

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

October 2015

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## Kosrae and Yap, Micronesia

*two magical stopovers in the mid-Pacific*

### IN THIS ISSUE:

Kosrae and Yap, Micronesia....	1
R.I.P., Gladys Howard.....	3
Shark Explorers, Cape Town, South Africa .....	7
Mozambique, Mexico.....	9
How Divers Affect Reef Fish Behavior.....	10
No Diver Left Behind?.....	11
He Might Have Been In Your Dive Class.....	13
Shark Bytes.....	14
Barracuda Slaughter.....	15
Letters about Latest Articles...	17
Is Your Camera Hurting the Marine Life?.....	18
Flotsam & Jetsam.....	20

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Dear Fellow Diver:

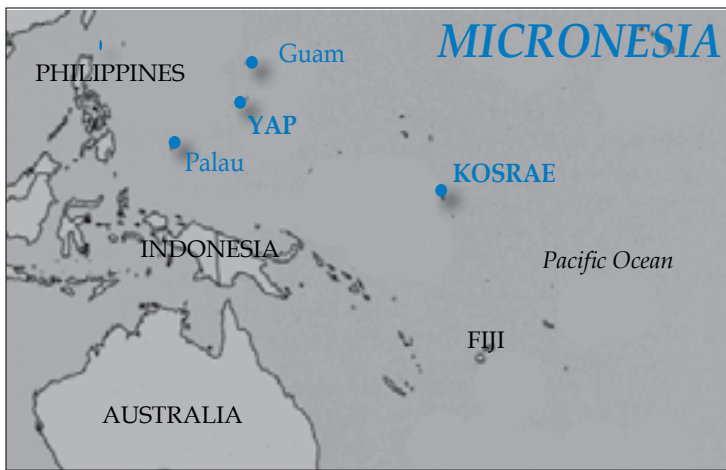
"How many sharks did you see?" "There were so many, I lost count." "I saw at least three dozen." "And what about that awesome group of eagle rays?" Had you been aboard my dive boat after our dive at Hiroshi Point in Kosrae in July, you would have heard this exuberant conversation. Pretty amazing.

One of the four Federated States of Micronesia, Kosrae earns its reputation as the "hard coral capital of the world," but it's also a hard-to-get-to destination, requiring stops at Majuro and Kwajalein, in the Marshall Islands, after departing from Honolulu. Because the United Airlines flight doubles as a U.S. mail and island supply flight, our plane departed late to accommodate cargo loading. When I deplaned nine hours later into the heat and humidity, I felt like I had hit a brick wall.

Kosrae Nautilus Resort sent a driver to pick up my buddy and me, and the 15-minute drive there offered a preview of the "Island of the Sleeping Lady," a mountainous island covered with dense vegetation, banana trees and coconut palms. Doug Beitz, once an Aussie fireman, and his wife, Sally, run the resort, having built it in 1994 simply because they wanted to do something new. After we checked in, soft-spoken Doug sat down with us to discuss the kind of diving we wanted. The weather had been unusual, he said, with typhoons to the north sending swells, reducing visibility and



One of Kosrae Nautilus Resort's Boats



lowering the water temperature to 80 degrees from a year-round normal of 83 degrees. Each morning, Doug would check the weather to determine which side of the island would have the best conditions before deciding what boat to take. He keeps one at two different marinas to get to the best diving.

Daily, we traveled five minutes by van to their 27-foot Poseidon, a comfortable covered aluminum boat with tank racks down the center, a bench for gearing up, and plenty of storage. Departing from Lelu Harbor, we dived the north and east sides of the island, once as

the only divers, twice sharing the boat with two others, and never saw another dive boat. Sixty mooring buoys mean dive boats are not dropping anchor, so the reefs, which begin at 30 to 40 feet along a wall sloping down for hundreds of feet, are free from diver destruction, though they show occasional storm and surge damage. Being someone who mostly dives the Caribbean, I was amazed at the range of coral species. At Hiroshi Point, going no deeper than 60 feet, I swam through a Dr. Seuss storybook, with fish everywhere, including Moorish idols, emperor angels, bird wrasses, pyramid butterflies, and clownfish. The coral looked like dripping sand castle homes that might be found in Whoville. Resembling inverted icicles, another type of coral reminded me of a cave full of stalagmites, although I was still in open water.

During my dive on the aptly named Eagle Ray Wall, a squadron of eagle rays swam slowly past, then a white-tip reef shark cruised by, followed by a playful eagle ray, while several sea turtles meandered past. Flame angels were everywhere, as were butterfly and angelfish varieties. With a little current at most sites, we drifted along for an hour or so, with our guide towing a float so we could eventually be picked up wherever we surfaced. Doug drove the boat and led the dives, taking turns with native Kosraean Salik, a hard-working, slender man around age 40 who spoke excellent English, also drove the van for our airport transfers and waited tables at the resort. If I needed help, Doug or Salik was there to assist me with my gear, then I backrolled in, exiting after the dive up the sturdy ladder.

We also dived in the harbor on a downed U.S. Navy seaplane, a Martin PBM Mariner patrol bomber, and an armed Japanese transport ship sunk by Americans during WWII. Visibility was a greenish 30 feet, but the Sunsang Maru was an interesting wreck with a lot of life. Being only 50 feet deep, I had lots of time to observe the schools of butterflyfish and emperor angels that made the wreck their home, as well as a cleaning station, where blue-streak wrasses swam in and out of a spadefish's gills. Though underwater for 70 years, the ship was in good shape, covered in coral wisps and white drippy stuff that made the old wreck look as if it were growing whiskers.

Days began with a breakfast of pancakes or French toast, eggs and fried rice, sitting either indoors in the air-conditioned restaurant or outside on a covered patio overlooking the pool. After two dives, Doug served fish sandwiches, tangerines and bananas aboard the boat while we off-gassed before our third



**Kosrae Nautilus Resort**

## Rest in Peace, Gladys Howard

One of the world's unique individuals and a true diving pioneer has passed away. Gladys Howard, founder and proprietor of Little Cayman's superb Pirates Point Resort, diver, cordon-bleu chef who studied with Julia Child, and advocate for Cayman Islands conservation, died on October 3 at age 83 after a long battle with cancer. Gladys is survived by her daughter, Susan, and granddaughter, Antonia.

In the 1980s, Gladys had a successful catering business and a TV cooking show in Texas, but she commissioned the late Larry Smith, one of the world's best guides and critter spotters, to scour the Caribbean for a site with great diving where she could establish a resort with fine food. Larry found a run-down fishing camp on Little Cayman, which in those days had no island-wide electric service and fewer than 50 permanent residents. Gladys was skeptical until Larry took her diving on Bloody Bay Wall. That sealed the deal, and in 1986, Gladys swapped a property she owned in Texas for a fishing camp. Gladys' early years were spent repairing the property, building the business and doing the cooking while her small staff led dives, waited tables and cleaned rooms. She lived a frugal life, plowing any profit back into the resort, while living in what is now the main building's storeroom. As word of the great diving and great food spread, she built a loyal clientele, many of whom make a trip to Pirates Point an annual must-do affair.

A tireless advocate for the flora and fauna of the Caymans, she spearheaded the effort to establish a nature reserve to protect the island's colony of red-footed boobies. She led the effort to purchase the nesting area of the critically endangered Sister Isles rock iguana to prevent potential development causing further decline of the species.

My wife and I first went to Pirates Point in 1995. We were certified in 1993 and subscribed to *Undercurrent* shortly thereafter. As an inducement to subscribe, Ben Davison offered the booklet *Ten Classic Dive Destinations*. Ben's description of Pirates Point was so good, we gave it a try. We found that we totally agreed with Ben and, so far, have been to Pirates Point 19 times. Perhaps our fondest memory of Gladys was her ability to turn clients into friends. We remember her nightly announcements after dinner of "Coffee in the bar, and it's decaf," followed by dominos. She awarded a gold medal to the winner to wear to breakfast, while the loser got to wear a rubber rat. It was all great fun, even if you ended up with the rat.

Her yearly "art" contest was a stroke of genius. To keep the beach clean at minimum cost, she instituted a contest to see what art her guests could create, made only from driftwood and trash they found on the beach. The annual winner received a free week at the resort. Not only did the beach get cleaned up, the clubhouse has some amazing decorations. She celebrated guests' birthdays and anniversaries by bringing out her collection of funny hats for guests to wear at dinner. The Pirates Point 20th anniversary celebration brought Larry Smith back from Indonesia to reminisce about the resort's early days. The 25th anniversary brought the "Barefoot Man" from Grand Cayman to celebrate Gladys and the resort.

Gladys will be sorely missed.

-- David Reubush, Toana, VA

dive (two-tank divers were taken back to the marina). Afternoons were quiet, marked with either a good book or a dip in the pool. Before dinner, cocktail hour in the small bar was limited to beer and wine (never on Sunday -- the Christian culture dictates a day of rest, the island shuts down, diving isn't offered, even shell collecting is prohibited). For dinner, one can get pizza, burgers, fish, chicken or steak, supplemented with locally grown vegetables and fruits. Kosrae is so remote that any hang-up with a supply ship affects the menu. Sure enough, one night there were no potatoes for the fresh wahoo and chips, so they substituted breadfruit chips. Surprise: They were better than French fries.

The hotel, of cement block construction with 16 basic rooms and two self-contained units, sits among tropical gardens and across the street from its own beach and a blue hole for snorkeling. My plain but functional room had two comfortable double beds, but with no dresser for clothes, I lived out of my suitcase. The AC, along with a ceiling fan, kept the room cold. The bathroom had a tub/shower combo, but the only sink was in the main room, with a small counter and refrigerator. Solar roof heaters produced plenty of hot water.

While I greatly enjoyed the diving, and quickly adapted to the basic digs and limited restaurant, I continued my journey westward four days later, when the island hopper came back through. Because the plane stopped in Pohnpei and Chuuk, it took five hours to reach Guam, where I boarded another plane for the 75-minute flight to Yap, another Federated State. Upon arrival, a rep from Manta Ray Bay Hotel offered me a cold bottle of water and cool face towel before the 10-minute van transfer to the hotel.

At the hotel, a board outside the dive shop had the next day's boat schedule. I was surprised to see my buddy's and my names missing, especially since we had prepaid our dives. We truly didn't exist in the hotel staff's mind, because at 3 a.m., they let themselves into our room with arriving guests, believing the room was unoccupied. The next morning, John, Yap Divers' manager, apologized for the mix-up and quickly added an extra boat with additional crew to the schedule.

***When I surfaced, hundreds of spinner dolphins were frolicking around the boat . . . they rode the bow waves and put on an amazing jump-and-spin show.***

Divers come to Yap for mantas, and our first dive did not disappoint -- we had a nice encounter with a couple of 10- to 12-foot males. Making 20 dives, usually three a day, I met up with mantas on six of them. At Yap Caverns, my guide, Charles, led us through a maze of coral caverns and swim-throughs. Two small leaffish, looking like sunken tree leaves, sought refuge inside a cavern near a large moray eel. Sunlight shining

through an opening overhead created a beautiful underwater cathedral. After the final swim-through, I dropped from 40 feet down to the white sandy bottom at 60 feet, exiting over a wall at 75 feet to see dozens of patrolling white-tip sharks. As I continued along the wall, nudibranchs lolled in the coral. When I surfaced, hundreds of spinner dolphins were frolicking around the boat. Once we were underway, they rode the bow waves and put on an amazing jump-and-spin show.

At Vertigo, lots and lots of sharks hung out. I backrolled in, and even before I bobbed to the surface, I saw my first. Wielding my GoPro, for the next 30 minutes I shot at least 25 reef sharks hanging out at the edge of the wall. The smaller, faster black-tips darted between divers. Once I tired of the hypnotic circling sharks, I joined the group to drift along the wall, where I spied a dog-faced puffer, two graceful eagle rays and a camouflaged octopus. On the walls, we had over 100 feet of visibility, with lots of hard coral variety and a little soft coral. Where the mantas got cleaned, visibility hovered around 45 feet. With Nitrox, I was able to do at least an hour on every dive, most of which were drifts. One day at dusk, I dived shallow Rainbow Reef, where my guide directed me to the precise home of the colorful Mandarin fish. Every night, the tiny fish come out to mate, and I watched a number of them dart in and out of the finger coral that hides them during the day. After 45 minutes, I climbed back into the boat to watch the sunset while sipping hot tea served by the captain.

Manta Ray Bay Hotel is well built, with 35 individually decorated rooms. Our two queen-sized comfortable beds sported bedspreads decorated with large eagle rays. The modern bathroom had a shower with plenty of hot water, a toilet in one room, and the sink in the main area. Air conditioning and a ceiling fan provided welcome relief from Yap's heat and humidity. My room, the Eagle Ray room, was on the second floor



**One of the Yap Divers Boats**

with a full ocean view overlooking the Mnuw (pronounced M-noo), a 170-foot Indonesian schooner that had been converted into the restaurant and bar.

At 4:30 p.m., the cannon fired to signal happy hour at the Crow's Nest Bar, which served specialty drinks and beer from the Stone Money Brewing Company on the top deck. Breakfast is served on level one of the Mnuw, and you order your egg preference (the women serving remembered my name and tea preference). It's an odd room, with uneven, sloping wooden floors and dark wood walls, but plenty of daylight. Lunch and dinner were served in air-conditioning on the second deck, or in the open-air third deck, where tables in rows allowed groups to sit together. My buddy and I joined others, sharing stories of our underwater adventures. On the top deck, a movie screen displayed nightly videos, guest productions and movies. The lunch and dinner menu offered sandwiches, burgers, salads and pizza, as well as daily fresh fish specials -- fish soup, fish tacos, fish sandwiches, beer-battered fish and chips and sashimi. Dessert options included cake and ice cream, milkshakes and coconut cookies. Three-tank divers order lunch the night before; it's served on board the boat between dives two and three.

Back to diving. Charles, our friendly, smiling guide, who spoke English well, had extensive knowledge of the reefs and tides, and led great tours. He lived on one of Yap's outer islands, but stayed on the main island while working. Each diving day, Charles retrieved my gear from my locker, loaded it on the dive boat and set it up. At day's end, he rinsed my gear and stowed it in my locker, hanging my wetsuit to dry. Inside the shop are dedicated camera workstations, and outside, there are freshwater rinse tanks and racks for drying gear.

While they have a fleet of eight boats ranging from 21 to 38 feet, I started in a small, fast boat that slipped quickly through the mangrove channels. Six divers was a comfortable number, but when we had eight with their cameras, it was too crowded. Entry required a backroll, with exits up a sturdy ladder. When even more divers arrived, I was moved to the big boat. All boats had covers for shade, but the big boat had cushioned seats and more space, important because some sites took an hour to reach. All two-tank dives included water or hot tea, a snack and big, soft towels. Guides lead the dives, but there are no restrictions.

Bill Acker, who started the hotel and dive operation after moving to Yap from Texas 30 years ago, is a personable guy who always smiled and said hello. He was our dive guide our last day, and his mantas showed up on two out of the three dives. Between dives, he spun tales of piracy in how he acquired the Mnuw. Captain Willie, teeth stained red from Betel nut and a white beard sharply contrasting with his dark skin, spent our surface intervals floating on his back in the calm sea, smoking a cigarette.

## Kosrae Nautilus Resort, Kosrae

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

## Manta Bay Resort, Yap

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

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent

*World Scale*

Sadly, however, diving was not perfect, thanks to a rude guest we referred to as "That Guy," seemingly clueless about when to show up. He always arrived very late. We would roll our eyes at one another and wait for the crew to help the 40-something, too-hefty American with his daily malfunction. A know-it-all, he interjected his opinion into everyone's conversation and photobombed everyone's shots. Even with oversized tanks, he became a snorkeler while the rest of us finished the dives. One evening he tripped, badly scuffing his elbow, but against our prayers, he showed up the next morning with a nasty, bloody arm. Another day he complained of an upset stomach, but instead of passing on the dive trip, he just vomited between dives. At the end of the week, Charles wondered out loud about contacting a local priest who was often called upon to make it rain. Maybe he could make "That Guy" go away.

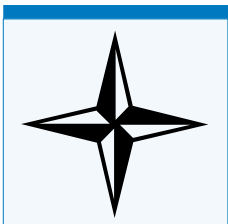
On my last day, I joined seven others for a drive around the four islands, all connected by short bridges, comprising mainland Yap (there are many outer islands, some 300 miles away). The Yapese people have maintained much of their ancient culture, with most still living in villages, where women perform traditional dances topless and the men are dressed in loin clothes, just as their ancestors had. We were told of Yap's role in WWII and shown hand-made canoes, plane wreckage, a men's house, the community building and Stone Money Bank. After the tour, I stopped in at the hotel's spa for a one-hour coconut oil full-body massage, just what I needed to prepare me for my long journey home.

The flights out of Yap leave at ridiculous times, making it necessary to pay extra for a late checkout. My flight to Guam departed at 3:30 a.m. Hotel staff failed to explain the checkout procedure to the guests, so it was clumsy and disorganized at the scheduled 1:30 a.m. shuttle time, leading to unnecessary delays at the airport. One can get grumpy at such a God-awful hour.

Yes, Kosrae and Yap require a long, inconvenient journey. But the superb diving, the local culture and the undeveloped environs provided a very satisfying trip. If you're patient, at home with a more simple life, curious about a unique culture and South Pacific underwater life, and especially tolerant of a lousy air schedule, you'll be in for a fine adventure.

-- L.E.D.

Our undercover diver's bio: L.E.D. says, "I earned my openwater certification in Florida in 1998 and received my instructor credentials in 2000. Having made more than 1,000 dives, I've dived in seven mainland U.S. states, 20 Caribbean islands, Canada, Hawaii and Micronesia, enabled to some degree by being my own travel agent. Most recently, I earned my full cave diver certification, and I dive Yucatan's stunning cenotes monthly."



**Divers Compass:** My costs at Kosrae Nautilus Resort were \$155 for a double room per night (it's \$140 for a single), \$135 for a two-tank day, including lunch (a third dive can be added for \$40, and night dives cost \$80), and meals for four days for two people ran around \$50 a day . . . booking directly through the resort, paying cash, or being a return guest can bring a discount . . . the resort can also arrange land tours, and fishing can be arranged . . . electricity is standard U.S. 110-volt; the U.S. dollar is official currency . . . tanks are

80 cu ft. aluminum with yoke valves that can be converted to DIN; Nitrox is available . . . At Manta Bay Resort in Yap, it cost \$1,509 per person for seven nights and 10 dives, including transfers, tax, breakfast; it's \$249 per person to supersize the package, which included lunch, Nitrox and a third dive each day . . . Night dives and Mandarin fish dives are \$58 each; a sixth day of three-tank diving cost \$165 . . . Meals cost \$200 for two people for a week . . . 80 cu ft. aluminum tanks with yoke valves are normal, although 15-liter tanks are available but no DIN valves; night dives and a shark feed are offered . . . Activities for non-divers are available . . .

electricity is standard U.S. 110-volt, and the U.S. dollar is the official currency . . . Websites - Kosrae Nautilus Resort - [www.kosraenautilus.com](http://www.kosraenautilus.com); Manta Ray Bay Hotel - [www.mantaray.com](http://www.mantaray.com)

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## Shark Explorers, Cape Town, South Africa

*only if you must see great whites in any way possible*

Great white shark diving is a big business in Cape Town, so many American divers headed to South Africa for a land safari often set aside a couple days to dive with the big guys. Trouble is, like any sort of diving, trips get canceled, and if yours does during high season, you may find yourself shut out of shark diving. One of our veteran reporters took his chances and, well, his trip was canceled and he struggled to find another option, a pretty bare-bones one at that. Should the sharks of Cape Town be on your bucket list, go forewarned.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dear Fellow Diver:

Admit it. You've seen Jaws umpteen times. You watch Shark Week every year, have seen Big Fluffy banging on the cage off Guadelupe Island, were amazed by the size of the female great whites at Stewart Island and gawped over Air Jaws erupting from the sea in South Africa. And you know you want to see the teeth. You want to see "lifeless eyes, black eyes, like a doll's eyes." You want to be in the cage. I admit it, too. So it was on a recent trip to South Africa that I found myself off Seal Island, shoulder-deep in 55-degree water, clinging to the top of a re-bar cage, waiting.

I had originally booked a one-day trip with Go Shark Diving. They were to pick up my buddy and me at 8:30 a.m. from our Cape Town hotel, drive two hours to Gansbaai, provide wetsuits, put us in the cage, call the sharks over, chomp-click, chomp-click, and we'd be out of the water and back to the hotel by 4:30 p.m. No sweat. So I was damn well put off when they called me the day we arrived and canceled the next day's trip, due to "conditions," or high seas. With only two full days in Cape Town before heading off to a safari camp, that left only one possible shot for my Bucket List trip. Go Shark Diving said they'd call back the next day and let us know if a trip in two days was possible.

They did, and it was. Except now the pick-up time would be 3:45 a.m. For various reasons, like jet lag for openers, that wouldn't work, so I whipped out my trusty iPad, and came up with White Shark Projects. The woman who answered the phone was helpful, but no, they were booked, and referred us to Shark Explorers. Linda from Shark Explorers had two spots open the next day, the dock was only 45 minutes away, and they would pick us up at 8:15 a.m. It was a deal.

July in South Africa is the dead of winter. It's also great white shark season, with sightings virtually guaranteed. When I stepped out of our hotel the next morning, I could see my breath. Donny, our driver, was a lively conversationalist, pointing out hiking trails and beaches, and soon we were in the achingly quaint village of Simon's Town, standing at the public dock, watching the crew load the boat with wetsuits, lunch and . . . cold drinks? The air temp was now in the mid-60s but the water wasn't, and my request for hot tea on board was politely rebuffed.



**A Shark Explorer Trip: No Air, No Tanks**



The boat was a 36-foot G-Cat with twin Suzuki 200 outboards, Loran, radio, cell phone and a head, or "changing room." When I asked about oxygen, I was told that because we weren't diving, there was no need. About that time, I noticed there were no tanks or a compressor for surface-supplied air. Jessica, the mate, started the briefing, and I quickly learned this was as basic as it gets. The cage would be lowered off the side of the boat about five feet deep; when a shark showed up, we were to hold our breath, duck under the surface and watch the show. (Other boats in the area were doing the same thing -- no surface-supplied air, no tanks.) The visibility was "great," she said, or about 20 feet, and we could expect a lot of sharks.

The "25-minute" trip to Seal Island actually took 45 minutes and was simultaneously spine-jolting and stomach-churning. My relief at arriving turned to dismay when we moored in the lee of the island and were treated to the reek of 60,000 Cape fur seals doing what seals do on the island and in the water. While the crew got the cage into the water, the nine passengers -- us, another American couple on their honeymoon (he talked her into this), and five Swiss, donned 7mm full body wetsuits with hoods and booties. The crew issued everyone a mask, but no snorkels. They threaded a couple of lines with well-used fish heads and heaved them overboard, along with a rubber lure resembling a swimming seal. I decided to watch and see if any sharks were working that afternoon before jumping into the chilly water. The five Swiss folks donned weight belts, jumped into the cage and stood shoulder to shoulder as the top was closed. The crew continued to pull in the chum lines and "seal" and toss them out again, slapping the choppy sea.

*The crew issued everyone a mask, but no snorkels . . . I was the last in the cage. The cold bit like a liquid coronary.*

In five minutes, a dark shape appeared off the bow and nosed the chum line. Captain Stephen Swanson pointed and yelled, "Down, down!" The occupants of the cage took their breaths and pushed themselves underwater by pressing against the top of the cage. The shark circled toward the stern and disappeared. The guests' heads popped up to the surface. Moments later, two sharks arrived and circled in

opposing directions. They left and another came in from the stern, tried to grab a fish head as the crew pulled it toward the cage, and slapped its tail in frustration. This went on for 30 minutes before the crew got the group out of the cage and it was our turn.

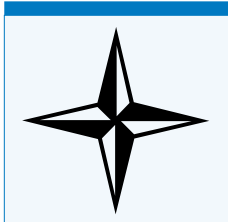
I was the last in the cage. The cold bit like a liquid coronary. I had wanted a corner position so I could watch from two angles but Jessica, a crew member who has a passion for big biters, jumped in on my right. She does this every day and never tires of it. We all grabbed the roof of the cage, holding our heads above water. But now the sharks were used to the routine and at least five minutes passed before we heard "Down, down!" I gulped air, pushed down and an enormous female swept in from the stern, bearing a tag on her dorsal fin. She went for the fish head. We saw the jaw line elongate, teeth flash in the green water and snap shut as the crew yanked the bait away. She turned under the boat; we could see her full length as the sinuous tail sent her back into the murk. "She's tagged," Jessica shouted. "We know her. Four and a half meters!" A big fish.



We waited. The action the first group was gone. We had about five more passes. With the cage attached to the boat, there was no respite from the surface chop; we bobbed up and down, forced ourselves underwater, then came up gasping. Eventually a six-footer showed up, but the big guys, not content with fish heads that got yanked away from them, were out hunting seals. I needed to escape the mal de mer before I did my own chumming, pushed the lid up and heaved myself out. The crew handed me a towel and I got the hell out of the cold suit and into the sweats I brought along.

The ride back was better, with a following sea. I sat next to the honeymooning bride on the bench, and asked, "So, how's the divorce going?" Her reply: "We've been married such a short time, I think I can get an annulment."

--D.L.



**Divers Compass:** Our July afternoon trip was about \$140 each ([www.sharkexplorers.com](http://www.sharkexplorers.com)) . . . You may want to check out White Shark Projects because their trips are \$118; they are out of Gansbaai, so if you're staying in Cape Town, add two hours for transport, and the boat leaves at 7 a.m. ([www.whitesharkprojects.co.za](http://www.whitesharkprojects.co.za)) . . . next year, I may try Go Shark Diving, especially since they haven't returned my deposit yet ([www.gosharkdiving.com](http://www.gosharkdiving.com)) . . . on our way up from the pier, I passed African Shark Eco-Charters; they had the best T-shirts ([www.ultimate-animals.com](http://www.ultimate-animals.com)) .

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## Mozambique, Mexico, Philippines . . .

### *more on the Thorfinn, and another Bonaire warning*

From time to time, we have commented about the *Thorfinn*, that rust bucket in Truk Lagoon, but we haven't written an in-depth piece in many years, because our travel writers will not waste their time aboard that boat. So last month's commentary on the *Thorfinn* brought several comments from our readers, echoing the writer's complaints, including this from subscriber Jim Rogers (Silverdale, WA). "Where have you guys been for the last at least 10 years? Captain Lance has always treated his employees like slaves. I don't understand why people stay on this floating hellhole. It stays anchored in one place, no AC, food is atrocious, and the captain makes Bligh look like an angel. The Blue Lagoon has better food, and the ride is maybe five minutes more."

Gabriel Peñagaricano (San Juan, Puerto Rico) says, "About 12 years ago I was aboard the *Thorfinn* with Lance Higgs. He was just as rude, uncouth and abrasive as described in the September issue. Fortunately, he had to leave on some business engagement, and we were spared his boorishness for several days. During that time, the operation was run by his wife, and it was quite a change. The two or three days during which he was on board were the worst I have ever experienced on a liveaboard or anywhere else." Nuff said.

**Another Warning About Bonaire.** We seem to do this annually, sadly. Crime against tourists remains unfettered. Kent O. Bonde (Miami Shores, FL) was there in September, and reports, "Petty crime appears to be a healthy pastime on the island. The house we were renting was burglarized while we were out to dinner, resulting in \$3,000 worth of lost computers and electronics. It was rented through VRBO and was supposedly located in a safer neighborhood on the island." Frank Hall (Floyds Knobs, IN) adds that while he was there in September, "A friend got his car broken into twice. Nothing was taken or broken because he didn't leave anything in the car and left it unlocked as instructed by the rental company."

**Vilanculos, Mozambique.** While our shark-cage diver had clumsy experience supplementing his South African safari (see the previous article), Christine Mistler (Tucson, AZ) found a good tropical reef

## Divers, Your Very Presence Affects Reef Fish Behavior

While fish on heavily dived reefs in, say, the Caribbean may be accustomed to seeing divers, does that mean they've adjusted to their presence? That's what researchers from Ohio State University wanted to know, so they studied the interactions between cleaners like wrasses and shrimp with their "client" reef fishes on two reefs with differing levels of diver usage.

In a study published in the online journal *PLOS One*, they compared the frequently-dived house reef of the Coral View Resort in Utila, Honduras, to an unmarked reef with far fewer divers in a marine preserve in the nearby Cayos Cochinos, observing cleaning activities among 18 fish types for a maximum of five dives a day. They also set up GoPros to film cleanings when no divers were around.

The researchers didn't find significant differences between the two reef systems with respect to coral cover, richness of fish species or cleaning station density. However, when divers were present, cleanings happened less frequently than when divers were absent and only cameras viewed the fish. At the Coral View reef, divers observed a cleaning rate four times higher than they did at Cayos Cochinos, but it was still 50 percent less than the filmed cleaning rate at Cayos Cochinos when no divers were around. Cleaning behavior resumed much faster at Cayos Cochinos when divers left.

Those findings show that divers have a definite impact on the reef ecosystem, at least in the Bay Islands, the researchers believe, stating "Despite the generally positive relationship between historical levels of diver activity and resilience to diver presence, full habituation across all individuals and species of reef fish has not been achieved at Utila: direct diver presence continues to depresses cleaning rates."

So next time you want to watch some cleaners and clients in action, consider how you may affect them when you're front and center. Back off a bit to give them some comfort space.

alternative in Mozambique in September after a two-week inland adventure. "Getting to Vilanculos turned out to be not so easy, but I can't say I regret it. Obtaining a visa turned out to be a spendy, time-consuming affair (you have to get it in advance). The corals were as healthy and unspoiled as anything I've seen in 25 years -- so many different colors, shapes and sizes; truly a divine forest. And lots of fish, fields of swaying anemones (guarded fiercely by clownfish), and a manta ray. The group I was with seemed more intent on focusing on the larger creatures, such as groups of devil rays and the mega-sized honeycomb morays, which were common. Another creature, big and not shy, was the loggerhead turtle. The diving is in the stunning and protected Bazaruto Archipelago -- a bit of a boat ride but well worth it. The seemingly endless, silky stretches of white sand, plus a sparkling Indian Ocean, also make it a worthwhile destination for beach aficionados. The town of Vilankulo is laid-back, and the people are friendly and not into hustling the tourists. Odyssey Dive is basic, but well run and managed. I felt completely safe and in competent hands. They provide all rental gear. The lodging at the attached Casa Babi was excellent, managing to be both simple and elegant. I was treated to local dishes, music and culture every day. Plus, they had six resident dogs, where I could get my dog fix -- a bonus for this lover of animals, both aquatic and terrestrial." ([www.odysseadive.com](http://www.odysseadive.com); [www.casababi.com](http://www.casababi.com))

**San Carlos, Mexico.** How about driving from Phoenix or Tucson to dive with seals in the Sea of Cortez? Dan Panzica (Scottsdale, AZ) had a great time in July at San Carlos, a quaint beachfront town on the eastern side of the Sea of Cortez, and an easy 450-mile drive from Phoenix. "El Mar Diving Center in Mesa, AZ, is one of the many local dive shops that offer weekend dive excursions. Traveling by bus was a great way to go. We departed from the dive shop at 7:30 a.m. and arrived at El Mar Diving Center at 3:30 p.m., with a couple of well-timed stops for lunch and breaks. The \$599 cost of the trip included two days of two-tank diving, transportation, and three nights in the Hacienda Tetakawi Hotel, which is clean, quiet and easy walking distance to several restaurants, bars, convenience stores and shops. The high caliber and professionalism of the El Mar dive staff made the trip flow efficiently, while keeping things fun for the guests.

Diving was from a 36-foot Norton cruiser designed specifically for diving. The morning dives were at Isla San Pedro Nolasco, a 75-minute cruise from port. Most of the action at San Pedro was well within 60 feet of the surface. Visibility was between 70 and 90 feet, water temperature was 83 to 85 degrees and currents were minimal. Underwater sunbeams lit up schools of tropical fish, sergeant majors, hawkfish, triggerfish and Moorish idols, but the stars were the sea lions. Their high-velocity athletic mobility was a sight to behold, like a combination of a Yap manta dive and a visit to a dog park full of happy, bouncing Labrador retrievers. If you tried to venture too close to shore, an elk-size male made it clear that you were not welcome; he was the guardian of the nursery. The afternoon dives were conducted at smaller islands with 20 to 40 feet visibility, light current and significant surge. Both islands had a wide variety of sea life, including octopus, seahorses, pipefish, moray eels and pufferfish. A great weekend without having to get on an airplane." ([www.elmar.com](http://www.elmar.com); [www.haciendatetakawi.com](http://www.haciendatetakawi.com))

**Atlantis Dive Resort, Puerto Galera, Philippines.** Rose Mueller (Houston, TX) visited there in September. Now, I agree with her when she found it "appalling that older men are allowed to bring young girls for an 'overnight' at the resort." That ain't a dive resort, that's a dive. But being that it was her third trip there (clearly she liked it well enough to spend the money to return), it's obvious that the old dive is not what it used to be. "The manager, Steve, began his job eight months ago and said he never had a complaint. We had the dubious honor of being his first! It began on a sour note with a 'checkout' dive on the sand when we were ready to complete 1,400 dives while there. We complained to the divemaster, and he made sure we were blackballed by the other guides. The groups weren't separated by expertise. The dives were 50 minutes, with little exception. With few guests and guides standing around, why were six photographers in one group? With all of the rules, why weren't there ones imposed for taking five minutes on a single photo? This operation is now a cattle car operation, so it's heaven for an inexperienced diver. We were with divers whose air consumption was 30 minutes. We were with a diver who got lost and hooked himself to the bottom, expecting us to return to him in an impossible current with five-foot visibility. We were chastised for going back in the water to retrieve a \$1,000 dive light for one of the divers." Dear readers, skip the once-popular-with-serious-divers Atlantis. There are plenty of better operations in the Philippines for your time and money, as the readers' reports on our website prove.

-- Ben Davison

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## No Diver Left Behind?

### *still no foolproof system to get divers get back on board*

It's still not uncommon for a dive boat to motor away from a site, then have the crew realize later they left a diver behind. The most recent occurrence (public, anyway) happened in March when Odyssey Charters in Pompano Beach, FL, left a diver floating off the coast, realized its mistake and sent out an emergency call. Another dive boat, the *Sea Siren*, arrived and luckily found him floating unharmed.

Moral of the story: Some dive boats, even in First World countries, still don't have foolproof systems to count divers before departing dive sites. Some boats do have good systems, either voluntarily or because the country they operate in requires it. But there are boats, from Key Largo to Komodo, that can be lax, even downright sloppy, in ensuring everyone is back aboard. That's why you must find out what their diver-counting system is before you jump off the boat.

We asked *Undercurrent* subscribers in our mid-month email if they or a fellow diver had ever been left behind, and if so, what system did the dive operator use to account for passengers? A few dive operators also told us their side of the story.

## **“Er, Where’s My Husband?”**

It was a fellow diver who saved reader David Cuoio (Las Vegas, NV) during a dive trip in the Turks and Caicos. “I would have been left behind if another diver had not asked the captain where I was. He had started the engines and would have left if she had not stopped him. Obviously, he did not have a well-planned method for accounting for the divers on his boat.”

***“Instead of a head count, they counted fins on the dive deck to determine if everyone was back from a dive.”***

If you can pick a place to be left behind, then Jeff Janak (Dallas, TX) is happy it was Cozumel, where if your dive boat forgets about you, another boat is often nearby to pick you up. “We were diving with the now-defunct TTC Diving, and my dive buddy and I watched as our dive boat, a mile from us, pulled away. I don’t know how they could have missed two of us. But in Cozumel, there are so many boats in the popular areas, we just swam to the nearest boat, 50 yards

away. They radioed our boat, which came back to pick us up, so we just stayed in the water. If things got really bad, we would have just swum to the beach and walked until we found help.” That’s maybe an easy option in some places, but less so in the vast Asia-Pacific.

For Harry Rabin (Santa Barbara, CA), it was his wife who got him back on Peter Hughes’ old liveaboard, the Sun Dancer, after a drift dive in Palau. “I saw the panga captain heading back to the main boat. I had my six-foot signal tube, but it kept deflating, so I tied it in a knot, cutting a foot off its height. Fifteen minutes later, I saw the boat heading my way, thanks to my wife. On the liveaboard, she asked the skipper, “Er, where’s my husband?” They told her, ‘Oh, we know where he is, we’re heading straight back there to get him.’ I never got the truth, but I suspect they goofed.”

## **Counting Fins Instead of Divers**

Yes, some dive operators take a cocky “we know what we’re doing” attitude, even up to the point where they have to call Search and Rescue. At least most don’t only count fins anymore, as they did on Peter Hughes’ *Star Dancer* in Papua New Guinea liveaboard a decade ago. Joe Nicklo (Houston, TX) was the odd man out at the dive site Jurassic. “Instead of a head count, they counted fins on the dive deck to determine if everyone was back from a dive. In my case, someone, probably one of the crew, put a pair of fins where the counting took place, so the count was determined correct, and they left. Fortunately, the liveaboard captain realized I was not on board when the boat was three miles underway, and launched a boat to come back for me. I was in shallow water near an island, so I never felt threatened. The crew and captain acted like it was no big deal, and their apology lacked sincerity. I never filed a complaint -- I was concerned someone would get fired -- but it’s my understanding that my incident prompted a different diver counting system on board.”

That’s why you should ask in advance: how do you account for divers -- counting fins? Tank? Pre-dive and post dive signatures? Roll calls? If you’re on a boat and don’t see anyone doing a head count, chances are they’re not doing it. So what are they doing?

And don’t assume you’re safe just because you’re on a U.S.-based dive boat. Besides the Pompano Beach accident from last spring, take the infamous case of Daniel Carlock, who went diving in April 2004 aboard the *Sun Diver*, based out of Venice, CA. He went with a group of 19 divers for a first dive to an oil platform. When he surfaced, Carlock was 400 feet from the Sun Diver, but downcurrent from the drifting vessel and unable to swim back. Carlock blew his whistle and waved a safety sausage, but the boat motored away. Somehow he was errantly logged back aboard during a roll call by the divemasters, and wasn’t missed until after the second dive. Even then, Carlock was listed as having participated on the second dive, and a search was begun at that site, rather than where he was actually left. Carlock was found four hours later by a sailing vessel on a trip with Sea Scouts, one of whom saw a prone Carlock. He was hypothermic, in

bad shape and maybe had another half-hour left to live. He sued the boat's crew and owners, and was awarded \$1.68 million (read the story at [www.undercurrent.org/members/UCnow/dive\\_magazine/2010/OpenWateCase201011.html](http://www.undercurrent.org/members/UCnow/dive_magazine/2010/OpenWateCase201011.html))

### **Which Boats – and Countries – Are Better?**

Problems, it seems, are generally reserved to boats carrying many divers, not the smaller six packs, nor when pangas have to account for their divers.

Peter Hughes, who ran his worldwide Dancer liveaboard fleet till 2008 and now runs the *M/V Galapagos Sky*, says smaller groups in small inflatables are easy to control by a simple headcount. "Our dives are done out of tenders, each carrying eight divers, one divemaster and one highly-trained driver. The buddy system is strictly enforced, as it's also required by the Galapagos National Park. If a buddy team is separated from the group or from each other after a two-minute search, the buddy team or individual must surface. If a diver is missing from headcount after the 60-minute dive time, then the second tender is notified and a headcount taken there, in the event the diver was picked up by the wrong tender. If the diver is not aboard that tender, the liveaboard is notified, and the three vessels immediately commence a search. In my 15-plus years' involvement with the *Galapagos Sky*, we have never left anyone behind or were not able to find a lost/drifted diver because of using that multi-faceted system."

While Galapagos is one of the most regulated dive destinations, Hughes says that level of vigilance varies widely for liveaboards operating in other countries. "Some areas are operating by no more than

## **Just Think, He Might Have Been in Your Dive Class**

Back in 2007, David Kilkeary of Crofton, MD, concocted a wild scheme to extort \$3 million from the Showboat Hotel & Casino in Atlantic City, NJ, in what might have been the craziest-ever scuba caper. He would take hostages on a casino shuttle bus by threatening them with a fake handgun and a hoax bomb, and plant a fake bomb in the hotel, figuring he could trade the hostages and defuse the bombs in exchange for \$3 million cash. Then, after receiving his ransom, Kilkeary would throw a Molotov cocktail from the bus to divert the police, drive the bus into an inlet, don his dive gear, escape on a Diver Propulsion Vehicle (DPV) across the inlet, where he would have dry clothing and a \$20 bill waiting, then simply hail a cab to his waiting truck . . . and enjoy life!

So, Kilkeary, then age 39, rented scuba gear and bought a DPV. To avoid suspicion, he signed up for a dive certification course but never planned to attend. After all, why bother? All he needed to do was to push the button on the DPV to zoom through the water.

On November 13, 2007, he placed the hoax bomb in a Showboat bathroom next to the poker room at 9:45 pm, then went to the shuttle bus area. When he tried to get on board with bags full of scuba gear, a scooter and a Molotov cocktail, the bus driver told him he had too much stuff. Kilkeary pointed a gun at him, but the bus driver refused to drive, and the two got into a struggle, falling out of the bus. The driver broke his ankles and Kilkeary threatened the four passengers aboard, saying he would blow everyone up. He tried to drive the bus, but he didn't know how to use the air brake. He released one woman with instructions to tell Showboat about his hostages and bomb in the bathroom. Hotel security found the bomb and evacuated 2,000 people from the hotel.

Kilkeary tried to take his three hostages to a second bus. One hostage offered to carry his scuba gear if the other two people were released. Kilkeary agreed. But after transferring the bags, the final hostage got away. Kilkeary, now alone, tried to drive away, but there were no keys. Because he didn't have a cell phone, the police delivered one to him via a robot, then negotiated with him for nearly six hours, while Kilkeary pretended to be a former General from the Republic of Georgia, speaking in a fake Russian accent. After an aborted SWAT raid, Kilkeary finally surrendered at 4 a.m.

After originally pleading guilty and being sentenced to 300 months in prison, he changed his mind recently and appealed, claiming he was represented by a bad lawyer and the prosecution mishandled his case. In June, a U.S. district court denied his appeal, so it will be several more years before he gets to take his first Discover Diving course.

the seat of their pants, some are tightly controlled by government regulation, and then there's everything in between."

Australia is another country with strict head-counting methods, created after the 1998 incident when two divers went missing at the Great Barrier Reef and were never found but were immortalized in the film *Open Water*. Queensland's government requires that before a boat departs for a dive site, a crew member counts everyone on board, writes it down and verifies the number with a signature. After a dive, two separate crew members must each conduct a headcount, compare that number to the original count and verify it with their signatures. The dive operator must keep those headcount records for at least one year.

Franklin Mah was impressed with the system aboard Mike Ball's *Spoilsport* while diving the Great Barrier Reef a few years ago. "As I got ready to go in, someone was there assisting me as needed, and there was also someone recording the time when each diver went into the water. During the dive, there was someone posted at the top deck to watch for any divers who might surface far from the boat and/or have problems. After I returned from the dive, they recorded the time I got to the boat. Later, someone approached me to get my bottom time and have me sign the log."

He was not as impressed while diving with the *Komodo Dancer* in March. "The diving was from tenders rather than the liveboard. There were three groups but only two tenders. Even though we left as a group, as each diver surfaced, he was picked up by whatever boat was nearby, then taken back to the boat, so you

## Shark Bytes

John Bantin, who writes often, wittily and thoroughly about diving for *Undercurrent*, just had his second book published -- *Shark Bytes*, his personal stories and first-hand descriptions and anecdotes of over 30 years of diving with and photographing sharks. While Bantin does write about shark behavior and characteristics, the book is not an encyclopedia, ID book, or natural history drama descriptor. "I don't offer myself as an expert regarding sharks," Bantin says. "I simply offer myself as a shark witness, and in *Shark Bytes*, I delve into the way my own attitude to and understanding of sharks has developed during the intervening years. It's about how I grew to love diving with sharks."

Along with his "wow" close-up photographs on nearly every page, Bantin describes his encounters with many of the sharks you might meet on your own dives, from wobbegongs in Australia to whale sharks in Galapagos. He tells about his first certified openwater dive in Antigua, during which his divemaster led him unsuspectingly into a cave that contained a nurse shark (and the dive boat sank); a scary encounter with silky sharks taking his measure in the Red Sea; and a tiger shark at Grand Bahama that picked him up by the tank and swam off with him. Bantin also doesn't stint on giving his opinions about shark behavior and humans' interaction with them -- in the chapter on oceanic white-tips, he gives his theory about why five unfortunate swimmers were savagely attacked by one off Egypt's Red Sea beaches in 2010. He devotes rich commentary

in the last two chapters, titled "Shark Feeding: Right or Wrong?" and "Is the Only Good Shark a Dead Shark?" He also shares his encounters with dugongs, dolphins, manta rays, and gigantic groupers.

There are quotes from Peter Benchley, underwater filmmaker Mike deGruy, Stuart and Graham Cove, and Marty Snyderman, the last of whom offers sage advice about being close to "Mr. Big and Might Be Dangerous." Whole chapters were supplied by Pete Atkinson and Bret Gilliam, experienced shark divers in their own right. Overall, Bantin's stories are both informative and conversational, treating readers as smart divers who just want to know more about sharks. By including his own trials and tribulations about diving, Bantin shows how, with common sense and a big heap of respect, shark diving can be both safe and glorious fun.

Buy Bantin's book through our website ([www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)), and all our proceeds from book sales go toward saving and protecting the world's coral reefs.



really didn't have a group that comes back up on the same boat. Of course, not everyone went out on every dive, so we might be assigned to a different group at times. So if you went down with your group but came up early or later on another tender, you really did not know what happened to them, and they probably don't know what happened to you. Eventually, back on the boat, the cruise director would come up to divers and ask for bottom time and depth, but this is when we were already on the boat. Nothing is signed. So if you were still out in the water, there would be no way of asking you for that information."

Nelson Riollano, assistant manager of operations for the Aggressor and Dancer Fleet, says all the boats follow the same diver-check system, and the combination of systems used -- heads, fins and towels -- provides a safety net of redundancy. "First, there's a standard form on a clipboard on the dive deck that has all the names of guests and the dive crew. The form has columns for nitrox or air divers, name, station number (seat position) on the dive deck (time in, bottom time and max depth. The last three entries are repeated for subsequent dives on that day. When divers return, every person is checked in by a staff member. Guests provide their max depth and bottom time for that dive.

Aggressor and Dancer boats still count fins on the fin rack. "The layout of most of our boats allows all fins to be stored on a rack on the back deck, where it is easy to count the number of pairs," Riollano says. "This is convenient for divers, since they don't have to carry fins from their locker down to the dive platform, and this allows us to also make certain we have snorkelers back on board."

The third check is counting the numbered towels on the dive deck. "Divers receive warm towels to dry off. Each numbered towel is assigned to them individually based on their cabin number. Although not an official accountability system, an unused towel on the dive deck is a sign we should look further for the diver's location."

While he doesn't list it as an official count, Riollano says another safety measure used is a visual check of any open dive tank wells, used to prevent the cylinders from falling. "In the case that we are not at full capacity, it is our policy to keep a cylinder in the tank well, versus having an open spot. A quick visual check will tell the dive deck staff if there is anyone missing."

Next month: We ask dive operators what systems work best, which ones don't, and what divers can do on their own to endure they're not left behind.

--Vanessa Richardson

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## Barracuda Slaughter at McCauley Memorial

### *what are the rules for spearfishing with underwater scooters?*

The underwater scooters known as diver propulsion vehicles (DPVs) have been touted by manufacturers as great products for giving divers more mobility and bottom time, greater range, and reducing air consumption. I never considered them for shooting fish. However, I discovered while on a dive earlier this year that some divers indeed use DPVs to help them hunt fish, and do it flagrantly at sites popular with divers who only shoot fish with their camera strobes. And the State of Florida, where it happens most often, isn't doing much to stop it.

The Danny McCauley Memorial Reef, a 110-foot-long WWII tug boat, has drawn thousands of divers since it was sunk off Palm Beach in 2013. I was one of them, signing up for a dive trip on the *Little Deeper* last winter. The sun glowed down on the shipwreck, its rays penetrating to the bottom. Visibility was 60 feet. The *Danny* bow perfectly aligned, was upright on the bottom, nearly 100 feet deep. Captain Jason Landau positioned *Little Deeper* 400 feet south of the *Danny*, to give the 17 divers time to get to the bottom and let the current carry them to the wreck. The Gulf Stream was flowing northward, running about a knot.

I followed Brian, the divemaster. The plan was to tie the flag line from a surface float to the *Danny* so we could explore the wreck. That was not to be. Two men with three spears, one riding a DPV, were killing the barracuda that lolled over the wreck.

As soon as Brian saw them, he tried to move the divers away. The spearfishers already had a large number of barracuda on stringers attached to the wreck's top structure. When one diver took a photo of the guy riding the DPV, the driver used his scooter to forcefully push the diver away. The other spearfisher loaded his gun, with the spear point facing us divers. It was a dangerous scene -- clearly, they were prepared to use force to prevent us from taking pictures. We quickly followed Brian away from the *Danny*.

Were they commercial fishermen or sport divers shooting fish for fun? Hard to say, but Captain Jason later told me that the spearfishers' boat looked shady from the start. "When I came up to the *Danny*, their boat was there, but no dive flag was displayed. As I pulled up to drop the divers, they quickly put up a dive flag. No commercial fishing numbers were on their boat. Commercial fishing requires a license in Florida, and large identification numbers must be posted on the vessel."



**Menacing DPV-Driving Spearfisher**

### **Florida's Unsporting Hunting Laws**

I decided to investigate whether those spearfishers were following Florida law in their barracuda slaughter, and contacted Florida's Fish, Wildlife and Game Commission (FWC). Spokesperson Tony Young pulled out a copy of the *Florida Hunting Regulations Handbook*, turned to page 17, and read to me, "Under prohibited methods for taking game there are the following: Shooting from vehicles, power boats or sailboats moving under power. Herding or driving game with vehicles, boats or aircraft."

Florida's hunting regulations on land are no different from any other state's laws prohibiting use of motorized vehicles to hunt. It is not only against the law, it is unsporting. In short order, wild animal populations would be decimated by hunters chasing them down with aircraft and all-terrain vehicles. But there is no such law in Florida regarding underwater spearfishing. "It is legal to spear fish using tanks, and it is legal to spear fish using motorized underwater propulsion vehicles," Dan Ellinor, biological management officer for the FWC, told me. "We don't really know a lot of people who use [DPVs]. And not a lot of people have complained about it."

Most spearfishers consider it better sport to free dive. But those who hunt to make money aren't in it for sport. Plus, DPVs have made killing fish underwater easy. The Tusa SAV-7 EVO model has indentations along its sides, so that the operator can more easily ride it with speargun in hand. A fish stands a chance of evading the spears of free divers or even scuba divers, because they can often outswim finning humans. But tracking them down and shooting them from DPVs is like hunting from a vehicle or aircraft. FWC states that shooting from vehicles or boats under power is not allowed on land. So, should it be allowed underwater? The animals have no chance. Because of divers who seek maximum kill, reef life is being wiped out.

It's also outrageous that DPV-driving divers are hunting at the sites where divers go to watch and photograph these fish, then killing the fish in front of the divers, as they did with us at the *Danny*. When the FWC sinks artificial reefs (it's also the agency in charge of that task), what rules does it -- or should it -- put in place for sport diving versus commercial fishing?

### **Barracuda Being Killed for Shark Chum**

While diving other shipwrecks near Palm Beach, I rarely see a barracuda, and then only a lone one or two. That's odd, because barracuda become territorial on shipwrecks, forming squadrons and swimming



in place against a current. But, as any experienced diver knows, they're not aggressive fish, which makes it easier for them to be speared. And, as I've been finding out, hunters have systematically been killing them for commercial sale. One guy offered Brian, our divemaster, \$2.50 a pound to kill barracuda for him to use as shark chum. "He knew I was a divemaster and that I knew the sites where they could be found. I didn't want to do it. They are so beautiful underwater."

A local spearfisher told me that he used to shoot barracuda for money but no longer does. "Once I had an offer of \$2.85 a pound. They want the barracuda to chop up for chum to catch sharks. I won't do it. Fifteen dollars to kill a fish for that? It is not worth it."

As fish stocks in the oceans are becoming so scarce that international regulations severely limit commercial fishing, shouldn't Florida, and every other state, create common-sense regulations to prevent aggressive self-interest from destroying the underwater environment for personal gain? Florida supports a multi-billion-dollar sport fishing and diving industry. If there are no fish to catch, or see, customers will go away.

### A Change to the Law

Change is coming, however. The FWC voted on new regulations regarding barracuda fishing. Starting November 1, it's a recreational catch limit of two barracuda per person per day, and a commercial and vessel limit of six barracuda per day. The penalty is a second-degree misdemeanor with a \$300 fine. However, the rules only apply to six Florida counties on the Atlantic side. While those counties may have the most divers in their waters, but that means barracuda in western Florida are all up for grabs.

## Letters about our Latest Articles

Our September issue and mid-month e-mail got a good amount of feedback from subscribers about a range of articles.

**Siren Calls.** First, a correction. In our article about the Siren Fleet losing five of its eight boats to accidents in six years, we wrote that the first boat affected was the Siren Fleet's first vessel, the *Siren*, sunk after being struck from the rear by a freighter during a night crossing. *Undercurrent* contributor John Bantin says the boat's name was actually the *Sampai Jumpa* (meaning "see you again") when it was sunk.

Michael Wood (Edmonds, WA) was supposed to go on the *Palau Siren*, the latest boat to be damaged (it struck a reef while moored and was severely flooded in August), but had to switch to the *Palau Aggressor*. His travel agent got the deposit refund from the Siren Fleet with no issues, "but the boat never contacted me, by the way, about the wreck or any accommodations on another boat."

**The Oldest Diver Around.** In our mid-month e-mail, we wrote about Jean Loughry, an 85-year-old diver from Salem, PA, who is awaiting word from Guinness World Records that she will be named the oldest female scuba diver. We knew some of subscribers could challenge Loughry for the title she's applying for, and we were

right. Sam Miller (Seattle, WA) cited Dottie May Frasier, the world's first female certified dive instructor back in 1955, who is now approximately 94 and, according to Mark Young, executive director the Scuba Show (where Frasier was honored last year, "Dottie is still active in the underwater world, and if anyone deserves recognition as the oldest female diver, it is her."

Elaine Blum (Miami, FL) wants to nominate her mom. "She was certified at age 78, and at age 86, is still an active diver, with over 500 dives."

**Shark-Feeding Lawbreaker.** As we wrote last month, the CBS Miami station reported that Randy Jordan, owner of Emerald Charters, regularly and knowingly hand-feeds sharks, even though it's against Florida law. An *Undercurrent* reader who has been on Jordan's dive boat for trips writes us, "Safety is not his primary concern, it's all about Randy the showman, finning about, handing out pieces of fish (no chumming here) while putting on his 'one-man show' for the group. Folks routinely lapse into deco on these 90-foot dives, something never mentioned in his briefing. Randy also maintains a *persona non grata* list of those who challenge the safety of his operation or he suspects may report any infractions to law enforcement. It's only a matter of time before some is injured if not killed by his operation."

Palm Beach County, as well as the FWC, can implement regulations that outlaw use of DPVs while spearfishing. They can establish no-kill zones around shipwrecks that have been sunk as artificial reefs. Such rules may be difficult to enforce, but with concerned scuba divers and responsible dive operators whose living is derived from tourists, it is akin to reporting boaters who anchor on reefs and destroy coral.

### **Some Want to Hunt the Goliath Grouper**

Ironically, while my dive group and I were being menaced by the DPV-riding spearfisher, I noticed a solitary Goliath grouper watching the mayhem off the side of *Danny*. In Florida, there are lobbyists trying to persuade the legislature to open the season for taking Goliath groupers. But these fish were nearly hunted to extinction -- it requires as much as 40 years for a grouper to achieve the size of the Goliath that was swimming off the *Danny*. It would only take a spearfisher on a scooter seconds to kill it.

The massacre at the Danny McCauley Memorial Reef is an example of why Florida must change its hunting laws. When FWC's Dan Ellinor told me, "Not a lot of people have complained about it," it likely means they haven't seen it. Once divers and fishermen understand why they are seeing fewer and fewer barracuda and other reef fish at the sites they visit, it may be a different story.

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## **Is Your Camera Hurting Marine Life?**

### *the effect of strobe and flash lighting on animals*

A recent article of mine in *Undercurrent* about photographing seahorses ("The Fight to Stop Seahorse Photography" in the November 2013 issue) debated the effect strobes have on them. Despite my reference to the research work of David Harasti in that article, about how flash photography has no long-term effects on seahorses, I received a protest from one reader that a photographer's flash will stress and kill them.

All wild animals are paranoid. They are continually stressed. You only have to watch a bird or a squirrel feeding in your garden to be aware of this. Constantly facing the possibility of attack by a predator, wild animals are always alert and ready for flight.

When I was an advertising photographer, I photographed animals, from cats to chickens and chimpanzees. All needed time to become accustomed to the new surroundings of the studio or special location in which they found themselves, but once they did, they seemed to ignore the huge output of light from the strong flash commonly used in a studio. Thanks to the technology available at the time, I needed around a thousand times more flash output than is produced today by a typical underwater flashgun or strobe.

Animals with quick responses see the flash as a slow pulse of light. Most animals have quicker responses than we do. For example, a saltwater crocodile has a reaction time 60 times faster than ours. It may be disturbed by you, but it certainly isn't startled!

Approaching a wild animal underwater, we are both intruders and possible predators. However, in the marine world, we are so far removed from what animals are expecting that they usually tend to ignore us unless we get too close. We are simply big, dark shapes vibrating with noise as we breathe. My experiments with bubble-free rebreathers tell me that it is our noise and our movement of which animals are wary. We are not invisible, but keeping as still as a rock and making no sound will give you the best chance of having a skittish scalloped hammerhead shark coming close.

So what happens when we take photographs? First, to be closely approached by a huge dark shape will alarm any smaller creature. There seems to be a rule under water that size matters. Small animals are eaten by larger ones. It's a war zone. Everything is eating everything else, or at least trying to. A big dark animal is a threat. A well-known marine wildlife photographer based in the U.S. is famous for his yellow wetsuits. They may look garish on the aft deck of the boat, but he believes they are less disturbing for the animals he photographs.

*A saltwater crocodile, with a reaction time 60 times faster than humans, may be disturbed by you but it certainly isn't startled.*

Each animal has a strategy for survival, so your very presence will be alarming, and it will take time for an animal to forget about your sudden arrival. The seahorse will turn its back, and the turtle may swim off in a hurry. Luckily, most marine animals have a short attention span, so if you stay still long enough, they will eventually ignore you. Of course, a large number of these dark shapes, all moving in different ways, will be exponentially more alarming. Large numbers of divers crowding round a single hairy frogfish must be very frightening for it. It frightens me!

When you approach closely with a camera, its big eye looks down at the creature. All animals are tuned to know when they are being looked at, which is why hunters wear masks. It is disturbing for them to be watched, but if they are not equipped for a high-speed escape, like, for example, a jack, they stay put and soon get used to the fact that they haven't been eaten. When the camera is fired, it makes a noise, and there is a pulse of light from the flash. (To put things in context, the pulse of light from a typical underwater flash is probably equal to one-thousandth the amount of light I used to photograph animals in the studio -- 20 joules of light as opposed to 20,000.)

As my next witness, may I introduce the octopus? It is an intelligent mollusc with a variety of strategies when threatened by a possible predator, including camouflage, diversion by way of an ink cloud, and finally flight. It also has a complex eye, which I suspect allows it to see well what happens when the camera is fired. I use a big camera, and at the moment the eye of the lens opens and shuts, there is a loud clatter as the mirror mechanism works, and the flash emits a pulse of light. Under these circumstances, the octopus usually appears to flinch, clearly indicating that it is disturbed. But what is actually disturbing it?

My experience leads me to believe that the octopus reacts first to the close approach of a large dark object (my body), and second to the vibration of the camera mechanism operating. However, after a few moments, the animal either settles down and decides there is no threat, or it will flee. I have spent more than 45 minutes with two octopuses that were courting, and my noisy camera, dark body and light-emitting flashgun had no obvious effect on the course of events. I was able to take hundreds of close-focus wide-angle pictures of the whole procedure, from beginning to end. Similarly, I have spent long periods with turtles that have simply got used to my presence and allowed me to take multiple flash exposures from very close indeed.

It may be different if you have a constant light source shining in their eyes, as when shooting video. If an animal decides it is not under threat of predation, it will tolerate you. Of course, an animal that is nocturnal will not enjoy being lit up by a bright light. Fitting a red filter over the flashgun when photographing animals at night appears to mitigate this problem. Some continuous light sources come with a red light function, too. The pulse of light from a flash is either too slow to disturb those animals with very quick responses or, I suspect, with lower life forms, too quick to evoke any response at all.

It's annoying that when you line up a camera on a macro subject such as a pygmy seahorse, or any seahorse for that matter, it tends to turn away shyly. This is because predators detect the presence of prey often by the existence of its eye. Many coral-browsers have developed a defense strategy of displaying a false eye on a less vulnerable part of their body. The eyes of the seahorse must be kept hidden when the animal feels threatened -- but don't think it only does this to photographers.

So do we stress the animals? The immediate answer is, yes. Just as the marauding jack stresses the anthias, fish stress the browsing octopus and the white-tip reef shark stresses the little fish hiding among the rocks at night. So all divers stress the animals by our sudden arrival. Slow movements and plenty of patience go a long way to getting good pictures. Fish are not frightened by big rocks, and I have noticed that a still group of divers huddled together in an area of sandy seabed, testing regulators, for example, can actually attract some sedentary predators, such as frogfish, which see the black shape as a useful dark place to hide.

So does the camera's flash disturb animals? I have serious doubts. My point is that fish are very aware of a diver's presence. The fact that divers themselves may alter fish behavior is in tune with the study described on page 20, which clearly finds that to be the case. It's not just the flash of the strobe they notice, it's the very presence of these enormous beings.

*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 Shark Bytes, available at [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)*

## Flotsam & Jetsam

**Paving Paradise in Grand Cayman.** The Caymanian government has confirmed plans to build a massive cruise ship dock in Grand Cayman's Georgetown harbor, which environmentalists claim will have a devastating impact on the island's reefs. The reason for the dock, besides getting more ships, is so passengers don't have to deal with the five-minute tender transfer across the harbor. But per a environmental impact report released in June, the dredging process will destroy 15 acres of coral reef and likely harm another 20 acres, home to two critically endangered coral species and four threatened ones. "It is a sad day for the country," Keith Sahn, a leader of the Save Cayman anti-port campaign told Yahoo News. "Once they do this, there is no turning back." To see how you can help their efforts, go to [www.facebook.com/SaveCayman?fref=ts](http://www.facebook.com/SaveCayman?fref=ts)

**The "Shocking" Way to Cure Seasickness.** Scientists at Imperial College in London believe that

being given a mild electric shock to the scalp before you get on a boat will prevent nausea. They're developing a gadget that will plug into a smartphone and deliver a short shock to the head via electrodes. The mild electrical current dampens activity in the part of the brain that processes motion signals, reducing the impact of confusing inputs received, and preventing symptoms of motion sickness. Study leader Qadeer Arshad told the *Daily Mail*, "We are confident that within five to 10 years, people will be able to walk into a drugstore and buy an anti-seasickness device."

**The Crown of Thorns-Killing Robot.** The crown-of-thorns starfish (COTS) is the scourge of Australia's Great Barrier Reef, so Queensland University of Technology researchers have created a hunter-killer robot, dubbed the COTSbot, to search out and destroy these coral-eating pests. It's fitted with stereoscopic cameras for depth perception, stability thrusters, GPS navigation, pitch-and-roll sensors, and a pneumatic injection arm that gives a COTS a fatal dose of bile salts. The COTSbot will scour the reef for up to eight hours at a time, with the capability of killing more than 200 COTS along the way, and it's slated to be autonomously working on the Great Barrier Reef by December.

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