

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## Grenadines Dive and Cousteau Dive Center *a winner and a no-show in the Grenadines*

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Dear Fellow Diver:

Last year, I received a flurry of press releases announcing the opening of the Jean-Michel Cousteau Dive Center at the very pricey Petit St. Vincent resort, which takes up an entire 115-acre island in the Grenadines, a cluster of islands in the southern Caribbean. Given the relatively unspoiled diving I have found there, I figured Jean-Michel's operation, though independent of the resort, would meet its standards, and might even visit unique diving spots that others didn't. One of our fine dive travel reviewers, who revels in new destinations -- and could afford the trip (yes, our writers pay their own way and don't let on to the purpose of their visit) -- jumped at the chance to visit. Here is his report.

-- Ben Davison

\* \* \* \* \*

Catching the tips of four-foot waves, our 22-foot open fiberglass boat sent a cascade of water into my face. Glenroy Adams, the lean, middle-aged but high-energy owner of Grenadines Dive, was heading east, far past the Tobago Cays. Over the roar of twin 75HP Yamaha outboards, I yelled, "Where are we going? To Africa?" Pointing to a low white bump, he shouted back, "To that rock."

It was the last dive day of my 10-day trip in May to Union Island and Petit St. Vincent (PSV), two of the more southerly islands in the St. Vincent and Grenadines chain. Sail Rock jutted



Grenadines Dive's 22-Foot Fiberglass Boat



upward like a jagged tooth whitened by guano, a lone pinnacle about 10 miles from Union Island. Seas on either side of its lee flanked us with roiling washing machines.

I descended 80 feet into cool 77-degree water, feeling the surge even at that depth. After some exploring, Glenroy handed the line to the float he towed to another diver and beckoned me to follow into a dark opening about six feet in diameter. A surge alternately pushed, then pulled me farther into the opening. Glenroy disappeared around a corner. I entered a narrow chimney, kicking hard against the

surge to rise. Like a roller coaster ride, the adrenalin rush ended too quickly. Outside, the strong currents kept us from more exploring and swept us away. We surfaced a quarter mile from our dive boat, which was still next to the island. Waving his dive flag, Glenroy shouted at the four of us to stay together. When the boat finally reached us, I was happy to climb aboard.

Planning this vacation was a crazy trip in itself. Grenadines Dive on Union Island was suggested by a fellow Undercurrent subscriber, and it was conveniently next to Kings Landing Hotel. But my emails to the hotel went unanswered, and phone calls were inconclusive. So I contacted Glenroy by email and phone, and he nicely put it all together.

My flight via Miami required overnighing in Barbados, so the next day, it was a 45-minute flight on a 19-seat Twin Otter to Union Island. An enterprising young man offered a ride for five bucks, so we crammed our suitcases into his sports car and away we went. At the hotel, Vilma, the friendly local at the front desk, walked us past the two-story hotel to a broad, covered veranda surrounding a coral stone duplex bungalow, and our 400-square-foot, air-conditioned mini-apartment, with a complete kitchen, dining area, satellite TV and a queen-sized bed. Next to the dive shop on bustling Clifton Bay harbor, we sat on our veranda, sipping sundowners, watching kiteboarders, fishing boats, ferries and water taxis hustle past.

At Grenadines Dive's modest shop the next morning, I learned that our first dive, at 9 a.m., would be to Tobago Cays, a protected marine park, well regarded by Undercurrent readers. The trip to the Cays (every dive trip, in fact) provided a mini-tour of the nearby islands. This morning, we picked up a diver from a moored yacht and a pair of Canadians from neighboring Mayreau Island. They hunted lionfish on our first dive, a mild drift along a ridge loaded with schools of Creole wrasse. On the second dive, after backrolling into the water at Mayreau Gardens, I was swept along on a high-voltage drift, flying over reefs rivaling those of Bonaire, with colorful sponges (especially azure sponges), plenty of soft coral and even more reef fish. Unlike Bonaire, the current made photography tough. I often lost my group while finning in place to take shots. Fortunately, divemaster Tim Jacobs, a congenial local built like a linebacker, didn't nag. He let me linger behind in the 50- to 75-foot visibility (water temperatures ranged from 80 to 82 degrees).



**Dive Grenadines Shop to the Right, Kings Landing Hotel to the Left**

Tim's laid-back approach matched the rest of the operation, where staff set everything up, switched tanks between dives and hauled everything at day's end. Tanks were filled to between 2800 and 3000 psi -- one day I checked mine to find only 2650 psi, so I got a replacement. Because they had only a small rinse tub and hose, I waded into the hotel pool after dives with my wet-suit on, holding my camera. The dive shop staff would hang my suit to dry.

I filled my dive days with easy drifts along similar ridges at sites like #9, Valley, Mayreau Garden and End's Reef. Most morning dives started at 70 to 80 feet. My "all-rounder" 60mm macro lens, coupled with ReefNet's swing-away 10X diopter, came in handy. I'd linger to photograph a southern stingray or a nurse shark, or pause to image a big eagle ray or a beefy black-tip shark that might swim past. Rock beauties retreated into holes, clouds of blue tangs foraged, while pairs of banded and four-eye butterflyfish went about their business. Occasionally a queen angelfish swam by, as well as green turtles or barracuda. Schools of blue-striped and French grunts hovered in the lee of coral heads, as schoolmasters and mahogany snapper patrolled just out of my camera's range. I didn't see grouper, but I saw graysbys, stoplight, princess and red-band parrotfish on almost every dive, as well as Spanish hogfish and usually glass eyes (locally known as "glare-eye"). Gliding by unspoiled reefs in a gentle current felt as if I had turned back the Caribbean reef clock 40 years.

Some dives were anchored or on fixed moorings, such as one shallow dive on the Puruni, a 100-foot-long British patrol vessel that sank in 1918. Its boiler was fairly intact, its propellers still visible. A huge school of tomtates, joined by a few striped grunts, reminded me of diving in Florida's Keys. At Horseshoe Reef in the Tobago Cays, young, sharp-eyed Keon Murray spotted a white-nosed pipefish, almost invisible on the sandy bottom. I put my 10X diopter to good use on a tiny secretary blenny as it peered from its hole in a massive stony coral.

*Gliding by unspoiled reefs in a gentle current felt as if I had turned back the Caribbean reef clock 40 years.*

## DAN's Underwater Drone for Solo Divers

Divers Alert Network often reminds its members to dive with buddies and never alone. But because many divers ignore those instructions, DAN apparently finds it worth investing in some heavy-duty technology to make solo diving safer.

DAN Europe is working on an underwater drone system that would accompany a lone diver and be able to detect if that person is in distress. The Cognitive Autonomous Diving Buddy, CADDY for short, is a collaborative effort between DAN Europe and the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme FP7, which focuses on cognitive systems and robotics research.

CADDY actually consists of two connected autonomous robots; one stays on the surface and the other moves near the diver. The latter robot will interpret a diver's behavior and is smart enough to figure out if

something is amiss. The surface robot navigates the underwater robot, and has a communications link with a shipboard command center if there is an emergency. CADDY's three main functions are to guide a diver, constantly check body language, and for commercial divers, help them work via an automated camera and flashlight. In an emergency, CADDY will also be able to steer a diver to safety.

DAN Europe is currently testing the system and measuring its maneuvering capabilities. Salih Murat Egi, a DAN Europe research fellow and coordinator of the CADDY project, says his team is also reviewing a system that generates an automatic diver status report, and testing acoustical communication technologies that relay the diver's cognitive status to the command center. He says, "When you consider that half the diving accidents involve unaccompanied scuba divers, CADDY will surely revolutionize the underwater experience."

It may be a while before it's available on your Raja Ampat liveaboard, but you can keep up with CADDY's progress at [www.caddy-fp7.eu](http://www.caddy-fp7.eu)

Reboarding the boat via the wobbling portable ladder's narrow steps was tricky. I handed gear up to Antoine Lewis, our quiet, muscular young boat driver, but the ladder did not extend over the gunwale, so either I had to heave one leg over the gunwale or perch on it, then take a long step down. Neither would be a good option for some aging divers.

***I was ponying up \$1,100 a night for accommodations -- in low season -- and no notice that the dive boat was not operating?***

While reboarding was not particularly easy, deciding where to dine each night was -- the variety of good restaurants in the little town of Clifton was an unexpected treat. Meals at the Anchorage Yacht Club and La Aquarium were decent, with a nice view of the harbor. Sophisticated-feeling Big Citi Grill had a view overlooking the main drag. Splitting our main courses meant that most of the time our total bill ran about \$50. Locally brewed

Hairoun ran about \$2.60 each. At Jennifer's, we had a table perched above street level. My spouse enjoyed a nice conch stew while I dined on a lightly encrusted whole red snapper, washing it down with a Kronenbourg 1664, a French lager. On Friday night, Joy's outdoor BBQ restaurant was packed with locals feasting on the \$6 ribs, chicken or pork dinners. I walked up to the beer window and out popped Glenroy, holding out a beer for me and asking us to join his table. The ribs and chicken slathered with barbeque sauce were delicious. Glenroy described how he started up with the help of Bill Tewes of Dive St. Vincent, the difficulties of making ends meet and how he draws customers from neighboring islands, itinerant yachts and local fishermen (whom I saw repaying Glenroy for tank fills with some fresh catch).

Clifton's narrow main street, a minute's walk from the hotel, was dotted with plenty of restaurants, residents and mingling yachties; it made for an almost carnival-like atmosphere. The ferry wharf, tiny bakeries, water taxi stand, hardware stores, markets and shops squeezed into a few blocks gave it an intimate neighborly feeling. One night, the annual Maroon festival marked the start of the planting season and the return of the rainy season. Drummers beat powerful African rhythms as dancers swayed to the beat, transporting me to a different time and place, a fun place.

Mornings around 8 a.m., I wandered over to the hotel's small open-air building for juice, fruit, eggs, bacon or sausage, toast and jam for the only meal they serve. Bernadile and Paula, two friendly local women who handled the chores, told us of happenings in town and kept a watchful eye on my spouse's explorations of the three-mile-long island. One day, she joined us divers (for no charge) to snorkel at Tobago Cays, where she saw plentiful reef fish, stingrays and a fair-sized shark (others saw turtles) right off the beach. One day, we hired a driver to show us the other town (Ashton), dramatic overlooks and a pond where locals scoop up salt for their tables.

One day, I found myself on a boat full of young men and women enrolled in a Discovery Scuba class. Diving in no current, I got plenty of photos while poking around on my own. Picking up scattered divers for our two morning dives meant we returned around 2 p.m., sometimes even later. The 22-foot runabout, with a center console, had seating for about six; extra passengers often stood in its up-turned bow. Some divers might not like such a tight boat (although it's bigger than the "six pack" dive boats in Cozumel), but I enjoyed the novelty of picking up



**A Cottage at Petit St. Vincent**

Italian, Canadian and French divers while seeing the neighboring islands.

After a week, it was time to move on to Petit St. Vincent, though it was hard to leave all the fun. When settling my bill, I told Glenroy I was heading for PSV to dive with Jean-Michel Cousteau's operation. He laughed. Guess what? I would still be diving with him. Cousteau's Intrepid 37 dive boat, L'Aventur, had been out of commission for several weeks, and all divers were being referred to Glenroy. What the . . . ? And that was the main reason for this trip! I was ponying up \$1,100 a night for PSV accommodations -- in low season -- for the privilege of seeing what it was like to dive with them, and no notice that they were not operating? So, rather than paying \$75 per tank to dive with Cousteau's team, I'd be diving with Glenroy at \$60 a tank. Plus, Glenroy gave us a free ride to the private PSV, saving me the resort's \$35-per-person transfer fee. Since I was already having a great time diving with Glenroy's operation, I couldn't see how I'd miss any "special" Cousteau experience, though my editor, Ben, would not be happy.

On PSV, we were given a quick golf-cart tour of the main facilities. Their relaxed, natural appearance was nicely set against well-manicured grounds. Our one-bedroom cottage, approximately 600 square feet, with clean lines and a light, airy layout, seemed out of the pages of Conde Nast Traveler; the interior colors mirrored the sandy beach and blue-green seas. Dark woodwork trim and furniture added a warmth to the pale, foot-thick coralstone walls. The bathroom had a pair of sinks, soft white towels, thick bathrobes -- and a contemporary "open-toilet nook." Sorry, but I'm not a fan of toilets without privacy. A 30-foot expanse of sliding glass doors from the bedroom (with a splendid king-sized bed) to the living room offered views of an offshore reef, then northeast across the Atlantic to Sail Rock. A table and chairs, couch and large coffee table in the living room provided plenty of staging area for my camera gear.

Each cottage has a flag system and message holder mounted on a short drift-wood pole that was checked every half hour or so; hoist a yellow pennant for service (food, shuttle rides and maintenance requests), hoist a red flag for "complete privacy." Paying top dollar, I used the flags liberally, but for the big bucks, I wondered why we seemed to be missing a smoke detector, why most of their bicycles had frozen chains or worn brakes, and why our beach hammock was coated with stuff that rubbed off on my clothes. I typically disregard the small stuff when I'm lodging in inexpensive places like Kings Landing, but the tariff at PSV was about five times that rate.

Cousteau's small, brightly lit shop appeared neat and tidy, with newer-looking gear hung and shelved in an orderly fashion. A staff member there told me that the inboard prop shaft seals on their dive boat had sprung a sudden leak, flooding the engine. I made the reservations with the PSV reservation office six weeks prior, with plenty of discussion about how I wanted to dive its operation, but I guess that didn't register. (I wondered why the Cousteau dive operation

## Grenadines Dive/Kings Landing

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

## Petit St. Vincent Resort

Snorkeling	★★★
Accommodations	★★★★★
Food	★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent

Caribbean Scale

didn't just lease one of PSV's boats or make arrangements for another island boat as a classy alternative, given the Cousteau reputation. But of course, Jean-Michel is not involved in the day-to-day operation, if involved at all.)

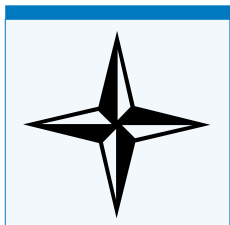
Regardless, PSV's service helped me forget my disappointment as I indulged my inner hedonist. At breakfast, coffee would be quietly placed outside our door at 6 a.m. (strong, as requested). At 7 a.m., our server would bring trays laden with fresh OJ, fruit, rich banana smoothies, thick French toast and eggs. Lunch, such as spring rolls, mixed satay with homemade peanut sauce and grilled fish, might be served in our room or at Goatie's Beach Bar & Restaurant, where we watched mariners sailing against the backdrop of Petit Martinique. At night, we relaxed in the sea breezes that kept us virtually bug-free, imbibing sundowners while watching the surf, then eating by candlelight at the Pavilion Restaurant, enjoying succulent entrees, like herb-encrusted rack of lamb with a rosemary jus.

With no room Wi-Fi or TV, combined with isolation from hustle and bustle on the rest of the planet, the island was a stress-reliever. One day, we bicycled and hiked around the island, and sat under thatched roofs in one of the many semi-secluded beachside nooks, each with its own flag and message system to summon treats off an epicurean lunch menu (seared Black Angus beef salad with artichokes, smoked salmon open sandwich, chocolate mousse with berry compote).

Before this trip, I only expected seven days of possibly sketchy lodging plus some "OK" diving, topped off by a stay at a world-class resort while diving with a storied Cousteau operation. The results were nearly the opposite. I was pleasantly surprised by Kings Landing Hotel's roomy bayside bungalow, enjoyed a cultural immersion on Union Island, and was impressed by the marine life while diving with Grenadines Dive; it was the proverbial throwback in time, to the days before all-inclusive dive resorts kept their guests in a bubble, isolated from the local culture. True, Petit St. Vincent and its lush setting was fantastic, which one would expect at that price, but for me, I was disappointed being unable to dive with Jean-Michel's dive operation. That said, other than offering a larger and far more comfortable boat, it's hard to imagine that Cousteau could have offered better diving than did Glenroy (which is very good for the Caribbean these days). And for sure, I savored evenings hanging out on Union Island, especially knowing that it cost me about \$900 less per day than PSV. But then again, life is short, and now I know firsthand how the "one percent" lives, if only for a few days.

-- S.P.

Our undercover diver's bio: S.P. says, "Learning to scuba (35 years ago), my beaver-tail neoprene wetsuit got me through my YMCA silver-level certification, even if I did freeze my bippy during 100-foot descents onto Great Lakes freighters. I've gradually earned all the main certifications, including Master Scuba Diver, and I have a SDI/TDI/ERDI solo diving certification that comes in handy when I am sometimes left on my own on dives while taking photos. In between frequent dive trips, from the Caribbean to the Asia Pacific, I am a public safety diver and try to dive once a week year-round when our local lakes are not frozen over, and when they, are I'm ice diving."



**Divers Compass:** SVG Air flights between Barbados and Union Island were about \$400 round-trip per person -- expensive for such a short flight, but unlike LIAT, ultra-reliable, and they didn't charge for excess baggage . . . Kings Landing Hotel is \$140 a night or \$980 for seven nights, including breakfasts, taxes and a weak internet connection . . . Dive Grenadines charges \$60 a tank, including BC, but it had an unexpected \$40 "check fee" versus a four percent credit card surcharge; I tipped about 10 percent . . . I spent three nights at Petit St. Vincent for \$1,100 per night (low season), including all meals, plus an automatic 10 percent for tips and another 10 percent for VAT; Presidente beers there were \$9.30 each (we brought our own rum and wine) . . . Departure tax from Union Island was about

\$19 per person . . . We did two overnights in Barbados at the clean, roomy Monterey Apartment Hotel for \$125 per night (I booked online via Expedia) . . . We took a worthwhile three-and-a-half-hour taxi tour of Barbados (\$30 per hour); some beaches on the Atlantic side were covered with thick mats of Sargassum seaweed, which stinks when it rots, but there was beautiful countryside in St. Lucy Parish, and Barbados Green monkeys roaming wild in rural areas . . . Websites: Grenadines Dive - [www.grenadinesdive.com](http://www.grenadinesdive.com); Kings Landing - [www.kingslandinghotel.com](http://www.kingslandinghotel.com); Petit St. Vincent Resort - [www.petitstvincent.com](http://www.petitstvincent.com); SVG Air - [www.svgair.com](http://www.svgair.com)

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## Cat Island, Chuuk Lagoon. . .

### *oceanic white-tips, and a nasty tub*

**Epic Diving, Cat Island, Bahamas.** If you're looking to dive with oceanic white-tip sharks, here's the place, says Brent Barnes (Edmond, OK), who went there in April. "We spent our week with Epic Diving, run by a couple who specialize in developing and providing sites for shark encounters. What an incredible trip!" Seven days run about \$3,000 for the room and diving, and sell out fast. "Greenwood Resort is a pleasant, rustic accommodation, but the service is very personalized. Most rooms are not air-conditioned, but eight are, with wall unit A/Cs for an extra \$120 for the week. There is a bar/restaurant with inside and outside seating. Dinners were multiple course, including soups, salads and seafood entrees that were delicious . . . Epic Diving usually takes 10 divers max, but there were only four during our week. Owners Vincent and Debra were first told by local fishermen of the reliability of the oceanic white-tips between April and June each year, and that sharks routinely take their catches. As oceanic white-tips are very tough for divers to have reliable encounters with, because they're deep-water denizens, they began to explore this site about five years ago. The first couple of years, they would often have to chum for two to six hours before the sharks would show, and some days they would not. However, this year, either the sharks have been present before the boat arrives or they show within minutes every day. The sharks are not dependable in the early morning, so we were picked up at 9:30 a.m. and driven 20 minutes to the tiny bay where Epic's boat was kept. The main truck intended to transport us was broken after the first day, so the four of us were packed tightly in rugged small trucks without working air-conditioning.

"We were tendered from shore to the boat in a small motor-boat with an inside protected cabin, a head and storage space. If 10 divers were on board, things would be tight. We were briefed on proper activities with the sharks and first snorkeled with them. A bait cage is dropped with a buoy and allowed to float in the current. Divers are instructed to stay within visibility range of the cage and drift with it. The boat loosely follows, and after an hour, it begins to pick divers up as they choose to end their dive. There was rarely a need to go below 50 feet because these sharks stay toward the surface; most of the action was between 10 and 30 feet. Once the sharks came (they were usually there before the boat even arrived), they would stay all day. The fewest oceanic white-tips we saw were three, and most days we had seven, but one day, nine. On the final day, we had encounters with seven white-tips and four silky sharks. One day, we had a brief sighting of a marlin, on another, an encounter with four dolphins. The diving is not difficult, though because it is done in 3,000 feet of water with no depth reference other than the bait cage line, and with multiple large sharks, this is for more experienced divers. Oceanic white-tips are intelligent and curious, and each seems to have its own personality. Debra reports they have counted over 70 different animals in the past five years. They will routinely circle in close proximity to you, often make passes and bump into your camera. Eye contact is important, as they

*"The fewest white-tips we saw were three, and most days, we had seven. One day, we had nine."*

are very aware of you seeing them. They are notorious for making close passes behind you while you are paying attention to another shark. When they circle past you and you turn your attention away, they will often do a 180-degree turn and come back at you. However, despite a week of physical encounters (literally), I never felt threatened or uneasy with them. During the week, we did nine dives and two snorkels, each lasting about 75 minutes. We were usually back at the resort by 4:30 or 5 p.m. On the last day, we did lure the sharks onto the wall and dove with them; we did no other diving on the corals or walls. There is room for cameras on the floor of the cabin, and a table if you need to work on your camera between dives. The trip is geared to photographers, so the staff is careful with cameras. Debra and Vincent are not only great hosts and really know sharks, they're just great people." ([www.epicdiving.com](http://www.epicdiving.com))

**Thorfinn, Chuuk Lagoon.** After Typhoon Maysak (it's called Mayson on the *Thorfinn* website) severely damaged the *Truk Odyssey* late March, a group of 10 divers with May reservations thought they were out of luck until they discovered room on the *Thorfinn*. Launched as a whaling ship two years before Elvis released *Heartbreak Hotel*, it has been serving divers since 1982 in the Truk Lagoon. Legendary Captain Lance Higgs, a Canadian, kept his boat out of harm's way during the destructive typhoon that also damaged the *Siren*, which was later torched to the waterline by locals. Long-time *Undercurrent* reader Ron Johnson (Katy, TX), who first dived Truk Lagoon 29 years ago, was a member of the group of "20-year veterans of liveaboard trips and stellar Aggressor/Dancer cuisine." He sent me a long and detailed report, backed by all sorts of photos from his trip, so I called both him and the trip organizer. The boat was not up to snuff and Higgs told them he had expected to go to dry dock in the Philippines soon (the last trip there was 2008), but he remains at Truk, most likely because of all the business coming from the disabled *Odyssey*, now back in business, and the dead *Siren*. Here are his remarks, which I have edited and take full responsibility for any errors.

"The good news: Captain Lance is one of the most experienced and seasoned liveaboard captains we have ever had . . . The 11,000-ton, all steel, steam-powered *Thorfinn* was rock-solid as Typhoon Dolphin graced us with gale-force winds and scattered showers. She barely rocked in four- to six-foot seas . . . The

## Diver Charged with Involuntary Homicide for Friends' Deaths

Stephen Martin, a dive instructor from Rustington, England, was diving with eight friends from the British Sub-Aqua Club in Malta last June when Larissa Hooley, his girlfriend of five years, descended from 49 feet to 114 feet without warning. "I thought she dived down because she dropped her flashlight, but she just kept getting lower and lower," Martin, 55, told the *Littlehampton Gazette*.

Martin's friend, Nigel Haines, and another diver went down to help Hooley, 48, and brought her to the surface. Martin says he pulled Hooley back to shore and tried to resuscitate her but she died on the beach. Haines, 59, was also in trouble after helping to rescue Hooley. "He had a burst lung through going to the surface not breathing," Martin said. "But because he was on the surface, he looked like he was OK."

Now Martin is fighting extradition back to Malta, where he faces involuntary homicide charges of causing the deaths of Hooley and Haines. Martin insists he is innocent of the charges and is fighting an order stating he should be extradited to Malta to face the charges, which carry a maximum 10-year prison sentence.

After hearing from witnesses and medical experts, a coroner in Brighton concluded the deaths were the result of immersion pulmonary edemas, and classified them as dive accidents. But the Maltese authorities accuse Martin of being negligent in his obligations. According to the Daily Mail, they say he "failed to keep a close watch" of Haines and Hooley, and should have halted the dive, due to "prevailing weather conditions." Martin has more than 15 years' dive experience, while Hooley had learned to dive recently in Thailand.

Martin rejects the claims. He said he was interviewed by Maltese authorities after the incident but then heard nothing from them until he was arrested on July 7 by his local police officers, acting on the European arrest warrant. The next day, a British judge approved his extradition to Malta, in line with a treaty between the two countries. Martin has lodged an appeal with the High Court and says, "This was a holiday, there was no official leader of the group. I feel like I'm being made a scapegoat by the Maltese government."



dive guides and skiff crew were superb. Toma and Eric led us to places within those wrecks that we would never venture to on our own. The guides' concern for our safety was evident. On deeper dives, they carried down a spare 80 cu-ft. tank, and there was always an 80 cu-ft tank on a hang line at 20 feet under the skiff . . . Our cabin crew was incredibly hard-working and kept our common areas clean despite what they had to work with -- there was one wet/dry vacuum with a round, three-inch hose end, but they vacuumed the entire ship three square inches at a time, nearly every day." (Note from Ben: Now, a vacuum cleaner hose without a rug-cleaning fitting should tip you off about what's to come. It reminds me of requiring prisoners to clean toilets with toothbrushes.)

"The bad news: Captain Lance was not nice to his Trukese and Filipino crew, referring to them as monkeys and showing little respect for them in front of us, making for some uncomfortable moments. Lance continually blamed someone or something else for *Thorfinn's* shortcomings. "Those monkeys don't know how to fill a tank properly . . . They didn't fix the pipes for the AC units so they could work . . . They didn't maintain the icemaker so we haven't

*"Lance continually blamed someone for Thorfinn's shortcomings, saying things like 'Those monkeys don't know how to fill a tank properly.'"*

had one since 2010." . . . He gave the longest dive briefings in the entire South Pacific, frequently straying off topic, sharing totally unrelated, although interesting, anecdotes. (His stories would be better saved for evening social times.) As a result, we ended up fairly far behind the schedule each day because the briefings were so detailed and tedious . . . Ice was supplied in short rations. There was no icemaker, so ice was made in a dozen cube trays like the old days, and kept behind a locked door in a refrigerator/freezer in a closet. Each time we needed ice, we needed a crewmember to retrieve it -- that is, assuming it had not all been consumed . . . For shallower dives, most seasoned divers dove nitrox to extend bottom time and shorten surface intervals. However, our dive guides dove on 21-percent air. When we asked them why they weren't diving Nitrox, "the Captain charges us for nitrox" was the response. They don't use it and violate no-decompression levels on nearly every dive, so divers in the boat must wait for the dive guide to finish deco stops.

"Food was what they could rustle up on short notice: Spam, hot dogs, frozen bagged mixed veggies, chicken, eggs, pancakes, puddings. We ate, but it was usually wretched. Twice, we were served undercooked chicken legs from a nasty dirty grill . . . One meal, we were served a five-inch-square, thin piece of what appeared to be browned beef in a dark brown gelatinous gravy. It was too tough to chew, and someone said, "This tastes like horse meat." Some didn't finish it, electing to remain hungry . . . No amount of paint could cover up the severely rusted hull or the trim pieces, nasty jagged and sharp pieces of metal, capable of lacerations or impalement . . . A 30-foot section of guardrail was missing on the top deck, supplemented by a 30-foot piece of clothesline . . . We were provided towels after diving, but these were rarely, if ever, washed, just simply hung out to dry by the engine room exit, leaving them with a stout smell of diesel exhaust.

"The dive skiffs were a U.S. lawyer's dream. A smooth, slippery piece of blue wood served as a step as we entered the skiff from three-plus feet above in churning seas. Imagine the back end of the skiff moving up and down in four-foot seas, moving the lower propeller blades, though not turning, up and out of the water. Timing was critical, as the lower ladder would raise and then slam shut. Finger loss and propeller blade laceration were concerns. Good body positioning skill and excellent timing were required to snag a grip on the ladder between swells to avoid being severely injured by the lower units pounding back into the water . . . The single basin-sized camera rinse tank on the main dive deck was totally inadequate for today's DSLR rigs . . . When walking along one of the hallways, I could see sharp cracks in the plastic wall, capable of cutting open a hand. Hall lighting fixtures were equally in disrepair. . . . My cabin had two single beds in a barely air-conditioned room. Other rooms on the main deck were cool. I had to run a fan constantly to barely tolerate the lack of AC. Only a sink in my room; shower and toilet facilities were down the hall . . .

Lance would arrive 15 minutes into a meal and magically turn on the air conditioner in the dining salon. It was kept off between meals; it got so hot in the galley that I asked for a few meals to be brought upstairs to me in the salon. AC was marginal all through this boat, save for two rooms and the main salon . . . The tank filling operation was so antiquated and slow that asking for a top-off would delay our departure. Lance tried to charge us \$12 daily rent for 100 cu-ft. tanks, plus an additional \$4 per Nitrox fill if we used 100 cu-ft. tanks rather than 80s. This had not been previously disclosed, so after some discussion Lance became upset and frustrated, throwing his hands up and telling the first mate to remove the charge as he disappeared to elsewhere on the ship . . . On most liveboards, last-day laundry of a few items is usually at no charge, although a tip to the cabin steward usually gets it done. Captain Lance charged me \$27.50 for a few things.

“In conclusion: I was blessed to be able to make this adventure of a lifetime. Visiting the Ghost Fleet of Truk Lagoon will always be at the pinnacle of my favorites list, but the *Thorfinn* itself is a sad experience.”

A note from Ben: Monkeys? Vacuum cleaners with no fittings? Crew pays for nitrox? It's everyone's fault but the captain's, the ancient mariner who owns the craft? I'm not talking about poor treatment of passengers or a run-down, rusting liveboard. I'm only talking about the humane treatment of employees. I'm sure no American travel agency would send clients to liveboards in California or Florida if they knew the captain called his minority crewmembers "monkeys." Why is Truk different? If I owned a travel business, I'd be ashamed to book divers with this demeaning captain on his floating Heartbreak Hotel. Of course, since Ron's group of divers were able get space on such short notice, maybe nobody is booking it, which would explain dinners of mystery meat and chicken legs, as well as laundry charges. But we know who books it, who markets it, who touts it. Will they continue?

P.S.: The trip leader told me that due to the slippery wood steps on the dive dinghy and an inadequate ladder, he once fell back into the dinghy, landing on his shoulder. Three months later, unable to lift his arm over his head, he learned he had torn a rotator cuff and will undergo surgery.

**Air Conditioning on the *Arenui*.** After reading last month's article on the *Arenui* -- our reviewer liked it, but lamented that although it calls itself a luxury boat and charges big bucks, it falls short of the claim -- *Arenui* cruise direct Debbie Arriaga wrote to so say that "during our recent annual maintenance, we have installed a new air conditioning system that now ensures that our restaurant is lovely and cool."

-- Ben Davison

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## A Fatal Attempt at a World Record

*this diver and his support team were just too cocky*

There are always going to be bold, brash divers who will want to go farther, faster, deeper than other divers. Take the world record for deepest dive. There has been a spate of attempts in the past few years to break it. The current record is 1,090 feet, set last September by Egyptian diver Ahmed Gabr in the Red Sea. The latest attempt, on August 15, ended in tragedy, when the diver, an ear, nose and throat doctor from St. Croix named Guy Garman, failed to return from depth. Garman, in his mid-50s, attempted his dive at Long Reach, a reef outside Christiansted Harbor, and was supported by ScubaTec, a tech diving school also located in St. Croix. Garman had planned his 1,200-foot record attempt dive for the past two years, but many technical dive experts believe that an oversupply of confidence by Garman and his support staff combined with a lack of experience and training dives turned into a fatal combination.

Garman, who called himself "Dr. Deep," had the dive line installed himself, a 1,300-foot line sunk into the sea floor with a 250-pound anchor. ScubaTec owner Ed Buckley told the *Virgin Island Daily News* that

Garman soon dived far deeper than his trainers, whose deepest depth was 215 feet. "His own research and planning and plotting put him well above the level of the deep instructors he got certified with." He also said Garman was a meticulous planner. "He'd tell [the support staff], 'If I have a seizure, this is what you do. If this happens, this is what you do.' He was treating the whole thing as being a scientist, not a recreational thing."

Garman's last deepest dive before the big one was in early April, when he made a solitary descent to 815 feet. For the August 15 dive, he wore three oversized "monster" tanks, four double tanks, three computers and a GoPro camera. He also had a clip-on marker on his dive line to measure his 1,200-foot descent and satisfy the Guinness people that it was a true world record. The weight of all this gear is estimated to be around 400 pounds.

Garman's goal was to descend with support staff to 200 feet, breathing off their tanks, go solo to the 1,200-foot mark, and then ascend to 350 feet, where support staff would stay with him for the 10 hours he'd need to decompress as he gradually made his way to the surface, stopping every 10 feet. In addition to Garman's seven tanks, 28 other tanks were also on hand. One of his support divers was his 20-year-old son, Kip, who, at 6 a.m., descended with him to 200 feet -- that's the last time father and son would see each other. Garman was supposed to meet his dive support team on ascent 38 minutes later at 350 feet, but he never appeared. "We kept deep divers in the water looking for anything, but they never saw the first bubble from him," said Buckley.

## **This Sunscreen May Indeed Have No Effect on Marine Life**

Slathering on sunscreen is good for skin protection, but as we've previously written, studies have shown that certain ingredients in sunscreen and other skincare products have been proven highly toxic to corals and marine life. According to NOAA's National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science, even low concentrations of BP-2, used to protect skin against damaging ultraviolet rays, can quickly kill juvenile corals.

While on a Palau liveaboard, Autumn Blum, an avid diver from Tampa, FL, hated watching sunscreen residue and suds from shampoos and conditioners wash overboard after a dive. "The chemist in me knew what the ingredients were, and it was a little troubling," she said. So she decided to create a line of natural body products that was good for both humans and the environment. But as she found out, even "organic" ingredients aren't great for marine life -- her first three natural shampoo products killed every fish in the trial tank.

She contacted professors at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, her alma mater, to do research more targeted than standard tests. They started with testing shampoo products. "We didn't want to just dump a bunch of shampoo into the tank, we wanted to be thoughtful about the concentration," said biology professor Denise Flaherty. Once that concentration was determined, the team wanted to know more than if the fish lived or died, they wanted to keep marine life free from any effect of the products, so their research focused on the changing swimming and feeding habits of the fish. Each product was tested on a tank of zebrafish and compared to a product-free tank of zebrafish. Tanks were checked daily for dead fish, as well as those swimming erratically or not eating. Blum's sunscreens passed the first phase with flying colors, even at the highest concentration tested: no dead fish in a tank with the equivalent of an ounce of sunscreen in three bathtubs full of water.

Another group of researchers tackled the coral testing. Eckerd professor Koty Sharp took student divers to collect corals for the lab. When the corals released larvae, the larvae were placed into dishes containing substrates that have been proven to be attractive to the larvae. "We don't know yet how sunscreen in reef water could influence coral larval settlement," says Koty Sharp. "However, we know that even a very small concentration of some chemicals can influence bacterial metabolism on these surfaces." To see how much sunscreen can be released from divers onto a reef, Sharp's team is doing further research.

With the results of her Eckerd lab testing, Blum thinks she has the right combination of marine- and human-friendly ingredients. Her Stream2Sea line of products (sunscreen, hair products, body lotions and lip balm) are just rolling out in health food stores and outdoor retailers, but you can buy them online at <http://stream2sea.com>

Garman's wife, Christi, was on hand for the record-breaking attempt. She was the one who announced that Garman's body and dive equipment were recovered three days later, the U.S. Coast Guard was inspecting his gear, and the medical examiner had ruled his death as drowning.

### So What Went Wrong?

Plenty, say technical dive experts. Many of them had warned Garman and ScubaTec months ago that if their dive plan went forward as described, it would most likely end in certain death for Dr. Deep. Andy Davis, owner of Scuba Tech Philippines in Subic Bay, told the *Virgin Island Daily News* that when ScubaTec went on the ScubaBoard online forum in March with its plans for Garman's dive, tech dive experts didn't think anyone would seriously attempt such a suicidal mission. "It was first believed to be a hoax, but once it was known to be a real attempt, a tragic outcome was predicted," Davis said.

*"It was first believed to be a hoax, but once it was known to be a real attempt, a tragic outcome was predicted."*

No other dive professionals have come forward with public statements, but *Undercurrent* was privy to e-mail conversations where many discussed what happened in writing. None wanted their name used - no one wanted to officially pile on to Garman and his family in the aftermath of his death - but they wanted their comments used to give informed insight that might save some other divers thinking of doing something similar.

### Way Too Cocky

Garman and his team put out a very polished video on YouTube a week before the dive (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKL1h4BIc4>). One dive veteran wrote in the email, "My immediate reaction while watching it was, 'He's a dead man.' What I was able to research on this guy and his 'team' left me with the impression of those with a zeal for celebrity, but a marked lack of professional experience and awareness of how to do this type of dive."

We've written many stories about divers who just didn't have the experience but had the chutzpah to think they could dive beyond their limits. Garman, unfortunately, is the latest, albeit an extreme example, with visions of "Guinness world record" in his head, the dive veteran continues. "The level of delusional 'hero' antics by 'weekend warriors' is sobering, and their fatality rate is equally astounding. This is what happens when well-intended amateurs think this is just another merit badge. Consider John Krakauer's book *Into Thin Air* about the amateurs who died on Mount Everest in 1996. Same mentality."

The video had red flags all over the place, the dive veterans agreed. "Wrong gear, overloaded divers who really can't swim with the equipment package, concentration only on 'up and down,' no real support divers at depth, and no contingency for deep problems. He ends the video sitting smugly and saying, 'All good!'"

Davis from Scuba Tech Philippines wrote a thorough and thoughtful essay about Garman's death and the causes for it ([http://scubatechphilippines.com/scuba\\_blog/guy-garman-world-depth-record-fatal-dive](http://scubatechphilippines.com/scuba_blog/guy-garman-world-depth-record-fatal-dive)). He says one of the biggest flaws was the cockiness of Garman's sponsor. "A quick glance down the Scuba TEC Facebook wall shows a distinct trend towards glamorizing and glorifying excessively deep dives. Virtually every wall post is boasting of a deeper, more extreme dive ... an 'elite' club that dives below 350 feet ... 'limited t-shirts' available only to those who dive below 300 feet with the organization. Glorifying deep dives, making depth a 'goal' in itself, and rewarding deep dives through varied forms of status can easily become an insidious form of gung-ho peer pressure. Rather than supporting a conservative and progressive approach to developing technical diving limits with patience, humility, caution and self-awareness, the opposite has occurred."

And look at the 'culture' of technical diving in St. Croix, which has no deep-water wrecks or cave systems. "Technical dives are conducted on deep ocean walls, with no other specific target or goal ... beyond

depth itself," Davis says. "To 'sell' technical diving, they have to sell 'depth'. Depth should never be glorified. Setting personal records and encouraging deep bounce dives for that purpose is the antithesis of a proper technical diving mentality."

### Too Few Dives

Another mouth-opener: Garman had less than a quarter of the dives of other technical divers, who don't go nearly as deep as he had intended. He had only been diving for four years, with less than 600 dives logged. "And he thinks he's ready to go to 1,200 feet, carrying seven high-volume cylinders strapped to him?" says another dive veteran. "The equipment package alone would have rendered him (at his size) unable to swim. Most guys I know who can work deep came from commercial, military, and scientific diving backgrounds, where you had 'work' to do on the dive."

Davis says Garman's 600 dives in four years works out, on average, as only 3 dives per week. He writes, "His progression from learner diver to advanced technical diver was extremely fast, leading to one-third of his dives (200 dives) being below 200 feet. Of these, a mere 35 dives were below 500 feet at the time of his record attempt. To many (most?) in the technical diving community (or recreational diving industry, for that matter), this experience would be considered woefully small; his progression was extremely fast and without pause for consolidation . . . I've been diving more than 25 years; 10 years in technical diving as a full-time professional instructor. Yet, I wouldn't currently consider myself ready to attempt breaking a world depth record."

## GoPro as a Still Camera for Divers? Still Not Good Enough

*In his first review of GoPro as underwater cameras, back in our November 2013 issue, our veteran gear tester, John Bantin, didn't recommend it as a still camera. In his latest review of GoPro's new Hero4 model, he focused on shooting footage, not stills. Ken Kurtis, who runs the dive trip company Reef Seekers in Beverly Hills, CA, gets a lot of calls from people thinking about getting a GoPro to use both as a video and still camera, so he recently tested the Hero4 as a still camera. Here's his review.*

While I was able to get some very good still pictures from my GoPro during a Palau dive trip last spring, the still-picture ability of the camera is spotty at best, and there are numerous limitations you need to learn to work around.

Based on the EXIF information, the aperture is fixed at f2.8. Although this would seem to limit depth-of-field, it doesn't, as far as I can tell. Objects from about a foot out to infinity seemed, to my eye, to be in focus. However, with such a wide lens opening, you would expect fairly fast shutter speeds to help freeze the action. Not so. I rarely got anything faster than 1/30 underwater, and frequently got speeds as slow as 1/3. (Topside, with bright sunlight -- was a different matter.) Underwater, even though the lens is short (EXIF data says it's a 3mm lens, with a 35mm equivalent of 15mm in Wide and 20mm in Medium), it's almost impossible to hold the camera that steady underwater, especially if you're suspended mid-water. That meant a lot of my shots were blurry due to camera movement, subject movement or both.

The camera will also alter ISO at the same time, and while you would think it would give you a high ISO to allow for a faster shutter speed, that doesn't seem to be the case. In fact, it left the shutter speed fairly slow and raised the ISO to account for differences in light levels. I'd rather it was the other way around. As a still camera, the Hero4 has no option for Narrow. Your only choices are Wide (12MP and 7MP) or Medium (7MP or 5MP). It's nearly impossible to shoot anything small. For shots of a yellow leaf scorpionfish, I had to have the camera maybe six inches away from him (with a +10 macro lens on), running the risk of going closer than the minimum focus distance.

Overall, it's better than nothing, but the GoPro Hero4 is a fairly difficult camera to use for stills, with many limitations that affect what subjects you can shoot and how you can shoot them. It's a lot of work and planning/thinking to get an acceptable picture -- more work than it ought to be for a camera that's basically pitched as point-and-shoot.

## Botched Procedures

Besides having little tech diving experience, Garman's dive planning was insufficient, say our commentators. "He was copying out-of-date methodology without fully understanding the real operational issues and need for multi-contingency planning. Things just don't always go right. But these guys seem to think they will. They don't understand the physics and physiology, and they are not 'working' divers who can multitask."

Garman was severely overweighted, says another dive professional. "It was ergonomically bulky, needlessly complicated for gas switching and virtually impossible to swim with. He was totally limited to ascent by his BC's inflated lift, and even that was not sufficient."

Where were the support divers? "Why no support divers deeper than 360 fsw?" one commentator wrote. "He was nearly 900 feet deeper. The nearest one would be totally incapable of assisting in a contingency. None of his supposedly qualified team have any idea what happened to him . . . because he wasn't within reach or even within visual range."

And why didn't he use a rebreather? "Using open circuit gear on such dives is ridiculous when you have rebreather technology that can allow virtually unlimited time at depth and controls the narcosis and oxygen toxicity hazards. But off they go in the wrong gear, full of absurd confidence."

"What's tragic is that helix breathing gases remove the danger . . . if used correctly," says another. "Then it simply comes down to managing your breathing gas volumes, and that should be done with a rebreather. Commercial divers have been on tethered dives from deep bells at over 2,000 feet. Why do these nitwits think they are making a mark by running around in shallower depths without the right gear?"

It was sadly botched until the very end. No one understands how Garman got loose of his decent line. Furthermore, as one diver in our group's e-mail discussion wrote, "They couldn't even recover him in the immediate aftermath because they apparently couldn't lift him with all his gear on him. The Coast Guard finally stepped in and mandated that his body be winched up."

As these living dive veterans shake their heads at Garman's tragic botched dive, so, too, would the pioneers of deep diving. "They mostly came from original roles in military, commercial and scientific diving professional backgrounds. They brought a wealth of operational experience and planning to technical diving. Today's divers should learn from their professional experience based on thousands of dives and an overwhelming attitude of precise planning and sharing practical system analysis to manage risk and maximize performance."

## Chest Pain in Older Divers

John Bantin's mother always insisted that her kids wait an hour after eating before swimming in case they got the cramps. "But as a diver, I often ate a hearty meal immediately before diving without, I believed, ill effect. Cramp, though uncomfortable, doesn't cause a diver to drown."

It's not as if he was overweight or had chronic health problems. "During my long career as a diving journalist, I was ever aware of my health and on the watch for any signs of ill effects, such as nerve damage or bone necrosis. By the time I was 66, I started to get occasional pains in the chest, but these thorough annual health checks indicated I had admirably low blood

pressure, a low heart rate at rest, and a quick recovery time after heavy exercise."

But Bantin's chest pains didn't subside. He thought they were a form of indigestion, since they were related very much to what he had recently eaten. His doctor suggested a gastroscopy [a doctor looks down your stomach with an endoscope] "in case the pain in my esophagus was caused by something more sinister. The results were telling."

*To find out what Bantin was diagnosed with – and how many other divers may have the same condition – read the rest of his commentary, "Chest Pains in Older Divers" on our blog. Go to [www.undercurrent.org/blog](http://www.undercurrent.org/blog) and Bantin's post is at the top of the page.*

Garman and DiveTec learned a hard lesson the hard way. The dive industry overall needs to view Garman's botched dive as a wake-up call for better training. The trend of de-emphasizing practical experience and giving insufficient training (remember, PADI says you're ready for its Instructor certification after just 40 dives) has to be revised. As one commentator succinctly puts it, "Collecting a bunch of meaningless specialty ratings and merit badges is no substitute for comprehensive curricula and hands-on real training."

-- Vanessa Richardson

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## Palau Siren Grounds and Floods

### *that's five disasters for eight Siren boats in six years*

Many liveaboards cruise the Asia-Pacific, but it seems to be the Siren fleet that has the most dramatic mishaps there -- and the most damaged or sunk vessels of any liveaboard fleet, period.

Take its latest victim, the *Palau Siren*. While anchored in Wonder Channel, which leads to Jellyfish Lake, on the evening of August 3, it struck a reef, due to strong waves and rough seas, and was severely flooded. Mik Jennings, marketing manager for Worldwide Dive and Sail (WWDAS), which owns and operates the Siren liveaboards, told us half the divers were on a night dive when the *Palau Siren* dragged anchor and was pushed onto a submerged reef. "As one group of divers were diving at the time, we had only one skiff to try to pull the boat away from the reef." One couldn't do the job in a tough current, and by the time the second skiff returned, the *Siren* was stuck fast against the reef. "Unfortunately this happened on a spring tide," says Jennings. "As the tide dropped overnight and the wind speed increased, the boat began to list in the shallows, so as the tide rose again, she began to take on water. By daybreak, she had become partially flooded and immobilized." All the guests were evacuated to Koror. WWDAS is working to right the boat, pump her out, and move her back to Koror for an inspection and eventual refurbishing so that she can be back in service early next year.

But questions remain. If strong winds, rough seas and rushing tides were the cause, should not the captain be prepared, knowing that their anchor can't hold the heavy boat, or anchoring far away from harm's way, or not diving the area at all?

WWDAS does a good job responding to people's questions, ours included, and it was quick to correct errors in a Palau newspaper article about the incident (no, the boat didn't sink), and reply to people's concerns on online forums, claiming "In regard to previous incidents, our insurer has sent out an investigating surveyor on each occasion and felt that they were isolated, unrelated incidents in which the crew followed correct company procedure." We can't verify that claim.

#### **A Checkered Past**

It started in 2009, when the Siren Fleet's first vessel, the *Siren*, sunk after apparently being struck from the rear by a freighter during a night crossing. One crew member died.

2012 was a bad year. Just before New Year's, five passengers aboard the *Mandarin Siren* were diving in Raja Ampat when they surfaced to find thick smoke coming from the liveaboard. Everyone was picked up by sister ship *Indo Siren*, but the *Mandarin* went down in flames. WWDAS says the fire was due to the electrical fault of the tumble dryer in the laundry room, and mandated that operating dryers would no longer be left unattended, and lint filters would be cleaned after every cruise instead of every six months.

Five months later, the *Oriental Siren* had a rough crossing from the Indonesian island of Layang Layang to the Malaysian island of Labuan. The captain decided to head back to Layang Layang on another dive trip -- one passenger was told of the crossing and that the crew did a visual hull inspection at the dock and

thought it looked fine -- but the boat took on water through a cracked hull overnight, and at dawn, the call was made to abandon ship. Everyone got on dinghies and headed into 15-foot seas, limping into Layang Layan an hour later. No one was hurt, but the *Oriental Siren* was declared a total wreck. WWDAS says the breach in the hull was below the waterline (thus invisible to visual inspections) and probably due to "a collision with a cargo container or submerged debris while travelling to Labuan."

***Five major liveaboard disasters in six years? Maybe it is pure dumb luck, but statistically, that's something other than just being unlucky.***

2015 is another bad year. In March, Typhoon Masak hit the *Truk Siren*, which was driven onto a reef, as was the *Truk Odyssey*. But while the *Odyssey* was freed and repaired, the *Siren* was hit by looters, who then burned it (WWDAS is replacing it with a new boat next spring). Now five months later, the *Palau Siren* is out of commission.

Of the Siren Fleet's original eight boats, only three are sailing now. While some of these incidents may be chalked up to just bad luck (certainly the *Truk Siren*), it seems crew errors played a role in the other incidents. In our July 2012 issue, we wrote about the *Oriental Siren* sinking and concerns with the Siren Fleet, citing previous passengers' perceived issues with the crew even then.

### **Finding Good Crew Can Be Tough**

The *Fiji Siren*, the *Indo Siren* and the *Philippine Siren* are still sailing, but some readers have expressed concern about the latter, a traditional Phinisi with sails. Henry Osborne (Boston, MA) was aboard with his dive shop's charter trip last spring. "Halfway through, we got into bad weather and the main engine broke down. The 22-year-old cruise director said the boat only had one engine, so we'd have to sail back to home-port. Our group leader asked if the captain had ever piloted by sail before on any other vessel. He said no. Then he was asked if he had steered the *Siren* by sail, and he replied he had been the captain on this boat for nine years, and they had never sailed it. Our leader told him, 'We will get off the boat right where we are,' and our group of 22 divers disembarked onto the little sand bank with all our belongings. We were picked up four hours later by a British research vessel. Normally, the trip back to port with the *Siren* would take six hours, but because of the storm, it took the boat 68 hours."

Jennings says WWDAS only hires qualified people for positions requiring professional certifications, giving everyone a Policy and Procedures manual to follow, and now gives all employees a 40-question general exam and 10-question, position-specific test that they must pass to show not only they've read the manual, but also understand it. Jennings says all Siren boats have ongoing training and practice, and are updated based on past real-life boat incidents. After the *Oriental Siren* sinking due to the hull breach, "it's company policy that all our boats have a water-pumping capacity of at least 10,000 liters per minute, with all main engines running in conjunction with NS50 pumps and all back-up engines in conjunction with NS80 pumps. We also have standalone Honda engine-driven pumps for removing water from the boat and/or for fire-fighting. We also now carry hull-breach kits that crew members are trained to use, and are also drilled with monthly. We have also reduced nighttime cruising where possible across the fleet to reduce risk."

While WWDAS seems to respond to each incident, trying to correct things and improve their practice, we can't lose sight of the very simple fact: five of the Siren Fleet's eight boats are no longer operating because of accidents, the latest happening last month. What's a diver to conclude about this fleet? Star-crossed or negligent?

### **This Is Not Just WWDAS's Problem**

Frank Wasson, owner of the *M/V Spree* that does Gulf of Mexico trips out of Key West, FL, often gives his point of view as a liveaboard owner on ScubaBoard forums. While he generally defends WWDAS, he doesn't always see eye to eye with them, saying someone from WWDAS "chewed him out" online a



couple years ago “when I mentioned that if the ‘flag country’ WWDAS officially sailed its boats under [it’s Thailand] was a real flag state that actually cared about maintaining compliance, and not some bunch of yahoos who performed the annual inspection for a box of frozen chickens and a fifth of scotch, we’d have a lot fewer sinkings, burnings and groundings. That doesn’t apply to just WWDAS boats, but to any boat headquartered in some Third World place that allows that kind of safety culture to exist. I may also have mentioned that hiring fishing boat captains who have no background in diving and little in common with their guests, including language, makes folks get uncertain instructions and guidance during an emergency, and therefore, more folks have the potential of getting hurt.”

WWDAS assured Wasson its boats are maintained to the high standards of Lloyds Register Yacht program, but Wasson says that is “a nice way of saying they can get insurance, but that’s about it when it comes to safety, and that their captains meet all flag state requirements for carrying passengers. But if the flag state requirements are inadequate, it allows an owner to shrug and say ‘Well, we meet all of the requirements.’”

Wasson told us that this is not just a problem for the Siren Fleet. “The recent spate of Aggressor and Dancer Fleet problems drives home the argument that without an owner’s presence (notice how Wayne Brown is spending a lot more time on the boats recently) or at least direct involvement in the daily operation of the boat, the crew, who have no ownership, will cut corners, and they will accept ‘normalization of deviance’ issues that the owner likely wouldn’t. When Paul Haines owned Aggressor Fleet’s boats, the captains had a small stake in their boats, which accomplished two things: The Captain wasn’t on a six-month contract hamster wheel, so he or she was more likely to stay with their boat -- and it also made them less likely to run their investment up on the rocks.” If crew were given more of a financial incentive or a better chance to climb through the employment ranks, maybe they’d better tend to the boats.

### **Excellent Customer Service -- But That’s Not Enough**

Where WWDAS really excels is customer service -- no diver we’ve talked to has complained that the main office didn’t take good care of them after an unfortunate incident, or short-changed them when reimbursing for damages and travel expenses. That’s why most repeat guests and dive travel agencies will continue to book trips. One dive travel agent (who wants to stay anonymous because he does business with WWDAS) tells us, “I have to give credit to them because they take the necessary actions, and quickly, to appease impacted guests. I’ve had a few conversations with guests on other trips where mishaps occurred (and did not make the press), and they said they intended to return because of the good value WWDAS

## **Lawbreaker Feeds Sharks Just Because He Likes It**

Randy Jordan from Jupiter, FL, hand-feeds sharks while freediving, despite a Florida law against it. “I’m just giving them a little bit of food,” he said in an interview with CBS Miami. “Not too much. I don’t want to get them too excited, too much of a frenzy.”

Jordan carries a crate of fresh fish and then dives down to hand-feed the sharks, just because he likes it. He admits he has run into a few “surprising” situations. “A tiger shark one time kinda took me by the arm and dragged me over to the food crate because I wasn’t paying her enough attention. I wasn’t feeding her quick enough,” he said. As Jordan feeds the sharks, he rubs their faces to “slow them down a bit and relax.”

It’s one thing to flaunt the law and take the risk alone, but Jordan foolishly takes paying freedivers with him, although he says he gives them some rules before they get into the water, such as, “Don’t stand up. Try not to get excited. Try not to scare sharks ... You really have to make sure that food is not on you or stuck to you and wrapped on you.”

Jordan has been fined nearly \$3,000 by Florida, which has banned the feeding of sharks or any fish while diving in state waters since 2002, and he’s on probation for a year, but he shrugs it off, saying he’ll continue to do what he loves by doing it in spots three to four miles offshore in federal water.

Good luck, Randy. Let’s see what comes first for you -- a shark bite or jail.

provides. With what seems like an unusually high number of incidents over a short timeframe, there have remarkably been no injuries and no deaths.”

But five major liveaboard disasters in six years? Maybe it is pure dumb luck, but statistically that’s something other than just being unlucky. How many other non-Siren boats have been hit as hard during that time? Besides the *Truk Odyssey* and three liveaboards that sank within three weeks in Thailand, WWDAS’s home flag country (read our article about that in the March 2014 issue), surely there have been others we don’t know about. But if even a fifth of all serious liveaboard disasters in the past five years have been Siren boats, that’s beyond statistical probability for bad luck.

No one can pinpoint the precise cause of every failure or predict the future, but for a fleet -- whether they are fishing boats, whale-watching vessels, ferries, or cruise ships -- to lose nearly two-thirds of its craft in six years raises a big red flag. It sure gives me second thoughts about paying big bucks to be on a Siren cruise. Sure, no divers’ lives have been lost, but a lot of vacations have been spoiled.

-- Ben Davison

P.S.: The damage to its Siren Fleet isn’t stopping WWDAS from adding more boats. It’s starting a whole new fleet now under its new Master liveaboard brand ([www.masterliveaboards.com](http://www.masterliveaboards.com)). The *Galapagos Master* was the first to debut in June, followed by the *Truk Master* (to replace the *Truk Siren*) in February, and the *French Polynesia Master* at a later date.

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## The Total Anguish of a Lionfish Sting

*physical, mental, financial -- and a trip to the “butt doctor”*

*There’s more than just a sting and a rash when you get pricked by a lionfish. As our correspondent learned, you may have to deal with long hospital waits, many medical providers and multiple dealings with your health insurance firm. Undercurrent subscriber Carol Cox (Mexico Beach, FL) has been dealing with this over the summer. Here is her story (which doesn’t have an official final ending until she is paid in full by DAN and her insurance company).*

I got stung by a lionfish in July, and getting care has been interesting, to say the least. I wasn’t even hunting lionfish, but my buddy asked for help getting a big one into his lionfish containment case. My hand slipped, and I got pricked in my thumb and two fingers. I took Motrin right away. I knew something was wrong when the pain resolved in my two fingers but not my thumb, so I had my husband drop me off at the ER. I kept my hand in hot water for the two hours it took to get to an emergency room, as well as the entire time in the ER, about four hours total.

I was the first lionfish patient for that ER, which isn’t good news. They kept my hand in hot water, gave me oral antibiotics and pain pills, and kept me until the painkiller had time to kick in. I showed them a blister developing on my thumb, but they didn’t seem concerned. By the time I was discharged, it covered the entire pad of my thumb. That night, when the blister covered a third of my thumb, I called Divers Alert Network (DAN), but all they said was blistering was normal.

On Sunday, at least half my thumb was covered by a large, deep blister. I contacted a triage nurse in my healthcare system by phone. She wasn’t concerned until I said I was worried about necrosis. That got her attention -- she gave me a referral to an urgent care center close to home. I discovered they weren’t open on Sundays, so I was referred to another place 45 minutes away, only to be told there that they don’t treat “poisonous lionfish bites.” So I called the referral line again, insisting on talking to the on-call doctor, who asked me what he was supposed to do about it. I told him to write me a referral to the closest ER in my area, one in a larger hospital than the place I had been the day before.

That ER doctor tried to find lionfish anti-venom (no luck, of course -- it's not available in the U.S.) and did an ultrasound to see if any spines remained (nope). He put me on an IV antibiotic for an hour, and told me I would lose all the skin on my thumb -- it might require a skin graft, but I wouldn't know until the venom had run its course. He said there wasn't much else to be done other than watch it and follow up with my main doctor.

I contacted DAN to request claim forms and started to tell the DAN person that I was not happy about the response I got when I called on Saturday, but the woman replied, "DAN is really a marine accident organization, such as in barotraumas, and not a marine life encounter organization." She recommended a specialist who wasn't in my network, although my insurance would still pay much of it. I didn't see any exclusion for lionfish stings in my DAN handbook, and the woman I talked to didn't say anything about exclusions.

I also talked with a couple of folks who got similar blisters from lionfish encounters. One had a surgeon remove the skin and he was able to begin diving again in two weeks, albeit with a tender finger. The other ended up with an infection and a black finger, which one surgeon wanted to amputate. However, he got a second opinion and the finger was saved, although he still has nerve problems after five months.

As for my thumb, the blister encapsulated at least three-fourths of it before I was convinced by the guy who almost lost his finger to pop it. Then it was tender and stiff, but the leak kept the blister from spreading more. To prevent infection, I kept it slathered in Bacitracin, wrapped in bandages, and I kept on taking oral antibiotics.

A few days later, I saw my regular doctor, and she sent me to a proctologist -- a *hemorrhoid* doctor -- the next day. My thumb must have looked really bad for it to be mistaken for a bunghole. But his bio said he was once director of a wound healing center and "he has a keen interest in the management of acute and chronic, complicated wounds." I just hoped he had some skills to go along with that keen interest.

The butt doctor was very nice and wise. He took one look at my thumb and said I needed a hand specialist. DAN pointed me to Peter McAllister in Panama City. He wasn't in my network, which meant my co-pay was much higher, but DAN assured me it would take care of my out-of-pocket expenses.

Finally, a doctor who knew what he was doing. Dr. McAllister said popping the blister was the correct procedure to let the toxins out and begin moving my thumb joint. He treated my wound like a second-degree burn, removing the dead skin and slathering it in burn creams and bandages. Two weeks later, I was back in the water, getting my revenge on lionfish -- minus a thick layer of skin on my thumb.

What I blame the lionfish most for is that it made me deal with the medical system. Without insurance, my total for two emergency room visits, three doctors and prescriptions would be \$8,000. My insurance covered many of the bills, and my out-of-pocket expenses, including prescription co-pays, are covered by DAN, so my total is about \$425. There are still \$4,000 in emergency room bills my insurance is processing; the wrong billing codes may have been used. (There is no billing code for lionfish injuries; they have to classify it as a non-specific venomous animal bite.) However, it is comforting knowing I can turn the bills over to DAN if my insurance doesn't pay.

Five weeks after the sting, my thumb is doing well, and it has a new layer of skin. I have minor numbness and sensitivity, and I experience bouts of pain that come and go. But all this is a huge improvement compared to what I went through getting it treated.



**Cox's Thumb Before Treatment**

# Flotsam & Jetsam

## The Best Lionfish Weapon May Be . . . Lionfish?

Florida Keys fisherman Gary Nichols has noticed something new: Lionfish are eating each other. "When you bring them up from the depths, lionfish spit out what's in their stomachs, and I noticed quite a few of them regurgitating other lionfish," he told *National Geographic*. He suspects lionfish eating shrimp and other crustaceans aren't satisfied by those small meals, so they're now preying on each other. DNA evidence in two studies has confirmed that lionfish in the Caribbean waters are engaging in cannibalism, and researchers are trying to determine if it's because they're depleting their existing food, like gobies and snapper. But Nova Southeastern University marine researcher Matthew Johnston doesn't think that's a cure . . . yet. "It would be interesting to see over time if there's an increase, because I think that would mean they're getting close to their carrying capacity for that area."

**Florida Cracking Down on Manatee Mania.** If you've always wanted to snorkel with Florida manatees, do it soon. Florida's Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing new regulations that will dramatically change how manatee-watching trips will run. Three Sisters Spring, the top manatee site, is getting overrun with tourists, going from 60,000 annual visitors in 2010 to almost 140,000 in 2014 -- it once hosted more than 1,200 people during just one day. New regulations would limit that number to no more than 29 people, including guides, at any one time. Also, fins will be banned to keep sand-stirring to a minimum, and a guide must be present with visitors at all time (non-locals can't qualify for that position). Fish and Wildlife is taking public comments until September 4 -- e-mail them at [crystalriver@fws.gov](mailto:crystalriver@fws.gov).

**Your Next Dive Destination?** Looks like the Great Barrier Reef has some new competition. Australian researchers just announced the discovery of a coral

reef with diverse and thriving marine life rivaling that of the GBR. Using a remote-operated vehicle and underwater camera, they spent three days exploring the never-before-seen habitats at Wilsons Promontory Marine National Park in southern Australia, separated by Tasmania from the Bass Strait. Besides boulders the size of houses, 100-foot-high sand dunes shaped by ocean currents, what makes the marine park's seafloor amazing is the "spectacular invertebrate and abundant fish communities." Wilsons Promontory is only 150 miles from Melbourne, but the area is remote and weather unpredictable. Still, the researchers want to encourage recreational diving there; government officials are analyzing their videos to determine which areas would be safest for divers.

**Drug-Trafficking Diver Caught in Canal.** Evelio Padilla Zepeda of Honduras pled guilty in San Diego's federal court last month after a failed attempt to smuggle nearly \$1.8 million worth of cocaine into the U.S. through the All-American Canal near Calexico. His case highlights the creative ways Mexican drug traffickers are using to move their goods across the border. Padilla, 28, was arrested on April 25 after Border Patrol agents watching remote cameras spotted suspicious activity near the canal. They found him in a wetsuit and rebreather, with 55 pounds of cocaine shrink-wrapped in 25 packages. Agents then found an underwater tunnel that started at a home in Mexicali. Padilla said he was paid \$700 to help transport three people across the border, and given a wetsuit. He jumped the international fence, found the waiting scuba gear and was then informed he'd be transporting drugs instead via a 1.5-mile swim up the canal to a bridge for dropoff. He said he did it because there was no other option. Padilla will be sentenced in December and faces 20 years in prison and a \$1 million fine.

**Where Are the Trained Sharks?** *Outside* magazine reports that a tourist in Yellowstone National Park recently filled out a comment sheet to complain that, "Our visit was wonderful, but we never saw any bears. Please train your bears to be where guests can see them. This was an expensive trip to not get to see bears." At least divers don't make the same request about sharks (we hope).

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