sleepless night, as the exhaust fumes seemed to leak in, but thankfully most other motoring occurred during daylight. Our checkout dive at Serbete was an excellent introduction -- squid laying eggs, thread-like nudibranchs hanging on a fan, blue-mouthed morays and colorful soft corals. Motoring on, we made five dives around Adonara Island in Leba Bay, where it was party time for schools of dancing shrimp, a minute filefish, tiny radial filefish that looked hairy with their flaps, and a score of small striped catfish.

On the first evening, cruise director Lisa gave her too-long, too-precise and too-strident vessel briefing; as rule followed rule, I felt I should be taking notes! When I was assigned to a group of four, with Lisa as guide, I worried that joyful diving would be impossible, as the checkout dive would suggest. You see, my dive buddy and I decided to surface after 60 minutes, after a beautiful dive along a terraced wall down to 69 feet. Using hand signals, I indicated to Lisa that we were surfacing, but she started handling my BC, trying to get air out of it, so I pushed her away, gave the crossed-forearms signal to back off and ascended. Afterward, she said she thought we had a problem as we had only been down 60 minutes, not the 70 minutes stated in the briefing. Jeez! Turns out, she is a German lawyer, and after all, a rule is a rule, and that's why the trains run on time. After clearing the air, we gained a mutual respect for each other, and she proved to be a first-class dive guide and critter spotter. My buddy and I monitored our own dives and stayed down longer than the 70-minute rule.



A Rosy Rhinopias

A Major Mask Recall Due to Shattering Glass

How 12 out of 2,600 Chinese-made mask lenses could shatter before its American distributor recalled the mask is a mystery to us, but at last, Technosport is recalling the Omersub Zero Cube dive masks that it sold in the U.S. between April 2012 and April 2014. Technosport sales manager Mike Stallings told us that the 2,600 recalled masks, made in China, had non-

conforming 2 mm lenses. "All those produced after April 2014 now have 3 mm tempered lenses that have been impact tested; the easiest way to differentiate between the two is the finish of the silicone apron. Masks with a gloss finish are the earlier production with the substandard lens."

Divers with recalled masks will get the new ones at no cost. Call Technosport at (800) 853-1911 Monday through Friday, email them at info@technosportinc.com, or go online at www.omerdiving.com.

Lisa and her Spanish husband, "G" (short for Guillem), had been aboard six months and were both the cruise directors and instructors, supported by three experienced Indonesian divemasters. Lisa did accounting tasks, and G was the go-to guy for first aid, equipment repairs and general management. In their early thirties, they were capable and friendly.

I was part of a trip organized by Hergen Spalink and Kerri Bingham, owners of the photography-focused dive trip outfitter Got Muck. They chartered the boat, along with renowned underwater photographer Burt Jones, and each rotated among the dive groups. The mostly American customers, a convivial group, represented many careers -- IT folks, psychologists, a scientist, a college administrator, banker, caretaker, pharmacist, volunteer dentist in remote areas, and an alpaca farmer/professor -- and a good share were retired.

On most days, we made four dives, some days fewer, which usually included a 6:30 p.m. night dive. Two groups of four divers were taken on schedule to nearby dive sites in the two fiberglass 26-foot dinghies. The other eight would suit up and board about a dozen steps down when the dinghies returned. Crew members loaded individual baskets with masks, lights and cameras, while fins, weights and tanks with BCDs were left in the dinghies. Once, my tank was not filled, but the crew quickly replaced it. The procedure: Backroll in, and after the dive, exit up a sturdy ladder after handing up your weights and BCD/tank.

Back on board, we'd traipse through the dining room on the way to the dive dressing area, so the crew had to constantly dry the pathway to prevent slips. They assisted pulling off tight wetsuits and rinsed them in a container of chemically treated water, if desired. But there was no shower on the dive deck, only one inconvenient bathroom across from the stairs we used to descend to the dinghy. Good-sized cubbies, large cushioned benches and plenty of hanging space made for an otherwise serviceable dive deck. Crew members carefully rinsed and air-gunned cameras, but camera tables in the dining area were at a premium and inadequate for the big professional gear of Burt, Hergen and a couple other divers, so gear often took up cushioned lounge seats. Dining tables doubled as camera workspace.

We spent two days each at the top muck diving sites, Beang Bay/Pantar Island and Mucky Mosque at Kalabahi. The views: Rhinopias, pygmy cuttlefish, dwarf hawkfish, nudibranchs, harlequin crab, snake and crocodile eels, frogfish, long-armed octopus, blue-ringed octopus, zebra crab on a fire urchin, baby rock mover wrasse, and the illusive three-inch violet- and red-flame firefish, black ribbon eel, a three-inch hairy octopus and a winged pipefish. What a bonanza.

My dive buddy and I felt the need for a break from muck, so I requested a dive at Rainbow Reef, where I had once done an exploratory dive. The crew didn't know the site, but I had good enough notes to identify it, so we gave it a go. It was a stunning, colorful dive -- very fishy, waving soft corals and hard coral bommies with thick coral coverage. I'm ho-hum when it comes

Arenui, Indonesia

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

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

to sea cucumbers, but a bright red sea apple (a round sea cucumber with yellow and red foot rows and orangish-red tentacles) caught my attention. Nearby, dozens of two-inch yellow sea cucumbers aggregated.

At Clown Alley, south of Pura, I spotted acres of anemones housing a few anemonefish species. There was enough current to allow slow drifting and easy stopping to enjoy the great numbers of anthias, butterflyfish, trevally chasing fusiliers and sea snakes weaving in and out.

As we motored toward Komba Island, its volcano, Batu Tara, erupted every 20 minutes. I fiddled with my camera, hoping to get night shots of the volcano spewing lava and boulders down its side into the water. As Arenui rested

600 feet away, the volcano's fireworks were a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Other than oohs and ahs, there was little conversation, as everyone jockeyed for their shots. Eventually, we lowered cameras and just marveled at the power of the eruptions. As we slowly motored away, the crew was kept busy cleaning ash from every surface and crevice.

Everyone dived nitrox, and the mix was checked by the engineering crew, with a list passed around, indicating 30 percent O₂, for each to initial (it's inconvenient for one to check his own mix because tanks are in the dinghies). I once asked G if I could check some of the tanks for the next dive, so we descended to the engineering room. G analyzed the first tank and got 28 percent; the second one was the same. An engineer checked the same tanks with his newer, pricier gauge and got readings of 30.3. G said that two tall oxygen tanks in the engineering area can provide enough oxygen for two stressed divers while they journey to the closest hyperbaric chamber, a 20-hour trip to Bali. When I asked about a helicopter evacuation, he only chuckled. Forget that.

Effervescent Kerri kept us in good spirits, was attentive to detail and provided assistance when needed. In the evenings, if she wasn't diving, she and some buddies were among the first to break out the beer. In marked contrast, Hergen had a delightfully dry sense of humor, and I doubt there is a camera he cannot fix. Both made sure divers had outstanding sightings. Burt, a quiet chap, was an art form underwater. After observing his subject and its habitat from a distance, he gently approached with perfect buoyancy, clicked and then backed away, disturbing nothing.

Twenty crew, three captains and two cruise directors kept the vessel running smoothly. Service was exceptional and fits what I would expect on a "luxury" dive vessel. If I asked for one of something, Jam Jones, a feisty dining attendant, would ask, "Don't you want two?" Within a day, my preferences had been noted and were anticipated before I asked. Jam knew just how I wanted my gin and tonic prepared -- lots of ice, gin, lime and, oh yes, splashes of tonic, too.

While the Arenui advertises gourmet food, I'd describe it as good, attractively presented and served with grace. Other than glasses of varied tasty broths, it seemed as if the buffet lunches were often retreads from the night before -- chicken, beef and fish served with salad, rice and noodles. The main breakfast was made-to-order, with choices including Indonesian chicken noodle soup with fried rice or noodles from the buffet, omelets, pancakes, French toast, oatmeal and bacon or sausage. Dinner was served on the upper

deck's under-the-stars dining area after the last dive. Examples: appetizers of sashimi and papaya beef salad; soup of red bean or cauliflower; main courses of grilled chicken breast with Balinese tomato sauce, fish with kismis orange served with potatoes and vegetable, and lasagna. Desserts often came with ice cream; my favorite was the chocolate lava cake. An extensive Indonesian menu was available nightly if nothing on the main menu suited -- Ifumi, stir-fried veggies in a crispy noodle bowl, was my favorite. The upper "sky deck" sported a comfortable, canvas-covered lounging space to easily accommodate 16 passengers. At the bow is the dining area for the evening meal, two tables with padded bench seating and chairs. The captains' wheelhouse is in between.

Most of us took the morning off from diving Alor Bay for a visit to see the Abui tribe. Walking uphill on a rough path, we came to a tiny, primitive village (no electricity or water) with several thatched huts. They were dressed for performance, dancing the lego-lego; jangling ankle bracelets and chanting filled the area. The chief was suited up with the bow, arrows and spear they use for hunting; a couple of divers negotiated with the chief to buy a few. They grow their own tobacco, which they tightly wrap, then smoke. Betel nut juice stained teeth and the ground.

After dinner the last night on the upper deck, crew members struck an upbeat tempo with guitars and drums that got divers gyrating on the floor. One of the divemasters climbed over the railing, dressed and painted like a warrior and wearing a two-foot-long, strapped-on "penis," which he lewdly pantomimed penetrating a lady diver lounging on the sofa; as he raised her legs, she held on to her wine, giggling. A cross-dressed male divemaster dressed in wig, makeup and not much else, seductively approached male divers and got a few to dance with him. A male Aussie diver wearing a sundress added to the frivolity. Fun, for sure. Odd, for sure. You had to be there.

Too much hype for the Arenui? From its website and many reviewers, "luxury," "boutique" and "gourmet" are commonly used terms which built my expectations, and in a way, I guess, that let me justify spending big bucks. Now, I would say that the Arenui gets top marks for crew graciousness, superb diving and attempting to meet our needs, which was their stated goal. The complimentary one-time, 30-minute massage on the sky deck adds to the vote for luxury (but who can stop at 30?). The cabins are luxurious, and the upper deck simply great. (A few folks complained about plumbing issues, but my room had none.) Food was very good, and varied with the Indonesia special menu, but not gourmet. To earn a "luxury" award, the main deck dining and lounge area would surely need to be air-conditioned and more comfortable, and more deck space is required to accommodate serious photographers. And no shower on the dive deck is also a mark against it. The Arenui is certainly luxury it ain't.

-- J.D.

Our undercover diver's bio: J. Diver says, "I began diving 12 years ago, quickly becoming obsessed observing fish and critter behavior. A thousand dives later, with plenty of time to

A cross-dressed male divemaster dressed in wig, makeup and not much else, seductively approached male divers.

Undercurrent Can Sure Use Your Help

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burn, I've made half my dives in the Caribbean and the remainder mostly in Indonesia, Philippines, Japan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Turkey. Using the excuse of absorbing local culture, I've drunk kava in Fiji, penis soup in PNG, tiger penis sake in Yonaguni, Japan, and enjoyed betelnut chewing and spitting in Palau. I'm convinced it helped my fish ID skills in those regions. I'm too absorbed watching fishes to fiddle with a camera."



Divers Compass: I paid \$6,200 to Got Muck for the 11-night trip, all inclusive except for purchases at the on-board boutique and for drinks; paying by credit card came with a 2.75 percent fee,, so I paid Got Muck by check . . . Indonesia government strictly controls alcohol, so it's pricey -- wine was by bottle only, ranging from \$28 for Bali rose wine to \$154 for French, but most ranged between \$45-\$55 (drink some and save it for the next night); my gin and tonics were \$10 each, beers were \$3 - \$4.50, but soda and juice were free, as were espressos . . . It's an easy two-hour flight from Denpasar, Bali, to Maumere, \$425 round trip, which was arranged by Got Muck, which also handled baggage and pickup . . . Puri Santrian, a traditional Balinese resort with several pools, spa and wifi, is my go-to place for overnights in Bali; I paid \$658 for three days there, and four trips on ground transport to and from the Bali airport cost me \$100 . . . Websites: Arenui - www.thearenui.com; Got Muck - www.gotmuck.com; Burt Jones - www.secretseavisions.com; Puri Santrian - www.santrian.com/puri

Fantasy Island, Roatan, Honduras

saying goodbye to an old friend

Dear Fellow Diver:

Having been to Fantasy Island nine times, I was looking forward to returning to see the fine people I had befriended who worked there. But after some pre-departure email exchanges, I learned that many of them had moved on after the resort closed last year for remodeling. I pondered canceling my May trip, but decided to proceed because I loved the setting, the comfortable diving and the gracious people. In a way, however, I wish I had listened to my inner voice.

Passing through immigration and customs was easy, but I looked forward to getting out of that sweltering airport, which is not air-conditioned. No, it was not to be. The Fantasy Island person who greeted me said we must wait for two hours until the next flight arrived, because it had four more guests. But why? It's but a 16 mile-round trip drive to the resort and back. I should have grabbed a cab. But it was a nice ride, with a variety of flora on the shale rock and volcanic rock hills. Fantasy Island has a beautiful setting, with a lovely little bay and sand beach on one side, with another bay looking out to CoCo View Resort. From Fantasy Island, one can shore dive to the Prince Albert and the airplane, or kick over to CoCo View Wall or Newman's wall.

I had reserved a ground-floor room, but upon my arrival, I was assigned to a second-floor room, which I refused. I was told the resort was full -- even though I saw no one sitting on the beach or in



Fantasy Island Resort

the bar. I doubted their veracity, so I persisted, and magically, at 4:30 p.m., a ground-floor room became available.

At the dive shop, I was given a free pass on taking the standard morning orientation, given all my previous visits, but I did reconnect with Miguel, the boat captain, and Selvin, a divemaster. The water would be rough, they said, at least three-foot waves, and having once injured myself on a ladder in heavy seas, I was leery. However, we three came up with a way to manage the "rough" conditions, so I stowed my gear in a locker and completed the paperwork.

Diving was, as it has always been, just lovely, though the surge down to 40 feet made for great fun trying to hold steady while photographing. My first day's diving on Newman's Wall, CoCo View Wall, then Prince Albert and the airplane was easier than anything outside of the cut would have been, though getting back into the boat was still tricky. Fish life was the usual suspects -- Creole wrasse, snappers, trumpetfish, fairy basslets -- and the occasional less-usual, such as glassy sweepers inside the wheelhouse of the Prince Albert, a hermit crab and a conch moving slowly across the sand on the way to Newman's Wall, as well as a couple of scorpionfish. On the second dive, from Prince Albert to CoCo View Wall, pairs of slender filefish were everywhere, and when another approached, probably a male seeking a mate, it would be vigorously chased off. On the CoCo View Wall, I found a bulb tunicate and what Selvin called a pineapple tunicate (my book says strawberry tunicate).

Of course, one can't be in the water all day, so it's nice to retreat to a pleasant resort, which Fantasy Island had been on my previous nine trips. But not this time. My room's balcony overlooked the little bay, and the room itself had a festive appeal decorated with lovely flowers. However, the air-conditioner worked poorly, never properly cooling the room, and my requests for repairs went unheeded. To make any request, I had to walk to the front desk -- my room had no phone. That also meant no automated wakeup call, so if I wanted a morning wake-up door knock, I'd have to walk to the desk each night before.

Frequently, my room was still a mess when I returned at 4 p.m. from my dive, which meant another visit to the front desk, then a wait for someone to arrive and clean up. The in-room safe had no instructions, so after going to the front desk to request help, the staff member who arrived wanted to set the combination himself and tell me what it was. That's a recipe for theft, so I had him turn his back and listened to his instructions. The frozen shower handle took gargantuan strength to turn, and when I could move it, no hot water arrived; I walked to the desk to request a repair, more than once, but it never happened. And with no room Wi-Fi, I Googled from the computer in the steaming lobby, which I did more than expected since my TV remote stopped working. All this for nearly \$1,700 a week, single occupancy.

While the resort grounds and exterior are pleasing, a nasty sewage smell hung in the air. Frankly, I'd caught an occasional whiff on previous visits, but this time it was everywhere and gross enough to upset my stomach -- perhaps less a problem than it might have been because the food was mediocre and prepared with indifference, so I wasn't eating much. The exception: sautéed or fried fish was generally prepared perfectly. But the potatoes and broccoli were always overcooked, as was pork and beef, and pasta offerings had long passed al dente; I wondered whether the goal was to kill bacteria. Salads, however, were



Fantasy Island Resort, Roatan

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

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

just fine. The made-to-order breakfast omelets had an off-taste, so I stuck to the cereal and fresh fruits -- after getting my own coffee and water, since it took forever to be served. As a single person dining alone, I was generally ignored by the wait staff, who made no eye contact if they did deign to serve me. From Fridays through Mondays, mainland Hondurans come for long weekends -- my guess is they're the true target market -- so on Tuesday, the poor menu selection got even worse.

Clearly, they make an effort to keep the resort clean, but once, I was sitting on my porch when water smelling of bleach (that's how you kill mold) started dripping on my hair and the balcony. Of course, I couldn't call the front desk. By the time I left the room

with my camera gear, the front was being washed and the bleach water was everywhere -- in my boat shoes and dripping from the upstairs walkway. I covered my camera with a towel, so it didn't take any hurt. When I asked the front desk about it, the reply I got was, "We have to clean." Of course, without any warning to guests. But then again, they couldn't call my room; they would have to walk up.

At least I had the diving to look forward to. One day, after seeing a turtle at Calvin's Crack, I discovered a brown and white seahorse, then a toadfish, which was happy to take a speared lionfish offering from Selvin. At Pirate's Point, while an eagle ray passed in the distance, lobsters and crabs were out and about, and green morays swam freely. At French Reef, a green moray followed me around, seeming intentionally to bump into my strobes. I found a reef mantis shrimp, too shy to leave his hole. At Half Moon Bay, a frogfish pressed himself into the coral so tightly he looked like a sponge. Alas, at Mary's Place, a great dive, a seahorse that for years resided at the exit from the swim-through was no longer there. Given the number of divers who bugged him with their strobes, he has either moved on or passed on. Diving is easy in Roatan, perhaps with the single exception of Connie's Dream, or, as I like to call it, Connie's Nightmare, which always seems to be awash in heavy current and not particularly good for a camera buff. I never got to see much this trip, because the current was misjudged from the boat and we swam into it -- not an easy task -- for the entire dive.

While I've always loved Fantasy Island's dive shop, it, too, has changed. Miguel and Selvin, as always, were fantastic. After a dive, Selvin would pass my up camera to Miguel, who would cover it with a (wet) towel to prevent the sun from shining on it. As soon as my hand was on the ladder, Selvin would whisk off my fins. Up two steps, I'd unbuckle everything, Miguel would haul the gear away, and I could safely climb onto the boat. How easy could that be? I made 18 dives, averaging 64 minutes, but rough seas led me to skip the night dive and even the drop-off dives they offer after the third afternoon dive. Nonetheless, the overall dive operation is slipping. The new Canadian dive shop manager, 26 years old, had recently earned her divemaster certification, and, having never managed a shop



Fantasy Island's Dive Boats

Latest Shark Research: Shields Are Effective, Bubble Curtains Aren't

Shark Shield devices may be the best way to effectively deter sharks. That's what research funded by the Australian government has found. Colin Barnett, the premier of Western Australia (famous for announcing a plan in 2013, after a series of shark attacks killed seven people between 2010 and 2013, to shoot great whites if they come within one kilometer of the coast), last month unveiled early data from three research projects carried out by University of Western Australia. Research teams led lab and field trials on electrical shark deterrents currently on the market, like the Shark Shield and electronic anklets, and potential deterrents such as loud underwater sounds, bright flashing lights and bubbles. So far, they've found that:

- * The Shark Shield electronic repellent does not attract sharks to the general area, and it deterred sharks in nine out of 10 cases. It has a significant effect in deterring a range of shark species, including tiger sharks and white sharks, though further testing is required to be "statistically confident" about that.

- * Bright, flashing strobe lights can be effective deterrents and deter a range of species from biting, but mainly nocturnal ones.

- * Loud underwater sounds, both artificial and those mimicking orca calls, were ineffective at deterring sharks in the laboratory, and were only a limited deterrent in open waters.

- * Some bubble curtain methods (think a long pipe running along the bottom of the ocean putting out a field of bubbles) were effective, but only for a short time, after which sharks became accustomed to the bubbles and didn't hesitate to cross the barrier.

- * Electric anklet shark-repellent devices don't have a significant effect in deterring any shark species tested.

The conclusions remain preliminary because the data is undergoing peer review. And while sport divers don't show much interest in using shark deterrents, they're important to commercial divers, surfers and swimmers in Australian waters.

before, seemed in over her head, but she did try to do things well. However, the compressor was down the whole week, so they daily carted in tanks from BareFoot Cay Resort, aluminum 80s filled to only 2700 psi. I had been assured in advance there would be nitrox, but there was none. That's because BareFoot Cay charged them \$11 per tank for nitrox, so, I was told, they would have to sell it for \$15 to make a profit, which was too much, they figured, so they scrapped it. Ever consider just breaking even and keeping the nitrox promise? Each day, I was told the compressor part would be in that day, but when I left the island, they were still waiting for it. Frankly, I think air/nitrox is the Achilles heel here, and I'm not convinced they have the right staff producing it.

The dive shop did arrange a "farewell" dinner with the restaurant for the five of us who had been there a week, but when I arrived, I found that the restaurant set up for only four, due to a dive shop error. Poor me, overlooked again. But not to worry; they found room at the table, which was nicely set up, and the medium-rare steak made up for a charcoal-burned, cardboard-dry lobster. I felt for him; he gave up his life for nothing.

So my 10th trip to Fantasy Island will be my final trip to Fantasy Island. I like Roatan and the people, but I will pick a new resort for my next visit, one with a good dive operator, decent food and clean rooms with hot water, telephone and Wi-Fi in them. Of course, CoCo View across the way is the favored choice for Undercurrent readers, but they only offer two boat dives a day, in addition to unlimited shore diving. As a solo traveler, I can't always find a buddy for shore diving, so doing at least three boat dives a day is my thing. But Roatan has plenty of nice little resorts, and I look forward to reporting on one that measures up. Unfortunately, Fantasy Island no longer does.

-- P.S.

Our undercover diver's bio: "I started diving in 1999 because I was sure the world would end in 2000, so I figured, 'Why not, I could only drown.'" Later, I committed

the heinous crime of taking up underwater photography, and, obsessed with capturing critter behavior, I've buzzed around the Caribbean, where I've made most of my 528 dives (I've also dived in the Philippines). Underwater photography has helped my fish, critter and coral/sponge ID skills, so now when I'm asked, 'What is that?', I no longer have to say, 'I dunno.'



Divers Compass: My one-week package with three dives daily and all food was \$1,520, including taxes; there is no posted tipping policy, so I tipped \$100 each to the divemaster and boat captain (there was one each that week), and \$50 each to the dive shop, room cleaners and kitchen staff . . . The chamber is a short ride away . . . there are tons of no-see-ums, worst at dawn and dusk, but they seem to disappear at night; Deep Woods OFF works for me . . . You can fly between some U.S. airports and Roatan nonstop on Saturdays; otherwise, it is usually a connection through San Pedro Sula . . . the only nighttime entertainment was fire dancers on Friday . . . snorkeling from the beach in the little bay is of limited interest; however, if you snorkel to the airplane wreck or the Prince Albert from Fantasy Island's gazebo, you can see lots of stuff, especially at dusk when the slipper lobsters and other critters come out . . . Airlines are putting Roatan "exit fees" into their ticket prices (tickets purchased after January 1, 2015), so you no longer have to make a payment at the airport . . . Website: www.fantasyislandresort.com

Aqua Lung Facing a Class-Action Lawsuit

for faulty dive computers somebody else made

Ralph Huntzinger, a diver from San Diego, filed a lawsuit in May against Aqua Lung America, alleging the software on some dive computers it distributes in the U.S. can malfunction, giving inaccurate information and thus making them life-threatening. According to the complaint he filed in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California, Huntzinger is seeking class-action status, and wants more than \$5 million in damages, plus court costs, for all affected buyers.

The computers he claims to be faulty are all Suunto computers; Aqua Lung, headquartered in Vista, CA, is the sole U.S. distributor for them. They include some Cobra models, Vytex models, Vyper and Vyper Air models, some D4, D6 and D9 models, the HelO2, the Gekko and the Zoop. When a permanent malfunction occurs, the computers report incorrect depths, show "self-dive" or indicate a dive is occurring when it's actually not, report incorrect air time remaining and/or incorrect air tank pressure.

"As an authorized repair facility for the dive computers, [Aqua Lung] is acutely aware of the defective software and/or hardware," Huntzinger's complaint states. "In fact, the defect is so well known to Aqua Lung that when a dive computer comes in for repair due to malfunction, its only attempt at repair is to replace the battery." If the computer continues to malfunction and is still under warranty, it's replaced with a new one because the defective software/hardware can't be repaired, but that replacement still contains the defective software and/or hardware. If the computer is outside of warranty, Aqua Lung simply tells the customer that there is no repair. Apparently, the computer defect is so prevalent that the ordinary two-year warranty for Suunto computers was extended to five years for problems related to self-diving, incorrect depth readings, tank pressure and temperature, but Aqua Lung didn't publicly state that it extended the warranty.

“This leaves consumers feeling as if they have fully repaired and functioning dive computers, when in reality the new computers suffer from the same defect and can similarly malfunction during a dive,” the complaint states. “Despite knowing about these dangers, Aqua Lung does not warn consumers, or even the Consumer Product Safety Commission of the defects . . . Instead, [it] continues to expressly and impliedly represent that the Dive Computers are well-designed, properly manufactured, and safe for their intended use.”

Huntzinger bought a Suunto Cobra 3 computer on the LeisurePro website in May 2013, but “had he known it was unsafe and unfit, he would not have purchased or used it,” the complaint states. While it doesn’t state whether Huntzinger found out his Cobra was defective during a dive, the complaint says he “suffered injury in fact, and lost money or property as a result of [Aqua Lung’s] unfair business practice.”

Huntzinger’s complaint states there’s at least one reported death as a result of a malfunctioning Suunto computer during a dive. On December 10, 2010, Pamela Seigman was diving with a new Suunto Cobra 2 for the first time near the Hawaiian island of Lanai. During her second dive and unbeknownst to her, Seigman’s Cobra failed to display the correct pressure remaining in her air tank, and failed to sound alarms that the manual states it was supposed to. The Cobra reported substantial air remaining when, in reality, she was out of air. Seigman died from asphyxia due to drowning. The Coast Guard investigation concluded that she died as a result of “equipment failure.” When Aqua Lung later tested Seigman’s Cobra, it malfunctioned and displayed an “ER 1” code, indicating that it was defective and unrepairable.

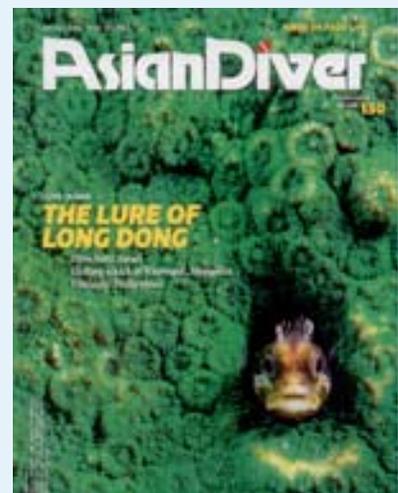
Huntzinger isn’t seeking personal injury damages for himself, but wants the \$5 million to be split among him and other affected customers, which he believes to be in the thousands. However, Aqua Lung only distributes the Suunto dive computers in question, it doesn’t make them. So does this lawsuit have any relevance because it’s not the manufacturer? David Concannon, a trial attorney in Wayne, PA, who litigates diving accident cases, says Huntzinger may have a case. “California law holds the distributor and everybody in the “stream of commerce,” i.e., the manufacturer, distributor and retailer, equally liable for injuries in a product liability case. The concept is called ‘strict liability,’ and the law is the virtually the same in every state.”

On July 10, Aqua Lung struck back, filing a motion to dismiss Huntzinger’s case. The main reason: Huntzinger never says his Cobra 3 ever malfunctioned, or that it was serviced or replaced by Aqua Lung. Because he alleges no direct injury, his complaint should be dismissed on this basis alone.

Other reasons for dismissal include the claim that Huntzinger has no standing under the U.S. Constitution to make claims on the diverse array of models, which includes some that were discontinued and haven’t been sold in the last six years, putting them beyond California’s statute of limitations of three to four years. Also, the Suunto models in question have significant differences in design, components and features (e.g., the Cobra 3 attaches with a

What on Earth Were They Thinking?

Here’s the cover of a recent issue of *Asian Diver*, published in Singapore and aimed at the Southeast Asian market. True, Long Dong is a dive site -- a popular one in northern Taiwan -- but one would think that some editor reviewing the issue would recognize the double entendre (especially for those who remember the character “Long Duk Dong” from the seminal ‘80s teen film *Sixteen Candles*).



hose to a tank to monitor air pressure, while the Zoop is worn on the wrist and doesn't read tank pressure at all).

Aqua Lung also says this also shouldn't be a class-action case because claims would have to be litigated under the laws of all 50 states, and California law may not be applied to claims of dive-computer buyers in other states. "Thus, the complaint should be dismissed . . . due to Huntzinger's improper attempt to raise claims on behalf of purchasers of numerous other, substantially different dive computers which [he] never purchased himself, and for the advertisement of which he never relied or suffered any pecuniary damage."

Timothy Blood, partner of the San Diego law firm Blood Hurst & O'Reardon, which is representing Huntzinger, told *Undercurrent* that motions to dismiss are routinely filed and expected in cases like this, but he doesn't expect Huntzinger's lawsuit to go away. A hearing on Aqua Lung's motion to dismiss is expected soon.

Ironically, although it's probably not related to this lawsuit, Aqua Lung and Suunto are parting ways at the end of the year. Huish Outdoors, which owns dive gear brands Zeagle Systems and Atomic Aquatics, will take over the distribution of Suunto dive computers in the U.S. starting January 1. A source at Suunto U.K. told us, "Aqualung wanted worldwide distribution of Suunto products. Amer Sports, Suunto's owner, was not prepared to acquiesce to that." An official statement on Aqua Lung's website verifies that, stating, "Aqua Lung's goal to have a global presence in dive instrumentation lead to our eventual decision to part ways . . . Concurrently, we have been working to develop our initial range of Aqua Lung brand dive instruments." Aqua Lung will start giving details about the new products in September, and expects to start selling them in January, right after its contract with Suunto expires.

- - Vanessa Richardson

Get the Most from Your GoPro

the accessories that guarantee you'll get better shots

The GoPro Hero range of action cameras is a marvelous addition to your dive gear bag. I first wrote about GoPro and its Hero3 model in the November 2013 issue of *Undercurrent*, but in its latest Hero 4 incarnation with its watertight housings, these little POV cameras have an application for almost any activity, especially risky activities that might destroy a more conventional camera. No wonder GoPros proved to be the most popular Christmas present of 2014.

However, I've watched divers who have made the trip of their lifetimes to remote locations like Truk Lagoon use their GoPro cameras after opening them straight out of the box. I fear they will inevitably be disappointed with the results. Here's my advice on how you can get professional-looking results when taking your GoPro underwater.

The standard watertight housing that it comes with is good to 130- foot deep. If you want to go deeper, there's a tougher 200-foot-rated GoPro "diving housing" available. Independent manufacturers also make GoPro housings. For those who want to take their GoPro really deep, there is the aluminum i-Pix



Snake River's Tray and BlurFix3 Filter

Fugitive Dive Operators Found, Then Charged with Manslaughter

Two Brits who ran the Key Largo Scuba Shack in the Florida Keys, then disappeared in 2011 after being accused of the death of an American diver, were found last month and now face extradition back to the U.S. Christopher Jones, 50, and Alison Gracey, 47, have been charged with involuntary manslaughter for the death of Aimee Rhoads, a diver on vacation from Washington State, who drowned when their boat *Get Wet* capsized off Molasses Key in December 2011 (the couple were in the Bahamas at the time, preparing to open the Bimini Scuba Shack). The boat began to take on water shortly after leaving Molasses reef, off Key Largo. Rhoads, 36, was trapped in the forward cabin. *Get Wet* reportedly sank in two minutes. Five other divers, along with the captain and a crew member, survived.

Jones and Gracey lied about the boat's ownership when questioned by the Coast Guard, then disappeared. What they were hiding: The *Get Wet* had failed a Coast Guard passenger vessel inspection, so the owners dropped the larger license that allowed them to carry more than six passengers, and opted instead for "a six-pack license," which let them skip the required boat repairs and operate without the safety inspection as long they took six divers or less. Scuba Shack Key Largo closed soon after, and the Bimini Scuba Shack apparently never opened.

Jones and Gracey weren't discovered until June 5, when they were arrested on the Caribbean island of St. Maarten. The two will stand trial in South Florida's federal court for involuntary manslaughter. The US attorney's indictment states, "The alleged unlawful and careless manner in which the defendants operated the boat caused the death of a scuba diver. Additionally . . . the defendants knowingly and willingly made a false statement to the U.S. Coast Guard about the boat's ownership." If convicted, Jones faces a maximum sentence of 10 years, and Gracey a maximum of eight years.

GP-H3 housing designed to be used up to 500 feet deep. (U.S. dealers are listed at http://i-divesite.com/product_pix.html#)

A wide variety of accessories will allow you to mount your GoPro Hero 4 almost anywhere. It's simple to bolt a Hero 4 to a bike or fix it to a skiing helmet and get interesting shots, but underwater, the characteristics of light conspire to make it more difficult to get good footage. It matters little whether you use a Hero 4 or a Red Epic camera that costs thousands of dollars. The physics of light and water remain the same.

Hold-Steady Accessories

If your material is going to be watchable, you need to keep your camera steady in water that may be moving. I recommend some sort of handle -- one that can be made neutrally buoyant will be best. You neither want your precious GoPro Hero 4 to float off nor to drop to great depths should you let go of it. SP Gadgets makes a Dive Buoy grip that you can adjust so the entire rig will be neutrally buoyant (\$30; www.sp-gadgets.com).

If you want to combine your GoPro with underwater lights, a tray with mounting arms upon which you can fix a couple of small video lights will come in useful. However, note where your hands end up on the grips or the handles in relation to the camera lens; you don't want to see your knuckles in every shot. You need the camera mounted well forward from where you hold it. Snake River Prototyping makes a V-shaped Tray Stabilizer for the GoPro that positions the hands well back from the line-of-sight and can accept lamps screwed in to the grips' top (\$130, www.snakeriverprototyping.com). GoPole makes several telescopic extending poles that allow you to record images from more than arm's length (\$23 to \$55; www.gopole.com).

Silver Screen or Black Screen?

If you are trying some daredevil activity, you'll be happy with whatever you record. Underwater, however, you'll want to be more selective, especially if you are using an ancillary macro lens for



Backscatter Flip 3.1 Filter System

recording small subjects. An LCD screen that shows exactly what the camera sees is essential. The Silver Edition of the GoPro Hero 4 comes equipped with it, but the much higher quality Hero 4 Black Edition does not.

So what does the more expensive Black Edition offer over its Silver sibling? Simply, light sensitivity and frame-rate. The Black Edition will run at 120 frames per second in 1080p high-definition video, meaning it can smooth out the action of faster moving subjects. It will function better in gloomier conditions, and it will even shoot 4k video. It's simply twice as good as last year's Hero 3+ Black.

For divers, an economically priced add-on LCD screen is available for the Black Edition. It plugs into the camera, and it comes with the fatter watertight back door for the housing to accommodate it. It also functions as a touch-screen to let you easily set up the options in each camera's menu.

Filters and Lights

Water absorbs light but does so selectively. The warmer wavelengths of light, the reds and the yellows, are filtered out as you go deeper, so everything starts to look very blue. You can make the most of the red, yellow, and green light that penetrates the water in the first 50 feet by filtering out some of the blue. Alas, despite its Protune software that gives an element of color control, the GoPro does not offer much in the way of white balancing, so filters are the only real solution to the rather blue-looking footage otherwise recorded. Snake River Prototyping's BlurFix3+ 55 color correcting dome filter works for both Hero 3+ and Hero 4 (\$40; www.snakeriverprototyping.com).

Although a flat red filter will work with the GoPro Hero 4, a domed filter will be more effective over the width of the image, and sharpness won't suffer at the edges. However, if you carry a set of filters suitable for good color rendition at different depths, you'll wonder what to do with the ones you're not using. You can get a little rig that allows you to mount two different filters at the same time, and flip either one or both out of the way when you don't need them. The Backscatter Flip 3.1 filter system combo allows you to flip one of two appropriate color correction filters in front of the lens, according to ambient depth, without actually detaching them from the camera. It comes with a choice of three filters, and there is also an option of a macro lens. (starting at \$69; www.backscatter.com)

As with any camera, if you want decent color when you go deeper, you will need to take some white light with you in the form of lamps. Still cameras can use flash, but for live action, you need a constant source of light. Although a GoPro will shoot stills, it does not synchronize with a strobe light, so a bright lamp that gives a good color light is required. (A dive light won't provide enough light.) In addition, the GoPro Hero 4 will try to look into the shadows, leaving the lit parts burned out. You need video lights with broad, even beams that can be positioned behind the camera and away from the optical axis of the lens to avoid backscatter (the lighting up of detritus and plankton in the water). You can combine video lights with the GoPro in a similar way to the mounting of strobe lights on still cameras. Think in terms of two video lights with an output of at least 1,000 lumens each, and check that their output color is not too blue. A pair of Big Blue AL1000XWP lamps offer 1000 lumens output each with sufficiently even light coverage to suit the GoPro sells at a reasonable price (\$165, www.bigbluedivelights.com).

Additional Extras

What else do you need? A spare battery and charger will come in useful. That battery can be charging while you are underwater with your GoPro, either connected to the dual battery charger,

the USB socket of a computer or anywhere you normally charge your iPhone. Depending on frame-rate and LCD use, the battery is good for 40 to 90 minutes, which means a fully charged battery for each dive.

The GoPro uses Micro SD memory cards, which come in a variety of capacities. If you are using a Hero 4 Black Edition, be sure to use memory cards with a suitably fast write-speed. You can download directly from the camera to a computer, or use an SD converter and download directly via the SD slot on your laptop.

I suppose the GoPro's Achilles heel is that its extremely wide-angle lens is positioned behind the flat port of the housing. Thanks to the refraction of light as it passes from a dense medium (the water) to a less dense medium (the air inside the housing), this angle-of-view is very much narrowed. Not only that, the recorded footage tends to look not-so-sharp toward the edges of the picture.

The secret of clear, sharp results underwater is to reduce the amount of water between the camera lens and the subject by getting as close to it as possible. A super-wide-angle lens calibrated for in-water

Lessons Learned from Dead Divers

Undercurrent contributor Ken Kurtis, owner of the dive operator Reef Seekers in Beverly Hills, CA, is also the scuba consultant to the Los Angeles County Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner. Ever year he leads the "Why Divers Die" panel at the big summer Scuba Show in Long Beach. Here is his summary of this year's panel.

We "only" had three fatalities in L.A. County last year, but two of them involved divers running out of air. Over-weighting further complicated the first fatality -- the diver ditched his weights, close to 50 pounds of lead, but he was still negative and sank -- and failure to ditch weights likely complicated the second fatality.

Running out of air while diving is far more dangerous than we, as an industry, are willing to acknowledge. If you do run out of air, your chances of surviving are likely slim. A rule I've always used is to multiply your depth times 10 and start your ascent with no less than that amount of air, and never less than 500 psi. So at 100 feet -- the depth at which both these accidents occurred -- you should be starting up with 1,000 psi. You should be on the surface with no less than 300 psi. If you've screwed up and you're running too low, the safety stop is a great idea -- but only if you have enough air.

In our first scenario, the diver had roughly 100 psi at 100 feet, and at 20 feet, made a safety stop -- with only 60 psi. That's where he ran out of air and unsuccessfully tried to make it to the surface. (He had a buddy with him, also extremely low on air, who was unable to help.) Had he not made the safety stop, it's likely he would have made it to the surface. If you're concerned that missing a safety or deco stop might cause you to get bent, remember: We can cure the bends, but we can't cure dead.

Although over-weighting didn't cause either accident, it may have prevented the possibility of the eventual outcomes simply being close calls. In the first case, the diver wore way too much weight, along with a steel tank and some non-ditchable weights -- enough to sink him.

In the second case, a belt presumed to be 10 to 14 pounds was ditched but never recovered, and the guy still had 22 pounds on him -- enough to hold him down. He made it to the surface (people heard him call for help) at least once and perhaps as many as three times.

Ditching all your weight should provide immediate floatation, and even if you go unconscious, the speed in which a floating unconscious diver will be recovered far exceeds the speed in which a position-unknown unconscious diver will be recovered. It's simple: Ditch your weights, save your life.

Regarding the second fatality, some people said "There wasn't any air in the tank, so how could you inflate the BC?" The solution is, orally. A lot of divers either don't know or have forgotten that you can orally inflate your BC rather than using the tank inflator. You don't need to get wet to practice this. Just put your BC on in your living room and practice inflating it orally.

use allows you to restore the image size, and get a larger subject properly framed. The Japanese manufacturer Inon has come up with a solution -- the SD Mount Cage can supply a mounting frame for its semi-fisheye conversion lens and/or wide close-up lens with a dome port to fit on the front of the GoPro camera. It's incredibly effective, but the mount and lens's price more than doubles the cost of your original outlay (\$480; www.inon.jp/products/gopro/top.html).

Finally, remember when you shoot footage with a GoPro, you are only making the bricks for the final architecture of your production. Downloading the free editing software from GoPro's website is the first step toward assembling a completed underwater film or slideshow that will keep your audience's attention. As epic film director David Lean said, "It's all in the editing."

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

What's Going on with the Aggressor Fleet?

\$500 vouchers may not be enough to quiet complaints

What's going on in the wheelhouse at the Aggressor Fleet? You may remember Joel Sill's story, "A Bad Night on the *Wind Dancer*," in our May issue, his first-person tale of the liveboard's hull ripping open after it broke free of its mooring at Cocos Island, Costa Rica. Less than two months later, another Aggressor boat had a similar experience. We're getting more reader reports about less-than-stellar maintenance and the crew's attitudes. And then there's the overall irritation with the Aggressor Fleet's overall policy of making up for mishaps with \$500 vouchers for future trips on its liveboards -- but only if taken within a year's time. All this from what was once the world's premier dive fleet.

"Should the boat be in operation if crew are unable or reluctant to go above 1,200 rpm or eight knots in perfect conditions?"

One *Undercurrent* reader was sleeping aboard the *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II* in May as it headed full-steam toward Provo when, around midnight, she and her husband were thrown from their beds as the boat hit the reef. "Water was coming into the hallway, so we grabbed our passports and wallets and went to the muster station, where the crew passed out life vests. I was astounded to see

waves breaking over a reef a few hundred yards in front of the bow, with the island in sight behind it under a three-quarter moon. We were stuck good (bad).

"The crew told passengers they would try to get the liveboard off the reef to shallow water, so if or when the boat sank, the water wouldn't be so deep. We were allowed to go back to our rooms to quickly gather our belongings and pack dive gear to put on the back deck. The crew radioed a Mayday, but the only vessel that could help was the *Turks & Caicos Explorer*. When they finally came, at 2:30 a.m., they had to stay a distance away, due to the reef, and offered their tenders to get us off the boat. We could only take a small backpack each. Using a flashlight to creep over the nearly-exposed coral to shore, we beached at the expensive Amanyara resort, but the armed guards -- probably thinking we were Cuban refugees -- never came to assist us, and the resort did not respond to our calls. So we had to land about 20 minutes later, walk on a rock-filled beach to reach the access road, then walk uphill another 20 minutes and climb over the Amanyara's security gates to the vans that

took us to another hotel, where we checked in at 4 a.m. and stayed for two days until it was time to catch our flights.

“We understand the boat was somehow able to get off the reef, and limped into the marina early in the morning. They even made it sound like they could clean up the water in the cabins, fix the damage and do the next charter the following day! I don’t think so. The upside is, no one was hurt, and the crew acted professionally under the circumstances. The downside is this was not an accident. They have been doing this run for over 20 years, there was almost a full moon, and they have all this modern equipment that is useless if no one is watching it.”

Cavalier Crew Clearly In Need of a Rest

In Costa Rica, the *Wind Dancer* is making Cocos Island trips again, but Timothy Warner (Chicago, IL), who was on the first trip since the accident, says the boat is not up to par. “My June trip over and back was in very calm seas, but it still took 42 hours there and 44 hours back, due to the limitation of the engines. We were told that seven knots and 1,200 rpm is the limit since the grounding and subsequent damage.”

Walker learned of the grounding in a roundabout way. Ironically, Carlos, the cruise director, started the meet-and-greet aboard by informing guests about a death on the *Okeanos Aggressor* the week before (a diver at the Manuelito’s Deep site got caught in the surge and was pulled under the boat; his body was found 80 hours later, in an underwater cave), but nothing about the *Wind Dancer*’s grounding the month prior. It was when Walker later talked to a panga driver that he found out, and how the crew had been working nonstop since, and hadn’t had a break in those two months.

The lack of a break may have particularly affected Captain Mauricio, who also did double-shift as a divemaster, as Walker says his good manners were often lacking. “We missed out on dives due to his need to return to Puntarenas by midnight Tuesday morning. He claimed it was because he needed to make high tide but we arrived at 3 a.m. We were also limited to three dives per day with three additional night dives. Quite disappointing given that the other *Aggressor* boats allow four or five dives a day.

“Then the question came up among those of us aware of the grounding (we purposely kept that info to ourselves so we wouldn’t create anxiety among the guests who didn’t know): Should the boat be operating if the crew are unable or reluctant to go above 1,200 rpm or eight knots in perfect conditions? Both of the engines were working, but as a diesel-boat owner, I could tell by the way the boat was

Three Men and No Boat

Three Alabama firefighters who went to Pensacola, FL, for a dive trip decided to dive together off the boat they rented, then paid the price for that mistake by getting separated from the boat and drifting in the Gulf of Mexico for 12 hours. It was supposed to be a quick, 10-minute dive on June 27, but a bad storm turned it into a half-day rescue mission.

Bryan Densel told Alabama TV station WTVM that he, Michael Bass and Jeff Thompson, all experienced divers, headed to a favorite fishing spot 13 miles off the coast. A storm was in the distance, but they expected to be back on the boat long before it arrived. “We went down the anchor rope and we got disoriented and away from [it],” says Densel. “We didn’t go far, but the water clouded up so fast.”

When the divers surfaced, the current had carried them 300 yards from their boat. After several hours of hard swimming, they couldn’t overcome the current and get back to their vessel, so they banded together. “I felt a few bumps on my tank and I got nudged a few times, but . . . we focused on not thinking about sharks,” Densel said.

The three swam and drifted for about 10 hours, through 10-foot waves and two major thunderstorms. Meanwhile, Thompson’s wife called a friend, who luckily knew their dive site because Densel had mentioned it before the trip, and he called the Coast Guard. “The greatest feeling of my life was when that plane flew over and dropped flares right on us,” Densel said. The Coast Guard pulled the men out at 12:20 a.m. on Sunday morning, dehydrated, hypothermic and covered in jellyfish stings, but alive.

Send Us Your Reader Reports

We're gearing up for the 2016 edition of the *Travelin' Diver's Chapbook*, so we need your reports to make it as chock-full as we can. Send us reviews of dive operators, liveboards and resorts you've dived with so far this year by filling out our online form at www.undercurrent.org/members/UCnow/SubRRTopMA.php. You can also follow the link "File a Report" on the left side of our homepage (www.undercurrent.org); or after logging in, follow the "Reader Report" link in the top navigation bar.

Please send us your reports from your spring and summer dive trips. If you're taking any this fall, make a note to write them up when you return. And thanks for helping us keep up-to-date with the great and the not-so-great dive travel out there.

continuously vibrating, and the smell of diesel fuel heating up while underway, that something was wrong with that drive shaft. But the boat's not going onto dry dock until January. Overall, that's careless thinking."

A Rehaul Needed for the Plumbing -- and Treatment of Marine Life

It seems like it's more than just this one Aggressor boat that needs major TLC. And crew need a refresher on good customer-service skills (or maybe they, too, need more time off?). Michael Lewis (Vonore, TN) was aboard the *Cayman Aggressor IV* in June and was appalled at the conditions. "The plumbing and sewage management is awful. My cabin (#5) had dishwater and food chunks bubbling up from the shower drain; we also had an awful sewage smell. It wasn't as bad

as cabin #7, where it was all but intolerable. Captain Lauren told us the shower problem was only grey water from other showers, but when I said I thought we were getting dishwater from the galley, and pointed out that we were under the galley, she finally admitted that was probably the case. We also had a problem with the AC leaking from under the sink. It kept the floor wet most of the time, even though it was emptied a couple of times during the 10-day trip, and that leads to mold and mildew. Several people had to start taking decongestants and antihistamines toward the end of the trip. This boat is in serious need of a total overhaul in dry dock."

Lewis says Captain Lauren ran a pretty tight ship, but she needs to stop riding rough-shod over her passengers, and to have a more hands-off stance towards the marine life. "While Captain Lauren gave an excellent safety briefing, she said absolutely nothing about being a good environmental steward during the trip. Most passengers were photographers and many of them lay on the coral and harassed the sea creatures to get good photos or video. Since Captain Lauren had encouraged people to pet the groupers earlier in the trip, I imagine most thought it was OK to pet all the marine life. We finally complained after one woman chased a sea turtle, started petting it and pushing it towards the bottom, and eventually panicked it to shoot to the surface."

The Worst Touch: Revoking a Voucher

Despite divers' frequent complaints, it has been the Aggressor Fleet's policy not to refund any money to passengers who paid cash and whose trips were cut short due to boat-related problems. Instead, they offer \$500 vouchers to use for another trip aboard an Aggressor or Dancer boat, and they can only be used within a year. For divers shaken up by accidents or injuries aboard one Aggressor boat, the chance that they'll want to go on another is not great. Why won't the Aggressor Fleet just do a show of good faith and return the money?

It's not that easy when you're running a franchise operation, because you don't actually own the boats bearing your brand name, says Nick Perry, a project manager for the travel agency Dive and Cruise (www.Dive-And-Cruise.com). "The Dancer and Aggressor company is essentially a booking agent; all ships under its names are owned by other people and locally operated. The company has contracts with the individual vessels and fills them through its office. So when they offer the \$500 voucher, it is actually all they can do without the yacht owner's permission. There are standards to having your liveaboard labeled and sold under the Aggressor or Dancer name, but that is

all. Operating procedures and solutions for issues like the *Wind Dancer* running aground are solved mostly by the local owners, not the booking office. The safety standards, cabin renovations and menu can be influenced by the sales office, but decisions on everything will come from the ground in Costa Rica. Typically the Aggressor and Dancer vessels hold amazing standards and quality of service, but not always."

Okay, but what if the booking office revokes a voucher it originally offered to a diver aboard a bad trip, and doesn't give a good reason for it? The Aggressor Fleet did that last month to our reader aboard the *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II*. After the running-aground experience, she was given the \$500 voucher. Besides paying for her hotel stay and airport transfer, the Aggressor Fleet worked with her to get her travel insurance company, CSA to refund the percentage of her trip cut short (she wouldn't be reimbursed if the trip interruption was due to an accident or negligence, so the Aggressor Fleet submitted its statement that it was due to an "incident" that resulted in the breakage of the bilge pipes, flooding the cabins and making them uninhabitable). But on July 20, the Aggressor Fleet told her it was rescinding its vouchers because her insurance claim had been settled. "What a lousy way to handle people who have been customers since 1986," she told us. "They said they did this so CSA cannot claim they compensated us. But we feel like we are being penalized for doing the right thing. I guess I would feel differently if [the running-aground] had been a true accident, but it was not."

It's hard to say what's truly behind the Aggressor Fleet's recent spate of accidents (especially because they didn't reply to our questions). The hiring of inexperienced crew members? Or understaffing the boats? Poor management? Even though it's a franchise operation, if the Aggressor Fleet doesn't maintain and enforce rigid standards for each boat, then there is no consistency. That's starting to show -- and its paying customers are the ones bearing the brunt of those bad decisions.

-- Vanessa Richardson

"What a lousy way to handle people who have been customers since 1986 . . . We feel like we're being penalized for doing the right thing."

Wearables Come to the Dive Industry

First there was the FitBit, then the Apple Watch, now there's the Mantis. Scubapro just announced its wrist-watch-style dive computer, priced at \$600, which comes with a host of health-monitoring features that track your biometric data. The Mantis has an "adaptive algorithm" that not only factors in the usual data like bottom time, depth and gas mix, but also breathing rate, heart rate and skin temperature (via a chest strap that will be available by year's end) to calculate the safest decompression times. It also has a calorie counter that's synced to your heart rate while diving.

John Bantin, our veteran gear tester, studied the computer recently and said, "The biometric approach may be admirable, but the bigger Scubapro Galileo computer already offers this. However, at times I forgot to wear the heart-rate monitor with mine and it

made no difference to the decompression mandated in my dives up to 170 feet deep. Few divers will buy the heart-rate monitor if it is an optional extra.

"Measuring skin temperature is a good idea. While some computers take into account water temperature, what's the difference between a diver cozily warm in a drysuit in very cold water and a diver chilled to the bone in tropical water but wearing an inappropriate wetsuit? However, I'm not sure whether these features are a sales-aid rather than of practical use. There may be an application among divers who are obese. Seen any of those on dive trips lately?"



Flotsam & Jetsam

Undercurrent Reader Loses Dive Knife; Another Reader Returns It 30 Years Later. Mona Cousens (Goleta, CA) lost her engraved dive knife in Baja California 30 years ago. In the early 90s, Jim Levi (Oro Valley, AZ) was diving off Seal Island, near La Paz, when he found the knife on the sea bottom. "I could see Mona's name engraved, but the knife had started to corrode," Levi told us. "I took it home as a souvenir and it sat in my shop since, until I found it again while cleaning. I realized that when I'm dead and gone, nobody would care about the knife, so I thought it was time to look for its owner." He Googled Cousens and found the posts she made to *Undercurrent*, then contacted us to see if we could contact Cousens. She and Levi exchanged e-mails, and Cousens got her long-thought-lost knife back at the end of July.

Diver Accidentally Kills Spearfishing Buddy. Florida dive buddies Dale Bartush and Jarrod Ditmars were celebrating the Fourth of July by spearfishing in Sarasota Bay, when Bartush accidentally shot Ditmars in the head. Bartush immediately surfaced for help, and when boaters pulled Ditmars, 21, out of the water, they thought he was dead until he started gasping for air. Ditmars remained alive for five days until his parents, Rob and Maribeth, took him off life support. Except for a fishing license and where and what to fish, Florida says there are no other requirements for spearfishing. The Ditmars say their son's accident is proof change is needed. "Because there was no safety on the gun, this was preventable," Maribeth told Florida TV station WTSP. Police ruled the shooting an accident, and the Ditmars say they forgive Bartush. "He made a big mistake diving where he shouldn't have been," Rob told WTSP. "The water was murky."

Florida Lawyer Caught with 28 Lobsters. With all the lawyer jokes out there, Fort Myers attorney

Steven Koeppel didn't do his profession any favors when he was arrested July 29 near Islamorada with 28 illegal lobsters hidden on his boat. In a random vessel check, officers stopped Koeppel's 25-foot boat during the first day of the two-day lobster sport season last month. Koeppel, 55, there with his two sons, showed officers 18 legal lobsters (the bag limit is six lobsters per person in those waters), but the officers found 28 additional lobsters hidden in a compartment under the deck. "If it had been, 'Oh, we didn't know the regulations,' it might have just been a citation," Officer Bobby Dube told the *News-Press*. "But the fact that the lobsters were hidden shows outright intent to circumvent the law; any first-year law student could tell you that . . . There's no way he didn't know what he was doing. And he's teaching his two kids to break the law."

"Dead" Diver in Honduras Actually Died in Australia. In 1974, fisherman and marijuana smuggler Raymond Stansel Jr. was indicted in Florida after being caught with nine tons of weed on the Steinhatchee River. Stansel was granted a \$500,000 bond, paid it with a cashier's check, then went diving in Honduras, where he was reported missing on New Year's Eve. His girlfriend and other witnesses said he fell off a boat, but investigators didn't believe them and kept on looking. They didn't find Stansel until 40 years later, when a *Tampa Bay Times* reporter found that Stansel -- now a tour boat operator named Dennis Lafferty living in Queensland, Australia -- had died in a car accident at age 78. He had married the girlfriend, who moved there with him and kept her name, but investigators never tracked her. Apparently, "Lafferty" was a good citizen, and there was an outpouring of grief in his adopted hometown after he died. Stansel left a family behind in Florida -- his two sons are in federal prison for importing cocaine, and ironically, one was on the run for 20 years, living in Alaska while married to a police officer. Read the *Tampa Bay Times'* great story at www.tampabay.com/news/publicsafety/crime/traffic-accident-in-australia-ends-40-year-old-mystery-in-florida/2234369

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