undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Raja Ampat Explorer, Raja Ampat Indonesia

same stunning reefs, same fish, one-third the price

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Dear Fellow Diver,

At 6:30 a.m., I stumbled from below decks of the wooden Raja Ampat Explorer, my brain still fuzzy after the 15-hour flight from Germany to Sorong, with stops in Singapore and Manado, Indonesia. The sun was just rising above lush, green mushroom-shaped islands dotting the calm ocean. Suddenly, I saw a drone sent up by a diver to show the maze of tiny green islands scattered over several miles, all surrounded by inviting reefs and clear blue water. A good omen for my next 10 days of what would be great dives in an awesome place.

Although this was my third time to Raja Ampat -- the first aboard the Pindito, the next I split with Kararu Voyager and Max Ammer's Sorido Bay Resort -- the destination is pricing itself out for all but deep-pocket travelers. So I tracked down a budget-priced liveaboard -- $2100 for 11 nights -- for an August trip -- not the ideal time, as it is typhoon season. However, despite choppy seas, cloudy, humid days in the high 80°s, 80 percent of my dives were five-star amazing.

Take the site Batu u Wayag. Before we backrolled off the tender, Wilson, my group's eagle-eyed divemaster, briefed us thoroughly on the topography and creatures, and, as he did daily, directed us to achieve proper buoyancy control.

Approaching a dive site on *Raja Ampat Explorer*

Once down, he helped out the two guys with the biggest cameras who were interested in critters. After I spent 15 minutes in one spot waiting, I was bored, and Wilson signaled I could kick onward. Soon a huge, nearly black manta sailed by in the 100-foot visibility. I spotted a big Napoleon wrasse on the colorful reef wall, but when I tried to sneak up, it descended. Gaston (we decided to buddy up after meeting), pointed to some table coral where sweetlips hovered, but I could only shrug because they were everywhere, every dive. He signaled again, now to show me a 5-foot wobbegong shark under the coral. After a cautious approach, I got shots of his frazzled mouth and head, and closer yet, his face and his eyes, tiny spots on his huge flat head. A three-foot turtle feeding on sponges allowed me close-ups of its barnacle-covered body. I tried to shoot garden eels, which, of course, disappeared when I got within a foot of them. That's when I thought, "Maybe it´s time to buy a really good camera."

With the budget price I paid, I didn´t expect a luxury vessel, but the Explorer worked out just fine. Owned and operated by Komodo Tours, she is a wooden two-masted schooner, with an inboard engine powering her along at nine knots. She's a sound boat, but basic, with lots of patchwork. She has two cabins on the bridge level and five below deck. I shared a roomy air-conditioned cabin below decks, with two thigh-high bunks on separate sides, each with a small cupboard and storage underneath. Our shower in the ensuite bathroom produced plenty of hot water; however, they asked us not to waste water or shower after every dive. They changed towels every three days. Around 6 p.m., I switched on the room AC, which made for a cool cabin at night. I noticed two emergency exits from the lower deck, one stairway, a ladder, and multiple fire extinguishers. There were no smoke alarms. Let's hope they are in by now.

They offered four dives daily, but only supplied nitrox for half the divers, because the slow compressor couldn't fill more tanks during surface intervals, but not all guests were interested in Nitrox. To switch between nitrox and air, some divers changed their computers each time from nitrox to air, while others dived with their computer only on air, to stay even more on the safe side. We dived from two tenders that looked like inflatable Zodiacs but with hard fiberglass coating all around, and rubber-matted patches on the tube. Most dives bottomed out at 80 feet, but the current made them challenging. Dive times ran around 60 minutes or until our aluminum 80s dropped to 700 psi, at which time we were to mosey up for a safety stop.

Every day, Wilson divided us into three groups, and when we entered, at least one tender hovered nearby to catch drifting or surfacing divers. At Chicken Reef, the guide Whisnu recommended a negative buoyancy entry to get down quickly, so when I hit the water, I kicked down hard, pressing my nose to equalize while simultaneously pulling the release valve on the back of my BC. At 90 feet, I found myself in a ripping current -- three knots, Wilson said later. Gaston and I flew along a wall densely covered with soft and hard corals, sponges and tunicate and decorated with scads of fish. Twice we tried to use our reef hooks but could not find a spot to anchor without ripping the coral. When we finally managed to hook, I relaxed and indulged in the menagerie of fish life below: barracuda, bat-

fish, sweetlips, grouper, and blue-striped grunts. Humphead parrotfish, jacks, fusiliers, surgeons, angels, puffers, and triggers surrounded us, and, once in a while, a yellowfin tuna sailed past. Two big stingrays glided by, and a shy shark cruised by in deeper water. It was quite the show.

The rock islands of Raja Ampat

Then, off to the back side of Chicken Reef, where we kicked into calm water and into the midst of so many fusiliers I often couldn't see Gaston behind me. Some divers had been pushed deeper and into open ocean. I saw two struggling deep down, but they managed to sink to the sandy slope and fight their way back up. In shallower water, I slowed my breathing and pulse to enjoy the healthy reef replete with huge areas of staghorn and lettuce coral. Hovering at my safety stop, I felt a tiny touch on my hand and found rope-like transparent protozoa, many of them tied together to as long as four inches.

Diving like this is what Raja Ampat is all about, and it doesn't take a luxury boat to find it. Europeans tend to look more for budget trips -- I think we don't wish to spend our money on all the luxury Americans seek -- and we were among a fun bunch of Austrian, Swiss and German -- two were women. Only three had fewer than 200 dives. We shared lots of laughs and jokes with the crew, locals aged 28 to 35, and the guides quickly learned which diver preferred looking into the cracks and who preferred looking out into the blue.

Raja Ampat Explorer,
Raja Ampat, Indonesia

Diving (Experienced)	★★★★★
Diving (Beginners)	Too much current at most sites
Snorkling	★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Food	★★★★
Services and attitude	★★★★★
Money's worth	★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★= excellent

Worldwide scale

The dive deck was tight when all 14 of us donned our gear -- a large table stood in the middle, with two water buckets for cameras and computers. One black mark for the Explorer is that the compressors are right behind the dive deck and run when divers and crew are walking around. Seemed to me like an inviting place for an accident. Rubber mats covered most of the dive deck floor, but there were none on the stairs to the sundeck or around the bow, so barefoot divers had to negotiate a slippery course. The dive deck, which had scattered rubber mats, is two feet above the dive platform, so I was careful stepping down and took the help offered when stepping into a dive tender with all my gear on. Choppy seas made getting in and out of the dinghy tricky, and I had to find the right moment to jump.

Every day started with a wakeup call at 6:30 a.m., when our Filipino chef came out of his small galley with toast, fruits, and cold cereal. After the first plunge came the big breakfast: eggs served any style, hash browns, pancakes, noodles, beans, and bacon, as well as fresh and delicious juices -- dragon fruit, watermelon, passionfruit. Lunches always had rice and a mix of veggies, a salad, and different meats, sometimes in spicy sauces. After the third dive, we munched on cookies, crepes or banana dumplings. Dinners were rice or spaghetti, tender

Raja Ampat Explorer **at sunset**

chicken and beef, whole red snapper or other fried fish, lasagna and lovely soups of crab, pumpkin and even asparagus. After I told the chef I had problems with gluten, he daily told me which dinner meals wouldn't be a good idea. Desserts were mostly fruit-based, not always up to standard -- I wasn't a fan of the cassava with sweet sauce and cooked potatoes. Our meals were served in a nice lounge, also home to the large camera table. Behind the bridge was a sundeck with chairs and love seats. Four divers chose to sleep there for the fresh air and to watch the star-studded skies. Or maybe to avoid sleeping below decks.

One day after lunch, Marcus, the cruise director, sat us down to address a serious issue. One of the divers, a photojournalist, had spotted a wobbegong shark under an overhang and had kicked off a large piece of pillar coral while getting his shot. When told about his actions later, he laughed it away. Previously, I had watched him lying on pink soft coral to shoot a tiny nudibranch; when he left, the coral had turned gray. The divemaster had not reprimanded him, which perhaps shows the tightrope between criticizing customers and keeping a good-paying job. The guy still refused to accept blame. Wilson told us that the dive guides had recommended against visiting famous dive sites like Cape Kri and Blue Magic, as there would be other dive groups there witnessing the damage, thus spoiling Komodo Tours' reputation and possibly causing its dive tour permits to be revoked. I don't know if this caused the jerk to wake up, but in the end, we did visit these sites. Wilson strongly warned us to watch our buoyancy, hover when shooting, or forget the shot rather than risk damage. We did see other divers on three dives.

At Cap Kri, a stunning corner site rich in marine life, we hit current again, but just two knots. All the soft coral and hairy sea stars opened wide to catch nutrients, resembling a colorful, flourishing meadow of flowers. The two guys with huge cameras got there first and not only took their time shooting pictures, but also reviewed their results together and signed which angle to use next. Meanwhile, Gaston and I finned behind, pissed at their self-absorption and lack of concern for others, wondering if the creatures would leave before we got our chance to take photos.

I should note, however, that not every dive was great. For example, we made two dives at some village jetty with good fish life under the jetty, but then mostly long sandy stretches with some boulders. The second was worse, with more sand and small boulders, not my thing, since it was slow going just for a few sightings for nudi and critter lovers.

Our last dive at Mike's Point was the highlight for me, as that's my name too. Whisnu warned of strong current, so negative entry was a must. I reached an overhang at 90 feet and grabbed hold, but could see no other divers. When I got my bearings, I saw bubbles behind a huge boulder. The 2.5-knot current was fierce, but I somehow managed to get across it and to a cavern-like overhang to rest and look around. Sweetlips, jacks, and surgeons floated effortlessly; it was like watching The Blue Planet in HD. Slowly I ascended and found a beautiful coral garden, where a hovering cuttlefish changed its color and features, even lifting two of its arms as a warning when I approached. A small turtle calmly fed on the

Advances in Integrated-Weight Systems

Have you lost weight pockets during a dive? Back in October 1999, John Q. Trigger wrote in *Undercurrent*: "I like my integrated BC, and, generally speaking, the concept of slipping weights inside the BC's attached, Velcro-fastened pockets works just fine. The guy who has to heft it back on the dive boat may not appreciate it as much, although in tropical waters I only add six pounds of weight to my U.S. Diver Alcyone BC's specially designed pockets, which allow a diver to ditch weight in an emergency by pulling a cord. While it's never been a big problem, I have lost lead from these pouches when an exceptionally high giant-stride loosened the Velcro holding the weights in."

Whether Velcro is employed to properly secure the weights in the pouches or the pouches in the BC, it is a design solution that has since been discredited.

For *Undercurrent* subscriber Dave Guccione, however, losing weights has become a big problem: not only do the weights fall out of his Genesis Phantom BC with giant strides from 6 feet or higher, but they've also fallen out at depth when he's been swimming horizontally."

We've all suffered the loss of such weight-pockets during a dive. I've swum down deep into the bowels of the wreck of the *Vandenberg* off Key West to fetch and reinstall my lost weights. Dive buddy and *Undercurrent* subscriber Robert Delfs (Sanur, Bali) remembers well my safe ascent up a reef using my reef hook as an anchor when I was unable to find lost pockets that tumbled out at 100 feet deep at a site near Komodo. The problem seemed to be that Velcro lost its holding ability in hot climates once it was salt-ridden and the material to which it was fixed gone a bit curly. That was then, and this is now.

Two decades later, we've probably seen the end of Velcro being used to retain weight-pockets. Nowadays, nearly every integrated-weight BC comes with weight-pockets securely held with pinch-clips or other patented solutions that offer quick release but not unscheduled weight release. And, once again we can jump into the water without fear of our weights tumbling out.

However, some divers are still using a BC with integrated weights retained by Velcro. Are you? Please write us and tell us whether you've had problems. Write to **BenDDavison@undercurrent.org**, and let us know your town and state.

- John Bantin

coral.

One thing I liked about my Explorer trip was the island visits it offered for sightseeing, birdwatching, and hiking. On Wayag Island, the captain took us on a hillside hike -- a bit of exertion, but worth it to see the karst landforms and the 360-degree view. After a birdwatching tour, Marcus took us to a village built like a fortress, with new, well-tended wooden huts around the outer circle and small shops in between, selling sweets, fruits, and small items. Kids were everywhere, watching us tourists with big eyes. In the evenings, I and a few others read while the remainder looked at their pictures or worked on their PCs; at some point most went up to the sun deck for small talk, but socializing ended around 9 p.m.

A basic twin bunk cabin

One night we anchored in front of Raja Ampat Dive Resort, a magnificent place with lovely bungalows and beach. It's a pretty penny to stay there, but I got my money's worth on the Explorer because I saw the same amazing fish life and reefs for a third of the price some people pay. The craft is not deluxe. But with a max of only 14 divers, I had space to stretch out and

relax and got plenty of care from the excellent crew. If you want to see the best of Raja diving and can tiptoe carefully on a few slippery parts of the dive deck and platform, you will come away with a great trip aboard the Explorer and save enough money to do it again.

-- M.J.

Our Undercover Diver's Bio: *Mike Nelson in* Sea Hunt *inoculated me with the dive virus when I was 17. I followed all his adventures on TV and saw myself one day in the future diving into the deep blue in a silvery wetsuit with those two hoses and big tube regulator. Diving since 1974, I've made more than 2,200 dives in more than 100 destinations worldwide. I'm always looking for special destinations that have 'icing on the cake' dives like Phoenix Island, Kiribati, Rowley Shoals, Djibouti and New Calendonia. I'm still dreaming of visiting Bikini Atoll and Yemen.*

Divers Compass: For 11 nights, I paid around US$2,100, which included four dives daily, meals and transfer from Sorong airport; the marine park fee was an additional $100 . . . sodas and beer cost extra, and other drinks were BYO. . . The Explorer offers rental gear, but only if you book it in advance . . . the best time for Raja Ampat diving is October to March . . . I laid over in Manado at the Novotel for $140/night . . . Lion Air to Sorong has a baggage allowance of only 22 pounds, so I had to pay $20 for 20 extra pounds . . . a recompression chamber is at Wasai, but I read it's currently not compliant with international standards and that bent divers should be evacuated to Manado . . .Websites: Raja Ampat Explorer -- **www.grandkomodo.com/mv-raja-ampat-explorer** . . . Novotel Manado - **https://tinyurl.com/y5wj3urh**

Sea Saba, Saba, Dutch Antilles, Caribbean

a delightful village, still pristine diving

Dear Fellow Diver,

One of the first tourist factoids you learn about Saba is that the island's airport has the shortest commercial runway in the world (and it scares the bejesus out of lots of travelers). You also learn that the five-square-mile island is an extinct volcano rising from the sea, with no beaches, one road (The Road), and U.S. dollars are the currency. Most activities are centered in the picturesque town of Windwardside, with its lovely red-roofed white cottages with green shutters and white-picket-fenced yards and gardens. As it turns out, it was close to a perfect week with but one tiny hiccup, probably not even worth mentioning, but I will: our assigned taxi driver for pick-up from the airport failed to show, but it was quickly remedied when another driver shuttled me up the hill.

Juliana's is a hillside collection of traditional Saban-style structures connected by open wooden stairs and decks straddling a narrow lane in Windwardside, with two suites, three cottages, and a dozen or so ocean or tropical garden view rooms -- even the chef has a garden. The hotel pool, with its huge flamingo and swan plastic floats and a stuffed toy pig collection, is

The island of Saba in the Dutch Antilles

across the road from the rooms and between the café and bar. We had the hotel's top-level Mango Suite, named after the large mango tree outside our spacious covered deck, and a mural of mangos on the free-standing bedroom headboard wall. We had a living room and kitchenette cooled by AC or ceiling fans under the vaulted ceilings, a glass-walled stone shower, pedestal sinks, wicker furniture, and a built-in closet. When it's part of a ten-tank dive package for $1410/person, breakfast and nitrox included, you know you have a deal.

After check-in, we walked through town to Sea Saba's dive shop, up a steep hill, as is everything. Co-owner Lynn Costenero checked our c-cards as we signed forms and checked out their spacious shop with a large stock and selection of scuba items and adventure gear. John Magor, her husband, is a Brit and Lynn is originally from Indiana; they have been on Saba since 1989. She pretty much stays in the shop running things. He is a cutler, and the next-door shop sells John's top-notch knife creations.

Our first dive -- there was no checkout -- was Tent Reef Wall South. By the end of the week we dived several additional Tent Reef sites, named after the bay's hilltop stone structure that resembles a teepee. My wife and I were the first to drop in when the pool opened. As I started my descent, I was greeted by a huge Caribbean reef shark that altered her path for a close drive-by to check us out. I did a double-take because it was at the high end of their size range, easily eight feet. There were plenty of tropicals, including princess parrots, black durgons, blue chromis and spotted filefish on the wall and barracuda patrolling off a bit. I spotted a huge queen angelfish during my 51 minutes, which took me down the nice wall, result of a long-ago volcanic fissure upheaval, to 101 feet in the tepid 81°F water with 50-foot visibility. My next dive on a rocky reef named Greer Gut included lots of nurse sharks including a puppy, and several large spotted drums and French angels, with a depth of 81 feet (when I reviewed my video of this dive, I realized I had recorded many dolphin clicks as well). After our first dive day, we knew Saba's diving was special.

Unfortunately, visibility deteriorated throughout our week, dropping to 25 feet or so, but it did not diminish the beauty. Several planned dive sites were abandoned due to the murk. The marine-park dive sites varied from pinnacles to boulders to walls, well covered in healthy Caribbean reef life; few sites were true coral reefs. I saw many yellowheaded jawfish on the sand, parrots, triggers, trumpets, trunks, morays, crustaceans and beautiful stands of healthy elkhorn coral, a refreshing sight. Caribbean reef sharks swam along the walls and pinnacles, while nurse sharks settled among the reefs and boulders. Turtles were also a constant.

Our first night, we heeded Lynn's dinner recommendation and dined above the dive shop at Chez Bubba, where the dishes were elegant and delicious. The white pea soup ($11) was velvet-smooth and very flavorful and was followed by Saban lobster ($31) and lobster pasta ($29). Heineken's and wine were $7.50. We passed a couple of open-to-the-street "pubs" with some ongoing Saturday night action on the way back to the hotel but opted for an early bedtime.

After the Storm – The Bahamas

Most of us have dived the Bahamas at one time or another, and when we learned that the powerful Hurricane Dorian made landfall in Elbow Cay, just east of Great Abaco, our hearts dropped. Tragically, it destroyed virtually everything in its path including structures on Grand Bahama. UNEXSO on Grand Bahama and Brendal's Dive Center on Green Turtle Cay have been put out of action. Brendal is thought to be safely in Florida.

UNEXSO reports, "… all animals are safe and continue to be lovingly cared for by our Dolphin Experience staff. All vessels are floating, almost all of our buildings sustained minimal damage. While we have the ability to be fully functional at this point, the island is not quite ready to receive guests."

Brendal in Happier Times

Subscriber Bill Domb (Riviera Beach, FL) says Premier Realty Group has partnered with Operation 300, both based out of Martin County, Florida, to help with the deployment of supplies and volunteers for Bahamas Relief from Hurricane Dorian. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Commonwealth of the Bahamas, requested the items on this list.

https://tinyurl.com/y6mxl3po

Besides simply donating money directly to the disaster fund **www.bahamas.com/relief,** or **www.gbdisasterrelief.org**, you can help the Bahamas economy by continuing to vacation in the unaffected islands.

While Dorian hovered over the area for several days, the rest of the Bahamas archipelago, although suffering rain, wind and waves, suffered little damage. As for dive operations, the popular spots like Stuart Cove's on New Providence (home of Nassau), Neal Watson's on Bimini and Small Hope Bay on Andros, are still in business, and welcome visitors.

www.stuartcove.com

www.biminiscubacenter.com

www.smallhope.com

www.ridingrock.com

www.stellamarisresort.com

Breakfast at the poolside Tropics Café provided a choice of the standard offerings with Dutch and local twists. Omelets had local ingredients, as did the pancakes, French toast, and house-made yogurt offerings. Lunch and dinner were great pub/cafe fare, and bar food was available along with many libations, frozen concoctions, beers and wines. Dutch owner/husband Wim Schutten (with his wife Johanna van't Hof) was the breakfast chef and waiter, up early daily catering to divers on pick-up schedules, fixed a room maintenance issue, bartended, waited tables, hosted, and managed. Handsome and ever-smiling, he was born in Holland, grew up in California, and went to school in Paris.

Patty, whose family arrived on Saba over three centuries ago, was our assigned shuttle driver for the week and arrived each morning at 8:45. Immediately likable, his strong Saban accent required my full concentration. He drove "The Road" as if it were in his bloodline. At the harbor, the dive crew transferred our gear to the boat. Embarking and disembarking was a little tricky as the pier was almost the same elevation as the upper/bridge deck on some tides.

While Saba is known as the Unspoiled Queen of the Caribbean, actually my queen and I were spoiled by the Sea Saba staff. They analyzed the nitrox cylinders and switched dive gear over during surface intervals in a flash. Daily, they rinsed and stowed our gear and after our final dive, rinsed and dried our gear and returned it to our hotel. The crews often rotated, perhaps to spread the work as it was offseason. Two Bens -- one a Brit and the other a German -- were good guides. Aaron was memorable with his dry humor and Texan drawl. Will, a very nice guy in the shop, also made pizzas two doors down. We often ran into them in the local bars enjoying a post-dive beer.

They run two purpose-built Delta Canaveral dive boats, each 38 feet long plus dive platform. The Sea Dragon (one screw and no head) worked all week, but the Giant Stride (two screws and a marine head) went idle after day two when the guest count decreased. Both have a covered area, with benches and tank racks down the sides. Though well worn, they seemed sturdy and well maintained. Each easily accommodates 10 divers plus a crew of three. Most dive sites are 10- to 15-minute boat rides, not far from shore, since it gets deep fast on Saba.

Sea Saba's dive boats at the dock

A serious photographer might register some disappointment with Sea Saba, since there is no dockside camera/charge station and a small red tub on the boat, which didn't even contain water for a couple of days due to government-imposed water usage restrictions, as the drought taxed the island's desalinization plant. But, the not-so-picky will find macro to blue water subject matter and plenty of colorful pinnacles such as Outer Limits and Shark Shoals. One must drop down to the mooring lines to 90 feet, where I gradually descended to 115 or so, then ascended, swimming circles around the pointy rocks that rise from hundreds of feet from the bottom almost to the surface. One pinnacle dive, I found an octopus rooting around during the day and a large spotted moray among the multitudes. Another day, I discovered a long-lured frogfish hiding in the colorful yellow sponges and a three-legged -- or is it flippered? -- green turtle at Man-O-War Shoals. At Tent Reef Deep, two scorpionfish hid in the clutter and file clams clung where they could. We made two morning dives daily, but could only do one of the two offered afternoon dives due to a scheduling conflict. The boat's departure for the afternoon dive was soon after the morning trip's return, tank exchange and hotel-restaurant-provided box lunch consumption. The harbor does have a small waterfront Latino-vibe bar and grill that should have gotten our business. We skipped the one night dive offered during our week for a romantic dinner.

Sea Saba staff mainly let you do your own thing while diving, but kept a careful eye, once kicking out to turn everyone around because some divers had failed to turn back at half a tank of air. On some sites, it was impossible to do anything other than what everyone else was doing -- winding around the pinnacle. I found no currents, so aside from the depth, diving is easy for all levels, and, just in case, Saba has a working chamber.

One afternoon I acquiesced to my wife's desire to take a class at JoBean Glass Art. Resigned to my marital duty, I packed several beers in a bag of ice and sat on the front porch enjoying Booby Hill. When the beer completely evaporated (no other explanation), I went inside to determine how much longer my sentence would continue, but I became fascinated by the glass bead-making process. While my wife seemed to master it quickly, I tried my hand at replicating a Statian blue slave bead without success.

We were pleasantly surprised with the restaurants on Saba, and as a resident of New York City, I don't say that lightly. We had great meals at high-end Chez Bubba Bistro and Brigadoon, both in Windwardside, and a memorable meal in the Bird's Nest (a secluded and romantic treehouse table) at Queen's Garden in The Bottom (the larger town). We had many good meals at Tropics Café and the 'cross-pool' Tipsy Goat, a fantastic café with a Tiki bar. Friday night is barbecue night at Swinging Doors, its only food service of the week, and "everybody" was there.

Dinnertime view at the Bird's Nest

We had many beers, stories and laughs with the proprietor, Eddie, a Saban and an affable retired sea captain. Our plates of ribs each had a full rack, a mountain of potato salad and a second peak of rice and beans -- huge and delicious -- served up by Ed's lucky lady, Pat, a lovely Irish lass abducted from NYC during one of his pirate raids. I enjoyed passing through the saloon entry doors like in the old Wild West movies.

Aside from diving, the only other tourist diversion on Saba is hiking. We taxied to the Tidal Pools Trail at the north terminus of The Road and took a short jaunt -- it became more of a rock scramble and boulder crawl as we approached the sea. We squeezed beneath a boulder gap to see a spectacular rough and rocky shoreline and several pools fed by splashing waves, some containing sea life.

Saba was in the throes of a three-month drought, and, unfortunately for us, the prayers of the locals were answered during our last three days. When the morning's torrential rains finally abated on Friday afternoon, our no-dive-due-to-flying day, we climbed to the top of Mount Scenery, the highest point in the entire Kingdom of the Netherlands. It was a miserable climb up a crappy staircase to 3,000 feet above sea level. The great views of Saba and Statia and the curried chicken salad sandwich from Bizzy B consumed at the top made the climb almost worth it. But it was a slippery and bumpy descent, and after getting down safely but slightly battered, I entered the Trail Shop and announced I'd like to donate $1 to trail maintenance for every time I fell on my butt on the hike. The young lady in the Trail Shop was rather bewildered looking at the $20 I dropped on the counter.

Even a little bruised, I can only say this was a memorable trip on a beautiful island, with plenty of nice people, great restaurants, scenic towns, rugged terrain, and superior dive operation. It's worth repeating -- and hopefully I will.

-- R.A.M.

Our Undercover Diver's Bio: *"I was exposed to diving at a young age by my father and Jacques Cousteau and got certified in 1977. Although possessing dry-suit certification, I prefer diving the Caribbean, Yucatan, Micronesia, Hawaii, and the Philippines, and am always accompanied by my lovely wife-buddy. I only feel truly stress-free at work when I have two dive trips planned ahead."*

Divers Compass: There is an American medical school in the capital city, The Bottom (closer to the harbor), which accounts for much of the island economy. . . . Several airlines fly to Sint Maarten, where one picks up a short flight to SAB ($200 RT) aboard the Winnair Twin Otter (upon approach, the runway does look tiny and intimidating with 30-foot-high cliffs down to the sea at both ends, but our skilled pilots used about half the short runway with zero drama. . . .Our travel package ($1,410 each) included seven nights' accommodations, daily breakfast, airport and dive boat transfers and five days of two tank boat dives . . . Sea Saba has rental gear, oft-used but in good condition; unlimited nitrox is $59/week. . . .Their website states that their repair capabilities and spare parts inventory make their dive and marine operations self-sufficient . . . . . The high air temperature was 81ºF with the overnight lows in the 60s due to elevation. **https://www.seasaba.com** **https://www.julianashotelsaba.com/**

The Tragic Tale of the *Conception* Fire

the cause remains unknown

The Labor Day sinking of the 75-foot liveaboard dive boat *MV Conception* off California's Santa Cruz Island killed 34 divers, making it the nation's deadliest maritime disaster in the past 30 years.

Conception, owned by the Santa Barbara-based dive operator Truth Aquatics, slept up to 46 passengers in a single large bunkroom below decks, with only one stairway up to the main deck and a small, out-of-the-way hatch to escape a cabin densely packed with people sleeping in the dark. When fire quickly engulfed the passageway exit, the passengers were unable to escape and died of smoke inhalation.

> *"There were kind of central areas with power strips. And they were a bit of a mess."*

Five crew members were asleep on the deck above the galley. When awakened by the fire, they were unable to use a ladder that was on fire, so they jumped to the main deck. They were unable to rescue the passengers and escaped the inferno by jumping into the water.

How the fire started and the failure of the crew to put it out or alert the passengers has left serious questions.

What Caused the Fire is Still a Mystery

As of September 27, investigators still don't know the cause, though it appears that the fire had electrical origins and seems to have started in or near the galley, and not in the engine room.

Passengers were in the habit of charging batteries for their cameras – video, digital, GoPros – strobes, light rigs, cellphones, computers, even underwater scooters, close to the galley. Nearly everyone aboard surely had at least one of these devices, and many had two or more. Some people speculate that a lithium-ion battery that was being charged may have exploded, causing the fire. Or perhaps a mismatched or faulty charger or a frayed electrical cord was the culprit. Others speculate that the sheer number of devices being charged overwhelmed the electrical system. Or perhaps the electrical system itself somehow failed and started the fire.

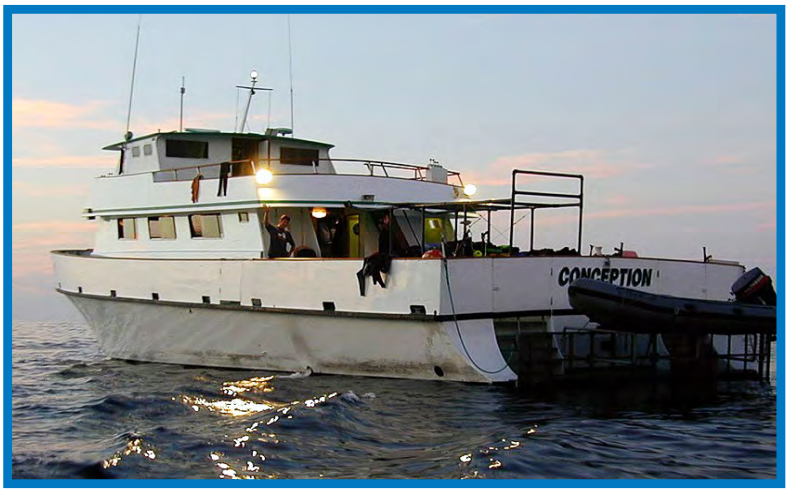
Lance Zimmer, a previous passenger, told KABC-TV in Los Angeles, "We didn't all have our own personal stations where we could charge stuff, so there were kind of central areas with power strips. And they were a bit of a mess. Many of the electronics were charged near the galley, close to the stairs [out] and the only access [to and from] below deck."

The potential danger of lithium batteries is well advertised, especially for airplane passengers; the FAA has reported 265 lithium battery incidents in cargo or baggage. Since the *Conception* disaster, the U.S. Coast Guard has recommended that owners of passenger vessels immediately urge crews to "reduce potential fire hazards and consider limiting the unsupervised charging of lithium-ion batteries and extensive use of power cords.

Why Was There Nobody on Night Watch?

The National Transportation Safety Board, investigating the disaster, has issued a preliminary report and has determined that no crew member was awake and on watch, a violation of U.S. Coastguard procedure, not to say common sense. It was a tragic error.

Commercial vessels are required to have a crew member on watch at night, even when a vessel is at anchor. Anchors can drag, and wind direction can



Truth Aquatic's *MV Conception* before the fire

change. Unexpected waves can dislodge and topple anything not fastened down. An alert crewmember can catch a gas leak, an electrical fire, or any other problem, and stop it or at least mitigate it, and certainly roust the other crew members and passengers. These days, the danger of charging batteries while everyone is asleep is another reason why a watchman is important.

When I was a dive guide on a liveaboard, night watch was certainly one of my duties, and that included inspecting the galley and engine room. *Conception* had no on duty at night, though one member of the crew was awake about a half-hour before the tragedy. The crew members slept on the top deck, above the galley; one crew member was asleep below decks with the passengers and perished with them.

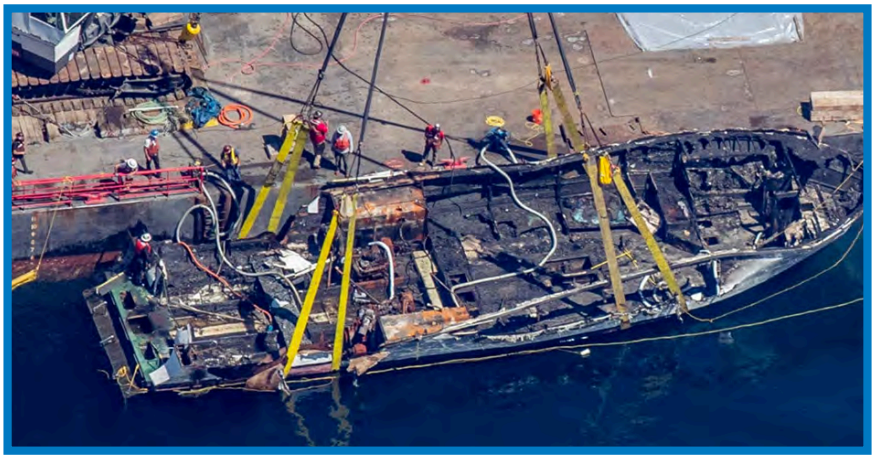
Apparently, after hearing a noise, one crew member above woke up and saw flames erupting from the galley/salon area and awoke the other crew members, who jumped down to the main deck, but were unable to do anything to help the passengers and eventually jumped into the water below.

Why was no one on watch? Did the captain not enforce the rule? Did a crewmember just blow it off or inadvertently fall asleep? These are questions the investigators are asking.

Ultimately, the responsibility falls on the captain of a vessel, in this case Jerry Boylan, who has been piloting boats for more than 30 years and had a solid reputation among those who had worked or dived with him. His lawyer, Michael Lipman, has said his client was "emotionally devastated."

Even without a watchman, one would hope that smoke and heat detectors would provide an early warning, but it is unclear, at this point, whether they were working. If functional, they would have emitted an ear-shattering screech and woken the passengers, presumably in time to escape.

The *Conception* was required to have smoke alarms, however, and it did pass an annual Coast Guard inspection five months before the fire. But, the fire seems to have spread so quickly that even if the passengers were warned, escaping up the stairway, in what must have been an extraordinary panic, may have been impossible



The remains being lifted for investigators

Were Passengers Aware of the Emergency Escape Hatch?

So far, no evidence suggests that anyone attempted to escape through the bunkroom's single, small emergency hatch, which was located above a bunk. Had the divers been told about it in the briefing? We divers know that it's not uncommon for such items to be glossed over in dive boat safety briefings and that divers fail to pay attention during the safety briefing instead of fiddling with their cameras and gear or chatting with friends.

Chris Connelly, a former captain for Truth Aquatics, told Sacramento news station KXTV that after the sinking, he was shocked when his wife, who had been on board the *Conception* many times, told him she was unaware of the escape hatch in the sleeping quarters. Other divers have told us the same.

The location of the escape hatch would make it difficult to locate and difficult to use, as Jennifer Homendy, a member of the National Transportation and Safety Board, confirmed in looking at the *Conception*'s sister ship, the *MV Vision*

Furthermore, the narrow staircase was no easy exit, especially if 34 passengers were rushing to climb it. And for those bedding down toward the stern of the boat, it would be a struggle to reach the stairway with 20 or more passengers ahead trying to exit in a panic.

John McDevitt, a former assistant fire chief and chairman of a National Fire Protection Association committee on boat protection, said the *Conception*'s design was flawed, telling the *Los Angeles Times*, "It was a compliant fire trap." He questioned why both egress points – the stairwell and the escape hatch – deposited passengers into the galley and adjacent dining area. "When you put two exits into the same

common area, you are not providing two means of egress; it's still only one. If they built that boat today, they could do more. When you put people down there in that dungeon, it's got to be [safe]."

Undercurrent subscriber Wendy Filener (Grand Junction, CO) wrote to us after the disaster about her experience on California dive boats, including the *Conception*. "All of the dive boats in Southern California are similar in design, with a large bunkroom below decks, usually pitch black with no windows, and only one truly useful escape route.

> *Even without a watchman, one would hope that smoke and heat detectors would provide an early warning.*

"I am familiar with the tiny – and highly difficult to locate in the dark – secondary hatch of the *Conception*. It requires a contortionist to first locate the highest bunk at the stern, climb up there, squeeze around by feel in the very back of it to locate the tiny escape shaft on its roof, then wriggle four feet or so straight up, all the while in pitch-blackness, and haul yourself out. There would be no possible way that more than a handful, if any, of the 30 people would have had a chance to locate and maybe make their way out of that black tomb in any reasonable amount of time."

Chris Barry, chair of the Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers' small craft technical and research committee, agreed that the *Conception's* structure and cramped sleeping quarters were not unusual.

He told the *Los Angeles Times*, "These aren't luxury staterooms. All [the passengers] want to do is crash and sleep. They don't need a lot of luxury, and there's obviously a trade-off between the amount of space per person and the cost."

But even though *Conception's* layout was compliant with Coast Guard standards, when the escape hatch is difficult to reach, generally invisible to passengers, and maybe even unknown, it is not at all a route of escape.

What Happens Next?

On September 5, three days after the deadly inferno, Truth Aquatics Inc. filed suit in Los Angeles federal court under a pre-Civil War provision of maritime law that allows it to limit its liability. Anyone filing a claim against the company would be served with notice that the firm was asserting it was not liable for damages, and victims will have a limited time to challenge that claim.

Such laws have their origins in 18th century England and are designed to encourage the shipping business. This time-tested legal maneuver has been successfully employed by owners of the *Titanic* and countless other crafts where passengers have lost their lives.

The suit said the company and owners Glen and Dana Fritzler "used reasonable care to make the *Conception* seaworthy, and she was, at all relevant times, tight, staunch, and strong, fully and properly manned, equipped and supplied and in all respects seaworthy and fit for the service in which she was engaged."

A week after the fire, a criminal investigation was officially launched into the fire, with the FBI, Coast Guard and U.S. attorney in Los Angeles overseeing the proceedings; Federal search warrants were executed in Santa Barbara on September 7 to search Truth Aquatics' office and two remaining dive vessels.

The diving community and maritime professionals have generally heaped praise on Truth Aquatics, stating that the long-running operation and crew have regularly been professional, safety-conscious, and maintained top-notch facilities. Truth Aquatics owner Glen Fritzler is well-regarded in the diving community and in May was presented the California Scuba Service Award at the Long Beach scuba show. Clearly devastated by the tragedy, he has been cooperating with authorities who are looking into a wide range of safety issues, including whether the crew had adequate training to handle a major emergency on the vessel.

If charges are brought, prosecutors are likely to apply an obscure federal law known as the Seaman's Manslaughter Statute, which predates the Civil War and was enacted to punish negligent captains, engineers, and pilots for deadly steamboat accidents that killed thousands. The crime carries a potential penalty of up to 10 years in prison and sets a low bar for prosecutors, who only need to prove simple negligence or misconduct on the part of the captain or crew.

The law can also be extended to a boat owner or charterer who engages in "fraud, neglect, connivance, misconduct, or violation of law" that takes a life. That is harder to prove and used less frequently, according to attorney Kierstan Carlson, who

Dive Vessel Inspections: Not All Insured Liveaboards Have Been Thoroughly Checked

In the aftermath of several alarming fires, groundings and sinkings by liveaboards around the world, several *Undercurrent* subscribers have asked what oversight exists by government agencies with regard to diving vessels. In the U.S., all licensing and vessel inspections are conducted by the U.S Coast Guard. For the most part, the USCG does a thorough and very professional job.

The licensing process requires applicants to show substantial evidence of sea time and practical experience to qualify to take the Master's examination. It's a tough test – candidates will be challenged on Rules of the Road, safety, fire-fighting, navigation, seamanship and contingencies. Masters (captains) must show proof of ongoing sea time, and renew every five years. Chemical drug testing, a physical, security credentials and a background check are required on each renewal. Unfortunately, no actual "operational" test in maneuvering an actual boat is given. I find this remarkable.

Annual vessel inspections are required where a USCG officer conducts a complete hands-on visit for each passenger vessel operating under a Certificate of Inspection to carry more than six passengers for hire. This includes hull, engines, navigational instruments, safety equipment, fuel systems, marine heads, stability, etc. Additionally, periodic dry dock inspections are conducted. This oversight is excellent, but it should be remembered that "seaworthiness" is mostly evaluated for general passenger voyages . . . not specifically for diving operations. Some USCG districts take a more focused approach to diving, but this tends to vary widely. USCG rules and regulations also apply in U.S. Territories and Commonwealth regions, such as the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

On the other hand, with the exception of vessels under flag from the U.K. and Canada, oversight is virtually nonexistent. This should come as no surprise to most divers. With Third World countries such as Indonesia, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Micronesia, Melanesia, most of the Caribbean and the Bahamas, Mexico, Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama, Colombia, countries of the Mediterranean, Thailand, etc., there is simply no infrastructure or budget to do a proper job. Nor is there any real process for proper evaluation, screening, testing and continuing quality assurance to captains.

Some travelers may be seduced into thinking that just because a vessel has insurance, it has been required to undergo specific inspections. This is not always the case. Incredibly, some insurance underwriters accept vessels solely with an application, a purported "recent survey," and some photos. This in no way should be a basis for diver confidence because it's difficult to determine what criteria actually were applied. And some vessels specifically do not buy coverage for "in water" activities. Like, duh, diving. I know, this sounds hard to believe, but it's part of the bizarre reality out there. However, if an operator has insurance from a credible underwriter, such as a Lloyd's of London syndicate, it will be vetted properly, and oversight will include operations and maintenance, as well as who is placed aboard as Master. It's worth inquiring if you have doubts.

There is a huge element of trust that must be considered. There is no guarantee that an operator will exercise due diligence to the vessel or its crew. Don't be fooled into thinking that a "big" name company with "fleet" operations will necessarily be safer. Many "fleet" operators – the Aggressor fleet, for example – don't own the vessels they advertise and put their names on. Most vessels are independently owned by other parties and merely sign on as "franchise" members. Sometimes a smaller operator with vigilant owner attention can be far better. And safer.

I strongly recommend that divers research the operations they plan on diving with and boarding, with a personal sense of "situational awareness." Look for safety gear (life jackets, rafts, EPIRBS, signaling devices, oxygen units, etc.) and engage the captain or vessel manager in a discussion about emergency protocols and evacuations in the event of an accident. Get the lowdown on search and rescue and abandon ship, and always make certain you have your own portable flashlight in your cabin in case a nighttime crisis manifests.

Some foreign flag vessel operations do an excellent job of assigning captains and crew with specific training protocols and overall vessel maintenance and voyage safety plans. Excellent operators include the Sea Hunter fleet in Costa Rica, the Truk Odyssey, the Bilikiki in the Solomons, the Nai'a in Fiji and Tonga, the Ocean Hunter fleet in Palau, Dewi Nusantara (Paradise Dancer) in Indonesia, Cuan Law in the British Virgin Islands, and I've seen the bar set much higher in recent years by the higher-end vessels in Indonesia. But frequent staff turnover and virtually no government overview still leaves me twitchy about many vessels.

Travel smart. Do your homework. Shit happens.

(First published in January 2016.) Bret Gilliam, a regular contributor to Undercurrent*, has been, among other things, a USCG-licensed Master for over four decades and has operated vessels up to 550 feet long and 28,000 tons worldwide.*

told *USA Today* that she advises maritime clients to expect a criminal investigation in the case of deaths.

Carlson says a ship captain could be convicted if found not to have proper firefighting or safety equipment aboard or failing to have someone keeping watch. "That means somebody in charge of the vessel, in charge of major operations. There are some cases where a captain will put a junior person who is not sufficiently experienced in charge. That would also be a breach of the standard of care."

On September 12, the Coast Guard raised the burned remains of the *Conception* from 65 feet of water off Santa Cruz Island, where it was anchored the night of the fire. The middle deck and the wheelhouse had been completely ravaged, and a large part of the hull was burned or charred black. Officials transported the wreckage by barge to Port Hueneme naval facility, where investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives are inspecting every last detail.

The National Transportation Safety Board said the investigation could take up to two years, but they are "100 percent certain" they will get to the bottom of what happened.

With so many fatalities, Truth Aquatics' insurance coverage (probably around $5 million) is bound to be inadequate. Even including all the company's assets, the funds available won't amount to much when divided so many ways. Plaintiffs in any filed suits will be looking for secondary defendants, such as the manufacturers of on-board equipment and the manufacturers of lithium-ion batteries and chargers.

Ryan Sims, employed as a steward aboard *Conception* for only three weeks, filed a lawsuit against the owners, alleging that they were "negligent in their failure to properly train crew members, give adequate safety and medical equipment and provide safety rules," among other claims. Given the significance of the fire and the layout of the vessel, the suit said, Sims "was required to jump from the top deck of the vessel to avoid fire," fracturing his leg in three places and injuring his back. Sims was one of five crew asleep on the top deck of the *Conception* at the time. His suit names Truth Aquatics, the Fritzler Family Trust (the Fritzlers own Truth Aquatics) and World Wide Diving Adventures, a family business that had chartered the boat. One of the family members, Kristy Finstand of Santa Cruz, died in the fire.

"This Labor Day disaster may well spark changes in regulations of commercial dive boats and related vessels," Kyle McAvoy, a retired Coast Guard captain and current marine safety expert with Robson Forensics, told CNN. "A lot of regulatory, policy, and safety initiatives are driven by tragic events such as this. The expression is that a lot of regulations are written in blood."

Next Month: what this means for liveaboard diving worldwide.

– John Bantin

Full-Face Flop

"The D-Mask may be the high-tech future of diving and snorkeling." So said the press release in Digital Trends last year. A Chinese designer with the rather odd name of Zj-DDG unveiled a new concept, but we're confident you'll never see it hit the market.

His full-face mask envelopes the user's entire face. He pointed out that it provides an all-round field of view, and the glass serves as a projection point for a head-up display. Perfect – as long as you don't want to use it underwater.

Apart from the apparent absence of a proper skirt to keep the water out, the designer has failed to understand that a diver needs to clear his ears. Functional full-face FF masks have a built-in nose grip, but this one doesn't.

Functional full-face masks, both for diving and snorkeling, have a bib fitting around the mouth and nose to prevent a build-up of expired carbon dioxide. With this mask, if the user managed to keep the water out, he'd soon be in distress from CO2 poisoning by breathing the exhaled air swilling around.

Clearly, this is a designer who put form over function, so much it would kill you.

Bringing Underwater Camera Gear to Dive in Mexico?

it just may cost you

If you travel to Baja California with lots of camera gear, you better have a pocketful of cash. Mexican Customs and Immigration officials are slamming divers with a tax on their photo gear when they pass through Los Cabos Airport Customs, and most likely elsewhere. *Undercurrent* published a letter by Rene Cote (Richmond, VA) about it in July.

The latest victim is subscriber Mary Anne Pedoto (Hamilton, OH), who told us, "my Pelican case was searched at immigration in August, and they pulled everything out that looked like camera gear, including my small drone. They wanted to know what the value of these things was, before informing me that there is now a 60 percent tax on all camera gear and drones.

"I was taken into another room, and there were two other women who had been tagged as well. I was tapped for $192; the others had smaller equipment and got by with less. They did give me a piece of paper [recibo or factura – receipt] that said my camera gear is covered for [re-entry] for a year. Since I have another trip in February, I hope this is true, but I don't trust that piece of paper. They only got me for my Nauticam GH5 housing and the drone. The Panasonic Lumix GH5, four Sola lights and Olympus lens were hidden in my backpack.

"Several people mentioned that some Chinese pros got taken for thousands. Others in our group [she was in a group led by David Haas, master photographer] got taken. They said it's a new rule."

So, we wondered, is this a new rule, or just customs officials on the take, since they want only cash?

As it turns out, it is a rule – though it may have been improperly enforced against Mary Anne – and has been on the books for some time.

The Rule

You are allowed to temporarily import up to two cameras or two video cameras (or combination of the two) for personal use. A GoPro or similar POV camera counts as one. Drones over 4 pounds require a permit and license and cannot be flown in protected areas or natural parks without a permit obtained in advance.

In addition, you may bring a laptop, notebook, omnibook or similar; a portable copier or printer; a CD burner and a portable projector, with its accessories.

Any more than that, and you will be hit with a stiff tax.

Enforcement Began This Year

Jenny Collister of Reef & Rainforest told *Undercurrent* that since last April, Mexico Customs

Climate Change Affects the Sardine Run

South Africa's sardine run along its Indian Ocean coast occurs increasingly later in the year and sometimes not at all. This can be disappointing for divers who have made the journey to enjoy what should be a spectacular blue water experience. (*Undercurrent* September 2016)

It's what scientists call a phenological event – something that's meant to happen at the same time every year. But as ocean temperatures increase the timing of the sardine run becomes more unreliable.

Exploring how the dates have changed over the last 65 years has proved difficult because there are few records for South Africa, but researchers have sought to determine changes in the pattern of the sardine run. They discovered sardines arriving off the coast of Durban have been increasingly late – so that the date has eventually moved from mid-June to mid-July.

Sardines can tolerate a maximum surface temperature of 70°F, but this is no longer consistently being reached, and this has caused problems for those promising sightings of shark and dolphins feeding on the sardines. There has also been an increase in mid-latitude cyclones in the east coast region of Africa, adding yet more unpredictability.

In fact, this unpredictability causes a species mismatch between predator and prey, increasingly observed as a result of climate change on these phenological shifts world-wide. This is because each species has its own unique trigger for a particular activity, so although the sardines might eventually show up, the sharks and dolphins might not.

Not Getting Enough Time Underwater?

Maximize your time below the surface by booking a resort that allows you to sleep with the fishes. The Conrad Rangali Island Resort in south Ari Atoll of the Maldives has debuted a two-level villa called the Muraka (coral in the local Dhivehi language) with an entire floor below the Indian Ocean. The resort opened its Ithaa Undersea Restaurant 13 years previously. **www.conradmaldives.com**

Muraka villa, Conrad Rangali

Prefer Africa? The Manta Resort, on Pemba Island off Tanzania's coast, has an underwater bedroom in its floating villa anchored to the ocean floor. We wonder if the motion of the ocean will rock you to sleep or if you stay up all night rather than sleep with the fishes. **www.themantaresort.com**

At least you get views of the ocean, but not to be outdone, the Chinese have the InterContinental Shimao Wonderland, southwest of Shanghai, built inside the abandoned Songjiang quarry with two floors located underwater, giving views of the hotel's aquarium. The hotel's seafood restaurant gives underwater views, too, even if you don't see food in the aquarium. **www.ihg.com**

You'd expect the Middle East to come up with something, and the two underwater suites at the Atlantis on Palm Island in Dubai look into the resort's aquarium, where 65,000 marine animals live among the mock ruins of the lost city of Atlantis. A view of the waters of the nearby Arabian Gulf would be a little stark by comparison. **www.atlantisthepalm.com**

Resorts World, Sentosa in Singapore has 11 ocean suites, which also look into the resort's aquarium stocked with around 40,000 captive fish. **www.rwsentosa.com**

You may not approve of aquariums, but soon you'll also be able to book a room in a fully submerged luxury hotel such as the Poseidon Undersea Resort in Fiji or the Hydropolis in Dubai, with true ocean views. They're still on the drawing board.

has been hassling some tourists bringing cameras in, taxing some of her clients for their cameras.

Why since April? Let us speculate. While Mexico loves American tourism, the government does not love Donald Trump's tariffs or his border policies, so enforcing existing customs laws is one way to raise cash in response. Welcome to the trade and immigration wars.

Luke Inman, of Cortez Expeditions, La Paz, told *Undercurrent*, "We had a customer try to enter the country with two DSLR bodies, a drone and a GoPro, and they charged 16 percent tax on the price paid for GoPro but they would not allow the drone through."

Customs officials word-wide have discretion and some may bend the rules or waive the duty, sometimes if they simply like you. However, these days, it appears Mexican agents are less forgiving and are toughening enforcement of their customs laws (just as American custom agents collect duty on foreign travelers at our airports). To try to get a better bead on the policy, we contacted the Department of Tourism in Tijuana, but a tight-lipped official said he could not comment on decisions by Mexican Customs officials.

Inman suggests that some underwater photographers demonstrate a sense of entitlement that can cause problems, as can their assumption that Mexican officials are automatically corrupt. Playing that card will only get you in deeper trouble.

Traveling with your camera installed inside its underwater housing can avoid mistakes, in that an official might think the housing is also a camera. To avoid an arbitrary or excessive evaluation for your equipment, carry original dated receipts showing when and what you originally paid for your camera equipment. Furthermore, a working knowledge of Spanish can help, especially if you keep that undisclosed at first.

Most importantly, carry a copy of the website info below (in Spanish) to show you've done your research and help you avoid the over-zealous agent who ignores the three or more camera rule and tries to hit you for everything. But, you'll have to speak up, be gracious and persistent. Keep in mind, they have the last word, which might be confiscation, a trip to the hoosegow, or a ticket on the next flight home.

Long-time *Undercurrent* subscriber David Haas (Stow, OH) gave us what he calls some "old guy's" advice for traveling with cameras:

"I pack my stuff in a plain Jane plastic suitcase. I've done this for decades with full-sized SLR systems, multiple strobes, etc., and my case never drew attention that it might contain photo gear or anything valuable.

"If I do get inspected, I'm polite but do things to not make it easy to get taken advantage of. I'll ask lots of questions, say I don't understand ("no habla"), and if asked about the value of my photo gear my response is 'Oh, I can't remember what I paid. It's so old and likely not worth anything.'

"I'll ask for a supervisor if they keep insisting on some payment, I'll need a receipt, I don't have spare cash, what's your badge number and name so I can claim it when I get home with my insurance, etc."

Lastly, he says he doesn't dress in an opulent manner so that he looks like he's willing to part with spare dollars.

His ad advice is applicable world-wide, especially in Third World countries where officials can be arbitrary or even corrupt when collecting duty. But, bear in mind that you are "playing away" and that the rules of the country you visit supersede those of your own country.

And these days, it seems like the duty rules of Mexico, at least at the Cabo airport, apply to your camera gear, and you'd better just go with the flow.

For more information on what will be taxed when you enter Mexico, go to: **https://tinyurl.com/y3csxnx3**

For further guidance for traveling to Mexico from the U.S. and Canada, use this toll-free number: 1 877 44 88 728

Dying Coral Closes Much of Cozumel Diving

and both the reefs and the jobs are on the line

Cozumel's reefs are under severe danger from the rapidly progressing white band disease, and beginning October 7, the southern part of the Cozumel Marine Park will be closed until further notice, seriously limiting where dive boats can go.

The closure has sparked tourism operators to protest outside the Cozumel offices of the National Protected Areas Commission (Conanp) in San Miguel, claiming that 500 families will lose their sole source of income.

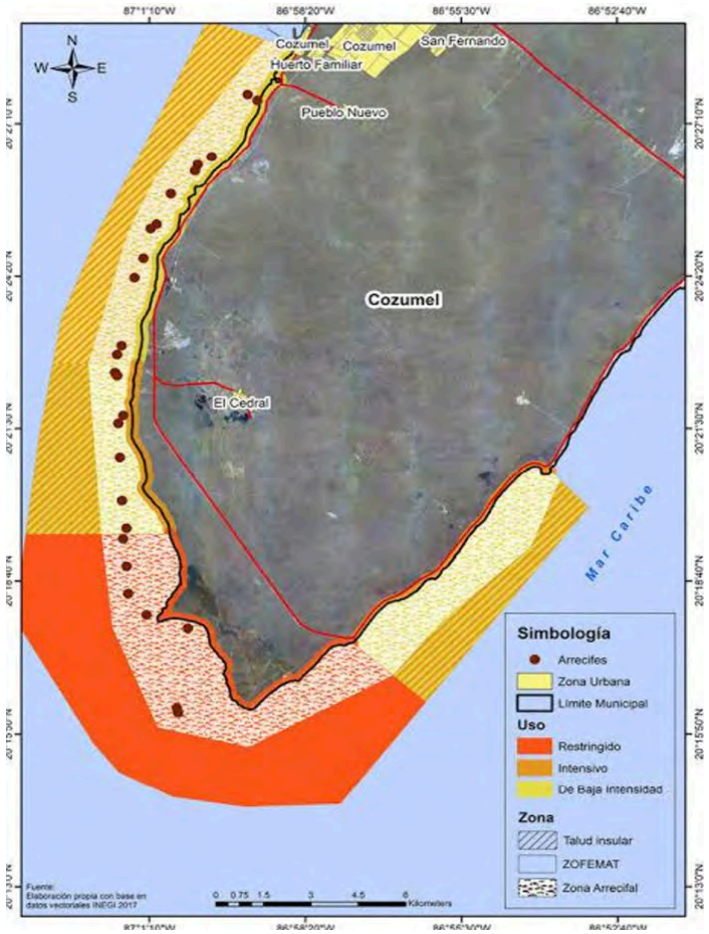
But in the mind of researchers and Conanp, the fast spreading disease is out of control, not only in Cozumel but throughout the Caribbean, and if something is not done quickly, most of the coral will be permanently destroyed in just a few years. This is not coral bleaching, from which many corals recovers, but a far more lethal disease

The areas where most diving in Cozumel occurs – from Palancar Gardens (on Cozumel's southwest quadrant) to Maracaibo, and Playa Bosh in the extreme southeast (including dive sites like Colombia, Punta Sur, and Chun Chacab Reef) will be closed so government scientists may investigate the causes of 'white syndrome' affecting hard corals there and gauge the amount and effect of pollution, especially from the large hotels.

Local dive operators say they can visit Barracuda Reef on the extreme northwest coast and popular sites like the wreck of the C-53, Paraíso, Tormentos Reef, San Francisco Reef, Santa Rosa, El Cedral, and Punta Delila on the west coast. The harder to reach more northern and eastern sites – from El Mirador on the exposed east coast to Baja de Molas at the most northerly point – will be open, but these are best for experienced divers who can tolerate lengthy boat journeys in possibly rougher water and handle tough currents when they arise.

Different from coral bleaching due to higher water temperatures, white syndrome (Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease) is thought to be a bacterial infection and starts when the coral polyps expel the algae on which they feed that live in their tissues; the tissues then disconnect from the coral skeleton, and the coral whitens and dies. Whatever causes this is apparently spread to other coral colonies by contact. Currents can carry infected coral, fish can spread it, perhaps even a diver, but the effect of divers can only be negligible. Higher ocean temperatures stress coral, but researchers believe other human-based factors are the basis: city sewage, pollution from hotels and cruise ships (including bilge and ballast water), agricultural runoff and gasoline from boat engines are under consideration.

And the threat is immediate and real: about 40 percent of Cozumel's coral in infected and up to 30 percent elsewhere in the Caribbean, Florida included.



Reefs and the restricted zone (in red)

Many dive operators in Cozumel have expressed their displeasure with *Undercurrent* for informing its readers about the closure – we suggested that if you are contemplating heading to Cozumel you may want to get more information before you sign up – but unless the disease is stopped, these dive operators may forever be out of business. Furthermore, *Undercurrent*'s loyalty is to our subscribers – not to the industry – and to our oceans, which much be protected.

Some believe that the dive operators themselves have responsibility in this matter. Our unimpeachable source in Cozumel, a ranking member of the dive community (whom we keep anonymous), says:

"Of course they are [displeased]. They've been abusing the marine park for years, getting away with not paying their dues, letting divers wear gloves to hold on to the coral while shooting photographs so as to not lose clients, not acting on reports about dive employees who allow clients to touch and kick everything so as not to 'antagonize them and lose their tips," and renting unlicensed dive boats for half the going rate, thus increasing enormously the number of divers in the park at any one time.

"It's Mexico, and anything goes: Not only do the inspectors and the director of the marine park get a kickback when some infraction is so obvious that they cannot sweep it under the carpet, but they issue derisory sanctions. [People] have complained to the previous director about three boats from the same dive shop that hadn't been buying bracelets for at least three years, and nothing happened. It still goes on today. To the business people here, the problem isn't how they contribute to ruining the reefs, but that others spread the news."

The owner of a major dive operation, a favorite of *Undercurrent* readers, sees a far bigger problem: the over development and lack of sewage treatment in the south of Cozumel. The problem is mainly north of Palancar beach where no sewage treatment is given by the big money-backed resorts. There must now be 30-40 such places. For instance, at Palancar Beach resort we suggest that our divers don't go in the water as we have seen fecal matter and toilet paper floating around. The big resorts in the south just pump there sewage down 50 feet then let the underground rivers carry out to the sea.

"So why close the southern sites that have little disease at this time. My guess it is just politics of the wealthy owners of the southern resorts to show that without divers there is minimal disease – which is already the situation with divers there! Those owners are the island elite who don't want to fix the problem for their bottom line. The answer would be to build a common modern sewage treatment plant in the south and maybe pay for it by a local tax to those that cause the problem... but money and politics go together in Mexico and they would rather sacrifice the thousands who are employed in the dive industry than provide a reasonable fix."

Regardless of the cause, the problem is real, so if you have plans to go to Cozumel – or are considering it – contact your dive operator for more information about where you can dive. Also keep in mind, that the disease has no park boundaries. Human activity seems to be the source, and we all have a responsibility to protect our reefs and our oceans.

– Ben Davison

Flotsam & Jetsam

The Power of Prayer. A 48-year-old protestant priest in Umkomaas, South Africa, accidentally shot himself in the head with his own speargun. He was knocked over by an unexpectedly big wave and the gun went off, firing the spear into his face. It passed through his right cheek and out by his left ear, crucially missing both his eyes and brain. Doctors were able to remove the spear after he was airlifted to the hospital. He puts his survival down to a miracle.

Some MacBook Pros Banned on Flights. Apple says the battery in the 15-inch model (sold between September 2015 and February 2017) can overheat, potentially swelling or igniting. The FAA has banned them from carry-ons and checked luggage on U.S. airlines, including cargo carriers, and airlines flying to or from the U.S. To see if your laptop is affected, visit Apple's recall page for details.

DAN Fund for *Conception* Families. Divers Alert Network, in conjunction with a number of sponsors, including *Undercurrent*, has set up a relief fund to help the families of those who lost their lives in the tragic fire that destroyed MV Conception on September 2. All donations are tax-deductible, and one hundred percent of all donations goes directly to the families in need.

www.diversalertnetwork.org/TheConception

Scuba At Home? You can if you can afford it. Slated to list for $11.8 million, an 18-acre property for sale outside Kansas City, previously owned by a mega-rich scuba enthusiast, has a network of scuba tunnels with grottos and pop-up holes leading to a 30-foot-deep outdoor pond. Or you could buy a less ambitious property and spend the money going diving somewhere much nicer. **https://tinyurl.com/y6rqpham**

Personal CO and Smoke Alarms. These are inexpensive, small and lightweight, and prudent travelers in remote areas carry them nowadays. A self-adhesive pad will allow you temporarily to fit it high up in your hotel room or boat cabin. An ear-piercing screech will tell you if something's amiss.

Here Come the Tourists. In a major change in foreign policy, the Solomon Islands has broken ties with Taiwan in order to establish diplomatic relations and build a trading relationship with China. No doubt we'll see a big influx of Chinese divers into one of the last untouched scuba paradises.

Air Supply Prank Not Funny. A Chinese man has been forced to apologize for turning off other divers' air supplies two days running while they were at depth, diving from Puerto Galera in the Philippines. He said later it was just a prank, done without thinking of the consequences. Nobody was hurt, but neither was anybody amused.

A Tragic Last Request. On September 21, Steven Weber, Jr. (Zachary, LA) dived into the ocean to pop the question to his girlfriend, attorney Kenesha Antoine (Baton Rouge, LA), through the window of their submerged hotel room on Pemba Island in the Indian Ocean, Tanzania, Africa. Video footage she later posted on Facebook showed him pressing a piece of paper against the glass with the message: "Will you please be my wife?" He then opened a ring box before swimming up out of view toward the surface. But he never got to hear her answer because he tragically drowned, perhaps a victim of shallow water blackout, during those precious moments of their once-in-a-lifetime vacation.

undercurrent

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