

Montego Bay, Jamaica:

Red Stripe Beer and Reggae Music Beat the Diving

Jamaica is a fascinating country, Montego Bay a good resort town and an unusual place to visit. But, if you're an experienced diver seeking uncommon underwater action, you'll be better off traveling elsewhere. Diving in and around Montego Bay is for the novice who wants to gain confidence, for vacationing divers seeking a broad tourist experience, and for those island-hopping along Delta Airlines Triangle fare route (see p. 7).

During the last couple of years I've had a couple of dozen tanks around Montego Bay. With one day's exception it's always been 40-70 feet visibility and soupy at that. Locals say you can expect this visibility up to half the year. I've not seen it much better.

Fish? The variety is surprisingly limited and the numbers of each species seem much less than in other Caribbean spots. Wrasses, hinds and conies are common, and I have enjoyed more aggressive damsel fish per square coral head than just about anywhere. For the novice, the underwater life provides an adequate tropical starter. If you're ready, however, for more than just a beginner's excursion, you'll be hard pressed to find it here, with the chartered dive boats. On the last five day foray, I spotted one green moray--however huge--a 3 foot barracuda--an uncommon sight in these waters--four rock beauties, one angel fish, a large puffer, and little else unique. This, friends, is disappointing diving.

Coral is everywhere and sponges are abundant near and over the drop off, but better in Negril, 50 miles to the SW. Most varieties are available (including large pillar coral off the Chalet Caribe hotel) but somehow the colors in Jamaican waters seem to lack the splendor often seen elsewhere. Negril has bushel-sized basket sponges, and over the edge in MoBay are tube sponges the size of elephant trunks. Annoying fire coral is around, but not in painful excess.

Scuba Jamaica (PO Box 469, Montego Bay) ... Within walking distance from many hotels, it is located on the edge of the tourist strip, 20 yards off the

INSIDE UNDERCURRENT

For the Underwater Photographer:
Contests and Cash.....p. 7

Triangle Air Fares: *A Caribbean
Side Trip*.....p. 7

Diving Novels: *Getting Close to
Nature in Widowmaker Cave*....p. 8

Camera Deals at the Caribbean
Freeports: *Spend Your Money
on Perfume*.....p. 8

Recalling Faulty Diving Equipment:
The System Needs Improvement..p. 9

Goody Bagp. 10

main highway. They make regularly scheduled boat dives at 8:30 am, 11:00 and 2:00 pm. Make reservations during the winter or you may find yourself snorkeling from the beach; in the summer you may be the only paying customer, but the guide will still take you. One tank is \$12.50 (all figures US), \$19.30 for two. After a single morning dive I returned unexpectedly for an afternoon dive and planned to pay the one tank rate again. Instead I was only charged an additional \$6.60 for the second tank for the day. That's good business. But, David Heath, the affable English owner seems to be a good businessman, given his extensive advertising and package program and well organized and prompt operation, a rarity in some Caribbean waters.

Before paying, I was required to show my C-card. Had I been without it, a pool checkout would have been mandatory. Freddy, the Jamaican divemaster, whose black hair had been reddened by long hours of sunshine, gave us a 10 minute boat ride to the reef. We anchored and Freddie methodically ran through and repeated the hand signals, then said that he would tell us what to touch when underwater. He never asked my experience or that of the other diver aboard (a highly experienced American), but then many divers are afraid to admit what they have forgotten, so Freddy never gave us the chance.

After the lecture we fell backwards into the water, sunk quickly to 60 feet and Freddy immediately directed us into Widomaker Cave, an ordinary tunnel about 40 feet long, hardly enough to name a dive spot after. We entered without a bottom checkout or shared ok sign, a precaution he should have taken, particularly after the excessive surface exercise.

Getting close to nature
in Widomaker Cave
See page 8

The remainder of the dive was standard Jamaican--60 foot visibility, small reef fish, coral, sand, and a couple of beer bottles without sufficient growth to make them worth collecting. The only unique sights were an 18 inch puffer with enormous soulful eyes and an iridescent anemone and its symbiotic shrimp which willingly posed for my macro lens. A good guide, Freddy kept a close eye on his followers. He insisted, however, that we touch the things that he wanted us to, insisting with such vigor that I felt guilty not touching the sponges he pointed out. His pedantry was annoying.

In the afternoon dive a young couple joined who, after a single pool lesson, had their first ocean dive the day before and now strapped on their tanks for the third time in their lives in preparation for an 80 foot dive. Once under, Freddy led them very closely, often by hand, holding the attractive lady's far more than her male companion's. Although there is reason to be critical of a professional dive shop permitting 80 foot ocean dives, the third time people have a regulator in their mouths (whether the couple gave the shop the same recount of their experience as they gave me I do not know), Freddy seemed competent and cautious and his pupils were mature and properly respectful of the ocean and the sport. Yet

On both dives Freddy's judgement was that we should take five at ten, however, on each dive he rose to decompress without signalling. I spotted him hanging in a school of fish and although I believed I was well within the limits decided to join him. Next time, Freddy, use those hand signals! You have a responsibility to your charges.

Chalet Caribe Hotel (PO Box 365, Montego Bay) ... Located 6 miles West of downtown MoBay, diving here is a breeze. With full gear you snorkel out along a trail marked by a rope tied to coral heads. It's 150 yards to the drop off where a wall drops from 40-120 feet. The compressor is on the beach, but the

main dive shop is across the road at the hotel where you'll have to show your C-card if you do not want to be checked out in the pool. The day we planned to take our guided dive trip we arrived at 1pm without reservations and were told that Tony, the guide, had gone to town. The time of his return was unknown and no one present could provide us with tanks. We would come to dive another day, but without a guide.

A few months back I made three dives with Tony. My buddy and I found that he attended to his followers, but the dives were very common. The main fault lies with the reef, but Tony made no effort to help us experience the unique. Tony got cold quickly and once hurried us to finish our dive. For unexplainable reasons I feel more comfortable with Freddy.

The basic problem of the Chalet Caribe is the quality of the reef, which is the basic problem of all Montego Bay diving. On this day, the visibility was 30-40 feet, while across the bay, where Scuba Jamaica dives, the visibility was 50 feet. It clouded over and rained this afternoon; across the bay the weather was not so severe, which, I've been told, is often the case. Fish are small and the varieties common. I saw a couple of three foot trumpet fish and had once before photographed an 18 inch turtle. But that's it, folks. I do enjoy, however, the schools of blueheads and other reef fish who have come to recognize the diver extracting his knife and rush over to urge a sea urchin lunch.

Boat dives are available at the same rates as Scuba Jamaica, but in the past I had trouble getting the guides to take us farther than half-a-mile down the same reef. A couple of divers in the hotel said the problem hadn't been resolved. I've since concluded, however, that boat dives are of little value here. From the Chalet Caribe to MoBay the reef is similarly unexciting.

Coral and sponges are nicer here than in MoBay and the famed giant pillar is found less than 100 yards from shore. But, one giant pillar coral does not make a dive resort.

The Sundowner (PO Box 5, Negril)...
50 miles SW of Montego Bay (at least 90 minutes by car). You'll find better diving here. The visibility tends to be better, perhaps half again as good as MoBay, and the fish more plentiful. I arrived at 9:30 for the scheduled 10 am dive, but the boat didn't get underway until 11 because we waited for two locals who never showed. The dive shop has a 39 foot twin diesel (it looked more like 33 feet), the largest dive boat on the island. It can hold 20 divers. Since it had been out of commission for a week, we took the banana boat, a 16 footer whose name describes it perfectly. The shop-owner was in New York, I was told, and the divemaster wanted to repair a sailboat, so a young assistant took the helm. His name escapes me, as did his skill, but I can report that he was the first one in the water and the first one out, returning to the boat without so much as a hand signal for his departure. I spent five minutes looking for him until I surfaced to see his legs draped over the edge of the boat while he snoozed.



Murky photograph? No. Murky water. 30 ft. visibility at the Chalet Caribe reef. Locals say it's this soupy as many as 30 days a year, but two-thirds of the year the visibility is 70 ft. or so, and there are better days. Plenty of varieties of sponges, coral and gorgonians, but where are the fish? They're around, but are small commoners. Give Montego Bay a low rating as a Caribbean dive spot.

Today's dive was nearly a mile from shore, one of several dive spots in either direction from the hotel. A full day's dive trip can include a distant wreck. We saw several deadend caves filled with schools of squirrel fish and other night trippers. Hundreds of upside down swimming purple and gold fairy bassets, for curious reasons, had caves all to themselves. During the dive a three foot barracuda kept an evil eye on us and I even spotted an angel fish, the first I've seen on a commercial tour in Jamaican waters. The 80 foot visibility was the best of the trip, making the underwater hues of Negril more vivid than Montego Bay. It was nice diving, the depths never exceed 50 feet and even though we were guideless, novices would have felt comfortable in the lazy waters.

Sea Crabs (Chatham Hotel, Montego Bay)...Sea Crabs is located just an air-blast away from Scuba Jamaica. A local diver told me that Stanley, the main man at the dive shop, is one of the top divers around. I've no way of verifying that since I made three calls on his shop only to find the door wide open but no one of authority in sight. A hotel employee explained that his boat was down, and since parts are so difficult to get in Jamaica there was no telling when it would be running again. I was not depressed, since I was certain Stanley would cover the same reefs as the others. But, then maybe Stanley knows something the others don't. Sorry Stanley, see you some other time.

Holiday Inn and the Reef Hotel....Located 6 miles east of Montego Bay, both have dive boats. After a talk with local divers and beach boys at the Holiday Inn, I decided to forego the Holiday and try the Reef, 100 yards away. The Holiday Inn mainly serves the tourist, noncertified diver, taking them 250 yards out to 50 feet of water. I was told they would be happy to take out experienced divers, but the \$22.75 tab for a single tank quickly dissuaded me. At the Reef, Ralph, the young Jamaican owner whose skill was touted by the locals, charged \$17.25 for a single tank, still too high, but I just had to get into the water. After I anted up, I learned that Lee, the assistant would be the guide. We put out to sea in a rickety glass bottom boat which Lee's 16 yr. old brother had to bail before we could embark, and should have bailed before we returned. Lee was a kid, not much of a guide, and an uncertified diver to boot (as are many local guides). He marveled at the inflator hose connecting my BC to my tank; it was the first he'd seen. The equipment he provided the other American on board was poor. He even failed to bring a BC or snorkeling vest for him. One regulator did not have a seaweave gauge (nor did the tank have a J-valve) so Lee handed that one to the American, saying that he himself needed the gauge to keep tabs on how well the American's air supply held out. The American shrugged his shoulders, so I objected for him. "Lee should use less air than any of us since he dives daily," I said. "The American should get the gauge." Lee frowned, but handed it over.

NEWS FLASH

On June 6, Navy Diver Bill Rhodes set a new deep diving record of 1,148 feet, breaking the old record of 1,010 ft. Diving 70 miles SW of Panama City, Florida Rhodes, along with two Americans and an Englishman, twice descended beyond 1,000 feet in the Personnel Transfer Capsule, an integral component of the Navy's Mark One Deep Dive System. Each diver, outfitted in heated suits, remained tethered to the capsule via individual life support systems which provided a breathing mixture of 98% helium and 2% oxygen. Upon completion of the dives, they remained in decompression for 11 days. According to public information officer Lt. Commander K. E. Galkin, in a telephone interview with *Undercurrent*, "the divers emerged in fine shape. There were no problems."

Unfortunately, the bottom was no different than Montego Bay, so I surfaced with 500 lbs. of air, bored for one of the few times in my diving life. Lee

had already run out, a further measure of his qualifications. As I learned later, Lee was on commission: \$1.15 for every diver he recruits.

Over a beer, Ralph, the owner, told me that a couple of days ago he and his friends speared two 150 lb. groupers over the drop off. His buddy, had speared a 700 lb. jewfish the day before that. He may have been telling the truth, even though I've never seen anything larger than 2 lbs in these waters, but don't expect his boat or any other to take you there.

Chalet Caribe packages.... The Chalet Caribe is almost exclusively a divers hotel, and a nice one at that. Winter doubles rent at \$28 (\$22 in the summer) and one bedroom with kitchen is \$38 (\$30 in the summer). They have 4 and 7 day packages for divers, but forget them. You save nothing. They simply add the cost of each component (hotel room, diving, etc.) and our figures indicate they may even charge a little extra for their trouble. If you insist on going to Montego Bay, avoid the Chalet Caribe package and pay only for what you do. Most likely you will not want guided diving after the first day and since the package includes breakfast and dinner, you will not be able to sample the fine restaurants in town. 7 days of diving at the Chalet Caribe is far too many (you may want to stay and dive elsewhere) and since there is no savings on the 4 day package, remain flexible.

Treasures.... The food is good, although slightly high priced, but not as high as many other Jamaican restaurants....last I saw there was no complete native meal on the menu, but with 24 hours notice they prepared us a great spread, including bread, fruit, akee and fish, curried goat, etc. ... diving is 50 yards from the rooms and you and your buddy can go out when ever you feel moved....snorkeling is as good as you'll find in the area....prices are lower than places of comparable quality....the hotel is small, charming and spotless. Traumas....the hotel is across the highway from the water and has no beach whatsoever (a garage-sized area is filled with sand for sunning)....small children cannot play in the water because the sea urchins and coral heads live and die a couple of baby steps from water's edge....afternoons frequently appear stormy and brief hard rains are not uncommon, making unlimited diving unattractive....off season the hotel is so dead you may be the only ones registered....being 6 miles from downtown, you need transportation to get to other restaurants....diving is acceptable, nothing more.

Scuba Jamaica packages....6 hotels are offered, but winter package rates are roughly 25% higher than comparable accommodations at the Chalet Caribe and again you receive no advantage over purchasing the components separately. Forget the package and keep your options open; besides, 2-3 days of diving with Scuba Jamaica is plenty.

Treasures....If you insist on a package, the hotels offered (except the Ironshore and the Palm Beach) are in the heart of the tourist area, making restaurants and activities easily accessible....packages ensure diving reservations. Traumas....aside from the Montego Bay Club, the hotels offered are not distinctive....the tiny beaches in the Montego Bay tourist area are as crowded in the winter as Coney Island in the summer....snorkeling is poor.

Sundowner....Less expensive, more relaxing. Winter doubles are \$55; \$40 in the summer, including breakfast and dinner. 2 tanks a day adds \$17 a person. You need a car to get here or, when you make reservations, specify ground transportation and the hotel will arrange it for about \$6/person. The best beach on the island awaits you and the setting is superbly romantic. Again, forget the dive packages. They're no special deal. Plan according to your own needs. For dive clubs, there's plenty of room, but pray they keep the big boat running.

Treasures....the beach is incredible, the water very warm....the food is good and reasonable....for \$2.25 (or a 1/2 mile swim, if you prefer) you can be boated to a tiny island where the snorkeling is ok and since you'll be the only ones present, skinny dipping ain't so bad either. Traumas....you must have a car if you want to get around, even to the few eating places in Negrilthere are no phones....for snorkeling the underwater terrain is without fish or coral until you reach the island.

Best Bet in and around Montego Bay....

There are a score of better dive spots in the Caribbean, but if you have chosen the Montego Bay area, the Sundowner is easily the best bet. No matter what criteria are used, however, compared to the other spots and shops reviewed here it is 10-20% better on all counts. If you are a romantic couple wanting solitude, unspoiled private beaches and occasional easy and ordinary diving, you've discovered a beautiful spa. If you are well traveled, experienced divers looking for underwater excitement, you will probably be disappointed.

Local joints....Hugo's Hut on Montego Bay hotel row is worth a cold Red Stripe, that first rate Jamaican beer. Hugo himself will spin stories, particularly if an attractive lady is at the table. He stores his Red Stripe in buckets of ice and keeps his rum bottles on shelves nailed to a tree trunk. Few tourists wander in, but Jamaicans looking for conversation do. I've had some good talk here, including a rap with a local on the last trip who explained that Jamaicans never swim during or after storms because the sharks and other denizens of the deep flock to the shores. The food is ample and at \$2.85 you get Kingfish or chicken in a slightly peppery tomato sauce, accompanied with salad and peas and rice (actually black beans and rice, a Jamaican specialty). This is no place for gourmets, but it will get you and your budget through the night. And, if you're looking for local contact, this is as good a place as any.

The Pelican Grill, in the heart of the tourist area, has the plastic decor of a Chinese restaurant in McAlester, Oklahoma, and a menu which is graphically not unlike Denny's, yet serves up a hearty Jamaican fare at easy prices. The curried goat (\$4.00), a little too bony but very tasty, filled me after two afternoon dives, which is quite a complement. I began with a local vegetable soup so thick rocket fins couldn't propel you through a tub of it. Try the potato pudding; it'll surprise you!

For dining in class, try Admiral Nelson's and its seafarin' motif, the Townhouse, and especially the Calabash, if only for its incredible night view of Montego Bay, the Bach background music and the feeling of being among the ruling class. Aside from the hotels, the Little Inn and the China Doll are OK places for lunch.

Divers Compass....Hertz, Avis and National have nearly identical rates; Jamaican Car Rentals is \$10/wk less for a compact (\$105 plus gas), but the airport counterman did the Ali Shuffle on our bill and tried to convert the cheaper US currency to higher Jamaican, a \$15 hustle.... Better yet, rent from local outfits near the hotels (Indio, Northern, etc.); they're cheaper and you can reduce the cost an additional 10% by clipping the discount coupon from the tourist guide Focus on Jamaica available at hotels....bring your wet suit top because many people get chilled at the end of their dives....Jamaica has heavy penalties for ganja users, but most Jamaicans scoff at the laws and peddle openly; regardless, if you partake, leave your smoke dreams at home....you need a birth certificate, passport or suitable ID for arrival and reentry....Jamaican laws say no coral

can be taken home, but we've never heard of anyone being hassled at customs.... take only dead chunks please....shelling is lousy....it's impossible to find new equipment or to get many kinds of repairs; have your gear in first class shape; you will not find fin straps, high pressure hoses, Nikonos O rings, and the likefilm is up to 40% higher than in the States; highspeed Ektachrome is hard to find, so bring all you need....Holiday Inn swings at night....seas are calm, so you can forget the seasick pills....

No effort has been made to review diving in Ocho Rios (70 miles east of MoBay) on this trip; we'll pick that up later. (C.C. July 2, '75)

For the Underwater Photographer: *Contests and Cash*

Two weeks of diving in the *British Virgins* await the first prize winner of the BV Islands photocontest; second prize is a week of diving. Closing date is July 31. For details, write airmail to George Marler; Box 108, Road Town, Tortola, British Virgin Islands. Or, send a self-addressed envelope to UNDERCURRENT and we'll send you a copy of the entry form. Categories include prints, slides, novice and fresh water . . . *International Divers Guide* will pay \$250 for the photo selected for its next cover and \$10 for black and white shots used inside. For details pick up the IDG at your dive shop (many dive shops have yet to stock this; they ought to get on the stick; it's a valuable publication) or write to IDG, PO Box 1889, Winter Park, Florida. Price is \$6.95 . . . *Saturday Review* will be sponsoring a bicentennial photo contest in which we would expect few underwater shots. A creative theme (consider 18th century

wrecks or the Japanese Aircraft in Truk Lagoon) might surprise. We'll pass on the details as soon as we get them . . . *Sierra Club* sponsors several good dive trips each year and now they are paying \$250 for a cover shot selected from photos from any of their outings. They also encourage formation of local Sierra Club dive units. For outing information write Sierra Club, 1050 Mills Tower, San Francisco, Ca., 94104. Membership is \$15/yr, plus a one-time only \$5 initiation fee . . . *Skin Diver* pays \$100 for cover shots and up to \$35 for inside page photos. Write first, telling them what you have; enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope: Skin Diver, 8490 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, Ca. 90069 . . . *Oceans Magazine* pays up to \$75 for black and white and \$100 for color. Enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope and a letter stating what you have. Oceans, 125 Independence Drive, Menlo Park, Ca. 94025.

Triangle Air Fares: *A Caribbean Side Trip*

With this issue we are beginning a series to help you get the lowest airfares possible to the best dive areas. There are as many plans as there fish on a reef, but we'll explain the best bets so that you can get the best prices. This month *two basic triangle fares*.

The Florida/Caribbean/Mexican Triangle . . . Sounds like a love affair and it will be if you can take advantage of it. The basic requirement is that you must fly (at standard fare) between the East and West coast, that is between Los Angeles or San Francisco, and New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington or Miami. Once such a trip is on your itinerary for a few extra dollars you can cover a number of other dive spots in the Caribbean.

Suppose, for example, you're flying midweek between Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. For \$26 over the standard fare of \$356 you can stop in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and in Montego Bay, Jamaica. Once in Puerto Rico you might decide to fly to any of the chain of islands stretching from the US and British Virgin Islands (\$32 roundtrip from San Juan to St. Thomas), south to Trinidad and Tobago. Delta Airlines hosts this trip.

Flying between any of the aforementioned eastern cities (plus Boston) and San Diego or Los Angeles? It's only \$5 over the standard fare to stopover in Miami via National Airlines. From \$5 to \$21 more you can stopover in Miami on a trip between Las Vegas or San Francisco and the east. Of course, Miami is a short rental car ride to the Florida Keys or a skip and a hop to the Bahamas.

Another Delta-sponsored trip takes you between San Francisco (\$407) or Los Angeles (\$397) and any of these diving meccas; Miami, Nassau, Bahamas, Grand Cayman, Merida Mexico (from Merida it's \$35 round trip to Cozumel!), or Mexico City (it's \$44 round trip between Mexico City and Acapulco!). In addition, you are required to stop in Jamaica, either Kingston or Montego Bay. If you wish, New Orleans can be one of the stops in your itinerary, but you must complete the trip in 21 days.

Hawaii/Alaska . . . You must be headed to Alaska to take advantage of this one. Fly Western to Alaska out of any of the major West Coast cities and for \$25 over the standard fare (only \$5 extra from San Francisco) you can spend up to 120 days in Hawaii. The same holds from Dallas, Minneap-

olis, New Orleans and Dallas, and from Atlanta its \$80 extra.

Organizing the trip . . . Call the sponsoring airlines at their local number and ask for information and fares on their triangle (some call it "circle") flights. Get the same information from your travel agent, but only after you have gotten the airlines quote. Travel agents sometimes err (keeping up with the rates is quite a chore) and so do airlines personnel; they need to be checked against each other. We called five travel agents for the Delta triangle fares to the Caribbean. One quoted \$50 higher than the correct price and another claimed that the triangle fare did not exist until we explained it. Get the name of the person giving you the quote so when you are ready to get your ticket you can locate the original source should you have a problem.

If you don't live in the coastal states you may still save money if you take the triangle fare and make the trip between your home and say New York

as a side trip. Check the fare between your hometown, New York/San Juan and/or Montego Bay/San Francisco and your hometown. Then check the triangle fare originating and ending in New York and the round trip fare between your hometown and New York. That should tell you the cheapest way to fly.

We are still checking fares for the Bermuda Triangle, but find that airlines insist on one-way quotes and cash in advance—no charges, please.

NOTE: Excursion fares are significantly lower than the standard fares quoted here, but the standard fares have no restrictions (e.g., to use excursion fares a passenger is normally required to stay a minimum number of days at the primary destination). Standard fares are normally used by business persons for trips of short duration or for trips scheduled with short notice. We'll discuss excursion fares to major dive areas in the next issue.

Camera Deals at the Caribbean Freeports:

Spend your money on perfume

We have always heard that the best camera buys are to be found in the freeports of the world. After research and comparative shopping in the Caribbean we've learned, however, that most deals are not much better than those in your own backyard. Jamaica has some of the best freeport prices. In Montego Bay, prices vary from shop to shop (there's also room for negotiation) and are the lowest downtown, not at the Freeport Shopping Center where the tourist ships dock. Compared to St. Thomas, for example, prices are 10-15% lower. In Montego Bay, Harjani's Indian Palace sells the Nikonos II, with 35mm lens and case, for \$195 plus \$5 at customs for duty. At least two shops near the Holiday Inn sell it

without the case for \$185. A common price for the Hassleblad (500C/M w/Black 80 mm f2.8 Planar and A12 Magazine) is \$780, including duty, about the same price we can find it mailorder, delivered anywhere in the states. You can save a bit on strobes. The Vivatar 292, for example, is easy to find in Jamaica for \$75-80, while the best we can find it in the US, delivered, is \$88.

In the next few issues we'll tell you where to find the best deals on specific equipment. In the meantime, if you're freeport shopping save your purchases for the real deals: china, linen, perfumes and local art. Liquor, of course, is a steal.

Diving Novels: *Getting Close to Nature in Widowmaker Cave*

The definitive diving novel is yet to be written, but a hearty effort has been made by James Jones with *Go to the Widowmaker* (Dell Paperback). Writing in 1966, Jones, apparently a diver himself, produced several solid diving scenes, focusing on since-named Widowmaker Cave in Montego Bay, which is visited nearly daily by Scuba Jamaica. A meaty book, based on resurgent and reassertive masculinity of the characters, *Widowmaker* has one scene in which a diver discovers for himself a new way to get intimate with nature, only to find himself being watched by a peeping jewfish. Jones describes one side of MoBay living which, together with diving, makes the book worth a place in your suitcase if you're headed to the land of rum and coke . . .

Two other diving novels are unfortunately kicking around drugstore shelves this summer. *Assignment Sulu Sea* (Fawcett, 1964), a Sam Durell novel by Edward S. Aarons, has a sexy lady on the cover with a scuba tank in the background. That's a come-on, since diving gets a single paragraph mention (calls the tank an oxygen tank!). The book is a bore . . . *The Frogmen* by Robb White (Dell, 1975) has lengthy underwater mine defusing scenes, but the underwater environment is so underplayed that the frogmen might as well be defusing bombs in the Berkeley City Hall. Unless you must read everything in sight about diving and underwater demolition, skip this one too.

Recalling Faulty Diving Equipment:

The System Needs Improvement

Suppose you're at 100 feet and nearing the end of a long dive. To be on the safe side you decide to take a five minute decompression stop before leaving the water. You must begin your slow ascent now to ensure that you complete the dive safely. As you begin to rise you find that your BC, which is attached to your tank with an inflator hose, is filling with air without your help. You have to struggle to prevent rising too fast. You let out air, but still rise too quickly. You're able to grab the anchor rope to slow your ascent and to hold yourself steady at ten feet. Your personal exertion and your malfunctioning vest cause you to run out of air too rapidly to decompress the full five minutes, but you surface safely, although tired and scared. You wonder what happened, but since this is the last dive of the trip you won't worry about it until you get home. Then, safe at home, you forget the incident and put your equipment away for the next trip, unaware that you have an inherent fault in the inflator mechanism. No one told you it had been recalled last month by the manufacturer and, unless you ask the right people, you may never find out.

Fictitious? Yes. Possible? Certainly.

Last fall Watergill Co. learned that a plastic airway in their At-Pac (a diving system which includes regulator, backpack, buoyancy compensator and weights) could deteriorate causing the bag to fill slowly, yet unexpectedly. Watergill had used brass to manufacture the airway, but with rising brass costs switched to plastic. As soon as they discovered the problem they sought a different plastic for the airway but it was not until a Watergill executive used a Dow-Corning silicone spray on the airway and witnessed immediate deterioration did Watergill get a firm grasp of the problem.

In a candid telephone interview with *Undercurrent*, Watergill President Ronald E. Coleman spoke openly about the recall. As soon as the evidence was clear, Watergill acted fast, he said. They informed the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission. Letters explaining the problem were sent to all dive shops to tell them to discontinue using the spray and to have the airway replaced at Watergill expense. They issued a national press release. According to Coleman, *Skin Diver* and *Aquarius* published notification of the recall at no charge. Watergill mailed 60,000 notices to graduates of NASDS courses, hoping they would be a conduit for information to others. Obviously, Watergill worked hard to spread the word, but Coleman himself admits they could not possibly contact everyone who owned the At-Pac.

Watergill did the best it could but are they, or the dozens of other manufacturers of critical equipment,

able to create a better system for equipment recall? What if manufacturers have serious problems with regulators, valves and vests? Can they communicate to the diver before he hits the water next time?

Perhaps the basic flaw in the Watergill recall system was that *no* warranty or registration cards were issued with the At-Pac so Watergill had no record of the purchasers (Coleman says that they have since included warranty cards with the At-Pac). Therefore, the dive shops had the responsibility to contact the divers to whom they had sold the unit.

Undercurrent contacted 10 dive shops nationwide. Six had sold the At-Pac and the managers indicated that they had been able to locate their customers, mainly because they had sold only two or three units. What if a major regulator had been recalled, a regulator which hundreds of dive shops each had sold several dozen? Surely, it would be impossible for the dive shops to track down their customers. Four dive shops contacted had not carried the At-Pac. Managers of three had not heard of the recall and, therefore, were unable to advise divers about the problem.

The best solution to ensure that divers get the message lies with the warranty card. Nearly all companies which manufacture a product with some potential danger for the user—automobiles, microwave ovens, and regulators—provide some sort of registration card. The system, however, is inadequate. Not only must the purchaser respond, but he must first locate the card. It is not uncommon for products intended to have warranty cards to arrive in the hands of the purchaser without the card. As an example, a friend of *Undercurrent* recently purchased a Scubapro decompression meter in a Washington, D.C., dive shop and upon later inspection found no warranty card. A brief note to the shop brought a response indicating that they could find no card. Unless the diver took it upon himself to write a letter to Scubapro *asking* to be registered, Scubapro would have no record of the purchaser and therefore could not contact him should a generic malfunction develop in the meter.

Although manufacturers claim that the purchaser must return the warranty card if he is to return the product for repair, the chances that the warranty registration will be checked are slim. In fact, for most manufacturers the cards are used to gather marketing data (that's why questions appear asking why you purchased the equipment or what type of advertising influenced you) and to build a mailing list for advertising. The upshot, then, is that the lists are often poorly established and maintained if, in fact, they are established at all.

What's the solution? It is not difficult. It is not costly.

First, every life-supporting piece of diving equipment should contain a warranty or registration card and the dive shops should have a supply on hand from each manufacturer to supply purchasers if the card is missing.

Second, rather than place the burden on the consumer to complete the card, the dive shop should collect the cards *at the time of purchase*. As an incentive, the dive shops can be rebated \$1 or more for every card returned. The \$1 rebate would not have to affect the retail price of the equipment because the manufacturer could simply raise his wholesale price by \$1 and then return that \$1 at the time the warranty card was submitted. Rebates after sales are not uncommon; it is a widespread practice in the automotive industry.

Third, manufacturers should carefully maintain their registration lists, if they do not already do so.

Finally, all dive shops and resorts should be contacted during a recall, even if they do not carry the equipment recalled. Visual displays should be made

available by the manufacturers so that divers browsing in shops are easily made aware of the problem.

Quality control among diving equipment manufacturers is probably no better or worse than among manufacturers of other technical equipment. They have a great responsibility, however, because of inherent dangers in the sport of scuba diving. Watgill performed responsibly and President Coleman is willing to speak candidly about the problem and how they worked to resolve it. Yet, one can, with a great degree of certainty, expect that serious problems will once again develop with other manufacturers' equipment, problems requiring immediate recall and notification of divers. Will the manufacturers be prepared?

We certainly hope so. The diving industry must work hard to keep ahead of well-meaning lawmakers who believe that government regulation is required to prevent unnecessary deaths. A major overhaul of each manufacturer's warranty, registration and recall system is one way to signal the government that the diving industry is indeed a step ahead.

Goody Bag:



Editor: I've got an enormous bushy moustache, but my mask leaks like hell around it. What can I do, besides shave it off. RS, Tiburon, Ca.

A coat of Vaseline on your stache will give you a good seal, but after 50 dives it destroyed the seal on one of our associates Scubapro wrap-around masks, which means you must carefully clean your mask after each dive. Best Bet is *Zip-Slip*, a silicone, anti-stick jell which in volume costs about 10 times as much as Vaseline, but will not ruin your mask or moustache, though three shampoos will be needed to get the hairs separated. Some dive shops have it or try food processing suppliers.

Editor: After my first week in the British Virgins my legs were covered with coral wounds. I photograph

and can't avoid the bumps. Any ideas? MS, Cleveland, Tenn.

If you don't want to wear a wet suit, get a pair of light cotton pajamas or a light synthetic jump suit from Penny's or Sears. Unless you hit the coral awfully hard, you'll be suitably protected and brushes against fire coral will go unnoticed. If you get scraped, the folk medicine is vinegar or meat tenderizer. It stings, but use it. Cover the scratches so the flies don't land and bring you more than you reckoned for. One buddy finds that the lymph nodes in her groin swell from the scratches. Everyone reacts differently and some problems beginning with coral poisoning can get serious. If you have any doubts, see your doctor.

Undercurrent welcomes questions or, if you know the answers send them along and we'll find someone to ask the questions. If you have a problem with any organization in the diving community and need help solving it, let us hear from you. If it's of general interest to the welfare of the diver, we'll do our best to lend a hand.

Correspondents located strategically in the major diving areas of the world as well as on all coasts and major inland waters of the continental U.S.

The editors welcome comments, suggestions and manuscripts from the readers of Undercurrent.