undercurrent®

THE PRIVATE, EXCLUSIVE GUIDE FOR SERIOUS DIVERS

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Grand Cayman Island, British West Indies

Where to stay, where to dive

Why in the world does every diver and his buddy have to go to Grand Cayman?

There are comparable walls elsewhere. Other islands have hotels just as suitable. Visibility can be just as good other places. But on Cayman I know that when I saunter up to a bar for a cold Heineken, the woman on my left and the fellow on my right are apt to be talking about the day's dive, not about the glass-bottom-boat cruise. There's comfort in knowing that the people hoisting rum punches in the afternoon were, in the morning, hoisting steel tanks. It's a diver's island. I'll return, that's for sure.

Last issue I wrote about my delightful stay at Spanish Bay Reef Hotel. During 12 days on Cayman I boarded at two other hotels and dived with other operations. Because of bad weather I couldn't arrange all the diving I wanted, but I could visit nearly every hotel and dive operation on the island. Compiled from interviews with divers at the hotels and shops and from correspondence from Undercurrent readers, as well as from my own responses, I offer the following impression of the diving and services on Grand Cayman.

My first stop was the Tortuga Club, which is located on a nice, undeveloped beach on the northeast tip of the island. I selected the Tortuga Club mainly because of a strange range of reviews from our readers. Some loved it, others deplored it. I would learn for myself.

Upon arrival, I learned immediately that the hotel was being sold; the new manager, Judy Gibson, was on hand to learn the business. Gibson seemed eager to learn, but she admitted to no prior experience. I puzzled over writing about a hotel in transition, but after four days I felt sufficiently disappointed to warn others. Hopefully, the new owners will take our words to heart and make the required changes.

The rooms were run down, way down. Although my room faced a lovely beach, the rusty chairs on the veranda ruined clothing I was wearing when I sat in them. The beds smelled musty. The sheets were torn. The quilt was filthy. The cockroaches were large. The toilet flushed poorly. Upon sitting, the seat broke off. The

room seemed to be the mark of an innkeeper trying to defer maintenance to the next owner.

Breakfast was always served buffet in trays warmed by candles; pancakes, French toast and eggs could and did sit for an hour or more. The instant coffee was no help for my grouchiness.

Lunches were simple skinny sandwiches. The only other item on the menu, a salad, was the size normally accompanying a meal. Owner Suzy Bergstrom said lunch was light because guests wanted it that way (none I talked to), but the day a covey of travel agents arrived, fresh conch and whelk salad, among other delicacies, were to be spread before their palates. Dinners were decent, but not special. The soups were excellent, but the salad was only a filler, and the main course, not abundant, was exciting on only one of four nights. Vegetables were canned, but desserts helped rescue the meal. I suspect the culprit was not Cleo, the cook, but Suzy Bergstrom, the holder of the purse strings.

Had the double rates been $50, I would have no complaint. But at $100, the highest on the island for an establishment with diving, Tortuga Club is a rip-off. I felt more ripped off when I learned that, because Divemaster Darby drove the hotel bus in the afternoon, my buddy and I would dive only one tank a day. Darby was a safe guide and took us to fine sites. But he offered little service and even required us to carry our own tanks down a narrow, 100-foot cat walk to the boat; that would pose a serious problem for people not too strong or agile.

Neophyte manager Gibson told me that she didn't expect the new owners to make any changes. If they don't, the Tortuga Club should be avoided. To me, it was a trap for the unknowing tourist who believes what he reads in hotel brochures.

But there are positive sides. A walk up the beach, away from the madding crowd, provided a fine respite from the urban blues I carted from home. An honor system at the bar allowed me to pour a drink anytime. I simply wrote down the tab. And, frankly, when I got carried away with the romance of the setting, the warm sun and the rustling trees, my concerns evaporated. Only that massive bill at the end of four days brought reality rushing back.

I must also comment about the two maturing turtles kept in a foot of water in a three-foot-square cement pen. I don't know that turtles think or feel, but these Tortuga Club symbols jammed into a filthy pool turned off more people than they turned on. I have plenty of political arguments about why the turtles ought to be freed, but the economic argument that many customers object is probably the only one anyone will listen to. FREE THE TURTLE TWOSOME.

Diving the wall with Darby was excellent. At one site, large swaying sea fans greeted our entry at the top of the wall. At another site rows and rows of staghorn coral, leaning toward the path of the sun, welcomed us. The wall was nearly vertical and well decorated with life. In occasional sand-filled valleys large basket sponges thrived. Back in the many caves, cuts and holes lurked harlequin bass, ubiquitous yellowtails of up to five or more pounds, and an occasional grouper, although large fish were not common. The wall in front of Cayman Kai, four or five miles west of the Tortuga Club, was similar and a little less spectacular, but still exciting.

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At Cayman Kai, guide Steve was safety-conscious but restrictive. After my buddy and I demonstrated that we could clear our masks and buddy breathe at thirty feet, we played follow the leader the rest of the time. A St. Louis dive club, which had been at Cayman Kai for a week, had been critical of Steve's tight reins and a gentle confrontation over cocktails had gotten him to loosen up, but not enough.

Cayman Kai is a good choice for vacationers. It is a modern, well designed, well maintained condominium community. All units are one- or two-bedroom, spacious, and nicely furnished. Every diver I spoke with at Cayman Kai was pleased, not only with the accommodations and the quality of the diving, but with the cuisine. We enjoyed a good lunch -- a conch burger for me and a delightful lobster salad for my buddy -- and sucked up a couple of cold beers on the outdoor bar overlooking the ocean. A barrier reef protects the shore about two hundred yards out. The water out to the reef, running from 3 to 15 feet deep, was a snorkeling surprise. I found everything from a sizeable octopus to jaw fish to an ocean trigger so large that he couldn't get through the shallow water without dragging on the bottom. The beach is not the best for kids, but it's adequate. Cayman Kai's condo's are for the most part excellent for families and clubs.

A couple hundred yards down the road from Cayman Kai is the Rum Point Club, in a setting as spectacular as you'll find on Grand Cayman. The aging, spartan, 10-room lodge is nestled among tall, whispering Australian pines. The food is reputed to be the best fresh fish and native food on the island and, of the divers I talked with at Rum Point, everyone to a person enjoyed himself. Owner Bruce Parker's brochure states that dives cost $20 for a one-tank, 20-60 foot dive; the charge increases according to depth up to $50 for a 200-250 foot dive. I didn't know whether to believe him and, since he wasn't around when the cook showed me the rooms, I couldn't get clarification. Parker's lot is up for sale: $900,000. The hotel, I suspect, may not last through the next rough winter.

On the southeast end of the island is Bob Soto's dive lodge, an economy operation. Its cement-block design provides sparse accommodations certain to displease anyone seeking a romantic tropical vacation, but certain to please the college student on a budget. It's the cheapest dive package on the island, but you won't remember it for its setting, comfort or cuisine. Instead, you'll remember it because you slept, ate and dived twice a day for $49. Because their boat regularly gets to the west edge of the north wall, you'll remember some memorable diving. But because of critical comments from a number of our readers who have bunked here in the last year, you should consider other options before patronizing the lodge.

Soto's second operation at the Holiday Inn takes scores of divers daily to the west side. Soto, Cayman's pioneer in tourist diving, has developed serious back problems and is just about finished diving. His wife has been managing the business, but now Soto has it on the auction block. Asking price for Soto's lodge is $495,000 and, for the dive operation, $295,000.

The rest of Cayman's dive operations are located on the west side. From there divers are taken to the west wall or to the south sound, depending upon the weather. The sites here are decent, and people who haven't traveled much will find no fault, but the sites do rate below those along the north wall. The main problem here is overuse. One can see coral broken by the dive-boat anchors and inexperienced divers. On some days, at some spots, fifty or even a hundred divers might drop down for the tour. The wreck of the Balboa, for instance, is the Disneyland of tourist diving. Here, in 30 feet of water, hundreds of inconsiderate yellowtails and sergeant majors descend upon unsuspecting divers, as did the seagulls descend upon Tippi Hedron in Hitchcock's "The Birds." If you bring bread to feed the fish, they'll not distinguish between finger rolls and fingers and they'll even climb

inside your BC pockets to fish out the fillets. The wreck itself has a few holes to swim through and somewhere a giant moray lurks. Me? Well, I'd rather dive the wall.

On the other hand, Trinity Caves, at the north end of the west wall, provided quite a nice dive. At fifty feet, the top of the wall seemed average, but after dropping through caves and crevices I emerged at 70 feet on a prolific reef covered with coral and sponges, some basket sponges big enough to pack your dive gear into. The fish life was interesting and a two-foot file fish, with iridescent blue stripes, followed me around for five minutes. Even for the most selective divers, Trinity Caves is a site to enjoy, although some broken antler coral testifies to the too many who come to enjoy.

The west side's 7-mile beach gets most of Cayman's publicity. It's a fine beach for kids, sun worshippers and spouses who don't dive, although I prefer the isolation and ruggedness of the beaches at Spanish Bay or the Tortuga Club. The most popular shelter on 7-mile beach (for divers and non-divers alike) is the Holiday Inn. What can I tell you about a Holiday Inn that you don't already know? Nothing. It's like any other. The rooms are fine, the food mediocre, the service good, and there are amenities: tennis, a pool and an outside bar. I, however, don't care much for most of the cautious tourists whose lack of imagination leads them to the Holiday Inn. Here we find fat men with Budweiser Beer hats, fat ladies sunburned to the point of death, wise-ass kids listening to transistor radios, and too many people who have never before left their home state, let alone their home country. Soto's shop sits in front of the Holiday Inn to serve these people and to serve a few discriminating readers of Undercurrent. Most I spoke with seemed generally pleased with the operation, although the armies of divers transported to the reef each trip is enough to turn me into a tennis bum. Yet, if you have a non-diving family to please, the Holiday Inn is the easiest way.

Because of my general distaste for Holiday Inns, I selected the Flag Royal Palms for a two-day, seven-mile beach experience. What a lousy choice. Its decor is so tasteless it must be a put-on. The windows in the rooms don't open, meaning you're no closer to the sea breeze here than you are back home. The food was mediocre. Most of the conversation between couples on the beach was how lousy the hotel was and how disappointed they were in their travel agent for sending them here. The dive shop at the Flag gets good reviews from readers, but the weather was so bad the two days I was there that I opted for touring. I preferred to tour. If you must stay on 7-mile beach, and want a dive shop at your hotel door, the Galleon is a good bet. The rooms are nice, the food good, and Surfside dive shop operates next door.

These hotels along the 7-mile beach are 3-4 miles north of Georgetown. About a mile south of Georgetown sit two small diver-oriented hotels which offer the best buys on Cayman: The Sunset House and, a couple of blocks south, Casa Bertmar. They are similarly priced and people I spoke with enjoy the food and rate the dining equally well. From these hotels, one can kick out a couple hundred yards to the wall for unguided dives. The accommodations at the Sunset House seemed a bit nicer than at the Bertmar, and the bar on the beach is a plus. Both, however, are good values at about $53/person/day for room, all meals, diving two tanks and gratuities.

Other diving possibilities: I learned that most hotels have flexible packages, so if you don't dive one day you don't pay. That opens other opportunities. A number of people enjoy diving with the fishermen who visit or tour the north wall daily. The trip is $15, with lunch, but you must bring your own gear, including tanks, which you can rent from your hotel or from Surfside Water Sports. Any hotel can find a fisherman for you. At the Holiday Inn names are posted on a bulletin board. Marvin Ebanks is one of the most popular.

Boats can be chartered from Surfside Water Sports or elsewhere, but Cornelius Van S. Roosevelt from Washington, DC informed us that he got personalized, guided

service at low cost from Captain Butch Sjostrom (Box 1516). Roosevelt said that his dives averaged about $11 each and only 2-5 people went along. Sjostrom even picked up Roosevelt and his crew at their nearby hotel.

Ron and Nancy Sefton provide a range of services for divers at their shop a mile or two north of Georgetown. They sell and rent a variety of photography equipment -- cameras, extension tubes, strobes -- and can handle most repairs. On Wednesday evenings Nancy offers two-hour photo seminars for $10.

Prices: Rates on Cayman vary as much as $50/person/day at hotels offering dining. We have computed daily rates for one person (double occupancy) for room, three meals/day and two tanks of diving. Where MAP is offered, we have added $3 for lunch, the 5 percent room tax and the 10-15 percent gratuity which in most cases is mandatory. Rates are for the winter of 1978. Rates drop after April 15 by 5-15 percent, then increase again on December 15.

Casa Bertmar, Box 679, Grand Cayman Island. $53/day. Additional beach diving available.
Cayman Kai, Box 1112, $77. One- or two-bedroom condos. Houses also for rent.
Galleon Beach Hotel, Box 71, $66/day.
Holiday Inn, Box 904, $74/day.
Royal Palms, Box 490, $75/day.
Rum Point Club, Box 260, $77. Advertises only a one-tank rate; a two-tank rate, if available, may reduce the cost considerably.
Soto's Dive Lodge, Box 894, $49/day.
Spanish Bay Reef, Box 800, $91.
Sunset House, Box 479, $53/day; Additional beach diving available.
Tortuga Club, Box 496, $100/day.

More about Cayman: Cayman is not for swingers. Nightlife consists mainly of mediocre hotel acts unless you hit the Friday boogie at outlying Apollo 11. Georgetown can be covered by foot in 2-3 hours, and that includes visiting every shop. Freeport prices don't save you much over hometown prices and I found no local crafts worth purchasing. There are a few good restaurants.

My paramour and I found the cuisine at the Grand Old House delectable. From a spiced land-crab appetizer for me and a shrimp in sauce for her, through salads, soups, and entrees of fresh sea foods prepared in grand style, the meal was a classic. Barefooted waitresses in light cotton dresses provided excellent service in a turn-of-the-century plantation house located on the edge of a crashing sea. The Grand Old House would be a fine restaurant in any city in any land. With wine and tip our tariff was $52. We had a fine lunch at the Almond Tree -- oh, that key lime pie -- and enjoyed rubbing elbows with the British bankers over pints of ale.

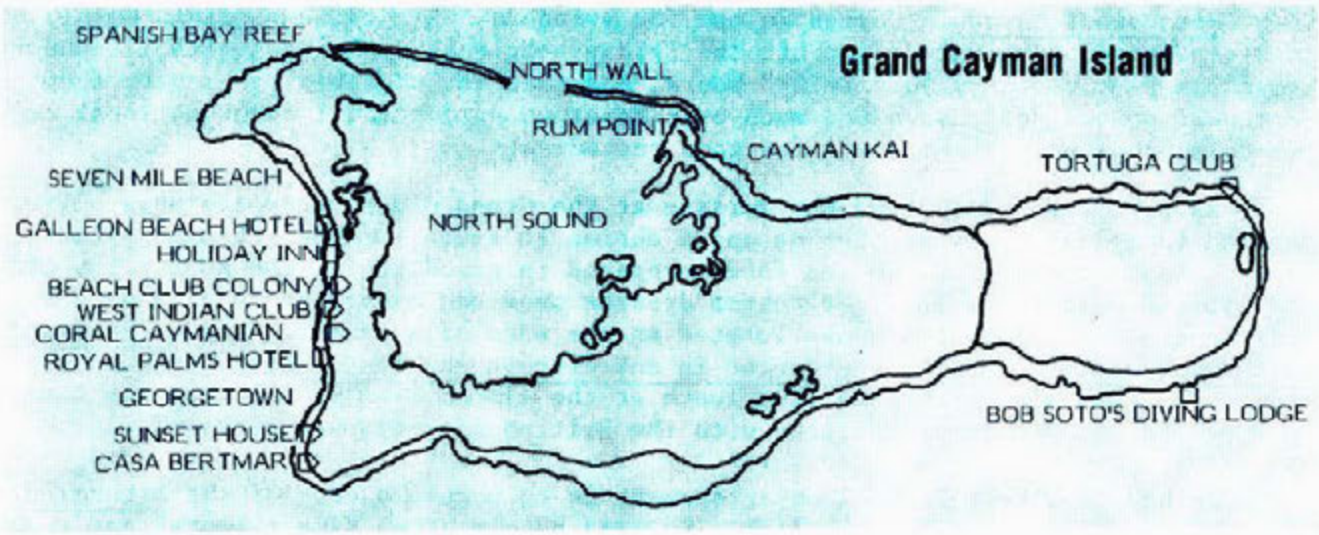
Perhaps the best sort of entertainment is to peruse a copy of the Natural History of the Cayman Islands, available in many hotels, then take a rental car around

the island. You'll spot interesting birdlife, understand the ecology of mangrove swamps -- and how they support the fry of many reef inhabitants -- and then get a sick sense of what development can do to the ecology of the island. Coat yourself with insect repellent because the flying residents greet visitors with big kisses. You might also stop by the turtle farm, view the Russian freighter hung up on the east-side reef, and then go to Hell, which has its own post office. Rental cars run about $18/day, and your best deals are from local outfits like Coconut.

A conclusion: If you stay on the west side and you're dissatisfied with the diving, simply hook up with another operation. Every hotel on 7-mile beach has a couple of dive shops within a half-mile, either way. There's still some pretty decent diving on the west side, but your guide has got to be willing to take you to it.

And, a caution: The Cayman Dread Red will get you if you don't watch out. There's a common red fire sponge which, if you touch it, will cause your fingers to swell and be a bit bothersome for about five days. About two weeks later, all the skin will peel off. The only known cure is three shots of rum poured directly on your tongue.

And, a P.S.: Of course, for real diving fools the best way to dive Cayman is from the launch Cayman Diver. At $600/week/person, you can dive as many tanks as the tables allow and get to the very best sites. See Undercurrent, January, 1978, for a review of the Cayman Diver. (C.C., 1/78)



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Aug 75	Montego Bay, Jamaica, Triangle Air Fares	
Oct 75	Lahaina, Maui, Shark Repellent	
Nov 75	Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, Homeswapping	
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The Sensuous Diver

There's more to a reef than meets the eye

Have you ever taken a close look at a coral reef? I mean a really close look, not just a quick once over as you streak along. Do you pause to ponder what you're seeing? Do you deliberate whether your new

discovery is alive and then whether it's a plant or an animal? Have you experienced the life of the reef in other ways? Have you learned how to touch and be touched by the reef's inhabitants? The tactile sensations of the reef are in fact sensational. Learning to experience them can add new dimensions to your diving experience. But, before we discover those dimensions, let's look at the tools of the trade.

Certain precautions must be taken before your touching begins. If you have overly sensitive skin or allergic reations to, for example, bee stings, wear some type of glove. More-experienced touchers prefer to go "nude," to wear no protection for their hands. Surely it's more satisfying because you can feel the soft bodies and textures, but you also risk stings and cuts. If you must wear gloves, consider soft cotton garden gloves. They permit greater tactile sensations and also enable you to pick up small objects easily. You may wish to wear only one glove, leaving the other hand bare for special sensations.

Before diving, find out what animals in the area need to be avoided. For example, are there stonefish? What do they look like? Where are you likely to encounter them? Inquire about local "rules" for handling the animals. Some dive-area operations, to protect their fragile reefs, prefer that you keep touching to a minimum.

One item to take on your touching trip is a magnifying lens. The best are those encased in plastic, but any will do. You'll be amazed at your new underwater perspective. It will be the first time that you discover, for example, the minute shrimp living between the bodies of soft coral polyps.

Another helpful device is a light to probe the nooks and crannies. In deeper water the light helps display the true colors of the reef.

The Art of Touching

While it's rewarding to touch and be touched, many organisms are delicate and can be injured by careless handling. An urchin probably won't be harmed by your holding it (*you* might be) but some of the more delicate soft coral polyps can be crushed and killed by rough handling. Even the lightest finger touch may crush polyp tentacles and hinder the animal's ability to feed. Exercise caution and be gentle.

Begin with a slow cautious movement of your hand toward the object to prevent it fom withdrawing or moving away. Your touch should be soft and light. At first, try simple touch. Experience the stickiness, the slime, the sharpness, the softness. Then try more adventurous stroking. If you can, gently pick up the animal. Look at it carefully. Turn it over, inspect it. Touch it and let it touch you. And then, replace it precisely as you found it.

If you are letting the animal touch you, don't withdraw your hand or fingers too quickly. Some animals, such as crinoids, may wrap parts of their bodies around you. Pulling away too rapidly could tear or break off some portion of the animal. And slow withdrawal will prolong your sensation and enjoyment. That's what touching is all about.

The Objects of Your Affection

If you're a novice at touching, begin by placing your hand on hard coral and leave it there a few seconds. Remove your hand and rub your fingers together. The mucous you feel is produced by the coral to protect itself from other organisms settling on it — you, for example — and also to help it catch food. Often small fish and crabs can be seen picking off these trapped organisms, robbing the coral of its dinner. In some species the polyp appears during the day. When you touch a section, notice how even nearby polyps retreat, having received the telegraphed message of your presence.

Soft coral polyps are out day and night. Run your hand along one whole strand and experience the soft fleshy body. Swim through some of the larger clusters and feel the silkiness against your body.

Anemones are close relatives of corals. They acquire food by using the stinging cells in their tentacles. Place your open hand upon an anemone and then remove it slowly. Feel the stickiness. That's the stinging cells discharging into your hand, just as they would discharge into a tiny fish that has wandered into the tentacles of the organism. Most divers will have no skin reaction to the anemone, but if you have serious reactions to land animals or insects, leave the touching to others. You can drop a small piece of coral into the tentacles and watch the anemone feed. Some shell collectors drop their shell into an anemone's mouth and return the next day to collect their clean shells. The anemone has only one opening, therefore what goes in the single orifice comes back out of it.

Sponges have a variety of textures. They are smooth, soft, ruffled, dimpled, hard or glassy. Look in the openings for fish, crabs and cleaner shrimp. Be cautious with tube sponges because occasionally one serves as headquarters for an eel. Sponges, too, are fragile and even the harder ones, such as basket sponges, can be broken by a careless diver climbing in.

Now, are you ready to handle a sea urchin? Use your knife to lift the urchin and place your hand underneath where shorter and blunter spines are located. In this position, there's a minimum chance of getting a spine in your hand. The urchin will use its tubefeet to move across your hand. It tickles, doesn't it? Sea stars, sea cucumbers and the brittle stars also use tubefeet for locomotion.

Use your magnifying glass to search for minute crabs and shrimp between the urchin spines. Gently touch the top of the spines with your finger or knife and observe how the surrounding spines move toward the object touching it. (Now do you know why you get so many spines in your hand at one time?) Finally take your regulator from your mouth and place it under the urchin. Press the purge button and send the urchin to the surface in a stream of bubbles, but make sure your dive buddy is not swimming above.

A sea cucumber can best be examined by first touching it lightly and feeling the soft body. Squeeze it gently and notice how the body hardens. This hardening is caused by increased water pressure

inside the body. If the cucumber is handled roughly it may eviscerate, that is, regurgitate its internal organs. But don't be concerned. This is the cucumber's self-defense. Apparently he presumes that a predator will eat what has been expelled, leaving the sea cucumber free to crawl away.

Sea stars are slow-moving creatures and can be easily picked up and investigated. Turn one over and look at the channels between the tubefeet. Often one or more flat worms can be seen living in a symbiotic relationship with the star. Lay the star on its back and watch how it rights itself. As the sea star is crawling along, place your finger in front of one of the leading arms. Let the star touch you gently and watch how the tip of the arm arches back, exposing several "sensory" tubefeet. The animal is probably trying to decide if you're going to eat it, or if it's going to eat you.

Sea stars have a specialized structure on their dorsal surface. They look like tiny "jaws" and are used to crush and remove parasites that try to settle on their bodies. If you have hair on the back of your hand or arm, take the star and turn it upside down on your "hairy surface" and leave it for a few moments. Then remove it *slowly*. You will feel the effects of these jaws as the hairs are pulled. This shouldn't hurt as long as you don't put the star on more sensitive hairy parts of your body.

Under rocks and coral, often live fast-moving animals called brittles or serpent stars, recognized by their dime-size bodies from which serpent-like arms extend. Pick one up by the body, not by its arms. If you grab an arm, you'll be left only with that arm. Like the lizard and his break-away tail, the brittle star will leave its arm wriggling in your hand or in the mouth of a predator. In areas where strong wave action could move coral or rocks to trap a brittle star, the break-away ability also permits it to escape entrapment.

The sea lily or crinoid is the oldest member of the sea star, urchin and cucumber group. In the daytime, only a thin curling arm (often yellow in color) is usually visible sticking out between the coral. Gently let the arm touch and curl around your finger. You'll be surprised at how gently the crinoid loops its arm around your finger. Do it a favor by *slowly* removing your finger from its arms. The arms are fragile and break off easily. If you find one in the open, notice how the arms work independently and how the whole body reacts to your presence. At the base of the crinoid, where the arms come together, you will find the "feet and toes" of the animal, which it uses to move or to grip. The crinoid can be removed, again gently, and placed on your fingertip. Notice how it grips its new home.

Bristle-tops, Christmas trees, featherdusters and numerous other names are given to tube worms. There are two types: the hard stony tube, usually found in the open, and the soft leathery tube, found under or between objects. The tube worm is the quickest-reacting animal you will encounter. But they do become accustomed to your advances and stay out, exposed, for longer periods of time. Look closely after the worm has retreated back into its tube and you will find a "trap door" that is pulled in after the bristles. Try to touch the featherduster, if you can.

Crabs are seldom encountered on the reef. If you do find one it will be difficult to pick up. Their many legs are sharp and pointed and grip the coral tightly. If you are able to lift one, turn it over and look for the large "flap" in the abdominal area. If the flap is long and pointed, it's a male; if it's halfmoon shaped, it's a female. At certain times of the year the female's flap may be extended or bulge away from the body. Look closely and you will find thousands of eggs. With your magnifying glass examine the eggs for development but don't touch. Carefully replace her in her hole and don't expose her to large fish looking for a gourmet meal.

In coral crevices you may be able to find the delicate arrowhead crab. Its very small body and long, thin legs that almost fold up upon themselves make it well adapted for living between crevices.

Lobsters on the reef, as opposed to those in restaurants, have both a body and a tail. Near the head are long, strong, sharp feelers. They're very sensitive and their power can be felt if a feeler ever hits you. Be careful taking a lobster from a hole with bare hands. The sharp spines on its body can cut you. These spines provide both protection and an anchor to wedge and "hook" the lobster against the sides of a hole to prevent it from being pulled out. Turn the lobster over and look underneath the tail for eggs. If it's a female with eggs, by all means put it back. That night, eat steak.

In the sandy areas between coral patch reefs occasionally you may spot a faint body outline or a pair of eyes sticking out of the sand. Look for a skate or stingray. To touch one, first be sure to approach from behind and be certain where the base of the tail is. The sharp barbed spine at the base of the tail can give you a nasty gash if you're not careful. With your hand or knife touch the tail lightly and be ready for the explosion of sand. You will often be surprised to find that the creature is much larger than you expected.

It's not as easy to touch fish as it seems. They always appear "just out of reach." The most readily approachable fish, especially if you have food, is the grouper. At many dive resorts, groupers have been tamed by frequent encounters with friendly divers. Remember that fish have teeth and the large groupers have large *sharp* teeth. Don't let him take your finger along with the bread you brought to feed him. When you're feeding a grouper, you may be able to stroke him.

Night Dives

At night, your underwater world becomes much narrower; it's only the width of your light beam. Enter the water 15-20 minutes before sunset. Lower yourself to approximately 15 feet above the reef and remain motionless. There may be little activity, but as it begins to darken, notice the day reef going to sleep and the night reef waking up.

The first noticeable difference is that the coral

begins to look fuzzy; it's the emergence of the tentacles of coral polyps, now ready to feed. Polyps are out at night because one of their main sources of food is plankton, which spends daylight hours in deeper water and comes near the surface at night.

The day schools of blue chromis and yellow-tailed snappers gradually disappear beneath the reef, replaced by night schools of red squirrels and soldierfish. Eels, particularly the spotted, swim about searching for food. Crabs and some species of sea stars and cucumbers start to forage. Lobsters become much more bold. Occasionally schools of squid are attracted to your light.

Turn your light off and let your eyes adjust to the darkness. Then wave your hand through the water. Often tiny, bright blue-green flashes of light appear. This is bioluminescence, a phenomenon caused by minute organisms in plankton called dinoflagellates. When they are disturbed they emit light.

If you find a skate or ray on the bottom don't disturb it until you are certain where the tail and spine are located. Then turn out your light and touch the tail. You will be treated to one of the most exciting underwater displays you will ever see. The whole ray will light up, as if made of a neon light.

Along the bottom and between coral are crabs and lobsters looking for food. You may see one unusual night creature, the Spanish slipper lobster, which looks somewhat like a chiton. During the day it keeps itself under coral ledges or buried in the sand.

If you look between coral and under ledges you may find some sleeping fish. Approach them very carefully and attempt to touch them. And if you are gentle enough, particularly if they are parrot or angel fish, you can stroke their bodies without disturbing them.

This whole process of entering the water before sunset can be reversed by entering before sunrise. It's an exciting time to watch the reef change and you may be treated to a brilliant sunrise.

Take your time and look at the reef. Don't just rush over it. Find a coral head that's "comfortable" and sit down for a while. Let yourself become part of the reef. Watch it come back to life after the effect of your initial disturbance has gone away. Notice how fish return and begin to carry on their activities—feeding and defending their territory.

Finally, you might consider taking with you Idaz and Jerry Greenberg's waterproof *Guide to Corals and Fishes of Florida, the Bahamas and the Caribbean*. The section entitled "Look, But Don't Touch" will help you to steer clear of those few things that might be a little annoying: stinging jellyfish, red fire sponges, fire coral and bristle worms. But don't hesitate to touch and be touched by the other creatures of the reef. It's the best way I know to add depth to your diving pleasure.

The author, Mike Grahn, holds a Master of Science in Marine Biology from San Francisco State University and has taught at a number of colleges in the San Francisco area. Last year Grahn led diving tours and lectured on marine biology at Cap'n Don's Aquaventures in Bonaire. He says he has grown weary of the cold Pacific Ocean and hopes this article will find him another Caribbean job.

Submersible Pressure Gauges

Should divers be free to dive without them?

Of all the means devised to ensure that a diver does not run out of air, only one — the submersible pressure gauge — provides constant monitoring of available air. Others are valid back-up devices, but they alert the diver only when his air supply is running out. In some cases, that can be too late.

The j-valve, for instance, simply makes it more difficult for a diver to breathe when he has less than 300-500 psi. If a diver wants to drop down 20-30 feet for a peek inside a hole, it doesn't tell him that he's not going to have enough air left to stop for five minutes at ten feet. Furthermore, if for any reason the diver cannot operate his j-valve to free that last 300 psi of air, then what was designed to be a warning system becomes a cause of death.

Some regulators come with a sonic alarm. When the air pressure is low, the alarm sounds to warn the diver. The device is useful, but it is not adequate as a primary source of information about remaining air.

Warning devices are useful, but isn't the industry circumventing a real issue of diver safety? Isn't it time to make submersible pressure gauges a mandatory and integral part of diving equipment? We think it is.

There are those who don't believe there are still divers around who dive without pressure gauges. We called a few shops at random to determine how many customers coming into those stores do not use gauges. Louis Gardiner at Madison Wisconsin's Petrie Scubalab estimates that 15-20% of the divers doing business there don't use a pressure gauge. Ed Gardipe, an instructor at New England Divers in Boston, figures 10-15%. Dale McCutcheon (Dale's Diving Den, Sandusky, Ohio) thinks that 25-30% of the divers coming to his shop dive without gauges. Bob French of John the Diver in Springfield, Missouri says the figure is only 5% in his shop, but since 1971 he has refused to sell regulators without a

gauge. Mike Ford, of Pinnacles Dive Shop in Novato, California, says he hardly ever encounters a diver without a gauge. But a spokeswoman for Diver's Equipment Repair in Kansas City said that nonusers might run as high as 50%.

There's agreement that most nonusers tend to be divers who have been at it for awhile. Today, instructional agencies indicate that gauges are mandatory, particularly for open-water dives. Regardless, some shop people we talked with know of instructors who only recently have begun to teach with or use a submersible gauge themselves. Most charter-boat operators in the U.S. require submersible gauges, but scores of resorts outside the country rent tanks with j-valves and don't have gauges attached to their rental regulators.

Overall, submersible pressure gauges are used widely, considering they have been marketed for less than a decade. Even so, the percentage of nonusers is shocking. What should be done about it?

One possibility is that dive shops can refuse to repair or recondition regulators that come into the shop without pressure gauges attached.

Another possibility, a bit more workable, is that shops can refuse to sell regulators unless the purchaser buys a gauge or brings in his old gauge to demonstrate that he has one. Some shops, such as Richard's Aqualung Center in New York, already have this policy.

At the same time, a few shop owners we spoke with were resistant, even though they could see the economic benefit. The reasons were "divers ought to be free to dive the way they want to," or "I don't have the right to enforce such a rule," or "it would hurt my regulator business."

Yet dive-shop owners universally seem to enforce the D.O.T. requirement that a tank that hasn't been hydro-tested in the last five years can't be filled. The safety threat of diving without a pressure gauge may be just as great as of a tank explosion. The complaints registered against proposed systems for mandating pressure gauges are similar to those registered a few years back against NASDS' John Gaffney's mandatory annual visual inspection of customers' tanks. Gaffney's annual inspection now is widely accepted and complaints have ceased.

Dive shops, however, have no association for self-regulation and, although there's great concern for safety among the owners, it's unlikely that a voluntary system would emerge. It's less likely that the hundreds of sporting-good stores which sell equipment, and even Sears and Wards which market their own regulators, would become part of a voluntary system for selling regulators only with gauges.

Perhaps, then, the burden ought to be on the manufacturers. Should not pressure gauges be an integral, non-detachable part of a regulator? It might make sense. You can't buy a car without a gas gauge. You can't buy an airplane without an altimeter. Why can you buy a regulator without a pressure gauge?

One problem with a non-detachable gauge is repair. Divers would be unable to make a repair, but shops, with special tools, of course could. High-pressure hoses and gauges are today of sufficient quality that repair is not a significant issue.

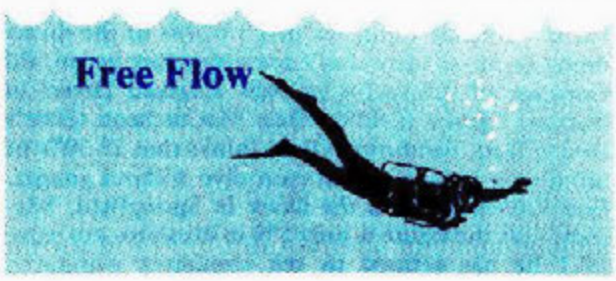
If all regulators were sold with attached pressure gauges, a diver who wanted only to buy a regulator would be forced to spend a few bucks he might not want to spend. In a few years, when all the pressure gauges become defunct or old divers stop diving, that would cease to be a problem. For now, if the new regulator gauge combo were phased in over a, say, two-year period, those not wanting to buy the new system would have plenty of warning.

Another objection is that companies which make only gauges and don't sell regulators would lose a share of their business. That's probably true. In light of the need for diver safety, that argument is not persuasive.

Of course, who's to prevent particular manufacturers from not going along, from continuing to produce regulators without gauges? The Diving Equipment Manufacturers Association is a body which potentially could set industry standards, but today it does little more than hold equipment shows and raise money for lobbying efforts. It has not demonstrated any desire to set standards or regulate the industry. Perhaps no one can bring self-regulation to the scuba-diving business.

Someday, as Dr. Glen Egstrom of UCLA suggested to *Undercurrent*, divers will have constant read-outs of air pressure and depth in a readily visible place, perhaps right on their masks. Someday, everyone will dive with a pressure gauge, no questions asked.

Today, we need diving systems designed for safety. A regulator with a non-detachable gauge is one of those systems. That's a challenge for manufacturers. Responsible marketing, which means insisting that pressure gauges be sold with regulators, is a challenge for dive shops. We hope that both groups listen — and respond.



This is the March issue of *Undercurrent*. If it arrived by mid-April, then it arrived on schedule. The issue was sent to the printer on March 15, then mailed from New York City between the 25th and 30th. The schedule has been the same since our first issue in 1975. Because we have changed our mailing service from Arlington, Virginia to New York, however, west coast mail is taking a little longer to arrive than it had been.