

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

June 2006

Vol. 21, No. 6

## Midriff Islands, Sea of Cortez, Mexico

*cool water, abundant marine life*

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Dear Reader,

A flicker of movement interrupted my fascination with an unfamiliar sea slug, sequestered in a miniature forest of delicately sculpted sea squirts and scarlet sponges. Like a creature from a B-horror movie, the interloper emerged from the dense growth, its dime-sized body shrouded in hairy-green algae. Then, a cast of decorator crabs rose from their hideaway sporting veils of sponges, feathery hydroids, and other hitchhikers.

Here, in Julia's Enchanted Garden, truck-sized boulders were plastered with extended tentacles and appendages scouring for food. With my light I led the swarms of plankton Pied Piper-like, into the arms of voracious sand anemones. While I spotted almost as many different nudibranchs as I had in Indonesia, a green turtle the size of a car hood and a burly free-swimming moray reminded me where I was . . . in the Sea of Cortez (the Gulf of California on most maps) in the Midriff Islands with Ricardo's Diving Tours.

The Midriffs include more than 55 islands, islets, and pinnacles that rise from 3000-ft depths and span 80 miles in the north-central gulf. Tidal currents race through, drawing up cold, nutrient-rich water, which mixes with warmer waters that flow north in summer. Here one finds a unique blend of species, including eastern Pacific tropicals and



*Ricardo's Super Panga at the Midriffs*

Photo by Yrma van der Steenstraeten

California cold-water marine life. Add the high concentration of whales, dolphins, and sea lions, as well as seasonal whale shark visits, and things can get interesting.

Ricardo is based in the small fishing village of Bahia de los Angeles, not easy to get to because there is no commercial airport -- it's an eight-hour drive from San Diego. He has 15 years' experience diving and navigating the Midriffs. His is a small-town, small-boat operation, rough around the edges, but he and his son-in-law, Baruni (who provides English translation for Ricardo's limited English), are enthusiastic with an aim-to-please attitude. One of Ricardo's best assets are his eyes. Once it took him all of five minutes to fulfill my request for an ocellated frogfish. The plate-sized specimen was so well-concealed, it took me a minute to realize what it was. Visibility can be limited (30-40 feet in the summer and fall, but up to 100 in the winter), so sites are often difficult to find, even when fixed by GPS.

When I found Ricardo four years ago, he took me where none of the other local boats had -- a little-known seamount, less than 30 minutes from the dock. Schools of yellowtail jacks darted across the mount while the best assortment of Cortez tropicals I'd seen since Cabo Pulmo darted among the pillars of rock and forests of beet-colored gorgonians. Lobster, octopus, and a python-sized moray joined the show. Now, he motors to the Midriffs in his new 26-foot "super panga," a larger version of fishing boats and dive boats used throughout Baja. Ricardo's two pangas hold up to six divers each and eight for shorter trips (that would be over crowded), but I never dived with more than three other people. There are seat cushions and a large beach umbrella. Gear is left loose on the deck. The boats are equipped with life jackets, radios, first aid kits, and emergency signaling devices, and Ricardo says he'll have a DAN oxygen kit by fall. Air in the tanks -- good aluminum 80's filled to 3000 psi - was always checked before dives.

Ricardo's operates from the town boat ramp and he'll pick you up on shore if you're staying along the rocky beach. While closer sites can offer good diving, serious divers will want to take the hour-plus trip to the outer islands of Isla Angel de la Guardia, Isla Partida, and La Raza, where there is better sea life, but potentially more current, especially upwellings. Though the ride can get harsh in big seas, especially on a 90-minute return trip, his boat is designed for the Gulf of California, where the sea can go from glass to a 5-foot wind chop in the blink of an eye. More than once, Ricardo's seamanship helped us avoid potentially dangerous seas.

With the help of glassy seas, we arrived at Isla Angel de la Guardia in under an hour. We anchored on the 50-ft. tall Rapture rock, where the current formed tiny whirlpools. The cacophony of 50 California sea lions told me this was their turf. I back rolled and dropped quickly to the lee of a boulder at 30 feet, where colder 70-degree water rose from the depths, clearing the visibility to 75 feet. I descended over a series of ledges to the precipice, aided by a mild down current, then plunged over the edge, eventually to 120 ft. Forests of yellow-polyp black coral swayed like horizontal weeping willows. Spanish shawl nudibranchs grazed on hydroids, replenishing their harpoon-like stinging cells. I spotted four black sea bass the size of small refrigerators. Rapture Rock rivals walls like

## Midriffs

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★
Diving ( <i>beginners with confidence who don't need guidance</i> )	★★★
Snorkeling ( <i>when the whale sharks appear</i> )	★★★
Unique Macro Life	★★★★
Fish Life	★★+
Service	★★★★
Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth ( <i>especially for groups of four or more</i> )	★★★★+

★ = poor    ★★★★★ = excellent

Worldwide scale

## *Killer Regulators*

Divers are risking their lives by failing to maintain and service their regulators adequately, according to a new report from Britain's Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Almost half the regulators tested during a three-year HSE investigation into diving deaths would not pass the European EN250 standard for regulator performance due to "lack of maintenance, servicing and cleaning, and incorrect setup." More than a quarter of the fatalities could be directly attributed to equipment faults, primarily in regulators.

The EN250 standard defines limits of breathing resistance — the work the diver must do to inhale and exhale. All regulators sold in the EU must pass this standard. The regulator is set up in an ANSTI machine, which simulates different diver work rates in breaths per minute, depths, cylinder supply pressure, and water temperature, all of which affect performance. When a dive computer was recovered from an accident, the dive profile was used to reconstruct the incident in the ANSTI machine.

HSE offers free testing for coroners and police services, so equipment associated with deaths can be tested to the conditions of the fatality. Excluding rebreather incidents, faulty regulators were "confidently identified as the probable cause" in 12 of 46 deaths.

Altogether, 60 regulators were tested, including some from the buddies of the deceased. Of these, 28 — almost half — failed the European standard test, whether or not they were directly implicated in the demise of the diver. In several of the fatalities, people were diving to the depth limits of their training, but also close to and beyond the performance limits of the equipment they were using. Most divers know that regulators become harder to breathe the deeper they go,

but few know the tested limits of their regulator, which is never provided by the manufacturer.

"If a regulator becomes very hard to breathe, the solution is to stay calm and ascend," said Nick Bailey of the Health and Safety Laboratory, where the testing has been taking place. "The problem may ease during the ascent, but the regulator should not be dived again until it has been serviced professionally... It is always wise to test-dive a newly serviced regulator in a pool or in shallow water, as current bench-test servicing cannot take into account performance under pressure."

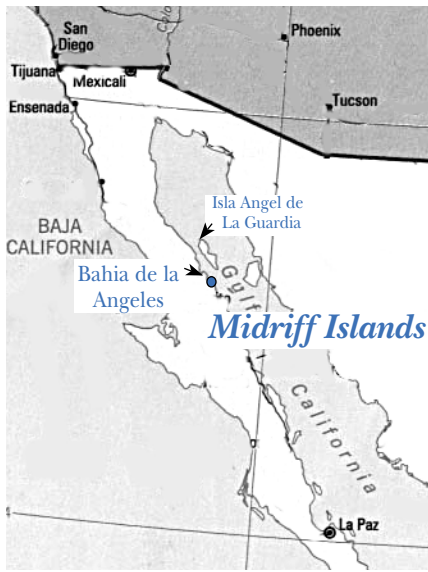
Octopus regulators are not tested simultaneously with main regulators, which is how they would be used in an emergency. The HSE believes there is a strong case for changing the standard to include a simulation of buddy breathing. In five of the cases it investigated for this report, a diver died after sharing air from the same first stage.

*excerpted from Dive Magazine, U.K.*

P.S. In the United States, there are no industry-wide standards for regulators. While DAN (Divers Alert Network) conducts an annual study of U.S. diving fatalities, it focuses on the medical causes of the death, not diver error or equipment. There is no systematic study of equipment used in a fatality. DAN, however, routinely asks whether equipment problems were involved in each case, but the equipment may have never been tested. DAN chief executive officer Dan Orr told *Undercurrent* that equipment problems are rarely found to be the cause of death, though they may precipitate a problem such as a fatal heart attack. When dive gear is involved, says Orr, problems generally are caused by poor maintenance, self-repair, lack of familiarity with the equipment, or operator error, such as forgetting to hook up an inflator hose.

Cozumel's Maracaibo Deep. As I ascended, a mature green sea turtle darted into deeper water. With the current swirling around the rocks, I held on at 45 feet and watched a procession of finescale triggerfish, yellowtail snapper, and swirling masses of Mexican barracuda. Higher, barrel-chested male sea lions darted so close with bared teeth I could almost tell what they had last eaten. When I surfaced the boat was right there, as always, and Ricardo and Baruni hoisted my gear out of the water, and helped me up the portable ladder.

Though only certified as an open-water diver, Ricardo has logged thousands of dives. He impressed me with his skills, though he is still learning the tricks of being a top-notch dive guide (e.g., giving a complete briefing). You can follow him for all or part of the dive or follow your own profile -- you tell him. Novices may find the conditions unnerving at times. Closer-to-town sites like Punta Pescador (max depth 40 ft.) will be more to their liking.



In September, few dives were duds. Almost every day we spotted green sea turtles, one of five species here. Large scorpionfish were so plentiful that if one couldn't manage his buoyancy he might bounce off them. I saw many free-swimming, constrictor-sized green morays, golden sea horses, two varieties of frogfish, and a healthy selection of nudibranchs. A couple of sites conjured up images of the Sea of Cortez's golden years, 200+ lb. black sea bass and enormous lobsters.

I stayed north of town, at Campo Archelon (resendizshidalgo@yahoo.com), which attracts an eclectic mix, including visiting scientists, assorted Baja legends, and nonlegends like me. They offer beachfront palapas (\$10 per night for two) and stone cabanas with cots, stove, hot shower, and refrigerator (\$40 per night for four). It's glorified camping with a cot on a sand floor, next to the water. Glorious, as long as no wind-sounds of the sea, whale breaths, or sea lion barks. I love the tranquil setting, especially the

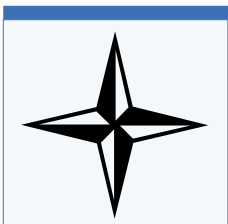
blood-red sunrises over the bay and the tide pool that hosts more macro-life than many dives. The water is a cool refuge from the 100-degree-plus days, with nights in the 90s.

In March I returned to winter westerlies roaring down the canyon, making for bumpy boat rides. While days were sunny and 75-degrees, the nights dropped into the low 50s and upper 40s. But Ricardo had a 150-hp Yamaha outboard for even faster trips and a sonar unit to locate new sites that were generally comparable or better than dives I've done in La Paz. Amarillo (Yellow Forest) was an exciting drift dive reminiscent of Cozumel's Santa Rosa Wall. It was plastered in thick stands of yellow polyp black coral, which sheltered juvenile whitetip and horn sharks. Baruni's Canyons had gorgonian-covered pinnacles dramatically rising from 200 feet and monster black sea bass in the depths. The cold water (70°F and below) prevented longer dives; even with my new 7-mil and a hood, 45 minutes and two dives a day was it for me. Most of the tropical fish had packed their bags and headed south until the water begins to warm in late May.

Between dives, six fin whales gulped plankton within a stone's throw. At times, the air and water were so still that I could hear whale breaths miles away. Rarely a day went by without a performance by hundreds of acrobatic dolphin pods. We snorkeled with sea lions at several sites. The islands, part of the Islas del Golfo de California Protected Area, are unique, harboring blue-footed boobies and osprey, and is a temporary home for elegant terns from South America.

Diving the Midriff is a step back in time. Pristine water, no other divers, and some of Baja's best diving at sites few people have ever seen. For me, the sense of adventure today makes it just about perfect. There's a lifetime worth of underwater exploration to be had.

- I.T.



**Divers Compass:** There is an airstrip for private planes . . . It's an eight-hour drive north from La Paz, which has an international airport. The drive is relatively straightforward, though with narrow roads, but you will be rewarded as you crest the last hill and see the azure-blue Gulf of California and offshore islands sprawl across the horizon, a vivid contrast to the hours of desert in your rear view mirror . . . You will need Mexican auto insurance. Contact Baja Travel Club (800-727-BAJA, [www.discoverbaja.com](http://www.discoverbaja.com).) For a membership fee, you get special rates on Mexican insurance and com-

prehensive emergency towing. Compare insurance coverages at [www.bajabound.com](http://www.bajabound.com)). Some rental agencies limit how far you can drive south of the border. For specialty rentals (RVs, Hummers, one-way rentals), try California Baja Rent-A-Car (888-470-7368, [www.cabaja.com](http://www.cabaja.com)) . . . Besides diving, fishing, kayaking, and windsurfing, there is spectacular hiking up 3,000-foot Mike's Mountain on the edge of town . . . The best motel option in town is Costa del Sol ([costadelsolhotel@hotmail.com](mailto:costadelsolhotel@hotmail.com)) with air-conditioned rooms priced in the \$60 to \$80 range. Clean with friendly service, and a \$5-\$10 dinner menu, offering basic Mexican fare and seafood . . . Newer accommodations are Villa Bahia (<http://www.villabahia.com>) and Los Vientos ([www.losvientospaandresort.com](http://www.losvientospaandresort.com).) Villa Bahia offers one- and three-bedroom guest houses. Some rooms have full kitchens. They have a slow 23-foot cabin cruiser with a non-diving guide and goes to average dive locales. Los Vientos has 15 units, ranging from \$107 to \$185/night/double occupancy. Each is furnished with beautiful traditional Mexican furnishings and art and has a pool, spa, and gourmet restaurant. Dinners range from \$25 to \$60 . . . The most popular diving season is June through November, when water temperatures peak in the low 80s. West and north winds can disrupt dive plans in fall and winter, though usually something is diveable. Ricardo's Diving Tours offers three different trips and has a complicated pricing system. Figure \$60-\$80 for local 2-tank dives, \$120 -\$160 for trips to the outer Midriff Islands and three tanks. Deal directly with Ricardo's Diving Tours. Some hotels take a percentage for arranging trips. E-mail [ricardoarcen@hotmail.com](mailto:ricardoarcen@hotmail.com). A website ([www.scubabaja.com](http://www.scubabaja.com)) is slated to be on-line by summer.

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## *Nimrod Explorer, Coral Sea, Australia*

### *a sea full of turtles*

Dear Reader,

I deplore missing dives I've paid for, especially when time is limited. The Nimrod Explorer's advertised first day schedule is, "Lunch served on way to the first dive site; two dives are offered today, including the orientation dive, at Lagoon Reef." So, to arrive at the boat by noon, I rose at 5:45AM, then got picked up for a bus trip to their 5-seat air charter, which flew to the vintage WWII landing field at Lockhart River; then a van to Portland Roads over an unpaved, washboard surface that's impassible during heavy rain; and a short ride in an inflatable to the Nimrod. All for a long wait until 6:45PM for the reprovisioning and refueling barge to arrive. Two precious dives. Scrapped. A Scottish chap chimed in that the same happened on his trip last year. For the time and money I spent, I'd expect an operation to find a way to guarantee that first dive day.

But if the diving goes well, one soon forgets about such matters and after a few tours of the reef I had become one happy diver. The Nimrod Explorer departed Cairns for its remote Ocean Outback Adventure, eventually reaching Raine Island, in the Coral Sea. Only one other vessel, the Undersea Explorer, makes the journey. This section of the Coral Sea was ours alone.

Marine life is mind-boggling. I saw more than twenty species of butterfly-fish, from the eastern triangular to the Pacific double-saddle. Not to mention the hybrids from interspecies hanky-panky like the offspring of dot and dash and spot-banded varieties with their delightful arabesques and curlicues.

The legendary visibility on the shallower reefs was only 40-50 feet due to coral spawning. At outer bommies of the Great Detached Reef, such as the phenomenal site called The Pinnacle, visibility hit 100 ft. and the dives as much as 120 ft. In November, we had little current and the water hovered around 80°F.

The hard coral reefs, which rise to inches below the surface, are pristine -- certainly the healthiest and most colorful I've seen. Except for a couple that have suffered storm damage, most sites have magnificent stands of branching corals from large elkhorn to tiny, delicate blue- and pink-tipped clusters at reef top. At Nature's Way, I saw more healthy staghorn than in all the Caribbean venues I've dived combined. Home to undulating black ribbon worms, at least six species of sweetlips that could suck a golf ball through a garden hose and Pacific giant clams with colorful mantles, Nature's Way was kaleidoscopic.

The hard corals offered the perfect backdrop for a rainbow of slender anthias. Like tiaras of precious stones, they glittered in the strong Australian sun. Colorful damsels and reticulated and humbug dascyllus darted in and out of the protective arms of the coral as if driven by a frenzied calliope.

Surfacing from this wonderland, I could see the solid footprint of a 72' steel catamaran with two aft ladders leading to a spacious dive deck. The Nimrod, which can adequately handle the 18-passenger max, is clean and in good repair, thanks to the wry, cerebral mechanic and raconteur, Mark. The generator and compressor are decently muffled. Between dives and meals, I repaired to my berth for note-taking and a nap. Like all the cabins, it had individually controlled AC, reading lights, dark wood veneer, and a private head and shower. The onboard desalinization system provided plenty of water, but it became tepid at peak usage so I took my shower first thing.

The craft has two double cabins, one with a single large bed, the other with two single beds. The four quad cabins are considerably cozier, but the design gives some relief since two beds are forward of a small central area where the head is and two are aft. Still, if you've got a roomie who snores or needs Beano, it's going to be a problem. The two aft quads have single berths, while the forward two have V-berths, and can be configured as double staterooms with full-sized double beds and twin upper bunks.

Food was plentiful, if not gourmet. Colin, who was filling in for the vacationing chef, and Carlie, who served as steward and social director, worked hard to have food out before and after every dive. Though he was shorted on the boat's meat order (for this we missed a half day of diving?), Colin kept the menu varied. Breakfast was an assortment of cereals, mixed fruit bowl, hash browns, fatty Aussie bacon, pork sausages, and instant eggs. Lunch could include sandwich meats and cheeses, pasta with various sauces/fillings, fresh green salad and ice cream. For dinner, it was a fresh green salad, a cooked vegetable or two, potatoes, chicken breast or wings, pizza, fish or red meat. There was always dessert, sometimes as fancy as Pavlova and plum pandowdy. The web site says that Aussie beer and wine are included in the price. We were initially charged and had to wrangle until midweek to get the Captain to concede.

We ate in the primary common area, the salon, where we also socialized, had photo shows and dive briefings. A large table is in the center, with banquettes along both sides. It was snug and the AC was feeble, making for some sticky meals. The rear upper deck was outfitted with tables and chairs, as well as seats along the stern railing. It was a good spot to enjoy the beer, though the few smokers found it was an area where they would minimally offend others.

### *Nimrod Explorer; Far North Itinerary*

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★
Diving ( <i>for beginners</i> )	★★★★
Safety	★★★★★
Food	★★★
Accommodations	★★★
Service	★★★½
Money's Worth	★★★★

★ = poor    ★★★★★ = excellent

*Asian Pacific scale*



## *The Right Seats for the Long Haul*

Those long flights to the South Pacific can eat up a dive day if you arrive exhausted. Usually, foreign carriers provide more economy class comfort than American airlines, but there are ways to get more comfortable economy class seats, reports Wendy Perrin in the April issue of *Condé Nast Traveler*.

**Boeing 767:** They have a 2-3-2 seat configuration, so your chance of getting a middle seat is only 14 percent. On Boeing 737s and 757s, your chances are 33 percent.

**Compare Seats:** Choose your seat before you pay: Certain Web sites –Travelocity, e.g. – offer a seating chart at the start of the booking process. Suppose you are trying to choose between two aisle seats, 26B and 26C, on an American MD-80 plane. Go to seatguru.com, click on American, and check the layout of the MD-80 to find out the pros and cons of the two seats. You'll learn that 26B has less leg room and limited recline. Seats in the same cabin can vary significantly.

**Emergency-exit row:** Seats in these rows typically provide an additional 4-5 inches of leg room. Sometimes you can snag an exit-row seat by requesting one at check-in. Occasionally you can buy one.

**Try switching:** Does anyone in your family or traveling party have elite frequent flier status with the airline? Ask that person to call the customer-service desk for elite-level fliers, and you may get help. Or head for an airline ticket office to plead your case. Employees are often more sympathetic in person than over the phone. Try to change your seat at check-in, and if that fails, at the gate.

**Join the carrier's lounge club.** A day rate is usually \$25 to \$50. Once in the club you'll have access to the club's powerful ticket agents, who can move mountains.

**Book premium economy class:** Available on some international carriers, these seats provide several more inches of pitch and width than regular coach seats, and cost 30-50 percent more than the cheapest economy fare. United sells access to the seats for \$299/year. A companion booked under the same reservation record can join you.

I did manage to get in 23-hour long-dives, including three night dives, in our five plus dive days. Before each dive, the chief divemaster, Demi, with a conspicuous grin and profuse head bowing, gave an amusing and adequate briefing with basic drawings. Since many experienced divers went their own way as soon as they hit water, the recommendations of no depths below 130', starting the safety stop when tank pressure reached 750psi and not surfacing without a buddy largely went in one ear and out the other. But with their impressive diver check system, it was unlikely we'd go missing, as did the Lonergan couple, the thinly veiled subjects of the movie "Open Water." The far north Great Barrier Reef is not the place to get lost or left behind. The crew logged each diver entering and reboarding, recording depth and time. If a diver sat out, he was required to sign off. The DM carefully checked the list before leaving the deck.

One Nimrod quirk is to return divers who surface too far from the boat by hauling them through the water behind the inflatable. I felt as if I were troll bait for the tiger sharks that visit this turtle breeding area and did not like being exposed to jellyfish stings.

Tanks are filled in place and readily available. However, they couldn't keep up with 15 divers who wanted Nitrox -- about half the divers had to settle for it every other dive. In return, the Explorer charged \$AU75, half of the advertised price for unlimited Nitrox. There is a dedicated camera rinse tank, but the general rinse tank quickly got funky and should have been changed twice a day.

At Black Rock and Raine Island, I got up close and personal with schools of massive bumphead parrotfish, some 4-ft.+ . As they smashed chunks of reef with their rhinoceros-like protuberance and gnawed down the pieces, I pondered how many fine white beaches one poops out in a lifetime. Just one of these fellows excretes thousands of pounds of sand per year.

Nearly as impressive and far more composed are the solitary, hulking, Maori wrasse. Casting a curious green eye at the diver as they pass, they soon disappear to wherever a fish of that size

goes to vanish. I saw a few gray reef sharks, juvenile whitetips, and adolescent silvertips, and tucked under spreading table coral a sizable tawny nurse shark with perfect café au lait skin.

The terminus of our itinerary was Raine Island, a blip of sand that serves as the world's busiest nesting site for Pacific green turtles. Nearly 15,000 were once counted in a single night. It is a protected reserve accessible only to authorized researchers and park officials, but it can be dived within limits by special permit. I eagerly anticipated our first dive, so it was anxiety-producing when two comically officious Queensland rangers, who looked like they'd been sucking on lemons, boarded and secreted themselves with the Captain for nearly an hour. After they departed, we were told that a "new regulation" prevented us from diving within 3 km of the island. After the week's earlier disappointments and misunderstandings, this moved our even-tempered group leader to get on the horn to the front office and demand action or a refund.

So, we dived Ruined Reef. As a "consolation" site, it was pretty darn nice. Bluespine, spotted and white margin unicornfish paraded about like prevaricating Pinocchios, while blackbelt and blackfin hogfish bedeviled bottom prey. The usual low profilers, such as tailspot squirrelfish and ringtailed cardinalfish, demurely observed from their hiding places.

### *Consider the Season*

While the Caribbean has hurricanes, the South Pacific has cyclones, identical phenomena, with seasons six months apart. This year Queensland had three cyclones in five weeks, two labeled category five.

The Nimrod Explorer did not have any trip cancellations due to the cyclones, a representative told us, though one itinerary was cut short by two days.

Despite a "swag of rain," Mike Ball of Mike Ball Dive Expeditions said that Cairns missed the brunt of the cyclones and, "Cairns operators anticipate periods of less favorable weather in the Dec to Apr season." Historically his operation loses a week of diving every 2-3 years in this period, but this year has not lost a day due to weather.

However, 200 miles south of Cairns in Townsville, Tropical Cruise and Dive lost nearly a week of diving in March due to Cyclone Larry, says owner John Magrin.

The Australian government estimates that only one percent of the Great Barrier Reef had severe coral damage. The dive shops we contacted claim little if any damage.

Nonetheless, if you have Australia in your plans, consider the season.

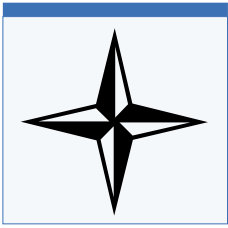
Early next morning I rose to watch the nesting turtles drag their bulk back to the sea. Through binoculars the sandy beach looked as though it had been subjected to a crazed dune buggy race with uncountable tracks running up and down. The sea was so littered with green turtles that wherever I looked with my binoculars an animal or two popped up for air. And then, to everyone's great relief, the rangers returned, hats in hand, and offered a sincere apology for their misinterpretation of the regulations.

I went scouting the turtles with gusto. They were rather skittish, so slow, nonthreatening approaches from above and behind worked best to get extended periods of viewing. Finning past these handsome creatures with carapaces of vibrant green and gray tones, I had happily achieved my goal.

Given the grueling haul from Los Angeles to Portland Roads, for a single week this trip alone isn't worth the hassle. But, with an additional week diving at another venue -- or a week enjoying the splendors of Australia, it becomes worth the investment. But I'd first research the Undersea Explorer, which also makes the run, and if I were to choose the Nimrod, I'd get a written guarantee from headquarters that the boat would be provisioned for an on-time departure or money back. Otherwise, 20 hour in transit and a \$2900 liveaboard trip is just too much.

- Doc Vikingo





**Diver's Compass:** Upon arrival, the captain told us we would be required to pay a \$60 fuel surcharge . . . The Nimrod Explorer is owned by an American company, Explorer Adventurers, which runs live-aboard in the Caribbean . . . I paid \$2,900 for my share of a double cabin, (and quad was \$2145) which included alcoholic beverages and any needed rental gear. Other seven-day trips start at \$2145 (but only \$1345 if you bunk in a quad) . . . For Nimrod details and pricing see [www.explorerverventures.com](http://www.explorerverventures.com) . . . This itinerary is only done twice a year, in our late autumn, but there

are several other excellent Coral Sea trips, where the diving surpasses the Great Barrier Reef . . . Nimrod has a first aid kit and O2, radio, automatically deploying inflatable life raft, life vests, fire suppression systems, emergency lighting and EPIRB (boat only, not divers). Nearest hyperbaric facility is in Townsville, a couple of hundred miles south of Cairns . . . For overnights in Cairns, go to [www.needitnow.com.au](http://www.needitnow.com.au) for the best deals. I stayed at the Coral Tree Inn ([www.coral-treeinn.com.au](http://www.coral-treeinn.com.au)), a good value.

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## Do You Have the Right Dive Insurance?

*needs differ and so do policies*

Several recent incidents got us thinking about dive accident insurance. The first occurred last August when a UK diver's insurance carrier declined payment of nearly \$70,000 for DCS treatment because he had exceeded his policy's depth limit. He was only able to leave Egypt after paying much of the local bill himself. Then early this year ten recompression facilities for several months refused to accept DAN's "reasonable and customary" payments, instead presenting the stricken diver with the bill.

*Some policies restrict coverage to 130 feet. While you may never expect to dive that deep, you may inadvertently.*

Dive injuries and related costs can run into staggering numbers. Last year, a 10-year-old Discover Scuba student in Grand Cayman, was bitten on the arm by a moray eel while diving the Sand Bar. The tab for medical attention, a private Leerjet back to the States and physical therapy approached \$100,000. The family, despite having a dive insurance policy, had to put the money up front.

### ***Points to Consider When Buying Coverage***

Prudent divers purchase secondary dive accident policies to cover claims their primary policies don't cover.

To assess your primary coverage, inquire about dive-related hyperbaric chamber treatment and emergency evacuation, both at home and abroad. You may indeed find that you are covered for dive accidents, including

recompression treatments and air evacuation. However, foreign facilities may want payment up front, or at least require prior authorization from your insurance company, before you are admitted to or discharged from the hospital, or even allowed to leave the country.

Good primary insurance is important, because most dive accident insurance policies are secondary and may not cover all expenses, particularly rehabilitation. Many primary health insurers don't advance or preauthorize payment. Dive insurance policies, however, often provide for assurances that are acceptable in most foreign and domestic locations. Otherwise, you'll need credit cards with high limits.

Some policies, especially the least expensive, have a depth restriction, commonly 130 feet. While you may never expect to dive this deep, if you're rescuing a buddy, chasing a dropped camera, being caught in a downcurrent, or becoming impaired by an accident, you may unexpectedly drop below 130 feet. A policy without depth limits eliminates wrangling over your "real" dive plan or "intent."

All dive accident policies require care to be first prescribed by a medical professional, documented in an itemized bill, reported to the insurer in a timely manner and other important details. You'll need to follow your policy rules to ensure coverage, not always an easy task in remote areas.

Finally, all comprehensive scuba accident policies provide trip cancellation and interruption benefits if a medical condition precludes scuba. But, you'll need travel insurance if you want broader coverage against

airline cancellation, travel agency problems, and natural disasters. And most don't insure against nondiving accidents, such as getting a foot crushed when a tank falls.

The six biggest providers are: DAN, PADI, NAUI, DiveSafe, DiveAssure and Diver's Security Insurance (DSI). All but DiveAssure are primary. While secondary insurers may provide coverage on the spot, they will turn to your primary carrier to cover medical costs up to its policy limits. So, when you consider the limits of your insurance, add together both the benefits of your primary policy and your secondary policy. It may be that a dive policy with a lower limit suits you just fine.

## **DAN**

DAN has more than 200,000 paid members to whom they offer insurance. DAN America offers three plans: Standard (\$54/yr), Master (\$64/yr) and Preferred (\$99/yr), providing dive accident medical coverage up to \$45,000, \$125,000 and \$250,000, respectively. The DAN membership fee and access to expert in-house medical information services are included.

They provide up to \$100,000 evacuation and repatriation benefits, including medical services and transportation for injuries incurred at least 50 miles from home. Evacuation and travel must be coordinated in advance through TravelAssist, which will make arrangements and provide a Letter of Assurance of payment, or advance up to \$5,000.

Ancillary TravelAssist benefits include monitoring the injured diver, repatriation of traveling companions and other services.

The Preferred Plan adds nondiving medical coverage for accidents occurring outside the home country and trip cancellation/interruption coverage when an insured's ability to dive becomes limited due to sickness or injury.

To control costs, DAN refers DCI cases requiring hyperbaric treatment to a member of its Diving Preferred Provider Network, as long as it doesn't put the diver at risk.

## **PADI**

PADI offers a range of dive-related insurance to PADI certified divers through Vicencia & Buckley Insurance Services. PADI diver protection plans include Silver (\$54/yr), Gold (\$75/yr) and Platinum (\$99/yr). The plans provide \$50,000, \$100,000 and \$275,000 of dive accident coverage, respectively.

PADI plans incorporate dive-related death and disability benefits, and provide optional non-diving accidental death and dismemberment coverage. All dive accident medical coverage is per incident, rather than the more

## ***Remember, It's Business***

The Diver's Alert Network is a nonprofit organization dedicated to diver health. Its insurance business is for profit, and benefits DAN.

Many divers prefer a policy offered by a carrier other than DAN, but don't want to give up access to the DAN hotline. The answer: buy the insurance policy that serves you and join DAN.

Under the Hippocratic oath, and by law in many places, medical facilities are duty-bound to help persons who can't pay, aren't insured, or aren't members of an association — as long as it's a bona fide emergency. They are not bound to treat conditions that are not life-threatening or do not pose grave risks to health. Most likely, they'll make a referral to another facility.

Medical hotlines for organization members don't provide hands-on medical care. While they probably are bound to help in a true emergency, hotline assistance for nonmembers would need to advise the stricken individual how to get in touch with the nearest ER or hyperbaric facility.

Many divers who aren't DAN members have called them and gotten good advice or a referral. These weren't emergencies and DAN wasn't bound to help. Nonetheless, they did. If you want to use the hotline, but want a policy from another source, your membership in DAN would be welcome.

restrictive lifetime maximum offered by some other insurers. However, how many incidents does a diver have?

Assist America rescue and evacuation benefits are provided when the diver and immediate family members are more than 100 miles from home. Evacuation, repatriation and treatment related to diving and non-diving emergencies must be arranged by the agency. Assist America guarantees hospital admission for divers outside the USA.

The Gold and Platinum plans provide medical and travel benefits for accident-related emergencies of any nature and dive trip cancellation and interruption benefits to divers and their immediate family. These may already be covered in your primary policy and trip insurance.

## **NAUI**

NAUI makes its three policies available to every diver: Standard Diver Plan (\$30/yr); Deluxe Dive and Travel Individual Plan (\$60/yr); and Deluxe Dive and Travel Family Plan (\$90/yr). After a \$250 deductible, these

policies provide medical dive accident coverage of up to \$50,000, \$300,000 and \$500,000.

The two top-tier plans also provide medical benefits for non-diving accidents up to \$10,000. After a deductible of \$250, they also cover up to \$10,000/\$5,000 in diving vacation cancellation/interruption expenses. There are no distance restriction for covered diving accidents. For non-diving accidents on a covered diving vacation one must be outside his primary residence country or more than 50 miles from his primary residence.

### ***DiveSafe***

A newer player, DiveSafe, Inc., administered by Willis Recreational Dive Programs, offers coverage to certified members of SDI, TDI, ERDI, IANTD, YMCA, NASE, WASI, ACUC, SSI and PDIC. The considerable appeal of DiveSafe is simplicity. It sells only a single policy (\$60/year) with no depth limit or exclusions for tech diving, deductibles, options or pre-approvals. The maximum lifetime limit is \$100,000 for dive accidents.

The plan has dive vacation cancellation or interruption coverage. The policy includes emergency medical evacuation and repatriation benefits up to policy limits. DiveSafe will assist the injured diver to arrange for hospital admittance/discharge deposits or other advances for medical services and can pre-authorize/guaranteed payments once an incident report is received. If you sustain a nondiving accident, injury or illness, you're on your own.

### ***DiveAssure***

The newest insurer, DiveAssure offers Gold (\$75/yr), Platinum (\$115/yr) and Diamond (starting at \$155/yr) plans. The plans are open to all certified divers and dive students. None have depth or mixed gas restrictions.

If you want to be heavily protected against medical costs, these provide \$250,000, \$500,000 and \$1,000,000 of dive accident coverage, per incident, respectively. All cover medical rescue and evacuation expenses following a diving accident.

The top two plans cover nondiving-related accidents and medical expenses incurred during a diving vacation with the same limits. That might be important for someone whose primary insurance doesn't cover accidents outside the U.S. Medicare is an example. If a hospital demands a cash deposit or settlement prior to leaving, AIGAssist will advance on-site medical expenses.

The Diamond policy provides comprehensive dive vacation cancellation and interruption benefits. Unlike the other plans, the insured can tailor this coverage, and purchase \$1500/\$3000/\$5000 of cancellation and \$2250/\$4500/\$7500 of interruption protection. And they go beyond diving problems. Uniquely, they cover sick-

ness, injury or death of a family member or traveling companion; weather or natural disaster; even being required to serve on jury duty or being delayed due to a traffic accident en route to your departure.

### ***DSI***

Diver's Security Insurance, a division of Capital Investors Life Insurance Company, was formed by divers. Policy costs vary by coverage and a five percent deductible applies to all charges. You must have a primary health care plan.

**DAN - [www.diversalertnetwork.org/insurance/plans.asp](http://www.diversalertnetwork.org/insurance/plans.asp)**

**PADI - [www.diveinsurance.com/dp/DP-index.htm](http://www.diveinsurance.com/dp/DP-index.htm)**

**DiveSafe - [www.divesafeinsurance.com](http://www.divesafeinsurance.com)**

**NAUI - <https://insurance.nauiservicesgroup.com>**

**Dive Assure - [www.diveassure.com/new/usa](http://www.diveassure.com/new/usa)**

**DSI - [www.diverssecurity.com](http://www.diverssecurity.com)**

Unlike other policies, DSI offers a menu of benefits. Class A (\$25/yr) covers chamber charges and related physician's services and supplies (certain depth and gas restrictions apply); Class B (\$10/yr) covers all other injuries sustained while diving or snorkeling; Class C (\$5/yr) only covers ambulance services, air included, to the nearest emergency facility and Class D (\$20/yr) covers other watersports. Each Class provides a scanty \$15,000 in benefits.

### ***Which is best?***

If a plan fails to cover dive injuries other than DCI, or has depth restrictions, it isn't suitable. If you don't have primary insurance, maximum medical limits of \$50,000 or less are inadequate. Beyond this, the policies serve different needs and not all are suitable for everyone.

For example, if you dive frequently you may prefer coverage per occurrence rather than a restrictive lifetime maximum basis. Look at PADI, DiveAssure and NAUI v DAN Standard and Master and DiveSafe.

If you use Nitrox or other gas mixtures, you will want a policy without gas restrictions. Other than DSI, all policies cover you.

If you want traditional travel insurance benefits, consider the upgraded DiveAssure Diamond plan. If you only dive locally, you don't need trip interruption coverage, so look to more basic plans. However, if you travel to distant venues and want generous benefits, consider DiveAssure Gold and Platinum and DSI upgraded DiveAssure Diamond.

If you have a medical condition that could result in

trip cancellation, consider DAN Preferred, one of the NAUI Deluxe Dive and Travel Individual Plans, and upgraded DiveAssure Diamond.

Finally, keep in mind that if you're injured, you're dealing with hard-nosed insurance agencies, not dive buddies. Don't have a naive expectation that a benevolent DAN or PADI or NAUI will treat you like family. They

won't. This is the insurance business. We have seen cases where injured divers wrangle with their dive insurance companies for months, eventually learning that what they thought was covered, wasn't. They hadn't read the fine print. All the more reason to have a solid primary medical insurance policy.

– Doc Vikingo

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## Surviving Three Days in 68°F Water

*what you can learn from a diver who did it*

In April, we reported that a New Zealand diver lost sight of his charter boat and drifted three days in 68°F water before he was rescued. Robert Hewitt, 38, a former NZ Navy diver, explained how he survived his 30km drift up and back through Cook Strait in a conversation with Dave Moray, editor of *Dive New Zealand Magazine*. This is a synopsis of the conversation.

“At the end of my first dive,” said Hewitt, “I indicated my position by holding my fluro-green catch bag above my head and was picked up. I didn't have a safety sausage. I have never dived with one.”

However, surfacing from his second dive, Hewitt saw his charter boat *Shock Wave* (from the Manawatu Dive Centre) in the distance. He lifted his catch bag and blew the whistle on his BCD. “I was down current and down wind in a half meter swell so it was difficult for the guys to see or hear me. The waves were getting higher so I ditched my weight belt.

***I decided to dump my regulator and cylinder, but as soon as I'd let it go something inside of me said 'get it, get it!' but it was too late.”***

“I was thinking ‘okay, I've still got the BC and the regulator and the bright orange cylinder, an excellent visual aid. It's got 70 bar (1015 psi) in it that could be useful. The inflated BC gave me support when lying on my back. I decided to keep these items.”

When a search plane appeared, “I held up my catch bag open wide in the hope they would see the fluro-green color. I also grabbed my knife and tried to reflect light into the pilot's eyes.” After the aircraft's second pass, “I rolled over on my stomach so that the orange cylinder was more visible.” However, the pilot never spotted him.

As the current swept him north, Hewitt decided not to try to swim to land, “though it was killing me not to swim. The first thing about sea survival is don't expel any more energy than necessary. To swim, I would need to ditch my BC, regulator and cylinder, which I was reluctant to do.” Instead, he lay on his back to conserve energy. “I was still getting pushed out and it took some strong thinking to convince myself that this was the correct plan.”

Hewitt recalled his Navy training, which had included spending the night at sea in a life raft. “The course was about conserving energy, keeping yourself in the huddle position (on back, lift knees up, put arms underneath the armpits and go with the current). I knew my body's heat exit points: head, crotch, feet and underneath the armpits.” Dr. Simon Mitchell, a columnist for *Dive New Zealand* points out that shipwreck survivor stories include tales of others who simply became exhausted and essentially allowed themselves to drown.

Once he accepted that he would be drifting through the night, Hewitt recalled, “I yelled to my loved ones and that gave me a mental picture of them. It gave me hope.” He prayed to God and to the Maori gods of the sea for comfort. “It seemed that everything was all right. Whatever pathway I would take, whether I would survive or die, everything would be all right. That was the defining point right there, because I was happy within myself.”

During the night Hewitt realized that he sapped energy when he moved his legs. “The only thing I could do was lie on my back, cross my feet, keep my mask on and nod off to sleep – power napping! I'd wake up because my mouth would be open and water would slam into my mouth and wake me. Those power naps got me through the night. When I saw the sun come up Monday morning it was a joyous moment because I had conquered my worst fear. I'd got through the night and was still alive.”

On the second day, he began eating the crayfish and

sea urchins he had taken during his dive. “During scattered showers I lay on my back and opened my mouth to catch what water I could. I had to take my mask off, turn it upside down and hold it up to grab whatever water I could, then tip it into my mouth. I started squirting/purging the regulator into my mouth from a distance because I knew that there was moisture in the air. I had learnt this from the Navy.”

As the day warmed up, Hewitt said, “I could feel myself dehydrating quickly. My body was starting to go into shock because of the heat and energy I’d lost. I knew I had to cool off and keep active so I took off my diving hood and my gloves and put them in the BC pocket. I then took off my BC, then my jacket. I lay on the BC trying to hide my face from the baking sun. I decided to dump my regulator and cylinder that had only about seven bar (100 psi) left. I filled the BC as much as I could and then dumped the rest. As soon as I’d let it go something inside of me said ‘get it, get it!’ but it was too late.”

When he awoke on the second day, Hewitt knew, “I had to keep my toes and fingers moving because if they stop moving the body would shut down the extremities and look after the main core. These were the little things I learned on the parade ground when standing still for long periods. It stops you from fainting!”

When immersed in water, normal physiology works against you, says Mitchell. The cold (which constricts blood vessels in the limbs) and the loss of a gravity effect

(which normally causes blood to pool in the legs) meant that most of the blood volume is ‘squeezed’ into the central circulation. One way the body regulates its water balance is by sensing a stretch of central blood vessels and the heart chambers. With blood shifting into the central circulation, these stretch reflexes become activated, telling the brain that the body has an excess of fluid in the blood vessels. Subsequently, the brain provides less stimulus to the kidneys to conserve water and they produce more urine (why one always wants to pee during a dive). So, an immersed diver dehydrates faster than someone who simply does not have access to drinking water.

Beginning to hallucinate, Hewitt took off his hood and gloves “to feel the cold water – trying to stay with reality.” The straps of his Apollo Bio-Fins dug into his Achilles tendons. “I couldn’t handle it anymore. As soon as I chucked them away I knew I needed them so I swam after them and put them back on. I didn’t put the straps on... and they came off my feet – lost.” (After he was rescued, he needed skin grafts to repair the damage.)

Feeling delirious and disorientated is consistent with a core body temperature drop to 32C – 33C (down from the normal 37C). A further loss of two or three degrees would have resulted in unconsciousness and drowning. This would have happened quickly because Mr. Hewitt removed his wetsuit top in his confused state.

Because of his Navy training, he did not make the error of drinking sea water, which contains salt at a high

## ***Does Dehydration Increase the Risk for DCS?***

Dehydration is often considered a contributor to decompression sickness (DCS), because hydration may enhance inert gas removal or increase surface tension of the blood. However, it’s not been studied.

Now, in a study with pigs published in the *Journal of Aviation, Space and Environmental Medicine* by Fahlman and Dromsky at the Naval Medical Research Center, they have shown that there is an increased risk for DCS due to dehydration.

Dehydration increased the overall risk of severe DCS and death. It increased the risk of cardiopulmonary DCS, and showed a trend toward increased central nervous system DCS. In addition, dehydrated subjects manifested cardiopulmonary DCS sooner and showed a trend toward more rapid death.

Male Yorkshire pigs were compressed on air to 110 ft of seawater for 22 hours and brought directly to the surface at a rate of 30 fsw/min. The hydrated group

was allowed access to water during a simulated saturation dive. The dehydrated group received intravenous diuretic medication and were not allowed access to water throughout the dive.

Of the 31 hydrated pigs, nine had cardiopulmonary DCS, eight central nervous system CNS, and four died. In the dehydrated group of 26, nineteen had cardiopulmonary DCS, six had CNS, DCS, and nine died.

The researchers concluded that in this study, hydration status at the time of decompression significantly influenced the incidence and time to the onset of DCS.

For the diver this means drink plenty of water before and between dives. That it increases your need to urinate is no excuse not to hydrate yourself. The early signs of dehydration include a flushed face, dizziness made worse when you’re standing, weakness, dry mouth, or cramping in the arms and legs.

Check the color of your urine to detect if you’re adequately hydrated. The darker yellow it is, the more likely you’re dehydrated.

concentration. The body actively defends how much salt it carries, so the kidneys excrete excess salt. However, kidneys are not good at concentrating salt in the urine, so to excrete seawater salt, the body adds water from its own body reserves to produce urine dilute enough for our kidneys to handle. By drinking sea water we lose more water than we gain!

Because an immersion victim becomes progressively dehydrated, he can develop catastrophically low blood pressure and cardiac arrest if pulled from the water by

his shoulders in the upright position. The sudden gravity causes blood to redistribute to the legs suddenly. Luckily, Hewitt was rescued by old buddies, professional naval colleagues, who understood this and kept him horizontal.

Hewitt says three things helped him survive: his love for his family and fiancé, his respect for the sea, and his Navy training “and the core values the Navy teaches.” His advice to others who might find themselves adrift: “Have confidence in yourself, your ability and don’t panic. Stop, take a breath and assess every situation as it comes.”

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## Divers, the Internet and the Industry: Part II

### . . . *authorized vs. unauthorized dealers*

Selling dive gear on the Internet is big business and many divers find plenty of reason to shop for gear online, as we reported last month. The changes in buying habits are creating a great upheaval in the way the dive business — in fact, any business — is conducted.

From the inception of scuba, the industry’s business model has been to drive business to local dive stores. Some large manufacturers still cling to that model. In fact, 37 percent of retailers surveyed by the trade journal *Dive Center Business* agreed with the statement that, “The Internet is a major threat to our business.

Dive shops keep our industry alive,” Tom Phillip, product manager for Aqualung, told *Undercurrent*. By providing air fills, training, local and overseas trips, and rentals — as well as sometimes sponsoring local clubs — dive shops recruit new divers and help to retain them by building local loyalty.

Cynthia Georgeson, from Johnson Outdoors, parent of Scubapro and Uwatec, told us that an authorized dealer network ensures that consumers get genuine parts, factory warranties, limited guarantees, technical expertise and support, plus personal service and advice. She adds: “Our dealers routinely check to ensure new products are functioning properly, and perform final detailing,” such as adjustments to regulators and BCDs. Regardless, at least some e-tailers (e.g., scuba.com and diversdirect.com) also preassemble gear before shipping.

Manufacturers support local shops by naming them authorized sellers for their area. They receive product, marketing support, and training, but some manufacturers require that dealers sign agreements that restrict price cuts. The strictest dealer agreements, such as those from Aqualung and Scubapro, limit how much a dealer can discount merchandise from the manufacturer’s suggested

retail price (MSRP). It’s generally no more than 10 to 15 percent. If a shop cuts more off a price it can lose its dealer agreements.

There are rumblings among retailers that this price protection is not uniformly enforced. Phil Ellis, proprietor of Dive Sports in Decatur, AL, was dropped this year as an Aqualung America dealer for discounting “covered” product for less than 90 percent of MSRP. Ellis, who aired his grievances with Aqualung on an Internet message board, claims he was forced to offer discounts to compete with other dealers. He reported that a customer came into his shop with a written quote from a nearby competitor on a Suunto Vyper computer (distributed by Aqualung) at 35 percent below MSRP.

Some dealers get around pricing protections by bundling products that allow deeper discounts into packages, such as a Sherwood regulator with an Aqualung BCD.

### ***Authorized Dealers vs. Gray Marketers***

Beyond restricting discounts, some manufacturers like Scubapro and Aqualung prohibit mail order and online sales. To get around the restrictions, some mail order and Internet sellers — including so-called “gray market” operations — purchase the controlled products from a dive shop going out of business, from an overseas reseller, from a manufacturer closeout, or perhaps from an authorized dealer who buys more than he will sell and surreptitiously ships it to an internet seller with a markup. Of the most popular e-commerce websites, only a few are gray market discounters. The most dominant is Leisure Pro.

Most scuba e-tailers, like [www.scubatoys.com](http://www.scubatoys.com), [www.diversdirect.com](http://www.diversdirect.com), [www.scuba.com](http://www.scuba.com), [www.diveriteexpress.com](http://www.diveriteexpress.com) and even [www.diversdiscount.com](http://www.diversdiscount.com), have become authorized dealers for the products they sell. They don’t

discount as deeply as the gray marketers. However, there's no sales tax on Internet purchases and many can undercut local dive shops (especially when they offer free shipping – which some do on promotional “specials”). E-tailers sometimes throw in “freebies” (gloves or a mesh bag, for instance) to sweeten the purchase experience. You may not see Aqualung or Scubapro products on these sites, but you will find most other well-known brands.

### ***Factory Warranties from Authorized Dealers***

Another benefit manufacturers reserve for authorized dealers (and their customers) is factory warranties on dive gear. Often regulators and computers must be inspected or overhauled annually by authorized seller/servicers using factory-trained tech reps, to keep the warranty in

***Some manufacturers restrict dealer price cuts to no more than 10 to 15 percent; if a shop cuts more it can lose its dealer agreements.***

force. Although many manufacturers offer free parts for the life of the warranty, there are service charges for each inspection and overhaul (\$15 to \$75, depending on the work performed). For shops with their own technicians, annual service provides income and an opportunity to sell other items.

If you buy your gear from an unauthorized dealer, the warranty won't be honored by the manufacturer or an authorized shop. So, forget the free regulator parts. Jack Kuhn of Harbor Dive Center (Sausalito, CA) says those parts typically retail for \$18-\$22. It's up to the technician whether to replace any. And often, no new parts are necessary. So the free-parts benefit may not mean much.

Scubapro warns customers: “Any Scubapro or Uwatec equipment purchased from a non-authorized source will not be covered by Scubapro Uwatec warranties. These non-authorized sources include Internet and direct marketing companies who obtain our products from questionable sources and do not undergo the rigorous training programs necessary for proper representation of our gear.” When Marcia Smullen (Big Sur, CA) tried to register a Scubapro regulator she purchased from Leisure Pro, she received a form letter saying, “We have no way of assuring the ultimate consumer that any item purchased via this source has not been tampered with or modified. Nor can we assume that our product has been properly tested and inspected.”

Pretty strong language, but spokesperson Georgeson told *Undercurrent*, “We are aware of product serial numbers having been removed or defaced so they are no longer readable, which is very risky for the diver. Scubapro

relies on product serial numbers to track product service and warranty records. Consumers and dealers rely on product serial numbers to keep track of service upgrades and alerts on products.” Georgeson adds: “We are also aware of product counterfeiting, which is when a well-respected brand name is ‘stolen’ and put on a fake, lower-quality product and sold as the genuine article.”

Frankly, however, can divers be persuaded by such arguments, especially when the same issues don't seem to bother other manufacturers? Who tampers with regulators? What guarantees are there that an authorized dealer “properly tests” or that a nonauthorized dealer doesn't. What dive stores inform their customers of recalls or e-mail problems. Many online dealers have sophisticated email programs to reach their customers. And, if Scubapro is concerned about safe products, why not allow someone who bought it from a nonauthorized dealer to register it, so Scubapro can get in touch with her if there is a recall.

As for fakes, when we asked Scubapro if they have seen any, Georgeson did cite one — a BC ripoff by a California company in 1998, a story that *Undercurrent* broke to the dive community. But we've found no proof of others. Apparently, rogue manufacturers in foreign nations aren't producing knockoff scuba products. It's a small market and New York vendors don't peddle regulators on the street.

To defend against online sellers, the manufacturing/dive store cabal argues that a diver who shops at an unauthorized dealer won't have a warranty and won't get repairs. So the largest Internet dealer, Leisure Pro, competes by offering its own warranty program. A buyer sends the product to them for annual servicing or repair. Like many dive stores, they service some products themselves and send others out to independent repair facilities. However, they're not upfront about it. Several divers have complained to us that they aren't pleased to learn after their purchase that the factory warranty is invalid and Leisure Pro supplies the warranty. It means they have to ship it back to LeisurePro and can't carry it into their local dive store.

Since so much effort is focused on warranties to keep some brands exclusively in dive shops, one has to ask just how valuable are warranties? We'll cover that in the next issue.

– Larry Clinton and Ben Davison



***Research ten years of back issues and Chapbooks at [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)***

# Flotsam & Jetsam

**Sting Ray City:** After scores of moray and stingray bites and hickies, not to mention boating accidents, the Cayman Government says it will regulate activity, though to what extent is unclear. While guidelines have been in place for years, many operations flout them. Nancy Easterbrook, a partner in Divetech, wants the new regulations to dictate the number of visitors and boats at any one time, and regulate stingray feeding. Now, they are overfed, often with unnatural food like processed cheese or someone's left over dinner. Not only is the feeding harmful, but also it has led to many serious accidents.

**Born with a BCD.** Most long time divers will tell you Scubapro invented the BCD. If so, they must credit the backswimmer, an insect born with a BCD. Backswimmers (*Anisops deanei*) carry a bubble of oxygen on their abdomens that serves as a BCD. At the start of the dive, the bubble is so big that the insect floats. As oxygen is taken up by respiration, the bubble shrinks and the bug sinks as deep as a meter. It reaches neutral buoyancy, by slowly releasing oxygen stored in its hemoglobin into the bubble. (*Nature*, vol 441, p171).

**She Blows:** While the experts don't think this year's storms will match last

year's, they expect six major hurricanes. If you're hell bent on diving the Caribbean, you're at risk of getting blown out just about every decent dive destination except on the southern fringes of the hurricane belt: Tobago (which did get touched by Ivan in 2004), Bonaire and Curacao.

**Coco View Founder Dies:** Nearly every diver who has visited Coco View has met Bill Evans. He founded it in 1982 and spent the next 24 years with his wife, Evelyn, managing that business. It was, and still is, one of the more revered dedicated dive resorts anywhere. Evans was 74.

**Murder:** In February, a civil jury found that Jamestown, RI dive shop owner David Swain had murdered his wife while diving in the British Virgin Islands. (See *Undercurrent*, April 2006). Though Swain had filed for bankruptcy, last month a judge ruled that he must pay the \$4.8 million in damages the jury awarded to the parents of Swain's wife, Shelly Tyre. Swain has never been charged criminally. He insists he's innocent and has asked for a new trial. BVI officials had listed Tyre's death as an accident, however Tortola police are now taking a "fresh look." (Tom Mooney, *Providence Journal*).

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*Undercurrent* is the consumer newsletter for sport divers that reviews scuba destinations and equipment. We accept no advertising. Subscriptions in the U.S. and Canada are \$78 a year (addresses in Mexico, add \$20; all other foreign addresses, add \$35).

*Undercurrent* (ISSN 1095-1555, USPS 001-198) is published monthly by Undercurrent, PO Box 3120, Sausalito, CA 94966-3120, with the November/December issue being the annual book-sized *Travelin' Diver's Chapbook*. Second-class postage paid at Larkspur, CA, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PO Box 3120 Sausalito, CA 94966-3120

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June 2006 Vol. 21, No. 6