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THE PRIVATE, EXCLUSIVE GUIDE FOR SERIOUS DIVERS

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## Victoria House, Ambergris Caye, Belize

-- *There's Better In Belize*

Dear Reader,

If you read my May missive on Turneffe Island, you got a good look at some first-class diving. I was on Turneffe with an Undercurrent correspondent who then traveled to the popular Ambergris Caye to write this report.

\* \* \* \* \*

After saying "good-bye" to our friends from Turneffe Island, my companion and I boarded a Tropic Air twin-engine propeller plane for the hop to Ambergris Caye. A sudden, unseasonal rainstorm (May is supposed to be the middle of the three driest months in Belize) kept us on the ground for more than an hour, but after a week at Turneffe I had acclimated to the pace in Belize. The 15-minute, 35-mile journey to Ambergris Caye ends at San Pedro, the largest island town on Belize's barrier reef (with 1,200 inhabitants).

Getting straightforward information on Belize accommodations and diving is not easy. I finally selected the Victoria House, expecting it to be among the more comfortable with superior food and decent diving services. The hotel consists of two main buildings and ten "casitas," little individual houses with thatched roofs, two twin beds, large tiled shower stalls, and small porch and ceiling fan -- with the constant sea breeze, I never missed air conditioning. The main buildings house the office, gift shop, bar/dining room and several guest rooms (every guest I met who was staying in one of these rooms was trying to switch to a casita). The casitas all face a short green lawn, followed by a narrow manicured beach bordered by a short seawall. The sand-bottomed swimming area had been cleared of sea grass, ubiquitous on Ambergris beaches. There is a shack on the boat dock where one might leave diving equipment, but it is not locked. At the foot of the dock there is a fresh-water shower, but no basin for washing gear. The only

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evidence of divers were some old weight belts strewn on the floor of the shack.

Wondering if I would have to lug my equipment each day into San Pedro (Victoria House is a five-minute drive on a dirt road south of town), I was happy to discover that the hotel is served by "the most experienced local divemasters on Ambergris Caye." I signed up for a two-dive trip (at US \$40; one dive was US \$30) and was told I would be met at the dock the next morning at 9 A.M. Relieved, I asked no more.

At 10:00 the next morning (after a heavy call to the guide by the hotel staff), I was met by Alberto Bradley (one of a family of brothers who provide guide services) in his 15-foot open skiff, a typical Ambergris dive boat. The boat was equipped with six tank holders, a portable aluminum ladder and two hand-driven 50 HP outboard motors. I handed over my dive bag, grabbed a weight belt from the shack, and climbed aboard. Like a Belizean gondolier, Alberto stood at the back of the boat, a motor handle in each hand. He turned the throttles and we zoomed toward a site called "Off San Pedro."

Here I was introduced to the basic topography of the dive sites off Ambergris Caye. I dived several other sites including "Victoria Canyons," "The Dardanelles" and "The Caverns" and all offered similar profiles. Alberto dropped anchor just inside the reef's edge. I would descend down the line up a sand bottom spotted with small coral heads at 45 feet. At the edge, the reef sloped down to depths varying from 90 to 150 feet. Grooves varying from shallow troughs (5 to 10 feet) to narrow slots (some of which narrow at the top to form caverns) to wide and deep (150 feet) canyons ran intermittently and perpendicular to the reef's edge. The coral thickened and became especially abundant and varied on the ridge and down the sides of the grooves. Enormous greenish-yellow tube sponges jutted from the reef like a giant's trumpet in a Tolkien fantasy. Barrel sponges formed ranges of mini-volcanoes. The canyon walls were decorated with elkhorn, staghorn, brain and fire coral in all shapes and sizes. Fluorescent gorgonia (including three-foot sea fans) and anemones abounded. There was no current. Instead of the 100 to 200 feet visibility claimed for the dry season -- the summer months -- I had 100 feet at best and usually 50 to 75 feet. Reef fish and schooling fish were not abundant. Alberto explained that San Pedro is an active fishing village (maybe too active). However, a few encounters with larger sea creatures provided the highlights.

On each reef dive, I saw a number of spotted eagle rays, not only far off the reef as ghostly apparitions, but also close up in twos, threes and fours gliding through a groove or circling over the shallower flats. Often I could approach within 10 feet and swim with a ray for some time before it would flash its white underbelly and disappear. At Victoria Canyons, I dropped over the edge of one narrow canyon to see an 8-foot nurse shark napping on the white sand bottom some 30 feet below. Crossing the next canyon, I came upon a swarm of blacktip and lemon sharks (ranging from 5-10 feet in size) thrashing among a small school of smaller fish. Three of the sharks came up the 20 feet to "sniff"

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## Belize On The Cheap

Some people like to compare Ambergris Caye today to Cozumel 20 years ago. One reason is that if you want to get by on the cheap, you can do it at Ambergris Caye. If that appeals to you, remember one thing: you get what you pay for.

### Packages:

You can go from Houston and back, spend seven nights at the Coral Beach, get ten dives and three meals for \$766, plus departure tax and 15% Belizean tax.

If you're interested in three-day trips with two days of diving, you can get air, hotel, and diving for roughly \$500 and stay at the Sunbreeze, Ramon's or others. Universal Destinations, 713/961-1257 or 1-800/627-3483.

Five nights at the Holiday Hotel, two days of diving off Belize, and one night camping on Half Moon Caye with offshore diving, and air fare from San Pedro: \$519. Ocean Connections, 1-800/331-2458; 1-713/486-6993.

### Doing it Yourself:

You might save up to \$100 over the packages, but you might drive yourself nuts trying to organize it -- and you take your chances once you get there. Nonetheless, if you get your jollies organizing your own trips, there are basic and clean rooms to be found in little hotels without a

single frill or much charm for as little as \$20/night double. Some of these hotels have restaurants, or you can walk a block or two to eat well for \$15-20 a day, a couple of beers included.

You can walk to the main dock and find dive guides to get two tanks of diving for \$30/day; some offer boats only, others offer guided dives. Or you can try the dive shops at the many little beach front hotels.

That means for a seven-day trip with five days of diving you can get by for under \$400. Add airfare on Continental, TACA or TAN SASHA out Houston, New Orleans or Miami at the lowest rate of \$251 (plus another \$50 to get from Belize City to Ambergris Caye) and you're in for \$700 plus miscellaneous expenses and taxes. That ain't bad.

**Hotels:** These are some not-on-the beach budget possibilities at current rates. Winter may be more expensive.

Lillies: \$25/night, 011-501-26-2059

Fido Hotel: \$30 for an apartment with a kitchen, \$30/night, 011-501-26-2056

Martha's: \$35 night double. 011-501-26-2053

Milo's: \$20/night double. 011-501-26-2033.

Ambergris Caye and Cozumel are indeed similar: they offer the least expensive tropical diving available to U.S. divers.

us, one getting a flipper smack from Alberto. At the end of the dive I looked up to see a green sea turtle paddling away from the reef -- like the last scene from one of those Godzilla movies? After an uneventful dive at The Caverns, I wandered into another green turtle (four-foot, tip-to-tip). Burning my last 1000 psi, I chased it but couldn't bring myself to hitch a ride each time it slowed to look back at me.

My most enjoyable experiences were two shallow dives inside the reef. Mexico Rocks are a scattering of coral heads on a 12- to 15-foot deep white sand bottom. I spent 90 minutes (and only 1800 psi) cruising among the coral and the resident lobster, starfish, queen conch, Caribbean stingrays, peacock flounder and a plethora of tropicals. It was great to lie on my back or sit lotus-style and watch the tangs, clouds of chromis, damselfish in their sun-drenched splendor. Hol Chan, a similar site but at 30 feet (a popular place for orientation dives and snorkelers), is a protected sanctuary. An acre of water just within the reef where no boats or fishing are allowed, it is a haven for grouper, snapper, parrotfish and all varieties of tropicals.

Had I not first been to Turneffe Island and seen the potential of Belize diving, I might have given the diving here high marks. But I felt let down. While each dive offered the usual panoply of tropical miniatures and smaller grouper, snapper, parrotfish and squirrelfish (and an unusual abundance of gray, blue, queen and French angelfish), I didn't see the sheer numbers that populated the reef off Turneffe. Also missing were the barracuda and schools of permit,



jacks, and mackerel. But the strongest contrast was in the dive operations -- and most Belize dive operations are quite similar.

Although Alberto was not much of a conversationalist, he was friendly and helpful when asked. But diving with him was more like diving with a buddy than a paid dive operator. I carried my own gear to the boat and set it up myself. When we dove alone (about half the time), Alberto took a genuine interest in showing me his reef. But when the group got up to four guests, he seemed in a hurry, vigorously swimming a set course over the reef and returning to the anchor with ten minutes to spare on the dive tables. The trip to the reef was always tough with his little boat slapping its way through 6- to 8-foot swells and rollers. Getting on and off the boat as it bobbed in the heavy seas was a chore.

One day Alberto was not available and another guide took three of us out on a very rough day. One of the divers had not dived since being certified a year earlier in Grand Cayman and was using brand-new equipment. Oblivious to her inexperience, the guide chose a deep dive site, eager to show us The Caverns. His enthusiasm for his choice was not to be challenged, even when the third diver indicated he was slightly claustrophobic. Our enthusiasm waned as the boat was beaten by the surf on the way out. After struggling with her new equipment while the boat bounced at anchor (the others of us had learned to get off the boat quickly), fighting her buoyancy and getting stuck on the roof of a cavern that our guide gleefully entered (while ignoring the hesitancy of our third member and the 100-foot depth), ascending at full throttle (with our guide!) and pulling herself up the short boat ladder in 10-foot swells, our newcomer was pale, exhausted and nauseous. It was a miserable experience. And to top it off, the guide failed to show for the afternoon dive. But I wasn't disappointed -- until I discovered that the hotel had charged me the more expensive one-dive rate for the experience.

People say that Ambergris Caye is like the Cozumel of 10 years ago. Perhaps. Walking along the beach from Victoria House through town to Ramon's Reef Resort, I was shocked at the amount of trash on the beach, nearly all of which had traveled from foreign shores and cruising boats. I passed a series of private homes interspersed with small hotels, most of which were small and run-down. In the edge of town I strolled into the courtyard of the Sunbreeze Beach Resort, which looked like a turnpike motel. I had considered staying here after a glowing article in another periodical, but that would have been a mistake. On a patch of sand was the Bottom Time Dive Shop, one of the better equipped operations on the island, however. Yes, commercialism and tourism haven't yet ruined the atmosphere or the attitudes of the locals, but "For Sale" signs, construction and trinket shops selling overpriced T-shirts and junk jewelry foreshadow a decline.

Ramon's Reef Resort is the most popular destination here. More like a typical beach resort with plenty of toys such as jet skis and paddle boats, its yuppie crowd stretched out on the well-kept beach and around the inviting pool surrounded by palm trees. Ramon's has its own dive operation, with impressive craft always packed to the gills with divers. The Paradise Hotel seemed to be another popular choice.

At the Victoria House, I found comfortable accommodations, a friendly staff and an easy-going environment. The meals were good, if not gourmet. Breakfast was a la carte and included fresh fruit and juices. Lunch and dinner were "all you can eat" buffet-style and offered soup, homemade bread, fresh fish in a variety of styles and other well-prepared dishes. For nondivers, there was snorkeling, fishing (my companion caught two 30-pound barracuda), bird-watching



and trips to Mayan ruins, making Victoria House a nice place for a family vacation (especially if someone in the family wants to sneak in a few dives). Diving at the Victoria House is clearly not intended to be a principal attraction. Few of my fellow guests were divers, and those who were mixed diving with other activities. But then again, I was often Alberto's only customer, which to me is a real luxury -- and a chance to do my own thing.

Someday, Ambergris Caye will be like any other beach strip, with big hotels and restaurants and the whole megillah. It's too close to the U.S. -- 2 1/2 hours from Houston -- to avoid the developers. But until then, it has got its own funky charm, with relatively decent diving and pretty good prices. If I didn't know about Turneffe Island and diving the outer reefs, I'd come back here -- and this is a very good choice for traveled divers who want to see a few pelagics, have a few other people around, and be able to have a drink outside of their hotel and buy a t-shirt or two. But for me, with the knowledge of the atolls, I'll probably not see this strip again. There isn't adequate hotel or diving services to sway me from the better diving. But an awful lot of our readers who have been to Ambergris Caye no doubt disagree with me.

Divers' Compass: At Victoria House (local: 011-501-026-2067; in U.S.: 800/247-5159 or 713/529-

6800), casitas are \$55 per person/day, double occupancy (\$90 for a single). Three meals a day are \$30 per person; two dives are \$40.

. . . English is the local language; Belize, you see, was once a British colony. . . . A \$1 surcharge is added for each dive in Ambergris to cover the costs of the decompression chamber. . . . Continental, Taca and Tan Sahsa Fly to Belize City from Houston, New Orleans and Miami, Tropic Fly connects Belize City to San Pedro (\$25 each way). . . . There are a number of small restaurants in town if you are not on hotel meal plans. . . . The main attractions at the Tackle Box are a makeshift aquarium inhabited by sharks, turtles and sting rays, and Belikan, that good Belizean beer. . . . Because strong trade winds blow in all but the summer months, there are many days when the dive boats don't buck the rollers and stay inside the reef in the aquarium-like, sometimes not impressive, diving.

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## *Reports From The Readers: Belize and Ambergris Caye*

In poring over comments of our readers, it seems that Ramon's Reef Resort is our readers' choice, although it does not meet the standards of beach resorts of many other Caribbean islands. Last year, Alan Bloom (Boulder, CO) said: "I have mixed feelings. On one hand, it was great because the weather was beautiful, the island quaint and the people wonderful! Excellent, basic, Caribbean cooking abounded. Although I had a confirmed beach cabana, I spent two nights in a stuffy, noisy "apartment" across the road before a cabana opened up. Dive guide, Herman, was open to going anywhere but the reef around San Pedro was pretty bare, except for a few isolated areas." Dick Peterson (Whitefish, MT), there last year, says, "Ramon's treats you like a king. Larry and Kris Parker run an excellent dive shop with friendly guides. Great place to really relax. I will go back and take my wife, who does not dive." And C.M. Frick (Houston) reports, "The atmosphere is good and accommodations decent. Food varies from restaurant



to restaurant, some fair, some excellent. Reefs are in good shape, although fish life is on the thin side." (800/443-8876; 011-501-026-2071) . . . And how about two diverse views of diving with the folks at the not-on-the-beach Coral Beach Hotel. Says Dr. Charles Burchell (Hattiesburg, MS): "Great live coral plus a great variety of sea critters. Swam with dolphins and whales. Fed the morays and collected lobster for our beach barbecues. Back to basics, no frills." Darrold Myers (Montgomery, AL) said that past February that "Coral Beach Diving was a turn-off. We would enter the water and four boat loads of people would follow one by one behind each other, like trained elephants. On one day we made two ten-foot dives inside the reef with nothing to see. With the exception of some tropicals on the shallow reefs, there were no fish. Town people were very friendly but the dive shops could care less. This was not the Belize I had known before." (800/348-9101) . . . Frank L. Ross, M.D. (Wantagh, NY), says, "The most abundant sea life I have seen, including half-a-dozen sea turtles, several nurse sharks, eagle rays and at least three barracudas per dive. In April, we dove with Bottom Time; divemaster, Rene Paz, assisted everybody with all their gear, was extremely friendly. We stayed at Lilly's Hotel. Clean, comfortable, right

## What to Do When Your Automatic Inflator Sticks Open

If the valve of a low pressure inflator on a buoyancy compensator or a dry suit sticks open, a dangerous, out-of-control ascent can result with an accompanying great risk of injury. What can be done to minimize the problem with stuck inflator valves?

The best thing to do, of course, is to prevent the problem. Proper maintenance and frequent inspection of the valve can go a long way toward preventing the valve from sticking. The second way to minimize the potential problem is to have a high level of awareness while diving: the sooner you recognize a problem, the sooner you can deal with it.

If, despite attempts to prevent an inflator valve from sticking, the valve does stick during a dive, here is the sequence of actions that should be taken.

### 1. Disconnect the low pressure hose.

Do not fiddle with the inflator button first. Valuable time will be lost while buoyancy is being increased. Simply unhook the hose, then inspect the button. Even if the inflator button can be returned to its normal position, it is probably not wise to reconnect the inflator hose until the entire mechanism can be inspected out of the water after the dive. Continue the dive using oral inflation techniques. (Do you know how to orally inflate your BC under water? Low pressure inflators are used so commonly now that some divers have not learned oral inflation procedures.)

### 2. Maintain control of buoyancy.

If you become positively buoyant from air admitted to your suit or BC by a stuck low pressure inflator, swim down immediately as hard as you

can while disconnecting the hose. Use pressure to reduce the volume of any extra air. The shallower you are, the more important this is because the rate of change of volume becomes greater the closer you are to the surface. Swim down hard, grab hold of something on the bottom, turn to an upright position and vent any excess air. Avoid rising passively. Fight to remain at depth.

3. **If control is lost and you rise toward the surface in an uncontrolled manner, maneuver yourself into a face-up position and flare your arms, legs and fins to create the maximum cross-sectional body area.**

This will slow your ascent rate dramatically. After achieving this position, attempt to vent excess air. Maintain a normal breathing pattern and ride out the ascent. Always disconnect the low pressure hose, even if you have to do it during an out-of-control ascent. Implement this as soon as you realize that you will be unable to swim down hard enough to overcome excess buoyancy. If you simply try to swim down all the way to the surface, a point will be reached where you will lose directional control due to the buoyancy problems, you will then be unable to achieve the flare position, and your overall ascent rate will be much greater than if you had flared earlier in the ascent.

**To summarize: the keys then to minimizing low pressure inflator problems are: prevention; quick recognition and reaction; the ability to overcome excess buoyancy; and the ability to flare during an uncontrolled ascent.**

*The author, Dennis Graver, is the Director of Education for NAUI.*



on the water. No Air conditioning, but strong ocean breezes provide a comfortable sleep. Good for us budget divers not needing a first-rate hotel." . . . Last December Linda Cheatham (Madison, WI) dived with the Guerrero Brothers: "Diving is either in National Park (easy, shallow dives) or outside the reef, where surface conditions can be extremely rough. Dive boat never had more than six divers. Divemasters loose on depths and times, but did know where the lobsters, sharks and turtles were. Experienced divers only on outside of reef." [eds. note: when the wind blows, and it does much of the time, diving can be confined to inside the reef] . . . Paradise Hotel, says Edward J. Musco (Brookline, MA), "has sandy lanes, beach, thatched cabanas and dive shop. The Palm Restaurant at the hotel serves excellent seafood and the best brunch with french toast and piping-hot cinnamon rolls." (011-501-026-2083; 713/850-1664) . . . William J. Wise (Wheeling, WV) says the "Hotel San Pedrano at \$29/night is nice, clean simple. Ask for rooms #4, #1 second, or #7. Because San Pedro is dived out -- reef dead, no fish. Call Pani Arceo on San Pedro (#011-501-26-2136) He has boat for long trips to excellent dive sites in Cay Caulker and will take parties of up to six. Excellent divemaster, very safe. Good, reasonable food at Elvi's restaurant (US\$7) and Celi's (\$12)." . . . Some people book the Reef Roamer for an overnight to the Blue Hole and remote Cayes. The diving is great, but people complain that the boat is run down and the staff lethargic. Says Jim Herndon (Glendale, CA), "Lots of big things to see: sharks, eagle rays, turtles, barracuda. Out Island Divers try hard, but never seem to get their act together. If there's not a problem with the compressor, it's with something else like their dog of a boat the Reef Roamer II." (011-501-026-2151; 800/331-2458; 713/486-6993) . . . We panned Captain Morgan's Retreat a couple years ago but it's now under new ownership. Brenda Pipes writes, "We enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere, friendly service, isolation and quiet. We were the only divers at the resort in Mid April, so in effect, we had a private guide, Batocho Paz, who took us anywhere we wanted to go. He hooked up our equipment, checked it out, and helped us in and out of the boat. There wasn't as much diversity in the dives as you might find elsewhere, such as Grand Cayman, but for a beginning diver, it was quite exciting. We saw only one shark, a nurse shark, but we saw dolphins, barracuda, and turtles." There is no road to Captain Morgan's: the hotel runs a shuttle boat service between the resort and San Pedro (800/447-2931).

Many serious divers go to Fred Goode's St. George's Lodge, a boat ride from Belize City. Anne Murray (Santa Fe) "saw more fish the first dive here than I had seen in one week in Roatan. Turtles, sharks, many eagle rays, manta rays, various large and small tropicals, moray and garden eels. The soft coral was thick as were the gorgonians, varied coral, good visibility, warm water -- and all one mile from the resort. Excellent food. Four guest cottages on the lee side of the island are right on the water. Nothing to do but eat, dive, eat, dive, nap, read, eat, sleep." Patrick and Susan Howarth (Mt. Sinai, NY): "One of the finest dive experiences that we have had. 2-5 divers in boat. No rush fish life unspoiled and unfed. Interaction with animals -- petting -- encouraged and taught. Remote, quiet, very expensive but worth every buck!" (011-501-44190; 714/955-2774)

And then there was a letter from Frank Fletcher of New York City, who said: "After reading your review of Turneffe Island Lodge in the May issue of Undercurrent, I will never again believe anything that you write! I was there barely five months before you, and the diving stunk! We never dove on Lighthouse Reef, Glovers Reef ('too rough'), the Blue Hole ('nothing to see'), Myrtle's Turtles, the Elbow, T's Trail, or the Sayonara. Photo opportunities were zero! I didn't take a single shot. I returned home with 20 rools of unexposed film. Occasionally we saw rays (in the distance), but that was about it. No sharks, no turtles, no permit, no tuna and no dolphin. The variety of tropical fish was about what I would expect from Nassau. For the night dive we dropped 15 to 20



feet to a very choice selection of coral rubble. No fish, just rubble. I was reminded of a quarry in Pennsylvania. No problems with the people, accommodations or food. They were just fine, but I went for diving. I shlepped a ton of gear from New York, paid a premium over what it would have cost at Rum Cay or Bonaire, and I expected good diving. I sure as hell did not get it! Are you related to the owners?" To that, I can only respond: I'm sorry your experience didn't match mine, but all I can say is that fish swim and apparently they showed up after you left. As you can see from our readers' comments about Ambergris Caye, when you dive with land-based operations, if the fish don't show up you can't go find them. It is true that Turneffe advertises dives to the Blue Hole, Glover's and elsewhere and I doubt that they do them very often since they're quite a trip -- and they charge extra. I think they might be a tad more honest to drop that from their advertising, or be more specific about the slim chances of doing those dives.

C.C., travel editor

## The Leaks Of The Nikonos V

### -- Design Flaw Or Lack Of Proper Maintenance?

Not long ago we received a lengthy commentary from a noted professional photographer who owns five Nikonos V cameras. "I have to own five," he wrote, "to keep three of them working at all times. If I have an assignment that is really prolonged or important I will also take along a couple of III's as back-up. I know other well-known underwater photographers who own even more. And virtually every one has the same complaints. The Nikonos V camera is poorly *designed*. It looks good, it feels good, it works great for a while. But when its time passes, watch out."

Our photographer friend won't let us use his name, saying "few of us will speak freely because most are either on Nikon's payroll teaching Nikon seminars or get their cameras repaired for free."

Geoff Semorille, owner of Camera Tech in San Francisco, told us that he has "a waste can full of ruined Nikonos V's that are not worth repairing. They flood and corrode easily. I have repaired more V's than any other Nikonos."

And the cost for that repair can easily run well over \$200.

The Nikonos V is sport divers' camera of choice. Because it offers the features of land cameras, especially through the lens metering and automatic strobes, it produces good shots for any amateur underwater photographer by assuring a higher number of acceptable shots per roll than the older models.

But to get those features, Nikon had to forsake simplicity of design. The Nikonos V is a major departure from the previous Nikonos models. The operation of the camera is much closer to that of a standard land camera and therefore more parts must be sealed off from water exposure with O-rings.

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*"These O-rings are so deeply set that when salt water is pushed in under pressure, standard soaking and washing may not get it out. When the water finally evaporates, crystals form, the O-ring gets cut, and the camera floods, creating those costly repair bills."*

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Six areas with one or more O-rings are not user serviceable. Three of these -- the door latch, the shutter release and the film advance -- move against the O-rings, creating friction. These O-rings are so deeply set that when salt water is pushed in under pressure, standard soaking and washing may not get it out. When the water finally evaporates, crystals form, the O-ring gets cut, and the camera floods, creating those costly repair bills. You're not only out the money, but also lose the use of the camera until it has been repaired. That's not good news if it happens on the first day of your tropical dive vacation.

Bob Warkentin of the Southern Nikonos Service Center, located in Houston, has published several articles on Nikonos maintenance and conducted seminars on the subject at the recent DEMA trade show. "The Nikonos V is not as forgiving as the Nikonos II's and III's," he says. "But the V offers the underwater photographer more technology than either the II's or the III's. The trade-off is that the diver has to do more routine work on the camera than he does for a land camera or the older models."

The Nikonos instruction book states the need for a systematic maintenance program, but it's not often done, says Fred Dion of Underwater Photo-tech in Derry, New Hampshire. "There are technical tips in the back of the booklet," he notes, "which should be



followed. I can tell when a camera comes in whether the owner has done the user maintenance or not."

Specifically, the Nikonos manual says: "After using the camera underwater, rinse it with running water with the camera back closed and the lens mounted. When the camera/lens assembly gets dirty, rinse it thoroughly in fresh water, immediately after using it in salt water, rinse it thoroughly in fresh water to remove any residue. Otherwise, corrosion may occur in minute places like screw holes or the junction of parts. To prevent this, soak the camera/lens assembly overnight in a basin of fresh water and move the external parts (for instance the film advance lever, shutter speed/mode selector dial, ASA/ISO film speed dial and so on), then rinse it vigorously in running water. Finally, dry the camera/lens assembly with a soft cloth -- never by heating -- before removing the lens from the camera. Be sure to wipe away any drops of water that may have seeped in past the O-ring."

Paul Shute, President of Helix, the largest company specializing in the retail sales of underwater photography equipment, says, "People just aren't doing that. The O-rings that can be reached and serviced by a diver need to be lubricated frequently to keep the rubber pliable."

Shute also notes that divers who grease the reachable O-rings don't always do it right. The silicone grease used must be wiped off, leaving just a film of lubricant. "I have seen divers coat the O-ring with gobs of grease and then close the camera. That excess grease prevents the O-rings from sealing tightly and the grease is sure to pick up dirt. The next thing you know they have a flooded camera. I know," Shute says, "because I have done it myself."

Even though proper maintenance may solve much of the problem, we talked with several who were critical of the design -- but refused to speak on the record because they receive free equipment from Nikon. One professional told us, "I think the Nikon put as much of the land camera technology into the Nikonos V as possible, but did not consider the water environment. I have had my Nikonos V's in the Nikonos repair facility more than all my II's and III's combined."

Not everyone has a leaky V. Jim Church, a professional photographer and teacher who has regular features in *Skin Diver*, says he uses his cameras in frequent classes and shoots. "I do wish that Nikon would come out with a model that had more user serviceable O-rings," he said, "but I really have not experienced many problems." He added, however, that he services his cameras almost daily.

Chicago photographer Dick Jacoby told us, "I have never had any of these problems. But that may be because most of my diving is in the Great Lakes and that is fresh water."

Says Bob Warkentin: "I have a V that I have used

for more than three years without any maintenance, other than what the average diver can do, and it is working just fine." Could it be that he is doing something that the other divers are not?

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*"It needs special care. I never let it dry out. I keep it in a container of fresh water until I dive and replace it afterwards."*

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"I do not treat the V like the earlier Nikonos cameras," Warkentin said. "It needs special care. I never let it dry out. I keep it in a container of fresh water until I dive and replace it afterwards. After diving I take it back to my room and then put it into the sink filled with fresh water." He agitates the camera for one minute "so hard that I splash water all over the walls."

Warkentin says that when the camera dries out the salt and mineral deposits scour the rubber in the O-rings and leave a mineral deposit around the metal or plastic, especially around the film advance, shutter mechanism and the door latch. "If kept in solution, the hard agitation can produce the effect of almost one atmosphere of pressure and wash most of the dissolved minerals out of the area around the O-rings."

Bill Gleason, editor of *Skin Diver Magazine*, told us that he uses a similar method. "I use a small hose contraption that I figured out. I attach it to the water faucet and it generates enough force to wash the minerals out from around the O-rings."

So, the upshot is that if you fail to care properly for your camera, you're flirting with a flood. And repairing a flooded Nikonos V will cost \$200 or more. Don't expect Nikon to do it at their expense. If the problem is salt in the O-rings, it's your bill. With proper professional maintenance and fresh water storage, you don't have to worry about your camera flooding on your first vacation dive, ruining your vacation photography. As Warkentin says, "When it's time to service your regulator, it's time to service your Nikonos."

The following companies provide annual service or flood repair:

**Camera Tech:** 1817 Balboa Ave., San Francisco, CA 94121 (1-415/387-7200). General annual maintenance \$140 plus parts. Flood repair \$160 plus parts. Turnaround time: 10-20 days.

**Nikon Service Center:** 5355 Oakbrooke Parkway, Norcross, GA 30093 (1-404-464-2394). The service center of Nikon Inc., they refused to give us their prices over the telephone. Some readers have complained about the excessive time required for service.

**Pacific Camera Service:** 2980 McClitock,



Unit H, Costa Mesa, CA 92626 (1-714/642-7800). Annual maintenance \$85 plus parts and shipping for first year, \$75 for following year. Turnaround time: 10 working days.

*Southern Nikonos Service Center:* 9459 Kempwood, Houston, TX 77080 (1-713/462-5436). Annual maintenance \$79.50 plus shipping and phone calls. Turnaround time: 3-4 days from receipt. A staff camera

recently serviced was returned with the notation "internal O-rings horribly filthy. There is pitting in O-ring seat of trigger and door latch. Some water was beginning to enter the body -- keep clean from now on."

*Underwater Photo-Tech:* 135 Hampstead Rd., Derry, NH 03038 (1-603/432-1997). Labor charges: annual tune-up \$55, overhaul \$85 (parts and shipping additional). Flooded equipment is estimate only. Two-week turnaround time. Rush service available.

## Why Divers Die:

### -- Slipped Tanks, Separated Partners, Shared Air

The National Underwater Accident Data Center (NUADC) at the University of Rhode Island investigates and analyzes the diving fatalities of United States citizens wherever they were diving. For several years, *Undercurrent* has been analyzing these reports, editing and condensing them, and sharing the relevant data with our readers. We believe that by reporting the unique and varied circumstances in which divers die, we may all learn how to become safer as we conduct our own dives. This is the second in a series of articles discussing the 181 sport diving deaths that occurred in 1986 and 1987.

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Five deaths each were recorded for 1986 and 1987 while the participants were engaged in diving on submerged wrecks.

On a submerged wreck off Key West, Florida, a 35-year-old female had completed a dive with her husband and another partner to a depth of 90 feet for 14 minutes. As she followed the anchor chain up to the surface, she suddenly started sinking back toward the ocean floor. The victim was quickly recovered and brought to the boat, where extensive efforts at CPR were not successful. She died of an air embolism.

All factors in this case point toward a too-rapid ascent. Many sport divers fail to adhere to the standard rate of ascent of 60 feet per minute or one foot per second (it is often recommended that you rise no faster than your smallest air bubbles).

A 25-year-old man lost his life while executing a six-minute decompression dive to 190 feet, beyond the limits recommended for sport diving. Upon the return trip to the surface, the victim stopped at 160 feet and indicated that he wanted to work on a porthole. His buddy proceeded upwards to continue his proper decompression stops. After 40 minutes under the water, the buddy surfaced and reported the victim missing. The recovery of the victim was hampered by several events. The second recovery team down sent the victim's body to the surface with

a lift bag, only to have it drop back to the bottom. The ship's anchor began to drag and had to be reset. The victim was not recovered until the next day. In the meantime, fleshy portions of exposed skin had been eaten by marine animals. Death was due to air

#### The Dolphin as Killer Commando

The U.S. Navy has been training dolphins and seals to engage in clandestine activities since 1960. Todd Steiner, writing in the *Earth Island Journal*, says, "Michael Greenwood, a former Navy psychophysicologist, allegedly told a secret Senate committee hearing that dolphins have been trained to attack and kill enemy scuba divers by injecting them with hypodermic needles filled with CO<sub>2</sub>. The Navy has denied that dolphins have been used to 'dispatch' enemy frogmen but has confirmed that dolphins have been used to intercept and capture enemy swimmers."

Recently, there have been reports that the Navy has abused marine mammals during their training and many have escaped. The Navy has denied the charges of abuse, but apparently a number of escaped animals do roam the seas. In 1988, several sea lions turned up at San Miguel Island, off southern California, wearing secret Navy equipment harnesses. In December, 1986, the Florida marine patrol reported finding an emaciated dolphin swimming in South Florida wearing a muzzle on its snout. It had apparently escaped from the Navy dolphin training operation in Key West, Florida.

The next time you encounter a dolphin or a seal while diving, just hope, as Steiner says, that it's not a "stressed-out killer commando, who just might be AWOL."



embolism with the use of cocaine possibly a contributing factor.

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*"Toward the end of the dive, the mother's tank had come out of the backpack harness and she and her son tried to hold it in place while rising to the surface, only to find that they had sunk back to the bottom."*

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Two Americans, a mother aged 46 and her son aged 17, died while diving on the wreck of the "Arabia" at the Fathom Five Provincial Park, Tobermory, Canada. The two victims were diving as a group of three with the boy's father. Toward the end of the dive, the mother's tank had come out of the backpack harness and she and her son tried to hold it in place while rising to the surface, only to find that they had sunk back to the bottom. The two victims were later found by police divers and an autopsy cause of death in both cases was listed as massive air embolism.

Off the coast of New Jersey, a 34-year-old man died after becoming separated from his partner and snagged amid wreckage of a ship on the bottom of the sea. Autopsy conclusions indicated that this diver expired due to an air embolism.

An air embolism was also diagnosed as the cause of death of a 46-year-old male diver who was wreck diving 25 miles south of Beaufort, North Carolina. This death occurred after the victim had attempted to buddy breathe to the surface. He appeared to be alright until just before reaching the boat, when he stopped breathing and became unconscious. Extensive resuscitation efforts were undertaken, but the victim was pronounced DOA after a helicopter flight to the hospital.

A 39-year-old man became entangled in cables while diving at a wreck in 120 feet of water 30 miles off Ocean City, Maryland. He and the buddy diver were rushed by helicopter to the University of Maryland Medical Center decompression facility, where the victim was pronounced dead. The buddy diver survived after decompression treatment.

A 120-foot dive to a wreck of a sunken steamboat in the St. Lawrence River took the life of a 33-year-old man. The victim apparently became disoriented, wrestled with his partner and then proceeded to dive deeper into the ship. The victim had been at a depth of 110 feet for about 20 minutes when this incident occurred. His body was not recovered until the following afternoon and the cause of death was listed as asphyxia due to drowning.

*Next issue: Deaths During Instruction.*

## Voices From The Deep

### -- The Scuba Experience In Poetry

Vera Schoen, who now lives on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, wrote to us five years ago to tell us she was putting together a volume of poetry about diving. We helped by running her request to locate poets. Many *Undercurrent* readers responded, and now her anthology, *Voices from the Deep*, has been published.

When I received my copy, I eagerly thumbed the pages and read several of the more than one hundred verses. I was pleased to read the poignant "Song Allegre" by PADI's Al Hornsby and liked several of the images created by Canadian writer and filmmaker Joe MacInnis. But I admit to knowing little about poetry, so I asked an excellent poet and critic, Steven Smith of Saskatoon, Canada, to review the volume.

Ben Davison

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I'm not a diver, but I've spent a lot of time sounding the depths and shallows of poetry. By bringing together the evocative underwater world and the lyric mode, *Voices from the Deep* offered more than a hint of potential. I plunged into this anthology with

keen curiosity, to find that, indeed, there are moments when that potential is fulfilled. But there are too few such moments.

The poems are divided into 20 chapters, by theme, and this organization allows the reader to compare different takes on various aspects and experiences of diving. This is a sensible and helpful editorial arrangement of work by more than 45 contributors.

The best strokes are offered by Joe MacInnis, who has many poems in this volume, and by Elizabeth Friedman and Diane Ackerman. MacInnis often uses charged language to bring sensation alive for the reader, as in "Diver":

Inhale sharp hiss  
Of life-saving air  
Exhale crackled champagne  
Of exhausted gas

...

My finned foot feels  
The soft ooze clayness  
On the floor of the gulf"

Elizabeth Friedman is inventive with language and image in "Riding the Gulf Stream at One-Sixty":



“hairstream  
limbflow  
linemast  
unfurling  
flesh to catch  
the liquid wind”

Diane Ackerman's controlled playfulness and originality shows often, for example, from “Christmas on the Reef”:

“Below us, skirty anemones  
twirled a flamenco in the sand,  
and uphigh, our bubbles  
grew silvery as sleighbells.”

There are some interesting formal variations, of which Bill King's “The Drop-off” is a good example. It endeavors to have the shape of the poem parallel the content. Here's an excerpt:

“i  
can  
without  
getting  
high,  
swim to the edge and go over this drop-off  
and  
continue  
on  
down”

Problems arise when the writers try to cram physical experience and fluid description into the container of end-line rhyme and regular meter, and do it badly. There are many such occasions. Hardly a poem that uses these traditional elements does it well. One small example of awkwardness appears in Norine Rouse's “Deep Dive”:

“Black Coral grew where fishes fed  
intermixed with sponges red”

The lines flounder while trying to adhere to a flawed understanding of metric form. What's wrong with “Black Coral grew where fishes fed / among red sponges”? The rhyme becomes internal, and the

language flows without contortion. Elsewhere such efforts yield, what seems to me, unintentional humor, as in Glenn Wasson's “Night Dive” in his rhyming of “stimuli” and “octopi,” or Richard Buck's “washing machine” rhymed with “lifeless, serene.”

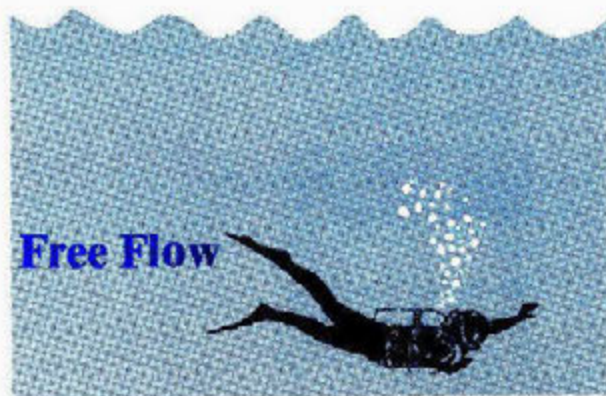
It is not uncommon for an editor to include his or her own work in an anthology, and editor Vera Schoen has done so here. She has obviously put plenty of dedication into gathering and arranging this collection, and perhaps she felt she had earned the last word, and so placed her poem “Drift Dive” as the sole piece in the “Finale” section of the book. She would have been better advised -- both as a matter of editorial modesty, and of poetic value -- to have left the last word to one of the more developed poets in the volume.

There is no questioning the enthusiasm of every author in this collection for the undersea world. This shows through despite what seem to be errant assumptions about what constitutes poetry. Just like diving, writing poetry requires a knowledge of the fundamentals, the tools, and application and development of particular skills through more practice. It requires familiarity with the poetic art of today. This book may be more rewarding for those interested in the diving experience as it might be expressed in words, than for those interested in poetry expression which happens to be about diving.

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Steven Smith is a landlocked poet and fiction writer living in Saskatoon, on the Canadian prairies. When not writing, he may be seen trying to spot the trout leaping in seas of wheat. His most recent book of poems is *blind zone*, published by Aya Press in Toronto.

*Voices from the Deep* is available through Harwood Books, 3943 N. Providence Rd., Newtown Square, PA 19073 (215/458-0793) for \$12.50, plus \$2 for shipping (PA residents add 6% sales tax). American Express, Mastercard and VISA accepted.



In 18 months in his commercial aquarium home in

Lansing, IL, Flazey, a foot-long, three-pound grouper, grew to 35 pounds and 3½ feet. Unfortunately for the aquarium owner, Flazey did it by eating \$5000 worth of his exotic tank mates. When he finally tried to wolf down a two-foot nurse shark, owner Terry Haley had had enough. On Independence Day, Haley donned his tank and took Flazey out to sea in Fort Lauderdale. He patted him goodbye as Flazey meandered toward the ocean floor, 140 feet down. “It was nice of him to hang around for a while,” Haley said after the fond farewell. “In fact, it would be great to know where he is right now, but he's probably looking at the menu.”