

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## The Red Sea, Egypt

*three great dive trips, three prices*

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Dear Fellow Diver,

An extended stay in Egypt gave me the chance to experience Red Sea diving three ways: on a budget, splurging on luxury and hard-core liveaboard. Each had its shining parts, each its quirks.

My introduction to high-value, low-budget diving was through Hussein Ramadan, a local PADI instructor in the Ma'adi section of Cairo whom everyone calls "Doc." He's an old-school instructor -- serious, skill-based and always organizing trips for students and friends that won't break the bank -- and you can join him. I hooked up with Doc and a fascinating group of U.S. expats from Cairo in a caravan of vans filled with gear and goodies for a four-hour haul to Hurghada to board the Reef Master. The boat, about 120 feet long, can take up to 36 divers, though we only had a dozen. The ambitious itinerary began with dives on the popular reefs near Hurghada, including one night dive with hunting lionfish and a massive fuchsia stonefish, then touched at the Brothers Islands south of Hurghada, the reefs near Marsa Alam, and a quick return to Hurghada. Five days, 13 dives, all food, BYOB for only \$840.

Diving (air only) was from one small Zodiac. We boarded fully geared up, no matter the seas. With limited staff, extra help for every diver was not possible. Frankly, I hated boarding a bouncing inflatable in four-foot seas. Standing on the dive deck, then stepping onto the inflatable edge and then its floor was an accident waiting to happen for most of us. Entries from the Zodiac were backrolls, and like every inflatable I've dived in the Red Sea, one re-enters dolphin-style after doffing all gear but fins. Or walrus-style for those



*Reef Master*



of us lacking cetacean grace, with crew dragging as one kicked one's way over the edge. Each dive was accompanied by a divemaster, either Doc or one trained by him. One divemaster turbo-charged his way through the water, and I learned to remain at my lazy pace and not let him dictate what was for me too darn fast. Doc also dives rather quickly for my taste, and I noticed that several experienced divers also kept their own slothful paces, but both Doc and his divemasters were fine with that.

Reef Master cabins included doubles, triples, and quads, mostly bunks. They were fine, a little cramped and short

on storage, with small ensuite bathrooms. Food was Egyptian: kefta, kosher, tahini, hummus, and salads. Breakfast featured the Egyptian national dish, fuul, (fava beans cooked long and spiced with vinegar, cumin, and pepper). No one went hungry. Some divers brought a variety of home-cooked treats, and cheerfully shared yummys like brownies. The boat itself is one reason the price is right. Though comfortable enough, its furnishings were plastic and rather garish, and at times functioned like the African Queen. During the hottest part of September, the air-conditioning went out on the third day, and sleeping on deck meant virtually no cushioning and lots of motion. When things broke, like my cabin toilet, they were only partially or temporarily repaired; broken lights just stayed broken. Like all electrical outlets in Egypt, they were two-prong European style and 220v. (Bring a EuroSurge unit for your laptops and sensitive electronics to protect against current fluctuations).

The fascinating people who dive with Doc made the trip. All were expats who had lived around the world and knew how to roll with the punches. Many had survived every hellhole on the planet. United by a passion for diving and a willingness to pool resources and travel cheaply, they made a sometimes-uncomfortable trip into a journey with friends. If you can rough it, the price is right and you'll have a ball.

A month later, my buddy and I went to Sharm el Sheikh, where we stayed at the Four Seasons Hotel, a lavish Moorish fantasy built along a steep hill leading to the beach. Sinai Blues, its dive operation, befits a five-star hotel. Just as you hear, "My pleasure" if you ask for extra pillows, Sinai Blues echoed the hotel's fine service. Full bar available, with the spirits imported but all beers and wines made in Egypt. Most of the divers were with family, and few dove more than once a day. The capable staff, led by an elegant German named Andrea, easily set up two or three dives a day for us. They required that a dive instructor come along on every dive, which I thought unnecessary, but the multinational staff was so charming that I enjoyed their local knowledge and help. Moreover, staff washes your gear, including wetsuits, after every dive. I paid well for the privileges at Sinai Blues, but it felt great not to carry, wash or worry about a thing. They really know service.

Sinai Blues runs not just the usual Zodiacs but also a bad-ass machine -- a rigid inflatable (RIB) with two Mercury 300-hp, four-stroke outboards designed for search and rescue. This beast flew at up to 55 knots, taking us to sites like the Thistlegorm wreck in an hour, rather than the four or five hours other operators needed. The most distant sites in the Straits of Tiran were only 10 minutes away. The ride is not for the faint of heart. At 30 knots, any wave hits hard, and when she was cooking at more than 40 knots, you had to post, as if riding a galloping horse, to keep your



**Sinai Blues' Rigid Inflatable**

spine intact. Thrilling, terrifying, but worth it to get places fast.

The straits of Tiran Island features sheer walls covered with sea fans, and gorgeous reef tops with stony and soft corals and teeming with fish of every hue, particularly on the dives at Jackson and Thomas Reefs. Most of the European and Russian divers always wanted to go deep, but the real beauty was in the shallows. Dives were conducted in groups of six or fewer, so bottom time was limited by the gas consumption of the worst diver. You could have nitrox for a small extra fee; I used it on the morning dives, and air on the afternoon dives. I always returned with half a tank, which I found frustrating. Most folks were not hardcore but, as the British say, "holidaymakers." And those deep divers can suck up the air.

I booked two special trips: one to the Thistlegorm wreck on the 600-HP RIB, and another on a private Zodiac for a short morning trip to putter around the tops of the reefs. Both were wonderful. Built in 1941 and bombed in 1942, the Thistlegorm's life was short. During World War II, she carried supplies for the British, and to avoid the Germans in the Mediterranean, she traveled from Britain around the Cape of Good Hope to the Red Sea. While she waited to pass through the Suez Canal, a Luftwaffe patrol bombed the sitting duck. Its twisted hull now rests at about 75 feet down. Divemaster Stuart, a native of Sheffield, knows the wreck intimately. On two dives, I came away impressed

with the bombing's destruction and a powerful sense of history. The first dive covered the exterior, with its small guns and decks peeled up like sardine cans. The second covered its interior, which was filled with Wellington boots, motorcycles lined up like rentals, batteries and trucks, many still with the manufacturer's name and date. My other special dive on the reef tops, by contrast, dazzled the eye with colors and life. Vivid stony and soft corals abounded as bird wrasse, anemonefish, orange and purple anthias, and butterflyfish of every hue darted in and out. This dive experience allowed me to do exactly what I wanted -- wallow to my heart's content in the incredible reef without being leashed by the rapid air consumption of a group, or stuck going deep with a group.

You can also book trips to Ras Mohammed's reefs if enough divers sign up. Both the Thistlegorm and the Ras Mohammed trips cost a hefty tariff above the regular rate, as do extra dives (each dive package comes with two dives per day per room, meaning one dive per day per person if you go with your buddy). My buddy and I did 12 dives each in 5.5 days, and paid extra but considered it money well spent. The Thistlegorm trip on the RIB cost \$300 per person, the extra night dives \$85 each. Andrea gave me a good price of \$80 on the private reef-top. Some divers pooh-poohed the house reef as dull but at night, I found shrimp, baby cuttlefish, octopi, crinoids, basket stars, hunting Volatans lionfish, and even flashlight fish abounding in the nooks and crannies. Turning off my light, I was surrounded by eerie, bluish, flashing lights of the little fish communicating with each other. Magical.

## ReefMaster

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★1/2
Diving ( <i>beginner</i> )	★★★★★
Snorkeling	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★
Food	★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

## Four Seasons, Sharm El Sheikh

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★★
Diving ( <i>beginner</i> )	★★★★★
Snorkeling	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★★
Food	★★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★1/2

## Blue Fin

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★1/2
Diving ( <i>beginner</i> -- <i>don't go</i> )	★
Snorkeling ( <i>not allowed</i> )	--
Accommodations	★★★★★
Food	★★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★1/2

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent

World Scale

## Yes, But Is Egypt Safe?

Safety when traveling in Egypt is on everyone's minds, and after living here six months, this is my take.

As a foreigner, you are precious to most Egyptians, and you will be protected. On the other hand, if you opt to join protests (like the Tahrir Square protest nearly every Friday), your fate rests in your own hands. Carry your passport or a copy of it with you. The police and military are legally obligated to protect foreigners, and your average Egyptian will go out of his way to help you. Avoid downtown Cairo on Fridays and whenever a demonstration is announced, but otherwise, areas like Giza and Saqqara, and vacation cities like Luxor, Aswan, Sharm el-Sheikh and Marsa Alam are safe and welcoming. Women should remember to wear sleeves, at least covering the shoulders, and it's prudent to wrap a cotton scarf around your neck in case you need to cover

up (not to mention protect you from breezes and sun). Some Egyptian men have the idea that western women are by definition loose and easy targets.

Sign up for the U.S. State Department's travel alerts, and register with its Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (<https://travelregistration.state.gov>). Its alerts are more paranoid than I think necessary, but ever since it was caught with its pants down when it didn't see the Arab Spring coming, the State Department has been super-cautious. I read the English language version of Egyptian papers like *Al-Ahram* and *Al Masry-Al Youm* online to see which way the wind is blowing.

I just finished hosting my family here at Christmas, and have more family on the way -- which should tell you whether I think it's safe here.

-- A.E.L.

The hotel dive package comes with transfers and a superb daily buffet breakfast. Rooms, many with sea views, are comfortable, and the on-site spa offers great treatments and exercise classes. Room service was 24/7, and though it falls a little short, it's much better than most Egyptian hotels. (My room far excelled that of friends staying at the Hyatt). The resort is family-friendly, with a kids club and many activities for tweens and teens. Families told me they loved bringing their kids there because it allowed them to have their diving fun while kids were safely engaged, and the staff clearly doted on the children. Don't bother buying anything Egyptian at the gift shop -- alabaster tea light holders that cost \$2.65 in Cairo go for \$30 here. Taxi tariffs were about 10 times higher than in Cairo.

In November, I spent a week on Blue O Two's Blue Fin with 23 divers, mainly from the U.K., and a few Norwegians and Americans. Cabins -- king suites and twins -- had ample storage and mini-fridges and warm hooded robes to wear on deck before and after dives. The king suites came with plasma televisions with HDMI and USB2 hookups to use for video cameras, external hard or thumb drives, or one of the boat's external drives packed with movies. Avoid Cabins 1 and 2 in the stern; they are prone to loud engine noise, problematic during late-night crossings. I always bring good earplugs and try to think of engine or anchor noise as soothing. This time, it didn't always work.

The "Best of the Brothers," itinerary focused on the two islands an eight-hour steam south of Hurghada. Each has sheer walls, stony and soft coral covers and massive sea fans drinking in the currents. Checkout dives were off Hurghada, where many day boats literally raft together. Though divers swamped the sites, I enjoyed them. The patch reefs and small pinnacles offer lots to see for those who care to look: crocodilefish, other lurk-and-lunge predators from scorpionfish to lionfish, and plenty of rabbitfish, wrasses, unicornfish, and various parrotfish and surgeonfish.

The Brothers came with a series of 5:30 a.m. wakeup calls. You can't do night dives there by law, so we started early. The first dive was always worth it, because I saw at least two thresher sharks (and several on an afternoon dive). Half of its body is composed of a curving graceful tail, the thresher swims with sinuous grace. It swats small fishes with that huge tail, then gobbles up the stunned creatures. Gray reef sharks also showed up on several dives, one which was known to the guides as "the big girl." I saw Napoleon wrasse on every dive, and some seemed to use divers as stalking horses. I also saw a few barracuda and, on my last dive there, a large tuna. Count on no more than three dives per day at the Brothers.

A steam south brought us to Panorama Reef and the Seven Pinnacles near Safaga, the port for Luxor and its famous archaeological sites, Karnak and the Valley of the Kings. Panorama Reef lived up to its name, combining wall and plateau around 80 feet, and shallows sparkling with color, stony corals and fish. I noticed tridacna clams abounding there, but they tend to be integrated into coral heads and rarely exceed one foot wide. There were many Clark's anemonefish, some so pugnacious that it was a relief they are so small. I confess to forgetting to mention fish so common that I started not to notice them -- flocks of coronetfish everywhere, and many blue-spotted stingrays lurking on every sandy bottom. Safaga was the only area besides Sharm where I saw turtles, all of them hawksbills.

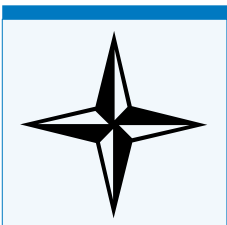
Head dive guide Achmed and his colleague, Abdu, coordinated diving based on conditions, which could be very rough indeed. In fact, one of the two inflatables was pushed onto a shallow reef at the southern end of Little Brother, and was literally deflated and unusable. It meant one fewer dive at the Brothers and an extra dive at Safaga. No problem for me as I tire of wall dives, even with sharks, because the topography becomes dull, but one diver complained about being cheated of a last wreck dive on Big Brother. Gotta roll with what happens if you are going to enjoy a liveaboard. The boat finished the trip with dives 16 and 17 near its Hurghada port.

Because Egypt is a desert, many think it's always hot. Excepting the summer and early September, the water is chilly. I wore a 7-mm steamer and 7-mm hooded vest on most dives and was not cold. In September, the water around Hurghada was about 80 degrees; at Sharm el-Sheikh in October, it was 78; and in November at the Brothers, it ranged from 71 to 76, with one night dive a chilly 66 degrees. One British diver wore a drysuit so he was the only one not to suffer. The water can be rough and the wind can cut through you. Be prepared for the fleet of liveaboards at the Brothers -- there were 16 between Little and Big Brother, and this is in post-revolutionary Egypt, when tourism is way down. The captains talk with each other, and folks more or less stay out of each other's way, but on some dives, I saw more people than big fish. Also, come prepared with a safety sausage on a reel. It's required, and though the boat will loan you one, it's wise to carry one with which you are familiar. Blue Fin asks you do safety stops with the sausage aloft for the Zodiac to find you easily when you ascend.

The cabins are wired for 220 volts with two-pin European plugs; hair dryers are not provided, nor is shampoo, though there is liquid soap. The boat uses a membrane system to fill EAN tanks, safer than carrying lots of oxygen but slower than a titrated fill (at least two-and-a-half hours to fill all divers' tanks). The exceptional deck crew helped with hanging suits, putting on fins and bringing juice after each dive. Achmed's dive briefings were detailed, well illustrated and thoughtful, as were the choices of sites. You could choose a guide or go with your buddy. Food was ample, surprisingly healthy with lots of fruits and veggies, and dietary needs were accommodated with grace. The food was less spicy than I prefer, but geared to western palates. Special mention goes to steward Hamdi, who not only cleaned up each cabin between dives, but also sometimes let his imagination run wild. I returned to arrangements of my duvet and towels that had me in stitches -- a swan-shaped duvet wearing my baseball cap and glasses was my favorite!

Blue O Two runs a first-rate operation, from their offices in the U.K. to their Red Sea vessels. If you value service, professionalism, good food, and intelligently thought-out diving, they offer good value. Regardless of how you dive the Red Sea, with a good operator, you're destined for excellent diving.

-- J.D.



**Divers Compass:** Dr. Hussein Ramadan's dive trips on the Reef Master usually occur every two to three weeks; five days cost about \$840, and no beer or wine on the boat, but you can BYOB . . . One week on the Blue Fin, with four dives a day, cost \$1,650; Egyptian-made beer is \$4, wine bottles from \$16 to 35, and free soft drinks . . . Direct flights to Cairo from the U.S. include Egyptair (which serves no alcohol), Turkish Airlines via Istanbul, American Airlines and British Airways via Heathrow, Lufthansa via Frankfurt, Air France via Paris,

and United Airlines; prices vary wildly between seasons, with highs of \$2,400 on American/British Airways around the Christmas holidays to \$660 on Turkish Airlines during low season . . . Egyptair offers a "business" class ticket that allows 30 kilos of checked luggage (rather than 20 in coach) and a snack, though seats are identical to coach . . . Direct flights to Hurghada and Sharm el-Sheikh abound from Europe; check U.K. and European travel sites for deals, and Blue O Two can find charters and cheap flights for you as well . . . You may not carry alcohol with you on flights within Egypt that aren't direct transfers . . . Contact info: Reef Master - contact Dr. Ramadan at hrshark31@yahoo.com or telephone +20-2-017-862-0257; Four Seasons - [www.fourseasons.com/sharmelsheikh](http://www.fourseasons.com/sharmelsheikh); Blue Fin - [www.blueotwo.com](http://www.blueotwo.com)

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## Rendezvous Dive Adventures, British Columbia

### *a laid-back idyll on Vancouver Island for cold-water divers*

Dear Fellow Diver,

As an experienced underwater photographer and certified solo diver, I'm used to taking my time and not worrying about a buddy. But in the unfamiliar 50-degree waters on the Pacific side of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, such thoughts take a back seat to safety. Peter Mieras, my Dutch-born host and skipper, stayed on the boat, so our checkout dive at Kyen Point was self-guided, navigating around twin underwater mounts topped by bull kelp. I was paired with a pleasant Swiss fellow who assured me that he also liked to go slow. Air temperatures hovered in the mid-60s, but the skies were gray. It was now down to business after Peter's thorough, illustrated briefing.

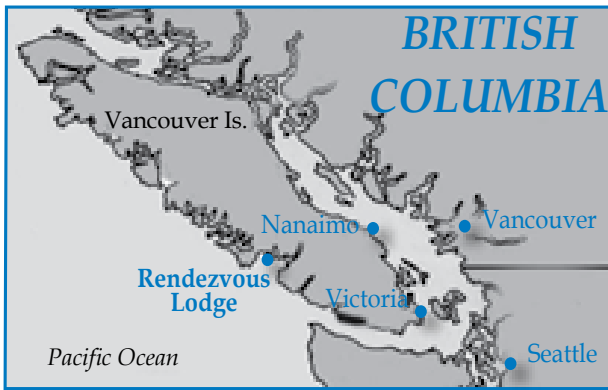
We descended through a thick chocolaty layer that cleared around 25 feet. My buddy kept within 10 feet, letting me do my thing in the 35-foot visibility. I had dived these waters last year (the creatures were so amazing that I had to return), so seeing the giant sea cucumbers, spotted brown ratfish, beautiful white-spotted anemones, vermilion stars, spiny rose stars, fish-eating anemones, huge plumose anemones, China rockfish and the quillbacks felt like a return to a familiar, albeit edgy, neighborhood. And here was a freckled pale sea lemon nudibranch, an exquisite ascidian tunicate with tiny red spots looking like needlepoint against a cushiony white, and the hump-backed painted greenling. Then my buddy spotted a gray wolf eel poking its soccer ball-sized head from under a ledge, looking like a grumpy old Muppet. Climbing back on board after 50 minutes, I felt I'd seen so many animals foreign to warm-water divers that I had already justified my trip.

We ducked into a sheltered cove for lunch: homemade carrot puree soup, lunch meats and cheeses to stuff between slices of sourdough bread. We then motored to Chup Point, a pair of seamounts close to a plummeting shoreline, separated by a boulder-strewn channel. Here I encountered the first of many fried-egg jellyfish -- a yellow "yoke" in the center. A black-clawed crab stared down the port of my camera. White and purple tube-dwelling anemone flourished their banded tendrils, and a predominantly black-eyed yellow goby posed, unconcerned by my presence. Giant dendro-notid nudibranchs, the length of my hand, seemed to erupt geysers off their backs. Then there were the usual Pacific Northwest suspects -- lingcod, delicate white feather dusters and white-spotted kelp greenlings. Here and there, a bright orange sea pen clung to the bottom.

Returning to the lodge (not to be confused with the Rendezvous Lodge on Vancouver Island's eastern side, near Campbell River), Peter said that a giant Pacific octopus nicknamed Gertrude was a house reef resident. We set off in search, but she wasn't in her usual haunts. There were



The Lodge on Barkley Sound



plenty of other invertebrates: feather stars with their slender "feet" exposed, rainbow stars, sunflower stars seeming to glow from within their central disks, lots of giant dendrinotid nudibranchs and a pulsating, free-swimming scallop.

After hanging my damp undergarments on a line outside the kitchen (dive gear stayed on the boat), I headed back to my tiny quarters to change. There are five guest rooms and two shared bathrooms, one with a shower. My 90-square-foot room barely held two twin beds but it was clean, had a screened window overlooking the bay, space for suitcases under-

neath each bed, reading lights and some clothing pegs. Size didn't matter -- socializing took place elsewhere, with meals at a common table, afternoons on the deck and evenings in the living room. With only six guests, things felt relaxed more than crowded. There was plenty of room to spread out. The main cabin was a large wooden A-frame, with the hosts' bedroom on its own floor and guest rooms in the adjoining bunkhouse. A deck stretched out along a lower level, roomy enough for a large, umbrella-topped table and hot tub. A separate building housing tables, and lots of outlets could be used to set up camera gear. The entire weathered-wood compound nestled against the side of a steep tree covered hill, with steps down to a floating dock. Approaching from the water, I saw a setting where some of J.R.R. Tolkien's kinder characters might happily reside.

The diving was on a relaxed schedule, not governed by the tides. Unlike dive sites in the straits that race between Vancouver Island and the mainland, there was little or no current in Barkley Sound. I could wake up, grab a cup of coffee and shower around 7 a.m., enjoy a leisurely group breakfast at 8 a.m., then saunter down to the boat by 9 a.m. The rest of the day unfolded on its own.

The next day on Diplock Reef, a complex structure about a quarter-mile southwest of Diplock Island, I collected images of red sea urchins, and a pudgy leather star, white with a pattern of regular radial red dots emanating from its central disk (which supposedly smells like garlic). A sad-faced cabezon draped over a rock appeared to be guarding its green eggs. A red- and white-banded scalyhead sculpin camped out next to a small group of hermit crabs and an opalescent nudibranch. A cluster of short white plumose anemone, interspersed with gooseneck barnacles, looked like a bouquet a newly-wed mermaid would throw to her bridesmaids. After our surface interval, we dove Tyler Rock, where I spotted a chocolate-brown bat star with thick "bat wings" between its rays. The tentacles of a wildly pulsing, soccer-ball-sized fried-egg jellyfish were gripped by plumose anemones that would, it appeared, soon be ending its days.

After a lunch at the lodge of sandwiches, a delightful lentil soup with lemon juice and sprinkled with feta cheese, and a dessert of coconut macaroons (homemade cookies topped every lunch), my dive buddy and his non-diving spouse went off kayaking. Peter and I again explored the house reef. I spied an orange longhorn decorator crab almost immediately, and a large cluster of light-bulb tunicates, transparent with a pink "glowing filament" within.

Our only real restrictions were that we try to be back on board within an hour, and all dives be no-deco and non-solo. Tanks were filled to 3,000 psi, and most dives were less than 80 feet. Everyone wore drysuits, but some divers had to abort or shorten their bottom time for preventable reasons: not weighted enough for salt water, cold hands and a lack of stamina in surface currents. With three-fingered

## Rendezvous Dive Adventures, B.C.

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★★
Diving ( <i>beginner</i> )	★★★
Snorkeling	★
Accommodations	★★★★
Food	★★★★★
Topside Attractions	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent  
World Scale

## Two Letters to the Editors

Dear Ben,

Regarding your January article, "Scubapro kills its free 'parts for life' program," I am also a victim of what I consider a breach of contract by Scubapro. My regulators normally get serviced in September, but because of an October dive trip, I delayed until November to get them serviced. Because I went beyond the 13-month period, I was charged for parts. I have been a loyal Scubapro customer for 15 years, and own three regulator sets and three Air2s. Scubapro gave no written notice to its customers of this policy change, even though most of my regulators are registered.

Are there any plans to start a class action suit over this? As your article points out, we paid a premium

for the free 'parts for life' warranty. How can they take it away without compensation?

- - Dave Bader (Norwood, NC)

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Reading the article "Why You May Need Trip Insurance" and the insurance episode with Jonathan Blake, I want to say that because the agent and the airline were clearly at fault, he has one other recourse - - small claims court. No attorneys can be present, and the outcome is based on facts. If the defendants don't show up, a judgment will be filed so that plaintiffs can attach assets such as bank accounts, property, etc. Not a nice thing to have to do, but an alternative to being the "screwed."

- - Richard Schwartz (Laguna Hills, CA)

dry mitts and three layers of undergarments, I was the only one who made three dives a day. As it was late July, a dark, 25-foot-deep, halocline-prone surface layer made many safety stops a weird visual experience. Missing the line meant a surface swim, making me glad I came up with adequate reserves of air. Once when we missed the line, my buddy proved himself by sticking with me as we off-gassed in near-blackout surface layer.

When we dove Renate's Reef on our third full day, I was hoping my buddy would help me spot the sixgill seen there by the prior week's group. Instead, I got a red Irish lord, a camouflage artist sporting a number of pink blotches that perfectly matched some nearby algae patches. On our way back, we rounded a small island across from the lodge, and watched harbor seals basking on shore. By 5:30 p.m., I was in the water again. The giant dendronotids were having a love-in, entwining their translucent bodies and laying eggs. My wide-angle Tokina proved its versatility, able to take whole body shots of giant sunflower stars, and close-focus wide angles of a decorated warbonnet.

I loved the ease of our house dives, but the boat dives were cozy in their own way. All were made from the Rendezvous I, a 36-foot, fiberglass Canoe Cove driven by a 330-hp, single-screw Diesel with an easy-to-operate marine head and a full complement of safety gear. Inside the aging enclosed cabin, it was usually warm. Two tables were bordered by cushioned bench seats. With only six guests at any one time during my stay, the back deck offered plenty of room to gear up. The long dive ladder featured a platform that allowed a diver to rest knees or finned feet before climbing aboard. The boat made a fine, if slow, water taxi as it made the two-and-a-half-hour trip to and from our lodge via the fiord-like Alberni Inlet to Port Alberni.

The ambiance at the Rendezvous was uniquely intimate in that guests spend their time in the close presence of Peter and his wife, Kathy, both in their 40s. Their love of diving, underwater photography and videography, and their good humor and unfailing courtesy made us feel like friends in a rented wilderness cabin. We shared wine at sundown and enjoyed Kathy's well-prepared dishes (dinners featured salmon, chicken and roast beef, and one night, a from-scratch vegetarian pizza followed by blueberries and raspberries sprinkled on ice cream for dessert). Then we viewed each other's photos, plus Peter's professional-quality video productions, on the couple's wide-screen TV. In between, I soaked up their travel stories and vivid descriptions of local marine life.

Despite Peter's sometimes confusingly sarcastic remarks ("Did 'awful' mean 'bad' or 'good?') and my amazement that Kathy never failed to end most of her thoughts with a chuckle, I enjoyed their almost constant company. Not everyone did; one couple confided that they felt like they were living in a fishbowl with nowhere to hide. They left a day early. My non-diving spouse and I were suddenly the only



guests. Would Peter and Kathy be reluctant to burn the fuel to take only one diver to sites 45 minutes away?

Fellow readers, both of them took me out, tag-teaming boat handling and dive buddy duties. Indeed, a sultan's treatment aboard a private yacht, if you're okay with hanging out in a 36-footer with another couple in undergarments. Mealtimes became dinner with friends -- who did all the cooking and didn't ask for help with the cleanup. Peter said that those lucky enough to be there with a ratio of one staff per guest received the "royal treatment," often returning and bringing more friends.

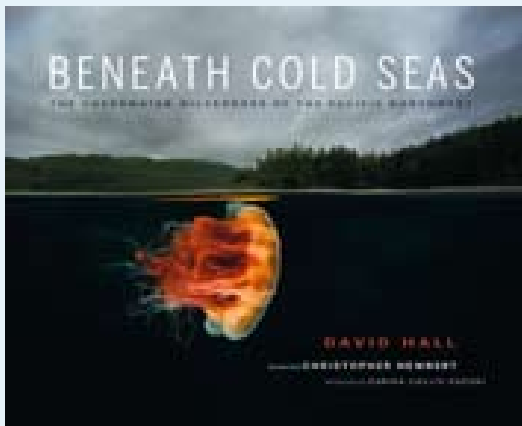
On my fourth day, I scored: I saw a giant Pacific octopus hiding in a crevice, peering out as I swam close, but not too close, to get a good image. Its one-inch-diameter suckers and thick arms looked strong enough to rip both my mask and camera away. Our last two dives were closer to the lodge, in order to be ready for a noon departure back to Port Alberni. The highlight was a free-swimming wolf eel, behavior Peter said he'd seen only some five times before.

At the Rendezvous lodge, non-diving activities included boating to catch sight of the gray whales, humpbacks or orcas (none seen), kayaking, reading while enjoying the views off the deck, and dips in the hot tub. Walking on shore was a possibility. However, we were cautioned to take Reilly, the couple's black lab,

## *Beneath Cold Seas*

It's hard enough to take a first-rate photo of reef life in the best of conditions. Try doing it in murky, bone-numbingly cold water while wearing a dry suit with 40-plus pounds of weights around your waist, and thick, insulating gloves making it hard to use the camera controls. That's what David Hall had to endure while photographing in Canadian waters, but those physical disadvantages make his 160-page book, *Beneath Cold Seas: The Underwater Wilderness of the Pacific Northwest*, all the more amazing.

While there are heaps of photography books celebrating the beauty of tropical coral reefs, there are few that focus on marine life in cold waters. Hall's book successfully disputes the belief that cold-water reefs are drab and dismal. He has regularly photographed the world's most beautiful dive spots for major magazines from *National Geographic* to *Time*, but he admits a particular love affair with the Pacific Northwest after diving Browning Passage in British Columbia 15 years ago. While Hall's



shots are taken entirely in the waters around there, the reef life he shoots resides along the Pacific Coast, from Northern California up to Alaska, and they are as diverse and spectacular as any creature in Raja Ampat or Fiji.

He shows us Caribbean- and Indonesia-focused divers that colder waters have an amazing -- and mostly endemic -- variety of invertebrates, fish, marine plants and very photogenic mammals. Iridescent jellyfish as delicate as rosettes float in the water with tall pines looming above the surface. A Northern kelp crab poses proudly in all its fiery brilliance. Close-up shots of a crimson anemone, a stubby squid and a cluster of gooseneck barnacles look like Technicolor works of modern art that would appeal to the highest bidder at Sotheby's. And of course, there are the requisite shots of curious sea lions and harbor seals.

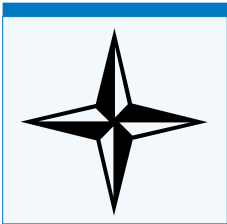
Hall's book opens with an introduction by marine biologist Sarika Cullis-Suzuki focusing on conservation issue. But Hall's writing is as eloquent as his full-color photos, with touching vignettes about his curiosity for and experiences in shooting crabs, jellyfish, nudibranchs and octopi, and why he goes to such physical extremes to get these cold-water critters on camera. While not many of us will ever dive the waters of the Pacific Northwest, at least we know what we're missing. By buying his book, you'll understand why Hall goes to the lengths he does for these photos.

*Beneath Cold Seas* is available in hardback at a \$45 list price. Buy it through us by going to [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org) and clicking on this book review on the homepage. The profits we make from your purchase go towards protecting both cold- and warm-water reefs.

with us if we decided to venture up the trails. On Vancouver Island itself, there is plenty to do and see; just get a good guide book. We stayed for one night at The Cottage, a superb bed and breakfast at Qualicum Beach on the Straits of Georgia. After the Rendezvous, we treated ourselves to a three-day stay at the pricy Wickaninnish Inn near artsy Tofino. I could have spent the entire visit exploring the tidal pools outside our window there. We spent a lot of time hiking in nearby Pacific Rim National Park. If you decide to eat at the Wick Inn's gourmet restaurant, make sure you make reservations far in advance, and specifically request a window table. From there, I could watch the mesmerizing play of the water on the rocks below.

I can't predict whether you'll receive the same kind of idyllic experience or royal treatment I enjoyed at the Rendezvous Lodge. Then again, maybe a sixgill or a giant Pacific octopus named Gertrude might just say hello.

-- S.P.



**Divers Compass:** My diver/non-diver package for a five-night, all-inclusive stay for two totaled about \$2,000, plus \$230 for Canada's sales tax, but bring your own booze; I added a 10 percent tip when settling our bill to show my appreciation for the personal service, shocking Peter as "too much" . . . I flew to Vancouver (you must have a passport), then rented a car at the airport for around \$50 per day; gas was around \$5 a gallon . . . the car ferry from Vancouver Island to Nanaimo via ferry is around \$90 each way, plus a \$15 reservation fee, and reservations are strongly advised during summer

months ([www.BCFerries.com](http://www.BCFerries.com)) . . . parking in Port Alberni was free . . . The Cottage B&B was \$90, plus \$10 tax, per night ([www.thecottage-bb.net](http://www.thecottage-bb.net)) . . . Wickaninnish Inn was \$580/night, plus \$82 tax ([www.wickinn.com](http://www.wickinn.com)) . . . Credit cards were generally accepted, but using cash will save you the foreign transaction fees . . . AC current is same as in USA . . . Recommended fish ID books for Vancouver Island are Lamb and Handy's Marine Life of the Pacific Northwest and Harbo's Whelks to Whales . . . Contact info: [www.rendezvousdiving.com](http://www.rendezvousdiving.com)

Coming up next issue: a liveaboard on the East Side of Vancouver Island.

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## Dive Stores in the Internet Age

### *survival means better local service*

The recent announcement that Scubapro has joined with LeisurePro to allow some of its gear to be sold online reveals a break in the last wall of resistance that the dive industry has put up against Internet equipment sales.

As we wrote five years ago, online sales of dive gear were seen by dive stores as a looming threat. Many divers we surveyed preferred shopping online for a variety of reasons. While many dive stores were upset and most dive manufactures refused to accept the Internet as a sales opportunity, we recognized the rapid change in dive consumer behavior and that the industry had to adapt. In response to our survey, the reasons divers offered for preferring Internet shopping still, for the most part, hold today.

#### **Lower Price, and Maybe No Sales Tax**

Dive gear is expensive, but some websites, even those of brick-and-mortar dive stores, offer deep discounts. However, most online sellers add the cost of shipping (though policies vary). In nearly all states, consumers pay sales tax with rates as high as 7 percent, plus add-ons from counties, cities, and local districts that lead to rates of 8 or 9 percent. States, however, are generally not collecting tax on out-of-state online purchases, so for nearly all divers, there's an additional cost incentive to shop online. Today, with states shopping for increased revenues, legislation is underway in many states to tax out-of-state online sales. By

adding as much as 10 percent to the cost of online sales, divers may have a greater incentive to walk into a dive store.

One drawback is that if the e-tailer is not an authorized dealer, manufacturers won't offer warranties on the merchandise. So some e-tailers are offering their own.

### Convenience

One can sit at home (or in the office on a boring day), place an order, and have it delivered the next day if he wants. Websites are open 24/7. There's no driving to the store, and no wasting time in the shop looking for merchandise they may not have. And if the item has to be returned, you don't have to drive to the store and explain the reasons for the return - - or persuade the retailer to accept it.

Most Internet retailers have satisfactory return policies. The biggest hassle is having to pack things up and ship them, usually at your cost, with an additional fee if you want UPS or FedEx to pick up the parcel from your home or business.

### Unlimited Online Information and Selection

Internet purchasers love surfing the web, comparing products and features side by side. "It's easier to look at a wider selection on Internet sites, and you can get some unbiased comparisons that are manufacturer-neutral," says survey respondent Denton Byer. "I ended up selling half the gear I bought through my shop, because it wasn't the right gear for me. Not knowing what else was available was a big reason for this. When I'm ready to buy a product, I already know exactly what I want. The only decision left is where to buy it, and that gets determined by who has the best pricing."

There's a subset of shoppers who trust the information they receive over the Internet more than a retail salesperson who may be biased toward the lines he carries, and may be less knowledgeable than the customer. Many local dive stores carry only two or three major brands of BCDs, regulators, etc., and clearly can't stock all sizes or gear. Some divers order a couple sizes over the web to try on, and one of our

## Did This Divemaster Commit Suicide, or Was She Silenced?

A divemaster who was found shot to death last month in her Spokane, WA home had been named in a second million-dollar diving negligence lawsuit two weeks before her death.

Kim Schmidt, 34, and the scuba company where she gave lessons were allegedly responsible for two diving accidents that left their students with brain damage. Police detectives are wondering if the thought of defending her second dive-related lawsuit prompted Schmidt to commit suicide, or if her death was a way of silencing the testimony she would offer at trial. Schmidt was discovered inside her home by her mother. A pistol was found nearby, and investigators were thinking suicide, until they noted that Schmidt's body appeared to have been moved after she was shot.

At the time of her death, Schmidt was romantically involved with another dive instructor named Dan Arteaga, who, along with Scuba Center of Spokane, is also named as a defendant in the lawsuit. In 2008,

Schmidt and Arteaga were giving Spokane resident John Gray an openwater dive lesson in Puget Sound. Gray became separated from the group in poor visibility and drowned. "We believe if there had been somebody with him, whatever problems he encountered, they would have been able to bring him back to the surface and keep him from falling unconscious and drowning," said Susan Nelson, the prosecuting attorney.

Attorneys representing Gray's estate say the same thing happened again in 2010, when Kimela Wyssman nearly drowned. Wyssman, who suffered brain damage, also filed suit. Arteaga and Schmidt found out about her lawsuit in mid-December, and Schmidt was found dead in her home on January 1. Spokane County Sheriff's deputies say they have questioned Arteaga about Schmidt's death, but have not named him as a suspect.

Meanwhile, Spokane's medical examiner has not ruled Schmidt's death as either a suicide or homicide. She is waiting for detectives to provide her with more information.

-- from a report by Jeff Humphreys, KXLY4, Spokane

readers told us that he ordered six BCDs from an Internet retailer, determined which one suited him best, and returned the other five for refunds.

### Specialty Items

Tech divers comprise a small market, so their equipment is often not available locally. Paul Winter, a tech diver from Raleigh, NC, noted that 120 cu-ft. HP steel tanks couldn't be obtained through any local shop "without putting cash up front and waiting for items that would in all likelihood not show up for six months." Mark Scheele purchased a Shark Shield online because local shops in New Mexico didn't carry them. On the other hand, many divers will not purchase life support equipment online, believing it is much better and safer to see the equipment and engage in face-to-face business.

### Industry Supports Shops

Of course, the scuba industry's motto continues to be "support your local dive shop," and seminars over the years at the Diving Equipment Manufacturers Association (DEMA) trade shows have helped dive shops to cope with Internet competition. At the DEMA convention in 2011, seminar leaders discussed how dive shops could use the Internet more to their advantage.

## Raja Ampat Liveboard Goes Down in Flames

On the morning of December 29, the five passengers aboard the *Mandarin Siren* went for a dive at Manta Sandy in northern Raja Ampat. *Undercurrent* subscriber Thatcher Hayward (Cambridge, MA) was the first to surface an hour later and saw thick black smoke coming from the aft of the boat. "I got on the launch and started screaming profanities because I knew I wouldn't get any of my things back," says Hayward. Luckily, there was no explosion -- the crew safely got all the tanks off the boat, as well as themselves -- but the *Mandarin Siren* went down in flames.

Worldwide Dive and Sail, the boat's owner, states that the origin of the fire is not yet confirmed, "but we believe it was caused by an electrical fault of the tumble dryer in the laundry room, and it quickly spread to the engine room." From now on, Worldwide Dive and Sail mandates that tumble dryers on all its boats not be left unattended while in use, and dryer filters will be cleaned after each cruise instead of every six months.

Worldwide Dive and Sail (WDS) gets kudos from the affected divers for how they handled matters between the fire and the flights taking everyone home. A satellite phone to sister ship *Indo Siren* got a launch to pick them up for a 40-minute ride. Everything salvaged from the boat was brought to the *Indo Siren*. Except for one diver whose bag with credit card and passport was luckily spared, the other four were left with just the dive gear on their backs. Then a three-hour boat drive to Sorong, where WDS paid for hotel rooms, toiletries and clothes. After they flew to Makassar, co-owner Frank Van Der Linde escorted them to Jakarta and gave them each a proper hotel room and US\$500 to tide them over before the trip home. Hayward says the U.S. consulate was equally considerate. "Everything was closed for the weekend but the vice consul invited us to his house, where he had our passports waiting for us." All guests were able to catch flights home within 48 hours of the accident.

Don Dunlop, WDS's marketing representative, says company insurance will cover the loss of the divers' personal items. "If the guests' possessions were not covered under their own travel insurance policies, they should be under this one." While WDS's policy is not to reimburse guests for the money they spent on the trip when there are "unforeseen events," Dunlop says the company decided to offer the divers a free trip in the future. "The guests we have heard back from are happy with this arrangement but if any are not, then we shall of course refund for the number of days missed, as per our terms and conditions."

For guests who held bookings on upcoming trips, WDS is giving a full refund, doing its best to find alternative arrangements in Raja Ampat, and refunding the difference in price, if any.

Hayward says he's happy with how WDS handled matters, especially the fact that it said it would guarantee that all the displaced *Mandarin Siren* crew would still keep their jobs. He is definitely taking WDS on its offer for a free trip but next time, he's getting trip insurance. "I lost \$11,000 worth of personal items, which WDS says it will reimburse, but I learned a valuable lesson for the next trip."

*Dive Center Business* publisher Mark Young told *Undercurrent* recently that Internet sales account for about 10 percent of the annual volume. By comparison, the National Sporting Goods Association reports that online sales amounted to 12.5 percent of the dollar volume of all sporting goods sold in 2010.

In a 2009 *Dive Center Business* survey, retailers expressed less concern about Internet competition than before. To compete with the Internet, they focused on the innate strengths of the brick-and-mortar dive shop experience: training, air fills and hands-on customer service. Here's a sampling of their replies:

"We offer 'custom fitted' packages. We offer in-house warranty and service. We sell all our gear with a smile and a 'thank you for supporting our store.'"

"Free financing and free trip with full-system purchase. Free day of rental gear with snorkel system purchase or \$5, \$10, \$20 off future purchases. Free trip with an open-water student referral."

***Internet sales of dive equipment account for about 10 percent of the annual volume sold.***

"Tell Internet sales customers we are loyal to them if they will be loyal to us. If not, we tell them their next Internet purchase should include a USB fill whip to fill their tanks, because if everyone buys off the Internet then we go out of business just filling."

"You buy a package, you get an incentive check to put toward another purchase. We give free labor on regs, computers and BCs for the first year with the purchase of a dive package."

"When customers purchase hard goods from us, we hook up everything, provide tanks and other needed gear, and get in the pool and show them how their new gear works. We take at least 10 percent off the price if they buy a package (BC, reg, computer), and match any price they find on the Internet from an authorized dealer."

"We back the equipment we sell. If there's a problem with your equipment, it will be easier to deal with your local store and their suppliers."

"Try it before you buy it. Personalized consultation, fitting, etc. Warranty support."

Note the strategy of offering to match prices of other authorized dealers. That works because many major manufacturers, such as Scubapro and AquaLung, enforce strict pricing guidelines on their authorized dealers. Dealers can only advertise discounts of about 10 percent off the manufacturer's suggested retail price. This is known in the trade as the Minimum Advertised Price, or MAP. Some dealers get around MAP rules by bundling packages that include products that can be more deeply discounted in order to drive down the overall package price.

### **If You Can't Beat Them ...**

The most striking evidence of the industry adapting to online competition is Scubapro's recent decision to make LeisurePro an authorized dealer. For years, Scubapro has refused to market over the web. That hard line didn't prevent Internet marketers like LeisurePro from obtaining Scubapro merchandise via the so-called "gray market" - purchasing controlled products from a dive shop going out of business, an overseas reseller, a manufacturer closeout, or perhaps from an authorized dealer who buys more than he'll sell and surreptitiously ships it to an Internet seller with a markup. Scubapro spokesperson Cynthia Georgeson even warned about counterfeit merchandise sold through gray market channels.

But last fall, Scubapro and LeisurePro reached a compromise. Here's how Harry Ward, director of sales for the Americas, announced Scubapro's stunning turnaround to its dealers in early October:

"The Scubapro business model has always been successful in ensuring our diving consumers receive proper training, education, and equipment. With consumer demand and changing trends in consumer behavior, it is now time to expand upon that philosophy and help you be more competitive in today's retail environment.

“Beginning October 15, 2011, we will allow our authorized dealers to advertise, sell, and ship our products online. Over time, it has become apparent that our ‘in-store sales only’ restriction has encumbered sales and service to your clients, as well as expansion into new markets. We will continue to strongly enforce and maintain our MAP policies for both Scubapro and Subgear brands. We believe this will enhance your business, and allow you to provide even better customer support. “

A few days later, LeisurePro began displaying the “authorized Scubapro dealer” logo. The move seems to have been accepted by Scubapro’s dealer base. Sal Zamitti of San Francisco’s Bamboo Reef Enterprises told *Undercurrent*, “LeisurePro had been getting their entire product anyway.” He believes he can handle the competition as long as LeisurePro sticks to the MAP rules. In fact, we compared the manufacturer’s suggested retail price on Scubapro’s popular MK25S600 regulator (\$695), and found LeisurePro’s price (\$729) to be 14 percent higher.

The good news is that after purchasing Scubapro products through LeisurePro, divers can now bring them to any authorized dealer for servicing. The bad news, as we reported last month: Scubapro has watered down its “free parts for life” warranty program. Aqua Lung has also loosened its restrictions on Internet marketing. Authorized Aqua Lung dealers can now apply to sell selected Aqua Lung, Apeks and Suunto products on their own websites, as long as they adhere to MAP guidelines without discounts, instant rebates or special offers. Or dealers can feature a link on their sites to the Aqua Lung store, where customers can complete a purchase online. Aqua Lung dealer Jack Kuhn of Harbor Dive Center in Sausalito, CA, says that although it’s not clear on Aqua Lung’s site, shoppers can decide whether to have the merchandise delivered to a nearby shop or to an address of their choice. Store delivery is free, and the dealer can then complete any necessary testing or assembly.

The Internet is even affecting dealers packaging dive trips. Despite the fun of traveling with friends and the help of trusted trip leaders, there has been a general decrease in group dive travel. A recent issue of *Dive*

## Still Unclear How Key Largo’s *Get Wet* Got Wet

Last month, we reported on the December sinking of *Get Wet*, a boat owned by Key Largo Scuba Shack, that killed one diver and put another in the hospital in critical condition. An in-depth investigation by the Coast Guard and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission into the fatal sinking will continue for several months, but authorities do know that the boat’s hatches were “exposed,” and combined with weather conditions, allowed the boat take on a lot of water very fast. The term “exposed hatches” could mean hatches were closed but not sealed to be watertight.

The Coast Guard has removed the bilge pump from the *Get Wet* to see if it was working. “We have not done that testing yet,” Lieutenant Jeff Fry, senior investigating officer for the Coast Guard, told the *Key West Keynote*. “Even if the pump was working, it probably would not have removed that much water.”

The winds on December 18 increased the seas at Molasses Reef, where *Get Wet* was doing an afternoon dive, allowing water to pour over the transom and “down-flood” into the hull through the exposed

hatches at the stern. When the boat started to move, water moved toward the stern and apparently caused the *Get Wet* to sink quickly, stern-first. The two divers below, Aimee Rhoads, 36, and Amit Rampurkarl, 27, were trapped by the deck cover. A large engine-hatch cover fitted with bench seats moved toward the bow as the water swamped the stern, further preventing escape. Boat captain John Nathaniel was able to retrieve the unconscious divers from the forward section, but Rhoads died and Rampurkarl remained hospitalized in Miami as of mid-January, and Fry has not been able to take a statement from him. No criminal or civil charges have been filed. “We’ll make a determination of what happened and consider if there are things that could have been done to prevent it,” Fry said.

After reading about the *Get Wet* sinking, *Undercurrent* subscriber Joel Sill (Los Angeles, CA) wrote in to offer his solution in case he ever gets trapped below the waterline during a worst-case scenario. “Sleeping in a cabin has been a recurring concern for me for years. When the Spare Air was released, I purchase one and keep it in my cabin. I attach a small light to a Velcro strap, and at least have a few extra breaths with some light if something catastrophic happens to the boat. An idea worth considering for other readers.”

*Center Business* notes, "It's easy to go online and see 100 dive vacation options that can be booked without a dive store. Often these trips are priced lower than a similar trip the dive center is selling." Some shops compete by tacking on "value added" goodies such as land excursions, extra dives, nitrox fills and extra days, which attract clientele but eat into profits.

Our reporting back in 2006 concluded: "To survive, dive stores must view the Internet as a tool rather than an enemy, recognize their customers' options and find a way to offer something they need or want." That prediction seems to be coming true.

-- Larry Clinton

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## A Computer for Non-Techie Divers

### *the \$350 Cressi Leonardo*

It seems like only yesterday that I was commissioned by a British magazine to write an article explaining the advantages of diving with a computer. That was 25 years ago, and the computer I had then cost \$600, which was a lot of money in those days. It was such a flamboyant display of wealth that other divers - - total strangers - - would try to rip it off my wrist at dive sites with the excuse that computers were dangerous and I should stick to tables, watches and depth-gauges like the rest of them. Of course, it was really the cost that offended them. Today, few divers would consider diving without one computer and many even use a second one as backup. They have become so relatively cheap that nearly every serious diver can afford to do that.

The manufacture of diving computers originally fell to a couple of companies. In Europe, diving computers bearing different brands all came from the same factory in Switzerland. Then that Finnish upstart Suunto got in on the act, although it stayed firmly with everything under its own label. In America, one of Bob Hollis' companies dominated the computer market, manufacturing for many different brands as well as Oceanic and Aeris. Companies that wanted something different went to Seiko in Japan, a company that made no computer under its own label but was happy to manufacture for others.

The diving business is very small. I was once told that the entire annual production of current European brand-leader Suunto by units only equalled 10 minutes of Nokia's cell phone production (a lot more people use phones, obviously). Similarly, Seiko makes a lot of products, and I'm told it no longer has an interest in the small world of diving computers. This left companies that relied on Seiko supplies out in the cold. Cressi, in Italy, was one of them. Not daunted, Cressi decided to source its own unique product locally. The Cressi Leonardo is it.

#### **The Algorithm**

Where do dive computer manufacturers mostly go today for algorithms? One man has grabbed the lime-light. When he's not busy working on nuclear weapons at Los Alamos, NM, Bruce Wienke likes to write decompression software for the leisure diving industry. To my knowledge, he has done this for Suunto, Mares and Atomic, and now he has written a nine-tissue version of his Reduced Gradient Bubble Model (RGBM) algorithm for Cressi.

Before any geeks write in to say that this is not a proper RGBM, I would like to mention that when the great physicist was questioned about this, he answered that it would only be possible to write a pure RGBM if it was also possible to miss out on the shallow part of the dive.



**Cressi Leonardo**

Obviously, that is not possible. The algorithm takes into account silent micro bubbles that might form the nuclei of symptomatic bubbles during a second dive or series of dives.

### **The Instrument**

The Leonardo's LCD face measures 1.8 inches in diameter, and is hidden behind a protective layer of transparent plastic. It has a strap long enough to go round any wrist clad in a drysuit cuff, while being easy to replace should it be necessary. It is set up using a single button, which is pressed in sequence to access the various menus. When adjusting any part such as the nitrox setting, one must be careful not to overshoot because it is slightly irritating to have to work all the way round again. When I first set it up, there was some frantic button-pressing accompanied by one or two harsh words, but then, I do tend to be impatient.

### **In the Water**

At a time when Internet forums on diving are full of recommendations to buy technical diving computers on the basis of "you're going to need one, one day," it was refreshing to get into the water undaunted by my own possible lack of technology skills. This computer is designed for use by those who want to go leisure diving and enjoy other reasons for being underwater than using the gear.

It proved straightforward to use, gave clear information, guided me when I was probably better off pausing for a minute or two at depth on the way up, gave a clear indication of remaining no-stop time or deco requirements, and beeped at me if I went up too quickly. It indicated clearly the safety stop time, and if I needed to see the screen more clearly in the dark, pressing a button switched on its own backlight. Unsurprisingly, the information it gave regarding deco requirements during the dive were not dissimilar to that given to me by the Suunto (also using a Wienke RGBM) alongside it, including the option to enable deep stops and a variable safety setting. What more do you want?

Of course, if you are one of those people who like to do six dives per day, the RGBM might punish you with shorter and shorter no-stop times. If you tend to be more European in your style of diving with, say, only three longer and possibly deeper dives in a 24-hour period, you'll find this computer will be ideal. You cannot program in your own gradient factors or your own algorithm -- Bruce Wienke, in his infinite wisdom, has done that for you. Buy it, set it, strap it on and go diving.

### **After the Dive**

Finally, for someone who works in media, what a pleasure it was to find that the computer interface and software for the Leonardo was equally at home on either a PC or a Mac. Times are tough, and Cressi has brought this Wienke-type computer to the market at a fiercely competitive \$350 list price. I imagine we'll be seeing a lot of them at dive sites before long.

*John Bantin is the technical editor of DIVER magazine in the United Kingdom. For 20 years, he has used and reviewed virtually every piece of equipment available in the U.K. and the U.S., and makes around 300 dives per year for that purpose. He is also a professional underwater photographer.*

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## **How Divers Can Give Back: Part I**

### *and your dive trip may be tax deductible*

As Samuel Palmer wrote back in 1710 in his *Moral Essays on Proverbs*, "'Tis better to give than to receive." Obviously, we divers receive a lot of personal reward from our time underwater, and it would do each of us well to give something back. From time to time, we cite organizations you can contribute to, but here are some other ideas. For example, you can make an exceptional dive trip while, at the same time, working to preserve the underwater environment. And if you do it with a bona-fide 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization



doing legitimate research, the IRS will allow you to deduct most if not all of your expenses. Plenty of organizations offer trips. Select your preferred dive destination or the type of marine life you want to help, and there's most likely a research trip suited for you.

Say you're into turtles. You can support the Sea Turtle Restoration Project by joining one of its two turtle and shark research expeditions to Cocos Island on the *Argo*, Undersea Hunter's newest liveaboard, scheduled for April 17-27 and September 24-October 6. The costs are \$5,940 and \$7,040, respectively, and you'll help tag sea turtles and sharks with transmitters to track their migration patterns. Trip information is at [www.seaturtles.org/expeditions](http://www.seaturtles.org/expeditions)

Coming up soon is the New England Aquarium's Bahamas Collecting Expedition, from April 27 to May 6. Aboard the *Coral Reef II*, you'll collect reef fish and invertebrates while working alongside aquarium pros, increase your fish identification skills and learn about the Aquarium's conservation efforts in the Bahamas. The final day of the eight-day trip is spent packing fish in Miami for live shipment to Boston. The all-inclusive \$3,500 price includes a dive in the Boston-based aquarium's Caribbean reef exhibit. There's a second voyage in the fall. For details, go to [www.neaq.org](http://www.neaq.org) and click on "Education and Activities," or e-mail Sherrie Floyd at [sfloyd@neaq.org](mailto:sfloyd@neaq.org).

## Loving the Chambered Nautilus to Death

With all the focus on depleting numbers of sharks and other marine creatures, there's not much attention paid to the chambered nautilus, a living fossil dating back a half-billion years but now in danger of being wiped out. Peter D. Ward, a biologist from the University of Washington, did a census of the marine creature in the Philippines last summer, and told the *New York Times*, "A horrendous slaughter is going on out here."

Sales of jewelry and ornaments derived from the nautilus's pearly shell have grown, and fishermen have been killing it by the millions to satisfy worldwide demand. On eBay, small shells sell as earrings for \$20, and big ones, up to the size of plates, can be found for \$56. Catching the nautilus is a largely unregulated free-for-all in which fishermen from the South Pacific accept \$1 per shell. But the rising demand may end up eradicating an animal that grows slowly and needs 15 years or more to reach sexual maturity.

The nautilus lives in the Pacific's deep coral reefs, as much as 2,000 feet deep. But it's easy to catch them with baited traps on long lines, and some liveaboards drop traps and bring them up from below so divers can see them. Navot Bornovski, owner of the Ocean Hunter boats in Palau, says his boats do so "to show the public the different faces of underwater creatures. By showing photos of deep sea creatures like the nautilus, I hope the public will understand the importance of saving creatures at all depths."

He says local dive operators don't harm them. "They are trapped at 900 feet and brought to the surface to be viewed, photographed and documented. After the session, we take them down to 150 feet and release them. Over 18 years, we have not had one single case of a nautilus dying in the trap. They all swim back to depth. In Palau, we have established a pool of data regarding local nautilus. And because of many published photos of live nautilus, Palau tourists almost entirely avoid buying dead shells." While it's illegal to do any shelling in Palau, or sell or buy artifacts of local nautilus, the stores there still sell shells, they just import them from Southeast Asia.

Now there may be no dead Nautiluses in the cages, or no threats of the bends from being raised from the depths, but our friends from the Fiji liveaboard *Nai'a* think there are other threats. *Nai'a* co-owner Alexis Edwards got a request from scientists chartering the boat 12 years ago to trap and bring nautiluses up to the surface for viewing. "It's incredible to see them up close; they are amazingly beautiful. But then came the time to release them, and we realized that free-swimming nautilus making their way back down were a yummy target for many predators. There was nothing we could do but to release them and say a quiet prayer. We never did it again."

Ward, the biologist, took his census last summer off the Philippine island of Bohol, paid for by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. His team worked with local fishermen to set 40 traps a day, but they were catching two creatures at most, a fraction of the rate of a decade ago. He suspects that one particular kind of nautilus is already extinct, or nearly so, in the Philippines. His team plans to go to the Great Barrier Reef in December to expand the census. The hope is that data from there, the Philippines and four other Pacific sites will allow scientists to estimate the world's remaining nautilus population, and what might constitute a sustainable catch.

The Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) hosts week-long “field survey” trips that teach divers how to do fish identification and collect data for REEF staff and scientists to evaluate. This year, field surveys are being held in brand-new sites including Nevis, Dominica and Panama, and your efforts will help marine biologists measure the impact of lionfish in those places. Trips feature daily classroom seminars and a full diving schedule. REEF has a travel desk to handle trip bookings. This year’s trips start in April at Nevis’s Oualie Beach Resort for \$1,558, and the last open trip is in November aboard the British Virgin Islands’ *Cuan Law* for \$2,200. A program fee ranging from \$150 to \$300 is added to each trip to cover the cost of the group leader, seminars and field survey materials. ([www.reef.org/trips](http://www.reef.org/trips))

Earthwatch’s goal is to get more people worldwide helping out in scientific field research and education, and a major way it does that is by sponsoring expeditions for people with no special skills to become “research assistants” and work alongside scientific pros on environmental matters they care most about. Most of its oceans-focused expeditions are taking place this summer, from a 10-day trip to search for and track dolphins in the Red Sea (\$2,995) to eight days of gathering multiple types of data in Belize to see if marine reserves are actually helping protect sharks, grouper and other species (\$2,595). ([www.earthwatch.org/expedition](http://www.earthwatch.org/expedition))

### How to Qualify for a Tax Deduction

As mentioned above, the trip must be run by a nonprofit with a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status. The IRS insists that the volunteer work must have no “significant” element of personal pleasure or recreation. This means you’ll need to volunteer about eight hours a day, five days a week to qualify to deduct the airfare or other travel expenses. If you tack on a couple extra days to visit the hotspots, you won’t be able to deduct the airfare. However, you will still be able to get a tax break for the program fee, meals and supplies directly related to your time spent volunteering.

But according to Jeff Schnepfer, a tax lawyer and author of *How to Pay Zero Taxes*, the IRS isn’t completely inflexible. If you put in your eight-hour days and spend an evening souvenir shopping, you can get the tax break. “Just because you’re having fun while you’re volunteering doesn’t disqualify the deduction.” Volunteers cannot deduct the value of their services, only their actual expenses. So keep good records of your time and expenses. Volunteer organizations will provide documentation for your tax preparer, with whom you should consult beforehand.

– Vanessa Richardson

*Next month, we’ll show you inexpensive ways to donate, describe trips by foreign organizations, why liveaboards want divers with medical skills, and how one dive shop is getting villagers at popular dive destinations the essentials they really need.*

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