

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## Top Dive, French Polynesia: Part I

*exciting diving for the experienced*

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Dear Fellow Diver:

The Zodiac motored slowly through the big swells of Rangiroa atoll's Tiputa Pass. When we reached the ocean, I back-rolled into the blue and followed the guide as he quickly descended to 130 feet, the deepest I had ever been. The visibility was stunning. I followed the guide toward the pass entrance, where row upon row of gray reef sharks rose from the ocean floor almost to the surface, seemingly perfectly spaced and in every row swimming in a separate direction: a wallpaper of sharks. The gentle current quickly increased until we were sucked through the channel, past bigeye jacks, barracuda, tuna, humphead wrasses and endless colorful reef fish. When we sought refuge in a cavern, I locked eyes with a great hammerhead shark passing just a few feet away. When the current finally relented, I was left gasping, breathing from my guide's octopus, my tank's supply nearly exhausted. This was 15 years ago on my first trip to Rangiroa. Would I feel the same excitement this trip?

From Los Angeles, it takes eight-and-a-half hours to fly nonstop to Papeete, the capital, about three hours less than a flight to Fiji. After landing late at night, my partner and I made a hundred yards' steep climb to the Airport Motel; the fol-



Top Dive's Jetty, Rangiroa



lowing morning, I booked a \$19 cab for one minute to carry my luggage down to the airport.

Enclosing a lagoon 50 miles long and 20 miles wide, Rangiroa is French Polynesia's largest atoll and the world's third largest. It is about an hour's flight from Papeete. When we arrived in the morning, owner Alain drove us to his Pension Bounty, between the famed Tiputa pass and Top Dive's shop. He offers four comfortable ensuite units set in a garden near a beach, each with a kitchenette,

a small deck, and hot water showers. That evening, we dined with Alain on his veranda, his only guests. He served fried prawns in a lemon butter sauce followed by grilled white fish fillets with oven-roasted potatoes, followed by a caramelized pineapple tart with vanilla ice cream. The conversation turned to his love of diving and how he and his wife decided to leave France for a new life in the tropics.

Four times a day, one of Top Dive's two skiffs makes the five-minute jaunt to Tiputa Pass. Dives start in the ocean and proceed through the Pass only if tidal

## ***Touch Me Not! Leave the Dolphins Alone***

Those who have seen the 2009 Academy Award winning documentary *The Cove* know about the abuses endured by dolphins captured for swim-with-dolphin programs. But how should we relate to wild dolphins we encounter while diving?

While diving outside Tiputa Pass in Rangiroa, I heard the familiar clicking sound and saw three adult bottlenose dolphins and a juvenile diving down toward my group, then swimming away. A 9-foot female trailing behind lingered, hovering vertically, like a dog wanting to be petted. As excited divers started to stroke her, some even trying to hug her, she closed her eyes. Was it ecstasy? After a long moment, she had her fill and swam away. I have had many encounters with friendly wild dolphins before, but I had never witnessed anything like this.

In the following days, she returned and displayed similar behavior. I discovered she had a reputation with the locals. Alain, the owner of a local pension, who dives regularly with Six Passengers, another shop in Rangiroa, told me that she is known there as 'Touch Me.' At Te Mao, a tapas bar I visited one evening, the owner postulated that she had been rejected by her pod and was now seeking human affection.

A billboard I came across when cycling one afternoon past the Tiputa pass outlook provided the most cogent explanation. Touching or taming dolphins has been prohibited in the Polynesian Marine Mammal

Sanctuary since 2002. It warned "Frequent contact with humans disrupts social ties that bind these wild dolphins. They become dependent and vulnerable..." This could lead to "the increase [in] pushy or aggressive behavior... [that] may cause accidents (percussion, biting), and lead to the necessity of removing individuals who are considered 'dangerous.'" It was not clear what the process of 'removing' a dolphin entailed. Is 'Touch Me' fated to find out?

The billboard also cautioned that diseases could be transmitted from humans to dolphins and vice versa. Lobomycosis, a chronic fungal skin condition with no known cure, could be contracted from touching an animal. A grisly image of an afflicted leg underscored the point.

This is not entirely scaremongering. In a medical journal article, John S. Reif of Colorado State University contends that while transmission of the *Lacazia loboi* fungus from dolphin to human may be rare, there have been documented instances. Dolphin encounters are great for business, so I should not have been surprised that neither the prohibition on nor the dangers of physical contact with these creatures ever came up in any of Top Dive's briefings.

– DTV

<http://europepmc.org/articles/pmc3787463#B1>

conditions allow. "We haven't been able to do this for several days," Yannik, the manager, told us. Because strong winds had been pushing water into the lagoon, failing to fuel an inbound current from the ocean, we could not cross the Pass and would have to complete our dive in the ocean. My disappointment, though, soon dissipated.

Fish life along the wall was prolific, with schools of goatfish, bigeye jackfish, fusiliers, barracuda, hump-head wrasses, and of course, sharks. During the safety stop, a turtle chomped at the coral while I looked out for a notorious striped triggerfish that had developed a taste for divers' ears. In the week I was there, three Top Dive customers were viciously assaulted and left scarred by painful bites to their ears.



**Pension Bounty, Rangiroa**

Although all following dives were at the same location, I had much to see, and in the balmy 83F (28°C) water, the fish were easily approachable. A three-foot great barracuda patiently waited for bluestreak cleaner wrasse to finish servicing its open mouth and gills. A moray eel slithered past on some urgent errand. A lonely remora followed me for much of a dive, perhaps hoping that I would adopt her. I especially enjoyed the sunset dives, when there was magic in the shimmering blue bands of the fusiliers.

The main settlement of Avatoru, with its church, post office and pharmacy, is over six miles from Tiputa Pass, where Pension Bounty is located and the area where most divers choose to stay. We had lunch at the busy snack Chez Lily, an informal open-air restaurant near the main pier and one of only two snack on this side of the island. When the overworked waitress emerged with our meals after almost an hour, the \$14 curried chicken was merely edible. The following day we biked to the market to buy a loin of frozen tuna, rice, and tinned vegetables to

### ***My Word, It's Ugly Down There!***

If you're a Twitter follower, you're used to seeing endless political tweets and news of disasters worldwide, but in recent days Twitter went nuts over a sea creature that simply looks like a penis.

The crew of the research vessel *RV Investigator*, on expedition to Australia's eastern abyss, was out to discover what lived in what is the deepest part of the planet. At 13,000 feet (4,000m) deep, what's called the 'abyssopelagic zone' has previously been difficult to explore.

Looking grotesque to us land dwellers, the creatures living there have adapted to survive the crushing pressure and freezing darkness. The phylum *Sipuncula*, or peanut worm, is one of those creatures, though it

looks strangely familiar to adult eyes (probably teens, as well). Not only does it look like a magnificent erect phallus, but also it shrinks dramatically if threatened! Gentlemen, does that sound familiar?

Besides this brief moment of hilarity, the scientists also found worrying levels of pollution. A hundred km (around 60 miles) off Australia's coast, they saw PVC pipes, cans of paint, bottles, beer cans, wood chips and other debris most likely discarded from ships that passed during the last 200 years. As for some of the creatures they discovered, including our friend, you can feast your eyes on pictures by going to [goo.gl/ZpmD3T](http://goo.gl/ZpmD3T)

***Top Dive, Pension Bounty,  
Rangiroa, French Polynesia***

Diving (*Experienced*) .....★★★★★  
Diving (*Inexperienced*) .....Don't Go!  
Snorkeling .....Varies by location  
Accommodations .....★★★★★  
Service and attitude.....★★★★★  
Money's worth.....★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

*Worldwide scale*

make our own meals. Fresh fruit is very expensive, available only briefly after a cargo boat arrives. I should note that English is widely spoken, though French and Tahitian are the local languages.

Travelers less attentive to a budget stay next door to Pension Bounty at the upscale Kia Ora Resort. It is the only hotel on the island with overwater bungalows and its own sandy beach. On their pier bar, I enjoyed the local Hinamo beer (\$5.80), which came with marinated olives and delicious fried chili coconut slices. A bowl of stale bread induced fish feeding frenzies below that sometimes attracted silkies or black tip reef sharks. Skipping the touristy Polynesian buffet show, I picked another night for dinner, where the menu showed duck breast and rack of lamb at about \$28 each. A decent local white wine ran a pricey \$56 a bottle.

It was not until our fourth day in Rangiroa that the incoming current returned. My buddy and I were teamed with Vay, a cheerful and capable Tahitian guide, and an inexperienced couple. A school of barracuda hovered above, and dozens of gray reef sharks crisscrossed the bottom near the pass entrance. Soon,

the current pulled me into the channel. I followed Vay into a valley for shelter and to watch the action. Vay had to reach up and grab the inexperienced woman diver, lest she disappeared into the lagoon. Her eyes bulged with fear as she grasped his arm for the rest of the dive. With all that shark action, I surfaced exhilarated, my tank still half full. I should note that twice we were teamed with rookie divers and had to ascend early. Given the cost of the diving, not to mention getting here, this is unacceptable for experienced divers.

***Top Dive, Motu Aito  
Paradise, Fakarava  
(South), French Polynesia***

Diving (*Experienced*) .....★★★★★  
Diving (*Inexperienced*) .....★★★★★  
Snorkeling .....★★★★★  
Accommodations .....★★  
Service and attitude.....★★  
Money's worth.....★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

*Worldwide scale*

Top Dive provided 15l (105 cu ft) aluminum tanks with nitrox 32. Their powerful twin-engine sun-covered hard-bottom inflatable boats featured well-designed ladders. Back at the dive shop, two hot water outdoor showers got rid of the salt.

Next, a flight to Fakarava, where we walked around the little village as we waited for the boat to our hotel. Hearing some commotion on the beach, I turned to see four large nurse sharks thrusting wildly by the shore. They had beached themselves

trying to prize a couple of tuna carcasses left on the shore by a fisherman and struggled to get to deeper water, which they did, clutching their bounty.

Fakarava, like Rangiroa, is a large atoll with only two ocean passes. Garuae, the northern pass, is near the main settlement where most visitors stay. Tomakohua, the southern pass, is two hours away by speedboat. Dive operators in the north sometimes offer day trips to Tomakohua if enough participants show and sea conditions permit it.

To assure ourselves dives in Tomakohua, we stayed first at Motu Aito Paradise, one of two pensions nearby. It was a two-hour boat trip in a twin-engine covered wooden boat, and dark when we arrived. Our host, Mannihi, a tall, handsome, mustachioed man in his sixties, showed us to our large thatch-roofed hut with two beds, dimly lit by two bare bulbs powered by solar panels, and no air condition-

ing. Our hut opened to an enclosed outdoor area with an open-air shower and a doorless hut with a toilet. With rainwater scarce, the shower and sink taps required gripping the handle with one hand to release a weak flow, a tedious process. And, Mannihi said, emptying one's bladder was no excuse for a toilet flush. Aside from Mannihi, his cousin, and the cook who came on the boat with us, we were the only people on the motu. My partner and I ate our dinner in the common area, while Mannihi sat nearby reading his newspaper.

In daylight, after a steamy night battling the insects (don't forget your DEET!), I explored my surroundings. Motu Aito Paradise was on a barren motu, or reef islet. The pier entrance led through a long, scruffy workshop in a closed compound planted with nonnative trees. The outlook from our hut was through narrow windows, set below eye level, providing no view and little ventilation, perhaps not a bad thing as our hut overlooked the neighboring motu where Mannihi kept his pigs. There was nowhere to relax other than the bed or in the common area, which doubled as Mannihi's living room. While one should expect Spartan conditions in this remote setting, some consideration for travelers' needs would have made it more pleasant. "Paradise" was the last thing I would associate with Motu Aito.

Later that day, an inflatable skiff brought us to a nearby motu and Top Dive's Fakarava South, with a compressor shack, dock, and Eric, who lived alone on the island for the past eight months with no internet or even radio; the boat showed when he had customers. With a shock of blond hair and blue eyes, and looking older than his 48 years, this veteran of French Polynesian diving previously ran a dive shop in Nuku Hiva, in the distant Marquesas. Logistical complications coinciding with our visit meant that he would be diving three times a day for at least three days in a row, and his obvious annoyance set the tone for our time with him. One could only wonder if he was tiring of his monastic life.



**Fakarava Motu Aito Jetty**

***Top Dive, Pension Pearl  
Havaiki, Fakarava (North),  
French Polynesia***

- Diving (*Experienced*) .....★★★★★
- Diving (*Inexperienced*) .....Don't Go!
- Snorkeling .....Don't Go!
- Accommodations .....★★★★★
- Service and attitude .....★★★★★
- Money's worth .....★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

*Worldwide scale*

Once I went underwater, I forgot about Eric's grumpiness. I back-rolled into a small school of unicorn fish, and as I reached the bottom, I came upon marbled groupers by the thousands, looking like an army of soldiers waiting to attack. Eric led us into the pass, where dozens of gray reef sharks swam against the current for some distance before retreating and circling back behind their peers. Many females displayed the scars from aggressive lovers. A few bulky 5-foot (1.5m) blacktip sharks (not blacktip reef sharks) hung with the group. As the current increased and I was pulled deeper, the channel became shall-

## *Goodbye American Pioneer Diver*

James Stewart, a pioneering scuba diver who was famous for exploring the sites of hydrogen bomb blasts, besides teaching generations of scientists from the Scripps Institute of Oceanography since the 1960s, has died.

Anyone reading *Undercurrent* through the '90s will recall his name popped up frequently, since he was one of the few real go-to experts who had command of the technical aspects of diving and the fun of sport diving, and he was always willing to share his expertise.

He authored the original *University Guide for Diving Safety*, which was used to create research diving programs across California, and famously survived a shark attack in 1961 off Wake Island in the North Pacific when he was twice bitten by a gray reef shark that cut two arteries. He was able to make it to a Hawaiian hospital, where he made a full recovery.

Stewart also consulted for NASA, the FBI, Army Special Forces and National Park Service, developing diver training for the Antarctic, where he even had a mountain named after him. He was 89.

lower. It took some effort to avoid the razor-sharp coral below and yet remain clear of any boat traffic above. I eventually surfaced a few yards from Top Dive's dock. Another thrilling dive.

Breakfast at Motu Aito Paradise was always a piece of fruit, small pancakes, jams, tea or coffee. For dinner, spaghetti Bolognese was served two days in a row, and the same chopped lettuce and cabbage salad appeared every meal. Inexplicably for lodging priced at \$300/night for two, alcoholic beverages could not be had for love or money. One evening, when I resolved I would almost kill for a cold beer, I bribed Mannihi's cousin to give us a lift on his boat to the village. We were drenched in a squall, but at least we had cold beer to cheer us.

A few sailboats crossing the Pacific moored in the lagoon. One evening Mannihi hosted a pizza dinner on the pier for their crew, who shared the wine they brought with them. Some, who were keen divers with compressors on their boats, related fascinating adventures of exploring remote unvisited reefs. One American who returns to

Fakarava every year noted that in the lead-up to full moon every July, there is a massive aggregation of groupers, and for about 18 hours they spawn before dispersing into the ocean.

Even though Top Dive made little provision for Eric's own comfort, their shop was outfitted with the latest membrane compressor, and all tanks were filled with nitrox 36. The open inflatable skiff was adequate for the short rides. A simple wooden ladder meant I could ascend without embarrassing myself. On most dives, we were the only ones with him.

To depart, his cousin ferried us to a pension a distance away, where we were to wait for another boat to complete the journey. After depositing us with our bags on the pier, he turned back and disappeared. It was a long wait.

After the deprivations of Motu Aito "Paradise," it was a relief to reach Pension Pearl Havaiki on the north side of Fakarava. More closely resembling a resort than a family pension, this property sits on a pretty beach of powder-white sand. Our garden unit was simply and elegantly appointed, cooled only with a ceiling fan. We could enjoy the sea views and breeze even though our unit was behind the air-conditioned beachfront units.

Top Dive's Fakarava North operation could not have been more different than its southern affiliate. It was a smaller operation than in Rangiroa, but they had a powerful covered aluminum boat with well-designed ladders. And, they had Irene, a diminutive Tahitian lady who was supremely helpful, directing us to a place where we could buy fresh fruit and a wonderful and inexpensive hole-in-the-wall snack for lunch. She even arranged for Jonathan, one of the dive guides, to provide a lift to our pension, so we could have time to rinse and dry our gear after our last dive.

## *Out-of-Practice, but I Want to Dive French Polynesia*

Dear *Undercurrent*:

I have a booking in August 2018 aboard the *Lindblad Orion* in French Polynesia, including Fakarava and the Southern Line Islands and more. Diving will be offered, and I will need to get myself up to speed before I go. They require the PADI refresher course for those who have not been diving recently, which I will happily do. It has been well over 20 years since I dived. Here's my question: all the info from your fine readers tends to be from the POV of experienced divers, but I need to find a destination with a good PADI facility which will give me some quality personal attention.

Any thoughts? I'm planning on taking a week next April, within an easy flight from NYC. I have thought perhaps Saba. I think a smaller destination would be better than a big-time operation. I am fully confident that my skills will return quickly. In my active diving years, I had excellent buoyancy control and was very efficient on my air consumption. While Hawaii would be a slog in terms of travel, I do have siblings on the West Coast, so could include a visit there, but heading South probably makes more sense. Being a bit out of

the scene for so long leaves me a little unclear on my best options.

— *Fred Kolo (NYC)*

Fakarava has serious currents, so it's no place for nervous, inexperienced, or out-of-practice divers. I suggest you spend time somewhere in the Caribbean or Florida, first getting your diving up to speed, and then go somewhere where there are currents (but not so serious) such as Cozumel, so you get used to diving in moving water, long before you get to French Polynesia. If you can't make two trips, make a single long trip to Cozumel, starting off easy. There are plenty of guides there to work one-on-one with you, which you'll find in our reader reports. If you go to Hawaii, make it Maui, where you can find strong surge at Lanai and drift diving the backside of Molokini, at the Oval Office, and elsewhere. Try Lahaina Divers or Mike Severns. (For a taste of what to expect in French Polynesia, read the accompanying article. Top Dive is the primary operation throughout islands.)

— *john@undercurrent.org*

Sebastian, a friendly Frenchman who had lived on the island with his Tahitian wife for the last seven years, was assigned to us for our last day of diving. After a 20-minute boat ride, we hooked to a buoy and I back-rolled into the blue. Landing among a large school of goatfish, I followed Sebastian's example: hold on to dead coral in the strong current and watch the whitetips and gray reef sharks patrol the pass entrance. After a few minutes, we let go, and I let the current sweep me into the channel, keeping close to the bottom to control my speed. Following Sebastian as he weaved his way through a series of canyons was tough, with the current ripping in various directions. Overhangs hid schools of glass-eyes. In one rested a 9-foot (2.5m) nurse shark. Grey and whitetip reef sharks swam among us. The patchy coral showed evidence of stress, with many sections bleached or broken, with marauding crowns of thorn starfish common. The current finally carried us into the lagoon, where Sebastian unclipped his sausage and we ascended. The surge was rough, so I inflated my BCD, then noticed we were right in the middle of the pass and our dive boat was 300 yards away, picking up other divers. About a mile away, a cargo ship was headed directly at us. "We may have to go back down to wait for it to pass," said Sebastian calmly. With my gauge indicating 300 PSI, I did not relish the prospect of descending on Sebastian's octopus. Fortunately, our dive boat arrived, and the burly Polynesian porter assisted in getting our gear out of the water while the captain tried to control the boat as the waves tossed it about. Sebastian made it on board just before the ship passed.

Was it worth crossing two oceans to come back here? Yes, indeed! Incredible and unique diving, odd experiences, in fact, a real adventure, one that I'll remember long after I forget those cushy resorts and liveboards that most of us visit. And next month, I'll report on Bora Bora and Tikehau.

--DTV

Our Undercover Diver's Bio: *Our Undercover Diver's Bio: DTV has been lucky to dive since 2001, mostly in the Indo-Pacific: Solomon Islands, Indonesia, Philippines, Palau, Chuuk, and the Maldives. He has also dived at the Cocos and Malpelo Islands, the Galapagos, French Polynesia, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, the UK, and the Azores. He swam with humpback whales in Rurutu and with Orcas in Norway. He doesn't bother with a camera, preferring to capture memories in his mind's eye.*



**Divers Compass:** Air Tahiti Nui (American Airlines partner) and Air France (Delta partner) serve Papeete from Los Angeles, with fares starting at \$1,232 r/t. Air Tahiti operates the inter-island flights ([airtahiti.com](http://airtahiti.com)). A multi-island pass that includes Bora Bora and the Tuamotu archipelago costs \$610 ... Top Dive rates include all equipment, but best bring your own computer. Nitrox is free and available in all centers except Tikehau ... A 10-dive inter-island pass shareable between two divers costs \$511 ([topdive.com](http://topdive.com)) ... Te Moana Diving Pass is an alternative offered

by independent dive shops. A 10-dive pass shareable between two divers costs \$648 ([temoanadiving.com](http://temoanadiving.com)). ... Papeete Airport Motel charges (\$127) a night with breakfast ([booking.com](http://booking.com)) ... The nearby InterContinental Tahiti Resort & Spa is a pleasanter option. (Check [ihg.com](http://ihg.com)) ... Pension Bounty in Rangiroa charged (\$959) for a six-night stay for two including breakfasts and transfers. Dinner was \$33/person ([pension-bounty.com](http://pension-bounty.com)). ... In south Fakarava, Pension Motu Aito Paradise charges \$1,185 for a four-night package with all meals and transfers for two ([www.ia-ora.com/en/dt\\_properties/motu-aito-paradise-2/](http://www.ia-ora.com/en/dt_properties/motu-aito-paradise-2/)) ... In north Fakarava the Pearl Havaiki charged \$453 for a two-night stay for two including breakfasts, dinners and transfers ([havaiki.com](http://havaiki.com)) ... Wi-Fi speed and reliability was fair to terrible and free in all locations except Motu Aito Paradise ... Download your movies before leaving home ... I was dissuaded from purchasing a local data SIM card by the shop at Papeete's airport because of poor coverage in the Tuamotu Archipelago.

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## Dominica, Fiji, Belize, Costa Rica, Florida

*big animals, no head counts, free flowing regulators*

Though we divers like to dream of exotic places in the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean, most of us still find the Caribbean and the Western Pacific our primary destination. And many find surprisingly good diving.

For example, long-time *Undercurrent* subscriber Clem Clapp (Maplesfield, AL) wrote after a May trip to the **Blackbird Resort** on **Turneffe Atoll** in **Belize**, "Our suite with hot tub on the water was roomy and comfortable, with plenty of hot water and really nice bed ... On almost, if not every dive, we encountered blacktip and nurse sharks, loggerhead turtles, eagle and sting rays, eels and large schools of fish. All dives were really nice and led by Aldo and Ralphie (a fill-in from Hopkins), two of the more competent dive leaders in my diving history. They were very alert looking for critters and always on the lookout for the many lionfish encountered, many of which were taken or fed injured to groupers or morays." [www.blackbirdresort.com](http://www.blackbirdresort.com)

Diving in the West Pacific can be very different from the Caribbean, as Paul Fitzpatrick (San Antonio, TX) discovered. Diving with **Aquacenter Diving** at the **Flamingo Beach Resort** in Playa Flamingo, **Costa Rica**, in May, he reported, "Like much of the Pacific coast of the Americas, there is little coral, but the fish are much larger. The best dives were great. We saw mantas on three of eight dives, usually at the safety stop. There was a huge school of lesser devil rays overhead on one dive and a group of six white tip sharks on another. Several times we were swimming in large schools of the kind that are rarely seen in the Caribbean anymore ... There are a limited number of dive sites, so we were repeating sites by dive number six or so. Some were outstanding, with lots of wildlife, and others were just dead. The dives were all close to the islands (rocks really) so there was a lot of surge even at 60 feet (18m). We mostly swam beside or around an island. There was a substantial thermo-



## *Advanced Danish POV Camera Finally Available*

Little point-of-view action cameras like the GoPro Hero have revolutionized underwater video recording, but divers have encountered some inconvenient drawbacks, mainly the inability to white balance for good color rendition at depth. To do so, the filters have to be fitted. The cameras also tend to have such limited battery life and housing depth restrictions that they are limited to sport diving only.

Now, a better version has reached the market, which *Undercurrent* first saw at DEMA in November. The Paralenz, designed in Denmark, has been beta tested by more than 200 divers in 38 countries. Capable of recording 4K video at 30fps for over two hours, it's designed for serious divers, who usually clip it alongside their masks.

Some unique new features include its depth-controlled color correction capability that eliminates

the need for filters; screen overlays displaying current depth and temperature; and easy media sharing and dive logging via the Paralenz Dive App, all combined in a lightweight package with a staggering depth rating of 650 feet (200m) — without the need for an extra housing. That should be enough for any of us!

Although we at *Undercurrent* could only give the camera a superficial examination, it looks to be substantially made, wrought out of machined aluminum, with flush controls and nothing to cause an entanglement hazard.

The cigar-sized Paralenz camera is intended to sell for around \$730 (649 Euros) with a mounting kit for \$28 (25 Euros) extra. At present, you can buy it online. For examples of footage obtained with this camera and more details, go to <https://www.paralenz.com>

cline at 50 feet (15m), going from 84°F (28°C) to 73-75°F (22°C)” [www.resortflamingobeach.com](http://www.resortflamingobeach.com)

Of course, Florida is the easiest place for most Americans to reach, and as we've reported many times, the better diving is along the coast north of Miami where the Gulf Stream flows. Diving in the Keys is much less predictable and sometimes not up to snuff, as Samuel B. Johnson (Greensboro, NC) notes about his April trip to the **Florida Keys**.

“The people were pleasant, and I enjoyed two unremarkable dives with **Key Dives**, typical of Florida Keys diving. However, on each of my dives, there was a serious safety concern. After the first dive, when the captain called the roll to make sure all divers were back on the boat, he skipped my name and did not call it. Had I still been in the water, no one would have known. When asked, the captain admitted that it was not the case and that I failed to hear; he had, in fact, skipped my name. It didn't seem to bother him much!”

“On the second dive, I was one of a three-diver group led by a divemaster. I stopped to take a photograph, and when I looked up, the divemaster and the rest of the group had disappeared. Luckily, I'm a fairly experienced diver, so I got back to the boat by myself, but it struck me that the divemaster seemed rather unconcerned that one of her group was missing. She returned with the rest to the boat and made no comment when I showed up later. Luckily the boat had not left without me.”

Nor was it so good in San Pedro, **Belize**, with

**Amigos Del Mar**. After an experience with them in June, Linda Teichman (Oakland, CA) was prompted to report, “I was unhappy that my first rental regulator tended to free flow; the second stuck. Both dives I had to switch to the spare. Thank goodness we were only on local dives, 10 minutes from the dock, so it was easy to switch out the gear. All the gear looked quite tired and worn.” [www.amigosdivebelize.com](http://www.amigosdivebelize.com)

### *Beyond the Caribbean*

Traveling far afield doesn't guarantee success either. Dennis McCrea (Burien, WA) went all the way to **Fiji** for a two-center visit including the **Volivoli Resort** in May. Sadly, Volivoli was destroyed by Typhoon Winston last year and is still rebuilding, but as something it wasn't. “We met several people who had been here in previous years, and they were disappointed that it had lost its 'local charm.' They commented, 'It is an amazing place to stay because of the accommodations, but it feels too upscale for a dive resort.’” Dennis adds, “If you want a really nice place to stay and go diving, this is one of the best. He calls it a 'Resort that offers Diving.’”

That said, “The coral in the 'Bligh Waters' surrounding the resort took a harder hit than Rainbow Reef in Taveuni. Shore diving is a waste unless you just want to get wet.” Also, he advises “bring plenty of DEET for the sand fleas/no-see-ums, and bring Benadryl tablets and lotion, as there is none for sale in Fiji,” which holds true for many tropical destinations, even in the Caribbean. [www.volivoli.com](http://www.volivoli.com)

## ***Big Animal Encounters***

By their very nature, wildlife encounters cannot be guaranteed. The ocean is not a zoo. Gregg Backmeyer (Atlantis, FL) found this when he booked on an **Amos Nachoum Big Animals Expedition** in **Dominica** in April and was very disappointed.

He wrote, “We had no sperm whales for the first four days. We did have false killer whales day one., pilot whales day two, and sporadic pods of dolphins, but none were bold enough to swim with us. At 10:30 a.m. on day five, we spotted sperm whales — finally. Something had evidently spooked them out of the area, and upon their return, they were very shy. We had no close encounters as a result. There are normally 10 pods of sperm whales that frequent the waters off Dominica. I realize that there are no guarantees with such trips as to the level of encounters. Nevertheless, for the expense [2017 price is \$8200 for seven days], it was quite disappointing.” [www.biganimals.com](http://www.biganimals.com)

Often, liveaboard diving is the only way to get big animal action. David Fox-Revett (Holland Landing, ON) was luckier diving from **Mike Ball’s MV Spoilsport** on **Australia’s Great Barrier Reef** in June. He wrote, “A major objective of the trip was snorkeling with Dwarf Minke whales. The diving was good, but I wouldn’t say great. Many of the reefs have been damaged by two recent cyclones that have broken up the coral. However, the coral does appear to be regenerating. The Minke whales

did appear several times, as advertised. We had two long sessions with them — one two hours and one four hours — with four to six whales each session.” [www.mikeball.com](http://www.mikeball.com)

Sean Bruner (Tucson, AZ), aboard the **MV Solmar V** out to **Mexico’s Islas Revillagigedo** in June, said “The manta action was fantastic, with up to five mantas at a time, and they came in close, cruising right up next to me. I was shooting black and white with my old film camera with Subal housing and got some fantastic shots. The white tips (sharks) were mostly in the caves along the ledge, but it was impressive to see so many, maybe a dozen piled on top of one another.” [www.solmarv.com](http://www.solmarv.com)

Mel McCombie (New Haven, CT) traveled on board the **MV Galapagos Sky** (formerly *Sky Dancer*) in the **Galapagos** in May and offers helpful tips: “The diving mostly rocked, although the memory of Darwin, Wolf, Isabela, and Fernandina tends to displace the few dives that were a little quiet. Don’t consider going unless you feel really comfortable with your buoyancy in rough conditions; you will enjoy yourself even in down currents, cross currents, etc., if buoyancy is comfortable.”

“Wear good gloves, because you will need to grab onto barnacle-clad rocks; bring a reef hook. A 7mm plus hooded vest plus warm booties will save your bacon. Divers on this trip wearing 3mm froze. The water temps ranged from 64°F (17°C) to 75°F (24°C). Bring a strong portable torch so you can sniff around, not just on the one night dive, but also during often-occluded and turbid day dives.

## ***Trouble Seeing Your Gauges?***

Gary Monsky (Long Island, NY) wrote to ask, “Are face masks with lenses with eye prescriptions recommended while diving?”

I replied, “Yes, indeed. The day I had prescription lenses fitted to my mask, my life (underwater) changed. Some masks are available with simple plus or minus prescriptions, and your dive store can fit them for you. However, it depends on your prescription.”

While there are numerous masks with additional lenses that accommodate the needs of short-sighted young people, there is less of a choice for those of us suffering from the passing of time and arms that have grown too short for reading comfortably.

A good mask that you can get off-the-peg lenses for in either plus or minus strengths is the Tusa Ceos, which is much less expensive than having a mask made exactly to your prescription (which can be done).

I have found that for diving, a simple solution is best. For example, I need +3 diopters lenses in my reading glasses, but I also need a correction for astigmatism for distance, so I used varifocal lenses in my day-to-day specs. However, for diving, I simply use straight +2.5 diopter lenses in my mask, and that suits me underwater, because visibility even in the clearest water is not sharp over a greater distance. It might mean lifting your mask to see where the boat is when you surface.

Your local dive store should be able to help. Otherwise, take a look on [scubaboard.com](http://scubaboard.com) and discover where others have found suppliers that will grind lenses and glue them in to your mask. An example: <https://prescriptiondivemasks.com>

— [john@undercurrent.org](mailto:john@undercurrent.org)

## Two Cameras to Start your Underwater Photographer Career

Thinking about underwater photography, but don't want to jump into the big bucks it might require? Consider the latest Nikon Coolpix W300, a mass-market camera that is rated 'water tolerant' to 100 feet (30m) deep. Deep enough for those divers who rarely pass 60 feet (19m), it will conveniently slip into a BC pocket and be ready to grab to prove that a manta really did fly around your head!

Not intended for serious underwater photographers since it does not appear to accept ancillary wide-angle or macro lenses, it's more useful for casual snaps rather than top-quality shots.

While the wide-angle zoom lens is barely wide-angle (a 24mm full-frame equivalent), it does have a 16 megapixel CMOS sensor and will shoot video footage up to 4K at 30 fps.

And, it's social media ready. When you come face-to-face with that manta, you can post proof directly on SnapBridge from your Coolpix W300. And, there's no need to get your Coolpix confused with that of another diver; they come in five different colors. Price is around \$389, a reasonable fee, but it's got some stiff competition from a superficially similar Olympus.

The 12 megapixel CMOS-sensor Olympus Tough TG5 doesn't go as deep (it's rated to 50 feet/15m). Its built-in zoom is slightly more wide-angle, but it will

accept an ancillary wide-angle wet-lens that's been specifically designed for it. You can also add a ring-flash reflector that distributes the camera's built-in strobe so that the camera's microscope mode is readily usable for super macro pictures. I really have successfully recorded a pin-head with this! It follows closely in the footsteps of the Tough TG4, which has had proven success both with stills and video.

Want to go deeper? If you put it into an Olympus underwater housing, it will safely go to 150 feet (45m) deep. It then accepts additional fish-eye lenses and macro wet-lenses, and you never have to be too worried about the housing flooding because you didn't assemble it correctly — the camera itself is watertight! I've heard some technical divers fill the housing with water while the camera is in it, then take it down to extreme depths, because the water is incompressible. Now, I've not tried that!

Once in the Olympus housing, the TG5 can also be paired with an off-board strobe, just like any more serious camera — and it can also be configured to shoot RAW files, with all the post-processing advantages that confers. And I've seen some brilliant pictures to prove it. The TG5 camera, for casual underwater photographers, costs around \$450, and its underwater housing is \$300 extra.

— [john@undercurrent.org](mailto:john@undercurrent.org)



Nikon Coolpix W300



Olympus Tough TG5

Pack some warm shirts or jackets, plus something lightweight with long sleeves to protect you on the daytime expeditions, since the sun is very powerful.”  
[www.galapagosky.com](http://www.galapagosky.com)

Feedback from other subscribers can make such a difference to your trip planning, helping you manage expectations and avoid problems. Your feedback is just as important to them, as well. So let us hear from you. Please send us a report on any trips you've made in the last six months by filling out our online form. You can follow the link “File a Report” on the left side of our homepage at [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org), or after logging in, follow the “Reader Report” link in the top navigation bar. [goo.gl/ktcju8](http://goo.gl/ktcju8)

Happy dive trips!

**PS: Nice Gesture:** Subscriber Lynda Durfee told us that earlier this month she received an unexpected \$250 voucher from Larry Speaker of the Aggressor Fleet to compensate for poor air on her *Belize Aggressor* voyage. “My cabin didn't have any problem (except AC first night), but others complained of fuel a smell in their cabins, apparently due to a spill in the bilge. I'm reporting this because I've seen reports on other Aggressor Fleet boats with more serious problems and poor response from the fleet office. This voucher is good on any future reservation, including discounted weeks. Now: where to go next!”

# Those Internet-Based Dive Travel Websites

*what they mean for you and the industry*

As the world changes at warp speed, perhaps the biggest change in the last few decades is how we communicate and shop via the Web. *Undercurrent* began in 1976 as a printed newsletter that was mailed to subscribers, but we became an online-only publication simply to survive. Today, the *Undercurrent* publisher lives in northern California, the senior editor in London, the Webmaster on an island in the Indian Ocean, the customer service rep in Texas, the layout artist in San Francisco, and the proofreader in Oregon.

When *Undercurrent* started, to book a dive trip our travel agent used teletype and wires to contact resorts and filled out airline tickets by hand. Today we can book a hotel on the hotel's website or on such sites as *TripAdvisor* or *Trivago*. To book a flight, we may go directly to an airline's site, or compare all our options on sites such as *Kayak* or *Expedia*. Whether their sites or the people involved are housed in San Francisco or Sao Paulo makes no difference.

Of course, we can also use travel agencies, and they, too, have changed. In the mid-'90s, to book a liveaboard trip, one had to contact Sea&See Travel, owned by Carl Roessler. He had firm control over most liveaboards worldwide, and advertised them

in full-page \$12,000 ads in dive magazines like *SkinDiver* while taking a 30 percent commission. As the Internet evolved, the liveaboard owners insisted on doing business directly with customers as well as Sea&See.

That dissolved Roessler's monopoly. He declared bankruptcy, leaving many boats with arriving customers, but without payment, creating hardship for several. Meanwhile, traditional travel agencies expanded into the dive business or opened anew, but without exclusive booking rights. The agencies such as Island Dreams, Reef and Rainforest, Caradonna, and Dive Discovery are staffed by travel professionals who visit resorts and liveaboards, and know the details required for each booking. That's been the business model for two decades. And now, it is under attack.

## ***The New Internet Booking Portals***

In the last couple of years, new Internet agencies have popped up, their long suit being clever and skilled use of Internet technology, their short suit being detailed service. Online portals such as *diviac.com*, *liveaboard.com*, *divingspecials.com* and *divebookers.com* allow you to choose from a range of destinations, dive operations and liveaboards by

## ***Harassing Animals and Coral to Attract Business***

Steve Cohen (Annandale, VA) wrote to *Undercurrent* to report bad diving practices by a dive center in the Philippines. He writes, "Not only do they post pictures of their customers sitting on coral, grabbing coral, harassing undersea life and so on, on their social media page, they also advertise, 'Come chase cuttlefish, turtles etc.' Their operation is aimed at brand-new and very inexperienced divers. Ignorant or stupid, or both?"

Since writing to us, Cohen says Pink Turtle Dive has removed the pictures of divers sitting on coral that were shared to the Scuba Diving group on its Facebook page. *Undercurrent* has seen some of them, and they appear to be inexperienced divers (often without fins) probably on 'discover scuba' experiences and being handled by dive guides.

Have you ever dived with this operation or anyone like it? Let us hear from you. Clearly, they are out of

step with current thinking regarding conservation, but we remember an old video clip of that famous Aussie, Valerie Taylor, that went viral on Facebook after people, unaware of whom she was or how old the clip was, saw footage of her handling a large moray eel. Times change. Cousteau's old movies featured his divers riding turtles, even blowing up the reef and worse, but he was still responsible for a lot of us becoming intrigued with the underwater world.

While we're tempted to shame this dive operation, let's just educate them. In their part of the world, conservation standards and concern for animals haven't caught up with what we know we must do to preserve our oceans and critters. Pink Turtle Dive and many other operators in third world countries — needs to wake up to the real need to protect our degraded oceans and its disappearing animals.

simply clicking here and there to pick exactly what you want. It's convenient, quick, and with so many venue options, very seductive, especially because they highlight bargain prices.

But, in our reviewing these services, we have learned that because so much of the burden for figuring out the trip falls on the buyer, you had better do your homework. For example, keep in mind these portals serve customers worldwide, and some liveboards and resorts may not be favored by Americans and Canadians. If English is your only language, you may not have many people at your destination to talk to.

If you're a savvy, well traveled diver, you know what you want — an airport pickup, nitrox, wetsuit rental, an overnight hotel near the airport, vegetarian meals or an Internet hookup. It can be a long list. If you are just getting started or traveling to an area unknown to you, you may need far more attention than these portals may provide.

The sites are attractive, especially because they tend to push bargain prices. However, one liveboard operator showed us two price examples on *diviac.com*, one for the *MV Arenui* and one for *MV WAOW*, that did not exist. Presumably a simple error, but they would sure gain one's interest.

To test booking these sites, we made exploratory inquiries to both *liveaboard.com* and *diviac.com* for a trip on the *Indo Siren* in Raja Ampat and a trip on the *Emperor Orion* in the Maldives during the second week of January 2018, as well as a trip on *Argo* at the end of this year to Cocos Island.

The *Argo* and *Indo Siren* trips were a few dollars less expensive than booking directly with the boats, while the *Emperor Orion* was actually a few dollars more. The online portal prices were not too dissimilar from each other. If you know what you want, the booking process is very straightforward.

Making contact with *diviac* from the U.S. resulted in an online chat with a representative in Miami, while making contact from the UK drew calls back ostensibly from Europe. When we failed to finalize a booking, they were persistent, often sending cheery follow-up emails, asking if other options might be more suitable, and so forth.

After our calls had been completed and we failed to book, ads started popping up during unrelated Internet searches or on Facebook for liveboard deals, as well as regular emails, some related to the trips considered, others generic. Unlike traditional agencies, they rely heavily on their Internet marketing skills to make a sale now or down the line. It's focused advertising.

## *Use the 24-Hour Rule to Your Advantage*

Here's an interesting wrinkle that we bet few have thought of. Ken Kurtis of *Reef Seekers Dive* in Beverly Hills, CA, advises, "Whenever you buy an airline ticket, and it doesn't matter if it's for a dive trip or a family vacation, don't forget that all airlines are required by federal law to allow you to cancel the ticket and get a full refund — even on non-refundable tickets — within 24 hours of making your purchase.

"So any time you buy a plane ticket, keep checking back for the next 24 hours. If the airfare drops, cancel your original ticket and get a refund, and go with the lower fare, which will also trigger a new 24-hour window."

Thanks, Ken, for an imaginative solution to that frustrating problem of wondering whether to book and ensure a place, or wait to see if there's a price reduction later.

Just like thousands of online companies dealing in multiple products, these extremely well capitalized online portals are based anywhere in countries like Switzerland — *diviac.com* — The Netherlands — *liveaboard.com* — and Germany — *divespecials.com*, but with sales staff based all around the world.

As you can imagine, most people in the travel business don't like this competition by technocrats. One told us "Online portals are all about flashy websites, and they have their phones or emails answered 24/7 with order takers placed all over the world, in all time zones. They even have a virtual agent on their sites, to answer questions. I think too many divers do not understand the differences between booking with these agencies and with an experienced dive travel agency."

However, for divers who have become accustomed to doing a lot of other business on the web, this is what they may expect.

### *What Do Liveboard Owners Think?*

For one, Alex Bryant, the owner of a large fleet of liveboards in the Maldives, is getting plenty of new business. He told *Undercurrent* that he now has serious volume and imagines *liveaboard.com* to be one of the biggest booking agents for liveboards in the world.

Others don't like it. Some worry that the online companies can become so powerful they will monopolize the customer base, like Costco and Wal-

Mart, and will be able to strong-arm dive operators into giving them bigger cuts. In fact, some dive businesses refuse to be listed by these portals.

Most dive boat operators and reservation managers seem to have accepted the inevitable advance of web marketing, though under silent protest. None wanted to be quoted by *Undercurrent*, but as one doyen of the liveaboard industry told us, “Our reservation and sales manager complains that these online booking services frequently just provide the client’s name and then move on, letting her do all the work while claiming their 20 percent commission. It drives her nuts!” That’s because she finds herself doing the detailed work formerly done by a dive travel agent.

Another liveaboard reservations manager told *Undercurrent*, “We have travel agents who work very hard. They are divers themselves, spending their own money to travel on familiarization trips so they can better serve their diver clients, yet they are losing business to these online booking portals that have rarely been to the destinations they are selling, do not pre-screen diver customers and do not give their clients proper information for their trips. It is frustrating for us, because we get guests on board who are unprepared for the diving on offer, and thus, it takes away from everyone’s experience.”

If, for instance, for divers booking a liveaboard trip to the Galapagos, they should be advised what they will face. This is no place for an inexperienced diver. There are big swells, ferocious currents, cold water, and long travel times in the open ocean. If they had not been warned they’d need a very warm suit and gloves, they’d be miserable. Undoubtedly, divers will want to visit Darwin and Wolf Islands, which requires an open-ocean passage of around 160 miles from the main archipelago. They need to be prepared for seasickness and be unaffected by it. These things need to be explained to anyone before booking. And some operators are telling us that customers arrive from the online-booking specialists quite unprepared.

Frank Wasson, the former owner of the *MV Spree*, which dived the Flower

Gardens in the Gulf of Mexico, says he did not like booking portals, because they did not allow operators to vet their customers, and that “butts on bunks are their only criteria when appropriateness is more important.” He stopped taking bookings through dive shops, too, for the same reason.

He preferred online booking directly to him to ensure “our clients told us about any medical difficulties, reviewed and accepted our release, and reviewed and accepted the terms and conditions of travel before we ever took their money or even knew their name.”

So, divers who use these portals better have some understanding of what they’re buying. For example, if one is looking for a relaxing time in the water, you wouldn’t choose to go diving in the ripping currents of the channels of the Maldives in Springtime, despite the photographs illustrating it showing crystal-clear water and loads of big animals. This is where a knowledgeable travel agent becomes useful.

### ***How Do Traditional Dive Travel Agents React?***

Just as dive-store owners once complained about the advent of online equipment buying from companies like Leisure Pro, traditional dive travel agents are up in arms about online booking portals, claiming they often provide inaccurate or insufficient information.

Jenny Collister from Reef and Rainforest told us, “We quote for the cabins that are actually available, whereas at least one of the online portals appears to be advertising cabins that are not available in the budget category. If you click through the site, you will often find the ‘from’ quoted price is not available and has sold out next to it.

“Reef and Rainforest qualify our customers and have lengthy discussions about what their level of diving is, what they want to see, what is important (food, other activities, the level of comfort) and make sure they know exactly what they are getting.”

Dom McCann at DiveAdvice said he is not the only one unhappy with these online portals, stressing that they have entered a mature market while promoting themselves as the future of dive travel.

### ***Don’t Wash a Wound with Sea Water***

According to the British Medical Journal, a 31-year-old man ignored warnings about swimming after getting a new tattoo on his right calf and contracted a flesh-eating bacteria infection while swimming in the Gulf of Mexico.

He developed sepsis at the site of the tattoo and two weeks later was put on life-support, but doctors reported that alcohol abuse had left him susceptible to infection and septic shock. They were unable to save him. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are 100 such deaths each year, some attributable to exposing a wound to seawater.

## *The Only Time You Should Hold Your Breath*

A video clip that has gone viral offers a sobering reminder that air trapped in a cave (or in any other place such a shipwreck) may not be fit to breathe. Experienced cave diver Jeanne Edgerton was exploring a cave system in Mexico with her husband and others when they surfaced inside a fairly large air dome.

On the surface, the hose from her tank to the BC became unattached and she had to struggle to stay afloat. Breathing hard without her regulator in her

mouth, she was becoming asphyxiated in the oxygen-deficient atmosphere. Thankfully, her husband, Brian Wiederspan, got the situation back under control by getting her to breathe from her regulator after other members of the group had failed to convince her to do so.

Of course, divers should keep their regulators in their mouths when surfacing in any untested air pocket. [goo.gl/2hfYEK](http://goo.gl/2hfYEK)

“They have little experience in the actual industry other than in technology, but give the average diver an impression that they must be well-resourced, professional and that they guarantee the lowest rates.”

“They lure [the customer] in with the promise of guaranteed lowest rates, and when they request a trip, they often give a lower rate for non-diver (sometimes a rate that is non-existent), and a rate for diver that might be close to the real rate.”

“Many people take them at face value, and by the time they have got into it and have given their credit card and found the rates do not include this or that, they don’t bother to fight it as it takes more time and effort.”

### ***What’s the Real Experience?***

We contacted *diviac.com* to book the *Belize Aggressor* and got into an online chat with their representative. She was very helpful with questions about transportation from the airport to the boat and hotel suggestions, advised not to go in September since “the weather was bad” (that is hurricane season), and admitted that she had not been to Belize or seen that craft. But she did say she had been on another *Aggressor* and offered that all the *Aggressor* boats “are the same” — not true, of course, but not a deal killer. In a discussion about pricing, she said tips were included, but a careful look at their website shows that tips are not included, but recommended, which would be about \$230 one would need to pony up at departure (or else stiff the crew, unintentionally). She did note that for 48 hours after booking, one can cancel.

Subscriber Elaine Doherty (Brisbane, Australia) told us she used *liveaboard.com* once in 2015.

“The service was reasonable, but after having transferred what I thought was the total amount

(and it was a big amount for a liveaboard in Raja Ampat), they then billed me again for port, park and fuel supplement. This meant yet another money transfer, which blew out the cost of the trip! When I initially made an approach to them, I specifically asked for the quote to include all fees including port, park fees, fuel, etc. This they obviously had not done. I have not used them again and do not intend to!”

Now, this is not to say that we haven’t seen an occasional problem with traditional dive travel agencies, but overall, it’s fair to say they are staffed with more experienced people who can draw on each other.

Nonetheless, the liveaboard and dive resort booking business is changing. And so are the users, people who avoid the telephone and prefer to do their work online, with one-size-fits-all websites. Regardless whom you book with, be a savvy booker. Ask the questions before booking to avoid unpleasant surprises later. With the new online agencies, you will have to dig deeper and dig farther to get the information you need, if you can, indeed, get it.

Remember, when you buy sight-unseen from Amazon.com or Overstock.com, you can return it. You cannot return a \$4,000 dive trip.

### ***Let Us Hear from You***

Have you booked a dive trip in the last year or so through an online agency or a traditional dive travel agency? How did it go? Tell us about it.

Why did you choose the agency?

Did you get all the information you needed?

Were there any financial or travel surprises?

Did you need help from them during the trip?

Tell us your stories, good or bad. We’d like to know! [BenDDavison@undercurrent.org](mailto:BenDDavison@undercurrent.org)

# The Florida Shark Diving Saga Continues

*a bite and an attack raise more issues*

In March, our item entitled “Kill ’em but Don’t Feed ’em” covered John L. Russell’s campaign to make it illegal in the U.S. to feed sharks for diver observation. It is illegal in Florida waters, but Russell claimed that some Florida dive operators are breaking this law, alleging that Randy Jordan of Emerald Charters in Jupiter, among others, conducts shark dives. Jordan was listed as the owner of Emerald Charters until December 2016, when ownership was transferred to 257 Charters, but he remains listed as the captain of the dive boat.

*Undercurrent* got plenty of feedback from readers, published in the April edition, with opinions equally divided, especially among local Jupiter divers. While noting that shark feeders like Jordan do valuable conservation work, such as removing hooks from sharks, we underlined the number one rule if attending a shark feed dive: let someone else do the feeding!

This proved portentous. At the end of May, a shark bit Jordan on his hand during his shark feed dive, causing such a severe injury that he was airlifted to St. Mary’s Medical Center in West Palm Beach. The *Palm Beach Post* reported that Jordan underwent ‘reattachment surgery.’ A shadow was already hanging over Jordan’s head, as the week before, seven divers became separated from Jordan’s vessel and had to be rescued by U.S. Coast Guard.

In 2015, Jordan was sentenced to a year’s probation and 100 hours of community service and fined \$1,500 after being convicted of three misdemeanor charges stemming from illegally feeding sharks. Jordan said, “When people see that the sharks are not going to rip them to shreds, then they’re not afraid of them, and they begin to love sharks and appreciate them as the apex predators that we need. Secondly, by monetizing sharks, by making money from people seeing them, it makes it so that sharks are worth a lot more money alive than dead.”

In 2011, Jim Abernethy, known for his organized shark interactions in the Bahamas from his vessel *Shear Water*, was also flown to St. Mary’s Medical Center after being bitten on the arm during a

shark feed. Jordan apparently has suffered past injuries, as well.

George Burgess of the *Shark Attack File* at the Florida Museum of Natural History has said that a bite that occurs when someone is feeding a shark is considered a provoked incident rather than a shark attack. “The impression that shark diving operations give is that it’s a perfectly safe operation. It’s generally safe, but not perfectly safe.”

However, a friend of Emerald Charters said that Jordan did not receive a shark bite, but the bite of a ‘sea creature.’ *Undercurrent* has yet to receive a response from Randy Jordan regarding what sea creature bit him and the extent of his injuries.

Of course, there is plenty of shark feeding in the Bahamas, and in early June, snorkeling in the waters off the Atlantis Resort in Nassau in the nearby Bahamas, Tiffany Johnson of North Carolina had her right forearm completely severed at the elbow by an attacking shark. The mother of three was airlifted to Charlotte to have multiple surgeries after being initially treated in a Bahamas hospital to stem the bleeding. While some people argue that the injury is due to shark feeding, there is no direct evidence. Sharks have bitten humans since they first shared the ocean together.

## *Sea Turtles Under Threat*

The individual sex of sea turtles is determined by the temperature at which the eggs are kept, prior to hatching. A new study by Dr Jacques-Oliver Laloë of Swansea’s College of Science argues that warmer temperatures due to climate change could lead to higher numbers of females and increased nest failure.

The pivotal temperature is 29°C (84°F), at which both sexes are produced in equal proportion; above that temperature, mainly females are hatched. Within the context of climate change and warming sea temperatures, sea turtle populations will be more female-based, and although males can mate with more than one female, this could threaten population viability.



# Finding Your Way Aided by a Compass

*an item of equipment that's often overlooked*

Divers who frequent dive sites with lousy visibility would shake their heads at those who enjoy good visibility and rarely have a use for a compass, so don't know how to use one. If you can see where you're going, what's difficult about keeping the reef on your right during the way out and on your left when you return? But, if you dive in low visibility, featureless sandy plateaus, or a wreck you are not moored over, you need a compass, and you need to know how to use it. If you do know how, read no further.

## *What Could Possibly Go Wrong?*

But pity the poor diver who leaves his dive boat in Truk Lagoon, only to miss the wreck and spend his dive swimming over acres of seabed. It happens!

Traditional compasses have a card marked with the 360° bearings that floats within the instrument on either a pin or oil and a needle that is free to rotate in the same way.

The card or needle wants to point to magnetic north. To use a compass correctly, you need to hold it so the fixed arrow marked along the side of the compass points in the direction you wish to travel.

This arrow is called the 'lubber line.'

Ensuring that the compass card or needle can swing freely, rotate the moveable bezel so that its position is marked. Adjust your direction as you

swim so that the needle remains in this position. When you want to return on a reciprocal course, you simply rotate the bezel through 180° and swim back. Some compasses have a sight glass that allows you to take a bearing, and you merely need to add or subtract 180° for the reciprocal course.

What can go wrong? Well, lots, actually. First, it is important to hold the compass out in front of you with two hands so that the lubber line really points in the direction of travel. If you wear the compass on your wrist, this almost ensures that you'll have the lubber line held at an angle instead. Also, holding the compass ahead of you ensures that a steel tank you might be wearing does not affect the compass magnetism, just as a steel or iron wreck will.

Many computers now offer an electronic compass mode. Take a bearing of where you want to head, and, keeping the electronic compass level, follow the bearing. Some will automatically give you the reciprocal bearing, but none, however high tech they might be, can take currents into consideration.

Unless you are heading exactly and directly into a current, it is inevitable that you will be pushed off course. You will need to vector a course, which is nigh on impossible. Never forget that Christopher Columbus traveled west, but hit the Bahamas rather than what was to become Manhattan. That's why it's important to navigate short distances between



## *A Bad Weekend At a Training Lake*

The weekend of June 17/18 was not a good one at White Star Park Quarry, in Gibsonburg (OH), a former limestone quarry often used for dive training and scuba certification.

On Saturday, one diver discovered the body of another diver floating motionless in the water. He pulled her to shore. Despite life-saving techniques administered by other divers, it was too late. Fearing for the deceased diver's buddy, a search was conducted, which was called off when it became apparent no other

diver was missing. Mary Wolf, 58, of Powell, OH, had been diving alone.

The following day, another woman diver, Annmarie LaPorta, 55, got into difficulties when she and her buddy became low on air and made a hasty ascent, during which she inhaled water. Emergency crews arrived, but her current condition is not known. Clearly, quarries, however benign, pose a danger to unsuspecting divers.

specific and noticeable points of interest in the undersea terrain. Slavishly following the compass will lead to mistakes, whereas this point-to-point piloting as you go adds gentle corrections.

Magnetic compasses are cheap to buy and low tech. Before you enter the water, either from the shore or a boat, get someone to point out roughly

your intended destination so that you can take a bearing on it. Never forget that there are 360 degrees in a circle, and avoid trying to do anything clever like adding turns and trying to calculate the resulting geometry underwater. That's for armchair divers!

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## What Do You Have in Your Dive Bag?

*better to have it and not need it*

In *Undercurrent's* mid-month email, we asked what items you might carry with you on a dive; items such as a surface marker device like a buoy or flag, a knife, a flashlight; items that are better to have and not need than to need but not have.

### ***Gear to be Located By***

Victor I. Ruess, MD, Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry at UCSF (San Francisco, CA), always packs a small strobe light in his BC pocket, replacing the batteries before any trip, in addition to the sausage and mirror, which he says are probably more hit-or-miss and no good after dark or in overcast.

*Getting lost at the surface appears to be the greatest hazard a diver faces.*

“Most potential problems are under one’s control and can be avoided through prudent diving, except for being left behind. Somebody else’s screw-up is what you need to worry about and prepare for as best you can.” He’s happy to dive with an EPIRB off Wolf and Darwin for the same reason.

“Getting lost at the surface appears to be the greatest hazard a diver faces. I’m a great believer in low-tech emergency solutions, ones that don’t rely on batteries or electronics. I never dive without my large surface marker flag on its extending surface, strapped to my tanks by a couple of elastic straps. I’ve used it in places like Aldabra, the Maldives and in Cocos, where divers from another boat reported seeing it (looking like a flashing light) from around six miles away. I’m surprised these are not offered more often in dive shops, but I suppose it’s an easy matter to make your own with some lengths of plastic tubing and some elasticized cord.”

Getting left behind on the surface is an obvious worry. Many subscribers suggested carrying

a Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) in a watertight case. This was reinforced by Dennis Chasteen (Lee, NH) when he wrote, “When diving from a boat or solo, I also carry a Nautilus Marine Rescue GPS . . . In addition to the safety equipment that you list, I also have a Dive Alert on my BC inflator hose, a whistle, a signaling mirror and a small strobe. I use a thumb reel affixed to my SMB when diving in current.” It’s worked for him: He’s been diving for 60 years and is still going strong at 76.

Ollie McClung (Birmingham, AL) relies on a signal mirror and a simple whistle. He says, “Two things I always include: A signal mirror (actually I carry a CD/DVD in my BCD pocket — cheap and easily replaceable) and a simple whistle. Yes, there are fancier, louder devices, but for normal diving where conditions are pretty tame, a plain whistle will do.”

Tabby Stone (Playa Del Rey, CA) tells *Undercurrent*, “In one BC pocket, I always have an inflatable surface marker and a long floating one that I bought years ago, but haven’t seen sold in a long time. I also have a small flashlight in that pocket. There’s a fold-up snorkel in the other BC pocket. If I’m going someplace with lots of current, I take an emergency radio, and on the shoulder of my BC I’ve got an Adventure Lights SOS light that is supposed to be visible for up to a mile.”

Underwater photographers can always use their strobes as position signaling devices, suggests Maxine Barrett (Rancho Palos Verdes, CA).

“After a routine 60-minute dive in the Southern Maldives two years ago,” says Paul Bizon (Wilsonville, OR), our group surfaced in an unexpected storm of high winds, waves, and sideways rain. “Two items stick with me to this day that I will always have with me on my future dives. One was the Nautilus Lifeline GPS unit that was attached to a dive buddy who was blown away from us out of sight. He was eventually brought aboard another boat after an hour following his calling out GPS coordinates over

his GPS unit to our captain. The second item that I now have a new-found appreciation for is a large buoyant marker sausage (not the weenie size) that three of us used as a buoy. We hung onto it for 45 minutes while bobbing in zero [surface] visibility, heavy wind, and severe chop.”

### ***Send Me a Message:***

Now here’s an underused idea. “I always carry a slate for writing so that I am clear about what I really need or want in any situation,” writes photographer Cathy Church from Grand Cayman. “Or I can send a message to the surface with [another diver] so that there are no misunderstandings if, for example, I am unable to ascend but just need some time to clear a reverse block or something.”

That’s a good point. Technical divers often carry more than one delayed deployment surface marker buoy (in different colors) so that they can send a message to the surface if need be.

“Who knows when my safety may depend on a written description to ask or answer the story better than a hand signal,” she continued. “A message like: I can’t find my buddy. He was just over there, but I want you to help me look for him right now.”

### ***Self-Protection:***

Robert Delfs (Bali, Indonesia) was known to carry a bottle of fresh water and a hat as well in case he ever suffered a long wait in the sun. It was just after he’d heard about the six Japanese divers lost at Palau.

He also has a pouch attached to his wing harness containing a reef-hook, a very bright flashing strobe, cutting shears, a blunt-tipped knife, a whistle and a 10-foot long (3m) surface-marker buoy.

When asked, he reflected, “The reason I always carry a very substantial reef-hook is my memory of a dive I did with you, John, at GPS Point, near

Sangeang Island outside the Komodo National Park. It was when the weight-pockets fell out of a BC you were testing, so you did your safety stop using your reef hook attached to the top of a bommie at around 40 feet (12m).”

A pony bottle with its own regulator is something Duncan McLaren (Glasgow, Scotland) always carries. He says, “You might never need it, but one of your companions might have problems, and I, for one, would rather let them have my pony regulator than my main one! If in a panic and my main regulator is snatched, then I can use the pony.”

Karen Kessel (Sonora, CA) says, “The two things that have always saved a dive or a trip are zip ties and duct tape. I never leave home without them. Oh, and a New Skin brush-on Band-Aid. It holds up for days in salt water if you get blisters from your fins.”

“O-rings and straps,” says Jim Perrow (Winthrop, WA) are essential items. “Also, I do not go without gloves, and I carry an extra pair of white garden gloves in my bag. I’ve trained with gloves on at all times in the pool, lake or ocean [since 1974], otherwise fingers get soft and cold. If you have not been trained with gloves on, then how do you know how to work knobs, valves, and fins and mask when you must wear them?”

Of course, some dive operations discourage the use of gloves as a way of discouraging divers from touching the coral.

Finally, sage words from David Inman (Devon, PA), who makes the important point, “Before the trip, spend some time inspecting and maintaining your equipment, so you don’t have to worry about it in the rush of the first day. Also, back at home, do not neglect regular service of your regulator, alternate air source, computer, and BC.”

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## **Flotsam & Jetsam**

**O’Neill Wetsuit Founder Passes.** Jack O’Neill, the surfer and boating enthusiast who moved to San Francisco, opening his first surf shop in 1952, has died in Santa Cruz aged 94. Known for his beard and his eye patch (the result of a surfing accident), he was founder of the iconic worldwide surfing supply company, and many divers adopted his wetsuits.

**Spare-Air Reinvented?** The Scorkl is a light-weight breathing device with a demand valve and

built-in pressure gauge marketed to people who want to swim underwater for around 10 minutes. We don’t believe the instructions explain the difference between interstitial emphysema and pulmonary embolism, but we guess the medics will tell them later, after they are rescued.

**Wizard Bails Out of Seven Seas.** Bill Wilkson, allegedly a former KKK Imperial Wizard of the Imperial Empire from 1975 to 1984, has sold the Seven Seas Resort in San Pedro, Ambergris Caye,

Belize. *Undercurrent* reported on his ownership in April 2015. The dedicated staff are still there, so now you can enjoy the resort knowing it's prejudice-free.

**Flying After Diving:** Mike Davis points out that the correct attribution for the source of the article in *Undercurrent* (June) should have been Cialoni D, Pieri M, Balestra C, Marroni A.: Flying after Diving: Should recommendations be reviewed? In-flight echocardiographic study in bubble-prone and bubble-resistant divers. *Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine*. 2015 March; 45(1):10-15.

**No Chums for Nat Geographic Crew.** The *Orange County Register* reported in mid-June that maritime authorities had stopped a National Geographic film crew from baiting for great white sharks within 100 yards of the coast of Long Beach during an attempt to get spectacular footage. In late April, a woman was severely injured by a shark while swimming at San Onofre State Beach, and now it seems media companies might be chumming to create the very news they hope to report.

**Anchoring Error Causes Consternation.** A French skipper of a charter boat is in hot water after dropping anchor at a popular dive site in Phuket, Thailand, with the anchor chain hitting one diver in a group on the head. Adding insult to injury, the anchor dragged away a motorbike, part of a popular attraction for divers at the site at Racha Yai Island, when it was retrieved. The marine police were informed. (Source: *The Phuket News*)

**Following in Prada's Footsteps.** Giuseppe Zanotti, luxury shoe designer, is known for his sneakers, and this year at the Milan Fashion Week, he showcased his Spring '18 collection, which included scuba-inspired footwear finished with chunky rubber soles, but otherwise not unlike neoprene beach shoes. In March, Prada showed a derivation of scuba boots using colored panels of neoprene. I don't suspect our female subscribers will be rushing right out.

**Dropping Your Weights.** Charles Ballinger (Mill Valley, CA) writes to remind us that dropping weights prematurely risks serious embolisms from rocketing to the surface from depth, and the risk of getting bent if you've been down a while and can't pause in the shallows to decompress! As was said, a properly weighted diver needs only to drop weights in an emergency on achieving the surface. Chuck, by the way, was the first to dive in all 50 states and published a book on his adventure. [www.dive50states.com](http://www.dive50states.com)

**Marine Life Photo Contest.** The Ocean Conservancy's Marine Wildlife and Seascape photo contest is officially open for submissions until July 9 and it's free to enter. After that you and your friends will be able to vote for your favorite photos online. <https://oceanconservancy.org>

**Genus Manta Ceases to Exist.** A paper in the *Zoological Journal of the Linnean Society* (London) reports that DNS sequence data has proven that members of the genus *Manta* actually sit within genus *Mobula*, revising the taxonomy. Hence the oceanic manta is now known as *Mobula birostris* and the reef manta should be now known as *Mobula alfredi*.

**Let the Goliath Live:** Donald Trump Jr, vacationing in the Bahamas with his family, went scuba diving, saw Exuma's swimming pigs, and fished for and reeled in a 140lb Goliath grouper, not something many divers who have seen the docile fish underwater would likely do. In Florida, if one catches a goliath grouper, it must be released. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) urged Donald Jr. to remember his father's words, who in 2004 said, "Whenever my sons go fishing, they always tell me, 'Dad, it doesn't hurt a fish to get hooked.' Well, I watch and I see and I believe it's painful for the fish."

## undercurrent

*Undercurrent* is the online consumer newsletter for sport divers that reviews scuba destinations and equipment. We accept no advertisements and have been published monthly since 1975.

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