undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Nai'a, Bligh Waters, Fiji

healthy corals, cruising mantas

IN THIS ISSUE:

Nai'a, Bligh Waters, Fiji. 1

Uepi Resort, Solomon Islands, South Pacific 5

The End of Coral Reef Diving? 8

Air Supply Problem 9

Investing in Digital Camera and Expensive Strobes? 10

An Aging Liveaboard, a Dangerous Dive Deck 12

Death and the Full-Face Snorkel Masks 12

The Diver & The Cook, Fascinating Nonfiction. 13

Would You Dive Alone? Part I 14

DEMA Working Hard to Pass The Dive Boat Act 15

Another Liveaboard Lost in the Red Sea 17

Two More Liveaboards Lost to Fire . . 18

Flotsam & Jetsam. 18

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Dear Fellow Diver,

Mantas! After a rough overnight transit from Vatu-i-ra, I was ready for the 7:00 a.m. dive in the Wakaya area on day four, west of the main island Viti Levu. Cruise director Bel's passion spilled over to us divers as she enthusiastically described and showed pictures of the mantas the previous day. She and Mike, her partner, study the mantas and have even named them. The rules: do not chase them and do not remove the camera she places at the pinnacle for recording their behavior.

Once underwater, I enjoyed the abundance of creatures -- scorpion fish, turtles, green morays, reef sharks, large groupers, a leopard shark, even a hammerhead -- and after 15 minutes, the mantas slowly arrived, swooping by close enough to see their details. During this first dive, I saw three mantas, with Danny Pegleg courting Shirley while M467 just hung out. Overwhelming in their grace, these 30-foot ocean mantas were beautiful. Over three dives, there were 14; on my 2010 Fiji trip, I saw only a couple.

Returning to dive the Bligh Waters between Fiji's two major islands with the Nai'a crew this September, I expected stunning sites and moderate currents on most dives. However, the currents were unreliable on the first day due

MY. Nai'a

to Bogi Walu, Fiji's eight-night trade-wind-driven surge, which brought choppy seas and stronger currents, exacerbated by a new moon. Bel suggested we take sea sickness drugs to stave off mal-de-mer and help us sleep during the rough overnight transit. And rough it was, forcing me at times to hold on to my bed and hope I didn't have to get up to pee. The first thing I did the next morning, with the help of Captain Angus, was sync my Nautilus Lifeline (marine rescue GPS and radio) with the Nai'a.

When I arrived in Nadi, I overnighted at the Gateway Hotel. The next day, around 1:00 p.m., a bus picked up divers for the hour trip to the Nai'a at Lautoka port. Before our afternoon checkout, the only one that day, we were shown to our cabins, unpacked, set up gear, and had a snack. I was still jet-lagged and groggy. The day felt rushed and met with some grumbling, but nothing could be done but to follow our marching orders. The Nai'a had somehow obtained and verified our C-cards online before we boarded -- except for my dive buddy, who was YMCA-certified 60 years ago. They also vetted for nitrox certification, as we all would use it.

The cool water (77-79°F) on our afternoon checkout dive woke me up, but keeping my eye on my buddy's in the five-foot visibility was hard. We were then divided into unchanging groups, Righty and Lefty, according to the side of the boat we would board our skiff. Three dive guides, Mike, Bel, and Semi, rotated between the two skiffs, and, when not diving, handled responsibilities onboard. The dive schedule would be 7:00 and 10:00 a.m., 1:00 and 4:00 p.m., and one night dive. Fifteen minutes before each dive, we were to be geared up with our 80 cu. ft. tanks checked for psi and nitrox by the crew, recorded by the divers, and ready for the briefing. Twenty-four dives were offered over seven days, and we would repeat several, either due to diver preferences or current avoidance.

Nai'a, Bligh Waters, Fiji

Diving for experienced	★★★★★
Diving for Beginners	not recommended
Corals	★★★★★
Pelagics	★★★★★
Small fish	★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★★
Food	★★★★
Service & Attitude	★★★★★
Money's worth	★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★= excellent

Worldwide scale

We were an eclectic group: a dozen from Europe, four Americans, and two Canadians aged 35 to 82. We were physicians, psychologists, biologists, financers, realtors, and one was a travel writer for the German magazine Der Spiegel. Not a drama queen or a hotdog among us, just friendly, serious, experienced divers on a legendary dive boat. While much of our conversation revolved around dives here and trips elsewhere, there was a lot of concern about the influence of ultra-right factions and candidates in upcoming elections, both in Europe and the U.S.

The Nai'a, Fiji's only liveaboard, a well-cared-for 120-foot vessel, has been plying Fiji's waters for 30 years. Her showcase is the air-conditioned wood-paneled lounge/dining room, with three small comfortable sofas and various fish ID and Fiji travel books. There's an open-door camera room toward the bow and an

MY. Nai'a's *diving tender*

ample dive deck and platform at the stern. Up top, the sun deck has plenty of lounge chairs (but no shade). Below decks are nine air-conditioned cabins -- with either double beds, twin beds, or bunk beds -- each with ample storage space and a head with a shower and plenty of hot water. One two-bunk bed cabin in the crew area housed our Der Spiegel writer (I'm guessing he was comped).

Day two, our first full dive day, was met with strong winds and currents too swift for the planned dives, two of the more outstanding sites from my previous trip: Mt. Mutiny and E-6. So we motored to a more sheltered area, Nuku Point, which had a slight current and stunning topography. We began, as often we did, dropping to 80-90 feet, then weaving our way back up. Large and small bommies blossomed with hundreds of colorful small fish, including butterflyfish and blue puffers along the bommie sides, a few nudibranchs, Halimeda ghost pipefish, hawkfish, and leaf scorpion fish. I followed our guide, Semi, through two swim-thrus, and below were a few sharks and schools of trevally, schools of triggerfish and barracuda, large dogtooth tuna and grouper, a variety typical at many sites.

On another day at a site named Kansas -- marked by a dense, beautiful bright yellow Sinularia flowing over the bommies and waving in the currents, like Kansas wheat fields -- anthias cascaded over a crevice between two bommies that exploded with purple dendronephthya soft coral. For photographers, the crevice windows framed the soft coral, as well as yellow and red fans. It was an iconic Fiji dive, and as we headed back, spinner dolphins surrounded our skiff and put on quite a show.

Following sites were Tetons I and II, with schools of barracuda, large groupers, small soft waving corals and sea fans, lots of small fish in crevices, and colorful anthias darting about. All beautiful dives, but the white-capped choppy seas meant bumpy rides in the two dual-outboard, sturdy 22-foot double-bottomed heavy-duty skiffs. For boarding after a dive, they lowered a stable, vertical metal ladder, but the sea was often too rough; some divers climbed in over the side, but I handed up my gear, turned my back to the skiff, and Clayton, our strong-armed driver, put his hands under my armpits and hauled me in.

At School House, our group finned into a mild-moderate current, and after a few minutes, the current near the bommies increased and became so strong I kicked hard but could not make headway. I warned my buddy away from the roiling currents but got caught. With some difficulty, I rose for my safety stop and surfaced alone in very choppy seas. I was sure I would need my Nautilus Lifeline to be found, but in less than a minute, Clayton came bearing down at the helm of the skiff, a testimony to the excellent Nai'a crew and, indeed, the skiff drivers!

Divers could dive their own computer profiles for up to 60 minutes, extended by 15 minutes if guides were informed in advance, though the depths and a lot of finning into the current quickly diminished psi. Following the dive guide was optional. As most back-rolled in negatively buoyant, there was a grouping following the dive guide, which became looser as the dive progressed. Of the eight divers on my skiff, five essentially dived solo, one went with a guide she hired, and one newlywed couple hung together. One diver never located the group on one dive. Headcounts on the Nai'a were taken via a portable peg board, with name tags

***Stateroom on* MY. Nai'a**

for each guest placed to indicate who got on the skiff and who got off.

The 120-foot steel-hulled Nai'a is well preserved since her refit for a live-aboard thirty-one years ago. She was refitted again in 2010 due to a cabin fire. Conscious about fires and passenger safety, the cruise directors were emphatic that we were not to plug any devices into our cabin sockets (besides hair dryers they provided) and only charge electronics in the lounge or camera room. (I was furious with my assigned roommate for plugging in her iPhone in our cabin and let her know. She unplugged it and left the cabin.) They pointed out the three escape routes from below decks' cabins: a staircase and two hatches, where ladders had to be put down, or else one would need a mighty boost by another. A fire extinguisher was outside my cabin door. At my request, Mike took me on an engine room tour, which was remarkably clean and clutter-free, and touted two gigantic CO2 tanks designed to flood the area to suppress a fire. In a briefing, Captain Angus demonstrated the hefty life vests with whistles and lights stowed in the cabin closets. There's even a defibrillator onboard.

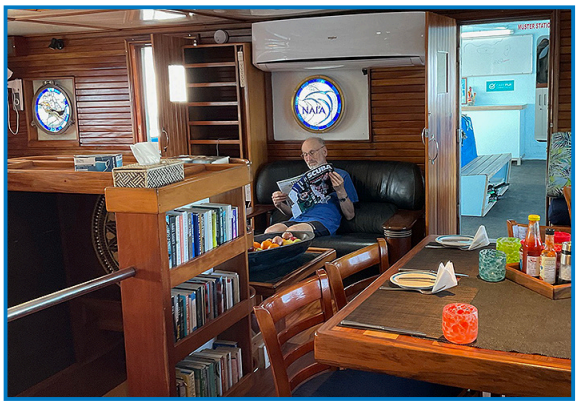
The two cruise directors/dive instructors, Mike (South Africa and Scotland) and Bel (Brazil), arrived together three years ago from Utila, Honduras. Mike is a tech master trained in repairing equipment. A perfectionist, he noticed things that needed correcting and did a great job troubleshooting my leaking air pressure gauge (corrosion) and had a new one to replace it. Underwater, he was keenly aware of his divers and pointed out esoterica, such as an endemic Fiji anemonefish. Bel was charming, a bit bossy, dramatic, and let it be known from the get-go that if you wandered off and got caught in the current, she would not come after you. You see, she was responsible for the group. She made most of the predive whiteboard drawings, and both made the briefings. Once, I asked Bel the direction of the bommies we were to head toward and expected a compass reading or at least a wave of the hand. "Bel direction!" was her quip. Dive guide Mo, whom one diver hired for personal shepherding, indicated the direction, as did Semi. Both were always eager to engage their guests as listeners or tellers of their own engaging tales.

Meals began with a continental breakfast at 5:30 a.m., full breakfast at 8:30, lunch at 11:30, 2:30 snacks (with one of the two talks given), and dinner at 6:00 p.m. The meals were nicely presented, varied, and substantial. Scrambled eggs and French toast were delicious. Freshly made ginger and orange muffins, and all breads were first-rate. One night, I could not eat all my tasty beef filet, so the chef fried onions and peppers and added them to the sliced filet for a sandwich for my lunch the next day. The last night's dinner choices were lamb shank, bacon-wrapped chicken, or vegetable risotto. Soups, such as root taro, accompanying dinner, were delicious and unique. That day, lunch was fish, vegetable, or chicken kebabs, served with fried rice, walnuts, apple, and yogurt salad. And one could always request another option. My favorite dessert was chocolate mousse, and cakes and brownies were delicious, with ice cream always available. With dinner, the gracious Maikeli, the Purser, served good red and white wines. Before or after dinner, wine, beer, or spirits were inexpensive and soft drinks were free.

The Nai'a crew is professional, highly skilled, gracious, helpful, and with friendly smiles. I felt safe, whether transiting under the guidance of experienced Capt. Angus, getting in or out of the skiffs, or being spotted by a skiff driver. The only glitch in this exceptionally organized trip was malfunctioning refrigeration on day six, which affected air conditioning and compressors. It was temporar-

ily managed, and we picked up an electrician from the main island the next night, who fixed it quickly!

It seems like all Fijians sing beautifully, and the crew sang to us aboard when we arrived, when we left, and in recognition of a diver reaching 200 dives. Party night with kava offered singing and dancing. These guys are GOOD! Without them, Nai'a would not be the legendary premier boat she is.



***Relaxing aboard* Nai'a**

Who should join the Nai'a? Confident and seasoned divers comfortable with moderate to strong currents and who love pelagics, colorful and widely diverse fish, and corals. The depths and currents are not for neophytes, and with only one guide in the water for eight or nine divers, beginners have little attention, though a personal guide can be reserved in advance. But for experienced divers, no matter where you have been diving, you'll find the Nai'a an excellent boat, and the diving is right up there with the best anywhere.

—- J.D.

Our undercover diver's bio: *"I began diving more than 20 years ago, quickly becoming obsessed with observing fish and critter behavior. A couple of thousand dives later, I've made half my dives in the Caribbean and the remainder mostly in Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Turkey. Using the excuse of absorbing local culture, I've drunk kava in Fiji, penis soup in PNG, and spat betelnut juice in Palau. I'm convinced it helped my fish ID skills in those regions."*

Divers compass: Nai'a price for a shared room, seven-day charter -- $4481. I transferred funds to avoid their 3% credit card surcharge . . . LAX to Fiji -- $5800 business class . . . nitrox is $150 . . . Rental gear looked new or at least in good shape . . . It would take over 24 hours to get to the nearest hyperbaric chamber in Suva . . . I prefer dry weather with higher visibility, July to December, though the water is cooler . . . I overnighted at the Fiji Gateway before boarding the boat, and for two days after the trip, $130/night . . . Garden of the Sleeping Giant (Orchid Gardens) is worth a visit . . . Nadi town is filled with blaring music and Indian merchants shouting for sales attention, which I found obnoxious . . . . For another fix of the beautiful singing voices, I went to a local church, Gateway Harvest . . . . Nai'a is a Hawaiian word that means dolphins. www.naia.com.fj

Uepi Resort, Solomon Islands, South Pacific

a near-perfect, remote dive resort; and a word about the Bilikiki

Dear Fellow Diver,

The moment I landed at the Uepi Island dock, I had a good feeling. After a day or two, I knew I had discovered a hidden resort reminiscent of what diving was like decades ago, but with lovely cabins, high-quality food, and pristine diving, with plentiful fish, diverse corals, and warm and relaxing waters. Wanna see lots of sharks? You've got it. Like big schools of fish? Macro stuff? Enormous sea fans? Pristine, eye-popping hard corals? Uepi (pronounced ooo-pee) has it all and even activities for nondivers.

The downside? Uepi Island is a long haul from the U.S., first requiring a plane change in either Fiji or Australia. After you arrive in Honiara, the

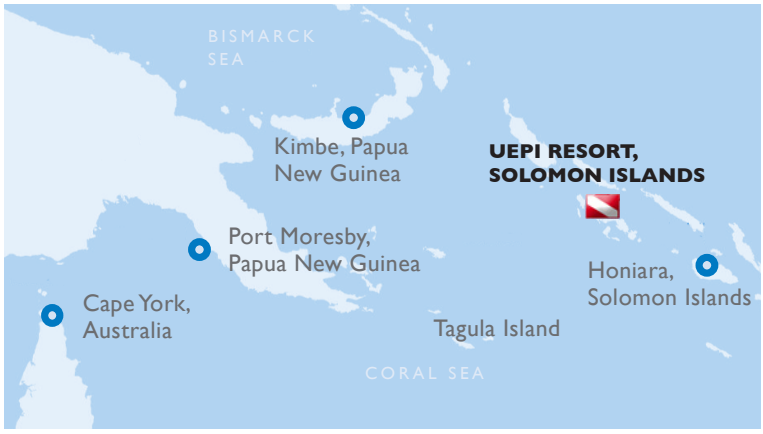
Beachfront at Uepi Island Resort

capital, there's a 1-2 hour puddle jumper flight to Seghe, followed by a 40-minute boat ride to the resort. So one ought to devote at least two weeks to the journey -- make a side trip in Fiji or Australia, or, as I did, combine Uepi with 10 days on the venerable liveaboard, Bilikiki.

I arrived in mid-August, just four weeks after Jace Kelly, the co-owner/manager, and his crew at Uepi finished rebuilding their six exquisite guest cabins. (Jace's father, Grant, built and ran the resort until turning it over to Jace a few years back.) Despite no A/C or hot showers (the temperature was fine, but a shower can be bracing in the winter; it's how they manage their limited water supply, Jace explained), ceiling fans maintained pleasant temperatures in the lovely dining hall and in my well-appointed and spacious cabin, which had a comfortable bed, adequate storage, and many Aussie outlets (they have adaptors) that included USB-C plugs. All cabins sit on the water, with pleasant front porches and sheltered hammocks. My cabin was the farthest from the dining area, a semi-lighted 8-10 minute walk through the jungle. At night -- it stays light until 6:30 p.m. -- I used my phone light to keep from stubbing a toe. The comfortable common dining areas had a nice lagoon view and a comfortable sitting area in the bar.

After my easy checkout dive among plenty of hard coral (85°F water, 100' viz) to get my buoyancy right, our next dive was at Charapoana Point, just three minutes away. I backrolled off the skiff and followed our guide along the wall, kicking easily in the mild current at 60-70 feet. Suddenly, I saw a flurry of big fish --sharks, a dozen or more, mainly grey reef sharks with a few black tips mixed in, and a hammerhead. Schools of hovering barracuda, trevallies, snappers, and cleaner fish abounded. I was reminded of Palau's Blue Corner but with a mild current, so I didn't need a reef hook; I just needed a simple handhold on dead coral. I turned the corner, and the dive turned into a small-stuff, hard-coral dive. Bright orange anemones, wild schools of grunts, and split-fin yellow-tailed snappers paid no mind to me as I swam through their swarms. I spotted a couple of nudibranchs, a pipefish, a small green eel peeking from his lair, and seven pink anemone fish cavorting about in their living nest. The dive was filled with life.

With trips to the sites usually five minutes or less, the sturdy aluminum dive skiffs were uncovered, with overhead bars where the cover would be. The boat was a little crowded with seven divers, a divemaster, and a captain, but doable. To enter the water, we all backrolled simultaneously and finished climbing a sturdy ladder after slipping out of tanks/BCs Some climbed up fully loaded. Captain Silas and divemaster Joe, who had 30 years of guiding for Uepi, were competent indeed (though one day, an embarrassed Joe forgot his weights, so he hung above us for the dive; we all got a chuckle). Briefings were thorough, and Joe called attention to the big stuff (sharks, barracuda, trevallies, dolphins, and an occasional giant manta) he spotted in the blue, as well as those hidden and macro creatures on the walls and bommies (the Aussie word for a coral outcropping). Lots of diverse anemone nests populated shelves at 15-30 feet. The diving is flexible, and you can go at your own pace, but we generally stayed within sight of each other, and the guides pointed out small stuff for those interested. Dives lasted 60-70 minutes, never below 80 feet; most were 60 feet on average. After most divers surfaced, I'd occasionally linger a while longer.



At 4:30, my third dive that day was Uepi Point, again with big stuff and swarms of large tropicals. Most divers only made two dives -- 8:30 a.m. and 11 a.m.-- but they willingly flexed the schedule for my group to 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. and offered a 4:30 p.m. dive or a night dive at 6:45 p.m. for four of us who wanted more (extra charge). Most guests are Australian, and Jace said that after two dives, they generally preferred to diversify in the afternoon and snorkel, kayak, or paddleboard, often with their spouse or kids. I traveled with five other Americans; the other guests were Aussie, Swiss, Polish, and Italian.

Grant, the patriarch and founder of Uepi, told me that before he and his wife Jill built the resort in the '80s, Uepi was a coconut plantation. Jace, who grew up on Uepi and is now 30-something, took over the resort with his wife, Katie. Jace manages a staff of 25, helps with menus, and affably interacts with idiosyncratic guests, with lots of help from Jill (and Grant and Katie), who, along with Jace, is raising their three kids. He helped me solve a port-changing tool problem -- a real "McIver." In their YouTube video "The Island Life of Us," you can see how their rebuilding of Uepi during COVID involved ingenuity, hard work, and lots of help from resort employees. It's a well-oiled machine, a testament to creativity and perseverance. They are great hosts.

They dock alongside a wooden pier, and the crew loaded our tanks/BCs into the skiff. Between dives, Silas and Joe, if asked, lifted our tanks with weighted BCs up to the dock and provided fresh tanks; we attached our gear to the tanks, and then either we or the crew lifted them back into the boat. Afterward, we rinsed our gear and electronics in separate containers or used the hose. The dive shop is just a repair and storage area. They don't sell anything, not even t-shirts. Valet diving hasn't quite come to Uepi unless you ask for it.

Photographers have to make do. There is no camera room, so I stored my rig on the dive shop platform's top shelf and charged batteries in my room. The crew handled cameras carefully, storing them on the bottom of the boat. It worked out fine since boat rides were only under five minutes (with one or two exceptions).

On one wall dive, I was delighted with the diverse corals and critters -- an eagle ray, two fearless cuttlefish, and three species of anemone fish. Under the overhangs lurked electric clams, sexy shrimps, nudibranchs, and endless tiny tropicals darting in and out of the healthy staghorn and table corals. White tip sharks regularly cruised by. Something seemed familiar about this dive, and later, I remembered the fine China Wall in Alor, Indonesia.

Uepi Resort, Solomon Islands, South Pacific

Diving for Beginners	★★★★
Diving for experienced	★★★★★
Staff	★★★★★
Accommodations (No A/C or hot water; cabins excellent)	★★★★
Food	★★★★½
Diving	★★★★★
Macro photography	★★★★
Wide-angle photography	★★★★★
Money's worth	★★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★= excellent

Worldwide scale

The End of Coral Reef Diving?

Have we Boomers seen the best of coral reef diving? Is there any hope?

CNN reports that the mass bleaching of coral reefs worldwide since February 2023 has been the most extensive on record. Climate change is fueling record and near-record ocean temperatures throughout the world. In October, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) said that, according to satellite data, a staggering 77 percent of the world's coral reef areas – from the Atlantic to the Pacific to the Indian oceans – have been subjected to bleaching-level heat stress.

The NOAA Coral Reef Authority declared it a global bleaching event in April 2024, making it the fourth since 1998. From 2014 to 2017, mass bleaching affected about 66 percent of the world's reef area.

Triggered by heat stress in warm oceans, coral bleaches when corals expel the colorful algae living in their tissues. Without these helpful algae, the corals become pale and are vulnerable to starvation and disease. A bleached coral is not dead, but ocean temperatures need to cool off for any hope of recovery.

At least 14 percent of the world's remaining corals are estimated to have died in the previous two global bleaching events.

Though this mass bleaching is already the most widespread, affecting reefs in 74 countries and territories, NOAA has stopped short of calling it the "worst" on record. In the coming months and years, scientists will conduct underwater assessments of dead corals to help tally up the severity of the damage.

In response to the bleaching record, scientists, world leaders, and the global funding community met in Colombia at the end of October to discuss last-ditch strategies to avert the functional extinction of corals, including further protections and financing. They have a difficult job ahead. *(CNN)*

Two morning dives brought on a little hunger, and not long after returning to my cabin, a staff member brought lunches to each cabin, an excellent place to enjoy a meal, usually a protein, vegetables, rice/noodles, fruit, and a baked dessert. In the mornings, at 7 a.m., I made coffee in a French press, then walked to the lodge for 7:30 breakfast. Muesli, yogurt, toast, and tropical fruits were the mainstays, as well as eggs to one's liking, but no breakfast meats, mildly disappointing to me and others.

Conversely, dinners were delicious fish, beef, chicken dishes, veggies, salads, lobster, crab, and ice cream/pie for dessert. On our welcome night, Jace briefed us, and dinner was trevally, chicken, crab, veggies, eggplant, rice, and birthday cake for an Aussie guest. Dining was buffet style, and a nearby bar and comfy chairs made for good after-dinner conversations.

My only night dive was on the house reef near the dock, which had good visibility and no current. We went out at 7 p.m., but the creatures didn't. I saw a couple of crabs, a slipper lobster, a sleeping parrotfish, a pair of Peterson shrimp, and not much else. Oh well, you pays your money, and you takes your chances.

But chances were always great for day dives. I was stunned by the size of the sea fans on the Double D wall, the largest I've seen anywhere. A wide-angle photographer's dream, some were 20 feet in at the widest point and varied from brown to red, to purple and green , to off-white. I found a couple of hawkfish on them but no pygmy seahorses. And the barrel sponges are enormous as well. On this dive, I happened upon an anemone nest with two advanced guards 10 feet from the nest that warned me to stay away by pecking at my facemask. My photographer buddy got some pretty cool photos!

And I had a great visit with six pygmy mantas or, as most folks call them, mobula rays. We sat on the sandy bottom 20 feet from the cleaning station and waited for the show. And we got it; they weren't shy. Another time, we hoped to snorkel with resident giant mantas in 12 feet of water in the middle of Marovo Lagoon. Grant gave us a 50-50 chance they would show. Oh well, we lost; they didn't show.

Recreation area on Uepi Island Resort

But overall, it was great diving. You may not get all the creature comforts at some upscale destinations or the massive soft corals of Raja Ampat. Uepi is a pristine hard coral destination with plenty of critters and swarms of fish that make photographers like me very happy. The diving, the staff/management, the resort, and the remote environment were truly magical.

And a great prelude to my next 10 days, the Bilikiki. While Undercurrent carried a full undercover review of the Bilikiki in October 2023, editor Ben asked me for a brief update because of reports of problematic staff (who, it turns out, are no longer there). Cruise Directors Pato and Fernando, as well as divemasters Sean and Danny, were cordial, polite, helpful, and handled needy divers well. We had nearly total diving freedom. Preparing, then loading, and unloading divers onto their "Tinnies" was well organized for the 24 divers and guides. The dive deck was crowded, and not everyone had a place to sit to put on wetsuits, but everyone was thoughtful and helpful despite the close quarters. One glitch: Two of my dive buddies, admittedly poor on air consumption, had requested "fat boy" nitrox tanks in advance, but when they got on board, the request had been overlooked, and the guides could only rustle up two for one of my buddies, none for the other.

Barracuda Point is a "wow" dive with hundreds of schooling jacks, dozens of

Air Supply Problem

A friend of mine was concerned that her pressure gauge, which was reading 1,000 psi underwater, would drop to zero psi as she took a breath and then popped back up to 1,000.

This happens when you don't have your tank valve fully opened (usually 3-4 turns) and you start running low on air. You basically are sucking all the air out of the hoses faster than the partially-opened valve can replenish the supply. That is why the pressure drops to zero psi, even if it's just momentary.

But she swears the tank valve was opened fully, so the other option was that something was wrong inside the regulator's first stage. She was advised to stop using it immediately and have it checked. Running out of breathing gas is a major problem, so you should always check your tank valve before jumping in the water to ensure it's fully open.

Besides physically opening the valve, one quick way to check is to take a huge breath on the regulator while you watch the gauge. Even a digital gauge shouldn't budge. If you see the pressure dropping, even just a little bit, and then rising, either the valve is not open entirely, or something inside your regulator is blocking the airflow. Correct the issue before you submerge.

And one more thing. It's important to go over your out-of-air options before you submerge. If you're diving with a buddy, discuss octopus breathing, buddy breathing, which regulator will be donated, and other options before you go under.

Ken Kurtis

http://www.reefseekers.com

Investing in Digital Camera and Expensive Strobes?

In the days when cameras used film, you could buy a top quality camera that would satisfy your needs for many years. Then came the digital revolution.

People assumed that they would save a fortune on film and processing, as well as see their results instantly. This second benefit was extremely useful to underwater photographers. There was nothing worse than returning with bags of unprocessed film, only to discover you hadn't got the results you were expecting.

The snag is that digital cameras are constantly evolving, and the camera you bought yesterday has quickly become obsolete by the model that replaced it today. The savings from not buying and processing film is soon eliminated by the depreciation of the hardware.

Many of us got hooked on pursuing higher-quality images and went for the next best product. I was one of them. Of course, this meant replacing the custom-made underwater camera housing, too.

Today, you can easily spend $12,000 on a good quality (full-frame 60-megapixel) camera, lenses, and housing with both macro and wide-angle ports. Add to that the cost of underwater strobes and mounting. Alex Tattersall, a well-known British underwater photographer, tells *Undercurrent* his investment in the kit he travels with is in excess of $35,000. We all like to spend money pursuing our underwater photography passion, and part of the passion is owning impressive hardware. What's wrong with that? Never mind that we probably only look at the pictures we take on a 72 dpi computer monitor.

Meanwhile enthusiasts argue the merits of the latest DSLRs versus mirrorless cameras, and camera store owners rub their hands in glee. We want the latest and best.

Thankfully, camera models don't change as they once did (probably due to the current chip shortage). But you might now find difficulty tracking down a housing for an older camera. Housing manufacturers tend to make very short production runs.

But reality hits when we want to sell our old equipment and find that it's probably worth a lot less than half what we paid. That's because everyone else wants the latest and best, too.

The flip side is that a lucky person can probably pick up an obsolete yet fully serviceable digital photography rig of several previous years' top quality for little money.

For example, a comprehensive kit comprising Canon 7D Mark II with Nauticam 7D Mk II housing in excellent condition with three lenses and appropriate ports, two Sea & Sea YS-D2 strobes, and Light & Motion Sola 1200 Focus light, was recently advertised in Utah for only $3000 when the buyer originally paid $15,898. (email: rmnolljr@gmail.com)

Massive depreciation has become the new reality with other technology. Ask anyone who's traded in an electric vehicle.

As a victim of this, I can tell you my underwater photographs have cost me a fortune, even though I worked as a full-time professional and made at least 15 dive trips annually. How many dive trips do you make? How many keepers do you file away for future use? I'm bemused to take photographs from my extensive library stored as 100-megabyte processed files and reduce them to a few kilobytes (1000 times smaller) for *Undercurrent*'s newsletter or mid-month emails!

However, don't calculate what your underwater photographs have cost you. It will break your heart. The development of technology is unstoppable. Bear in mind that when trying to dispose of your expensive rig on the second-hand market, the latest little GoPro 27 megapixel submersible camera that can record 4k video can be bought for less than $400. It seems few will want the older model you purchased just a couple of years ago. It's the story of consumer electronics.

As for land photos, the latest smartphone will take beautiful quality pictures that you can post instantly on the Internet – and you can get an underwater housing for that, too.

John Bantin

schooling barracuda, and hunting sharks cruising the wall. Hooking in for 40 minutes, I watched the swarms get closer and closer, coming from overhead and against the current. And to top it off, there were loud, core-shaking rumblings of a nearby (50 nautical miles) active underwater volcano, Kavachi. I felt like I was in an IMAX theater.

The bottom bunk was fine -- I'm 6'4" and couldn't fit my torso in the upper bunk. My 5'6" roomie drew the short straw! The Bilikiki is an older retrofitted cargo ship, so it has its quirks of steep stairs, step-over barriers between parts of the ship, a noisy engine, no shade on the sun deck, and no A/C in the lounge, only in the cabins. Still, its dives fit nicely into the history of the Solomons.

An unguided dive at Bilikiki Bay was rich, diverse, and beautiful, with a

couple of clown triggerfish leisurely nibbling at the wall. I spotted a bushtail tang, rare around here, and an inter-species clownfish nest. This bay has a unique beauty that is different from but equal to the best Raja Ampat dives.

Uepi island Resort's dive boat

The Iwami Maru wreck had poor visibility, but it was still worth doing. It's a big ship in 85 feet of water, with the propeller mainly intact and lots of interesting fish about -- totally unafraid spadefish, grunts, glassies, and snappers. Cleaner shrimp gave me a cuticle manicure in a cubby on the wreck deck. White Beach was a cool treasure hunt of a WWII equipment dump that occurred when the Americans left and were not allowed to take anything with them.

Camera facilities . . . one 6'x6' table in the lounge . . . are inadequate with no outlets. Eight big-rig photographers were on board and the first days were very crowded on the table. Cameras could not be kept at night on the table or on the dry table on the dive deck due to a rocking boat, so people kept them under the photo table in small baskets or in their rooms.

In comparison, the diving at Uepi and off the Bilikiki was equally excellent, though a bit different. Plenty of big stuff at Uepi -- sharks, occasional giant mantas, mobula rays -- but few on Bilikiki dives. But the Bilikiki traveled to more variety -- caves, swim-thrus, and wrecks. Macro opportunities were abundant with both. If your goal on a trip is to dive, dive, dive, these two perfectly complement each other.

P.S.: Little did I know that my editor, Ben Davison, had visited 37 years ago (you'll find the URL for his report below), and the diving today is just as good as then. Here's his report.

https://www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/issues/y1987/UC0987/undercurrent198709.pdf#page=1

D.S.

Our undercover diver's bio: *"I got the diving bug watching Sea Hunt as a kid, got certified in 1983, but didn't start diving the world until 1991. I've logged over 1,700 dives in the Caribbean, Indonesia, Australia, Tahiti, Palau, PNG, Maldives, and the Philippines. While I love the convenience of liveaboards, I enjoy resorts for their relaxing pace and beauty. My life goal is to dive on my 90th birthday. (Only 18 years to go!)"*

Divers Compass: I paid $3600 for eight nights at Uepi with two dives/day and US$70 per 3rd dive. (The 10-night stay on the Bilikiki cost me US$6600, plus $180 for nitrox) . . . Uepi has no nitrox due to a lack of demand from Aussies . . . One flies through either Fiji or Brisbane to get to Honiara; Solomons Air runs on "island time," with delays and unexpected stops, so give yourself 1-2 days' slack. . . .I came through Australia, and only 7kg were allowed in the overhead bins; I had to pay AU$45 for that, and AU$65 for my 41 kg dive gear . . . carry your batteries in your carry-on . . . Good-quality rental gear was available at the resort, and minor repairs were done expeditiously . . . Soft drinks were about US$4, beer $5, and wine $7 per glass; no hard liquor other than what divers brought . . . The nearest dive chamber is in Brisbane, a 3-hour flight from Honiara . . . The best time to dive is the dry season, April-November. We had a few showers, but nothing that got in the way of enjoying our stay. **www.visitsolomons.com.sb/tour/uepi-island-resort**

An Aging Liveaboard, a Dangerous Dive Deck

Undercurrent's readers go exploring

In December, rather than a standard issue, we will send you the *2025 Travelin' Divers Chapbook*, which compiles all the readers' reports we received this year in a searchable volume. You may access it online, download it, or even order a printed version.

We have pulled a few interesting reviews you might miss, and we're abbreviating them here with our commentary. As John Bantin likes to point out, you're more likely to be injured by your dive boat than a fish, which the first item demonstrates.

Your Dangerous Dive Boat

While Ellen Marie Smith (Edina, MN) had an excellent trip in March to the Bahamas, diving with **Epic Diving** and staying at the **Blue Marlin Cove** resort, she reports trouble on their 65-foot dive boat on the Tiger Beach trip. "Be careful on the dive deck. People were rinsing their masks and dumping the water on the dive deck. As there are no mats on the deck and it was slippery, my buddy fell on this slippery mess, dislocating and fracturing her arm. (Ironic, as she was worried about the sharks before she did a few dives. Be very afraid of boats!) Luckily, Vic of Epic Divers is an ER doc and got her arm back into the socket. We didn't take her to the island hospital but waited to return home. She was a trouper but not very comfortable."
https://www.epicdiving.com/ https://bluemarlincove.com

We're in Hot Water

You can't ignore how climate change affects the oceans, especially if you dive in water as hot as Dean C. (Colorado Springs) did in September. Diving from the

Death and the Full-Face Snorkel Masks

Undercurrent's October story about the recent deaths of another two snorkelers in Hawaii while using full-face snorkeling masks prompted David Concannon (Sun Valley, ID), an *Undercurrent* subscriber and attorney at law specializing in diving litigation, to write. Here is what he said (with our editing for brevity).

"In 2019, I assisted HEAD in its dealings with Hawaiian authorities conducting an epidemiology study of FFSMs to assess their impact on drownings in the state. HEAD voluntarily tested its FFSM products as well as other manufacturers' FFSMs to see if they could pose a risk to users. The results were alarming.

"Originally, FFSMs sold by HEAD with brand Mares were supplied by Ocean Reef and badge-engineered. "This arrangement ceased in 2019 when, writes Concannon," HEAD designed its own FFSM and, in the process of testing to meet EN standards, realized that 90 percent of the products on the market could not meet the standard and were wildly unsafe (including the Ocean Reef model). The timing coincided with the epidemiology study in Hawaii, which originated because FFSMs were getting pilloried in the press.

"At that time, there were only two ANSTI Breathing Machines in the entire world [designed] to test FFSMs, one at Dive Lab in Panama City, Florida, and the other at Mares headquarters in [Genoa], Italy. I would be surprised if any of the manufacturers other than HEAD does any testing of its FFSMs.

"For use underwater (diving), the corresponding norm is set out in European standard EN250 for work-of-breathing with scuba regulators. There is no norm defining the performance requirements for full-face masks used in snorkeling.

"What is at the heart of EN250 norms? One aspect deals with carbon dioxide build-up. During normal breathing, a person at rest converts around 4-5 percent of the inhaled air into carbon dioxide.

"The exhaled carbon dioxide (CO_2) is not an issue in an open and ventilated environment; it is dispersed so that the next inhaled breath does not contain any CO_2 above background levels. If the content of CO_2 in the inhaled breath starts to rise, the human body experiences hypercapnia: a rise in CO_2 in the body and consequently its accumulation in the bloodstream, which leads to shallow breathing and the feeling of shortness of breath.

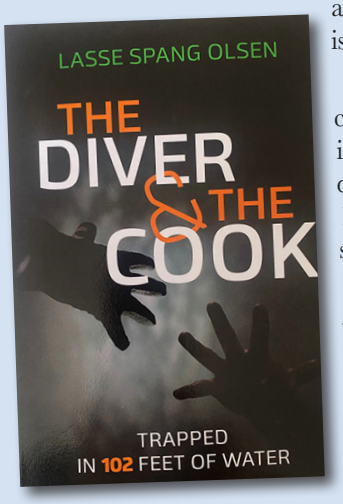
"Shallow breathing increases hypercapnia because it does not get rid of the CO_2 in the lungs since the lungs are only partially emptied. So, whereas hypercapnia can start because of *external* CO_2 build-up, it can quickly worsen due to the addition of *internal* CO_2 build-up [within the mask]. This snowball effect can quickly make a bad situation worse."

[Other symptoms of hypercapnia include distress, anxiety, confusion, and even seizures.]

Concannon concluded, "HEAD would like to encourage [U.S.] authorities to develop safety standards for Full Face Snorkel Masks and restrict careless manufacturers and distributors from bringing unsafe products to the market."

The Diver & The Cook, Fascinating Nonfiction

I find true stories always more fascinating than fiction, and *The Diver & The Cook* is a true account. Imagine a ship sinking and being trapped inside it for days. Well, that's what happened to Nigerian ship's cook Harrison Okene when the *Jascon 4* sank with all hands, off Nigeria in 2013.



The *Jascon 4* was a 100-foot tugboat that towed oil tankers to and from oil barges that serviced rigs far out to sea. While built to cope with any weather, it suddenly capsized and sank in 100 feet of water.

Two-and-a-half days later, divers arrived on the 350-foot diving support ship *Lewek Toucan* to retrieve the bodies of the Jascon 4's crew. You can imagine their surprise when they discovered Harrison alive in an air pocket. Their almost impossible task was to get him out and safely to the surface without him drowning or dying from decompression sickness. (He'd long outstayed his no-decompression time!)

Danish filmmaker Las Sprang Olsen became intrigued with the story, and located the people involved, including Harrison. After making a documentary about it, he published a book (in Danish) called *Dykkeren of Kokken*. This is the English translation.

It's a first-hand account by those involved, complete with contemporary photographs, including those taken of Harrison when he was discovered trapped after 60 hours underwater at 100 feet. Harrison's own account of those days surviving at depth in the dark is vivid.

This is an unusual book. If it were fiction, it would be far-fetched. But it isn't fiction. It really happened. I found it gripping and scary, as any diver would. It's a story both of Harrison's perseverance and the miracle of his saving.

– John Bantin

The Diver & The Cook – by L.S. Olsen –is available on pre-order and on Kindle and Google Play. Paperback copies can be delivered worldwide. (See website for price) **www.DivedUp.com**

Quino El Guardian in the Sea of Cortez), he found the water was "Hot, Hot, Hot. Water temps ranged from 85-90°F with occasional surges to 91°F, which had me looking for a volcanic vent, and as low as 78°F, which felt blissful."

As for the ***Quino El Guardian***, Mexican Liveaboards will replace it next July with a new boat in the Sea of Cortez, and the *Quino El Guardian* will travel to Socorro. However, it's at the bottom of the comfort charts for such a long journey. Dean says, "Sleeping arrangements were compact with two bunks sleeping four people in a lower deck cabin smaller than a bathroom on other boats I have been on . . . . Crawling into the bunk was like entering a coffin, since the beds were narrow and the top bunk and ceiling were low. Many people hit their heads on the top bunk or ceiling. Four shared toilet/shower combos are on the dive deck, and all share the two basins for shaving and brushing teeth on the open deck. This makes for some interesting midnight trips to relieve bursting bladders after beers. Lock the bathroom door – even at 3 a.m. I was startled by the late-night roving watch." **https://tinyurl.com/35fsvy2u**

A Little Luxury for Couples

If you're looking for luxury living and highly personal diving, Douglas Peterson (Naperville, IL) says **Ibaragi Boutique Hotel** on **Roatan** is "way above five stars. Give it 10. Top of the line. Romantic and beautiful pool, restaurant, bar, and grounds, with lux-friendly service and great food (especially the gourmet breakfast). Adults only. There is plenty of room on their fast, comfy, shaded boat. Instead of putting us together, they took a less-experienced group on a separate boat, so it was just the two of us with the excellent DM, Caleb. Relaxed pace, no regimentation, it was all about helping us two divers have a great time." It's typical Roatan diving, but he says, "must-see dive is Blue Channel, a 20-foot-wide sand channel with 40-foot reef walls on both sides. As the divemaster predicted, when we came out of the channel onto the sea-grass-covered sloping sand, visibility dropped to 25 feet, but there was an amazing 10-foot-tall, 100-foot-wide wall of big eye shad. The orals had brown algae on them at many locations, but the soft corals seemed in reasonably good shape." **https://www.ibagarihotel.com/**

It's Worth Learning to Dry-Suit Dive

Iceland diving is indeed unique, and reader Ryan M. Neely (Akeley, MN) hired guide Sigurdur Haraldsson from **Ice Dive** in Iceland to take him to Silfra and ocean dives. "We saw a ton of jellyfish, and starfish, and soft spongy corals, and a cousin to the scorpionfish, a curious seal, even a nudibranch, and dived several freshwater lakes. Kleifarvatn, where there's some hot springs activity, and Silfra (of course), and Davidjá (still a crater, but at the bottom of a lake). Lots of massive freshwater trout here." It's quite the diving (and land) adventure, so

if you're interested in Iceland, you can read Ryan's full report here. **https://tinyurl.com/46b3dy67**

Lahaina is Coming Back

Dive Maui is open for business on Front Street in downtown Lahaina, reports Jeff Robertson (Roseville, CA), who gave them a go in September. "They have a specially designed ridged inflatable boat (RIB) or selected shore dives of no more than four divers. I chose a shore dive at the Mala Pier, led by instructor Abbey. Corals are growing on the old sunken concrete beams and schooling reef fish abound. We saw several resting white-tip reef sharks and so many turtles I couldn't count. The place is a huge cleaning station for them. It was incredible. Maximum depth was barely 30 feet, so we had a long, relaxing dive." If you want to support Lahaina's recovery, here's your chance. **https://goscubadivemaui.com/**

Dive with the Ghost of Nero

Joe Simmons (New Braunfels, TX) is a retired professional archeologist with more than 1000 dives. He joined a group in August in Italy to make six dives, the deepest 42 feet, on "sunken Roman Imperial Villas in Baia – the Las Vegas of the ancient Roman world from the first century BC until the third century AD. Visibility generally ranged from 20 feet down to 10 feet or slightly less. However, the uniqueness and historical importance of what we looked at were far more impressive than the visibility. The guides uncovered and then recovered intricate Roman mosaics or wall footings, column bases, toppled walls, and even exposed natural hot springs. The sheer impact of diving on Emperors Claudius, Caligula, and Nero's nymphaeum and bath complexes, seafront villa ruins of a patrician involved in a foiled assassination plot against Nero, and areas of the ancient harbor entrance underwater since the fourth century AD was truly gob-smacking!" **https://www.subaia.com**

Solomon Islands Liveaboard Alternative

In this month's travel story on the Solomons, our undercover writer noted that the *Bilikiki* is an aging graft without many of the comforts found in other liveaboards. An alternative is the **Solomon Master**. Jeffery Lynn Reeb (La Canada, CA) was aboard in September and reports. "I'm well aware that the vessel's reputation in the past has been less than stellar, but it has changed hands recently and undergone a retrofit. The new owner (Mark Shandur of Master Liveaboards) greeted us during the boarding process and explained that the vessel is back under their management/ownership and they are focused on turning the operation around. I found the vessel clean, everything worked, the food was excellent (the Chef worked previously on the *Bilikiki*), and the dive operations were a 10. There were 14 crew for 14 divers. I couldn't lift a finger." You can find his full report on our website and his video and photos at **https://flic.kr/s/aHBqjBKrEq** **https://masterliveaboards.com/solomons**

So, fellow divers, keep your reader reports coming. We and all *Undercurrent* subscribers look forward to reading about your dive trips.

– *Ben Davison*

Would You Dive Alone? Part I

many subscribers would, and many won't

Dive training agencies stress the importance of the buddy system, which is not two divers in the same ocean but two divers staying together and paying attention to each other.

However, if you ask divers about the buddy system, many will say that you dive with a buddy because they are there to help should you get into trouble. Few mention that you are there to help your buddy.

One of our subscribers, the former owner of a dive store, Rich Gallagher (San Rafael, CA), emphasized this in his response to our recent email to subscribers, asking if they dive solo.

"By diving alone, one is not responsible for taking care of one's buddy, so one can relax and enjoy the dive without constantly watching for and monitoring another's remaining air, buoyancy control, depth, anxiety level, etc. I think [the] evidence indicates that it is a mistake to assume your buddy will be able to help much in an emergency. To do so, they have to stay close at all times during the dive to promptly spot a problem and be skilled enough to diagnose it and respond quickly and correctly."

Yet, many people are critical of solo diving, and another subscriber, Adrian Hill (Nepean, Ontario), notes that their preparation often falls short of what they need even if they dive with a buddy.

"It astonishes me how many sport divers criticize the very concept of solo diving while engaging in practices I would never consider: having no dive plan

or knowledge of the site; failing to buddy-check all gear and air; wandering far from my dive buddy; not knowing remaining bottom time or gas; diving into deco; failing to monitor my buddy; popping to the surface with no surface marker; and failing to know the name of the dive boat and what it looks like!"

When we asked subscribers who tend to be experienced divers if they ever dive alone, we weren't sur-

DEMA Working Hard To Pass The Dive Boat Act

The Dive Equipment & Marketing Association (DEMA) is actively supporting a bill before Congress, the "Small Passenger Vessel Liability Fairness Act." The act creates a new class of vessels and removes them from liability protection under an old law.

The old law, the Limitation of Liability Act (1851), was designed to protect American shipping. One of the main sections limited claims to the vessel's value and its cargo, but a sunken boat is of no value beyond what it is insured for. When the *Conception* burned in 2020, killing 33 divers and a crew member, the law limited the families of the deceased to what their compensation was in maritime disasters. Owner Glenn Fritzer filed a suit to invoke this law, freeing him of any personal obligation to the families other than what they might receive from his $5 million insurance policy, most of which was used to salvage the burned hull. The law's roots go back to when the shipping industry couldn't obtain insurance, and the government needed marine commerce, so the law was to keep owners in business should there be a tragedy with the loss of a sailor's life.

After the Conception incident, Congress sought better compensation for victims' families and passed the Small Passenger Vessel Liability Fairness Act, which requires owners of small passenger vessels to be held legally responsible for damages in future boating accidents and incidents, regardless of the boat's value. They cannot limit their liability to the vessel's value and will be held liable for all losses arising from a maritime casualty. The act applies to craft under 100 gross tons and carrying not more than 49 passengers on an overnight domestic voyage and less than 150 passengers on any voyage not an overnight domestic voyage. It also has the effect of requiring updated safety standards for day boats providing scuba diving.

DEMA believes the act had the unintended consequence of increasing insurance premiums. In a press release, DEMA says members have reported insurance price increases 2 to 5 times higher than last year due to the increased liability under the SPVA.

Tom Ingram told *Undercurrent*, "In Florida, we know of an operator that saw a $160,000 increase in their store and vessel liability coverage. They are now paying nearly 10% of their annual cash receipts on insurance. Another Florida operator reported a $25,000 increase for his two vessels –more than double what he paid last year. An operator in Hawaii reported an $85,000 increase over their previous premiums, and a dive and travel store with no vessels in Washington, DC reported a $40,000 increase." Those are hefty increases, but one can pin it all on the Small Passenger Vessel Liability Fairness Act, especially if an operator has no boats. Liability insurance premiums are being raised for every business.

Of course, Insurance increases will be passed on to divers, increasing their costs. DEMA also states that increased insurance costs could lead to less funds for maintenance and safety issues aboard scuba diving vessels.

In coordination with insurance actuators, DEMA devised a bill that would modify certain aspects of the SPVA, including removing day boats from the SPVA and restoring their place in the Limit of Liabilities Act.

Ingram says that "the DIVE BOAT Act changes would provide significant relief." It would:

Reduce the lookback period for claims from two years to one year for liveaboards (overnight vessels), which is more in line with how insurance premiums are assessed. (Up from the historic period of six months).

Remove "dayboats" from the types of vessels subject to heightened liability standards – reverting them back to the same standards as all other vessel operators, e.g., sport fishing and tow boats. "

In a follow-up, Tom Ingram told *Undercurrent*, "The Dive Boat Act would still hold overnight operators to higher standards but return day boat operators, which continue to operate at the heightened USCG safety standards (that DEMA also supported) with much-needed insurance premium relief and put them on a level playing field with other U.S. small vessel operators. Otherwise, the Dive Boat Act does not alter any compensation a victim or their family would be entitled to at a trial."

The efforts of DEMA have some traction, and a bill has been introduced to modify the act. The act should help stabilize the cost of U.S. diving.

– *Charles Davis*

prised that so many responded that they do indeed dive solo despite it being a contentious subject. During open water certification training, buddy diving is presented as a hard-clad diving rule. In turn, most resort dive operations insist upon divers having a buddy (though

Many divers never took a solo diving certification course and developed their self-sufficiency skills with experience

"staying with the group" is their variation of the rule). Liveaboards are much more likely to allow solo diving, especially if one is certified. Indeed, our responses clearly show solo diving is more widespread than one might believe. In fact, just about every dive one makes may have some solo aspect.

Subscriber Thomas Hemphill (Vancouver, WA) put solo diving in perspective for us. He suggests four ways divers may find themselves solo diving:

- Solo diving by accident. It is very common in limited visibility and even more so when divers are focused on finding and composing subjects to photograph or video or gathering seafood.
- Solo diving by misinterpretation. A buddy pair in clear water with 150-foot visibility or better, at a depth of 50 feet, and diving 80 feet apart might not fit the term "buddy diving."
- Solo diving by necessity. During an open water class, a beachmaster/safety diver is expected to gear up and get to a distressed diver. Or a working diver who is in water conditions that are shallow and not risky, such as cleaning a boat hull.
- Solo diving by choice. Sometimes, being alone underwater is great meditation. It certainly has been for me many times. Divers simply choose to dive alone. In warm water, there's no need for a buddy to zip up your dry suit, so you can go it all alone.

Solo Diving by Choice

Most of our responsdents emphasized that they solo-dived by choice; they were self-sufficient divers who enjoyed being alone without another diver to think about. Michael Amico (Dana Point, CA) encapsulated this feeling when he wrote, "I dive daily in the Philippines alone. Each morning, I make a wall dive, and depending on the tides, I will dive as deep as 160 feet. It's amazing to sit on the edge and relax and watch the fish go by … it's gotten to a point where I can look for my two familiar groupers and check in on them. I let people know where I'm going and about how long I will be there … I don't use a second tank, but I just got one and will start bringing it with me."

Adrian Vanderkroef (Newtown, CT) summed up what a lot of *Undercurrent* subscribers felt when he wrote, "The first time I saw Lloyd Bridges on Sea Hunt – when I was about six years old – I fell in love with the concept of scuba diving. He portrayed a high degree of self-sufficiency and pretty much always dove solo. Perhaps that was imprinted on me."

Solo Diver Certification

Many divers who wrote to us never took a solo diving certification course and developed their self-sufficiency skills with experience. After all, solo courses – also referred to as self-reliant courses – didn't become readily available until the 1990s and took a while to become popular. These courses emphasize that solo divers must carry an autonomous alternate air supply and other emergency gear.

Mary McCombie (New Haven, CT) told us, "I had been diving solo for about 15 years before I took the SDI solo certification course. I took it because I had heard that some resorts and liveaboards supported solo diving if you had the SDI certification. It was well worth it! I have been able to dive solo at Wakatobi and on Explorer Ventures boats. My favorite dive at Wakatobi was a 90-minute solo dive on the house reef, where I could be as OCD as I wished and stay in one place to look at something without someone tugging on my sleeve.

"I only dive solo without a rescue bottle when I go in on the house reef near our little house in Bonaire. I know that reef like the back of my hand, and my rule when I dive solo without a rescue bottle is the law of thirds. I am always back near the dock with 1000 pounds, after which I spend another 20 minutes puttering around in the shallows.

"The course actually taught this old dog a few new tricks. I had been an indifferent deployer of my SMB, and now I am skilled at doing it."

Robert Bodkin (Bremerton, WA) wrote, "My solo diving card was issued in 2011. I prefer to go solo. If I need a buddy to be safe, I should get additional training or otherwise provide the necessary additional safety, diving double 80s and generally a sling bottle of 50 percent Nitrox. If a diver needs me to be a buddy, then I am taking responsibility for not only myself, but an additional diver, and I do not want that responsibility."

Terry Feinberg (Gilroy, CA) wrote, "Self-reliant diver was probably the best cert course I've taken. I always

Another Liveaboard Lost in the Red Sea

The 30-meter liveaboard *Seaduction* sank last month in the far southern Egyptian Red Sea after its captain apparently disregarded severe weather warnings. The 18 diving guests and crew escaped from the boat, but most had to abandon their possessions and subsequently spent some eight hours adrift in small boats.

The incident occurred in the early hours of October 24, halfway through a charter trip out of Hamata. Most vessels, including liveaboards, were reported to have heeded warnings of stormy weather and high waves and stayed farther north in the more sheltered area of Sataya Reef.

Seaduction, however, had sailed on to Elba Reef near the border with Sudan, where the timber-hulled vessel is thought to have sprung a leak.

The boat had been chartered for the "deep south" trip by the Laval Subaqua Club in France. Two of the only four members who managed to save their passports returned to France and spoke about the incident to *France Info*.

Philippe Galodé said he had been dozing around 3 a.m. when his friend asked if he thought the boat was lying at a strange angle. "I went upstairs to see what was going on," he said. "According to the captain, everything was under control." Other guests later said they noted the list as early as 2:00 a.m.

"After half an hour, the boat started to shake very seriously," said ex-club president François Paillard. "We started to take out the life jackets, assuming that it was not going to get better, no matter what the captain said. Finally, we did what the captain did not do, which was to get ready to evacuate."

By 3:30 a.m., water had risen in the cabin, said Paillard. "We were all saved at the last minute – the boat was listing hard and then completely capsized. It was panic; everyone jumped into the water." The divers managed to don life jackets, but few had time to get dressed and retrieve passports, phones, cash, or other personal property.

Paillard commented that the 10 crew members had followed the captain's orders but were "not seasoned sailors."

The liveaboard carried two 5m RIBs, but there had been time to launch only one RIB and one of two lifeboats. Amid the strong waves, they had to bail continually to stay afloat.

The survivors spent eight hours adrift before a trawler spotted an orange lifeboat cover, brought the survivors on board, and provided them with clothes. They were later transferred to a naval patrol vessel that brought them ashore, where they were taken by bus to a hotel in Hurghada.

The 14 divers who had lost their passports and belongings were left waiting for the French consulate in Cairo to make the necessary arrangements to allow them to travel.

"The consul asked them to take steps immediately with their insurance companies, but they can't do anything," Nelly Leroux, speaking to *France Bleu*, said, "They have nothing left. My husband doesn't even have shoes on his feet. The trauma is still very significant – he just told me that he had flashbacks and that he couldn't sleep."

Claire Penard, the president of the dive club, said that the levels of bureaucracy involved had made the process challenging. "It's extremely hard," she said, "and the evacuation was particularly traumatic because we really thought we were going to die." *[divernet]*

dive with a second mask in a pocket. When I dive alone, I strap on a pony bottle for redundant air supply."

BRM (Seattle, WA) made an interesting comparison to hiking alone. "The training for technical diving is less about being saved by your buddy and more about saving yourself if a mishap [occurs] at depth . . . I had frequently gone backpacking into wilderness areas, often alone. This was before cell phones and before GPS. When alone in the mountains, with no other hikers and no way to communicate, then a broken ankle, an animal attack, or any serious injury and the solo hiker is just SOL with no assistance possible. As a result, I would hike with a heightened sense of awareness. Like solo diving, solo wilderness hiking is discouraged as very dangerous. But my motive for the solo hiking was the mental serenity or Zen-like experience, which comes from being alone for several days in beautiful mountain settings with no humans or other signs of civilization."

Rene Cote (Richmond, VA) wrote, "I get very frustrated by rushed dive guides, and so it's not uncommon for me to be trailing behind [a group]. I carry an SMB, a loud whistle, and a Nautilus emergency beacon. If pony bottles were always available, I would strap one on . . . I tried to convince one liveaboard company to let me dive solo (I'm PADI Self Reliant certified), but that company only recognizes SSI for solo diving . . . "

It seems to us that refusing to accept SSI solo training, but not PADI solo training, is quite unfair to a serious diver who did the required work to get a solo certi-

fication. John Miller, who runs Texas Dive Center and is a Solo/Self Reliant/Independent dive Instructor for PADI, SDI, and SSI, says, "I combined the standards of all three training agencies' Specialty Instructor Manual standards to train them, as each agency has different levels of standards for the certification.

"Some require navigation skills; some require a lot of demonstration of self-help skills; some are heavy on knowing both surface air consumption and RMV rates so the diver knows how to calculate the volume of needed gas in both the primary and backup cylinders. Some require you to carry an extra mask, while others just recommend it. One requires just two dives, while another requires three. My students must deploy a Delayed Surface Marker Buoy (DSMB) on all three dives from 30 feet after demonstrating various skills at a deeper depth. They have to monitor and record their gas consumption at different depths over time; they have to be able to switch to their 40 cu. ft. alternate cylinder within 30 seconds while maintaining the depth.

"Understanding the need to know what it takes to dive as a self-reliant diver, e.g., solo or independent of a dive buddy, takes great diving experience. It means checking and re-checking your equipment before entering the water, as there is no 'buddy check.' It means knowing your life support equipment is in top condition, and folks – there is no such thing as a safe dive. Therefore, we always need to follow the rules."

Two More Liveaboards Lost to Fire

On Wednesday, November 6, the wooden-hulled *MY Nouran* caught fire and sank at Daedelus Reef in the Red Sea. Passengers and crew were rescued by a nearby vessel but lost their possessions and passports.

On Thursday, November 7, the steel-hulled *MY Blue Voyager* was lost to fire in Hulhumale harbor in the Maldives in the early morning hours. No passengers were onboard and the crew escaped in their underwear.

MY. Blue Voyager

It's an epidemic of liveaboard disasters!

Clearly, earning certification as a solo or self-reliant diver requires significant training, emphasizing the details. But many divers who dive solo haven't been trained. We'll discuss that in the next issue.

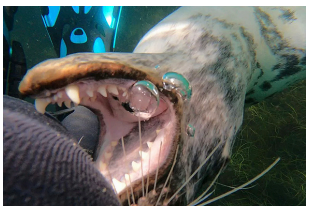
– John Bantin and Ben Davison

Flotsam & Jetsam

Octopuses Need Oxygen. Onlookers on the Monterey Bay wharf in California had an "incredible sighting" on October 28, when over the course of an hour, more than two dozen octopuses surfaced. While it was exciting for the onlookers, it might mean bad news for the octopuses, says Monterey Bay Whale Watch. "Due to the millions of anchovies that have been in the harbor for weeks depleting the oxygen supply, we think these beautiful cephalopods were seeking more oxygen at the surface!" Some were attacked and eaten by gulls and otters, but others managed to get away by releasing ink or submerging quickly, making "quite the sight" for those at the "right place at the right time," they posted on Facebook.

Where Did Milton-Affected Sharks Go? Storms will certainly displace sharks, and the shark tracking app Shark Tracker reveals Florida's sharks moved out of the way of Hurricane Milton. Sharks have been documented leaving the Tampa Bay area ahead of storms in the past, and a more recent paper showed that on Florida's east coast, sharks moved out of the way of the big storms when other marine life did not. So, where do sharks go? When a storm disrupts a shark's normal behavior, their goal is typically to get to deeper water, according to Greg Skomal of the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries. There is some variation by species, but particularly the smaller sharks go deep. (*Smithsonian Magazine*)

A Lucky Shot. While photographers can sit through an entire dive waiting for a unique shot, 26-year-old Lucy Manning just reacted spontaneously to get this photo of a grey seal about to bite her thigh. Diving around Lundy Island, in Devon, off the coast of England, she felt a seal nibble on her fin and quickly took this shot just as he was about to nip her. "There were loads of them floating about, and they're so playful. They're really cute, but they do have teeth." She said she was a bit scared but wasn't injured. (*Kennedy News and Media*)



Robotic Whale Shark Lands Chinese Aquarium in Hot Water. There were many reasons that visitors to Xiaomeisha Ocean World in China could be forgiven for grumbling: The high cost of admission, long queues, and the poor condition of the aquarium. But they were excited to see a mighty whale shark up close. Not so. Rather than exhibiting a real whale shark – which can grow up to 60 feet in length – guests were furious when the animal turned out to be a giant robotic replica. They noticed gaps in the torso, where parts of the robot had been joined together. We say, better a robot than a captive whale shark. **www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPwZyWKP5Lo**

Bird's Head Blog. Burt Jones and Maurine Shimlock report that new conservation strategies may soon bolster protection for Indonesia's Bird's Head Seascape's sharks and rays. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) recently named 122 Important Shark and Ray Areas in Asia, with 43 designated in Indonesia, including 12 in West Papua (the Bird's Head Peninsular) and Papua. **https://tinyurl.com/2fe84rpr**

Flying Needlefish are Dangerous. A 36-year-old Italian surfer was killed in a freak accident on October 18 in Indonesia's Mentawai Islands when a needlefish leapt from the water and impaled itself in her chest. Needlefish have a long, narrow beak filled with sharp teeth, can grow up to three feet long, and cruise just under the surface. Three years ago, we reported that "a 16-year-old girl jumped from the liveaboard *MY Keama* at Ari Atoll in the Maldives and collided with a needlefish. She was seriously injured when its needle-tip snout penetrated her neck and brain."

All for a Hearty Drink. The wreck of the *James R. Bentley*, a 170-foot-long schooner, has sat at 165 feet on the bottom of Lake Huron since 1878. In September, a team of divers descended to it just to collect a few scoops of the 30,000 bushels of rye the vessel carried. Chad Munger, the founder of Mammoth Distilling, bankrolled the venture, hoping to sprout the seeds and grow rye so he could recreate a classic old whiskey. The divers did collect the seeds, and Munger hustled them to Michigan State University, where scientists attempt to sprout them. After several weeks of various techniques, they remained dormant as ever, dashing Bentley's dreams of creating a whiskey like our forefathers sipped. (Carsa Giamo, *NY Times*)

Necessity is the Mother of Invention. Cozumel had problems with the amount of sargassum weed washing onto its beaches, so people there are testing the effectiveness of artificial reefs made of the weed combined with artificial coral made with algae. The project is part of a program run by the banking institution BBVA and the Riviera Maya Hotel Association.

A Fisherman Throws it Back. An unnamed fisherman in the Pelion region of Greece's Aegean coast, who found the body of a 74-year-old snorkeler in his nets and threw it back into the sea, has been found guilty of manslaughter. The snorkeler had been reported missing to the authorities the previous day. Instead of passing on news of his discovery, the fisherman had initially left the scene, Coast Guard officers told the court in the city of Volos. The body was later spotted 15 feet from shore.

When Hyperbaric Facilities Might Not Save Your Life. We recently wrote about two rebreather divers dying in Malta. One was conscious and happily gave a thumbs-up when he entered the recompression chamber. But he didn't survive. It turns out a senior consultant left only a junior trainee to monitor the recovery and then went home after instructing the trainee to maintain phone contact with him and to avoid making independent major decisions. Still, something went wrong. The consultant apparently misdiagnosed the diver's condition over the phone, suspecting oxygen toxicity rather than DCI, and he received excessive nitrogen, exacerbating his DCI. The consultant could face a prison sentence of up to four years and a hefty fine if found guilty of involuntary manslaughter.

Lost and Found. When *Undercurrent* subscriber Ken Kurtis visited the Atlantis Resort in Dumaguete, Philippines, he inadvertently left behind a little portable luggage scale he was rather fond of. Luggage scales are useful to traveling divers who are inevitably near baggage weight restriction limits. That was before the COVID epidemic. When he returned on a trip in September this year, more than four years later, it was waiting for him. It's the small things that make the difference. Kudos to the people at Atlantis Resorts.

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