

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Admirals Club, Singer Island, Florida

superb critter diving, trips to the Gulf Stream

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Dear Fellow Diver:

It was night. My mask and snorkel were caught in an invisible web of fishing lines as I spy-hopped to see which pier I was exploring. The wicked combo of the line and the incoming tide was tugging the mask off my face. This is what it's like to get into trouble diving solo, just when you think all is safe.

Within minutes of gearing up and walking into Florida's Intracoastal Waterway between the low-slung Blue Heron Bridge and Singer Island, near West Palm Beach, my light attracted a tiny squid. It hung inches from my camera, which allowed clear shots even in the murky waters. I was on a slow stalk less than 15 feet deep. My prowl was rewarded with a number of close-ups as first one, then another mantis shrimp perched at the top of the holes I had scouted out earlier. An ocellate swimming crab assumed a boxer's stance, ready to defend itself. But now I was snagged. Scissors hung off my BCD, and my scallop-bladed knife was chest level. I could detach my snorkel or remove my mask. Finning to hold position, I dangled my camera rig from its strap off an elbow and pushed my wrist through my buoy line holder. Hands free, I untangled my snorkel and finished the adventure.

So went my last night dive at the under-the-radar Admirals Club. Its private dock is less than 160 feet south from the Blue Heron Bridge, a dive site that photographer Keri Wilk called the "Lembah of the U.S." Wilk, Norbert Wu and other expert photographers



Admirals Club Dock (Blue Heron Bridge to the left)

Send Us Your Reader Reports by November 20

We're getting ready to work on the 2013 Travelin' Divers Chapbook, so we need your reader reports. The due date is November 20. To send us your reviews of dive operators, liveboards and resorts, complete the online form at www.undercurrent.org/members/UCnow/SubRRTopMA.php. You can also follow the link "File a Report" on the left side of our homepage (www.undercurrent.org); or after logging in, follow the "Reader Report" link in the top navigation bar.

was sipping sundowners and chatting with Rich on his dock, a manatee broke the water. My mood shifted from contemplative to upbeat. At high tide at noon the next day, I waded in, a mandatory dive buoy in tow. Within the first five feet, a dainty juvenile French angelfish played hide and seek in debris under the dock. A small male planehead filefish shyly provided profiles. As I made my way against the incoming tide toward the bridge's eastern span, big yellowline arrow crabs worked their claws like miniature construction cranes, the span between their pincers a foot or more. Swimming under the bridge, I finned to a submerged piling and spotted an uncommon lined seahorse. My hope for a "new friend," as birders call their initial sighting of a species, had been fulfilled on the first dive. On the way back, with the tide now flowing out and the water becoming more turbid, I photographed delicate, young, black and white highhat juveniles. I emerged after a little over two hours.

Back on the dock, rinsing my gear with a freshwater hose, I chuckled at how unlike the Admirals Club is from the hoity-toity image its name conjures. Forget membership fees, stuffed shirts and stiff upper lips. It's an unassuming, pastel green two-floor apartment building with 12 units. Its swimming pool is the Intracoastal Waterway, accessed from a short set of stairs next to its private dock. The person in the apartment next door may be a long-term tenant who works on the island, or someone vacationing with their kids (I was the only diver). Plus, the Admirals Club is strictly self-serve. Rich and Eva only supply salt, pepper, beach/bath towels and paper towels; you bring your own coffee, soap, shampoo and groceries. The Admirals Club has no rinse tanks or drying lockers (although you can leave gear behind a locked gate), but my full bathtub worked fine for that purpose.

Diving is self-serve, too. I brought most of my own gear, then drove a half-mile each day to pick up a couple of full tanks and weights (\$26 per day at Force-E in Riviera Beach). To dive the Gulf Stream, you schedule boat dives with Force-E or nearby shops like Jim Abernethy's and pick up your own tanks (weights are included on the boat). That said, the convenience as an East Coast dive destination is huge, being just 20 minutes north of the West Palm Beach airport. My spouse and I could walk to interesting restaurants on Singer Island (we liked Johnny Longboats and Two Drunken Goats), or drive across the Blue Heron Bridge to hit another local hang-out, the Tiki Waterfront Sea Grill. A modern Publix supermarket sat just across the bridge, and a booze shop was also nearby. With our full kitchen, we stocked up on steak, roasted chicken, veggies, breakfast foods and lunch fixings. Our do-it-yourself

may be unhappy for having their "secret" hideout revealed, but Undercurrent readers who relish fish photography need to know about this one. Owners Rich and Eva Baumgart are dive-friendly. Diving their dock and those nearby, then diving under the Blue Heron Bridge, followed by a few boat dives in the Gulf Stream off West Palm Beach, put me in seventh heaven last June.

The weather was iffy as fringes of Tropical Storm Debby blanketed the area with cloudy skies upon my arrival. While I



Thumbnail-sized fringed file fish (no Photoshop)

dining made timing meals to the tidal charts super easy.

After an early dinner, I set out to look for critters at the turn of low tide. Submerging around 6 p.m., visibility was only two to five feet but with much more to see, from my Midwestern freshwater perspective. Using my all-purpose, 60-milimeter macro lens, I got close enough to starfish, porkfish, purple sea urchins, cardinalfish, Caribbean lobsters, sand perch and a thumbnail-sized rough box crab to satisfy my quest for decent images, though for some photographers a little Photoshop might be in order here and there.

After the first couple of bridge dives, I explored its easternmost spans between Singer Island and Phil Foster Park. Entering the water an hour before high tide, I swam against a mild current, jamming my dive line holder into the sandy bottom from time to time to anchor myself. I paused to photograph a solitary white polyp emerging from bright red soft coral. To prevent my buoy line from hanging up on the bridge pilings in the current, I swam through one set of pilings from north to south, then returned the other way through the next set. A yellow stingray loitered under a span. I photographed a bank sea bass and watched a decorator crab, festooned with camouflaging "ears," crawling up an orange soft coral.

As a surface interlude, my spouse and I walked over the bridge, holding our hats and sunglasses in place during Debby's gusty tailwinds. An osprey perched in one of Rich's trees. During the next low tide, I explored north of the Admirals Club dock, delighted by a monster horseshoe crab plowing furrows in the sand as it looked for dinner. As evening cloaked the end of my two-hour-long dive, parrotfish wore their pale green and brown splotchy colors for nighttime. I surfaced with more than 1,300 psi, never having gone deeper than 16 feet in the three-foot visibility. The bottom temperature was 79 degrees, making me happy I'd worn a hooded vest under my 5-mil wetsuit.

After rinsing my gear, I walked it back to my apartment, a two-bedroom unit measuring around 600 square feet. I hung my wetsuits over the tub and set my BCD on towels on the kitchen's linoleum floor. With temperatures into the low 90's, the air conditioner in the living room ran nonstop. A flat panel TV hung from the living room wall, facing a couch and the kitchen. The décor could be described as eclectic seashore hand-me-down. Older glass-topped tables held my camera gear in the kitchen and living room. The folding closet door in one of the bedrooms leaned forlornly in a corner, but hey, the closets themselves were roomy.

Approaching midweek, I explored north of Rich's dock. A crevally jack, a bluewater predator, zoomed in to check me out. A decorator crab, camouflaged with fire sponge and crawling up another fire sponge, fascinated me. Neighboring piers sheltered an unexpected cloud of Atlantic spadefish and a school of common snook. Rays of sunlight filtered through the pillars and columns of the docks, eerily beautiful.

My second dive turned into a night dive, again exploring piers to the north. Caribbean lobsters bunched shoulder to shoulder, inching toward my Sola focus light, waving their antenna and touching my camera rig. A black durgon rested on the bottom, its typical blue-black coloration replaced by a ghostly pattern of light and dark, reminding me of rayed craters on the moon. A scaly mantis shrimp peered at me long enough for me to study the dark spots moving around in itshon-

Admirals Club, Florida

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

World Scale

Shore Diving in Intracoastal Tidal Waters

To plan your dives, you'll need local tide tables. The Blue Heron Bridge is part of the Lake Worth Inlet, or Riviera Beach. Complimentary tables are available at local dive shops or online at www.tides.info/?command=view&location=Palm+Beach,+Lake+Worth,+Florida. Tides progress about 50 minutes each day so that during the week, a high tide starting around 8a.m. on Monday can swing to after 12 p.m. by Friday. To maximize bottom time, I entered the water about an hour before and after the tides turned. During the dive, the main thing is to reach your exit point before the current gets too strong.

It helps to have a tool to hold your position, and enough weight to keep on the sandy bottom. I don't recommend a reef hook, as there are no reefs with dead coral to hook onto. I started off by using a lobe on my line holder to stab into the bottom, but the sand was too densely packed for this to work well. I didn't want to

dull my dive knife, so I bought an inexpensive, 16-inch-long, blunt, stainless steel rod called "The Tank Ticklin' Stick" that I saw the locals using. It has a stainless steel ring at one end that clipped into my buoy line holder. I could detach and slip it through my fingers any time. It also works as a tank banger.

In these waters, divers must stay within 50 feet of a dive flag or risk being fined. The catch is that sooner or later, its line hangs up on the many pilings and piers. Locals solve this problem in two ways. One is by hanging weights off a buoy line holder and leaving it nearby on the bottom, but that means having to buy or rent extra weight, and it can be carried off by the current. The preferred method is to wrap the line around something that won't be damaged, then clip it back into the line holder. Locals also use a cave or wreck reel on which they clip a small, blunt, grappling-style reef hook to use when drift diving. The free end still goes up to a dive flag, but it eliminates the need for a separate reef hook and line.

-- S.P.

eycombed eyes. At the end of the dive, phosphorescent streamers lit up the water when I waved my hands.

Debby's winds turned more favorable mid-week, permitting a two-tank boat drift dive off West Palm Beach. Many dive shops there work as a reservation agent for different boat charters (Abernethy's is an exception; it typically uses its own boat first). You make your reservation, pay your money, then drive to a nearby marina and your dive boat. Force-E found a boat willing to go out the first day after Debby's tailwinds shifted westerly, so I hooked up with Little Deeper, a 38-footer driven by twin diesels. She could accommodate 20 divers but only five were on board, plus divemaster Jason Landau and boat driver Alan Wacker. The roomy cabin easily held everything we wanted to keep dry.

On our first morning dive, the guide was to watch over two novice divers while two others and I would go together. The current was stiff, and after finning back to the stern to grab my camera, I discovered my "buddies" had completely vanished. The 55-foot-deep reef sheltered a small number of typical Caribbean reef fish. The current pulled me along until the reef disappeared. For 30 minutes, I skimmed about 15 feet off the sandy bottom, conserving air. Then, in the 60-foot visibility, I spied a huge "rock" off to the right. Finning closer, the rock grew immense flippers and a huge plated head. My lips formed an OMG as I beheld an enormous loggerhead turtle, its shell more than three feet in diameter and about a foot and a half top to bottom. (I saw two more on the second dive.)

Ten minutes later, I sent my DAN safety sausage to the surface while hanging on my reel during my safety stop. On the surface, the two-foot waves were choppy enough that neither boat nor land was visible. After inflating my BCD, I could see the high-rise-lined coast off West Palm Beach. I positioned my eight-foot sausage to stick up high. When the boat finally picked me up, I learned that, with engines running, the crew could not hear my Dive Alert a half mile away. However, I puzzled why I had drifted so far from the boat. Turns out Jason's divers had a problem at first, and returned to the boat with him. The other two guys surfaced around that same time, just to make sure the boat was not too far away, then the group had hooked onto the reef for 10 minutes to do some

sightseeing. All that time, I was going my merry way, heading north, with my nearly hour-long dive time putting even more distance between the boat and me.

For my farewell dive in the Intracoastal Waterway, I caught an afternoon high tide to explore the bridge's western span and the sandy shallows off Phil Foster Park. As I approached, stirring up a bit of sand, an uncommon bandtail searobin, a big-eyed, duck-lipped creature with blue spots on its wings (another first), ignored me as I took my fill of photos. I was next attracted to an odd little fish less than two inches long with a dappled gray, brown and white body blended into the grains of sand around it -- a lancer dragonet. Continuing, I added a flame box crab to my images. The unusual sights kept racking up as I observed a remora hanging around the back of a red-band parrotfish, then a tiny red-ridged clinging crab inching along an encrusted creature-condo. I ended the dive appreciating two fingernail-sized fringed filefish, one predominantly green, the other grayish, slowly swimming in a formation that would make a synchronized swim team proud.

Having pursued fish photography throughout the Caribbean, I'd say one could do as well here as just about anywhere. The critter photography reminds me of St. Vincent, though with lower visibility and a tidal flow to handle. Nonetheless, this trip was one of the best bang-for-the-buck dive adventures I've had in years.

-- S.P.



Divers Compass: A seven-night stay at the Admirals Club runs between \$900 and \$1,200, depending on the season and number of guests . . . Car expenses ran about \$250 for the rental and gasoline . . . Air-filled tanks from Force-E Scuba (www.force-e.com) are \$10 per day, and weights were \$5.50 a day, but Admiral Club guests get 10 percent off; I spent \$65 for the two-tank boat dive . . . One of the best mementos of my trip was the 244-page book Under the Bridge, with hundreds of great images by local photographer Suzan Meldonian . . .

A good surface interval was strolling along the tidy walkways of Palm Beach Shores on Singer Island, then a long public beach along the Atlantic to view turtles (including a rare, critically endangered Kemp's Ridleys) rehabbing at the Loggerhead Marineline Center (www.marinelife.org) . . . To make reservations at Admirals Club, call Richard Baumgart at 561-842-2028.

Amoray Dive Resort, Key Largo, Florida

mixed reviews, but still a winner

Dear Fellow Diver:

From a statistical point of view, Amy Slate's Amoray Dive Resort is quite interesting. The online reviews I read were evenly distributed between excellent and awful, something I had never seen. So while I was there in July, I tried to figure out what was causing the spread.

Key Largo dives sites are well-described in Undercurrent reviews posted online. The area is heavily used, and not all divers are good at avoiding contact with the reefs, most of which are unhealthy at best. The dives are normally 20 to 30 feet, with many tropicals and imposing barracudas (I also saw a small white-tip and a turtle) making the location good for beginning divers and for people who haven't been diving for a while. The water temperature was in the mid-80s; I was comfortable in just a dive skin. On some dives, there was pretty good current but mostly the water was calm.



Amoray's main dive boat is the 45-foot Amoray Diver. The Monday crew was relaxed, friendly and helpful, on a par with the crew of any dive boat I've been on. Briefings were a little weak, as the staff had not been in the area for long, not uncommon throughout the Keys. Next day, the first dive was on the Duane, a deep (for this area) wreck. This captain was more aggressive, seemly displaying an "I'm the captain" chip on the shoulder. When he barked a question at me, I replied, "Aye, captain," with no irony intended (he lightened up considerably on the later shallow dives). Given the wide range of diver skills in the Keys, and the possibility for problems to occur on this dive, he was a "drill instructor" in getting the divers'

attention, and getting it through our heads that we needed to be careful and aware. His job was to get us there and back safely; I think he approached the challenge properly.

The other boat is the smaller Just-in Time, a nice six-pack and the personal property of Justin Minichino, Slate's brother and co-owner. They use it when there is overflow or when someone purchases "Platinum Service," which runs \$100 a person for a two-tank dive (two-person minimum). On this boat, one can visit deep wrecks other than the Duane and Spiegel Grove with the proper advanced certification and an OK from Justin. He's knowledgeable about the reefs, and gave great briefings. On one dive, he took us to a rarely-visited reef with no buoy, and carefully set and secured the anchor in the sand. The boat has an excellent sound system. On the first dives, Justin put on the Keys' ubiquitous Jimmy Buffet (for you Parrotheads, the album sounded like Songs You Know by Heart). Cruising out to a dive site in the Keys, listening to Jimmy Buffet, hey, it doesn't get better.

On the downside, Just-in Time's Platinum Service didn't include careful gear unloading. When the trip was over, Justin unceremoniously threw his customers' dive gear off the boat onto a communal pile on the dock. Given that some divers have BCs loaded with solid lead, the chance for a problem should be apparent. In my case, it was no big deal because I was going to replace my regulator anyway. To be fair, Amoray's website says that crew will break down your gear, I just had a different meaning in mind. If you are on the Just-in Time, I suggest you unload your own gear. Another experience: While hanging on the dragline waiting to get back on the boat, Justin swam up and asked if I would let him "cut." He explained he would then help me get on the boat. But after getting aboard, he simply walked away from the dive platform and went forward, forgetting me. As this is what I expected to happen, I was amused rather than shocked or outraged. However, be warned!

At the resort, my spotless room was perfect for divers. The floors were of a tile that does not get slippery when wet. Though sparsely furnished, I had a full refrigerator/freezer, a small breakfast-nook table, microwave, toaster oven and coffeepot. For the meals I ate there -- fruit or yogurt for breakfast, a quick sandwich between morning and afternoon dives -- this setup was ideal. With limited counter space, preparing a real meal would be tough. Outside were large grills and picnic tables. The room could handle sleeping for six, with a queen bed in



The Amoray Diver in Front of the Resort

a separate bedroom and four trundle beds in the common area. As mine was a waterfront room, I had a balcony overlooking the bay and the nearby dive dock. The balcony had a very comfortable hammock where I could easily have spent the rest of the day. My room was connected to an adjoining room, so the two spaces could be combined for a large group. The single door did not block sound well, so pretty much anything in one room could be heard in the other. Once a curtain rod fell by just being brushed, but management quickly repaired it and painted the hole in the drywall.

There are plenty of stores, restaurants, etc., within walking distance. In the next parking lot over is Jimmy Johnson's (of NFL Fame), full of football memorabilia, overpriced bar food and standard Keys-style drinks. While it's worth stopping for a drink or listening to the live band, it's not a place to have a meal. Across from Jimmy's is Sundowners, which is on the bay, so the sunset view is great. The food was good and appropriately priced for a resort area. Many also mentioned Hobos, about a mile up the road; one of the captains stated it was the best steak place in Key Largo. It's a great place for good volume for a good value.

My wife, having not dived for awhile, took a morning refresher course, then in the afternoon, she joined the group led by another instructor. On both dives, he hit the water and took off, never looking back or attempting to "guide" the people who contracted his services. During the dive, my wife vomited into her regulator a few times. She is prone to seasickness, and while the fast pace set by the "guide" may not have had anything to do with her distress, it certainly did not help. Because of that poor experience, she canceled her dives for the rest of the week. But because the pre-paid guide fees are non-refundable, I decided to stick with my already-booked guided dives. The one I had for Tuesday (the Duane dive day) set her pace to mine, showed me interesting spots on the reefs, and when we wandered pretty far away from the boat, she did the "peek of shame" and got us back. If you use an Amoray guide, perhaps you should put in writing what your expectations are for the guide, and have it witnessed by the guide and management.

I'm sure the turnover rate at Amoray explains some of the wide range of ratings. If you're lucky to have good guides, you get great service. After all, the staff was highly qualified during our visit. Everyone, other than the dive "guide" noted, seemed driven to provide excellent service. As near as I can tell, the mate on Just-in Time was both a certified captain and divemaster. When he warmed up to me, he revealed himself to be an intelligent, interesting fellow.

Ok, a last Justin Minichino story, I promise, but it really illustrates some of the strange things I saw. While going through the channel between the bay and the ocean, Justin left the wheel to, I think, look for his sunglasses in one of the boat's storage areas, leaving the wheel unattended. The mate was sitting near the wheel and fully aware of what was happening. Along with "only speaking when spoken to," he apparently knew enough to not touch the wheel of Justin's boat. With nobody steering, the boat changed course, and headed for the concrete wall of the channel. Boat speed is low in the channel, so there was no immediate problem, but in roughly ten seconds, things were going to get interesting. Justin looked up and told the clearly nervous, conflicted mate that "he should steer a while." The mate leapt to the wheel with appropriate alacrity and set the boat on a safer course. It made me wonder about the

Amoray Dive Resort, Florida

| | |
|------------------------------------|----------|
| Diving (experienced) | ★★★1/2 |
| Diving (beginner) | ★★★★★ |
| Wreck Diving (beginners, don't go) | ★★★★★ |
| Snorkelling | ★★★★★ |
| Accommodations | ★★★★★ |
| Food | ★★★★★ |
| Service and Attitude | ★★★★★ |
| Money's Worth | ★★★★★1/2 |

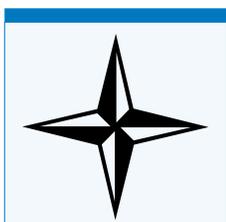
★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale

treatment required to turn an accomplished and intelligent fellow into someone who could sit still during such a situation. "Sit still" is not quite accurate in this case -- he was clearly fidgeting and trying to figure out if he would be in more trouble if he touched the wheel without permission or said nothing and allowed the boat to impact the wall.

At one point, Justin mentioned (or bragged?) that people worked at Amoray only for a year, pointing out numerous boats with captains who had formerly worked for him. He gave no indication this might not be ideal for his business. The apparent "do what you're told, speak when you're spoken to" management style that I observed leads to some odd situations. It seems that the strength of the basic business model- affordable rooms set up perfectly for divers, right next to the dive boat dock - can overcome the brow-beaten staff. Most of the time, I was so impressed I wondered why Amoray was not franchised all over the world and known as the best dive resort anywhere. Then there would be the "how on earth do they stay in business?" moments. If you can overlook the lapses, then this is a great place. In fact, I have already booked another week.

-- E.R.



Divers Compass: Two people can stay a week here and dive two tanks daily for six days, for \$1,400 to \$1,700 total . . . The resort is about an hour's drive from the Miami airport . . . I heard "through the grapevine" that if you wish a gratuity to reach the crew, give it to the crew directly or use the tip jar . . . Website: www.amoray.com

Bikini Atoll, Hawaii, Raja Ampat...

and one reader's Hurricane Sandy dive trip

Hurricane Sandy Diving. Eleven years ago, the *Wave Dancer* sought refuge in Belize during a major hurricane; it capsized, and 20 souls were lost. Last month, *Aqua Cat*, which operates in the Bahamas out of Florida, was on a cruise with Sandy approaching. Terrence Taylor (Lutherville, MD) who has been on her before, reports that "the first three days of diving (15 dives) were very windy, so we spent most of the time in the lee of Eleuthera. Unfortunately, Hurricane Sandy intervened. We were able to get in two dives Wednesday morning, then hightailed it to Nassau and moored at a sheltered mooring at the Atlantis Marina. Captain Mark was upset about not being able to provide a great charter, but kept us informed with constant reports on the weather and the boat's situation. While the wind approached 100 m.p.h. for three days, with constant gales in the 60 m.p.h. range, the ship fared well, and we were allowed to stay onboard with plenty of water, food, power and drinks. (The Atlantis essentially shut down and confined guests to windowless areas.) While this was a stressful situation, the crew worked hard to make our confined stay as entertaining as possible, and also went to get lengths to change reservations for many guests several times, showing great patience." (www.aquacatcruises.com)

Raja Ampat by Liveboard. This is the hottest dive destination on the planet, and Rickie Sterne and Chrisanda Button (Wesley, AR) tells us they learned of these Indonesian islands "from a report published in *Undercurrent* in September 2003. The subtitle of that report was 'Is this the world's best diving?' For us, the answer is probably yes, if your idea of great diving is defined by beautiful reefs, with healthy hard corals brightened by stands of colorful dendronephyta, lush black coral, large schools and aggregations of mid-sized tropical fish, interesting individual fishes and invertebrates, mantas and dozens of white-tip and black-tip sharks cruising past in singles, duos and triples. Our *Putri Papua* cabin had a comfortable

Does This Seattle Diver Deserve Death Threats?

As Superstorm Sandy slammed the Northeast this month, a different kind of storm hit the Pacific Northwest when a young local diver was seen hauling a huge Pacific octopus from a popular Puget Sound diving area near Seattle's Alki Point, causing a ruckus among divers and in media outlets around the world.

"It's just not done. It's bad form. Even if you can do it, you shouldn't," said Bob Bailey, who witnessed Dylan Mayer, 20, bringing the octopus ashore. Bailey told the British newspaper *Daily Mail* that Mayer punched the octopus several times as he was dragging it ashore, and that it was still alive when Mayer dumped it in the back of his pickup truck. Mayer had a one-day hunting license and legally did nothing wrong, but divers worldwide were infuriated by his actions.

Part of the problem is that this particular area, Cove 2, is regarded as a pristine park, albeit not an officially protected one. Divers go in hopes of observing the giant Pacific octopus, considered intelligent, agile and not usually hunted. The other issue with hunting an octopus is that if it is female, it could be guarding its eggs. The sex of the octopus in question is in dispute, and Mayer has repeatedly said he saw no eggs when he captured the creature. He told the *Seattle Times* that he punched the octopus in self-defense because it had wrapped its tentacles around his mask and mouth, and that he couldn't breathe. The reason why he wanted to capture it in the first place: "to draw it for this art project, and eat it for meat."

Another amazing aspect of this story is how it went viral and caused such an uproar. The story began after another witness to the octopus' capture wrote about his hostile confrontation with Mayer on the Northwest Dive Club's website, calling on local dive shops to ban Mayer from their stores. Visuals helped fan the flames when he posted pictures of Mayer with the octopus, and then Mayer himself posted photographs while grinning and measuring the cephalopod with a yardstick on the floor of his garage. Now Mayer's family has been bombarded with less-than-friendly phone calls, dive shops have banned Mayer, and he says he has been receiving abusive e-mails and even death threats.

What a change from a few decades ago, when divers, not known to be radical environmentalists back then, were finning around, spearing anything they could get close to. The Mayer incident shows a fundamental shift in how divers are near or at the forefront of environmental protection and preservation. But death threats and threatening phone calls to the family? While you may applaud these divers for being so protective of the dive site and its inhabitants, keep in mind that Mayer's actions, however inappropriate, were not illegal.

Instead of making death threats, how about getting legislators to make some changes? Phil Anderson, director of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, has decided to use the incident as a force for change. After receiving a petition signed by 5,000 divers, he announced plans to explore regulatory options for banning the harvest of giant Pacific octopuses at Cove 2 and possibly elsewhere in Puget Sound. He'll be holding public meetings this winter to hear the public's thoughts. Even Mayer is in favor, telling Anderson he supports a ban, saying, "I didn't know they were so beloved, or I wouldn't have done it."

double bed, a single berth for storage and an ensuite bathroom. Jeffrey, the boat's new cook, has definitely improved the food. Dinners began with fresh, homemade soups; main courses included fish and chicken or beef, with plenty of fresh veggies and always rice. When we crossed the equator, Captain Robert called us to the bridge. He manipulated the boat until his electronic compass showed only zeroes -- we had stood on the equator! We made a dinghy tour of Fam Lagoon to admire the lovely mushroom islands, and strolled along an isolated beach. We were offered the opportunity to climb Mount Pindito. We saw three species of wild orchids blooming, and several beautiful birds. The crew was kind and attentive, and helped us gear up. The dinghy driver lifted our gear into the dinghy before we climbed back in. The dive guides conducted night dives daily, even when we were the only divers. Grand Komodo's boats are comfortable liveboards, not 'floating hotels' with 1,000-square-foot cabins. However, the considerate service and the skill of their dive guides made us feel that we had enjoyed a luxury diving experience." (www.komodoalordive.com)

And Raja Ampat by Land. A couple of issues ago, we wrote kindly about the land resort Raja Ampat Dive Lodge. Fredrick Turoff (Philadelphia, PA) tells us of Raja4Divers on Pef Island that "so impressed three of my party that they canceled their next week's plans to go to another area and extended their stay.

Potential Danger with Aqua Lung Weight Pockets

Aqua Lung is conducting a voluntary recall of SureLockII weight pocket handles, which it has put into most of its BCDs since 2009. They are concerned that the rubber handle can pull off of the plastic weight pocket, leaving the weight pocket still attached to the BCD. The company says there are no known occurrences of this happening underwater or any reported injuries, but it's making a judgment call to

recall all of them. The revised handle now has a thickened band of rubber at the base.

Anyone using SureLockII weight pockets, no matter what year you bought them, should bring them to the nearest Aqua Lung retailer, which can quickly replace your handles while you wait. The replacement is made under warranty and free of charge; however, the handles will be in short supply for most of November.

For more information, call 888-818-3483 or email support@aqualung.com.

From Sarong, it's a three-hour boat ride through the Dampier Strait to the remote resort past Gam Island. Armin Keller and Sabine Kaufman are the able dive operators. With six spacious seaside bungalows a short walk from the restaurant and dive operation, this new resort has much going for it. Each bungalow has a king bed, desk and shelves, porch with lounge chairs, and an indoor-outdoor bathroom. The Papuan shower -- a large stone basin with hot and cold taps into which you dip a large ladle to pour the water over yourself -- was a new adventure. The spacious restaurant adjoined a lounging area and library. Meals were sumptuous. Fresh island smoothies were available. The photo room has six stations for photographers, each with several power supplies, towels, plastic trays with useful tools and supplies, and a computer with a large monitor. Night dives took place around the dive dock and the house reef. Nitrox was supplied at no extra charge, which pleased this 65-year-old diver. The amount of fish, critter and coral life will astound (this was my fifth trip to Raja Ampat). I had a new experience on my last night dive -- a Wobbegong shark grabbed a small black-tip shark just to my right and swam directly by me, pausing right in front of me for a short while. I managed to get a shot of the Wobbegong's head with the other shark in its mouth before it swam off slowly with us in pursuit. It headed under a coral outcrop, its body convulsed, and the small shark was gone. What an exciting end to the visit's diving." (www.raja4divers.com)

Diving Both Sides of Hawaii. Most traveling divers skip the eastern side of the Big Island to dive the Kona area, and Skip Lynch (Duxbury, MA) tells us why. While diving with Nautilus Dive Center in September, he says the "owner/dive guide weighted himself heavily, wore gloves and crawled along the bottom, pawing the live coral mercilessly. I was led to believe I was being taken on a boat dive, but was charged \$85 to make two shore dives a few miles down the road. I had my own equipment, by the way. (Another operator charged me \$10 for a tank, plus one refill, so I could make the same shore dive myself.) Adding insult to injury, the second shore dive, about 10 minutes after the first, was at the same site! We proceeded at a snail's pace along the bottom (roughing up the coral), and I would receive frantic signals if I swam a short distance away, even while in plain sight. Though I didn't participate in the coral-mauling, I was chastised repeatedly for having 'stressed' a razorfish, which I admit I approached too closely, causing it to dive into the sand."

On the other side of the island, Ernest Lavagetto (Walnut Creek, CA) headed north of the ever-popular Kona in October to dive with Sea Adventures at the Mani Lai Resort on the Kohala coast. "Sea Adventures runs six-pack dive boats, handles all your gear and offers hot showers. They generally dive the reef off Puako, geologically interesting because of a large number of lava tubes and caves, and an abundance of turtles, fish and nudibranchs. Of particular interest is a manta ray cleaner station near the Sea Adventure dock. The visibility is great, and you can see if the mantas are there before you begin the dive. I would say the success rate is more than a third of the time. If no mantas are spotted, you move on to another dive spot. While Kona is famous for the night manta dives, photographers will enjoy the daylight photo opportunities in relatively shallow water. Sea Adventures is not widely known by the diving community but it really does offer a better dive environment than the larger group diving boats. Gary Simmons

is probably the best underwater guide you'll ever have. If you don't stay at the resort, you'll need to call Sea Adventures to get access to its dock because it's in a gated community (you don't have to worry about someone breaking in to your rental car)." (<http://maunalaniseadventures.com>)

Bubbles Below , Kauai. This dive shop generally gets good reviews from our readers, but here's a little burp. Mark A. Magers (Oakland, CA), diving with them in October, said the competent crew showed him a variety of fish -- a frogfish, a purple leaf scorpionfish and a good-sized octopus. However, "we signed up for the three-tank 'adventure' dive, billed on the website as 'when you've seen Sheraton Caverns enough...' (their words, not mine). Yet the second dive was ... Sheraton Caverns. All dives were on the Poipu side of the island. It did not feel like an adventure at all. The cost for two of us for three dives each, with nitrox on two of them (not sure why we didn't get nitrox on the first dive), was \$500, a ton of money for what we got in return."

Indies Trader, Bikini Atoll. Here's a bucket-list trip for trained and competent divers, says Stephen Pahl (Los Altos Hills, CA). "Very expensive and extreme diving. The captain and divemasters treat you like an adult -- plan your own dive and simply let them know. They provide advice and counsel if they want to modify your plan. Most dives are at least 150 feet for 20-plus minutes, resulting in deco stops for 20 to 40 minutes. If you want to see the largest, most diveable WWII warships and the *U.S.S. Saratoga*, you have to come here. Chris, the skipper, and divemasters Brian and Edward were wonderful. Accommodating to each diver's needs and desires, they lead dives deep inside the wrecks and provide history of the site. While the boat is clearly more 'Spartan' than most, it was reasonably comfortable to serious divers. This is not a trip for casual divers and the inexperienced -- you need to be very comfortable with extended decompression stops and diving in closed environments." (www.indiestrader.com)

-- Ben Davison

Life Insurance for Scuba Divers

what 14 of the top insurance companies are offering

If you've had a difficult time getting a good rate on a life-insurance policy because you let on that you're a scuba diver, you're not alone. What's considered risky can vary by company. For instance, some will rate you negatively if you dive too frequently for their taste. But by shopping around, you may find a company that doesn't penalize for diving. Insurance companies will often change their criteria annually to be competitive.

Jeff Root, an independent life insurance agent in Lake Forest, CA (www.rootfin.com), says that when he has scuba-diving customers contacting him about obtaining life insurance, he asks them these questions:

- What's your average number of dives per year?
- What's the average depth of your dives, and what's your deepest dive?
- Are you diving in overhead environments (caves, shipwrecks, ice)?
- Do you do any rescue diving or diving for pay?
- What are your certifications?

Then he references the answers across all the top-rated life insurance companies to see which carrier will look most favorably at their diving.

On a recent blog post on his website (www.rootfin.com/blog), Root posted 15 of the top insurance companies' scuba diving underwriting summaries, and let us publish them here.

You'll notice in the "Notes" column the frequent mention of a "flat extra." That's a charge insurance companies use to handle higher than standard mortality risks (you have cancer, you work in a dangerous

occupation or, apparently, you're a scuba diver). The flat extra can be temporary, say for five years, or it can be permanent. A flat extra is an additional cost added to the price of a policy. Flat extras are expressed as a cost per thousand dollars of coverage, and they typically range between \$2.50 and \$15.00 per thousand. So say you bought a \$100,000 policy and were given a flat extra of \$2.50 per thousand. That would add an additional \$250 cost to your policy.

| Carrier | Best Class Available | Max # of Dives Annually | Max Depth Allowed | Notes |
|-------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|--|
| American General | Preferred Plus | 10 | 100 feet | Open water, no penetration diving; PADI-certified or dive with guide 76-100 ft. can get Preferred Elite, but with a \$2.50 flat extra. Penetration diving at \$7.50 flat extra |
| AXA | Preferred Elite | No max listed | 100 feet | |
| Banner Life | Preferred Plus | Not strictly defined | 75 feet | Certification and frequency are different between Standard and Preferred |
| Fidelity | Standard | Vacation only | 100 feet | Plus. \$2.50 flat extra for beyond 75 ft. No medical exam required. |
| Genworth | Preferred Best | No stated max | 100 feet | If no participation in a year or more, no flat extra applies; beyond 125 feet and penetration diving are \$2.50 flat extra |
| ING | Super Preferred | No limit | 100 feet | Must be formally trained with a basic or better certification; 100 to 130 feet requires flat extra |
| Lincoln Financial | Super Preferred | No max stated | 100 feet | Must be certified |
| MetLife | Standard Plus | No max | 100 feet | Formally trained and always accompanied; dives past 100 feet add a \$2.50-\$3.50 flat extra |
| Minnesota Life | Preferred Select | No limit | 100 feet | Limited to lakes, rivers, pits/quarries and coastal waters. |
| Mutual of Omaha | Preferred Plus | 19 | 100 feet | Must be certified; 100-130 feet is \$3.50 flat extra; if less than 10 dives per year, it's \$5 flat extra. Cave diving is \$2.50-\$5 flat extra. |
| Protective | Select Preferred | Individual consideration | 75 feet | Lakes, rivers, pits and coastal waters. Must be certified & accompanied. 100-foot-plus diving is \$2.50-plus flat extra |
| Prudential | Preferred | No limit | 100 feet | 101-130 feet ok at Preferred with advanced certificate and 10+ dives/year |
| SBLI | Preferred Plus | 10 | 75 feet | Penetration diving and diving beyond 100 feet is \$2.50-plus flat extra |
| Transamerica | Preferred Plus | No Max | 75 feet | Preferred up to 100 feet; 101 to 250 feet is a \$2.50-\$5 flat extra; 250-plus feet is a \$7.50-\$10 flat extra |

These High-Pressure Hose Recalls Should Have Divers Concerned

In May, it was Miflex, with its double-braided, high-pressure hoses bursting at the consoles; 17,000 had to be recalled in North America. Later in the summer, it was some Phantom high pressure hoses that had to be recalled by the manufacturer, Innovative Scuba Concepts. They two were bursting at the fitting that attaches to the first stage.

This this month, three companies, including Innovative Scuba Concepts again, are recalling high pressure hoses sold between August 2011 and August 2012. Innovative Scuba Concept is recalling 1,900 of its hoses, Trident Diving Equipment is recalling 480 and A-Plus Marine is recalling 210 of them. The importers received nine reports of burst hoses; no injuries were reported, but this is troublesome stuff for divers. What gives?

Well, regardless of brand names and different prices, the latest recall is for hoses made from the same batch. All three companies were importing their hoses from Li Chung Plastics in Taiwan. (Miflex's recalled hoses were made in-house at its Italy headquarters.) Mark Derrick, owner of technical dive shop Dive Gear Express in Pompano Beach, FL (www.divegearexpress.com), is convinced this was just one bad batch out of many good ones that are problem-free. "We bought our hoses from Innovative, sold gobs of them and did not have a noticeable problem. In fact, at the time of its recall this summer, we had sold about 900 of the hoses and never had a return of a defective hose."

While this may be just one bad batch, the continuous recall of tens of thousands of high-pressure hoses in less than 12 months tell us that these high-pressure hose makers -- with the companies that import them looking over their shoulders -- need to get their quality controls in order, and stop putting sport divers in jeopardy.

The current batch of recalled hoses was sold under the Phantom and Mesh Flex brand names, which were printed only on the product packaging. They have production date codes stamped into the metal fitting that attaches to the regulator with the following codes:

- Innovative Scuba Concepts: 11Q3, 11Q4 and 12Q1
- Trident Diving Equipment: T0811, T0911, T1011, T1111, T1211, T0112, and T0212
- A-Plus Marine: 11Q3, 11Q4, and 12Q1

For the details, contact Innovative Scuba Concepts at (800) 472-2740 and www.innovativescuba.com; Trident Diving Equipment at (800) 234-3483 and www.tridentdive.com; and A-Plus Marine at (800) 352-2360 and www.aplusmarine.com

Need a New Wetsuit?

stretch, seams and other factors bring big changes

If your old wetsuit keeps you more wet than warm and you're in the market for a new one, a few things may have changed since the last time you went shopping. New technology and new materials have manufacturers touting benefits like more stretch, less bulk, more warmth and less hassle getting in and out of their wetsuits.

But when standing in front a row of them hanging at your dive shop, or viewing the lineup at an online store, it can be daunting to pick just one. From a price range from under \$100 to nearly \$500, what are you getting at each price range? Are they all cut from the same bolt of neoprene, or is the quality truly going up alongside the price tag?

Chris Moleskie, president of Wetsuit Wearhouse in Williamsport, MD (www.wetsuitwearhouse.com), told *Undercurrent* that wetsuit companies price their products differently, "but if there's only a price difference of \$50 to \$75, there's probably no difference in quality of material or components. However, if you're comparing a \$100 suit to one that's \$250 and up, then yes, you'll see a difference. You get a better quality of neoprene, more stretch and better seams, meaning more warmth and less water inside your wetsuit."

A Quick Wetsuit Primer

Your wetsuit keeps you warm by trapping a thin layer of water between your skin and the neoprene, and heating it up. That's why it's important to get a wetsuit that fits properly, otherwise cold water will keep flushing out the warm water. Neoprene contains loads of small air bubbles that provide insulation against cold, so the thicker the neoprene, the better the insulation..

According to John Bantin, Undercurrent's dive gear expert, neoprene now tends to be sourced from the same companies in China, and the manufacturing process is the same for every major brand of neoprene. While there are numerous grades of neoprene, and each manufacturer has a comparable grade to compete with each other, the basic difference between the grades is the density of the neoprene (amount used), combined with the amount and size of gas bubbles that are formed within the structure.

For semi-dry suits with the latest in cutting-edge material, John Bantin gives favorable reviews to Xcel and Scubapro.

A decade ago, neoprene grades had a higher percentage of neoprene, making them denser and heavier. While that made wetsuits more durable, it also made them less comfortable and harder for various body shapes to squeeze into them. Now neoprene foam grades have become softer, lighter and much stretchier, says Sal Zammitti, owner of the Bamboo

Reef dive shops in Northern California (www.bambooreef.com). "With soft-stretch neoprene so you can fit a wider variety of body types. We were making two to three custom wetsuits per week 25 years ago, but now we haven't done one in a couple of years."

Some manufacturers use a mixture to allow for more flexibility, and even more eco-sustainability. Take Xcel, its green Thermoflex wetsuit, made of limestone neoprene (created in Hawaii by clean hydro-electricity) and boasting an ultra-stretch lining made in part from recycled plastic bottles. But with list prices between \$290 and \$380, the Thermoflex ain't cheap.

Another innovation is hydrophobic neoprene, also referred to as water-repellant neoprene, because it soaks less water into the skin. "There's no warmth factor there, but when you get out of the water, it weighs less, and it's less bulky to walk around in," says Moleskie. "But you'll only find that in a super high-end wetsuit, at \$300 plus."

What to Consider when Buying One

The first criterion to consider - which many divers overlook, says Moleskie - is that the wetsuit be specifically a dive wetsuit. Surfing and general watersport wetsuits are made out of standard-grade neoprene, while dive suits are made of compression-resistant neoprene. Neoprene compresses, but less thickness equals less warmth. "If you're at 65 feet, you'll go from a 5-mm thickness to 3-mm with a standard wetsuit, but a 5-mm dive wetsuit stays 5mm at depth." Many manufacturers make wetsuits for different sports, so look at the tags to make sure it's dive-specific (O'Neill's dive series wetsuits have a scuba flag stitched on them, for instance) or ask a knowledgeable salesperson.

While you should consider neoprene quality, the main thing to consider is the percentage of stretch in a wetsuit. You want a wetsuit that gives enough to let you get in and, out, and move around in it easily. Some manufacturers tout material with as much as 400 percent stretch, meaning it really gives. "But super-stretch is now found at the mid-\$100 price point, so it's becoming more affordable," says Moleskie.

The seams are another big deal when it comes to staying warm, comfortable and leak-free. There are various types, and each one has its pros and cons in different water and weather conditions. Flatlock stitching, with a zig-zag pattern similar to railroad tracks, is comfortable and flexible but because it's applied by sewing machine, it leaks. Therefore, it's recommended for warm-water wetsuits only. Glued and blindstitched

seams (also referred to as GBS) are best for colder waters because the seams are glued, then stitched, meaning there are no holes for water to seep into.

At the top of the seam quality – and price – echelon is the sealed and taped seam. It has the same construction as GBS, then a rubber strip is applied over the top. The advantages: more flexibility and an airtight suit. You can test the quality by blowing into the arm of this wetsuit type – if it blows up like a balloon, you’re ensured no water will come through the seams. Sealed and taped wetsuits are often referred to as “semi-dry suits,” meaning they’re the best non-drysuit choice for the coldest waters. The top-of-the-line wetsuit Zammitti sells at his Bamboo Reef stores is AquaLung’s SolAfx, a sealed and taped wetsuit with 8-mil body thickness, 7-mil arms and legs, and liquid rubber seals covering the seals (list price \$495).

Extra features to consider are fleece lining, which wicks away moisture and retains heat. This comes in handy for frequent cool- and cold-water divers, because when two divers may be wearing the same 5-mil wetsuit, one could be freezing while the other one is toasty. “While that feeling could depend on the wetsuit seams, it could also depend on your own tolerance,” says Moleskie. The \$250-plus wetsuits often boast a jersey fleece lining, but you can also wear a fleece rash guard under your non-lined suit for the same effect.

Nearly 10 years ago, we did a story “The Skinny on Wetsuit Shrinkage,” about how wetsuits can truly shrink due to age, wear and tear. But Moleskie says that due to the latest decade of wetsuit tech advances, he never hears that complaint from customers. “The only time I see degradation in neoprene is when a diver blatantly ignores the wash-and-care instructions and throws it in the washer. If anything, wetsuit material today will stretch out a little bit.” Meaning you can eat a full breakfast before that first dive in your brand-new wetsuit and not feel a twinge of guilt.

To buy the right wetsuit, consider where you dive most. The warmer the water, the lighter weight – and less expensive – your wetsuit can be with you still feeling fine inside it. Wetsuit costs will increase alongside the thickness of the material, but the features you can shell out for – such as sealed seams and compressed thickness – are well worth it to stay warm. For semi-dry suits with the latest in cutting-edge material, Bantini recently gave favorable reviews to the Xcel Infiniti (list prices range from \$200 to \$360; www.xcelwetsuits.com); and Scubapro’s EverFlex suits (list prices range from \$320 to \$400; www.scubapro.com).

-- Vanessa Richardson

Who Is That Masked Man?

Bret Gilliam discovers who “Ben Davison” really is

In January 1977, as I was struggling to build up my first dive operation called V. I. Divers Ltd. in St. Croix, a customer came down and spent a week diving with us. He and his wife had a great time, and as they were leaving, they gave me a cheesy “newsletter” sort of publication called *Undercurrent*. I’d never seen it before but they explained that it was a *Consumer Reports* for diving which had recently started up, was distinguished by unbiased reporting on equipment, resorts, dive operations and the like, and was developing a reputation for objective, reliable articles done by its editors who arrived anonymously and just blended in with the rest of the diving customers, then wrote about the experience, good and bad.

Of course, I immediately asked if they were part of this *Undercurrent* thing and if I was about to get reviewed. They vehemently denied it, saying no one knew who the editors were. They gave it to me so I could see how my competitors in the Virgin Islands and other areas of the Caribbean were faring in their reviews -- and to be forewarned that some unidentified reporter could drop in on me sometime. They also assured me that my company’s laid-back attitude about diving freedom, varied sites and great customer service would probably do well.

Wonderful, I thought. Unbiased objective reporting in the diving industry, in which you couldn't even get a mention in *Skin Diver* magazine without an ad contract? It just didn't seem likely. I was already advertising in *Skin Diver* and it always seemed to run some sort of little column about V. I. Divers Ltd. in every issue, along with a big yearly section on the Virgin Islands. They thought we were great, but then again, they thought everybody was "world class" if you bought an ad. Let your ad contract lapse, and you fell off the earth into the ocean's deepest depths as far as they were concerned.

So I read through *Undercurrent* and decided to write the editors immediately to dare them to come down and evaluate us, but nothing ever happened and I forgot about it. Then eight months later, I got the August 1977 issue and the lead story on the front page was a review of my operation, called "The Burgeoning Business of Beach Diving," written by a Ben Davison. My first instinct was to check our customer roster to see when this guy was down with us but, of course, there was no "Ben Davison." We had been clandestinely infiltrated, just as our guests had predicted. I nervously retired to my office to read what they had to say. Here are a few gems from that article:

"St. Croix, however, earned our attention because we respond now and then to a well-orchestrated hustle. In January, a letter arrived from the President of V. I. Divers, Bret Gilliam, saying he would 'like to host one of your writers to see how we fare in your evaluation. We aren't perfect, but we like to think we do a pretty good job of taking care of our guests.' Not long after that, the Virgin Islands Tourist Board wrote 'Y'all come see us some time, hear?' St. Croix has been an obscure speck on tourists maps... only now is it back... dive trips are offered by a handful of guides in business, more for sun than income, Bret Gilliam included. But he had his eye to the future and after a guide gig or two, he opened his own business, expanded and continued to expand.

"Now he has the only full-service dive shop on the island, and owns the *Virgin Diver* (an 85-foot live-aboard) that operates one-week charter trips out of British Virgin ports. Along with being an enthusiastic diver, Gilliam's real skill seems to be tough-minded management. Gilliam will bust his buns to get the tourist trade, and I don't doubt he'll be successful. He expects an avalanche of visitors from *Skin Diver's* forthcoming coverage, and when I was in his shop, boxes of new gear were arriving, and he was continually on the phone hustling new staff to handle the onrush. That's sound planning, and that's why Gilliam's getting St. Croix on the diver's map."

Well, I thought, not a bad start. This guy seems to appreciate the effort I'm putting in and thinks I'm going somewhere. Swell! The article continued: "I selected St. Croix because Gilliam offered a one-week certification course, which I sought for a newly recruited buddy, but only after we had answered his earlier invitation, saying that he would learn of our visit when he read about it in *Undercurrent*. He replied, 'You're right. Booking as a regular diving customer is really the best way and most objective way to conduct a review. Good luck with *Undercurrent*.' So Bret, we booked as a regular customer. I was the guy you promised to have a dive for the first day, but didn't..."



The "Real" Ben Davison

Ah shit. I knew we had screwed up because this guy must have arrived on an afternoon flight and missed our morning boat departures. We made a practice of doing only one boat trip a day in order to give folks three dives and lunch in an unhurried setting that let us access the remote drop-offs and reefs other operators couldn't get to in their little outboard boats. We ran a 50-foot boat then, huge for that era, and traveled up to 25 miles to get the best diving. It was an all-day outing, but I guess we didn't make it clear that you had to be there by 9 a.m. My bad, and I fiercely scribbled a note to myself to add this information to our booking brochure.

The reviewer also never realized that we ran the boat trips because he immediately opted for our inexpensive beach diving tours than ran all day and at night. “St. Croix diving is well suited for the diver who brings his own tank and buddy, feels confident in new water, and wants to explore the reefs on his own, because there is more than enough beach diving to keep one occupied for a vacation. Gilliam encourages people to head off on their own, and will provide a map of beach dives for anyone who has demonstrated on a guided dive that he can handle himself. For...confident beach divers, St. Croix indeed rates well. Gilliam has two competent guides... and Bill Walker, a gentle and excellent instructor. For the macro photographer, Fredericksted Pier will provide critters almost impossible to find elsewhere.”

The writer went on to favorably rate our operation for the most part, and to disparage our competitors, much to my delight. Along the way, he pointed out some things we could improve on, and I immediately implemented the changes -- the very next day. He also made some notes on hotels and restaurants that would prove both amusing and the key to his secret identity 20 years later. “We stayed at the Buccaneer.

Summer rates of \$51 a night are awfully high, but it’s attractive and relaxing. In town, the Club Comanche at \$24 a night... a good choice. For fine dinner, we loved the Comanche. We didn’t enjoy the appetizer of quail eggs garnished with salmon eggs... but the cat beneath the table did.”

In retrospect, the five-star luxury Buccaneer Resort now has rates that start at \$410 and go up over \$1,100 a night. The Club Comanche (our hotel base for guests that offered harbor view rooms, pool and a big pier for our dive boats) has only gone up to the \$85 - \$200 per-night range. What a difference three decades makes... I eliminated the quail eggs appetizer from the restaurant menu, but our resident cats, who we adored, stayed on forever.

Overall, that review really put us on the map, and I was astonished when a rave article in the same publication followed, about how much the writer liked the certification course we provided his girlfriend. He rated us the best place for training in the Caribbean. Later *Undercurrent* followed up with reviews of our liveaboard operation on the *Virgin Diver*, then one of only two in the Caribbean, along with Paul Humann’s *Cayman Diver*.

Undercurrent was always fair and I appreciated the exposure, as it brought in a lot of sophisticated divers who read and trusted its reporting. We were frequently reviewed over the next eight years before I sold the business, and we always got high marks. A mutual trust developed. Although I never knew who “Ben Davison” was, he communicated with me through assistant editors from time to time, asking for honest information on diving conditions, expansion of tourism, conservation issues, crime, airline service, etc. I always gave them the straight truth, even when it meant losing money sometimes, but I knew that if I fudged on accuracy, I’d lose my credibility overnight.

I think I finalized my commitment to honesty in late 1979, when an editor called in the aftermath of a hurricane to find out what diving conditions really were locally, as they thought they were getting “hyped” by other operators and the tourism board. I replied that, although we would recover just fine in about a month, the rough weather, high winds and silty runoff into the ocean had reduced visibility at the dive sites to two feet or less, and extended as much as a half mile offshore. I recommended that no one schedule a trip for at least six weeks to allow things to get back to normal. Yeah, that cost me some revenue but I made it back 10 times over from customers who came later and said they respected me for telling the truth and putting customers first.

About that time, my editor contact at *Undercurrent* asked me to contribute articles, using my own byline, on subjects like safety, medical emergencies, training, deep diving, narcosis, remote destinations and the growth of the diving industry. I sold my Virgin Islands interests in 1985 and moved on to bigger things,

“As I strode down the hall, he called after me, ‘Let’s chow down on some quail eggs sometime!’ I stopped dead in my tracks.”

Setting the Hook

Add another volume to the pile of books about the mystique of the *Andrea Doria*, the 240-foot-deep wreck off New York's Montauk Point known as the Mount Everest of diving. *Setting the Hook: A Diver's Return to the Andrea Doria* is a personal account of Peter Hunt's explorations of the wreck beginning in 1983, and his compelling urge to return to the ship many years later. It brings a unique perspective to a well-covered subject.

In the "pre-tech" days before dive computers, when only commercial divers were using mixed gases, these early pioneers battled nitrogen narcosis and other perils to retrieve precious artifacts such as *Andrea Doria* china. Hunt reveals some of the mysteries behind the collision that sunk the ship, and how the early divers tried to unravel them. It's his personal relationship to the ghost ship that makes this book unique. For instance, he compares the isolation of solitary wreck diving to the stories of passengers trapped in the crippled hulk -- some of whom never made it out.

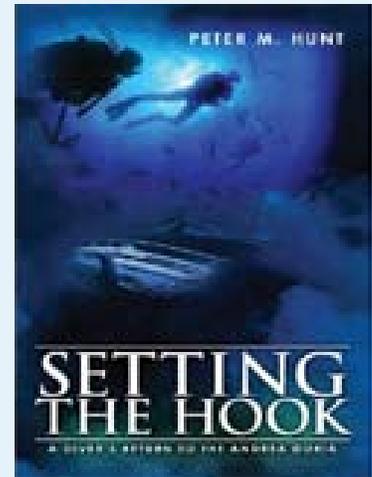
Hunt later became a fighter pilot, eventually settling down with a family and a job as a commercial pilot. In 2000, he found himself missing the "sense of exploration of wreck sites few to none had experienced." By then, technical diving had evolved, and Hunt undertook the

rigorous, expensive pursuit of training and equipping himself for one more visit to the now-deteriorating hulk. Ironically, he points out, there have been more fatalities on the wreck among trimix divers than in the compressed-air era.

A gripping subplot is touched on in the first chapter: While preparing for his return to the *Andrea Doria*, Hunt was dealing with the onset of Parkinson's disease, adding both poignancy and urgency to his quest to recapture his daring youth. You'll need to read the book to see whether he achieves his goal.

Click on the "Books" tab at www.undercurrent.org to order a copy through us, and you'll get Amazon's best price -- plus our profits will go to save coral reefs.

Reviewer Larry Clinton is co-author of *There's a Cockroach in My Regulator*, a paperback filled with bizarre, unusual stories from the pages of *Undercurrent*.



but I was also contributing more often as a writer to *Undercurrent*. However, I still had no earthly idea who the mysterious publisher and senior editor, "Ben Davison," was. I'd inquire every now and then, but was always politely rebuffed with the explanation that only a handful of staff even knew his real name, and none had ever met him. So I figured I'd forever remain in the dark. But he paid well enough for my articles, never failed to embrace controversies, like the initial arguments over diving computers, nitro and technical diving, and I decided that having an honest forum on these subjects for divers to make an informed choice was worth not being privy to the Lone Ranger's secret identity.

Then in January 1997, a strange thing happened. I was attending a private cocktail party at the DEMA conference in Orlando for senior writers who contributed to my magazines, *Scuba Times* and *Deep Tech*. I had to host another private affair later that same night -- I was in the process of taking one of my companies public for a nearly \$46 million sale, and had rented the entire private dining room at Morton's Steakhouse for a grand celebration. I had 60 major industry players arriving, along with my top staff all showing up, so I was anxiously sneaking peeks at my watch as time dragged on, worried about being late. Dinner and the liquor bill at Morton's was going to set me back over \$50,000, and I was already getting cellphone calls about my whereabouts from my executive assistant, Cathryn Castle (now editor of *Dive Training* magazine for the last 13 years).

Finally, I got up, excused myself from the magazine writers' group and left them to be entertained by my publishing partner, Fred Garth. As I was walking out of the hotel suite, a pleasant-looking, middle-aged guy said it was good to finally meet me and asked if we could grab a quick drink before I left. I didn't know him and I apologized, saying that I was already late for another event that I was hosting. He shook my hand and said he understood... maybe some other time. I waved and hurried out the door. As I strode down the hall, he called after me, "Let's chow down on some quail eggs sometime!"

I stopped dead in my tracks. I've got a near-photographic memory and had never forgotten that tossed-off critique of my resort restaurant in the original *Undercurrent* review 20 years before. I turned around and asked what this stranger meant by that. He simply replied that he thought I had a fondness once for that esoteric dish.

I looked at him closely and said, "Is that you? Are you really the guy that wrote that?" He grinned and said, "Nice to meet you. I know you're late but I just wanted to say hi finally after two decades."

I looked at my watch, pulled my cell out and dialed Cathryn, who was supervising the Morton's party to say I was going to be a little late. Something important had come up and I'd be along later.

I turned back to the stranger and said, "I'm Bret Gilliam. Who are you?"

And the figurative "mask" came off as he introduced himself with his real name. I was actually filled with emotion to meet the guy who had helped launch my business career through an article in a little newsletter that had made a decision years ago to be a real journal with ethics and give readers the straight, honest truth in an industry that avoided honesty like politicians giving campaign speeches.

"Yeah," I replied. "I'd really like to have a drink with you."

We walked back into the suite, sat down away from the others, and I spent an hour catching up with my newest best friend. I finally made it to dinner 90 minutes late but Cathryn had everything in hand, as I knew she would.

"Well, do you want to tell me what was so important to make you disappear for a dinner that's costing you more than some people's houses?" she asked.

"Sorry, I couldn't break away. I bumped into an old friend I didn't know."

In the years since, "Ben Davison" and I have managed to get together just a half dozen times for dinner in various cities, but it has always been a great occasion with a now dear friend. We talk on the phone a lot. And I still write for *Undercurrent*, although I've retired from all other diving industry connections except

Costa Rica's Shark Finning: Is the Government in Cahoots?

While the Costa Rican government routinely polices the waters around Cocos Island looking for shark-finning boats, the *Costarican Times* reports that officials captured only one during the entire month of August. Apparently, the rangers' boat radar picked up 15 boats, but they were only able to pursue one of them, in which they found fins in the hold). The small catch is not because of understaffing or malfunctioning radar, says the newspaper. No, the editors opine, "Most likely the others were Taiwanese boats that had already paid off the Costa Rican government to allow them to escape. [It] is receiving huge kickbacks for allowing shark finning in its waters.

On August 15, the editors amended the article with this update, "The boat captain who was arrested did not even get jail time nor was fined. He was let off with a slap on the wrist and was told, 'Please don't do this again.' Even when the Costa Rican government catches shark finners, it lets them go. More proof they are just in it for the kickbacks and money."

Truth, fiction or exaggeration? We asked Alan Steenstrup, owner of the *Undersea Hunter*, what his crew is seeing on their routine trips to Cocos. "Shark finning is a continuing problem. The park rangers do the best they can, but their funds and resources are limited. There used to be an environmental organization called MarViva patrolling at the island, and they did a phenomenal job, but unfortunately they are no longer present.

"Regarding the newspaper article, of course, it is possible there is corruption, but I would say that making such a blanket statement is going too far, especially if they are not backing it up with proof. The park rangers mainly rely on one patrol vessel, and Costa Rican laws are quite weak, which does not help in this case."

But here's some good, long-awaited news: Costa Rica passed a blanket ban on shark finning last month, closing loopholes in an existing law passed more than a decade ago that outlawed finning but allowed the transportation and importation of fins from other countries. President Laura Chinchilla also announced an investment of up to \$15 million in a new radar system that will allow authorities to better identify boats breaking the ban.

litigation consulting. Let me only comment that it has been my pleasure and privilege to be included in *Undercurrent's* family over the years. In exchange, I've received a certain sense of nostalgia, fond memories, friendship and benchmarks of the diving industry chronicled in those pages.

"Ben Davison" has done good work for nearly 35 years, the diving industry is a better place and the readers better informed, due to *Undercurrent*. He has earned his place in history, even though only a handful of people actually know his name or would recognize him. That's a rare entity. If there were a proper Hall of Fame in diving (other than the dubious awards ceremony held by various sycophants devoted to a mutual, self-aggrandizing exchange of statues, medallions, medals and plaques issued to those who lobby the loudest), then he would be in it as a member of the first inductees. And I would proudly stand to applaud him. But I'd never reveal or disclose his true identity. You can "waterboard" me but I ain't giving him up.

Bret Gilliam is a 40-year veteran of the professional diving industry with over 18,000 logged dives. He retired in 2005 as one of diving's most successful and wealthiest entrepreneurs, and now lives on an island in Maine.

Flotsam & Jetsam

A Fishy Regulator. While it's too late to include this in our book *There's a Cockroach in My Regulator*, we had to share this bizarre story from subscriber Lada Simlek (Croton on Hudson, NY). "I did a night dive in Long Island Sound with a buddy, and we surfaced in a school of thousands of small fish. They were densely packed, perhaps an inch apart, and attracted to our lights. They were hitting us so much it felt like someone throwing gravel at us. Weeks later, my buddy went diving, and the air tasted and smelled bad. One of the fish had swam inside his regulator and died there. The regulator had to be boiled to get the smell out. So it ain't just cockroaches."

Diving Medicine for Scuba Divers, 4th Edition. Renowned dive medical expert Carl Edmonds, who-co-authored this book, tells us it has been recently updated and is now available online for free at www.divingmedicine.info. You can download

the entire book or each of the 43 chapters separately. "Because we do not apply copyright restrictions, dive instructors and clubs are encouraged to supply copies to their clients and members," Edmonds says.

Sending Tanks by Mail? Make sure all the air is out of it before you wrap it up, unlike some idiot who apparently shipped a full tank and caused havoc in Kirkland, WA for a day last month. Post office workers called the fire and police departments last month to report a suspicious package that was hissing and releasing gas. The post office and a nearby apartment complex were evacuated, and all roads leading to the area were closed. "We're going to treat this as the worst case scenario," said fire department battalion chief Mike Haschak told the *Kirkland Reporter*. The Haz Mat team called in to investigate the package ultimately discovered it to be "hissing scuba equipment," which was also confirmed by the package's sender when he was contacted. No word on whether he got a rebuke or a bill for the neighborhood shutdown.

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