

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## *The Spoilsport, Coral Sea, Australia*

*fine boat, pristine diving*

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Dear Fellow Diver:

When something is worth doing, I believe it's worth doing to excess. That said, I booked back-to-back seven-day trips to dive the Coral Sea aboard Mike Ball's well-regarded Spoilsport. I had a traveling companion for the first leg, but for the second week, I was a stray, a single woman diver, so I appreciated the pre-departure gathering at the pub around the corner from Ball's Cairn's office. I peered at name tags and made a bit of small talk with my new traveling companions (Australians, New Zealanders, North Americans, ex-pat Brits, and Singaporeans). Eventually, a couple of Spoilsport's crew led us across the road to the boat. Over a glass of sparkling wine, we listened to an exhaustive orientation as the Spoilsport left on our overnight passage to the seamounts of the Coral Sea.

On my first week, with seas on the stern quarter, it was a bumpy and uncomfortable journey (the website proclaims, "Spoilsport has a twin hull design which maximizes stability and passenger comfort in all conditions."). Some guests, unprepared for the motion (I guess they believed the website), didn't show up for breakfast the next morning. Kerrin, the trip director, gave us a rundown on dive procedures (for example, "don't leave batteries charging unattended in your cabin,") and we all know why).

By 9:30, my buddy and I hit



*Spoilsport is a catamaran*



the water off the Nonki Bommie at Holmes Reef. Nonki rises from about 35 meters to a few meters from the surface and has a cleft at the top filled with huge, photogenic sea fans -- a spectacular first dive. I was slightly under-weighted, so my buddy lent me a 1kg weight, then we swam down to 28m and began to spiral up. Belying their ugly name, two spectacular big nose unicornfish carried on a territorial dispute, with lightning-fast color changes from dusky black, through electric blue markings, to ashy gray, with their long tail filaments rippling as they

weaved around each other. At the top of the bommie, Pablo Cogollos, the expedition photographer, waited in the sea fan cleft for photo opportunities to immortalize his guests against the stunning backdrop. After the second dive, Russell, the skipper, moved Spoilsport to a site named "Amazing" because of the maze of bommies rising from pure white sand.

After a long surface swim along the mooring line, we descended. My buddy found a huge crown of thorns, which she prodded lightly with her reef pointer, watching it turn from almost brick red to a pale gray. There were jewel damselfish, with tiny blue spots and golden eyes, guarding their cultivated turf gardens, busily chasing off herbivorous tangs -- and divers. After dinner -- and twilight dive if we wanted -- we began our overnight passage to Bougainville Reef.

By 6.30 the next morning, we were moored at the wreck of the Antonio Tarabocchia, a 460-foot Italian cargo ship that ran aground in 1961. I was woken by Kerrin calling out, "wakey, wakey!" A cheerful fellow, he was good-humored throughout the trip despite working long hours. I headed to the coffee machine in the salon, grabbed a mouthful of fruit salad, listened to the dive briefing, and hit the water at 7:35 a.m. I was soon at the wrecked engine block. The prop shaft extended away across the reef top, where a large school of trevally swam. The reef is exposed and bare, with unidentifiable pieces of the wreck cemented into the reef by concretion (a chemical product of iron from the wreck and calcium salts in the seawater, which looks like manufactured concrete). We found the boiler in about 15m of water, surrounded by a forest of branching corals. As a macro nut, I was happy to see little red-spotted guard crabs and scarlet coral hawkfish.

I had traveled to Cairns with two friends. The first week, my buddy and I shared a small bunk bed cabin; one had to be reasonably nimble to climb to the top bunk. But the mattresses were comfortable. The adjustable cabin air-conditioning kept me cool at night. The shower, equipped with luxurious towels, gave plenty of hot water. The small cabin was no bother since I only used it for changing clothes or sleeping; I could relax in the salon or open-air top deck.

With a full complement of 28 divers (plus crew) trying to dive at once, everyone's goodwill and good manners are a must. Each diver is allocated a bench place, and the tanks are refilled in situ with air or nitrox. The trip director briefed us at each site, sketching details on a whiteboard. Experienced divers were on their own -- the maximum air depth was 130 feet. An instructor accompanied the inexperienced, out-of-practice, or apprehensive divers until judged competent

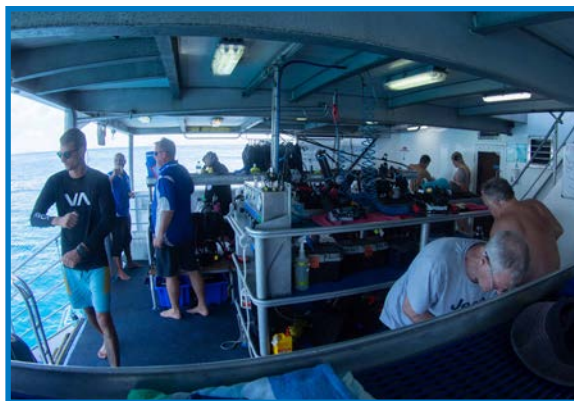
### The Spoilsport, Coral Sea, Australia

- Diving for Experienced ★★★★★
- Diving for Beginners .....★★★★
- Accommodations (my cabin) ....★★★
- Food.....★★★★
- Crew.....★★★★
- Moneysworth.....★★★★½

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

*Worldwide scale*

to dive unsupervised. A Singaporean couple, experienced divers unaccustomed to diving on their own, had a crew member accompany them. Solo divers were matched by experience/air consumption. The first week, our traveling companion, Keith, was buddied with a man who used air so fast he would finish a dive in 30 minutes, which did not suit Keith well, but he had some flexibility to join us when his buddy surfaced. I had an assigned buddy in my second week who matched my air consumption. I was keen to take the last spot available on my second week, so my cabinmate was a nice guy from Minnesota; we quickly worked out an easy-going routine for preserving modesty for both of us.



*A busy dive deck*

After two American liveboard divers disappeared on the GBR two decades ago (remember the movie Open Water?), checking divers in and out of the water has become meticulous. Each diver must carry an SMB and was loaned a Nautilus Lifeline as we were diving 200 miles from Cairns. You enter with a stride off the 5-foot-high dive platform (or, if you prefer, from the water-level re-entry platforms) and exit up a sturdy single-spine monkey pole ladder. They lifted cameras and offered help, preferring that you keep your fins on until you were out of the water. They'll lift your gear if you cannot climb the ladder fully laden -- as we age, many can't, so no embarrassment. Once you're on the re-entry platform, they pull off your fins then you clamber up the steps to the dive deck, where a crew member notes dive time and depth. All the while, a lookout on the top deck with a two-way radio oversees divers in the water.

Regardless of the GBR's coral bleaching problems, we were farther out in the

## *Another Cozumel Propeller Accident*

Amor Armitage, a 37-year-old British yoga instructor, on a diving/snorkeling trip with her husband to Cozumel on December 17, was struck by the propeller of her own boat. Here is her story.

"I was a bit cold and decided to head to the boat to warm up. I swam to the boat ladder, there was music in the boat, and the captain wasn't looking my way.

"When I hold on to the ladder, I pull off a fin, the captain doesn't see me, I suddenly realize the boat has started to move, and I'm unable to say anything; words just aren't coming out.

"Everything seems to be slowing down as I feel the boat's propeller hitting my abdomen, my genitals, and my legs; my body is heavy, and I see the boat moving away from me.

"From my gut comes a visceral scream, asking for help; the captain sees me, but I know I have to swim to the boat, so with cuts all over my body, I manage to swim.

"He tells me I have to climb the ladder; I looked down and saw my insides; I feel there is no way I can get up on my own."

Amor thought she would die at that point, but her husband surfaced, and his encouraging comments kept her going. "He did his best to keep me with him, and I really feel that without my angel, Chase, I wouldn't be here today."

Amor was transported to the intensive care unit at Cozumel International Hospital after being brought ashore in an ambulance. Amor's bones and tendons were rebuilt and attached during a four-hour surgery. Additionally, she had surgery on her "totally messed up" inner thigh.

An official will look into the incident, according to a source with the Cozumel Harbor Master.

Not having insurance, they are seeking ways to raise the more than \$70,000 hospital bill.

– [www.medicotopics.com](http://www.medicotopics.com)

## *How Not to Lose \$95 in a Bonaire Tourist Tax Scam*

When I checked in for my flight to Bonaire in January, the gate agent told me about a new tax on tourists and said I could pay the tax online to save time in Bonaire. So, before boarding, I googled “Bonaire tourist tax,” and the first website that popped up indeed looked official and asked the questions I expected from a government website. I filled out the form, paid the \$95 tax, and was notified I’d receive a QR code within the hour to show Bonaire immigration.

When I arrived in Bonaire a few hours later, I had not received my QR code. I told the immigration officer, and he asked, “How much did you pay?” When I responded, “\$95,” he grimaced and said, “You’ve been scammed. The Bonaire tax is \$75 per person.” I paid it . . . again.

I have since learned that the authentic website is: [tourismtax.bonairegov.com](http://tourismtax.bonairegov.com)

My google search led me to the scammer’s website: [tourismtaxbonaire.us/](http://tourismtaxbonaire.us/). On closer review, I now can see it is prefaced by “ad,” has grammatical errors, and has some disclosures in fine print, but it looks authentic. Though it’s nearly four weeks since I was fooled, it still pops up first in a Google search.

After I entered Bonaire, I called the phone number on the back of my Visa card and quickly got to an agent who canceled the charge and canceled my card, leaving me with no Visa card until I returned home. At least whoever stole my Visa number could no longer use it.

But a question remains. Is the government of Bonaire – or The Netherlands – doing anything to shut down this website?

– Geoff Fallon

Coral Sea, where diving is exceptional. It falls loosely into three categories: big fish or schools of fish; stupendous walls and coral scenery; or sea fans and soft corals. Often all three at once. We spent the first three days on Holmes, Bougainville, and Osprey reefs, with occasional long swims to get to the wall. The crew was happy to pick up divers who needed it. The water was warm 82°F at the end of October (late spring), and most divers were comfortable in 3mm of neoprene or even fabric suits. I wore a 5mm wetsuit.

At the North Horn of Osprey Reef, the guides held a shark feed, assuring us that the amount of food was so small the sharks would not become dependent on handouts. The first to arrive were lithe grey reef sharks with their hitchhiking remoras, followed by a solitary whitetip reef shark. Red bass and a school of beautiful bluefin trevally joined, with a couple of small (less than 4-foot) potato cod cruising in once the riff-raff had arrived. At least one grey shark had a tag attached to its dorsal fin. We gathered around the walls of a natural amphitheater, and a bin with a couple of tuna heads was lowered down. The sharks and other predators circled the amphitheater, providing plenty of photo opportunities before the staff diver opened the bin, and the tuna heads shot up like a jack-in-the-box. There were 10 seconds of a writhing feeding frenzy, and then it was all over. (The second week a shark researcher joined us to check on the acoustic transponders he uses to track the tagged sharks.)

Even the least interesting dives were very good; the best were world-class. The excellent visibility, up to 100 feet, and dramatic underwater scenery led me to work on my wide-angle skills. At False Entrance on Osprey Reef, Pablo swam up and pointed at his camera’s LCD screen, which showed a school of big-eye trevally. He gestured for us to follow him, a sprint of maybe 300m. A big school of trevally came into sight as we swam into a canyon, and I spent a happy 10 minutes surrounded by great swirling silvery fish.

Pablo drove the Spoilsport’s drone for aerial shots and took photos of divers at photogenic locations. A marine biologist who studied at the Universidad Autonoma de Madrid and has been trained as a Great Barrier Reef Master Guide, he delivered upbeat evening lectures on reef and seamount biology. He also organizes Mike Ball’s photo competition; the photos voted “best” by guests are entered in an annual contest where the winner gets a free week on the Spoilsport. Because



the photographic possibilities are endless, I relied on his advice on which lens to use at a new site. I prefer macro, and I was disappointed at the few critters I spotted: a handful of nudibranchs, a few crustaceans, and no anemone shrimps. I did see four species of coral crabs.

We motored back to the edge of Australia's continental shelf, spending time at Cod Hole before motoring to the Lighthouse Bommie, so-called because it is a lighthouse-shaped spire. The base is about 30m down, but it is most spectacular at 10m, where I spiraled up in a lazy corkscrew. Plenty of soft corals and mimic filefish, blennies, and the ubiquitous arc-eye hawkfish fish lived in the crevices. In mid-water, yellow blue-lined snapper, red bass, and yellowtail fusiliers cruised past. Blue-green pullers and anthias swarmed in the shallows.

On my night dive safety stop, with torches off, I was hanging on to the mooring line when my gloved hand felt something large and really weird attached to the line. With a pulpy feel. With my hand, I patted and probed the thing, trying in the darkness to work out what on earth it might be. At that moment, my buddy batted me about the head and shoulders, and I heard "Git off!!" through her mouth-piece as she pulled her hand away. It struck me as hysterical, and I dissolved in a cloud of bubbles.

My dive log notes for the one dive I did at the Vertical Gardens site at the Southern end of No. 10 Ribbon Reef read like a schoolgirl's journal, with multiple exclamation points and (I blush) even emojis. It was one of the most memorable dives I have done in my 50-year diving career, with a 40m vertical drop-off, sea fans and soft corals, artistically placed hard-coral outcrops, clouds of small fish, schools of fusiliers, and ever-changing vistas. Seventy minutes in the water was not nearly long enough, especially since it was too windy the second week to dive there.

On the dive deck are a central (wet) rack for cameras, two easily accessible air lines for blowing water off housings, a couple of 240v power points for chargers, and a rinse bucket. The rack is first come, first served. Since I'm temperamentally disinclined to confront a TG5 owner with the territorial instinct of a Titan triggerfish to get space on the camera rack, I did all my lens and battery changes in my cabin.

"Manta is Spanish for cloak – aptly describing the manta's blanket-shaped body"

– Pablo Cogollos

If you're out to sea for a week, it's essential that the meals are good, and indeed they were excellent, with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. This is, of course, not down to chance; the sequence of meals on the two trips was almost identical. Meals are help-yourself buffets, except for the Restaurant Night, a three-course, sit-down, waiter-served dinner. At breakfast, we were offered a full cooked breakfast and continental buffet options. Lunch might include hot soup, cold meats, vegetarian quiches, Caesar salad, smoked salmon, and fresh fruit. Dinner often had a cuisine theme and (free) wine served at the table. The crew ate after guests had helped themselves from the buffet -- I (deservedly) got a gentle rap on the knuckles for wandering up to dinner late and keeping the unfortunate crew waiting.

Three-quarters of the crew changed for the second week -- including the skip-



*A twin bunk cabin with a tricky climb*

## Lost and Found – How Lucky He Is

A Florida Keys spearfisher underwent a dramatic experience when a sudden down current transformed his 10m free-dive into a rapid descent into deeper waters – but he survived to tell the tale after spending some three hours missing at sea.

Dylan Gartenmayer, 22, was boat diving several miles off Key West on January 19 with two friends as surface cover. Conditions had been deteriorating, but he had insisted on one more dive when the incident occurred.

He had to maintain his breath hold for about two minutes before regaining the surface, by which time he was a long way from the boat.

Gartenmayer, wearing a wetsuit and carrying a snorkel, swam about a mile partly supported on floating bamboo he had found, to reach a channel marker

buoy. He managed to cut and fasten together three mooring buoys to form a makeshift raft.

His friends, assuming that he had blacked out underwater, had raised the alarm when he failed to reappear.

As the U.S. Coastguard launched a search operation, the freediver's family and friends joined on his grandfather's boat and spotted the diver's raft.

"As soon as we stopped running out and started looking, we spotted him at almost the exact coordinates we were given," said one of the family search party." (*divernet*)

The rescue was captured on a phone video.  
<https://bit.ly/3l3ISxF>

per, first mate, chef and trip director roles -- so it gave me a chance to wonder whether the operation of SpoilSport was affected by the different crew on the boat. My verdict: Different personalities, chalk and cheese, but from my point of view, alike in running a tight ship.

It was difficult for me to go home after such a great boat and excellent diving, but to keep the memories alive, Pablo's photos and videos are available to download a few days after the trip. He sets his trip documentary to music, and while slightly formulaic, it's a wonderful way to convey the magic of the trip to friends and relatives . . . . and to bring back fine memories.

But not everyone's trip ended with pleasant memories. Passengers were required to return a negative COVID test before boarding. The COVID virus is a tricky bugger and can flourish in the cramped and cozy spaces of a liveboard. Social distancing is nearly impossible. My two traveling companions tested positive the day after returning home, so they likely contracted COVID while on board. I'm sure Pablo's photos and videos helped them get through it.

-- T.A.

*Author's Bio; With more than 1000 dives logged, our author learned to dive in the U.K. in the '70s, worked in Eilat when the Israelis still controlled the Sinai Peninsula to the Straights of Tiran and dived Truk when the Thorfinn was still a steamship and not a floating backpacker shack. In the last decade, Southeast Asia, Raja Ampat, and the Philippines have been on the agenda, not to mention the cold waters of Tasmania, including kelp and muck dives in the Derwent River.*



**Divers Compass:** The eight-day, seven-night Coral Sea trips run between US\$3000-US\$4300, depending upon accommodations . . . . Mike Ball offers a wide range of trips, including a five-day trip with a round-trip helicopter ride to Turtle Island (one of the world's top resorts) for boarding, thereby avoiding an overnight cruise to Cairns . . . . It's possible to do five dives a day; I paced myself and did 40 dives over 12 days . . . . The "face" of Mike Ball's office (or voice on the phone) is the incomparable Dorothy, with efficient pre- and post-trip organizing . . . .

To reach Cairns from the U.S., one must first fly to Sydney or Brisbane. . .

[www.mikeball.com](http://www.mikeball.com)

# Turneffe Island Resort, Belize, C.A.

*private island, plenty of reef sharks*

Dear Fellow Diver:

When Hurricane Lisa scraped by Honduras and made landfall in Belize on Wednesday, November 2, I wondered if my Saturday morning flight would be a "go." I was to join 23 others for an Island Dreams trip, and the truth is, I was almost hoping it would be canceled. I imagined a rugged, cold, and wet 90-minute small boat ride out to the Turneffe atoll and the 14-acre Turneffe Island Resort, with diving so murky I'd be lucky to read my gauges. It didn't sound like fun.

But the resort was open, a Thursday email informed me, the planes were flying, and I had no excuses.

Upon arrival Saturday afternoon, two hours after leaving Houston, I donned my surgical mask (a requirement) in the Belize airport but noticed that a diver traveling with us had forgotten his. To my surprise, he spotted one lying on the airport floor, decided it was clean enough, and put it on. Ewww!

Thankfully, the helpful resort staff soon met us and took my mind off the gross transgression. After a bus ride to the marina, I boarded their comfortable but crowded Newton for a pleasant ride with clear skies and -- surprise -- flat seas.

The next day, for our first dive, we motored around for half an hour, searching for clear water until our divemaster realized it was hopeless. He finally picked a spot called Billy Bob, and we all jumped in. It was murky, disappointing at first, but once I decided to let go of my hope for gin-clear water and looked around in the 30-foot visibility -- which was better than I expected -- I saw sharks and barracuda and lobsters and neck crabs. And a shoal of dozens of fish, mostly French angels, more than I've ever seen at once, anywhere. Not bad for a first dive less than four days after Lisa blew through.

It was back to the lodge between dives and then off for a dive off the wall, where visibility was a little better. We were told to stay above 70 feet -- that was the usual restriction but not closely observed -- but below 70 feet, it was dark, silty, and prohibitive, so why go? Above 60 feet, I swam with reef and nurse sharks, eagle rays were close enough to see clearly in murky water, as were barracudas and black grouper, and jawfish worked in the sand. Not a bad first day, given the circumstances, and we were only a couple of minutes from the resort! I was encouraged.

When I arrived Saturday, the staff was still cleaning up from the hurricane. It's an impressive palm-filled property dotted with red roofs, cottages, and hammocks. I was shown to my deluxe room in a duplex, with a vaulted ceiling and tropical wood interior (they have



*Turneffe Island Resort & boat dock*





eight deluxe rooms, four larger superior rooms, and ten villas of ascending size, amenities like private pools, and priced, about \$2500-\$4000/person, diving and meals included). I had a king-sized bed, nightstands, a small table and chairs, a mini-fridge, a closet, a roomy bathroom, and a screened outdoor porch. The small safe wasn't attached to anything, so I'm not sure what good it was. I never used the bathroom shower, preferring to wash off in the marvelous screened outdoor shower. With my room just a few steps from the dive center and dock, I would walk there barefoot on my tender feet, and, after the day's dive, return in my wetsuit to pop into my outdoor shower to give myself and my wetsuit a thorough rinse. I returned it to the dive shop to hang and dry (the single rinse tub for 24 divers was not nearly enough, nor was the single shower). The divemasters had already rinsed and stowed my

other gear.

Except for riding a Newton to the Blue Hole, we 24 dived from three skiffs, each with a captain and a divemaster. On the first day, the staff loaded my gear on my skiff; I hooked it up, and after that, the crew had everything ready to go. A smiling crew member would check my Nitrox while I watched. Other than Blue Hole day, the dives were a few minutes' ride, which was good because the sun was bright and the skiffs were uncovered. We had three dives daily, and while there was no shore diving, I did snorkel in the shallows one afternoon, which was moderately interesting, with juvenile reef fish, crevices with critters, okay for passing the time. Later afternoons, some divers went to the spa for massages -- most raved about them -- and Happy Hour started at 6 p.m. each day, with snacks.

As dive resorts go, Turneffe Island Resort is high-end, the only property on its 14-acre island, Little Caye Bokel, and with a staff of 65, I was told. The large dining area is next door to the bar/lounge area, with a pool outside. The meals measured up to the resort's quality. Breakfast always had a buffet of fruit, cereal, and yogurt, and a friendly staff, well-tuned to dietary issues, served all the meals. The breakfast menu offered a variety of egg dishes supplemented with meats, pancakes, or French toast. Lunch and dinner were consistently excellent, with fish, chicken, and lobster on the menu (Belizean specialties one night), salads and fresh vegetables, and no one going hungry. Toward the end of each meal, a staff member would ask if anyone cared for a second helping. Desserts were to die for, with lots of chocolate involved. Between dives, one could find snacks like fresh cookies in the dive shop or restaurant. We mostly ate indoors at two long tables for our group, but the tables could be separated into smaller groupings.

### Turneffe Island Resort, Belize, C.A.

Accommodations .....	★★★★★
Food .....	★★★★½
Diving (Beginners) .....	★★★★★
Diving (Advanced) .....	★★★★
Accommodations for photographers:	
On boat .....	★★★
On land .....	★★★★★
Boat Snorkeling .....	★★★★
Beach Snorkeling .....	★★
Money's worth .....	★★★★½

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

*Caribbean scale*



And a table was separated for one woman from our group who dined alone. You see, she became ill soon after we arrived but refused to take a COVID test, so she ate at an isolated table. She did go diving on my skiff a few times, which was okay for all of us in the open air. However, she remained somewhat ill, and upon departure, wore a mask back to Belize City. I suspect that kind of separation may become a new normal in dive travel; after all, COVID has taught us that drinking and dining with strangers with runny noses, coughs, and fevers put us all at risk for ruined vacations.



*Superior rooms with views sitting atop deluxe rooms*

Turneffe Island Resort is not just for divers but for fishermen as well, who come for bonefish, permit, and tarpon. We divers who just watch fish tend not to mingle much with those who catch them. We're different folks, as the barman told me. We don't close the bar and go to bed early; those who come to fish tend to toss down a few more than those who just watch fish. Of course, that might not have been the case, say, in the nineties, when a diver with a hangover would be greeted with a laugh, not a finger-wagging. We've learned better.

After the first day, my divemaster, Marcel (a Belizean who's been at this resort for many years) started spearing lionfish. As soon as the spear hit the fish, sharks appeared. Marcel would drop the flopping fish, which the sharks quickly devoured unless a snapper or grouper got there first. One mortally wounded lionfish dashed into the coral with a shark right behind. The shark rooted him out. I find it sad to see any fish speared, but lionfish don't belong in the Caribbean. In the 40 years since being released, they have decimated the small fish and invertebrate population, and divemasters play a critical role in con-

## ***Ships May Be Fueling a Coral-Killing Epidemic***

For some time, researchers have speculated that infected ballast water, which ships take on in one region to keep it stable and then release at a different port, may contribute to the spread of stony coral disease. A recent study by scientists at the University of Miami seems to confirm that. The disease has spread throughout the Caribbean, especially to those islands with significant cruise ship traffic, such as Jamaica, St. Maarten, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Grand Cayman, and Belize.

The UM Rosenstiel School researchers conducted two disease transmission experiments of simulated ship's ballast water in their experimental reef lab. "The results suggest that ships' ballast water poses a threat to continued spread and persistence of SCTLD throughout the Caribbean and potentially to reefs in the

Pacific, and that the established treatment (UV) and testing standards may not mitigate the risk of disease spread," said Michael Studivan, the study's lead author.

The solution is to find a means to treat the transported pathogens before they are dumped and the reefs are destroyed, as well as to require ships to dump ballast water far at sea, which is only an interim measure.

Reference: "Transmission of stony coral tissue loss disease (SCTLD) in simulated ballast water confirms the potential for ship-born spread" by Michael S. Studivan, Michelle Baptist, Vanessa Molina, Scott Riley, Matthew First, Nash Soderberg, Ewelina Rubin, Ashley Rossin, Daniel M. Holstein, and Ian C. Enochs, 10 November 2022, *Scientific Reports*. DOI: 10.1038/s41598-022-21868-z



*Luxurious double room*

green morays cruising around, saw lots of groupers, including Nassau groupers, and a few cleaning stations.

What's Belize diving without a trip to the Blue Hole? Two skiffs took divers well below 100 feet to see the stalactites and pillars while the other dived the shallow reefs nearby. Then we were off to Half Moon Cay, one of my favorite Caribbean dives, with those familiar reef sharks, rough tail rays, green moray, scorpion fish, blue parrot fish, and garden eels on the sandy bottom. After a nice picnic lunch on the Caye, I took a short walk and climbed up to a platform to see red-footed boobies nesting in the trees. Our third dive at Long Caye Wall, with very interesting swim-throughs, is one of the better Caribbean dives -- two sharks, three eagle rays, and a turtle -- ended in a sandy area with many garden eels, several sting rays, and a green moray on the hunt. Throughout the week,

trolling their population on their local reefs. And because they are offered to sharks, divers see more sharks than ever.

The sad part about Belize, and most Caribbean islands, is that much of the hard coral is dead, and though it's been in decline for many years, spiny coral disease is taking its toll. I did spot a few patches of live coral with spots of color, but there are plenty of healthy soft corals and lots of healthy barrel sponges, some three feet or more across. On many dives, I saw

## *Manta Populations Improve*

The oceanic manta ray population off the coast of Ecuador is now estimated to number 22,000, 10 times more than any other known sub-population of the species *Mobula birostris*. The giant manta is the world's largest ray, with wingspans reaching more than 18 feet. Populations are typically small and vulnerable to human impacts, but the Ecuadorian population is not only massive but potentially healthy (according to a 14-year study by Fundación Megafauna Marina del Ecuador).

Over a decade, populations of the reef manta (*Mobula alfredi*), which have a wingspan of up to five feet, have increased significantly in Indonesia's Raja Ampat archipelago, highlighting the importance of long-term conservation and management measures.

Edy Setyawan, of the University of Auckland, says,

"Despite the global decline in oceanic sharks and rays because of overfishing, the reef manta rays in

Raja Ampat have been recovering and thriving." In Dampier Strait, between 2009 and 2019, the estimated population increased to 317, an annual compound gain of 3.9 percent. South East Misool's estimated gain to 511 was 10.7 percent.

Today, an estimated 16,000 to 18,000 of the creatures may survive, with the Maldives hosting the most,

at least 5,000 individuals, followed by Indonesia with at least 3,500. "Unfortunately, reef manta rays are generally in decline, as in Mozambique where they have been continuously caught in targeted fisheries, or just holding steady, as in Australia and the Maldives," says Setyawan.



## *A Painful Ear Infection from Polluted Indonesian Seas*

I developed a nasty ear infection after a Mandarin fish dive (dive number 1000!) we did off the *Blue Manta* liveaboard in a filthy harbor in front of a small Indonesian village, Maulana, Banda, on Neira Harbor. Swimmer's Ear presents as pain, swelling, and a feeling of pressure or fullness in the ear. On board, they had antibiotic ear drops, which didn't help, so I added amoxicillin, which they had on board. Despite a few days of this treatment, the infection continued progressing, which was surprising since it should have worked (I'm a pharmacist).

I did some research and determined that recent rain had washed sewage into the harbor, and likely my infection was caused by a highly resistant, hard-to-treat bacteria from fecal matter) that required a second antibiotic, ciprofloxacin. As soon as we returned to port, the director sent a driver to a local resort and picked up some.

Without my medical background, proper treatment would have been delayed, and a trip to a medical center would have been necessary. However, the antibiotics knocked out the good bacteria in my gut, and I developed nausea and diarrhea. The following week I was

one of four people who had food poisoning.

I missed the last day of diving and the first two days of diving on the second boat, the *Aliikai Voyage*, all because of diving in sh\*t, and I was even wearing a hood. It could have been prevented by rinsing my ears immediately after diving and using antibiotic drops.

The *Blue Manta* cruise director said divers get ear infections on this trip every week. So, why not be proactive and do something to prevent it? Disclose the possibility of infection and suggest a thorough rinsing of ears with fresh water, followed by antibiotic ear drops after the dive for those who chose to dive. Likely, this would have prevented my ear infection. I shudder to think of the cost of those missed dives.

In the future, if I'm concerned about water pollution after a dive, I would immediately rinse my ears in a freshwater shower and instill antibiotic ear drops, continuing the treatment for at least five days and hoping there was no fecal contamination. It seems excessive to travel with oral antibiotics when they're rarely needed.

– Catherine May,  
Barrie, Ontario, Canada

most of my dives lasted an hour in the comfortable 82-degree water. Though there was little current, we tootled along until it was time to surface, and the skiff driver was there to pick us up.

It was not necessary to stick with Marcel during the dives, but I did because he went nice and slow and was great at pointing out critters that I'm sure I would have missed otherwise. So, at Three Amigos, he pointed out the endemic spotted toadfish and an impressive channel-clinging crab (also called a spider crab). Schooling fish such as jacks and snappers were everywhere. As the week went on, the upper levels of the sea slowly started to clear of silt, but it got worse at depth. At North Cut Ridge, I could see what I call a "siltocline," similar to a halocline but involving a silt layer instead of changing levels of salinity.

One morning my buddy and I went to get our fins, and his were missing, but nearby was another set of fins. We hurried outside in time to spot someone on another skiff waving my buddy's fins. He had grabbed the wrong pair. Once they exchanged fins, we headed to Secret Spot, backrolled, and I was delighted to see visibility had improved even more, so we divers could spread out more while keeping an eye on the divemaster. An endemic spotted toadfish was the highlight, though I spotted three reef sharks, a large hawksbill turtle, and a nervous little juvenile spotted drum flitting about. After my five-minute safety stop (I try to do extra time), the boat pulled up, and the crew lifted my BCD with weights and then my fins. I climbed the wide ladder and was greeted with orange quarters.

Turneffe Island Resort is a relaxed place with a friendly and attentive staff. The first half of November is usually a good time to travel, with fewer crowds and slightly cooler temperatures. One cautionary note is to consider the no-see-ums, which began to return toward the week's end. One night late, I ventured outside to view an eclipse of the full moon without repellent and didn't stay long. It's crucial to wear repellent if outside dining in the evening, especially the Friday



night barbecue followed by hermit crab races. I was a reluctant participant, but after finding a suitable contender, I had way more fun than I expected.

Before we departed, the divemaster passed out a printout of the dive locations and what was seen specific to each skiff. During the first part of the week, I had decided not to return and dive here again. But, looking over the printout and remembering my dives, thinking about how the visibility had gradually returned, and reflecting on the quality of the resort, I signed up for a return trip. The sharks, groupers, and eagle rays swayed me, not to mention the fine resort and staff.

– J.R.S.

PS: The rules for tipping, post-COVID, seem a little tricky, but groups make it easier since you can talk to one another to see what's appropriate. Here, the dive staff is tipped separately from the other staff, and the recommended tipping rates seemed inflated. To make it easy, I gave cash to Tina, our efficient Island Dreams tour leader, who parceled it out. How much you tip is up to you. My editor, Ben Davison, says Undercurrent will take a look at post-COVID tipping soon.

Our undercover diver's bio: *Having been certified since the early '70s, I've logged nearly 5,000 dives. While I hate the stress of travel, I buck up and love diving around the world. My best dives were in the '90s at Sipadan, when you were still allowed on the island, with showers in the jungle and sinks hanging on trees. I plan on diving until my last breath, even if I have to crawl into the water.*



**Divers Compass:** My deluxe shared room cost \$2695, three dives a day (except two the first day, unless you paid \$100 for number three), and all meals. Tips and alcohol were extra . . . . Our package included one night dive, which didn't happen because it was dark and silty . . . . They list 25 different sites for boat snorkeling . . . . Paddle boards and kayaks are free for the taking . . . . A nice touch was the optional 6 a.m. coffee service at our door . . . . The gym advertised online was not operating, nor were the touted yoga sessions . . . . WiFi throughout the resort, at times

a little spotty, perhaps due to the hurricane's aftermath . . . . Beer is about \$7, mixed drinks \$12 or so.

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## Cozumel Diver Disappears from Surface

*what you need to know about down currents*

The rise and fall of the tide, no matter how imperceptible to us, can cause a big pressure difference between an ocean and a smaller sea or lagoon, becoming apparent when the water flow

*Downward currents can be strong, multi-directional, and dangerous. They can begin the moment a tide changes*

confronts reefs, walls, or other underwater obstructions. Like the air passing over an aircraft's wing, the water has to speed up to pass an obstacle such as a submerged reef. For example, the slight tidal

difference between the Pacific Ocean and the Rangiroa Lagoon in French Polynesia can produce a spectacular standing wave as it passes through the constricted Tiputa Pass.

### ***The Danger of Down Currents***

Currents can also be caused by strong wind or high-pressure atmospheric conditions building up pressure in the open ocean. When a current comes up against a vertical wall, it must flow up and over, around, or down. That vertical down current can be very dangerous to those divers unaware of how to cope.

Divers meet down currents at the Maldivian atolls' outside reefs and at Indonesian islands,



where there is a tidal difference between the Indian Ocean and the smaller seas to the north, such as the Banda Sea. Indonesia's Raja Ampat is well known for its currents. One of its famous sites, Cape Kri in the Dampier Strait, often has an infamous down current that may appear just as divers are finishing their dives. It can whisk divers down to 130 feet before releasing them to bob back to the surface, a frightening experience for an unsuspecting diver. Divers have died there.

### ***They Can Be Very Localized.***

Downward currents can be strong, multi-directional, and dangerous. They can begin the moment a tide changes. There may be tell-tale signs: schooling fish swimming energetically yet vertically, or soft corals flattened in the flow.

Sometimes they are very localized. The flow that promises to send you down 100 feet might not affect a diver only a few feet away from you. In my early diving days, I had the surreal experience of trying to climb a reef wall near Komodo when another diver kindly offered me his gloves. He was not affected by the current and was wondering what I was doing, yet he was only an arm's length away.

*Swim horizontally away from whatever is causing the down current, usually a reef wall.*

If you find yourself in a down current, it can be of little use to inflate your BC or SMB or to try to swim up against the current. I've watched in awe as the surface marker buoy I deployed at 60 feet hit the down current near the surface, turned away from the reef face, and descended fully inflated.

### ***Imagine a Waterfall***

Think of a down current as a waterfall. If you get close to the wall, you might get out of it in the lee of an overhang. But where do you go? Certainly not rock climbing. And you're not a powerful swimmer like a salmon.

So, you must swim horizontally as hard as you can away from whatever is causing the current – that waterfall – to flow downward. It's usually a reef wall. You don't know how wide the waterfall is, so swim toward the open ocean and out of the waterfall.

If you did inflate your BC and dropped your weights, you risk an uncontrolled ascent to the sur-

## ***And Don't Forget about Rip Tides***

A 27-year-old diver, Zachary Nelson, went missing on Saturday, January 29, off Pebble Beach, on California's Monterey Peninsula, while diving from the shore with three friends. The water conditions were rough, and the group got caught in a rip current. Only three made it out of the water.

The U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Navy, and several Monterey County search and rescue crews searched over 17 hours, covering 111 square miles with no sign of the missing diver. Rescue boats and rescue swimmers had a rough time getting out to the location, and the sheriff's dive team was unsuccessful in entering the water due to the water conditions. They flew a drone with infrared capabilities into the night.

The search was suspended on Monday, January 31.

face once you are free of the current – so that's to be done only if you are almost out of air and totally out of ideas.

### ***That Cozumel Death***

It was an unfortunate American diver who found himself in such a down current during a dive at Santa Rosa reef on the south side of Cozumel on January 16. Frank Szat (Itasca, IL) was aboard the same boat as the missing diver and posted this on Facebook:

“My wife and I were diving on the same boat, different dive group. The ‘lost’ diver was very experienced. He was only several feet from his wife and his divemaster on the wall as they were preparing their SMB. A sudden down current pulled him down before anyone could help. The currents were strong and multi-directional, but manageable the whole dive ... up until that point . . . . There was even a vortex at the surface over blue water as we came up from our safety stop.”

He was diving with Dressel Divers, who according to another Facebook poster, Jacques Le Brock (Montreal, Quebec), responded as best they could. “I was on the boat and witnessed it all. They had to account for the other divers/teams while preparing to search. I am confident they did not delay the search, and they did not ‘lose him.’ The dive master and his wife were within sight when it happened. The divemasters and dive company did everything they could.”

That afternoon, personnel from the Naval Search, Rescue, and Maritime Surveillance Station began to look for the missing diver after he failed to resurface. He has not been located.

The current was so localized and instant that his wife and a dive guide were less affected by it. Even though he was an experienced diver, he couldn't respond quickly or correctly and disappeared into the depths. What a terrible tragedy for his wife to witness.

We reviewed scores of Facebook posts regarding this incident, and it was apparent that many Cozumel divers who posted knew nothing about down currents, having never been told about them either in certification courses or by Cozumel dive operators before a dive.

Cozumel down currents occur frequently. I don't

recall how many divers *Undercurrent* has reported have disappeared in Cozumel's down currents over the years, but I may have run out of fingers to keep counting.

But don't be put off by the prospect of down currents or any currents. Just be prepared. The small amount of rising tide at the constriction of the Tiputa Pass into Rangiroa's Lagoon is so powerful it forms a standing wave, yet Stan Waterman dived the pass when he was 80 years old.

You can too.

– John Bantin

Here are some links to read a few past articles.

<https://bit.ly/3YIFCea>

<https://bit.ly/3YgLrcW>

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## Mexico Closes Down Great White Shark Cage Diving *and there are questions why*

As of January 10, 2023, cage diving with great white sharks at Isla Guadalupe, 400 miles southwest of Ensenada, Mexico, is permanently prohibited. The Mexican Government's ban covers all tourism inside the reserve, including film production and liveboard diving.

But will it stand?

Last year, cage diving and sport fishing were

*Isla Guadalupe is one of the top destinations globally to view, photograph, and study white sharks safely.*

suspended between May and December to evaluate tourism's impact on the several hundred protected white sharks congregating there. The Mexican Government said the closure was intended to gather information to adopt the best sustainability practices that guarantee their conservation.

However, unlike the blue waters of Isla Guadalupe, the future of shark dive tourism is not crystal clear.

The new policy issued under a *Management Plan for Guadalupe* on January 9 states: "White shark observation may not be carried out in the Reserve

for tourist purposes, to avoid altering their habitat, behavior, and feeding sites, and thereby preserve and conserve the species"

Declared the *Guadalupe Island Biosphere Reserve* in 2007, it falls under the protection of Mexico's Natural Protected Areas Commission. With its clear, calm waters and reliable seasonal white shark population, Isla Guadalupe is one of the top destinations globally to view, photograph, and study white sharks safely. Scientists have named more than 380 individuals that routinely visit Isla Guadalupe between July and December.

### **Great White Tourism**

Organized shark dive tourism began in the early 2000s by several operators, including San Diego-based Horizon Charters. Since then, the cage diving industry had grown significantly with new operators, leading to increased regulation by SEMARNAT (Mexico's Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources).

On average, vessels visited for five days, charging each diver \$4000 or more. Sharks are attracted with substances like fish blood and oil, ground fish, and tuna heads. Floating metal-barred cages with a closable top are secured to the vessel's side. Openings in the sides of the cages allow photographers to capture close images of the sharks. The industry has attracted some criticism that the chum adds excessive nutrients to the water. A few white sharks

have injured themselves by striking the cages or becoming entangled in them, and one died. These incidents brought brief shutdowns and subsequent industry responses to mitigate the causes.

Shark tourism has been a significant contributor to the economy of Baja California, with a host of small businesses trading on its popularity. The U.S. non-profit Shark Allies estimates the value of the Guadalupe white shark population at \$123.1 million over 30 years and the value of the 113 individual white sharks interacting with dive boats at more than \$1 million each. However, much of the money generated by channels like The Discovery Channel and National Geographic benefits U.S. companies more than Mexico.

### *The Threat of Poaching*

While the great white shark is a protected species, the new management plan has no provision to prevent illegal fishing and protect the sharks. In some parts of Mexico, but not yet the outer Baja coast, great white sharks have been killed illegally, and fish byproducts, including shark fins, have been exported illegally through the Sinaloa Cartel.

Licensed shark-vessel operators are potent watchdogs while the sharks are present. However, during the 2022 shutdown, Dr. Michael Domeier of the Marne Conservation Science Institute says no poaching was observed.

My organization, Shark Stewards, is concerned about illegal poaching and the trade of shark fins, especially from less glamorous species like reef sharks, mako, and blue sharks, which are highly valued in Asia. A recent study discovered over half the shark fins in the Taiwan market were from threatened or protected species, including some white sharks. A single intensive fishing effort by an industrial longliner could wipe out the Guadalupe population. However, new technology like satellite observations from Global Fish Watch, vessel monitoring systems like AIS that are required on large fishing vessels, and the difficulty of fishing for 4000-pound sharks unobserved make this less likely than many believe.

Having worked in the shark fin trade in Asia for 16 years, Shark Stewards has found that dorsal fins from large sharks like basking, whale, and white sharks (all CITES-protected species and almost impossible to import or export legally) are used more for display than for shark fin soup.

However, the loss of even a few mature breeding females could immediately impact the population recovery of this threatened species. The loss of the economic benefit of the \$250/person park fee and the loss of Baja California staff employment is



## *Dave Crosby was a Serious Diver*

Before he died in January, rock legend Dave Crosby told Stephen Frink, for a 2013 interview in *Alert Diver* magazine, “I grew up in Santa Barbara as a kid, and I would spend all day, every day at the beach. I was sailing that water by the time I was 11, and now, 60 years later, I’m still at it – either sailing on it or diving under it.

“You can’t be around the ocean and not notice things are changing. Drift nets are a shit show ... 30 miles of line that kills anything that swims in its path. Global warming and ocean acidification are massive challenges to the sea. And to mankind, for that matter. I find diving the most peaceful thing I do in life, but as divers, we need to be fighters. The ocean is so elevating to my spirit I am willing to fight for it.”

also significant. There is also a substantial amount of money lost by shark diving operators based in Mexico, as well as in the United States.

As this article goes to press, the future of the Guadalupe ban is unclear and evolving. We have contacted the Mexican Government, scientists, and all major operators through booking agents or the operators themselves for comment. Of the seven operators we contacted, none is booking for 2023. One Mexican scientist on our team confirmed the statement of the Management Plan for Guadalupe and that the park remains closed without any immediate news of change.

### *Dive Operators Respond*

At least two operators have claimed there are legal actions against the Mexican Government, although we have not received details about the lawsuits or the courts in which they were filed.



The liveboard *Horizon* has been sold. The owners posted on Facebook, “The closure of Guadalupe Island has left us financially tapped out. We cannot do the right thing by our divers with \$500,000 in refunds and stay in business. So we made the decision to sell the company to a new operator who will be taking the *MV Horizon* in a new direction at the end of February 2023 . . . . We fought pretty hard for Guadalupe with our lawsuit challenging the 2022 closure, but we came up short, and we apologize to you for that. We really tried.

“The *MV Horizon* will continue to refund diver deposits, and we are asking if you can leave a little behind to consider it.”

But Mike Lever of Nautilus liveboards said in a quote to ScubaTravel.com: “Legally Guadalupe Island is not yet closed. The Government is illegally trying to push through a new management plan that will allow commercial fishing to continue but stop all tourist activities. If they are successful, it dooms the shark population to extermination from poaching and illegal fishing. We’re fighting that in court and with every resource that we have. Their process is illegal in that they are required to consult with the consejo (council of stakeholders), hold public hearings, and such. They can’t just write a management plan and make it the law.” Nautilus is not booking for Guadalupe in 2023.

The Mexican-owned company Pacific Fleet, which operates at Guadalupe, is not booking for Guadalupe. In an email, they said, “Unfortunately, as of now, the park remains closed, but as you can imagine, it is highly political. We are working together with all operators to fight this decision. There is still a lot of movement, so we are

hopeful to be able to offer Guadalupe in the future again.”

The travel and adventure group Be a Shark monitors the closure status and lists actions and updates on its website. A January 26 Instagram post said, “The island has been officially closed until further notice. I would be concerned at this point by any operator who is still taking any \$ or deposits for 2023. We are tracking the updates

on our site once we fact-check them. Take a look at [www.beashark.team](http://www.beashark.team).

Shark dive ecotourism can negatively impact shark behavior, with potential injury and impacts on a threatened species, with energetic and reproductive effects. However, proper oversight by SEMARNAT, the benefit to the Mexican economy, science, and the ambassadorship that shark tourism provides, exceeds the potential harm to sharks and may be the best solution to save and understand them.

*David McGuire, Executive Director  
Shark Stewards, a non-profit project of the Earth  
Island Institute. [www.sharkstewards.org](http://www.sharkstewards.org)*

### ***Guadalupe Skywatch Program***

The Horizon New Beginings has started a Facebook site called Guadalupe Skywatch Program, asking divers who are interested in Guadalupe Island and the fate of the great white sharks to follow their Satellite monitoring that will watch over the island for illegal shark fishing in the coming years, providing a 24/7 conservation tool. Your support on this page will help. One last thing we can do for the sharks as we cannot monitor them in person.

<https://www.facebook.com/Guadalupeskywatch>

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## **Red Sea Liveboard Smacks into a Reef at Night**

### *Are liveboards getting reckless?*

The great circular reef at Sha’ab Abus Nuhas near the entrance to the Gulf of Suez in Egypt’s Red Sea has seen many ships come to grief over the centuries. One of the oldest wrecks is the *SS Carnatic*, a steam sailing ship from the 19th Century, the *MV Chrisoula K*, and one of the more recent, *MV Giannis D*, a Greek freighter that grounded in the 1980s. As such, it is a magnet for dive boats and divers.

Alas, Sha’ab Abu Nuhas still claims victims, the most recent being Seawolf Diving Safari’s *MY*

*Felo*, which ran aground on the reef at 2 a.m. on October 31. The vessel was on a night crossing to an Abu Nuhas dive site with 22 members of two Bremen, Germany, dive clubs and the 10-member crew. The *Felo* was evacuated, and six guests and three crew members incurred minor injuries. The wooden-hull liveboard had major damage and was later declared unfit for repair.

Seawolf Diving Safari posted details on their Facebook page, which included an accident report created by the German divers. They introduced



the report in part by saying “Today, we would like to show you the accident report from the point of view of the victims. Representation and sensations of the guests involved often differ from those of the crew and dive guides. Seawolf takes the representation of guests more seriously because it allows us to learn, recognize our mistakes, change and deepen actions in emergency situations.” [Kudos to Seawolf for the effort toward full transparency; however, they have not responded to questions we sent via two emails.]

The report raised several safety concerns, primarily why it was traveling at full speed in an area known for many shallow reefs and what navigational precautions the crew were using. The report questioned the crew’s emergency training and emergency plans. They did not use signal flares or other lights. The report claims the evacuation was delayed, and it became an emergency, with the crew telling some guests to jump into the water, which led to injuries. Some passengers’ life jackets were not fully functional, and the crew members were not wearing life jackets.

While the Seawolf website states that their vessels have two life rafts, each capable of carrying 24 passengers, the report states that they were not used. Instead, the guests and crew (the captain stayed onboard) climbed into the two inflatables, each designed for eight people but loaded with 15. The boats did not have emergency supplies, communication devices, navigational equipment, or lights. When the inflatables left the *Felo*, they were just given a general direction to travel and eventually saw the lights of another liveaboard, the *MY Aphrodite*.



*MY Felo*

Egyptian-built liveaboards might look sleek in their recent paint jobs, but most are of cheap timber construction. As such, they do not survive contact with a reef. The Red Sea is covered with reefs, most visible just below the surface. Admiralty charts tell mariners to stay in the main shipping lanes. But dive boats want to get close to the reefs. Combine that with the tendency for crews to navigate by eye and rely on “inshallah,” and you can understand why every year there are casualties.

Bearing that in mind, it does beg the question, what were they doing driving *MY Felo* at full speed after the midnight hours?

There are so many registered liveaboards in Egypt (around 150) that if a boat has problems, another vessel will likely be close enough to rescue passengers and crew. Because the Egyptian hulls are wood, wrecks tend to sit high and dry (until eventually destroyed by the waves), allowing passengers to collect valuables if they are timely. Bedouin fishermen will strip a wreck bare almost overnight if it is left unguarded.

It’s all part of the adventure of Red Sea diving!

– Charles Davis and John Bantin

PS: One of *Undercurrent’s* readers booked a future trip with PADI Travel on the *M/Y Seawolf Felo* several days after the incident. When he learned of the accident, he contacted PADI travel, which was unaware that the boat was no longer operable. He was not offered a refund but instead was rebooked on another Seawolf Diving Safari vessel, which he accepted.

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## Flotsam & Jetsam

**PADI Reacts at Last.** PADI instructors must now be educated about what they are teaching. After an eye-popping out-of-court settlement with the family suing PADI over the death of 18-year-old trainee diver Linnea Mills in a cold Montana lake in November 2020, they have changed their requirements for those teaching drysuit courses. To teach any drysuit diver on Open Water, Advanced, and Specialty courses, an instructor must now be certi-

fied as a drysuit specialty instructor. PADI will also require their divemasters to have additional certification. More about the tragic Linnea Mills case in the March edition of *Undercurrent*.

**Chuck Nicklin – Another Great One Gone.** We seem to be losing lots of pioneering divers these days. Chuck Nicklin passed at the age of 95 on December 7. He was one of three underwater cam-

eramen filming *The Deep* and a resident of La Jolla, CA, where he had started a dive shop in 1959. His fortunes changed after he freed a whale entangled in netting and became celebrated as “The Man Who Rode the Whale.” His other underwater filming credits included two 007 films: *For Your Eyes Only* and *Never Say Never Again*. Perhaps his most significant legacy was mentoring future giants of underwater photography Marty Snyderman, Howard Hall, and his son, Flip Nicklin. He continued to dive well into his nineties.

**Mosquitoes Chase You on Dive Trips?** Pregnant women are more attractive to mosquitoes, as is someone who has had a few beers. Now, researchers at Rockefeller University have found that people with higher levels of carbolic acid on their skin are 100 times more attractive to the female *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which haunts you wherever you dive. For unclear reasons, the acid your body generates smells like cheese or smelly feet, which attracts female mosquitoes hunting for human blood. You can’t cover it up with perfume or cologne. The best you can do is to take a shower to cut down those juicy compounds, especially around your feet. (Teddy Amenabar, *Washington Post*)

**A Horrific Shark Attack.** The British *Sun* newspaper reports a 19-year-old Mexican diver was decapitated in front of horrified fishermen by a giant great white shark in an attack on January 6. Nineteen-year-old Manuel Lopez had been collecting scallops in Tobari Bay in the Sea of Cortez using surface-supplied air. Local divers and anglers had not been out for several days due to the presence of large white sharks. Another British newspaper, the *Daily Star*, added, “It is believed that Lopez ignored the warnings because he needed to fish to make money. He is one of many divers and fishermen who pay the local government a yearly fishing stipend of around \$385 to fish there.” The *Daily Mail* reported that last February, another diver was

killed by a shark in the waters off the Sonora town of Yavaros.

**Funding His Dive Trips with Federal Money.** Diving in exotic places can prove expensive, but Jeffrey T. Parsons-Hietikko, a prominent HIV/AIDS researcher, was caught using federal research funds to take lavish scuba-diving trips in the Cayman Islands, Fiji, and Belize. He has agreed to repay the federal government \$375,000. You can get a lot of dives in for that kind of cash.

**The winner of the World Shootout underwater photography competition** announced at the Boat Show in Düsseldorf, Germany, this year is Italian underwater photographer Claudio Ceresi. His award for the best photo of the year is a three-week, \$10,000 Papua New Guinea diving vacation for two. Prizes totaled \$267,000 in value. You can view the winners’ entries in 12 categories at <https://bit.ly/3JHsQCZ>.



**Murina.** The Croatian word for “eel” is also the title of a thoughtful, highly regarded subtitled film, with a back story filled with spearfishing and scuba (wow, those Mediterranean waters are devoid of fish). *Murina* is the tale of a girl on the cusp of womanhood, struggling to leave the constraints of her dysfunctional family living in a charming Croatian cove. Film critics give it high marks, as I do, but I’m a fan of “small” foreign films, so before you jump and rent from Prime or Hulu, check the review. <https://bit.ly/3DywCuk>

## undercurrent

[www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)

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