

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Aqua Cat, The Bahamas

reefs and the vessel showing their age

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Dear Fellow Diver,

The 28-foot Sea Dog pulled alongside one of the mostly uninhabited 365 rocky islands that make up the Exumas archipelago. Wearing my mask, snorkel, and fins, I jumped into the warm, clear water from the jet boat that the Aqua Cat tows for eco-adventures such as this. I snorkeled a few yards to a crack at the end of the small island.

Thunderball Grotto didn't look like much from the outside, but as I swam through the darkness, I entered a beautiful cavern with a huge domed ceiling containing several skylights. Rays of sunlight reflected off the water's surface and danced over the dark stone walls, making the cave unusually bright and inviting. Sunbeams danced across the backs of small tropical fish, mainly sergeant majors. Here, in the James Bond movie of the same name, nuclear warheads were stored. Yes, Sean Connery had once hung out here. The memory of that giant chamber in the middle of a hollow island will forever be in my mind.

My June American Airlines flight had been delayed, so by the time we cleared formalities in Nassau and waited for another couple who had issues because they were bringing a drone to the island, we arrived an hour late at the 102-foot Aqua Cat, moored offshore. Lead Divemaster Diego, a youthful 42-year-old Brazilian with a great sense of humor, showed us five latecomers



Aqua Cat



room, and the vinyl was yellowed. There were rust and corrosion around the shower and sink. I was put off by a moldy shower curtain liner and threadbare bath towels. Often, at nights the cabin walls pulsated from an off-balance washing machine running in the nearby laundry room. Everything in the cabin seemed loose and rattled. I could not close the curtains because the rails that held them down were no longer attached to the wall. The air conditioner kept the room cold, but it made awful noises.

Most days the crew offered two morning dives, two after lunch, and a night dive -- as well as daily shore excursions and eco-adventures. The Aqua Cat's 11 cabins were full with 24 certified divers -- ages 17-76 -- and the majority made most of the dives. "Bahama Bob," the oldest aboard, had dived the Exumas in the '80s and hoped he would feel young again by diving here once more.

On my first dive, I was disappointed with the murky 40-foot visibility at Dog Rocks reef, covered in brown algae. There were few fish, a stingray being the only exciting creature I encountered during an hour in the 79°F water. After lunch, a few of us boarded the Sea Dog and took a short ride to Lizard Island. The last time I was there, the iguanas were hungry and aggressive. Even though I used a stick to feed them grapes, I still got my thumb bit. This time, the large brown lizards behaved impeccably.

Weather was beautiful, with mornings calm and clear, leading Captain Ron, who

around and assigned our dive stations. A few of the aluminum tanks -- 63, 80, and 100 -- had screw-in inserts, so I was able to use my DIN regulator without an adapter. I rushed to get my gear assembled and then headed to the salon for a cold hamburger and salad while Captain Ron explained what to do in case of an emergency.

Three of us shared cabin number 10, the largest on the boat, with a queen bed and a single bed. While the craft had recently been in dry dock, other than new carpet, I could see no significant improvements. When I was aboard eight years ago, she was a beautiful boat, but time has not been kind. Paint peeled in the bath-

Life Insurance Quotes for Scuba Divers

Scuba divers often find that life insurance is hard to come by once they acknowledge they dive. The web, of course, has made it easy to compare all sorts of products, and now you may search for life insurance policies from carriers that insure divers.

LifeQuotes.com, an online life insurance exchange, provides instant quotes from 50 life insurance companies. It lets you compare policies, and then buy from any company that will accept you. Most are well known and you can find policies from \$100,000 to \$25 million.

One enters all the standard information about health, then, as a diver, you enter the number of dives made in a year, the maximum depth, whether you are an instructor or professional diver, and whether you make high-risk or technical dives. Once you've answered the questions, up pops quotes from those insurance companies that will take you, along with their policies for you to read. You can buy online, talk to an agent, or share the information with your own insurance agent.

One downside: you're required to enter your address, phone number, email address, etc., which exposes you to data mining. I created a persona to get my quotes. To look at various scenarios, I also had to remove the cookies LifeQuotes placed.

– Ben Davison

has been with the company for 25 years, to say he'd never seen weather this nice for a week. But that didn't cure my disappointment in the reefs, fish life, and visibility -- the exception being Split Coral Head, where, from under the boat, I could actually see the drop-off. Although I saw no fish, at least the water was clear and the very deep wall, covered with wisps of wire coral, looked healthy. I stopped at 99 feet and was barely over the edge.

After a short swim back across the sandy bottom, I explored a large, high-profile piece of reef starting at 40 feet and rising to within 15 feet of the surface. Though it was not teeming with life, I did see barracudas, fairy basslets, porgies, and a tiny secretary blenny hiding in a hole on a large brain coral. I saw few butterfly or parrotfish and no trunkfish, trumpets or eels -- could this be the future created by lionfish and algae? Back under the boat, I watched six-foot-plus gray reef sharks round up horse-eyed jacks.

It was here that the Aqua Cat held its weekly shark feed, so it was not surprising that sharks hung around, going about their business calmly when humans weren't intervening. All that changed on my next dive -- the shark feed. We 34 divers descended together, swam to the mooring pin, and knelt in a semi-circle as Diego swam in with the chumsicle. A dozen reef sharks and hundreds of jacks attacked the frozen bait ball for nearly 30 minutes until Diego removed what remained of the chum. I moseyed back to the boat, followed by several sharks that hung out with me during my safety stop. The well-fed gray reef sharks had calmed down and just cruised by gracefully.

Diving for Bahama Bob was a bit of a struggle. When he was ready to enter the water, the crew would put his fins on his feet. When he returned after a brief time underwater, they helped him out of his gear at the surface before he climbed the ladder. Bob made only four dives, but he had a great time while befriending all the passengers and crew, quickly learning everyone's names and where they were from. One day, Bahama Bob and his friends skipped a dive to go fishing; they returned with a huge wahoo, which became our dinner. Another day, after kayaking, he was ready to sell everything and move to the Exumas.

The day of my fabulous snorkel at Thunderball Grotto, we stopped at Big Major Cay -- known as Pig Beach -- to see the famous swimming pigs. Who knew pigs could swim? The friendly feral pigs ran from the shade of trees to greet us. I waded in waist-deep water to feed them apple wedges. The family of about 20 adorable pigs lives freely on the sandy beach, basking in the sun and swimming in the surf -- although the young ones stay ashore until they learn how to swim. They aren't native, and the island is uninhabited, so no one knows how they came to live on Big Major Cay.

Another fun break was the shore excursion to the Exumas Land and Sea Park. Carlis, the competent first mate, piloted several of us to a small beach where a sperm whale skeleton lay; its autopsy had revealed black plastic bags in its stomach. I walked across Banshee Creek in the mangroves and stopped to play the musical rocks -- large pieces of limestone that had different tones when struck -- then climbed BooBoo Hill, the highest point in the island chain, once a pirate lookout. The near 90-degree heat and high humidity were taxing, so I was happy to return to the Aqua Cat for the next dive. At Danger Reef, I saw a humongous loggerhead turtle with three big remoras riding on its back. Several six-foot gray reef sharks patrolled the site and horse-eye jacks spiraled under the boat during



Happy pig at Big Major Cay

Aqua Cat

Diving (Experienced).....	★★★
Diving (Beginning)	★★★ ½
Snorkelling	★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Food.....	★★★★★
Service and attitude.....	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean scale

my safety stop. Exiting the water was as easy as climbing stairs. A crew member was waiting on deck to offer assistance and give a quick rinse with warm water.

After lunch, I took a Sea Dog trip to Shroud Cay, where the water was perfectly clear. I attempted stand-up paddle boarding but only made it to my knees. Then I hiked to Camp Driftwood, the highest point of the island, to take in the view before a thunderstorm rolled in.

The 'Washing Machine' was a crazy drift dive. At the countdown, we 17 divers, purposely negative, simultaneously entered the water and sank to the bottom. Following Diego, we drifted in the swift current. I felt like I was stuck on the spin cycle as I passed through converging currents between

small islands. I dropped into a hole and got tossed about before getting spit back into the flow. I drifted over a small nurse shark, floated past a school of spade-fish, and zoomed by a huge lobster that was hanging onto a small reef for dear life. A turtle greeted me as I was carried along. Indeed, a fun dive.

The food was delicious and plentiful, thanks to Chef Mishka from South Africa and her great recipes. Breakfast consisted of fresh fruit, yogurt, cereal, juice, coffee or tea and a dish like pancakes, omelets, or quiche. Buffet lunches had a soup of the day and salad, in addition to hot choices like pizza, tacos, or lasagna, followed by fresh-baked cookies. At the dinner buffet, I had the choice of a vegetarian option, a meat entree, and a fish dish, such as fresh wahoo with avocado sauce. Wine was offered, and there was a bar upstairs at the sundeck. Beer on tap, wine, and rum were available all day, but one drink ended your diving day. I opted out of night dives, preferring to socialize at cocktail hour rather than battle the annoying bloodworms that were attracted to light beams. Those who dived saw a few octopuses out and about.

Besides the captain, first mate, lead divemaster, and chef, seven other crewmembers helped keep the guests safe and comfortable. Among three young divemasters, Adam was from South Africa and told the corniest jokes. Slim, blonde, soft-spoken Erika came from Hungary, and 20-year-old Austin was American. They took turns giving briefings and leading dives. Adam took photos, Austin shot video, and Erika ran the boutique. Karina from Peru helped Mishka in the kitchen, and Lorio, also from South Africa, kept everything clean. Two engineers on board kept everything running smoothly. Thursday night, the crew hosted a cocktail party, as well as a surf and turf dinner, followed by Diego's awards ceremony, a slideshow, the guest photo contest, and Austin's video from the week.

Heading back to port, two opportunities to dive remained. The first, Lost Blue Hole, was a sinkhole in the middle of the ocean, a dark blue circle 100 feet in diameter and surrounded by a ring of white sand. I passed two large stingrays buried in the sand and spotted several reef sharks at the perimeter of the hole. I dipped down into the dark, cold water to 80 feet, about half its depth. As I rose, about 30 silky sharks



Sea Dog

shot across the sea grass toward the blue hole. A nurse shark swam gracefully away. The last dive took place at a shallow site called Periwinkle Reef. Diego had smeared peanut butter on my tank, and the juvenile princess parrots loved it. I laughed when one swam by with peanut butter stuck to her lips, though I doubt it made her laugh.

It was hard to say good-bye to the friendly, hard-working crew who made my trip with all the fun side excursions enjoyable. While the boat clearly needs work -- and such little but important things as new linens and towels -- my biggest disappointment was the diving. Most reefs looked unhealthy, the visibility generally was poor, and there was a definite lack of marine life. This was my fourth time aboard Agua Cat, and I can't say that I'll be back, but if you have never dived the Bahamas, it can be a fun trip, though it's a less-than-stellar craft. As far as Bahama Bob, he went in search of his lost youth, hoping that returning to the Bahamas and diving again would restore it. Although he had a great time, his wayward youth was still adrift.

-- 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: 8 nights/7 days/ 5-1/2 dive days run \$2595/person. Port fees are an additional \$205. Nitrox: \$150 for the week. Gear rental is available. Airport transfers are included. . . . Once onboard, everything, including alcoholic beverages, is included except crew gratuities.

The Good, the Bad and the Uncomfortable!

Undercurrent subscribers telling it like it is

The reports from *Undercurrent* readers tell it as it was when our subscribers visited, and as such, their reports can be telling in details never mentioned in other media.

For example, **Eleuthera** looks inviting on a map, but in fact, there are better diving destinations in **the Bahamas**. Mary K. Wicksten (Bryan, TX) stayed at the Cape Eleuthera Institute in June, primarily for a scientific project, but went diving as well. She wrote, "I got a map showing a big resort near the Institute, but it went bankrupt and was abandoned years ago. There is a small dive shop, but it was closed. I'm told that one can charter a boat from them, but I never saw anybody there. If you're looking for a snorkeling 'thrill dive' in one of the passes, be aware that the channel at Cape Eleuthera is very shallow -- it's easy to be scraped. Even worse, it empties into a boat basin where the fishermen clean their catch. Visibility is poor, and bull sharks jump for food. (No lie! I saw it!)

When I dived **St. Eustatius** in the Caribbean many years ago, I was delighted with the reefs and fish, which have a good chance to remain healthy since it is a small island, little human runoff, and a marine preserve. It was the choice of Kristin W. Weck Farrag (Dundee, IL) in April, who dived with **Golden Rock Dive Center**. "Loads of fish and turtles -- very few sharks. Lots of little stuff, too. Not too many lionfish; they keep good control over them. The divemasters who run Golden Rock, husband and wife duo, Gary and Lynn, were fantastic."

She noted that the dives are all pretty deep, and she was "always pushing the 'no-deco' limits, but Lynn and Gary went out of their way to get us the three dives per day safely, so kudos to them! In retrospect, we should have gone with Nitrox to squeeze out some extra bottom time, but we made it work."

www.goldenrockdive.com

The Old Gin House [where she stayed] is just that: Old! “The grounds are nice, but the ‘garden’ rooms really need some work. Windows are surprisingly screened (a good thing). However, the windows are wood slats, so all the A/C goes right out the window. Very difficult to keep the room cool enough.” Our tip: get the larger, more expensive rooms, not in the historic building. www.oldginhouse.com

Bonaire in the Dutch Antilles has always been popular for the unlimited shore diving, as well as the easy boat diving it provides. Todd Lichtenstein (West Orange, NJ), who went underwater with **Bonaire Dive and Adventure** in February, says its reputation is intact. “I would say that the reefs around Bonaire are the healthiest I have seen in the Caribbean. Lionfish are now abundant throughout the Caribbean, but there are few in Bonaire. I only saw five the whole week. It could be that the lionfish eradication program they have in Bonaire works better than in other places.”

www.bonairediveandadventure.com

However, things weren't perfect on shore. He was more scathing when he reported, “There was a rinse tank in the parking lot for use, but there was a problem here. Bonaire seems to be overrun with wild donkeys. They are everywhere, including the parking lot at **Den Laman Condos**, and they used the rinse tank as their watering hole. After we noticed that, we never rinsed our equipment there. We had to lug our stuff from the parking lot down to the rinse tanks on the pier. There were no carts or wagons, so it became an ordeal to get our equipment from the truck to the pier. The tanks were not always well-maintained. At least half the tanks leaked, either from the shutoff valve or from the tank O-rings, which were cracked and split. We had to abort one shore dive because we discovered a bad leak in one of our tanks. Even when we tried to listen for leaks before the dive, it was not always possible to alleviate this problem.”

www.denlaman.com

It could be worse. A memorable line from the Ben Stiller/Jennifer Aniston movie, *Along Came Polly*, was when Scuba Claude asks, “Are you guys for scuba?” Evidently not if you book with **Octopus Diving** on the Dutch side of **St. Maarten**. Robert Levine (Englishtown, NJ) booked with them the previous December before arriving by cruise ship in February. He was disappointed, to say the least, to arrive at the shop in the morning ready to go, only to find his booking had been canceled due to lack of other customers. We think that's an appalling and inexcusable business practice and recommend no *Undercurrent* reader should trust booking with this outfit.

It was a very different story at the **Southern Cross Club** on **Little Cayman Island**. It gets thumbs-up from Lisa Jabusch and Steve Nieters (Mount Juliet, TN), who visited last January: “The resort had a very low census, but they still took us out for all our dives (probably because we were prepaid), even if we were the only two divers! There was no grumbling or shrugging us off, and all the guides were skilled at showing us the macro stuff we wouldn't have found on our own. Ocean-front bungalows were very roomy, and having our own porch and outdoor and indoor showers were great after diving.”

Eagle rays were a high point there in May for Rickie Sterne and Chris Button (Wesley, AR), who



The Southern Cross Club

reported, “Late one morning at Grundy's Gardens, we saw 13 eagle rays in one 66-minute dive. First, a small squadron of four swam over us. A few minutes later, two singles sailed past. Then came a squadron of five. As the two of us were completing our safety stop, one more pair of eagle rays swam majestically beneath us.” But it wasn't all bigger animals. “When asked what I hoped to see during our dives, I said, “Nudibranchs!” In 16 years of Caribbean diving, I had seen only a single species of sea slug: *Elysia crispata*. We saw six species of opisthobranchia other than lettuce leaf sea slugs. We also were shown three species of

slender simnia snails, roughback shrimp, and nearly a dozen pipehorses. The walls are covered with hard corals and less algae than we have seen elsewhere.” The pair was equally happy with their accommodation, saying, “Southern Cross Club’s rooms, bungalows, and suites are all attractive and comfortable. Wherever you stay in the resort, you will be able to see the ocean from your porch.” There during the same month,

Kevin Darnell (Wichita Falls, TX) adds: “The food was excellent. There were several choices for each meal, and the staff was each very attentive and friendly.” www.southernclub.com

“The resort is located along a stretch of tattoo places, restaurants, beach massage parlors, and tacky souvenir shops.”

in March, “If partying and the beach scene is the focus of your vacation, then this is an OK choice, but if diving is your focus, I do not recommend the resort. It is located along a stretch of tattoo places, restaurants, beach massage parlors, and tacky souvenir shops. The resort plays loud music until about midnight, and the rooms are very close to all the action, so sleep is elusive. The newer rooms in the back are slightly less noisy, but still, the noise can be heard with the windows closed and air conditioner running.” www.alonavida.com

Todd Lichtenstein stayed at the **Aiyanar Dive Resort** on **Anilao** in the **Philippines** during April, and found, “The bedroom area was very small, with virtually no storage space to put clothes. The small desk was barely large enough for my laptop computer. The mattresses were firm and comfortable, but both top and bottom sheets and the blankets were too small for the mattresses, so that when the beds were made up it was as if they had been short-sheeted. We had to remake the beds every night and turn the sheets and blankets lengthwise so that they would cover our bodies. The bottom sheets were so small that they could not be tucked under the mattress. We would wake up in the middle of the night with all the sheets balled up on the bare mattress. We told the hotel manager about this problem, but it was never fixed.” He attended a photo workshop given by Reef Photo. “At least for this workshop, there was one dive guide for every four

It’s different strokes for different folks, and Bob Huckabee (Broomfield, CO) obviously chose the wrong resort for his tastes with **Pura Vida (Alona Beach)**, on **Panglao** in the **Philippines**. He wrote

Your Dive Travel Agent and Frequent Flyer Miles

Many *Undercurrent* subscribers are Frequent Flyers and wish to use the miles accrued when it comes to planning a dive trip. Finding flights can be tricky, especially if you are wont to buy an economy fare and use miles to upgrade. Dive travel agents can be quite useful in helping you with this, but it may come at a price because it gets tricky.

Timothy Webb of Caradonna Dive Adventures said, “Going back and forth between the client and the airline really doesn’t work for anyone. What we prefer to do is have the client arrange this with the airlines to avoid the back-and-forth and the wrong information. The other challenge is having the authority to do so unless the client gives you the security information. We find the best service is providing the client with the information they need to finalize these arrangements with the airline directly. Once they have their tickets confirmed, we can finalize the inter-island flights, diving, transfers, hotels, etc.”

Jenny Collister of Reef & Rainforest told *Undercurrent*, “I charge a flat fee of \$300 to work with a

customer’s Frequent Flyer miles. It often takes several phone calls back and forth with the customer, going over options; long hold times with the airlines and in-depth knowledge of airline partners and routings. If it goes smoothly, I often waive the fee or reduce it. My perseverance has obtained free tickets when the customer has given up, saving them thousands of dollars. [For example] we recommend Fiji Airways [when traveling to the Solomon Islands] because of the ability to get two 50-pound bags from Los Angeles to Honiara when your purchase their ‘dive pack,’ saving the customer hefty overweight fees. Australia is very strict about the carry-on weight, making it very difficult, especially for photographers, to fly via Australia.”

Our suggestion: talk it through with your travel agent, and if you don’t want to log the hours looking for free flights where you must make a stopover or two, especially at airports you never heard of, get your agent’s help. It can be worth the extra money.

– John Bantin

people, and the guides were rotated among the divers throughout the week. Most of the guides were excellent and very skilled at finding critters. The workshop was great and very well run.” www.aiyanar.com

You can have just as much fun diving in Florida’s east coast waters, according to Gregory S. Bruce (Portland, OR), as anywhere in the Caribbean. He was at **Boynton Beach, FL**, in February, diving with **Loggerhead Dive Charters**, and reported: “All dives were nice, mellow drifts that you could easily turn

“We actually saw scalloped hammerhead sharks on both dives. Pretty cool, considering how hard these buggers are to find around the world.”

into and fin lightly and stay in place to search for critters. Water was 74-76 degrees. 5mm is perfect. Jump in, drop down on the reef, head west to the ledge of the reef, which was about 5-10 feet high, and drift north. Reef life was abundant. We saw two huge loggerhead turtles, angel fish as big as hubcaps, loads of tropical fish, a couple of sharks, lobsters, crabs, etc.” www.loggerheadcharters.com

Experienced diver Mark Etter (Lititz, PA) did not have high expectations diving off **Maui**, Hawaii, with **Lahaina Divers** last March. He was surprised with big sharks. “Twice a week, Lahaina Divers schedules trips to Eastern Molokai to a site called Fish Rain, where we actually saw scalloped hammerhead sharks on both dives. Pretty cool, considering how hard these buggers are to find around the world. The five sharks that we saw were more than eight feet long and at depths of 80-95 feet. They were shy, but did hang around for 5-10 minutes. Lahaina Divers organizes this trip for experienced divers. The conditions can be rough, but that’s always where the cool stuff is anyways. The drop off is a ‘live’ drop off close to the rocks, requiring all eight divers to jump in almost together.” www.lahainadivers.com

I feel sorry for Dennis A. McCrea (Burien, WA), who went to **Fantasy Island** on Honduras’ **Roatan** in April, because he had not read our scathing review of it last summer. As it turns out, he experienced much of the problems our reviewer reported. “After three boat dives and wanting a warm afternoon shower, no hot/warm water. It was the morning of day 5 [before] we had hot water. Rooms were clean, but need some cosmetic repairs. Missing grout, cracked tiles, water pressure in the shower made the detachable shower head a necessity. Had to hold it next to your arms, legs, and on your head to get wet. There is a big turnover in staff – it seems most people have only worked there for a week or two. The woman who runs the bar had a careless attitude and seemed inconvenienced when we asked for limes with our drinks because she had to slice them.” www.fantasyislandresort.com

Iceland can make a convenient stopover between North America and Europe, and it has one remarkable dive site at **Silfra**, where you can dive in the cold, freshwater crack where two continents collide. Harvey S. Cohen (Middletown, NJ) passed through in June and didn’t miss the opportunity to dive with **Dive.IS**. He reported, “I had only one drysuit dive logged when I arrived, but I was reasonably confident that I could handle the drysuit in these conditions. It was not a problem. They’ll coach a complete beginner through the dives, but they recommend taking their drysuit course first. All the equipment was high quality and well maintained.” Water runs from Iceland’s second-largest glacier, underground through many miles of lava rock over several decades, and emerges at Silfra to flow into the huge lake Thingvellir. It is filtered – clear as air and delicious to drink. The dive follows a mild current. The max legal dive depth is 60 feet. Toward the end, there are parts that are extremely shallow. The views throughout the dive are awesome. There are two kinds of plants growing on the rocks – scummy brown algae and phosphorescent green seaweed-like algae that’s quite pretty. Animal life is generally limited to a few dwarf arctic char, well camouflaged and shy, but our guide spotted a standard char and I saw a pink worm.”

We hasten to add that Iceland appears to have only one, if dramatic, dive site worth the effort.

www.dive.is



Mandarinfish make an appearance on Philippine reefs

Sharks Have Personalities Too

A new paper published in the *Journal of Fish Biology* offers the first evidence that sharks really do have distinct personalities. In fact, some sharks really may be nicer than others, or whatever the shark equivalent of nice is.

Specifically, the study focused on boldness, defined as “the propensity to take risks,” a characteristic that’s been used to study personality in marine species from zebrafish to crabs. Using Port Jackson sharks (a nocturnal species found off the coast of southern Australia), the researchers ran two tests, one designed to test the sharks’ boldness and the other to see how they reacted to stress. For the first, they placed each shark in a small enclosure within a tank, timing how long it took for the animal to poke a head or a fin out of the box, and how long it took them to swim into the open. For the second, they held each shark out of the water for a minute; once they put it back, they recorded how many times per minute it beat its tail through the water, a marker of anxiety.

For both tests, the results spanned a wide spectrum: Some sharks emerged from their box in just two seconds, while others took a full 20 minutes; tail-beat frequency was all over the place, though the sharks that had emerged most quickly in the first test were also more active in the stress test, suggesting that they were making more of an effort to escape the stressful situation. Based on these differences, the researchers concluded that boldness wasn’t a behavioral pattern that held firm across all members of the species, but rather, one that varied from one individual shark to another – in other words, a shark personality trait.

So, some sharks are shy, and some are outgoing; some are adventurous, and some prefer to stick close to what they know. A better understanding of sharks’ personalities may help scientists learn more about what drives their choice of things like prey and habitat, and their ultimate survival.

From an article by Cari Room, Science of Us

Liveaboard life can be great when everything is perfect, but when it’s not, you don’t get an option to abandon ship. Eric A. Frick (Elmhurst, IL) enjoyed **South Ari Atoll in the Maldives** during May, although it seemed very crowded. He went snorkeling for a whale shark encounter while on a diving charter aboard *MV Adora*. It proved quite competitive, considering all the other boats doing the same. “When instructed to do so, we all jumped in. Picture several dozen tourists flailing through the water in snorkeling gear. We came upon one 12-footer and enjoyed looking at it, but we were a solid mat of humanity, floating on the surface. Actually, a shot of all those writhing visitors on the surface would have been better than the one I got of the shark. After that, I was happy to simply motor to a reef to do a dive, and wonder of wonders, a magnificent 18-foot whale shark appeared [during the dive].”

www.liveaboard.com/adora-liveaboard

Donald Mease (Hagerstown, MD) joined the liveaboard catamaran *Cat Ppalu* with 11 friends, some of whom were not divers, to dive around **Eleuthera** in the Bahamas last March and wasn’t happy. They felt like they were an annoyance more than customers. “For whatever reason, the captain found it necessary to dive the same sites two, and in one case with a night dive, three times. It was very disappointing for being on a boat. Also, we were under the impression that there would be some beach time available for the nondivers. When we asked about going to where the swimming pigs were, the captain seemed visibly annoyed that he was going to have to sail there, though this stop is advertised on their website. One more incident involved a nondiver wanting to have an alcoholic beverage, and Captain Sam told her no because she might be getting in the water later. Overall, after planning this trip a year in advance, it was one of the most disappointing trips we have done.”

www.catppalu.com



Snorkeling with a whaleshark in the Maldives

In Palau aboard the *MV Palau Aggressor II* in March, Brent Woods (Deep River, ON) wrote, “I was pleasantly surprised to see a review of the *Palau Aggressor* in the May issue of *Undercurrent*. I was also disappointed with my recent trip on this boat. The diving in Palau is so good that not even poor boat detracts from the memory of the trip.

The *Palau Aggressor* is about 20 years old and showing its age. The boat looks tired. All of the cabins have bunk beds without ladders. The AC in one cabin was stuck at its lowest setting for the whole trip. One of the main fridges in the galley broke down during the trip. I hate being photographed and looking at pictures of myself. I requested not to be photographed. I was the most photographed person on the trip. My tip was small.” www.aggressor.com

Keep your reports coming. Share your real experiences with other readers. It’s what makes *Undercurrent* unique.

– Ben Davison

Calculating a Healthy Ascent

there aren't any bad computers anymore

As you know, the core function of a dive computer is to monitor your likely nitrogen absorption as a function of depth and time, calculate what might be happening to a number of tissue models that might replicate the tissues of your own body and, by an algorithm, calculate the diver’s remaining no-stop time, or mandated decompression stops, during a calculated ascent.

That’s a lot of work. Thank goodness these computers all now use buttons instead of those wet fin-

Most buyers of diving computers tend to take them out of the box, strap them on their wrists and go diving with the factory settings.

ger contacts of yore when divers went slightly crazy trying to set up their instruments.

Back in the day, I had a lot of fun taking numerous computers on a single rig, diving past 165 feet and comparing how their different algorithms required different ascent behavior. The fun has now been taken out of it, mainly because Bruce Wienke, Ph.D., a program manager at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), with a serious interest in computational decompression and models, has sold a version of his RGBM adapted algorithm to many different manufacturers.

This means many computers now, for a typical leisure dive, perform in virtually the same

way. Those manufacturers that have not gone the Wienke-way have adapted or adopted algorithms that give a similar effect, such as a derivation of the Buhlmann ZH-16 algorithm that has been the mainstay of many independent computer makers. These also include Oceanic and Scubapro.

Even Oceanic, a company that trod its own path with its Pelagic DSAT algorithm, eventually decided to offer all its computers with two algorithms, letting the diver choose either the Pelagic+, based on Buhlmann ZHL-16C, or the original DSAT. Its sister company, Aegis, which merged with Oceanic in 2014, continued with DSAT. In 2015, Aqualung acquired Pelagic and kept the Pelagic+ algorithm in Aqualung-branded products.

Today, in all the computers currently available, the user can adjust them to suit personal beliefs, sometimes in the form of ‘gradient’ factors. So when it comes to choosing a computer, it’s really a question of whether you like its display legibility, whether you prefer its menu, whether you consider it intuitive to use, and whether you like the looks of it.

That said, most buyers of diving computers just take them out of the box, strap them on their wrists and go diving with the factory settings. Of course, doing that might be fraught with hazard. Best to read the instruction manual first. Moreover, if you are diving with a second computer as a backup, you need to be sure that both computers are set to the same parameters, or you’ll be getting conflicting information.

After the dive, you can download the data from virtually all dive computers to your home computer so you can spend long evenings going over depths and times.

So, because today's computers do largely the same things, how do you choose between them?

All modern diving computers can be adjusted for nitrox mixes. Entry-level computers are just as safe as the more expensive models, but simply offer just basic functions: depth and dive time, remaining no-stop (no-deco) time and an ascent rate. Dives are recorded and logged. The basic Mares Puck is probably the least expensive and often found at around \$150. The Suunto Zoop Novo and Aqualung i300 are good, inexpensive computers, and can often be found for less than \$200. The Oceanic B.U.D. is intended as a back-



Suunto Zoop

up to a primary computer, but can be used alone. Most of the more expensive computers offer a built-in electronic compass and lit display.

Many of the larger computers have user-change-

able batteries, generally with a two-year average life expectancy. Those that double as a watch need to have their batteries replaced by technicians who can pressure test them, a cost that crops up more often than you would expect.

The Oceanic OCi, the Aqualung i450T, the Mares Matrix with its optional analog-type display, the Ratio iDive Easy, the TUSA Talis, the Cressi Newton, the Scubapro Mantis M2, and the Suunto D4i, D6i, and DX, typify computer watches. They have the advantage that you never forget to take your computer diving because it's always on your wrist.

Some bigger computers have colorful displays using OLED (organic light-emitting diode) or TF (thin film) technology.

These really help clarify what a computer is trying to tell you. A display in red is obviously crucial, in yellow it's signaling a caution, and green is good.

Those with colored displays include the Mares Icon HD4, the HW OSTC, the Atomic Aquatics Cobalt 2, the Suunto EON Steel, the Ratio iX3M



Aqualung i450t

Shark Shocker Tested

Let's face it, some divers – and certainly some surfers and swimmers – are paranoid about shark attacks, and there will always be someone ready to sell them a magic device to avoid that happening. Of course, the problem is that you don't know if it works. You only find out if it doesn't work, and by then it's usually too late.

There have been some pretty revolutionary ideas out there, including magnetic wristbands, wetsuits that are meant to taste bad to sharks (by the time the shark has spat you out, it's probably a little late) and even drones to keep watch from above. Now a new study has found some value to an older idea using electrical impulses to scare off would-be predators.

University of Western Australia researchers have produced the most robust analysis of any such electrical device so far. The study used stereo camera technology to accurately determine the exact proximity that a white shark approached an active Shark Shield device. Lead researcher Ryan Kempster and his team fixed the Shark Shield to a rig in the waters off South Africa and

attracted sharks with a bait-loaded canister. The team recorded 322 encounters with 41 individual sharks ranging from 6 to 13 feet in length.

The setup created a deterrent field with a radius of about 4 feet and stopped the sharks from taking the bait 100 percent of the time on their first approach. However, the animals did become accustomed to the electrical impulses, and this success rate dropped to 90 percent and the field reduced by an average of 5 inches each time the same shark approached. Eventually, one can assume, the shark would finally reach the bait, but if the bait were a human, he might have enough time to get out of the water.

In 2008, a surfer was killed by a great white shark while using this or a similar device, and Kempster was quick to add that although they now know the exact electric field characteristics that will deter a shark, it does not imply that other devices will be as effective. The research is funded by the Western Australian state government.

(Source: University of Western Australia)

Tech, the Oceanic VTX, the Liquivision Lynx, and the Shearwater Perdix. The downside is that illuminated colored displays can use more battery power. (Rechargeable batteries put the onus on the user to remember to recharge them. That's something one might forget during a busy dive trip.)

Some of us have reached an age when a larger display is a godsend. If you prefer a large display, you might consider the monochromatic Scubapro Galileo Sol and very new Mares Quad, or colorful Shearwater Perdix, Mares Icon HD4, and Atomic Aquatics Cobalt 2.

More and more divers want their computers integrated with their gas supplies so they get all the information needed in one place. This integration can be by hose, as with the Mares Puck Air, Atomic Cobalt 2, Oceanic Pro Plus 3 and Suunto Cobra3, but wirelessly integrated computers are becoming more acceptable.



Oceanic VTXL

But, oddly, not in the U.S. Doug Krause at Oceanic told *Undercurrent* that the American diving public was

more resistant to this modern technology than elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, Oceanic, Suunto, Mares and Scubapro (to mention only a few) offer a wide range of computers that will integrate wirelessly with the first stage of a regulator and in certain models with those regulators on multiple tanks.

These integrated computers don't just tell you how much gas you have in your tank. They calculate how long it could last at the depth you are diving and with the breathing rate you've demonstrated during the dive. Just keep your remaining no-stop time greater than your remaining airtime and you'll never get into trouble!

In an attempt to make the computer's algorithm more personal, Scubapro offers the combination of a wireless heart-rate monitor and skin temperature monitor with its Mantis M2 and Galileo Sol computers, constantly adjusting for real-time real-person data.



Galileo Sol

Most *Undercurrent* subscribers are leisure divers, but if you want to use multiple tanks with nitrox, consider the Suunto D6i or Scubapro Mantis M2. If you want to use trimix or a closed-circuit rebreather, consider the Shearwater Perdix, the OSTC, the Suunto DX or Suunto Eon Steel. However, if you don't need this function, why add the extra complication and risk of going into the water with the computer wrongly set up?

Many computers can be set for 'gauge' mode where they act simply as a depth gauge and timer (and record keeper), a mode popular with technical divers who prefer to use tables. The sampling rate in 'gauge' mode can be as infrequent as once every 20 seconds. In the free diving mode, a computer samples every second or even a fraction of a

The Failure to Understand Your Computer

Was it the lure of depth or the inability to understand his computer? According to witnesses at a Cayman Coroner's Court in April, Victor Crawford, a 62-year-old diver from Alabama and passenger aboard the *Cayman Aggressor*, had dived to a depth of 314 feet while breathing nitrox (which should not be used below 110 feet). Health Services Authority pathologist Dr. Shravan Jyoti said the cause of death was drowning as a result of 'nitrogen toxicity.'

Crawford went missing in March 2015 during a group dive before divers from *Ocean Frontiers* discovered his body later. (See the full article in *Undercurrent*, June 2015.)

Although witnesses said that the deceased was an

experienced diver, Department of Environment spokesman Scott Slaybaugh said the case involved "a series of actions which were significantly hazardous and far beyond the standard of safe diving practices."

These included leaving the group to dive alone, going beyond the maximum operating depth for the gas he was breathing and ascending rapidly without making the decompression stops mandated by his computer.

Coroner Eileen Nervik read statements of four witnesses to the case, before the jurors deliberated and came to their verdict of "misadventure."

(Source: *Cayman Compass*)

second, so if you want to use it for free diving, be sure it has this facility.

What do you need? A big display, maybe in color? A watch-sized computer you'll never forget to take with you because it's always on your wrist? Integration with your breathing gas supply? Use with more than one tank during a dive? Able to use it with trimix or rebreather? Do you want to be able to change the battery yourself? If you have a computer with a dual algorithm, be sure it's set to the one that suits your diving style.

I haven't attempted to list every computer available. Some are badge-engineered. My own favorites? For simplicity and economy, at \$330 the Suunto Zoop Novo is hard to beat. For an easily readable display by an older person plus gas integration, I like the long-established Scubapro Galileo Sol with its intuitive menu, but you must remember to set at least micro-bubble level 1. (It comes out of the box without any micro-bubble setting, i.e., MB0.) It can be found for \$1270. For



Suunto EON Steel

a colorful display without constant fear of the battery going flat, I'd prefer the Shearwater Perdix (\$950) or the all-singing, all-dancing Suunto Eon Steel (\$1440). If it's a computer watch, the Mares Matrix (\$435) has an optional display that looks like a conventional watch.

Before you make up your mind, there's one last thing to consider. What about using your phone for deco? Yes, you can put a smartphone in a case, and with the right app downloaded, you can use it as a diving computer.

For example, the German-made Scuba Capsule 6, combined with an iPhone 6 or iPhone 6S and the app supplied and downloaded, makes a great diving computer with a full-color display, it's nitrox and trimix-compatible, and it works in conjunction with Suunto tank transmitters. It doubles as a digital compass, map atlas, with GPS (at the surface) and gas planner, too. Not only that, but you can also take photographs with it during the dive, while keeping essential dive information as a head-up display! Expect to pay around \$500, plus another \$350 for the wireless tank transmitter. (iPhone not included.)

Remember, no dive computer manufacturer can

guarantee you won't suffer an incident of decompression sickness (DCS) caused by scuba diving. Read the manual and fully understand it before you go diving.

– John Bantin

Your Guide to Conservative Computer Settings

From The Journal of the *South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society* (SPUMS) and the *European Underwater and Baromedical Society* come this sage advice:

- For a diver with a physiological need or a personal wish to dive more conservatively, most dive computers have user settings to make this possible. However, there is a variability in conservatism between models, so if you need advice on reducing DCS risk, consider these recommendations.
- If the information exists, be aware of the baseline level of conservatism of your computer. Additional clues may come from comparing the operation of your computer against those of diving colleagues or by wearing two computers made by different manufacturers and decompressing as guided by the more conservative of the pair. Make yourself aware of the operational implications of a dual-algorithm computer.
- Never use the RGBM 50 percent settings because you are increasing the risk of a DCS incident many fold.
- Avoid staged decompression diving. In addition to increased risks, the computer may automatically cascade down the conservatism levels towards the default algorithm.
- Use higher-level personal factor in the computer's settings if more conservatism is required.
- If a computer 'locks up,' or enters error or gauge-only mode, because of a violation of a mandated deco stop or a too fast ascent rate then do not dive while it is locked (usually 24 hours but it may be longer if you have applied personal settings).

(Source: *Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine Vol 46 No2 June 2016 -Conservatism Settings in Dive Computers*)

Scuba, the Sport of Grandparents!

As you can imagine, we got a big response to our item in Flotsam & Jetsam last month, when we noted that a pair of 60-somethings were going for the Guinness World Record for the oldest diving couple. Lots of luck, we thought, knowing our subscribers.

Most who responded were mere youths in their 70s, exemplified by Peggy and Bill Goldberg, but who say that most of the members of their dive club in Gainesville, FL, are closer to 80. One recently widowed woman only just gave up at 91.

Marianne LeSage tells us Spokane (WA) divers Ed and Marlene Torrison are 80 and 72, respectively. Gabriel I. Peñagaricano (Guaynabo, PR), himself a diver of 82, thinks his best friend from grade school, 84-year-old Jack Duncan, and wife Judy of similar age, probably

qualify as the oldest married couple still diving.

However, long-time subscriber Phil Hampton (Orlando, FL) wrote, "I am 85 years old and logged my 2,906th scuba dive on my birthday in July 2016, diving with the *Turks & Caicos Explorer II*. My wife, Grace, logged her 1508th dive in Bonaire September 25, 2015. She missed diving in T&C this year due to a back problem. We will celebrate our 59th Anniversary in November. I was certified in 1969, but Grace didn't get certified until she was 57. That was in December 1987. Almost all of her 1508 dives have been with me. Our last dive together was in Bonaire September 2015." And it looks like there will be more coming up.

No wonder the French call scuba "L'esport des grandparents."

Mosquitoes and Malaria

Too many divers ignore the threat

Malaria is a serious disease that not all traveling divers fully consider. Years ago, I was sitting in Ambua Lodge in Papua New Guinea, talking to a California diver who had just spent a week on a liveaboard. He was drinking a gin and tonic, while sweat rolled down his forehead and dripped off his nose. He thought he might have contracted malaria from mosquitoes along the shore, he said, and maybe the tonic would help. He had another drink, but in less than an hour, he began shivering uncontrollably and headed off to get under the blankets. He was at the lodge four more days before he could travel. The quinine in that tonic water wasn't much help.

In 2015, there were about 214 million reported malaria cases. The tiny, insidious *Anopheles* mosquito spreads the malaria plasmodium, of which there are five known species. The plasmodium falciparum, the most difficult to treat, is prevalent in all areas of the Solomon Islands.

So where's the real risk to divers? Happily, there is no malaria present in the Caribbean islands, save Honduras Bay Islands, where in the past two decades we reported on two divers who contracted malaria. However, it's generally well controlled throughout these islands, though the CDC still says the threat to American travelers is "moderate."

Indian Ocean islands such as the Seychelles and the Maldives have no incidence of the disease. Small islands with dive resorts across the tropical belt from the Maldives to Raja Ampat and into the Pacific offer less risk than those that have local villages, yet divers passing through towns such as Sorong (West Papua) or Honiara in the Solomons (where a high proportion of the residents suffer from malaria) increase their risk.

Larger landmasses such as Papua New Guinea (where the risk is high) are a different matter. There is a moderate risk in the eastern islands of Indonesia, such as Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Lombok and Sumatra, but none reported in Bali or the Gili islands. In most of Equatorial Africa, malaria is a major concern.

In Ecuador, Guayaquil, Quito, and the Galápagos are free of malaria, but if you decide to make a trip inland, be aware of the risk.

Palau is malaria-free, as are the remote islands of Micronesia, and the Marianas have no malaria reported. There is a low risk in the rural areas of the Philippines, a low risk in Thailand, and a moderate risk in Vanuatu.

The question divers often ask us is whether they should take a malaria prophylaxis. The drugs tend to have few, if any, side effects, and if you've ever

seen a person like the diver at Ambua swing from fire to ice, you will be tempted to take no risk and find a suitable drug. You'll need to get a prescription based on your destination, your age, your family history, and medication you might be taking and whether you are likely to be pregnant. Do your own research, because few North American physicians know about malaria and proper drug choices, and if you're concerned, see a tropical medical specialist. Available drugs include:

Atovane plus proguanil (Malarone). Taken once per day during possible exposure and for seven days after, it is suitable for short trips and last-minute trips, since it can be started the day before traveling. Some physicians discourage the use of this drug as a prophylaxis, preferring to reserve its efficacy for treatment of known cases.

Doxycycline (Vibramycin-D) is taken two days preceding a trip and for four weeks after return. It increases the risk of sunburn.

A combination of Chloroquine and proguanil is rarely recommended nowadays because it's largely ineffective against the most common and dangerous type of malaria parasite, although it may be suggested for areas where that particular strain is less common, such as India and Sri Lanka.

Primaquine is also a good choice for short trips and is the most effective medicine for the prevention of plasmodium vivax, mainly found in South America and Africa.

Mefloquine (Larium) was thought to be the miracle antimalarial with only one tablet taken weekly, until users reported anxiety disorders, panic attacks, depression and vivid hallucinations – clearly a bad choice for divers! However, some divers in the South Pacific area carry a dose as an acute therapy in case they suffer a malaria attack, rather than as a regular antimalarial.

We won't dwell on how to prevent mosquito bites – long sleeves, avoid being out at dusk, etc.

Are Aliens Taking Over Our Oceans?

Octopus, squid and cuttlefish numbers are on the rise and gradually taking over the oceans. New research published in *Cell Biology* tells us that global warming, combined with over-fishing, may have caused a boom in cephalopod populations. Besides being an important source food for many animals, including marine mammals and seabirds, they are predators themselves. They are quick to adapt, are relatively short-lived yet very fast-growing and intelligent enough to exploit new opportunities.

Lead author of the scientific report, Dr. Zōe Doubleday, thinks that cephalopods are very responsive to temperature. Warmer seas might accelerate their life cycles, increasing the amount they reproduce. At the same time, over-fishing has reduced competitors and predators of cephalopods.

Foodies and culinary experts may think they taste delicious, and supplies are plentiful, but remember: octopuses were probably the first intelligent beings on earth, evolving more than 400 million years ago and some 230 million years before mammals. They have three hearts and three-fifths of their neurons are in their arms, which they can regrow. They're cannibalistic loners that have sex at a distance using a modified tentacle. Masters of camouflage, not only can they change color when mimicking objects and other animals, they may be able to see with their skin.

But are they actually aliens? A study published in



Nature has pointed to a study that has led researchers to conclude that octopuses have alien DNA. Their genome shows a never-seen-before level of complexity, with no fewer than 33,000 protein-coding genes identified. That's more than we have!

Dr. Clifton Ragsdale from the University of Chicago said, "The octopus appears to be utterly different from all other animals. The late British zoologist, Martin Wells, said the octopus was an alien. In this sense, then, our [research] paper describes the first sequenced genome from an alien."

This has been a ground-shaking claim for the scientific community, which caused an upheaval among marine biologists who seemed both shocked and intrigued.

—other than to say that the most effective mosquito repellents contain DEET. *Consumer Reports* says that a 25% solution is enough, but many prefer higher concentrations. It should not be used for more than three weeks running and may reduce the sun-protection factor of some sunscreens.

There are no vaccines against malaria. And,

strains of malaria have become resistant to older drugs. It's an insidious disease and may recur through one's life. If you're making a diving trip to the tropics, you shouldn't just blow it off.

For more information go to: www.cdc.gov/malaria

— Ben Davison

Six Hours Adrift Alone

a stirring tale of Australian true grit

As Nietzsche said, “That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.” Jacob Childs, a 30-year-old PADI instructor and course director from Bundaberg, Queensland, Australia, who considers himself a relatively experienced diver, would agree. He demonstrated his true Australian unflappability when *Undercurrent* asked him about his six-hour ordeal drifting afloat, alone in the open ocean after he became separated from his dive boat and his dive buddies.

“July 6th started like any other day of diving; an early rise, prepping, making sure everything was functioning, spares. It was 8.30 a.m. when our group left Bundaberg in the club's boat, heading out 30 miles to the wreck site of the *Althea*, arguably my favorite local dive site. We each agreed on all the normal things involved in any dive planning: signals, lost buddy separation procedures, buddy pairs, emergency procedures, etc. This also included what was to happen if a diver surfaced away from the anchor line. The procedure that was to be followed was, if a diver were to surface away from the rest of the group, or away from the line, the boat skipper was to disconnect from the anchor line, leaving a buoy in place in case any other divers surfaced, collect the separated diver, and return to the buoy. We were also ensured that every diver had an SMB/DSMB and whistle.”

It took a long time to anchor the vessel securely, thanks to the hard rock seafloor and the heavy swell. Divers were in various states of readiness, and there was a gap of around 15 minutes between the first and last diver entering the water.

“I had ensured before entering that a line was run from the fore to the aft to allow divers to pull themselves to the bow of the vessel and the anchor

line. I had also made sure that a trail/tag line was attached to the rear of the vessel. This was helpful, as all the divers were hanging onto this line while we waited for the last diver to enter the water.”

They all descended, but Childs surfaced prematurely after losing his grip on a descent line in the strong current, then realizing that the tag line had

Goodbye Undersea Hunter, Hello Nautilus Undersea

After 26 years of active service in Costa Rica, the *Undersea Hunter* is joining the Nautilus fleet to run diving expeditions to Socorro and the Mexican Revillagigedos. She's been renamed *Nautilus Undersea*.

The *Undersea Hunter* was the first vessel in a fleet that includes *Seahunter* and *Argo*. She was purchased by Avi Kapfler and his business partner, Yosi, in 1990 and became a firm favorite with professional filmmakers like Howard and Michelle Hall, Marty Snyderman and the IMAX crew, as well as with many loyal return customers.

She made around 450 trips to Cocos alone, along with many special expeditions to French Polynesia, and passed through the Panama Canal in the Caribbean. The *Undersea Hunter* was a huge upgrade in liveboard specifications at the time and was ideally suited to the sometimes arduous 350-mile journey out to Cocos from Punta Arenas on the Costa Rican mainland. Before she was brought to Costa Rica, she'd taken an active part in a James Bond movie and provided submersible support to some of Dr. Sylvia Earle's deep-sea missions.

The Kosrae Resort Raffle Result.

A man from New South Wales, Australia, tax accountant Josh Ptasnyk, 26, has won the Kosrae raffle and for the price of a \$49 raffle ticket will be the new owner of a 16-room Pacific island Kosrae Nautilus resort and dive center in Micronesia.

It comes with two dive boats, five cars for rental, and two 10-seat passenger vans. His ticket was number 44,980 and he was one of 50,000 people from over 100 different countries to buy tickets.

Doug and Sally Beitz had owned the resort since 1994 and decided to raffle their resort and home rather than sell it in the “normal really boring way.” They set a reserve of at least 50,000 tickets to be sold but easily surpassed that by selling 75,485. We estimate the total revenue raised to be \$3,698,765.

The website says that the business is debt-free, employs sixteen full-time staff, has \$10,000 working cash in its business bank account, and \$5,000 worth of food supplies for its 80-seat restaurant. It comes with



owner accommodations comprising both a luxurious manager’s residence plus two separate apartments.

We hope ‘Joshua,’ whoever he may be, is up to quitting his day job, making the move, and managing this complex endeavor. Joshua says “I am looking forward to cutting the red tape, making a trip to the resort to see what paradise looks like, and to experience all that the resort has to offer.” Meanwhile, the Beitz family will return to their native Queensland as millionaires.

– John Bantin

been hauled in. He quickly drifted past the vessel before the skipper could find it and throw it out again, but it was too late. At the same time, the others divers had started the descent to 120 feet.

Childs said, “I can only surmise that the skipper had seen bubbles coming back onto the anchor line, and opted to stay and wait for the other divers to surface, rather than sticking to the agreed plan. I lost sight of the boat within about 15 minutes. I inflated my marker buoy and waited.”

It was midday

“After an hour and a half, I decided to ditch the weights stored in my Hollis harness-style BCD. I assumed I’d soon be found.” Two hours later he saw a helicopter approaching and thought, “Bugger me, these guys are good, found me already.” However, it was not to be. It flew within 500 yards of him before it veered away.

“Later I saw the Customs plane come in. It flew right over my head, and it also started to search an area that didn’t contain me. At this point, I began to ask myself if the dive boat had also gotten into trouble. The plane’s sweeps were getting larger, and as darkness began to set in, I was still confident that the people in the plane would spot me.”

Childs had the presence of mind to record himself on his little digital POV camera, capturing his vocalized thoughts, as time passed and the light began to fail. This footage has since gone viral. www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJAAee3XAuA

His hope of being found faded when search crews failed to find him in the water despite his large orange surface marker buoy.

He had dumped his tank, but said he was nice and warm in his Hollis wetsuit and not over-tired because he was floating. He could have done with a drink of water.

“So that’s it. The sun goes down they won’t do nothing. That’s a wrap on old Jakey,” he recorded on his GoPro. He was eventually rescued just after sunset.

“I guess the most disheartening thing from the whole experience was seeing the plane leave. I found out later that it went to a higher altitude.” A water police vessel found Childs at 6 p.m.

“It’s a long time to spend by yourself,” he said a day after being rescued. Apparently, there were a lot of boats out there, but I didn’t see any of those ... all I saw and heard was a trawler, which I tried swimming towards,” he said.

Skipper's Remorse at Loss of Diver.

Laurel Silver-Valker jumped off her dive boat on December 29 to hunt for lobsters below Ship Rock off Catalina Island. She was never seen again. Silver-Valker, 45, was a regular on *Sundiver* trips, even volunteering as a crewmember on occasion. The dive boat left Ship Rock and went to a different site before the skipper realized she was not back on board, returning later to do a search.

A US Coastguard investigation into the disappearance and presumed death of diver Laurel Silver-Valker has resulted in the voluntary surrender of the credentials of the skipper of the *Sundiver Express*, the 43-foot dive boat that left the dive site with her unaccounted for.

Facing possible prosecution for six alleged offenses, Kyaa Heller agreed to surrender her merchant mariner credentials and is no longer authorized to serve as the master of a commercial vessel.

It has been alleged to *Undercurrent* by Jorge Lopez, attorney representing the sons of the deceased, that “she instructed her divemaster to add Ms. Silver-Valker’s name to the dive roster and boat manifest after realiz-

ing that she was left behind and missing and before the Coast Guard arrived. The inference is that Ms. Heller was trying to cover up her error.”

There is no excuse for departing a dive site without confirming all passengers are on board and accounted for,” said Lt. Cmdr. Nathan Menefee, senior investigating officer.

“Passenger vessel operators must take the role and responsibility of Master seriously, as the safety of their passengers is in their hands. The responsibility of a Master cannot be delegated.”

Sundiver and *Sundiver II* continue to be operated under the captaincy of Ray Arntz, co-finder of California’s only German U-Boat wreck, the WWI UB88.

Readers of *Undercurrent* may remember Sundiver Charters. We wrote about diver Daniel Carlock, who won a \$1.68 million judgement against them. He too was left behind on a dive and floated for five hours off the coast of Newport Beach in 2004 until a boat full of Boy Scouts happened to spot him.

When hauled from the sea just after sundown, he said all he wanted was a cup of tea. What did he most regret about the experience?

“Missing a \$15 T-bone steak at the club hotel.”

In 2004, a boatload of divers was swept past their vessel, the *Oyster*, at Little Brother Island in the Red Sea, and they were left adrift in the open ocean for

more than 13 hours, covering 45 miles from where they surfaced. It was not until night fell that those searching for them finally saw their bright dive lights. Carrying a fully charged diving flashlight on every dive is a safety measure few divers consider. It could save your life.

– John Bantin

Flotsam & Jetsam

A Bill to Ban Scuba Divers from Feeding Sharks in U.S. waters has been introduced in Congress, with provision S.3099 by Senator Bill Nelson. “It will be unlawful for any person to engage in shark feeding, or to operate a vessel for the purpose of carrying a passenger for hire to any site to engage in shark feeding or to observe shark feeding.” Shark feeding is already banned in Florida, but despite this, Randy Jordon still operates a regular shark dive out of Jupiter. Some other operators had gotten around this ban by taking their customers into adjacent Federal waters. (Access to Sportfishing Act 2016). You can join a petition here: <http://chn.ge/2aitRBn>

Lost at Sea. Getting left behind at the surface is every diver’s nightmare, and one preventative is the Nautilus Lifeline, an expensive high-tech answer, using vhf radio frequencies. A lesser nightmare is losing your Nautilus Lifeline during a dive. Two years ago, a marine biology professor at Scripps Institute lost his in the Cayman Islands. Last May, Harry Payne was walking along the shoreline of Padre Island, TX, when he came across it half-buried in the sand. Its serial number eventually revealed the owner after it had drifted more than 1100 miles.

Disastrous Algae Bloom. EcoWatch reports that a guacamole-thick layer of algae has taken over Florida’s Atlantic coastline and four counties have declared a state of emergency. The foul-smelling toxic green algae bloom has invaded Florida’s

waterways and is believed to have stemmed from the polluted Lake Okeechobee. Local industries have long dumped an assortment of chemicals, fertilizers and cattle manure into the lake, and it has been reported that algae samples from the lake taken in June found levels of toxins at 20 times higher than the safety threshold set by the World Health Organisation. It has severely affected St. Lucie, Martin, Palm Beach and Lee counties and kept divers out of the water.

Shark Rumors. “Evil people are putting sharks in boxes and releasing them near Egypt’s beaches in order to harm the country’s tourism sector.” It was not a joke, but news circulating in Egypt’s local media. Statements like these, videos of shark attacks and warnings against going to various beaches soon caused panic on social media following an incident when a shark severed the leg of a 23-year-old swimmer at Ain Al Sukhan in the Gulf of Suez. While there have been more sightings of sharks closer to shore this year, the Egyptian Chamber of Diving & Watersports appealed for calm, stating that the phenomenon was probably caused by harmful behavior by humans, such as feeding sharks by throwing food from boats, either intentionally or unintentionally, accustoming the sharks to feeding at the surface.

Seafood Watch. The Monterey Bay Aquarium updated their guide as to what seafood one might eat and what one should avoid. It lists best choices and good alternatives, as well as those species that are endangered plus those one should avoid eating at all costs. ‘Best Choices’ should be preferred first; they’re well managed and caught or farmed in ways that cause little harm to habitats or other wildlife. ‘Good Alternatives’ are those one might buy, but be aware there are concerns with how they’re caught or farmed. Take a pass on those listed as ‘Avoid’ for

now; they’re overfished or caught or farmed in ways that harm other marine life or the environment. More information here: www.seafoodwatch.org/-/m/sfw/pdf/guides/mba-seafoodwatch-west-coast-guide.pdf?la=en

Bahamas Shark Bites. Sharks act very differently with carrion in the water than they do when there’s a freshly killed or injured fish on offer. In the latter case, it ‘rings the dinner bell’ and the shark becomes a determined attacker. Waco (TX) dentist Dr. Steve Cutbirth discovered this while free diving to spear hogfish near Green Turtle Cay in the Bahamas during the last week of July. He was bitten on the face and knee by a large bull shark excited by the dying fish he had just speared and reckons he was saved significant tissue loss by his mask, and the knife strapped to his leg. After leaving the water, Dr. Cutbirth was stitched up by a local nurse and reported on his own Facebook page that she did such a good job there was no need to return to the US early.

Skip the Customs Line with your iPhone. A new app authorized by U.S. Customs and Border Protection allows users to submit entry information over the internet after landing, allowing them to skip the line at the airport and potentially re-enter the country much faster than before. Canadian citizens with B1 or B2 visas can do the same. The Mobile Passport app from Airside Mobile allows users to configure profiles in the app to streamline an entire family’s entry. All information is encrypted, and users connect via Wi-Fi or a cellular network. The app is not a substitute for a physical passport, and the system has yet to be rolled out at all American airports. No specific iOS device is required, but the app requires iOS 8 or later and occupies 20.4 MB of space.

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