

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

February 2013

Vol. 28, No. 2

## Dolphin Dive Center, Loreto, Baja CA, Mexico *seals, dolphins and a mix of marine life in the Sea of Cortez*

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Dear Fellow Diver:

Chances are, your Baja California dive trip won't be like mine. I arrived in late October, a month after the peninsula received 21 straight days of rain, and a week after Tropical Storm Paul brushed past. The result: lush greenery everywhere, desert blooms in all colors. Was I diving the Caribbean or Baja California? Sometimes I got confused when I emerged from a dive and saw an emerald coastline. Baja's dry, red landscapes were nowhere to be seen; they were covered in green vines, grass and shrubs, and, most notably, the fuschia San Miguel flower.

I was also here during off season, when neither whale sharks, Humboldt squid, nor Spring Breakers are hanging around, so I felt like I had the already quiet town of Loreto to myself. It's tucked away on the east side of the Baja peninsula, 225 miles from La Paz and 365 miles from Cabo San Lucas. It feels even more remote because the Sierra de la Giganta mountain range that looms up from the sea fences off the town from the flat plain behind it. If you want to avoid the "Housewives of Orange County" who come covered in sequins and animal prints on the flights down to Cabo, Loreto is your kind of place.

It certainly appeals to Carlos Slim, the Mexican billionaire who dukes it out with Bill Gates for the title of world's richest man. During a surface interval at Isla del Carmen, a former salt mine now turned private island for trophy sheep-hunting, I saw



A Resident of Isla Coronado (photo by Bruce Williams)



a huge white yacht in a cove downwind. "That must be Slim's," Rafa, divemaster and manager of Dolphin Dive Center, told me. "He loves it here because it's so private and quiet, and I see his boats a lot." At the next day's interval at Isla Coronado, north of Isla del Carmen, sure enough, there was Carlos, anchored by a golden horseshoe beach. While helicopters and kayaks are visible on board, Rafa doubts the billionaire dives on his vacations.

Diving here is mostly conducted around the five uninhabited islands across the bay from Loreto (Carmen, Coronado and Danzete are most visited, while Monserrate and Santa Catalina are farther south and require special-request trips), their 50-mile stretch making up the Loreto National Marine Park. Depending on wind and waves, the three islands closest to town

take between 20 and 45 minutes to reach via fishing pangas that fill the marina and are used by Dolphin Dive as its dive boats. Loreto's marine park is the northernmost range for many tropical Pacific species that are present all the way down to South America. While the water was at its annual warmest, between 80 to 85 degrees, in late October, it's not warm enough on average for coral reefs, so marine life lives on coastlines of boulders, thick walks and rocky, rubble bottoms.

But as Chris and Jim, a veterinarian couple from Vancouver who dive here often, told me, the waters are "Sea Fan Heaven." I found that out as soon as we descended to the lone pinnacle of Piedra Blanca. Dozens of light green fern-like fan corals waved their greetings from the rocky bottom. Schools of wavyline and burrito grunts swam about. Barberfish and blue-and-gold snappers ignored me as I spiraled my way up the pinnacle. I saw the first of many moray eels and sergeant majors, and the eventually boring abundance of the latter was a running joke among the divers on my boat ("Gee, where are all the sergeant majors?" "Wow, I never saw so many as I have at THAT site!").

Fish life can be plentiful, colorful and diverse in the Sea of Cortez, but in Loreto, sites were either a hit or a miss. At Las Lajas, a finger formation at Isla Coronado, I swam over endless gray rubble and boulders with no activity except for a green moray that came out its hole (that's why I missed Rafa's discover of a tiger snake eel). But at La Lorbera, just up the way, schools of grunts, juvenile angelfish, tang and ruddy-red Pacific creolefish hovered above massive boulders that stood at 50 feet. I rose to 30 feet and looked down at all the schools, moving in traffic formations among the rocky skyscrapers.

Rafa told me that he would see tons of bumphead parrotfish seven years ago, but now sees only a solitary few on random dives. Humboldt squid season had just ended, but he says he hasn't really seen them either in the last two years. The problem may be that Loreto's marine park currently doesn't give fish much protection. Rafa says there's an unspoken agreement that fishermen head to the park's southern boundaries and leave the northern part for tourists. But other divers told me they saw more fish the farther south they dived.

My favorite dive had nothing to do with fish. On the backside of Isla Coronado, Rafa anchored the panga near barking sea lions resting on the ledge, while ospreys perched on nests high atop smooth, guano-stained cliffs. After we moved along sheer underwater walls at 70 feet, the sea lions came into view. The visibility was a crystal-clear 100 feet, and the sea lions were out in mass. I followed Rafa's lead, doing jumping jacks and sommersaults to get their attention, and the juveniles came in droves to check us out. A big one was either too playful or too cranky, first snapping at Rafa's fins, then the

massive camera unit held by Jim, who backed off. But Jim and Dan, a Northern California banker who also dives here regularly, both told me this was the best sea lion dive they had done.

On the rides back from Isla de Carmen and Coronado, Rafa spotted pods of bottlenoses and told Daniel, the boat captain (and his uncle) to head toward them. As we caught up to the pod, the dolphins sped alongside and below the bow, riding with us at 15 m.p.h. for a few minutes, jumping and flipping to our oohs and aahs.

Loreto is tough to get to. From the U.S., there's only one (pricey) flight a day. I had flown into San Jose del Cabo airport, the closest to Cabo San Lucas, because I had wanted to visit the charming colonial town of Todos Santos, an hour north of Cabo. I rented a car with Avis, which doesn't operate in Loreto, so I dropped it off in downtown La Paz and took the five-hour ride north in a 12-passenger bus run by EcoBajaTours. I had the comfortable AC ride nearly to myself, and the otherwise flat drive was beautiful, thanks to the exotic green lushness. After a stop in Ciudad Constitucion, the bus descended into a jagged canyon in La Giganta, then the aquamarine Sea of Cortez sparkled ahead.

As a mission town, Loreto is not as lovely as little Todos Santos, and it doesn't have the array of amenities as Cabo or La Paz, but it works well as a tranquil fishing village. It was the first Spanish settlement in Baja, and its mission and plaza, the town's heart, is worth a visit. The town was celebrating its 315th anniversary while I was there, hosting musical events and food feasts every night for a week -- so I'm glad my hotel, the Iguana Inn, was not in the town center. While there are charming small hotels around the plaza, and it's typically quiet, nighttime activity could affect your sleep.

But most people come here for kayaking, fishing (dorado, tuna, grouper) and diving. I chose the Iguana Inn because it was inexpensive (rooms are \$55 or less per night), a block from the dive shop and had kitchenettes. I got a free upgrade from the smallest room to a bungalow because Hurricane Paul warnings had scared off some guests, and I was the only guest for three nights. The inn consists of four rooms, plus the owner's house, on a side street leading to the marina. Rooms 1, 2 and 3 have patios facing a shared outdoor area with a gas grill (Room 4 is in the back with its own private patio). DEET, Culligan water and a library of books are free to use. Room 1 was simple but clean, with a queen and a single, tiled bathroom and a well-stocked kitchenette, but only Mexican channels on the TV. Plenty of hot water in the shower and sink, and toilet paper goes into the wastebasket, common in most Baja bathrooms I used. Mike and Julie, former real estate brokers from Orange County, were gracious hosts and very responsive on the phone and e-mail to my questions. They confirmed my first day of dives with Dolphin Dive Center, and Julie gave me restaurant recommendations and all the need-to-know local gossip. When she saw me pick up The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest from the lending library, she told me I had to see the Swedish film versions of the Stieg Larsen trilogy, and immediately had Mike set up a DVD player in my room.

Once the sun hit my window at 7 a.m., I made a breakfast of cereal and yogurt, then walked to Dolphin Dive Center for check-in at 8.15 a.m. While Rafa and Daniel prepped gear in the six-person panga, stored on a trailer hitch, we divers walked a half-block to the marina and waited a few minutes while the two men drove the panga over, backed it into the water and floated it to a slip by the jetty, where we boarded. At our first dive, Rafa got in the water first, while Daniel helped everyone put



**Dolphin Dive Center**

## Loreto, Baja California

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

★ = poor    ★★★★★ = excellent

*World Scale*

on their tanks before a backroll. We ascended together, and with only four to five divers on each of my dives, it was easy for us to stick together. While Rafa kept an eye on everyone, he let us go at our own pace.

Rafa is a superlative divemaster -- friendly, eagle-eyed, fluent in English, and a former fisherman who judges currents just by standing at the bow and looking down. On a windy day and after a choppy ride, Rafa decided to go to Coronado a second day in a row for the shallow site of Las Tijeretas, but when he saw the current flowing away from our destination, he had us descend to the bottom, grab a bar attached by rope to the boat's stern, and hold onto it while Daniel drove us close enough to the site so we didn't

have to fight much current. Unfortunately, the bar shifted down, knocking two divers loose, so we ended up exploring a few rock formations at 75 feet. I wouldn't recommend bringing up the subject of religion during conversation, because Rafa is a passionate Pentecostal -- when he talked about how a local was recently "cured" of homosexuality, there was a long, awkward silence before someone changed the topic.

Rafa is eager to please his customers, especially the photographers, by showing them marine life up close, but he clearly disrespected the animals. At Los Picachos, off Isla del Carmen, he irritated a balloonfish enough to make it puff up while fluttering by me. At the Coronado dive sites, he poked a stick into a crevice to get an iridescent Pacific spiny lobster to come out. The worst was when he found a hawksbill turtle resting in a dark cave. When the turtle saw us and immediately tried to exit, Rafa poked him three times with his hand so it would stay put while Jim readied his camera. Afterwards, Bill, a Boeing engineer from Seattle, said, "I felt kind of bad for that poor turtle. "Me too," I piped up. Rafa cast his eyes down and looked sheepish. Turtles must go to the surface to breathe; no one should ever hold them down.

During my four days of diving, visibility was between 80 and 100 feet when the water was like glass. Wind later brought it down to 55 or 60 feet. My fellow divers wore 3-mm wetsuits; I rented a skinsuit at Rafa's suggestion, more to avoid the tiny stinging sea bugs floating on the surface, but it did come in handy at the lower depths, when the temperature was closer to 80 degrees. My aluminum 80 filled to 3,000 psi would last me about 50 minutes, then Daniel, who was always right there when I surfaced, took up my BC and fins before I climbed up the metal side ladder. Four divers were fine in the little panga, but add one or two more and it started getting claustrophobic, with sunny space to lay out wetsuits and towels at a premium. Rafa brought water and snacks for surface intervals on the boat, ranging from bananas and trail mix to coconut macaroons and apple muffins he bought at his local bakery. We were back at the marina by 3 p.m. at the latest but still, a long day without lunch.

After a siesta, I walked Loreto's quiet streets or around the marina, where the malecon, or boardwalk, was only partially finished (the dirt-road part is fine for walking). Drug cartels and gang violence are a world away (many people told me that, like Carlos Slim, drug lords enjoy vacations in Baja, renting or owning homes there to lie low and get away from the violence), and the locals are very friendly. Just say "Hola" or "Buenos dias" to get a smile and start a conversation.

Mexican is obviously the main cuisine. Orlando's, a block from the Iguana, has excellent food served on a palapa-covered, sandy-floored patio. The chili rellenos are great, and I enjoyed my plate of flautas, beef, rice, refried beans, corn tortillas and tomato salad for \$8.50. Next door is the most popular ice cream shop in town, which offers a rainbow array of fresh-fruit popsicles, and chocolate sticks covered in everything, for \$1 each. Loreto has plenty of full- and part-time expats, mostly living in "Gringo Gulch" complexes outside of town. Their favorite downtown hangout is Augie's, a bar south of the marina owned by Augie, a dead ringer for Roger Ebert before his jaw surgery. Local "characters" come for the daily happy hour from 4 to 7 p.m., with free appetizers and 2-for-1 drink specials. Unfortunately, it's all glass-windowed in, so no outdoor patio or seaside breeze. My favorite place for those was the Giggling Dolphin, a palapa-covered patio next door to Dolphin Dive Center, with a friendly manager and a TV turned to ESPN. A delicious chicken tortilla soup was \$3, taco plates were \$5. To fill up my kitchenette, I walked six blocks to the El Pescador supermarket.

I should mention the Sea of Cortez's colorful collection of invertebrates. Pacific tube anemones in lavender, emerald and orange waved delicate, feathery tentacles in the current. Yellow polyp black coral, resembling floral bouquets, and vibrant red sea fans were everywhere. Crowned sea urchins crawled boldly on rocks, shy purple sea urchins lodged in crevices. I was impressed with the range of sea stars, from the chocolate chip with a minty green bottom to the fiery multicolored brittle. My favorites were the shimmering Sally Lightfoot crabs, scrambling sideways for cover on the rocks at Isla Coronado.

On my last day, we headed south to Danzete, a 40-minute boat ride along the coast, and anchored in the horseshoe of Honeymoon Bay. With its newly mossy-green mountains, it looked like Bora Bora. Again, diving was a hit, followed by a miss. At West Rock, we dropped down to a rubble bottom, then edged around boulders at 65 feet. Rafa pointed out a fine-spotted jawfish with huge eyes gaping out of the sand. It was aquarium diving, with schools of sergeant majors, chromis, and purple-grey trianglefish pouring over the rocks and around us. Twice, schools of big-eye jacks dashed past so fast I could hear them whizzing by. When I mentioned how I longed to see an octopus, Rafa took us to the mainland at Punta Coyote, a half-circle of rock jutting out from a

## Two Easy Ways to Recycle Your Dive Gear

In last month's issue, we discussed options for recycling old dive gear. While we wrote it wasn't so simple to do, two readers beg to differ, citing two easy options for selling, trading and donating used equipment.

Bill Parnes, in New York City is vice president of marketing at Leisure Pro, and he wanted us to know that the online retailer has a trade-in department. Leisure Pro sells used and discontinued gear to dive shops and instructors that need it for rental and training, and the company promises to pay top dollar for yours. Give a short description of your items by phone or e-mail, and Leisure Pro will pay for shipping it to its headquarters. Once it arrives, a Leisure Pro rep will call you back with a price offer that you can redeem in cash or new equipment. If you're not satisfied with the offer, your gear will be mailed back to you free of charge. Currently, Leisure Pro is looking for regulators, gauges, computers and octopuses in good condition. It doesn't

take rubber goods -- that means no masks, fins, snorkels, bags, boots or wetsuits ([www.leisurepro.com/Content/Used.html](http://www.leisurepro.com/Content/Used.html)).

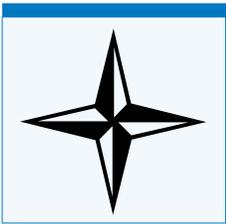
Rich Synowiec (Ann Arbor, MI) lives near Divers Incorporated, a dive shop that just started a program called Scuba Crap to recycle, donate, buy and sell used gear. Fill out the trade/sell form on its website, and include it with the gear you're shipping (it's on your dime, although Scuba Crap will ship back to you on theirs if the deal doesn't go through). Staff evaluates your items to see if they can be re-sold, then e-mails you two offers, one for "cash" and one for "trade, for you to choose from. Choose cash and you're paid by check or PayPal. Choose trade, you'll get credit to buy new gear at Divers Incorporated's online store. You can also donate your gear -- Scuba Crap will refurbish it and give the profits to a dive-related charity on its list or of your choice([www.scubacrap.com](http://www.scubacrap.com)).

cove. Visibility was poor -- all I saw were two zebra eels poking out before Rafa moved the rock covering them so that Karen, a visitor from Seattle, could photograph the jewel moray also in there. At the end of the dive, Rafa found a small octopus but he used his stick to pry it out from its hiding place three times. I wish I hadn't requested it.

After a week in Loreto, I took another week to kayak the coast down to La Paz. When not kayaking, I was snorkeling, and I noticed that the farther south to La Paz we got, the fish were more plentiful, and the coral healthier and more vibrant. Schools of fish and healthy marine life are more reliably seen the farther down the Sea of Cortez you go. Still, Loreto is a great getaway from the crowds. Sea lions and dolphins are common, as are whale sharks in season, and when the wind and currents are working with you, dive sites offer up plenty to see, even when topside has gone back to its desert shades.

Apparently, the Southern California-based owners of Dolphin Dive Center want to sell, and Rafa wants to buy it. If you're going to dive with him, be a good, environmentally-conscious diver and tell him he only needs to point the marine life out, not man-handle it.

-- J.V.



**Divers Compass:** The one daily U.S. flight, from LAX via Alaska Airlines, is around \$450 round trip; Hertz, Alamo and Fox have car rental offices downtown . . . . If you're not comfortable driving the two-lane road from La Paz for five hours, the bus from La Paz leaves nearly every hour from the main Malecon station for \$53 one way, and they're comfortable, with AC and movies; schedules and bookings are at [www.ecobajatours.com](http://www.ecobajatours.com) and, if you can translate Spanish, at [www.abc.com.mx](http://www.abc.com.mx) . . . .

Dolphin Dive charges \$120 for a two-tank dive; there's a 10 percent fee for paying by credit card, but Rafa waived that for me, and also gave me a discount for the gear I rented ([www.dolphindivebaja.com](http://www.dolphindivebaja.com)) . . . . Iguana Inn rates are between \$45 and \$55 per night, and a \$5 per-night discount is taken if you stay three nights or more ([www.iguanainn.com](http://www.iguanainn.com)) . . . . If you want more upscale hotels on the water, La Mision is next to the marina, and the beachfront Hotel Oasis is at the end of the still-unfinished boardwalk ([www.lamisionloreto.com](http://www.lamisionloreto.com); [www.hoteloasis.com](http://www.hoteloasis.com)); Dolphin Dive Center also books hotel/dive packages . . . . One U.S. dollar equals about 13 pesos; you can typically pay with dollars at hotels, bigger bars and restaurants, not so much at little taco joints . . . . There's an ATM in the plaza square, and El Pescador supermarket offers a good exchange rate . . . . Dolphin Dive Center owners Susan Speck and Bruce Williams wrote the book Diving and Snorkeling the Sea of Cortez, with photos and detailed descriptions of 91 dive sites, and it's available at [www.authorhouse.com](http://www.authorhouse.com).

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## Cedar Beach Ocean Lodge, B.C., Canada

*gourmet heaven for cold-water divers*

Dear Fellow Diver:

This past summer, while at scenic Cedar Beach Ocean Lodge, I experienced a six-day gourmet feast. Good, occasionally great, cold-water diving in British Columbia served to whet my appetite. My first dive at tiny Thetis Island, off the east coast of Vancouver Island, was on a purposefully-sunk Boeing 737, a difficult project in which Peter Luckham, owner of the dive shop I used, played a large hand. Resting at 100 feet, both sides of its wings were covered in

white and pink giant plumose anemone, their up or down orientation being of no consequence in the 49-degree waters. I was delighted to see so many wing-walking golden feather duster sea stars with feet fully exposed. Before the dive, Andy Lamb, the lodge proprietor and undersea expert, advised us to be alert for fried egg jellyfish being slowly drawn into the mouths of plumose anemone. I saw the first of many such fascinating life-death struggles in the first 10 minutes of my dive.

At site after site, I saw many of the fish and invertebrates I'm used to seeing when diving around Vancouver Island: big, photogenic lingcod, wary copper rockfish, lemon nudibranch, sunflower sea stars and several sculpin species. Orange sea cucumbers and painted greenlings were abundant. So many sharp-spined red sea urchins carpeted the ledges at some sites that I needed to be extra-conscious of my buoyancy when positioning my camera. Photographing my first clown doris nudibranch and an eel-like brilliant emerald green penpoint gunnel made me a happy camper, as did a tiny white, brittle Alaskan skeleton shrimp clinging to my hood. Alas, I saw no octopi or wolf eels. Peter and Andy lamented that overfishing was taking its toll.

The lodge is a single-story home perched on a rise overlooking the sheltered waters between Thetis and neighboring Kuper Island. Sailboats and motor yachts moor in the bay below, otters play in its freshwater pond. Set up as a B&B that serves dinner, the lodge holds six guests maximum in two bedrooms, each with its own private bath and shower, and nicely separated for privacy. One has two beds and an expansive water view. Mine was smaller, spotlessly clean and has a roomy closet. Its modest 260-square-foot size is dominated by a comfy king bed, nightstands and a chair. The high-beamed ceilings in the dining area/great room reminded me of Valhalla; a wide expanse of windows overlook the bay. Bookcases filled with tomes on diving and marine life surround the huge fireplace.

I came hoping I'd get to dive with Andy, whose mild mannered persona belies his knowledge of marine life. He is co-author of Coastal Fishes of the Pacific Northwest and the wonderfully illustrated Marine Life of the Pacific Northwest. He was an underwater bloodhound during the dives he made with us. As soon as I finished photographing one thing he found, he'd be signaling for me to come over and look at another. After dinner, we would pop our SD cards into his wide-screen TV, and Andy identified everything in photo after photo. (For example, "That's a transparent tunicate, Corella willmeriana.")

Based on an island with some 350 residents, Peter Luckham's 49th Parallel Dive Charters has had its economic woes, and he has scaled down from a 37 footer to a Fat Cat Bay boat. Themewul, as it's named, is powered by a single 115-HP Yamaha four-stroke outboard, with room for just Peter and only four others. Though just 17 feet long, Themewul is covered, and has on-board oxygen and a radio. Its stability made our two-tank voyages fairly comfortable, and back rolling (perhaps a whole foot and a half) into the water was a breeze. For boarding, a decent ladder had plenty of hand holds, which was a good thing, because I always made the climb with my tank and 36 pounds of lead; bending my leg to lift it over the gunwale was the hardest part. Peter helped others take off their gear in the water. With the low freeboard, heading into wind and waves meant zipping back into drysuits. Laughing, we donned masks and snorkels as salt water off the bow blew back into our faces. Males could use the "outdoor" head; females could heed nature's call on one of the many islands. I kept lunches in a dry bag, and under-seat storage stayed fairly dry. With just three divers during my stay, there was room for Andy to act as guide and marine



**The Themewul**



interpreter but unfortunately, he didn't join us for a couple of days.

Don't expect concierge diving services; there is no dive shop, no staff, just a trusty little boat and an experienced skipper. Peter humped tanks and weights down a walk of perhaps 200 feet to the dock from his vehicle. We changed over our own tanks. Each day we'd walk our own gear to the boat and back, rinse it at Andy's lodge and hang it to dry. Andy's services were thrown in as part of Peter's advertised package. Unfortunately, this benefit came at the expense of an apparently more cost-consciousness frame of mind that seemed to progressively dampen Peter's spirits toward week's end. Earlier, I mentioned the hard economic times for dive charters -- should you repeat my journey, you'll find that Peter is now charging for Andy's presence.

As decent as the diving was, Virginia Lamb's cuisine blew me away. She is the wonderful, rosy-cheeked chef at Cedar Beach, looking a bit like Santa's wife, Mrs. Claus, in her apron as

she merrily stirs a sauté. By contrast, black-spectacled, white-bearded Andy Lamb is tall and lanky, looking a bit gawky washing dishes after meals. "I'm just the kitchen help," he declared.

I'd start the day with Belgian waffles topped with a choice of sautéed banana slices with real maple syrup or sweet strawberries with fresh whipped cream, a tender fried egg on the side. Breakfasts included eggs Benedict made with crab and prawn, home fries crisped in olive oil, and toast with a whiskey-laced orange marmalade. During surface intervals, I usually ate a hearty sandwich of sliced turkey, ham and Swiss cheese topped with lingonberry jam on a hearty golden-crust roll. Dinners included a New York loin roast with grilled mushrooms, followed by the most delicious cheesecake, topped with rum peach, that I've ever eaten. Mid-week, Virginia carried in a dinner platter of Dungeness crabs in full shells, artfully arranged on a bed of fresh succulent prawns with lemon wedges and drawn butter. The homemade potato salad, corn on the cob and zucchini salad were followed by a homemade crème brulee. After-dive and between-meals snacks included hearty blueberry scones, chocolate cake and leftover peach cobbler. In my opinion, Virginia held her own with the renowned chef Gladys Howard at my beloved Pirates Point on Little Cayman.

During my last two days, Andy rejoined us as our guide and marine interpreter. At Tree Island, he demonstrated the quick reactive flight capabilities of the swimming anemone when confronted by a leather star. At Josef Point in Gabriola Passage, Peter perfectly timed the slack at this tight, high current-funneling channel. Andy pointed out some Vancouver Island "classics:" a cute little scalyhead sculpin; a placid, red Irish lord with big green eyes; a beautiful red, purple and orange tank-like Puget Sound king crab; a brown-spotted white leopard doris; a shy little mosshead warbonnet; a

## Cedar Beach Ocean Lodge, B.C.

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

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent

World Scale

wild-looking hairy crab and a delicate glassy plume hydroid. On the last day, Peter timed the slack perfectly at Boscowitz Rock, another potentially high-current zone, just off Race Point. Again, great visibility prevailed (well, maybe 30 feet), and Andy was off like a bloodhound on a hot scent. The visual feast included deep maroon-colored northern feather duster worms, sea scallops puffed up like crème-filled banana cakes, a tiny but striking Cockerell's nudibranch with fat, orange-tipped papillae, and a giant Pacific chiton resembling a stretched-out brown pancake gone fuzzy with mold. My last dive for the week was at Alcalá Point, along Porlier Pass. A giant basket star unfurled on a ridge, its ghostly snake-like arms silhouetted against the inky black void, evoking an image of Medusa. Finding a beautiful red flabellina nudibranch topped off a great dive.

Saying our goodbyes to our dive companions and hosts, my non-diving spouse and I topped off our vacation with a stay at famed Wickaninnish Inn, on Vancouver Island's Pacific side. Highlights included watching the tide sweep in and out of the tidal pools below our room and hiking along the Wild Pacific Trail, where we watched whales breaching in the waters below. The new Ucluelet Aquarium was fantastic, featuring many open-tank, hands-on displays. I could pick up a sea cucumber or sea star as friendly, knowledgeable staff provided interesting descriptions. The night before our flight home, we stayed at the Wedgewood Inn in Vancouver, featured in the book 1000 Places To See Before You Die.

The Gulf Islands feature some high-voltage and interesting dive sites that a (small) group of experienced cold-water divers and photographers would enjoy, especially if accompanied by marine naturalist Andy Lamb. The best sites could be squeezed into a carefully planned two- or three-day trip. Non-divers can kayak, hike, and sightsee; Andy will accompany them on land-based nature walks, as well. And Virginia, of course, will turn your stay into a gourmet heaven for diving.

-- S.P.



**Divers Compass:** Lodge pricing was \$100 per person per day, plus \$125 a day for five two-tank days of diving; it cost me \$2,100 for a diver and one non-diver after tax was added . . . I rented a car at the Vancouver airport for \$50 a day; gas was \$5.50 per gallon . . . The round-trip car ferry between Horseshoe Bay and Nanaimo is \$96 and between Chemainus and Thetis Island, it costs \$43; during the summer, make reservations to avoid being bumped ([www.BCFerries.com](http://www.BCFerries.com)) . . . Night dives are no extra charge, but whether they run depends on the tides and mood at the time . . . There was a variety of tanks to choose from, at no extra cost -- aluminum 80s and 90s, and even some sweet high-pressure steel 100s . . . Nitrox is \$10 per tank, \$27 a day . . . Websites: 49th Parallel Diving - [www.divemaster.ca](http://www.divemaster.ca); Cedar Beach Ocean Lodge - [www.cedar-beach.com](http://www.cedar-beach.com) (Virginia Lamb handles dive/lodge packages).

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## The DEMA Dive Show

*a slightly irreverent review*

Last month, John Bantin reported on the range of gear, good and bad, that he saw at the Dive Equipment and Marketing Association (DEMA) show in Las Vegas in November. I'll give you a slightly different take.

By my calculation, to make one complete tour of the DEMA floor, I traversed 2.38 miles of aisles, past an endless number of booths hawking every last thing a dive store might consider selling. I found bad underwater art, aromatic inhalers to "ease the queese," and waterproof iPad covers. I've

## Yes, Another High-Pressure Hose Recall

Doesn't it seem like we announce a dangerous high pressure hose problems every other month? This time, it's A-Plus Marine Supply, which says its hoses, which connect a regulator to the tank's pressure gauge, can separate, cutting the air supply.

Here's what Eric Duntz, president of A-Plus Marine Supply, wrote us about the recall: "As of the date of the recall release, we have, through our sales records, recovered all but roughly 40 hoses. The hoses we are not able to trace have been sold through various retail dive stores that cannot trace the end users. The hose problem came to our attention via a retail store that we sold to. It reported that the hoses in question were installed and, luckily, failed as soon as they were pressurized. As soon as this happened, we

started to collect that lot number of hoses. The hose crimp was not done properly by the manufacturer [based in Taiwan]."

These hoses are very distinct, as they are date-coded. The 40 hoses outstanding were sold between April and June 2012. They have the phrase "Scuba Diving High Pressure hose I.D. 3/16" (4.76 mm) W.P. 5000 PSI Exceeds SAE 100RT braid with Kevlar fiber from Dupont," printed in white lettering on the black rubber hose's outer covering. The hoses have metal fittings on each end. "CE EN 250 230" is stamped on the female side of the fitting, and "12Q1" on the male side (see the recall notice at [www.aplusmarine.com](http://www.aplusmarine.com)).

Those with recalled hoses can contact A-Plus Marine for a free replacement. Duntz says the new ones now have a stainless steel crimp. Call A-Plus Marine at (800) 352-2360, or send Duntz an email at [eric@aplusmarine.com](mailto:eric@aplusmarine.com).

always like the bright Rum Reggae batik shirts from Indonesia that get displayed each year, but it's hard for me to figure out what kind of diver wears the Goth look that Surface Interval Clothing peddles. Scuba do-rags appear every year, but the only divers I've ever seen wearing a do-rag are aging, bulging men trying to look youthful and hip, but they're fooling no one. There's hardly a funky dive resort that doesn't have a three-inch ring hanging on an overhead string that you try to launch in an arc in order to catch a hook screwed into a wall in its bar. Anyone can make one, but I'll be damned if Mellow Militia was trying to sell them for \$29.95.

There was Body Glove peddling paddleboards, looking to get dive resorts into another water sport. And there were mooring buoys, dive boats for sale and courses to teach you how to captain one. Some booths sell only one product, like Frog Spit, a mask defogger, while others, like Trident, sell an endless number of accessories, from carabineers to glow sticks. Even National Geographic is a wholesaler, peddling snorkels and masks. All the while, there were vendors trying to give me massages, urging me to test an electronic device to reduce my back or joint pain, and another selling insoles to make walking easier if I expected to cover the floor and then walk back to my hotel room.

The people manning training agency booths or selling equipment were overwhelmingly white males, with the exception of a number of booths manned (yes, manned) by Koreans, Malaysians, Japanese, Taiwanese and Chinese selling neoprene, wet and drysuits. Not long ago, these folks were behind-the-scenes-suppliers to American companies. Dive gear made in Asia, it once seemed, was considered inferior, so Tabata changed its name to TUSA, and now Asian companies are running the rubber show and have a rapidly growing presence in dive technology.

The travel booths were often staffed by people from the country represented (e.g., Bonaire, Fiji, Indonesia), and many were women, especially in travel wholesaler booths. And the buyers wandering the aisles? Largely retailers, men and women, but African Americans were rare. In America, divers and suppliers do not reflect our demographics

The dive destinations with booths were the ones you see advertising in *Sport Diver*, and each year, there are always new Indonesia destinations. Okinawa was pushing itself as a destination, and there was even Dive Oman. One unique property caught my eye -- Villa Dunbar, rising from a tiny island like a Mediterranean outpost -- but it is off the Honduran island of Guanaja, where fish life is subpar.

Behind the booths and on the tables, most resorts display pictures of their grounds, reefs and fish. The Caribbean pictures must be old (not one had a single lionfish) or carefully Photoshopped. There were a few seminars on lionfish, but not much optimism about stopping their proliferation.

Praying that our reefs will be saved (though they have only been here 6,000 years or so), Reef Ministries had a quiet booth. At another, folks from the Worldwide Christian Divers were selling T-shirts emblazoned with "Jesus is the Regulator of My Life." It brought to mind the 1976 song by Bobby Bare, "Drop Kick Me Jesus through the Goalposts of Life."

People behind the booths tried to pull me in with a simple "Good morning," or maybe "Have you ever dived Fiji (or wherever)?" Some offered candy; later in the day, some offered drinks. Malaysia served satay, spring rolls and white wine, while the Cayman Islands poured rum for anyone who asked).

Glo-Toob was the most innovative, offering eye candy in Nikki Leigh, *Playboy's* May 2012 Playmate. I didn't get the connection between her and the small emergency lights they sold, nor did many others, who were probably too old to much care. I saw her in the booth, with no one other than Glo-Toob people around, which is maybe why they hired her in the first place.

- - Ben Davison

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## Yes, the Dive Gear Caused His Death

### *but no, his sister can't sue the manufacturer*

A woman who watched in horror as her brother died while they were diving, and learned later that his diving gear was defective, can't sue the manufacturer because she wasn't aware of the defect at the time. So said a California state appeals court on January 10 in the matter of Fortman v. Forvaltingsbolaget Insulan AB.

Barbara Fortman, a resident of Redlands, CA, and her brother, Robert Myers, who was visiting from Chicago, were diving off Catalina Island in March 2009. Myers was wearing a Catalyst 360 dry-suit, which came equipped with a low-pressure hose that incorporated a small plastic flow-restriction insert. Both the hose and the insert were manufactured by Forvaltingsbolaget Insulan AB, a Swedish company that does business in the U.S. under the name SI Tech.

A few minutes into the dive, Myers signaled to Fortman that he wanted to ascend. Fortman put her hand on her brother's arm when they began their ascent but she realized that, despite kicking, they were no longer ascending. Fortman stopped kicking, and they sank to the ocean floor, where Myers landed on his back. His eyes were wide open but he was unresponsive.

Fortman later testified that she was unsure whether Myers was still breathing. "I didn't even know to look to see whether he's breathing," she said. "It didn't occur . . . I didn't allow myself to think that there was really something wrong with him. I don't think he was still breathing."

She tilted his head back as they began to ascend again so that if his air flow was constricted, he could breathe with his regulator. Myers remained unresponsive during the ascent, and halfway to the surface, his regulator fell out of his mouth. When they reached the surface, Fortman summoned help. Myers was taken to the hyperbaric chamber on the island, where he was pronounced dead.

Fortman testified that she initially thought Myers had a heart attack, but she learned months later that her brother's regulator had malfunctioned. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department collected Myers gear, and technicians examining the regulator's second stage found that the flow restriction

## Why DEPP Has Been Giving the Silent Treatment to Divers

Whenever we write about dive equipment insurance, we always get a few reader complaints about the leading provider, Dive Equipment Protection Plan (DEPP) and its slow handling of complaints. The latest we received was from reader Pec Indman (San Jose, CA) who says DEPP has been giving him the silent treatment. "DEPP is not responding to claims. I've been insured by DEPP for many years and have filed claims successfully in the past. But when I had a camera flood in November, I e-mailed, left phone messages and sent faxes, but have not had any response. Since I paid via credit card, I may have some recourse, and am pursuing that avenue for now."

We sent Indman's e-mail to Deane W. Lehrmitt, CEO of Innovation Programs Group, Inc., broker for the DEPP program for clarification, and she sent us this reply: "In a sense, he is not wrong. We suffered a total and complete systems failure on November 16 that was not restored fully until December 26. During that time, we could not access customer information, send or retrieve email, access the Internet or retrieve any of our saved documents. We operate off of a dedicated server for our system, and that server was the piece that was affected by the failure. So while it seemed we were non-responsive, it was not because we chose to ignore our customers."

Lehrmitt says the system has been restored, and DEPP is up and running again. But more than five weeks worth of system shutdown for a company handling insurance claims and storing important information? Unheard of in any 21st century business. Buying technology that runs smoothly and doesn't take weeks to recover should be one area where DEPP spends your policy payments, don't you think?

insert, a black cylindrical-shaped object, did not appear on any of the product schematics. According to the investigation report, the insert was in a location "that would appear to restrict normal airflow." The investigators determined that the flow-restricting insert in the suit's low-pressure hose somehow became lodged in the second stage regulator and caused the regulator to fail.

Fortman and Myers' parents filed separate suits against SI Tech. Fortman sought damages for emotional distress, alleging that "[she] was present at the time and place of the occurrences described . . . and contemporaneously observed, witnessed and saw that he was unresponsive to her signals, and perceived that her brother had stopped breathing and was being fatally injured by defendants' defective and unsafe products." Her negligence claim was based on the "bystander" doctrine, first set forth in the 1968 California Supreme Court case *Dillon v. Legg*, in which a mother, seeing her child run over by a negligent truck driver sues the driver for her emotional distress caused by witnessing the accident.

In the Fortman case, there was no factual dispute over what happened. Thus the defendant manufacturer filed a motion for summary judgment, saying the only question is for the trial court to decide whether the defendant owes a duty of care to Fortman. STI contended that Fortman couldn't establish an awareness of the causal connection between the injury-producing event and the resulting injury. So while Fortman may have seen her brother suffer injuries, she couldn't have perceived that he was being injured by the company's product. In reply, Fortman said she only had to establish that she observed the accident, not what caused the injury.

Under California law, a person who sees a close relative injured or killed because of someone else's negligence can sue the wrongdoer for emotional distress. But the Second District Court of Appeal in Los Angeles said such suits are allowed only if the watcher is aware of the cause of the harm when it occurs. "Fortman witnessed the injury, but did not meaningfully comprehend that the company's defective product caused the injury," Justice Richard Aldrich said in the 3-0 ruling that relied on a 1989 California Supreme Court ruling that set limits on suits for emotional trauma caused by witnessing an injury: The plaintiff must be a close relative, must be at the scene of the wrongful conduct and must be aware of the cause of the injury.

Fortman's lawyer, Roland Wrinkle, said the appeals court's decision last week was an unjustified narrowing of the 1989 standards, and he will ask the state's high court for a hearing. SI Tech's lawyer,

Steven McGuire, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the ruling was consistent with the standards set by the state's high court. He acknowledged that Fortman might find the dismissal of her lawsuit unfair but said, "That's the way the law works sometimes."

We asked *Undercurrent* contributor Laurence Schnabel, Of Counsel to the Los Angeles-based law firm Lewis Brisbois Bisgaard & Smith and a certified divemaster, for his take on the court's ruling. His view: "In my opinion, the appeal courts that fashioned and since refined the Dillon v. Legg bystander claims, which Fortman used as her basis, are wary of allowing too broad an application of the doctrine, and they fear a wide Dillon application will flood already overloaded courts with more litigation.

"The court's opinion is not final, but the chances of a rehearing request, if made, being granted is slim, and a Supreme Court grant of review even slimmer. My suspicion is that Fortman sued under the Dillon doctrine because she was not an heir of her brother's and thus could not sue for wrongful death. That type of suit can be filed only by the deceased's heirs at law, relatives such as parents, wife, kids, who are closer in law than a sister, thus relegating the plaintiff sister here to a Dillon claim."

Indeed, Myers' parents have filed a wrongful death suit against SI Tech, which is now in trial in California's Superior Court. This ruling does not affect that case.

- - Vanessa Richardson

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## Filling Cylinders In Water

### *perhaps a cause of a tank explosion*

*In my article last month about the death of a Belize dive shop employee due to an exploding tank, I noted that the tank was not filled in a water bath, as if that would matter. Several readers wrote that filling a cylinder in a water tank was not necessarily the right thing to do. So I turned to PSI-PCI, the experts in such matters, and received an article (which I have edited) written by its founder and former president, Bill High. He explains why a water bath may not be such a good idea, though a strong barrier between the tank being filled and people is a very good idea.*

- - Ben Davison

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When just looking at physics, we can agree that heat transfer is far greater in water than in air. Cold water divers concluded that long ago without any physics classes. However, claiming one law of physics to justify placing dive cylinders into typical dive store water tubs during fill, as is still done at some air stations, simply isn't the right thing to do.

Chilled water tubs can contribute to overfilled cylinders, as can careless operators who think overfilling is all right because the water bath will drop pressure some. Structural damage during overfill is cumulative and irreversible. Hydro tests have been shown to be unreliable in detecting fatigue damage for overfill; therefore, even those overfilled cylinders, which have passed hydro tests, may suffer a leak or rupture.

A cylinder is full when an accurate gauge shows the marked service pressure at an ambient temperature of 70 degrees. Many air station gauges are seldom or never tested to assure accuracy. A cylinder filled slowly (as all cylinders should be) in chilled water will actually be overfilled when allowed to come to a higher ambient temperature. It is worth repeating: Water tubs often contribute to overfilling.

#### **Reported Water Tub Benefits**

Several perceived benefits to using a water bath during fill are offered by tub proponents. They include: 1) cooling allows more air in the cylinder; 2) cooling allows faster fills; 3) the water will absorb the energy of a ruptured cylinder; and 4) the tub itself provides explosion protection.

Regarding the first two benefits mentioned above, cylinders, when filled at the industry- recommended fill rate of 300-600 psi per minute, do not get hot. They may be warm but usually the temperature of the water is so close to the cylinder increase (about 100 to 110 degrees maximum) that the exchange rate is slow and low. We don't want more air in the cylinder than is allowed by law. We don't want fast fills beyond the industry standard, if for no other reason than cylinders will get warm, and such practice makes the air station undefendable.

The whole water tub thing began in the mid 1950's, when we knew little about cylinders and their care. Steel cylinders got warm during what we now know to be fast fills. We didn't know about prudent fill rates, and we often ignored the service pressure limit. Cylinders were filled quickly, removed from the water promptly, and very little actual in-water temperature reduction took place. Then along came aluminum cylinders with walls nearly half an inch thick. They didn't seem to get as warm. That was because although we still filled quickly, the heat generated within the cylinder took much longer to transfer to the outside. The water bath cylinder was removed from the water and sent on its way, long before the fast fill-generated heat could be dissipated into the water.

What about the perceived benefit that the water bath will absorb explosive energy? There simply is not enough water between the tub walls and the exploding cylinder to have any measurable effect whatsoever, unless of course the tub is a nearby swimming pool. But surely the tub itself will provide protection? Not necessarily true when you look at a great many of the water tubs in use today. Plastic garbage cans are used, as well as sheet metal buckets of one sort or another. The energy within a full, exploding cylinder is so great, well over one million pounds per foot of potential kinetic energy, that all these containers break up and contribute shrapnel to injury and property damage. Even concrete block barriers usually disintegrate.

#### **Water Gets Inside**

The greatest concern for water baths when filling cylinders is water entering into them. With water, metal and the ample oxygen in compressed air, cylinders can be damaged dramatically in a very short time. A study by the University of Rhode Island revealed that under adverse conditions, a steel cylinder with a small amount of saltwater (remember, the fill tub may contain contaminated water) could be in danger of exploding within as little as 100 days. In a perfect facility, tub water does not enter the cylinder, but in many tubs, water is allowed to enter the valve aperture, as well as the fill whip connector. Those water droplets are pushed into the cylinder.

Note that I referred to a perfect water tub system. A very few do exist, reinforced concrete and steel tubs serving both to hold water and act as a blast shield. Cylinders placed into the water cannot drop below the

### **The Debate About Fish and Pain is Settled – Or Is It?**

It is a debate that has raged for years, but now scientists have concluded that fish do not feel pain. Fish do not even suffer when they are hooked and fighting for their lives, according to a new study in the science journal *Fish and Fisheries*. They say fish do not have a brain system or enough sensory receptors in the nerve cells to experience suffering. While fish may struggle to get free, this does not mean they are in pain. Instead, they show 'little effect' from injuries and toxins that would leave humans in agony.

Researchers at the University of Wisconsin inserted needles into the jaws of rainbow trout. Jim Rose, a zoology and physiology professor who led the project, said, "In spite of large injections of acid or bee venom, that would cause severe pain to a human, the trout showed remarkably little effect." Fish also resumed normal activity within minutes of surgical procedures, as well as after being caught and released back into the water.

"It is highly improbable that fish can experience pain," Rose says. "We are not diminishing the importance of welfare considerations for fish, but we do reject the view that mental welfare is a legitimate concern."

But Ben Williamson, spokesman for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, said, "Fish don't scream in pain but they exhibit other pronounced reactions to painful stimuli. To claim otherwise is as sound as arguing the Earth is flat."

valve aperture, and fill whips can't reach water level. It has a drain that is used often. Of course, the fill station should be away from customers. Even this perfect water tub for filling is unneeded, although any true blast protection is a very wise investment. Nowhere else in the gas industry are cylinders routinely filled in a water tub.

*P.S.: Fred Calhoun, writing in the November/December 1988 issue of NAUI News, addressed the dry fill/wet fill issue accurately and in detail. Fred's article is still distributed by PSI-CSI in its publication Scuba Cylinder Reprint File. The textbook Inspecting Cylinders also explains how the tub fails to achieve what its promoters desire.*

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## Middle-Age Women and DCS

### *are they at higher risk of getting the bends?*

Every diver must be concerned about decompression sickness, especially as we age. The 50-year old body is not a 30-year-old body; and a 70-year-old body is not a 50-year-old body. But women divers, it seems, have a special set of issues associated with menopause. As a longtime diver, divemaster and middle-aged woman, I've met more than a half dozen 50-plus women who've been diagnosed with DCS. I've seen numerous cases in Cozumel, where I dive every year. All these women claim to have been bent while staying within the recreational dive limits. We know fitness and aging are important factors in the DCS equation. But the question that interested me is whether aging women face additional risks as their bodies change with menopause.

*Undercurrent* ran a story in 2006 about research done on women divers and their menstrual cycles ([www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/dive\\_magazine/2006/MenstrualCycles200608.html](http://www.undercurrent.org/UCnow/dive_magazine/2006/MenstrualCycles200608.html)). But what do we know today about menopause and its possible effects on DCS risks? "There are no answers," says Neal Pollock, research director at Divers Alert Network. "We have a very tiny research budget and staff, and there are a lot of questions." Of course, there are researchers elsewhere with an interest in the topic, though it doesn't seem to be getting much attention.

However, physiological differences between men and women may have an impact on nitrogen loading. First, men (even those who aren't gym rats) generally have more muscle mass, and thus a better ratio of muscle to fat. "If you compare two people with equal amounts of fat, but one has less muscle and one has more, the one with less muscle is probably at greater DCS risk," says Pollack. That's because fat unloads nitrogen more slowly than muscle does.

Also a diver with less muscle mass will work harder in currents or on the surface, thus stressing her body more. If that diver is yo-yo diving too, as is popular in Cozumel, that could be a formula for trouble. Another difference: Women tend to get colder than men do. "If you have a lot of uptake of gas, say on a deeper or longer dive, you have tissues loaded with gas as you get cold, and you have impaired unloading," says Pollack.

In addition, says Dr. Margery Gass, executive director of the The North American Menopause Society, "Women do start to lose a little bit of bone at menopause...then [the rate of] loss goes to same loss that men experience, as it relates to aging." Aging women need to pay attention to bone health, and bone and muscle strength. Gass says that DCS may occasionally lead to osteonecrosis, which means that part of a bone does not get blood and dies. It is a little discussed risk of DCS.

Okay, so are women, especially older women, at more risk for DCS, even if we don't yet have a study to prove it? Yes, and no. "I believe that women are at a slightly greater risk for DCS physiologically," says Pollock. "However, women are behaviorally much safer than men. They don't have the same stupid gene men have." And thus, they're less likely to take foolish risks in diving and other activities.

## Watch Your Weight, Heave Some, Too

In the age of super-sized fast food, divers need to make smart choices. Obesity increases all types of health risks for women and men, not just DCS. Staying strong and maintaining muscle mass is vitally important for postmenopausal women divers. And older male divers should incorporate strength training into their fitness regimes too.

Los Angeles-based fitness guru Kathy Kaehler, author of *Fit and Sexy for Life*, is a huge proponent of strength training for women. She says that with commitment, middle-age women can dramatically improve their body fat ratios. A woman with poor fitness might have a body-fat percentage in the high 30s to low 40s, but with proper strength and fitness training, she could lower that percentage to the mid to low 20s in a year. The reality is that as we age, we have to work very hard to put on and maintain muscle. "I've gone through menopause, and the first thing that left me was my muscle - that was my wake-up call," says Kaehler.

As for all aging divers, Pollack has this advice: Dive more conservatively as you age, and be honest in your appraisal of your abilities. Also, "stay physically fit and make sure you're medically fit."

In addition, give yourself a safety margin by always doing a minimum of a five-minute safety stop. More is better." Also make all your dives multilevel, says Pollack. "Once you leave a depth, don't return to it." No more yo-yoing.

*Kathleen Doler is a divemaster, freelance writer and lifetime fitness fanatic who lives in Truckee, CA.*

**(Note from Ben:** Research has shown that patent foramen ovale, a heart condition found in a significant percentage of the population, increases susceptibility to the bends in both sexes, regardless of whether they dive within the limits of decompression tables.)

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# Diving in "Shark-Infested" Waters

*with oxygen tanks, to boot*

Don't you scratch your head when you read stories of people swimming, boating or being rescued in "shark-infested waters?" The phrase conjures up comic book visions of WWII sailors floating amid thousands of crazed sharks. Once upon a time, perhaps, some seas were shark infested, but today they exist only when someone is chumming sharks for photographers.

Nonetheless, the CBS station in Miami reported this in August, "Suffering through jellyfish stings on her face, Diana Nyad is in day two of her quest to swim from Cuba to Florida in shark-infested waters without a protective cage." She should have worried about the jellies, not the sharks.

The *Sydney Telegraph* had the America's Cup previews last September "contested in the shark-infested waters of San Francisco Bay." And the *Ellesmere Point Pioneer* in the U.K. had "the fearless Father Christmas braving the shark-infested waters to deliver presents to the aquarium's team of divers." At least they get the joke.

However, I just discovered a new angle by Lindsay Craven, a staff writer for North Carolina's *Yadkin Ripple*, who profiled a local assistant dive instructor as a daredevil who has "been scuba diving in eel-infested waters." I won't mention the chap's name so as not to embarrass him.

And while I'm ranting, how about this item in the *Dubai National*? "The cheery Filipino Mario Tapales . . . is the man to indoctrinate me in the PADI course. It seems diving is a lot more than just donning some goggles and strapping an oxygen tank on your back."

Plenty of American writers get that wrong too. Matthew Lynley, a *Wall Street Journal* blogger writing about Google photomapping reefs, writes, "Google is adding street-view photos of six of the biggest coral reefs around the world . . . If that doesn't make you want to slap on an oxygen tank and hop into the ocean, who knows what will." Maybe if you have emphysema, but I'll stick to Nitrox.

A few months ago, the *Los Angeles Times'* business section reported, "Now St. Nick is strapping on an oxygen tank to take photos underwater with shoppers at Sport Chalet." I'm pretty sure Sport Chalet knows better.

Even Hollywood actors get it wrong. In a *Playboy* interview, Matt Damon said he was terrified after shooting an underwater scene in *The Bourne Supremacy*," saying, "So I wouldn't be constantly aware of how scared I am of drowning, I had to go to a pool with this great stunt guy and divemaster a couple of times a week for a month or so to train me to relax underwater without an oxygen mask." We assume the divemaster set him straight and gave him the right type of gear -- and mask -- so he didn't end up drowning.

But the grand prize goes to the *Fiji Times*, for putting it all together in 2008. "A tourist battled an all-night ordeal, swimming 10 kilometres in shark-infested waters near Vanua Levu for about 12 hours before reaching Taveuni. Thomas Holz, 40 . . . and three other holidaying tourists were part of a 5 p.m. diving outing organized by Bubble Divers at the Rainbow Reef in Vanua Levu. . . Twenty-five minutes into the dive, [Holz] surfaced for air after exhausting his oxygen supply.

"The divemaster told me to hold on where I was while he dived for the remaining three who had also run out of oxygen," Holz said. "The boat was about 100 feet away, and I could see it on the horizon but couldn't swim for it because the currents were too strong." When the divemaster resurfaced a few minutes later with the other tourists, Holz was nowhere to be found.

"Holz said he could hear the sound of the boat engine, but it was far away and he could hardly see through the dark. 'I swam for Taveuni. The currents were strong and . . . though I was tired, I hung on to the oxygen cylinder and kept swimming. Then early this morning, I felt the seabed and just screamed out for help before I collapsed on the shore.'" Not from oxygen poisoning, I hope.

-- Ben Davison

## Lionfish Control: Targeted Areas, Lots of Manpower

Invasive lionfish may never be eradicated in the Caribbean, but a new University of Florida study shows that it may be possible to keep them under control – in specific, targeted areas and using plenty of manpower.

Efforts have been made to control the fish by holding derbies, where divers and snorkelers spear or net as many fish as possible. The study, outlined in the *Reviews in Fisheries Science*, attempted to determine how intense and consistent such efforts would need to be to curb a lionfish population.

The Florida researchers spent much of 2011 working with the Central Caribbean Marine Institute, local divemasters and scuba volunteers who removed lionfish weekly from several sites off Little Cayman Island. The team asked the divers not to remove lionfish from an area called Rock Bottom Wall so it could be used as a control site. At the lionfish removal sites, lionfish density decreased, and the average size of the remaining fish was smaller. In comparison, lionfish numbers increased markedly at the control site.

When the study began, it wasn't unusual to capture lionfish measuring about 400 millimeters long. But by June 2011, at the dive site Blacktip Boulevard, the removed fish ranged from 140 to 295 millimeters in length, with 83 percent of the fish smaller than 220 millimeters. The size of the fish has food chain implications, as the larger lionfish are more likely to consume bigger prey, such as grouper or snapper, while smaller lionfish prefer to nibble on shrimp.

The study's findings have laid the groundwork for future studies into ecological impacts of lionfish on native fish populations and the cost-effectiveness of removal efforts, said Tom Frazer, head of the Florida research team. "You're not going to be able to determine how many resources you can use for that problem until you have an idea how much time and effort is involved in removing the fish."

## Flotsam & Jetsam

**Sorry, Gladys.** In last month's article "Post-Op Diving" about diving after major medical operations, Gladys Howard, beloved owner of Pirates Point Resort at Little Cayman, wrote us about how she celebrated with a dive on her 80th birthday after enduring cancer treatments and a knee replacement. But we screwed up the photo caption in the print article. Gladys is actually on the left, and it's her dive instructor, Martha Steinhagen, who's the one holding up the "80" whiteboard. Apologies, Gladys, but hope you're doing well and diving regularly.

**Paul McCartney and Richard Branson Support the Turtles.** The Cayman Turtle Farm on Grand Cayman is under fire after the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) went undercover there, filmed a catalogue of failures, and alleges that the turtles, bred for their meat, are kept in inhumane conditions, suffer illness and injury, and tourists are in danger of illness from handling them. The WSPA wants to stop the breeding program and have the turtle farm dedicated completely to rehabilitation, research and conservation. McCartney publicly stated that he backed WSPA, and Branson says he's awaiting the farm's independent review with interest.

**Looking for Treasure?** Underwater treasure hunts are always intriguing, especially if you get a share in the profits. Bobby Pritchett, CEO of Global Marine Exploration, wrote us to say his company just got a contract in the Dominican Republic for salvaging shipwrecks 200 to 500 years old. That may be a good area to search -- Deep Blue Marine announced back in spring 2011 that it found what it thinks is the Caribbean's oldest shipwreck, on the



northern coast, after finding jade statues, Mayan jewelry and gold coins dating back to 1535. The salvager split its profits, probably worth millions, evenly with the Dominican government. Pritchett is seeking investors, so if you like high-risk diving from a financial standpoint, contact him at [gmexploration.com](http://gmexploration.com).

**Money Dispute Leads to Dead Dolphins.** Villagers on Fanalei in the Solomon Islands have slaughtered approximately 1,000 dolphins after a fallout with the conservation group Earth Island Institute. They say the Berkeley-based nonprofit failed to pay them \$400,000 as agreed for stopping the traditional hunt. Earth Island says the money had been seized by a few renegade villagers, who weren't distributing it. Whatever the misunderstanding, it's a huge setback for conservation efforts in a "hot spot" for the dolphin trade -- the Solomons were notorious as a source of live dolphins for aquariums in China and Dubai, selling them for \$150,000 each. Tourism operators are calling for the Solomon Islands government to get involved, and one unnamed dive operator told Radio Australia he feared that "people will become more and more disgusted when they realize what's happening."

*Undercurrent* is the online consumer newsletter for sport divers that reviews scuba destinations and equipment. We accept no advertising, and have published monthly since 1975.

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February 2013 Vol. 28, No. 2