

# undercurrent

THE PRIVATE, EXCLUSIVE GUIDE FOR SERIOUS DIVERS

P. O. Box 1658, Sausalito, California 94965

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## Aquaventures, Bonaire, Netherlands Antilles

Before I began writing travel critiques, I had taken a number of vacations to spots widely touted for superb diving. Just as I was well satisfied more than once I was more than once disappointed in what I found. I had not found what I had expected. Establishing high expectations for any life experience can get us trouble if we haven't done our homework before establishing our expectations. Travel articles provide a source of information, but we must remember they are articles, not critiques. They describe, not analyze. Advertisements are simply advertisements. Word of mouth is helpful, but only if we're sure of our sources.

If our expectations remain unfulfilled after a dive vacation because of uncommonly poor weather or visibility we can only shrug our shoulders. But if we arrive to find the diving has never been exciting, that the guides are disinterested or unsafe, or that the accommodations are unlivable or the food inedible, our disappointment can turn to anger. Why, damn it, didn't we know this before we started out? My rule, after I get whatever information I can, is to temper my expectations. I expect a certain standard of good diving--plenty of reef fish, nice coral and sponges, a few different types of dives, and I'm delighted with anything more. So far it's worked. I haven't set myself up for a let down.

Now a trip to Bonaire is a difficult trip about which to temper expectations. Writers unabashedly call it "the best." Divers return with smiles wide as a giant clam. Travel agents who know diving--there aren't many--often recommend Bonaire. So what could I expect, except "the best." Whatever that means.

Before leaving I had to first find Bonaire. Rand McNally shows it just off the north coast of Venezuela, nestled with its sisters, Aruba and Curacao. That may seem a prohibitive distance to touring divers, but measured in dollars from most US airports, it will seldom cost you \$100 more than a flight to any other Caribbean port-of-call.

Although there are other operations on the Island, my task was to review Aquaventures and the Hotel Bonaire, a joint operation which gets all the media play. I arrived at the Hotel at 10pm--it's a \$4 cab ride from the airport--sent my bags to my room after checking in, and headed straight for the casino. Since it was a diver's hotel, I would feel right at home among the players.

### INSIDE UNDERCURRENT

#### An Opportunity for Bonaire

Investment .....p. 4

#### Undercurrent Survey on Buoyancy

Compensators: *The readers have their say* .....p. 6

#### Selling your Photos and Photo Essays:

*Let the Sea Library do your legwork* .....p. 14

\$100 Worth of Jacques Costeau: *Take a free look at a free book* .....p. 15

Freeflow .....p. 16

The roar of the casino did not meet my expectations and my wallet is thankful. It's an intimate little casino and with the hotel about half full, only one roulette game and a single black jack table operated. Minimum bets are \$2 so your entertainment may be short-lived. There are a dozen one-arm bandits, which in Bonaire they are indeed. Drinks hover around a dollar. There's no pressure whatsoever to gamble; at least half the patrons sat around only to talk.

One view of the crowd and I concluded I would be diving alone. A 300lb man whizzed through scotches as quickly as he whizzed through a stack of \$1 chips. An attractive, well dressed, middle aged couple sipped rums as they watched the action from the corner. Across the way an ostrich of a fellow with spindly legs and a bobbing adams apple chatted with several endomorphs and ectomorphs. Although four paunchy people drunkedly yanked the handles of the bandits, drinking was moderate. Surely, then, no divers were present. I drank a cold Amstel--why is American beer so lousy when compared to the brews of other countries?--and headed for bed. Tomorrow, I'd be alone at the dive shop.

In the morning the bandy legged man had traded in his white trousers for a bright red wet suit. Those who had carried full glasses the night before, now carried full tanks to the waiting boat. The middle aged woman who last night looked a socialite, today became a diving photographer. What an incredible view of the diving public! Indeed, diving is for everyone.

I announced my arrival to Bruce, one of the guides. Smiling, he introduced himself, asked me to produce my C-card and to read and sign a sheet indicating that I knew the basic rules of diving and would take responsibility for myself. Since today I was the only newcomer I would not get "the articles," a 30 minute lecture tour which gives the rules of the house--"no decompression dives," for example--but was given a small booklet to read and a quick rundown. I would be number 48, I was told, and would use #48 to sign up for morning or afternoon dives, for identifying my tank, and for the bill when I left. I would store my gear in box #48 and could tote it to the boat or on the bus, and could even dip the box filled with gear into the fresh water tanks. The boats are designed to hold each diver, his box and his tank, in his own area just large enough for standing and dressing. When the dive was over I would leave my tank by the compressor, it would be filled immediately and placed back in slot #48. I was impressed, not only now but throughout the stay. The system worked perfectly. Without such organization at a dive shop which has served more than 100 divers a day, chaos would reign.

As I was asking about the morning dive, up walked the legendary Capt'n Don the patriarch of Bonaire diving and the owner of Aquaventures. Barefooted and over-dressed with brief trunks and a comb tucked in the back, the Capt'n introduced himself, then explained that everyone takes the first dive from the beach. It's a warmup dive which gives the newcomer a chance to become accustomed to the water. I was quickly introduced to a buddy and away we went.

Is the organization of Aquaventures the obsession of a military man? Of a tough businessman? Of a savvy diver? Of a mad man? Capt'n Don is a bit of each, plus some. He is indeed legendary, but to be labeled as such requires an explanation. He usually sports a single gold earring, from which an o-ring has been known to dangle. One night a week he hosts a "show and tell" of divers movies; he knows if you don't

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show, and he'll tell you tomorrow. Now and then he'll set up a bottle of brandy to accompany after-dive coffee; he's been known to drink his from the well of his fin. He now marks his reefs with empty clorox bottles, but it wasn't long ago that he used inflated condoms sent by the gross by diving doctors. He wears his snorkeling vest under his wet suit top, with a hole cut through for the inflator. Just a few years ago his only depth gauge was a red ribbon dangling from his mask. He judged the depth by the rate at which it lost its redness. The Capt'n claimed it was accurate within five feet up to 75 feet. Sooner or later the ribbon gave way to sun and salt water and he gave way to a more conventional mean of determining depth.

To some divers, Capt'n Don's eccentricity is embodied in "The Armstrong Opinion," displayed on the dive shop door:

"Once a person gets certified and has some experience there becomes a guide/diver relationship rather than a student/teacher relationship. The guide is then felt to have a minimum responsibility for the diver's action. The guide is acting in an advisory capacity, should warn of known, unobvious hazards, inform of local laws, customs, etc. But should not be expected to make basic go/no go decisions where the diver has all facts before him/her. The ultimate decision is left up to the diver's own good judgement."

This bit of existential philosophy means "take responsibility for yourself." If you're uncomfortable diving without a guide or with an assigned buddy, state your discomfort. Capt'n Don says that by observing how a diver suits up and handles the beach dive they develop a quick and accurate profile. They may volunteer to join your dive if you look a little shaky, but otherwise you're on your own. That does not mean that guides Ebo, Bas or Bruce abdicate responsibility for a safe trip. They're competent, observant, and in the water with you. But with a dozen people on a dive, one guide won't be everywhere. The waters are gentle, but if you want expert company, simply ask. For the experienced diver, the converse is that you will not be controlled on any dive; if you wish to spend it at 10 feet doing macrophotography or at 150 feet, the decision is yours.

At 9:30 and 2:30 two or three different trips were offered, either by boat or by bus for a beach dive. In a week's stay one could dive a different reef every time. I took a macrophotography dive in 30 feet of water at the downtown piers; there were excellent close-up opportunities. One shore dive was average but we did cross a nice field of elkhorn coral. The surf was rough and because the dive required a 6 foot leap and exit by climbing up a rope, it was tougher than most divers care to experience. This day it shouldn't have been dived.

The remainder of the beach and boat dives showed me the full beauty of underwater Bonaire. It seemed as if the stationary flora and fauna normally found in 100 square yards had been jam-packed in 10 square yards. Coral, sponges and gorgonia were so thick and lush that the reefs became fairylands. Unlike many other Caribbean areas where nice reefs spring out of miles of barren sand, here the reef is everywhere. In one spot, even a patch of sand becomes the key to a beautiful dive. Called Bowkers Lake, a patch of sand surrounded by a complex overgrown reef in 40-50 foot visibility becomes a mystical foggy fairland which could have been inhabited by Tolkien's Middle Earth people. It was spooky and surprisingly beautiful.

Visibility during my trip was disappointing: 40 feet once, 80 feet once, and somewhere in-between the rest of the time. Had I only read what I had written in the November Undercurrent--the rain increases December to February--I might have avoided the several days of intermittent rain that ended just two days before I left. Interviews with divers who had been there before verified a normal 75-100 foot year-round visibility.

The reefs were well-populated with a wide range of fish and invertebrates; I saw jackknife fish, stonefish, basket stars, a wide variety of parrotfish, angel and butterfly fish and what everybody said were sea snakes, but were most likely an eel variety since Charles G. G. Chaplin states there are no sea snakes in the Atlantic (Fish Watchers Guide to the Caribbean). I saw no fish of sizeable proportions, however there are occasional dives on the windward side for those who care to venture in less tame water. There were few shells, which is of no consequence to collectors since Capt'n Don prohibits removing anything from the reef. Bonaire reefs remain virgin because the government prohibits spear fishing. No government, however, can protect against the inexperienced diver. Once I found a delicate crab with toothpick legs. My assigned buddy, on his first trip to warm waters, yanked it from its hole for a closer look. No sooner did he get it free than one of the ubiquitous yellowtail snappers snapped it from his hand, then swam circles around us with a half dozen legs dangling from its mouth.

Most reef dives take place in 60 feet of water, but since many are along dramatic walls you can pick your depth.

Diving from the Hotel beach is terrific. The reef begins 60 feet from shore, dropping from 30 to 120 feet, where scores of garden eels weave back and forth to the music of the sea. Whatever you are looking for in diving, if you miss it in Bonaire it's because you didn't look.

The Hotel Bonaire: Rooms are plain and adequate. Off season rates are \$18-22 winter it's \$36-40. Whatever value is added to the rooms at the higher price is unclear. By any stretch of the imagination, this is not a luxury hotel.

Where the Hotel Bonaire failed, at least in mid-December--was in the kitchen. Breakfasts were odd; one day they couldn't make pancakes, another they couldn't unlock the refrigerator to serve eggs. Beach bar lunches were relaxing, but more than one hungry diver had to order two sandwiches to get enough to eat. But, they're inexpensive. Dinners were a culinary disaster. Fish had been cooked so long I thought it to be kippered. Lamb chops were dried out and had an unpleasant flavor. Everything was overdone, except the service (the waiters could be found later serving as croupiers). The appetizers were always substandard, the soup just about always, and the salads were tasteless. The coffee was strong and good, but some Americans who liked the dinners, disliked the coffee.

It's difficult to prepare good food on small islands, but there's another reason for the problem. The financial future of the Hotel is up in the air and it appears that management is just getting by until it is settled. Hopefully, the change will not affect the dive shop (see box).

### **An Opportunity for Bonaire Investment**

When in Bonaire we learned that the Hotel Bonaire may be seeking new ownership. By the time you read this article it may be up for sale or, in fact, already sold.

Capt'n Don believes his operation is sufficiently institutionalized to continue its fine service regardless of location. If the hotel management continues to decline or if new management disproportionately emphasizes the casino operation, Capt'n Don may seek other alternatives for Aquaventures. One possibility is outright purchase of the Hotel Bonaire. Another is to move to a different hotel on the island. A third is to purchase nearby cottages or an existing hotel for the sole use of divers.

Whatever the decision, Capt'n Don is seeking investors who are themselves divers. And he's also looking for divers who are savvy about hotel management. If you are interested, drop a note to the good Capt'n and let him know of your interest. As his plans clarify you'll hear from him. And, if you're a potential investor, indicate the amount of capital you may care to venture: limited (less than \$5000), moderate (\$5000 to \$15,000), or substantial (more than \$15,000).

A note: we have made no financial analysis of the Hotel Bonaire or Aquaventure and are neither advising for nor against investment. We have reviewed the quality of diving at Bonaire and the nature of the operation run by Capt'n Don. The review speaks for itself.

Hopefully, it will affect the kitchen. The only way dinners could be worse would be to switch their present fare to mudpies and magpies.

All is not lost for there are palatable meals in town, a brisk walk or a \$2-3 cab ride away. I had my first evening's meal at the Flamingo Beach Hotel and found it much better than acceptable. Everyone believes that from among the 125 dishes at the Hong Kong Restaurant and Bar one can select a first rate Chinese meal. In town are another handful of eating establishments, which anyone who has been at the Hotel more than a few days will be able to recommend. Or just ask Captain Don. At the hotels, dinner runs about \$10 plus.

Package Deal or Pay as you go? To your hotel bill add \$14 per person for breakfast and dinner (MAP). Tank, back pack and weight belts rent for \$5.50 per day; guided reef trips are \$4.50 each; air fills are \$2.25 each. \$17 per day for two guided dives is downright cheap, particularly when one considers the low cost of additional beach dives (just the cost of an air fill).

Package tours are widely advertised to Aquaventures and the Hotel Bonaire, but our analysis of the cost indicates that they are of no economic value whatsoever to the diver. Since you may decide to forego a day's diving to tour the island and you'll most certainly want to eat in other establishments then forget the package and pay for whatever you decide to do. You won't spend any more money and how you spend your time won't be controlled by the parameters of the package.

KIM has a low fare out of New York for \$235. GIT fares may spring up from other cities. Aquaventures is so well suited for large dive groups that clubs interested in going should negotiate with KIM and the Hotel for reduced package rates (see December Undercurrent).

Conclusion: Is Bonaire the best? Let's just say it's in the top 10% for fine diving. It's loaded. You can't beat Capt'n Don's organization nor can you expect to find more diving options anywhere. Even the beach dives, day or night, are superb. There are plenty of divers for swapping stories and the setting is conducive for meeting them. The dive shop staff is friendly and helpful; they even remember your name! As a serious diver, you'll do yourself a disservice if you miss Bonaire and Capt'n Don.

Diver's Compass: Aquaventures has a well stocked darkroom for black and white or color processing. You can make your own enlargements up to 11x14... The water is warm but bring your wet suit top and cotton pants; you need protection from the wide range of weird tinglies inhabiting the bottom, especially at night; I touched something which numbed ten fingers for five days, and ten days later several layers of skin peeled off each fingertip ... Bonairians are friendly, easy going, and sometimes shy, which makes the Island a nice place to walkabout ... if you call a cab, ask for Nick, a pleasant chap who goes out of his way to give you a tour and the local scoop; the fare jumps up after 10pm but he even waived the increase for one acquaintance ... Because the Hotel adds a 10% service charge to your bill, don't tip unless you feel truly compelled ... Hertz delivers cars to the hotel, but if you just want to sightsee the four hour \$10 per person tour is the better way to see the island ... Aquaventures equipment is well maintained and they can handle just about any repair problem you might develop ... Night dives are a highlight. Capt'n Don's lecture is worth the price of admission: look for the albino urchins or the 10,000 year old anemones, and get underwater fast so the sea wasps don't hunt you down; you can leave your light at home since Farallon's easy to use flashlight rents for \$2 ... European goods sold in the Dutch Antilles are about as low as anywhere in the Caribbean; Dutch chocolates and cheeses are good to take home; some people like the Bonaire sport shirts; for blue and white china collectors there's plenty, but check the back for seconds and "made in Japan" ... (C.C. 12/15/75)

# Undercurrent Survey on Buoyancy Compensators:

In the September issue of Undercurrent we included a comprehensive questionnaire to gather readers' opinions on their personal flotation devices. We believe that the best test of diving equipment is with divers themselves and the results indicate that our beliefs were well founded. Nearly 500 divers responded. They had averaged 35 dives during the past year. Although most were sport divers, instructors were well represented and their comments added substantially to our findings.

This report will be devoted only to buoyancy compensators. We will discuss back pack devices in a later article. We received insufficient information about snorkeling vests to develop valid conclusions.

Our presentation of the data is affected by several variables. First, many divers failed to indicate the model of their BC, either because there was no ready means of identification or the diver overlooked the question. In most cases we could determine the model, but if in doubt we did not include the data.

Second, manufacturers often modify or substitute components of their product without changing the basic product or the identification of the product. We made no effort to differentiate between subtle changes in models, but gave some indication of those distinctions by quoting several respondents.

Third, we decided to limit our report to the BC's of five major manufacturers: U.S. Divers, Scubapro, Seatec, Seamco (Nemrod) and Sequest (Fenzy). We received insufficient data about other BC's, either because they were too new or they had limited distribution. We do not claim our findings to be statistically significant, but we do believe they represent a well founded intelligent opinion of divers who have put their equipment to the real test of constant use, storage, and reuse.

Fourth, many equipment problems can be attributed directly to poor maintenance. A number of divers, when indicating a problem, also stated that they had carefully maintained their equipment and that they cannot take the blame. At the same time, many divers admitted to their own failure to maintain their gear and when that was the case we did not include those divers quotes. We were greatly impressed with the veracity of the responses.

We will proceed by providing a list of components divers should consider when purchasing a BC. We will then discuss the data gathered on each of the five BC's, following each with a list or representative comments from divers responses. We purposely have not included many positive comments about the BC's. We believe that discriminating divers can easily recognize the advantages of any given piece of equipment and, given space considerations, decided to exclude unnecessary exclamations. The comments selected provide many helpful hints in overcoming problems. Each section is concluded with our own analysis. Finally, after reviewing the data we select a BC we think has demonstrated to be a notch above the others upon which we have reported.

## Profile of a BC; what components to consider before your next purchase

1. Lift: For normal diving at least 25 pounds is required. If a diver intends to carry heavy loads--fish, cannonballs or anchors--he should select a vest with a capacity of at least 40 pounds.

2. Size: If you're a small person select a BC which doesn't extend too far below your navel and isn't so wide as to restrict the movement of your arms when you try to bring your hands together in front of you.

3. Bulk: Gussetted or pleated sides reduce the drag when snorkeling.

4. Hose: The diameter should be large to facilitate exhausting your air (the addition of a dump valve makes this requirement less important). It should extend from high up on the vest, preferably at the back of the neck. The hose should be long enough to reach your mouth with your head turned all the way to the side opposite the hose port, but no longer. The mouthpiece should be comfortable and easy to use.

5. Construction: Double bag construction (nylon outer, polyurethane inner) is preferable. The outer bag should have holes for draining water. Heavy rubber single bag construction is suitable.

6. Pockets: They are not essential, but very useful.

7. Straps: A crotch strap is essential. We prefer the strap to fasten to the waist strap rather than to run up the divers back to the top of the vest. The potential of entanglement is greater than the advantage of keeping the BC in better position when diving. Divers tend to find wider straps more comfortable than narrow ones. Because straps are an inexpensive part of a BC, divers should select a BC on other grounds and modify the straps to their own liking.

8. Color: A bright color should be selected if you dive in high waves, excessive current or tide, or wherever being highly visible on the surface is a consideration. If shark avoidance is a significant consideration, opt for black.

9. Purge valve: It's critical and all BC's have them.

10. Mechanical Inflation: A means other than oral is a must.

CO<sub>2</sub> cartridges: We do not consider CO<sub>2</sub> cartridges alone adequate. First, economy minded divers are often unwilling to expend a cheap cartridge at the expense of their own safety. Second, cartridges and firing mechanisms need constant maintenance, which many divers in our survey indicated that they fail to perform. Even if they do maintain them, there are instances of inexplicable misfirings. Third, snagging the cord underwater can cause dangerous rapid inflation, particularly if the vest is without a dump valve. Fourth, cartridges have no value in buoyancy control. Fifth, trained divers can use air in a BC for backup breathing; a diver cannot breath CO<sub>2</sub>. We believe, therefore, that CO<sub>2</sub> cartridges should only be used as a backup to either of the following two systems.

Tank inflator: We prefer the inflator which connects to the oral mouthpiece, not to the BC itself. Too many divers reported unintentional inflation when the front of their vest struck hard objects. Second, correcting a malfunction is easier with a mouthpiece inflator because you can observe the problem by holding it in front of you, an impossibility with a vest connection. Third, some divers ripped their BC's by catching the vest-mounted mechanism when climbing into a boat. Fourth, divers complained about excessive gear; a hose running parallel to the oral inflator hose is less obstructive than a hose running around your right side to the vest. Finally, the automatic inflator adds enough weight to the head of the oral inflator to prevent it from floating in an inaccessible position.

Pony Air Bottle: A small minority of divers prefer the pony bottle. It provides a small auxillary air supply which can be breathed through the BC mouthpiece in an emergency. However, the clumsiness of the air bottle makes

it difficult to climb into boats and very uncomfortable to ride surfboards or mats. Unintentional inflation is possible by striking the bottle valve.

11. Dump valve: Diving with an automatic inflator and no BC dump valve is dangerous. We've received too many reports of inflator malfunction with the diver unable to exhaust the vest through the hose. The valve should be located far up on the vest to permit the largest volume of air to escape.

The dump valve is a new BC feature first added to an American BC by U.S. Divers. We believe that no BC with an automatic inflator should have ever been put on the market without such a device. Surely new technology was not required to create a dump valve; rather it would seem that someone just didn't think of it, which can only suggest inadequate research and development. We believe that the lack of a dump valve on any BC capable of automatic inflation is inexcusable.

#### The BC's of five major manufacturers; what the users say:

Scubapro (68 respondents). Although Scubapro makes 2 BC's, our comments are directed to the larger model (the one with a lift of 35 lbs). One fourth of the respondents had purchased it because their dive instructor recommended it, 18% because of large lift capacity, and 8% because of good construction. 7% said they had tried several others and preferred Scubapro, and another 7% said they liked the ease of operation. 44% had no complaints whatsoever. Those who did reported far more annoyances than serious problems. 28% found the BC uncomfortable when snorkeling, 13% said they had difficulty adjusting the straps, and 10% found that the straps cut them. 9% indicated their purge valve leaked.

#### Comments from the Scubapro users:

The inflator hose manages to float free from the vest--the velcro fastener can't hold this snake down. D. M. Ottawa, Kansas.

You have to lubricate the male end of the inflator before each dive because the o-ring inside of the female connector dries out and the connection will leak. J.E.G. Southampton, Pa.

Once the tank inflator was stuck in a full inflate position. I put a little silicone on it and it has functioned properly ever since. B.D., Cumming, GA.

The push buttons on the automatic inflator are placed side-by-side in such a way as to be easily confused. No name.

The biggest problem I have with the BC is the inflator; the clip that joins the inflator mouthpiece with the line to the tank is constantly popping off during dives. I've had it checked and nothing seems to be able to really fix it. I believe the Seatec attachment connector is better but I prefer the Scubapro mouth piece arrangement. K. S., Cranston, R.I.

Purge malfunction due to valve deterioration caused by use of silicone spray on plastic parts. Inflator valve momentarily stuck in open position due to play of valve piston in plastic housing. Repeated pressing of inflation button reseated valve after 1-2 seconds. No problems encountered after replacing valve and using proper lubrication procedures--recommended silicone for rubber, not plastic. E.K., Gainseville, Fla.

My buddy and I added a CO<sub>2</sub> cartridge and mechanism from an old vest and it works beautifully. G.M., LaPlata, Md.



I use my vest inflator to breath on in place of an octopus rig in an emergency. With a little practice the inflator can be used in place of a second stage of the regulator. I have tried with a diving instructor under a controlled situation and it works well. P.G., Crisfield, Md.

The quick disconnect fitting is difficult to connect, however it releases readily. Lining up the pin and the notch at the same time trying to push it together is difficult when you have all of the rest of your gear on. W.C., Villa Park, Ill.

The plastic inflator cracked, so I now check inside before every dive. P.N., Manhattan Beach, Ca.

The plastic waist buckle would not stay fastened so I replaced it. M.N., St. Louis, Mo.

When the crotch strap is adjusted properly it tends to pull very tight so I replaced it with two short straps that hook onto my cutoffs or my wet suit. M.H., New Orleans.

Undercurrent comments on Scubapro: Scubapro had the highest rate of users who experienced no problems with their B.C., although the difference between Scubapro and several others was not significant. Users experienced mainly inconveniences. The most significant problem was with the Scubapro automatic inflator, which is difficult to align, can pop off too easily, and has a confusing button array.

Although Scubapro users generally think favorably of their BC, we believe that a dump valve is a must for any BC using an automatic inflator. The Scubapro BC has none. Scubapro has no plans to add a dump valve, as we were told in a telephone interview with a staff member, because divers complain of excess water in their BC, and Scubapro believes that the potential leakage at the dump valve is reason enough not to add one. We believe that the evidence of unintentional inflation and the subsequent inability to exhaust the BC rapidly indicates a greater hazard. For that reason, we must look toward BC's manufactured with a dump valve.

U.S. Divers (68 respondents): Although U.S. Divers has produced a variety of models during the past few years, they appear to have settled on the BC I which, with the automatic inflator added, becomes the BC II. In our data analysis we made every effort to report only on these models. 39% of the users said they had experienced no problems. 16% found the BC uncomfortable when snorkeling, 17% had problems adjusting straps, 6% with straps cutting. 10% said the purge leaked, 17% said the automatic inflator had failed or broke, and 9% said their bag leaked.

Comments from the U.S. Divers users:

The dump valve is superb, allowing full deflation in less than 3 seconds. The dump valve leaks slightly. I also have several buddies who have the same problem. A good cleaning of the seal is a temporary cure, but after 4 or 5 dives the leak reappears. D.P.L., Mineral Wells, Tex.

I have to tuck the oral inflator hose under the vest to keep it from floating in front of my face. This is not too comfortable. S.G., Deerfield Beach, Fl.

The mouthpiece to the oral hose is made of hard plastic with no secure way to grasp it in the mouth. In cold water at the surface, inflation can be difficult, the air supply simply escapes out of my pursed lips. J.M., Los Angeles.

The CO<sub>2</sub> inflator and the oral inflator hose separated from inner bladder. Returned vest to dealer who gave me a completely new vest and inflator. No further problems. Occurred after about 60 dives. R.G.L., Knoxville, Tenn.

You have to be careful when getting into a boat or the auto inflator will catch on something and separate the bag from the metal nut laminated to the bag and cause a leak, but it can be easily fixed with wet suit cement. E.B., Oliphant, Pa.

Hose disconnect button in inflator housing is easily depressed by palm of hand when using right hand to depress fill button. This causes hose fitting to disconnect from inflator valve just enough so the connection is broken and inflator is deactivated. I compensate for this problem by using my left hand to activate inflator, which is inconvenient. G.L.P., Mission Viejo, Ca.

Vest inflated automatically from tank pressure, causing immediate surfacing from 50 feet in about 3 seconds. When tank inflator valve was taken back we were told that the valve type had been recalled and we had not been notified. J.S., Tallmadge, Ohio.

Mechanism for inflator fell apart in my hand when pressed to stabilize buoyancy. Relied on oral inflator hose because tank inflator hose kept slipping out of connection. J.M., Frankfort, Ky.

The low pressure inflator lock spring has snapped in two twice and both times were while diving. This allows the low pressure inflator hose to disconnect from the BC vest which is no emergency but is regardless an inconvenience. The dealer replaced the complete low pressure valve both times. J.B., North Platte, Neb.

The BC II original model developed a seam leak on the bladder after one month's use. I could find no BC repair kits at any USD dealer from Hawaii to Miami so I patched it with wet suit glue. Next leak was at the CO<sub>2</sub> inlet to bladder. This leak was repaired using an air mattress repair kit. Next the plunger on the oral inflator fell off making oral inflation impossible. Since repair parts were not available I used a 2" wood screw to make do. The crotch strap hook has a tendency to unsnap on contact with the weight belt. The dump valve located on the right allows too much water to enter the bladder further complicating vest operations. The final straw was the complete rip out of the CO<sub>2</sub> assembly during a Keys dive this past June. The complete assembly pulled loose from the bladder during the ascent while loaded with a multiple camera rig. By remaining upright I was able to make it to the boat and unload the gear. I advised USD of the problems, returned the vest and it was replaced with a new one that has a modified CO<sub>2</sub> assembly, modified crotch strap and modified oral inflator. It would seem that USD experienced more than just one failure like mine. R.P., White Sands, NM.

The buckle on my crotch strap on two different dives locked on to my weight belt underwater. I have since turned the clip around 180° so that the detent portion is facing me. That solved the problem. R.B., Bellevue, Wash.

Undercurrent Comments on U.S. Divers BC I and BC II: On the questionnaire many divers stated flatly that they believe they have the best BC on the market. Many more cited serious problems with their BC, as their comments clearly indicate. The most serious problems stem from the automatic inflator. Roughly a year ago U.S. Divers redesigned the mechanism and instructed dealers to replace it free of charge. The "Catch 22" of course, is that a diver would have to first experience a problem before he would seek a remedy. Testimony of the divers quoted clearly indicates the potential danger. We believe that the industry must overhaul its recall procedures (see Undercurrent, August 1975) and not to do so can at best be labeled irresponsible.

U. S. Divers believes that the major problems have been corrected and so far we have no information to the contrary. Much to their credit, they are quick to replace parts and do stand behind their lifetime guarantee with a minimum of hassles. At the same time, we must question the marketing of such a

critical product that experienced so many serious problems in its use. Those problems should have been solved before the rush to the marketplace.

The BC I and II have a nice comfortable feel to them, but even if the perfections have been worked out we believe that an inflator attached directly to the vest has more disadvantages than advantages. We did not select the US Divers BC I and II as our best bet.

Seatec (28 respondents). 28% of the divers buying Seatec vests did so on recommendation of their dive shop or instructor. 20% liked the price and 16% liked the quality of construction. One-third have experienced no problems; 24% find it uncomfortable, 12% complained about the strap adjustment, 12% indicated they had a leak at their oral inflator and 12% said the hose was too long.

Comments from Seatec Users:

The oral inflator hose is longer than I need and gets in my way while diving. B.S., Pacific Grove, CA.

The oral inflator mouthpiece has edges that come to a sharp point thus causing me to inadvertently stick myself. J.V., Lawndale, Ca.

The buckles and clamps rust despite very good maintenance including fresh water rinse and silicone spray. R.W., Scarsdale, NY.

The only problem with this vest is that it should have a larger crotch strap. K.B., Valdosta, Ga.

Insufficient lift when I'm fully geared. If I'm without cameras, speargun, lance, etc., lift is enough to keep me comfortable. R.H., Baltic, Conn.

The oral inflator hose keeps coming loose from connection. J.B., NYC.

The oral inflator doesn't purge properly so you end up filling your BC partially with water. K.K., Mt. Clemens, Mi.

BC fills with water and does not drain out fast enough by the drain holes. I keep the bottom unzipped which alleviates this problem, however the water then gives me more negative buoyancy. D.J., Rockville, Md.

The only problem that my wife and I have with our BC's is when returning to the boat. This BC is a double bag construction and if it is not inflated before starting to climb into the boat the outer bag is filled with water, adding unnecessary weight in exit from water, or of filling the vest with air is often forgotten if you have to wait at the boat when surfacing. R.L., NYC.

Undercurrent comments: Seatec user problems are best classified as annoyances and endemic to nearly all BC's. Seatec has shortened its hose in answer to many complaints. The dump valve is located a little low on the vest so it requires leaning back and turning the right side upwards for a complete exhaust of air. It has 40 pounds of lift, which should be adequate for all but the heavily burdened. Seatec also produces a small BC, the 301, which we consider inadequate for Scuba divers.

Fenzy (27) 24% of the users indicated they had purchased the Fenzy because of its reputation, 11% because of a recommendation by an instructor, and 11% because of the standard air bottle. 41% of the users said they had experienced no

problems. 19% believed that the hose ought to be on the left side, not the right, and 7% felt that the hose was too short. 15% found the BC uncomfortable when snorkeling.

Comments from Fenzy users:

I like the fact that with an air bottle I can make an emergency ascent from 150' or more and have some air to breath on the way up (not with CO<sub>2</sub> bottles). If you don't believe the craftsmanship and quality of material just pick one up and look at it. The Fenzy is heavy and made of heavy material and assembled, not just thrown together. J.W., Lebanon, Ohio.

Bottle is not galvanized and has rusted inside and out. M.W., San Francisco.

Unintentionally inflated on 2 or 3 occasions in past 3 years when crawling over gunwale of boat or heavily brushed against underwater obstruction. W.L., Santa Rosa, Ca.

Oral inflator is on right side and occasionally restricts the movement of the single hose of my regulator also on the right side. N.B., Barlettesville, Ok.

Horizontal position of air bottle makes it very difficult to climb into rubber dinghy from ocean, since it catches underside. G.S., Northhampton, Ma.

Bringing up anchor and chain (weight about 75 pounds) I had insufficient lift but what the hell, nothing is perfect. T.R.G., Las Vegas, Nevada.

Undercurrent comments on Fenzy: Fenzy vest owners are openly enthusiastic about their BC. They form a cult or worshipers unlike that of any other BC. Although Fenzy is generally perceived as the Cadillac of BC's, we believe that the pony bottle inflator, however advantageous as a backup breathing system, is somewhat archaic. We've cited the reasons earlier. The hose does come off the right side, which means that divers buying a Fenzy for the first time have to unlearn old habits. Even with these criticisms, Fenzy users generally swear by their BC and, as you can see, the users of the others often swear at them.

Nemrod (26 respondents). Nemrod's design is quite similar to the Fenzy. 31% of the users said they purchased the vest because of the air bottle, although 1/3 of these said they would prefer tank inflation, but it was not available when they purchased their vest. 15% said they liked the large lift capacity. 18% of the users had experienced rips or tears in the bag, 15% said their BC had inflated unintentionally when they bumped their air bottle.

Comments from Nemrod users:

Air fill bottle seems to get stuck when trying to inflate vest underwater and when extra pressure was exerted the bottle broke loose. More often than not too much air was added. I was aware this might happen and take care to watch ascent, but the potential danger of air embolism remains. For the last year I have been using a Scubapro inflator while not using the bottle once. T.D., Hazelwood, Mo.

Two things worthy of replacement on the vest are the plastic screw for the bleeder valve--the threads strip easily--and the tiny screw that prevents the valve from unscrewing all the way off is too small and breaks extremely easily. P.S. East Hartford, Conn.

12 Oral inflator hose does not stay attached to vest. K.G., NYC.

On two occasions there was a short burst of air when the vest was to a small extent inflated unintentionally. Once when climbing back into the dive boat--the other time when underwater and must have accidentally hit the release valve. I feel the vest is too bulky, not as neat as the Fenzy. S.B., NYC

When folding the vest to put in a dive bag I unintentionally folded it in the same place. This has weakened the material at these points. A.A., USMC.

The stupid air bottle on this thing doesn't have an automatic shut off which makes it dangerous. Also no one fills it separately. When I got this vest no one told me how to fill it. The little rips and tears of this thing were a surprise because I am very careful. I tried to contact the company about it and have had no response yet. M.Z., Crystal Lake, Ill.

The open top pockets are worthless for holding anything. R.R., Park Ridge, Ill.

Undercurrent comments on Nemrod: A large and bulky vest, the cost with an inflator hose and an air bottle is over \$200, similar to the Fenzy, and nearly double the other BC's reviewed. The users generally like their vest and experience major problems only with using the air bottle, and its connection with the bag. A review of the divers' comments, including several who commented both on the Nemrod and the Fenzy, indicates that the Fenzy is preferred to the Nemrod. The Nemrod bottle, with push button inflation, is an improvement over the older type.

Other B.C.'s: Divers reported on nearly a dozen other B.C.'s on the market but not in sufficient numbers to derive valid conclusions. These BC's were either new or have limited distribution. They include Healthways, Dacor, Sportsways, AMF Swimmaster, and La Spirotechnique. We expect to repeat this survey next year and look forward to reviewing the results on these or any new models added to the market.

Conclusion and Recommendation: Obviously no single vest can meet the needs of everyone. In the responses returned by divers, where one would believe his vest had insufficient lift, another reporting on the identical vest would claim that the lift was too great for his purposes. Some divers insist on air bottles, but most seem to prefer the automatic inflator from the tank. Many believe that a CO<sub>2</sub> cartridge is more than adequate. Some cave and wreck divers don't like the air bottles bouncing around, while others want the extra air supply. Obviously every diver should meet his individual needs in selecting a BC. Using the items we outlined early in this report should be an aid in that selection. For the uncertain, we have our choice.

Before indicating our selection, we are to call attention to the Enthusiasm and reverence displayed by Fenzy owners. For the most part that loyalty is justified, although there is a faddish element to the Fenzy just as there is to any product which is the most expensive of an entire line. The cost of the most BC's at \$100 plus (with inflator) is curious--respondant Herb Underdahl of Sherwood, Oregon, points out the cost is double that of a two person inflatable life raft. At over \$200 the Fenzy indeed represents a substantial investment. And without a dump valve, use of the Fenzy represents potential trouble.

Our choice for the time being is the Seatec BC-V. We believe it is the most complete of the vests reviewed and divers have reported that it has withstood their usage as well or better as any other model. In our opinion, it should be purchased with the automatic inflator attached to the mouthpiece, not

directly to the vest. That inflator can be purchased separately and added to any other large hose BC on the market.

A final note: Manufacturers should provide more specific written information about the use and maintenance of their BC's when the product is purchased. Dive shops should provide explicit instruction about the use of any automatic inflating device since few students have had adequate instruction. Surely many problems seem to be caused, or at least contributed to, by the diver himself and his lack of knowledge. Yet, manufacturers and dive shops must at the time of sale do better to inform divers of the problems and emergencies they may experience with their new equipment. Divers have but one life. When it's lost there's no cause to quibble over where the blame lies. We're all in this together.

## Selling Your Photos and Photo Essays

*Let the Sea Library do your legwork*

Do you have photographs of dolphins meeting divers underwater? Or dolphins leaping through the ocean's surface? How about simple yet dramatic photos of underwater animals working in symbiotic relationships: cleaner fish or shrimp at work or relationships established through immunity or parasitism? If so, there's a bright and effervescent young businesswoman who wants to see them. She has a market for you.

Jill Fairchild, diver, photographer and businesswoman, owns and operates *The Sea Library*, a firm which specializes in cultivating the world-wide market for ocean photography and for representing underwater photographers and the sale of their photographs. According to Ms. Fairchild, *The Sea Library* has from 50,000 to 75,000 photos on file, each year sells hundreds to a variety of users throughout the United States and Europe, and has so far done business in 110 countries. *The National Geographic*, *Skin Diver*, *Natural History*, and *U.S. News and World Report* are clients who have purchased photographs from *The Sea Library*.

The market for ocean photography is mushrooming. Publishers of entertainment journals, science publications, children's books, and educational film strips are examples of frequent users. Ms. Fairchild says that her clients are "looking for the ambience of the underwater world—why people dive, what takes place when they're underwater—the entire experience." Although exceptional individual photos may find a buyer, the best bet is in photographic sequences portraying the behavior of underwater creatures or describing specific expeditions and journeys.

Sales price varies according to the user. Although producers of educational film strips may pay only \$50 for a single slide, the fee for inside shots in magazines may run \$125 and cover photos may bring \$300. Advertising firms may even pay more. So far the highest price ever paid for a single photo was \$600! Ms. Fairchild said that there are no regis-

tration fees or hidden costs for the photographer. *Sea Library* works on a flat commission basis: 50% of each sale.

Certainly your photos must be of the best quality if you expect *Sea Library* to handle them. Each will be reviewed with a high-powered magnifying glass (called a "loop" by those in the trade) and you can expect immediate rejection of those with soft or fuzzy images or scratches. She prefers a portfolio of 200 transparencies or more—"if they're accepted you should be able to sell something"—accompanied by a numerical list of the slides (don't forget to mark the number on the slide too) and a brief notation to identify each. After *Sea Library* reviews them, they will return the rejected slides with a copy of your list indicating the slides they have selected for the library. Although they would hope to be the exclusive representative of your work, you may have your originals returned if you so request.

Any time your work is published, you'll be credited as the photographer. You'll also be placed on a mailing list to receive descriptions of shots for which they already have a buyer but do not have the photos.

Jill Fairchild calls her enterprise "a business with a cause." She said she likes "to think that I've been very influential in changing the tide of concern of the oceans." She's worked with hundreds of potential clients to persuade them to publish stories about the ocean and its life. In the two years since she's been in business she believes that "they are using many times more photographs now than ever before."

If you believe your portfolio would interest the *Sea Library* and its clients, bundle it up with a typed roster and send it to: Jill Fairchild, *The Sea Library*, 8301 W. Waring, Los Angeles, Ca. 90069. Allow 2-4 weeks for review. Although in January Ms. Fairchild herself will be off filming the humpback whale in the Maui Channel, she has a staff on hand to handle the review. One note of caution: *Sea Library* works hard to market its photos, but don't expect overnight success. For any photographer, it's good advice

to expect nothing so that you'll be satisfied with any results.

P.S. For those with movie footage there's a special market so write to explain what you have. If

you're a photojournalist, write to suggest an article before taking a trip or sitting down at your typewriter. If it's worth your time, the *Sea Library* will let you know.

## **\$100 Worth of Jacques Costeau:** *Take a free look at a free book*

If one were attempting to market a product vaguely connected to the ocean, the use of the name "Jacques Costeau" would seem to be a sure-fire method to cultivate the market. Costeau books are best sellers. His documentaries attract millions of TV viewers. Surely U.S. Divers has benefited by publicizing Costeau's role as Chairman of the Board. Even school children sport writing pads signed by him. Yet, when Commander Costeau asks us to spring for \$100 to purchase a 20 volume set of encyclopedias entitled *The Ocean World of Jacques Costeau*, we might be expected to balk. After all, \$100 is quite an investment, even in the worldly wisdom of our aging hero.

Well, we invested. You might be interested in what we found.

Each 144 page volume is more than half filled with photos which are properly related to the text. Photographic quality is high, although not spectacular. A few you will have seen before. Nearly every photographer who has ever wound a roll of film into a Nikonos has at least one photo among the 2880 pages: Ron and Valerie Taylor, Carl Roessler, Jim and Cathy Church, Jack McKenney, Paul Tzimoulis, Bob Hollis, Fred M. Roberts, the full range of Costeau camerapeople, and the staff of every government agency.

A few familiar Jacques Costeau stories appear from other publications—the problem solving octopus and the tethered dummy being attacked by a shark are two. Yet, just as the photos are eclectic so is the text. The publishers have wisely avoided simple rebottling of vintage Costeau.

Within the series some repetition appears. More than once you will learn about how the sea cucumber spews forth its guts to distract a predator or how an otter feasts while resting on its back. The repetition, however, is not a function of poor editing, but rather a result of the organization of the material. The encyclopedia is *not* organized alphabetically. Instead, each volume is a major topic: Quest for Food, Attack and Defense, Man Reenters the Sea, Invisible Messages, and Mammals of the Sea, to name a few. Such organization is frustrating for one in search of information on a certain species; information on the sea urchin appears in 14 of the 20 volumes.

On the other hand, each volume may be read as a single book, not as a compilation of unrelated facts. Aside from the common topics listed above, nonstandard material is found in the volume enumerating legends of the sea, the volume devoted to polar

regions, the one on sea life at varying depths, or another on coral and coral reefs. The concluding volume provides an index, glossary, scientific classification of sea life, a section about treating poison and venom from marine life, and a host of other data. Although most topics are necessarily treated superficially, it's difficult to imagine any oversights.

### **Should You Own a Set?**

For children from 10 through high school, the encyclopedia would provide a marvelous library addition. There's plenty of good reading and research material and a lot of encouragement for further understanding of the ocean world. Since the books are designed for a family audience, they are of little value to any serious research effort, even though filled with substantial scientific data about a great range of creatures.

For the diver who's an avid ocean buff, collecting volumes on every aspect of the sea, the encyclopedia is interesting and easy reading, yet remains a luxury. Surely it packs a wealth of fascinating information. Did you know triggerfish pick up sea urchins by grasping the longest spine in their teeth, raise and drop them, hoping they land upside down to expose their vulnerable underside? Or that sea lions bite off the propulsive fins of ocean sunfish, then store them alive but helpless on the ocean floor as a food reserve? Though much of the information can be found elsewhere—the *Encyclopedia Britannica* still remains the best source for sheer encyclopedic facts—Costeau's volumes cover the water front and the water. If you were to read and remember the contents of each volume, you would be the foremost expert on the underwater world at any gathering. If you provide slide shows for your neighbors, there'll be information here about everything in your collection and plenty of trivia to wow any audience. Indeed, for these purposes the books are loaded.

### **Judge for Yourself**

If you believe you can take a look at the first volume without unwittingly being drawn into the \$100 deal, write to the *Ocean World of Jacques Costeau* (Sherman Turnpike, Danbury, Conn. 06816) and ask for an order blank to permit you to be enrolled as a subscriber and to receive the first volume free of charge. That's a standing offer with the encyclopedia and we proved its validity by subscribing and canceling twice. Our cancelations were accepted without questions and we were permitted to keep the first volume.

*Oasis in Space*, the first volume, is surely *not* the best in the series so provides you a fair picture of what to expect from future volumes. If you decide to discontinue your subscription, simply inform the publisher. Volume II and Volume III arrive six weeks apart—assuming you have paid your bills—and the next seventeen arrive all at once with a payment book for seventeen monthly installments. Each book costs \$4.98 plus a 69¢ service charge; the total cost

costs \$4.98 plus a 69¢ service charge; the total cost is roughly \$108.

Should you remain a subscriber, there's plenty of easy reading ahead between dive trips. And when you tell your buddies that the migrating spiny lobster of the Caribbean forms single quarter-mile lines of more than 1000 lobsters and marches for weeks at a time you'll either be a genius or a jerk. It depends upon how bright your buddies are.

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## Free Flow



Hugh Hefner, it's about time! The keeper of the hutch is negotiating with a very fine underwater photographer out of Rochester to shoot a 1976 Playmate centerfold. Hef, unfortunately, wants it shot in a swimming pool—we could think of all kinds of sea-life he wants the model to avoid, but we censor our own stuff—but much to our photographer friend's liking Hef wants 200 transparencies to select from! Grapevine has it the photographer doesn't have to wear a wet suit, but Hef will hold the key to his BC straps until the shooting's over.

From New York, Joel Biblowitz wrote to say that he had the same experience with Lahaina's Central Pacific Divers as we had. 'Terrific. We're pleased to know when we're on target, and want to hear when we're not. Review us as we review them because we write for you not for them.

That big Underwater Exposition in Miami looked somewhat like a boy scout convention. It lacked class. Most booths lacked flourish. Entertainment was a few movies. Spectators stayed away in droves. Though no one was talking, if 20% of the expected 50,000 showed, we'd be surprised... 'twas a bore, my buddy, 'twas a bore...

However, we did learn that Miami and the Keys are without a decompression chamber. That is, they have raised the money for the chamber but now need to raise the funds for a compressor to operate the

chamber. The Florida Underwater Council is working hard to raise the several thousand needed and since it's likely that you'll be down there to dive in the next few years you can send your tax deductible contribution to the Florida Underwater Council, 1408 S.E. Bayshore (#1201), Miami, Florida. Even if you don't send your check, you can use the chamber if you need it, however, we do have word from the deep that Davy Jones never bends anyone who contributes. Now that's worth a ten spot, isn't it?

Although Jerry Greenberg, photographer extraordinaire, isn't going to shoot Hef's lady, he's putting together a new waterproof book on Caribbean underwater life, and he's including coral identification, an oversight of too many others. His wife is capably handling the drawings...

An incredible book! *Blue Meridian: The Search for the Great White Shark*. Peter Mathiessen writes about expeditions searching for the legendary creature. He's a writer of such skill, understanding and passion that his book rates with any novel. Narratives of diving trips are often such bores that one wonders why they're ever published. Mathiessen's book is so well written that one wonders why it has not been at the top of the best seller list. It's replete with data for divers, with adventure that we have all experienced, and with adventures that we hope never to experience. It's grabbing, gripping and beautiful. Best of all, it's one up on the actual pursuit of the great white; you can experience it without having to leave your bathtub. \$1.75 from the New American Library, PO Box 999, Bergenfield, N.J. 07611

**Got \$65,000?** A group of professional divers have salvage plans to plunk out \$13 million from a sunken liner, but they need your cash to get under way. If you're well-heeled and wish to learn more, drop a note to Undercurrent and we'll make the connection for you.

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Correspondents located strategically in the major diving areas of the world as well as on all coasts and major inland waters of the continental U.S.

*The editors welcome comments, suggestions and manuscripts from the readers of Undercurrent.*