

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

March 2018

Vol. 33, No. 3

## *Avalon II, Jardines de la Reina, Cuba*

*is it the Caribbean's best?*

### IN THIS ISSUE:

<i>Avalon II, Jardines de la Reina, Cuba</i> . . . 1
Easy Travel to Cuba . . . . . 2
If Attacked, You're Not Just a Shark Attack Statistic! . . . . . 4
<i>Avalon II, Too</i> . . . . . 5
Magic Oceans; Bohol Island, Philippines . . . . . 6
Underwater Bullies . . . . . 8
75 Hours Afloat At Sea and Survived! . 10
Less of an Achievement than a Moon Walk . . . . . 11
Do You Need Advanced Open Water Certification? . . . . . 12
Did Your Travel Insurance Cough Up When Required? . . . . . 13
What's the Latin Name For It? . . . . . 14
Divers Disappointed in Sipadan . . . . 15
Get Your Weights Off First . . . . . 16
Liability Waivers and the Dive Professional . . . . . 17
Liveaboard Trip Canceled 24 Hours Before Departure . . . . . 18
Woman Divers – Have You Had a “Me Too” Moment? . . . . . 19
No More Tropical Mosquito Bites . . . . 19
Flotsam & Jetsam . . . . . 20

[www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)

### Editorial Office:

Ben Davison, Publisher and Editor  
3020 Bridgeway, Suite 102  
Sausalito, CA 94965

[BenD@undercurrent.org](mailto:BenD@undercurrent.org)

At 6:30 a.m., I hopped on Avalon Cuban Dive Center's comfortable bus in Havana for the six-hour ride to their boat dock, southwest, in Júcaro, Friends and I were headed to the Tortuga houseboat-on-a-barge. But surprise! The barge was undergoing repair, and we eight had been upgraded to the luxury liveaboard, Avalon II. A sweet beginning to the week.

As I boarded the Avalon II, I was impressed: from my spacious and modern cabin to the hot tub up on the sundeck. But I didn't take the long bus drive and the five-hour boat crossing for the amenities -- it's about diving the Jardines de la Reina (the Queen's Gardens). Was this distant archipelago "the very definition of pristine" a la the Caribbean of 50 years ago, as Undercurrent's previous reviewer (July 2016) claimed? Or would it be "a major disappointment," as one reader countered. Over the next week, I found the answer.

After an uneventful crossing and a 7:00 a.m. breakfast the next morning, it was time to dive. First up, an OK check-out dive. The next dive was at Five Seas (Cinco Mares), the name of a shipwreck (or bits of one). From the dive skiff, I back-rolled into 79°F (26°C) water to be greeted by a 7-foot (2m) reef shark easing over the bottom below me.

I was impressed here, as on most dives, with



*MV Avalon II*



the numbers of fish. Mixed schools of blue-striped and French grunts, schoolmasters, and plenty of reef fish. And, big guys were evident immediately. Hovering near a sloping wall, I watched a three-foot black grouper's body darken as cleaners tidied it up. Later, I petted a two-foot Nassau grouper as it passed. So many Caribbean reef sharks cruised off the reef, some coming in close, that I stopped counting them half-way through the dive. On a couple of dives, I spotted silky sharks hunting fish near the surface.

Irain Abreu, the lead divemaster -- Avalon II put two divemasters in the water for our eight divers -- was a good critter spotter as we cruised the low profile 20 ft (6m) high wall, typical of my Jardines dives. With my magnifier, I checked out a secretary blenny and then a bright-yellow rough-head blenny peeking from its hole. Under a ledge at 70 feet (22m), Irain discovered two golden fairy basslets, a beautiful species not even in my Paul Humann book. At the top of the wall, I tried to join a school of Creole wrasse, but they skirted away. After 50 minutes, I surfaced from the mooring, handed up my weights to the boat captain, and climbed the sturdy ladder onto the dive skiff, where the crew helped with my gear.

As the trip got underway, I had met with Irain and with Tony Cárdenas, an excellent biologist, who also dived with us, to explain that my friends and I

## *Easy Travel to Cuba*

In my five dive trips to Cuba over 24 years, I have always seen plenty of Americans. Of course, citizens from every other country visited, but Americans had to fly through Mexico, Bahamas, or Canada, use no credit cards, request no passport stamp, and perhaps toss out a white lie or two when returning home. Many divers did, and rarely did one face any issues.

While Barack Obama moved to open relationships with Cuba, last summer President Trump reversed policy on American trade and travel. While his restrictions have caused confusion for American tourists (but not tourists from other countries, who travel there freely), they seem to have had a negligible practical effect.

The U.S. State Department allows organized tours and individuals to travel to Cuba, as long as the purpose falls under one of twelve categories. If you're traveling as an individual, when you make your airline reservation, you will be asked on the airline website to click the menu for your reason for travel: your reason is cultural exchange.

It is illegal to stay in hotels or do business with

companies that are connected to the Cuban government (there is a list of restricted business at [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov), which you should visit for the latest information on Cuba travel), but there are plenty of Airbnb rooms.

Avalon will provide a Letter of Authorization (General License), as well. I printed out a copy and kept it with my passport in case I was asked. I wasn't, and my stop at the U.S. customs counter in Fort Lauderdale lasted 10 seconds.

For my January trip, I flew both ways on Jet Blue, but my friends flew on Southwest, United, Delta and American from various U.S. cities — with cheap fares or modest doses of frequent flyer miles.

Like most divers, I wanted to spend a few days in the capital, so I flew into Havana, an easy, cheap and interesting city. I spent an evening walking around the old city — food and music were everywhere — and went to the National Theater for a jazz concert. You can stay in homes via Airbnb or informally, for about \$35 per night per room, with \$5 pp extra for a nice breakfast.



**Avalon II and her numerous skiffs**

liked to explore slowly and see a wide variety of reef life. We didn't want to chum, feed, or harass sharks or other marine life (a criticism of the Avalon operation by more than one Undercurrent reader). They readily agreed, and for the most part, they did a great job, never-ending dives early while offering site choices and snorkeling opportunities. Both Tony and Irain, experienced Cuban dive instructors, are fluent in English, as is Alejandro, the other DM on the boat.

Each morning, the 8 a.m. dive began after breakfast (omelets, toast or pancakes, tropical fruits). We took a short surface interval back on the Avalon II, and, after our second dive, returned about 11:30 a.m. Before lunch, I sometimes soaked in the hot tub. Afterwards, I had plenty of downtime before the 3:00 p.m. dive. Moreover, with all that downtime, I enjoyed visiting with the divers from Russia, Brazil, France, Sweden, and Finland. My friend spent hours discussing Russian history with a hard-drinking trio from Moscow and Vladivostok. Some afternoons or evenings, Tony lectured about the reef system, which complied with the educational nature of the trip, as required by the U.S. government to make this trip (see sidebar). He focused on the reef ecology, environmental threats, and the history of protection for Jardines.

The cabins were essentially identical: a double bed with a single bunk up top, adequate room and a spacious bathroom with potable water, made by osmosis. The big front salon was used for education and lounging, but the second-deck area behind the dining room was the go-to spot for visiting.

The Avalon II moved few times during the week; our skiff, one of two for the 15 divers on board, took from 5 to 15 minutes to reach each site. (As one Undercurrent reader noted, although the Avalon II is a liveaboard, it operates a bit like a land-based operation.) With little current, the skiff would moor at a site marked with a float; then divers would head down, travel along a wall, and return across the top. One excellent dive accidentally became a drift dive. At a site called "Entre" (Between), Tony briefed us thoroughly, noting there could be a slight current, so we would head up current, but once down he headed down current. We drifted along a sand channel and coral ledge, and when the current got brisk, I'd hide behind a coral head to check out small stuff. Above, a giant school of horse-eye jacks did their mysterious circling act. Out a ways, I noticed a lot of big stuff: dog snappers, cubera, hogfish and two large, uncommon orange filefish (they're silver -- who names these things?). A shark passed dragging four remoras, three more that a fellow diver had attached to his butt, leading to pointing, plenty of camera action by fellow divers, and a few guffaws topside.

On top of the reef, my partner almost bumped into a hawksbill turtle, then I heard a tank banger and saw a diver waving his arms like a cheerleader; he had

### **Avalon II, Jardines de la Reina, Cuba**

- Diving (Experienced).....★★★★★
- Diving (Inexperienced).....★★★★
- Snorkeling            Good but limited opportunity
- Accommodations .....★★★★★
- Food.....★★★★
- Services and attitude .....★★★★★
- Money's worth .....★★★★

★ = poor    ★★★★★ = excellent

*Caribbean scale*

## *If Attacked, You're Not Just a Shark Attack Statistic!*

The death of a scuba diver by shark bite at Cocos Island in December has renewed divers' interest in shark attacks worldwide. For 2017, the Florida Museum of Natural History reports 88 confirmed unprovoked shark attacks, 30 provoked attacks and 18 cases of small boats being attacked by sharks. Only five of the unprovoked attacks proved fatal worldwide; none occurred in the U.S.

However, attacks in U.S. waters were more common than anywhere, with 31 in Florida and 10 in South Carolina, twice as many in South Carolina as in the previous year.

The Shark Research Committee, whose goal was to assist Leonard P. Schultz of the Smithsonian Institution, reports that since the year 2000, there have been 103 shark attacks reported along North America's Pacific Coast. We divers aren't immune — 6 attacks — but surfers have the greatest risk (62), followed by kayaking (17), swimming (8), paddle-boarding (6) and one each

for outrigger paddling, windsurfing, fishing, and boogie boarding.

If you are unlucky enough to be bitten by a shark, statistical categories matter little, as British businessman Andrew Phipps-Newman (45) found out in the Galapagos Islands in early February.

Phipps-Newman was snorkeling with sea lions off Santa Fe when a supposed (12 foot/4m) Galapagos shark grabbed his foot. Terrified, he managed to fight off the predator by hitting it repeatedly with his GoPro set-up before he lost it in the meleé. He suffered three severed ligaments in his foot and a broken bone.

He was helped ashore, picked up by a dinghy, and attended by a doctor (who happened to be a member of his group) while enduring a three-hour trip to the hospital in San Cristobal. Such attacks are incredibly rare in Ecuador with just eight reported in more than 60 years.

spotted a Goliath grouper in my weight class snug in a tiny sand channel. Irain spotted a cache of three lobsters, a Goliath's favorite prey, and rousted one from its hole with his lionfish pole spear. Gulp! Dinner came early for the big guy, who sported the lobster's two antennae out of his mouth. (I didn't like Irain's intervention, but it did provide a good show.) Throughout mosts dives, the dive-masters speared lionfish, leaving them for sharks and grouper who still haven't learned to hunt them on their own. I noticed my new diver friend using air fast, so signaled Irain to get the boat's location. He steered us to a different mooring, where our skiff had moved, and we poked around to end a great dive. (They provided our newbie personalized help and instruction for no charge other than an extra tip.)

Avalon II provided 15- and 12-liter (100 and 80 cf in gringo-lingo) aluminum tanks, which they filled to 2900-3000 psi (200-206 bar). Being an air hog, I chose a whopper, and always had air to spare (my deepest dives touched 100 feet/30m). We analyzed our nitrox mix on the skiff and noted the reading on a clipboard. Dive times averaged 50 minutes, but the divemasters didn't enforce a limit and allowed longer dives. They didn't babysit divers.

The boat and bilingual crew were topnotch. Excellent lunches and dinners came with a range of choices, served on a beautiful table setting. They served lobster many times, once grilled. After purchasing kingfish and dog snapper from fishermen, the chef turned the kingfish into steaks and served the snapper whole. There was always chicken or pork, accompanied by the inevitable rice and either red beans or Cuban soupy black beans, then followed by delicious cakes or fruit cocktail, a la my mom in the 1950s. One night the crew served a cake (and sang) for my partner's birthday.

There was no counting drinks or any nickel-and-diming. Wines were offered with dinner, beer and drinks were always available, and at cocktail hour, our gracious host, Jane, prepared mojitos.

Several dive sites were along low-profile walls, but some were canyons, swim-thrus, and larger formations. At Black Coral I, we descended to 85 feet (26m) to

cruise above coral mounds, watching the show unfold. Sharks patrolled off the reef, and once bar jacks rubbed against one shark's sandpaper skin to remove parasites (I wondered what the shark gained in return for his service?). Yellowtail snappers frenzied in a white cloud, which puzzled me. Later, Irain explained they were eagerly chowing down on shark shit. (Snapper for dinner, anyone?) In the deep sand flats below, I watched garden eels duck out of harm's way as permits milled around. A pair of huge rainbow parrotfish -- an odd couple, because they were terminal-phase males -- swam between coral mounds. Here, a high percentage of live coral had little overgrowing algae or strangler tunicate.



**Dining saloon on *Avalon II***

However, I don't agree with those who compare these reefs to 50 years ago. We're 60 miles off a low-density shore, in a no-fishing protected area, and I could still witness the serious degradation of coral reefs due to warming and the resultant acidification. Though I saw no coral bleaching, Tony said the water gets as high as 86°F (30°C) in the summer. January weather was very pleasant, if sometimes breezy. The only adverse effect was reduced visibility of 50 feet (15m) on shallow dives. Water was 79-80°F (26°C).

Tony once took us to snorkel in the mangroves and seagrass, where I spotted upside-down jellies, juvenile barracuda, gray snappers and others in the reef's nursery. The highlight of the show was to be snorkeling with a croc, but she failed to appear. Tony guessed the cooler weather kept her sunning rather than coming out for a chicken-leg-on-a-stick. The cute jutias and iguanas enjoyed being hand-fed fruit snacks on the beach.

I did see one croc crunch on chicken: "Tito," an eight-footer, who came out on cue alongside the Tortuga houseboat, at the island base of operations for Avalon II. Twice I took a ride to the Tortuga for its spotty satellite Internet connection, which was good enough to check emails and make calls to the U.S. using WhatsApp or Facetime. The dive crew slept at the island base, arriving at the Avalon II each morning with our gear set up in the skiffs and ready to dive.

Since my friends and I were flying out of Camaguey at 12:45 p.m. Saturday, the boat modified plans and made the 5-hour return crossing Friday afternoon. Having to cut out the final day dive, they scheduled a night dive to make up for it. While I skipped it, my friend reported lobster, crabs, octopus, a red army of night fish and a huge number of long-spined urchins marching off for their nightly foraging. The Avalon website says that night dives can be scheduled for a "generous tip," but when we suggested another night dive, to my surprise, the answer was no. However, most requests resulted in a yes, including minor equipment repairs and a loaner computer when a diver had a dead battery. The rental equipment (Avalon asks that you pre-pay for it) looked good to me.

I have dived all over the Caribbean, and I would certainly put this in the top

## ***Avalon II, Too***

In December, one of our writers was aboard the *Avalon II* and we have posted his story as a blog on our website. While he had a different experience, he too found the diving to be among the best, if not the best, in the Caribbean. You can read that story by [clicking here](#).

tier, if not the very best. It's costlier and harder to reach than destinations such as Cozumel. However, finding solitude in Cozumel is as likely as finding a mojito at an AA meeting. Here, you will be the only divers for miles and enjoy virgin Caribbean diving -- if not all the coral -- as it was 50 years ago. And, by all means, combine it with a wonderful stay in Havana.

-- A.M.

Our undercover diver's bio: *A.M. has been diving many small and unique locations in the Caribbean for more than 30 years. While he is easily lost underwater, he manages to find his way on back-roads exploring in Central America and the islands. He has written several Undercurrent reviews, including one on Cuba's Bay of Pigs.*



**Divers Compass:** Seven night trips on the Avalon II begin at \$3800/ double occupancy. I prepaid \$3600 double occupancy for my trip (fees, taxes, airport transfers, Nitrox included) ... I pool-tipped 10% in U.S. dollars (this is essentially the crew's salary) ... My many questions were handled well via email and phone conversations by Luisa Sacerdote in Avalon's Italian office (Avalon is jointly owned by the Cuban government and an Italian Company, which manages the business) ... [www.cubandivingcenters.com](http://www.cubandivingcenters.com) ... in Havana, I booked a

room at the home of Mercedes Gonzalez ([mercylupe6@gmail](mailto:mercylupe6@gmail.com)) ... American friends booked nice rooms via [www.airbnb.com](http://www.airbnb.com) (price about \$35) in the same Vedado neighborhood of Havana ... bring everything you think you'll need, like toiletries, pharmaceuticals, etc. ... you can easily change U.S. dollars to international Cuban currency CUCs ("kooks") at the Havana airport for spending in Havana (you'll need CUCs -- Cuba's convertible currency -- for taxis, rooms, restaurants -- and can use them for all or part of the boat tip).

---

---

## Magic Oceans; Bohol Island, Philippines

*another great Philippines bargain*

The sun was setting behind the island as the outrigger motored slowly toward Secret Corner. Short stretches of powder-white sand interrupted the lush limestone coast, covered by lush tropical foliage. We anchored off Anda's main township, four miles east of Magic Oceans, where a few locals were bathing off the beach. Only



Magic Oceans' "outrigger" or "bangka"

four of us dove that night, my buddy and I and our two local dive guides, Lee Ann and Irish, a local PADI instructor trainer. The sandy bottom with its occasional tufts of grass at first didn't seem promising, but having been there the night before, I knew it was full of curiosities.

First to appear was an inquisitive snake eel (Brachysomophis crocodilinus), poking its head from the sand. Next, what looked like a floating blade of grass, perhaps 6" long, upon close inspection revealed tiny pulsating gills and fluttering pectoral fins: a short-tailed pipefish (Trachyrhamphus bicoarctatus).

I rudely interrupted two hermit crabs' conjugal intimacy, and they scurried away from my light. A mantis shrimp briefly poked its head from the sand. A six-foot holothurian sea cucumber (Synapta Maculata) fed in the sand, its thin body marked by evenly spaced rings. When I poked it gently, a porcupine boxfish, witnessing my transgression, was alarmed enough to spike its body. A few yards away, a trio of three-inch scorpion fish waited patiently for their prey. A box crab scuttled away as a couple of coconut octopuses drew my attention. The star of the evening was a tiny, beet-red flamboyant cuttlefish dancing on Lee Ann's pointer. It was my last night dive, and I was not disappointed.

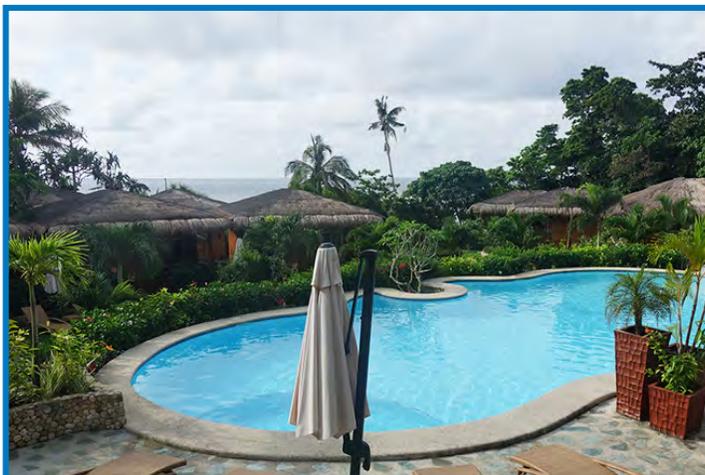


Having read Undercurrent's excellent undercover review on Magic Oceans' sister resort, Magic Island in Moalboal, Cebu (Undercurrent, April 2015), I combined a trip to both, only to be grounded most of my time in Moalboal by a severe cold. Although the resorts are less than 200km apart on opposite sides of the islands of Cebu and Bohol, the transfer took most of a day, with long drives and a two-hour ferry crossing.

Opened just two years ago, the Dutch-owned Magic Oceans has 20 units set back from the ocean, tightly compacted in beautifully manicured gardens with a swimming pool. The 370-square-foot cottages are larger and more luxuriously appointed than those at Magic Island, and each comes with both a queen and single bed. During January, I didn't need the air conditioning.

Upon arrival, the well-trained and friendly local and expat staff introduced themselves and always helped us whenever asked. We took meals family-style at one table with Eef, the resort director, and Peter, a German expat who had been dive center manager for but a week, often joining us. Our predinner cocktail hour at the bar and lively meal conversations included the other guests, all experienced, well-traveled divers (American, Australian, German, and French), half of whom were traveling alone. Eef, a Dutchman probably in his late thirties who helped build

the resort, said they recruit guests from dive markets where English is widely spoken (which, of course, is where the money is).



**Magic Ocean's pool area**

They served breakfast in their open air, thatched-roof restaurant from 7a.m., which included a la carte choices of eggs prepared your way, bacon, toast, preserves, cereal, fruit, French toast, and pancakes. The extensive lunch menu offered both western and local choices. Chef Laurel was more accomplished than his colleagues at Magic Island, and modified any dish to my liking. For dinner, many folks chose the \$23 three-course menu (e.g., a

spring roll starter, then stir-fried beef or chicken adobo with vegetables and rice, and some concoction with ice cream), but I went for one of the excellent a la carte Filipino choices such as pancit canton. After one taste of the white wine, I reverted to the San Miguel beer at \$2.

Our last night we dined at the swanky Amun Ini Restaurant at a neighboring resort, where we shared aubergine and bean hummus as a starter. For main, I had a pleasantly spicy blackened chicken breast, and my companion tried local clams with chorizo, which he found underwhelming. Desserts were a bread pudding and a chocolate soufflé. With a couple of beers each, the bill came to \$65.

The small dive shop was clean and well organized, with a substantial area where the crew nightly hung gear to dry. Before each trip, the staff checked my Nitrox mix and then loaded my equipment into the boat. From the dive center, a few steps led down to the water, and I had to brave the sea urchins -- better wear hard-soled booties or sandals -- in the shallows until I reached the boat to climb the substantial steps -- not a ladder -- lowered from the boat. When the construction of their jetty is complete, this inconvenience should be eliminated.



**The jetty was under construction**

Their beautiful outrigger left at 8:30 each morning for two morning dives, from 5 to 20 minutes away. Fruit, tea, and coffee were offered during the hour-long interval, and we returned to the resort for lunch. They offered a third dive at 2:30 and an evening dive trip on demand at 5:30. As on Magic Island, I could strap on a tank any time and dive the house reef, guided or unguided. With the water a balmy 82°F (28°C), and plenty of action in the shallows and a substantial drop off a short kick away, it was possible to make several dives a day.

The resort's three spacious and comfortable outriggers -- 48 feet (15m), 73 feet (23m) or 86 feet (27m) with inboard engines -- were outfitted with shaded benches and ladders. We spent most dives drifting slowly past walls at 65 feet (20m) or less, with my maximum depth being 100 feet (30m), when I dropped to check out a pygmy seahorse. I saw some bleached tips of the staghorn coral, but other varieties seemed unaffected by warm

### ***Underwater Bullies***

Bret Gilliam, a veteran industry executive, once told me that divers eventually either get bored and stop diving once they have "seen everything" or they become underwater photographers.

I once owned a large underwater camera rig, but eventually I realized that I preferred using my time to observe and interact with marine animals rather than fuss with my camera to capture "the perfect shot." I sold it and started enjoying diving again. While I have no problem with divers taking pictures, I do object to those who think that other divers deserve no more than a passing glance at a critter before they must make way for the photographer to get his shot. We had one such guy on this trip. An interesting and polite fellow when not diving, underwater he transmogrified into an annoying bully. Once when he elbowed his way between my buddy and the pygmy sea horses he was looking at, my companion gently pushed him away. Responding to the bully's outraged expression, he motioned that he was not done yet. For me, capturing memories takes time too.

Some dive guides pay less attention to clients without cameras, pointing out critters mainly to photographers. I have a simple solution for that. Like some photographers, I present guides with my own spotting wish list. Try it. You will be surprised how it focuses their minds.

- DTV

waters. I admired how the symbiotic creatures were aesthetically matched to each other. On one gorgonian, I saw five pygmy seahorses, barely distinguishable from their host. A shrimp on a feather star looked like it was knotted in the crinoid's feeding arms. The colors of many varieties of clownfish complemented their anemone hosts. One guest counted 25 varieties of nudibranchs during his five-night stay. There were many small schools of colorful reef fish: catfish, fusiliers, sergeant majors and batfish. I saw an occasional jack or tuna in the distance, and a single sea snake, although the staff claimed they were common here. Notwithstanding, I found the wall dives, which lasted one hour, a little repetitive and not as interesting as the night dives.

I was disturbed by the sight of the large bamboo fish traps suspended by thick rubber cables over most walls, even at Snappers' Cave, a seamount that is supposedly a marine sanctuary. Tight webbing ensured that nothing wider than a centimeter could escape. I dread to think of the coral damage each time these heavy contraptions are dragged up -- all for the sake of capturing a few small reef fish; a poignant reminder of the poverty of many locals.

Magic Oceans does have some shortcomings. Unlike its neighbors, its beach is pebbly and uncomfortable, with lots of sea urchins lurking beneath the surface. The towels were tired, and there could have been more of them. Some equipment we rented was faulty -- one regulator free-flowed and on a night dive their dive light failed. (We had a similar problem at the sister resort.) On the other hand, I liked their focus on the needs of divers, both in the water and topside. Small, thoughtful touches abounded. As I was writing these words at dusk in the outdoor bar, someone discreetly placed a mosquito coil below my stool to ward them off.

Eef told me he plans to build a spa, but in the meantime, one can arrange a room massage. One afternoon, we took a motorized tricycle to town to visit its market and the 19th-century church with its fresco-painted ceiling. Bohol's more famous attractions are the chocolate hills and the Tarsier conservation area, home of the world's smallest primate, and the resort offers a one-day trip to visit both.

For my last dive, it was a bright, sunny day, the first on this trip, with visibility double the average 15m, which had been the norm. Turtle Point lived up to its name, with many green sea turtles visiting its pretty coral garden, most accompanied by matching green remoras. A four-foot turtle kept a weary eye on me, but rested motionless on the sand as I remained close. Our communion was interrupted when Lee Ann pointed out a school of squid nearby. With her pointer, she parted a plume of soft coral to reveal white translucent eggs. Nearby, about 30 brown squid jealously eyed one couple, bodies shimmering white as they engaged in a mating ritual. When the others tried to approach the female, her mate would angrily repel them with his tentacles. Occasionally the female would dip into the coral to lay her eggs while the male shielded her from behind. As I slowly inched my way toward them, he flashed his



**Predinner cocktails were at the thatched roof bar**

**Magic Oceans; Bohol  
Island, Philippines**

Diving ..... ★★★★★ ½  
 Accommodations ..... ★★★★★  
 Food ..... ★★★★★  
 Services and attitude ..... ★★★★★  
 Money's worth ..... ★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

*Worldwide scale*

tentacles in my direction -- warning me not to come any closer. I remained transfixed until Lee Ann motioned for us to ascend. It was a great finale.

While I was at Turtle Point, a blue ring octopus visited the resort's jetty construction site a few hundred yards away. Eef told me that the kids had played with it before they released it back into the sea. While it wouldn't take much to get me back to Magic Oceans, the thought of seeing that blue ring octopus will do it.

-- DTV

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:** My five-night stay, double occupancy, at Magic Oceans cost \$830 including breakfast ... Dives were \$32 plus \$8 for Nitrox ... You can fly from Manila to Tagbilaran (TAG) airport, then be driven (\$90) two hours to Magic Ocean or take the five-hour transfer by car and ferry from Cebu (CBU), which has direct flights to Seoul, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Tokyo ... If you stay in Magic Island first, you may be able to incorporate a whale shark dive at Oslob on the day you transfer between the two resorts ... February through May are said to be the best months to visit. <https://magicoceans.online>

---

## 75 Hours Afloat At Sea and Survived!

*an unplanned feat of endurance and lessons learned*

Every diver's worst fear is surfacing and finding there's no dive boat to be seen. And then drifting aimlessly at sea.

In *Undercurrent* September 2016, we recounted the stories of divers getting lost near Malpelo in the Pacific and at Mauritius in the Indian Ocean during the same week. Clearly, every diver needs an effective surface signaling device such as a large surface marker buoy or even a large flag on an extending pole. At night, you should carry a fully charged back-up flashlight that you've not used during the dive. Moreover, you should consider high-tech solutions, such as the Nautilus Lifeline Marine Rescue radio beacon or the McMurdo Smartfind.

New Zealander Robert Hewitt had none of those when he went diving near Mana Island (Cook Strait) in New Zealand in February 2006. An experienced Navy instructor, he became separated from his buddy but continued diving alone. He had intended that instead of returning to their boat, he would swim to the shore 220 yards (200m) away.

However, when he surfaced in a strong current,

he found himself several hundred yards from where he expected to be, and the dive boat with his buddy had moved on. Wearing a farmer-John wetsuit and jacket, with a hood and gloves, he was alone in the ocean while his friend, noting eventually he hadn't made it to the shore, and unable to find him, raised the alarm.

### *A Scientific Case Study*

Physiologist Heather Massey from the University of Portsmouth (UK) has studied what happened to Hewitt, his progressive deterioration over the following four days and three nights that he floated, how he survived and how he eventually recovered after his rescue.

Water conducts heat around 20 times faster than air. Hewitt floated in 61°F (16°C) water, well below his body temperature. Physiological models have determined that the median survival time for a lightly dressed swimmer is roughly between 4.8 and 7.7 hours. Hewitt spent 75 hours in the water, drifting more than 40 miles before he was spotted and rescued.

Even so, his rescue was only by chance. The intensive air and sea search had proved fruitless, but he was finally stumbled across by two police officers in a Zodiac. He was pulled into an inflatable, alive but hallucinating, before being transferred to a larger police patrol vessel.

Cold water immersion produces a four-stage response. First, there's that familiar cold shock that induces gasping, hypertension and increased cardiac workload. Hewitt's properly fitted 5mm wetsuit saved him from that, and as an experienced diver, he was used to diving fully clad in cool water. However, many people drown when falling into cold water, because the shock both induces heart arrhythmia and causes them to inhale water.

In the next stage, one loses muscle power, thanks to peripheral muscle cooling, and gradually becomes weaker. Hewitt did lose the ability to swim and even lost consciousness at times, but his inflated BCD kept his head above water and prevented him from drowning. Retaining his fully inflated BCD extended his survival time.

The third stage is deep body cooling, which affects both physical and mental functions. When he was rescued, he likely was at the edge of hypothermia, but nobody took his temperature before he was wrapped in blankets and given warm drinks, so that cannot be confirmed. His first recorded body temperature reading was 99.5°F (35.7°C), which suggests that he was able to generate and store sufficient heat keep his body temperature above the level considered to be hypothermic.

One factor that staved off hypothermia, besides his wetsuit, was that Hewitt was large and muscular — 5'10" (1.8m) tall and weighing around 220 pounds (100kg). Every one-percent increase in body fat is thought to slow the rate of heat loss by 0.18°F (0.1°C) per hour, which adds up when applied over 75 hours. This gave him a better chance of surviving heat loss than a leaner person. His high level of aerobic fitness would have enabled him to generate heat for prolonged periods of time by swimming. Exercising while wearing a wetsuit reduces deep body cooling. He also tried to maintain a fetal position at other times to minimize heat loss.

The final stage of response can happen at the time of rescue. Evidently, it's common for people to collapse due both to a change in pressure as they move from water to air and a strong nervous system reaction to being rescued. This was discovered during rescues of yacht crews during the 1979 Fastnet Race disaster in the UK, hit by a Force 10

gale. Helicopter crews found that some of the sailors who had been safely plucked from the sea died during the ride back to land. Lifting the winched sailor from the sea in a vertical position caused disastrous blood pressure drops. Nowadays such casualties are kept horizontal. With this in mind, Hewitt's rescuers kept him horizontal and gave him verbal encouragement to fight for his life.

### ***Heat Loss Is Not The Only Problem***

Heat loss from immersion is not the only problem faced by a diver lost at sea. Dehydration can be as serious a problem. We divers know how immersion stimulates urination, which is not good when you are already dehydrated. Hydrostatic squeeze,

## ***Less of an Achievement than a Moon Walk***

From time to time *Undercurrent* gets news of yet another record attempt, featuring such stunts as the greatest number of scuba divers underwater at any one time or the most divers able to form a human chain underwater. We rarely publish the details, because, frankly, these activities tend to be a little inconsequential or even pointless. Nevertheless, here's a new one.

It takes about 15 minutes to walk across the top of Sydney Harbour Bridge, and the views are spectacular. However, in search of something to do with his scuba equipment and lured by the chance to see his name in the record books, Rod Moore decided to slog across the harbor the hard way. He would walk across the boulder-strewn harbor bottom, taking his chances in the murky water.

Moore had made the 3km (2.5 mile) trek across the bottom of Australia's Lake Macquarie in 2017, so he decided to try for double the distance in January. It wasn't as simple as walking across a smooth lake bed. He came across 10-foot-tall boulders covered in kelp.

He breathed air supplied by hose from his support boat, and, while circumnavigating large boulders, tried to keep his air feed from tangling with the endless boat moorings, while avoiding stepping on glass bottles and other rubbish. He was successful and made his way into the record books, today probably enjoying just as much obscurity as he enjoyed before he undertook the task.

So next time you're bored with a dive site, here's something to pass the time, but just don't take your stroll on a coral reef. And no need to write and tell us about it unless you achieve something more than simply covering the distance.

## *Do You Need Advanced Open Water Certification?*

As you get older, you find you become less and less qualified for things you do, despite having been doing them successfully for years. This is especially true of scuba diving. So, training agencies offer more and more courses that promise to certify you at new levels — which, of course, enables the agencies to sell more products (more specialties) to existing divers without having to convince new customers to become divers.

Unfortunately, this means that you might be asked to flash your Advanced Open Water certification card to prove you are capable of undertaking dives you might have been doing for years.

Randy Brook (Twisp, WA) wrote to *Undercurrent* to tell how he was looking into booking a Micronesia cruise that included birding, cultural visits, and scuba diving, but was surprised that the tour operator insisted on scuba divers having an AOW (advanced open water) certification.

Although he had been diving for more than 30 years, like many other experienced divers he knew, he never believed he had to go beyond the basic Open Water Diver (OWD) certification. Instead, he answered questions about his diving experience when signing up for various trips.

The term “advanced” means different things to different people. While most of us know that it should mean well experienced, in this case it merely means having moved on a bit from getting certified. In fact, one only needs five extra dives to move from an open water certification to an advanced open water certification, and that can be accomplished immediately after

making the minimum number of dives to achieve the basic certification. Regardless, of the “advanced” designation, it’s not advanced at all. Many AOW divers have so few dives, they’re but a few dives from first learning to dive. In truth, they are little more than novices.

Government regulations in Queensland, Australia, require all divers to be certified and carry a C-card when booking a trip. Yet Mike Ball Dive Expeditions seems quite sensible in advising those who book: “Divers who have completed less than 15 dives, less than 5 ocean dives or less than 5 dives in the last 12 months are required to complete a complimentary on-board orientation dive. In addition, divers over 65 years old who have completed less than 50 dives are required to complete the complimentary on-board orientation dive.”

Alas, many general tour companies and cruise lines are not knowledgeable about scuba diving and buy into the training agencies’ notion that an AOW card is an important badge for a diver to carry. Perhaps because tour companies want to keep liability to a minimum, they fall back on the security of paperwork, all the while misunderstanding that one who carries an AOW card may not at all stack up to a diver with 50 dives. Regardless, it’s far easier to ask for a card, than to have a conversation about experience.

So, my fellow divers, for some general excursions, you’ll have to either pull out your AOW card or go elsewhere. Let’s just hope that dive operators, seeking to earn more money, don’t start requiring divers without the AOW card to pony up for the class before they are permitted to dive.

peripheral vasoconstriction, and a tight wetsuit cause increased diuresis. The wisdom is that, if marooned in this way, you should avoid drinking any fresh water you might have for the first day so that hormone changes are triggered in the body, and you naturally start to conserve water.

Hewitt used his mask and wetsuit jacket to collect rainwater when he could, but not enough to equal the minimum volume his body would have required. After he was rescued, he drank a liter-and-a-half and then received another six liters of water intravenously. Starvation is less of a threat than dehydration. Hewitt had previously been collecting crayfish (spiny lobster), and he ate his catch. However, limiting food consumption, especially protein, while not a long-term survival plan, can assist with water conservation.

His wetsuit also began chafing his softened skin, and his rescuers found him to be covered in sea lice that were feeding on him, which they hosed off with fresh water. His face and lips were sunburned.

Next comes the impact phase when a person realizes their life is under threat and they are struck by fear. A recoil phase is when the survivor starts to show a gradual return of awareness and cognitive function. During his time alone as he drifted, he prayed and recited the names of his family members.

Reciting prayers and mantras enhances and synchronizes inherent cardiovascular rhythms and suppresses worrying thoughts, leading to a reduction in anxiety. Practicing routine tasks serves to increase the amount of spare capacity in working memory for planning and decision-making. Hewitt repeatedly and systematically checked all his gear.

Eventually, one reaches a psychological low in the struggle to survive, and by the third day, Hewitt had suicidal thoughts.

While he might easily have given up hope, he had the training, knowledge, and skills to establish a psychological state of preparedness for an emergency.

Clearly, it is a miracle that he survived his ordeal and was rescued. It took him several months to return to normal physical and psychological functioning, but he did recover fully.

### ***What can we divers learn from Hewitt's awful experience?***

Wearing a thick wetsuit and having plenty of body weight helped him, but that's often not a choice one can make beforehand. Staying in the

fetal position or 'heat escape lessening posture' is a good idea. Keeping his BCD inflated kept him afloat and safe from drowning when he went unconscious.

But, the best idea is to avoid the circumstances that may lead to you getting lost. Take an effective signaling device. A low-tech one that needs no batteries, such as a marker buoy or extending flag, is best. Once darkness falls, a fully charged flashlight will give rescuers a fighting chance of finding you. Expect the unexpected.

*(Abridged from a report in SPUMS Diving & Hyperbaric Medicine Vol.47 December 2017 and other sources. Lost at sea: the medicine, physiology and psychology of prolonged immersion. Heather Massey PhD. Department of Sport & Exercise Science, Portsmouth University, UK)*

---

## **Did Your Travel Insurance Cough Up When Required? *or should you forgo paying those stiff premiums?***

Whether to buy travel insurance for a dive trip is often a dilemma, first because insurance is expensive, typically around five to nine percent of the trip cost, depending upon your age. If you want to go with the "cancel for any reason option," it runs as high as 20 percent.

You have to weigh that cost against your current and potential health issues, the reliability of your flight, your resort or liveaboard, and the likely hood of bad weather when you travel.

Most divers self-insure and take their chances. If they are healthy, don't have a complicated trip with local airline connections, have left plenty of time to cover delays, and aren't traveling in hurricane season, they presume they'll never have a claim greater than the cost of their policy.

For those who decide to insure a trip, most want the best deal possible, and many, after only a cursory review of the coverage, spring for the best price. For the few who eventually file a claim, many will learn, to their dismay, as you will see in this story, that the small print excludes their problem and they aren't reimbursed.

After all, insurance companies are not beneficent uncles eager to make you financially whole should

things go wrong — even if their advertising promises that. They are profit-making companies with policy language skewed in their favor.

So, what does that mean for a traveling diver? We surveyed our readers to see what problems they might have encountered with trip insurance and, as we learned, it's not uncommon for insurers to refuse what seems like the most clear-cut claim. Readers inundated us with stories — some are salutary tales — that may give you pause when you consider whether to insure your next dive trip.

### ***Credit Card Insurance is Free***

The first thing to realize is that you may have some trip insurance connected to the credit card you use to pay for your trip, especially if you use a gold or platinum card. The coverage varies, so before you rely on it, you must read the fine print.

When Ana Martin's (Olympia, WA) gear bag went missing last September on her way to the Solomon Islands, her credit card company came to her rescue. Her trip from Seattle involved flights first with Alaska Airlines, then Fiji Airways, and finally with Air Niugini. When her dive bag failed to arrive, she had to rent dive gear from her liveaboard, the *MV Taka*.

As it turns out, her dive gear had disappeared forever, so she sought restitution from Air Niugini, which refused, indicating they are not governed by the Montreal Convention that governs nearly all other airlines. Claiming no fault, they washed their hands of responsibility.

Martin told us that Fiji Airways made a goodwill restitution of \$1600. The travel protection insurance

*His policy did not cover delays caused by plane maintenance problems*

she took out through Expedia (\$107) only paid \$700.

But, she had purchased her ticket with a Citibank Platinum card. "Within three weeks, (they needed a lot of paperwork), they paid their maximum benefit of \$3000. A good reason to carry and use a Platinum card! Here restitution totaled \$5300, just about enough to cover the cost of her gear.

(We might add here, don't overlook your homeowners' insurance if your equipment disappears along the way; many policies cover such personal losses.)

Ruth Lindner had to cancel a Fiji trip for medical reasons, and reimbursement from her DAN insurance fell \$2000 short. "My Chase United credit card had trip insurance, so I used that for the balance." She later had to cancel a trip to the Caribbean and "it was all covered under the Chase United credit card insurance. The insurance has no extra charge."

Coverage, if any, differs between cards. Paul Moliike (Dover, DE) used his Chase Preferred card to purchase business class tickets on Qatar Airlines to Denpasar, Bali, where he was to pick up the Wakatobi's twice-a-week flight to the resort. "Unfortunately, my first flight left late, so I missed my connecting flight in Qatar, which made me miss my flight to Wakatobi (he had planned a 10-hour layover in Bali). I had to stay in Bali three nights."

When he returned, he contacted both Chase and Qatar Airlines. Qatar said the delay was due to a combination of operational and technical reasons or aircraft defects, and Chase, too, declined his claim.

One might expect that planning to arrive 10 hours before a connecting flight should be enough; however, if you are hooking up with flights that don't fly daily, 24 hours seems like the minimum. Any glitch will put you out of luck, and you'll miss

part of your dive trip. And, too often there will be no insurance reimbursement.

### ***Insurance and Missed Connections***

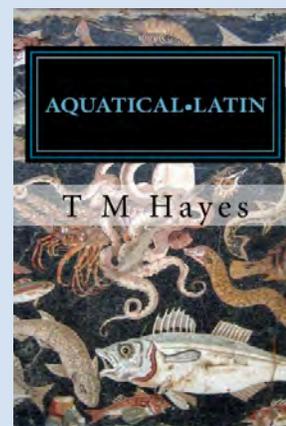
When Air Traffic Control at JFK delayed his flight departure, Dale Cowan, M.D. (Brecksville, OH) subsequently missed his connection to Italy. His insurance company rejected his claim for his prepaid expenses. He says if "flight is canceled for any reason other than severe weather (defined as a storm that closes an airport), a claim will be denied. Pay the extra amount to cover instances where cancellation is due to carrier decisions, in addition, of course, to illness or death."

Doug Peterson (Elk Grove, IL) had the same outcome after his overnight flight was canceled and he couldn't leave until the next day. He requested reimbursement for missing the first night of his hotel stay, but the small print of his travel policy stated they did not cover delays caused by plane maintenance problems.

Tim Barden (Salem, MA) booked his Micronesian trip through United Airlines and added a travel policy from Global Allianz, figuring the company "would have been pre-vetted by UAL." After he dived Chuuk, he was headed for a prepaid stay at Manta Ray Bay, Yap, which required him to change planes in Guam. United canceled his flight from Guam because of mechanical problems, and their next flight wasn't for another four days. "With

### ***What's the Latin Name For It?***

Have you been daunted on a dive boat when other divers refer to the marine life they've seen using the Latin names? This book might be for you. *Aquatical Latin* looks at the meaning of names (the etymology) and taxonomy of 950 fishes common to tropics, explains the scientific names and pronunciation. After a dive, you could slip into your cabin, bone up and then stun your fellow divers with your new-found knowledge. Written by Tim Hayes, *Aquatical Latin* is well researched and costs \$19.15. To order from Amazon, [click here](#).



## *Divers Disappointed in Sipadan*

Sipadan, Malaysia's only oceanic island, is a unique marine life hotspot once identified by Jacques Cousteau as one of the best dive sites in the world.

It's famous for its population of green turtles, white-tip reef sharks and visiting megafauna. Divers stay on nearby Mabul Island, which is also home of Bajau fishermen living in their traditional palm thatched houses.

In February, divers hoping to see manta ray cleaning stations were doubly disappointed to return from Sipadan to Mabul Island to witness the shocking sight of two mantas, 13 mobulae and a shark being butchered in the shallows by six local fishermen right next to Big John Scuba's dive lodge.

Horrified tourists took pictures of the fishermen cutting off the rays' pectoral fins and uploaded them to social media. What promised to be the experience of

a lifetime instead turned into a mass slaughter horror show.

Sabah Shark Protection Association head, Aderick Chong said, "A dead manta ray can fetch some hundreds of ringgit, but a live manta ray can make us much more, not just in terms of money but also marine biodiversity. . . . There is a need to come up with creative ways to provide alternative livelihoods among the fishing community in the Semporna region, and to make it understood that endangered marine animals are more valuable alive than dead."

If you want to contribute toward the conservation of these magnificent animals, a number of charities including [wildaid.org](http://wildaid.org), [marinemegafaunafoundation.org](http://marinemegafaunafoundation.org) and [www.sabahsharkprotection.org](http://www.sabahsharkprotection.org) target manta fishing.

great regret, I cut my vacation short and returned to the U.S."

United eventually compensated him for the unused parts of his original ticket, plus some, and even paid for the extra days at the Blue Lagoon in Chuuk. However, Global Alliance refused to reimburse him for his prepaid stay. He says "Qualifying causes for paying claims include a host of unlikely

*Her dive gear had disappeared forever!*

events, possibly even an attack of killer zombies from space, but not 'mechanical problems' or several other issues, all much more likely to occur than most of the allowed causes."

Again, dive itineraries to remote areas reached by flights that only go a couple of times a week leave you at the mercy of the airlines, and unless you have read your trip insurance policy carefully, at the mercy of your insurer.

### ***Buy Enough to Cover All the Costs***

Insurance companies generally require you to buy a policy that covers the *full* cost of the trip, and that is tricky, as Bob Speir (Falls Church, VA) learned when he had to reschedule a trip to the Galapagos after Buddy Dive lost its liveaboard license there. He was lucky to rebook similar dates on the *Galapagos Sky*, for which he only had to extend the return portion of the ticket by a single day. Speir, who had paid \$500 for \$10,000 of cover-

age, expected it to cover the \$400 for the additional hotel and airline fees.

"I received a call from the insurer's claims agent, who quizzed me on *all* the costs I had incurred, not just the extra ones I had documented. When my estimate reached about \$10,700, he said he had all he needed. A few days later, I received a letter denying my claim. Even though the policy says that in the event of a trip cancellation by the provider, my coverage would pay up to the lesser of the trip cost or my purchased coverage (\$10,000), there was a little sentence in the middle of the policy that said, "You must have covered the entire cost of the Covered Trip including the air fare."

"I found later that many travel policies are written this way. The claims agents are adept at coming up with cost totals that exceed the purchased coverage. They demand receipts for expenses that are not normally documented (e.g., food and drink paid for in cash, tips, etc.) and reject claims when full documentation cannot be provided."

### ***Insurance Claims Are Rarely Straightforward***

There's often an absurd catch. Back in 2005, a hurricane led to American Airlines canceling Yvonne Lanelli's (Alto, NM) flight to Grand Cayman, where she was connecting to Cayman Brac. Her trip insurance reimbursed her airfare, but would not cover her prepaid resort, reasoning that resort had stayed open and had offered to extend her reservation for a year. "How I would get to the open resort on a canceled flight was immaterial."

## *Get Your Weights Off First!*

Our sad February story of the diver who fell overboard and drowned because he was still wearing his weight belt after shedding his other gear struck a chord with many readers. We wrote that the last piece of equipment on, and the first one off, is the weight belt, leaving subscriber Edward Svitil (Alpharetta, GA) to ask, what about BCs with integrated weights?

BCs with integrated weights allow you to pull the weight pouches free in a moment. You should do that in the water and then hand them up to a crew member

before climbing into a small boat. While it will save you, it will also save the crew member from suffering a hernia when he hauls your rig aboard. If for some reason you can't do that, get them out of your BC as soon as you've climbed the ladder (or been pulled into the Zodiac) and are in the boat.

If you have a BC that does not allow you to release the integrated weights in their pouches, I suggest you get rid of it.

— *John Bantin*

After Don Bloch (Chino Hills, CA) broke his wrist in a freak accident in Roatan, he was unable to make contact with Dive Assure, so he paid for X-rays and the Honduran physician to stabilize his wrist. Rather than get the necessary surgery in Honduras and risk that it might not be up to snuff, he returned to California to have the work done. Guess what? The policy states: "Benefits are applicable when you are outside your country of permanent residence." Dive Assure refused to cover his surgery.

*There's often an absurd catch.*

John Crossley (Panama City Beach, FL) accidentally swallowed seawater while diving in the Lembeh Strait (muck divers know how much trash is on the bottom), resulting in severe vomiting and diarrhea. He was too ill to drive to the nearest doctor in Manado, so he contacted his DAN-sponsored travel insurance company, but they would not accept a written statement from the dive instructor and insisted he travel to the doctor. Unable to do so, they refused his claim for three diving days he missed but had prepaid.

Doug Franquemont (Colorado Springs, CO) purchased travel insurance for a dive trip to CoCoView, Roatan, and before he departed his son had an acute psychotic illness requiring hospitalization, causing him to cancel the trip. One expects family emergencies to be covered, but the policy excluded mental illness. "I felt betrayed by the fine print, and when I consider travel insurance, I read the paragraph of exclusions and see myriad ways for the company not to pay. So I have never again purchased travel insurance."

Roger Hale (Topsfield, MA) had to cancel a Caribbean trip after being diagnosed with skin cancer that needed immediate treatment. His doctor had removed a small spot on his head, never suggesting that it was cancerous. He took out his trip policy, then learned the spot was cancerous. Travel Guard (AIG) claimed it was a pre-existing condition even though it had not been diagnosed when he took out the policy. Hale got them to change their minds after he contacted the Massachusetts Attorney General's office, which interceded on his behalf.

However, there is a cautionary note here. Take out your policy as close as you can to the date you make your first trip payment.

Insurance companies can be quite heartless. Penelope Cooper (El Paso, TX) wrote to *Undercurrent* to tell the sad story of a couple of divers in her group who had booked to go to Palau.

The husband had committed suicide a few days before their departure. Although the company's policy, which they got through DAN, did not cover suicide, "you would think that his wife would be covered due to unforeseen circumstances. . . . Today, DAN has a different insurance provider."

### *It's Not Always Bad!*

It's not all bad, of course. Jeff Falk (New York, NY) told us he always buys top-quality travel insurance. "In the past two years, I had to cancel three dive trips due to unforeseen medical issues. In each situation, the cancelation was within two months, and I used Travel Guard, which was wonderful. I was able to do everything online and never had a problem. Travel Guard is part of AIG Insurance — a bit more costly, but well worth it."

Kathy Teller (East Quogue, NY) had booked a trip from JFK to Grenada on American Airlines. After her flight from Miami was canceled due to a hurricane, she says, “I put in a claim for a canceled flight. I only expected the one flight to be covered because I changed the others and used them. I was pleasantly surprised to receive a check covering the entire trip.”

Hurricane Harvey disrupted Mark Leiserowitz’s (Houston, TX) return trip from Hawaii to Houston, and he incurred \$900 in hotel costs and meals, which his credit card insurance, Chase United, covered in full.

### ***You Make a Choice When You Pay Your Money***

So what to do before you buy insurance? Visit an insurance comparison website like squaremouth.com, quotertight.com, or insuremytrip.com, enter the precise details of the coverage you seek, then examine the exclusions in the sections that concern you. Don’t be tempted to underinsure, keep all

your documentation, and during your trip, collect receipts for every single expense incurred.

That said, many experienced travelers never buy trip insurance and consider themselves well ahead of the game. Longtime *Undercurrent* subscriber Randy Preissig (San Antonio, TX) says sticking with his basic DAN Dive Accident Insurance is all he needs. “Of course, this is essentially ‘catastrophic coverage’ — but isn’t that what you need to protect against? I have never bought regular trip travel insurance for a simple reason: I’ve never had to cancel a trip. I’ve thus saved eight percent of the cost of each trip and now enough to pay for four or more trips. If you are healthy and a moderately experienced traveler, I recommend this course. The approximately \$1000-per-person-per-trip savings will more than pay for most of the losses you are likely to encounter (if you ever do!), and the savings will fund a self-insurance ‘kitty’ for future trips.”

– Ben Davison

---

## **Liability Waivers and the Dive Professional**

*top lawyers give an insight into the legalities*

Many divers believe that signing a liability waiver is giving the dive operator carte-blanche to escape punishment if they are stupid or negligent in a way that leads to an injury or worse. I don’t like to sign a waiver and give away my rights, so I attended a seminar at the Dive Equipment and Marketing Show last November, in which Rick Lesser and Jorge Lopez, eminent diving lawyers, spoke to diving professionals about the effectiveness of liability waivers. They provided interesting insights into the efficacy of such waivers from a business point of view.

Lesser said it was important that waivers did not violate public policy (the law), and that they were not “adhesive,” i.e., diving is not an essential activity, and participation is not a legally binding contract between the two parties. Each waiver should be a separate document for each diver, and they should get time to review it before signing.

They told how one might think these diving waivers are more likely to be a useful tool in litigation in a court in Florida than, for example, in Colorado, thanks to Florida courts hearing more cases involving diving injuries. “Colorado waivers are as strong as Florida’s since that state dances to the ski industry, which is probably stronger than the dive industry.”

Although the effectiveness of liability waivers might vary from state to state, there were exceptions, and dive professionals could be found liable through their negligence, gross negligence, reckless disregard and wilful intent, depending upon the jurisdiction.

Liability waivers are not enforceable in maritime cases (those occurring outside coastal waters) or if the operator violated public safety statutes. They cannot be applied to an employer and employees (though most business insurance policies require a liability release).

The assumption of risk, for example, that “everyone knew that scuba diving was a dangerous activity,” is not a defense under Maritime Law.

The failure to fly an ‘A’ flag, the duty to keep first aid supplies and equipment on board a dive vessel and the duty of care in keeping a passenger count are requirements, which means that the burden of proof falls upon the vessel operator. (The international ‘A’ flag is a blue and white pennant rather than the red flag with the diagonal white stripe often used.)

How many dive boats have you been on that did not fly the blue and white pennant? Do you check

## ***Woman Divers – Have You Had a “Me Too” Moment? We Need Your Thoughts***

In February’s issue of *Undercurrent*, we mentioned the complaint from a female subscriber about her treatment by a dive guide on an Indonesian live-aboard. Could this be the result of a patriarchal or sexist attitude to women and, subsequently to female divers? Are you a female diver who’s experienced unfortunate attitudes while abroad or even when diving at home? Do some dive guides patronize you and assume you are an inexperienced diver? Worse than that, have you experienced outright sexual harassment when diving? If so, we’re working on a story, and we’d like to hear your story. Write to [BenDEditor@undercurrent.org](mailto:BenDEditor@undercurrent.org)

Please include your name and hometown so we may get back to you, but we will keep you anonymous if you wish.

that there are first aid supplies such as a full tank of O2, with the means to deliver it, available every time you board a vessel?

Lesser said that the recurrent themes of litigation include equipment failures (often through neglect or poor servicing), serious technical diving beyond recreational limits, the failure to confirm knowledge transfer between trainer and student, and casualties who had been unfit for the activity. However, doctors are rarely held liable for approving divers who later prove to be unfit. Are you hiding a health reason that might disbar you from diving?

When the trial starts, be aware that juries rarely include knowledgeable divers — and, in fact, most ordinary members of the public see diving as a potentially dangerous activity. Nonetheless, says Lesser, uniform dive training standards are usually defensible. However, he describes the “Sacramento syndrome,” so-called, from when divers had traveled a long way from Sacramento to California’s Pacific coast and insisted on diving, although sea conditions were totally unsuitable and life was lost. It is the duty of the diving professional to discourage diving if conditions are not right.

Lesser advises diving professionals never to discuss what happened after an event and before seeking legal advice. Moreover, never put such information on social media before a case is completed. That explains the often-encountered refusal-to-comment by those who might have been involved.

He advises dive professionals to have adequate insurance coverage, and reminds them that the amount in group coverage may not be enough once divided among all those who might be implicated in the case. He suggests a minimum coverage for an individual diving professional of \$2 million.

So, what does this mean for us sport divers? Mainly, that if you have signed a release, have a problem, and a lawsuit follows, it will be a tough fight for you or your heirs.

– John Bantin

*The 2018 selection of “Super Lawyers,” representing less than five per cent of the practicing attorneys in California, was announced in January, with attorney Rick Lesser receiving his twelfth annual selection.*

---

## **Liveaboard Trip Canceled 24 Hours before Departure** *and it’s a struggle to get fair compensation*

Erica Watson (Chicago, IL) won a trip aboard the *Oman Aggressor* at a drawing at the Aggressor booth at Our World Underwater in February 2017. While her voucher was good for a year, the live-aboard’s maiden voyage wasn’t until late November 2017, so she had a narrow window of opportunity.

She signed up for a December trip and flew 20 hours to Oman. After settling into her hotel room, she received an unexpected call. The next day’s departure and the entire cruise was canceled,

because, she was told, a group due to board had canceled, and it was now too expensive to take the boat out for just two people.

She was shocked. Who wouldn’t be? The best the Aggressor could do was let her stay on the boat in the harbor and take day dive trips with a local operation. She turned that offer down because “I didn’t really want to stay on a boat in a marina on Christmas.” So, they offered to extend her voucher, and she could return another time. “There was

## *No More Tropical Mosquito Bites*

At last, there's a way to defeat those dreaded mosquitoes that haunt you during a dive trip.

Seems as if they can associate a particular odor with the vibrations and acceleration they might experience when a person swats at them. As a result, to avoid being whacked, they'll avoid that scent the next time.

Researchers at the University of Washington set up a complicated study of mosquito behavior and discovered that once they "learned odors in an aversive manner, those odors caused aversive responses on the same

order as responses to DEET," said senior author Jeff Riffell, a UW professor of biology. "Moreover, mosquitoes remember the trained odors for days."

So, when those nasty buggers come at you, take a swing or two. They'll learn you are someone not to be reckoned with and we seek out a more passive human target!

(From a paper published in *Current Biology*, Jan 25, 2018)

one other person who was to be on the boat, and he was given a refund and offered a half-price voucher for the same trip at a later date (the same incentive that is being offered in many emails I currently get). My best guess is there was no group, and somehow they forgot to tell us until we were there or on our way. [That the Aggressor was offering half-off trips on the *Oman Aggressor* in January implies they're having trouble filling the boat.]

Erica had Dive Assure trip insurance, but the policy wouldn't reimburse her airfare or other expenses because the Aggressor did not cancel because of bad weather or mechanical problems. It simply had refused to sail.

So, instead of spending a week aboard the Aggressor, she paid for her hotel, meals, and diving, hoping for some good photos. But, "the water was very green, and the visibility was horrid. I made the most of the situation while there, and I had an amazing time exploring Oman and UAE."

Having seen the green water and done the tourist thing, Erica didn't care to buy a second round-trip flight to return to Oman, so "I have written to the VP of Aggressor to ask that I be allowed to use the voucher for another boat as they only offered to extend the one I had for the same boat on the phone call [from the president, Wayne Brown]. No reply yet. I also tried calling, but there was no answer. I do not currently have a new/extended voucher in my hands. I am still waiting on that. I see two versions of making good here. One is they can just extend it — crappy in my mind and doing the minimum. Or they could excel and even just speak to me or return my calls/emails. I still have NO response at all."

What complicates this for the Aggressor is that most boats are owned individually, and the Aggressor Fleet is essentially a marketing organization. Regardless, there are surely creative ways

for the Headquarters and the owner of the *Oman Aggressor* to figure out how to apply the voucher to other boats, so we can't let that get in the way.

To resolve the matter, on February 16th, we sent an email to our subscribers and our list of non-subscribers, asking them to vote on: 1) whether the Aggressor Fleet should pay for her next flight, whether to Oman or elsewhere? 2) whether the Aggressor Fleet should extend her voucher to other boats in their fleet? or 3) whether a return trip aboard the *Oman Aggressor*, to all of which she is entitled?

The following day, Erica returned to the Aggressor booth and the Chicago Show where she had one her trip a year ago, and while no one there could help her out, she was given Aggressor Fleet owner Wayne Brown's email address and eventually spoke with him. She told us that after hearing complaints about her going on social media and excuses about why her emails were not answered, she was offered a choice of seven days on the Belize boat, Turks & Caicos, Bahamas or Cayman in 2018 and will gladly take the cruise. And, she says, she may be making some progress with Dive Assure.

She told us, "I had a person tell me they had just read about me in your article while I was [at the Aggressor booth]! I believe that your article, along with a sharply worded response to the owner, helped. Thank you again!"

As for our poll, we received 394 responses. As to whether the Aggressor Fleet should pay for her next flight, 85% answered "Yes." As to whether the Aggressor Fleet should extend her voucher to other boats in their fleet? 95% answered "Yes." And, as to whether a return trip aboard the *Oman Aggressor* is all to which she is entitled, 11% answered "No."

– Ben Davison

# Flotsam & Jetsam

**Shark Net Ensnares Free-Diver.** The shark nets off some Sydney beaches may protect swimmers, but they've been criticized heavily for trapping endless other marine animals. In January, free-diver Dimitri Ross, 32, fell victim to such a net off Brighton-le-Sands. His lifeless body was pulled from the water after being cut from netting after an hour-long search.

**Stripped Down Scuba.** A company called Naughty Nawlins is running vacations, including scuba diving, on a small island off the coast of Belize, where clothing is optional. For one week at the 5-star resort, 48 guests can strip off, eat, drink and indulge to their hearts' content. We're not too sure how scuba gear integrates with the nudity idea, though. The first week available is already fully booked.

**Full-Face Snorkeling Masks.** Carbon-dioxide, the by-product of respiration, is exceedingly poisonous. It gives us the desire to breathe. There is a growing concern that full-face snorkeling masks can allow CO<sub>2</sub> to accumulate inside them, leading to the death by drowning. *DailyMail.com* reports that Heidi Williams, the loved one of a deceased snorkeler in Hawaii, Bryan Beyer, an experienced swimmer and lifeguard, is contemplating a lawsuit against the manufacturer of the full-face mask he was wearing when he died in January. It is only one of such recent incidents.

**No Leg to Stand On and Armless.** When jet skier Toby Bird, 24, surfaced in Australia's Lake Macquarie after being thrown off his craft, he was missing a leg — his \$32,000 carbon-fiber prosthetic leg. He was hopping mad! He contacted Snorkel & Dive Safari, and a diver rushed out to search, but he had no luck, mainly due to strong currents. If

you happen to be in the area, keep an eye out for a heavy, waterproof gray leg with a skin-colored foot. Meanwhile, in New Zealand's Bay of Islands, divers located the lost carbon fiber prosthetic arm of wakeboarder Ty-Ray White.

**More Plundered WW wrecks.** Dutch divers have been plundering British and German wrecks in the North Sea, displaying British WWI submarine artifacts at the Dutch dive show in February. Items have been finding their way into private and public museums in Europe. One diver told the Dutch diving magazine *Duiken* that the wreck the HMS E3m, a WWII submarine, had been effectively cleaned out.

**Better News for Sharks.** According to a report by the nonprofit WildAid, the demand for shark fin soup in China has dropped by 80 percent, with imports of shark fin declining by 81 percent. However, shark fin soup is still in demand in Macau and other parts of South East Asia — and even, quietly, in the U.S.

**Braided Hose Alarm!** The interior of light-weight braided hoses can deteriorate, especially those subject to high ambient air temperatures or intense sunshine. Small crystals of the material can come loose and jam hoses and even regulator second-stages. If you have older braided hoses, disconnect them at both ends from time to time to check for any loose material. Old traditional hoses can deteriorate, too, and these should also be checked. Braided hoses should be replaced every five years — or more often if there is abrasion, or they have spent extended time in the sun. Any braided hose you buy should use polyether-TPU rather than polyester-TPU.

## 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.

### Letters to the Editor/Submissions

[EditorBenD@undercurrent.org](mailto:EditorBenD@undercurrent.org)

### Editorial Staff

Ben Davison, Publisher and Editor  
John Bantin, Senior Editor  
Dave Eagleray, Webmaster

**Contact Us** Call: 415-289-0501

Go to: [www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/contact.shtml](http://www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/contact.shtml)

or write: Undercurrent

3020 Bridgeway, #102

Sausalito, CA 94965

[www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)