

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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CoCo View Resort, Roatán, Honduras

eat, sleep and dive a lot is their motto

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Dear Fellow Diver:

On my flight from Delta's Atlanta hub to Roatán, I was surrounded by a crowd drinking at 10 a.m. and loudly advertising it. My partner issued soothing reassurance, "They won't be at CoCo View." A safe prediction, because CoCo View's T-shirt motto of "Eat, Sleep, Dive" sums it up: it's all diving, not partying. For many Caribbean divers, CoCo View (CCV) is the premier destination.

At the Roatán airport, I got my first dose of CCV efficiency. Nora, the resort's rep who greets incoming divers, walked me out to their bus, and 20 minutes later, I was listening to a short welcome briefing as my gear was whisked to my over-the-water bungalow.

I've been here before (and thus avoided the beach checkout dive -- mandatory unless you've been here previously -- which you do on your own in lieu of the first boat dive), and noticed the upgrades in my comfortable bungalow. It now had in-room Wi-Fi, a coffeemaker, mini-fridge and bottled water. It also had A/C, though I preferred the sea breezes most days. My partner suggested a shore dive, but my mood was to hang out on my little balcony and transition from work mode to Caribbean vibe.

Next morning at 6 a.m., as I fired up the coffeemaker and looked out at the reef line, I spotted four divers kicking in from their dawn dive. Apparently, some folks skip the "sleep" part of the T-shirt instructions. A few eggs and a couple hours later, I stepped off the stern of Coco II, one of



Entrance and Exit to CoCo View's House Reef



four identical, well-designed dive boats, and dropped in to "Two Tall Two Small," a site so close to CCV's house wall that my friend, who traveled with us, started his second dive by dropping off right there and cruising the wall back to the lodge.

I can often dive the same reef twice and feel differently about it, depending on chance sightings. My first dive here was OK, with Creole wrasse schools and an eagle ray banking close by. Six days later, the same site yielded one of my better dives. As I came to a sand chute, I saw my partner head-to-head with a goliath grouper. Matched in weight class, they eyed each other

until the fish eased out from under its ledge. I swam with 100 yellowtail parrotfish, about the only parrot that schools, while another diver pointed out a scorpionfish I had just passed over. My partner clicked her rattler to show me Florida corallimorphs, then she found a branching anemone and a strawberry tunicate.

CoCo View claims to be the largest dive resort in the world (though a number of resorts catering to Japanese divers would not agree). There were 70 divers during my week in mid-February; when I had tried to book the trip six months earlier, my first choice of weeks was sold out. With the size and age comes a well-worn routine. The writer who had reviewed CCV previously for Undercurrent (August 2008) compared it to "Camp Granada," and I did indeed feel like I was at scuba camp. While I prefer smaller operations, this camp had some big advantages: air fills of at least 3000 psi and my gear always properly set up on the boat, which left promptly at 9 a.m. and 2 p.m., with cold water, fresh fruit and a Divers Alert Network safety kit on board. In addition to standard aluminum 80 tanks, they offered small bottles for air-sippers and jumbo 100s (which I chose).

My assigned boat had 13 divers for the week, and most of them showed up each time. I was issued a dive locker right behind my boat, making handling gear a snap. They changed rinse tank water frequently (a CCV regular noticed me reading Undercurrent, and told me that after an Undercurrent reader report had complaints about contaminated water, CCV made more frequent water changes). Thirteen is a load of gringos on one boat, and two boats had 18 each, part of a large group from Portland. My boat had couples, solos, and my threesome.

Only one divemaster herds a large group, but it works here because most divers are experienced and many do their own thing; about half of all CCV divers are repeat visitors. However, the crowd can be a problem when the divemaster clicks his rattler to point out something and the herd swoops in, with some videographers apparently planning a feature-length film. Who needs five minutes of video of a stationary seahorse? But speaking of seahorses, you won't miss these CCV trademarks; the divemasters know where the real cuties live. And when the pack assembled, I tacked down the reef and out of the way.

The reefs are stressed -- as they are everywhere in the Caribbean -- with varying degrees of healthy coral varieties, but in better health than most locations. Tim Blanton, CCV's photo-shop pro, said the recent warm water had spurred algae growth. (Water was down to 80 degrees in mid-February.) He also told me where to find the healthiest, most vibrant reef -- at the end of the house reef, CoCoView Wall on one side of the lodge, and Newman's Wall on the other. It's the key to CoCo View's popularity. After the morning dive and a 40-minute interval, I often stepped off the back of the boat for the "drop-off" dive on Newman's

Wall. I would swim along the sloping wall at around 55 feet, until I got to a sign that pointed me across the lagoon channel to the wreck of the Prince Albert, a 140-foot freighter sunk by CCV staff in 1985. It's not a great wreck dive but it provides shelter for morays and occasionally grouper. I loved poking around in the channel for the sand dwellers, from ghost feather dusters to garden eels. The visibility here was soupy, perhaps due to heavy recent rains.

CCV veterans favor being dropped off after the afternoon dive on CoCoView Wall, a more vertical wall. Tim Blanton's tip was to request being dropped off 200 meters farther down the wall, where I found the most live coral I've seen in years. It was a longer swim back, but I had plenty of time, because the place to be was on top of the wall around the amazing coral garden and in the sand channels at 20-foot depths. Here were sheet corals, huge pillar corals and big schools of reef fish, including my only shy hamlet spotting of the week. I liked exploring the turtlegrass shallows, where I found mystery invertebrates, juveniles of every species, and denizens like two big permits that

Checkout Dives: Why They're Important

We received an e-mail from reader Dana Muir (Ann Arbor, MI) with a complaint about CoCo View's stringent checkout dive requirements. "I understand requiring a checkout dive. I don't understand inflexibility in making arrangements. Why won't CoCo View ensure that people arriving on a noonish plane can do their checkouts on the same day?"

Some past CoCo View visitors wrote to defend the resort's requirement, like Danny Drew (Round Rock, TX), who said there's two reasons for it. "Not knowing how long a diver's flight will be, and the level of possible fatigue and dehydration from the plane's dry air, they feel it is better to allow a few hours for new people to rest, hydrate, unpack, attend to administrative paperwork and get used to island time. Also, the resort staff is very busy, and Saturday is the changeover day for one set of guests to the next. This allows for the one day off per week that most of the divemasters get. However, they do have a divemaster internship program, and if prior arrangements are made -- plus a fee -- then a Saturday checkout is easy to arrange."

Glenn Dair (Atlanta, GA) admits he and his dive buddy were impatient to start diving as soon as they landed. "It was our fourth return but several years since our last visit. We were insistent, firm and good-natured about our wishes to dive on arrival day. After a lot of discussion, the owners found one of the divemasters still on site, and we were given the checkout tour, which enabled us to be on the first boat the next day. Needless to say, we tipped generously at the end of the dive. We were glad to have the guidance on the house reef, but with close to 1,000 logged dives each, we did not need to be watched."

Some readers questioned the value of checkout dives for experienced divers, especially when some dive operators do less-than-thorough ones. Ernie Casuarina (Rye, NY), who leads Caribbean dive trips, says it seems only Bonaire operators do checkout dives, and not good ones, either. "At least among the dive operations I have worked with, the checkout consists of a single unsupervised shore dive to assure proper weighting and correct functioning of all equipment before diving from a boat. The lack of supervision makes the procedure flexible and informal -- and really quick, if desired. However, it does not thoroughly guarantee proper weighting because a novice or poorly-trained diver may simply add enough weight to assure an easy descent, and then, as a result, end up being grossly overweighted -- which is one of my pet peeves and main concerns for once-a-year, on-vacation divers. I see it way too often -- but never among 'my' divers, of course."

Margaret Hargreaves, (El Quseir, Egypt) is one diver who defends checkout dives as essential. "I work as a professional diver, and if we didn't insist our guests make checkout dives first, we would be letting some people literally put their lives in grave danger. The check dive showed us that in spite of their certification level and number of verified dives, we had to ensure they were professionally guided on every dive. Flying can cause dehydration, along with pooling of the blood, which are factors for DCS, and travelling can be tiring, which can hinder dive performance and safety. Divers Alert Network recommends leaving at least 12 hours between landing from your flight and diving. I think a dive operation is correct to err on the side of safety. After all, it is the customer's safety they are concerned about."

CoCo View Resort, Roatán

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent
Caribbean Scale

scouted past me a few times. CCV is an outstanding place for an avid snorkeler. (Night dives are also done from the shore, to the house wall area, where the protected lagoon make for easy entry and exit points).

Ruben Melgar, my boat's captain, and divemaster Marcos Rodriguez were competent, helpful and safety-conscious. I liked Marcos's slow pace, but he wasn't much help as a creature scout. Most of his rattles were to point at lobsters, barracudas or creatures inexperienced divers might miss. But once he pointed at a turtle just 20 feet from me, which I would have missed, so I shouldn't scoff too much. At a couple of sites, he announced there would be "friendly" green or spotted morays, and yep, I was startled by a big green that swooshed right past me. The divers

seemed to love the show, but did they notice Marcos spreading out the fish chow behind them? I was told that Kirk, another divemaster, is the resident scout for interesting creatures.

Most dives tend to be a similar profile: down the mooring line to the top of the wall, cruise the wall, then, following the divemaster, make a turnaround to loop back over the top of the wall in the shallows, reach the boat in 45-50 minutes, then exit 10 minutes later by climbing the two big stern ladders, with help as needed from the captain. After dockside briefings, the boats left on time for the five- to 10-minute trips. CCV offers an all-day trip on a faster boat for \$75, too pricey in my opinion. Calvin's Crack and Mary's Place are two dives with great swim-throughs and formations; they're where I discovered longsnout butterflies and blackcap basslets in the holes, while Creole wrasse streamed above. As I moved into the deep crack at Calvin's, Marcos controlled traffic so we would not bunch up in the site's signature passage. I eased myself near the bottom, where the view through the sea fans all the way to sunlight was great. I exited into blue water at 95 feet and poked around on the wall, with jacks overhead, as other divers followed. On top of the reef, sea fans swayed in a hefty surge at 20 feet.

I saw a few lionfish, but fewer than on recent trips to Cozumel, Cuba and San Salvador in the Bahamas. Doc Radawski, the founder of CCV's dive operation, told me the lionfish population had stabilized. He claims green morays and grouper do eat them naturally (i.e., not just when speared), and says he has video proof. A visiting post-doctoral researcher has found 75 species in the stomachs of dissected lionfish.

Valley of the Kings was one of my fishiest sites. As I headed over the wall, my partner pointed to a big scorpionfish standing lookout on a ledge, then a big male blue parrot with the trademark squared-off snout. Creole wrasse poured over the edge and allowed me to join their school, one of my favorite moments in diving. A dozen puddingwives milled around near the top, and I spotted two big mutton snappers, though I think there was a scarcity of bigger fish in this supposedly protected area (Marcos claimed it was slowly improving.) On the concrete hold for the



CoCo View's Over-the-Water Bungalows

The Final Report of a Father and Son's Cave-Diving Deaths

In our January issue, we wrote about the sad but foolish deaths of Darren Spivey and his 15-year-old son, Dillon Sanchez, who went cave diving at Florida's Eagles Nest Sink on Christmas Day and didn't make it out alive. The Hernando County Sheriff's Office has determined that they died accidentally after their tanks ran out of air. Their computers showed they dived down to 233 feet on compressed air, far beyond safe limits. It's believed that Spivey and Sanchez, neither of whom were

certified in cave diving, lost track of time while exploring the caverns. Because Spivey's regulator was not in his mouth, rescue divers assumed that Sanchez ran out of air, and his father attempted to buddy breathe with him. They also believed Sanchez panicked and attempted to swim to the surface, as he did not have his mouthpiece intact and his mask was around his neck. His body was found 67 feet below the surface. After the divers were pulled out of the water, the rescue divers and investigators found that besides the empty tanks, their dive lights had run out of battery power. Most cave diving deaths are victims who had neither the experience nor training for the challenge. This is one more tragic example.

anchor line was a big peacock flounder in perfect camouflage, and as I went up for a safety stop, a large array of reef squid skittered past.

At the lodge, the talk is all diving. At my table, it was about the reefs and fish, while many conversations reflected gear-chatter or editing pictures on laptops. Most divers are middle-aged, with quite a few dive trips advertised on their T-shirts. Thanks to the friendly "camp" atmosphere, I could ask a stranger to see his fresh video, and several folks borrowed my Humann books (yeah, I lug them; apparently sticky fingers took the lodge's only set, but can't they afford to spring for another set or two?).

To a hungry diver, the "eat" part of the T-shirt message is important. Here it's mostly an American home-cookin' buffet, and definitely plentiful. Meals were set by the day -- if it's Tuesday, it must be outdoor BBQ day. There were always enough choices so I could dodge those faux tacos mom used to make (hard-shell tortillas with hamburger, cheese and lettuce) and find something to my liking. Breakfasts had variety on the steam table; I'd opt for an omelet and toasted a muffin, and there were always juices and fruits. Lunches often had red beans and rice, as well as more choices and the soup of the day. Dinners were typically fish or shrimp and a meat choice, cooked veggies and a small salad bar. Friday night, the last night for most folks, was lobster and steak with chimichurri sauce. And always a tasty dessert; carrot cake was my favorite. The sweets disappeared fast -- there are a lot of relaxed-fit pants in this crowd.

Honduran beer (better than Budweiser) is \$2.75, and there's regularly a happy-hour special or the rum drink of the day, along with popcorn and snacks. The bar music reflects the crowd: Elton John, some Bob Marley and definitely Jimmy Buffett. A local band performed on a couple of evenings, but the scene wrapped up early. By 8:30 p.m., I would be among the "night owls" at the bar. But there were a few partiers: One "CoCoNut" (10-plus visits) jovially asked me to tell his wife that she ate dinner last night, and then asked another diver to say the opposite; apparently she had been too drunk to remember.

Friday is "tip day" and also the day to say good-byes to new friends. My early Saturday flight was noted on the whiteboard, and my departure was as efficient as my arrival. I flew to San Pedro Sula, where I rented a car and headed to the Honduran highlands and Copán Ruinas town. I visited the spectacular Copán Maya site, toured a coffee plantation and spent a day birding with a great guide, Alex Alvarado. I stayed at La Casa de Café B&B (\$58 for a double with full breakfast), and ate tasty Honduran pupusas and baleadas. Many North Americans understandably fear gang-related violent crime in Honduran cities, but the rural highlands are safer than your hometown and mine. It was a relaxing and cheap addition to my splendid trip to what, indeed, is among the top diver-dedicated resorts in the Caribbean.

-- M.A.



Divers Compass: I paid \$1,449 plus a 16-percent tax in advance, all-inclusive for six days of diving, double occupancy . . . Extra costs were \$130 for a week of Nitrox, my bar bill, tips for the boat staff and pool-tipping for the remaining staff of about 50; bring cash or pay an extra charge of four percent on credit cards . . . If you haven't been here for several years, you may suffer sticker shock: It's not the cheap place it once was but it is still a fine deal, considering that most people will do 20-plus dives . . . CCV suggests a daily donation of \$2

for the marine park and the same for the chamber . . . The best digs are the four bungalows, next best are the similar over-water cabanas; there are also nearby houses available for larger groups . . . Websites: CoCo View - www.cocoviewresort.com; La Casa de Café - www.casadecafecopan.com; birding guide Alex Alvarado - www.honduranbirds.com

Maldives Princess, The Maldives

a long way to see whale sharks, but worth it

Dear Fellow Diver:

I cursed my burned-up cheap battery charger that didn't like the voltage adapter I had bought specifically for this trip; it didn't handle the 220-volt wiring of the Maldives Princess. Wondering if I could keep taking photos, I approached my shipmates to see if anyone had a charger I could use. Luckily, another diver did, and that became the communal battery charger for half the boat.

Danny, the boat's Maldivian manager, had met my partner and me at the Malé airport the day before. A shaggy-haired, shy young man, he proved to be an able manager throughout the trip. After waiting for other travelers whose flight was late, we walked across the street to the waiting dhoni, our dive boat for the week, and then motored out to the Princess. We were ushered into the main salon and given a welcome-aboard cocktail as a crewmember delivered our luggage to our cabin. While the cabins are large by liveaboard standards, mine lacked much storage space other than a two-level closet. However, it had a good AC unit, television with DVD player, a large shower (I never did get hot water, although people across the hall did) and a mini-fridge. The bed was comfortable -- cabins had either a queen or two double beds -- and the cabin was serviced twice a day.

The first morning, I was wakened at 6 a.m. by a ringing telephone. In my jet-lagged haze, I stumbled around to find the source of the unexpected noise. I lifted the receiver to hear Ashan, the Sri Lankan waiter, say, "This is your wakeup call!" I found my way upstairs to be greeted by the aroma of coffee and toast, my morning ritual for the next week. The Princess had remained at anchor the first night, near a nondescript shallow site we used for our checkout dive. Only a pair of rather large cuttlefish made it worthwhile. Following the dive, the captain headed out, while the 18 divers onboard (half were English-speaking Americans, Canadians, Australians and Polish, while the other half were non-English-speaking Italians) took advantage of the buffet breakfast: eggs served a variety of ways, meats, cheeses, fruit and cereals.

Our route, plotted each afternoon with a grease pencil on a map in the dining cabin, took us from Malé south to the North Ari Atoll, down to the South Ari Atoll, east to Felidhe Atoll and then north to the South Malé Atoll. While it was monsoon season in the Indian Ocean, the weather was warm and clear, and the water in the low- to mid-80s. I selected the exotic Maldivian Islands, southwest of Sri Lanka, largely so I could photograph whale sharks. Over the week, many dives were a combination of reefs, pinnacles and walls, with the usual suspects for

these waters -- varieties of clownfish, eels, clown triggers, bandcheek wrasse, Moorish idols, coral hind, scalefin anthias and Napoleon wrasse. At Maamigili Corner, the Blue Corner of the Maldives, a ripping current and sharks made this site identical to that famous Palau dive site. While the Princess provided no reef hooks, thankfully I brought mine to handle the Corner's currents, so serious that if I turned my head the wrong way, I could feel my mask about to blow off.

The Princess is a three-year-old luxury yacht, 147 feet long, with four decks. At the waterline, the cabin deck holds nine cabins, then there is the salon/kitchen/dining/outdoor lounge deck. Above that is a lounge and suite deck with two suites and the bridge. On top, the sun deck sports a whirlpool, which the crew didn't fill because the water sloshes when the Princess is underway. I could always find a nice place for alone time. The aging but well-maintained 28-foot long dhoni, loaded with our gear, followed us throughout the trip, tying up to the mother craft when it was time to go diving. That's how most live-aboards work in the Maldives. With a 15-foot-wide beam and an upper sun deck, the dhoni had plenty of room for us 18 divers. The crew put a sturdy ladder over each side when the dives concluded. They offered three dives a day with no time restrictions, and additional night dives. Depths ran 60 to 100 feet.

On my first night dive, the crew turned on a large spotlight, attracting a cloud of plankton, followed by mantas wanting to gorge themselves on the murky soup. I and everyone else jumped into the boiling sea, joining four or five mantas swooping in from all directions. I sat motionless, panning my camera, while the mantas came within inches. It was endless action.

After a day or two, I abandoned trying to change camera ports and lenses in my cabin -- there just wasn't a good place to work -- and used the main salon, which had tables, lounge furniture and a bank of receptacles for charging batteries. I spent a good share of my time here, socializing with others who were using the Internet or just kicking back. Some of the furniture has seen better days. Danny told me that one broken sofa happened when kids had repeatedly jumped on it. I could see how hard it was to keep a busy liveaboard looking good.

But they kept the meals ship-shape. Lunch buffets offered pasta, maybe a pizza, different soups and salads -- one salad of chopped tuna, coconut, curry spice and lime was so good that that I now make it at home. Dinners were a selection of fish, chicken and pasta, all cooked with a variety of spices that make everything taste exotic. Wine, beer and spirits were available for purchase. One evening, the crew trucked food and drinks to an island set up with tables and chairs; they laid down tablecloths, set up candles, lit grills and carved out sand sculptures of whale sharks, mantas and dolphins. This was not their first rodeo, as they say. Shrimp, chicken, whole fish and veggies were grilled to perfection. A very nice evening ended under the stars with dessert and good conversation.

One day, we visited a manta cleaning station at Madivarn, where a pair of mantas came to spruce up. Unfortunately, five other dive boats visited then, too. Following our dive, my buddy and I bobbed on the surface for a good 15 minutes, waiting for our dhoni to locate us among all the other dive boats and divers.

The Maldives Princess contracts for the dhoni and dive crew, apparently the norm for the Maldives. After a bell sounded to announce a briefing, it was usually Danny who drew the site on a whiteboard and described the location, depths, tank pressure to begin a safety stop, etc. Nitrox was supplied to all divers, but apparently no crew ever checked to see if every-one was Nitrox-certified. Oxygen percentages were measured and presented to divers to log, but sometimes tanks went unlogged for a given dive.



Maldives Princess



The dive guides, all Maldivians, were friendly, worked hard to keep the groups together underwater and interacted with us after the dives. The Sri Lankans tending tanks and towels kept more to themselves, mostly because of the language differences. They set up and handled all the gear.

At Maamigili Beyru, known for whale sharks, they had us prep for snorkeling so we could get into the water fast. They didn't explain why, once we had spotted the whale shark on snorkel, we could then get into our dive gear. At some point,

I gave up asking why and just went along. My take was they were keen to have divers see the shark and once we did, the crew figured we would try again on scuba. However, whale sharks, like freight trains, don't stay in one place for very long. This was a shallow site, and the crew could spot the shimmer of the sharks' wake on the surface, but our first effort, while following the fast-swimming divemaster, brought no sightings. Back to the dhoni and off we went in hot pursuit. This time I jumped in, swam a short distance, took a quick breath from my snorkel and down I dived, camera in hand. Suddenly there he was, slightly below and swimming majestically toward me. I had just enough time for a single shot, then I headed to the surface for another gasp of air, and down I went again for a parting shot of his tail. The following day we tried our luck on scuba. No whale sharks, but a squadron of devil rays swam by. (I should add that most places' visibility ran 75 to 80 feet. Not gin clear, but February is the start of whale shark season and it takes a lot of plankton to feed one.)

One day we visited the Kudhima wreck, a 150-foot cargo ship sunk as a dive site. Sitting upright in 90-plus feet of water at the edge of a reef, she literally bristled with sponges, corals, crinoids, algae and sea squirts painting every inch of the exterior of the boat. While the inside was easy to access, the good stuff was outside, with schools of batfish, puffer fish, leaf fish, and all sorts of macro subjects.

At a night dive at Aumataa House Reef, where the resort feeds the fish, the popularity was apparent by the number of anchored liveboards (the boats do a shark-feed night dive in heavy current). After a short briefing, I was off, reef hook in hand. The action was everywhere. Large, black-blotched stingrays and nurse sharks mauled the rock mass where the divemaster had hid the can-o-fish guts, while white-tips cruised the perimeter. As I moved closer to get a decent shot, a big nurse shark, its body suspended vertically toward the surface, shoved its head into the pile of rocks. It was seven feet long, but its thick girth made it look like an oil drum with fins.

Back on the boat, I heard that Konrad, a diver from Poland, had missed the dive. Having ear issues, he had missed a few dives but had been looking forward to this shallow night dive. Most of us had been hanging around in the outdoor lounge, so the dive crew assumed everyone was present and didn't ring the bell. Konrad, however, was in his cabin. After I told Danny that the crew had failed to ring the bell,

Maldives Princess, Maldives

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

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

World Scale

he directed them, with some prodding, to take Konrad out for a personal dive, while the rest of us sat down to an alfresco meal on the back deck and awaited his return. Konrad was thrilled.

Throughout the trip, I saw plenty of dolphins in the wake, visited beautiful islands with thatched-roof bungalows stretching over the water, and saw desolate spits of sand, vistas fit for the covers of upscale travel magazines. Yes, it is a long trip from the States, with never any guarantee of whale shark sightings or decent weather, but I was here at the right time for excellent diving with plenty of unique creatures, good whale shark sightings, and an enjoyable group of people to share them with.

-- A.V.



Divers Compass: I paid \$2,646 per person, double occupancy, for seven nights, with airport transfers . . . My flight from Chicago ran \$2,271 aboard Air Emirates; before connecting to Malé, I had to overnight at the International Hotel in the Dubai airport . . . All arriving luggage is X-rayed, and contraband (read alcohol) will be confiscated in this Muslim country; alcohol was not available on any of the land excursions . . . My travel agent, Ultimate Dive Travel, had suggested I reserve a forward cabin away from the engine room, but I heard no complaints from guests rooming near it . . . You can leave your heavy gear at home; the Princess's rental gear was all new Scubapro . . . Website: www.maldivesprincess.com

Are Some Male Divers Too “Helpful?” *and how should female divers handle them?*

A woman I'll call “Linda” from Seattle, WA, recently wrote on a diving online forum with an interesting question, “Have any fellow female divers been treated in a patronizing way by men in their dive group? My husband and I dive as a part of larger groups and I am often the only woman there. Although we are both experienced and watch out for each other, I've had random men in the group approach me to check that my gear is assembled properly, offer helpful tips for beginners, and generally treat me like an idiot. On one occasion, someone came up to me and tested my regulator and BC inflator while I was wearing my gear without even asking. I know that they're probably trying to be helpful, but I'm getting annoyed. My husband likes diving with these guys . . . any tips on how to deal with this situation without alienating people?”

I'm a female diver myself, and I've never had a guy sidle up beside me to check my gear. I assume that it's because I look like I know what I'm doing. But what if it's because my 5'10" height gives off a “don't mess with me” air? Or I'm subconsciously scowling and just look bitchy? Or I'm just not his type? That got me thinking about my fellow female divers. Are there lots of other Lindas out there getting unwanted attention on the dive boat? Are there certain situations in which male divers leap to help female divers -- and some women more than others?

So I put this question to *Undercurrent* readers of both sexes: When does a diver cross over from being friendly to becoming patronizing, especially when it's a male diver? I received plenty of responses -- “it-happened-to-me” stories, agreements and defenses about why men do what they do, and tips for both sexes on how to offer help and how to accept it or reject it nicely. Then I asked two psychologists -- one man, one woman, both divers -- to review reader comments and give their take on how men and women differ, and how those differences can be managed easily and respectfully during a dive.

Men: Just Born That Way?

"Linda" got some comments from men about "We were raised to be helpful," and *Undercurrent* reader Jason Propsner (Marietta, GA) is part of that group. "I was raised to be a gentleman, to look out for and respect women. I guess this diver can blame my mother and grandmother. But I would never randomly check any stranger's gear. I may observe that they look uneasy or confused and offer help, but this would apply to male or female. But a female taking offense to the male help is overanalyzing the situation, and I expect puts every situation into a sexist context -- when a man trying to be the 'knight in shining armor' is instead made out to be a 'chauvinist pig.'"

"Lady, be pissed if you want. But solicitous men around you can keep you a bit safer."

Dr. Michael Smith, a psychotherapist in Oakland, CA, who handles conflict counseling and sexual harassment issues, says that, from an evolutionary biology perspective, men have three main ways of behaving. "They're competitive, hierarchical and they're problem solvers. When a man sees a woman on a dive boat fussing with gear, he wants to go check

it. It comes to three main drivers: They can establish themselves as an important person; they get ahead in the pecking order over a man thinking the same thing; and they're solving a problem. You see this among all animals; we're only one step above them in the evolutionary chain."

Another thing going on in a dive boat: latent sexual energy. "On dive boats, men and women are nearly naked," says Smith, and because men have the hardwired urge to procreate, they may be stimulated or aroused even if they don't mean to. "Men aren't always aware of it, but they can control these urges and aim to be more civilized," says Smith.

Al Kholos (Winnetka, CA) frankly agrees that pretty women will get attention on the dive boat. "I presume 'Linda' is attractive, and if she's the only woman in the dive group, she should expect a certain amount of come-ons even if she's married, and her expertise is known to her fellow members. I know I'm likely to keep an eye on the attractive ladies nearby, even if they are vastly more experienced than I. So lady, be pissed if you want. But solicitous men around you can keep you a bit safer."

What about not-so-attractive women? Two women readers wrote in to say they feel invisible on the dive boat. "A self-proclaimed overweight diver with 150 dives wrote, "No man has ever tried to help this little lady with her gear or give her unasked-for advice or whatnot. Occasionally I am looked at side-eyed, like, 'Uh-oh, here comes the heart attack that will fuck up our dive.' Then when they see my awesome trim, buoyancy control and air consumption, and that I carry my own gear and am the last one out of the water, I get a lot of compliments. Regarding sexism, however, I have seen younger, thinner female divers get unwanted advice and attention from men on boats."

An "older, overweight, single" female diver wrote, "I have often almost been left behind at the end of a dive, because boat attendants, dive masters and other divers simply forget about me. Even though I am friendly, make an effort to be interested in others, and am interesting to talk with, many times it's for nothing, because most all the males (young or old) act as if I don't exist. When I was both thinner and/or younger, I would get offers of help all the time. But to touch me or my equipment unasked was an invitation to be stared at and hear 'Excuse me? If I need help, I'll be willing to ask for it.' Taking over adjusting someone's equipment is downright rude and condescending, but it does happen to petite, pretty women all the time, no matter how strong or capable they are."

Women: Just Playing Games?

However, women may be giving mixed signals when it comes to responding to men with offers of help. They can be inconsistent in how they want men's help, like saying they're strong enough to do anything but then having a man change their car tires," says Smith. When he was in Maui helping a friend run a

dive shop, he saw lots of men doing the diver's equivalent of changing tires for a woman -- carrying their tanks. "Women could do it, but some have more difficulty than men, who are mostly stronger and, in my opinion, most women didn't object to handing off their tanks."

If you think that's just a man's point of view, it's not. Dr. Jeanne Reeder, a psychologist and diver in Columbia, MO, says that some women play games when it comes to showing their strength, and she saw a lot of game-playing comments from *Undercurrent* readers. "Some had regressive behavior -- sarcasm, defensiveness, and the desire to use payback."

Jerome Henkel (Las Vegas, NV) had a dive buddy like that back when he was living in Guam. "We were casual friends with no other relationship other than being dive buddies and having the occasional meal. She asked me for help when gearing up and moving tanks on and off the boat. Nothing I wouldn't do for any dive buddy. After a time she moved to the States, and I did so myself three months later. I contacted her to do some dives out of Ventura, CA. When we got to the boat, I started to move tanks but she suggested that I leave her tank to do herself. OK, I figure. Then, when we were gearing up, I again moved

The Illegal Feeding of Florida's Sharks

Although feeding fish has been banned in Florida waters since 2002, some tour operators are trying to skirt the regulations, promising shark dives by luring the fish with bait. But word got out to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) when they started getting complaints about shark feeds off the shores of Palm Beach County during dive trips. One woman said the sharks got so aggressive she had to get out of the water.

Working undercover with the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office (PBSO), the FWC did two separate undercover investigations of Palm Beach dive charter operators. On February 8, deputies from the PBSO acted as "Joe Divers" paying for a day trip with Emerald Charters of Jupiter. During the dive, they took videos of owner Randy Jordan feeding sharks by hand within state waters. He also used a milk crate filled with fish chunks to lure sharks. Thomas Smith was captaining the boat. On February 22, the deputies took another undercover dive trip on board *Miss Jackie*, owned by Luis Roman of Calypso Dive Charters in Lake Park and captained by Toni Crumrine. During the dive, they videotaped Roman feeding a goliath grouper and a lemon shark, and also trying to lure sharks by shaking a milk crate filled with barracuda chunks.

Afterwards, the FWC and PBSO team used GPS devices and other methods to confirm that the illegal feeding was indeed occurring in state waters, which, in the Atlantic, is within three nautical miles of the Florida coastline. The State Attorney's office charged Jordan, Smith, Roman and Crumrine with operating a vessel for hire within state waters to allow passengers to observe fish feeding. Jordan and Roman were also charged with fish feeding. The DA's office charged the men with second-degree misdemeanors, punishable by up to 60 days in jail and a fine of up to \$500.

Emerald Charters' Randy Jordan stands defiant and denies the charges. In an interview with the Florida newspaper *Sun-Sentinel*, he said he feeds sharks every day for his clients but does so in federal waters, where it's still legal. "When people see that the sharks are not going to rip them to shreds, then they're not afraid of them, and they begin to love sharks and appreciate them as apex predators that we need," he said. "Second, by monetizing sharks by making money from people seeing them, it makes it so that sharks are worth a lot more money alive than dead."

On the Emerald Charters Facebook page, Jordan wrote, "On February 8, the FWC placed two undercover divers on the *Emerald*. They tracked us with a land-based radar and videotaped our lemon shark encounter. Lieutenant Dave Bingham just met with me and gave me a ticket for feeding sharks in state waters. They determined I was 367 feet off the line. Regardless, I am cited and will have to go to court. First of all, please let anyone know about this that wants to enrich their soul by celebrating my misfortune. I am still feeding sharks and educating divers about sharks. I'm sure after the press release and subsequent interviews, I will be more booked so talk it up!" His comment got 99 likes.

But not everyone is supporting him. The Florida Association of Dive Instructors is upset with the low fines and lowly misdemeanor charges given to the four guys, so they started a petition on Change.org to urge Florida to enforce laws against shark baiting, increase the fines, increase protection into federal waters and give stronger punishment to the offenders. You can sign it at <http://chn.ge/1nuVCDE>

to help her with her gear, something I did on each dive in Guam. Now, it's, 'I can do this myself, don't be so condescending.' At that point, I realized there was something different in our dive-buddy relationship. I don't know what had changed, but I didn't like being raked over the coals for doing the same thing I had been asked to do previously."

"I make it clear to the folks on board -- as well as reminding my husband -- that I am a diver, not a diver's wife."

Reeder cites a classic game-playing example from an *Undercurrent* reader from St. Louis, MO, who says that on the first dive of every trip, "I make it clear to the folks on board -- as well as reminding my husband -- that I am a diver, *not* a diver's wife. I will care for my own gear. I will handle all my tank changes. I will carry my own gear to and from the boat. I will rinse my own gear. I try not to be

abrasive, instead explaining that it helps me to feel safe underwater knowing that I've performed all my own safety checks and maintenance on my own gear. If the crew forgets and changes a tank for me, I gently remind them of my preferences, and by the end of the trip, they all know to leave my stuff alone. I get a little ribbing about being so independent, but it's always been good-natured. I think the most important thing is knowing where your boundaries are, and communicating them clearly and respectfully to others."

But Reeder sees her as someone who may be overdoing it in wanting to prove her competency and outdive the men. "When females are into game-playing, that will hook the man in even more."

Women Talk Back

Readers who did get unwanted help told how they solved that problem. Dorothy McDonald (Cincinnati, OH) says that on the occasion when someone swims next to her and makes some unnecessary adjustment, "I choose to ignore the person and swim away. Or if it happens to me while still on the boat or on land, I would make a very loud exclamation of shocked and 'innocent' surprise to draw everyone's attention to what the offender was doing and make him explain himself. Something like, 'Ooohhh, you scared me! I didn't know you were there! Was something wrong?' Hopefully that would be enough to prevent him from doing it again."

Diane Gedymin (Huntington, NY) says her perfect solution is, "During the next dive go over to the 'helpful' diver and check his gear diligently, and if he says something, say with a smile, 'Just returning the buddy favor.' He will get the message loud and clear."

Angela Didde (Kansas City, MO) says her solution is just to outdive them. "I was diving in Hawaii and was the only female in a group of four male divers. Being older and at that time slightly overweight, they assumed I would hold the group back and make their dive shorter. The result was much different -- after less than 20 minutes, the majority of the group needed to ascend due to low air. A full 25 minutes after they went up, the divemaster and I came up after a wonderful relaxing dive. A good dive is the best payback."

Hey, Guys: Ask, Don't Assume

Now that we're living in the 21st century, all men need to learn that they should ask, they should not assume. "When it comes to paying for dinner on the first date, nine out of 10 women assume that the man will pay, but a man should not throw out his credit card," says Smith. "Instead, he should first ask, 'Do you mind if I pay for this?' While he does end up paying, he is not assuming, so both parties win. Same with diving. A man should say, 'Would you like help lifting this tank?' And ask in a genuine, sincere way. Learn to be sincere and not be competitive in an 'I'm stronger and bigger than you' way."

Reeder cites *Undercurrent* subscriber Jeff Bennewitz (Albuquerque, NM) as a good example of a male diver offering help sincerely, even if he did piss off another man in doing so. "I don't concentrate on female divers, but find a certain majority either ask for assistance or are offered assistance with gear issues. Case in point: On a recent trip to Palau, I noticed a female diver with a grossly fogged mask. She

was totally blind underwater and didn't have the skill to rinse her mask to clear the fog. Back on the boat I offered to clean her mask, but her husband declined and said he would take care of it. Next dive, again I observe her in distress with a fogged mask, and holding onto her husband as they surface early. Back on the boat, before I can remove my gear, she hands me the mask and asks, 'Please help me with my mask.' I cleaned her mask and applied a fresh defog solution. Final dive of the day, I feel a rough tug on my BC. She is trying to get my attention, but she is wide-eyed in a good way, showing double OK signs, that she can see clearly now. I was thanked profusely as we cleaned and rinsed our gear, but her husband didn't speak to me during the rest of the trip."

Sergio Pereira (Chula Vista, CA) says he now plans to change his ways. "After reading Linda's story, I believe I may have been guilty. In the future I will take your advice and not be too quick to offer not-needed assistance that you correctly state may be based on sexism."

Ladies: Be Kind, Not Cutting

Some women struggle with the question, 'If I'm accepting help, am I showing weakness?' The answer is: You're plenty strong as men in lots of ways, probably just not as much in the upper body. "Men are physically stronger, it's a given, so it's easier for them to schlep tanks and gear," says Smith. "But in other areas -- law, medicine, diving -- women are as good as, if not better than, men, no question. Women just have to believe that in themselves."

If you're confident in your own skills, then act accordingly when rejecting help, says Reeder. "Don't get hooked in by someone else's actions, whether male or female diver. If someone shows behavior that interferes with you and your gear, give a quick negative shake of the head, say, 'I got it, thanks.' Be straightforward and direct, not passive-aggressive. And if a guy does it twice and doesn't take the hint, then have a private talk with him to set him straight."

But ladies, please don't assume all men are jerks, Smith says. "If you're not accepting his help, do it in a kind way. My experience is that most men are not cads. Ninety percent of that unwanted behavior is because the guys have not been socialized to what's acceptable behavior. Ninety percent of them will stop when women ask them to stop. It's easy and kind enough to say, "Thanks, I appreciate it, but I can manage it on my own."

As an example of how men can look like gentlemen and women can look confident while together on a dive boat, I'll let reader Sandra Quick (Grand Rapids, MI) have the last word on how to handle gender differences. "I don't feel I particularly need extra help; however, I'm not offended if someone wants to help me schlep a tank or pay a little extra attention to my gear setup. The more eyes, the better, as far as I am concerned. I have been known to set up my gear with the bungee cord still attached to the tank, and ask a

Another Diver Kidnapping Near Sipadan

Fourteen years after 21 people (including two Americans) were kidnapped from Sipadan Island, a popular dive site off the Borneo island of Sabah, one more tourist -- and a resort worker -- have been grabbed in the town of Semporna, a quick ferry ride away.

At least seven gunmen raided the Singamata Adventures and Reef Resort, a five-star PADI resort in Semporna, on April 2 and seized a 29-year-old Chinese tourist and a 40-year-old Filipino resort worker. The two victims are being held by members of the militant group Abu Sayyaf, who were also involved in the 2000 kidnappings in Sipadan, and in the November kidnapping of a 58-year-old Taiwanese woman on Pom Pom Island, who was eventually released a month later after paying ransom. The Abu Sayyaf has resorted to ransom kidnappings to raise money for weapons and to fund terror attacks in the Philippines.

Undercurrent contributor Larry Clinton took a ferry from Semporna to Sipadan for diving in August 2012, and says "the town itself looks like a seedy backpacker destination," with nothing that would entice divers to stay. While the U.S. State Department doesn't have a Travel Alert currently issued for Malaysia, it does state on its website that U.S. citizens are accordingly advised against travel to the coastal resorts in Eastern Sabah, including the divers' favorite Sipadan, because "kidnappings-for-ransom occur frequently in these areas."

fellow to help zip/unzip my wetsuit. These are things I am happy to do for other divers, too. Divers are a friendly and helpful group of folks. And if you are a competent diver, it doesn't take long for others in your group to recognize it, regardless of your sex."

-- Vanessa Richardson

Does a High-Fat Diet Increase DCS Risk?

new research says yes, but there are those who disagree

In decompression sickness (DCS) research, the effect of a diver's diet hasn't been studied much. A group of Polish researchers at the Medical University of Gdansk decided to see if a high fat diet plays a role.

They consider obesity a significant risk factor in DCS, because more inert gas is stored in fat tissue and the solubility of nitrogen in fat is 5.3 times higher than in hydrated tissue. Another predisposing factor, they say, is the poor circulation in fat tissues, which slows down the elimination of inert gas. However, some in the scientific community dispute those assertions.

The researchers believe that, due to the long duration of fat metabolism, a diet that is rich in fats will raise the level of lipids in the blood, which increases the amount of dissolved nitrogen, and thus the probability of DCS. So the researchers set out to see whether lipid level could be used to assess a diver's risk of DCS.

They gathered 56 men, ages 20 to 48, who were either sport or professional divers, and had them fill out questionnaires about their diet and work habits, which were used to calculate the approximate consumption and percentage of fat in their daily food intake. They tested each man's blood for lipid levels, then took them on two simulated dives in a recompression chamber -- one to a 100-foot dive, then a 200-foot dive after a 24-hour break -- and ran Doppler tests to determine whether any bubbles had formed.

Following the 100-foot dive, there were no symptoms of DCS, but after the 200-foot dive, symptoms were found in 29 of the 56 men. The group with no symptoms had an average daily fat intake that was four percent below the norm, while the group with stress averaged a daily fat intake 54 percent above the norm. Men without decompression stress also had lower cholesterol levels, averaging 188 milligrams per deciliter of blood (mg/dL) while the group with stress averaged 211 mg/dL. And when it came to body mass index (BMI), the no-stress men averaged 24.9, while men with stress averaged 26.3. There was no significant difference between groups in relation to age.

"A statistically significant correlation was observed between the occurrence of decompression stress and daily fat intake, cholesterol and triglyceride levels and BMI values," the researchers reported in their study, published by the journal *Underwater and Hyperbaric Medicine*. "Despite a statistically significant correlation, decompression stress occurred both in the groups with normal body weight and in those who were overweight, but not among all the overweight individuals. It may suggest that BMI is an overrated risk factor and could indicate new, additional risk factors such as the diver's diet, overall cholesterol and triglyceride levels."

An excess of fat in the diet leads to disturbances in the lipid balance, the researchers summarized, and higher consumption of animal fats, with a lack of vegetable and fish fat, leads to increased cholesterol and triglyceride levels. The time required to metabolize excess fat will result in consistently higher post-meal lipid levels. "No one dives on an empty stomach," the researchers wrote. "Dives should be performed approximately two hours after a meal, when nutrients have been absorbed into the bloodstream, and fats in the diet have a direct impact on the increasing volume of inert gases that are dissolved in the blood serum during a hyperbaric exposure . . . in the case of someone who has eaten a fatty meal, normal decompression

Coming Soon: Underwater Wi-Fi

Two researchers from the University of Buffalo have successfully tested an “underwater network architecture” that might be able to provide underwater Wi-Fi in the near future. But don’t think you’ll be able to use it to post selfies immediately to Instagram while diving. The researchers, electrical engineering professor Tommaso Melodina and his graduate student Yifan Sun, say their underwater Wi-Fi system will be used to monitor ocean life, detect tsunamis and earthquakes earlier than current technology and even assist police in tracking drug traffickers.

The challenge is to find new forms of transmitting the Wi-Fi signal. On land, Wi-Fi is transmitted using radio waves but they drop out under water.

Sound waves, on the other hand, travel great in water, which is why submarines use sonar for navigation. Melodina and Sun took this principal and applied it to their Wi-Fi theory, testing out their system in Lake Erie last fall to some success. They attached 40-pound sensors to a buoy, then dropped them into the water. The buoy, bobbing on the surface, converted the Wi-Fi radio signal into soundwaves. Melodina and Sun then used a laptop to transmit information to the sensors and shortly began detecting “a series of high-pitched chirps” which ricocheted off a nearby concrete wall -- the beginning of a deep-sea Internet system.

“A submerged wireless network will give us an unprecedented ability to collect and analyze data from our oceans in real time,” said Melodina in a statement. “Making this information available to anyone with a smartphone or computer, especially when a tsunami or other type of disaster occurs, could help save lives.”

time consistent with the dive tables may prove to be insufficient for complete desaturation . . . From our experience, such a situation will result in at least a greater severity of decompression stress.”

Some dive medicine experts question their results, one of whom is Nico Schellart, a professor of biomedical engineering at the University of Amsterdam. He has also studied whether body fat affects divers, and in a controlled study found that neither body fat nor BMI enhanced bubble formations; the correlations were “highly non-significant.” However, age and, especially, maximal oxygen consumption (VO₂ max) determined bubble development.

Schellart wrote to *Underwater and Hyperbaric Medicine*, disputing the validity of the Polish study, stating, “It seems likely that [daily fat intake, and triglyceride and cholesterol levels] are indicators for bubble stress, but with the present study design and statistical analysis, the question cannot be answered whether they are stressors. To date, BMI is an indicator, poorer than body fat; according to new insights, [those two factors] have lost their status as stressors.”

The researchers replied, “For years, the research on the impact of age, body weight, fat mass, maximal oxygen uptake went on, but no one paid attention to the factor as obvious as nutrition . . . Many times it has been proven that a high-fat diet with a predominance of animal products causes an increase in cholesterol and triglyceride levels in the blood. It should also be stressed [that] in the mechanism of fat digestion and absorption, [there is] a long half-life in the blood, from a few hours to a few days . . . the results indicate a strong causal relationship between the studied parameters. Just highlighting the effects of diet was the aim of our research . . . there is a high probability that a high-fat diet increases the maximal oxygen uptake, not the mass of [body fat].”

We contacted Petar DeNoble, research director at Divers Alert Network, who knows the study well, and is skeptical about its results. “First, the ‘decompression stress’ was estimated by monitoring venous gas embolism [VGE] using Doppler detector, but quantitative measures [i.e., bubble grades] were not presented . . . The dive to 100 feet for 30 minutes did not cause VGE in any diver, which is quite unexpected. The dive to 200 meters caused VGE in 29 out of 56 divers despite 180 minute of decompression. It is likely that the VGE grade was very low. One thing is sure: Nobody among exposed subjects developed symptoms of DCS.

“Although the high-fat intake was the variable of interest, the subjects were divided in two groups not based on their fat intake but rather on the response to decompression. Results would probably be very similar in either way, but the chosen approach raises suspicion of possible research bias.”

In short, don't panic, DeNoble says. "The dive exposures used in this study are not representative of recreational diving. DCS in recreational diving is a very rare outcome, and so far there is no evidence that diet or obesity measurably increases risk of DCS in real life. However, obesity increases risks of other diving injuries, and obese divers should be aware of it. Divers -- and non-divers -- should balance their diet and maintain physical fitness to mitigate their risk of chronic diseases."

We'll also add that there are plenty of other reasons to eat a diet low in animal fat, so why gorge yourself on a second plate of ribs at that resort or liveaboard barbecue just because you've already paid for it?

"The influence of high-fat diets on the occurrence of decompression stress after air dives," by D. Kaczerska, P. Siermuntowski, R. Olszanski, K. Krefft, S. Malgorzewicz and K. Van Damme-Ostapowicz, Underwater and Hyperbaric Medicine, Vol. 40, No. 6, pgs 487-497

Why Divers Die: Part I

too much panic, too few trips to the doctor

Every year, several hundred divers die around the world. Their deaths are usually caused by bad decisions, like diving beyond one's experience, diving with known medical conditions and diving in bad conditions. Most dive-related deaths are avoidable, and many of them might have had better outcomes through better training, better knowledge of the associated risks, appropriate medical screening, better gear maintenance -- and just plain common sense.

Since our founding in 1975, we have published significant dive fatality cases so that our readers might better prepare themselves for safe diving. For many years, we relied on Divers Alert Network (DAN) and the cases it gathered of U.S. fatalities, but DAN no longer compiles them for public attribution. This year, we're using cases studied by DAN's Asia-Pacific division. We hope that by explaining these cases, divers will understand better how they could contribute to their own demise, and exercise proper judgment throughout their diving career.

What Would Your Doctor Say?

For years, we've been reporting on the dilemma of divers reporting medical conditions. There are some who solicit letters from their doctors indicating they are fit to dive and get themselves cleared before they arrive at their destinations. There are those divers with conditions well managed by medications who fear they will be denied diving by naïve dive operators if they disclose those conditions. And there are those who carry their doctor's permission letters, disclose their conditions, and are still ordered to get a local doctor certificate. Disclosure is a dilemma for some divers, but the upshot is that diving is stressful and conditions can overwhelm a diseased heart. Even in snorkelers, as this first case indicates.

This 64-year-old woman visiting the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) was morbidly obese, a poor swimmer and taking a mix of medications -- anti-arrhythmics, anti-convulsants and anti-depressants -- but she didn't declare any health issues on the dive shop's form. She went snorkeling alone and five minutes later, crew members saw her motionless and unconscious, 13 feet from the stern; no one had heard any splashing or call for help. She was pulled on board, unconscious, not breathing and with no palpable pulse. CPR was unsuccessful. Had she declared her medical conditions and lack of swimming skills, it's likely the dive operator would have advised her against snorkeling -- or even prevented her from snorkeling, especially when doing it solo -- but we know many divers keep adverse health conditions under wraps for fear of being prevented from going in the water.

To Eels, Your Fins May Look Tasty Enough to Bite

Dear Ben,

I read with interest your story last month about the feeding of lionfish to sharks and eels, and the effect this seems to be having on those animals' behavior. So here's another episode for you.

My wife and I were diving on the south shore of Roatán in August 2012. I suspect that the staff at dive shops and resorts there have been culling lionfish for some time. I know our divemaster had been doing so -- I witnessed him simply leaving the speared fish to drift in open water for whoever got there first. On my dives, it was mostly groupers and large jacks that got the goods. I did not witness any sharks or eels feeding on the discarded fish, however, I did see an unusual number of free-swimming eels out during the day. On one dive, my buddy and I were finning parallel to the wall at 30 feet, behind two women who were finning in the same direction. As we watched, a large eel bolted from the wall, at a high rate of speed, swam directly toward the two women and very deliberately bit one of their fins, then turned around and retreated back to the wall. For the remainder of that dive, that eel (or possibly another) followed us all while keeping close to the wall. It's very clear this animal is associating divers with food -- not a good thing!

-- John Siminger, Shelburne, VT

Then there are those people who don't want to know what's going on with their bodies, avoid doctors and just go diving. Take this 53-year-old, who had logged 2,000 dives and sure looked fit and healthy. But he had a strong family history of heart disease and told others he "avoided doctors." He took a day trip on a dive boat with 13 passengers; he didn't declare any medical conditions prior to diving. He was paired with an inexperienced buddy and they made an uneventful 40-minute drift dive down to 54 feet. The second dive was a wreck dive to 80 feet, but after 40 minutes, the buddy was low on air and wanted to surface. They did not do a safety stop and inadvertently ascended the anchor line of another boat. The man decided he and the buddy should swim to their own boat, about 300 feet away. However, his buddy was unable to swim against the current, so the man towed him for several minutes -- that's a lot of work -- until the buddy was able to make headway. When they reached their boat's line, they pulled themselves along it, but when the buddy reached the boat, he noticed the man was floating away, face-down and motionless. Unconscious, with his mask in place and regulator in his mouth, he was dragged aboard the boat and CPR commenced, but it was unsuccessful. He died of an arterial gas embolism, but coronary atherosclerosis was a significant contributor. DAN reports that "in a diver dying of a cardiac arrhythmia due to heart disease, normal off-gassing of nitrogen via the lungs can be compromised."

So, need we lecture? Avoiding doctors does not make one a manly diver. Accept your age gracefully, as well as your medical conditions. Older divers, especially those with a known significant medical condition and/or relevant family history, like the dead diver above, need to check in with their doctor for an all-clear before a dive.

Back to snorkeling. Finning long distances, through ocean chop or against tough currents, can be hard work, as any diver knows. But what about all of that pre-dive exercise?

This 56-year-old man was visiting the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) on a day trip charter boat. He was an inexperienced snorkeler, but he was in good shape -- so he thought -- and had snorkeled for 30 minutes, played beach cricket and then hiked up a hill. An hour after lunch, he went snorkeling, and 15 minutes later, a crew member on lookout noticed him drifting past, staring at those on board. The lookout shouted, "Are you OK?" and the man raised his arm weakly and appeared to wave goodbye to his wife. The lookout reached him just as he began to sink, rolled him over and found him to be unconscious. He gave two rescue breaths and towed the man to the boat, then started CPR for 10 minutes as the boat motored to a nearby

resort. On arrival, a guest and the boat skipper continued CPR, but stopped after no response. It's surmised that he died from an irregular heartbeat due to too much exertion.

Don't Panic -- And Make Sure Your New Mask Fits

Panic is a serious stressor that can lead to cardiac arrest, as happened to this 61-year-old woman on a GBR day boat trip with 88 passengers. She joined a group that snorkeled from a beach fringed by a coral reef that began 65 feet from shore. Accompanied by another passenger, who was using a "noodle" buoyancy aid, she snorkeled toward the tender. However, when she encountered a strong current, reported to be around five knots, she began to panic. Her buddy shared his noodle with her, and then the boat towed them to chest-deep water. The woman became unconscious soon after walking to shore. Her husband, finding no pulse, started CPR, but it was unsuccessful. Again, cardiac arrest was the probable culprit, due to panic and exertion against a strong current.

In our lead story about CoCoView, we talk about required checkout dives. A lot of experienced divers like to avoid them, especially if it means missing a boat dive or if the dives are staged at an uninteresting site. But if one has been out of the water for a while or has new gear, a checkout is essential. Now in this case, a 52-year-old did a checkout dive, but didn't act on what he learned. He had just bought a new mask and snorkel, which he used the day before his fatal dive, but he complained that he couldn't get a good mask seal; the mask didn't flood, it just leaked enough to be annoying. Diving with two friends, one an inexperienced diver, he appeared relaxed underwater, but twice his buddy saw him kneeling on the seabed, clearing his mask, the last occasion being 20 minutes into the dive. After the man returned his 'OK' signal, the buddy swam off to continue diving. But after a few minutes, the buddy could not see the diver and did a search before returning to the boat alone. On the way, he found the man's mask and snorkel, but the man was neither on the surface nor in the boat. The two other divers radioed for assistance, and a nearby vessel found him floating face-down on the surface, approximately 650 feet from the dive boat. He was unconscious, regulator out of his mouth, and not wearing his weight belt. CPR was unsuccessful.

Of course, had the two divers stuck together, the deceased might still be alive. More about buddy diving next time.

-- Ben Davison

A Dive Shop Owner's Take on Dive Training

"too many inexperienced divers say 'I can do this'"

Hi Ben,

I just finished reading Bret Gilliam's Part I on "The Decline of Dive Training" in your March issue, and while I agree with most of what he says, he missed a larger point when it comes to referral training. In the "good old days" when training was completed start-to-finish with your local dive shop, the shop had a large stake in making sure you were trained properly and enjoyed the sport to the point where you wanted to continue. By certifying qualified, happy divers, there was a better chance you'd buy some big-ticket gear and continue diving with the shop -- it was essentially an investment in a long-term customer, and long-term profits for the store.

But when divers go to a resort to complete their training, that perspective goes away. First, the resort has no real emotional investment in the aspiring divers who will be gone in seven days. There is generally no long term benefit to the resort. The divers are also on vacation, a totally different mindset from taking a class, and who in the service industry really wants to ruin someone's vacation? All of this means (and this is not intended as a slam at the resorts, it's just the way things are) resorts will generally do whatever

they need to do to “get someone through” the required certification dives. You’re going to have to be pretty incompetent to fail. The resorts will bend over backwards to get skills completed and dives done, which may mean divers relying more on the supervising instructor than might normally be the case at a local dive shop. So what you end up with many times are divers who are certified but who lack basic competence. As Bret points out, clearing your mask once on the 24th try doesn’t cut it for many of us, but it may seem to meet a training standard, especially to a newer, inexperienced instructor supervising.

There’s a local dive here in Los Angeles at Farnsworth Banks. It lies a few miles off the backside of Catalina Island, tops out at 54 feet, drops down to hundreds of feet and is exposed to currents and swell. Festooned with sea life, it’s a gorgeous dive that can be done within recreational depths, but it’s considered (and advertised as) an advanced dive. We start our briefing by saying, “People have died here. Don’t you be next.” As I was signing people in on a Farnsworth trip some years ago, one diver noted that her last dive was a few years earlier and that she only had maybe 10 dives under her belt. I told her I wasn’t going to let her do the Farnsworth dive. She said, “I can do this.” I explained why I didn’t think that was a good plan, and she again insisted, “I can do this.” I told her we’d see once we got there.

We had planned on two dives at Farnsworth, and I told her she wasn’t doing the first dive, but if I thought conditions were benign enough, I’d take her with me on the second dive. It was a spectacular day, so after the first dive was completed, I told her she could dive the second dive but would be glued to my hip. During that dive, I did everything but breathe for her: adjusted her buoyancy, tightened her weight belt, towed her around like a rag doll (I don’t think she ever kicked), vented her BC on the way back up, and then plopped her on the swim step when we were done. When I asked her how she liked the dive, the first words out of her mouth were, “See? I TOLD you I could do it!” She simply had no awareness of how much help she’d gotten.

The other thing that’s changed in the past few years is that when I got certified in 1978, entering the world of scuba diving was a lifestyle choice. You really *wanted* to get certified, and you invested significant time and effort to do so, with the assumption that this was something you’d be doing for quite some time. Scuba is no longer a lifestyle choice for a lot of people, it’s simply one more item on their bucket list. “We could try rock-climbing, skiing, surfing . . . oh yeah, let’s go ahead and get certified this weekend.”

And even though you’ll find plenty of veteran instructors like Bret or myself who bemoan the downward spiral of training, the reason our accident rate hasn’t spiked is that the ill-trained people don’t stick around too long. Ours is a fairly safe sport and many accidents are the result of poor diver judgment or inattention (e.g., being out of air) rather than lack of skill. You can possibly make foolish decisions a number of times before it catches up with you, but a lot of these people simply leave the sport before they have that serious or fatal accident. The systemic problem is that when you look at all of this, we -- as an industry -- are shooting ourselves in the foot, and we’re contributing to our own demise.

-- Ken Kurtis, Owner of Reef Seekers Dive Co. in Beverly Hills, CA

Here’s Bret Gilliam’s reply:

I find myself in complete agreement with all of Ken’s perspective, and his comments should be recommended reading for all in the diving industry. Unless some fundamental changes are made -- and in a timely manner -- the competence levels of new divers will continue to decline, and the sport will suffer from lack of growth and customer retention. That’s simply bad business.

Also, the accident/incidence rate will spike. In fact, it has already dramatically increased, but it’s difficult to accurately quantify because so much of the accident and fatality data are concealed in confidentiality agreements when cases settle. The industry wants to ignore this reality, but it’s true. I’m on the inside of many lawsuits for both the defense and plaintiffs, so I am privy to all the evidence. Ken obviously understands and has had to deal with this stuff firsthand. The industry needs to wake up and address the reforms needed.”

Flotsam & Jetsam

Business Class to the Cook Islands for \$1,928.

A tropical paradise for New Zealand divers, but not many American divers visit the aquarium-like reefs that have plenty of tropicals and a bit of shark action. If you're looking for a unique dive destination, here's your chance. Until May 19, Air New Zealand is offering this business-class deal from Los Angeles, and you can fly anytime up to October 26. Details are at www.airnewzealand.com/special-offer-business-class-flight-to-rarotonga.

Indonesia and Palau Are Doing It, Why Can't We? "February was a banner month for marine conservation and sustainable marine tourism," writes underwater photography pro and *Undercurrent* contributor Maurine Shimlock. "Indonesia announced that the entire archipelago would become the world's largest manta ray sanctuary. Palau declared a ban on all commercial fishing within its exclusive economic zone. What, if any action has been taken elsewhere, especially by the U.S., to protect sharks and manta rays within its waters?" Read Maurine's commentary on America's efforts -- or lack of them -- in her latest blog post for us, "Taking a Stand," at www.undercurrent.org/blog.

Hawaii Boat Captain Ditches Divers, Gets DUI.

Imagine paying \$100 to do a nighttime manta ray dive in Hawaii only to be stranded in the dark waters when your boat captain inexplicably ditches your group. Some 30 confused divers experienced just that in March when Spencer Erwin, a boat captain for the tour outfitter Iruka Hawaii, abandoned the group during their dive. Luckily, another boat was in the area and took the divers back to shore. Erwin, 30 and his boat, the *Sea Wolf*, were later found drifting offshore;

he was in a daze, but unhurt. Another tour boat captain towed the *Sea Wolf* back to Honokohau Harbor, where police were waiting to arrest Erwin on suspicion of operating a vehicle under the influence. Iruka Hawaii released a statement apologizing for the incident and stating that its tours will be suspended until it can be sure such an incident won't happen again.

Another Drunk Employee, A Worse Outcome.

A British man who recently opened a dive shop in the Philippines was shot dead by what the *International Business Times* calls a "disgruntled employee." Tony Gilchrist, 35, who owned Fish Buddies on the island of Malapascua, was shot four times in the chest and twice in the head by his own security guard after he had fired him for turning up to work drunk. Melchor Alciso Jr., 42, was arrested on suspicion of murder. Described as a "gentle giant" by his family, the 6'8" Gilchrist moved to the Philippines from Surrey, England two years ago, and he recently raised nearly \$17,000 for the Philippines relief effort following the devastating Typhoon Haiyan that struck the nation in November.

Another Critter for Divers to Worry About.

Doctors have saved the life of a Russian woman who was left paralyzed after being attacked by a needlefish in Vietnam's resort area of Nha Trang. Kalinina Oxana, 44, suffered severe neck and spinal cord injuries while swimming near the island of Hon Chong on April 13. She could not move her limbs or urinate after the incident. After a seven-and-half-hour operation at the local hospital, Oxana recovered feeling in her limbs and the ability to make slight movements with them, but she had to have another surgery before her condition stabilized. Doctors recovered numerous pieces of fish bone and teeth still lodged in her neck. And the same group of doctors saved the life of a local fisherman whose throat had been pierced by a needlefish while he was fishing at sea last December.

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