

Undercurrent®

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Tropic Surveyor, Malpelo Island, Colombia, S.A.

—Better than Cocos Island?

Dear Reader,

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," Dickens wrote. He must have been a passenger on the Tropic Surveyor.

Lured by tales of wild encounters with sharks, mantas, and whale sharks, I flew to Colombia in mid-June to board the 100-foot Tropic Surveyor. She has been operating for two years, but only recently has she been available to the American market. A Miami sales rep painted a rosy picture on the telephone: "Bring a sweater because it can get pretty cool in the evenings. Water temperature can drop into the sixties so a quarter inch wet suit is recommended. You'll love the food, we have a gourmet chef!" I perused the brochure that trumpeted "safety and comfort". At \$1795 for ten days, I liked the sound of things. Unfortunately, the rep didn't know squat.

Arriving in Cali, we were shuttled to our hotel by guide Carlos Restrepo, who speaks fluent English. Carlos picked us up the following morning for a tour of historical sites, religious shrines, and sundry shopping opportunities. On one stop, we were treated to a magnificent display of artifacts including a selection of handcarved pre-Colombian dildoes that seemed to be the high point of the tour for some group members.

At 4:00 PM, we dragged our luggage to the lobby and waited 90 minutes to board the aging bus that would take us over the Andes to the small Pacific coast town of Buenaventura. During the ride, a skirmish ensued over cabin assignments that led to harsh words between guests. One diver attempted to referee diplomatically and was verbally savaged by a diver from Denver who seemed obsessed with getting a particular set of rooms even though he had never seen the vessel. When we arrived, we were warned never to let anyone not wearing a Surveyor tee shirt touch our bags. Buenaventura makes Belize City look like the garden spot of Latin America.

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Surveyor cabins are four or six berth, with two smaller cabins apparently booked at lesser rates. Most include a marine toilet. My cabin had no reading lights for the bunks, a major inconvenience since the trip involved long passages at sea or idle time waiting to dive. While those who argued the loudest seemed to win their preferences, in a fitting irony, three who waited patiently until all others were housed -- including the professional diver Bret Gilliam, who was aboard -- drew the only cabin with functional air conditioning. Overall, the air conditioning was inadequate; some cabins became unbearably hot. Also the heads proved to be temperamental and exceedingly foul smelling (ask for a cabin with no head to avoid the aromatic inevitability when it fails to flush). Two heads and showers are on the main deck; another head is for women only. The dining salon, down a steep ladder, has several tables with bench seats and chairs. Barely seating the 23 guests aboard, it's supposed to handle the advertised capacity of 32! A fan maintained a tolerable temperature.

"It didn't take long to get underway, but 45 minutes later, we were ordered to "heave to" by armed authorities in a small gunboat. Passengers were rounded up on the sundeck while cabins were searched. But for what? Who knows? Some female guests reported that their underwear was left strewn on their bunks.



Without further interruption, we made for Gorgona Island, 90 miles southwest and at 3 degrees latitude. After a calm crossing, we were hustled to the beach by dinghy for an environmental and historical briefing from park officials. (Why not bring them to the ship instead of moving 30 people ashore and losing the better part of three hours?) A penal colony until the mid-1980's, the island is a lush equatorial jungle with towering palms and hardwoods surrounded by a colorful variety of flowering plants. Higher in the interior are spectacular waterfalls that feed an abundance of streams. For touring, a guide is mandatory, as is wearing the knee high rubber boots they provide as protection against snakes. My escort pointed out one snake: "Muy malo. You die within 30 minutes if he bites you." Apparently, some of the snakes and an assortment of tigers, jaguars and other beasts were introduced to the island to discourage prisoners from escaping. The park staff seem spooked.

The Surveyor departed for the northern tip of Gorgona, anchoring 300 yards from the pinnacles that mark the dive site. All diving is done from two 12-foot inflatables with outboards (the brochure says three) and a 19-foot fiberglass

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open boat. Two to three dives were scheduled during the day, with diving every night. After the gear had been loaded, everyone crammed into whatever space was left. For longer runs, it left a lot to be desired. Upon reaching the sites, divers could either gear up in the water or on the dinghy and then do a back roll. The boat driver recovered divers as they appeared on the surface. Most of the best dives were in currents that ranged from mild to extreme. Water temperature was in the low 80's, and I cursed the full wet suit advised by the Miami agent. A Polartec dive skin is all you'd need this time of the year. The crew said that a thicker suit is needed in the winter.

I dived with Diego Hurtab, the director of operations (there's no requirement that you dive with a guide). We quickly descended to barren rocky topography. Visibility was 60 feet, but improved in the deeper water. After five minutes of boring seascape, a 15-foot manta floated in, oblivious to us. Around the pinnacle in a cave, several large white tip sharks lay on the bottom. Then, a colossal manta almost 25-feet from wingtip to wingtip appeared, allowing us to approach closely, then performing a few graceful arcs before fading into the blue. The manta returned soon with two smaller mantas with 12-foot wingspans. On two more dives squeezed into the afternoon, I saw several other mantas. Each had a pair of large remoras on its back that we used as handholds for exciting rides -- for one woman, as long as 15 minutes. It was a fabulous day of nearly non-stop opportunities to dive with these awesome animals.

Some notes about the food. Maybe it's a cultural thing, but most of the Americans thought it was god awful. If it were not for generous helpings of white rice, some of us would have surely starved. The best meal was a generic baked chicken with mashed potatoes. There was ample fresh fish (speared by the crew) along with offerings of "mystery" meat during the week. Overall the fare was bland and uninspired. Sauces or gravies were non-existent; a hot sauce from a re-cycled bottle was offered for a spice fix. Some meals were downright inedible; one shrimp dish looked suspiciously like it was served from a bait bucket. Decidedly absent was any influence from the "gourmet chef" I had been told to expect. Even a nodding acquaintance with a cookbook could have livened up the meals. Lunches and dinners were virtually the same, with breakfasts the usual variations on eggs (some never completely identified). Beer and soda were free. A Colombian version of firewater was available, but after observing it reduce strong men to gasping wretches, I passed.

Unlike most modern liveaboards, the Tropic Surveyor has no storage bins. Divers used the handrails on the deck to hang gear, making for cluttered passageways. Camera gear had to be stowed in the staterooms. Those with an extra bunk converted it into a designated camera zone. The narrow stern is taken up by an extra portable compressor and racks for the aluminum 80' tanks. There were constant short

Great White Attacks Californian

A Northern California abalone diver was badly injured in mid-August when a shark swallowed him head first, to the shoulder blades, then spit him out. The shark may have been a great white.

David R. Miles, 38, of Eureka, had severe lacerations to the back, chest, face and scalp.

"There is only one reason he's alive and that's because the shark didn't want him," Coast Guardsman Kevin Kelly said. "He's a very lucky man."

Miles told rescuers the shark hit him from behind, then rolled toward the surface and dove, swallowing him. Apparently the shark realized Miles -- who was wearing a wet suit -- wasn't his regular food and spit him out.

The badly injured Miles swam 70 yards to a rock where he refused to go back into the water. Another diver, Mike Schwartzel, eventually helped him the rest of the way to shore where he was air lifted by helicopter to the Mendocino Coast Hospital in Fort Bragg.

fills sometimes as low as 2200 psi and frequently not enough tanks were ready for the divers. Both passengers and crew seemed to overcome these deficits with patience. Two barrels of fresh water were set up, one reserved for cameras. It was quickly subverted when one irritating woman insisted on washing every piece of her gear after every dive.

Shortly before dark, we anchored near a freshwater stream that empties on the beach. The crew wrestled several hundred feet of large diameter hose and a gas powered pump to shore to top off the water tanks, a lot of effort for a ship equipped with a watermaking plant. After an uneventful night dive, we departed for the 28-hour run to Malpelo, 210 miles northwest. Although it was a beautiful day with a relatively calm sea, most of the group from Denver was prostrate with seasickness, aggravated by the steamy cabins and the food.

Malpelo is little more than a rugged granite mountain poking out of the Pacific. Two miles by a quarter mile, its sheer cliffs soar to 845 feet. The only "safe" way to gain access is via a rope ladder dangling 50 feet from a scaffold suspended from the cliff face. Three of us braved the ladder and climbed to visit a four-man contingent from the Colombian army, the only inhabitants.

Our first dive was at the Altar of the Virgin, along the steep cliffs. Visibility was typically 75-80 feet. The bottom was a smattering of boulders and ledges with a variety of fish, including snappers and grouper up to 30 pounds. But, what made this dive unique was the overwhelming abundance of free-swimming moray eels--literally hundreds buzzing around the rock or merely laying about. They had no fear of divers and were easily approached. The ship crew doesn't feed them, so they seemed to accept us as other members of the community, instead of associating us with food. During the ride back, a pod of 30 adults and several young dolphins appeared and I snorkeled with them for 15 minutes.

At the north pinnacles -- the Three Musketeers -- I entered a gigantic tunnel and cave system -- the Cathedral -- that extended all the way through one structure. Thousands of bait fish and silversides opened as I passed, then closed immediately, blocking out all natural light. Fish populations were prolific; an occasional white tip shark lingered in the overhangs. One cave housed at least 40 lobster stacked like firewood.

Video Footage Wanted

Fathom Pictures wants to purchase underwater video footage of several locations:

The Red Sea
Palau
Coral Sea
Great Barrier Reef
Fiji
The Maldives

If your stuff measures up and was recorded on a Beta S.P. camcorder, fax information to:
415/461-4563

While the Malpelo/Gorgona route has mantas and whale sharks with the outside possibility of swimming with a humpback whale, the draw to Malpelo is sharks. Not rinky dinky white tips or the occasional reef shark. The emphasis here is on quantity and quality: hammerheads. And Malpelo delivers in spades. While recent reports have suggested that the Cocos sharks have been thinned by fishing or driven deeper by El Nino, they are alive and well at Malpelo -- if you are an experienced diver in good shape who can handle the tough conditions. Most of the divers on my trip could not.

To reach the critters, dinghy travel time could be up to an hour in

seas as high as eight feet. With seven divers and the boat operator stuffed in a 12-foot inflatable, we nearly swamped several times heading to the first site at La Gringa. My buddy and I dropped to the bottom and made our way through a passage at 50 feet that led to the exposed side of La Gringa. Going through the 200-foot tunnel, we passed two eight-foot white tips coming from the other side. I dropped beneath them, and exited at 90 feet into a strong current. Hugging the rock face, I inched my way around the ledge only to be greeted by one of the more amazing sights I had ever seen in 30 years of diving: the entire ocean seemed to be filled with hammerhead sharks. They moved in an endless column from about 100 feet all the way to the surface.

My initial reaction was to gawk, but after a few minutes, I swam out to get better photos. My exhaust bubbles immediately caused the sharks to move away. After I retreated to a vantage point behind the ledge, the sharks resumed their position. By holding my breath and swimming under the school, I could move close, but the school scattered as soon as I exhaled. We hit depths of 130 feet and our computers were well into decompression when I reluctantly curtailed the dive. We returned to the original entry site by going back through the tunnel, to protect us from the raging sea while waiting to be picked up. Somehow the idea of bobbing around on the surface while hundreds of sharks eyed me from below didn't sit real well. As it turned out, our plan was prophetic.

We completed our decompression without incident in the foamy surge and surfaced to find the inflatable nowhere in sight. After swimming vigorously for 10 minutes maintaining our position, I finally flagged the inflatable down and we clamored in. But, there were no other divers aboard. Nearly 20 minutes later, two from the Denver group surfaced with a Colombian guest who was also an instructor. They had been unable to make it back to the entry point and were precariously floating in the breaking surf between La Gringa and another ledge. The Americans were too weak to swim the 75 yards into the lee and we almost capsized trying to recover them.

Despite a half hour search, two women divers were still missing. We were convinced they had either drifted away or drowned. With the dinghy now virtually awash in the rough seas and all of us bailing frantically with masks, we started back for the ship. Near the other end of Malpelo, we found the two women, floating in their BC's, exhausted and bleeding from being bashed into the rocks after a panicked ascent on the exposed side when one ran low on air. In the meantime, eight divers had set out in the larger fiberglass dinghy to visit the nearby Cathedral and had capsized. The boat quickly sunk in 150 feet of water. The crew spent the rest of the day trying to raise it. There were no more trips out of sight of the ship for the remainder of the afternoon.

Diego and his staff gave a good orientation to the dive sites and stated almost matter-of-factly that certain sites were for advanced divers only. They let individuals determine their own skills and capabilities, but proceeded to

Death in the Blue Hole

The mysterious Red Sea Blue Hole has lured another diver to his death. An Israeli disappeared in June while diving with two tourists near Dahab Village on the Sinai desert on the Red Sea coast. Local divers claim that dozens of people have died exploring the Blue Hole in the last 20 years. This is the fourth death since 1990.

The attraction is an opening in the reef 180 feet below the surface, where divers describe a brilliant deep blue light in the sea. These divers went into the opening and from there the Israeli disappeared."

"The Blue Hole has a myth surrounding it — only heroes survive it." Yisrael Gonen of the Israeli Divers Union said. "Actually it is pure stupidity to dive there. It is suicide."

deposit us where the conditions were unquestionably "extreme". They offered no apologies if we couldn't hack it. To their credit, they made every effort to work with divers of all levels, but once they brief and warn you of the hazards, then "you pays your money and you take your chances". Unfortunately, many individuals did not realistically evaluate their capabilities; this spelled potentially dangerous situations for them, along with needless inconvenience to their fellow divers and the boat crew.

Within the group, several divers would not initially admit that the conditions were too difficult for them. This led to several aborted dives for capable divers who had to assist in rescue situations. Others had to abandon dive plans to accommodate the problems of the less experienced. The Colombians accepted this as the cost of doing business with Americans (since most of the screw-ups came from that group). They quickly adopted an "I told you so" attitude but were always courteous and helpful. Once, the two women who had to be rescued by our boat after their long drift demanded to use the ship's limited supply of oxygen because they had omitted their safety stops. Diego complied, but 90 minutes later, they dived again. "They think they're bent and use half my oxygen but now they go on another dive," he said. "That's not smart!" I agreed.

On the following day, we visited the Three Kings (Solomon, David and Saul), three pinnacles adjacent to La Gringa with no lee. The guide warned us that the screaming current would sweep us away unless we dropped in upstream and dived for the bottom as fast as possible. Less than 30 seconds elapsed from exiting the inflatable and seeking shelter behind boulders at 100 feet. There the magic began again.

Within a minute, the first school of hammerheads approached against the seven knot current, while we hung on for dear life! By ducking behind ledges or large rocks, it was possible to get directly under the sharks for an unprecedented view. Photographers quickly learned to use one hand for camera operation and one for anchoring themselves. But a diver trying to shoot video with two hands tumbled over the bottom and was swept away to be picked up by the dinghy. Literally hundreds of sharks passed every few minutes. In the strong current, they seemed unbothered by our exhaust and would come within a few feet as we stretched out like flags in a stiff wind. I couldn't decide whether I was incredibly lucky or phenomenally stupid to be in this situation. Lucky or stupid, this was a once in a lifetime experience!

To conclude the dive, we let go and hugged the bottom until we drifted downstream where the current abated. A free-drifting safety stop was taken and the dinghy was waiting when we popped up.

Back at the ship, I learned that the other inflatable had exploded an air chamber on the rough outbound trip with another group. We were down to one 12-foot inflatable for 23 divers. Amazingly, this news was not greeted with angry

Malpelo & Gorgona	
from the Tropic Surveyor	
Diving for Experienced (with sharks and mantas)	★★★★★
Diving for Experienced (other sites)	★★
Diving for Beginners (or even average divers)	forget about it
Accommodations	★★
Food	★
Ambience	(affable ship of fools) ★
Moneysworth (with sharks)	★★★★★
(regular sites)	★
★ poor, ★★ fair, ★★★ average, ★★★★ good, ★★★★★ excellent	

protests. Some divers had finally realized that they had no business tempting fate in the tough, shark-filled conditions. The Denver group decided to limit themselves to the relatively calm sites along Malpelo's cliffs.

Now reduced to a tried and true cadre of strong divers, we established ground rules. "Anyone who blows the descent or gets swept away is on their own. The dinghy can recover them wherever they surface, but no one else is aborting their dive." With this code of conduct, we set out with renewed optimism. The ride was nothing short of horrible and by the time we were ready to enter the water, the dinghy was nearly ready to sink from all the water that had poured in from the huge waves. I wondered if it would be there when I came up.

At the "David" and "Saul" pinnacles, it was less than 75 feet across and 115 feet deep. The sharks appeared on cue and, for the next 20 minutes, I was enthralled as they passed overhead in wave after wave. Most were 8-10 feet, but some big hammerheads hit 15 feet. As I swam toward the main school of hammerheads, a school of blacktip sharks (hundreds of them) entered the narrow passage. It didn't look like there was enough ocean for everyone when the two schools converged. Suspended in the current with my air supply low, I had no choice but to continue my ascent into the convergence of the two species. I was nearly paralyzed by fear as I drifted into hundreds of sharks, but they moved slightly to allow me a small passageway with only inches to spare. Then the door slammed shut. I rose to the surface unscathed. I could never experience anything more exciting short of taking up skydiving without a parachute!

The following day, sea conditions had improved and we anchored a half mile from the Three Kings, making an easy run in the one dinghy. We were treated to a succession of dives with the sharks, but never in such numbers as that last scene. Finally, it was time to head for port 30-hours away. Diego circumnavigated Malpelo one last time, where we were escorted by a dozen dolphins as a good-bye. We were not home free, however, since we had run out of water. The only water we had for showers was rainwater collected from downpours. That night the ship lay idled for six hours when both engines mysteriously shut down. The crew toiled furiously to effect repairs. When we finally reached Buenaventura, we were calling ourselves the Tropic Survivors!

So, my friends, Malpelo and Gorgona diving is truly unique and thrilling by any standard. I might have caught the Tropic Surveyor on a week of incredibly bad luck, but it will take lot of improvements to basic amenities, before I could raise those ratings. Likewise, they have to get three operating inflatables in top condition to support the diving properly. It would be worth Diego's time to visit quality liveboards like the Wave Dancer or an Aggressor to see what Americans expect. Yet, for experienced divers who can handle themselves, be forewarned -- and go for it.

Divers' Compass: A ten day package including hotel in Cali, city tour, transfers, and liveboard is \$1755 (Call Cruceros de Colombia in Miami at 305-592-5888); One American had the moxie to book through the Colombia office and

Dear Undercurrent

Re: your article on Stella Maris

What is the impact of continual shark contact with humans through shark dives? What are the sharks doing or not doing to the reef ecology because of their behavioral changes caused by such myopic activities?

What place do shark dive articles have in a magazine touted for its independent reviews of dive locations? Stick to the point gang. Leave the eco-babble to the politically correct and continue the good work on enhancing the value of my dive dollar.

Robert D. Webster

paid \$750; if you can speak Spanish, give it a go in Bogota at 257-3894 (check operator routing and country codes). . . . Jenny Darby at Caribbean Adventures can provide experienced travel services at 800-934-3483. . . . American Airlines flies from Miami as does Avianca and Aces; fares begin at \$349. . . . Allow at least two and half hours prior to departing Cali; the airport is a madhouse of confusion and security redtape. . . . electrical current on board is 220 volts; with four 110 volt outlets available, there would be a real problem if a group of photographers were on board. . . . there is no rental equipment and no film processing. . . . a VCR played underwater videos shot from the dives.

Reports from the Readers

For 18 years, I have written this missive for serious divers, and serious divers don't go to *Club Med*.

On the other hand, we all start someplace and for novices or those seeking attributes ranging from partying to facilities for kids, Clubs have their advantages. As Gretchen Geller of Sea Cliff, NY, writes: "As a novice diver, I am content to float along with a crowd at 30 to 60 feet and watch the scenery. I have no need to test my endurance on depth or bottom time. At *Club Med* I know I can dive happily each day; my nondiving spouse (who is not into shopping) can be happily occupied in his own pursuits, and my children can be so content they beg me to go back."

The Clubs tout their dedicated diving program, trying to attract serious divers. My friends, don't believe them.

Club Med Turkoise: don't believe the ads

Says Brian Rubin (NYC), at Club Med Turkoise Providenciales Island in the Caribbean: "For beginners. The only boat dive worth going on is the first boat, which goes to a mediocre wall (good visibility but no fish) or to Paradise or Pine Cay. One-hour boat ride each way. The remainder of the diving is on a lousy reef with poor visibility (April, about 20 feet)." ...Says Michael Daley (Yardley, PA), "Some captains and divemasters arrogant. Limited dive briefings. Little assistance with gear. Boats relatively

crowded. Visibility never better than 70 feet. Many short fills. Poorly managed operation for a Club Med. Second or third dive limited to 50 feet and 30 minutes, but divemasters never checked computers." ...Jennifer Utley (Memphis, TN) adds: "Most diving is in Grace Bay. Visibility not the 200 feet claimed in ads; generally at least 60 feet. Advanced diver would get frustrated with the checkout dives. Club Med reserves one boat for 'advanced' dives. The dive sites do not differ; however, the comfort on the boat does."

Club Med Guaymas: undedicated to divers

About this Club Med in Mexico, on the Sea of Cortez, Richard Corcoran reports. "Marketed as 'all-inclusive,' but divers are nailed with an extra fee of \$100/week. Despite ads, and our investment in several Quick-Snap cameras, they did not have underwater housing available. First of two-tank boat dive unrestricted for experienced divers. Depth limit is 130 feet if computer diving. Second dive is to 50 feet and 30 minutes -- too restrictive for computers. 1-1/2 hours to Seal Island, where sea lions make a run at you, then veer off at the last second. Sea of Cortez angels are beautiful and plentiful. Lots of scorpion fish. Swam through a dozen large rays. Brisk wind for three days prevented anything more than mediocre local dives. Visibility 5 to 25 feet." ...Hunter Johnson (Palm Springs,

CA), there in June, says, "One day had clouds of brine shrimp that cut visibility to almost zero. Lots of seals, really fun! Good for beginners — very structured— 50 feet for 30 minutes were guidelines — less interested in safety than in getting back to shore ASAP." ...Glenn Grant (Aurora, CO) says, "Main attraction is diving with sea lions. For avid divers, the constraints are outrageously annoying. The boats are good, the divemasters are over-worked."

Club Med Bahamas: the best

Then again, the *Club Med* on Bahamas' San Salvador Island, which opened last December, has the best diving in the Bahamas at its dockside. Says Florina Chuy (NYC), "Great diving facility; one of two diving operations on the island (the other is Riding Rock Inn). Close to the wall and the reefs are virgin. Two boats leave in the morning — one for a one-tank dive, the other for a two-tank dive. A third tank in the afternoon for an additional fee. All morning dives were wall dives. Boats are spacious. This *Club Med* has a scuba doctor and its own decompression chamber. Wall dives superb, afternoon shallow dives not as great."

Galapagos: Try Marc Bernardi

You're no *Club Med* diver? Well, the hot spot these days is the

Galapagos and a particularly exciting trip offered on the *Reina Silva*, led by Marc Bernardi of Miami's Aquatic Encounters. Says Morgan Hunter (Vero Beach, FL): "Not the typical Galapagos diving trip. Marc Bernardi and local dive guide, Gerri Brock, take you 160 miles north of the central Galapagos where almost all of the other boats stay near two tiny specks of islands in the open ocean. Strenuous diving in cool water; open, rough seas; strong current; and some long, hard sprints to intercept the fish. You give up some dives because of the length of the trip, and some bottom time because of the strenuousness of the dives, but boy, that is an easy trade-off for the exciting adventure! My wife and I saw whale sharks three of the five dives. Several times we were in the midst of 50-100 hammerheads. On almost every dive we played with sea lions or fur seals. We saw penguins while snorkeling. Spectacular squadrons of spotted eagle rays and the largest octopus and biggest seahorse I've ever seen. We also saw an oceanic shark and a Galapagos shark. Water 72 to 75 degrees."

Says Howard Block (West Palm Beach, FL), there in June, "Upon entering the water, I saw my first hammerhead, 10 feet long, and realized that the waters were alive with hammers. Dinghies took us to the dive sites. Dove with sea lions, turtles, morays, leopard rays, marble rays, and Galapagos sharks. On the rides back to the boat, we would encounter porpoises and snorkel until we were tired of playing. Made land

explorations with giant tortoises, sea lions, sea iguanas...*Reina Silva* is a 90-foot yacht with 10 cabins with private facilities. Food was very good, varying from steak to lobster, with plenty of fruits and snacks available throughout the day. The captain and crew were friendly and helpful. My wife and I have been on eight liveboards and this was the most exciting."

Contact *Marc Bernardi, Aquatic Encounters*, at 303/494-8384; FAX 303/494-1202

For easier diving, try Anguilla

We get good reports about *Tamariain Watersports*, on Anguilla, where the diving is typically Caribbean, though some people say it's a notch better. Tim Czujak (Port Chester, NY) says, "Iain Grummit and Tom Peabody are truly concerned with the welfare of the marine life and dedicated to showing you the best diving. Several wrecks to explore, numerous reefs and grottos, impressive variety of corals. All within minutes of the dive shop. I've seen numerous turtles, eels, sting rays, eagle rays, barracuda, jacks, snapper (red, margate, yellow-tail), and even sharks (nurse, reef and lemon) when diving with Tamariain. Their boat is a pleasure to dive from (a platform deck on a cat-type V hull); easy in/out; more than enough deck space for a dozen divers. When the visibility at his locale was poor, Iain was quick to book me on

another dive operation on Saba for a day-trip. (Saba was great--100-foot visibility!) I had purchased a 10-dive package in advance and when I could not complete all the dives (due to conditions), Iain was more than happy to refund the pro rata portion of the price. The island itself has some of the best beaches and friendliest people in the Caribbean." And, I would add, some of the priciest, classiest, and best hotels. Robin Leach would feel comfortable here.

P.S. Stay warm

You need to be prepared for cold water when diving in the Pacific, whether it's the Galapagos, Cocos or even way off to Australia. For example, on the *Spoilsport* last September (the equivalent of March in the northern hemisphere), John O'Brien, Rangoon, Burma said, "Water chilly and ended up wearing a shorty over an SSA suit." In the Solomons, on the *Bilikiki* in June, E. Adland (Rockville, MD) says that the water temperature "started at 84 degrees and, by the end of the trip it was down to 76."

And there's the Red Sea. Long time reader Barry Brisco (Madison, WI) says that "the Red Sea's Sinai Divers misrepresented the water temperature in July as 76-78 degrees, when it was 71-72. Still did five dives a day. Go nearer summer for warmer water when the fish are even more active. Peak season for mantas is March-June, though visibility may be less."

Your Life is in the Hand of God

—if you sign that liability release

David Reuther was going diving in the Cayman Islands. On the way to the dive site, the charter boat he was on encountered a huge wave and he was injured. A federal court in Indianapolis applied British law and allowed him to pursue his claim for negligence, because the release he signed did not waive his rights arising from careless operation, although it did cover diving-related

activities. Had Mr. Reuther's injury occurred while he was actually diving, he would have had no claim, no matter how grievous the fault.

Don Hewitt was taking an advanced open water scuba course when he disappeared in Puget Sound. No trace of him or his diving equipment was ever found. His heirs attempted to bring suit against the instructors,

claiming fault on their part. A Washington appellate court found that Hewitt had signed a release in which he gave up all rights against the instructors, no matter how careless they were: therefore, no suit could be maintained.

Susan Mitchell drowned after becoming entangled in underwater guide lines set up by her instructor while participating in an advanced scuba course. A Wisconsin appellate court held that the release she signed, supplied by PADI, absolutely prevented her or her estate from bringing any claim for negligence against her instructor.

These cases demonstrate that releases divers sign are probably enforceable according to their terms, at least as to claims of fault resulting from carelessness or negligence. Many of these releases, which divers sign without reading carefully, provide for waiver of virtually all rights which a diver may have for injuries or even death resulting solely from the fault or misconduct of the dive operator.

“Several releases are unconscionable, demonstrating a callous disregard for the rights of divers who sign them.”

I have reviewed copies of releases used by several liveboard dive operators, some of which call for complete and total release of all rights. Several releases are unconscionable, demonstrating a callous disregard for the rights of divers who sign them. Some operators wait until after the diver has paid all fees and is aboard the boat before demanding execution of such a release. This is totally unfair for it leaves the diver without a choice.

The release used by one large liveboard operator provides that the diver waives absolutely all claims that may arise against the operator, no matter how serious the fault. Even though death may result, the liveboard will completely deny any responsibility. Furthermore, they even deny all liability if their boats are unseaworthy. For example, if they do not properly maintain safety equipment and the boat explodes or burns, maiming or even killing the passengers, the liveboard is relieved of any liability. Likewise, if they fill a tank with bad air, which you don't discover until 140 feet down on the Blue Hole dive, they will pay nothing even though you could prove the bad air that caused your injury was solely their fault.

Another leading liveboard operator is no different. Their release provides for a complete waiver of all claims. Although the release does not specifically deny liability for an unseaworthy boat, it does something just as bad. It provides that equipment is rented “as is”. It specifically places the burden on the diver to inspect the equipment and denies any responsibility whatsoever for any defect. Unless you are trained to detect hidden defects in a regulator, don't rent one from them—for they refuse to stand behind the quality of what they supply. You might

expect this from a used car dealer, but not from a well respected liveboard operator. If your rented regulator fails solely because of sloppy maintenance and you die, they can hide behind the release and say “tough luck to your wife and kids, I rented the regulator as is and it's your responsibility to find the hidden defect.”

How about another top liveboard? They also demand a release in which the diver agrees to waive all claims. If the operator hires an incompetent captain who runs the boat aground and a diver is killed or injured, the liveboard will deny all liability because you signed their release. “We're sorry our captain got drunk, but don't expect us to pay for the damages. We're no Exxon and this wasn't the Valdez”.

It gets worse. According to the release form, if someone else sues the liveboard, it may recover its costs from everyone who signed such a release. It's true! The divers all agree to reimburse the liveboard for “any and all claims...by whomever or wherever made or presented.” While it is doubtful that such a clause could be enforced, it suggests that many dive operators have no respect for divers' legal rights and will seek to take advantage of their customers to the maximum extent possible in order to minimize the costs of their own mistakes. The liveboard operator will allow exclusion of this last clause if the diver complains. The liveboard operator also advises they are in the process of changing their form.

Is there anyone out there who attempts to be fair?

Yes! The operators of the *Little Cayman Diver*, in a short straightforward and understandable document ask the diver to agree to take responsibility for his or her own safety and not hold the operator liable for accidents occurring in the normal course of diving. This does not release the operator from liability for its own fault. Congratulations to this dive operation for being reasonable. While the release does limit liability for property damage, its language is clear and understandable.

“What happens if the diver complains about the language of the release? I frequently line out the offending language on releases and the operators seldom object.”

What happens if the diver complains about the language of the release? I frequently line out the offending language on releases and the operators seldom object.

Do these operators really understand what they are asking the diver to give up? Did some nondiving lawyer somewhere prepare the strongest release imaginable for the operators to pass on without thinking? Well it's time the operators became more responsible. It's time that

divers started objecting. It's time that so-called consumer organizations insist that these releases be more fair and reasonable.

I've been aboard two of the boats criticized here. The actual operation of these boats does not reflect the lack of responsibility indicated in the releases. The boats were

safety conscious and well run. I doubt they would supply a defective regulator or an incompetent captain, but they need to rethink their releases.

Diver/author Robert Ewald is an attorney in Louisville, KY, who normally represents the defendant, not the plaintiff. As an avid diver who loves the sport, he wants to share the view from the other side.

Analysis of DAN's DCS Accidents

—Even the fit get bent

The Divers Alert Network, DAN, received reports on 708 accidents involving American divers in 1991. The cases of 437 sport divers who were diagnosed as being bent had adequate data for analysis. 288 cases occurred in the U.S. Some interesting foreign data:

Mexico	35
Bahamas	29
Caymans	20
Honduras	11
Belize	7
Turks and Caicos	7
Bonaire	4

Here are a few pertinent aspects of those cases, which we hope will provide you with tips to help you dive more safely.

Injured Diver Characteristics

The 1991 age distribution is similar to previous years. One difference is six injuries of 10-14 year old divers, which were equal to the total for the previous four years combined. While Open Water Certification limits young divers to 60 feet, two were deeper. Three of these cases were DCS I, involving pain-only symptoms; the other three were DCS II, of which one case was possibly embolism. There were no residual symptoms in any of the divers.

Approximately 27 percent of the injured divers were female, about the same percentage as the general diving population. Forty-five percent of the female injuries occurred in the first two years of diving, compared to 21 percent of the total male injuries.

Contrary to myth, DAN data suggest that women seem neither more nor less likely than men to experience decompression illness.

Diver Health and Fitness

Divers with current medical problems may be more susceptible to DCS than healthy divers. Twenty-six percent of all injured divers had a current medical problem. Fifty-four percent had at least one previous illness. Chest-lung problem, GI and abdominal problems, spine and back problems, and muscular and skeletal

problems were the most common previous illnesses. Thirteen percent had suffered a previous decompression illness.

“...The ‘one beer and you’re finished diving for the day’ rule has nothing to do with preventing bends. It’s a rule imposed by charter managers and boat captains who get off on exercising moral authority.”

What I find curious, is that 90 percent of the injured divers proclaimed themselves “fit.” Having observed thousands of divers over the years, I don’t find my fellow aquarians to be unusually fit people. We’re probably no better or worse than the general population. For example, it’s not uncommon to have a number of people on a dive boat 30 or more pounds overweight.

Do only the fit divers get bent? Sounds like the injured divers want to blame someone else other than themselves.

Seventy-two percent stated they exercised weekly, averaging 3.5 days a week per diver. Seems like the 28 percent who don’t exercise are lucky to stay fit.

Strenuous Exercise Before, During or After a Dive

Exercise to the point of muscle fatigue may contribute to decompression illness, and should be avoided from one to six hours before and after diving. Twenty-nine percent of the injured divers admitted to performing some form of strenuous activity prior to or after their dive.

Sixty-one percent of the divers who got bent reported that their dive itself included strenuous activity. Divers who struggle in a current or make a long and tough swim would be well advised to take extra time on a decompression stop.

Alcohol Use, Nausea, Fatigue

While the exact role alcohol consumption plays in decompression illness is unknown, it apparently contributes to decompression illness because it tends to cause dehydration. Without appropriate rehydration, repetitive post-dive drinking for several days may lessen the body's ability to offgas nitrogen accumulated during scuba diving. Performance may be impaired for many hours after being intoxicated. Thirty-seven percent of the divers who got bent drank alcohol in the 12-hour period prior to their dive.

I have personally found that rules prohibiting the moderate intake of alcohol -- a beer, a glass of wine -- prior to diving more often than not represent a new form of moralism, rather than any effort to prevent bends. The DCS culprit seems to be dehydration, which is caused by any number of substances and is cured by drinking water or juices. The 'one beer and you're finished diving for the day' rule has nothing to do with preventing bends. It's a rule imposed by charter managers and boat captains who get off on exercising moral authority. Let he who drinks a beer be required to drink two glasses of water. With that the problem is solved.

Getting smashed is another matter. For the past several years, nausea and diarrhea have been the most common acute conditions affecting the diver on the dive day. Vomiting and diarrhea may well contribute to diver dehydration; if the diver is hungover, he is already dehydrated. Furthermore, fatigue and lack of sleep can impede optimal physical performance and lead to inappropriate decision making. One-third of the 1991 injury population began the dive-injury day fatigued or with less than an adequate amount of sleep. That, too, can be another symptom of excessive partying.

Smoking

The percentage of current smokers in scuba diving continues to fall below the national average: 52 percent of the U.S. population are either current or past smokers; the injured diver population has ranged between 31 and 43 percent as current or past smokers. Twenty-eight percent of the national population currently smoke, while only 15 percent of the DAN injury population were current smokers.

The percentage of arterial gas embolism is higher among current smokers than the entire population, but the percentage of contributory factors was also higher. As a result, no conclusion can be made that smokers are at a higher risk for embolism than non-smokers, based on current data.

Next Issue: Computers and DCS

Bends Can Make You Crazy

If you think a quick trip to the chamber will clear up a case of bends forever, you might be as crazy as those who go through the treatment.

Twenty-five recreational divers were treated for decompression illness at the Royal New Zealand Naval Hospital using the United States Navy treatment algorithm. Upon discharge from the hospital, 11 had obvious neuropsychological abnormalities. Of the 23 contacted a year later, none had recovered fully.

Of the 12 who had no problems at the time of their discharge, six developed (or were noted to have) problems during the next year, mostly in the form of personality changes.

SPECIFIC PROBLEMS AND DISABILITIES ONE YEAR AFTER DCS TREATMENT

<u>Problem, disability</u>	Number of patients (% of total patients)	
Normal health	6	(26%)
With Problems	17	(74%)
Mood disorders (uncontrollable irritability to depression, lassitude, and social withdrawal.)	14	(60%)
Impaired recognition (impaired short-term memory, difficulties with arithmetic, etc.)	12	(52%)
Headache	10	(43%)
Sensory disturbances	6	(26%)
Impaired balance	6	(26%)
Motor weakness	6	(26%)
Arthralgia & myalgia	4	(17%)
Visual disturbances	3	(13%)
Dysphasia, dyslexia	2	(9%)
Bowel & bladder problems	2	(9%)

Personality problems (e.g. mood disorders) largely became evident after discharge. They varied in severity from day-to-day, and had a greater effect on family life, relationships and employment than the neurological deficits. Two patients had a considerable cognitive disorder typical of recent organic brain damage.

A later review, perhaps as much as one-year after an episode of DCS, may be needed to assess the outcome and to determine if the patient is fit to return to diving.

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