

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Walindi Plantation and *MV FeBrina*, PNG

machetes, bare butts and cannibals are part of the package

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Dear Fellow Diver:

Max Benjamin, the "First Father" of Papua New Guinea diving, purchased a cocoa plantation at Kimbe Bay in 1969, which he segued into an 800-acre palm oil plantation and a first-class dive resort. Alan Raabe came along later, and the two bought the live-a-board *FeBrina* (Fe = iron, Brina = salt water) in 1991 for Raabe to skipper. They put in moorings to avoid reef damage, and traveled to remote areas to administer inoculations. A preschool was built and another is in the works; water from Walindi's wells is shared via pipes to nearby folks.

Knowing Undercurrent readers' glowing reports of the diving and facilities, I signed up for 45 hours of door-to-door travel, totaling 11,000 flight miles. Flying from Port Moresby into Hoskins, West New Britain, I was struck by the dense greenery covering the mountains, and a volcano spewing smoke. As the terrain leveled, large chunks of the jungle had been replaced by neat rows of palm oil trees, refineries and holding tanks. On the drive to Walindi Resort, we passed houses on stilts with no running water, and ladies carrying loads on their heads or selling a few items they had grown. A news-worthy tidbit came on the radio. There had been an arrest of 29 cannibal cult members in the Highlands, eight of them women, for eating raw human brains and making soup from their victims' penises. I asked the driver, a local, if it were true or a hoax. "Oh, yes, very true," was his



MV FeBrina



reply. "Popular some places." Michael Rockefeller met a similar fate, they say, in the 60s.

At Walindi, the welcoming hostess cautioned us not to go barefoot. Getting betel nut spit on your feet is a common way of spreading tuberculosis (the deep-red toothy smiles of the locals spoke of the nut's popularity). And to avoid malaria, it's wise to wear bug spray and cover up in the late afternoons (and of course, be on a malaria prophylaxis).

After a good sleep in a large, lovely bungalow, the night air filled with the calls of birds and frogs, I was ready to dive. When I arrived at the dock at 8 a.m, my gear was set up and off we went. A four-foot chop for the first three days made the hour-long trip to sites jarring in the 21-foot, out-board-powered, aluminum boat. But what reefs! On the first dive, at Joelle's, a dizzying variety of tropical fish slowly swam about the seamount, as did schools of barracuda, big-eye trevally and surgeonfish. Off by themselves were red-tooth and clown triggers. Clarks, spinecheek and pink anemonefish hid among waving anemone tentacles. I gave a wide berth to a patch of *Corallimorpharia*, whose toxic sticky substance can penetrate a wetsuit and burn like fire.

In Kimbe Bay, the variety of soft and hard corals was staggering. Large sea fans often harbored glorious nudibranchs. Red sea whips formed their own little forest while razorfish moved in choreographed unison. My depths ranged from 70 to 113 feet, and there was generally a safety stop to look for nudibranchs or observe the schooling fish. Visibility varied from 50 to 150 feet. Land and water temperatures were in the mid-80s. Perfect.

Max and his friendly son, Cheyne, run Walindi and employ approximately 90 workers. Seven locals provide security: Machetes, not guns, are the weapons of choice. The resort has 12 well-appointed bungalows facing Kimbe Bay; they lack air conditioning but screened windows on three sides let in the ocean breezes. Two additional four-room plantation units can get noisy. Electricity is via generators, and between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m., only two switches in a bungalow and the battery charging area (an Aussie three-pronged 240-volt) will operate. There is a mini-fridge and coffee/tea-making equipment. Well water is potable. A count of 37 guests is a "good full" (mainly Aussies and Japanese, many birders or hikers), according to Ema, Cheyne's fiancé and registration manager. I was there in late June, at the end of low season, and there were less than a dozen guests.

The staff served dinners in the covered, open-sided dining room. Sunday Roasts offered a buffet of baked whole fish, tender roasted pork and chicken, and a variety of salads and vegetables. When the *FeBrina* returns to port, they put on a grill of steaks, hamburgers and sausages. The local steaks were flavorful but tough. Their only steak knife, flimsy and dull, had to be passed among diners. Food is plentiful and good, though occasionally there are shortages (they recently went three months without any cheeses, and before that, it was cereal and milk). Bananas, passionfruit and papaya were offered at breakfast and lunch. My favorite dessert was a banana crepe (pancake) with plenty of ice cream.

Back to the diving. While I saw gigantic sea fans on several dives, one on Vanessa's Reef measured in at 12 feet. Bradford Shoals was a super dive, with schooling and circling barracuda, big-eye and bar jacks, dogtooth tuna and impressive leather coral. Otto's was bigger than life, with plate corals covering large areas. Exploring the crevices, ledges and small caves, I spotted young scorpionfish and a stonefish. Schools of barracuda and big-eye jacks hung in the

deep, as did two sharks. Most impressive was a blown-up, silky orange anemone with short tentacles -- it looked just like a pumpkin sitting alone on an elevated coral head. Inside were two pink anemonefish measuring a quarter inch and two inches, respectively.

I must say I've never seen so many bare butts and pee streams. In Kimbe Bay, we were out for two to three dives, with lunch in between, but no bathrooms on any of their three boats. The men aboard had no compunction about peeing over the side or going to the bow, dropping suits and letting loose. One woman lowered her wet suit, stooped and peed while standing on the ladder. I tried to be more proper by removing my wetsuit and diving in the water, but the biting sea lice had me making quick order of it.

For lunch, we would tie up to Restorf Island, and the crew would lay out the food -- better than the dinners -- on a cloth covering the flat tank storage area with real plates and silver. Sample fare included curried fish, rice, papaya, coleslaw and tender, thin-sliced roast beef. One day we dived offshore, a virtual muck dive that included miniscule wrasse, threadfin, pixie and dwarf hawkfish, scorpionfish and mantis shrimp. Divemaster Lucas was adept at pointing out the tiniest of crabs -- tiny green, boxers, pompom and shrimp, well camouflaged on black coral, crinoids and anemones. I learned from another divemaster who hunted pigs with spears with his grandfather that a measure of a man was how many pigs he owned. He proudly told me he owned five.

Dan and Cat, Walindi's dive managers, are highly visible before and after dives. Dan would stop by the dinner table to brief us on the next day's diving, asking for requests. Cat thoroughly answered my questions before and during the trip. In fact, when I realized after I got back home that I had left my expensive sunglasses there, I emailed Cat, who had found them. A kindly Aussie mailed them to me when she got home. Everyone I encountered at Walindi was courteous, helpful, ready with a smile and eager to please. Westerners manage the show but locals get the job done.

Then it was on to the MV FeBrina, a 73-foot, three-decked former Australian fishing vessel brilliantly converted into a liveaboard dive boat by Captain Raabe. The covered dive deck's functionality is top notch. Each guest has two large wooden stacked bins; on top is ample space for working on cameras. The crew changed water for cameras and mask-dunking daily. Charging stations, both 240-volt and 110-volt, are on the deck.

When I mentioned I was going to dive the FeBrina, most friends told me, "You're gonna LOVE Captain Raabe. What a character!" True on the second count, questionable on the "love" part. It was difficult to deal with his irascible behaviors or to listen to his diatribes about his handpicked crew, previous guests and locals -- all of which were peppered with colorful "politically questionable" remarks (such as "Pat a Kiwi on the head and she'll drop her drawers"). On the other hand, he told captivating PNG adventure stories and even showed a vulnerable, kind side toward day's end. Everything about him was on overdrive, bigger than life. A word of advice: If you're going to ask for clarification of a decision, do it after he goes diving to decompress. Twice, I and another diver engaged in heated disagreements with him over dive-related issues that carried over to the dive deck. The last day before heading to dock, Captain Raabe had planned for two dives. We asked for a third, but he belligerently said that we were crazy because we were flying the next morning. We countered with the shallowness of the dives and what our dive computer indicated -- going with DAN's recommendation of 18 hours no-fly was within our profiles. I suggested we begin with a dawn dive instead of 6:30 a.m.



One of the Bungalows at Walindi Plantation

Walindi Plantation, PNG

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

MV FeBrina, PNG

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

World Scale

for our first dive because we never motored at night, but that was met with flat refusal. Back and forth we went, getting increasingly volatile. Just before he stepped into the water, he shouted that he was sick of the lot of us, and that if we get the bends, just don't tell him about it. We dived three morning dives under 60 feet, finishing by noon.

Regardless, the FeBrina is the best-run vessel of the dozens I have been on, thanks to a crew of eight PNG locals and, yes, the salty Raabe at the helm. Levo, the engineer, has five years tenure. Josie, the boat's cornerstone and 12-year vet, serves as manager, dive brief-er, instructor and ombudsman, and can handle the vessel if necessary. The three "girls," including divemaster Diane who was pinch-hitting, cooked, served, cleaned cabins and handled personal laundry for free. Digger, another divemaster, and Junior and Joe, known as "the boys," joined Josie as dive deck crew. Most dives are programmed in the FeBrina's auto-mated GPS system, and with various crew comfortable at the helm, Captain Raabe could be elsewhere while motor-ing.

Cabins, including two singles, are on the lower deck, bow and stern, with steep stairs leading down from

the air-conditioned lounge. Heads are adequate but sinks are tiny. There was plenty of hot water for showering, towels were changed daily, my bed was comfortable, and best of all, individual AC could be set to personal preference. We were advised to leave the porthole closed.

Diving was easy: Analyze and record Nitrox, suit up, listen to the bare-bones but adequate briefing and don your tank. Walk down the few wide steps backwards, and Joe is there with your fins. Stride at water level into welcoming 85-degree water with up to 100-foot visibility and no current. Twenty-one dives were offered on my six-night trip. FeBrina's policy is to have two divers in the water with guests. Junior, a deckie, not a divemaster, often chose to dive, especially when there was a shark feeding and I was alone on the other side of the reef. This young man in his 20s was a terrific spotter of the tiniest, most esoteric camouflaged critters. We made sport of seeing who could make the "best find." A floating "pod" of tiny, nearly developed, pinkish eggs loosely attached by only a thread to each other had us both puzzled

While the FeBrina can take 12 divers, we were four Americans and a Belgian, ages 28 to 70. Besides me, there was a professional underwater photographer averaging 1,000 shots per day, a geneticist who has been diving 50 years, a nomadic bon vivant seeking sharks around the world and a psychologist bent on identifying each and every critter spotted. Relaxing after the last dive of the day, we shared much laughter and diving tales among us four and, of course, Captain Raabe. The schedule was a diver's dream. Continental breakfast before the first dive at 6:30 a.m. A full breakfast to order, then the second dive at 9 a.m. A

snack, then the third dive at 11:30. Lunch, siesta, then the fourth dive at 3:30 p.m. Snack, a night dive at 6 p.m., then dinner. Josie suggested three rules: Keep dives to 60 minutes because the vessel needs to travel during the day, come up with 500 psi (which was not monitored), and when close to land (which we never were), ladies keep their thighs covered so as not to insult the locals.

Silver-tip, white-tip and gray reef sharks joined us on most of the dozen dives at Fathers. At least one swam within 10 feet on each dive. FeBrina encourages the sharks to stay around several sites by hauling down a bait box, to the photographers' delight, but preferring natural behavior, I would stay on the other side of the reef. Once, two large white-tips followed me rather than the dive guide with the box. I watched my dive buddy, who was heading for the feeding spot, unaware that two were on his fins, close enough to be kicked -- and they were. Captain Raabe was going to chum a site we had just dived, and the sharks swimming there were close and amazing to behold. This time, the bait box would be 30 feet underneath the boat, and there was no place to avoid them. I asked Captain Raabe if he would consider not doing it, but he berated me for being "one of those nut jobs" and if I wanted a "natural" setting, then I shouldn't be diving. "You think it's natural having you down there?" Donning his tank, he continued his harangue. Sharks swam shallow at the back of the boat, almost at the surface. I chose not to dive. (Digger, the guide handling the box, got a nasty bite on the thumb by a red emperor snapper).

Critters were friendly at Father. After posing for photos, a broadclub cuttlefish, settled down to his natural coloration. As he came closer partially unfurling and retracting his tentacles, I "mimicked" him by extending my hand toward his extensions and enjoyed the slow motion dance. On Meil's, a bannerfish circled within a foot for 20 minutes; when I hovered, he would stop inches in front of my goggles. Turtles at Jayne's took pieces of sponges from divers' hands. Our four night dives were good, not great. Divemasters were tenacious about prodding octopi out of their crevices, which was too much hands-on-critters for me, but then, I'm not a photographer.

A morning dive at the Arches at Father's Reef on the Fourth of July seemed very appropriate as the corals and sponges were bursting with colors, much like fireworks. I swam by six five-foot-long bumphead parrotfish on my way down. On the limestone mount, two small octopuses crawled about. The only arch is around 96 feet, and if there was another, I never found it. As dozens of pyramid butterflyfish swarmed around the seamount, I made my way slowly up the mooring rope, encrusted with tiny critters, allowing time to explore. It's said that

Diving with Helium May Be Limited

Helium, used in Trimix and Heliox, is well liked by deep wreck divers because it's non-explosive, and its low density reduces the work of breathing under pressure. However, it's an expensive gas, and looks like it will become even more so. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported last month that helium is in short supply, and various businesses that rely on it, from hospitals to balloon shops, report dwindling amounts and increased costs from suppliers.

The U.S. government controls the world's entire supply as a strategic material for military and aerospace development, and much of the country's helium supply (30 percent of the world's supply) is kept in a

Texas reservoir that connects to pipelines in Kansas. But according to Congressional testimony last May, that reservoir could run out by 2020. Congress is trying to get private companies to take to helium production, but it's slow going and has resulted in severe price spikes.

What does that mean for divers? More cancelled wreck dives. Mike Convery, co-owner of Pittsburgh Scuba Center in Homestead, PA, called suppliers in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin to try to find helium to use on a weekend wreck dive trip at Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary on Lake Huron. None came through, so he had to cancel the dive. Convery has increased helium prices at his shop from 60 cents to \$1 per cubic foot, and is not planning any deep dives until a supplier pulls through. There's a place in New York that has some," he said. "But they have laws about transporting gas across state lines."

70 percent of all Indo-Pacific marine species can be found in PNG. About all I missed were orcas and hammerheads, although there were sightings a few miles from where I was diving. However, the dolphins tried to make up for it with regular appearances. And both Kimbe Bay and Fathers are great places for nudis. The most elegant was a white, yellow-fringed heron *ardeadoris* spotted at Meil's. The flabellina bicolor and colorful exoptata were nicely spotted, too.

Ending the last dive of my trip, a fellow diver and I turned sommersaults in the pure joy of these outstanding waters. While on board, I read a just-for-laughs article Captain Raabe published in *Ocean Realm* in the late '90s, in which he was given advice from his "spiritual mentor" in Japan. It goes something like this: Life is like the shrimp-goby relationship -- symbiotic, always seeking a balance -- so relax, and let it happen. Max Benjamin and Alan Raabe, above and below the water, are great examples of symbiosis and seeking equilibrium in a world where doing so is often not easy.

Travels are not easy, either. The 8 a.m. flight departing Hoskins was simply not going to, which is often the case. I returned to Walindi for a breakfast and six-hour wait. Of course, this led to a cascade of missed planes -- every single one -- and forced overnights in Port Moresby and Brisbane. Air Nuigini arranged good billeting and a fine allowance for food both places. Stopped by police armed with M-16's and grenade launchers on my way back to the airport was a fitting goodbye to this untamed land. They quickly passed us on. "Take Me Home Country Road" was blaring on the van's radio as we continued on to the airport.

-- J.D.



Divers Compass: Round- trip airfares from the U.S. through Brisbane run \$2,500 to \$4,000, depending upon stops and season; get your visa in advance . . . A Walindi bungalow twin share for four nights with 10 dives cost me \$1,312 . . . On *FeBrina*, six nights in a single cabin (it's typically eight nights) was \$2,261; Nitrox was \$150 and good wine is complimentary at dinner . . . I arranged my trip through Cliff at the dive travel agency Reef & Rainforest (www.reefrainforest.com), and he also enjoys staying here . . . A PNG visa on arrival is \$49; exchange money

in Port Moresby Immigration, next to where you buy it . . . Make sure your agent for Air Niugini flights gets the divers' extra 33 pounds luggage allowance, which brings it up to 68 pounds for PNG domestic flights, 99 pounds for international; that airline mandates only one carry-on weighing no more than 11 pounds, but my small carryon and backpack were not weighed nor questioned . . . Laundry was complimentary both at Walindi and *FeBrina*, so take only a couple of changes . . . Website - www.walindi.com

Bahamas, Carriacou, Puerto Rico . . .

and choose from land-based or liveaboard options in the Galapagos

We get a number of readers' reports, which we bundle into an online *Travelin' Divers Chapbook* and send out to subscribers in December. Many reports deserve special note, because they inform you of new opportunities you might not consider, or to alert you to problems you might not want to face.

M/V Spree. If you've been diving for a while, you'll remember the *M/V Spree* as that bunkroom boat that dived the Gulf of Mexico's oil rigs. She now uses several ports to reach Florida's Dry Tortugas and the U.S.S. *Oriskany*, and Texas' Flower Gardens, but let us report on the recent addition to her itinerary -- Puerto Rico's Mona and Desecheo Islands, where, over the years, intrepid divers have traveled in hopes of finding the last remnants of big fish in the Caribbean. Brent Barnes (Edmond, OK) took a five-day journey in April. "A couple of land-based operations go to Mona from Puerto Rico, but that is rare, due to the distance and

weather in crossing the rough Mona Passage. The *Spre* is not a luxury liveaboard but is functional. Owners Frank and Melanie are fun to dive with. They limit trips to about 18 divers; the lodging is bunk beds, with three inside heads and an outside head. Food is excellent and plentiful. There are virtually no diving restrictions, other than dive with a buddy unless you are solo certified. Planned no-decompression dives are not allowed. There are typically four to five dives per day, but the diving was somewhat disappointing. The first dives of the day were drift dives, with all divers dropped over the wall in a short timeframe and then each buddy pair picked up by the *Spre* itself. It was somewhat intimidating to see the 110-foot *Spre* barreling down on us, but Frank was a master at guiding the boat. I was impressed with the wall off Mona, which would rival the walls of the Cayman Islands, San Salvador or Cozumel. The coral was healthy and the visibility exceeded 150 feet. Other than a couple of nurse sharks, we did not see a single shark, dolphin or whale, and little pelagic life at all. We did see several eagle rays and a few turtles. Smaller fish were somewhat plentiful. I was amazed at the small number of larger grouper and jacks. Clearly, fishing pressure has had an impact on Mona and Desecheo." (www.spreexpeditions.com)

Carriacou. Years ago, I reported on a few fine dives off this sleepy little Caribbean island northwest of Granada. In August, Katja Gorjup (Maribor, Slovenia) sailed in, got certified by Lumbadive and reports that "Diane and Richard from Lumbadive have a lot of experiences and are full of joy for doing what they do. It was great having a friendly and calm instructor who was not just highly competent in leading me around the reefs, but also showed me a lot of interesting species. Seeing turtles, 100-plus different types of fish, lobster, octopus and so on, I always end up being enthusiastic about doing a next dive." In May, Isabelle Groleau (Toronto, ON), spent two weeks there, got her divemaster certification and reports "Two beautiful weeks of dives, two highly instructive courses, which will make me a divemaster, besides a better diver. I shall remember for a long time my dive to Mushroom." (www.lumbadive.com)

"Five divers got lost in the murk and couldn't find the reef ledge . . . this points out how a third dive guide could be of benefit."

Galapagos by Land and by Sea. For experienced divers, a liveaboard is the only way to go around these islands, but some divers prefer to be land based, and there are indeed land-based operations here. For example, the Red Mangrove Dive Academy is based at the Santa Cruz Lodge, on Santa Cruz Island, and with two solid boats, they can get you to plenty of big fish action, although at \$1,800 per person for four nights and four dives, it's not cheap. On the website, they note that "Red Mangrove is proud to be a paddy (sic) dive resort" (www.redmangrove.com). Another option is Scuba Iguana, also on Santa Cruz Island, which Carlyle Stout (Ashland, OR) says "is very well run: good gear, good safety instruction, knowledgeable dive masters, thorough briefs before each dive, good boats and divemasters. Pelagics and fish life were fantastic: manta rays, eagle rays, hammerheads, Galapagos and white-tipped reef sharks, green sea tortoises and barracuda." (www.scubaiguana.com)

If you do want a liveaboard, we have recent reports on the *Humboldt Explorer*. Hal Berson (New York, NY) chose it because "they did the most dives at Wolf and Darwin Islands, which are far better than the rest of the islands on this trip. They also depart on Monday morning instead of a Wednesday like most of the others, so this was good for conserving vacation days. The boat is relatively new and comfortable enough, though the beds are tight, and I often woke up with my arm or hip asleep. It's no high-end luxury cruise, but every member of the crew chipped in helping with wetsuits, getting into BCs, handing over cameras and fins. The panga drivers were outstanding, always there in advance of us surfacing, able to locate any pair who may have drifted from the main group, which happens in these tough currents. We used Leslie at Dive the Galapagos to book the trip and our land extension (www.divethegalapagos.com). If you want to see whale sharks, a thousand hammerheads, a couple hundred silkies, and Galapagos sharks, turtles, dolphins, rays, fish, sea lions and free-swimming eels, then this trip is a must." (www.explorerverventures.com)

Atomic Aquatics Recalls 4,200 Dive Computers in North America

Atomic Aquatics, which makes the \$1,200 Cobalt dive computer models, announced in late September that it's recalling 4,000 of the units in the U.S. and 200 in Canada, which were sold between November 2010 and July 2012. The computer can leak, causing the lens to blow off suddenly, which can result in impact injuries and a breathing gas leak. Atomic has received 23 reports -- but no injuries -- of the lens being forcefully expelled, due to excess air pressure inside the computer.

The recalled products, made in the U.S., can be identified by the manufacturing dates, which are the first four numbers of the serial number. The first two digits signify the week of manufacture (01 through 52) and the second two digits signify the year of manufacture (10, 11

or 12). The manufacture dates of recalled computers are between May 31, 2010 and April 16, 2012 and have serial numbers that start with any of the following numbers:

The 10 Series: 2210, 2910, 4010, 4710, 5010

The 11 Series: 1111, 1711, 2611, 2811, 3211, 3311, 3411, 3511, 3611, 3711, 3811, 3911, 4011, 4111, 4211, 4511, 4611, 5211

The 12 Series: 0812, 1112, 1212, 1312, 1412, 1612

Serial numbers, 2210-XXXX through 1612-XXXX, can be found by scrolling to the "System Info" screen on the computer.

If you have one of the recalled computers, return it to either an authorized Atomic Aquatics dealer or the Atomic Aquatics factory for inspection and repair. For details, contact Atomic Aquatics toll-free at (888) 270-8595, e-mail sales@atomicaquatics.com, or go to www.atomicaquatics.com.

Linda Rutherford (Montara, CA) was aboard the new 120-foot *Wolf Buddy* in August. "It has powerful twin water-jet engines that are quiet and provide a smooth ride. Not having a prop is safer for wildlife such as turtles and whales. The routine was to move, as quickly as possible, below surface surge and current to 30 feet below and meet up with others, then proceed as a group to a ledge at approximately 60 feet, crouch behind a large boulder, deflate the BC to rest motionless and wait for the fantastic display of fish to swim by -- nine-foot Galapagos sharks and hammerheads, huge whale sharks, manta rays, eagle rays and turtles. Large fish schools hindered visibility a bit when we were watching the exciting pelagic visitors. At times, there were strong currents and downcurrents. Pushing off the reef to follow the whale sharks into the blue, we had to be sure to remember to re-inflate our BCs to avoid being swept down. We had two good dive guides, but what would happen if one got sick? There were 16 people, divided into two groups, each with a guide. For the challenging conditions, it would be better to have a third dive guide available, for at least some of the dives. On the Mola Mola dive, the water was a cold, greenish, murky soup. Five divers got lost in the murk and could not find the reef ledge, where we waited for 20 minutes at 40 feet while the guide looked for them. In retrospect, divers could have been warned to take a compass reading on the wall, so they could have been swimming in the right direction. Again, this points out how a third dive guide would be of benefit. The lost divers surfaced and asked the dinghy crew where the dive guide was. The dinghy driver shrugged and indicated that he did not know. Our bubbles next to the cliff wall were not visible in the surge. Perhaps a tiny bit of apathy in the dinghy crew was a factor. A conscientious dinghy driver would know the dive plan and where divers should be." Interesting story. And regarding the compass, how many divers carry them -- and how many of those know how to use them? (www.buddydive-galapagos.com)

Cat Island. The Bahamas' 700 islands have several out-of-the-way dive operations, and occasionally one is worth noting. In June, Jamie Pollack (New York, NY) went out with Epic Diving on relatively undeveloped Cat Island and was treated to oceanic white-tip sharks, reef sharks and silky sharks. "One diver saw a marlin pass by. They take you out for five days of shark diving, and you can be in the water for hours. Once they attract the sharks, they hang around for a long time. You get in the water first on snorkel to let the sharks get used to you. Then you can go on in dive gear. I didn't want to get out of the water, so my tank was passed to me right in the water! The water is crystal clear, and the weather was sunny and hot. My pictures came out amazing, as the sharks stay near the surface, and light from the sun reflects on the sharks beautifully. We even got the oceanic white-tips on the reef. These animals came right up to me and swam

right by; they are beautiful and majestic. The season is only from April to June. There are two options for accommodations -- a house you can share with a group (which is what I did and liked a lot) or a hotel about 20 minutes away." (www.epicdiving.com/catisland.html)

-- Ben Davison

Is This Dive Operator Right or Wrong? *and is there a way divers can avoid the bad ones?*

Dive operators will be on the defensive when a bad accident happens aboard their boats. If you are there when something goes wrong, brace yourself because you may be contacted by lawyers on both sides if there's a lawsuit. And woe to you if you dare talk about what happened, especially to the press -- you'll really get their attention. In today's litigious society, dive operators are not only more likely to stay mum about the details, but also they may try to zip the lips of their customers.

Consider the aftermath of the death of Massachusetts diver Karen Murphy, 43, who died while diving the *General Sherman* wreck near North Myrtle Beach, S.C, with Coastal Scuba on July 24. A few divers onboard spoke to the press.

Registered nurse Darlene Sterbenz told WPDE NewsChannel 15 in Conway, SC, that she, her friend and fellow nurse Debbie Warren, and the Coastal Scuba crew found Murphy floating in the ocean, unresponsive. A young male employee of Coastal Scuba pulled Murphy onto the boat, and Sterbenz and Warren tried to revive her. But Sterbenz said that's when Coastal Scuba's crew failed to act. "Did you call the Coast Guard?" she barked to the boat's captain. "He said no." The Coast Guard said its team was called at least 10 minutes after Sterbenz said Murphy was found. Sterbenz said that while they were trying to save Murphy's life on the boat, the divers Murphy had been diving with were still underwater.

Sterbenz also told the press the medical equipment on board was faulty, with dry rotted emergency oxygen masks on board. She said one emergency oxygen tank was empty, and an employee threw the other overboard. "Poor young man kind of freaked out," said Sterbenz. "He said it's going to blow, and he threw the oxygen overboard."

Kevin Kirk, a master diver from Kentucky, talked to the *Charlotte Observer* about the experience, saying he realized something had gone wrong as he was surfacing from the dive, when the rescue diver flew by him on the way up. Murphy was already on the deck when Kirk and his wife surfaced. A crew member and Warren were performing CPR, then Kirk and his wife, a surgical technician, helped perform CPR while the boat was driven the hour back to shore. Kirk also verified that the oxygen tank was empty. They tried to resuscitate Murphy with a different tank, but couldn't find a mask that would work, so they continued taking turns applying chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation until the Coast Guard met the boat.

"Why would they want to muddy the waters by sending these letters? You can't make people not talk to the media."

Kirk said the *Sherman* wreck, at a depth of 50 feet, is considered an amateur dive site, but the dive was more advanced that day due to low visibility and a swift current. "With the right conditions it would be a very easy dive," he told the *Observer*. "But visibility was only 10 to 15 feet with a decent current."

A week or so later, David Marvel, a lawyer representing Coastal Scuba, sent letters to three people, asking them to use caution when speaking to the media, stating that "should any investigation determine that the vessel's equipment was in proper working condition and/or that any deficiency was the result of

PADI Has a New Owner

PADI, which started as a little nonprofit organization decades ago, has not only been owned by a private equity firm, it's just been sold to another private equity firm. The New York firm Lincolnshire Management announced in August that it had bought PADI Worldwide Corp., based in Rancho Santa Margarita, CA, from Seidler Equity Partners.

Lincolnshire's managing director Kate Lehman told *Buyouts* that she and her colleagues liked PADI because of its global presence, and because of Lincolnshire's experience with membership-supported organizations that provide training in the sports and recreation industry. Holdings in the firm's portfolio also include Flight Training Acquisitions, an aviation training company, and The Alaska Club, a chain of fitness clubs in Alaska.

Lincolnshire's two big goals: expand PADI into Asia, and lure younger generations into diving. "Scuba is a steady business, and we see growth coming out of Asia, as well as with 'Generation Y' consumers, or those generally in their 20s and 30s," Lehman said. Lincolnshire will also help build out PADI's social media platform.

Lehman said PADI's performance has remained strong in recent years, despite the Great Recession, but she wouldn't give the details of its financials. Nor is

Lincolnshire releasing terms of the deal, though it typically backs companies with revenues between \$50 million to \$500 million, and operating cash flow of \$5 million to \$50 million.

Will this deal help PADI improve its dive training standards? It's too soon to tell, but the focus on an expansion into Asia and social media platforms seems to signal that Lincolnshire and PADI have a "bigger is better" focus, and changing the way it currently trains divers is at the bottom of the to-do list.

Peter Meyer, senior vice-president of Willis Recreational Diving Insurance, is not too optimistic that this deal will change anything. "I have always felt that PADI was missing something with respect to its handling of dive training (too simple, too fast), and would expect this sale to simply confirm that attitude going forward. For example, I do not believe that anyone can be an 'Advanced' or 'Master diver, based on current PADI training program outlines - the names just do not support the real ability of those individuals that take these programs - and I think the entire industry already recognizes that. I am involved in some litigation that has PADI training as a focal point, so I can't address that in any further detail, but I can tell you that I think its standards and training are part of the overall problem with the industry."

operator error, any public comments to the contrary would be defamatory and Coastal Scuba will pursue all available remedies."

Kirk says he didn't receive that letter but that, as a professional diver, he was obligated to file a report with PADI. Even before Murphy's death, he was planning to file a quality assurance complaint with PADI because of safety concerns. "[There was] the lack of a safety during the dive briefing, as far as where the O2 was located, an all-recall if there was an emergency on the boat . . . Of all the operators we've ever dove with, we really did not like how things were going on this one."

Kirk doesn't have any qualms about speaking out. As he told WPDE in a second interview, "We don't know the cause of death or what actually happened to Mrs. Murphy, but there were enough concerns that I felt like they needed to be spoken of."

So were Kirk and Warren in the right for talking to the press? According to Bret Gilliam, a frequent *Undercurrent* contributor who has advised and testified as a diving expert in more than 250 lawsuits, they did nothing wrong. It is Marvel who is "acting inappropriately. You can't threaten witnesses like that. If there are dive professionals involved, like Kirk, they're obligated by the rules of their membership to file a report. The boat captain also legally has to file a report with the Coast Guard, which will conduct its own investigation, and witnesses are obligated to cooperate. To send a letter in advance will piss off witnesses, alienate them, and lead them to think there was something the dive operator has to hide or cover up."

Perhaps Coastal Scuba was quick to have its lawyer send out shut-up letters is because of its history of violations with the Coast Guard (which WPDE also highlighted on its website, after reporting about the legal letters). USCG records show Coastal Scuba has had five violations since 2004, including failing

to have proper documentation aboard its vessel, not having small children wearing life jackets on board, and leaking diesel fuel in to the Intracoastal Waterway. In 2005, another woman died while diving with Coastal Scuba, but the company was not found at fault for her death (she collapsed on board the boat after a dive).

Gilliam says that Coastal Scuba's history of violations is inconsequential, because they're so common on passenger boats. "I've seen far more offensive violations on vessels." True, the boat erred in lacking an operating oxygen kit, he says. "But the outcome of the diver fatality might not have changed even with a fully functional kit. If the diver died either from arterial gas embolism or a cardiac event, neither would have been prevented by immediate care, even from professional EMS teams or a doctor. So we have a tragedy and clearly poor conduct by an inexperienced vessel captain, but it's likely that none of the operator's actions caused the death. The USCG was radioed within 10 minutes. They would not have responded within any critical time parameters to change the outcome either, even if they were called in the first 30 seconds of the diver surfacing. Remember: With other divers still underwater, the vessel is somewhat limited in what it can do with regard to evacuation.

It's another story to be on a boat with a history of leaving divers behind, backing over them, pumping bad air and serving bad food. "But what this boat is guilty of is minor," says Gilliam. "Far more egregious stuff is happening on other boats."

How can you avoid getting on a boat with a bad history? You can't, because it's virtually impossible to find out. "If you want to take the time to Google an operation and see what comes back, that's the only way to find out," says Gilliam. "Coast Guard files are, for the most part, confidential and heavily redacted, so it's hard to find out the details, especially for the public. And it gets worse once you get outside this country." The authorities in Third World countries like Indonesia and the Maldives aren't known for their quick disclosure and easy access to records of their dive operators' histories. However, we'll toot our own horns here and say that our Reader Reports and annual Chapbooks are an extensive, accurate source of divers' experiences, both good and bad, with dive resorts, liveaboards and dive operators worldwide.

"In the case of Coastal Scuba, it would appear that Karen Murphy, a certified diver capable of independent unsupervised activity, had a problem underwater, therefore, the company had no culpability. Why would they want to muddy the waters by sending these letters? You can't make people not talk to the media. No judge will find this a sympathetic argument, based on their conduct."

Where Lionfish Eradication May Be Working

A marine wildlife expert from Bonaire visiting the Cayman Islands on September 4 told local environmentalists that the efforts made on that Dutch island to cull lionfish were beginning to work and populations are falling. Fernando Simal said that concerted and coordinated efforts across the island to enlist the help of visiting and local divers, the introduction of lionfish hunts and changes to local laws allowing the use of spearguns to cull the invasive species have all paid off.

Simal revealed the results of a comparative study with the neighboring island of Curacao, where cull efforts had been slower to start and were significantly less than the commitment made in Bonaire. His findings showed that the lionfish in Bonaire were smaller,

weighed less and, above all, had less density. The lionfish population was almost half that of Curacao's, and the size of the fish was 33 percent smaller, a positive because smaller fish eat and compete less with indigenous species. Simal said lionfish is promoted in Bonaire as a tasty dish and now fetches around \$14 per kilo which, coupled with the licensing of spearguns for divers hunting the fish, has meant that the cull works.

The Caymans' Department of Environment marine team said that they were also starting to see some positive effects from the culling efforts. Numbers in areas which are dived regularly are falling, but local experts raised concerns that lionfish are still dense 100 meters outside the mooring areas, and that more efforts are needed to keep up the pressure on the lionfish population.

-- Cayman News Service

Of course, talking to the press can get people in trouble. Just ask the dive industry executive who, in a foreign press interview a couple of years ago, cast aspersions on a diver who had died while diving from one of the company's dive boats. The family filed suit on a number of issues, including the intentional infliction of emotional distress. This complaint was not covered by the company's insurance. The executive had to defend himself and subsequently settled out of his own pocket.

Despite sending out letters to divers to shut it, Coastal Scuba manager Cameron Sebastian told WPPE he had no comment on Murphy's death except that Coastal Scuba was cooperating with the investigation, when asked if the operation had had any other dive-related deaths, he replied, ""It happens occasionally in this business. If you've been in it long enough, it can happen from time to time."

The Coast Guard investigator took witness statements and is investigating Murphy's equipment. The Horry County deputy coroner said it could be up to two more months before the cause of death is discovered.

-- Vanessa Richardson

Maiden Voyage on a New Dive Boat? Forget It

especially if you want Nitrox and air conditioning

If you get a special e-mail from a liveaboard fleet advertising exclusive, discounted rates for a new boat or a boat being moved to new waters, just hit delete. Over the years, we have received endless complaints from divers eager to jump on something new, only to find that the boat sailed without the required dry dock work being completed, or the crew is new to the area, or Nitrox has not been installed, or rain pours through the roof -- and so on.

Case in point is the *Carib Dancer*, formerly the *Cayman Aggressor*, which made its debut in May with trips to the Bahamas' Exuma Cays. Michael Joest (Baden-Wurtemberg, Germany) was on the fully booked maiden voyage and says, "The AC didn't work well the first few days, so I preferred to sleep on deck. There sometimes was a strange smell coming out of the heads, but they managed to get rid of that with bleach, the Nitrox compressor didn't work, so no chance on N-dives. The welcome and information on how to handle things was a bit short, 'what if' procedures were mentioned in 10 seconds only, nobody wanted to look at my log book or c-card, which I found a bit strange. All guys working on the boat seemed to be only slowly getting used to their jobs again. The food was three-star, but they offered gluten-free stuff for me. It was a maiden cruise, so naturally all kind of problems appear out of nowhere, which I had no problems with."

But other divers aren't as laid back as Joest, and they expect more for their money. Ellen Rierson (Grand Cayman) went on a late June trip and says, "We all believed there would have been plenty of time to work out the 'kinks' prior to our charter, since there were nine charters before ours. We were wrong. Aggressor posted Facebook updates with photos of a shiny 'new' boat and reports of many new items and enhancements. Unfortunately, it appeared that most of what was done was merely cosmetic. The boat already seemed tired and worn, with several critical on-board system failures. An example was the lack of Nitrox, despite the heavy advertisement of its availability. When we asked why and whether this was a new issue, we were told that the oxygen generator had *never* worked from day one. According to the staff, Aggressor/Dancer management was telling the crew to fix it, and the crew was saying they did not have the technical know-how to do such." Other problems: major plumbing issues, inedible food and surly crew (three of them were kicked off the boat at the end of the week).

Rierson sent a letter to Wayne Brown and Wayne Hasson, the Aggressor Fleet's CEO and president respectively, and says she got "nothing more than excuses blaming (non-existent) inclement weather, abrupt

Beware of the Hand-Biting Barracudas

Thomas Goreau, president of the Global Coral Reef Alliance, wrote a guest post for our blog last year, entitled "Barracuda Attack," about his encounter with an infamous barracuda near Cozumel that took off his little finger and the side of his hand (read it at www.undercurrent.org/blog/2011/01/04/barracuda-attack). His tale got plenty of reads, and other *Undercurrent* subscribers posted their own barracuda stories. The most recent was written by Adriana Ingrid Diez (Buenos Aires, Argentina), who came face to face last month with another barracuda hanging out in a popular dive site that also likes to go for the hands. Here's her story:

"I was with my husband, Daniel, in Half Moon Caye, Belize on September 3. It was an incredible bright and sunny day; the water was warm and calm like a pool. I was carrying my camera in my right hand, and a 10-inch-long metal stick, one that divers use not to touch the coral, in my left hand. We were at 42 feet, between two marvelous reefs, when something hit me on my left side, and something happened to my left hand. At the same time, I hit Daniel, who was on my left. He was surprised, as he could only see a barracuda, and he didn't realize I had been bitten until he saw the blood coming from my hand. The barracuda had appeared from nowhere, and everything happened in seconds. I grabbed my left hand and I saw wounds in my ring and pinky fingers, plus others on the hand. But I counted my fingers -- all of them were there, thankfully.

"It was in front of us, then it was behind us, menacing, coming and going, following us. We started to go up to the surface, very calmly, and we didn't see the barracuda again. It was big, almost four feet long.

"Once we reached the surface, we were 200 yards from the boat, but the crew heard our whistles immediately and sent a small boat. The divemaster cleaned my wounds carefully, then wrapped them with Band-Aids. The crew started asking if there was a lionfish around us, saying that could have been the reason for the attack, because locals are feeding barracudas with the lionfish that they find. They also use small spearguns or metal sticks, like the one I was carrying, to feed and kill barracudas and nurse sharks. 'Were you wearing a ring?' everyone asked. 'Bracelets?' No, nothing, just the metal stick. Was the fish attracted to it?

"Then we called DAN to report the incident. They responded very quickly, sending a fast boat to take us to Belize City. On the ride, the driver mentioned that he had heard of eight barracuda attacks in Belize just that season alone. One of them was to a lady who had been bitten in the face, close to her snorkel. The driver also mentioned that people were feeding barracudas with sticks and harpoons.

"Once in Belize City, I was taken to Belize Medical Associates, where a Dr. Roberts told me that I needed stitches, antibiotics and a tetanus injection, and that the tendon of my left ring finger was almost totally cut, so he needed to sew it up. Lots of shots -- I thought I was going to faint. It was impossible to go on diving, at least on this trip.

"Two days later, I was back in Argentina. I had the stitches removed on September 19, and I'll need physical therapy in the next month to recover full movement of my hand. But I fortunately have all my fingers."

staff resignations, and the fact that the boat had only been in the water for a few months. Ironically, we were offered 'free' Nitrox on a future charter. The company's offer of \$100 off on Nitrox, provided the coupon provided is used within a year, is nothing but a cruel joke. At this point, I can say with fair certainty that none of us will ever give the Aggressor/Dancer Fleet an opportunity to make good on that offer."

Joel Sill (Los Angeles, CA) was aboard right after Rierson, in early July, and had similar trip issues. He contacted Aggressor before his trip to make sure there would be Nitrox, and got a letter from Brown stating, "The Nitrox was down while we waited on a part but has been fixed, so there should be no issue for you." But when Sill boarded, the Nitrox wasn't working and the crew said they've heard nothing about it becoming available. After the trip, Sill contacted Brown again, with his complaints and those of fellow divers, about the lack of Nitrox, bad food, malfunctioning A/C units, etc. Brown e-mailed all the complaining divers, saying that crew finally got the Nitrox system up the day the divers were leaving, "so at least the future guests that want it will have it. I can assure you that *Carib Dancer* was top of our list every morning, correcting the items that were found after the launch." Brown didn't offer free Nitrox or anything else with his apology. Sill says, "I was completely unsatisfied with his answers; they felt like they came from a politician, not a diver. My travel agent says he has become consistently so. I won't travel on any of their vessels again."

We contacted the Aggressor Fleet to find out what happened. Wayne Hasson says the Nitrox system works now but admits getting it to work was a big headache. "It was brand new and very expensive, to say the least. We brought down two experts from the U.S. two weeks in a row to fix this problem, costing a lot of money, but they could not fix the problem. It finally got fixed on the third try. We spared no expense to get this system working correctly for our *Carib Dancer* guests. It was only able to pump to 27 percent, so it was given to guests for free. Canceling a charter because Nitrox is not the full 32 percent benefits no one. It's not easy to operate outside of the U.S. where you cannot always find companies with professionals that can troubleshoot and fix problems with technical equipment of this sort.

Hasson has issues with Rierson's complaints. "While there's always two sides to a story and anyone could argue who's to blame and what should be done, we were threatened from the start by her and her group to give them all their money back or suffer the consequences of what they could do, using blogs and e-mails to everyone they knew just so they could hurt our companies. I'm sorry, but this is unfair and unjustified."

The Aggressor Fleet has gotten good marks over the years for its good customer service, especially when it has had to make amends to customers for dive trips gone wrong due to mishaps beyond its control. Yes, as Hasson points out, it's difficult to get some things done in Third World countries. Also, many Aggressor boats are franchises, meaning the boats are owned by individuals, not by the company, so sometimes issues are out of management's hands, and it has to scramble when things go awry. For example, the owner of the *Utila Aggressor* recently decided to get out of the dive charter business and sell the yacht, thus, Honduras' Bay Islands is off the Aggressor's list of dive destinations.

So take our advice: If you take a liveaboard's maiden voyage or go on a trip during the first two months, know that you're taking a risk, and be prepared for it. Taking a known boat on an exploratory cruise is one thing, taking a renamed boat into a new area for the first time is an entirely different situation. You'll be the first ones to find things that should be improved -- and probably will be corrected long after you've finished your trip.

By the way, Aggressor is launching the *Thailand Aggressor* on March 3, traveling both north and south in the Andaman Sea from Phuket. Hasson says the boat is the former *Star Dancer* and yes, it will be refurbished before starting service in Thailand. Give them at least four months before you climb aboard.

-- Vanessa Richardson

Reef Fish of the East Indies

and the recent controversy caused by a photo of the authors

With a list price of \$250 and a weight of 14 pounds, this will probably be the most expensive piece of literature you've ever bought - but the price and the poundage is worth it to add *Reef Fish of the East Indies*, a three-volume set, to your library (it's available for sale at the "Books" tab of www.undercurrent.org).

Renowned marine biologists Gerald R. Allen and Mark V. Erdman have combined 60 years of surveys, fieldwork and research to create the most definitive guide of the Coral Triangle to date, perhaps forever. The 1,292 pages of text and 3,600 photographs (40 percent of which are of fish not seen before in print) gives comprehensive information on every known reef fish species from a region known as the global epicenter of marine biodiversity.

Volume 1 includes descriptions of the regions that make up the East Indies, along with a discussion of the geographic distribution of area's species. The other two volumes are devoted to the 120 fish families, with up-to-date classification, habitat, and distributional range of each relative. You'll get a concise

description of each of the 2,631 currently known reef species from the region (25 of which are new ones recently discovered by Allen and Erdman), which are then broken down into variances between and within species to differentiate between sexes, life stages and regional-specific color patterns. You want details; you got 'em. All three hardbound volumes come packed together in a slipcase.

This is an essential reference for any scuba diver. Whether you're headed for an Indonesian dive trip or not, you'll drool over many of the amazing species and photographs in these books. Allen and Erdmann say they wrote the book to engender an appreciation of the region's amazing biodiversity, and highlight the urgent need to conserve it for the benefit of future generations.

The *Guardian* in Great Britain recently ran an article about the books, illustrating it with a photo of Allen and Erdman, taken by frequent *Undercurrent* contributors Burt Jones and Maurine Shimlock, photographing a new species in Cenderawasih Bay. The photo showed some of their photography and research gear resting on the reef. Because the photo had Jones and Shimlock's byline on it, that couple got a deluge of negative, accusatory emails, such as "Congratulations for destroying the reef," and "You are two-faced and liars." You can read Jones and Shimlock's reply in one of their recent *Undercurrent* blog posts at www.undercurrent.org/blog/2012/08/17/not-guilty-as-charged.

In response to the angry comments, Erdman wrote this reply, which we think well describes well the responsibility of scientific research to coral reefs. "I very much respect your concern, and I have no desire to create a polemic, but I do feel it may be of use for me to quickly clarify this photograph . . . As for the scientific equipment that is seen laying on the substrate in the photograph, this is indeed a real-life situation, as I had just collected a new species of cryptic dottyback fish from 230 feet depth and we were taking specimen shots to document the live coloration of the fish for the purposes of the scientific description of the new species. I can imagine that this photograph may look as if there was significant coral crushing going on, but I can only assure you that:

A) the scientific equipment was carefully placed on the reef in a manner so as to not break any coral;

B) though Dr. Allen and I are indeed very close to the substrate to get the shot required for the description of the fish, both of us have well over 10,000 dives under our respective belts, and most definitely are not "laying on the coral" and crushing it.

C) though the process of collecting and documenting new species may seem objectionable to some (and I certainly respect that opinion), it is in fact a "necessary evil" if new species are to be described and our global biodiversity heritage cataloged properly. I note that our efforts to describe patterns of biodiversity across the East Indies -- and especially to highlight areas like Cendrawasih Bay that have high numbers of endemic species found nowhere else in the world -- have helped governments in the region to prioritize where they invest conservation dollars, and has led to the placement of millions of hectares in new marine parks, including the 1.5 million hectare park that now protects the marine biodiversity of Cendrawasih Bay.

"Finally, as I think is made clear above, there was no attempt to "alter the habitat to get the shot." I had brought up a cryptic new species from 230-foot depths that would be impossible to photograph *in situ*, due to its behavior of living deep within the reef interstices, and we were simply photographing the anaesthetized animal to document its living coloration for the purposes of the new species description.

"Again, I have no desire to quarrel, and I very much respect your concern for diver/photographer behavior on reefs. I only note that the activity documented in this image is an important part of the scientific process that documents new species and



The Shimlock/Jones Photo that Caused a Fuss Online

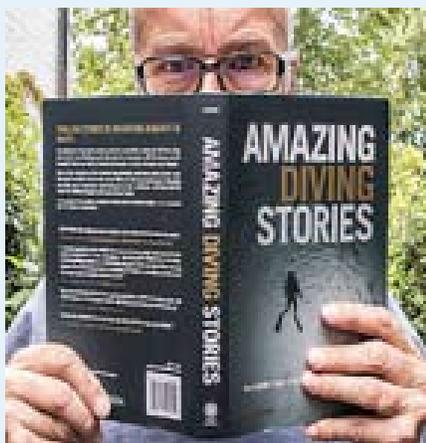
directs governmental attention for conservation efforts, and I can assure you that we actively strive to minimize any damage to the reefs from our surveys. Thank you for your concern on behalf of the world's reefs -- I can only affirm that we also share this concern."

Kudos to Erdman and Allen for their decades of efforts, and to the help of the dozens of individuals, companies and nonprofits that funded their work and helped to get their book published.

Amazing Diving Stories from One of Our Own Writers

In the search for great underwater adventure writing, one needs to look no further than *Amazing Diving Stories*, the absorbing new book by John Bantin, one of *Undercurrent's* top-notch contributors. He has compiled dozens of true tales that will intrigue and delight everyone, from the seasoned scuba diver to the bathtub snorkeler. Consider the British diver who barely survived a crocodile attack while diving from a popular Indonesia liveboard, the foolish divers descending to 270 meters, and the divers fired upon by the military when diving in the Red Sea. Or that "new" dive resort in the U.K. run by a delusional innkeeper, who gave his hungry guests a rifle to shoot a sheep for dinner. Or divers' excitement searching for sunken WWII planes with Papua New Guinea natives. Some of John's stories occur in areas unfamiliar to North American divers (he lives just outside London), but the trials and tribulations described in his more than 60 pieces (organized in categories such as Dangerous Animals, Near Misses and Not so Near, and Treasure Seekers and Finders) will be recognized by anyone who has strapped on a tank.

John is today's most engaging writer about the underwater world (here's a man who makes 300 scuba dives a year), and he gets behind the scenes of terrible tragedies, applies his great wit to his own travels and travails, and explores unusual and bizarre behaviors -- both animal, fish and human -- that take place a few fathoms down. John has been a mainstay in the pages of *Diver* magazine in the U.K for more than 30 years, and for good reason. Not only does he have a keen eye for a good story, his smart, conversational writing style and keen British wit keeps his readers' attention.



The Author with His New Book

I had the pleasure to have dinner with John a few years back, and reading this book is like hearing his voice. His deep knowledge about diving, sharp humor, and talent to spin a good yarn have come together in *Amazing Diving Stories*. Don't save it for your next dive trip. Savor it now while the autumn leaves fall.

To buy John's book, go to www.undercurrent.org, click on "Books," and you'll go directly to Amazon; the profits we earn from this, and every, transaction you make while you're there will go directly to save coral reefs and their critters.

-- Ben Davison

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