

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## *M/V Bilikiki, Solomon Islands*

*fishy reefs and WWII wrecks*

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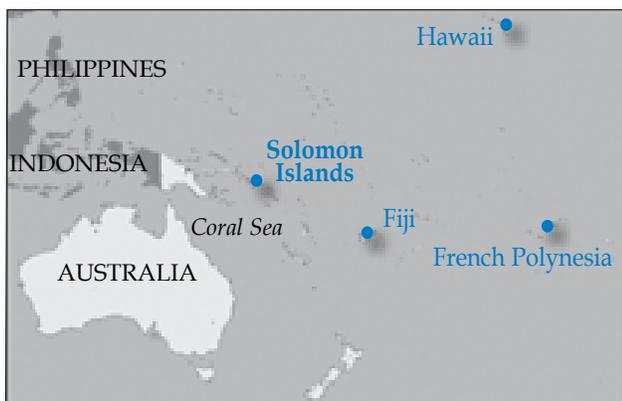
Dear Fellow Diver:

Jet lag does nothing for attitude enhancement. So when I travel from the U.S. for a full day or more, my annoyances are magnified. After the flight to Fiji, then on to Honiara, I and 10 other divers arriving on the same flight had to hang around the Honiara Hotel from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., before being transported to the Bilikiki. Assured by the pleasant office manager that he would look for us around 4 p.m. for pickup, I roamed the muggy open-air lounge and the cooler restaurant, then settled into a lounge chair in the shade overlooking the harbor. A birthday bunch of children laughed loudly and peed in the pool. Unable to nap and knowing I had to pass time for 90 minutes more in my travel malaise, I ordered lunch and read a book. At 3 p.m., I looked around and saw that my 10 companions were missing. When I asked at the desk, I was told they had left for the Bilikiki. In a slight panic after I discovered the phone numbers listed in my paperwork did not answer, I sought aid from a hotel staff member, who went to the beach and flagged down one of the Bilikiki's tinny drivers, and I was soon on board. Without an apology, cruise director Kellie graciously gave me the briefing, and I set up my tank. Cocktails on the upper deck before dinner adjusted my attitude.

Ten days later, I had nothing but good diving memories. For sheer coral beauty adorning winding canyons and reefs, Kicha, a dive site in Morova Lagoon, was a standout. A few dozen schooling barracuda and a large white-tip were in juxtaposition to pygmy seahorses, deep blue sea stars and cushion stars. You can't beat an awesome



*M/V Bilikiki*



site, so we dived this one a second time. Catching my attention were a group of squarespot anthias, males painted magenta with a blue square. An Indonesian pipehorse, or its close cousin, was swimming near a fan; I watched it gently curl its tail to attach.

The Russell Islands host great caves, caverns and swimthroughs. At Custom Cave, three of us followed divemaster Sam through a 60-foot-long tunnel that opened to a wide cave in which shimmering shafts of sun burst through. After exiting, Sam went his way, and I finned into one cave after

another with gradually smaller openings. I spotted a comet in a crevice at a cave entrance; deeper within was a paddlefin cardinalfish. A larger crevice led inside the island to a pool of water opening on land; sunlight filtered through the trees on thick vines. At Bat Cave, I swam through a wide crevice for 50 feet before surfacing to view bats inside a cave. Seventeen self-absorbed divers popped up with their shining lights, disturbing the creatures. I dove deep to avoid being kicked by fins. At Leru Cut, I swam through a narrow passage, surfacing to find hanging vines and boulders with the filtered light. Magical.

The Bilikiki (the local word for sandpiper) is a well-maintained, bug-free, older vessel that is 125 feet long and has a lot of character. She and her sister, the Spirit -- out of commission for two years due to lack of business -- are the only liveaboards in the Solomons. Converted from a Taiwanese fishing boat, the Bilikiki has been plying these waters since 1988 under the ownership of Rick and Jane Belmare, who divide their time between Australia and Canada. Much of the vessel has a bow-to-stern slope (from bed to bathroom in my stateroom), but wall-to-wall carpet inside and out controls the potential slipperiness. Ten staterooms accommodate 20 in comfortable bunk beds; my lower was a double-sized bed. Guest rooms are below decks -- with slatted wood doors and no windows, they're enough for privacy but not enough to keep out the sounds of your neighbors talking and snoring, among other actions. Master-controlled air-conditioning kept cabins at 75 degrees.

Diving must be coordinated with each island's chief and elders, as their communities own the reefs through customary law. Early on, the Belmares gave them seeds to grow food other than papaya and bananas. Today, to feed us divers, the Belmares buy fruit, vegetables and fish from them, while passengers are potential buyers for the impressive carvings. In addition, there is an undisclosed monetary exchange and mutual support. One day while steaming toward a dive site, Sam responded to a village request to help locate a sunken boat that sunk, but the crew was unsuccessful.

Undersea, Solomon's topography varies widely -- walls, valleys, bommies, caverns, caves, sandy bottoms, and plenty of colorful soft and hard corals, including a field of giant sea fans. Tropical fish and critters abound, including the more esoteric types. Visibility varied between 10 and 100-plus feet because it is a nutrient-rich environment, often with lots of "stuff" floating. Water ran about 86 degrees, similar to daytime temperatures.

Wrasse flaunted the vast quantity of species in their family: wedge-tailed; whitepatch razorfish (juvenile, deep reddish-brown); bird and sharpnose. I spotted a tiny, greenish-yellow fish erratically darting about -- a juvenile white-spotted wrasse -- then found it in the initial and terminal phases. I often saw spadefishes (batfish to some), mostly large groups of golden and longfin. Crocodile flatheads blended in well with the sand and rubble. I occasionally saw sharks and turtles, bumphead parrotfish, Napoleon wrasse and eagle rays. I found pygmy seahorses at several sites, and joined in spirited competition with other divers to find all seven of the Solomons anemonefish species.

Led by their good-natured captain, the Bilikiki crew maintained a high level of service and safety. They were friendly, respectful and professional -- never in our faces but always ready to assist. The Belmares show them respect by having the stern's upper deck set aside for crew use only. The friendly manager/dive instructor duo of Sam and Kellie were always around between dives, joined us for sunset viewing and ate meals with us.

They made diving easy, loading the gear each day on their two stable tinnies, and helping me in and out from the mother boat. When I was geared up and seated on the stern's water-level loading platform for a solo dusk or evening dive, one of them was ready to give a firm push on the back for a face-plant to avoid the tank hitting the platform. The dive deck provided ample space for suiting up. Rinse tank water was changed daily, with a chemical added to kill the plankton that die in wetsuits' minuscule nooks and crannies, and stink up the place. In the lounge space was a large table for working on cameras, while the charging station was on the upper deck. More than half of the divers had underwater cameras, a few with strobes. I was ready to punch a certain diver who banged into me underwater many times with his dual strobes. Of course, this guy had to get into just the right position, even if it meant damaging coral.

Dive sites were usually just a minute or two tinnie ride. There were no buddy-dive rules, only a suggestion to limit dives to one hour when the boat was going to move; otherwise, it was between you and your computer. Kellie or Sam checked the site before briefing, and one always dived to spot critters for those who cared to follow. At dive's end, I would hand up my weights and tank, and climb the tinnie's sturdy metal ladder. After each dive, I went to the upper sundeck and ensconced myself in the lone hammock, replaying the dive in my mind for 15 minutes. Afterwards, I visited the deck below, where popcorn, fruit or cookies were laid out.

World War II history abounds. At the Florida Islands, I floated above a nearly intact Japanese Mavis seaplane at 100 feet, and a debris field of planes, boats, bombs, bottles, a tattered Japanese flag attached to a piece of metal -- and pipefish galore. White Beach in the Russell Islands is an eyesore, with jeeps, barges, pipes, tires and other WWII leftovers that were unceremoniously pushed into the water around the island. (The Royal Australian Navy is still clearing unexploded bombs.) But its marine life at this site did

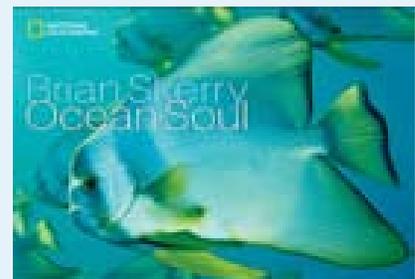
## Our Book Pick This Month: *Ocean Soul*

Brian Skerry has photographed ocean life for more than 30 years, many of them on assignment for *National Geographic*. With his new book, *Ocean Soul*, Skerry has partnered with National Geographic and Conservation International to raise awareness of the plight of the world's oceans through his photos and stories of marine life.

Skerry divides his 150 color photos into four chapters, each focusing on a different type of ocean ecosystem and the creatures found there, like Belize's black groupers in "Warm Waters" and the gentoo penguins of Antarctica in "Cold Waters." The photos, ranging from leatherback turtles in Trinidad to right whales in the New Zealand, are first-rate, as befits a *National Geographic* photographer, but they're nothing you haven't seen anywhere else. There are no photos of the things harming or

killing the ocean's soul, like the effects of shark finning or climate change; the focus is on marine life at its best. However, Skerry's personal stories about his encounters with marine life, the preparation and research done before diving in, and the explanations of how he got those world-class shots give the book its heft.

*Ocean Soul* is worth putting on your coffee table, but it's really targeting those unfamiliar with or new to scuba diving, to show them the wonders of the waters. The 13" x 11" hardbound book has 256 pages and a list price of \$50. Go to [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org) to follow our link to buy it on Amazon, and our cut of the proceeds go toward saving the marine environments Skerry features in his book.



## *M/V Bilikiki, Solomon Islands*

Diving (experienced)	★★★★★
Diving (beginner)	★★★★
Snorkelling	★★★
Accommodations	★★★★
Food	★★★★1/2
Service and Attitude	★★★★1/2
Money's Worth	★★★★★

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

not disappoint: pajama cardinalfish, eight-banded butterflyfish, needlefish, morays, barramundi and a puzzling black caengastropod snail with a fleshy shell-less appearance. When a cuttlefish laying eggs noticed me, she deposited one more, then calmly retreated five feet to watch me. Back on board, I eagerly watched the National Geographic DVD Lost Fleet of Guadalcanal.

I could choose to dive at 8 a.m., 11 a.m., 2 p.m., 5 p.m. and after dinner, around 8:30. By the time 5 p.m. rolled around, most divers chose to skip the night dive and took a drink to the upper deck to await sunset. One late afternoon, I went in for a dusk dive in calm waters, cloud cover, rain in the distance, and no current on the wall. Current around the point was strong,

and I decided not to fight it; four dives had left me hungry. With my night dive light blazing, I exited alone to a black sky, strong wind, two-foot waves and heavy rain. One tinie had been waiting along the wall, the other around the corner, and I was picked up instantly. The rain continued to pour throughout dinner, blowing under the windows' plastic drop-down coverings; those of us closest hustled inside. The vessel rocked for part of the seven-hour transit that night but it was mostly stable.

With the exception of a twenty-something couple, we were a middle-aged group of experienced divers who were never short of stories. The USA led in numbers, along with divers from Australia, Canada and South Africa. This was the fourth trip for an older couple who never lagged in showing enthusiasm. One woman only snorkeled. She arrived with luggage filled with a treasure trove of gifts for the villagers, and refilled it with village crafts. We guests intermingled in the comfortable, covered lounge area mid-decks, at dinner at the three large tables on the adjoining deck, and on the upper deck for viewing scenery. Plenty of space and a lot of conviviality.

Buffet meals were attractively displayed, with a plate of fresh tasty fruit -- banana, papaya, mango, starfruit and wonderfully sweet pineapple. Breakfast always included eggs (fried like rubber bricks), breads, pancakes or French toast (no syrup, just jams). Lunches were pizza, quiche, chicken wings or sandwiches, along with salads -- rice, sweet and flavorful tomatoes, slaw and bean. For dinners, soup, several salads and potato dishes accompanied the main course, which was good but generally bland. The roast pork for Sunday dinner was succulent. Fish in sauce was served a couple times, and crab joined the last meal. The three cooks were conscientious about providing vegetarian choices. Desserts were delicious profiteroles, flan and lime pie; ice cream was frequently available. John, the bartender, would mix a drink and pour out wine, or you could do it yourself and keep track. The cheapest bottle of wine was \$20, or \$5 by the glass; beer was \$3.50, shots of liquor were \$4. When I asked for a one-shot gin and tonic, I got two -- and was billed for it.

Between afternoon dives, we visited four villages. At three of them, beautiful and intricate wood carvings were for sale at reasonable prices. Kellie and Sam advised that negotiations should be whispered close to their ears, so fellow carvers could not hear -- and don't insult their art with a ridiculously low bid. I bought an interesting, well-carved palm nut sculpture with turtles and fish. At the fourth village, we were presented with fragrant leis. Most of the thatched houses were on stilts, with a separate kitchen used by several families.

Overall, we had two bust dives, not bad for a 10-day trip. Off the village at Peava Harbor, eight of us descended 20 minutes before dusk to await the mating ritual of the mandarinfish. We formed a loose circle around the twiggy hard coral and waited. Whenever there was movement, cameras flashed, blinding not only me but I assume the fish, too. After 40 minutes of immobility, I left without seeing the elusive mandarinfish. Still, most of us were game for manta-watching several days later. At Devil's Highway, we quietly waited for them to come sailing overhead. None came.

To get in three dives on the last day, Sam offered a 5:30 a.m. dawn dive where we were anchored, Patrick's Beach in the Florida Islands. I was ready 20 minutes early, and two boat crew members magically appeared to put my tank in the tinnie. I was shuttled to a site near shore, backrolled, and reveled in being alone in the dark waters. Sam and another early-morning diver were brought to the area halfway through my dive. Sam spent his time searching and digging out crown-of-thorns starfish. I surfaced to a brilliant sun and a sparkling rainbow. I couldn't see the tinnie in the glare, but it was upon me in 20 seconds.

Our last dive of the trip was Anuha Island. The sandy bottom with widely interspersed bommies was full of delights. As I rounded one outcropping, I came head to head with a two-foot broadclub cuttlefish. After matching the grayish tan of the rock, the cuttlefish went through an array of color changes, from yellow to bluish purple to dark brown before finally settling back into its original color. As we continued our staring match, he came closer and reached out a tentacle toward my mask. After diving 75 minutes, it was time to end my wanderings undersea at the Solomon Islands. I spotted Kellie alone and hovering. I slowly approached and was treated to the view of two robust ghost pipefish, a reddish-brown variation, side by side and floating nose downward. What a final image of this great dive trip.

-- J.D.



**Divers Compass:** My 10-day trip cost me \$3,880 . . . Airfare on Air Pacific from LAX to Fiji was \$1,200; from Fiji to Honiara via Fly Solomons was \$875 . . . I used Poseidon Dive Adventures to set up the trip, and got burned on the inner-island flight leg; I should have let Bilikiki set it up, as its reservations staff knows the ins and outs of pricing in that area . . . I dived nitrox, as did most of the divers, which cost \$200 for the 10-day trip, or \$10 per tank. Website: [www.bilikiki.com](http://www.bilikiki.com)

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## British Virgin Islands, Utila, Raja Ampat

*serious inflator problems, credit card ripoffs*

**Utila Aggressor.** It's a much improved craft, we are told, and Elizabeth Idell (Montgomery, AL), who was onboard in January, found it comfortable, with a good crew and fine food. Her only complaint was that "I couldn't see anything but the top of my hair in the mirror, but then I'm short." Having made a lot of Caribbean dives, she said the diving was good. "A good shark dive, several turtles, and friendly groupers. None of these dives was difficult or technical; two young divers had no problem . . . The reef was relatively healthy, despite diminished young fish (maybe the lionfish issue). The Honduran government has issued Hawaiian slings to each boat. The divemasters prep the fish to feed to groupers and sharks. They tried to feed them to eels, with no success, although lobsters loved them. This might be a goo idea if it teaches the native grouper and shark to hunt lionfish -- only time will tell. Some groupers were insistent on being fed. One bit me even though I was not feeding, nor had I handled the lionfish. It wasn't a bad bite, though it didn't bleed enough to attract anything interesting." ([www.aggressor.com](http://www.aggressor.com))

## Integrated Weights Vest: Helpful or “a Piece of Junk”?

Dear Ben,

Regarding the story in your April issue, about the death of the police officer whose power inflator failed, when all one needs to get to the surface is to swim up to it, then the macho sounding “power inflator” isn’t required.

When divers are not properly ballasted (like they’re all wearing 40-plus pounds of lead), they are a menace to themselves and anyone in the water with them. If someone needs air admitted to a vest in order to get to the surface, then he or she is overweighted, and that’s wrong.

Nearly every diver’s inability to dump his or her lead from integrated weights vest is a classic problem. I’m the captain of the Cape Ann charter boat Easy Diver. My crew regularly wrestles the lead out of the dangerous devices known as “integrated weights vests.” To be absolutely sure that such a piece of diving junk would “work” on every dive, one would need it to be “serviced” before every dive, and still one couldn’t be sure.

We need to stop blaming the victims. The latest buzzwords to percolate through this activity include “maintenance” and “service.” No one needs to service the quick-release buckle on the “standard” weight belt.

-- Fred Calhoun, Gloucester, MA

**Utopia Dive Village, Utila.** There are a few dive resorts on this Honduran island, but Eric Weiss (Alexandria, VA), who visited in January, said this one is a great all-inclusive operation, with good food, a nice open-air bar, large air-conditioned rooms, pleasant grounds and a safe dive operation. Years back, I found Utila diving ho-hum, but Weiss, who has been around the block, says, “The reefs were healthy, with lots of little stuff, and I saw whale sharks, mackerel, turtles, eagle rays and two octopuses on a house reef night dive.” After deplaning, the resort boats you to its dock. ([www.utopiadivevillage.com](http://www.utopiadivevillage.com))

*A warning about the airport at San Pedro Sula.* “One diver did not realize that the Delta agent failed to return his credit card, which he used to pay for an overweight bag,” says Weiss. “The agent tracked him down 30 minutes later, but it turned out that \$1,000 had been charged within minutes at several Wawa stores in Delaware.” That’s not an uncommon swindle for an unwary traveler. Years ago, I bought sandals in Bonaire and left with my card, but when I returned home, I found that \$1,400 had been charged in Texas stores. Of course, MasterCard negated the charges, but it’s not fun to be part of someone’s fraud game.

Weiss also offers a diving caution: “On my first dive, my mask kept flooding, so Anke, my guide, insisted I trade with her. I haven’t taken off my mask underwater in a hundred dives. Then my BC started power inflating. Back on the boat, Anke suggested removing the inflator hose and adding air orally. I took off my in-line horn and it never happened again.” Gear maintenance issues? Read on.

**TLC from Golden Rock Dive Center, St. Eustatius.** Charlene Carlock (Beavercreek, OH) dived there in February, and reports, “My buddy had a problem with her BC on a prior dive trip, injuring her ears in an uncontrolled ascent, and was insecure about diving again, but the staff took special care with her. In another instance, Glenn, one of the owners, noticed me struggling with my BC, which was re-inflating on its own, and he disconnected my hose. That was a big wake-up call for me, to get my BC serviced regularly.” Yes indeed. By the way, St. Eustatius is one of my favorite Caribbean getaways. Glen and his wife, Michelle, run a good operation at Dive Statia, and diving is easy and quite nice in a healthy marine park. ([www.goldenrockdive.com](http://www.goldenrockdive.com))

**Grand Komodo Tours, Raja Ampat.** This Indonesian dive spot is the hot place these days, if you have plenty of time and money. Grand Komodo Tours gets raves from our readers, including Dan Purnell (Vancouver, WA), who was aboard the *M/V Putri Papua* for a Triton Bay trip in February. “Much of the journey to Triton Bay was over open waters, and the seas were stormy and rough. This was the first Grand Komodo boat to enter Triton Bay after nearly a year, when resistance from local villagers did not allow dive boats into the area. Our trip was kind of a trial run to see whether the conditions had changed. Along the way, Misool diving was amazing: black- and white-tip sharks, wobbegongs, hawksbill turtles, pygmy

seahorses, schools of sweet lips, bumphead parrots, groupers of all sizes, unicorns, Napoleon wrasses, batfish and so many others. At some sites, my vision was impaired by clouds of anthias or surgeons and fusiliers. The Pisang Islands had amazing sites, featuring bommies draped with soft corals and sea fans. Clouds of glassfish hung over the corals. We finally entered Triton Bay, with tens of thousands of fruit bats flying overhead and exotic birds gracing the skies. Tropical rain forests, islands and sheer cliffs outline the bay. The waters run with current and ripple with fish. And then you begin to explore the coral reefs. I think this is where Mother Nature threw away the design plans and just went wild. Walls of soft corals provide a feast for the eyes. Forests of black coral provide refuge for groupers, hundreds of them, perhaps thousands. The diversity of coral and fish is off the charts -- big fish, little fish, macro and micro critters. Just outside the bay are a couple of pristine hard coral reefs that stretch as far as you can see. At times, they are completely obscured by thousands of fish, hunting the swarms of baitfish smothering the reefs. At times, there would be 25 big groupers resting on their pectoral fins, staring at me. We only got to dive a day and a half in the Iris Strait, the explored part of Triton Bay, before the locals demanded that we leave. Although the Indonesian government has made progress with the villagers, Triton Bay is not completely 'open' for tourism; it will take some time. We were able to do some exploratory diving on the other, 'less explored,' side of Triton Bay, discovering two new amazing reef complexes, teeming with life and color. The explosion of life in these nutrient-rich waters more than compensates for the typical visibility of 40 feet. This was my seventh trip with Grand Komodo Tours. As always, the crew was helpful, friendly, enthusiastic and eager to please. The dive boat is relatively basic, clean and very nice. The food was delicious. Triton Bay is one of the most inconvenient places to visit on this planet, but despite all the bumps along the way, it is probably the best time to visit. Triton Bay will never be the same when the world really discovers it." ([www.komodoalordive.com](http://www.komodoalordive.com))

*"Three of the 16 divers disregarded any admonitions to stop touching (and in the case of the pre-teen diver, hitting and harassing) coral and animals, and they were allowed to keep diving."*

**Misool Eco Resort, Raja Ampat.** There's land-based diving from this resort, which Hollie Lindauer (Portland, OR) visited in March. "Flights from Bali are routed through Makassar to Sorong, with an overnight required on the outbound. The outboard boats take about 4.5 hours between Sorong and Misool. The resort is gorgeous, entirely constructed of reclaimed wood and incorporating many ecological features -- desalinating water, septic gardens, water-saving devices and sustainable food sources only. The rooms are comfortable and elegant, with spacious decks and steps into the lagoon. The lagoon has beautiful clear water, and octopuses, morays, spotted stingrays, needlefish and baby sharks are often visible from the boardwalks. It's a great snorkel and swimming area, and part of the house reef. All the rooms' bathrooms and public spaces are open air, which is problematic due to mosquitoes. Food is plentiful. The dive guides consisted of four locals and one Brit. Four to five dives daily. Given the unusual, varied species and mild currents, it's ideal for photographers. They did have difficulty restraining photographers who had full lights on night critters and sharks, and who sat on corals while photographing. The soft corals are stunning, with huge sea fans and whips protruding from wall faces, which makes them difficult to protect from some divers. One manta and one leopard shark were sighted. I would often see one or two large black- and white-tips per dive, a turtle, small schools of bream, jacks, mackerel, bumpheads, batfish and snapper. Larger schools of fusiliers, glassfish, angels, snappers, damsels, trigger, dart, clown and anemones. Unique nudibranchs, huge flat worms, mantis shrimp, pygmy seahorses, squat lobsters, scorpion and leaf fish, epaulette and wobbegong sharks. Sadly, there is plastic trash from the shipping lanes floating in the water and on the beaches. Diving is very similar to Wakatobi." ([www.misoolcoresort.com](http://www.misoolcoresort.com))

**Thoughtless Photographers.** What's with the photographers who trash the corals for their pictures? Lisa Evans (Fort Collins, CO), aboard the *MSY Seahorse* in December, writes, "We were all required to sign

a paper saying that if we touched the reef, we got one warning and then would be asked not to dive. Everyone understands accidental touching, or photographers balancing themselves with sticks or a finger on dead coral. But three of the 16 photographers had no ethics, and disregarded any admonitions to stop touching (and in the case of the pre-teen diver, hitting and harassing) coral and animals, and they were allowed to continue diving. It made the rest of us sick at heart -- and angry -- to see them in the water, dive after dive, fins hitting coral, the kid whacking at things with his stick." Regardless, she thought highly of the crew, and said the meals were good, occasionally great, and cabins were comfortable. "But twice we had fumes in our cabin, I think from the nitrox compressor. The AC didn't filter, so things stayed pretty damp in all cabins, which doesn't do much for fresh-smelling living quarters. No water pressure in the shower. We generally traveled to new dive sites in the morning instead of at night, which meant that the engine woke us up about 5 a.m. Several times, we arrived to find boats already there, and had to schedule our dives around their schedules. The diving was incredible. Huge diversity of species. I saw five mantas at one time, occasional sharks (lots of wobbegongs in certain places), nudibrachs galore, huge schools of jacks, trevallies and fusiliers. Large schools of bait fish. Lots of octopuses. Healthy coral and sea life, although some broken coral -- more careless divers, I think."

*Caribbean Dream, B.V.I.* One of my best dive trips resulted when two friends and I chartered a skippered sailboat and dived throughout the Caribbean where dive boats never traveled. Scott Hueston (Peterborough, ON) did the same aboard the *S/V Caribbean Dream* in February, and says, "It's a 47-foot catamaran based in the British Virgin Islands. The crew consists of Glenn, the captain and Angela, the chef. Both are divemasters, and they chose dive sites based on good snorkeling and quiet anchorages. After breakfast, we would either snorkel or dive, pull up anchor and sail to the next destination. After lunch, we would be diving or hiking and exploring the islands. Hors d'oeuvres were served at 5 p.m. with the day's special cocktail. Dinner is served at 7 p.m. with wine. Steamed mahi-mahi with green rice, rack of lamb on truffle mash, chipotle duck breast with sweet potato and plantain mash, New York strip with pepper stir fry. Desserts were spectacular -- lavender-infused ice cream, banana upside-down cake with walnut caramel, creme brulee, baked hot chocolate with Bailey's whipped cream. The diving in the BVIs is pleasant; nothing too deep, lots of coral and small stuff. Turtles, eagle rays and the odd shark. Our dives maxed out at 50 feet. There are several dive shops on the various islands where Glenn would get air fills once we had gone through the tanks on board. The week can be customized to whatever you want. More diving, less diving, wrecks, reefs, you decide. The boat has air conditioning, sleeps six guests in the three queen staterooms, each with a private head and shower. The locations were beautiful, the sailing is relaxing, the food exceeded all expectations, the diving and snorkeling were wonderful." With six guests, the price is roughly \$5,000 a couple, and a gratuity of 15 to 20 percent is suggested. (<http://caribbeandreambvi.com>)

-- Ben Davison

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## Do You Need a Dive Watch?

*or is it just expensive arm candy for divers?*

Look at any scuba dive magazine, and you'll see plenty of full-page, full-color advertisements for dive watches, touting their multiple benefits and professional endorsements.

Take the Oris ProDiver Chronograph, with automatic mechanical movement and helium valve, and water-resistant to 3,300 feet. The Luminox Deep Dive Automatic is Swiss made and touted as the most dependable watch used by the Coast Guard, Air Force and Navy SEALs. Ball's Engineer Master II Diver Worldtime is endorsed by freediving champion Guillaume Nery, who uses it while diving under the icy surface of Lake Long in the French Alps, and it has "self-powered micro gas lights that glow 100 times

brighter than luminous paint for up to 25 years.” The ad we saw for the Citizen Eco-Drive lists 13 features, including light-powered technology, a screw-back case and screw-down crown, and an ISO certification, if you care about that sort of thing. Then there is the Rolex Submariner, introduced in 1953 as the first watch to be water resistant up to 300 feet, and now its “triple-seal triplock winding crown” make it resistant to down to 1,000 feet.

All those sound good for anyone wanting to follow in James Cameron and Richard Branson’s submarine-exploring footsteps. But boy, are they expensive. Looking at online retail prices for these watches, the Oris ProDiver averages around \$3,500, the Ball watch prices range between \$2,000 and \$3,000, and the Luminox averages \$1,500. The Rolex Submariner is much higher, with an average retail price starting at around \$7,500 and easily going into five digits. We saw an 18-karat gold Submariner going online for \$21,000 -- and that was for a pre-owned one, not brand new. Compared to all those, the Citizen Eco-Drive is a mere bargain, averaging \$400.

But why do you need a dive watch, especially when dive computers are so prevalent now? There must be a market for them, as manufacturers run full-page ads in dive magazines regularly. But priced in the thousands of dollars, these watches seem more like flashy jewelry than essential dive gear, especially for those use two dive computers. Can they still serve a purpose? Or are you just a total sucker for buying one?

John Bantin, who regularly writes dive equipment reviews for our pages, says yes to the last question. “A dive watch says something about a man just as diamonds do a woman. I own a Rolex, but it’s safe at home in the bedside drawer while I am in the Maldives diving. People buy expensive dive watches for the same reason they buy expensive cars -- because they want them.”

## Should You Splurge on an VO2 Max Test?

Gretchen Ashton, owner of ScubaFit (which recently got PADI to create a training course for dive and fitness instructors to teach fitness to divers) recently wrote an article titled “Scuba Fitness: Oxygen Utilization Testing for Scuba Divers.” ([www.examiner.com/topic/advanced-scuba-diving/articles](http://www.examiner.com/topic/advanced-scuba-diving/articles)). She writes that by knowing your oxygen utilization (VO2), a measure of cardiovascular and metabolic efficiency, you might improve your aerobic capacity, and presumably also improve your gas consumption both on the surface and underwater.

VO2 max is the maximum amount of oxygen one can utilize during intense exercise, and is expressed in milliliters of oxygen used in one minute per kilogram of body weight. The individual mounts a treadmill or bicycle, is fitted with an alien-looking head rig of tubing that allows for measurement of the volume and gas concentrations of inhaled and expired air, and then workload is gradually increased. By the end of the exercise, the person will be giving his all, and I mean all.

To suggest that a routine recreational diver expose himself to this rigor strikes me as somewhat excessive. VO2 max typically is of interest only to serious endur-

ance athletes, and recreational diving under usual conditions would be considered only a moderately intense activity at best. Moreover, one does not find a human-performance testing facility on every street corner. And if you do find one, you can expect to pay around \$175 or more to get your VO2 max measured.

Also, while such direct testing certainly is the most accurate measure of VO2 max, it also can be reasonably estimated by exercise stress testing such as the Bruce protocol. For the average diver, it might be easier to obtain it this way, especially if you’re over age 45 and getting a periodic routine stress test as part of your wellness physical (which you should be). Even simple heart rate can provide a rough estimate of O2 transport and predict aerobic fitness.

I contacted Ashton to verify the VO2 values indicated, and the claim that such assessment might benefit the typical diver. Her response was as follows, “I’m very busy with other projects, and not planning on writing more about this topic at this time. I am also concerned about how you plan to represent me since we have no history of collaborating on articles.”

Well then, unless you’re in training to be a “marathon” diver, don’t waste your money.

-- Doc Vikingo

Mark Derrick, owner of Dive Gear Express in Pompano Beach, FL, doesn't even sell dive watches. "In fact, I hesitate to even call those things 'dive watches'. They have nothing much to do with diving, they are really just submersible wristwatches. As such, they're just jewelry, and experienced divers don't wear jewelry when diving. The wrists are valuable real estate, which means we need them for a dive computer, a backup, a compass and, if rebreather diving, a handset as well."

One person in the pro-watch corner is Colin Miller, a former Navy diver and currently a dive medical officer and moderator of the dive watch forum at **Watchuseek.com** (which gets a high volume of traffic). He says the number of divers he knows who eschew dive watches is equal to those who do wear them, and he is one of the latter. "For diving, it's essential as a backup timer, both as a bottom timer and to time dive excursions and safety stops. I use a dive computer, and I have a backup computer in my BC pocket and a watch on my wrist to time my safety stops. While a watch, a snorkel and a knife are viewed as optional gear for recreational divers, military divers are trained to dive with them. They're support equipment, and I don't like to leave things to chance. You don't want to abort a mission if your battery died or your computer malfunctioned. So a watch is essential equipment as an old-school, low-tech backup."

But Miller agrees that pricey dive watches aren't any better than inexpensive ones. "The reason for expensive dive watches is the reason for expensive cars. You can't get to work any faster in a Mercedes than in a smart car. I own more Citizens than any other type of dive watch. Citizens and Seikos are great watches, and they run from \$150 to \$300."

Note that there is a difference between a "dive watch" and a "bottom timer." Derrick says he sells bottom timers because they continue to have a place in technical diving. "A bottom timer that automatically begins counting runtime upon immersion and also keeps track of depth is not the same as a submersible wristwatch. Modern digital bottom timers include a logging function, ascent rate monitor, maximum depth indicator, and some include a digital compass. Particularly notable is that bottom timers are designed to be easy to read, with large and often backlit displays. No diver wants to be on a dive at an equivalent narcotic depth of 150 feet and trying to interpret what Mickey's hands mean. "

Whether you follow Miller's lead with a dive watch or Derrick's suggestion of a bottom timer, you need to use either properly in case your dive computer goes on the blink -- and you'll need to remember how to read dive tables. Miller recommends combining a dive watch or bottom timer with a depth gauge, a traditional pressure gauge (or a combination depth/pressure gauge) and submersible dive tables so that you can

## Where's That Sound Coming From?

Long ago, researchers concluded that a diver could pinpoint the source of a sound underwater within 10 degrees, which should make locating the sound source easy. However, any diver who has had to locate a sound source knows it's tough.

If your buddy hits his knife against his tank when you're on the surface, you can turn to him because you can sense exactly where the sound comes from. Not so underwater, where you might sense that it's coming from behind you, but you have to look around for a visual clue to locate it. Indeed, sound localization underwater is difficult, and 10 degrees seems far too narrow.

So researchers at the Naval Submarine Medical Research Lab in Groton, CT, set out to see just how accurate 10 degrees was. They arranged sound projectors on a steel circle three meters in radius, with subjects sitting in the center, and found that at best, divers were able to pinpoint sounds at approximately 20 to 30 degrees, between 500 and 4000 hertz, significantly poorer than previous findings. (The human hearing range is between 12 and 20,000 Hz.)

How can you use that research? Well, for example, if you hear a boat engine but can't see the boat, face toward where you think the sound emanates, and the boat should be somewhere within a 30-degree arc ahead of you. Keep in mind, if you swim to where you think the sound comes from, you can still miss the boat.

-- Ben Davison

continue a dive and finish it safely. The important thing is that you keep track of your decompression status or dive profiles so you can switch comfortably from computer to tables.

Keeping track of your ascent rate is critical if your computer malfunctions. A 30-foot-per-minute ascent rate means rising one foot every two seconds. By keeping a hand on the anchor line and your eyes on your backup watch and depth gauge, you can manually track your ascent rate. But you can still count “a thousand one, a thousand two,” and accomplish the same thing.

For some divers, it’s the history of the dive watch that appeals. “Remember that Rolex and Omega have a long history in professional and sport diving,” says Miller. “So there’s the cachet that goes with those names, which essentially created the dive watch as we know it today.” Note that Rolex was the company that got its watch taken down to the bottom of the Mariana Trench, attached to James Cameron’s wrist.

And if you have an old dive watch lying around that you no longer use it, consider selling it. You may be surprised by how much you could get for it. Back in the late 50s, a U.S. Navy doctor known to us only as “Bob” bought a Rolex from the Navy Exchange on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. He only needed a dive watch to time his air reserves so he reluctantly spent \$70 on the Rolex, as that was the only watch in stock. His wife was not happy. However, Bob wore the watch every day for 35 years before finally putting it in a drawer, where it sat for another decade. Then last fall, he put the watch and some other items for auction on eBay to get some extra cash for Christmas gifts. He started the bidding on his banged-up timepiece at \$9.95, but the bidding quickly went over the \$30,000 mark.

Befuddled, Bob and his son did some research and discovered that his watch was a Rolex Submariner, Ref 5510, the same model worn by Sean Connery in the James Bond classics *Dr. No*, *Goldfinger* and *Thunderball*, and considered the rarest and most sought-after version of the watch. In his eBay auction listing, Bob wrote that he didn’t have any of the original papers, but that he hoped to get \$50 or \$100 for the thing. The final selling price when the auction closed on December 4: \$66,100. Bob’s wife was probably pretty happy then.

- - Vanessa Richardson

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## More Marine Species on the Brink

### *these are next on the endangered list*

*We’ve written often about sharks and the threat posed to them due to the voracious demand of shark-fin soup in upwardly-mobile Asian countries. But sharks aren’t the only ones under the gun. Mantas, mobulas, whale sharks, even sting rays are under siege. Following are three articles that show the rise in demand -- and decline in numbers -- of species you always thought would be admired more for their beauty than for their meat, fins, so-called medicinal qualities, and even their use as billboards.*

#### **Who Would Have Thought Gill Rakers Are in Demand?**

A few years ago, something surprising began turning up in Asia’s fish markets: the gill rakers of manta and mobula rays. Shawn Heinrichs and Paul Hilton, photographers who have been monitoring the international soaring trade in shark fins, decided to find out what was going on. The appearance of those creatures in the markets “came as a real shock to us,” Mr. Heinrichs said by phone from Indonesia. “They don’t even taste good, so what was the reason?”

In January, the conservation organizations Shark Savers ([www.sharksavers.org](http://www.sharksavers.org)) and WildAid ([www.wildaid.org](http://www.wildaid.org)) released a comprehensive global study showing that these species have been driven to the brink of extinction within a chillingly short space of time. The main reason is demand from China, where their gill rakers (filaments that filter the animals’ food from the water) are marketed as a supposed cure for a variety of ailments. The southern Chinese city of Guangzhou is the hub of the trade in the dried parts, which retail for as much as \$225 a pound. The gills are boiled along with other fish products in a soup that

is promoted as a cure for anything from chickenpox to cancer. "I call it endangered species soup," said Mr. Heinrichs, who led the research.

The researchers note that the gills had not previously been prescribed in traditional Chinese medicine, and many of its practitioners conceded in interviews for the study that gill rakers were not effective in treating illness and that many alternatives were available. The rising popularity of the ingredient seems to be the result of traders' efforts to create a market, the report's authors concluded.

The growth in demand has been devastating for populations of both rays -- even more so because these creatures reproduce very slowly. A female manta may produce between 10 and 16 pups during her lifetime, far fewer than great white sharks, for example, which can produce that many in a single litter. And while great whites are protected under international conventions, manta and mobula rays are not, largely because the fishing pressures described in the new report are little understood by conservationists and the public.

"The economics and the moral imperative are clear," Peter Knights, executive director of WildAid, said in a statement. "We need an immediate moratorium on gill raker trade, and measures for complete protection to some populations and to reduce fishing pressure for others."

A silver lining is that these creatures are also viewed as generators of millions of dollars in tourism revenue because divers and snorkelers travel from far and wide to observe them. For the time being, however, this is not helping to curb the trade. In addition, because of the extreme vulnerability of the manta and mobula rays, the race to save them is "an entire factor worse" than the race to save sharks, Mr. Heinrichs said. With manta and mobula rays, "we simply don't have the time to go through years of raising public awareness before action is taken. The race to preserve these species is almost over before it even started."

-- Bettina Wassner, the New York Times' "Green" blog

### Turned into Tuna Bait and Billboards

The world's largest shark eats only plankton, and couldn't bite a human if it wanted to. Globally, scuba divers pay an estimated \$50 million each year for the chance to swim with the incredible fish known as whale sharks. Their long migrations through international waters makes international cooperation necessary to protect them, which is particularly important because the 30 years it can take for these animals to reach reproductive maturity means that populations will take a long time to recover if they are overexploited. They're listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources as "vulnerable" globally. Between their charismatic nature, their inability to harm humans, and their value to ecotourism, it should be easy to convince governments to protect whale sharks, making two recent reports all the more shocking.

*It's estimated that more than 1,000 whale sharks are landed annually. Some of their huge fins are placed in windows of shark fin stores as billboards.*

At the recent Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) meeting, Australia introduced a proposal to ban intentionally setting tuna nets around whale sharks. You read that correctly: It is currently legally permissible (and not uncommon) for fishing vessels to intentionally deploy tuna purse seine nets around whale sharks. Schools of tuna

will often aggregate around anything, including buoys, logs or 50-foot-long sharks that are extremely valuable for ecotourism and extremely vulnerable to overexploitation. Being caught in a tuna net and dragged onto the deck of a fishing vessel is often lethal, and an estimated 75 whale sharks have died since 2009. Unfortunately, Australia's common-sense proposal was stalled by the Japanese delegation, and was not enacted this year. It will be discussed again when the WCPFC meets again in December.

Although whale sharks are protected from harvest in many countries, new research shows that whale shark fishing is on the rise in China. Between 1980 and 2003, only 17 whale shark landings

were officially recorded in China. Since 2003, there have been 167 recorded landings, but interviews with shark-processing plant employees indicate that over 1,000 whale sharks are landed annually. While there is a limited market for whale shark meat, it is the fins that are the biggest draw. Whale shark fins, not surprisingly, are enormous, and therefore fetch the highest price at market. Some of the huge whale shark fins are used to make shark fin soup, while others are placed in the windows of shark fin stores to serve as billboards.

Logs and buoys will attract tuna just as effectively as whale sharks, and a sign will advertise the presence of a shark fin store just as effectively as a whale shark fin. Our current inability to protect these charismatic, harmless and vulnerable sharks from being killed as tuna bait and billboards is one of many reminders that nothing about marine conservation is easy.

-- David Shiffman, the "Southern Fried Science" blog

### **These Popular Cayman Residents are Disappearing**

Recently, I assisted team members of the Guy Harvey Research Institute (GHRI) conducting the first census on the stingray population at the Sandbar [near Rum Point Channel in Grand Cayman] since July 2008.

## **189 Failures Lead to Recall of 17,000 Miflex Hoses**

Last November, we wrote an article questioning the safety of Miflex's double-braided, polyester high-pressure hoses that claimed to be more flexible, durable and stronger than other high-pressure hoses even though they weighed less. When you get multiple complaints from divers about the hoses breaking, both at the crimps and in the middle, and at least one dive shop stating publicly that it won't carry them because of all the field reports about leaking issues, you have to wonder what the company is doing to address the problem. We contacted XS Scuba, Miflex's U.S. distributor, for a reply to that story, but Mark Gibello in its sales and marketing department didn't get back to us with one.

Now comes a notice last month from XS Scuba that it is recalling 17,000 Miflex hoses due to a drowning hazard. "The diving hose can rupture, reducing the available air supply to the diver," says the press release issued by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. It also stated that while there has been no report of injuries, XS Scuba received reports of 189 hose failures. That's an astronomical number. And why wait so long to do a recall, when these 189 hose failures were starting to be reported as far back as last summer?

We asked Gibello again for a reply. He wrote us, "You can get all of the details regarding the recall on our website." So based on XS Scuba's website, the recalled hoses were sold between May 2009 and the present, and consumers should immediately stop using them and call XS Scuba at (888) 249-5404 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Pacific to receive instructions for obtaining a free replacement hose. Gibello did tell us that recalled hoses are being replaced with a new factory-authorized hose, but offered no more specifics.

Miflex, located in Villasanta, Italy, sent out a press release in April that the recall is voluntary by XS Scuba, and limited only to the U.S. and Canada, claiming that we North Americans apparently don't know how to use them properly. Miflex states, "This action is due to specific requirements in the U.S. and Canada. We have experienced a very low number of failures that occurred when the hose was roughly handled or subjected to excessive bending. No manufacturing nor material defects were found, and possibly the reasons of the ruptures were the ones above mentioned. Miflex has on its website instructions about proper use of the hose, and we suggest to all our customers to strictly follow its guidelines.

"As we have, and continue to receive, extremely positive feedback from many customers, we confirm that we will continue producing and selling the high-pressure hoses in their current configuration with hose protectors. They are EN250certified, and are fit for use in scuba diving. They will no longer be available in the US and Canada following a specific request from our distributor, who will market a new version called Carbon HD, with a bigger diameter and higher burst pressure. The new heavy-duty HP hose will be available in the next few weeks. It has been designed for divers that want maximum resistance from a hose, although this will reduce the flexibility."

So, you American and Canadian Miflex hose users, it's your fault. Presumably, the Europeans and Aussies are all gentle souls when it comes to handling their gear. But we don't buy it.

For two years starting in 2002, the GHRI, assisted by the Department of Environment, did a comprehensive population analysis of the rays, the first ever conducted on rays in a marine wildlife interactive program. Basic information such as width, weight, sex, DNA samples, migrations and diurnal behavior were collected. PIT tags, similar to microchips used in pets, were placed in each ray to allow identification of individuals, and therefore tracking of their growth, over a long period. Over successive counts, tag retention was found to be 100 percent. All rays over a certain size had tags; only new young recruits to the sandbar did not have tags.

A sample of 100 rays was taken every month for six months in each year to determine population composition, growth and pregnancy rates. It was likely that every ray visiting the sandbar during that time was sampled and tagged. Site fidelity was strong, with only one animal visiting the nearby Stingray City from Sandbar and then returning. These animals are long-lived, slow-growing relatives of sharks, so it was expected that many rays would visit the sandbar for 20 years or more.

Canadian researcher Christine Semeniuk did more work on stingrays in 2005, mostly to investigate their well-being using blood analysis. The next census was done by GHRI in July 2008. On July 1, the first day of the census, we sampled 51 rays. The next day, it was 40. On the last day, only eight, as most rays had already been caught measured and put back in the water.

In the last year, I have noticed, as have several tour operators, a decline in the number of rays experienced at Sandbar. In January 2012, the same team working with the same methods as before caught and measured 61 animals. That sounds like there are plenty of rays to go around, but that is a 38 percent reduction in Sandbar's stingray population compared to 2008. Forty-three rays were recaptured, and 18 new recruits were tagged. Of particular note, only 43 of the 99 animals counted and tagged in the 2008 census were sampled in 2012.

What has happened to the stingrays? And what are we doing about it? Each stingray is clearly worth in the order of \$100,000 per year to the Cayman economy. Over a ray's long lifetime, it is worth several million dollars to the Cayman economy. So how is it that the rays enjoy protection only in the wildlife interaction zone areas? Why are these extremely important animals not totally protected from harvest all around the Cayman Islands?

Our data suggests that the rays have not migrated to other sites, as site fidelity is very strong. We saw no evidence of shark attacks, and all animals appeared healthy -- so fishing mortality remains the main suspect for the sudden decline. The Marine Conservation Law needs to be changed to protect stingrays throughout the Cayman Islands.

-- Guy Harvey, Caymanian Compass

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## Taking Kids on Your Next Dive Trip

### *where to take them, how to keep them entertained*

Whether they're your young children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews, you can make your next dive trip a family adventure. The excitement of an exotic trip overseas will fill children with countless amounts of energy. But because those under age 15 aren't old enough to do standard dives, you'll have to plan for this trip differently than you would for yourself and other "old timers." I have a few suggestions for you.

**Include them in your trip research.** Let them look at maps and learn about the destinations you're considering, allow their opinions in the decision-making process. Give them input into daily planning, shopping and choosing activities.

**Prepare them for dives.** Is attaining diver certification on the trip a goal for your child? Many kids are comfortable in freshwater but don't have enough experience or comfort level in saltwater. Some skills you can work on with them prior to the trip are swimming, floating, snorkeling and most importantly, learning to take the mask off underwater while breathing through the snorkel. Take time to find a dive resort that specializes in training kids. Interview with the same diligent approach you would have for any other family activity. Kids learn better with other kids as part of a group; they encourage each other and develop a team spirit.

**Pick the right program.** You found the right resort, now pick the right dive training program. I'm a PADI instructor, so that was the choice for me when training my kids. Many children ages 5-7 start with the SASY program, then move into Seal Team at ages 8 and 9. Then kids are well on their way and confident enough at ages 10-14 to join the Junior Openwater program. If your child is ages 10-14 and hasn't done any of the warm-up courses, I recommend the Discover Scuba experience prior to formal enrollment. Or

## Kid-Friendly Dive Resorts

A roundup of suggestions for the best dive lodgings to take kids -- whether they're diving or not -- from Kids Sea Camp's Margo Payton (<http://familydivers.com>) and the family-focused dive travel agency Rascals in Paradise ([www.rascalsinparadise.com](http://www.rascalsinparadise.com)).

**Aggressor Fleet family weeks.** They're happening in July aboard the *Belize Aggressor*, *Cayman Aggressor* and *Turks & Caicos Aggressor*. Dive programs are for those age 10 and older, but kids of any age get to participate in fish and coral ID, small boat handling and fishing, poetry and photography contests, and a scavenger hunt. Kids ages 5-10 get a 25 percent discount. ([www.aggressor.com/itineraries\\_family.php](http://www.aggressor.com/itineraries_family.php))

**Anthony's Key Resort, Roatan.** The grown-ups can go off their own all week and leave kids ages 5-14 at Dolphin Scuba Camp, taking place from Memorial Day weekend through August. They'll learn about and interact with bottlenose dolphins, take snorkeling trips, get exposed to diving and take field trips around the island. Age-appropriate PADI dive programs are offered year round. ([www.anthonyskey.com](http://www.anthonyskey.com))

**Buddy Dive Bonaire and Buddy Dive Galapagos.** The Bonaire resort offers one-, two and three-bedroom condos on the water, and a full food and beverage plan. Multiple programs for kids ages 5 and up are at the Buddy Dive Academy. Buddy Dive Galapagos has two Family Week programs in July; this is the only time kids are allowed to dive in the Galapagos with Buddy Dive's new luxury liveaboard, *Wolf Buddy*. ([www.buddydive.com](http://www.buddydive.com))

**Castaway Island Resort, Fiji.** The Kids Club lets tiny tots from age 3 and up build sandcastles, learn Fijian dance and take nature walks. Teens have their own programs for snorkeling, canoe races and volleyball. Each bungalow sleeps four, though one family-size bungalow sleeps 10. ([www.castawayfiji.com](http://www.castawayfiji.com))

**Cobalt Cove and Divetech, Grand Cayman.** Besides hosting a Kids Sea Camp in July, Divetech offers water programs year-round for kids ages 5 and up, and Cobalt Coast offers babysitting ([www.divetech.com/Kids.htm](http://www.divetech.com/Kids.htm)).

**Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Island Resort, Fiji.** Located on Vanua Levu, it has a full-time marine biologist for helping guests experience underwater life. The kids' Bula Club has its own pools, clubhouse and mealtimes. Its daily activities highlight marine life and Fijian culture, while the adults are free to go by boat to dive Namena. A nanny is assigned to each child under six, while those 6 to 12 get teamed up with Fijian "buddies." ([www.fijiresort.com](http://www.fijiresort.com))

**Kids Sea Camp.** Payton offers 13 diving weeks to choose from every summer in eight countries, from Bonaire to Yap. Oceanfront bungalows at PADI five-star resorts with scuba programs for kids ages 4-18 from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily. Besides diving, activities include horseback riding, treasure hunts, kayak racing, ziplining and tubing. Certified kids have their own boats to dive with other kids or their families. (<http://familydivers.com>)

**Sam's Tours, Palau.** Sam's Tours offers PADI Junior Open Water Diver and Junior Scuba Diver programs to kids ages 10-15, and helps you book the right family-appropriate lodging ([www.samstours.com](http://www.samstours.com)).

**Small Hope Bay Lodge, Bahamas.** This unpretentious, family-run lodge on Andros Island welcomes kids with open arms. Besides diving programs, the lodge offers naturalist programs, a games room, bikes and babysitting. Children under 8 get a separate dinner hour and post-dinner activities, while adults enjoy their own downtime. For more details, check out the travel story we wrote about the lodge in our April 2008 issue. ([www.smallhope.com](http://www.smallhope.com))

encourage them to consider the PADI Seal Team program or SSI's Scuba Rangers as a good place to start the process; it's perfect for introducing kids to scuba in a low-stress, fun environment. Remember, always celebrate each accomplishment and allow them to go at their own pace. If your child has a medical condition, don't keep quiet about it. By failing to tell the instructor, you're putting your child and others at risk. Talk to the child's doctor and ask if she or he is approved for diving. Medical forms are required for all courses, and if any condition does exist, a note of approval is required from the doctor.

**Stock up for the trip.** Be prepared with plenty of entertainment for flights -- paper, crayons, a book or board game. Prepare for flight delays and cancellations by packing snacks and a change of clothes to take with you.

**Remember the medical gear and travel documents.** Be prepared to handle small cuts and bug bites, and provide plenty of sun protection. Remember travel vaccinations, medications, swimmers' ear prevention, and carry these items in your carryon. Give yourself plenty of time to get the kids' passports in order; it takes approximately three weeks.

**Have them keep an online scrapbook.** I never realized how much children had to say until I started traveling with mine. Create a website, and encourage them to write about their adventures each day, to post along with their pictures. It's a great way to have a lasting memory for the whole family.

*Margo Payton is president of Kids Sea Camp, a summer program for children to learn about diving. For more information, go to <http://familydivers.com>*

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## When You Least Expect It

### *minor and potentially lethal dive injuries, all in a few days*

When I look back over my 42-year diving career and more than 10,000 dives, I realize how few dive-related injuries I have sustained. A few infections from coral scratches, a nasty sting from a bunch of *Corallimorpharians*. Nothing besides a little care has cured me from repeating these injuries. Perhaps I have some deterioration in my hearing, but that is a function of old age, as is "selective" hearing, where we males recognize words such as "sex" and "dinner," but not "garbage" or "washing up." Certainly minor compared to injuries inflicted on my friends who partake in the supposedly healthy lifestyle choice of bicycling. They always end up in the hospital with broken bones, missing teeth and the gift of life-long scars.

So it was a bit of a shock when, out of the blue, a fish bit me and I started bleeding. Strangely, exactly the same thing had happened to my dive buddy, Rodney Pearce, when we were diving a Zero wreck in Papua New Guinea's Rabaul Harbour just a month prior. Rodney's bite was the result of a coral cod mistaking his fingers for food in the billowing silt stirred up while investigating Japanese markings on the aircraft, while mine was the noble efforts of a large Titan triggerfish protecting freshly deposited eggs in its nearby nest.

But there is a bit more to the story. You see, I had just a few minutes previously pointed out a nesting triggerfish to my dive model, Kirtley Leigh. They are known to nest around Christmas time and become aggressive. I gave a danger signal to her and gesticulated to make it clear we were going to swim away. I felt quite pleased with myself in a superior, pedagogical kind of way, and we moved along, soon to be captivated by a beautiful hawksbill turtle that pleaded with me to have its photograph taken. As the turtle assumed several dramatic poses for my camera, and Kirtley and I swirled with balletic elegance and harmony to capture the essence of its "turtle-ness," another triggerfish took advantage of my distraction, hurtled into me from below and chomped my wrist. I was surprised rather than hurt, but because there was blood, I quickly handed the camera to Kirtley to make sure the event was recorded.

This all happened just as we started a wonderful nine days' diving in our own backyard, escaping the hell of Christmas hype and pandemonium. It is easy to do, and we chose Cairns-based Deep Sea Divers Den's liveaboard, Ocean Quest, to do it on. After displaying my bleeding wound to all and applying first aid, I decided that it was really rather trivial, so I affected a limp to make it seem worse. I love sympathy. But there was more, and potentially not trivial.

I noticed I was getting a bit of "heartburn" during the dives. There was no problem before the dive, and I had a rapid recovery after, but nevertheless, I felt soreness in my upper lungs. This got worse as the dive progressed. I was getting quite uncomfortable. My first thought (and shame on me) was that I had bad air. But this is virtually impossible on any Great Barrier Reef dive operation. The air has to be tested regularly, and operators are all meticulous in their attention to clean air. Besides, bad air smells and this was sweet, with no smell. But I was on the right track. You might care to do your own diagnosis now before I reveal all.

It got even worse, and I realized that not only was my chest sore, but I was also producing a large amount of mucus. Got it yet? I should have realized right away when this happened, but it was not until I was half asleep that night that the "eureka" moment occurred. These are symptoms of saltwater aspiration.

My Scubapro G250 is a notoriously dry regulator, but it could have a pinhole in the diaphragm that would produce a fine spray of saltwater for me to breathe. First thing in the morning, I was on deck using my emergency tool kit to pull the second stage apart and check it out. The diaphragm was fine and properly seated. Next stop, the exhaust valve -- and there it was, a tiny corner of the valve had "tucked" under the seat and leaked when I inhaled. A quick flick, and problem solved.

I don't know why it took me so long to figure it out. I just have not had a problem like that for a very long time, and it happened, just like the triggerfish attack, when I least expected it. By the way, oxygen after the dive will rapidly treat the symptoms of saltwater aspiration. It is a personal choice, but I feel that margaritas and some bubbly also help.

I must say the crew looked after us splendidly, and they have a tough job. They're mostly looking after students or inexperienced divers, so they see some crazy things that they have to prevent from becoming dangerous. They managed to stop the diver who had his regulator firmly fastened under his weight belt from jumping in, along with several who had their air still turned off. I spotted a diver with the worst case of bicycling leg kick I have ever seen being nursed, and weights on the bottom testified to dive guides adjusting overweighted divers. But dive supervisors Ed and Katie and their team of instructors handled all this quietly, with good humor and enthusiasm. There were many very happy customers.

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## Blissed Out or Hotwired?

### *how the Internet screws up dive vacations*

Some people I know are building a liveaboard. They have thought about everything a traveling diver could possibly want. The cabins are spacious and well appointed; the ample dive deck is organized and user-friendly; the dinghies are fast and comfortable; the food promises to be excellent; and massages are offered gratis. Guess what else is included: satellite internet, available 24-7.

That's the one sour note in the deal, as far as I'm concerned. Not that I don't spend almost every waking, land-based hour at the computer writing, answering emails, doing research, etc. like everyone else I know. But even though I am usually on a liveaboard to work, my time on boats remains sacred. That's

what “away” messages are for. The precious few days or weeks separated from computers, email and news (especially nowadays) are a time to let my monitor-weary eyes watch the sun disappear behind an island where thousands of bats have just taken flight, share sea stories with fellow travelers, and linger over a trashy novel with the breeze in my face. Call me a dinosaur or a hopeless romantic (the latter is preferred), but that’s the way it has always been, and that’s the way I want it to always be.

I don’t understand this all-consuming, barely controllable need to be constantly connected. What’s wrong with spending two weeks at sea, making the world go away while focusing on the minutiae of life found on a tropical reef? It’s already a bit much that most underwater photographers (my husband included) spend hours downloading and reviewing images. (Full disclosure: There are tradeoffs in every marriage; Burt does Photoshop and I do our taxes).

In October 2008, we worked with Howard and Michele Hall on their IMAX movie Under the Sea 3D: Deep Sequel. The location was about as remote as it gets, at Gunung Api in the Banda Sea. Production required email capability over a satellite phone. We learned the stock market had crashed (again), and the entire crew grew frantic. After a few days of everyone monitoring their shrinking portfolios, we were all depressed. It took a huge collective effort not to let our personal worries affect filming. We talked about it, decided to stop worrying and stop checking stock prices on the Internet. Our evening Scrabble games began again, people woke up early for yoga on the deck, and we read instead of lining up to email our brokers.

I realize the need for communications with a worldwide reach, especially during an emergency. I don’t object to that. What bothers me is the feeling that, by allowing ourselves to be ruled by the compulsive need to communicate, to let our “friends” know what we’re doing every minute, no matter how mundane or silly the activities might be, we are not appreciating the moment, but the machine. If we are always thinking of the next email, tweet, or social network post, what becomes of our memories? Are they condensed to a limited number of characters? Are they deposited into our computers or smartphones in a short form?

Somehow for me, savoring a journey to a faraway place enhances our recollections of that journey. Indeed, it creates and recreates our memories, as our inner space constantly embellishes the encounters and the experiences in ways cyberspace can not. So many people arrive at dive resorts or on liveboards totally frazzled by their busy lives that it often takes several days for them to unwind to a point where they begin to appreciate the sea’s natural rhythms. I believe that, in the end, our memories will become our most treasured possessions. (My 99-year-old mother-in-law agrees.) Will your memories mirror the frustrations of your workaday world as you queue up to check email, when you could have been toasting the sunset? Or will you be able to close your eyes and remember a time when you gave yourself the gift of the sea, natural and unadulterated?

*Maurine Shimlock, along with her husband, Burt Jones, is an award-winning marine life photographer, whose most recent book, Diving Indonesia’s Raja Ampat, is available for sale at [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org). You can also read Maurine and Burt’s regular blog posts for us at [www.undercurrent.org/blog/author/burtmaurine](http://www.undercurrent.org/blog/author/burtmaurine).*

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