

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## Galapagos Sky, Galapagos Islands

*where the wild things are*

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Dear Fellow Diver:

I now understand why divers say the Galapagos is one of the finest dive destinations in the world. I knew it was not for beautiful coral reefs, as the Galapagos has very few, nor for brightly colored tropical fish. But until I dived this ocean of giants, this underwater Jurassic Park, I just didn't understand its power. Close encounters with whale sharks, bottlenose dolphins, manta rays and hammerhead sharks were common. Yes indeed, if I may borrow from Maurice Sendak, this is where the wild thing are.

I journeyed aboard the 83-foot Galapagos Sky, launched in 2001 by Santiago Dunn and now managed by Peter Hughes himself. It holds 16 guests in eight double cabins and is well equipped with navigational and safety equipment. Safety must be the hallmark in these waters. The crew provided dive beacons, and we were given instruction on their use. They also fitted a dive horn on each BC because this can be tough diving; hence their rule: Always stay with your dive buddy and your dive-master (I was glad to follow the guide who was instrumental in spotting things I would have missed, as well as creating opportunities to see the large creatures).

We boarded in the afternoon, and after briefings, motored to our checkout dive in an ugly area with poor visibility and little of interest to see (our only poor dive). That gave me plenty of time to adjust my gear and ensure I was properly weighted.

The next morning, Fabrizio Carbo, who has been a dive-master in these waters for 30 years,



A Cabin on the Galapagos Sky



guided us on our first real dive. He signaled to our group of five to hug a rock cliff -- the lower our profile, the better chance for a close encounter. Clinging to the rocks, I peered into the deep blue. Slowly a shape materialized from the gloom. A manta ray as large as our Zodiac was swimming right toward us. As it flew over our heads, it looked like a 747 flying by. A second, then a third manta appeared. As if in slow motion, the five-meter ray gracefully soared over my head, so close I could have touched him. I thought to myself, "I'm done." I could have packed my bags right then and left, and this would have still have been a successful trip.

Back on the Galapagos Sky, I socialized with the gang who would be my shipmates for this seven-day voyage. Your fellow divers can make or break the entire liveaboard experience, but my luck was good, as this was indeed an interesting group of people. Five gre-

garious Ukrainians on our boat were a wild bunch, with a good sense of humor that led to many off-the-wall comments. They wanted to drink beer and do tequila shots in-between dives, but that didn't go down, so they waited till their diving was done, then accompanied their shots with cigars outside. My wife and I shared a dining table with Eric from France and Francis from the Canary Islands, both seasoned divers. We had great dinner conversations and swapped many good dive stories.

Our voyage on the twin-engine Galapagos Sky would visit many islands in the archipelago, traveling from San Cristobal Island, where we boarded, to Darwin Island, 124 nautical miles to the north, crisscrossing the equator several times. We traveled mostly by night, and the rocking boat was as soothing and restful as a hammock on a summer day. The Sky carries two Zodiacs (called "pangas"), each holding eight divers, plus the divemaster and driver. On the mother boat, the crew helped each of us gear up before a dive and assisted us into our panga, where the crew helped us to our seats, then delivered fins and cameras. On rough days, the surge caused the panga to rise and fall as much as two meters, making it a real balancing act to step safely into the panga, so their help was essential. Back on the Sky after each dive, I was handed a cup of hot chocolate and a freshly baked pastry while the crew helped me out of my wetsuit.

For me and many of my dive companions, four dives a day was a handful, which is perhaps why no one accepted the only night dive offered, a fifth dive that day. Burning all those calories was great, so I felt no guilt when it was time to eat, and the Sky's chefs produced plentiful and excellent meals. The sit-down dinners had a selection of two entrées: for example, octopus Basque style, with peppers and sauteed potatoes, or pork loin and vegetable stir fry with pineapple sauce and steamed rice, preceded by a dried fruit timbale served with fennel salad, and followed by berries panna cotta. Wow. Typical buffet breakfast: fresh tropical fruit, granola



**The Dining Room**

and cereals, fresh breads, a meat and cheese plate, crepes stuffed with blackberry jam and cottage cheese. Or eggs perico style, and mashed green plantain with cheese. A typical buffet lunch: warm vegetables salad with garlic drizzle, tuna tartar or chicken lasagna or shrimp skewers and baked polenta, followed by tiramisu or fresh fruit. Sodas, beer and wine were free. One night, we had lobster the chef had purchased from local fishermen; another night an on-deck BBQ with chicken, beef and shrimp skewers was a ton of fun. Still hungry? A snack bar was stocked with cookies, chips, power bars and dried fruit.

Galapagos waters are colder than most tropical locations, but on my November trip they ranged from the low 70s to the low 80s, warmer than usual thanks to El Niño. Almost everyone wore a full 3-mil suit with hoods, but I got by with a 3-mil shorty and no hood.

My dives at Wolf Island were particularly memorable. On one dive, several large moray eels swam from rock to rock while a couple of sea lions darted in and out of our group, providing an acrobatic spectacle that put Cirque de Soleil to shame. Agile and curious, the sea lions loved to play with us divers. They barreled toward me at great speed, then turned at the last moment just inches from impact, at times brushing me with their whiskers. And hammerheads . . . what bizarre twist of evolution led to the creation of this most unusual shark?

## **It's Not Just the Fishermen Who Are Destroying Reefs**

In the past 45 years, Caribbean coral cover has declined from 35 percent to 16 percent. Fish populations have plummeted due to overfishing. And fishers are having a hard time making a living. Meanwhile, scuba dive tourism has increased dramatically.

A recent study by Dr. Ayan Johnson and Dr. Jeremy Jackson found that 94 percent of divers acknowledged that their diving damages the reefs. "That industry needs to be regulated too, if reefs are going to have a chance at recovering," said Jackson.

Johnson interviewed 388 fishers and scuba instructors, hoping to understand how they use the ocean, how they perceive the reefs and fisheries, and what types of management they would support. Their answers give cause for hope: The social climate is primed for policymakers to put strong conservation measures in place for the benefit of both groups.

According to Johnson's research, fishermen are more aware than divers of the degradation of their reef ecosystem but don't acknowledge much of the blame for it. But divers are also to blame -- especially as their numbers grow -- because of poor behavior under water. Many novices kick the reefs, and tourist demand for local seafood has depleted the very fish they want to see when they dive.

"Most jarring were the words of a 15-year fisher who told me that fishers used to show the size of their catch vertically [holding his hands off the ground]," said Johnson. "Now they show fish size horizontally [holding his hands shoulder width apart]. And this all happened in the past few decades."

Meanwhile, dive instructors say showing visitors seahorses and rare marine life is great for their business, but the halo of reef damage left behind by tourists bumping sensitive corals continues to degrade the already damaged environment.

The study found that most fishers (89 percent) perceived catching fewer fish than previous generations. An overwhelming 96 percent of fishers and 94 percent of divers with over five years of local experience reported that some species they used to catch or see are rare or missing now. The numbers of large grouper, snapper and parrotfish populations have plummeted across the region, along with the coral itself. Meanwhile, invasive species like lionfish have been able to establish themselves throughout the region, further threatening endemic fisheries.

Jackson and Johnson offer up some policy reforms, including establishing large marine reserves that are closed to both fishing and diving, limiting the number of fishers and divers, and easing the transition to more sustainable use of coral reef resources. They believe their study shows that both fishers and divers are ready for meaningful management actions.

*--from an article in the Curacao Chronicle*

## Galapagos Sky, Galapagos Is.

Diving (experienced)	★★★★★
Diving (beginner -- don't go)	★
Accommodations	★★★★1/2
Food	★★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★1/2

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent

World Scale

Eyes jutting out from the tips of its T-shaped head to its gaping jaws full of razor-sharp teeth. We encountered dozens of hammerheads, at lengths exceeding four meters, dwarfing us divers.

Bottlenose dolphins circled us, at times swimming no more than a foot away. I guessed their speed and agility was in the same ratio to mine, as mine would be in ratio to a giant land tortoise. When we surfaced, we were greeted by half a dozen red-footed boobies hovering a meter above. Landing in the water next to us, they poked their heads underwater to see if we had attracted tasty morsels for them.

It's this proximity to ordinarily shy creatures that makes the Galapagos Islands such an extraordinary venue.

On shore, several penguins preened and sunned themselves. I waited in the water, hoping a penguin would decide to take a dip, and lo and behold, one awkwardly ambled forward and slipped into the water. I followed him with my video camera close range. Then two meters below the surface, I spotted a cave at the shore's edge. From inside, a pair of large eyes watched me. It was a silky shark about two meters long. And then more eyes gleamed . . . four, six, eight . . . four silkies spying me.

The iconic pinnacle of Bartolome Island loomed overhead, its summit reached by 365 stairs. At Wolf Island, I encountered plenty of bottlenose dolphins, and in one instance, a huge bait ball. As I swam in and out of it, the apparently dull fish, turning in unison to a different angle with the sun, provided a dazzling lightshow of silver and sparkles, just the thing to confuse predators.

Darwin's Arch, on the very remote Darwin Island, is considered by some to be the best dive on our planet. No one may step on the island without a government permit, and no tour boats are allowed in the waters. Only a few dive boats venture out this far. The spectacular arch rises from the depths to a lone tower, half a mile from Darwin's Island. Here, the Humboldt Current brings in rich nutrients. Numerous cleaning stations attracted those large pelagic animals I came to see. Manta rays and bottlenose dolphins entertained us, but no whale sharks. The season is June to November, and I was there in December. Oh well.

The dive briefing room was a spacious U-shaped couch, with fish ID books, dive information and maps. Two large LCD TVs on each side allowed for plenty of movie viewing, and while the Ukrainians watched Russian movies, the rest of us watched such fare as Forrest Gump. The Sky is well designed, with polished railings, banisters and stairs. On the top deck, I kicked back in a lounge chair or hammock, watching frigate birds, resplendent with their red pouch under the bill, glide 10 feet above. My cabin, the smallest on board, was still quite comfortable, with two decent single beds, and lots of room and shelf space for camera gear, clothing and odds and ends. The spacious head sported a large sink, lots of counter space and a shower large enough for two. Fresh towels were delivered daily when the room was cleaned.

Not every trip goes exactly as planned. At the most isolated point of our trip,



Photographing a Galapagos Resident

## What Rats Can Tell Us about Drinking, Diving and DCS

Drinking alcohol before a dive is often cited as a risk factor for decompression sickness (DCS), although it seems that evidence is still lacking, and just how alcohol consumption affects DCS risk in divers is unclear. However, giving alcohol to rabbits after decompressing them has been shown to be beneficial in preventing or treating DCS, but that's insufficient evidence to suggest it may do the same for humans. Since rats are often used as test subjects before moving on to humans, Peter Buzzacott of the Divers Alert Network led a research team using rats to continue studying what role alcohol may play in DCS.

Fifteen male rats were given 50 milliliters of water, mixed with 12 milliliters of ethanol, every day for four weeks. (That's the equivalent of a 175-pound man drinking two liters of Foster's lager, a tough task even for an Aussie.) Fifteen other rats, the control group, were only given water. Both groups were put through staged decompression in a hyperbaric chamber. The test rats usually drank at night, so they probably weren't under the influence at the time of decompression -- that mimics divers who regularly drink but then sleep, so they have low or no blood alcohol level before diving in the morning.

After decompression, all rats were observed for signs of DCS for an hour. When comparing the binge-drinking rats to the control group, neither their weight nor their alcohol consumption was associated with DCS. The researchers concluded that moderate alcohol consumption prior to compression neither prevented DCS nor caused it in young male rats. (A similar study using older, or female, rats could yield different results.)

There are theories about how ethanol may protect against DCS. It may enhance the solubility of nitrogen in the blood. Perhaps it lowers the surface tension of bubbles, and thus, acts as a de-frothing agent. It may reduce the aggregation and coagulation of platelets, or increase the dilation of blood vessels, thus accelerating gas washout. However, it's a big leap from rabbits and rats to humans, so forget about slogging down two liters of Foster's the night before your next dive.

*"A Rat Model of Chronic Moderate Alcohol Consumption and Risk of Decompression Sickness," by P. Buzzacott, A. Mazur, Q. Wang, K. Lambrechts, M Theron and F. Guerrero, Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine, Vol. 45, pgs. 75-78.*

boat captain Andres Ramirez summoned us divers to a meeting. Andres, about 30 years old, was on his first voyage as captain and had important news: One of the boat's two engines had failed. We could only travel at half speed. How a crew reacts when problems strike tells me a lot about a dive company, and I was impressed with how the crew dealt with this new deck of cards. Francis, Eric and I talked with Captain Andres to get a clearer picture of our options, and together we decided on a new itinerary. We traded in a few dives west of Isabela to dive on an active geological site at Rocha Redondo and then move to Pinzon. This provided a more direct course back to San Cristobel Island, a prudent decision given our circumstances.

At Rocha Redonda, funerals bubbled from the ocean floor. Red, orange, white, yellow and green lichen covered the rocks. I set up a GoPro on a Gorilla Pod, weighted it down with a 3-pound weight, and pressed the video record button, giving me a rock-solid, documentary-style video (like having a real underwater tripod) of this unusual geologic feature. I'm skilled enough to teach land photography, but underwater photography is not my strong suit. However, Francis Pérez, one of my fellow travelers, turned out to be a master underwater photographer. When I viewed his photos, I knew I felt like a piano student in the presence of Mozart.

Off Pinzon Island, I marveled at the array of colors on a pair of lobsters. A foraging banded sea snake methodically searched every nook and cranny for food, once violently wriggling his body as he devoured some unsuspecting critter. Stingrays, morays and turtles became commoners, and for a while, I watched a large horse conch, big as a volleyball, propel himself along by his purple-spotted foot muscle. And then there is the bizarre red-lipped batfish. Picture a white bat crawling along the sea floor on its wings. Now add Angelina Jolie's lips and apply a generous helping of bright red lipstick. OK, that's a red-lipped batfish.

We made it safely back to port on Santa Cruz Island, where we had an opportunity to take a land excursion to see the giant Galapagos tortoises. These ponderous beasts were almost wiped out by early sailors. Fortunately, the Ecuadorian government has made great progress in restoring their population. I also explored several of the huge lava tunnels that helped to form these islands over 1.5 million years ago. Some divers, so intent on spending every minute in the water, often don't leave themselves time to see Galapagos topside -- don't make the same mistake. In fact, my wife and I spent three weeks in the Galapagos Islands, including a full week on land at the Royal Palm on Santa Cruz Island, where we booked day excursions and another week on a tour boat, the Ecoventura.

Indeed, the diving was great, even on the many dives (23 were offered) I haven't described. What made this trip truly memorable for me was not what I expected. Sure, I loved the wild things -- mantas, dolphins, hammerheads, the red-lipped bat fish and the funerals. And every dive, other than the check-out dive, was splendid. But I will cherish the good times I had on the boat, especially with our two outstanding divemasters, Fabrizio and Max Castillo -- really good guys, funny, friendly, exceptionally knowledgeable and helpful. If I return to the Galapagos someday, it will surely be on the Galapagos Sky.

P.S. You can check out some videos I took on this trip and uploaded to

## The *Sun Diver* Loses Another Diver

We've written many times about the lawsuit that diver Daniel Carlock brought against the *Sun Diver*, a 43-foot dive boat out of Long Beach, CA, that left him floating for five hours off the coast of Newport Beach in 2004 until a boat full of Boy Scouts happened to spot him (a jury awarded him \$1.68 million in 2010). Does its owners face a second lawsuit now for leaving another diver behind?

Laurel Silver-Valker jumped off the *Sun Diver* at 9:35 a.m. on December 29 to dive for lobsters below Ship Rock off Catalina Island, and hasn't been seen since. Silver-Valker, 45, was a regular on *Sun Diver* trips, even volunteering as a crew member on trips. At first, the dive seemed to be going well. A post on the *Sun Diver's* Facebook page at 10:06 a.m. that day shows two photos of Ship Rock, and the caption, "Gorgeous day and a full boat!" Then the *Sun Diver* left Ship Rock and went to a different site before realizing Silver-Valker was not on board. The boat returned to Ship Rock to do a search but around noon, the captain called the Coast Guard to report Silver-Valker missing.

Rescue teams have continued that search for more than two weeks, with as many as 30 divers searching Ship Rock at once, but nothing. Police have classified Silver-Valker as a missing person; they don't know whether she had trouble while diving or resurfaced to find the *Sun Diver* had left her behind. The U.S. Coast Guard is also doing its own investigation.

Ken Kurtis, who leads dive trips in that area via his Beverly Hills dive operator, Reef Seekers, says, "Given the underwater terrain of Ship Rock, which basically is a steep-ish slope into very deep water (far beyond recreational limits), it's certainly possible and even likely that currents and water motion over time since the accident have moved her into deeper water. Also, rescue teams have done numerous searches and circumnavigations of the dive site with the assumption being that they've literally covered every inch underwater and would have found her if she was still there to be found. Until she's located, any details surrounding what happened will remain a mystery."

The *Orange County Register* wrote that Sundiver International, the company that owns the *Sun Diver*, lost the right to conduct business in California nearly four years ago due to tax issues. According to the Franchise Tax Board, it has unfiled tax returns and \$3,991 in unpaid taxes, so it suspended Sundiver International on Feb. 1, 2012.

"When a company is suspended, they are not supposed to be engaged in any business," says Melissa Marsh, a Los Angeles attorney who helps revive suspended companies. "They are not allowed to collect any money. The banks have a right to close their accounts." Suspended businesses also are not allowed to defend themselves in court, according to California code.

That restriction could become particularly troublesome for the *Sun Diver's* owners after what happened to Silver-Valker.

YouTube of fumerals (<https://youtu.be/vWwimhyDlMU>), sea lions (<https://youtu.be/-gv3SI59xSg>) and the Bartolome Time lapse - ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6zhr26Qsn8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6zhr26Qsn8)).

-- S.N.

Our undercover diver's bio: While you read this, our author, who has well more than 500 dives under his belt, is aboard the Ocean Princess as it circumnavigates the continent of South America on a 64-day cruise. He is delivering 32 lectures on both photography and modern technology, traveling with a drone that shoots 4K video.



**Divers Compass:** Until June 1, the cost for seven days is a pricey \$5,495 per person; for 10 days, it's \$7,855 . . . If you don't want to tote your equipment, they have rental equipment available, but it's wise to be wearing familiar gear . . . The colder the water is, the better the large animal encounters; while El Niño may play havoc with sightings, the best months are normally June through November . . . For photographers, the vessel has a dedicated rinse tank, an equipment area and sizeable charging station . . . This is nitrox diving, with larger tanks available for

heavy breathers . . . Website - [www.galapagosky.com](http://www.galapagosky.com)

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## Bahamas, French Polynesia, St. Vincent *and two great places for underwater photo classes*

**Headed to Phuket?** Looks like you will have to present a certificate from your doctor verifying that you are fit to dive; operators will lose their license if they don't enforce the rule. It's a new safety measure rolled out after the November death of a Chinese tourist diving with Phuket William Diving aboard the *MV Peterpan*. She got separated from her group and was found six hours later by divers from another boat; she was face down at 40 feet, her regulator was out of her mouth, and she had facial abrasions. The *Peterpan* had moved away from the dive site without her.

**Bahamas Pros and Cons.** The best thing about the Bahamas for a diver? It's close, easy to get to, and while the sites have deteriorated over the years, good diving can be found, usually.

In the early '80s, we first reviewed Blackbeard's Cruises, calling their liveaboards "camping at sea." They're still operating, and nothing has changed. Seems to be about the most inexpensive way for the young at heart, not just the young, to make a bunch of dives and have a good party. Aboard Blackbeard's *Morning Star* last May, Gary Brown (Bloomberg, TX) said, "Everyone begins to bond after about a day at sea. Some divers put their photos and videos on the television at night, as everyone told their stories of intrigue about the day's diving encounters. Tropical fish were plentiful as we moved from site to site, and the shark feed was a lot of fun. The Washing Machine was something you will not forget! Octopuses on every night dive! The camaraderie is a large part of the trip, especially at night when all gather on the top deck with cold draft beer and drinks to mix and mingle. A great trip for beginners and good for experienced too." (<http://blackbeard-cruises.com>)

And just as long ago, we reviewed Freeport's Sun Odyssey Divers, which did a fine job then and is still proving a great diving experience for visitors to Grand Bahama Island. After a January trip, Louis Sparks (Tulare, CA) wrote, "Nick and Karen were the best of proprietors and hosts. While winter conditions were a bit problematic at times, we had four wonderful days of diving. Wrecks, sharks, turtles and incredible coral were the highlights. Nick and Karen made it that much more enjoyable with their professional and personable care of us. Nick never risked our safety when conditions were questionable, and Karen was great for laughs and insights. Over 33 years in the area -- it sure shows." ([www.sunnodyseydivers.com](http://www.sunnodyseydivers.com))

Yes, those Bahamas winters are at times not even sub-tropical. After all, you're diving the Atlantic, not the Caribbean. Terry H. Anderson (Bryan TX) was aboard the *Bahamas Aggressor* and writes, "I went in January and that was a mistake, for it was cool and windy. Belize, Costa Rica or even Cozumel that time of year is better for the weather. The diving was mediocre. In six days, we saw one or two turtles, three or four eels, and the fish populations were less than any of the destinations mentioned above. The best thing was the reef sharks -- lots, but only on three different sites, and not cruising most walls. Beautiful coral and few critters. Disappointing. One evening, we got in a squall with nine-foot swells and a 50 m.p.h. wind that broke the mooring. It was a night dive and could have been a disaster, but the

## *Oshenerth: Blue Magic*

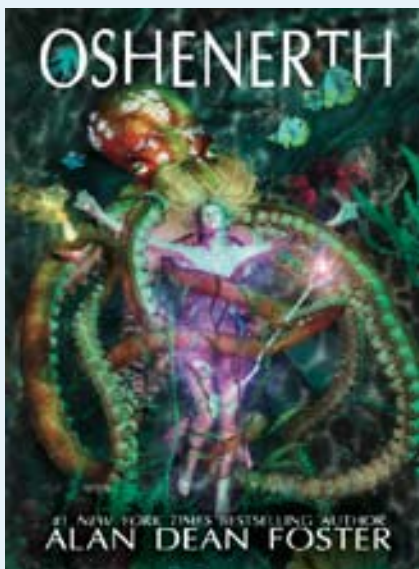
*Undercurrent* contributor Alan Dean Foster has written 125 books, including *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, which recently made *The New York Times'* list of best-selling print and eBooks. His latest effort is an epic that takes place entirely underwater.

As opposed to a work of science fiction, this book is pure fantasy. The difference? Science fiction explores what's possible, even if improbable, while fantasy explores the impossible. Foster introduces us to a race of people who reversed evolution and returned to the oceans. An imaginative world this fanciful can hardly be described in conventional terms, so Foster creates his own vocabulary, such as the term "mersons," humanoids with gills who can communicate with other sea creatures. Freed from the conventions of traditional earth-bound writers, Foster indulges in extravagant wordplay, starting with his title (pronounce it slowly, out loud).

The story begins when a merson hunter named Chachel and his best friend, a cuttlefish named Glint, encounter an alien figure drifting on the "mirrorsky," or ocean surface. Although concerned they may have encountered a demon, they bring the unconscious figure down to their village shaman, a giant octopus named Oxothyr, who performs a little magic to fit her out with merson-like gills and fins. Impressed with her unique perceptions, Oxothyr becomes her mentor and takes her under his tentacles.

At first, all goes swimmingly (yes, the puns are contagious), while the changeling Irina adapts to her new surroundings, a reef colony called Sandrift. Foster uses his diving experience to vividly portray his exotic cast of characters, such as the "manyarm" Glint, who expresses emotions by changing color. I once thought Pixar did a good job capturing the personalities of undersea critters in *Finding Nemo*, but Foster's insights blow them out of the water (sorry, but imitation is the sincerest form of flattery).

It helps that these underwater characters can communicate with each other. At one point, Chachel the hunter encounters a "silvery school of big-eyed trevally," which "offered insulting remarks." Foster writes, "Chachel ignored them. One did not waste time quarreling with food." But then news arrives that a nearby settlement has been attacked by an army of spralakers, a collection of crabs, but not your usual Louis dwellers -- some are as big as tanks. From then on, the book turns into a war novel, as Oxothyr rallies his followers to fight the crusading crustaceans.



We never truly learn what motivates the spralakers, although their leader obliquely calls their campaign "the Overturning." The armed hard-shells seem intent on destroying other communities, rather than occupying them. Parable-huggers can draw their own conclusions. Are the spralakers conducting a secular jihad? A regime-change invasion? Is Irina an interloper or a savior? It's up to us to work these puzzles out.

The book ends with a climactic battle with an inventive array of weapons, but before the matter of battle has even settled, Oxothyr expresses concerns about other looming problems: "I do not feel that I can identify the true nature of the greater menace that threatens us all." Sounds like a lead-in to a sequel, in the great *Star Wars* tradition.

Purchase *Oshenerth* through *Undercurrent* at [www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/bookpicks.shtml](http://www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/bookpicks.shtml) -- you'll go to Amazon.com and the commission we earn will go to various projects to save coral reefs.

--Larry Clinton, co-author of *There's a Cockroach in My Regulator*



captain and crew did a very professional job getting the divers on board safely.”

#### **When You Don't Get What You Pay For.**

Jill Levenson (Bellingham, WA) had a great trip aboard the *Undersea Hunter* to Cocos Island in December, but that was not the boat she had planned for a year in advance or had paid handsomely for. You see, a year in advance she had secured the master cabin on the *Argo*, companion craft to the *Sea Hunter* and *Undersea Hunter*. “We choose the *Argo* carefully, based upon other trip reports and pictures of the large beautiful master cabin and the expansive lounge, and we planned on going down on the *Argo's* submersible. After it was too late to change our plans, we were told the *Argo* had been chartered by the National Geographic Society for a Galapagos trip, so we were now booked on the *Undersea Hunter*. We were disappointed the sub wasn't going to happen for us, and the pictures of the master cabin on the *Undersea Hunter* were underwhelming, but we knew the diving would be great, and it was.

On the *Undersea Hunter*, we were escorted to our ‘master cabin,’ next to the Captain's cabin off the wheelhouse. It was tiny and dark, with wood paneling from the 1970s -- the worst master cabin we have ever booked. During travel to the island, the wall on the interior side became very hot from the engine, I guess, and it made the room very warm. The air-conditioning worked pretty well, but it was disconcerting to feel the heat radiating off that wall. The master cabin isn't worth the extra money, and we were inside it a lot -- 36 hours each way. The ‘salon’ was non-existent -- it was one couch off the small dining room. It wasn't comfortable for guests to hang out together in the dining room, so when we weren't diving or eating, we stayed mostly in our cabins or lounged on the small deck on top. There weren't enough chairs and loungers for everyone, so some of us had to sit on the deck. We were fortunate that the crew and other guests were wonderful. It's just an old, small boat.”

The *Undersea Hunter* is a well-regarded boat, and of course, the *Argo* is a couple of steps up. That said, when people plan a special trip and pay the big bucks required, they have some rights, we think. The folks at Undersea Hunter should have offered them the opportunity to refuse the switch and receive a full refund. (They probably would have reluctantly accepted the switch because there was no way they could have changed their vacation dates.) Second, Levenson should have been compensated for her loyalty and good cheer in accepting what she saw as a significant downgrade that she would have never signed up for on her own, without their having to ask. We hate to see our favorite liveboards behave as our airlines do.

**French Polynesia.** Longtime *Undercurrent* correspondent Mary Peachin (Tucson, AZ) cruised these islands aboard the luxurious *M/S Paul Gauguin* and did her diving with Top Dive. At Fakarava's Garuae Pass, she mingled with “black-tips, gray-tips and white-tips swimming in every direction. I felt as if I were in the middle of a Hanoi street with countless vehicles speeding around me. Large schools of reef fish hung in the current -- jacks, soldierfish, surgeonfish, big-node unicorns, orange-line and pompano triggers, blue-fin trevally and more . . . Top Dive has operations in the Society Islands of Papeete, Bora Bora and Moorea, and the Tuamotu atolls of Rangiroa and Fakarava. At each destination, they would pick me up at the dock and drive me to their dive shop or boat to head directly to the dive, then return me after one or two dives to catch the tender back to the *Gauguin*. They had clean and attractive shops at all locations. Their boats, of varying sizes, had excellent English-speaking divemasters and offered good complimentary equipment --

## **There's More to *Undercurrent* Than This Issue**

In between the monthly issues we do, we offer two other ways for you to get the latest news, opinions, photos and videos of what's going on in the dive industry. Check out our Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/Undercurrent.org](http://www.facebook.com/Undercurrent.org)) where we regularly post dive-related news and ask for your feedback. Our blog ([www.undercurrent.org/blog](http://www.undercurrent.org/blog)) is where our top-notch contributors, like John Bantin and Bret Gilliam, can provide new insights into dive topics when we've run out of room in our monthly newsletter. We promise not to clog your Facebook news feed with multiple posts -- only the best and most relevant stuff -- but we hope these two venues are other good ways to give you what you like to get from us.

an Aqua Lung regulator and BCD, a three-inch shorty for the 82-degree water, nitrox and a Suunto dive computer (I left mine at home).

“They were prompt and courteous. When I inadvertently left my magnifying glass in my vest in Papeete, they delivered it to me in Moorea. Their expertise was evident when it came to the speed and direction of currents in both Fakarava and Rangiroa. The width of these two passes creates strong currents flowing in every direction. The exact timing of the incoming tide is crucial, and divers have to deal with upwellings and side currents so as not get swept away. In Rangiroa, the divemaster had to hold onto a diver to keep her at depth. One day, however, they canceled my dive so they could take five divers from another cruise ship, leaving me to dive off the *Gauguin*, whose divemasters don’t use dive computers but do have depth gauges. Their diving was geared to the less experienced, and there were approximately 20 divers taking the certification or refresher, along with a few experienced divers. The *Paul Gauguin* is splendid, with fine accommodations, food and crew, and is expensive.” (Top Dive - [www.topdive.com](http://www.topdive.com); Paul Gauguin Cruises - [www.pgcruiises.com](http://www.pgcruiises.com))



*M/S Paul Gauguin*

**Cozumel Underwater Photo Instruction.** Reader Pec Indman (San Jose, CA) hooked up with the Liquid Motion Academy, a school of photography, film and underwater imaging on Cozumel Island. She says, “I think *Undercurrent* readers would love to know about them. Learning from award-winning cinematographers Anita and Guy Chaumette was a fantastic experience. I spent two wonderful days improving my skills. I have been taking underwater photos for years but had upgraded to a new, bigger camera. I loved the way Liquid Motion has learning modules, and that dives are one-on-one to best support learning. Anita and Guy were easily able to accommodate my schedule, and clarify what I was interested in and the skills that I wanted to work on. The night before my dive, Guy came to my hotel room to discuss the plan and the lesson on his iPad. The next day the dive boat picked me up, and Guy and I dove together, without having to worry about other divers. During the surface interval, we reviewed my photos and discussed the plan for the second dive. Guy is enthusiastic and a wealth of information -- he made me an eBook about the learning module (this time on underwater lighting), so I worked on that and included some of my photographs with comments. Anita and Guy offered my friends and me the opportunity to observe turtle hatching on the island, as they have been working on a documentary film about turtle conservation called *City Under The Sea*, which premiered in Washington DC -- see the trailer at [www.liquidmotionfilm.com/CityUnderTheSea%20Trailer.htm](http://www.liquidmotionfilm.com/CityUnderTheSea%20Trailer.htm) ([www.liquidmotionacademy.com](http://www.liquidmotionacademy.com))

**An Underwater Photo Class in Bali.** Andrew Bernat (Arlington, VA) took his course with Underwater Tribe in Tulamben in November. He says, “What makes this workshop unique is that it is one-on-one and very instruction-oriented. There was an hour of explanation and presentation on some aspect of underwater photography, then we geared up and walked in. Luca would ask me to photograph a particular feature, look at my photograph, make suggestions about something I might consider, and then we’d iterate until he was satisfied. Communication was via a slate. The workshop focus was on composition, lighting, aperture and shutter speed primarily for wide angle. My equipment was not ideal for this, as strobe arms are not long. Nor was my experience, which has been almost entirely macro. But that’s why it was really useful for improving my skills.” ([www.underwatertribe.com](http://www.underwatertribe.com))

**St. Vincent.** Indigo Dive has always received good reports from our readers, but owner Kay Wilson decided to sell, and one never knows what new owners may bring. Robert A. Munno (New York, NY), there in November, says Dave and Luz Fery are doing a fine job. “Personalized full-service diving with the lovely couple now running Indigo Dive. Twelve fantastic dives on beautiful dive sites and wrecks. No

cattle-car diving here, just laid-back dive service with the wife and me, the only divers most days. Very stress-free dive operation. The Blue Lagoon Hotel, where Indigo Dive is now headquartered, is clean and well maintained, with very nice all-water-front rooms with balconies, lovely grounds, new pool, marina, shops and two good restaurants. The only 'bad' was traveling through Barbados and dealing with the crappy airline LIAT." ([www.indigodive.com](http://www.indigodive.com))

**Truk Lagoon's Thorfinn, Revisited.** This boat is a management disaster, which we wrote about in our September issue. Perhaps the only good element was Gerard, the dive manager, but he has resigned, informing many of his old customers by writing, "After almost eight months as the dive manager, I quit this ship (gossip says it will be the next wreck of the Chuuk lagoon). My predecessor served five months, and the divemaster before him seven months. My secret to stay longer than them? After three months of work, I took a six-week break (obviously an unpaid leave). I am going to dive in other seas, even if it won't be on the self-proclaimed 'safest liveaboard in the world' by the Captain and his legendary generosity, his respect for the crew, his infinite patience, his stylish clothing and attitude, his refined and polite manners, his deep understanding of new technology, his respect for technical divers, his funny jokes about guests' nationalities, and as you have discovered on board, many more qualities that make him a kind of superman, as he modestly confesses."

*"After eight months, I quit this ship as the dive manager (gossip says it will be the next wreck of the Chuuk lagoon.)"*

**Coming Up.** We've got some excellent reviews in the works, including a liveaboard trip to Puerto Rico's Mona Island, a new out-island resort in Belize, a never-advertised Caribbean island off of Colombia, a Bahamas liveaboard, the Andamans and more.

--Ben Davison

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## From Shark Baiters to Shark Riders?

### *the misguided effort to tame wild animals*

It all started many years ago with shark feeding at Stella Maris in the Bahamas. They wanted to stimulate some sharks into a feeding frenzy for the purpose of wildlife filming, and the German-run dive center there stumbled on what was to become a regular and spectacular diving experience. It became a way of getting close-up to these predators that was hitherto thought to be impossible.

Other dive centers in the Bahamas soon caught on, and before long, such shark dives were springing up all over the tropical world. Ben Rose at UNEXSO used a chain-mail suit and found that, so protected, he could actually pet the sharks. Herwarth Voigtmann in the Maldives first went that bit further by feeding them with the bait held in his mouth. His daughter was even photographed doing it in the nude! (An accident later resulted in shark feeding being banned in that country.)

Inevitably, people seek to be more adventurous as they get more confident. Today, we are regularly regaled with YouTube footage of snorkelers riding tiger sharks, pretty young women wearing little or nothing at all while breath-hold diving with sharks, and shark-feeders performing a variety of stunts for the benefit of the ubiquitous underwater cameras.

Jeremy Stafford-Deitsch, photographer and author of a best-selling shark diving book during the '80s but now retired from diving, is scathing of such recent developments. "An often ugly stage of shark diving is upon us. The advances in underwater photographic equipment mean that getting fantastic photographs in

## What Every Liveboard Needs for Their Aging Clientele

How about a hydraulic diver lift, such as that used on the *Loyal Watcher* dive boat in the U.K.? Simply stand on the platform, which is a few feet below the surface, grab the rails, and it lifts you out of the water and up to the deck.

*Undercurrent* contributor John Bantin, a British diver, says, "Many dive boats in the U.K. now have hydraulic lifts because divers in Britain habitually use drysuits with thick undersuits (extra lead required) and multiple tanks or rebreathers, with

twin tanks as bail-out rigs. That's a lot of weight to haul up a ladder."

When asked whether such a device would make sense for Southern California divers, Ken Kurtis of Reef Seekers said, "With all the testosterone we still have on most local boats, if anyone put one of these diver-elevators in, it would be quickly be dubbed 'The Emasculator.'" But for the rest of us with creaky knees and bad backs, it's a capital idea. Have a look at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_3113oxz0RE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3113oxz0RE)

reasonable conditions is almost guaranteed. While there are plenty of responsible dive operators offering superb shark dives to genuinely interested divers, a considerable number of attention-seeking types have emerged who, seeking to use sharks to make themselves famous, indulge in ever more vulgar and irresponsible stunts for the sake of the camera -- stunts that soon appear all over the Internet, and beyond. The perpetrators inevitably claim that their antics are for the benefit of the animals. Elbowing each other out of the way for the limited limelight, these divers must come up with ever more idiotic stunts; one aging ex-model even recently posed naked among circling sharks as her own contribution to shark conservation."

George Burgess, the curator of the Shark Attack File at the Florida Museum of Natural History, has said, "It appears that the pendulum has completely swung. A newly restructured shark image has emerged in the shark-feeding dive communities, and sharks have been transformed from blood-thirsty man-eaters to playful puppies. As is often the case, the truth lies somewhere in between the two extremes."

Cristina Zenato, a "shark consultant and trainer" in Freeport, Bahamas, has carried on with the shark-petting tradition started by Ben Rose, and developed her shark dives into what may only be described as a spectacular shark ballet, handling and balancing compliant Caribbean reef sharks on their snouts and even kissing them. She apparently loves her sharks.

I asked Mike Neumann, owner of Fiji's Beqa Adventure Divers, a place that promises the most spectacular shark dive in the world, to look at footage of Zenato at work and tell me what he made of this new style of interaction between people with sharks. His reply: "The romantic might call it love, but a cynic might say the shark is assuming a position to have ectoparasites removed, and simply following what it takes to be the cleaning creature when it retreats. Clearly, the sharks have been conditioned and habituated to humans insofar as they appear to have lost their natural fear of them. This is a known side-effect of provisioned shark dives in that, when they are conducted responsibly, they lead to less defensive aggression, the flip side being those infamous beggar sharks, hence the need for good protocols. Those sharks may well want to be cleaned."

Neumann refused to be drawn into commenting on Zenato's vertical tonic immobility stunt. "Jim Abernethy [of Florida-based Scuba Adventures] has equally amazing footage of lemon sharks snuggling up to divers at the Tiger Beach cleaning station and equally only being rewarded with a friendly rub. Both Jimmy and Cristina have removed vast numbers of fishing hooks from the sharks, so the sharks may indeed regard them as some sort of cleaner organism of consequence. It may be something else, especially in the case of Cristina, who induces a trance-like state by stimulating the shark's snout. The sharks may simply come in for the resulting pleasurable sensation.

"Shark dives need to be regarded as wildlife encounters, and conditioning needs to be kept to a minimum, limited to attracting otherwise shy species. All else is simply unwarranted and often disrespectful

showmanship that benefits only the human, with only more risks for the animal. Cristina and Jimmy get a pass not so much for what they do but for who they are; the other shark molesters not so much. Once you've logged thousands of shark dives, devoted your life to shark conservation, but above all, removed hundreds of hooks, you, too, will be entitled to some rather superfluous and clearly not reciprocated shark love -- petting, scratching, hugging and kissing included!"

Not to be outdone by Zenato, Eli Martinez from San Juan, TX, has been seen habitually vertically spinning Emma, a well-known large tiger shark at Tiger Beach in the Bahamas, with her snout on the palm of his hand, and he does this apparently without the protection of a chainmail suit. Where will it all stop?

Neither should we forget diving icon Valerie Taylor, the greatest shark handler of them all. Taylor may be Australian, but recent attempts to set up similar shark-patting dives by fellow Australian and shark educator Tony Isaacson on Queensland's Sunshine Coast have met with a lot of resistance. Local dive operator Philip Hart says, "There seems to have been a success with 'shark whispering' in some other parts of the world, but we are a long way from conditioning our local predators to come up for a cuddle. Encouraging them to come in close to our major swimming beaches sounds more like an accident waiting to happen than a fun experience."

While it's patently true that it is natural for sharks to stay clear of the air-bubbling intruders that have only recently, in evolutionary terms, entered their world (it is only the lure of free food that will bring them close enough for good photography), one could argue that these more extreme human interactions are reminiscent of no-longer-politically-correct lion-tamers at a circus. If such behavior would be frowned upon with wild animals on land, why should we be so enchanted by it underwater?

*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 dive 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)*

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## Why Divers Die

### *factors to consider before you go underwater*

Every year, hundreds of divers die around the world. Their deaths are usually caused by bad decisions they make, like diving beyond one's level of competence, diving with known medical conditions or diving in bad sea conditions. Most dive-related deaths are avoidable, and many of the incidents might have had better outcomes through better training, better knowledge of the associated risks, appropriate medical screening, better gear maintenance -- and just plain common sense.

Since our founding in 1975, we have published significant dive fatality cases so that our readers might better prepare themselves for safe diving. Divers Alert Network's Asia-Pacific division publishes the most detailed cases of diving and snorkeling fatalities; its latest report covers dive deaths in Australian waters in 2010. We hope that by explaining these cases, divers will understand better how they could contribute to their own demise, and exercise proper judgment throughout their diving career.

#### **Tropical Divers to Cold-Water Divers**

A preponderance of our readers make all their dives from resorts and liveaboards in tropical waters, and smart ones know that tropical training and experience can't be transferred to cold water beach diving. This 31-year-old woman had been certified in the warm waters of Thailand and was making her first dive in nine months in much colder water in Australia. That meant a 5mm semi-drysuit, with which she wore

20 pounds of weight, far more than she was used to. She and her buddy made a shore dive, with visibility much lower than in tropical waters, and after 20 minutes in shallow water, her buddy couldn't see her. Rather than continue searching, he went to the local dive shop for help. Divers soon found her lying on the bottom, face up, at 13 feet, regulator out of her mouth. She was dragged into the boat, unconscious, and CPR couldn't bring her back. While the buddy system breakdown was tragic, heavy weights, new gear and cold water were serious contributors.

### The Perils of Diving -- or Even Practicing -- Alone

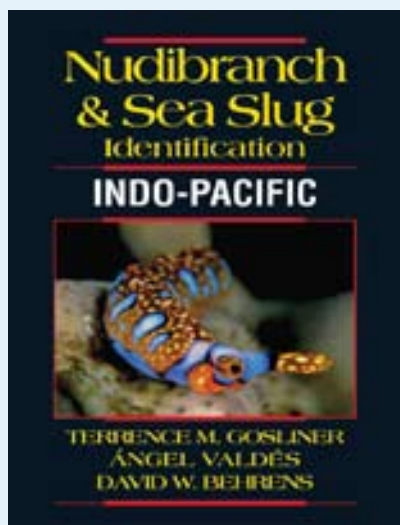
A fit 27-year-old freediver was practicing breath-hold in the five-foot-deep pool of his apartment complex. At some point, another apartment tenant walked by and noticed him lying at the bottom, unconscious. Ten minutes later an ambulance arrived and hauled the man out, noting that he had regurgitated. At the hospital, a CT scan showed severe hypoxic brain injuries, and he died the next day.

Even though she hadn't dived in 11 years, this 46-year-old woman woke up one morning and, for some reason, decided to bike to the beach, towing her gear in a wagon, for a shore dive. The choppy waters were only 64 degrees, and visibility was less than six feet. Six hours later, her bicycle was still in the same place,

## *Nudibranch and Sea Slug Identification: Indo-Pacific*

Indonesia has so much to offer the nudibranch enthusiast. For example, on Nudi Wall at Lembeh Strait, nudibranchs litter the seabed as if a great big sack of Gummy Bears has been carelessly tipped out. Nudibranchs are colorful slugs that wear their feathery gills on their backs. There are so many varieties, but how do you know which you've seen?

The Indo-Pacific area is so vast, too. It makes the Caribbean look like a pond. You'll find critters existing in vast numbers from Indonesia's Pulau Weh in the west to The Bird's Head Peninsular to the east. Add the stretch of tropical water from the coast of South Africa all the way to the west coast of the Americas (where species from further east have "leaked"), and it becomes immediately apparent there is an almost never-ending supply of nudibranchs and sea slugs to discover.



That turns many macro photographers into nudibranch photo buffs. The problem is to reliably identify what you've collected in your camera's memory card. New World Publications has come to the rescue with *Nudibranch and Sea Slug*

*Identification: Indo-Pacific*, just as it has with the identification of invertebrates, corals and fishes closer to home.

The book does what it says on the cover, and has a familiar format, but it's a weighty tome of 400 pages packed with colour pictures, usually six to a page, along with basic information to help the reader get the best chance of the right identification. It's broken into sections, separating acteonids, sea hares, head-shielded and sapsucking slugs from the main bulk of true nudibranchs.

The three authors -- Terrence M. Gosliner, Ángel Valdés and David W. Behrens -- are well-established marine scientists who have often collaborated, including an earlier book with a similar title (now out of print). This new book represents an improved version of that earlier work, with more than 500 additional photographs and species, pointing out that most of these critters can only be found in the eastern Pacific, so they have concentrated their efforts entirely in the tropical zone.

With a \$60 list price, it's by no means inexpensive, but I can imagine this book becoming the standard reference on liveboards and in dive centers, and also be waiting on the bookshelves of many macro photographers to help with getting the names right, once they have sorted their pictures.

To purchase *Nudibranch and Sea Slug Identification*, go to [www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/bookpicks.shtml](http://www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/bookpicks.shtml) -- you'll get Amazon's best price, and we'll donate our commission to save coral reefs.

and she was reported missing. Police divers found her body two days later, in three feet of water, 500 feet from where she had started, her tank empty. Tests found her regulator to be in poor condition, with sediment deposits, corrosion, and distorted O-rings, among other things. The BC inflator was faulty, leaking air into the BC, indicating that she would have needed to dump air regularly to keep her position in the water. She was also wearing a too-thin wetsuit for that water temperature, and too much weight. Speculation is that she ran out of the air and drowned, but with all these issues, anything might have happened.

*Even though she hadn't dived in 11 years, this diver woke up one morning and, for some reason, decided to bike to the beach to do a solo shore dive.*

### **Bad Conditions? Scrap the Dive**

When the conditions are bad, resort boats don't go out, and liveboards may not let their divers in the water. Divers off on their own, however, must make their own decisions, but because they have driven long distances to dive, or perhaps have a buddy intent on diving, some, against their better judgment, proceed with dives they should have scrapped.

This 46-year-old diver was already anxious when setting out with her buddy on a shore dive in a sheltered harbor. As they finned toward a rock wall, she indicated her dive computer wasn't working, but they carried on. At the wall, the buddy checked her tank and only saw 1400 psi, but they decided to keep on diving past the wall. Forty minutes later, the woman grabbed her buddy's arm and showed her gauge: 300 psi. The buddy gave her his octopus, but five minutes later, at 23 feet, the woman grabbed her buddy's arm and indicated she wanted to surface. On the surface, she gasped for air and couldn't speak, only communicating by nodding or shaking her head. The divers were 300 feet from shore and swamped by waves, so her buddy said they should re-descend, but the woman couldn't use her regulator or snorkel, even with her buddy's help. He rolled her onto her back and started to tow her while she kept gasping for air, then went unconscious, with froth pouring from her mouth. A nearby boat got her to shore in eight minutes, but waiting paramedics couldn't shock her heartbeat back. Police later found that there was a big leak in the hose attached to the BC, which explained her high air usage, but her not paying attention to her anxiety and lack of air at the beginning of the dive set the stage for its fatal end.

### **What is Buddy Responsibility?**

Of course, every diver is responsible for himself, but what should a diver do when it's clear to him that his buddy is not operating on all cylinders? Do you let it pass, ask a few gentle questions ("Are you ok?"), get tough ("Jack, you really shouldn't be diving today"), or just refuse to go so your buddy won't.

In this case, the buddy was observant but passive and went along for the ride with his experienced, 51-year-old cave-diver friend. He noted his friend had been unhappy, withdrawn and distracted all weekend, and needed several reminders about usually routine aspects of dive preparation. Outfitted with a new drysuit and regulator he was trying out, he ascended into a cave. He looked clumsy, his buddy noticed, and needed help dropping his travel air tank after the eight-minute descent to 115 feet. He didn't respond to his buddy's signals and may have been suffering nitrogen narcosis. Regardless, his buddy dropped to 170 feet before noting his friend was above him at 150 feet, inverted in his drysuit. The buddy rose and righted his friend, who signaled he wanted to ascend. His buddy led him up, but his friend fell behind and then stopped. When the buddy tried to help again, his friend panicked and pulled his buddy's mask off. The buddy then made a barely controlled ascent, nearly drowning, then descended again for a decompression stop. He saw his friend finning around at 115 feet before becoming inverted again and not breathing. When police recovered his body the next day, he was tangled in his guideline, and his tanks were empty. His dive computer showed several ascents, including one up to 45 feet, before he died. It's likely that the combo of his poor mental state and profound narcosis led to his death.

## Getting a Post-Dive Call from the U.S. Air Force

*Divers doing drift dives and trips to remote destinations could find it worthwhile to bring along an Electronic Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB), which, when activated, will send out a distress signal via satellite to identify the position of the user and alert the search-and-rescue team. EPIRBs are water-resistant on the surface, but typically they're not pressure proof, so a diver must protect it in a pressure-proof canister during the dive. Sometimes canisters have their own issues, like flooding, and as Undercurrent subscriber Marc Pinto (Denver, CO), found out, it can cause plenty of action above water while you're finning blissfully unawares. Here's his story.*

I took a trip to Cozumel last year and dived with Deep Exposure Dive Center. On one day of that trip, my buddy and I were the only divers, and upon surfacing from a dive, the folks on the boat said someone from the U.S. Air Force wanted to speak to me. Not having much regular contact with the USAF, it only took me a few minutes to think to check my EPIRB canister before calling the guy back. It was then I discovered that the canister had flooded (due, I believe, to my mistake of not opening the canister to equalize the pressure before diving with it). It apparently got out a partial transmission before succumbing to water damage, but that was

enough to alert the USAF Search and Rescue folks, and also to identify the message as having come from my EPIRB, since I re-register it periodically. But it was not enough to also transmit my location. So a USAF Captain contacted my emergency contact, who, unable to reach me, called Deep Exposure.

I sheepishly called the Air Force Captain, who was quite nice, but had apparently been insistent in wanting to speak directly to me, despite being told by the Deep Exposure people that all was well. I apologized profusely, and pleaded with him to not put me on any sort of "guys crying wolf" list, because if I ever really needed to deploy my EPIRB, I was quite interested in having them show up.

The story ended well: There was no emergency, the USAF was not upset with me, and I gained additional comfort in diving with the EPIRB, knowing it actually worked as it was supposed to.

But two asides. First, while an EPIRB is helpful in any number of problem situations, there are likely many remote dive locations where, even if the USAF knew we were in trouble, there wouldn't be anyone on the other end for them to contact to actually give assistance. And second, in my roughly eight years of diving, I have never seen another diver diving with an EPIRB. Apparently, that level of safety doesn't sell.

## The Heavy Load of Obesity

We've frequently commented on how obesity is a primary factor in many dive injuries and fatalities: The more weight one packs, the less fit he may be to dive. Obese divers and snorkelers have a larger workload at depth, but especially on the surface.

Take this too-heavy 77-year-old snorkeler on a day trip to a pontoon site on the Great Barrier Reef. He had had coronary bypass surgery and a history of hypertension, but he failed to list his medical conditions when asked at the start of the trip. Though initially calm after entering the water, he was swamped by swells and hit his head on a buoy, causing him to panic and climb onto his buddy. The boat lookout sent out a driver, who grabbed the snorkeler's hand as he went limp and unconscious, but even with the help of two assistants, he couldn't lift the obese snorkeler into the boat, so they towed him to the pontoon. CPR did not revive him.

There was a similar case at the Great Barrier Reef the same year, where another obese snorkeler panicked and asked to go back to the boat. The guide steered him toward the approaching tender, but he couldn't lift himself aboard and went limp. He was too heavy for the driver to haul up, so he was towed 150 feet back to the boat. The captain tried CPR and oxygen (there was no defibrillator aboard) as the boat drove 55 minutes to the nearest island, where a defibrillator got no response.

A question that plagues the industry is whether a dive operator should refuse to let a morbidly obese patron dive. Mainly, if a diver presents medical certification, that's enough. However, some people haven't told the truth. A savvy operator suspects the customer just doesn't have the body to dive, but he takes their business anyway, though in some cases, he may not be doing the diver a favor.



A severely overweight 49-year-old openwater course student received a dive medical clearance from a doctor, who noted her obesity and hypertension, but she failed to tell him about her previous heart and breathing troubles, which would have been disqualifiers. For the first openwater dive, she was with several divers and two instructors, one of which buddied with her. They snorkeled to a buoy 165 feet from shore, but she was too buoyant, so her buddy put an extra six pounds in her BC pocket. Almost immediately after descending, she surfaced and complained of being sick, then started breathing rapidly. Back in the shallows, she took puffs of albutamol, a prescription drug to open up the lung's airways, but she soon became unresponsive and blue in the face, with frothy sputum coming from her mouth. Paramedics couldn't find a pulse, and a defibrillator didn't work. Had she told her doctor her full medical condition, she wouldn't have been cleared to dive, and she'd still be alive.

--Vanessa Richardson

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## Travel Agent or the Internet? Part I

### *which option gives you a better dive trip overall?*

When I began traveling abroad decades ago, I always used a travel agent because they had information I couldn't get my hands on. As I became an experienced traveler and as the Internet developed, I gradually began setting up my own trips, but only if I'm headed to one destination. If I'm going to more than one venue or doing more than just diving, I get help. For example, on a trip to dive Utila, I also wanted to hike in Guatemala. I let a travel agent put that together, knowing there were too many elements to get them all right. Then again, when I dived Little Cayman not long ago, it was easy enough to do it myself.

Most divers I know switch between the two options, depending on what type of dive trip they're planning. Some, however, always pick one over the other. For example, *Undercurrent* subscriber Stefani Axelrod (San Francisco, CA) began using Outdoor Travel Adventures in San Diego ever since she booked a dive trip to Indonesia with them in 2010. "After I spent many hours on the Internet, I found using an agent made the whole experience more pleasant and less time-consuming." Letting someone else do the research for you does indeed save bundles of time and stress.

Another subscriber, Bob Speir (Falls Church, VA), has the opposite view. "In my limited experience with Caradonna and Maduro/Fanta Seas, I found they offer nothing over self-booking and cost you money and hassle. Usually, what the dive travel agent offers is what a resort is already offering online. Doubt it? Try comparing Maduro for prices at Bonaire's Buddy Dive, versus Buddy's website. On a trip to dive in Galapagos two years ago, I did \$1,000 better arranging my own flights and en-route lodging compared to the arrangements that Caradonna offered. Best deals are obtained using the airlines' vacation services or Travelocity for flights and lodging, and then deal with the dive operators directly."

Two views for sure, but travel agencies must be doing something right: The American Society of Travel Agents reports that 54 percent of travel agencies saw an increase in revenues in 2014, and were upbeat about future business. And it's not just "Internet-illiterate" older divers who use dive travel agencies, says Richard Mitsoda, managing director of Maduro Travel. "An equal amount of Maduro Travel's business comes from Millennials, Gen Xers and Boomers. The 25-54 age group makes up the bulk of our customers. It's not that they don't have the ability to research online; they want information from the people who have the knowledge and who they trust."

So let us see what travel agents do bring to the table.

## Saving Time and, Usually, Money

With countless choices for flights, hotels, tours, etc., unless you're booking a direct flight to one destination, booking a dive trip online can be headache-inducing. According to one survey of 2,000 worldwide travelers, 20 percent said it took them more than five hours to research and book travel online. If you're retired, perhaps that's an enjoyable way to spend time. If you're employed, you may not have that time.

Some travel agent charge extra for services (say, \$25 for their time and research), but Cindi LaRaia, owner of Dive Discovery Travel in San Rafael, CA, says divers don't pay any more for trips that she, like most travel agents, books. "We make our commission from suppliers, and because we offer their specials and showcase them on our sites, they are happy to pay us."

Agencies frequently do offer the same prices as operators, she acknowledges, however, they can also add value. "We know the best routing on airlines, and can check that quickly. We also help those who have miles and want to use them to a far destination. I check the routing on the carrier and partners so they can get those flights sorted out -- at no charge to them. That's a huge timesaver and value."

While there are those such as Speir, who beat his agency's airline prices, Axelrod says her agency saves her between \$500 to \$1,000 on overseas tickets. "My agency was able to get deals we weren't able to find."

*One subscriber's dive travel agency saves her between \$500 to \$1,000 on overseas airline tickets. "They got deals we weren't able to find."*

Ken Knezick, owner of Island Dreams Travel in Houston, says that's especially true these days. "If I look at a specific itinerary in our travel agent's SABRE airline booking system and compare it with the fare quoted directly on United Airlines' site, in almost every case our SABRE fare is lower. The airlines have gone to great lengths to get trav-

elers to book directly with them, but now they are charging those same fliers a considerable premium over what [we can get]."

Kate Rice, who writes about airlines for TravelPulse.com, says agents who book a lot of flights develop strong relationships with airline sales representatives. "That means they have double leverage that they can use on your behalf -- the purchasing power of the agency group they're affiliated with, as well as the personal relationships they have with their sales reps." Of course, they have to work that relationship, which may not have happened in Speir's case.

Many travel agencies offer exclusive deals through their emails or websites. Mitsoda says Maduro Travel has regular deals. They recently announced prices for dive trips to Dominica, Indonesia, and Bonaire that Mitsoda says no one else has. For example, a two-resort combination dive trip to Minahasa Lagoon Resort and either Eco Divers Manado or Eco Divers Resort Lembeh start at \$1,078 for seven nights, plus a \$200 resort/dive credit and a totally refundable deposit. Says Mitsoda, "We can offer many things beyond just the price."

## Get Exactly What You Want

If you don't know what type of trip you want -- land-based or liveaboard, muck diving or beautiful reefs, bare-bones budget or a room with a view -- or where exactly to go (Indonesia diving is spread over thousands of miles), it's the travel agent's job to guide you in the right direction and tailor a trip precisely to your needs.

When Wendy Pacofsky, vice-president of Outdoor Travel Adventures (Axelrod's agency), talks with a prospective client, she asks a series of questions. "First, I ask what the budget will be, because that affects everything and will narrow down destination, accommodations, airfare and ground

## What Really Happened to the *Truk Siren*?

"Fires can be a hotbed for rumor. When the *Truk Siren* ran onto the reef during Typhoon Maysak last year, it was destroyed by a fire that started later. Immediately, the rumor mill went into action, suggesting the vessel had been torched on the instruction of the owners in order to claim a total loss on the insurance. Vessel owners do not destroy their livelihoods intentionally, nor do they ever wish their passengers

to come to harm. Neither are insurance companies' beneficent uncles waiting to pay out on a whim. They employ investigators.

"It was only when I heard the boat's owner discussing the difficulty he had with his insurers and with another boat owner that I decided to find out what really happened to the *Truk Siren* and put the record straight. This is what I was told . . ."

Read what John Bantin found out in his post "Burning Question," the latest addition to our blog page, at [www.undercurrent.org/blog](http://www.undercurrent.org/blog)

arrangements." If they don't have a place in mind, she asks, what time of year are you traveling? How many days do you have, including travel time? Are you looking for easy reef diving, big animals, photogenic dive sites? What's your skill level? Are you okay with red-eye flights and multiple connections, or do you want one-stop travel? Do you want land-based activities? Clearly, a trip can get complicated, too much so for some Internet surfers, especially inexperienced travelers.

Say you're going to Cozumel for the first time. You don't want to book your room a \$20 taxi ride away from your dive operator. A good agent will see that you don't. In fact, notes Knezick, "Cozumel has 130 different dive operators, and the one that's the cheapest is not assuredly the best. It's our job to understand which operator has the most knowledge of dive sites, the best gear, the best-trained staff and offers the best experience." Mitsoda says all of Maduro Travel's agents are certified divers and their average travel agent experience is 18 to 20 years.

### Get Connected

A good agent has an extensive Rolodex (well, it's probably an e-Rolodex these days). They have people on the ground to connect you with, such as local tour guides and people you can reach out to if you encounter problems.

But that doesn't necessarily mean you will get a lot of freebies on dive trips -- maybe free Nitrox, sometimes. But Knezick recently received an email from a client he had booked at Thresher Cove Resort on the Philippine island of Cebu, stating, "Thanks to you, we've been labeled as VIPs, specifically because we booked through Island Dreams."

### Have Someone Hold Your Hand

Despite extensive travel planning, you're bound to encounter some bumps and an agent that has your back, even when thousands of miles away, can make your trip less stressful. Travel agencies have the clout to get money back; they have the clout to make sure you are in the room you paid for, or that you are charged properly.

All the travel agents we talked to say troubleshooting is a regular part of the job. Mitsoda says that before Winter Storm Jonas hit the East Coast in mid-January, his agents were rebooking trips while it was just a blip on the map. "We have long-term relationships with the suppliers, so we could move flights and stay dates and not incur fees. Who has more leverage -- a person who spends thousands of dollars for one trip, or someone like us who spends tens of thousands on regular trips and have relationships going back years?"

LaRaia says she often drops everything to problem-solve for clients. She had a family recently on their way to Playa Del Carmen via Cancun, when their flights were canceled and changed at the last minute. "They sent me an e-mail, and I was immediately on the phone to the dive resort, to tell them

to advise the van-transfer company to be prepared for the air problems and late arrival, so that everyone was aware and didn't just leave the family stranded." Try that on your own.

*Can you find as good, or better, deals on dive trips than the pros? If you're game for a "travel face-off," e-mail me.*

And when you're suffering from illness, a death in the family or anything else that requires you to cancel a dive trip, a good agent will handle that while you deal with other burdens. Rickie and Chrisanda Button (Elkins, AR) had returned from a dive trip last spring and thought Rickie was just exhausted from

extensive diving, but it turned out he had metastatic cancer and renal failure. "Obviously, we would not be making a three-week liveaboard trip in Indonesia that October as planned," says Chrisanda. "Reeling under the emotional impact and very busy with medical appointments, I contacted Kimberly Larson, our agent at Reef and Rainforest. Kim did all the cancellations herself, and made a new invoice for me of all nonrefundable charges. That invoice was very helpful in filing a claim for trip cancellation with our travel insurer, TravelGuard, who paid our claim in full and promptly. Without Kim's help, I would not have been able to make the necessary cancellations, let alone file an insurance claim. How many travel agents would be as helpful in cancelling a trip as in booking a trip?" (Rickie's cancer treatment is going well, so now they're looking for a good destination to do "rehab" diving.)

Another thing to keep in mind: Your agency most likely is required to have a bond or license for financial protection, which guarantee their clients' money in case they fail to deliver. Regulations and penalties vary state by state, but basically your money is totally protected should anything go wrong, like the airline goes broke or your dive resort closes unexpectedly. If you book direct, you do not get this protection.

### **Price or Value?**

Michael Feld, who leads the New York City dive group Ocean Blue Divers, has been scheduling dive trips for his group since 2006. He's well experienced in leading his group, but he always books through Deep Blue Adventures. "An annual trip is to Buddy Dive in Bonaire - we've been there nine times, so I could handle the whole thing myself. But agents add logistical value, especially when it comes to booking multiple people. Cheryl Patterson is quality-oriented and knows what we like."

For many, the decision may come down to whether price is all that matters or whether they want service, as well. As Mitsoda puts it, "Do you buy a camera from Amazon because it's \$15 less? Or do you buy it at Harvey's camera shop downtown, even if it's \$15 more because they'll show you how to use the features? For an agent, if you can bring both a good price and good value to the table, that's the perfect equation."

### **Readers, We Challenge You to a Travel Face-Off**

Mitsoda says he knows some people will never use his dive agency or any other; they'll always use the Internet. Like reader Bob Speir, who's sure he can always get a better deal online. So readers, if you're as confident as Speir in finding good deals, we want to know.

And for the second part of this story next month, we are challenging you to a "face-off": Who gets the better dive trip package overall, the dive travel agent or the online-surfing *Undercurrent* subscriber? We're asking a few dive travel agencies to put together sample dive trip itineraries for us to see what they come up with in price and offerings. And we'll ask a few intrepid subscribers to volunteer to do the same.

Can you find as good, or better, deals on these sample dive trips than the pros? If you're game, e-mail me at [EditorBenD@undercurrent.org](mailto:EditorBenD@undercurrent.org)

--Ben Davison

# Flotsam & Jetsam

**The Calypso Will Sail Again.** Last April, we reported that Jacques Cousteau's famous research vessel was about to be scrapped due to unresolved squabbles between his family and a French boatyard, where the old boat was languishing. But the *Calypso* is getting a second chance. The Cousteau Society says that this spring, the "*Calypso* will be able to leave the . . . shipyard. Restored, she will sail again as an ambassador for the seas and oceans as Captain Cousteau wished."

**Leonardo DiCaprio's Scary Dive.** In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Leonardo DiCaprio says he owes his life to fellow actor Edward Norton. The two were diving in the Galapagos while filming a documentary about climate change when DiCaprio noticed his tank was out of air. Norton was a great dive buddy -- he stayed close by, rushed over to offer his octopus, and the two made a controlled ascent. Good thing DiCaprio made it -- he recently gave more money to environmental causes, with the biggest chunk (\$6 million) going to the ocean-focused nonprofit Oceana and to Skytruth for Global Fishing Watch, a platform that uses satellite data to monitor fishing activities. (If you believe his story, another in the long list of celebrity near-death diving stories, please honk your horn -- your dive horn, that is.)

**Tag Turtles and Sharks at Cocos Island.** Turtle Island Restoration Network (TIRN) does an honorable job in saving sea turtles worldwide, but it needs the help of you, my fellow diver, both financially and physically, to do so. They're offering three splendid dive trips to Cocos Island to tag and track sea turtles and sharks to protect their migration routes -- April 22 to May 6 and August 19-31 aboard the *Sea Hunter*, and November 29 to December 9 aboard the *Argo*. Rates start at \$6,132 and include meals, nitrox fills,

marine park fee and transfers from hotel to the dock -- it's largely tax-deductible because it helps finance the research expedition. And there's more! TIRN is raffling off one spot on its *Argo* trip -- tickets are \$100 each. For information, go to <http://seaturtles.org/events>

**Will Paul Allen's Billions Fix This Cayman Reef?** If you're the co-founder of Microsoft and owner of the Seattle Seahawks and Portland Trail Blazers, of course you own a big yacht. But Paul Allen's 303-foot *Tatoosh* has been charged with destroying a large swath of protected coral reef in Grand Cayman. The Cayman News Service reports the *Tatoosh* was anchored near the *Doc Poulson* wreck and The Knife dive site in the West Bay on January 14 when its anchor chain destroyed 14,000 square feet of the coral reef, 80 percent of it. Allen's company defended itself by stating, "The local port authority had directed the *Tatoosh* to anchor in a designated area, and the crew moved the vessel on its own accord as soon as it learned from local divers there might be a problem." Allen, probably distracted because his Seahawks failed to make the Super Bowl, could incur a hefty fine if he's found responsible, but the Cayman government seems to shrug its shoulders at the giant cruise ships and billionaire mega-yacht owners who have dismantled the beautiful reefs with errant chains. By the way, "*Tatoosh*" is derived from a native American word meaning "nourishing beast." Allen got it half right.

**Good News for Many Mantas.** WildAid, the late Peter Benchley's favorite conservation organization, says the Peruvian government has approved strong regulations to protect the giant Pacific manta ray. According to the Manta Trust, Peru has the largest population of Pacific mantas. It now joins dozens of other countries with manta protection laws, including neighboring Ecuador, which is crucial since the animals migrate to the Galapagos. However, Shawn Heinrichs of WildAid warns, "Manta rays are targeted across the world for their meat, skin, and gills. This has driven many regional populations to the brink in the last decade."

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