

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Sunset House, Grand Cayman

happy 60th birthday, but you're really showing your age

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Dear Fellow Diver:

The beloved Sunset House on Grand Cayman is currently celebrating its 60th year in business. When I had the chance to go for six nights in August, I expected to understand why so many divers love it. After a week there, I'm still baffled.

The shock started as soon as a friendly staffer helped my buddy and me wrangle our bags to a second-floor oceanview room. The difference between the website photos and the actual room was a shock: I expected basic, but this bordered on shabby. Harsh and dim lighting, two double beds with no bedcover, old particleboard furniture, and no pictures on the walls. The miniscule bath featured an ancient showerhead, and a cheap outdoor chair was the room's only seating. Our tiny, pitted balcony with rugged table and chair was no place to linger over cocktails at sunset.

Look, I've experienced some really basic Caribbean resorts, but next to Sunset House, they're downright swanky. And surprisingly, for a dive resort, there are no hooks in the bathroom or on the porch for hanging wet stuff. Everything was clean and worked, but it was hard to get over the feeling of staying in a beige, low-ceilinged cell. I knew the TV preferences of the person staying in the next room. I could see daylight through the front door.



The Sea Ray



And it was certainly hard not to notice that Sunset House lies directly under the airport's flight path. If you're looking for some R&R with your diving, it's hard to find it in the rooms.

But its dive operation works well enough. Staff were young, efficient and personable. My buddy and I stuck with Christian, a Singapore native who had worked at dive resorts worldwide, because he's an enthusiastic naturalist like us. At Oro Verde, which Christian described as "a wreck of a wreck," it was easy to meander around and become disoriented -- storms have tossed and turned

the hull until it's mostly debris, sheaves of metal resting on each other, with few recognizable parts, lying at 60 feet. But those dull slabs of metal make great homes for lobsters, octopus, eels and little critters, and I enjoyed puttering and poking around the debris. Christian told us the tale of the former cargo ship that hauled bananas between Jamaica and Grand Cayman -- legend has it that a soon-to-retire captain wished to pad his nest egg with a shipment of Jamaica's more profitable crop, pot. The crew mutinied when he refused to share, and the ship went down during the ruckus off of Seven Mile Beach and got its' "green gold" moniker. Oro Verde's funniest feature is bicycle carcasses tossed next to the wreck -- because low-salaried divemasters typically had to get to work by bike, their mates take their bikes after they depart the island and place them here in their honor.

Every diver was assigned a storage locker, big enough to hold two divers' gear, and lock near the dock. Before every two-tank morning dive at 8 a.m. (afternoon dives are offered to the U.S.S. Kittiwake wreck or Stingray City), I gathered my gear and schlepped it to the dock. If asked, staff would help carry it down, but it took a special request. Each boat, named for a ray (Eagle Ray, Stingray and so forth), has tanks on the sides in boots; a central table holds cameras and other delicate gear. There's decent shade from a central awning, a rudimentary marine head just below, and deck showers. Between dives, staff offers sliced oranges. Boats officially hold up to 18 divers, but I found mine jam-packed with just 10 aboard. I can't imagine the cheek-to-jowl situation of gearing up when the boat is full.

Fake News: The Diving Version

Last month, I came across a story on the website The Travel (www.thetravel.com), with 25 rare pictures of sunken ships most people have never seen before. Of course, this piqued my interest -- what wreck dives had I been missing all these years? Unfortunately, most of them are well-known to divers, but the last ship description had me laughing.

"Another long-forgotten ship that was sunk by the German force was the *SS Thistlegorm*. Before two German bombardiers sank it in the middle of the 90s, she successfully carried out three voyages, transporting aircraft parts and other valuable goods. A decade later, though, the remains of the ship were [said to be] discovered by the maritime explorer, Jacques

Cousteau. Well, admittedly, the sight must have been quite spellbinding, yet a bit freakish. As for the ship, sunk by the Germans, it still resides somewhere in the pitch-dark sections of the Red Sea in Egypt where it surely belongs."

Nothing could be farther from the truth. On one single day during the first week of October, more than 30 dive boats were anchored over the *Thistlegorm*. That's around 500 divers. It's the most visited wreck in the world, and many *Undercurrent* subscribers complain in their Reader Reports how it's just too busy with divers. Obviously, don't look for good travel advice from The Travel.

– John Bantin

The briefings were fun and introduced me to a Sunset House tradition: Crew arrange beach towels and weights to create a 3-D representation of the dive site instead of the usual whiteboard drawing or verbal description. Afterwards, I entered the water via a giant stride off the transom, and after the dive, came back up a ladder at the stern. Though no one requested help with doffing gear back aboard, crew said they were happy to help anyone who needed it.

Another Sunset House custom seemed more problematic. Halfway through a dive, the guide always brought our group back to underneath the boat, pointed upward to indicate it, then left the buddy teams to guide themselves back. Not a problem for experienced navigators, but I saw some newer divers go off and lose the boat.

One Cayman Islands rule I found irksome was no solo diving anywhere. With the easy shore diving at hand, it was frustrating not to be able to hop in without a buddy. And if you've bristled while reading Undercurrent's recent "Rude Divers" articles about resorts that enforce dive time limits, you won't like Sunset House's maximum of 60 minutes for boat dives, including safety stop. I came on board with 1100-1500 psi dive after dive. Apparently, the time limit is to keep the morning schedule on track, but as an experienced diver, I just didn't like it.

But I particularly enjoyed each 60 minutes spent at the deep, craggy dive sites on Grand Cayman's northwest corner -- there's something sublime about knowing the Cayman Trench dropped five miles below me. Sentinel Rock was particularly dramatic: pinnacles covered in deepwater gorgonians jutted up from the wall's edge. Just south was a swim-thru at 95 feet. I finned through, even though I was skating on the edge of my EAN profile, but the dramatic view as I exited the arch, framed against the rich blue of the drop-off, was worth it.

The deeper site of Round Rock West, offered craggy deep profile coral formations at the top of the wall, 75 feet deep. The site's namesake sits outside of the swim-thru's exit -- as I lazily spiraled around the round rock, I admired the abundance of yellowtail snappers, horse-eye jacks and the occasional grouper going about their business, as well as a beautiful eagle ray swimming slowly by, its black and white reticulations contrasting against the blue. I enjoyed many sightings of hawksbill turtles, both shallow and deep -- seems like Cayman's turtle conservation is working well.

The water was impressively warm in mid-August, between 81 and 84 degrees. I was overdressed in my 5-mil suit, and after a day, doffed it for a polyolefin suit. Visibility ranged from 40 to 90 feet. But Grand Cayman is a popular cruise ship destination, so when there were two or three in the area, their generators and engines disturbed the underwater Zen at Sunset House and near George Town.

Many shallow sites offered drama without the heavy nitrogen load. La Mesa boasted a healthy, large and current-swept table above 60 feet of coral and sponges, with a big school of schoolmaster and mahogany snappers, and white and striped grunts. At an interesting cut in the side of the table, I peeked in to see crustaceans in its hollows. The Devil's Grotto never gets deeper than 50 feet and boasts beautifully framed swim-thrus; one sported 30 tarpon hanging out in a casual cluster. Although the eponymous



My Underwhelming Room at Sunset House

Sunset House, Grand Cayman

Diving (Experienced).....	***
Diving (Beginners).....	****
Snorkeling	***
Accommodations.....	**
Food.....	**1/2
Services and attitude	****
Money's worth.....	***

= poor ***= excellent

Caribbean scale

Zeagle Recalls Five Types of BCs

Zeagle is recalling five models of its Sport BCs because buttons on the direct-feed inflator and/or the oral inflation valve can break or fracture while in use, leading to either loss of air or uncontrolled inflation of the BC, which could cause a diver to drown. The Consumer Product Safety Commission states 23 reports of buttons breaking, but no injuries so far.

This recall is for the models Sport Base, Sport Resort, Sport Base Plus, Sport Resort Plus and Sport Focus. Around 2,600 of the Sport BCs for recall are in the U.S., and another 800 in Canada. (None were sold in Europe because they didn't meet the required safety standards.)

If you own one of these BCs, stop using it and either call Zeagle at 888-270-8595, or visit a registered dealer for instructions on how to receive a free replacement (www.zeagle.com/sport-bcd-inflator-recall).

grotto failed to live up to its billing -- it was once red but now is more brown -- the site's other nooks featured charming marine life to ponder. Less pretty was the behavior of some divers, especially an out-of-control British teenager who darted in and out of the single file of divers weaving its way carefully through the grottos, kicking up sand and riling tempers.

That brings me to the biggest downside at Sunset House: There are a lot of newbies, with the behaviors common to inexperienced divers. I saw them running out of air, having no clue where the boat was, jumping the queue for the ladder, kicking up the bottom and harassing the fish (including trying to grab a lionfish!). You have to learn by doing, but that doesn't mean I wanted to spend my dives surrounded by the antics of divers learning the ropes. Of course, I was once a new diver, and I'm sure experienced divers thought the same of me. If you're a new diver, you'll find the diving quite agreeable here, and you'll have lots of company.

Fortunately, Sunset House has a great setup for shore diving. I entered the water with a jump off the cement dock or descended one of two ladders. Natural navigation

was easy because of the distinctive topography (hardpan in the shallows, coral starting around 30 feet), and some man-made additions. Just north of the entry was a highly-photographed mermaid statue called Amphitrite, cheesy but quite pretty. Heading toward deeper water, I encountered a small barge covered with big sponges at 60 feet. Beyond that, the wall descends into the abyss. I enjoyed those dives, especially not being on the 60-minute clock.

I can't report many sightings of weird and wonderful creatures -- no seahorses, pipefish or pipehorses, no frogfish -- but I loved the variety of hamlets. In addition to more common ones like barred, butter and tan, I saw black, shy and bicolor hamlets. Robust tiger grouper and mutton snapper, along with turtles, showed up on at least half my dives. But alas, there was more brown (and some red) algae than I thought was right.

Service at the resort's restaurant, Sea Harvest, varied widely. Breakfast, included in most room packages, was limited. Tables were set with bowls of Kellogg's cereal packets. I went for eggs, offered either fried, scrambled, or in several omelet variations, but toast was cheap supermarket bread with butter and packets of Smucker's jams. There were no other pastries available, the thin coffee was disappointing to this caffeine addict, and juice was canned orange or grapefruit. The fruit plate was an extra charge. Sure, the food was sufficiently nourishing, but the experience lacked pleasure.

Lunch and dinner offerings were more satisfying and far broader, with pastas, fish, steak and, my favorite, an extensive Indian menu. I enjoyed murg tikka, marinated chicken breast on a skewer with mint chutney, and lamb rogan josh, a slow-cooked curry with ginger, chili and saffron, and I appreciated that I could order those meals either hot or less spicy. The bar, a big, open-sided thatch-roofed cabana named My Bar, seems to be a locals hangout; it was packed on the weekend, and I enjoyed its sunset view.

We frequently ate dinner elsewhere, finding very good but always expensive meals. Blue by Eric Ripert at the Ritz Carlton was transcendent, but it cost us \$100-plus per person and \$40 on the taxi. Chalk it up to Grand Cayman's offshore banking and big luxury resorts -- which is why it would only help Sunset House with business if they gave their accommodations a badly needed upgrade.

For an afternoon dive with the stingrays, personable staffer Mel drove my buddy and me across the island to where Sunset House keeps a 50-foot boat that holds 30 divers, helmed by Captain Reid. After a 30-minute cruise to Stingray Alley, a couple of large female Southern stingrays, alerted by the engines, awaited us. Mel fed the rays artfully from a container filled with squid. The dive was essentially one long safety stop with a circus of rays, who wrapped their silky abdomens around me, looking for handouts. They were capable of inflicting a good hickey, but it didn't really hurt. Sometimes it looked like we were wearing rays like sombreros! It's a one-note joke, but it was a hoot, especially because there were only four of us on this dive; I'd be hesitant to do it with more than six.

So I'll admit to not understanding why Grand Cayman and Sunset House are so popular among the dive crowd. For the money (about \$260 per day per person), it's not bad, but it's not great, either, especially when you're at a tired, aged resort with bleak rooms and a disappointing breakfast. It's cheaper in Mexico, and in Bonaire, you pay the same for nicer rooms and more flexible shore diving. The diving here was pretty good, but no better than most places in the Caribbean. Celebrating its 60th birthday, Sunset House may have sentimental value, but Cayman's value is less than its other Caribbean counterparts.

-- A.E.L.

Our Undercover Diver's Bio: *"I'm something of a fuss-budget diver, but it's based on diving all over the Indonesia, the Pacific, the Caribbean, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. This trip marked my 3,250th dive. I live part of the year in Bonaire, a favorite dive spot; my last trip prior to Cayman was the month before to Lembeh and Siladen."*



Divers Compass: Grand Cayman is easy to fly into, with American, JetBlue, Southwest and Delta flying from U.S. cities, and British Airways from London . . . An ocean-view room, double occupancy, cost \$262 per person per day, and included daily two-tank dives, unlimited shore diving, airport transfers and breakfast . . . To celebrate its 60th anniversary, Sunset House has a seven-night dive package, with the above options plus a glass of bubbly and an anniversary T-shirt, starting at \$1,435, double occupancy, through December 21 . . . Sunset

Divers also reintroduced a three-tank North Wall Safari on Ocean Spirit every Wednesday on demand, with lunch included . . . Full rental gear and Nitrox are offered . . . Drinks at My Bar were, in Cayman dollars, \$4 to \$6 for beers, \$8.50 for wine, and \$7-\$8 for rum drinks . . . One Cayman dollar is always worth 80 cents U.S., so add 20 percent to prices . . . Most dinners on Grand Cayman cost around USD\$50 per person, without drinks . . . Website - www.sunsethouse.com

Caymans, Cuba, French Polynesia . . .

plus hurricanes, shark dives and two remote sites worth the trip

Indigo Divers, Grand Cayman. While the author of this month's travel story didn't care much for Sunset House's dive policies and abundance of newbie divers, Indigo Divers is a long-time favorite for our readers, particularly because it only takes out six divers at a time. Wayne Newberry (Savannah, GA), who has been diving with Indigo since 2010, went again in August, and says, "If you're looking for small group diving, plenty of room on the boat, fruit, snacks, water,

soft drinks and clean dry towels on board, you won't be disappointed." (www.indigodivers.com)

A Brand-New Cayman Aggressor. For liveaboard diving around the Caymans, the Aggressor has unveiled a brand-new boat. Lenny Zwik (Austin, TX), went aboard the newly commissioned *MV Cayman Aggressor V* in August, and was decidedly enthused. "One of the most spacious and efficient liveaboard dive operations I've experienced in my diving career," he says. "There are two large, dual-tiered camera tables, with a

large rinse tank available for photographers, generous hanging space for wetsuits and cubbies for small stuff . . . Unlike the *Aggressor IV*, the cabins have side-by-side twin beds and a reasonably sized en-suite bathroom. There are two master cabins on the main deck, each with a king bed, private balcony and picture window, for \$400 above the deluxe cabin rate. The common areas are nicely appointed, spacious and comfortable, too." (www.aggressor.com)

Really Bad Dive Trips. Sometimes a dive day is just cursed with mishaps and injuries that happen too much and can often be easily avoided, particularly by the dive crew. Jeanne Reader (Columbia,

MO) experienced that kind of dive day while with Cozumel's Scuba Club on a boat with 18 divers. First, one diver returned to the boat, coughing up blood and experiencing labored breathing, which ended his diving for the week. Another diver fell on her knee while climbing the boat ladder and ruptured her meniscus. It was so painful, she and her husband departed Cozumel early to visit her orthopedist. Reeder also was injured -- a boatman dropped a tank on her hand while she was in the water, holding the railing with one hand and trying to pull off her fins with the other. The tank split open her finger, but fortunately, she only missed the final diving day of her trip.

Sinister Circumstances Surround this Diver's Death

New Zealand authorities want to know why a dive boat captain waited to call emergency services an hour after a diver went missing and made only one perfunctory dive to try to find her. They'll probably never find out.

The body of Thai diver Bua-Ngoen Thongsi was recovered by police divers three days after she disappeared on a dive off Motunau Beach, near Christchurch on New Zealand's South Island, back in February 2015. The inquest, which started in June, has found that evidence from the witnesses is unreliable. (The names of those involved in Thongsi's death have been suppressed in case criminal proceedings were started.)

The captain and two other men were aboard the boat with Thongsi, 37, diving for crayfish. David Boldt, the legal counsel assisting the coroner, suggested to the police that the men were attempting to cover up what happened when Thongsi went underwater and subsequently lied to investigators about how she had died.

The boat skipper alleged that Thongsi had trouble with her regulator, but after he pushed the purge button a few times, "it seemed to fix itself." He said that after she entered the water, another diver held on to Thongsi while she floated to the back of the boat. The skipper then went back to the wheel. The diver holding Thongsi said she began sinking when he let go of her. She had a blank look on her face, no sign of life, and did not appear to be breathing, so he immediately alerted the skipper. The third man said he believed "something might have happened while she was with the skipper and the other diver, but he had not seen it."

During the inquest, Boldt asked that man if he thought Thongsi might already have been dead when she was floated to the back of the boat. He replied that he had not been aware anything was wrong until he

saw the other two "clambering around and saying something had happened." He then admitted there was an attempt to cover up what had happened, and that elements of his story, which he had originally told the police, had also changed during the inquest. He said once it was clear something was wrong, the skipper spun the boat around so fast to go back to the buoy, it knocked him over and he did not see the skipper try to rescue Thongsi.

The boat captain said he turned the boat back to the buoyed descent line after "a sixth sense told him something was wrong." However, it was not until after Thongsi submerged and he noticed there were no exhaled bubbles that he realized she wasn't breathing. He then entered the water but spent only 30 seconds searching for Thongsi. When grilled during the inquest, he alleged the water had been too murky, and he thought there was little point in looking for her after she had been underwater for more than four minutes.

An earlier inquest with testimony from the Police National Dive Squad found Thongsi had a full tank of air when she was found on the seafloor. Her gear functioned perfectly on a reconstruction dive, and there was nothing faulty in her medical history that could explain what happened.

During the inquest, Boldt told the divers and the boat captain, "There are a lot of red flags about this incident, and there were concerns that ... there was an attempt to cover something up."

It's up to New Zealand's Crown Prosecution Service whether they bring a criminal case and, based on the coroner's findings, there seems to be insufficient evidence to do so. If there was indeed a cover-up, it looks like these three divers got away with it.

A New Spin on Dolphin-Human Interactions

People who swim with spinner dolphins aren't doing them any favors. That's why the National Marine Fisheries Service has issued a video giving six reasons why you shouldn't. The main one: It could disturb their rest, potentially harming them. Dolphins feed offshore at night and return to coastal waters in daylight hours to rest, socialize, tend their young and avoid predators. If their rest is repeatedly interrupted, it can affect their health, behavior and reproductive success.

Although they may not appear to be sleeping, spinner dolphins move and breathe from the surface while resting, so it's important to give them enough space -- say 50 yards -- so that they can get enough sleep to survive. If they are regularly disturbed, they may be forced to move to a different and less appropriate location. Hawaiian spinner dolphins choose sheltered areas with sandy bot-

oms that allow them to easily see predators approaching.

Wild dolphins must maintain their natural behaviors to survive in the wild. Although naturally curious, this should not be interpreted as friendly behavior, so if a dolphin approaches you in the water, do not engage with, follow or interact with it.

Another good reason to follow these rules is a financial one. Swimming with dolphins in U.S. waters may constitute harassment under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Violations can be prosecuted in court and are punishable by fines of up to \$100,000 and/or up to a year in jail.

Watch NOAA's video (at the bottom of the page) at www.fisheries.noaa.gov/feature-story/six-reasons-why-you-should-not-swim-wild-spinner-dolphins

Deborah Berglund (Bozeman, MT) had an unfortunate experience at Alor Divers in Indonesia last October. The boat routinely had to ply rough seas to get to sites 30 minutes away, and on her first day, Berglund got tossed around and thrown to the deck, injuring her back. The unsympathetic boat crew didn't stop to allow her to crawl back to a safer position, leaving her hobbling around for the rest of the week. To add insult to injury, Alor's food was marginal, with only lip service given to the dietary restrictions she had told them about in advance, Berglund reports. "I would not recommend this resort for anyone wanting comfort or good food."

Albert Stevens (Moorestown, NJ) has dived with Oasis Divers on Grand Turk for 15 years and has a favorite divemaster, Mackie, "who really cares about the reef, and is very knowledgeable about the coral and sea life. His dives are very slow, so you can really look for the critters." But Stevens' latest trip in August was marred. "On the fifth day and after 10 dives, my back was itchy. I never have a reaction to seafood, so I thought it might be the soap at the Manta House, where I was staying. But when I got up in the morning, I had blotches on my shoulder. Much to my shock, I had skin bends. How can this be with no violations in diving? A call to DAN confirmed that I had skin bends and should get checked out." Stevens received therapeutic oxygen at the hospital and stopped diving, but he and his wife enjoyed a relaxing stay at the Manta House, savoring long mornings over good espresso at the Arches restaurant. (www.oasisdivers.com; www.grandturk-mantahouse.com)

It's Not Always Diving Paradise in Cuba. It is home to the last of the Caribbean's pristine reefs, but you can't go just anywhere around the island and expect to find underwater nirvana, as Jocelyn Gill (Woodlawn, ON) discovered during her July stay at the Memories of Jibacoa resort in the northern town of Varadero. "I've been to a number of Cuban dive destinations (Cayo Largo, Havana, Santiago de Cuba), and this one was the worst. It's very unfortunate that Cubans need to overfish these waters." She saw no large vertebrates like groupers, barracuda, sharks, turtles, rays or green morays, but she did spot more common critters, including soapfish, scrawled cowfish, orange filefish, glassy sweepers and large Caribbean squid. So if you're planning a Cuba trip, keep in mind that most of the island's diving accolades are directed at the Jardines de la Reina, an archipelago and protected marine area off the southern (Caribbean) coast.

And if you do go there, also remember that all liveaboards are not equal. Bette Nordberg (Puyallup, WA) was on the *MV Jardines Aggressor* in April and reported the cabins were incredibly tiny. Despite the fact that she and her roomie were both petite, they could not pass each other in the gap between the beds, and there was virtually no storage room.

"The crew spoke almost no English, with the exception of the 'cruise director' and our 'education specialist.' (Travel to Cuba is limited to educational trips at this time). Because the crew spoke so little English, they made little effort to speak with passengers. Dive briefings were, 'Go out with the reef on your left, come back with the reef on your right.' Our marine biologist turned out to be a

Cuban college graduate with a biology degree, not a marine biology degree.”

Despite their lack of English, the crew exerted strict control over the diving. “No one was allowed in the water without a guide,” Nordberg says. “No one could dive their own plan. No one could be in the water longer than 45 minutes. I even got in trouble with a divemaster for being unwilling to chase a swinging boat at the end of my three-minute safety stop. I knew the boat would swing back, so why swim to chase it? Everyone was kind and wanting us to enjoy ourselves, but the rules were absolute -- even when it led to our group turning back on a reef dive later than they should, with the result that some ran out of air, got flustered and confused, and had to be rescued by skiff.”

Food can sometimes be hard to get in Cuba, and the meals reflected that. The generator’s exhaust permeated the cabins, so much that div-

ers requested the fans in their cabins keep going at all times. And it got worse, particularly when the generator exhaust got slammed into the dock. “As a result, the exhaust smell on the dive deck was overwhelming, and I believe dangerous. There was nowhere for the exhaust to go, and no place for fresh air to enter.”

Adding insult to injury, the cruise director suggested a \$400 tip that had to be made in currency other than pesos -- so that the crew could trade it on the black market.

If you want to visit the Jardines de la Reina, read our full report on the *Avalon*, our boat of choice, in the March 2018 issue.

A French Polynesian Liveaboard with Lots of Flaws. One of our long-time subscribers from Vail, AZ, was aboard the *MV French Polynesia Master* on a June cruise from Fakarava to Rangiroa in French Polynesia and reports multiple operational problems. “The nitrox, for which there was a charge, was not reliable -- at the beginning, it was like 25 percent. When I suggested I was not paying for nitrox that was less than 30 percent, I got a scolding from the cruise director rather than any acknowledgement there was a problem.

“Passengers were split up thoughtlessly so that 10 Germans who traveled together found themselves in four different groups. My buddy and I were paired with two other Americans, who were very poor divers. One of them never successfully completed a three-minute safety stop without the guide physically holding his tank valve at the correct depth. We requested to not dive with them after it became apparent it was going to be a problem but were rebuffed multiple times.”

Max Weinmann (Atlanta, GA), aboard the same vessel in July, noted that the *Master* had undergone many refits, and cabins were spacious and pleasant. However, the design of corridors and door openings encouraged inevitable accidents and knocks that could have been avoidable, and the food was severely below expectations.

Weinmann was on a “celebrity cruise” with photographer extraordinaire Michael Aw. As we’ve reported in the past, many travelers are disappointed in trips led by celebs, because the celebs are often disinterested in advising the divers who have paid handsomely to join them, and more focused on their own photography underwater, and their own editing and self-promotion back on board. I first reviewed one of these trips, sponsored by Nikon, more than 30 years ago, got nothing from it and reported as much, only to be handed

Is This Diver Carrying too Much Weight?

In response to our article in *Undercurrent* last month about divers often carrying too much weight, a Texas subscriber wrote this: “I am a 5’7” woman over age 65 and weigh 160 pounds. I dive warm water with a 1mm suit and use 14 pounds. So often I’ve been told that I’m over-weighted. When I dive with less, I really struggle at the 15-foot safety stop. I’ve completed over 250 dives and constantly read articles about buoyancy and weighting. I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m a cork and there’s nothing to be done about it. Generalizations about what everyone should be doing are misleading.”

We asked dive industry expert Bret Gilliam, who’s no lightweight, for his thoughts. “I seriously doubt if this woman is overweighted given her gender, age, height and weight. Also, she doesn’t comment on descent or any issues with exhalation and inhalation.

“I’ve always advised students and divers under my supervision to base their weight selection on buoyancy at 10 to 15 feet of seawater, and with 500 PSI remaining in their tank. This will result in being slightly overweighted during the main portion of the dive, but this is easily handled by the BC. Neutral buoyancy seems to be a complex issue to many, and today’s instructors really don’t spend as much time as they should assisting students in such skills. The last thing we want is a diver struggling to stay down for a safety or deco stop.”

Don't Bust Your Ears

We all know the rule: Don't dive with a head cold. Too many times, the dilemma arises when you finally get to go on that dive trip you've been so looking forward to – and forked out plenty for – only to discover you've caught a cold.

Robert Levine (Englishtown, NJ) faced that situation earlier this year. During a Blackbeard's Cruise trip on *Morning Star* in the Bahamas, he had difficulty clearing his ears and finally blew so hard attempting to equalize, he damaged an eardrum and was consigned to shallow snorkeling the rest of the week. Levine says it was the first time he's ever had to call Divers Alert Network in the 26 years he has held its insurance. They were great, confirmed it was not an uncommon problem with divers, and told him to see an ENT doctor or visit a medical clinic.

"When I returned home, I went to an ENT specialist, who did a hearing test and pressure testing, then cleaned out my ears and told me that, from all my coldwater diving, I have adenoids like a skin tag in front of my ear drum," Levine says. "So, it was not easy finding the hole. I made three visits over a two-

month period before getting the go-ahead to go back to diving."

Basic dive training tells us that diving with congestion can lead to ear troubles, because if your Eustachian tubes, connecting the middle ears to your throat, get blocked, it can make ear clearing on the way down virtually impossible. More importantly, without clearing your ears, a "reverse squeeze" from the same cause on the way up can break your eardrums.

"Before diving or flying, I was told I should take a Sudafed or spray my nose to make sure I can clear my ears," says Levine. "If I run into a problem equalizing, abort the dive." Sage advice.

And be glad you're not a diver for the U.K.'s Royal Navy. David Sisman, a retired Navy lieutenant commander and founder member of the British Sub-Aqua Club, told how having a cold did not excuse a diver from duty. He burst his eardrums so routinely that eventually the build-up of scar tissue started to affect his hearing. In the end, doctors gave Sisman Teflon eardrums in exchange for the worn-out ones he was born with.

a rash of crap by both the photographer (who has since disappeared into obscurity) and Nikon.

Based on Weinman's report, he had a similar experience. "Lectures and photographic instruction were a fiction promised on the brochure but consisted only of photos from his travels and the tours he ran," he says. "One would have hoped that, when making such a financial commitment to a leader's skill, veracity and knowledge, he would rotate through all groups, lending his advice, expertise and knowledge to all. In the end, it felt like I was merely there to sponsor his goal of photographing the coral spawning."

This Sounds Like a Better Option. French Polynesia offers more than just good diving, and Fred Kolo (East Hampton, NY) decided to enjoy its full splendor by joining a Lindblad expedition cruise on the *MV National Geographic Orion* to the Tua Motu and Marquesas in October. There were only 11 divers among the 80 passengers on board, so during the two-week trip, they offered only 13 dives along with the snorkeling, birdwatching, hiking and other shore activities. The channel dives in the Tua Motu are tide dependent and, because this wasn't a dive cruise per se, the *Orion* was not often there at the right times, but it was the Marquesas,

seldom dived by North American divers, that impressed Kolo.

"We spent full days at Nuku Hiva, Ua Huka, Hiva Oa, Fatu Hiva and Tahuata on the magnificently beautiful Marquesas, so green and vertical, and so different from the flat landscape of the Tua Motu. These dives were essentially on submerged rocky cliffs, and very enjoyable. Fish life was profuse but not extravagant. We saw a manta on the first dive, a curious pair of spotted eagle rays who kept coming back around to check us out, a huge green moray guarding the entrance to a cave, and various sharks, including a hammerhead. But the big news here was the three separate trips to snorkel with manta rays in plankton-heavy water. Maya, one of the dive staff, photographed 22 different mantas from below -- the markings on each manta's underside are unique. This is one of the few places where one can see both reef and oceanic mantas.

"The *Orion* is really a splendid small cruise vessel," says Kolo. "I can't speak highly enough of the entire staff, the excellent meals and the general wrangling of the Zodiacs to keep everyone on board as busy as they wished to be." (www.nationalgeographic.com/expeditions/ships/national-geographic-orion)

Invasive Lionfish and Crowns-of-Thorns May Have Met Their Match

Researchers who are working to eradicate invasive lionfish in the Caribbean and Atlantic waters, and voracious crown-of-thorn starfish on Australia's Great Barrier Reef, may have finally found the solution: killer robots.

The RangerBot is an autonomous drone designed by researchers at the Queensland University of Technology that can detect and destroy crowns-of-thorn. "Once the identification is confirmed, RangerBot can instigate a fatal injection into the starfish, but doesn't affect anything else on the reef," says Professor Matthew Dunbabin.

RangerBot is the first robotic design to go into action on a coral reef -- the Australian Institute of Marine Sciences is using it on a trial basis -- when its creators secured \$750,000 of funding after winning the Google Impact Challenge in 2016.

In Massachusetts, students at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) have designed an autonomous underwater robot that can hunt invasive lionfish. Through a combination of floating spears and repetitive learning, the robot can track down and harvest lionfish by itself, without a human operator, and send kills to the surface for collection.

How can it distinguish a lionfish from another innocent fish? The robot has an artificial intelligence platform that allows it to learn, and computer vision software helps the robot identify its prey by giving it images of what fish should not be hunted.

The WPI team will spend the next year working on a navigation system that lets the robot set up and carry out a three-dimensional grid search. The goal is to produce a robot that can be released into the water at a reef and left alone to get on with the job.

Hurricanes and Liveboards: The 2018 Report.

Hurricanes (and cyclones) have routinely hit and destroyed dive destinations in places like the Caribbean, Philippines and Indonesia, but they can be especially tough on liveboards. A notable victim was *Truk Siren*, destroyed in Truk Lagoon in 2015. The *Wave Dancer* in Belize was sunk in 2001 while moored in a hurricane hole in Belize and 20 people lost their lives when the captain made a bad decision. This year, a couple of readers reported being affected by the big blows, but both liked how the situation was handled.

David Graham (Orlando, FL) was aboard the *Kona Aggressor II* in August just as Hurricane Lane approached Hawaii. The passengers were put ashore in Kailua Kona on Wednesday instead of the scheduled Friday afternoon. "From my perspective, the situation could not have been handled any better," Graham writes. "Captain Randy and the crew kept us informed as the situation developed, with the yacht's owners working hard in the background. By the time we went ashore, they had arranged hotel accommodations for us at the very comfortable King Kamehameha Marriott Courtyard. (I had visions of sleeping on some high school gym floor). They arranged for one crew member to stay ashore with us to coordinate while the rest of the crew sheltered on the boat tied up in the harbor. They promised reimbursement at a generous daily rate for our meals - and the check for reimbursement arrived." (www.aggressor.com)

Hurricane Fabio interrupted a July trip of the well-reviewed *MV Nautilus Belle Amie*. James K. Harris (Benbrook, TX), aboard for diving Mexico's Socorro Islands, says that while the storm didn't pass over them, it caused swells so huge, the captain had to modify their itinerary. Starting at San Benedicto but leap-frogging the Socorro Islands themselves, he went straight to Roca Partida for two days before running for safety to the Sea of Cortez. They lost six programmed dives, but "due to the hurricane interruption, the captain said we'd get 40 percent off a future trip -- a generous offer for something that wasn't their fault." However, Harris did note that the superior suites became very hot, thanks to being directly under the deck, which was always in full sun, and air conditioning was patently inadequate. Cabins below decks in the hull had no such problem. (www.nautilusbellemie.com)

Where to See the Big Guys. The Sea of Cortez has some unusual diving, and Joel Snyder (Tucson, AZ) had a particularly unusual trip aboard the *MV Rocío del Mar* -- while on his October trip along the whole eastern length of Baja California Sur, he dived with hammerheads, whale sharks and mantas (www.rociodelmarliveboard.com).

Fiji's Beqa Lagoon Resort is a great place to join an orchestrated shark feed if that floats your boat. Donald Richmond (Bonney Lake, WA), there in May, wrote, "I never thought I would dive with sharks, but made an exception here for reasons I

cannot put into words. When I came back from the shark dive, I immediately signed up for another. When you go down, the area is filled with many different kinds of sharks and thousands of fish. The tigers are more lethargic than I thought they would be, and the Fijian divers are very skilled and comfortable grabbing them by the nose and steering them safely by you. I felt safe the whole time with 20-foot sharks swimming within a foot of me, and I came back absolutely amazed." (www.beqalagoon-resort.com/sharkdive)

Of course, the epitome of shark diving is while in a cage watching the great whites, which has become big business off Mexico's Pacific Coast. James Burkhart (Katy, TX) went cage diving in August with great whites at Guadalupe Island aboard the *MV Nautilus Explorer*. He was unhappy with the on-land accommodation, the bus rides and the long sea voyage, but "the memory of that fades when compared with the thrill of three days of standing in a cage filming the great white shark." The trips are cheap and convenient, with organized bus departure from San Diego. (www.nautilusexplorer.com)

Two Great Out-of-the-Way Dive Destinations. You may not even know of Rota, a small, remote Micronesian island, 40 miles north of Guam, but

if you're headed to Truk or Palau, consider a side trip. David Cook (Kingston, TN), there in April, reported large schools of trevallies, tuna and other fish, thanks to low pressure on fish life from the sparse human population. He recommends the Bayview Hotel and Blue Palms Dive Services (www.diverota.com/divingservices.htm).

Jordan is not a place you may have considered for diving, but Curtis Kates (Los Angeles, CA) visited its Red Sea port town of Aqaba in October and was full of praise. "I made nine dives with Arab Divers, and aside from beautiful reefs, healthy coral and lots of colorful tropical fish, I saw octopus, cuttlefish, boxfish, spotted puffers, porcupine fish, stonefish, a massive eagle ray and a turtle. The sunken *Cedar Pride*, the C-130 Hercules and the tank are great for wreck enthusiasts as well." (www.arabdivers.jo/en)

Read these reader reports and many more next month, when we'll be sending you our latest *Travelin' Divers' Chapbook*, which will provide you with endless new options, as well as good advice about operations to skip. It's our job to help you create the best dive trip possible, and our great thanks to all the readers who help us do just that.

-- Ben Davison

Part II: The Ups and Downs of Ocean Currents

how to enjoy diving -- and avoid getting lost -- in them

Different dive destinations have different types of currents. Protected as it is by Cuba, the Leeward Islands and Windward Islands, the Caribbean has few places with really strong currents. Maybe you've encountered wind-driven currents in Cozumel or Belize, but these pale into insignificance when compared with those driven by ocean tides.

Florida has a strong current, usually streaming south to north along its Atlantic coast, that is strong component of the Gulf Stream. Generally, these currents are constant in direction, if not strength, and you can enjoy taking advantage of drifting in them without getting lost or sucked under.

These Dive Sites Definitely Pull You In

You'll find very strong currents in the channels of tropical lagoons, where a very small difference in tidal height can make a huge difference to the torrent of water that pushes in and out. One notable

destination includes the three channels of Aldabra Atoll in the Indian Ocean, where Cousteau once got his ship Calypso stuck in the flow of the main channel.

Then there are the passes of the Tua Motus in French Polynesia, where vast numbers of reef sharks aggregate in the fast-flowing water. Rangiroa has the second-largest lagoon in the world (Kwajalein in Micronesia holds the top rank). It has two broad channels, one being the Tiputa Pass, famous for a standing wave where dolphins regularly frolic when the tide is rising. Here, divers can get down and hook in with their reef hooks, being careful to latch on to secure substrate, and watch the show. When it's time to call the dive, divers release their hooks and allow themselves to be washed into the lagoon, ascending carefully as they do. These dives are only done safely on a rising tide when the flow goes into the lagoon. Nobody wants to get flushed out into the open ocean.

A Tough Lesson to Learn from a Dive Tragedy

It may be an extreme case, but it's one we can all learn from. Back in August 2012, Lex Warner was on the deck of the *MV Jean Elaine*, preparing to dive a wreck off Cape Wrath in northwest Scotland. A 50-year-old experienced recreational and technical diver, Warner had received his trimix certification three years prior and was a member of the "Dark Star," an informal but invitation-only group of experienced technical divers.

Ready to dive and seriously loaded with a trimix rebreather, two open-circuit bailout tanks, and the other paraphernalia required for such a deep, dark dive, Warner slipped and fell on the heaving deck of *MV Jean Elaine*. He was so loaded down, he could not get himself up. Skipper Andy Cuthbertson and deckhand Allan Stanger helped him to his feet. With mouthpiece in, Warner nodded he was OK. Minutes later, he was descending onto the wreck far below.

Other divers saw Warner at both 130 feet and 230 feet, and he appeared to be swimming well, but at 290 feet deep and only 10 minutes since his deck fall, his dive computer revealed, upon later examination, that he started heading back on the long route to the surface. His breathing appeared normal, but by the time

he reached 66 feet, he was struggling to breathe and control his buoyancy.

Other divers tried to help Warner, but by this time, he was without any breathing equipment in his mouth, and eventually they had no alternative but to send him shooting to the surface by means of an emergency lifting bag. Attempts to resuscitate Warner at the surface failed, and he was declared dead at the hospital.

A post-mortem examination revealed he had suffered internal injuries inconsistent with diving, which the medical examiner attributed to his fall on the boat. Several months later, the Marine Accident Investigation Branch, alerted by Warner's wife, reviewed the findings and decided he died from decompression sickness due to ascending and missing decompression requirements. However, both sets of doctors agreed that Warner's internal injuries were a medical emergency in their own right.

What can be learned from this? If you are not 100 percent fit and well before diving, don't press on regardless, thinking it will be better underwater. It won't. And that doesn't matter whether you are doing an extreme technical dive or a simple one down to 60 feet.

A gentle flow has to speed up when it passes over an obstruction. I remember well going down in the Bahamas with Stuart Cove to look at a wreck he'd just sunk. It had unfortunately turned turtle and was upside down on top of a reef wall, with its hull acting like an airplane's wing, and water was rushing over it. Cove rapidly discovered how useless were the new fins he'd just been given.

Similarly, although the currents in the northern Red Sea are generally benign, the tide flows round the southerly point of the Sinai Peninsula in such a way that divers simply have to choose to go with it. The only real hazard is getting accidentally washed up onto the top of the reefs.

In the Galapagos, the strong current at Darwin Island can be testified to by reader Christopher Watt (Needham, MA). "On a few dives, it was like being a flag being whipped by a strong wind, sometimes going hand-over-hand to get in position against the current. Good to use the shelter of large rocks or other formations to make moving around easier."

When he got separated from the group, Watt knew the right decision was to go with the [horizontal] current and not blow all his gas getting back

to the group. He surfaced with his surface marker buoy and was spotted by the nearest Zodiac driver.

In springtime, monsoons bring strong currents and high-voltage marine life encounters to the most westerly atolls of the Maldives. The local diving dhoni drivers understand these inward ocean currents, squeeze around the thilas and kandus (sunken reefs), and always seem to know where divers are likely to surface.

Tidal currents are usually strong in Palau. Be aware that they can go both down and up as well as horizontally. Rose Mueller (Houston, TX) wrote, "We were in Palau during two of the most extreme tides of the year. My group wanted to go to Peleliu. The current was extremely strong and blew the other divers over the wall onto the shelf. We continued - and I suddenly realized I was 107 feet deep in a matter of seconds."

How to have a Safe (and Fun) Current Dive

Why dive where there are currents? Because it's where the fish are. If you can get to the "current point," the place where the current splits in different directions as it meets an underwater obstruction

such as reef topography, you can find yourself comfortably in an eddy while watching the action.

Taking a ride with the flow can make for a relaxing dive, and you can cover a lot of ground as the seabed or reef rolls by. But currents cannot always be anticipated accurately. The late Larry Smith, an iconic dive guide in Indonesia, used to famously say in his dive briefings, "The current will be mild to wild," meaning you won't know until you get on the dive site.

But it's what you do when you surface that counts. You may have moved a long way from where you started. You need a very visible marker, either a tall surface marker buoy or a large flag on an extending pole that can be easily spotted above wave crests. I was once spotted several miles from my boat at Cocos Island, thanks to the flag I otherwise keep strapped to the side of my tank with elastic cord.

Once it becomes dusk, that emergency flashlight or strobe light you keep in your BC pocket proves invaluable. When a whole boatload of divers once went missing at Elphinstone Reef in the Red Sea, they were found by the aid of their lights after it got dark. In a worst-case scenario, a personal locator beacon might be a lifesaver.

Harry Pearson (Cape Canaveral, FL) tells of diving in strong currents at Malpelo, that lonely Colombian island out in the Pacific, back in the mid-90s, and how a dive flag he deployed on an extending pole was very effective as a surface marker device to ensure he was later found by the pickup

crew. Bowstone Diving in the UK supplies these flags, and ships them to the U.S. and Canada (www.bowstonediving.com). It's an inexpensive low-tech solution that is very effective.

Another one: a signal mirror. Peter Buzzacott, former director of injury monitoring and prevention at Divers Alert Network describes how to use it for signaling a boat. "Simply extend one arm and give a thumbs-up signal, lining up your thumb with the boat (or aircraft) that you want to signal. With your other hand, hold the mirror up to your eye and look through the hole in the middle at your thumb. Wiggle the mirror; when you see sunlight flash on your thumb, you'll know you are flashing at the boat or plane."

We often hold great faith that we'll get attention and be rescued due to the noise coming from whistles and those air horns driven by air from the diver's tank. However, people looking for you will usually be in a small boat, and it's difficult to hear anything over the noise of the engine. It's also a good idea to agree on a pre-arranged dive time so that pick-up boat drivers know when to expect you.

Similarly, a high-tech radio-driven solution is only useful if it's in working order, with its batteries charged, and your boat's crew know that you might use it and thus will listen for it on their radio receiver.

For more detail on safe current diving, take another look at "Diver Safety - It's Not Sexy!" in our November 2016 issues.

-- John Bantin

How Did This Diver's Wife Die?

the computer and scuba gear make the husband look guilty as sin

If you want to murder your spouse and get away with it, doing so while diving is one option. Of course, you have to make sure there are no witnesses. You need to create an alibi and a well-thought-out story and stick to it. But keep in mind that dive gear and computers will always have their own tales to tell.

Murders done while diving have a checkered record of success. You may recall the infamous case of Gabe Watson, an Alabama diver accused of murdering his wife, Tina, while on their honeymoon in Australia in 2003 -- she died while diving the wreck of the *SS Yongala* in Queensland. An

Australian court charged him with murder; Watson pleaded guilty to manslaughter and spent a year in jail there. Tina's family had him tried for her murder back in Alabama in 2011, but Watson was exonerated -- the judge ruled that he was incompetent but not a murderer.

There's also the case of David Swain, owner of a Rhode Island dive shop, who was accused of killing his wife, Shelley Tyre, in 1999 while diving in the British Virgin Islands. In that case, her tank was still two-thirds full of air and her weight belt was still in place, but her dive computer and mouthpiece were missing. Seven years later, Tyre's parents filed a

wrongful death suit, which proved that her air supply has been shut off and her mask had been ripped off from behind, indicating a violent struggle.

Swain stood to gain from a life insurance policy and soon remarried after his wife's death. But the jury found Swain guilty and awarded Tyre's parents \$3.5 million in damages. Swain was arrested in 2007, extradited to the British Virgin Islands where he was found guilty of murder, and is now serving a 25-year jail sentence.

The Mother-In-Law's Lawsuit

Which way will the case against William Gamba go? He is being sued by the mother of his dead wife, Blaise, for drowning her off Florida's Gulf Coast in November 2016 and framing it as an accident. In the civil lawsuit, Nancy Huhta accuses Gamba, 39, of concocting an elaborate cover-up to make money off Blaise's \$1 million life insurance policies and their joint assets, including a waterfront home in Madeira Beach he sold last year for \$1.5 million.

The Sheriff's Office had originally reported the death as a diving accident, but homicide detectives are now re-investigating. The Pinellas-Pasco Medical Examiner's Office ruled the death a drowning and the manner of death as undetermined.

Gamba told investigators he had been scuba diving while Blaise, 37, was snorkeling, five miles

offshore. He looked up and saw her "making unusual jerking movements," then looked down and saw a five-foot cobia. Gamba said that at first he thought Blaise was afraid of the fish, but she continued jerking around, then went still. He swam to her and brought her head above water, then helped her onto the boat. She was coughing the whole time and didn't speak. As he headed back toward land, she stopped coughing. Gamba flagged down another boater about five miles west of Madeira Beach. The man climbed aboard and radioed authorities while Gamba performed CPR on Blaise. Then he had his own medical emergency and went unconscious shortly after deputies met them. Paramedics rushed both to the hospital; Blaise Gamba was pronounced dead the next day.

His former mother-in-law's lawyers conducted their own investigation that lays out this scheme in the lawsuit: Blaise Gamba, a physically fit and experienced diver with no health issues, was swimming on the surface when her husband pulled her under. He held her there until it seemed she had drowned. It could have been the perfect crime, but the other boater turned up, so Gamba appeared to attempt CPR on his wife. When they met the paramedics, he faked his own medical emergency to deflect blame and protect himself from talking to them. He continued dodging investigators by pretending to have a seizure and forcing deputies out

Read This Before Plugging In Your Dive Camera

Remember the woman who set her hotel on fire? As we wrote in our May 2018 issue, she decided to accompany her husband, representative of a well-known American liveaboard franchise, to the London International Dive Show a few years ago. After arriving at the Customs House Hotel, she plugged her curling iron in before dozing off, jet-lagged. She and her husband were woken up by hot embers falling on them, culminating in the top floor of the Customs House being totally destroyed by fire. (Everybody was evacuated safely.)

You see, the UK uses 240-volt electricity. Most countries use 220 volts. America, as always, has to be different in its measurements by using a 110-volt electrical supply. It's not simply a question of plugging in with the right adapter. Plug a 110-volt device into a 240-volt supply and you'll get fireworks.

Thankfully, most photo equipment we divers charge nowadays uses a smart charger that automatically adapts from 110-volt to 250-volt supply. Those with a

USB2 port, which includes most laptop chargers, adapt that to a useful six volts.

But don't forget about the plugs. American ones are also very different to those used in other countries. European two- and three-pin plug sockets are most common, but the UK uses a square three-pin plug (also found throughout Asia) and Australia has its own different take.

So while I recommend taking your own universal electrical adapter (the HP Travel Power Adapter costs \$69), I also strongly suggest you check that the input voltage on the device you plug in matches that of the supply. It's one of the reasons most liveaboards don't like you charging things out of sight in your cabin. As for hair dryers, electric razors and the like, either take a transformer to 110 volts or use what's supplied with your accommodation. A fire aboard a boat is a thousand times worse than in a building from which you can safely evacuate.

Don't just plug in and hope for the best.

The “White Shark Cafe”: A Hot New Winter Hangout

Research led by scientists from Stanford University and the Monterey Bay Aquarium have discovered an area in the Pacific, halfway between the U.S. mainland and Hawaii, containing a vast community of tiny light-sensitive creatures so delicious and tantalizing that, during winter, sharks cross miles of ocean en masse to reach them.

During the rest of the year, the northeastern Pacific’s great white sharks feed on elephant seals and other marine mammals in a triangle between Monterey Bay and San Francisco Bay, and also around Mexico’s Guadalupe Island. But then it was discovered that radio-tagged sharks were leaving these areas in December to aggregate in a part of the Pacific that had previously looked empty. They occasionally make dives

as deep as 3,000 feet during the long journey, suggesting they are following prey, but it’s still not clear what sharks were eating. What is clear is that their destination, now named the “White Shark Café,” is swirling with phytoplankton, fish, squid and jellyfish.

Salvador Jorgensen, a research scientist with Monterey Bay Aquarium, says, “During the day, they go just below where there is light, and at night, they come up nearer the surface to warmer, more productive waters under the cover of darkness.”

Then, triggered by some puzzling mechanism, the sharks leave this mid-ocean retreat to gather again, starting in August, along the California coast to feed on bigger foodstuffs.

of his hospital room, saying he was too sick to talk to them. Meanwhile, witnesses said he “showed no emotion” while his wife was dying and was more interested in her medical condition and law enforcement’s involvement in the case.

Doctors discovered the lungs of the deceased Blaise were full of water, contrary to the statement Gamba had made, saying she was still breathing when he brought her back to the boat.

After Blaise’s death, Gamba became “unusually interested” in progressing with her organ donation. His medical knowledge made him aware that Blaise might be subject to an autopsy, so he arranged for some of her organs, including her water-filled lungs to be harvested for donation. (The medical examiner drew the conclusion that she drowned based on circumstances, hospital records and the fact that the autopsy didn’t reveal any other findings.)

While talking with the Sheriff’s deputies, Gamba’s stories about what had happened at sea changed from moment to moment. Sometimes he said Blaise had suffered a head injury, other times he said she didn’t (the autopsy revealed no evidence of it).

When examining the boat Gamba had rented, deputies inspected his scuba gear and found it incorrectly assembled and not in a functioning state. What’s more, there was no sign of any seawater on it, nor did his dive computer record any dives on that day. Oops.

Gamba claimed Blaise had been frightened by a big fish, then panicked and drowned as a result. Her mother thinks that is highly unlikely. How many

experienced divers get panicked in the presence of big fish?

Huhta’s lawsuit goes on to say that Gamba’s actions were premeditated. About two weeks prior to her death, the couple was on a trip to the Florida Keys, where Gamba told Blaise to buy a thick wetsuit, which would prevent any bruising or scratching from showing up. However, the thickness added to the wetsuit’s buoyancy, making it less likely she would accidentally drown.

Lucas Fleming, Gamba’s defense attorney, told the *Tampa Bay Times* that allegation didn’t make sense because the couple had invited Huhta to join them that day and had plans to meet up with friends that later fell through. On the organ donation claim, Fleming said Gamba “made no decision about which organs would or would not be donated” because he was unconscious during that time.

Huhta’s lawsuit also portrays Gamba as a career fraudster and a serial cheater. He previously staged two car accidents he later got payouts for. He later set fire to another car and a boat to get insurance payments. While he was a patient at a New York hospital, he threw himself off a gurney, which resulted in a six-figure payout.

Blaise’s diary entries in the months before her death show that she was thinking about confronting him about the affairs. And Gamba immediately switched to a “merry widow” phase -- his actions in the weeks after his wife’s death were “highly inconsistent with those of someone who was mourning the loss of a spouse,” the lawsuit says. He stopped wearing his wedding ring and had it appraised for resale, along with Blaise’s wedding

and engagement rings. He called the firm where she had worked as a business litigation attorney to ask when he could expect her final paycheck and life insurance proceeds. He also sold her car. Gamba, who now lives in California and works as chief nursing officer at a hospital, later refused to co-operate with investigators, disallowing them access to Blaise's iPhone and iPad.

"The events of this case are a natural progression of his insurance fraud portfolio," the lawsuit says, "as Gamba has now moved on from simple

property damage and self-inflicted personal injury to intentional murder for the purpose of life insurance recovery." Huhta's lawyer told the *Tampa Bay Times* that she is requesting a jury trial and seeking "everything that the law allows" in damages.

So, divers, if you're fighting with your spouse, it might not be a great idea to go diving together until you've kissed and made up, filed the divorce papers or made someone else the beneficiary of your life insurance policy.

-- Vanessa Richardson

The Craziest Things You've Seen on Dives

poop, sex toys and, of course, crazy divers

In last month's issue, we asked what crazy things you've seen while diving. A few came back to us with stories of things they saw underwater that left them thinking, "WTF?"

"Green Torpedoes Coming at Us"

Many tales show how it's marine life that surprises in the most unexpected ways. Marc Lippman (Miami, FL) tells us how an octopus in Belize called his bluff. "My older daughter is my 'spotter,' and suddenly she went into point mode. We swam over to see what she was looking at. It was an octopus down in the antlers of a staghorn coral.

"I took out my dive knife and, holding it by the blade, I offered the handle to the octopus, hoping it would put a tentacle on it and then, with a finger on its tentacle, I could coax it out. The octopus did grab the knife handle, but I couldn't hold onto the blade, so now we had an armed octopus holding us at bay. Eventually the creature made its escape with my knife, which it later dropped."

The bioluminescence of plankton at night streaming off the bodies of sea lions or dolphins in motion can make them look like alien spacecraft underwater. It's a common sight in the Galapagos Islands, but Clayton Fuller (Coronado, CA) wasn't prepared. He describes the hair-raising scene of "green torpedoes coming at us" and the boat as they made their way between Wolf and Darwin Islands. The pod of dolphins veered right and kept on going.

Mike Panek (Boca Raton, FL) sent us a photograph of a yellowtail swimming about normally

but greatly disfigured by a massive hook caught in its mouth. Panek called it "the fish who cheated death." Maybe it was able to feed efficiently. We're thinking it suffered a deferred demise, unless someone else sends in a new photo of it.

Sharks Don't Want Saving, Only Spearguns

It's annoying to see a diver interfering with the animals, particularly when that person thinks he or she is saving the day. While diving in Saba, Fredda Lerner (Annandale, VA) and her husband watched as some reef sharks became interested in a little coral head, and one eased itself into it while attempting to seize its catch.

"To our amazement, another diver decided to swim over to the coral and drag the shark out by its caudal fin. Luckily, the shark was so freaked out, it swam quickly away. Our instructor could not believe it. What the heck was she thinking? After the dive, we asked her what she thought she was doing. She said she was afraid the shark was drowning, so she was saving its life by pulling it out of the coral. Hello, really?"

Many divers like to get up close with sharks but as shark wrangler Stuart Cove likes to remind us, they are predatory animals with lots of sharp teeth, so they need to be treated with respect. But it's easy to feel some smug satisfaction when sharks make annoying divers learn that respect through some mild fear tactics (with no bites involved). Edward Noga (Akron, OH) tell how he and a friend were diving on a tugboat wreck off Hatteras, North Carolina, when they were confronted by

another diver racing up from depth, eyes wide with fear.

“He had been spearfishing, and the sharks had gone after his bagged fish. The genius had attached the bag to his weight belt and couldn’t get it off, but that was not dissuading the sharks. I cut it off and let the sharks take it, but going for a Darwin Award, the guy decided to try to recover the bag and tease the sharks. Back on the boat, the imbecile said he tried to poke the sharks away with his spear-gun, but one shark grabbed it from him and took off. Someone went and found it for him later.”

The Red Sea Wins for Crazy Tales

People, of course, can offer even greater surprises in the water due to their wide range of behaviors. Somehow, a lot of their tales happened while diving in the Red Sea. Khaled Kenawy (Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt) made a video of an underwater fistfight

between an Egyptian dive guide and the visiting British diver he found pillaging an artifact from the 19th-century wreck, SS Carnatic. While attempting to persuade the diver to put the object back where he’d found it, the dive guide had his regulator ripped from his mouth. That act earned the perpetrator a fine, some time in an Egyptian cell, and the suggestion that he not return to Egypt. And of course, the video went viral on social media.

Returning to her liveaboard, *MV Rearis*, Farzi Mireskandari (London, UK) was doing a safety stop near the stern with her buddy and looking up through the clear water to keep an eye on where they were in relation to the boat. They could clearly see the two stainless steel stern ladders leading up to the swim platform, glinting in the sunlight. But without warning, another object broke through the surface: the white backside of the boat’s skipper, an Austrian named Tony, followed by a man-sized turd Tony had released into the water. “Not many

Underwater Statues Are Unwelcome in the Maldives

British sculptor Jason de Caires Taylor is famous for his hauntingly beautiful sculptures underwater, from Cancun to the Canary Islands. But his latest work, a submerged art gallery in a lagoon on a Maldivian island, has offended Muslim sensibilities – and government officials had it destroyed.

The Coralarium was intended as an artificial reef at the Fairmont Maldives resort on the island of Sirru Fen Fushi in Shaviyani Atoll. It contained several sculptured statues of people, similar to Taylor’s other works in the Caribbean and the Canary Islands. But on September 21, all the Coralarium’s artwork was hacked away by military, police and other pickaxe-wielding law enforcement personnel after the then-president of the Maldives, Abdulla Yameen, decided the sculptures were considered idols of worship, and thus offended the five pillars of wisdom of the Muslim faith. The Indian Ocean nation, predominantly Sunni Muslim, was preparing for presidential elections when Yameen gave the order.

Islamic art typically focuses on patterns and Arabic calligraphy instead of on figures, because it is feared by many Muslims that the depiction of the human form is idolatry and thereby a sin against God, forbidden in the Qur’an.

It seems Taylor’s eco-art was destroyed as a failed last-ditch effort to mobilize religious support for the incumbent president. However, results of the democratic election on September 23 replaced Yameen

with Ibrahim Mohamed Solih as the new president.

“I was extremely shocked and heartbroken to learn my sculptures have been destroyed . . . despite continued consultations and dialogue,” de Caires Taylor told supporters. “The Coralarium was conceived to connect humans to the environment, and be a nurturing space for marine life to thrive. Nothing else!”

But Taylor has already moved on. He created 48 life-size figures set in the shallow waters of a new resort on the Indonesian island of Gili Meno, set to open next year. Indonesia is also a predominantly Muslim country. We’ll have to wait to see what happens there.



people get to see such a sight from below, whether diving or not," Mireskandari wrote. Let's hope not.

Equally startling but less amusing, *Undercurrent* senior editor John Bantin once saw a fully equipped diver in tow with his girlfriend, who was wearing only a bikini but no dive gear, and breathing off his octopus rig at 100 feet deep near the wreck of the *SS Thistlegorm*. They both made it back to the surface, but what a foolhardy move.

Less chilling to Bantin was the sight of a large group of male divers conducting some sort of celebratory dive in the nude. The disastrous effect of cold water was equally apparent among the assembled company.

"A gratifying observation," says Bantin.

Lost and Found: Top Dawg and Dildos

It's amazing what you can find by accident underwater. Luke Inman (La Paz, Baja California) was with a group of rebreather divers at El Bajo in the Sea of Cortez when they stumbled across a new Top Dawg video camera housing. After a dive and drift lasting more than two hours, they surfaced a long way from where they started, but decided to

go back to see if there was any other boat over the site looking for that camera gear.

When they got back, they indeed found a boat carrying a dejected diver who had given up hope. When Inman's group asked if he had lost anything, the diver said it was no point in them looking because he and his friends had been searching for hours.

Inman asked if it was a Top Dawg housing with a Sony camcorder inside. The diver remained exasperated, saying he told them it was lost and there was no way they could find it, despite their rebreathers. It had fallen off the deck when his boat had arrived at the site.

"Did it have Radio Shack batteries in it?" Inman asked, at which point the camcorder's owner finally got a clue, realized the rebreather had his Top Dawg, and finally cheered up.

A less happy ending: During an underwater clean-up in Lake Erie, Georgann Wachter (Avon Lake, OH) came across a discarded sex toy. When Wachter surfaced, there was no person waiting to see if someone had rescued it.

-- Ben Davison

Flotsam & Jetsam

Palau Bans Sunscreen. President Tommy Remengesau signed the Responsible Tourism Education Act, which makes Palau the first country to ban sunscreen products containing all 10 of the chemicals most threatening to coral reefs and marine life. Similar bans are pending in Hawaii and Bonaire. Among other initiatives, Palau now asks all visitors to sign a pledge to protect the environment that is stamped in their passports.

Use Lube for That Leaky Mask. Are you still dealing with water getting into your face mask during dives? One way to get a better seal over what might be crinkly skin or a moustache is to apply a coating of K-Y jelly, a water-based, water-soluble personal lubricant, to the edge of the mask's skirt. Unlike petroleum-based lubricants, it won't damage the silicone and washes away when you take your mask off.

The First Recorded Death by a Sea Snake. Sea snakes are abundant in the Indo-Pacific oceans, so they're not an unusual sight for divers. They're not harmless, but no one has ever died from one

of their bites, until last month. The victim: Harry Evans, a 23-year-old British backpacker working on a fishing boat 400 miles off the coast of Darwin, Australia. If approached by a sea snake while diving, don't make any sudden moves. At the same time, don't panic -- just carry on swimming, and it will do the same.

They Said She Was Too Young. Despite being underwater in the Red Sea for 55 hours, the claim by 14-year-old Egyptian diver Ashraf Fawzy to have carried out the longest openwater dive by a female will not be recognized by Guinness World Records because she is not an adult. Her father, a naval officer, plans to file a lawsuit. The current record is held by Australian Cristi Quill, who spent 51 hours and 25 minutes underwater off the California coast in 2015.

A Big Dive in Belize. Next month, the billionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson intends to join a team that will explore the darkest depths of Belize's Blue Hole using the Aquatica Stingray SR500, a deep exploration submarine with military-grade sonar, to map the sinkholes in the vast underwater interior. Harvey Fleming, the expedition leader, says they don't really know what they'll find at the 420-foot depths, but the UNESCO

site is believed to hold clues to the mystery of how the Mayan civilization collapsed 1,000 years ago. The team will also include Fabien Cousteau, grandson of Jacques.

Don't Wait for the Blinking Light. When your dive computer's battery is on its last legs, it will probably wait until it's immersed in the waters you're diving to finally tell you it needs replacing. Better to be safe than sorry: If the battery is at the two-year mark or has had heavy use, get it replaced before you go on a trip. The biggest part of the bill will be pressure-testing your computer to ensure the depth sensor is accurate and the seals watertight. Better than risking doing it yourself . . . or having your computer go kaput during a dive.

Return of the GoPro. When an Australian couple lost a rented GoPro camera on the Great Barrier Reef in 2017, presumably they had to pay for it. But American diver John Darrin found it where it lay, 12 months later. He retrieved the files from its SD card and posted the pictures on Reddit and Facebook in the hope of locating their rightful owners. Steven Gibson and Eva Vazne said they couldn't believe it and had lost hope of ever seeing their vacation pictures. Hopefully, they got a refund.

The First PADI Medal of Valor. It's to be awarded this month at the DEMA show in Las Vegas to cave divers Rick Stanton, John Volanthen, Richard Harris, Jason Mallinson and Chris Jewel. Their joint efforts in the rescue of the Thailand soccer team from a flooded cave earlier this summer inspired PADI to establish the new award and to formally recognize one of the greatest moments in dive history.

Your Dive Photos Can Help Scientists. The Sealife Collection Initiative is a collaborative website run by 300 taxonomists that will classify and display photos and videos of all marine

species worldwide. To do that, it relies on divers like you who register online (membership is free) and upload your photos and video to its database, the World Register of Marine Species (<https://sealifecollection.org>).

A Seal is the Suspect in This Shark Attack. A seal swimming around people freediving for lobsters could be why 13-year-old Keane Hayes was attacked by an 11-foot great white shark near Encinitas, California in September. Seals are one of the great white's favorite foods. Lifeguards provided life support to Hayes, who suffered massive injuries to his upper torso, until he was flown by helicopter to a trauma center. Doctors say he's expected to make a full recovery.

Yet Another Attempt at Artificial Gills. It has been 12 years since *Undercurrent* first explained why there would never be enough oxygen dissolved in the water for people to breathe via artificial gills. And in May 2016, we reported how this failed idea resulted in investors being refunded their money. But creative minds just won't stop trying. Concerned about rising sea levels, designer Jun Kamei is working on the Amphibio, a 3D-printed vest and mask that purports to let the user breathe underwater. If you see a crowdfunding appeal for it, don't bite.

Can Fish Smell Anymore? Not so much, and that's making them easier prey. New research in Nature Climate Change reinforces the conclusions of a previous study from Britain's Exeter University that increasing acidity in the oceans, caused by carbon dioxide dissolving in the waters, is harming fishes' sense of smell. By studying sea bass, researchers at universities in England and Portugal showed how acidified water affects molecules bound to olfactory receptors in the fish's nose, making them less able to respond when encountering the smell of a predator.

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