
An Inside Look at Dive Destinations

News from the 1995 DEMA show in San Francisco

Last year it was the Dive Equipment Manufacturers Association (DEMA); this year it's Dive Equipment and Marketing Association (DEMA). Even with the name changed, the annual trade show, in San Francisco's Moscone Center this January, seemed the same. As always, I cruised the aisles looking for what was new in dive travel. I didn't find anything as exciting as last year's Dive Churchill (as in Canada and migrating polar bears), but I did ferret out some interesting tidbits.

Song of the Seas

In August 1991 the *Mollie Dean*, a Fijian live-aboard carrying six divers off Kadavu, rose over a large wave, fell hard in the trough, and began to sink. A hole in the hull was taking in water rapidly. Everyone got off the vessel before it went down. Owner Greg Lawlor vowed at the time he would build a new boat. He would start immediately and would launch a new 85-foot vessel, purposefully designed for diving, by August 1992.

It took until January 1995, and the boat grew to 101 feet, but Greg made good on his promise to put another boat in the water. The new *Sere in Wai* (Song of the Seas) caters to 10 divers and claims diving in Beqa and Astrolabe Lagoons, Wakaky, Namena, Savusavu, Tavenui, Lau Group, and Vatulele.

Fijian reefs are controlled by the local Fijians. Acquiring permission to dive these reefs is a complex system of getting the

clans' permission and keeping it. Greg had a reputation for maintaining good relations with Fijian clans, which allowed the *Mollie Dean* to dive on the better reefs of the area. I'm interested in finding out how it's going to be on Greg's new venture (Mollie Dean Cruises, P.O. Box 3256, Lami, Fiji, 011-679-361171 or fax 011-679-361137).

South China Hammers

I've mentioned Layang Layang before, but only as a place for those willing to put up with primitive conditions. Located

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more than 100 miles off the coast of Kota Kinabalu, this atoll is surrounded by walls that drop 6,000 feet into the South China Sea. I've heard Layang Layang's walls compared to Sipadan's, but the major attraction is supposed to be the large schools of hammerheads that are in the shallow water in March and April. And now the atoll has a new 78-room dive resort, complete with air

conditioning, verandahs, and swimming pool.

Layang Layang is a part of the Spratly Islands, which are claimed wholly or in part by China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei. In spite of the fact that China has recently moved some ships into the area, making it somewhat of a flash point for Asian politics, this resort bears watching. If stories of schooling hammerheads and great walls, all from a land-based operation, are true, I'm interested (Layang Layang Island Resort in Malaysia, 011-60-3-248-1003 or fax 011-60-3-241-7555; U.S. agent, 800-245-0050, 415-788-0503, or fax 415-788-0103).

On Los Roques

In our January issue, we covered Los Roques, the little-known islands 120 miles southeast of Bonaire, where we found some of the best diving in the Caribbean (Lost World Adventures, 800-999-0558).

Los Roques may not remain little-known for much longer. A new live-aboard will be departing from Bonaire and diving the nearby Cayo Sombrero in Venezuela, then Puerto Cabello, Los Roques, Los Aves, and back to Bonaire. The 42-foot *White Whale* will offer four divers two state-rooms with double beds and private heads, along with a compressor and eight tanks. Cruises are 10 days minimum and run \$180 per day (011-5997-8761 or booked by Caradonna Caribbean Tours, 800-328-2288 or fax 407-682-6000).

Another company, Dive Tours, was hawking land-based packages to Los Roques at DEMA. Their \$1,108 seven-day package starts and ends with an overnight on Margarita Island. Accommodations in Los Roques at the Posadas Hotel include five days of diving (Dive Tours, 800-433-0885).

Seychelles Whale Sharks?

A video of a whale shark caught my eye as I passed by the Seychelles booth. "We believe we have more whale sharks in the Seychelles than Ningaloo Reef, Australia," was the sales pitch. That's a startling statement, considering that every year, February through June, whale sharks gather in *masse* at Ningaloo.

The Seychelles are beautiful islands that I have always wanted to visit, but my image of the diving (other than the distant southern atoll of Aldabra) is that it's good, but not worth the long trip there just to dive. If this brash statement about the whale sharks were true, that would all change. When pressured for statistics, the Seychelles representative replied that they just discovered the sharks and would be watching closely to document the number of sharks in the region. The season? I was told it was year-round, with most sharks in October and November (Seychelles Tourist Office, 212-687-9766 or fax 212-922-9177).

Dive Durban

South Africa was also promoting diving at DEMA, touting wrecks, whales, and great whites. My general impression that the water is a bit rough in the area was borne out when I inquired about live-aboards and the answer was "Oh no, the water is much too rough for a live-aboard." However, diving conditions in this area are

complex, and general statements are not going to fit in every case. Even the water temperature varies widely along South Africa's coast due to the different currents.

Most of our readers who have visited Sodwana Bay Lodge, a four-hour drive from Durban, have categorized the diving as good, but not worth the long trip unless you're there for other

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reasons. Another reason may be wildlife game reserves close by (South African Tourism Board, 800-222-5368 or fax 212-764-1980).

Bali and Beyond

Another way to dive the Banda Sea, other than the *Cehili*, will be the *Island Explorer*. The 132-foot live-aboard has two dates set aside for diving east of Bali (May 14 and September 10). Departing from Timor, the boat is scheduled to dive, among other places, Lucipara (noted for its abundance of sea snakes) and the Banda Islands on a 12-day cruise. The area is great diving, but I'm not sure how well the *Island Explorer* is set up for diving, and I'm also not sure about the season. The *Cehili* dives this region November through March. Could be worth checking into (Poseidon Ventures, 800-854-9334).

Malpelo Big Critters

See & Sea is offering a new way to dive Malpelo, the latest discovery in big-creature action diving — more sharks than at Cocos. The 100-foot *Tropic Surveyor*, which made it seem that the only way to get to the good stuff was to rough it, had been the only game in town. Now, if you want to spend the bucks, Carl Roessler is booking the *Inzan Tiger*. It's you, three other divers, and all those hammerheads for only \$2,970 plus airfare. A plus for *Inzan Tiger* is that it leaves from Costa Rica, unlike the *Tropic Surveyor*, which requires you to overnight in Colombia, a country I'm not that excited about visiting (See & Sea, 800-348-9778 or fax 415-434-3409).

Down on the Plantation

I've always liked Plantation Beach on Cayos Cochinos. It's laid back, a little funky, and has a good variety of diving. Walls are nearby, they have a couple of seamounts a ways out, you can grab a tank for some OK diving off the beach, and they have Don, a divemaster who knows where to take you to find an exceptional array of weird reef tidbits.

Cayos has become a protected marine biological reserve, with the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute setting up a laboratory. With an enforced ban on all types of commercial fishing and on any further construction, this place might even improve (800-628-3723, fax 713-680-2306).

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