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THE PRIVATE, EXCLUSIVE GUIDE FOR SERIOUS DIVERS

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Grand Cayman, BWI, After Gilbert

-- And An Update On Cozumel

Dear Reader,

About 10 p.m. on the Sunday night before Gilbert, I was sipping an Amstel at the bar of the Tortuga Club, an inn in the 1950's on the east end of Cayman. I go there to relax, not to write.

Frank Connolley, the manager, told me that Cayman Radio had reported that a hurricane was coming our way. The wind had been gusting bad enough to force us to switch our diving from the rough north side to the east side. In calm enough water I had enjoyed a magnificent dive in The Maze, winding back and forth through tall narrow canyons, to emerge in the clear blue at 100 feet. Frank said it didn't look like hurricane weather to him, but he advised me that evacuation flights were starting the next day.

The Tortuga Club has no television, no satellite receiver. Frank has the only radio and he certainly didn't listen to it all the time. So none of us really knew what 23,000 other Caymanians knew: that Gilbert was a monster. I went to sleep with a stiff ocean breeze rattling the palms outside my door.

The next morning, I drove 40 minutes to the airport only to find hundreds of people jammed together, waiting to be called to board nonexistent airplanes. Cayman Airways was shuttling as fast as it could, but Eastern and Northwest seemed noncommittal. Gilbert was due about 1 a.m. The winds had already picked up enough to indicate that this was no normal blow. And several hundred tourists would not get seats. Rather than wait it out and find myself, at nightfall, unprepared for the storm, I decided to gear up and hunker down in one of the several designated emergency centers.

By 5 p.m., I and two other Tortuga residents had our spots on the floor at the East End Community Center, the most elevated shelter on this island of maximum elevation 60 feet. The wind was howling outside now, and the sea was pounding at the shore. The Tortuga kitchen had made us sandwiches, provided fruit and bottled water, beer and sodas; we had pillows and blankets from our

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rooms and lights from the dive shop. A large tanker arrived, filled with fresh water. A van brought cases of pork and beans and spaghetti. And people brought canaries in cages and cats with litter boxes. Frank Connolley came in at 10 p.m., driving through fierce wind, to bring us a tin of biscuits. He would spend the night at the Club. "The Captain stays with his ship," he said. Mind you, Frank doesn't own the Club, but he's got nearly 20 years of his life invested in it and employs family and neighbors. He would stay.

Inspector Gilbert McLouglin stood in the kitchen with a hurricane map, plotting coordinates whenever they were announced -- which was irregularly and incompletely. Throughout the night, half a dozen Caymanians -- not one of whom knew much about what he was saying -- engaged in an intense discussion of the physics of hurricanes. At 8 p.m. Gilbert was headed north to Little Cayman; at 10 p.m. it switched direction and seemed to be heading to Belize. By midnight Gilbert had taken aim at Cayman, the eye due to pass 20 miles to the south. Inspector McLouglin pointed at a trough of deep water to the south of Cayman. "I can tell you one thing," he said, looking at each of the men around him, "when Gilbert gets there one of two things will happen. He will either speed up," he said, looking at each man in the eye, "or slow down." Everyone nodded solemnly.

Nobody else seemed to care much. The main room was filled with women and children who began the evening playing but eventually tried to sleep, a near impossibility since louvered shutters on an exhaust fan continuously clapped together. Outside on the leeward porch, a couple dozen folks watched the storm lash the trees. Most became bored with the tedium of continuing winds and no action. Periodically, someone would jump into a car to go check on a neighbor who refused to leave his home, persuade others to come to the center, or clear the road of fallen trees. The East End is a community, bound together by the thick blood of intermarriage. At no time was it more evident.

At 5 a.m. the lights went out. Without electricity, there was no water being pumped and the toilets stopped working (next time truck in cheese, not pork and beans). But there was no panic. Barely mild concern, and the community center, built sturdily in recent years, leaked not a single drop of water, nor uttered a creak or a groan. The winds outside were probably gusting to 140 miles per hour. The storm peaked at 7, and soon after Edney McLean and other residents were driving in and out with local news. At 9 a.m. Frank Connolley drove up to tell everyone. He was in shock. "It's destroyed! The dive shop, it's gone. Not even there. The bar, the rooms, the sea came right in." Frank had taken cover in the unfinished condos, where he watched a score of tanks float into the bush.

The day after Gilbert, Frank straightened up the bar area, and a crew of men began to clean up, tar paper the roof, and make plans for a new dive shop. The bar was open, he told me, and handed me a cold beer from an ice chest. With the rooms at the Club filled with sand, water, and crushed furniture, with no electricity, water or telephone on the island, I and the other two refugees went in search of a bed. We were welcomed by Ray and Judy Plain at the Cayman Dive Lodge, who gave us rooms, gratis, and access to the kitchen and their gas stove.

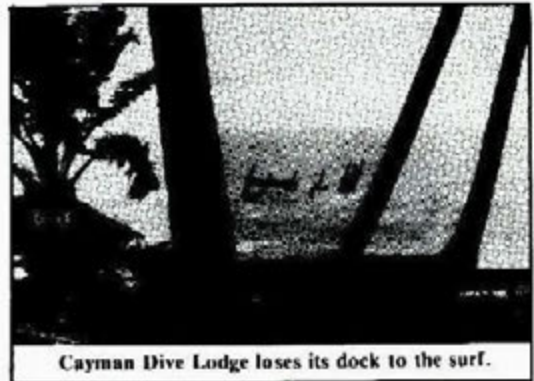
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Although the Lodge had been closed for repairs even prior to Gilbert, we were welcomed as members of the diving fraternity.

I spent several days surveying the damage to Cayman, which was minimal, thanks to sound structures and good disaster management. From a diver's point of view, the boats and shops and key hotels, save the Tortuga Club, survived surprisingly well. Boat docks at the Cayman Dive Lodge and Rum Point were demolished, and the surfside shop at Rum Point was flooded -- the whole area was underwater. Ron Kipp lost a rickety boat, but that was a day before Gilbert. I was dying to see the reefs, but people had cleanup to do -- and I couldn't find anyone willing to take me out before I had to leave.



Cayman Dive Lodge loses its dock to the surf.

At the Holiday Inn, where there was once a nice expanse of beach sloping gently into the sea, there was a ledge forty feet closer to the shops. Little beach remained. Will it fill in again? Elsewhere the beach gained sand. On the other end of the island, the Tortuga Club once had the only beach for miles. Gilbert cleared the shores of sea grapes and palm trees, leaving a 60-foot sandy beach with plenty of roots poking through the sand, but with great potential.

Just as we were ready to go to press, a correspondent to Undercurrent returned from Cayman to report damage to some shallow reefs, but plenty of sand covering reefs along the northshore and low visibility three weeks after Gilbert -- but Stingray City is still populated. We called John Sunquist of Fisheye Photo who corroborated that perspective. Cathy Church told us that the coral on the south end was not affected much, but large staghorn was damaged. "Looks like someone did a bad pruning job, but like most bad pruning jobs it should eventually look all right." She found that large sponges as deep as 100 feet on the northwest point had disappeared. Cathy speculated that they had adjusted to typical storms from the northwest, but they couldn't handle Gilbert, which came from the southwest. She also noted a fair amount of shifting bottom sand. "Some of the areas of the Balboa are exposed that haven't been exposed for years and others are still covered." The biggest surprise: "I put nudibranchs out for photos before the storm and after they were still where I put them."



Tortuga Club dive instructor Keith Neale looks at what remains of the cement & cinderblock dive shop.

Little Cayman resident dive expert Nancy Sefton reports that the north side may have even "better" diving now -- more fish, she says. And, "there's not a thing out of place in Bloody Bay." On the south side a lot of sea fans were knocked out and blown up on the beach. Our correspondent reports that sand covers many shallow reefs. Pirates Point and the Southern Cross Club had severe damage. On Cayman Brac, Craig Burns, the past manager of the Tiara Beach reports elkhorn damage on the south side. The Tiara Beach, as well as the Brac reef, lost their docks.

The bottom line: Regardless of the Cayman Government's self serving public pronouncement by official Norman Bodden that "there has been no damage to the reef," there was typical hurricane damage, but much of it the self repairing

kind. The larger question remains: will healthy reefs remain when the silt clears? Tourists are not streaming back to Cayman and the residents are concerned. If I had a trip scheduled, I surely wouldn't cancel because of fear of bad diving. To the contrary: I'd be awfully curious about the aftermath -- and pleased to have uncrowded boats and restaurants without waiting lists. And that fabulous wall, it seems, remains unscathed.

Now, words from our readers:

Management of the Cayman Dive Lodge has been in flux (Ron Kipp sold it last year apparently for less than he paid for it years ago). Owner/managers Ray and Judy Plain lasted out a dispute with glad-handing partner Bob Autrey and say they now have a new big bucks partner, so needed refurbishing will continue, while retaining the hard-core divers basic lodge ambience. The rooms are small, but newly furnished, and Ray and Judy are super. Once they reopen and make three tanks a day the rule -- their intention -- this roadside inn will be a good choice for divers who prefer the isolation and camaraderie of the east end -- and the relatively untrammelled diving available.

The Cayman Islander is a budget hotel, across the road from Seven Mile Beach -- keep that in mind. As R.S. Pong (Downey, CA) writes of his April trip, "For the money and the built-up expectation because of advertising, it was not the best trip, but the north wall was very nice."

Reader Amy Cohen (NY) stayed at Cayman Kai Resort (45 minutes by car from Seven Mile Beach) "in a large beach villa. Some of our party stayed at the main condo complex. Well equipped kitchens and living areas. As we were right on North Wall, got to dive it every day. Short boat trips -- exciting dive to Stingray City where hand-fed a group of 7 southern stingrays. In addition, saw many eagle rays and turtles."

Cayman Marine Laboratory, run by Dr. Tom Byrnes, is unique. Says Richard Ruschman of his trip just before Gilbert, "On no dive did we have more than four divers and Tom accompanied each dive. Before each dive Tom gives an interesting 30-minute chalkboard on-boat lecture on the flora and fauna of the site being dived, e.g., discussion of sponge and coral reproductive systems and food gathering methods, symbiotic relationships between sponges and corals and various fishes and shrimps. We dived the wall or shallower reefs abutting the north wall. Tom was courteous and punctual. I highly recommend him." Two tank dives are \$45 and he also offers 5 p.m. lectures at his Governor's Sound Lab (\$10). (809/947-0849)

In the last couple of years, we have gotten our first complaints about Peter Milburn and his Dive Cayman Ltd., most likely a result of his growth from a tiny personalized operation -- the story of Cayman. Those who like him, love him, as does E. Feleppa (Rye, NY) who has been out with him several times this year: "Personal and personable. He adapts to weather and personal tastes of clients. Peter has run at least one dive a day to Stingray City [sounds like a used car lot to me]. Some inshore western sites are looking worn, but the walls are still spectacular & offer great vistas. Shore diving in the vicinity of Turtle Farms, Spotts, etc., can be exquisite!"

And our reader/photographers like Fisheye as well: Says Dr. Tom Ambrose (Columbus, OH), "Fisheye Photo is a small dive operation, with a personable, helpful and knowledgeable staff. They specialize in the experienced photo diver and allow great freedom to do your own exploration. They run night dives any day of the week, provided there are interested divers." Michael Piper III (Metarie,

LA) says of his last August trip: "I rented a video camera after viewing my first tape, my Nikonos stayed in the hotel for the next six dives, now on videotape. The fixed focus semi-fisheye lens allows the diver to photograph whatever he sees from a distance of one foot to infinity, with 1-5 feet being the best range to pick up color."

The Holiday Inn is an action spot on the island, no place for the serious diver to get a dive package. If you're into the beach and beach bar scene and boogying to the music of Barefoot, this is the place. As K. Norkus (Hickory Hill, IL) writes, "I prefer the Holiday Inn and the accommodations there. It's a laid-back, relaxed, and 'fun' place to be. Cayman people make you feel like you belong." Frankly, I don't like the hotel, but I do like the setting. Hope the beach comes back.

We haven't heard from a single reader who has dived with the Hyatt Regency's Nick's Aquasports. Does that mean that this hotel is just too elegant for serious divers? (809/949-1234)

Rivers Sport Divers, reports Dougald N. Clark, Jr., (Fayetteville, NC), "is operated by Lynn and Wallace Rivers. They're prompt, courteous and attentive to any details that pertained to an individual's equipment and diving safety. For those who are merely pleasure divers and have a family, I strongly recommend Wallace and Lynn Rivers for their diving at Grand Cayman." (809/949-1181)

Says Brian Blomberg (Tempe City, AZ) of last year's diving with Don Foster: "Often crowded around popular dive sites. Guides did not want to venture too far from base, even at the request of divers." Richard K. Penn (York, PA) writes, "Diving good, guides helpful -- didn't go out of their way unless asked. Quality of diving -- better than Freeport, not as spectacular or clear as Bonaire." Tom Pawlowski (Kenosha, WI) says: "Visibility only about 90 feet. We dove the wall twice and each day we spotted 5-8 large rays and several sea turtles. Also, there were no more than 10 people on our dive boat and one day we only had 6." Brooks Martyn (Simsbury, CT), a "1st time novice," stayed at Coral Caymanian Condos and reports that "in my limited book, Don Foster's operation is 5-star -- (courteous, efficient, super organized), but a more experienced diver might not appreciate the regimentation." (809/949-7025)

"Try diving with Captain Butch Sjostrom, owner of Seasports," says Joe Landrum, Ada, OK. "He will mold the dive to what he feels your ability is. Most of his really great dives are for advanced divers in groups of 2 to 4. I have gone with him for the past 8 years -- about twice a year. He doesn't take you to the same dives as other 20 cattle boats go to. Butch is not there to sell you a T-shirt, but to take you on a dive that you will remember the dive environment, not only the people next to you." (809/949-3965)

Spanish Cove, one of my favorites, is up for sale, so the future is in doubt. According to divers I spoke to pre-hurricane, it seems to be providing adequate service; the setting is excellent, its access to the north wall convenient, and its dive operation is generally good. Since a change in ownership can mean any number of things, I'll refrain from publishing readers' comments. In the right hands, this can be the premier dive resort.

Old-time fans of the Sunset House will be pleased with this April report of Barry L. Riddle (Chesterfield, VA). "Hotel has now connected to city water, so rooms finally have fresh water showers. Divemasters very good, very helpful. When weather permits, south side diving can be even better than the usual west side dives. Sunset House is a good operation for serious divers who don't want

The Real Threat To Cayman's Reefs

The damage caused by Gilbert to the reefs of Grand Cayman is insignificant compared to the damage caused by divers. This is a portion of a piece that appeared in *Earthwatch* magazine prior to Gilbert. It explains many things, including the cause of much of the silt on the reefs.

"The ecological formula that has kept the Cayman Islands' Reefs alive for thousand of years was hardly meant to take an invasion of rubber-skinned tourists into account. In 30 years' time, what Eugenie Clarke knew as a sleepy little place: one or two hotels and no diving programs at all, has burgeoned into a sleek, cosmopolitan island playground that draws over 200,000 visitors a year . . . Grand Cayman has become a mecca for scuba divers and deepsea biologists alike. The island's economy, once based on turtle meat, postage stamps, and the money sent home by Cayman's freelance sailors, is now dependent on tourism and international banking.

"Despite the tough restrictions that the Cayman government places on divers, Grand Cayman's prosperity has had a disastrous effect on the reefs. Even conscientious divers tend to chip off a piece of coral here or there or stuff a scrap of rock in their pockets as they pass. Multiplied by 200,000, even the most innocuous souvenir hunters take their toll . . . the dive boats that carry divers to the middle reef, meanwhile, can damage a square yard of reef on each trip simply by dropping anchor. And dive boat anchors are Tinkertoys compared to the mammoth weights that cruise ships must drop . . . a single cruise ship's anchor and chain have been know to destroy up to an acre of prime

reef on a stormy night. As elsewhere in the Caribbean, all this activity combined is slowly but decisively grinding the reefs into sediment.

"The Cayman government has already taken steps to curb the reef's deterioration: starting in 1987, hundreds of moorings were sunk off Grand Cayman's shores for dive boats; and similar facilities are in the works for cruise ships. But . . . at the present rate of tourism, erosion is inevitable -- the best preventative measures amount to little more than damage control. Already the sediment created and stirred up by boats and divers, together with waste from the island's population, has decreased water visibility up to 50 percent, and the accompanying shrinkage of the euphotic zone is taking its toll on the island's deeper reefs.

"Since tourist numbers won't drop of their own accord and the local government's best intentions can't contain the damage divers wreak, the reefs only hope may lie in the hand of Nature itself -- in this case in the form of a plague of mosquitoes. After years of saturation bombing with insecticides by Grand Cayman's Mosquito Control Unity, the local mosquitoes have begun to develop immunity to the poisons. The Control Unit has no new substitutes at the moment. The only solution is to find a safe and effective insecticide to turn to as they did 50 years ago, when most tourists found Grand Cayman insufferable. If so, the island's coral might finally get back to the business of building limestone."

Burkhard Bilger
Assistant Editor, Earthwatch

or need luxury accommodations and a lot of pampering." It's no Hyatt Regency, that's for sure, and more than one diver has complained that because it's directly in the path of the airport, planes landing at 10 p.m. and later are not appreciated. Dennis Jones (Cape Coral, FL) was a bit hard on them when he wrote that it is "Way over-priced: I had better living conditions in Viet Nam than at Sunset House." But the diving is indeed appreciated. Last year, Horace De-Shazo (Miami) reported that "my 12 year old son was certified by PADI and has logged 55 dives in Florida, but this was his first trip -- the two dive masters were the best I have ever seen with mixed experience groups. My wife, son and I were allowed to dive anywhere we wanted. I know they were watching but they didn't bother us. We took him to 110 feet at Big Tunnel with no harassment from dive guides." Patti & John Ng (Arlington, VA), there in May, said, "Diving great and the dive masters very friendly and helpful. Shore diving ranked up there with the boat dives. Hotel itself has to do something about the locals -- they swarm the bar and make parking impossible for guests. Would be nice to have a beach/pool type area, but then again, you can't have everything." (809/949-7111)

Not even Gilbert could kill the Tortuga Club. By October 1 seven rooms were

open and the dive shop will soon be running out of another room; there's no word when the dock will be rebuilt, but apparently Keith Neale, their first class divemaster, will ferry divers to the diveboat offshore. At the end of September, I was still unable to locate anyone who had dived the east end, but I can't imagine that Gilbert left those shallow sites unscathed. It looks like the Club is about to get a new owner, a Brit, who so far has kept his plans for the marvelous setting to himself.

Treasure Island Resort is an enormous hotel and condominium complex, and a center of nightlife. The dive operation is run by long-time Caymanian guide Atlee Evans and his Quabbin Divers. Says Michael Piper III (Metairie, LA) of last year's trip, "Treasure Island Divers made every effort to ensure a safe, enjoyable dive. No C-card, no dive. Conservative no-decompression limits used. The decompression bar definitely beat having eight divers trying to grab a single weighted line. On my first dive, we located a six-foot nurse shark at sixty feet. On nearly every dive we saw several lobster. Fish and critters of all sizes were abundant, including grouper, morays, French angels, and an occasional turtle. Yellow tail snapper have become so accustomed to being fed Cheez Whiz, they will go after anything yellow, including a yellow Q-Light. Hotel service personnel are rude and management doesn't care. The rooms are large and comfortable. Nearly half of the rooms, as well as the condominiums, have parking lot views." Others complain of the staff as well. . . .As to diving, Dean Proper (Leonardo, NJ) says, "All dive trips have a deep (100 foot) dive and shallow dive (35-50 feet). We do not like to dive to 100 feet and found no way to get 2 shallower dives from anyone. One hundred feet is macho but impractical on cloudy days and significantly shortens the dive time. One dive had a vote of 20 divers as to whether to go to 80 feet or 100 feet. All voted for 80 feet. I suggest had the vote been 50 feet or 80 feet, all would have voted for 50 feet. You should do an article on the inflexibility of this." Good point -- shorter dives for the tourists mean shorter schedules for the boat.

P.S.: Few Cayman dive operators allow you to use meters to extend your bottom time. If that's a concern, call ahead to find out.

An Update On Cozumel

The shallow reefs at Cozumel may be in trouble. Bob Goddess, who runs Tropical Ventures in Seattle, reported to us after his trip in late September. "In some places all the soft coral was ripped out and in other places it looks like someone dumped sand all over the reefs," he said. Cozumel guide Ricardo Mondrigal told us the sand covers reefs to fifty feet, but people are speculating it will be cleaned up once the currents return. But sand can kill the living organisms, so whether the reef gets cleaned up soon enough is a serious question. Several marine biologists are being contacted for opinions and hopefully to seek a remedy. Deep diving, of course, remained pretty well unaffected. Mondrigal said after the storm, "I saw pieces of coral on the road."

Virtually all of the hotels suffered some damage, especially from first floor flooding. Most were open by October 1. The exception is the Barracuda, which will not open for several more weeks. Four piers, including the main pier in town, survived. They're on government land and may be used by any shop.

Among dive operators, Discover Cozumel was the biggest loser, says Goddess. Five of seven boats were destroyed and their liveboard broke loose and damaged a dozen other boats. Tom Hardigen reported \$3000 damage to the seven craft of Dive

Paradise. One Aqua Safari boat was damaged, but most went unscathed in dry dock. Iron window covers on the shop caused some damage when they were blown into it.

Thanks to earlier work by Mother Nature, the potential damage from falling coconut palms was mitigated. Since 1984, most of Cozumel's beautiful coconut palms, including those that once lined the main street along the sea, had been killed off by a disease called "lethal yellowing."

In the days after Gilbert, dive shops in all parts of the United States and Canada collected food and supplies for Cozumel. An outstanding effort was organized by Doug La Grone of Aquaventures Scuba Center, a PADI facility in Houston, who orchestrated the shipment of more than 30,000 pounds of food and 1000 gallons of water. Apparently the hotels now have plenty of food for the tourists, but the residents of Cozumel, out of work and without savings, have little for their own tables and still need help.

C.C., travel editor

The Selling Of Scuba Gear

-- What Mail Order Is All About

For as long as we can remember, companies selling scuba gear by mail have been an anathema to dive shops. You've heard the storeowners cry: Support your local dive store ... mail order operations sell to noncertified people ... they sell shoddy goods ... they don't service the stuff they sell ... they don't provide the information or education that a local dive shop provides.

In the mid-1970's, as dive shops began to proliferate, the howls seemed to increase. Today, the noise has subsided. We set out to find out why.

Four major mail order businesses advertise regularly: Berry Scuba in Chicago; Sports Merchandisers, located in Marietta, Georgia; Divers Supply in Anniston, Alabama; and New York's Central Skin Divers (good old "honest Archie," as his ads have claimed). Interestingly, each began as a retail store selling dive equipment. The mail order business evolved.

The Decline of Mail Order

A few years back, just about every brand (Scubapro the exception) was advertised by mail order stores and sold through the mail. Not so today. Many major companies have stopped selling to mail order outlets, often using a so-called "nontransshipment clause" to stop mail order.

Dacor uses two techniques, Gordy Shear, president of Dacor, told us. "We have put in a clause in our dealer contract that to sell our equipment, there must be personal instruction given for each item. That is, a salesperson must explain each piece to the buyer. Equipment is getting too sophisticated to sell by mail order. We also have a nontransshipment clause; our

dealers cannot buy our equipment and then sell it through the mail."

"What?" you say. You've seen that full page mail order advertisement from Central Skin Divers saying regulators from Dacor, *et al.*, "always on sale." We called Central to order a specific Dacor regulator, and were told that the only way we could order one was if we worked for a police or fire department or the military.

Parkway, Tekna and Beauchat are among the companies that don't have the restrictive clauses. Bob Edorph, national sales manager for Tekna, told us, "We have never restricted our dealers except for expecting them to keep the price reasonable; that is, not cheapen the line." Tekna has no written dealer agreement stipulating either price or prohibiting transshipment, but, Edorph said, "we are looking into it."

Pressure from retail shops has been a major reason toward the move to prohibit transshipment. Many dealers already have some retail outlet territorial protection; that is, some manufacturers will only sell to one shop in a defined geographical area so as not to flood the market with dealers. But with the entry of aggressive mail order firms, the protection afforded the dive shop is mitigated.

Peter Radsliff, marketing manager for Oceanic, told us: "We do not go after every dive shop to carry our line. We don't have the capacity to supply all of them, so we try to spread our dealers around. We want them to make money. If they don't, they could go under and we might have to buy our equipment back."

To further manage the market, Radsliff said, "we

have a clause in our dealer agreement that we have the right of first refusal to purchase our products from a dealer who gets into financial trouble. It's not in our benefit to load up a market."

Have these clauses curtailed the mail order business? Wallace Neal, president of Sports Merchandisers, says yes. "When US Divers put in their dealer clause, we replaced them with Dacor. But then Dacor put in their clause; our business went off about 50%. Dacor has the largest share of the diving equipment business, and if we had that one line, we still could do a good business."

As one might imagine, there is animosity among some mail order companies toward the dealer clauses. As one mail order dealer said, "When these guys were getting into the business, no one knew them and they were happy to have us sell their products. Now, when they have become established, they dump us. Dealers want brand names that people know and instructors use, so it is difficult to get a new company off the ground. We used to sell Tabata by mail, but now that they have a dealer network, we can't carry them."

Of course, the retail store outlets love the transshipment clauses. In calls to half a dozen dive shops around the country, not one owner claimed he was being hurt today by mail order, although many said they really had no way of telling.

Nonetheless, as one manufacturer, who requested that we not mention his name, told us, "There are divers out there who are fairly knowledgeable about equipment and don't just follow the suggestions of some instructor. This is the guy who will consider mail order. He buys smart."

Not being able to carry or sell equipment of the major manufacturers by mail means that price discounting has become less of a factor in the competition between retail stores and mail order shops. In competitive markets where divers can shop, they may not always find discounted regulators, but the shop may throw in a goodies bag or free air fills. For the diver who doesn't live close to a dive shop -- or where there is only one nondiscounting outlet -- mail order companies may be the only way to get gear -- or at least get a deal. To the single shop, it may offer some form of competition and have some leveling effect.

Better Prices?

Mail order businesses often appear to sell gear at prices lower than most retail stores. Just like any other big discounter, they can benefit from lower overhead and higher volume, if properly managed. As Wallace Neal told *Undercurrent*: "We don't get better deals than other stores. But most manufacturers offer discounts for early payment and we take those discounts. We manage our cash flow and also minimize finance charges. We run our operation as a business and most dive shops don't. We also do not

keystone [eds. note: mark up products a full 100%], but if you're in a market with a lot of dive shops, most of them don't either because of the competition."

Second Rate Stuff?

One dive shop owner, who requested that we not name him, has his own reasons for thinking the mail order houses are not competition. "I can't prove it, but I know that there are a lot of goods turned out by every manufacturer that has something cosmetically wrong with it. We can all buy these items at a good price, and I think that this is one way where the mail order firms buy brand items and sell them cheaply and make a buck. No one sells goods below their cost. Scratched tanks, for example, can be bought \$20-\$30 under wholesale because they wouldn't bring full mark-up with the scratches. Style is also a factor; if a manufacturer has some 1987 BCs around, you can buy them fairly cheaply. But I don't like a mail order company selling up -- offering a 1987 BC for \$125 and then telling the customer that for an additional \$150, he can get a 1988 model."

"Thanks to the proliferation of offshore manufacturers, especially in Asia, there is no end to the supply of regulators and BC's designed along the lines of the major manufacturers."

In checking with manufacturers to find out how they handle "blems," "seconds," or discounted items, the transshipment clause comes into play, preventing any items of the protected brands from being sold by mail. Seconds of brands not protected by transshipment clauses, of course, could be sold by mail. From time to time a consumer will find seconds available in dive stores. Normally, they are clearly marked as seconds and sold at a discount. If the item is discontinued or if a manufacturer's inventory was reduced to make way for a new model or new colors, those items too may be discounted -- and sold by mail only if not protected by a transshipment clause.

New Ways to Compete

For the mail houses to stay competitive, they must look for new ways to compete. And thanks to the proliferation of offshore manufacturers, especially in Asia, there is no end to the supply of regulators and BC's designed along the lines of the major manufacturers.

Macon's Divers Supply is countering the dealer clauses with private label goods. They have a line of products sold under the "Sea Elite" brand name, made exclusively for them.

Wallace Neal thinks that this is the way to go. "If

we in the mail order business would all get together and have a line under one name that we could market, we could build the brand name recognition that most people seem to want."

Private label and "controlled label" brands are well-established in other industries. A company simply contracts with a manufacturer to produce a line of goods under a name it owns. A "controlled label" is a brand of goods produced by a manufacturer and sold to only one chain in a given territory. A controlled label is owned by the manufacturer and not the company distributing the product.

The Berry Scuba line is U.S. Tech. Sports Merchandisers sells U.S. Scuba. Different items are produced by different manufacturers, some of them the so-called "offshore" companies in the Far East. On

the other hand, some of it is produced on special order by U.S. firms making goods for more widely known labels. For example, Inflatable Systems produces the well known Sea Tech buoyancy control devices; it also produces for several other companies, including private labelers; Professional Sports Inc. produces Pro Sub as well as others. If a discount house orders a private label, they can name the specs, reducing costs of manufacturing if they desire.

We bought an ARIS regulator from Berry. Upon inspection, we discovered that the first stage was a Swimmaster design, a defunct company whose designs are now owned by IDI. We couldn't determine the genesis of the second stage. In the 1980 Navy tests, the 1st and 2nd stage Swimmaster design did well; but there's no way to tell about these com-

Have I Been Robbed?

Dear *Undercurrent*,

In mid April I sent a check to Pacific Divers Supply in Maui, Hawaii for an Edge computer, in response to their full page ad in *Skin Diver*. The check was cashed in May, but as of mid-August I have yet to receive the Edge or any information from them. The toll free number is no longer in service.

Have I been robbed?

Phillip Yarish
FPO Seattle

It sure looks like it.

Pacific Divers originally rented space at 431 Alamaha Street, in Kahului, on Maui. Sometime in the month of May they abruptly closed shop. We called several dive operators on Maui to see if we could trace them, but with no luck. One operator told us that the owner of the building Pacific Divers had rented had contacted him to sell some of the equipment that had been left behind.

They also had established a schedule of advertisements with *Skin Diver*, but canceled it after one insertion.

We learned that the owner of the Pacific Divers was apparently a fellow named Dennis Standefer. He may have once owned Northwest Diver Supply in Eureka, California, which too was a substantial mail order business.

Orca Industries, the manufacturer of the Edge, is also trying to get hold of him. Jim Fulton, National Sales Manager, said, "we don't know who supplied him with his Edges because he is not one of our dealers. When one of the units he sold came back to us for service, all of the serial numbers

had been removed."

We continued our investigation, learning that other suppliers too were seeking redress, and eventually got in touch with Lt. William Cavagnaro of the Las Vegas Police Department. Cavagnaro told us that after leaving Hawaii, Standefer set up shop in Las Vegas, apparently to dispose of much of the equipment he brought from Maui. Cavagnaro, who himself had once owned a dive shop, told us that he had been investigating Standefer, but hadn't seen him around Las Vegas for a few weeks.

When we told Lt. Cavagnaro that you had ordered your Edge by mail from Pacific Divers, he told us that could help the case substantially. You can bring the postal inspectors into the case by contacting your local post office for the telephone number or address of the postal inspector's office which serves that area. They will send you a form to fill out and, hopefully, go to work.

But don't expect immediate restitution -- if any at all. It looks like you called it right, Philip. You were robbed. But the trail is getting warm. In fact, if anyone reading this article had a similar experience, please drop us a note. And don't forget to contact the postal inspectors.

Ben Davison

P.S.: Some dissatisfied customers have erroneously called Central Pacific Divers, in Lahaina, Maui, asking for their goods. Central Pacific is a reputable dive operation that we have recommended since we first dived with them in 1975. Central Pacific Owner Pete Huddleston told *Undercurrent* that "we have nothing to do with that company and are not associated with them."

binations other than to accept the mail order retailer's word -- which is what in-store shoppers do as well.

Of course, mail order companies aren't the only private label carriers. NASDS stores have for years been stocking their own brand under the Z-90 label.

Mail Order Servicing

Although the four major mail order houses have repair capacity, a problem associated with "off-shore" products is servicing. The only place that can service the private label products is the retailer who sold it. If you bought it through the mail, you have to send it back to get it serviced. But that may take no longer than it will take to get it serviced through a dive shop. Once upon a time, most local dive shops handled much of their own repair; the owner was often the service technician -- or at times a service technician might be shared with stores. Today, much servicing is done out of the shop. A quick check of several shops in San Francisco led us to discover that it can take from 4 days to 3 weeks to get a regulator serviced. Most mail order houses claim they can handle servicing in 2-3 weeks.

If there is a problem while the equipment is under warranty, mail order houses may tell you to send it back to the factory for retrofitting. You can expect the dive shop to perform the warranty work -- or send it back for you.

Fitting Gear

In a dive shop, you can make sure that BCD is not too small or the wet suit top fits. When you order by mail, you may have to send goods back and forth several times to get a proper fit or a color you like. Since you are responsible for the postage and insurance, this can get a little expensive as well as being time-consuming.

One of our staff called Central Skindivers to "buy" equipment by mail for his teenage son who was just getting certified. Honest Archie, himself, told him to go into a shop, try on several BC's, and

find the one that fit. Then call back the order and if they didn't have that identical BC, they would be able to send a comparable product that fit.

Sale to Non-Certified Divers

One hears claims that mail order companies sell life support equipment to anyone, certified or not, who sends in a check. But mail order people just scoff at the criticism. Wallace Neal says to that, "So what? How many times has a salesman in a dive shop asked to see your C-card when you wanted to buy some equipment? The only time a C-card is asked for is when someone wants an air fill."

"One always hears claims that mail order companies sell life support equipment to anyone, certified or not, who sends in a check. But mail order people just scoff at the criticism."

Susan Jordan, manager of Divers Supply in Macon, Georgia, told us, "We ask if someone is certified, but there is really no way we can check. We have to take their word for it. We also get a lot of business around Christmas-time, where nondivers are buying gifts for their diving friends and relatives. If we demanded C-cards, we would lose that business. The real control is at the time someone gets air."

A Changing Business

Wallace Neal told us, "I see mail order sales over the next few years being flat. But dive shops may wish we were back in strength when major sport outlets like Oshman's and Herman's find out that they can order rubber goods like masks, fins, and snorkels from the Far East and be competitive." For the most part, these marketers deal in the low end of the lines. But, Neal speculates, "one of these days, they will wake up and take a lot of the business away from the diving retailer."

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A Midwest reader wrote to tell us that he bought a mask at his dive shop for \$50 and a week later saw what looked like the same mask in Sears selling for \$24. How is this possible? Just the same way it's possible to buy Gucci luggage or Rolex watches from street vendors for 20% of the retail price. You're not getting the real McCoy.

Dacor's Gordy Shear told us that in one year, they had 510 masks returned for leaking or other problems that were not Dacor masks. But they had to look awfully close to tell the difference. Just as in the fashion or jewelry business, once a model is in distribution, several foreign manufacturers, usually in the Far East, make "knock-offs" and sell them to anyone who will buy them. Oceanic's Peter Radsliff told us, "These are not exact copies. They do not use surgical grade silicon rubber, the glass may be inferior or not be tempered correctly, and the fit sure won't be what the original design is." A reputable dive shop won't buy these, but there are plenty of sporting good retailers who like the idea of buying what appears to be a first rate mask for \$8 and selling it for \$25. It makes for good profits.

Returning Merchandise

If you have purchased items from Land's End or Eddie Bauer's or other reputable places through the mail, and you don't like what you see, you can send them back when ever you get around to it for a full refund, no questions asked.

Mail order dive services make it tougher. This is the policy of the four companies we checked with.

Sports Merchandisers -- Before sending any product back one must call and inform them. Products that are returned for either cash refund or exchange must be sent within 15 days of receipt of the goods to avoid a restocking fee. They will take back goods up to 30 days with a restocking fee of 15%. To return goods enclose a note explaining why. It is also a good idea to enclose a copy of the bill as well.

They service the products they sell. However, if the product is under warranty, they request that it be sent

directly to the manufacturer rather than to them.

Central Skindivers -- Goods must be returned within 2-3 weeks following receipt; you must first notify them by phone and include a copy of the bill. They repair and service their products on the premises.

Berry Scuba -- To return goods to Berry, you must call them within 30 days from the time you place the order. You will get an authorization number which must be included when you return the goods and you will be tagged with a 15% restocking fee. They handle regular servicing and warranty work.

Divers Supply -- To return goods, one must call first and get a reauthorization number. There is no charge if exchanging goods, but a 15% charge if returning goods. They repair regulators and will return goods under warranty to the manufacturer if a repair is required.

Conclusion

For some people it's preferable to sit at home and shop. Buying a knife or a dive computer by mail is easy and simple. Yet, most divers prefer to go into the store, smell the neoprene, handle the goods, and talk about the products.

Mail order surely provides a service for those people whose local store doesn't stock a specific brand or item. They're a necessity for divers who live in rural areas or outside the country or who are serving in the military. In fact, these individuals comprise a major share of the mail order market.

Regardless of the criticism, mail order is here to stay. With the restrictions manufacturers are placing on mail vendors, the consumer will be increasingly faced with brand names he does not recognize. That may deter most divers, but not enough to pose a problem to the big four mail order marketers. After all, they run one and two page advertisements in *Skin Diver* each month at \$7000 a page. That's more for a month of advertising than many dive stores spend on advertising in a year. Restrictions or not, the big four mail order operations must be doing just fine.



Sharkey's Reef, a New Orleans restaurant, features a 90 feet long, 20 feet wide, 15 feet deep aquarium. Divers often frolic in the tank and feed the

500 fish for the amusement of the diners. They weren't so amused one night in August when diver Wiley Beevers (swear to God, that's his real moniker), a local attorney, was attacked by a six-foot shark while feeding lettuce to the tropicals. Another diver jumped in to pull out Beevers as other sharks started a little frenzy. It took 75 stitches to close the gash in Beevers' arm and hand. According to friends, Beevers now swears the shark was six feet between the eyes, not six feet long.

NOTICE TO READERS: The next issue of *Undercurrent* will be the combined year-end November/December issue. It will reach subscribers in the latter half of November.