

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Jost Van Dyke, British Virgin Islands

I sense there's good Caribbean diving here, but...

Dear Fellow Diver:

"You're in for a real treat tomorrow," Martin, my divemaster, told me. Colin (that's Captain Colin Aldridge, the owner of Jost Van Dyke Scuba would be taking us to one of his secret spots on the Atlantic side, "a sea mount with tons of fish and lots of jacks and sharks." These pinnacle dives normally cost \$200, but Colin tossed it in to make up for a week of poor visibility. I set off with five other divers and Colin, who briefed us while we geared up at Cathedral, before cruising around the island tip to the site. We were to enter as a group, head down the anchor line to the top of the mount at 70 feet, and make two or three passes around. Colin would carry a reel with its line tied to the boat in case we lost site of the anchor line. The water was a milky aqua color as I went hand-over-hand down the line in 10-foot visibility. At 96 feet, I put my computer in front of my partner's mask to show her the depth and her eyes popped. At 110 feet, all I could see were my feet standing on the bottom. Colin aborted the dive. Seventeen minutes after starting, we were back on the surface.

My partner and I have been diving in the Caribbean for more than 20 years, seeking out the less-traveled spots and hoping to find a place we would want to return, from St. Eustatius (very good) to Vieques (don't go). When we were in St. Eustatius, our divemaster said when he went on vacation, he went to Jost Van Dyke. So we gave it a shot.



Jost Van Dyke Scuba

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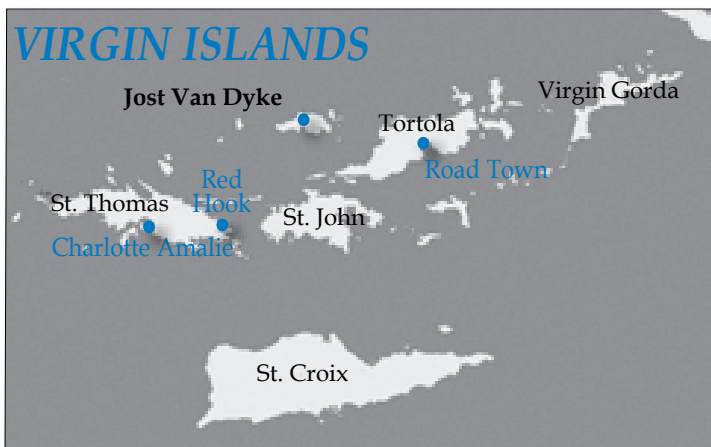
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Jost Van Dyke (JVD) is three square miles, with 200 residents, no doctor and no airport, but it's overwhelmed at night when hundreds of people from the endless parade of BVI sailboats fill its bars and restaurants. It lies five miles from Tortola and seven miles from the Red Hook ferry terminal in St. Thomas, one of the U.S. Virgin Islands. At the ferry office, there were no signs for Jost, so I bought tickets and luggage vouchers for the M.V. Native Son, only to learn it doesn't travel there. I got a refund. Two guys wearing no uniforms or ID

badges but saying they were from Inter Island Boat Services took my \$140 for two round-trip tickets, and watched our luggage while my dive buddy and I went across the street to the Marine Market to pick up supplies I had ordered online.

Thirty minutes later, we were in Great Harbour, a picturesque seaside hamlet on JVD. I picked up our reserved Suzuki jeep and drove to the road's dead end at Sandy Ground Estates, a 17-acre property on JVD's eastern end. We had to walk down a steep, 100-yard rocky trail to the manager's office, so we left our gear locked in the jeep overnight with no problem. Caretakers Leroi and Nadine were surprised we didn't take the water taxi from Great Harbour. I would have, had I checked Sandy Ground's "Getting Here" website page, or during pre-trip conversations with JVD Scuba -- or if I had just simply asked the best way to get there.

Eight villas are spread among a lush, tropical hillside above a private white-sand shady beach. We had the Hideaway, a two-bedroom unit with a kitchen and two baths. Every room opened to achingly beautiful views of the blue water of Baker's Bay, Little Jost Van Dyke and Tortola. Sailing catamarans swept past all day long. At night, we sat beneath a full moon, listening to the breeze rustle through the coconut palm and coquis chirping in the garden. As much as I hated humping up that trail in the morning, I loved the quiet evenings.

Next day, we made the 15-minute drive to the dive shop, a funky little place with roving kids and dogs, situated on Great Harbour's sandy Main Street. JVD Scuba is crammed with T-shirts, gear, sunscreen, insect repellent and just about everything you need (or think you need) for a dive trip. Colin and his wife, Andrea, own this and three other shops on Tortola. She checked our C-cards and introduced us to Martin, our divemaster whose Cockney humor helped overcome what turned out to be not the best of diving.

For the next six days, Martin hauled our gear bags to the 27-foot Dedicated, sitting just off the beach. JVD Scuba runs five 27- and 29-foot boats, plus the 55-foot Nautilus. All have first-aid kits and oxygen, and get to most sites in less than 30 minutes. We geared up on aluminum 80s filled to 3000 psi. (Nitrox tanks are available, which Martin ferries over from Tortola daily.)

We picked up another diver from a sailboat moored in Great Harbour, and headed off on a flat sea to the collapsed Pirate's Perch, a 150-foot Dutch freighter sitting upright at 94 feet near the western tip of the island, where the Caribbean meets the Atlantic. I back-rolled into 81-degree water and followed the mooring line to a lobster trap where a second line led to the wreck. The railings and deck were covered with white Carijoa riisei soft corals waving in the gentle current. A large horse-eye jack hung back from a cloud of several hundred French grunts. Two decorator crabs on one side were either fighting or making little crabs. Large bristle worms covered the deck. Visibility was 70 feet at best; late winter undersea swells had churned up the bottom, and particulate matter hung in the water column. We wrote this one off as a checkout dive.

After 35 minutes, we took a 15-foot safety stop, then Martin ascended to the untended boat. I handed up my weights and clambered up a narrow stern ladder between the twin outboards. Martin handed out oranges and water, and we motored to The Cathedral, a two-minute ride away. After 42 minutes of surface interval, we were swimming over and around huge basalt boulders encrusted in bright magenta, orange and blue. A large spotted drum swayed in the surge that led to a funnel-shaped cavern. Sunlight filtered through a natural chimney in the rock, and we surfaced in the grotto under blue skies. Heading back under, we timed the 10-foot surge and emerged from the cave to swim along the coast, to chasms carved by the sea into huge boulders over millennia. Although dolphins had been seen eight times the previous week (yeah, the "you should have been here last week" schtick), aside from a lone barracuda, the fish life was limited to queen triggers, queen angels, four-eye butterflyfish, soldierfish and other common tropicls. The underwater topography was great but I wanted more fish.

After the second dive, I hauled my mesh bags on the short walk to the shop, washed the sand out of the large plastic rinse buckets, washed my gear and hung it up. Theft is not a problem on an island with only 200 residents, so they say. In the morning, I packed it up again. Martin was available to help at any time, but divers are responsible for their own gear.

The undersea swells dogged us for the rest of the week. The following day, we headed east to Playground, another rocky site in unusually calm water bordering the Atlantic between Little Jost Van Dyke and Green Cay. We met at a grouping of brown pillar coral, and headed through canyons of immense rock covered in healthy coral and gorgonians, but visibility was down to 50 feet. There were lots of crevices and swim-throughs, and I did see a big puffer in one cavern, but what was supposed to be a very fishy dive wasn't, at least from what I couldn't see. We ended up in an amphitheatre of rock and gazed up at a large tarpon hanging in the crashing surf above. At the base of the cliff, two lionfish hovered in small holes in the rock. Between dives, Martin looked in the hold for a spear, but in vain. He said that groupers routinely take dead lionfish off the spear, but these predators still remained unspeared as the week progressed.

When we weren't cooking at the house, we tried the local restaurants. JVD is a sailor's party island, its bar and restaurants packed as soon as the sun drops under the yardarm, and two hot spots get most of the press. At Foxy's, at Diamond Cay, the true-to-life Foxy holds court and plays guitar, but service suffers. Four of the five Foxy's brand microbrews were out of stock, along with several standard brands of beer. When I asked for menus, the bartender looked at his watch, even though lunch is served until 3:30, and spent the next 10 minutes trying to figure out how to make a frozen margarita instead of taking our order. We walked out. Foxy's is the only place out on the east end, and mainly caters to the yachties who moor there. You could walk there from Sandy Ground, but has got to a good half mile. The place is full every night, though, and does offer free wifi. At the Soggy Dollar in

Jost Van Dyke, B.V.I.

| | |
|----------------------|-------|
| Diving (experienced) | ★★★ |
| Diving (beginner) | ★★★★★ |
| Snorkelling | ★★ |
| Accommodations | ★★★ |
| Food | ★★★ |
| Service and Attitude | ★★★★ |
| Money's Worth | ★★★★ |

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale



The Scene at Corsair's

White Bay, visiting day boats are moored cheek-by-jowl in the bay, and the beach is wall-to-wall people at lunchtime. The Soggy Dollar is living off its reputation, and you probably won't get even close to the bar. Walk down the beach to One Love, try the lobster quesadilla or one of the other fresh fish dishes and relax while the madding crowd carries on elsewhere.

Corsair's has arguably the best food on the island (and right next to the dive shop) and we ate lunch there frequently, noshing on pizzas, great burgers, salads, pasta or fish. The dinner menu includes steak, lobster and Thai dishes. You can hang at the bar with owner Vinnie Terranova (he's from "the islands of Staten and Long"), take a table, an open-air stool or one of the hammocks on the beach (use bug spray for the latter). Ivan's Stress Free Bar has a \$25 barbecue every Thursday. It's an island party with ribs, chicken, fish, live music and a laid-back feel. Colin and Andrea may be there when they're not herding day-boat-ers through the Discover Scuba class.

Wednesday found me at the dive shop at 8:30 a.m., hoping to get an early start, only to find Martin giving a Discover Scuba course to four yachties. I twiddled my thumbs on the beach until 10:30 a.m., when we headed out on the 55-foot Nautilus to North Wall Right. Colin let us gear up first and get in the water. A small nurse shark sat in a hole in the wall, and had been there long enough to acquire a spiny sea urchin on its dorsal fin. The visibility was improving, and I spied a big spiny lobster sharing its den with a slipper lobster. Colin called the second dive off, due to time constraints of the other divers (that sort of thing can be expected, I suppose, at shops catering to sailors and cruisers), but he promised three dives for the following day, rationalizing that the visibility would better still.

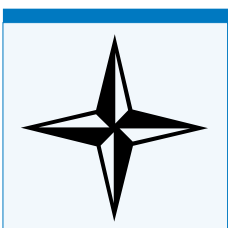
And it was. Back at Playground, I was amazed at the colors that a little sunlight and clarity brought to the huge boulders. I saw an eagle ray while still with my group of overweighted newbies, then headed off alone. The sun sparkled off azure vase sponges, while coral trout and rock hinds swam among barrels sponges. Seven barracuda watched me take my safety stop while the rest of the divers were already back aboard.

So while the visibility just wasn't what I had come to expect for March in the Caribbean, Colin tried to do the best by us. On my last day, we went to Great Thatch and Little Thatch, two small islands just off Tortola and in the lee of the swells. The weather was clear, the water was clearer, about 70 feet, and I swam alone along a 65-foot wall, enjoying the healthy coral and reef life.

Frankly, the easygoing life on JVD has me looking forward to returning in the spring or summer, when the swells have subsided and the visibility clears. The frustrating and tantalizing thing is that I had sensed that there's good Caribbean diving there, but I just couldn't see it. JVD Scuba tries to reward experienced divers with freedom and better sites, but sometimes it's just the luck of the draw.

Next time, I plan to stay at White Bay Villas, just over the hill from Great Harbour. I spoke to another couple staying there who got a last-minute deal on a one-bedroom condo in a two-unit building, along with a car for a week for \$1,400. You can spend more if you want a villa, but either way, the day boats are gone by evening, and the sunset is yours.

-- E.H.



Divers Compass: A few U.S. cities have nonstop air to St. Thomas; Jet Blue is perhaps the least expensive carrier, but you stop in San Juan, get to St. Thomas late, and have to overnight there before catching the ferry to JVD in the morning . . . The hour-long taxi ride from Charlotte Amalie to Red Hook's ferry dock will cost about \$25, plus tip; Inter-Island Boat Services operates round-trip boats to JVD at 8 a.m. and 2 p.m. for \$70. . . Grocery stores on JVD have only minimal offerings, so order

groceries from Marina Market in Red Hook . . . It cost me \$1,750 for a week's stay in a two-bedroom unit, but closer to the action and without the hike are the elegant White Bay Villas; ask for last minute discounts . . . A Suzuki Sidekick runs about \$50 a day; open-air pickup truck taxis cost up to \$25 each way to Great Harbour, less from White Bay, and you can carry your drink on board . . . A ten-dive package at Jost Van Dyke Scuba cost \$499 per person, plus tax, and included tanks and weights; gear rentals (Sherwood BCs and regulators) are \$10 a day, and private charters for the well-heeled are \$850 per day . . . Websites: Jost Van Dyke Scuba - www.jostvandykescuba.com; Sandy Ground Estates - www.sandyground.com; White Bay Villas - www.jostvandyke.com; Inter-Island Boat Services - www.interislandboatservices.vi

Lalati Resort and Matangi Resort, Fiji

dive luxury living: a tale of two islands

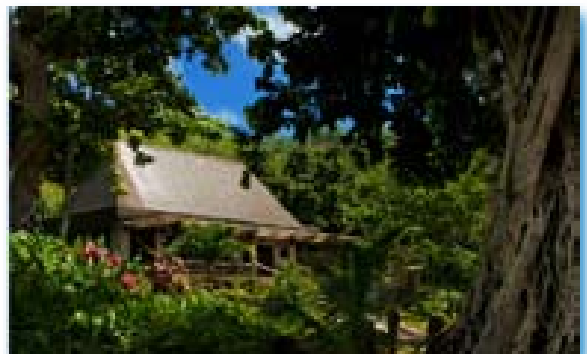
Dear Fellow Diver:

After two decades of liveaboard dive vacations exclusively, my spouse and dive buddy decided she was ready for less diving and more onshore relaxing. (Is that what getting older does to you?) Fiji has a number of picture perfect resorts, so we booked two six-day stays at resorts that appeared to combine luxurious accommodations with excellent diving -- Lalati Island Resort on Beqa Island (pronounced "Benga") and Matangi Resort on Matangi Island, near the much larger island of Taveuni.

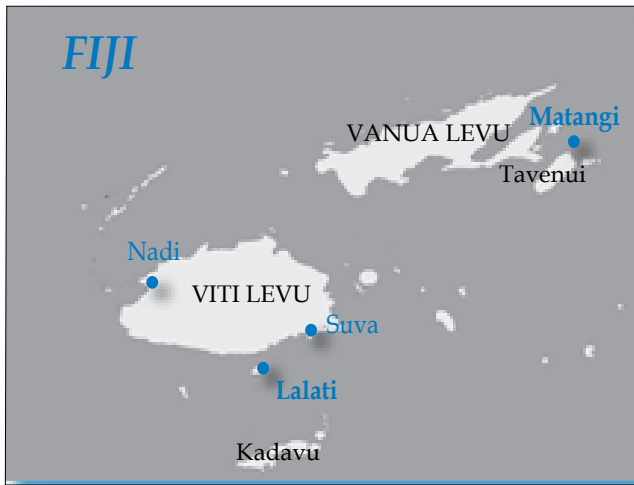
After a 12-hour red-eye flight from LAX to Nadi, I slumbered through a two-and-a-half-hour van ride and a thirty-minute boat ride to Lalati. Only the beauty of the tropical layout and the staff harmonizing a traditional Fijian welcoming song cleared my foggy brain. On-site managers Chris and Sarah, a friendly English couple, got us quickly settled into our non-traditional bure -- no thatched roof, but a sturdy tin one, on which the rain beat a noisy tattoo. (This is the rainiest region of Fiji; rarely do divers report week-long stretches of dry weather.) Our sizeable bure was about 40 by 18 feet, with the bedroom, bathroom with composting toilets (a fan might have reduced the bathroom dampness) and a side room. High ceilings, hardwood floors, plenty of seating and ceiling fans over the beds (no A/C). While the treated rainwater is considered drinkable, other drinking water is available in the main building, and bottled water is for sale. Towels and sheets were changed mid-way through our six-day stay.

Paul and Kirsty, another friendly English ex-pat couple, serve as the dive-masters and also manage the dive operation, which has two compressors, a selection of rental gear, rinse tanks and lots of space for storage and hanging up suits. They offer aluminum 80s, and three smaller tanks for smaller divers. Bottom times were at our discretion, based on our computer limits, and the one-hour surface intervals were spent on the boat. Water temperatures in December averaged 77 degrees, with air temperatures in the mid 80s.

While most of Fiji is seriously fished, reef life is rich and diverse. On my first dive, Paul pointed out blue ribbon eels, a black juvenile eel and even dwarf lionfish. I marveled at a field of garden eels, clownfish wriggling into their anemones and an eight-inch scorpion fish. On another dive, I spotted a green turtle, and a few four- to five-



One of the Bures at Lalati Resort



foot reef sharks appeared on many dives. Once, a big manta ray swam near the boat. Paul, who had never seen a manta in the shallows near a dive site, thought its fin tips were trevally dorsal fins, so we were all slow to don our mask and fins and jump in. On our one sunny day, we came across a small pod of spinner dolphins that rode our bow wave, leaped and pirouetted. My dive buddy slipped in to get an underwater sighting, which, to the surprise of the crew, she did. I followed her in and spotted several dolphins below, with shafts of sunlight bouncing off their backs.

At Lalati, however, there was no shortage of what Fiji is famous for: lush soft corals in a rainbow of colors, hard corals, sea fans so wide I couldn't reach each edge with arms outstretched, stunning sea stars, cleaner shrimp and bizarre nudibranchs. Because Beqa passage is famous for "ripping" currents, as Kirsty put it, they always put out a current line. Once, they rejected a site where a bobbing buoy signaled a tough current. On a typical dive, I would drop in on a bommie coral head, kick downward and let the current carry me along walls that bottomed out at 70 feet or more. But rain runoff from nearby Viti Levu (the Fijian "mainland") often produced visibility of less than 35 feet, so sweeping vistas were conspicuously absent. After drifting for a bit, the guides would lead us through a cut between bommies to calmer waters, though we had to stay close or risk losing sight of them. On one cloudy day, Paul appeared to lose track of where he was, as the visibility dropped to less than 15 feet.

The dive staff carried our gear and set up our tanks. Their 20-footer has twin outboards and can comfortably handle up to eight divers, while they used the smaller, more economical, single-engine boat if four or fewer divers showed up. Both are fully covered and kept at the pier next to the dive shop. Giant stride entries were easy off the low stern, and a small ladder made exiting the water simple. The larger boat had tank racks; we used the smaller boat once and just laid our tanks on the deck. Two Fijians piloted the boats - capable and experienced Paul, and Louie, obviously in training and with a propensity for eating most of the mangos in a cooler brought onboard for the guests. They use cell phones for communicating with the resort, which worked very well. One day, a large boat from Beqa Lagoon Divers, on the other side of the island, pulled up to the same mooring as ours, despite none of the nearby sites being occupied. That's just rude, by any standard. The boat was packed with around 20 divers but fortunately, we saw few of them underwater.

The resort's dining area, kitchen and office took up the main building, a comfortable place to hang out. Meals were served at the table instead of buffet style. I found the food fresh and tasty in general, but a couple of the lunches were scanty (e.g., a very small salad with two pieces of seared ahi, a boiled egg cut in half and three pieces of potato). They offered fruit at breakfast, but only four pieces, and when I asked for more, I was told there would be a charge. They suggested I gather fallen mangos for snacks, so I did. Given what readers report of fine meals at Fijian resorts -- and what we found at Matangi -- I think Lalati could step up its menu and serving sizes.



The Spa at Matangi Resort

Fiji Airlines' Abysmal Service

Air Pacific is Fiji's national airline, Pacific Sun the local carrier. They both have a poor reputation, and deservedly so. But many local or inter-island carriers in the Third World are undependable, I usually confirm before departure. This time, I didn't -- and I paid.

To get to Matangi Island Resort from Lalati, I had to take an hour-long cab ride to Suva, then board a short inter-island Air Pacific flight from Suva to Taveuni, which I had booked months earlier. Arriving at the check-in desk an hour before departure (without reconfirming the flight), I learned my flight had been canceled two days prior, and the flight they had re-booked me on had just departed. Incredibly, airline staff admitted they had not attempted to contact me, even though they had my email address. Of course, I should have asked Lalati Resort to re-confirm my flight (liveboards routinely do that) but in my diving bliss, I just flat out forgot. So, it

was a three-and-a-half-hour cab ride from Suva to Nadi -- though paid for by Air Pacific -- and I barely had enough time to make the flight to Taveuni. My dive gear didn't arrive for another 24 hours.

Before returning, Matangi Resort called to reconfirm my flight to Nadi, and I learned that Pacific Sun had put me on a 8:30a.m. flight, four-and-a-half hours earlier than the original one (I did receive an email from Air Pacific about the change). From Lalati Resort, allow two hours total travel time between leaving the resort dock and arriving at the airport terminal.

Some Americans fly Air New Zealand via Auckland to Fiji specifically to avoid Air Pacific's chronic flight delays and cancellations, but this adds a lot of extra time, and you still deal with internal flights. For groups of four or more, chartering a plane may prove economical. Try Private Jets Charter (www.privatejetscharter.net) or Island Hoppers (www.helicopters.com.fj).

Although the resort only offers two dives a day and no night dives, one can shore dive endlessly; I gave it a go the first day, about all I could handle with jet lag. The small reef was silty and unspectacular, but there were things to photograph even under the pier, where a dwarf lionfish lolled about. Lalati offers a "shark dive" for \$88/person, but I'm no fan of shark circuses so I skipped it. Later, a diver told me the sharks were so well-fed that the bait didn't excite them much. Kirsty said they would draw up to eight species of sharks, including bull, silvertip, even the occasional small mako and tiger, no friends of humans. One wonders if someday a rogue will join the group, with adverse consequences.

Regardless, I was quite satisfied with Lalati. Whenever I walked the grounds, cheerful staff members always directed a hearty "Bula" my way -- and the diving and the divemasters were topnotch. As we headed toward Matangi, I wondered how much better lolling about could be, given that the resort was almost twice the price of Lalati.

It was an arduous journey to Matangi, but when our boat beached and we waded ashore at a gorgeous, white sand beach in a lush South Seas setting in front of the main building, I knew it would be worth the travel inconveniences. A dozen staff members serenaded us with a sweet welcoming song (a tradition at most Fiji resorts), and they were delighted to see a California family who had arrived with us; it was their 22nd visit to Matangi. Accommodations are super: either traditional thatched bures or "treehouses" perched on stilts next to a massive tree. The floors, counters and cabinets are dark hardwood, woven matting or reeds cover the interior walls, and bottled drinking water is replenished daily, as are towels. A/C is above the bed, which is enclosed in diaphanous netting. Adjacent to the bathrooms are private outdoor showers, a treat in a tropical climate. Daily laundry services are free (which they should be for the price). The enormous central dining area is surrounded by chairs, couches and even a few "hanging" beds by the pool area. Every one of the staff was friendly and welcoming.

The dive operation, run out of a small building near the dining hall, has a modest amount of rental gear, an open-air covered area where you can hang BCs and suits, and two small rinse tanks. They only offer aluminum 80s and, as I discovered, all with ancient O-rings. On the first tank I set up, I could hear an air leak at my yoke. I asked Ali, the Fijian divemaster, if she could replace the O-ring. "Try another tank," she said. It also leaked. A third tank did not.

Lalati Resort and Spa

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

Matangi Island Resort

| | |
|---|------|
| Diving (<i>experienced</i>) | ★★★★ |
| Diving (<i>beginner</i>) | ★★★★ |
| Snorkeling | ★★ |
| Accommodations | ★★★★ |
| Food | ★★★★ |
| Service and Attitude (<i>resort</i>) | ★★★★ |
| Service and Attitude (<i>dive shop</i>) | ★★ |
| Money's Worth | ★★★★ |

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

World Scale

During every dive, I saw bubbles stream from at least one tank. The shop had no replacement O-rings. What other basic items might they be missing? I've never thought to bring spare tank O-rings with me on live-boards; now I see the value in a "save a dive kit." When I slipped my dive gloves, on for the first dive, Ali said, "I don't like divers using gloves on my reefs." I assured her my buddy and I would be careful not to touch the coral and that we preferred to dive fully covered (we used full 3mm suits and hoods to stay warm in the 76- to 78-degree water and to protect us from stings). After observing us during the dive, she said no more about our gloves.

The two fully covered, aluminum, single-engine dive boats are about 18 feet long and would be cramped with just eight divers. Both had four-step ladders for exits, but the top step was missing on one, so my short dive buddy found it difficult to ascend; she learned to take off her BC and tank in the water and hand them to the boat driver to lift on board, not her normal practice. Actually, it should be. That extra load risks an accident when climbing into small boats. Giant stride exits were easy off the stern. The boats have radios but there was no oxygen. The staff set up our BCs and regulators, car-

ried the gear on and off the boat, and provided mesh bags for the rest. Oddly, only two- and three-pound weights were available; no singles.

Even at such a pricey resort, boat departure was on "island time." I soon learned there was no point in being ready before 9 a.m., even though on the first dive day we were asked to be at the dive center at 8:30. Most of the sites were just a 15-minute ride, though occasionally we spent a half hour in transit. Once, we did the surface interval at the resort because the boat was too full to carry additional tanks for all 10 divers, though we were diving sites just a few minutes away. Other times, the surface interval was on the boat, but twice we went ashore at beautiful little bays.

Regardless, all was forgotten when I descended underwater. The visibility, up to 60 feet, was much better than at Lalati because there were no nearby river mouths. The sites seemed prettier than Lalati's typical bommie clusters -- sloping fields of hard corals that appeared to go on forever and were teeming with a huge variety of fish made an hour's dive pass quickly. Besides the usual suspects, Ali and fellow dive guide Elia took care to point out a tiny pipefish that looked like the stem of a leaf, a remarkably cryptic stonefish, a comet (*Calloptesiops altivelis*, black with rows of white spots) hiding in a coral crevice, and psychedelic nudibranchs and flatworms. Big animals were minimal: an eagle ray and a couple of curious white-tip reef sharks.

The soft corals seemed not as common as they were off Lalati, where the currents were stronger. However, on one dive we were dropped in near a point where a fast current ran; I was last off the boat and had to crawl hand-over-

hand along the reef -- giving thanks for my gloves all the while -- and around the point to catch up to the group. The soft corals were in full bloom. There were also some stunning wall dives with intricate cuts, where the reef tops come to within 20 feet of the surface, perfect for a long safety stop. Lalati normally offers a trip to the famous Great White Wall, more than an hour away (for a steep \$135 per person, although a group could try negotiating that down), but during my stay I was told the currents were too rough and would sweep divers right off the wall. On most mornings, it was clear and relatively calm; only a few days had any significant rainfall. However, it is not unusual to have several cloudy and rainy days in a row during the November-to-February summer season, so be prepared for that possibility.

The enormous, high-roofed dining hall next to the pool looked like it could easily seat 50, but the resort was no more than two-thirds full during my stay, and there were never more than 20 people present at a time. They served consistently fresh and delicious meals at the tables, with more than ample portions, including unlimited non-alcoholic drinks, breakfast fruit and afternoon snacks. One evening, we were treated to traditional Fijian dancing and songs by the local village members.

Lalati may be a better value for divers, as the diving is more exciting (if you like currents). Matangi is more luxurious and correspondingly more expensive, and while the reefs are beautiful, there seems to be not as much big animal action. Matangi cost far more than any resort I have visited, and I worried that I would come away feeling I had wasted my money. Truth is, it was worth it. But keep in mind that neither location is a dedicated dive resort, nor were many of the guests divers, so the conversation was not "all diving all the time." But then, sometimes that's a good thing when relaxing in paradise.

-- B.L.B.



Divers Compass: Island Dreams Travel (www.divetrip.com) has full dive-package Lalati rates beginning at \$2,970 a person for seven nights, while Matangi begins at \$4,768 per person, with a few tours thrown in; having Island Dreams or any agency organize the trip is easier and may have helped me avoid hassles, but my partner bargained directly with the resort and I believe came out ahead for our stays during late December, when both resorts were a third empty. . . Bring electrical adapters: Fijian plugs are "Type I" Australian AS-3112 standard, and the voltage is 220 to 240; bring tank O-rings with you if you go to Matangi . . . In Lalati, I paid US\$50 for Internet access for a week but could only log on a quarter of the time; on the fifth day, Chris solved the problem by entering a specific DNS number into my computer (wish I had known that earlier). . . The Internet access speed at Matangi is luxurious by Fijian standards: up to 1.5MB for downloads and F\$80 for a week of access. . . English is the primary language, and credit cards are accepted . . . Websites: Lalati Resort & Spa - www.lalatifiji.com; Matangi Island Resort - www.matangiisland.com

CO Poisoning Risk Higher Than You Think

why and how divers need to protect themselves

On March 4, Ronda Cross, on vacation in Baja California from Calgary, Alberta, went diving off Cabo San Lucas with her cousin, Roxanne Amundson, and divemaster Jorge Duchateau. When Amundson and Duchateau surfaced from their dive to 75 feet, Cross, 41, was not with them. Her body was found floating in the water nearby and pulled out by the crew of another boat. Her husband, Colin, believes she was overcome by carbon monoxide in her tank, fell asleep and drowned. A report in the Mexican online publication Sudcaliforniano stated Cross's cause of death was asphyxiation by

drowning, as did a woman employed by the funeral home that received Cross's body. Amundson and Duchateau both said they felt sick on their dive, and had little strength and trouble breathing when they surfaced. "I was dizzy in the last three or four minutes of the dive, Duchateau told the Calgary Herald. "I was having a super strong pain in the chest. I wasn't really aware of anything." But he declined to divulge where he got his tanks filled.

Colin Cross told the Calgary Sun he was taking legal action, hiring a lawyer in San Diego, and he warns everyone considering a dive trip in a developing country to ensure the rental tanks have been properly filled and inspected before using them. "The blame has got to be put squarely on who filled up those tanks."

The author of the article published below, a diving physician and a fill station consultant for government and businesses wishes to remain anonymous, due to the multiple hats he wears professionally. He believes the blame for foul air should not rest entirely with the dive shops. Responsibility should also be taken by the dive agencies -- and divers themselves -- to reduce the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. He wrote an essay on the topic for Undercurrent to explain his reasoning for why the risk of CO poisoning is higher than we all think.

* * * * *

Let's start with some history on compressed air testing in the sport diving industry. In the past, PADI required all its five-star resorts and dive shops to test their compressor air quality quarterly. For the first year of a facility's operation, it was also required to send these results to PADI headquarters. After that, the fill station would have only to keep the results "on file," so there was little enforcement after the first year, unless a compressed air quality problem was brought to PADI's attention. However, this requirement did serve to create industry awareness that compressed air quality should be monitored regularly.

NAUI has a code of ethics that cites a quarterly testing frequency; however, there is no enforcement, and many NAUI shops I have visited have no current testing certificate available. In fact, many of these shops were unaware of this code. I wrote NAUI several times about its high rate of non-testing at their facilities, despite its guidelines specifying quarterly testing, but never heard back from them.

(Note: Undercurrent contacted NAUI about its policy on preventing CO poisoning, and what its dive shops are required to do regarding air fills for divers. Randy Shaw e-mailed us three articles from NAUI's former medical adviser Kelly Hill, and told us NAUI's answer is contained in those stories. The articles, published in 2002, 2004 and 2005, are primarily Hill's commentaries about the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) investigations of CO poisoning in swimmers at Lake Havasu, AZ, and Lake Powell, UT, and a CDC stat that 15,000 ER visits annually are due to non-fire CO poisoning. None of the articles mentioned anything about CO poisoning in divers, nor did they mention anything about NAUI's guidelines for testing for it.)

The Lawsuit That May Have Changed Everything

The quarterly air-testing requirement changed substantially in 2009 or thereabouts, when PADI settled a lawsuit brought against CoCoView Resort in Roatan and PADI headquarters by the estate of the late R. Gibbs. Gibbs, a Texas native, and a CoCoView divemaster both died in 2005 after breathing from a tank that contained excessive amounts of CO, as indicated in the plaintiff's statement of facts. There were once long threads about this incident on both ScubaBoard and CoCoview forums, in which several divers at the resort that week indicated that the contaminant was CO, but the owners of Scubaboard and CoCoView Resort subsequently removed both threads.

The deceased's attorney argued that the fill station was in fact manufacturing a product -- compressed air -- and this product was defective, which resulted in the two divers' deaths. I am not an attorney, but I have been told that the burden of proof for product-liability law is much lower than if one was to try to show that the fill station owner/operator was negligent. The manufacturer of compressed air had a duty to produce a product that would not harm the consumer. All that was needed was for the plaintiff to show that the manufactured product, compressed air, contained a contaminant that killed the diver, akin to showing that an undercooked hamburger that contained *E. Coli* 0157 resulted in a person's injury or death.

The details of the settlement were never made public; however, shortly after the settlement PADI decided to remove its compressed breathing air quality assurance requirements (quarterly testing to the Compressed Gas Association's Grade E specification) for its affiliate shops and resorts. This is presumably because the outcome in this case using product liability law would leave PADI very exposed to future liability, given that so many of its shops and resorts were not testing as required and enforcement was difficult. Instead, PADI would now defer to the local authority having jurisdiction over compressed breathing air quality, which, unfortunately in almost all sport diving locations, has translated today into little to no testing of sport diving air. In many jurisdictions, there are requirements for commercial divers under the local labor code, but most of these standards specifically say they don't apply to the sport diving industry.

(Note: Undercurrent called and e-mailed PADI about its policy and guidelines on air fills, testing them, and prevention of CO poisoning, but PADI failed to respond.)

Where Can You Get a Good Air Test Around Here?

Therefore, the sport diving industry went from having some semblance of a quality assurance program for compressed breathing air in 2009 to one today where its largest training agency has ended its quality assurance program, arguably the most important safety concern for divers -- a fact that very few sport divers are aware of. The situation today is that there is no (major) training agency "enforcing" any sort of quality assurance for compressed breathing air, except for American Nitrox Divers International (ANDI), which, according to its website, requires all its affiliates to send in their "quarterly" air tests to headquarters, but whether this actually happens on the ground today is not known.

In terms of government enforcement, Florida is the only state I am aware of that requires its dive shops to routinely test their compressed dive air. While the program might sound like a step in the right direction, it has its drawbacks. Should the dive shop fail a test, it is not required to report the test failure to the Department of Health, rather only to rectify the situation and send in the re-test pass. Florida requires that a quarterly test be taken, which must meet the Compressed Gas Association's Grade E specification, and goes one step further by requiring that an "accredited laboratory" be used to test the air.

It has become the Wild West out there for sport divers with regard to any sort of air testing, and it is becoming more difficult to find dive facilities where one can locate quarterly tests being done, despite all U.S. and Canadian fire services requiring their compressor stations to test regularly (quarterly in the U.S. and biannually

in Canada). Sean Sheldrake, a unit diving officer for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, wrote a 2009 article expressing his concern that many shops in his Pacific Northwest region stopped testing once they realized PADI was no longer going to enforce the quarterly Grade E testing requirement. "You can't count on an unfamiliar shop testing their air in all instances," he writes. "This also goes to show that a shop you've used for years might stop air purity testing without informing customers."

The sport diving industry went from having some semblance of a quality assurance program for air to one where its largest training agency, PADI, has ended that program."

Regarding the role of Diver Alert Network (DAN) in this safety issue, it has been silent until recently, when it donated 10 Analox fixed compressor CO monitors to shops in Cozumel and Playa Del Carmen, after the number of CO incidents in the region continued to mount. It was odd, as there was no explanation why only this area received the monitors, and what the rationale was behind the donations. One suspects it was due to recurrent ScubaBoard reports of divers finding CO in their breathing air, plus several injuries and a CO-related fatality over the last 24 months. That fatality, occurring in October 2011, apparently happened even with CO monitors at the compressor station in Cozumel, but based on my personal observation, these monitors were originally located in a walled-off compressor room where the operators wouldn't have been able to hear the alarms while filling tanks on the plant floor away from the noisy compressors.

(Note: We contacted DAN about whether it tracks dive deaths connected to CO poisoning. Its reply: "No, we do not have specific statistics on the percentage of dive deaths caused by CO poisoning." When we asked DAN the reason for donating the CO monitors, it replied, "Cozumel is a destination visited by many DAN members. In recent years, there has been more than one instance reported where contaminated air was suspected as the cause of a diving accident. In order to minimize the likelihood of this happening again, DAN and Analox Technologies teamed up to donate CO monitors to the facilities in Cozumel who fill tanks for recreational divers.")

One must wonder why DAN has not aggressively pursued this important safety issue, but any talk of contaminated air in the sport diving industry is simply bad for business. DAN's financial well-being relies on good relations with the dive industry. PADI and NAUI are both listed as Corporate Guardians, and *Undercurrent* has written in the past of PADI's influence with DAN. Regardless, it would be important for DAN to step up.

The accredited U.S. compressed breathing air laboratories still report a CO failure rate of 3 to 5 percent for "dive" compressed air samples received from around the globe. Air samples for the U.S. fire service air samples have a CO failure rate about one-tenth that of the global dive centers. It should be remembered that unlike fire fighters who breathe any CO contamination at only 1 atmosphere absolute (ATA), recreational divers may travel down to 5 ATA, where the CO partial pressure and resulting toxicity will be five times that found on the surface.

How Divers Can Protect Themselves

In light of the insufficient frequency of air quality testing for sport divers, plus the continued global sporadic identification of CO contamination in dive air, the only acceptable solution to this problem is for each diver, or group of divers, to carry a portable CO analyzer to test each and every tank prior to use, much like the Red Cross tests every unit of blood for HIV and hepatitis B and C prior to transfusion. In the long term,

Good Feedback from Our Readers

The last few months of stories have produced a good batch of opinions, suggestions and advice from *Undercurrent* subscribers, so we're including a few here to educate and entertain you.

Regarding Doc Vikingo's May story on whether divers should splurge on a VO2 Max test, Bill Schlegel (Jefferson City, MO), a clinical cardiologist for more than 30 years, agrees that the answer is no. "The use of the Bruce Protocol treadmill stress test as a standard for fitness to dive is well documented. There is no reason to do formal VO2 testing as part of a fitness-to-dive test on the average sport diver."

David Steinberg (Portland, OR) liked our June story "Why Divers Run Low on Gas" because it proved his method for not running low on gas is a good one. "I have been telling my fellow divers about a simple habit I've been using since I was certified, and after I ran out of gas on my first official openwater dive that year: 'If you can't estimate within 100 psi how much gas you have left, you are not checking often enough.' So just before I look at my gauge, I estimate how much there is. It doesn't take long before a diver will know

approximately how much gas he should have without looking, then look and verify it. This does two things: The diver becomes much more aware of his gas usage, and checks his gauge more frequently."

Also in the June issue was "Why You Might Remove Your Regulator When You Shouldn't," in which we reprinted a section from the book *Deep Survival* that discusses research about divers who died with air in their tanks and perfectly functional regulators. Debra Cronenwett (Enfield, NH) related that to her own experience. "Thirty years ago, when I was a newbie diver, I heard a story about a diver whose first symptom of nitrogen narcosis was that he removed his regulator. Hearing this story may have saved my life, because shortly thereafter, I was at 90 feet on the last day of a week-long vacation and began to feel funny. (This was back in the day when one used dive tables only, not computers.) I had the thought that it was difficult to breathe through a regulator, and maybe I should remove it. This rang alarm bells in my head, and I immediately went to my buddy and made the universal sign for 'crazy' next to my head. He started to ascend with me hanging listlessly from his arm. I 'woke up' at around 80 feet and was able to help get us safely to the surface. So keep telling these stories -- it does help to hear them!"

Four Steps to Ensure Your Air is Clean

My simple current three-rule routine at all fill stations is as follows:

***Ask to see the compressor and its intake location.** Assess for possible entrainment of vehicle or boat exhaust into intake. Assess risk for other contaminants in ambient air, such as the presence of paint or glue odors, or other industrial neighbors who could contaminate the intake. If there is a risk that cannot be quantified or assessed, then choose another operator.

***Test every tank for CO contamination prior to diving, with no exceptions.** The one time you don't test is likely the time there will be CO contamination, which can and does come from the burning of an electric compressor's lubrication oil if overheated.

***Smell and taste the dive air in every tank prior to diving.** There are hydrocarbon volatiles stored on the activated charcoal bed in the compressor's purifier, and if this bed is overheated, which is more likely in the tropics, a slug of narcotic hydrocarbons will be released from the charcoal bed back into the breathing air. Often these hydrocarbon contaminants can be detected by smell. Non-volatile oil mist can often be tasted in the breathing air.

*** An optional step:** Ask the fill station operator for the most recent air test. But in reality, these tests, even when done every three to six months, give a false sense of security. It's just better to assess the compressor intake for contaminant risk, and test every tank for carbon monoxide and odorous volatiles.

one would hope that the dive industry will encourage all fill stations to have a quality assurance program that includes, at a minimum, quarterly air testing, but with the recent availability of affordable in-line CO monitoring (less than \$1,200 for the Analox CO Clear with all the regulators), this should become a routine compressor requirement as well. However, I don't see a day anytime soon when all fill stations will have in-line CO monitors, because compressed air quality is not seen as a priority issue by the dive industry, and discussion of the contamination issue is bad for business.

Individual countries should also develop a compressed breathing air standard and the means to enforce it, but I don't see this happening in the popular dive destinations, given our current economic climate and reluctance to introduce additional government regulations. Thus, every diver must become responsible for ensuring his breathing air is CO-free. Just as every diver double-checks his oxygen content in a nitrox tank prior to a dive, the training agencies need to begin to train divers to check every tank for CO contamination prior to a dive. While the frequency of CO contamination in dive air may be low and sporadic, the health consequences of breathing CO-contaminated air gas underwater are high, even more so because CO is tasteless and odorless. The only way to detect its presence is by using a portable analyzer before the dive.

There are really only two portable diver-dedicated CO analyzers I would recommend right now -- the Analox CO EII (www.analox.net) and the Oxycheq CO Expedition analyzer (<http://oxycheq.com>). Both cost about \$340 from resellers if one shops around. These units will take a reading in under 30 seconds. I prefer the Analox unit, as it has the backing of a company involved with contaminant detection not only in the sport diving industry but also in the military and commercial diving industries.

If you don't want to spend the money for a portable CO testing device, a company called Outdoor Equipment Rentals rents the Analox CO EII for \$35 a week (<http://oerentals.com/coanalyzer.html>), although let's hope the outfit keeps these units in calibration, as per the Analox manual, which requires them to be sent back to Analox at least annually for a formal calibration.

I used to think sport divers should routinely ask if a dive shop or resort regularly tests its air quality, but in my recent experience, only about 25 percent of shops in the tropical tourist areas are testing at all. In many jurisdictions, there is no testing whatsoever. I now believe it is much safer for the diver to carry a portable CO analyzer and to smell the breathing air for the presence of odorous hydrocarbon volatiles rather than to worry about whether a shop has tested its air or not. Plus, the reality of periodic testing is that the air was only clean at the time of the test, and much can happen in the intervening three to six months to allow the production of contaminated air.

The one thing a sport diver can also do at the fill station is ask to see the compressor. If it's buried in the back of the shop under a film of oil, or if the owner won't show it to you, then look for another dive operator. Also, you can look at the location of the compressor's intake relative to any potential point source risks for contaminants such as vehicular or boat exhaust, BBQs, generators, petrol pumps, stored chemicals, etc.

What hopefully will happen over time is that there will be a CO analyzer on every dive boat, much as we now have for nitrox analyzers. As more divers show up with their own CO analyzers, signaling the importance of this issue for them, the greater the likelihood that the dive compressor operators will install inline CO monitors on their compressors.

It would be great if the US-based dive training agencies would specify what minimum breathing air standard their affiliates are expected to follow to ensure the quality of compressed breathing air. Unfortunately, now that PADI has settled a product-liability lawsuit for a CO-related fatality, I suspect, that none of the other agencies will want to develop compressed air quality recommendations or enforce the policy in an effective way. Instead, as PADI has done to reduce liability risk, the training agencies will defer to the local authority having jurisdiction that, in most locales, except for Florida, will translate into no compressed air testing whatsoever.

I suspect that if a city told its residents it was no longer testing for *E. coli* in the drinking water, most people would stop drinking that water or want a testing device for *E. coli* to use at home. With the largest dive training agency on the planet no longer requiring its affiliates to test their breathing air quality on a quarterly basis, the time has come for individual divers to routinely carry a CO analyzer so that they can test for this odorless, tasteless and toxic contaminant in their tanks and prevent themselves from becoming a possible fatality.

Problems with the Siren Fleet

divers must evacuate two liveboards in less than six months

On June 6, the *Oriental Siren* was making its final diving voyage (unbeknownst to everyone on board), from the Malaysian island of Labuan to Layang Layang in the Spratly Island chain off the Borneo coast.

"Although we were scheduled to head for Layang Layang, a 185-mile journey, on the afternoon after a wreck dive, the captain decided not to because he was unsure of the weather," *Undercurrent* subscriber Sean Bruner (Tucson, AZ) reported to us of the last days of that final voyage. "The boat had made a rough crossing coming back from the last trip, and had arrived the same day we met it in Labuan, so the captain did not want to risk another rough crossing. We sheltered behind a small island for the night. The next day, we had a nice dive on the same wreck we had done the day before. We were scheduled to do a second dive on a different wreck, but the captain decided he wanted to head for Layang Layang while he had a weather window. The crossing had been estimated for around 16 to 18 hours."

Subscriber Sherri Wren (Palo Alto, CA), who was also on the trip, said a divemaster told her about the rough 24-hour crossing from Layang Layang. "He said it was so bad that they did a visual hull inspection at the dock, but everything apparently was fine. It was a nice day when we started the journey. I had a cabin in the front, and didn't think the crossing was bad."

But when Bruner woke up to use the bathroom during the night of June 6, he noticed water on the floor. He assumed water had slopped out of the shower, so he went back to bed, but he did notice one strange thing. "When a wave hit the boat sideways, I would hear the distinctive thump, but it was followed by a splash or sloshing noise that was coming from inside the ship. Water would then flow into the cabin from underneath the shower stall."

Wren also work up early, around 3 a.m., to feel water right next to the bed, “but it was a not a lot, so it didn’t concern me.”

At 4 a.m. on June 7, Bruner went upstairs. “I could see into the engine room, as its door was propped open, and there was a lot of water on the floor. When I got up early on the previous two mornings, the boat was deserted. This day, it seemed like the entire crew was running around.

I saw Arndt, the German cruise director, and he said we should be in Layang Layang in a couple of hours. Then the boat was slowing, and there was considerable activity by the crew, with much shouting in Thai. At some point, Brian, Arndt’s Irish assistant, came into the dining room and announced there was a ‘bit of an emergency’ and we were to put on our life jackets. He said one of the two bilge pumps was down, and we were taking on water.”

“The captain, who spoke little English, sat huddled in front of the dingy . . . he had totally checked out.”

Around 5 a.m., the divemasters started knocking on cabin doors, telling everyone to come upstairs and put on their lifejackets. “Of the 10 crew, most were Thai who spoke little English, so most of the comments were coming from Arndt and Brian,” says Wren. “They said the boat was taking on water in the rear, they didn’t know from where, and crew was setting up an auxiliary pump because the main one was irreparable. They were on the phone to Worldwide Dive and Sail (WDS), the ship’s operator, and made a mayday call to the Malaysian army, but got no reply.”

Then the engine died, the lights went out and the boat was dead in the water. As dawn was breaking, the call was made to abandon ship, and passengers were allowed to go to their cabins to gather essential items. Bruner retrieved his shoes, credit cards and medications, and found a disturbing sight. “The cabin was now under a foot of water. At first, I couldn’t find my money belt, and I frantically searched around. I calmed myself, found it, but I didn’t bother to get my computer or anything else. We had been told to take nothing, so I left everything behind, a decision I would later regret.”

The seas were rough, with eight- to 15-foot swells, and the skies were dark, but luckily it wasn’t raining. According to Mary Sittlinger, another passenger who wrote about her *Oriental Siren* experience in a letter to WDS, the boat was approximately 15 miles from Layang Layang, where there was a Malaysian naval base, but while Arndt continued to make regular Mayday calls, there was no response from the navy.

Guests and crew clambered aboard the dinghies, and the life rafts were activated, but both life rafts deployed upside down. “One was blown onto the side of the ship and the crew was able to right it,” says Bruner. “They then spent 20 minutes attempting to right the other, but finally gave up and it was never righted.”

Wren says it was unclear who was in charge of the rescue. “The captain, who spoke little to no English, sat huddled in front of the dinghy. He could have directed the Thais, but he had totally checked out. So it was the divemasters and the passengers who had to make the decisions.”

Wren and Bruner were two of the 11 people in the dinghy, along with the checked-out captain and Steve, a former British navy engineer, who said it was a good idea to head to Layang Layang, where they could alert the navy and rescue the others. “Although it was a risky move to separate the two groups, it was eventually decided that’s what we would do,” says Bruner. They headed into the 15-foot seas, getting soaked as waves splashed over the bow. “One wave almost swamped us,” says Bruner. “We had to refuel three times from a jerrycan, and the engine sputtered at times.”

An hour later, the dinghy limped into Layang Layang. No naval boat came to meet them. Instead, they were met at the dock by a navy man, who asked for their passports. “When we told him we were shipwreck survivors and there were another 15 persons awaiting rescue, he asked us why we hadn’t towed them behind us,” says Bruner. “It was clear the gravity of our situation hadn’t sunk in.”

Wren agrees that the navy was absolutely unhelpful. "I told them there were more people to save, and they said, 'No, it's too dangerous. You go back out.' Steve, the Brit, argued with the navy man who had "greeted" them at the dock to mount a rescue. The man replied it was too dangerous to take out the navy's dinghies, which were about twice the size of the *Oriental Siren's*. Eventually, the navy agreed to set out, just as the life raft limped in with the other 15 aboard, including Sittlinger and a Japanese couple who were clearly shaken up from their experience. "Little Mari had curled herself up in a fetal position at the bottom of the boat, and I believe she passed out," Sittlinger writes. "To make matters worse, there were statements in all the local newspapers the next day that the Malaysian Navy was involved in a high seas rescue where they found 26 people clinging to life rafts. "

On the same spit of island was the Layang Layang Dive Resort, which wasn't much more hospitable. "The staff was nice but the manager was horrible," says Wren. "He would not help us unless he had a line

Why Doesn't DAN Have the Same Insurance Standards Worldwide?

Dave Van Rooy, our webmaster who lives in Bali, recently received a letter from the Asia-Pacific branch of Divers Alert Network, requiring that he get a complete physical before it would grant him dive travel insurance. "It's apparently due to my age," says Van Rooy, 67, but he never had to meet that requirement when he was living in the U.S. What gives?

The letter from DAN Asia-Pacific details its reasons. "Our statistics highlight that there has been a significant increase in diving-related deaths involving divers over 45. Many of these result from cardiac-related problems that were precipitated by the numerous cardiac stressors in the diving environment. These incidents often occur in divers who were unaware of any pre-existing problems. As a diving safety initiative, we are encouraging divers over 50 to visit a doctor, preferably one trained in diving medicine, to discuss their diving and health and determine whether any particular testing is advisable."

John Lippman, executive director of DAN Asia-Pacific, headquartered in Australia, told us, "We committed about five years ago to collect information about what medical conditions divers are diving with. Many divers outside Australia have never had a dive medical, and many seldom see a doctor, so this provides us with an opportunity to gain valuable information. We sometimes refer divers to a doctor if there is something indicating concern. The whole procedure is an administrative nightmare for us, but it is something we decided to take on for the benefit of research and diving safety. Most members take this in stride, some get upset, but some are extremely grateful. We are pretty sure this has saved some lives, and it's also compiling valuable information about diving health and safety. This is motivated by safety, and not driven by insurance risk."

In Dave's case, DAN didn't make him have a medical examination, Lippman says. "We took his word that he had regular medicals, and he actually provided evidence of his latest."

So why doesn't DAN America follow the same procedure? Wouldn't gathering that information be valuable for its research, administrative nightmare be damned? Are we lazy Americans getting off the hook? When we asked DAN America, headquartered in Durham, NC, about the difference overseas, we got this written reply, "To date, underwriters of the DAN Americas policies have not made the request for physicals. Regardless, we continue to look more closely at the relationship between fitness and diving. While it is not DAN's right to dictate an individual's health and fitness practices, DAN Americas conducts member health surveys to gain insight into the health condition of our membership base. We consistently review the underwriting protocols of our policies."

We find it interesting that a medical organization staffed with MDs and Ph.Ds defers to its insurance company when asked about requiring medical examinations for divers. We're not a medical organization, but having been in business as long as we have, we can see these issues pretty damn clearly and can certainly take a more direct stance. Rough water, deep diving, currents, surges, climbing into a Zodiac, long swims, multiple dives a day, shore diving and on and on are stressors. If you plan to subject yourself to these conditions, for starters, consider your weight, age, strength, aerobic capacity, experience, whether you've ever had a bends hit (or an underwater freakout), and your physician's recent assessment of your health. Then, if you feel comfortable after thinking these things through, go get wet.

of credit from WDS. Even after he had that, I'm sure he jacked up prices, but at least we had a place to stay." The next day, the Malaysian air force sent a C-130 troop carrier to fly the shipwrecked crew and passengers back to Labuan, but not before the navy posed them standing in front of the boat for a photo.

While Malaysia's military wasn't too helpful, Wren says the U.S. State Department was exemplary. "When we landed at Layang Layang, I called my husband to ask him to contact the State Department. Within minutes, he was connected to the deputy counsel of the embassy in Malaysia, who was then quickly on the phone with me. He asked, 'Are you OK? Do you need anything? What can I do?' And he checked in with me throughout my journey back to the States. So if you are in a bad situation overseas, the people at the State Department do exist, and they're instantaneously available to you."

No naval boat came to rescue them. Instead, they were met at the dock by a navy man asking for their passports.

Wren and Sittlinger say WDS's response was also exemplary. At the Layang Layang resort, the office opened a bar bill and let passengers buy clothes from the gift shop. After arranging for the Malaysian Air Force carrier, the owners met them in Labuan and worked nonstop to get everyone on flights back to their respective countries, then followed up with phone calls. Wren says WDS offered to refund her trip. Both she and Sittlinger said they would sail with WDS's Siren fleet again. But Wren has one criticism, and it's with the command structure on the boat. "If there is a crew that does not speak English, then the divemaster should say, 'I am the designated one in charge now.' It's not a great idea to have a captain who doesn't speak English if you're trying to sell to an English-speaking market of divers."

And there perhaps lies the problem. WDS is known for its strong marketing to English-speaking divers, and for expanding its fleet of liveboards across the Indo-Pacific. Is it moving too quickly with expansion and marketing, and too slowly in making sure its ships are safe and its crews are trained to handle bad weather and dive-related emergencies?

We reported in our February issue about WDS's *Mandarin Siren* sinking in Raja Ampat in December, after a possible electrical fault in the laundry room caused a major fire and sent the five passengers into a life raft (they were rescued soon after by sister ship the *Indo Siren*). Again, WDS's reaction was quick -- hotel rooms, toiletries and clothes were paid for, flights home were quickly arranged.

When divers arrived for a *Philippine Siren* voyage in March, they were told the trip was canceled due to an engine failure. WDS marketing manager Susie Erbe told *Undercurrent* a new engine had to be installed, and guests were offered a full refund and either alternative vacation arrangements or a flight back home.

With engine problems and two liveboards scuttled within less than six months of each other, questions arise about the safety of the Siren boats. True, liveboard fleets have glitches, parts need to be replaced, boats need to be rehailed, but rarely do you hear about situations as bad as what has been happening to Siren liveboards this year. Some previous passengers say it goes beyond the condition of the boats to the nonchalant behavior of WDS management, from liveboard crew all the way up to its owner.

After hearing about the *Oriental Siren*, an *Undercurrent* subscriber who asked to remain unnamed wrote on the ScubaBoard forum about her harrowing experience in January 2011 aboard the *Mandarin Siren*. "Guests were put in the water at Sardines, a dive site in the middle of the ocean, during a huge thunderstorm. I politely asked the guide if we could turn back and dive back at Mioskon, as I felt that would be far safer, but my request was ignored. I still don't understand why the decision was made to sail to Batanta Island through open water without any shelter for our last day, when such a huge storm had already set in and was not getting any easier. The guide wouldn't listen at the time, and we set sail. It was the longest four hours of my life. The *Mandarin Siren* almost turned over, the tanks were horizontal, the crew were screaming on the back deck, with some of them unable to swim, and I was told there was water in the engine room.

All the guide said was, 'We will be there in half an hour,' but that half-hour turned into two hours at least. Guests were being sick around me, and books and the coffee machine were flying around. When we finally arrived to safety, the guide said the office was aware of our location, but there was not much concern, as everything was still intact. There was more concern about the empty spaces that didn't sell on my trip."

"I never felt as unsafe as I did on that Indo Siren trip. When I got off the boat, I was so tempted to get down and kiss the ground."

Julie Klassy (Anchorage, AK) was on the *Indo Siren's* maiden voyage in April 2011 to Komodo, with WDS owner Frank van Der Linde aboard, and says crew took divers out in dangerous conditions and were very nonchalant about it. "Only one of three divemasters had any experience in Komodo. Sometimes the current was so strong, the boat could

not get to dive sites, but it let divers, some of them inexperienced, go dive in these conditions." One woman was caught in a downcurrent, pulled down 100 feet and yanked back to the surface in 12 minutes, but the crew didn't offer her first aid. "They said, 'Go get a glass of water,' but no first aid, no blanket, not even asking if she was OK. They said they had oxygen on board, but they'd have to report to Divers Alert Network if they broke the seal, and they didn't want to do that."

One day, when a fellow diver asked her if she was doing a second dive, Klassy declined because she was physically and mentally exhausted. "The guy replied, 'This is 'diving by Frank' -- he'll take you down in terrible conditions, you manage by luck and sheer force of will to return, but Frank is ready to go back again.'

"This was the first time I had ever been on a boat where I felt like my safety was at risk. The crew would sometimes admit the dives were a little dicey, but they wouldn't change anything. They'd say, 'Well, this is what it's like when diving in Komodo.' Well, when you're in that situation, you're typically familiar enough with that area to redirect divers to a less dangerous area nearby, but this crew was not at all familiar with the area." Klassy did talk to Van Der Linde about her concerns with struggling divers coming up terrified from dives. "I felt the response was that I was the bitchy American who was going to make a big deal and everyone else was fine with it -- but they were not, because I talked to them."

Jenny Collister, owner of the dive travel agency Reef & Rainforest, booked both Bruner and Wren on that final *Oriental Siren* trip. She has worked with WDS for 11 years, and has not had any issues because the company responds to problems and concerns immediately. "Wooden boats that go out on remote locations for months on end take a beating in those conditions, but WDS reacts immediately. They phoned me the second they heard about the *Oriental Siren*, so I was completely in the loop. The owners want to do right by their clients and, for the most part, I've heard nothing but rave reviews." As for the non-English-speaking crew, Collister let WDS know that they definitely need to have a Western cruise director on board ships to deal with the language barrier, but Asian crew generally have an eager-to-please mentality. "They don't want to spoil these nice people's vacations, so they go out in bad weather. It's a cultural thing -- they always want to tell people what they want to hear."

But a prominent dive travel agency in the U.K., feels differently, and has stopped working with WDS due to concerns about the boats and the overall business operation. One of its staffers was aboard the *Mandarin Siren* and saw there was no backup means of propulsion. The rig was not suitable for sailing, just for looking good in the promotional pictures. Van Der Linde replied that the boats all sailed, and the crew were fully trained sailors. But the truth came out aboard the *Philippine Siren*, where a small rudder was used in conjunction with the motor, not the kind of rudder needed to sail, and the crew admitted they were not really able to sail. Because some of the Siren boats operate in open sea in remote areas, the safety of using a Phinisi with only one truck engine for open-sea crossings is questionable.

The staffer also finds it interesting that WDS doesn't publish any technical specifications for its boats on its website. The agency is also concerned about WDS's fast expansion. While its ambition and drive for quickly building boats and distributing them over the best dive destinations is admirable, it's also fraught

with pitfalls. Local knowledge is an important component in the dive travel industry. The lack of that was highlighted with the incident on the *Oriental Siren*.

As for that boat, WDS announced on June 26 that it is officially lost. "A marine surveyor was sent to Layang Layang, and a full investigation was conducted," says a statement on the WDS website. "The final report is not yet received; however, we believe it will state that the vessel was structurally sound. It is

Environmental News about Baja California, Australia and DEMA

Kudos to Mexico's outgoing president Felipe Calderon. Last month, he cancelled permits for an enormous, Cancun-sized resort planned for the Baja California shoreline near the Cabo Pulmo preserve. Marine life has exploded there, following a decision two decades ago by residents to stop commercial fishing and develop ecotourism activities instead. But in 2008, federal authorities granted permits for a Spanish developer to build about 30,000 hotel rooms, golf courses and a marina on a strip of seaside desert about 90 minutes northeast of the Los Cabos resorts. Calderon said the permits were being withdrawn because the developer hadn't proved the 9,400-acre resort wouldn't harm the environment. "Because of its size, we have to be absolutely certain that it wouldn't cause irreversible damage, and that absolute certainty simply hasn't been proved." But the fight isn't over. The developers said that they would rethink the project and re-submit another proposal.

Subscriber Don Wilson (Trenton, NJ) wrote us that after reading our March 2008 story about Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort, he went diving there, and says it's superb. "The marine sanctuary is evidently well controlled. When have you seen a school of a couple hundred puffers? And huge schools of jacks, and on and on. I have seldom seen such high populations of fish and diversity of species. I had been disturbed by the signs everywhere along the way up from Cabo San Lucas, indicating future development, luxury resort, private property, keep out. I wanted to write now to express my happiness that the Mexican government has resisted the developers. Still, the Cabo Pulmo sanctuary is only a couple of miles along the shore. There are still around 60 miles back down to Cabo San Lucas, and I am sure developers will rape that whole area."

Across the Pacific, Australia has created the world's largest network of marine reserves, and will restrict fishing and oil and gas exploration in a major step to safeguard the environment. Australia will now go from protecting 310,000 square miles of ocean to 1.2 million square miles of ocean, including the Coral Sea off Australia's northeastern coast and the adjoining Great Barrier Reef. The number of marine reserves will rise from 27 to 60, and encompass a third of Australia's territorial waters, which sustain more than 4,000 species of fish. The current government expects to pay US\$100 million to compensate the fishing industry for the new restrictions taking effect later this year, but the conservative opposition has vowed to review the boundaries if it wins elections next year, an outcome that opinion polls agree is likely.

On the flip side, the Australian government has just approved a Dutch trawler's permit to extract 34 million pounds of baitfish off southeastern Australia by casting immense nets over baitballs. Of course, tuna, turtles, albatross, seals, dolphins -- anything trapped in the nets -- become by-catch.

It's a tougher road to ocean conservation in the U.S., as we reported last month about the opposition of DEMA (the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association) to the effort of the Obama administration to protect our oceans with the National Ocean Policy (NOP). DEMA executive director Tom Ingram took issue with our article, saying we had misrepresented DEMA's position. We had e-mailed him questions, then both interpreted and quoted his responses in our article, but Ingram wrote: "I am forced to publish your questions and our responses for our members to review, so that it is possible for them to understand your publication better."

However, the only error he pointed out was that we said DEMA was a member of the National Ocean Policy Coalition, which also opposes Obama's policy. Ingram says that DEMA has only partnered with the Coalition in support of the letter written by Congressman Doc Hastings, who chairs the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee, to the House Appropriations Committee about why he too opposes the National Ocean Policy.

Ingram didn't specifically rebut anything else we wrote about DEMA's stance toward the National Ocean Policy, nor did he offer any additional information about DEMA's position. So regardless of his criticism of *Undercurrent*, DEMA still seems to be aligned fully with gas and oil companies, factory fishing businesses and everyone else opposed to the National Ocean Policy, in opposition to the many environmental and scientific groups that support it.

suspected there was a substantial breach in the hull below the waterline. The most likely reason for this was a collision with a cargo container or submerged debris while travelling to Layang Layang." WDS says it has leased an alternate yacht and will continue to run the Timor-Leste season from August to November, as planned. The press release continues, "Since returning home, many of the guests have written to thank the Worldwide Dive and Sail crew for their handling of the emergency, even to go so far as to say that the Siren Fleet 'will more than likely end up the safest organization to dive with.'"

Klassy is one diver who disagrees. "I never felt as unsafe as I did on that *Indo Siren* trip. When I came off the boat, I was so tempted to get down and kiss the ground. I feel like WDS just got really lucky. I read what happened to the *Mandarin Siren* and then the *Oriental Siren*, and I believe their luck is running out. They've had enough close calls, so the big emergency here is that they're not specifically focused on safety, and that leads to these repeated emergencies that put divers at risk."

-- Vanessa Richardson

Flotsam & Jetsam

Turtle Freed for Queen Elizabeth's Jubilee. The Cayman Turtle Farm said it is freeing a 60-year-old turtle to celebrate Queen Elizabeth's 60 years on the British throne. The turtle, known as Sir Thomas Turtleton, weighs more than 600 pounds and has been used to breed for more than 30 years. He was released in North Sounds, the largest protected bay on Grand Cayman, and will be tracked by satellite. Sir Thomas served his Queen well but doesn't she deserve more than one free turtle, given her long reign -- and the need to replenish our oceans?

Natural Formation or UFO? A Swedish research team spent 12 days in June exploring a 200-foot-wide object at the bottom of the Baltic Sea, between Sweden and Finland, with robot camera, sonar and deep sea divers. The conclusion: It appears to be some "natural, geological formation," like a giant stone. But team leader Peter Lindberg told FoxNews.com that it's still unusual because there's no silt covering the rock, typical for sea-floor stones, and it "appears to have construction lines and boxes drawn on it" with straight edges. Also, a 26-foot-tall pillar is holding it up. Lindberg, who is still screening the video footage says,

"If an intelligent life form has built a spaceship, there's the question of 'why not make it out of stone or coral?'"

No More Shark Fin Soup at China's State Banquets. In what environmental groups call a "monumental decision," the Chinese government just announced a ban on the serving of shark fin soup at official banquets. The move falls short of an outright ban on the possession and sale of shark fins that have been adopted in the United States, and it remains to be seen how well China's instructions will be adhered to by officials countrywide. Still, the news was widely seen as sending an important signal, and it may also increase the pressure on Hong Kong, the main hub of the shark fin trade, to follow suit.

One Pissed-Off Fisherman. On May 9, Florida fisherman Donald Bamford, 74, was so angry that marine biologist Alison Johnson's dive flag was in his fishing spot that he dragged her from the seafloor by her flag line, pulling her to the surface in less than a minute. Once topside, Johnson, who was collecting data on mutton snapper spawn, suffered a severe headache but couldn't convince Bamford to let her keep diving and decompress. Johnson was treated for DCS, while Bamford was arrested on a misdemeanor battery charge and released after posting \$2,000 bail.

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