undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Atmosphere Resort, Philippines

primo macro, fine wines

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Dear Fellow Diver,

Just because "muck" rhymes with "yuck" doesn't mean that a mucky dive site is dirty, smelly, or disgusting. When "muck diving" was first named more than 40 years ago by the iconic Aussie Bob Halstead, he was shooting tiny critters in Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea, on the silty, sandy sea floor, not on the reefs or bommies. Today, macro shooters enthusiastically pursue muck because the many inhabitants are highly photogenic, and at Atmosphere Resort, muck critters abound. Most sites are less than 20 minutes away from the private beach of this surprisingly luxurious boutique resort, 400 miles south of Manila. For about $400/day, double occupancy for room, board, and diving (depending on room and season), it's quite the deal.

The deck of their primary dive boat, a 50-foot bangka (a double-outrigger Philippine boat), sits a good five feet above the water, so my first giant stride entry carried me deeper than I'm accustomed. (I got used to this, but a fellow male diver had to learn the hard way not to spread his legs too much during the drop.) After I surfaced. I looked down, but the bottom was not visible, not atypical for the Philippines. The visibility was a relatively low 15-20 feet at many sites, and the bottom is mostly featureless. But for my dive group, six Americans with cameras, none of

Poolside at the Atmosphere Resort

that was a concern.

Upon reaching the mucky bottom, our dive leader, Saimon, pointed out small, colorful critters that were wonderful macro subjects. Saimon, who started at the resort 10 years ago, is a PADI divemaster, as are the other leaders, Arjay and Michael. On a single dive, I patiently photographed a seahorse, a frogfish, and a nudibranch. In the Caribbean, I'd be lucky to see just one of these critters once in a week. During other dives, I spotted several species of frogfish, seahorses, shrimp, and nudibranchs, as well as a pipefish and a few interesting reef fish such as Moorish idols and anemone fish. I was delighted to discover both a mimic octopus and the deadly blue ring octopus -- one bite can kill a person -- and even a 5-foot olive sea snake. I never saw big stuff like sharks, mantas, or dolphins. They're rare in these waters, though the Atmosphere offers 1.5-hour trips to Cebu to snorkel with whale sharks.

In addition to the 50-foot bangkas, Atmosphere has a couple of 30-foot speed (but by no means speedy) boats. The bangkas have a head and plenty of covered area for staying out of the scorching sun, while the speed boats have canvas tops but no seats, so divers sit on the side rails during the ride and back roll to enter the water. After each dive, the crew handed me a moist, warm face towel and a large beach towel and then passed around a plate of fresh fruit. On the bangka, the guys happily make coffee, tea, or hot chocolate, which they call "choco." Upon return after a dive, a white-shirted waiter greeted us on the beach with a tray filled with glasses of fresh, chilled fruit juice.

Atmosphere Resort, Philippines

Diving for macro photographers	★★★★★
Diving for non-photographers	★★★
Accommodations	★★★★★
Food	★★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's worth	★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Worldwide scale

The meals at Atmosphere Resort were, hands down, the best I've had at endless dive resorts, and my dive mates shared my opinion. We ate in the well-appointed ocean-front dining room, open on two sides, so a breeze boosted by several ceiling fans made it comfortable during the hottest time of the day. They offered vast and varied menus for breakfast, lunch, and dinner (you can review them on their website), with various choices that rivaled those of a fine U.S. restaurant. Attentive, hard-working staff served all meals. Chef's specials at both lunch and dinner included such choices as a prosciutto-wrapped chicken filet with creamy garlic gnocchi with sundried tomatoes and spinach. Desserts are made in Atmosphere's on-site bakery and include several ever-changing flavors of homemade ice cream, baked treats, and decadent chocolate offerings. They carried more than 80 wines from all over the world, storing them in a climate-controlled wine cellar tended by a knowledgeable and personable sommelier, Eduardo. I indulged in some wonderful French wines. Although I assured my fellow divers I never overindulge, one morning on the boat, I asked the crew to make me some coffee before the dive.

Atmosphere's Breeze restaurant

A favorite dive site was Ginamaan (pronounced like "cinnamon" with a "G" My group audibly groaned when Saimon told us this site was an extensive collection of dumped tires, but we changed our tune when he explained the tires were placed more than 30 years ago. Three decades in the nutrient-rich water has produced a colorful growth on the tires, which attracts numerous critters. The tires are in several clumps, each about 10x10 feet, so I felt like I was swimming from reef to reef. Here I saw, among much else: seahorses, pipefish, nudibranchs, and shrimp, as well as some hard and soft corals. The low visibility was never a problem since my lens was just a few inches from the tiny subjects. By far, this was the most colorful site we dived, and we dived it three times by request. The water registered a comfortable 82 degrees, but I wore a 5mm wetsuit because I spent long periods staying stone-still to capture my subjects.

The covered dive center is open on two sides, so it was always comfortable for checking gear and putting on wetsuits. Its boutique has little other than T-shirts and some artifacts, not even toothpaste or sunscreen.

Basak is another good site, with the standard mucky bottom that slopes off deeper than recreational limits. In the 40- to 60-foot range, this site contains many interesting things to shoot. With Saimon's help, one diver took a much-sought-after picture of a cardinal fish with eggs in its mouth. At times Saimon might point out a critter I did not want to shoot, perhaps because it was too small and I had the wrong lens or because I already had enough shots of the subject. I signaled "no thanks," and he promptly found another subject. He and the other guides are the kind of professional leaders a macro shooter really appreciates and respects.

Toi-Toi is similar to Basak, except that it begins with a grassy area before giving way to the ever-present muck. Seahorses and Halimeda ghost pipefish lingered in the grass, a natural camouflage from predators. Our sharp-eyed dive leaders were not fooled by this camo and quickly found and pointed out the critters. Even though I like to think I could have found them myself, I probably would have missed most of them were it not for the eagle-eyed dive leaders.

Don't Ignore it My Friends: COVID Preys on Traveling Divers

One of our intrepid travel reviewers returned in late August from a Galapagos liveaboard trip and wrote:

"Sadly, I came back with an unexpected souvenir: COVID. Six of us tested positive at the end of the trip. I'm now sick as a dog (fever, coughing, achy, very sore throat) and can barely function. The BA.5 variant hit me hard.

"I began the trip fully vaxxed with two boosters. When I tested positive (I brought test kits along), I took a course of FDA-approved Paxlovid (which I also brought; I was prepared). And I still feel crummy. There is no such thing as one hundred percent immunity.

"I felt guilty traveling home knowing I was sick, kept my N95 glued to my face, and looked at all those maskless travelers and marveled. Surely, I was not the only sick person in airports.

"I'm happy to see the new vaccine is coming out. Be sure to get your jab – you do NOT want this!

"Mask up, travelers!"

– VV, August 31, 2022

A bangka is the primary dive boat

In the afternoons, the air rose to the low 90s. Add 77 percent humidity, and it was too hot and sticky to walk around the attractive palm-studded grounds, but a swim in one of their beautiful pools could be refreshing.

I would retreat to my lovely, modern Asian-inspired room, where I had full control of my air-conditioning and ceiling fan. I had a comfortable king-sized Asian-style bed, and a separate twin bed was also designed for sitting. I had a toilet room and a shower outdoors in a small private garden with 9-foot walls, where I could luxuriate in a hot or cold shower. The Philippines water is not potable for travelers, so my room staff kept a three-gallon dispenser full of purified water. I had free and adequate internet, but the resort requested that guests not slow it down by streaming movies; if you want to watch something, make it the broadcast channels on the room flat screen TV.

As one would expect at such a high-end hotel, the design and personal service of the small diving operation were tops. After putting my gear in a numbered crate at the beginning of the week, they carried it back and forth to the boat, set it up, and afterward rinsed and hung my wetsuit in the large drying room, enhanced by the wise decision to vent the heat from the compressor into the drying room. At week's end, the staff gave my gear a more thorough rinse and -- I've never seen this before -- rinsed my BCDs both inside and out -- saving me the hassle of doing it back home in my bathtub.

Another smart design is the rubberized lining for the four camera dunk tanks (and four others for rinsing gear) and two freshwater, open-air showers for rinsing divers. The well-lighted camera room, right off the dive center, contains about 15 working stations, each with four electrical outlets. While it is not air-conditioned, fans keep it at an acceptable temperature.

What Happens to Your Unwanted Neoprene Products?

An estimated 8,380 tons of old wetsuits lie unused and annually end up in a landfill because of the lack of scalable, sustainable recycling systems for neoprene.

The British diving magazine *Scuba Diver* reports that PADI, in partnership with Circular Flow (a new British company), hopes to offer the dive industry an effective means to recycle wetsuits and other non-biodegradable neoprene products such as mask straps and changing mats. To ensure feasibility and determine global scalability, the initiative began with an August test run in the UK.

Hundreds of divers turned in clean, dry wetsuits and other neoprene items to participating UK Dive Centers for recycling. Circular Flow ships the depleted goods to a specialized factory, where the material is recycled using a patented recycling process employing electricity, pressure, and heat, but not water or chemicals.

Let's hope the initial trial is successful and they roll out the service worldwide. Your unwanted neoprene is a significant source of environmental pollution.

Meanwhile, also in the UK, A.P. Diving, the company that makes the Inspiration rebreather, among other products, has installed a granulator machine that can grind down recycled unwanted plastic and rubber parts into pellets ready to be used again in its injection-molding equipment.

Tanks always had at least 3,000 psi. For nitrox users, the guides gauged each tank before we left the dive center. Hauling the gear was not an easy task. As is typical in the Philippines, Atmosphere has no boat dock, and divers must wade out over an uneven gravel bottom into surging, waist-deep water and then walk up a 15-foot plank to board the boat. The only real downside to this operation: It was challenging to climb the plank, a good five feet off the water. But they provided a makeshift railing crewmembers held each end of a 15-foot-long, 4-inch-diameter bamboo stock that I could grab to steady my entrance and exit. I was in awe watching the staff walk it while toting tanks, dive gear, and heavy, bulky camera rigs.

One day each week is set aside to dive Apo Island, which is visible from the shore at Atmosphere and about a 45-minute bangka ride away. As we could see from our mooring, Apo is an economically depressed place without much attraction for tourists. Apparently, the waters had schools of fish not long ago, but when COVID hit, the fish became the primary source of food. During the lunchtime break, groups of women paddled out to dive boats moored off Apo to sell T-shirts. It's both inspiring and sad to see these middle-aged women paddling their small, two-person outrigger bangkas against the surface currents in the hope of selling a few T-shirts. We were informed of this the day before, so we all brought cash to buy their $7.50 T-shirts -- whether or not we needed one.

Mexico's Guadalupe Closed to Great White Diving

Guadalupe Island is currently closed. Technically the park is closed for six months every year and opens on July 1st for diving with the white sharks.

This year, the park did not open for the first time in as long as I have been running trips in Mexico. The closure was the final action by the former park director before she resigned. She now works for an NGO trying to take over the operation of Guadalupe from the parks service. Undoing her proclamation is not an easy thing.

If the park service is allowed to get away with arbitrarily and unilaterally keeping a park closed at Guadalupe, they can do it anywhere. Cozumel. Playa Del Carmen. Socorro. Sea of Cortez. There are 190 national parks in Mexico; any one could be the next to be closed. It's hard to imagine.

Ultimately all the stakeholders and operators will prevail in court actions. But it takes time to get in front of the courts, and none of us have been able to get to trial before December.

In the meantime, we are applying for injunctions and working on different political angles. All it takes is one friendly judge, and Guadalupe will be open the next day.

Our boats and crew are on standby, ready to go.

– *Mike Lever*
Nautilus Liveaboards

Hard corals are abundant in Apo's waters, and the visibility hit the 40- to 50-foot range, but the reefs are not particularly colorful or varied. The primary objective at Apo was to photograph turtles, and I was able to shoot them swimming in the open ocean, and, more challenging, lifting off from the bottom. Shots of resting turtles are reasonably easy to take but not particularly interesting unless the turtle is directly facing the camera, so it took effort to get an unusual shot. Here we had lunch on the boat between the second and third dive, but the typical dive routine at Atmosphere was a two-tank morning dive, back to the resort for lunch, and then a one-tank dive in the afternoon.

By now, I hope you know the Atmosphere Resort is a beautiful hotel, the dive operation is first-rate, and if you're a macro photographer, you'll have it all. On the other hand, if you're not interested in shooting critters, you'd get pretty bored muck diving in low visibility for a week. And that's what many Philippine resorts offer. So, research your destination well.

P.S.: Consider the Puerto Galera area, a favorite of Undercurrent readers who look for reefs, and Ken Knezick, the owner of Island Dreams Travel, a favorite of our readers, told us, "I remain a big fan of Puerto Galera, with El

Galleon Resort and Asia Divers as my go-to dive resort. El Galleon is a very comfortable, accommodating, and affordable setup, offering a wonderful variety of dives within a 15-minute boat ride. The only longer trip is to Verde Island, which is beautiful coral reef diving. Access is easy: a flight to Manila, followed by car and boat transfers. https://www.islanddreams.travel See also: https://www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/dive_magazine/2022/ElGalleonResort202206.html

--G.P.T.

Our undercover diver's bio: *Certified in 1983, I am a PADI Advanced Open Water diver with more than 1,000 dives from resorts and liveaboards in the Caribbean, Indonesia, Maldives, Red Sea, Mexico, Florida, California, and Hawaii. This was my third trip to the Philippines.*

Diver's Compass: Philippine Airlines has nonstop flights to Manila from both JFK (16 hours) and LAX (14 hours) . . . Atmosphere is on Negros Oriental Island, an hour-plus flight from Manila, followed by a 30-minute van ride . . . My seven-night stay cost about $400/day/person, double occupancy, including roundtrip air from Manila to Dumaguete, the 50-minute van ride; all meals; a day trip to Apo Island; and three dives with no charge for nitrox . . . COVID-related entry requirements may be found at www.philippineairlines.com . . . . www.atmosphereresorts.com.

Golden Rock Dive Center, St. Eustatius

good diving, few divers

Dear Fellow Diver,

"Let me tell you why this site is called Double Wreck." Gary, our dive guide and instructor, began another of his enjoyable dive briefings. "Statia is called 'Golden Rock' because of its profits -- it was involved in arms shipments to the colonies during the Revolutionary War. Its flag changed 46 times. Two Captains had anchored their wooden merchant ships behind us and went ashore, where they drank and argued. Heading back to their ships on dinghies, they continued to yell and cuss at each other. They should've counted to 10 to calm down instead of drunkenly firing their cannons. Both ships went down."

On the reef, I saw the anchor and cannon from the 1700s, but I also saw swarms of blue and gray chromis with a colorful ocean trigger patrolling their border. The healthy soft corals, fans, and barrel sponges hosted neighborhoods of bustling residents in myriads of colors: Rainbow runners, three-foot barracudas, Pederson cleaner shrimp, hermit crabs, and big crawling crabs. Even a turtle with a remora attached. Fields of garden eels sprouted from the sand ripples bordering the sea grass, where frog fish lurked. Big sand rays dug themselves in. Five lobsters huddled shoulder to shoulder under a ledge, with some holding and aerating their eggs

Golden Rock Dive Center

The Old Gin House

. . . and then I heard a "ting ting." Gary pointed at a wall of 8-inch squid about 30 feet by 50-foot. I stopped doing the math once I counted to 63.

Traveling in early August, this was my second trip to Golden Rock Dive Center, owned by Americans Dave and Sarah Hellevang. Sarah donates a ton of time to help visiting high school divers. Dave is the Captain. The manager, Ciara, and her husband Gary, both Irish and both PADI instructors, guide most of the dives.

Before we left home, we received their questionnaire asking about dive preferences, experience, and other information. They politely insisted on full upfront payment for the morning dives, which at first aggravated me a bit, but I understand COVID recovery finances, and being a small operation, they can't afford to hold seats open for no-shows. So, I secured our spots. It's a concierge, PADI 5-Star operation specializing in friendliness, mellowness, safety, and personalized attention. For example, one of the divers at Golden Rock, an 82-year-old 1,000+ dive Dutch gentleman, had dived with the island's other shop many times, but this year they discouraged him from diving with them. Upset, he switched to Golden Rock and was pleased that he quietly received that bit of extra attention that he needed due to his age.

The reefs appeared healthy, thanks partly to the waters surrounding the island being a well-tended marine park, with generally 60-to 80-foot visibility. Besides reefs, the interesting Stenapa wrecks area has a big flat barge, a large section of oil terminal pipe, and a tugboat. My dive log says, "Zen dive Fantastic! Beautiful green soft coral, black-edged sea rod on wreck walls. Whitenose pipefish. Fingerprint Cyphoma. Yellowfish pike blenny. Anemone shrimp. Chaetopterid worm. West Indian Sea Egg. Great!" To look at small creatures, I carry a detached GoPro macro lens in my BCD pocket, a fantastic magnifier. (I love zooming in on Arrowhead crabs with their blue mittens stuffing their tiny faces.) It was as good a night dive site. Gary had a "red light" flashlight for spotting particular creatures and even carried extra torches in case anyone's batteries ran out.

Ferry from St. Martin to St. Eustatius or Saba?

Rather than fly from St. Martin to St. Eustatius (or Saba or St. Kitts), consider the ferry service . . . or maybe not. While they have a sleek 72-foot catamaran (*MV Makana*) that holds 150 passengers, it was in for repairs, so we were on a beater, a cramped storage locker of a ship. Pretty unpleasant. We raced from our St. Martin 3:15 plane arrival to get to *Makana* for the 5:15 departure (foolish plan); upon arrival at 4:25, the arrogant Makana worker seemed to enjoy telling me, "You're too late to board," even though the passengers were milling around. I had to grovel to get officially approved and then waited 30 minutes to board. They handed us barf bags, though the seas remained calm. With a stop in Saba, it was about a 3.5-hour trip.

At the end of our Statia visit, our boarding time for Saba, where we were to stay for a week, was 6 a.m. We arrived at 5 a.m., the required hour, but their office didn't open until 5:20. And the boat was late. I passed the time watching mountain goats and their kids miraculously scampering on the skinny front face ledges of the steep cliff across the street.

The ferry is $85 round-trip and adds to any travel adventure. But only book it if the *MV Makana* is making the run. And don't cut it close with your back-home flight departure. **https://makanaferryservice.com/**

That shows how thoughtful he and Golden Rock Dive Center's staff are. I was hauling a tank to the porch so I could adjust my vest straps, and Ciara immediately said, "Let me take care of that for you." Throwing it over her shoulder, she told me, "You're on vacation after all!" The crew humps all your gear, rinses it after each dive (they have separate tanks for different types of gear and a deodorant rinse for wetsuits), hangs it, and it's on the boat the next morning.

I like to light things up during day dives, so when I turned on my torch on the Chien Tong, a Taiwanese trawler 80 feet deep to the sand, it lit up like a Van Gogh image of colorful, healthy hard corals. We stayed on one side of the wreck to avoid being pushed by the current into the hull on the other side. A team of jacks hovered over the stern, another at the center, and yet another at the bow, all facing into the current and waiting. I looked to my buddy so she might catch me in an awesome picture pose, but, bummer . . . her old GoPro had blanked out.

From what I noticed, they had no stringent rules, perhaps because it was apparent that every guest was a veteran diver. One day Sarah took a group of teen divers out on their larger twin hull EZ Goin so that our experienced group could remain on the smaller Stumpy. We had from four to six divers on each dive, and they held passports from Germany, Netherlands, and France, while three of us held blue U.S. IDs. On one dive, a local young man completed his Open Water certification, and when we gave him a group "Congrats!" he beamed from ear to ear.

My buddy likes macro, and Gary and Ciara helped her find lots of stuff while I enjoyed doing my own thing. We stayed in sight of the guides, who slowly toured the sites in the 83°F water for about 40 minutes, then left us near the mooring line. Most dives were around 50 feet; max. 60 feet except for Chien Tong, max. 80 feet and cliffs, 130 feet. We came up when we felt like it, usually at 55 minutes. Only once were we asked to surface as a group, and that was after our single drift dive. For some divers, occasional currents were a bit bothersome, so Dave was careful to seek low current sites.

Golden Rock Dive Center, St. Eustatius, Dutch Caribbean

Diving Experienced .....★★★★
Diving Beginners .....★★★★
Accommodations .....★★★★
Food .....★★★★
Beach Snorkelling.....0
Money's worth ..... ★★★★ ½

★ = poor ★★★★★= excellent

Caribbean scale

Our goal on one dive was to search for blue beads at the same-named dive site. The spun-glass, hexagonal-shaped beads were used throughout the slave trade years to reward slaves, who used them as currency. Statia was a huge slave trading site, a sickening fact, and lots of the beads changed hands. When slavery was abolished in the Dutch West Indies on July 1, 1863 (two-and-a-half years before the U.S.), many enslaved people threw their beads into the sea. Warehouses full of them became decrepit, and the beads, now out of favor, spread everywhere. Divers and hikers still find them these days, but I didn't. I gave up searching in the boring terrain and was rewarded with a sailfin blenny, a gold spotted eel, a flying gurnard, a mantis shrimp, and a white patch aeolid nudibranch.

Stumpy, their comfy 28-foot dive boat holds eight divers comfortably, but

How to Avoid a Shark Attack

A rather silly story has appeared in the *New York Post*, explaining what to do if you are attacked by a shark while scuba diving. It tells of a 'steely-nerved' scuba diver who demonstrates a fool-proof method for defending herself against these man- and woman-eaters, gently fending off a slow approach by a tiger shark by simply redirecting it by pushing it away.

What's not mentioned is that it happens daily at Tiger Beach in the Bahamas and other places, but Hawaiian resident, Kayleigh Grant is using it to promote herself on TikTok. Tiger sharks move ponderously and are inquisitive, but they can be sneaky and creep up on an unsuspecting diver.

However, there are hundreds of shark species, and I think Kayleigh would be out of luck if she tried to do this with an oceanic whitetip, for example.

Sharks make a slow approach but can move with a sudden burst of speed. When in French Polynesia, I failed to see the moment a reef shark bit another diver because it happened in the fraction of a second that the mirror flipped up on my DSLR. I was photographing both him and the sharks. It happened that fast.

Shark expert Dr. Erich Ritter (RIP) was injured by a bull shark, witnessed by television cameras, in a similar attack that happened in a moment.

Kayleigh gives sound advice about not looking like prey in the water, but different species have different feeding habits and are attracted to different prey.

Tigers have catholic tastes when it comes to scavenging carrion, and when their bellies have been cut open, fishermen and scientists have found pots of paint, car tires, coal, unopened cans of salmon, small barrels, nuts and bolts, and boat cushions, according to Alessandro De Maddalena in his book *Sharks, the Perfect Predator.* So try not to look like any of these items.

I have been grabbed more than once and swum off with by a large tiger while photographing one and not paying attention to a second that sneaked up behind me and had a predilection for my scuba tank. No harm came to me, and I was twice saved by Stuart Cove, who simply pushed the animal off me. You can read about that and other experiences with sharks in my book *Shark Bytes.*

"What you actually want to do is not splash or turn around, face the animal, and maintain eye contact," Kayleigh, the TikTok influencer, advises, analogizing the technique to what you should do to prevent a bear attack. She explains, "With tiger sharks, you can place your hand on the top of their head, push down gently, and that will redirect them away from you."

To that, Stuart Cove would say, stay away from the sharp part.

– John Bantin

there's no head for either gender. Before my first dive, they checked the Nitrox, but I also wanted to check my own tanks (I don't want to get an air tank by mistake), so they brought me a gauge. Their blend was usually 31-32 percent. At the sites, I sat on the gunwale and they lifted my tank and helped me strap up, before I back-rolled in. They run a granny line on the port side, but after I got entangled in it, I switched my backrolls to starboard. When surface currents were running, some entering divers grasped the granny line rather than head down quickly. For exit, I climbed the solid ladder, then sat on the rear gunwale while Dave stripped off my tank and BCD.

A tagline drifts off the back, and one diver, who took off her fins after grasping it, let go before she reached the ladder. You can't swim in just booties, so I gave her a gentle shove forward. "Keep hold of the tag line once your fins are off" should be part of the dive briefing.

We often returned to shore between dives, where their shop has a freshwater shower and two freshwater hoses for your rinsing pleasure. Their dock is a 50-yard walk to their shaded porch overlook where we had lunch every day -- breakfast leftovers we had stored in GR's small office fridge. You see, the Boardwalk patio bar and grill next to the dive shop was closed, and the nearby burger, and pizza spot, Blue Bead, when it was open, took too long to prepare and serve food. We were asked how long we needed; there was no set time, and we took about an hour off. It was only a seven-minute stroll back to the Old Gin House if we needed anything.

Statia is a small and quiet island, except during Carnival week when we were there! A limited number of restaurants and accommodations get the job done, unconcerned about 5-star ratings. Even at the upscale Breeze restaurant, I had to politely ask four times for our pre-dinner cocktails, which finally showed up with the entrées. Planning for a meal post-night-dive, we discovered that all five restaurants at the waterfront were closed because of Carnival. We learned of an open restaurant up the hill in the little town of Oranjestad. Cool Corner is a simple, tasty Chinese restaurant noted for its bouncy, international, danceable soundtracks. Nearby is a fascinating small historical museum at the gates of the historical cliffside fort overlooking the dive bay. "Quaint" would describe the center of the town, along with its free-ranging cow, some goats, and chickens. Everywhere felt completely safe, and forgive me for "generalizing," but it seemed like most locals avoid eye contact, but if you speak first and say "Hi," they smile big. There was, however, plenty of local energy focused on the Carnival. We watched 10 guys struggle to turn around their two huge soundstage trucks in the tiny main square, accidentally ripping some big branches off a veteran tree. Whoops.

The dive boat **Stumpy**

Rather than fly from St. Marten to Statia, we took the Makana Ferry (see sidebar). I had forgotten to set up a ride from the dock to our hotel. On our way to Statia, about 8 p.m., I emailed the Old Gin House, whose owner Marlies called a driver. When we arrived, the Old Gin restaurant was closed -- in fact, it would be closed all week due to staffing issues -- but Marlies had superb chicken Caesar salads. Remembering our 2019 trip, it has a delicious waterfront open-air restaurant, one reason we chose it as our hotel. But she told us it would be closed for the week due to staffing issues. "Are you kidding me?" I thought. Luckily, they still served a filling breakfast of eggs, bacon, ham, cheese, fruit, baguette, and yogurt, all included in the stay. Also, free of charge, the wild chickens were shoo'd away regularly by the staff, although one managed to steal my baguette! Friday, our last evening, the Old Gin restaurant re-opened for dinner. As expected, our meal was upscale and delicious. Their website pics and menu were accurate representations of the plates.)

I enjoyed all my 15 dives, but most were coral garden topography with some underhangs and small crevices. Cliffs South, however, had a bigger, slopey, deeper (to 130ish) feel to it, with some rivers of Creole Wrasse, a couple gray reef sharks, a sleeping nurse shark, and a ray with a jack shadow-hunting alongside; I should have pre-researched dive site descriptions (or asked) because I missed out on some of Statia's big architecture like Drop Off, Grand Canyon, and Gibraltar.

Going Deeper than Ever

The latest achievement of undersea adventurer Victor Vescovo (He's an American investor, retired naval officer, and space tourist) in his unique two-person any-depth submersible *Limiting Factor*, is the first-ever human descent to two of the ocean's deepest points: the 29,300 feet deep Yap Trench and the 26,335 feet deep Palau Trench.

Sadly, he recorded unidentified human contamination at the bottom of the Palau Trench, thought to be plastic sheeting.

Before the dives, both trenches were extensively mapped from the mother ship *Pressure Drop* using the expedition's multibeam sonar system to identify the deepest points and areas of interest to be explored and mapped in detail. In support of the GEBCO Seabed 2030 Project, they and other researchers hope to map the entire seafloor by 2030.

For our final dive, since my buddy and I were the only two going that afternoon, we requested a repeat to Double Wreck and had a personalized dinghy ride dive adventure. Once again, the site was calm and mesmerizing. After 55 minutes underwater, lo and behold, the wall of squid made a reappearance! We hovered weightless with the creatures eyeball-to-eyeball and absorbed the magic. At an hour and ten, we turned to Gary and hand-signaled Thanks. Thanks. Thanks. He nodded and guided us back to the boat.

PS: A lovely hyper-luxury eco resort has opened on the Atlantic side of the island. Not to be confused with Golden Rock Dive Center, it is called Golden Rock Dive and Nature Resort. We called their Breeze restaurant, and they immediately picked us up for a delicious upscale gourmet meal at their beautiful restaurant near their large "lazy river" shaped pool on stunning high grounds in the shadow of Quill National Park's dormant greenscaped volcano. Golden Rock Dive Center seems to be their shop of choice.

— P.L.

Authors Bio*: The writer is Divemaster certified with 831 recreational dives at 29 locations throughout the Pacific, the Caribbean, and the Coral Sea. His current motto is "I love hovering weightless, and everything else is extra credit! I always carry a big safety float and signaling mirror."*

Divers Compass: The Old Gin House was $1295 total for double occupancy, including a full breakfast . . . My twelve-morning dive package was $660/person. Afternoon dives were $55, night dives $79, Nitrox $5 per tank . . . The first dive was about 8:45, the second dive about 11:00, and the third dive about 1:15 . . . Restaurants ran from $40-$80/person, depending on the venue, the menu, and the drinks . . . For diving, water bottles are not provided, so bring your own and they refill for free (or buy their bottle for $5 and they refill N/C) and only "reef safe" lotions permitted . . . No good shore diving . . . September and October are the most likely months for hurricanes. Bring your hiking boots: a 1295-foot climb gets you to the top of the 1972-foot Quill Volcano, out and back 2.8 miles. Extend it with a walk into the crater. Your hotel can arrange rides and even a guide. **www.goldenrockdive.com** **www.theoldginhouse.com**

Rude Divers Can Ruin Trips

thankfully, they are few and far between

In last month's travel story on the *Caribbean Explorer II* liveaboard, our author described the frustrating behavior of two divers who spoiled an otherwise great trip. These divers steadfastly and repeatedly refused to follow the established procedures for returning on board after a dive.

"To avoid crushed skulls, divers were instructed to ascend to the dinghy line, take off their fins while holding the line, pull themselves to the platform, hand up their fins, and then stand on the ladder, hold tight, and climb up. In the ocean swell, if one were to hang onto the ladder while removing fins as the platform went up and down, it would be easy to lose footing and get sucked under it."

Unpleasant words passed between them and the boat captain. "Luckily, neither was hurt, but it dampened the trip as these two miscreants sulked and complained."

More important, because of the divers' behavior, the captain selected more protective, and therefore, less adventurous sites, dumbing down the dives.

On a liveaboard, everyone is literally in the same boat. Nobody wants anyone else to have a bad time, and indeed, nobody wants anyone else to have an accident that hurts a diver and possibly curtails the trip. But when it comes to dives, no diver should be self-serving.

To a lesser degree, the same can be said about diving from a dayboat. Scuba diving is not a competitive activity, although occasionally, someone will try to make it so.

In our monthly email, we asked readers if they had any experiences with divers behaving badly. We hoped not to get too many responses, but what we did get was telling.

Scott McMillan (Mill Valley, CA) said he usually travels as part of a group, and those who don't fit in don't get invited next time.

Thankfully, his divemaster took the same approach to rude divers on a Caribbean cruise ship with him and his dive buddy. Rather than simply relax in a drift dive, the divers ignored the dive guide's instructions and kicked all the way. Their

Rude Divers – a Dive Center's Perspective

Our company, St. Croix Ultimate Blue Water Divers, operates two boats with an 8:30 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. departure and want our divers to arrive at least a half hour before. Arriving late affects our departure and upsets our passengers – some folks have afternoon excursions planned and must be on time – and our crew schedule. We have an afternoon boat, and if we're delayed by late morning divers, we might not get to go to a specific location where guests want to dive.

We have had guests who arrive five minutes before departure. They still need to park, use the restroom, and get fitted for gear.

Divers have arrived five minutes after the scheduled departure – we waited for them – and then tell us they need to return their rental car down the boardwalk.

We have had guests call 10 minutes before departure to say they are not coming (usually, it's a night-before rum-induced cancellation) and expect a full refund. They can cause staffing issues because we have a divemaster for every eight guests. So, if nine have made reservations, I have added a second DM. To drop down to seven or eight stinks and causes the staff to lose money.

Once on board, other signs of rudeness appear, such as a diver who ignores the boat briefing. Our captain briefs about boat safety, entering and exiting the water, and the dive site. The DMs brief their profile for the site. For safety, we have a structured re-boarding process. One side of the island can be rougher so the boat can bounce substantially, and the ladder can fly up. The captain watches the seas, then directs the divers to board on his call. We have a colored tagline system above the hang bar. Divers are to surface, swim to the split in colors, take their fins off, hand them to DM, then pull themselves up to the lower dive deck and over to the ladder. Some divers swim directly over to the ladder with fins in hand, or worse, still taking them off and trying to climb the ladders.

We do not have a standard schedule of dive sites. The staff goal is to give the guests the best experience that day offers while maintaining a high level of safety. We have had guests get angry because we couldn't deliver the wall or a wreck, assuming we didn't want to. Not the case, as conditions dictate lots of what we do.

Even though we are not required to have dive guides in the water, our company does so as a service. When divers do not follow a DM, it sometimes means the dive ends. The DM now must leave the group to go search for them. We have strict rules that no one should surface without a DM, so now the DM has to choose to surface with the group or go look for the other divers. This isn't fair to the guests who are following the briefing.

Divers often don't seem trained enough to understand or have forgotten how to use the right words, such as NDL, DECO, and No Stop Limits. Here's a conversation:

Guy: Why did we come up when I still had 1500 psi?

DM: Because we were five minutes out of deco.

Guy: Yeah, but I still had plenty of air.

DM: But if you went past your NDL, you wouldn't.

Guy: But this is just a recreational dive, so I wouldn't go into deco.

DM: If you stayed another 5 minutes, you would have …

And then there are those divers who insist on setting up their own kit …. and do it wrong. They are often the ones telling our young DMs that "I have been diving longer than you have been alive."

Many divers won't admit it has been a long, long time since they've been in the water. They are trainwrecks. Just admit it has been a while, so it doesn't take away from everyone's experience.

Oh well. Thanks for letting me tell the dive center's side of the story.

– *Patti Stewart*
Training Director
St. Croix Ultimate Bluewater Adventures

Japanese Dive Shop Apologizes

A diving shop in Okinawa apologized after a photograph appeared online of some of its diving customers posing on the remains of the *Emmons*, a destroyer sunk in a Japanese Kamikaze attack during World War II. The act was seen as discourteous and incited disapproval from relatives and friends in a survivor group residing in Okinawa.

What a contrast to how we from the West treat Japanese war wrecks! Those of you who've been diving at Truk Lagoon, the forward operating base of the Japanese armed forces in WWII, may have noticed that it's rare to see a Japanese diver there.

Soon, Operation Desecrate One, sank the Japanese military vessels that escaped Operation Hailstone and retreated to Palau Lagoon.

Sixty years after they were sunk, I dived on these wrecks during a specially organized 'wreck week' with Palau dive center Fish 'n Fins. Most of the divers accompanying me were Japanese, but they seemed oblivious to the wrecks' history, appearing to think they had been sunk in some national disaster. That was all but one: Tomimatsu Ishikawa was the Chief Engineer on the fleet oiler *Iro* when it sank, and I dived with him on it when he was in his late eighties. He said the Japanese defeat had been a shameful event that nobody who survived it was allowed to mention.

Maybe that's the difference. The attack on Pearl Harbor led to the eventual defeat of Japan, for which they will forever have shame. Meanwhile, with the passing of time, maybe we should start treating Japanese war wrecks with the same respect the Japanese give ours.

– John Bantin

guide couldn't get them to stop, so to stay together, everyone else had to kick as well, therefore flying over the terrain and critters at breakneck speed. Later, the rude divers harassed a pufferfish. So, the guide refused to invite them on the day's third dive. Are we surprised?

It's not uncommon when diving to have one diver who stands out and not always in a positive way: Douglas Peterson (Naperville, IL) remembers a fellow diver in PNG who wore all black and had a self-appointed moniker embroidered on his wetsuit – "Night Diver."

"He constantly grabbed, kicked, and banged into the reef, but after he stood on a table coral for a couple of minutes, I mentioned my concerns to the senior dive guide. He responded that this was his third trip and he was a good customer. No further need to discuss."

The captain selected more protective and, therefore, less adventurous sites, dumbing down the dives.

It can be difficult for guides in Southeast Asia to eliminate people from their group. The people's nonconfrontational nature can mean a guide may be reluctant to enforce diving or environmental rules when Westerners are the dissidents. It's even more difficult when tips, such a large part of their income, might be in jeopardy. Less so in the Caribbean, where tips may be a smaller share of total income.

In Cozumel, writes Tim Lambert (Birch Bay, WA), a diver was quite inconsiderate to others on the boat, and nobody wanted to buddy up with him, so it became the divemaster's chore. When he decided to stand on the coral, the guide immediately directed him out of the water.

Day boat etiquette is essential. Raymond Clark (Whiting, NJ) reflected on sharing space with a father and son who turned up late for departure, moved someone's gear without asking so they could sit together, and left their bags blocking the isle while they set up. After the first dive, they left their gear scattered all over the deck.

Getting ready for the next dive, they started rummaging through Clark's dive bag, and when he asked them what they were doing, one said someone stole his mask. They insisted on going through everyone else's bag. Clark says, later in the day, in the rinse tank, "I find a knife hole on the top of my wing and a matching hole in my dive bag, so it didn't happen on the dive." He thinks he knows the culprit.

A subscriber from Virginia reflects on a similar experience diving out of West Palm Beach. "This diver was new, very rich, and had all sorts of new equipment. After one dive, he spread it all over the deck. I don't have good balance and don't walk well in fins, so I had to sweep his regulator aside to get to the back of the boat for the next dive. He

lit into me. But there was no way I could get across the deck without doing that. Divers should keep their equipment by their place under the bench or in their net bag in between dives, not all over the floor of the deck."

But, if we may offer a bit of advice: best to ask some to move their gear before undertaking it

Don't book a trip where the diving is too difficult for you.

yourself. Or you may become the rude person.

Some liveaboards specify a minimum number of dives before passengers can book (in Egypt, it's commonly 30), and some don't at all. I've been on liveaboards to adventurous places like the Galapagos, the Maldives, or the remote parts of Indonesia, where currents can be unpredictable and go both up and down. And yet, there have been divers aboard who barely know how to dive. Rude? Inconsiderate? Or just plain stupid?

Cocos Island, Costa Rica, is one of those difficult destinations. Steve Damsky (Poughkeepsie, NY) thought his trip aboard the *Okeanos Aggressor* just last May was clearly affected by four divers not up to diving in the strong currents. He says that since this was group diving, deep (around 100' on every dive), the inexperienced divers should have never been on the boat. "There was one person with only 40 dives and three others with less than 100, but none had any deep experience or certifications beyond open water, including Nitrox. So, within the first two days, we had one case of DCS, and two got swept by the current and had to be rescued. On another dive, one of them panicked and caused the dive to be abandoned after 10 minutes. As a result, until we all complained, the divemasters wouldn't take us to the more challenging sites where large pelagics were more common. We were limited by the four inexperienced divers.

The entire Western Pacific offers difficult conditions, one reason for its spectacular diving. Alice Ribbens (St. Paul, MN), a dive professional, and her husband traveled on a *Nautilus* liveaboard last December to the Revillagigedo Islands/Socorro, where there are often big seas. A number of divers from a California group hadn't researched Socorro conditions and were unprepared and overwhelmed, complaining about the currents, the visibility, and the rough seas, and why they were staying at Roca Partida for so long (where the diving was spectacular).

"The divers were divided into three groups, rotating as Group One, and told to be ready to get in the pangas at a specific time, with the others following five minutes apart. The crew was very frustrated when one day's designated Group One (made up of some of the California divers) was not ready and their drop time was 25-30 min later than it was supposed to be, which threw off the schedule for the rest of the day. For the remainder of the trip, a group of primarily dive professionals (most

Tire Wear Kills Fish

When you buy a new set of tires, have you given any thought to where the old ones go? One problem is that they are not made purely of rubber and the dust they produce as they wear has become a stealth pollutant becoming a huge threat to life in the oceans.

Scientists have spent decades on the trail of a mystery toxin killing salmon in large numbers. A recent breakthrough, reports *the Guardian*, revealed the culprit.

For decades, Coho salmon returning to spawn from the Pacific Ocean to the creeks and streams entering Puget Sound in Washington state were dying in large numbers. No one knew why; however, scientists working to solve the mystery of the mass deaths noticed they occurred after heavy rains.

Toxicologists suspected pesticides, as the main creek they studied ran through a golf course, but found no evidence of pesticides. The first real breakthrough happened when they tested actual runoff collected from a nearby road and exposed test salmon to it. The fish died within hours.

Tire-wear particles – a mixture of tire fragments, including synthetic rubbers, fillers, and softeners, and road surface particles – are one of the most significant sources of micro plastics in the ocean. The average tire loses about 10 pounds during its lifetime and it's only going to get worse because electric cars are heavier than their gasoline equivalents and produce greater torque from their motors so that the dust from tires and brakes becomes even more significant.

Last month we reported on how marine critters, once inside the rim of a tire, can't climb out. Now, the problem is much larger.

of whom did not know each other before this trip) was designated Group One. This caused a lot of complaints from the divers who hadn't managed to get their act together when they were Group One – and a lot of disparaging remarks about the "Instructor Group." If a liveaboard tells you to be ready to jump in the water at X: o'clock, you should be ready at least 10 minutes prior!"

Diving from liveaboards and day boats requires cooperation among the divers and the crew. A rude diver is a self-centered diver. It only takes one to spoil a dive, spoil the day, or maybe spoil the week.

– Ben Davison

Unexplained Snorkel Deaths in Hawaii

the same issue for scuba divers

For years, snorkeling in Hawaii has been the leading cause of tourist deaths. Snorkel-related drownings with no signs of distress have often been a mystery. A new study by the Hawaii State Department of Health offers some reasons.

According to the project director, Carol Wilcox, the study refutes the belief that snorkeling-related deaths are just from water inhalation. She said most snorkel-related fatal and near-fatal drownings are due to low levels of oxygen in body tissues prompted by excess fluid buildup in the lungs, otherwise known as hypoxia induced by rapid onset pulmonary edema, or ROPE. [*Undercurrent* has been writing about this problem in scuba divers, referring to it as swimming-induced pulmonary edema (SIPE).]

The study also connects snorkel-related drownings with a cardiac condition that restricts the heart's ability to fill with blood between beats. Wilcox said this cardiac condition helps explain why middle-aged men are more likely to be affected.

Snorkel Resistance

Another predisposing risk factor the study discovered is breathing through a snorkel with too much resistance. This causes an increase in negative pressure in the lungs and can also result in SIPE.

The study says SIPE accounts for the lack of distress signals in many snorkel drownings as it causes muscle fatigue and loss of consciousness and can also be triggered by a heart condition.

By contrast, when drowning due to the inhalation of water, there are often obvious signs of struggle.

The main difference is the source of the excess fluid. In SIPE, the excess fluid is not inhaled into the windpipe. Instead, a buildup of bodily fluids seeps into the lungs, reducing the ability to deliver oxygen to the body, leading to a lack of sufficient oxygen.

Hawaiian Deaths

There were 204 snorkeling-related deaths in Hawaii from 2012 to 2021. Of those, 184 were tourists. John Titchen, the chief of the Honolulu Ocean Safety and Lifeguard Services, says one reason that tourists die from snorkeling is their unfamiliarity with Hawaiian waters and with snorkeling in general. "The waters are tranquil and crystal clear, and they think it looks easy," Titchen said.

The study's authors surveyed people who had survived near-fatal drownings . Wilcox said 71 percent of the 131 survey participants reported calm conditions, 87 percent reported good visibility, 63 percent reported at least sufficient snorkeling experience, and 88 percent reported at least sufficient swimming ability.

Advanced Diver, Really?

Dear *Undercurrent*,

I agree with the letter "What's the Significance of "Advanced" *in PADI AOW Certification?* from Greg White (*Undercurrent* July). I have 667 dives, but nothing irks me more than to have a diver say something like, "Hey, just got my advanced certification. I'm on my 15th dive."

I get the financial pressure to sell lessons, but there should be some standard to qualify for "Advanced" other than taking lessons and a few extra dives. I waited until I had almost a hundred before I went for my Advanced Certification.

– Paul Mila (Long Island, NY)

SIPE – Be Aware of the Symptoms

Undercurrent has written about the dangerous in-water condition of swimming-induced pulmonary edema (SIPE) or immersion pulmonary edema (IPE). It was first identified in fit young triathletes who suddenly had difficulty breathing in the swimming section of a competition and was wrongly associated with the effects of cold water.

Since then, more and more otherwise mysterious scuba diving deaths, where the drowned diver still had air in his tank, have been attributed to SIPE. And now, SIPE is considered to be the cause of many unexplained snorkeler deaths in Hawaii. Snorkel-related drownings with no signs of distress have often been a mystery, and we may now know why.

SIPE occurs in all ages of adults and at all fitness levels – even Navy SEAL trainees experience SIPE. However, the frequency increases in middle-aged and older adults who subject themselves to heavy exertion while swimming or diving.

What are the symptoms of SIPE?

It begins when fluid from the arms and legs (which tend to retain water under normal gravity conditions) collects in the lungs of the immersed person rather than returning to the bladder as would be normal. The victim finds it harder and harder to breathe, culminating in asphyxiation. In effect he drowns in his own body fluids.

The only remedy is the total and timely removal of the person from the water.

Preventable?

Though there's currently no standard blood test or chest scan to screen for one's predisposition for SIPE, Richard Moon and his team at Duke University have dedicated hundreds of hours to studying this phenomenon. He has found one way to screen for the condition is a test that requires an oral fluid load exertion and 40 minutes of exercise while immersed in cold water. In this test, most SIPE-susceptible individuals will experience mild symptoms and signs of SIPE.

A fitness check with a cardiologist before engaging in strenuous activities is always advisable, but it does not eliminate the risk of SIPE. So, if you think your regulator is suddenly not performing properly during a dive, get out of the water immediately.

Almost two decades ago, she went for a swim with her fins and a new snorkel mask in Waikiki and swam out and suddenly became short of breath and lost strength in her arms. "I started to hear this huge heartbeat in my ears, like deep drums … I knew I was going to die," Wilcox said, adding that she survived because she was pulled out of the water and given oxygen.

Not only was Wilcox using an unfamiliar snorkel, which may have contributed to her near-fatal drowning, but the incident occurred a day after she returned to Hawaii from Canada, a flight time of around seven hours.

Long Flights a Potential Cause

The Snorkel Safety Study is the first to hypothesize that long-haul air travel may be a significant predisposing factor to snorkel-induced SIPE, which could also help explain why so many snorkeling-related fatalities are tourists. Most incoming visitors have spent a minimum of five hours on an airplane at a cabin pressure up to 8,500 feet elevation.

Dr. Philip Foti, a Kailua pulmonologist and the study's principal investigator, said there have been few studies "to determine both the effects of high altitude on those with certain types of lung disorders, as well as in those without any."

Jumping from a boat

Besides identifying plane travel as a possible predisposing risk factor, the study is also the first to identify the added risk of snorkeling from a boat. "It takes a lot of effort to jump into water where you cannot touch bottom," Wilcox said. "Adjusting your mask and snorkel and fins, and then swimming away … chances of survival are better if the incident happens where the snorkeler can touch bottom."

High Resistance Snorkels

The study was unable to conclude the risk of using a full-face snorkel mask, as only four of the 50 masks the study group tested were full-face masks.

"The safest option is to use a mask and snorkel that doesn't have various modifications of the tip to keep water from entering. Use a straight snorkel and mouthpiece that are both adequately sized, and make sure there are no faulty or narrow valves," Foti said.

– Reprinted from the Honolulu Civil Beat *and written by Alicia Lou*

How Safe Are You From Fire?

lessons from the Allegro Cozumel Hotel fire

The Allegro Cozumel Hotel caught fire on July 31. After starting in the Kids' Club, it spread quickly to the palapas (palm-thatched-roofs) of buildings, reports the *Riviera Maya News*. When staff members tried to extinguish the fire with hoses, they could draw no water. Hotel employees tried the fire extinguishers, but they were not in good condition, so the fire got out of control.

Twelve 12 eight-room villas were destroyed, along with three dive buildings, three Kids' Club buildings, and a massage building, all of which had palapa rooftops. The fire apparently started from a short circuit in a compressor in the Kids' Club. Two people were treated for smoke inhalation, two for first-degree burns, and two others for ankle sprains.

A few weeks previously, local authorities determined the hotel was at high risk after an inspection revealed failures in water pressure for their hydrants. Many of the 575 guests claimed there were no fire alarms.

At the time of writing, neither the hotel nor its parent company has issued a statement or compensated their guests.

For divers, the Allegro disaster raises the specter of being trapped by fire in an unfamiliar place. The 2019 Labor Day fire aboard the *Conception,* with 34 deaths, and the fire aboard the *Red Sea Aggressor I* shortly after, which killed one, focused us divers on escaping from liveaboards and led to serious discussions about smoke detectors, emergency hatches, and night patrols on vessels since.

Both boat fires were likely caused by lithium batteries that were being charged, overheating and igniting. While liveaboards worldwide have become more careful about battery charging, it's not the same in hotels, where people will charge their batteries without thought. Your safety rests with the behavior of other guests.

Fire regulations you take for granted at home will not be as rigid in the remote locations we favor for dive trips. When you book into a dive hotel or any hotel, do you check if the emergency exit routes are viable before you hit the sack? Safely ensconced in your hotel room, you cannot be aware of what might be going on in the next room or anywhere else in the building.

Third-world buildings may be constructed from materials that burn easily and fast. You may see fire extinguishers, but are they charged? They should have a visible charging expiration date or a pressure gauge showing whether they are ready for action. Check the smoke detectors. An indicator light that flashes every minute or so will show if they're active.

So, keep in mind that in many places we travel, it's a case of "buyer beware." You have to protect yourself.

–John Bantin

Flotsam & Jetsam

Another Safe Sunscreen. After reading the item about sunscreen in *Undercurrent* in August, Mel McCombie (New Haven, CT) adds the brand *Elta MD* sunscreens also contain zero harmful ingredients. It's recommended by every dermatologist she knows and comes in formulations for all skin types. It's also available online at Amazon.

Four Generations in a Family Dive Together. The Van Raden family submerged together in the waters of Lake Six (Frazee, MN) in late July for a bit of scuba diving. While just about the whole family scuba dives, it's the first time the 80-year-old great-grandfather to the seven-year-old great-grandchild got to do it together. The family owns

Northwest Divers, a Moorhead, MN, business that's been going strong for over 50 years.

Capt Paul Watson Resigns. Sea Shepherd Founder Captain Paul Watson has resigned from Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (USA), citing political differences with members of the board of directors, who wished to be less confrontational with illegal poachers and turn the Sea Shepherd fleet into research-only vessels. He remains a director of Sea Shepherd Global.

They're Still Finding Bodies. The vehicle discovered in a California lake by the independent dive group *Adventures With Purpose* contained the remains of missing teenager Kiely Rodni, who disappeared on August 6, near the Prosser Family Campground. The divers discovered it in Prosser Lake, about 35 miles from Reno, NV, in about 14 feet of water.

Pirate Kidd's Treasure. The massive engraved silver ingot that weighs more than 110 pounds, discovered by divers off the coast of Madagascar, is thought to have been part of the treasure of notorious Scottish sea pirate Captain William Kidd. He was executed for his crimes in 1701 but tried to barter the locations of treasure he'd buried in return for his life. The tale spawned the classic novel *Treasure Island*.

Authorities in Raja Ampat Getting Serious. According to sources, at least seven bomb fishermen were arrested on July 30 in the Sele Strait in the Sorong Regency, and each faces up to 20 years in jail. The fishermen were from Buaya (Crocodile) Island, which lies very near to Sorong. This island is infamous as the home of migrant bomb fishermen originally from Sulawesi Island. An official statement says they were caught red-handed and in the process of detonating a series of bombs.

$12,000 Fine for Diving With Orcas. Thomas Gould, a British Colombia, Canada resident and owner of the commercial dive vessel *Ice Cube*, has received a record fine for getting too close to orcas near Prince Rupert Harbour in April 2020. In full scuba gear, Gould entered the water on two different occasions after his vessel got close to a pod of seven resident killer whales, contrary to Canada's Marine Mammals Regulations. The orcas have been regular visitors for more than a decade, and signage posted in the area indicates mandatory minimum approach distances. It is also illegal to swim, dive, or interact with them.

Still Want to Dive the Solomons? A U.S. coast guard cutter conducting patrols on an international mission to prevent illegal fishing in the Coral Sea could not get clearance for a scheduled port call in the Solomon Islands. This incident comes amid growing concerns about Chinese influence on the Pacific nation. The cutter *Oliver Henry* was to make a scheduled stop on August 26 at Guadalcanal to refuel and re-provision. It went on to Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, instead.

Judge Tosses Manslaughter Charge. A Los Angeles federal judge threw out an indictment charging *Conception* skipper Jerry Boylan with manslaughter in the deaths of 34 people in the 2019 Labor Day fire aboard the vessel, out of Santa Barbara and anchored at night off the Southern California coast. Boylan (68) was charged with misconduct, negligence, and inattention for which he entered a not-guilty plea. The indictment failed to specify that Boylan acted with gross negligence. Family members of seven of the victims said in a statement that they were stunned by the decision.

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