

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Royal Playa Resort, Roatán, Honduras

this basic East End place offers the most pristine reefs

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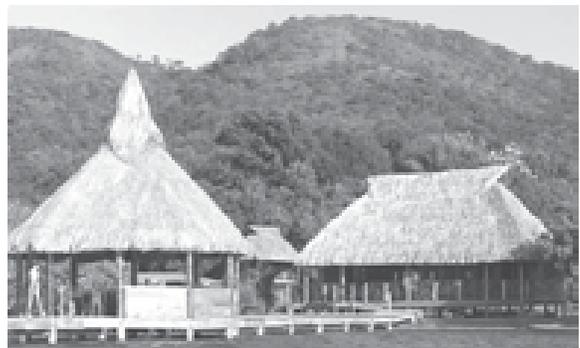
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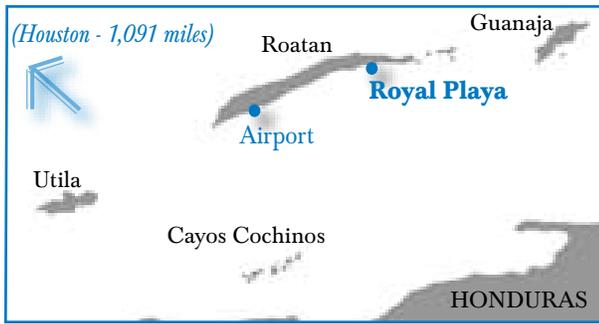
Dear Fellow Diver:

Years ago, I spent a week at a resort in Guanaja, one of Honduras’ Bay Islands. I have vivid memories of miserable welts and endless itching after being assaulted by no-see-ums and mosquitoes. So for my February trip to Roatán, I brought Buzz-Off socks, an Insect Shield cap, lots of DEET, and Benadryl spray, pills, lotion, and cream. But at Royal Playa, the critters surprisingly left me alone. Either my preventive arsenal did the job, or the gentle breezes and cooler than normal 80-degree temperatures kept the bugs at bay. The remote location and lack of guests also didn’t offer much of a feast, compared to the more populated resorts on the western half of the island. Better yet, this hidden gem doesn’t offer the same ol’, same ol’ Roatán diving. It’s tucked away on the east end in remote Port Royal, so there is no road accessibility. That means few divers, no published dive sites, one dive operator -- and pristine reefs. Much of the Caribbean lacks the fish population of years’ past, as does Roatán, which could have advanced divers saying ho-hum but here, the swim-throughs, overhangs, cracks, caves and chutes, all covered with soft coral, are exquisite.

I lucked into finding the place. I was on Roatán for bone and tarpon fishing at Mango Creek Lodge and when I asked about diving, they neighborly referred me to Royal Playa, a minute east by boat. Owners Matt and Corinne Cavanaugh welcomed me dock-side, joking that it was “friends and family week.” Like other Roatán resorts, Royal Playa has been hard hit economically; a couple from the Pacific Northwest overlapped my stay by one day and then I was



Royal Playa’s Main Lodge and Dock



the only guest. When they left, Matt offered them a 10 percent discount for a return trip.

We took advantage of our day of togetherness on a trip to remote Pigeon Caye. The 90-minute run on a fiberglass seat in a 19-foot, 40 HP outboard panga with no shade cover was cozy, but at least there was no fuel surcharge. Tyron Bodden drove the boat, Terran Mattute was our divemaster. The 22-year-old kids live in the village of Oakridge, an eight-mile one way walk through the jungle to work for them. Terran's dive briefings could

be defined as brief ("Wall to your left or right") but he was great at finding critters. The first descent was Barbaret Wall, with an abundance of sponges -- elephant ear, azure, tube, large barrels jutting out. While an occasional school of snapper, blue runners and grunt showed up, the scenery was more like a lobster and clinging crabs over here, a moray eel and juvenile spotted drum gliding by over there. Upside-down jellyfish lying on shallower bottoms had algae growing in their frilly tentacles. A school of Caribbean squid welcomed us back at the surface.

Stopping for lunch on the sandy beach of tiny, uninhabited Big Island, we found a couple from one of Roatán's West End resorts rafting in the gentle surf. Then while picnicking on chicken salad sandwiches, coleslaw and watermelon, a float plane brought in a second couple. These were the most people I saw all together during my stay, and we still had the reefs to ourselves. Back on the panga, Tyron and Terran assembled our gear, helped us don it, then we backrolled into the water. Moret Wall was stunning, with 100-foot visibility of the steep dropoff into the deep blue. The underwater botanical garden at 60 feet was so lush and studded with corals and critters, I forgot the 79-degree chill piercing my pair of skin. Despite its beauty, the dearth of schooling fish and pelagics was noticeable. An hour later and after a safety stop, I climbed the wide, sturdy ladder to board the panga. As we passed a crumbling pirates' fort on the ride back, Terran poured a glass of fresh, pulpy pineapple juice and handed us each a pack of cookies.

The Port Royal region is quiet and isolated now, but steeped in a history of battles between British troops and buccaneers (Henry Morgan and Jean Lafitte were famous visitors). As many as 5,000 pirates inhabited the area in the early 19th century. The slave trade also played a major role in Bay Islands history. The Garifuna, of Caribe Indian and African ancestry, established the first permanent settlement here. Ruins of forts and walls, along with an occasional anchor, bottle and other treasure are still being discovered in various cayes.

Open since 2006, Royal Playa is on 12 acres, surrounded by the Roatán Nature Reserve jungle. Five thatched-roof, two-story cabanas of Honduran pine, built by Matt himself, are scattered among mango trees on the lawn, with a distant view of the Caribbean. Being the only guest there would have been very dull if the Cavanaugh's family and friends weren't so nice and interesting. They ranged from their 15-month-old son Archer to Matt's 88-year-old stepfather Tommy, who regaled me with stories of flying the Himalaya hump from India to Burma and China. Everyone seemed to have a dog. When I realized I had forgotten my alarm clock, Matt and Corinne looked at each other, then Matt said, "You won't need one here." When the staff arrived daily at 7 a.m., the dogs howled and barked, a cacophony louder than any alarm clock.

My spacious cabana had a comfortable four-poster queen bed with mosquito netting that was definitely not ornamental, two nightstands without lights, a table with two chairs, a screened balcony

Let Me Hear From You

Got a story idea for us? Agree or disagree with something we wrote? Have a question? Want to tell us about a diving incident or equipment problem you had? Send me an e-mail at BenDavison@undercurrent.org, or send a letter to our mailing address (at the bottom of page and page 16 on every issue).

- Ben Davison

upstairs and a screened area with two hammocks downstairs. Corinne has artistically painted the floor beneath a large beveled mirror, which was attractive but the resort is basic, without a single amenity. No dresser or closet; just one hook for hanging clothes -- definitely suitcase living. There's an electric ceiling fan, plus a small fan on the bed headboard (if you don't mind sleeping in a wind tunnel). The bathroom has a wood trunk that holds a red sink with a single bar of Ivory soap under a carved mirror. The tiled, oversized shower stall has scalding water but lacks a shower curtain. A sign politely states that the toilet doesn't accept paper. Four 110-volt outlets were good for charging cameras and computers but a single light near the bathroom partition meant it was flashlight reading before bed. Still, it was easy to sleep,

Roatán Dive Guide Charged With Attempted Murder

On January 14, Waihuka Adventure Divers co-owner Maurilio Mirabella was following his routine: bringing a batch of divers to Cordelia Bank, three miles south of downtown Coxen Hole, to swim with sharks while he fed them. But on that day, Willy DeBeer, a dive guide with Sueño Del Mar, followed him there with his own group of divers. When Mirabella saw them after finishing his group's dive, he was furious. He followed DeBeer's group down, approached the diver he thought was DeBeer and tried to turn off his air. Turns out the diver was DeBeer's girlfriend, Dana Cook. DeBeer swam over to rescue her and, as horrified divers from both parties watched, the two dive guides got into an underwater scuffle at 65 feet. Eventually, they stopped and everyone surfaced. DeBeer reported the incident to authorities (Cook says the fight was recorded on video), and the charge of attempted murder was filed against Mirabella.

Mirabella has declined to comment on the charges, but he apparently was angry that DeBeer was trying to profit from "his sharks." He came to Roatan to build Las Rocas Resort in West Bay but after seeing reef sharks at Cordelia Bank, he started Waihuka and the shark-encounter dives in 2000. After he started chumming the site, he could rely on at least a dozen reef sharks to show up regularly. He has divers kneel on sandy patches at 60 feet to let the sharks swim around them. Waihuka's Web site refers divers to reserve the \$120 one-tank trip through Roatan Shore Tours. Other Roatan dive shops see that dive site as belonging to Mirabella and leave it alone as a common courtesy, says Tom Pauley, a divemaster who led many shark dives for Waihuka. "Because Waihuka Divers developed the site, all the dive operations respect the business they developed and use them to dive the site, getting a commission for sending the divers."

But DeBeer didn't see it that way. Multiple people told *Undercurrent* that bad blood was boiling between him and Mirabella for some time. "Willie is a loose cannon who has been fired from every job he has held while on Roatan," says Tim Blanton, an underwater photographer and dive master who guides trips for Waihuka. "He got caught with his hand in the cookie jar while working for Waihuka and was fired. He is not legal to live and work in Honduras as he has no

proper documents. Maurilio is a hot-headed Italian partner who has managed to alienate almost everyone he deals with. He and Willie were just made for this sort of encounter."

Sueño Del Mar owner Ray Lopez says after DeBeer joined his operation, he discussed taking customers to the shark dive himself. "I told him to not do that as we had an agreement with Waihuka divers to send them any interested divers and let them do the dives." The week before the incident, DeBeer took paying customers from various resorts to the dive site, stating he was a freelance shark dive expert. Lopez reprimanded him and said not to do it again. Lopez adds, "The day of the incident, he went to the dive location and was warned by Maurilio not to dive the site. Willy was advised by the deckhand, the instructor on board and the other divemaster to not do the dive, but Willy ignored them and took the divers anyway. Willy has been fired by us for diving the site after I told him not to and putting our guests in danger."

Blanton and Lopez agree it was a stupid thing for both men to do, especially in front of paying divers. "I in no way condone what Maurilio did and feel he should be prosecuted to the extent of the law," says Lopez. "Willy may be right that no one owns the ocean but he should have pursued it legally through the courts."

As in many areas offering shark encounters, Roatan divers' opinions are split on whether these dives are a good idea. "This is still one of the finest shark-encounter dives in the Caribbean with an outstanding safety record and a high standard of regard for the environment and shark protection," says Blanton. "Waihuka should not be held responsible for the actions between two 'childish' adults." Pauley says that, safety and ethical issues of shark feeding aside, the dives are being overpraised. "The site is not private property. These sharks are used to people, and they will associate food with any people coming there." What happens if Waihuka closes shop and other dive shops start going there? "Well, then a real problem can happen," going beyond a couple of fighting dive guides.

Royal Playa Resort, Roatán

Diving (<i>experienced</i>)	★★★★
Diving (<i>beginners</i>)	★★★★★
Snorkeling	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★★
Food	★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent
Caribbean Scale

lulled by croaking frogs, rooftop geckos and other jungle-critter noises, before the dogs howled their version of rev-eille.

The dive shop is adjacent to the lodge, with two rinse containers, a cold-water shower, bathroom, and wet-suits and ScubaPro gear for rent. Aluminum 80 tanks, always filled to more than 3000 psi, can also be filled with Nitrox. Matt will also repair gear if he can. When there are guests, the boat leaves promptly at 8:45. They offer three dives daily but the schedule is relaxed, and Matt is an accommodating guy who would arrange a fourth or night dive if asked. While the panga is used for long-distance fuel efficiency, Royal Playa does use a bigger boat, a 26-

foot Mako with 250HP outboard Yamaha motors, for moored and drift-dive sites. Most of those are minutes from the dock. The Mako offers a small aft dive deck, side benches with tank holders, a sturdy stern ladder, a Bimini cover for shade, a first-aid kit and oxygen. Front Porch is less than a five-minute ride away, and the underwater approach to what could be considered Royal Playa's "house reef" has a spectacular dropoff. The walls, plunging to 2,000 feet, were covered with a variety of colorful sponges, and black and soft coral. I admired a school of surgeonfish and a sculptured slipper lobster while finning about.

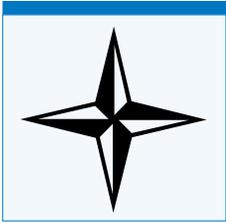
While various dives at The Point, Carlos and Charlie, and Ft. Morgan Cay had similar marine life, the rocky reef structures varied in size and marvel - - the multitude of swimthroughs, chimneys, sand chutes, caves and overhangs never ceased to amaze. We typically dropped to 90 feet and gradually worked our way up. On most dives, I saw large moray eels, adult and juvenile lobster, and large channel clinging crab. The swaying of soft coral, gorgonians, fans and rods in the gentle current was Zen-like. At Lime Key Wall, a lone eagle ray swam by -- it and a lone nurse shark would be my only sizeable sightings. Sting rays burrowed in the sand, and yellow-headed jawfish popped in and out of sandy holes. While I was burning off nitrogen at George's Place, a school of spinner dolphin surrounded the boat. Some of these dives occurred in choppiest seas, so grabbing the swinging ladder to board was a timing act.

Though I dived alone with Terran during the week, I spent much of my time with the Cavanaugh clan on the dock (the hotel doesn't have much of a beach, so the dock's swim ladder is for those wanting to swim, snorkel or kayak from shore). The main lodge is the family residence with a galley-type kitchen, with a dining table for breakfast and lunch. Dinner was served at the end of the pier, a scenic spot covered by a circular thatched roof and housing a table, couches and a bar. Meals are home-cooked, Honduran style, by friendly locals Loreen Merren and Eloise Gael. I particularly liked the fish head soup, called "fish tea" by locals, made with basil, coconut milk, and chayote squash. Empanada-like pastolitas stuffed with chicken or beef were another standout. A local fisherman brings his boat to the dock daily to sell fresh catch for \$2 a pound, so the plentiful fish dishes meant I could have seconds of Wahoo, shrimp Creole, crab and lobster, served with red beans and rice. Even in roadless Port Royal, Saturday afternoon is party time. The few neighbors who live along the shore arrived by boat to catch up while nibbling on guacamole, chicken wings and California rolls.

Royal Playa is similar to the reefs it takes its divers to: relaxed, easy and going with the flow. The Cavanaughs and their friends welcomed me just like family, making it easy to forgive them the basic room amenities. With just five rooms on a big plot of secluded property, it's a far cry from the close quarters of a liveaboard or a crowded resort like CocoView down the coast. While Matt will take divers farther out to coastal sites, from the popular Mary's Place to as far east as Barbaret Island, I was perfectly happy with the pristine coral gardens and breathtaking steep walls

on Roatán's southern stretch, which I consider the best diving on the island. Combine that with an all-inclusive week package priced under \$1,000, and Royal Plaza is a good choice for an off-the-beaten-path dive trip -- if you don't feel lonely if you and yours are the only divers, which might be possible.

-- M.S.



Diver's Compass: A seven-night, double-occupancy package with all meals (not liquor), three daily dives, round-trip transfer to Oakridge, taxes and fees is \$850 through November 30, then increases to \$900 . . . It's \$50 extra for ground transfer from the Roatán airport for a 40-minute drive on an 18-mile, potholed road to Oakridge, where Matt arrives by boat for the 10-minute ride to Royal Playa's dock . . . A 50 percent deposit is required at reservation, and the balance is due 30 days before arrival . . . Nitrox is \$150 for the week, or \$15 per dive; night dives are \$50, and there's an additional charge for a fourth dive . . . Continental, Delta and Taca Air fly direct to Roatán on weekends from Houston, Newark, Atlanta and Miami . . . Web site: www.RoyalPlayaRoatan.com.

Florida, California, Bahamas, Philippines..

good U.S. diving, Cozumel's best gear repairman, and more

Horizon Divers, Florida Keys. If you're like a lot of my fellow divers, you've postponed a trip abroad to go diving for a variety of reasons, but don't forget you can find some decent diving in the good old USA. George T. Felt (Moultonborough, NH) reminds us there are still a few surprises in the Florida Keys, which he visited in February. "I stayed at the Marriott in Key Largo, and took a refresher course with one of their staff. The teaching and service there is excellent. I dived with Horizon Divers (I had dived with them before) and was reminded of their good location, solid boats, and excellent staff and pre-dive briefings. You are on your own (with your buddy), as they do not routinely put a divemaster in the water. You are required to hire a guide if you want to dive a wreck and do not have advanced diver training or have not been in the water in the last year. Roll calls were always well done.

"We saw Goliath grouper that were so big you couldn't put your arms around their mid sections (not that you want to try) -- their approximate dimensions were six-plus feet long and 400 pounds. Scary big. Also saw a pair of really big Cobia that were mistaken for sharks at first glance. Generally healthy coral but some sites were in decline. This area is a good value and has surprisingly high-quality diving for an easy-access stateside vacation. Marriott is steep on price so for less-expensive accommodations, consider the Holiday Inn or the Ramada. They're decent but undistinguished places to crash but not on the water, despite what they tell you -- a canal is not "the water" in my view." (www.horizondivers.com)

Truth Aquatics, California. California has the ever popular Truth Aquatics, based in Santa Barbara. Bob DeFeo (Novato, CA) notes that, "They have three boats, *Truth*, *Conception* and *Vision*. I appreciate the value. They dive the northern and southern Channel Islands, San Miguel, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, Anacapa, Santa Barbara, Catalina, and San Clemente. They also offer snorkeling, kayaking, and hiking adventures on and around the same islands and Santa Barbara. I took the two-day dive cruise around Santa Cruz Island. You board the vessel Friday evening and leave port at 4 a.m. on Saturday. You can easily do four to five dives in one day, weather and conditions permitting. The boat departs for Santa Barbara between 1 and 2:30 p.m. to get back between 5 and 6 p.m. Superb dive briefings, and two to three deckhands assist with filling tanks and assisting divers. The safety swimmer/diver is suited up when divers are in the water and each boat, a rigid hull inflatable with outboard, has a pick-up or mooring tender that's deployed alongside during diving and when moored. Depth-finder screen is positioned so all on the dive deck can see the depth below the keel. Exits are done via stern swim platform that sits about two feet below the water line with additional platform above, followed by the three-step ladder to the dive deck. Crew pulls fins and weights, if desired.

"The *Truth* has two showers below the deck in the stern, a drying room for hanging wet suits (bring your own hanger) and an electric dryer for drying towels and clothing. The *Truth's* dive deck has one hot-water shower, while the *Conception* and *Vision* have two each. All boats have cleaning

tables and water hoses for licensed fishermen or shellfish/lobster gatherers to clean speared fish, shellfish and lobsters when in season. Tanks can be rented at the dive shop's dock or bring your own. Compressor on board; they give great fills. Full or light breakfast fixings, full hot lunch, dinners, beverages hot and cold, wonderful desserts and plenty of munchies for snacking. No alcohol served so BYOB. Sleeping accommodations are below deck – single or double berths/bunks with privacy curtain, reading light, pillows, blankets, foam Naugahyde-covered pads. Most divers bring sleeping bags.

“Dives are wonderful in the kelp forests along the numerous coves and dive spots up against the islands. Many seals and sea lions, lobsters, sunstars, urchins, sculpins, anemones, stonefish, kelp bass, occasional black bass...sometimes horn, leopard and swell sharks. Colorful dives and great diversity of aquatic life; a photographer's dream scenario. Dives require 7mm suit, with many using dry suits. Weather can change quickly here, necessitating the changing of dive spots, but the experienced, service-oriented skippers and crew usually find another calmer spot right around the corner. You're very pampered when you dive with Truth Aquatics. My two-day trip was \$396; I did seven dives on the trip and some divers did as many as nine.” (www.truthaquatics.com)

Club Med, Bahamas. Last month we reported on the good diving at Riding Rock Inn on San Salvador Island in the Bahamas. The only other hotel there is the Club Med so if you're a serious diver, pay attention to this caution by reader Phil Meyer (Oakland, CA) who was there in January. “While I enjoyed staying at Club Med, I would have used an outside land-based dive provider or a liveaboard, had I

known more about the dive operation. The dive sites visited were only the ones easiest for the boat captain. They revisited the same sites several times during the week. I dove this same operation in 2001 when they had two boats. It was a very different experience. Also, there has been a deterioration of the reef; fish life was not near the level of my last visit.”

Cozumel Gear Repair Tip. Steve Mason (Brimley, MI) says, “I recently found myself with a ‘broken’ Atomic SS1 and was referred to Javier Polanco at Cozumel Scuba Repair. When I arrived at his shop, he was working on piles of gear. He stopped what he was doing and immediately worked on my Atomic. He fixed it in seconds with a simple adjustment and told me it was no charge because it was so easy to fix. I gave him some cash and insisted he take it because he saved my diving vacation. He is on 1st Street South between Avenues 85 and 90.” (www.cozumelscubarepair.com)

Philippines May Raise Dive Package Prices. We've long reported that this is about the best bargain for the remarkable fish life of the South Pacific/Indian Ocean. However, things may change soon. The country's tourism secretary, Ace Durano, says fees for the country's eco-based offerings are undervalued so he is encouraging dive operators and travel agencies to increase prices of dives and tour packages to slow the rate of visiting divers. While, say, a US\$2 marine fee to dive off Malapascua Island is a great rate for divers, Durano thinks the cheap rate will have bad long-term effects on the marine ecosystem. As an example, Durano said the cost of an up-close dive with whale sharks in Donsol Bay is only US\$10 per diver. But the volume of tourists in Donsol has had an effect on the whales, which don't stay around

Sales of “Shark Shields” Soar in Australia

After a spate of shark attacks in the New South Wales region (five so far this year, compared to eight for all of 2008), sales of an electronic repellent device called Shark Shield are booming all over Australia. Paul Lunn, co-founder of Shark Shield maker SeaChange Technology in Adelaide, told *Undercurrent* that sales have increased by 50 percent, and he has seen a 200 percent increase in inquiries so far this year from Australian dive and surf shops.

The Sydney Morning Herald reports that Australian police nationwide have now implemented a mandatory-use policy for their dive teams to use Shark Shield. That may be due in part to the fact that one recent victim was Navy diver Paul de Gelder, who lost an arm and a leg after being attacked on February 11, presumably by a bull shark, during a training exercise in Sydney Harbour.

Shark Shield generates an electrical field, or a “shark-safe zone,” 25 feet in diameter around the diver. Electrodes generate a pulsing sensation detected by the shark through its

sensory receptors, and create muscular spasms that send the shark fleeing but cause no lasting effect. There's also a specific model for divers called Shark Shield Scuba7; one electrode fits to the ankle in a neoprene pouch and the other is Velcroed to the tank (wearing a full wetsuit is recommended). Once the antennas are underwater, the electrodes emit the protective field. List price is \$670.

While most of the reported attacks have occurred around the Sydney area and only a couple were divers, Lunn reports most orders have come from the recreational dive area, which is mostly located near the Great Barrier Reef. “When we first marketed to the Australian dive market, we had difficulty because dive shop owners believed we were highlighting a negative issue. Now that dive shops have had courses cancelled, many now promote that they use Shark Shields during dive training.” Lunn's company will start marketing Shark Shields in California and Florida this year; a list of U.S. retailers is available at www.sharkshield.com.

long in shallow waters anymore. “At US\$75 per boat for a whole day interaction with the whales, that’s cheap,” he said. “Now it seems there are too many boats for a certain number of whale sharks.” Considering the number of foreign divers coming to the Philippines, he says an increase in fees could control the influx, and dive shops could afford the premium

because there will still be divers who want the underwater biodiversity that’s not offered in many other places. Plus, setting higher prices means travel operators could have more resources to manage the sites they take tourists to.

-- Ben Davison

“This Industry Isn’t Run By Divers Anymore”

reader feedback from sport divers and industry professionals

In the March issue, Undercurrent contributor Bret Gilliam wrote “A Personal Perspective on Dive Innovation,” about whether the dive industry has run out of new ideas. His take: Yes, it has, and it needs to focus more on attracting younger generations into the sport and less on tail-chasing each other’s products without any real advancement (his entire piece is available to read for free on www.undercurrent.org). Since it was published, Gilliam told us he received nearly 200 e-mails, all from divers who support most, if not all, of his position. Here’s a few of the comments.

Dear Bret: As a fellow instructor, I have certified over 2,000 divers and gone on to run a small dive travel business. I agree with all your conclusions. At first glance, it appears the industry has benefited the sport by adding new divers, but they have actually watered down the sport to get individuals into it who might not otherwise be able to handle the swimming skills. Not only has this affected the safety of the sport, it has cooled down the macho factor so that diving no longer attracts adventure seekers. “It’s too safe” might be the cry of those who are turning to bungee jumping or dirt bike racing or . . . ? It’s the sport of old farts and kids, isn’t it?

Another trend that will negatively affect the sport is the use of technology, to the detriment of dive classes. I see students going online or using videos for the lectures instead of meeting with an instructor-led group. Then the student goes to a resort, where they practice a few skills in a pool and do some checkout dives. Often, the resort tells them not to bother buying equipment, as they can rent it at the resort and won’t have to pack it on the trip. This leaves the local dive shop completely out of the picture. No loyalty means no commitment. These divers own no gear, have no local contacts and only think about diving in relation to a yearly vacation. Forget any local diving or dive clubs or contact with dive shops.

-- Roger Dunton, Scotts Valley, CA

Dear Bret: Being a vacation-only diver for over 20 years, my wife and I still own the same small and narrow set of full-foot fins that we rented, liked and bought on Bonaire 20 years ago. I never had a problem with going fast, even if I had to keep up with an eagle ray for good photo shots. Looking at tremendously overengineered fins on some divers, I always

wondered where are these people going to swim with them? To Venezuela? I remember going back to the boat against strong current off Saba -- I was the first at the mooring line. This year I “splurged” and decided to replace our tank bangers with those Scuba-Alert buzzers. None of them worked, so we happily banged when there was something to bang about. This is real rocket science? I am lucky to own a 17-year-old Oceanic Datasport Computer, the one with the green/yellow/red graph and huge digits. I can actually see it. Not so with my Citizen dive watch.

-- Michael Zagachin, Peabody, MA

Hi Bret: I used your recent article to fire up the troops. Several of our product-development team read it and came back to me with genuine disagreement, or was it anger? Maybe it’s because I personally get involved in product development, even testing equipment, but it’s probably more because their responsibility is innovation of our products, and they felt you took a stab at them. Anyway, I agree with you. The dive business has been lacking innovation lately, at least the big game changers. I’m pushing our team to think innovation all of the time, and they’ve put some really good ideas together. Some are in the works and others are pipe dreams. Some are outside of diving. Your article could be the stimulus to pull these ideas off the drawing board and onto the work bench.

-- Name Withheld, manager at a major dive manufacturer

Dear Bret: I am a product of the 70s who once wrote Dick Bonin a letter, thanking him for changing my life with the innovations he introduced. The most memorable day was when Mike O’Connor walked into the dive shop I was employed at, dangling a Pilot regulator from his right arm. To touch it was almost like magic. It seems that every product Scubapro created then (except the NautilusAtPac copy) leaped the existing technology. Computer microprocessors and pilot-valve second stages like the Tekna were innovative products, not merely cosmetic, such as the Sling Shot fins touted today. Your article rekindled the excitement of seeing great new equipment for the very first time.

-- Steve Bijou

Do These Stunts Really Promote Diving?

Sure, the diving industry needs all the help it can get to keep current divers purchasing and lure new people into the sport, but these two recent scuba-focused promotions seem a bit cheesy.

In March, Intercontinental Hotels suspended a pair of divers off the Sony Building in Tokyo to promote new luxury resorts on the Japanese island of Okinawa. The stunt, orchestrated by ad agency McCann Erickson, Tokyo, has two stuntmen performing an “air-diving ballet” high in the air several times a day for four days. They’re supposed to represent the diving offered at Intercontinental’s Manza Beach and Ishigaki resorts. Oh yes, hanging off a high-rise really gives one the sense of what it’s like to dive underwater – especially when they reach their maximum depth with a plunge onto hard concrete.

At the other end of the spectrum is this effort to attract divers with a question about as difficult as that famous Groucho Marx question, “Who is buried in Grant’s tomb?” British newspaper *News Shopper* teamed up with Avago Divers of Kent, England, to offer a free dive lesson to the first five people who can answer this question: “Calypso was the name of the ship used by which famous French diver?” Why not just offer a free lesson? That would get attention.

Hello Bret: I too believe the industry suffers from fear of innovation. However, here are examples of innovation and divers that build equipment for other divers. John Routley is a diver and manufacturer in the UK, among the most prolific innovators in the industry. Paul Raymaekers is the manufacturer of the Revo Rebreather -- there are now several versions of this innovative rebreather in use around the world. While it’s a stretch to call it affordable, it’s far from the \$10,000 price tag on electronic rebreathers. The KISS rebreather is very established (I own one myself) and within the same price league as the Revo, approximately \$4,500. Gordon Smith (RIP) really helped to open up the rebreather market to a broader population of diver. The Apocalypse rebreather is allegedly close to production at around \$2,000, if it comes off as planned. Bruce Partridge manufactures dive computers and PPO2 monitors which are both innovative and functional. The creation of a venture capital fund to drive ideas with potential would be a major step in the right direction. Creation of a network of senior industry people to foster innovators would do wonders.

“Resort courses” were an interesting innovation. The problem is that it’s a pretty spur-of-the-moment decision on vacation that requires commitment to getting on a boat for a half-day to see pretty fish for 90 minutes across maybe two dives. Most people aren’t going to dedicate a day of their vacation to do it.

My idea is to have a mobile resort course available at popular tropical tourist beaches. Tourists have traditionally thought nothing of paying \$75 to \$100 to jump from a crane with a bungee cord tied to them or to strap on a parachute to be pulled by a boat. Setting up a couple of young instructors with a trailer full of rental gear on the beach for the day would generate a ton of interest.

-- Paul Moravec, Blairstown, NJ

Dear Bret: In 2000, my wife and I did a 12,000-plus diver survey looking at panic. My research interest was spurred by my observation that the medical exclusion of students with a history of panic or psychiatric medication was all wrong. There was no objective evidence to back it up, and a few years later the rules were changed to include those divers. I had many patients with panic disorder and depression who never had problems underwater when their conditions were under control in treatment. Some divers have contacted me to say that diving helps their depressions. I agree with them.

-- David F. Colvard, M.D., Raleigh, NC

Hey Bret: As the owner of the largest Web site devoted to scuba, and subsequently the most widely read publication for the industry, I read your article with interest. ScubaBoard is the pioneer for scuba on the Internet, and we are doing our best to keep things fun and innovative. Your comment “Do we really need another model of split fins?” was spot on. Forget the fact that I still dive with Jet Fins; the fact is there is scant innovation in our industry. I was completely underwhelmed at DEMA last year. The “new” stuff was repackaged old stuff. DEMA has been replaced by the Web, though they don’t seem to realize it yet. There is probably more scuba business generated through the pages of ScubaBoard than at DEMA. I am an underfunded nobody and yet, by simply allowing divers to have a voice, ScubaBoard has forums dedicated to everything from solo diving to DIR, from the latest (not-so-great) gear to how to make that gear yourself. A few years ago I offered a free forum to any scuba manufacturer or agency that wanted it. No strings, just a real-time connection to the divers who buy their gear. It amazes me that a few manufacturers simply refuse to take advantage of this service. Customer service today is about fostering lines of communications to your end users that allows better service by answering a single question publicly than having to answer that same question a hundred times on the phone. It’s realizing the diving public no longer trusts the local dive shop to answer all their questions, because they already know more about the product than the shop does. The few who “get it” are reaping the benefits.

-- Pete Murray, founder of ScubaBoard.com

Dear Bret: Your recent article is to the point. Grzelka once told me that he asked his son’s contemporaries (when they were all teenagers) if they were interested in scuba diving. They responded they would look into diving when they were older and looking for less exciting things to do. Nestor Palmero once told me in the mid ‘80s that we had “safety-ed ourselves out

of business.” It really is a shame that the industry is run by “people with certification cards” rather than by divers.

-- John Wall, Fairfax, VA

Dear Bret: The only thing dumber than split fins is the new camouflage-colored dive suits. Talk about an industry that’s run out of ideas.

-- Drew Rahaim, Wilmington, DE

Dear Bret: When I first got into the dive business, Oceanic excited me with its innovative ideas. With time came the hard truth of reality. If their submersible MP3 player didn’t break some new sales record in two years, it’s gone. Their Kirby Morgan (JMC) full-face mask -- gone. Lite Vision masks, likewise. I love my Zeta 2nd and now that’s out the window as well. I have to admit I have no idea what drives these decisions or why these products fell by the wayside before they even had a chance of being adopted by a cautious diver. Those that did are now left with a bunch of orphaned gear. I have been waiting for an air-integrated trimix computer but until then, I will be sticking with my DataTrans that has lettering readable by my aging eyes.

-- Joseph Sobczak, New Castle, PA

Dear Bret: I appreciated your piece in *Undercurrent*. Scuba diving is the only sport without a consumer association, except for local dive clubs. Back in the early ‘90s, I attempted to start the Scuba Divers Association (SDA) with the encouragement of Bob Gray, then DEMA’s executive director. I pulled together a good plan, lined up member benefits (insurance, travel discounts, etc.) and had a booth at the 1992 DEMA show. The Scuba Retailers Association recoiled in horror at the idea. They saw it as competition even though I assured them I wanted to work with their members to enhance the individual diver’s experience. No matter, they actively opposed SDA and it died. The time may have come again to resurrect the idea of an independent recreational diver association. It could help encourage recreational divers to continue diving, encourage the manufacturers to innovate and rally divers around the ocean environment cause. Ben Davison’s newsletter and website could be a catalyst. I realize recreational divers are an independent lot and that diving isn’t a competitive sport but I still believe there is enough shared need and interest to merit an association.

-- Bruce Butterfield, Vienna, VA

Hi Bret: Great piece. It used to be that many of the leaders in our industry didn’t have time to dive but they still loved it when they got the chance. Today it seems they’re not even interested. They couldn’t care less if they were selling widgets or fins, as long as they make a sale.

-- Alex Brylske

Dear Bret: Dive computers should be much cheaper now and not the cost of a desktop computer. And the cost of fins, snorkels, BCDs and other products make it harder for the “average” person to buy or replace gear. So I guess in order to keep profits up, the dive industry raises prices to make up for

the decline in demand! The same is happening with dive travel, dive resorts and liveboards. Prices keep going up and the new, average-income diver finds it only within his or her means to travel to nearby, inexpensive weekend trips.

-- Ron Bailey, Roanoke, VA

Dear Bret: I am an independent scuba instructor trying to use all of the technology to get folks interested in diving. Why do things cost so much? Why is everyone leaving in droves? I am trying to capture five percent of a shrinking and very competitive market. I get no help from anyone, especially DEMA. I am on Facebook, MySpace and Windows Live. I have Twitter, and I “Digg” articles constantly. But still the twentysomethings think, “Mmmm...ok, but only cause I have nothing else better to do.” I would love to run a virtual dive shop and harness the power of the Internet forum for questions, eBay for sales, Craigslist for selling used gear, and instant-messaging services on Yahoo and AOL for providing excellent customer service. YouTube should be providing the training before we hit the pool. There are no cool video games of underwater action. Everything cost a fortune. The biggest complaint I hear is, “Wow! I can play paintball for 50 bucks, what’s up with you?”

-- John Day

Hello Bret: I have a 16-year-old boy, and I certified him almost six years ago. While he enjoyed those first dives, the idea of having to get up early, pay attention to what’s going on,

Say What?

In March, we ran an article from TheTimes in London stating an inquest ruled that a young diver died at the end of his dive because he used all his air, then the tanks became heavier and dragged him under. Of course, it doesn’t work that way -- tanks get lighter - and our error is that our edited version of that article was not what got into print. I edited the article down, saved it, then did a second version with my commentary. The first version got inserted in the issue and I failed to catch that because I didn’t do my job This is what you should have read:

In December, *The Times* newspaper of London reported that a 14-year-old boy died while diving with his father because he ran out of air while waiting to be picked up. An official inquest found that he had been “dragged down by the weight of his empty tanks when he ran out of air.” A police diving expert said that, “The air also gave him buoyancy so when it ran out, the weight of his diving gear would have dragged him under.”

Of course, when air in a tank is used, the tank becomes more buoyant, not less. So much for the police expert, or at least for the reporting. Our bet is when the boy ran out of air, he couldn’t inflate his BCD from his tank. And, as a 14-year-old, he didn’t know how to inflate his BCD orally. It took 19 days to find his body. Sad.

-- Ben Davison

and realize there's a big difference between the virtual world and the real one seemed too big a challenge (not to mention the draw of being yet another rock star). And he is magnitudes ahead of all his friends. At the risk of sounding like Andy Rooney, I just don't think most twentysomethings have what

it takes to really connect under the waves. Staring blankly at a buzzing laptop and catching flies with those slack-jawed faces seem to be more in line with this generation.

-- Joseph C. Dovala, Thousand Oaks, CA

Why Divers Die: Part III

the older you are, the higher your mortality risk during a dive

In the past two issues, we've highlighted cases from Diver Alert Network's 2008 report on dive accidents and fatalities (it actually discusses dive incidents that occurred in 2006). In this final part, we're also adding notes from a study DAN's medical experts did on the same topic, published in the December issue of *Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine*. DAN researchers are interested in the effects of age on injury and death risk, because as people age healthier and stay active longer, those risks are inevitably higher. Reports from emergency-medicine departments indicate a substantial number of people injured in recreational sports are age 65 and older. They represent 17 percent of injuries in golf, 15 percent in tennis, 9 percent in fishing and 4 percent of diving injuries (although there's no information on exposure duration).

For its study, DAN calculated the annual rates of dive-related deaths among DAN-insured divers between 2000 and 2006, and investigated the effects of age and sex on the death rates. Divers 60 and over had a relative risk four times greater than that of male teenagers. Young adult males had a four-fold greater risk than young adult females. However, the differences in risk associated with gender disappeared by age 60. Researchers think the youthful differences between the sexes reflect greater risk-taking due to men's higher testosterone levels. However, the rates increased with age even when testosterone levels declined.

Matters of the Heart

In reviewing DAN's cases and studies from the UK, Australia and New Zealand, we're always taken by the number of divers who die from heart attacks. Their disease is often undiagnosed and their risk is increased by being overweight, out of shape, and either inexperienced or out of the water for a long time. The risk of dying during physical activity for older people is associated with a high prevalence of heart disease. People ages 66 to 74 are 27 times more likely to die from heart attacks than those ages 35 to 44. Responses to diving stress and exertion in people with heart disease, undiagnosed or not, may cause death or weakness, especially when the possibility of drowning is added to the mix.

Differences in fatality rates for men and women and their changes with age may be partially explained by the different prevalence of heart disease in the two sexes. Heart disease as an underlying risk in drowning is hard to determine when the

baffling effects of drowning are included, so it can be under-reported. On the other hand, in the absence of evidence, the diagnosis may be biased toward cardiovascular disease-related causes in older victims. When DAN diagnoses the disabling injury in each dive-related death for its annual report, it's based on health history, accident scenario and autopsy findings.

Barry Hauser, 48, was an experienced diver with multiple medical problems, including severe coronary artery disease requiring a stent in his heart, obesity, high cholesterol, hypertension and chronic back pain. He and his wife were among a group of 20 divers aboard the Republic IV to dive for lobster at the Juno Ledge, two miles off Florida's Juno Beach. Hauser made the dive 70 feet but became separated from his buddy and the group. He was discovered missing when the dive finished at 11 a.m., and crew found his body floating just north of the boat. Hauser had apparently inflated his BCD before losing consciousness. He was pronounced dead at the hospital, and his death was certified as drowning secondary to a heart attack.

Excluding cardiac causes, which were suspected in one-third of deaths in DAN's insured divers over age 49, the fatality rate in older divers would still be greater than in younger divers, as the relative risks for embolism and drowning suggest. This may be related to a decline in physical ability -- muscle strength, flexibility, coordination and dexterity -- all of which may make older people prone to errors and more vulnerable.

Joan Radford, 66, was diving for lobster off Florida's Big Pine Key. After entering the water, she had problems putting on her fins and mask while on the surface, possibly because she had significant degenerative joint disease. Radford dropped some of her lobster-gathering equipment, so her buddy descended to retrieve it. When he returned to the surface, Radford wasn't there, so he assumed she had descended but he found her unconscious on the bottom. Radford was taken to the hospital, where she was pronounced dead from drowning.

Rough conditions on the water can also exacerbate health issues. This very experienced 64-year-old diver was making his third dive of the day with a buddy. They dived a wreck at 60 feet for 60 minutes before working their way up to 40 feet. The diver motioned to his buddy that he wanted to surface but they had trouble finding the chain that ran from the wreck to shore and surfaced in rough seas. The buddy went down briefly to

Belize Says Sharks Aren't Endangered; Maldives Bans Their Killing

James Rosado, a dive guide on Caye Caulker, was fishing with his girlfriend on February 28 near Bajo Caye when they came upon a gory sight: A sailboat covered with blood as several men on board cleaned and gutted approximately 20 nurse sharks. Rosado, 25, also spotted two speedboats a short distance away, which held a fishing net between them that had caught another 10 sharks. As he took photos, one fisherman shouted out a death threat, then put a knife in his mouth and dove into the water in Rosado's direction.

Rosado sped off to get help from Caye Caulker police and fisheries personnel but nothing came of it. Since the incident, he saw some fishermen from the boat selling shark filets to island residents and restaurants. He printed his photos on fliers around Caye Caulker, hoping it will generate support for a ban on the commercial fishing of nurse sharks in the area. Rosado takes divers to Hol Chan Marine Reserve and Shark Ray Alley near San Pedro Island, and has seen a "dramatic decline" in the number of sharks in those protected areas over the last year. "If this is allowed to continue, it will ruin the tourism industry," he told Belizean newspaper *Amandala Online*. "Soon, if you come to Caye Caulker to see a shark, you might have to go to a restaurant."

It is not illegal to catch and kill sharks, as no species in Belizean waters is listed as endangered. But shark fishing is big business here, as it is worldwide, for the fins to end up in the Asian delicacy shark fin soup (see details in our

March article "Shark Hunt Continues at Cocos Island"). The Belize Audubon Society has been advocating shark protection legislation for several years but says discussions have yet to move from talking points to actual law. According to Fisheries Administrator Beverly Wade, the vessel and crew Rosado saw were properly licensed, and they said their catch was only intended for the local market. She says commercial shark fishing is confined to the deeper waters of the south and fishing communities along the coast.

"It is unfair to target the fishermen ...they have not done anything bad," she told *Amandala Online*. "It may be unsightly for the tour guides because they see these sharks every day but to the fishermen, this is a good catch. What we need now is a management regime." Belize's Fisheries Advisory Board is supposed to meet soon to consider drafting legislation that could include restrictions and special licenses for shark fisheries to prevent unsustainable shark fishing.

Then came some good news in the worldwide fight against shark fishing. In March, the Maldives imposed a total ban on hunting reef sharks, intended to make the country a "shark safe haven." The measure will ban all reef shark hunting in waters up to 12 miles off the Maldivian coast. Within a year, the government wants to extend the ban to all the country's territorial waters, paving the way for a complete ban on all shark-product exports. The fisheries ministry will work to find new livelihoods for the shark hunters.

10 feet and when he resurfaced, the diver was unconscious. His buddy towed him to shore, where resuscitation efforts were unsuccessful. The only known issue on his medical history was prostate cancer but his autopsy revealed severe coronary artery disease, so he most likely had a heart attack before drowning.

Face Up To Your Health Issues

Preventing cardiac deaths during diving depends on divers' knowledge of their health, an appreciation of specific dive risks and a willingness to adjust their behavior -- and lower their risk. In some of the fatal cases DAN studied, divers knew about their health risks but it's unknown whether they sought medical opinion about their fitness to dive. A small fraction of divers who were unaware of pre-existing conditions could have benefited from regular medical exams. Then there are divers fully aware of their medical issues but keep diving without taking precautions.

One of them was Chester "Chet" Alan Robinson, 55. He was an experienced diver with a history of heart disease, including placement of a coronary artery stent, and had stopped taking his medications in February 2006 because he didn't like how they made him feel. Robinson's doctor had advised him not to dive, but Robinson went ahead with a dive that August

to the *Oriskany* near Pensacola, FL. Robinson's dive profile isn't known but he did complete the dive with two buddies and was back on the charter dive boat at 1:30 p.m. While removing his dive gear, Robinson complained of chest pain and collapsed on the deck. The medical examiner said his death was caused by cardiac arrest.

Younger divers, don't assume you've got a clean slate. If you have weight and heart issues, your mortality risk is higher than that of a decades-older diver who is physically fit. Consider this 40-year-old experienced but obese diver, who was part of a public service dive team performing a working dive in a river. He was wearing a wetsuit as he entered the water, tethered by a line, but the current was strong and visibility was poor. After two minutes at 12 feet, he surfaced in distress and lost consciousness. He was pulled back to the boat and team members performed CPR but he was pronounced dead at a medical center nearby. The autopsy disclosed severe coronary artery disease, and his death was ruled to be the result of a heart attack.

Gregory William Johnson, 43, had 45 dives but he was overweight and had poor physical conditioning. He and his brother arrived at the island of St. Maarten aboard the cruise ship *Disney Magic* and took a dive excursion with Dive Safaris.

Johnson and his brother were on the bottom when he indicated he wanted to surface. He went up alone while his brother stayed on the bottom. When the brother surfaced a few minutes later, he found people trying to resuscitate Johnson, who had blood coming from his nose and was vomiting. The most likely cause of Johnson's death is an air embolism from surfacing too quickly, although a heart attack can't be ruled out.

Get a Medical Opinion

Some countries require divers to have mandatory annual physicals but in the U.S., it's up to divers and their instructors to establish the need for physicals. While divers may be required to fill out a health-screening questionnaire by a dive training agency when they're getting certified, most don't get any medical opinion from their doctor about diving at all during their lifetime.

The American Heart Association (AHA) says screening for coronary artery disease risk factors, including family and personal history, should start at age 20. (Most questionnaires administered by dive training agencies fulfill this purpose.)

DAN says divers over 35 might benefit from discussing their heart risk factors with their primary-care doctors. The AHA suggests medically supervised exercise stress tests in men over 40 and women over 55 who want to do competitive sports, have two or more coronary risk factors, and have one notably abnormal risk factor. A selective approach to medical evaluation of fitness for diving based on one's individual risks seems most suited for recreational diving.

Stress and exertion are hazards you must consider when evaluating your health and fitness to dive. While there's a broad consensus about the criteria for diving fitness, it's essential that both the diver and his physician understand the risks.

The final decision to go diving is up to you. Sometimes personal choices go against medical advice but if you're properly informed about your health risks, it's less likely you'll ignore them. For divers who stay physically fit, watch their health and choose their dives wisely, there is no age limit.

-- Ben Davison

A Better Way to Find Lost Divers

Mike Ball's invention: special buoys and "dummy divers"

Like many Great Barrier Reefbased dive operations, Mike Ball Dive Expeditions has not been immune from the past few years' incidents of paying customers getting lost on dives and spending hours at sea before getting rescued. In our March issue, we reported on the two American divers who got separated from Mike Ball's Spoilsport and treaded water for seven hours. To prevent repeats of that incident, Mike Ball Expeditions has been testing a new method for locating missing divers at sea. Trevor Jackson, the Spoilsport captain who led the tests, sent us this report.

Imagine being lost from your dive boat. You can see it in the distance searching, moving from side to side on the horizon. But it's so far away, the effort to get to it is fruitless. Your hopes sink with the sun and pretty soon it's dark. With no chance of being spotted for another 12 hours, your thoughts turn to survival, keeping warm, staying together, and conserving energy. Not a situation anyone would want to find himself in.

Recent infamous events here in Queensland, where two divers spent the night drifting around the Reef in the dark last year [Editors: see our report on that in the July 2008 issue of *Undercurrent*], prompted me to review what we aboard *Spoilsport* would do if we were faced with every dive boat's nightmare -- divers who don't return. So I decided on a practical experiment.

Early one morning, I made a fake human, dressed it in dive gear and threw it in the water before any crew had come on deck. I told the lookout on duty later to ignore the "diver," and to give the crew no assistance later on when we went to find it. I let two and a half hours go by. We completed the early dive,

and then I alerted the crew that we had a "lost diver," who was last seen entering the water a few hours ago. An initial concentrated search of the horizon produced nothing. The diver was gone from sight.

We then tied a weight belt to a life jacket and threw it in. There was a fair bit of wind and tide about, so the jacket would give us an indication of where to start looking. Surprisingly, the jacket took off in a direction contrary to where we believed the diver might be. Five minutes later we threw another weighted jacket in, followed by another a bit later. Pretty soon, the three jackets were forming a line leading toward the horizon. I instructed the helmsmen of both our dinghies to drive parallel to that line and head out for about a mile. Our fake diver was found, 27 minutes after the drill started and a mile from the boat; completely invisible to the eye and at 90 degrees to where we had initially expected him to be.



Captain Jackson and His Buoys

The experiment was both pleasing and sobering. The striking thing was that, despite what the conditions seemed to indicate, the diver wasn't going in the direction we had assumed. We decided to build permanent markers to help locate drifting divers and store them on board *Spoilsport* for such an event. The result was the specially configured floats which you see in the photo on page 12. They include a strobe, built-in radar reflector and a flag, for use both day and night in any conditions.

We ran regular drills with the buoys to see how well and how consistently they worked. The more we practiced, the more convinced we were that the buoys were going to be a real revelation. The buoys were not only giving us direction but the rate of drift as well. If we knew approximately when the divers went missing, we could apply a little rudimentary math and figure out how far out they were also.

After starting a drill one day, I grabbed one of the crew and said 'Come on, let's try something new.' The dummy diver had been lost for an hour, and we had launched the two buoys 10 minutes apart. Because they were drifting now at the same speed as the diver, we could use the gap between them to get a reasonable idea of how far out we would need to go to find our dummy. Lining up the two buoys in the dinghy, we drove at top speed between the two and timed the ride -- it took 40 seconds to meet our diver. Because the buoys drift at the same rate as a diver, it was then simply a matter of dividing the time the divers were lost by the time interval between when the two buoys were launched. In other words, 60 minutes divided by 10

minutes, equaling six. We then multiplied the time it took for us to speed between the buoys, 40 seconds by 6, or 240 seconds. All we had to do then was keep the buoys in line and speed out in the right direction for 240 seconds, and our divers should be there, or at least pretty close by.

Despite what the conditions seemed to indicate, the diver wasn't going in the direction we had assumed.

Over a year has passed since those drills. In dozens of tests, the buoys have given us the direction and distance of our lost diver dummies with stunning accuracy. There are certain conditions in which the buoys don't work as efficiently but with constant practice and a good measure of common sense, we've trained all our crew to use the buoys to regularly locate dummies missing for up to two hours and at ranges up to three miles.

The safety of our guests and crew is of paramount importance here at Mike Ball, as it is for any professional live-aboard on the water. Based on those dummy trials, I know that in the event of an emergency requiring us to locate a diver missing on the surface, we are now one step ahead of the game.

Organizing a Group Dive Trip: Part II

handling group discounts, deposits and important details

As we said in Part I of this story last month, planning an international group dive trip is plenty of work and plenty of hassles. But picking a destination and the group of divers is relatively easy -- it's getting money out of them and managing the special pre-trip requests that could create the biggest headaches. Here's more advice from travel pros and *Undercurrent* readers about putting together an enjoyable, affordable group dive trip.

Use Your Numbers to Negotiate Discounts

If your group can fill a liveaboard or a dive shop's boat, you have more weight to negotiate, says reader Deb Fugitt (Fort Worth, TX), who regularly organizes photo dive trips to Indonesia. "Ask the dive operator with arbitrary rules to make an exception. I have successfully negotiated away 45-minute dive limits, three-dives-per-day limits, and extra charges for single divers and night dives. In this poor economy, there will be many willing to work with you."

Reader Ken Paff (Detroit, MI). "My partner and I like having a dive boat of friends, and by e-mailing the dive operator in

advance, I usually get 10 to 25 percent off the posted price." To get the most flexibility for her friends, Glenda Cole (Atlanta, GA) tries to book an entire dive resort or liveaboard. "I negotiate to have our group in our own boats. If we are at resorts with smaller boats, then we match people based on experience. We are able to tell the divemaster who needs the most attention and who has more experience." Cole also works to get extras like a free night dive and lights thrown in, discounted rental gear and a special farewell dinner or cocktail party."

Most traveling dive groups average six people, but it's worth a shot for the trip leader or the travel agent to ask for a group rate on air travel if most or all of the group is traveling together. Fugitt saved 20 percent per airplane ticket with a group rate for a trip in January. But it may not be so easy with this economy or if you don't have a big enough group to meet an airline's standards, says Wendy Pacofsky, vice-president of Outdoor Travel Adventures in San Diego, CA. "Airlines are becoming less accommodating to groups, not doing special seating or offering frequent flyer mileage. Group fares are less so they

come with more restrictions. Frequent-flyer miles usually need to be booked directly, decreasing chances of a group discount, or else people may have to pay \$200 more to use their miles.”

Ron Carmichael, who plans multiple dive trips through his Splash Dive Center in Alexandria, VA, doesn't bother negotiating airfare for small groups. “They'll laugh if you want fewer than 25 tickets; some airlines require 40 or more. That's why you should go through travel wholesalers like Caradonna or Trip-N-Tour. They can buy 300 tickets to Bonaire this year for big groups and therefore get better deals on airfare.”

To get a better deal on general airfares, plan a year in advance. However, don't assume the least expensive air travel option is the best. The economy is making airlines cancel flights and change schedules more frequently. “I am planning more aggressively, getting options for alternate routes and asking divers to arrive earlier so that a change of plans doesn't ruin the trip,” says Fugitt.

Essential Info from Every Diver

As the trip nears, a trip leader needs to give more details about the trip, and he also needs to collect essential information from everyone to hand to the agent and travel operators. That will eliminate crossed wires, misunderstandings and the “But no one told me about” replies that can ruin a trip.

To avoid that, send a FAQ document two months in advance, with details about entry requirements for a foreign country, luggage weight limits and overweight charges, recommended thermal protection, what to pack, an estimate of additional expenses and how they can be paid.

Pacofsky asks the trip leader for every diver's passport information, special dietary and medical needs, flight seating preferences and room arrangements. “It's hard to contact 10 people at a time, so it's good to work with one point person who can collect all that info.”

One headache of group travel is checking passport details. Each diver needs to check their passport expiration dates, and make sure the name listed on it is the same name on their airline ticket. “Many dive destinations, from Indonesia to St. Lucia, want six months of validity on your passport,” says Tim Webb, president of Caradonna Dive Adventures in Longwood, FL. “For any international destination, the client name should be as it appears in his passport. When the name is different on the airline ticket, you may get stuck in that country, and it costs around \$125 to make the name correction on a ticket.”

Another issue: Many countries require arriving travelers to have four blank pages in their passports. If you don't have them, officials will send you to another country that will admit you, where you must go to the embassy. We've had *Undercurrent* readers traveling in Asia tell us of being delayed for days, at great expense.

Carmichael finds it useful to get a copy of everyone's certification card and passport to have at the dive store and on the trip leader. “The dive shop or agent can help when the worst

Somali Pirates Also Going After Dive Boats

Smaller boats are easier to catch than giant oil tankers, so it was inevitable that Somali pirates would chase after any dive boat that got within range. In early April, they seized the *Indian Ocean Explorer*, a 115-foot liveaboard that sails the Aldabra Islands, four remote atolls near the Seychelles and Madagascar, and 700 miles southeast of the infamous Somali coast. (See our review of the boat in August 2006.) Luckily, the boat's passengers, a group of British divers, narrowly missed being kidnapped. They had gone ashore at Assumption Island only hours before the *Explorer* and its seven-man crew, all from the Seychelles, were seized. Aquatours, the London-based tour operator that books the boat, was e-mailed by the Royal Navy that the *Explorer* had been hijacked. The Royal Navy says the boat was expected to be taken to Harardhere, a pirate stronghold north of Mogadishu, and held there. Hopefully, the crew will be unharmed as Somali pirates rev up their angry attacks.

The *Indian Ocean Explorer* is the only dive boat we know of that operates anywhere near the range of the Somali pirates, so divers should be more concerned about sitting on a sea urchin than encountering these barbarians.

happens. When the big tsunami hit Thailand in 2004, five of our customers saw their hotel wiped out, and their money and passports gone. Because we could fax or e-mail passport information meant the difference between waiting six weeks and three days to get a replacement.”

If you're organizing a group, require everyone to get dive travel insurance, available through your travel booker or online at Divers Alert Network's website. It's also important to give contact information and itineraries to the agent or dive shop organizing the trip in case there's an emergency or delay on either end. “I was once boarding a flight from Los Angeles to Indonesia when I heard my name over the intercom,” says Fugitt. “The *Tropical Princess*' engine had broken down, and the dive trip rescheduled for six months later. Luckily, the agent had my full itinerary and cared enough to find me.”

Handling Deposits and Payments

It's amazing how many divers jump overboard when trip payment or deposit time arrives. Payment is the trickiest part of any dive group's relationship, especially for a trip leader. If he collects deposits from everyone and hands them in altogether to the dive operator, he's seen as the person in charge – and the person responsible for filling slots if group members flake. Joe Cesena (Petaluma, CA) was in charge of a dive trip for four people, who agreed to split all expenses. “I decided on a charter boat in the British Virgin Islands. Each person would pitch in

\$2,000 to cover all expenses. I personally covered the \$2,000 deposit to reserve the boat. Then my two dive buddies backed out at the last minute and the other did not want to pick up the additional monies to cover the trip. I was stuck and lost my \$2,000 deposit. Luckily, the charter let me use part of my deposit toward a land-based vacation it offered.”

Ed Franks (Albany, NY) was the leader for a six-person group for a *Golden Dawn* trip in Papua New Guinea last November. He had everyone pay their own \$1,000 deposits, although he paid the deposit for another diver. Over the summer, she had to drop out for health reasons. *Golden Dawn* owner Craig de Wit asked Franks to fill her slot, saying in an e-mail, “All correspondence for the booking has been through you, so if somebody in your party has pulled out for whatever reason at this late stage, then you are responsible for that slot to be filled and payment made accordingly.” Franks was out \$1,000. De Wit told *Undercurrent* his policy is to refund deposits six months prior, and only refunds afterwards if the space was filled, which didn’t happen on Franks’ trip. Also, because Franks had initially asked for a full boat booking and negotiated a discount based on six divers, de Wit didn’t feel remorse for keeping the deposit.

To avoid those snafus, set specific deposit and payment amounts and dates, and stick to them with no exceptions. “I’ve learned most divers won’t cancel until a payment is due, so I require a substantial nonrefundable deposit,” says Fugitt. “Schedule a partial payment due about the time you can easily find a replacement diver. And final payment should be due when there is still time to find a replacement. Don’t think that anyone, including a good friend or business associate, will be ‘good for it’ and pay later.”

Carmichael has divers sign an agreement to follow the payment schedule. “If someone cancels, trip insurance is a buffer. But at the end of day, you must communicate that deposits are not refundable, and make sure they understand and sign to it.”

Webb suggests offering payment plans to everyone. “If each group member owes \$2,400, give every person a 12-month coupon book that says ‘you owe \$200 a month’ to make it as easy as possible for both of you.” If you’re handing deposits to a travel agency, look for one certified by the U.S. Travel Association because it carries a bond that reimburses clients in case the dive operator you’re booking with goes bankrupt.

Calming Everyone’s Ruffled Feathers

All the details are handed in, paid for and finally you can enjoy your trip, right? But the trip leader is the point of contact between divers and the dive operator for the entire trip. Calming ruffled feathers and readjusting hotel rooms will be common. The best thing to do is not get frustrated, says Jim Lyle (Hermosa, CA). “Leading a dive trip is much like herding cats; not the easiest thing to do but nothing to fret about.” He keeps spirits high by printing T-shirts or caps for everyone to wear on the trip, and

follows up later with a shared photo album or a keep-in-touch potluck dinner.

Greg MacPherson (Carrollton, TX) says problems often bring the group closer together. “Another diver who had joined our group for a night dive claimed someone had taken his flashlight. I asked the group to make an exhaustive search that was fruitless, as we knew it would be. But it brought our group together even more because the guy had been a jerk on the dive. Later, we all had the opportunity to share our stories about this guy and laugh about it.”

If you do happen to overcharge or have extra money left over during a trip, don’t keep it to yourself. Be a good dive buddy and either divvy it up the best you can, or, as Carmichael recommends, add a fun surprise during the trip for everyone. “I buy dinner on the trip or give a free round of drinks. If it’s only a two-dive day, I buy an island tour in advance and surprise them. It’s nice to add something good they weren’t expecting.”

-- Vanessa Richardson

Will Argon Keep a Drysuit Diver Warmer?

Some divers, particularly technical divers, go to the trouble of carrying a tank of argon for drysuit inflation because they believe that argon makes them feel warmer in comparison to air. But Simon Mitchell, a dive physiology expert and past vice president of the Undersea and Hyperbaric Medicine Society, says this assertion hasn’t been proven. “There is a vast potential for a ‘placebo effect,’ where parameters like perceived warmth are being subjectively judged,” he recently wrote in *Dive New Zealand*. “Put another way, if a diver is told that a particular dry suit inflation gas will make them feel warmer, there is potential for the ‘power of suggestion’ to influence their judgment.”

He cited a 2001 study published in the journal *Undersea and Hyperbaric Medicine*, in which the authors ran dives without telling the divers what drysuit inflation gas was being used. The authors placed electronic temperature-measuring probes on the divers to accurately measure temperatures. There was no difference in the magnitude of the temperature drop between the dives with argon or air as the drysuit inflation gas. Nor was there any difference in divers’ opinion of their warmth. Mitchell says if there is a warming benefit, it is unlikely to be substantial.

P.S.: The same conclusions can be made for anecdotes about how breathing Nitrox keeps divers warmer underwater. Dive experts say there’s no scientific evidence to show that it’s true.



The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Flotsam & Jetsam

Join a Treasure Hunt in the Keys.

Wreck-diving firm Mel Fisher's Treasures is offering the "Atocha Dive Adventure." The week-long package includes training in commercial treasure salvage techniques and two days of diving the Spanish galleon *Atocha*, lying in 55 feet of water and 35 miles from Key West, to help Fisher divers find its remaining gold and silver (they've already found \$400 million in loot). Any diver who discovers treasures will get a previously conserved *Atocha* piece of equal value, up to \$2,500. The first treasure hunt is June 8-14, and the \$2,500 cost also includes private room and bath in a Key West vacation rental and a sunset sail with wine, but no meals. Trips will be offered all summer. Contact Shawn Cowles at scowles@melfisher.com or call (305) 294-5441.

One Breath, No Fins, 288 Feet. At April's Vertical Blue competition, held at Dean's Blue Hole in the Bahamas, elite free-divers set five new world records and 30 national records. For unassisted freediving, William Trubridge, 28, of New Zealand descended 288 feet with no fins and returned to the surface in three minutes, 30 seconds. Using fins, Austrian Herbert Nitsch, 39, went to 395 feet, and he also

broke the free-immersion record (using a rope to go down and up) with a 360-foot depth. For women, Brit Jill Campbell, 39, set a fins-wearing record at 315 feet.

Let's Not Get Wet. We divers like to get wet, as they say, but there are limitations. On March 21, diver Dorothy Reynolds, 66, was watching the movie on a Continental flight to Hawaii when, for apparently no reason, another passenger stood up next to her aisle seat and began urinating on her. She pushed him back, but he continued to spray. The drunken whizzer, Jerome Kenneth King-zio of Saipan, was sentenced to three weeks in jail. A U.S. Attorney said Reynolds reported that not only was her vacation ruined, she continues to suffer emotionally from the incident.

Didn't See the Show? Buy the Book.

If you missed the great documentary *Oceans* on cable last fall, content yourself with the book. Good color photos show the explorers' voyages in seven oceans, from the Arctic to the Indian. Each chapter gives a briefing of archeology, geology and marine biology for that ocean; highlights for the Sea of Cortez include hammerheads, sperm whales, and the Humboldt, "the Terminator of squids." Hardcover, 240 pages, \$35 list price, but buy *Oceans* at www.undercurrent.org to get Amazon's best price, and proceeds will go to saving the oceans' coral reefs.