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A GRAND CONCLUSION

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



Rolling up our wetsuit sleeves

On the topic of conservation, Sir David Attenborough once said 'No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced'. The fundamental point here is that experience breeds empathy, which in turn to caring.

I've never thought of scuba diving as a sport, but rather as a genuine encounter with nature, one that fully immerses me in an aquatic realm most non-divers see as totally alien. As our passion grows, so does our emotional bond with that world, often to the point of taking a personal stake in preserving it.

With the challenges brought on by human activity – pollution, excessive harvesting of natural resources and, of course, climate change – one of the most talked-about topics in the diving community is: what do we do next?

Rather than sitting on their fins, some divers have opted out of traditional dive vacations in favor of a more net-positive form of tourism known as regenerative travel. You could call it '"Citizen Science 2.0', where the focus is on taking an active part in restoring local ecosystems through a bevy of programs, from coral reef restoration to helping maintain a giant clam nursery. Closer to home, another avenue is getting involved in local cleanup outings around popular shore diving sites, piers and wrecks.

There is so much to do, and so much to explore.

Fittingly, this issue features a Q&A with Julie Andersen and Jamie Pollack from Shark Angels, a non-profit marine conservation organization dedicated to protecting not only sharks but the broader ocean ecosystem through education.

On the international travel scene, we're back with more from the liveaboard Arenui and the still-remote and unspoiled region of Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo). We also have part two of our journey aboard the Solitude Adventurer from Maumere to Ambon, and a piece on the Grenada Dive and Conservation Festival, along with a look at the diving around Grenada and Carriacou. Rounding things out is a nice feature on a new family-focused liveaboard experience in the Red Sea with Emperor Divers.

While not quite what you could call international, part five of the Great American Dive Trek breaks away from the mainland to feature diving in the US territories, including Puerto Rico, the USVIs and Guam.

Whether it's signing up for a reef restoration program on the far side of the world or hauling discarded fishing line off your local pier, every diver can give something back to the waters that have given us so much. So, let's roll up those wetsuit sleeves and get to work.

Walt Stearns, Editor



Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia

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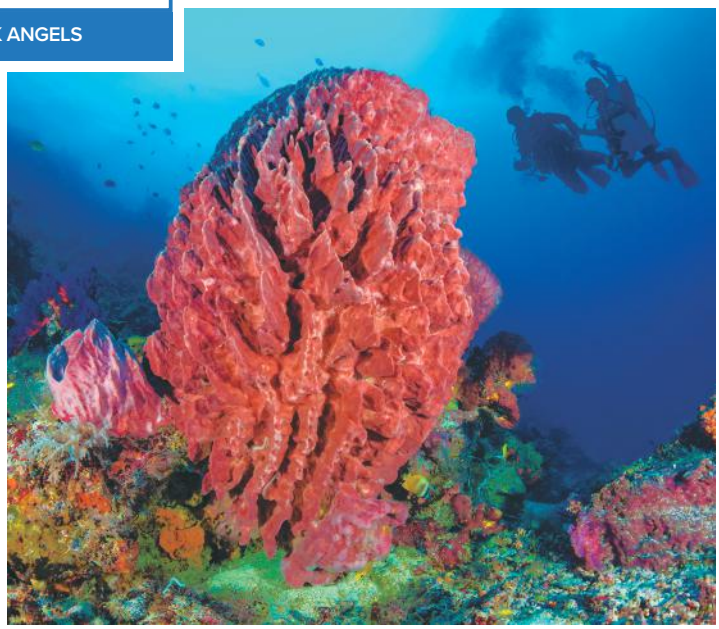


PHOTOGRAPH © **SHARK ANGELS**











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92% OF US ADULTS WANT DOLPHINS FREED, SAYS PETA

In what is described as a 'massive shift' in public sentiment towards marine-mammal captivity, 92% of US adults are now reported to believe that dolphins belong in the ocean rather than in artificial tanks.

The newly released survey was commissioned by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and involved just over 2,000 adults. Sampling precision of such independent Harris online polls is claimed to be within +/- 2.7%.


© Mark Evans

Despite public opinion now overwhelmingly appearing to favor wild environments, hundreds of dolphins remain confined across 17 marine parks, resorts and aquariums located mainly in five US states (Florida, California, Hawaii, Texas and Mississippi), says PETA. Some dolphins also remain in captivity in Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana and Maryland. Four-fifths of respondents want captive dolphins released to the wild or moved to protected seaside sanctuaries whenever possible, while 70% of Americans who have previously visited a US marine park or resort report express concerns about the animals' welfare.

Leading issues cited include small enclosure size (42%), enclosure conditions (30%), mental health (37%), handler mistreatment (28%) and physical illness or injury (19%).

Artificial breeding programs used by facilities to maintain captive populations for public entertainment are opposed by 63% of respondents, while 57% state that learning that a venue retains dolphins for performance purposes negatively affects their perception of the business. A total of 63% of respondents would view a venue more favorably if it publicly pledged to retire its animals to sanctuaries.

60 miles a day

In natural ecosystems, dolphins operate in complex social networks and can swim up to 60 miles per day, whereas entertainment facilities confine them to tanks or shallow lagoons to perform in shows and interactive swim programs.

According to PETA the US captive marine-mammal industry is increasingly an outlier, with the Miami Seaquarium finally having closed, Mexico passing a sweeping ban on marine-mammal breeding and shows, and Canada and France introducing laws to phase out cetacean captivity.

"The public has spoken, and Americans are overwhelmingly opposed to keeping dolphins in captivity – yet marine parks are covering their ears and clinging to a cruel relic of the past," said PETA president Tracy Reiman.

"These intelligent animals don't belong in concrete tanks swimming in endless circles - we are calling on every park still confining them to make the smart business move, listen to what the public wants, and release them to sanctuaries."

SCUBA DIVER ARRESTED AFTER **RAJA AMPAT TURTLE KILLING**



A Chinese diving instructor visiting Indonesia has been taken into custody by authorities investigating the illegal spearing of a protected sea turtle in a marine conservation zone in Raja Ampat.

The incident occurred in the Fam (Pam) Islands near Piaynemo in south-west Papua between 9 and 11 September. The suspect, identified by authorities as 36-year-old Chinese national Wei Shang, was intercepted on 14 September at Sultan Hasanuddin International Airport in Makassar as he attempted to leave the country.

Chinese media and industry records identify the diver as an AIDA freediving instructor-trainer, though Shang has denied being the individual shown in the video, claiming to be a victim of mistaken identity and subsequent online harassment.

According to marine conservation authorities and law enforcement, the suspect was sought after the 36-second video surfaced showing a scuba diver using a speargun to shoot a resting critically endangered hawksbill sea turtle in the back of the head. Separate footage showed what was said to be the same animal subsequently butchered, cooked, and served. The footage was initially posted on Chinese social media before being circulated globally, triggering intense outrage across international diving and conservation communities.

Members of the local Meos Mansar Indigenous Community Patrol gathered evidence – including flight records and lodging details – and co-ordinated with local officials to request an emergency exit block.

The use of spearfishing gear – especially while on scuba – is strictly prohibited within Raja Ampat's marine protected areas, and is seen as an unacceptable practice in many parts of the world. Under Indonesian conservation law, targeting protected wildlife carries heavy fines and severe prison terms.

Following his detention in Makassar, Shang was transferred back to Sorong in south-west Papua for formal questioning and criminal proceedings. Conservation management units have emphasised their zero-tolerance policy regarding illegal hunting in protected marine sanctuaries.



STARSHIP 40 – WHEN SPACE CAME TO CHRISTMAS ISLAND

Christmas Island is famous among divers for what lies beneath the surface. In August, something from much further above arrived offshore — SpaceX Starship Ship 40.

Launched from Starbase, Texas, on 24 July as part of Starship Flight 13, Ship 40 completed a controlled suborbital flight before descending into the Indian Ocean. The 170-foot spacecraft survived its splashdown intact and remained afloat, allowing SpaceX to attempt something it had not previously achieved - recovering a Starship upper stage from the ocean.

After approximately 24 days at sea, the spacecraft was towed into calmer waters off Christmas Island on 18 August. Over the following ten days, members of the SpaceX recovery and engineering team used Extra Divers' diving equipment to make repeated dives beneath Ship 40. Working underwater, they inspected the spacecraft and assisted with aspects of the recovery operation.

For the local dive team, it was a surreal experience. The arrival of Ship 40 also created an unexpected tourism opportunity. Extra Divers took visitors out on daily rocket tours, giving tourists the chance to watch the recovery operation and the work being carried out around the spacecraft. What began as an extraordinary sight offshore quickly became one of the island's newest attractions.

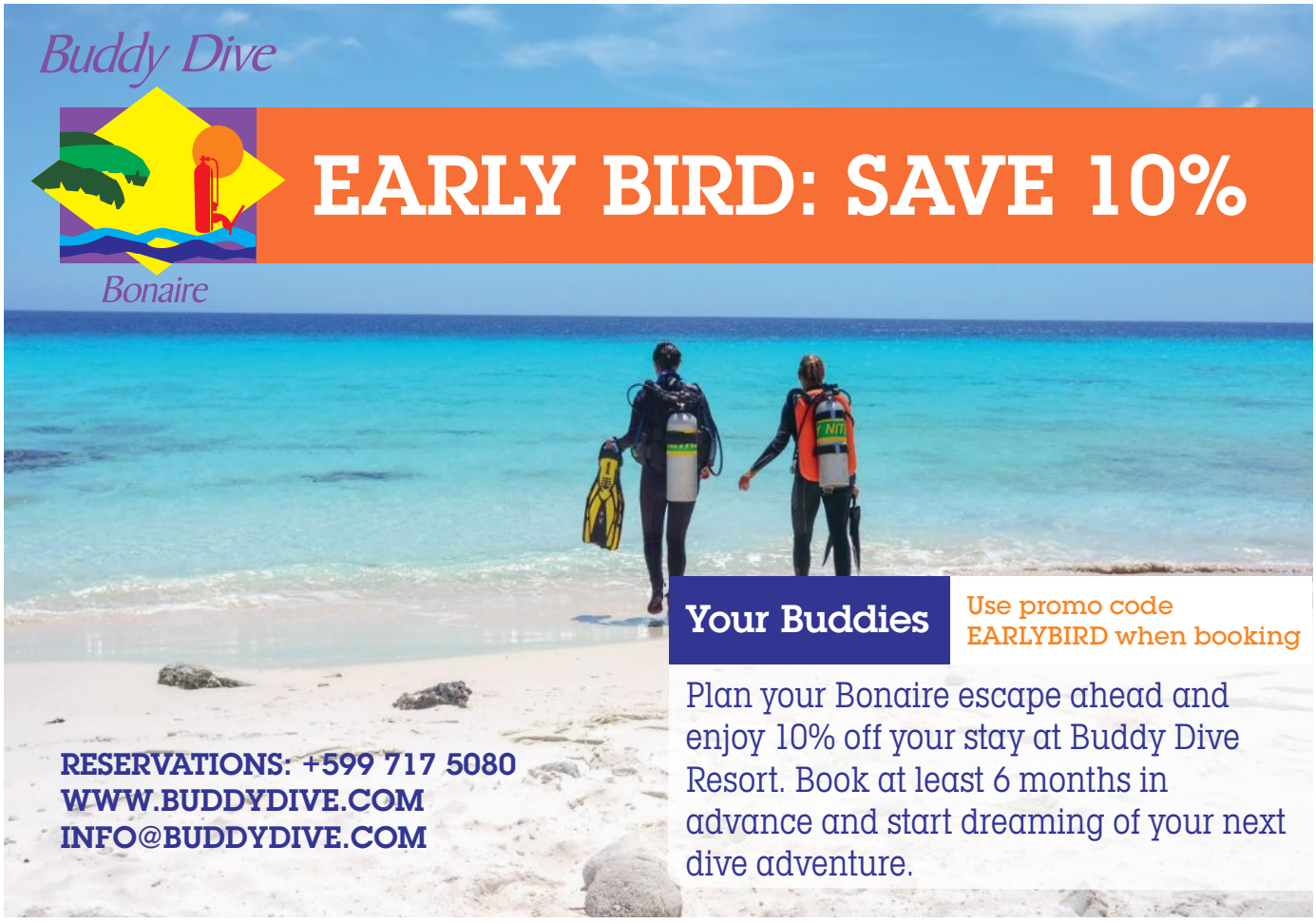
The international interest was equally extraordinary. The



dive center manager was interviewed by media around the world about the recovery and life on Christmas Island, with the resulting coverage reaching millions of viewers. For a remote island that normally sits well away from the international spotlight, SpaceX suddenly put Christmas Island on screens around the world.

The SpaceX crew also found time to experience the island from a diver's perspective. They dived the incredible Flying Fish Cove, and by the time they left, they were already talking about coming back. It's not often that a team arriving from a space programme gets to swap spacecraft inspections for a Christmas Island reef dive.

The spacecraft itself did not stay long. On 24 August, the semi-submersible heavy-lift vessel Forte arrived and, after partially submerging its deck, positioned itself beneath Ship 40 before lifting the spacecraft clear of the water. Forte departed on 28 August with Ship 40 aboard, beginning the long voyage back towards Texas for further analysis.







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LOST FISHING TRAWLER FOUND OFF RHODE ISLAND

A shipwreck located by scuba divers in just 91ft of water is believed to be a fishing vessel called Mistress, sunk off Rhode Island seven years earlier with the loss of two fishermen.

The 52-foot timber trawler with 20-foot beam had been built in Maine in 1984. The divers have now photographed the wreck, which they say lies only 49 feet from the base of one of the five turbines on Block Island Wind Farm. Also at the site are what they believe to be human remains.

The wreck was located during an underwater investigation sponsored by the US conservation campaign group Green Oceans. Sidescan sonar had detected a potential wreck site in September 2025 and checked this in July 2026, before a dive-team investigated it on 30 August.

The divers documented a number of features that appeared to correspond with photographs and records of the Mistress, including its four-bladed bronze propeller and propshaft, fuel tanks, net drum, and deck hatch.

Green Oceans says that these features were compared with material contained in the original US Coast Guard investigation into the sinking.

The organisation stresses that the wreck's identity has yet to be formally confirmed, but it has supplied sonar imagery, underwater photographs and supporting documentation to US federal and Rhode Island authorities and is calling for the site to be secured for forensic examination.



In her first year, Melanie logged ***250 dives*** on weekends and holidays.

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The first thing you notice is not the sharks. It is not the manta rays gliding over the reef like black-winged angels, nor the whale shark rising beneath a traditional fishing platform at dawn. It is not even the turtles, though there are moments in Indonesian Borneo when turtles seem to appear on every dive, resting under coral ledges, crossing sandy channels, or lifting slowly toward the surface for air. No, the first thing you notice is the feeling of space.

In an age when many famous dive destinations have become familiar, photographed from every angle and shared across every screen, the islands off East Kalimantan still feel like a secret whispered between the sea and those who have taken the time to arrive. Maratua, Sangalaki, Kakaban, Derawan, Muaras, Mataha - the names have a rhythm of their own, soft and unfamiliar, like places from an old nautical chart.

Here, on the Indonesian side of Borneo, the Celebes Sea spreads out in layers of blue. Rainforest presses against the coast. Fishing villages balance on stilts. Frigatebirds circle above remote islands, and below the surface lies one of the least-explored chapters of the Coral Triangle.

For decades, divers flew past Borneo on their way to Raja Ampat, Komodo or Sulawesi's better-known reefs. Those who paused discovered something extraordinary - an archipelago where manta rays still return to quiet cleaning stations, green turtles nest on pale beaches, whale sharks gather near fishing platforms, and oceanic atolls breathe with the pulse of the tide.

Today, Indonesian Borneo remains wonderfully uncrowded. Only a small number of liveaboards operate in this region, and among them, Arenui Boutique Liveaboard brings a rare combination - frontier diving without giving up elegance, remote reefs without giving up comfort, and exploration softened by the warmth of Indonesian hospitality.

Aboard Arenui, the transition between worlds is almost theatrical. One hour, divers are watching gray reef sharks and barracuda gather in the blue. The next, they are back on a handcrafted Phinisi-style vessel, wrapped in a towel, coffee in hand, cameras being rinsed, lunch appearing on the table as if the sea itself had paused to let everyone breathe. It is this contrast that defines the journey.

The ocean outside is wild, generous and unpredictable in the best possible way. The atmosphere onboard is intimate, polished and deeply personal. Cabins are decorated with Indonesian art and hand-carved wood. Meals are plated with the care of a boutique hotel. Arenui does not make Borneo feel less adventurous - it makes the adventure feel richer.

The Arenui's classic Best of Borneo itinerary begins and ends in Tarakan, tracing a route through the Derawan Archipelago and its legendary islands - Maratua, Sangalaki, Kakaban and Derawan. The extended Best of Borneo and West Sulawesi itinerary adds another dimension, pairing Borneo's pelagic energy with the pristine coral gardens and critter-rich slopes of Central and West Sulawesi, beginning or ending in Palu.

Together, these routes offer one of Indonesia's most-unusual combinations: manta rays, whale sharks, zebra sharks, hammerheads, gray reef sharks, barracuda schools, turtle sanctuaries, jellyfish lakes, macro night dives, untouched coral gardens and boutique liveaboard comfort - all in one flowing journey.

Maratua: Where the ocean breathes

Maratua is an atoll with a double personality. From above, it looks serene - a long ring of green and white wrapped around a lagoon of luminous turquoise. Coconut palms lean over beaches. Wooden jetties reach across shallow water. Turtles can sometimes be seen from the surface, drifting below the boat. Underwater, Maratua becomes something else entirely.



> "There are places in the world where divers arrive after the legend has already hardened around them. Borneo offers something more exciting - the sense of a legend still being written. Arenui's presence here is part of that story"



It is becoming increasingly difficult to embark on a trip down a 'road less traveled', but with the Arenui and its range of itineraries taking in Indonesian Borneo, you can soon find yourself on sites that have only been dived by a handful of people before you – truly spectacular

Photographs courtesy of the Arenui

Indonesian BORNEO

THE LAST GREAT DIVE FRONTIER



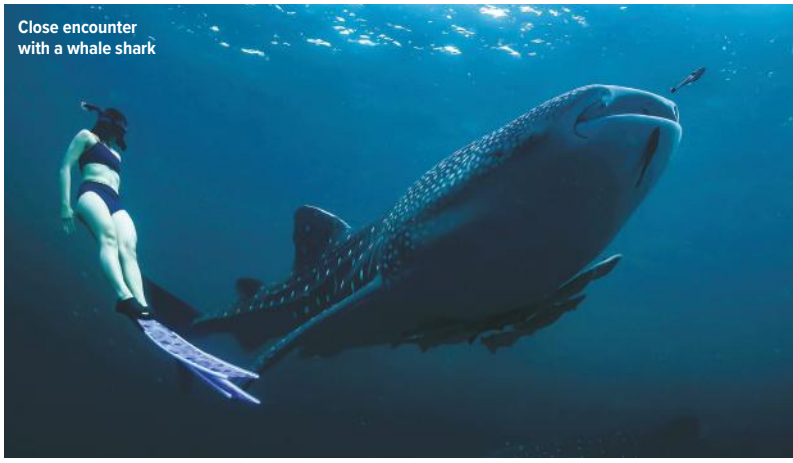
Manta ray flypast

Did you know?

Indonesia is one of the premier destinations in the world to encounter both reef and giant oceanic manta rays. The four primary regions for sightings are Nusa Penida (Bali), Komodo National Park, Raja Ampat, and Sangalaki (Kalimantan)



The reefs are pristine and teeming with life



Close encounter with a whale shark

This is where the Celebes Sea moves with purpose. Tidal flow passes through the openings of the atoll, carrying oxygen, plankton and life across reef walls and coral slopes. The ocean seems to breathe in and out through the channels, and the animals know the rhythm.

For divers, Maratua can feel like sitting inside the engine room of the sea. At the most-exciting channel sites, the show begins slowly. A few gray reef sharks appear first, their bodies balanced perfectly against the water. Then more arrive, circling in the middle distance. Schools of barracuda form and reform, their bodies catching the light like polished blades. Trevallies gather in dense, muscular groups, turning in unison with the precision of a single animal. Every few minutes, something changes. An eagle ray crosses the blue.

A turtle rises from the slope. A distant shape becomes a shark, then disappears again. And sometimes, on fortunate mornings, the unmistakable outline of a hammerhead appears beyond the reef - broad head swinging gently, body moving with ancient confidence before it fades back into the open sea. The possibility of that encounter is part of Borneo's spell. Nothing feels staged. Nothing feels automatic. The sea gives what it gives, and because of that, every sighting feels earned.

Sangalaki: The kingdom of mantas

There is something ceremonial about the way manta rays arrive. They do not burst onto the scene. They do not rush. They appear as dark shapes in the blue, growing larger with each wingbeat until the whole animal is suddenly there: immense, calm, deliberate, moving with a grace that seems impossible for something so large. Around Sangalaki, manta encounters are part of the island's identity.

The island itself is small and low, a ring of sand and palms surrounded by shallow reefs, sandy channels and coral outcrops. Beneath the surface, these features create ideal conditions for manta cleaning and feeding. Cleaner fish wait over coral heads. Plankton gathers in the water. Mantas arrive to circle, hover and return, sometimes passing over divers again and again in slow, elegant loops.

The best way to dive with mantas is to do less. Settle low. Stay quiet. Let the animal decide the distance. When divers resist the temptation to chase, the encounter becomes more powerful. A manta may bank gently toward the group, one eye visible as it passes overhead, then curve away and return minutes later from another direction. Sometimes two or three appear together, weaving around each other in what looks like choreography. It is difficult not to feel chosen.

Science may remind us that mantas are following currents, plankton and cleaning routines, but every diver who has held eye contact with one knows the encounter feels personal. Mantas seem aware. They make even experienced divers forget the camera for a moment.



Jellyfish Lake



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Huge shoal of barracuda



Aerial view of Indonesian Borneo

Kakaban: The island with a secret heart

Kakaban looks, at first, like another green island rising from the sea. Then you step ashore and discover that it has been keeping a secret. Hidden inside the island is a marine lake, isolated from the open ocean long ago and now home to millions of stingless jellyfish. To reach it, visitors walk through forest, past roots and limestone, until the water suddenly appears: still, enclosed, slightly mysterious, reflecting the sky like a dark mirror.

Then you enter. The jellyfish are everywhere. They pulse through the water in golden clouds, rising and falling with the light. Some are small and translucent, others larger and more solid, their bells moving with soft, hypnotic rhythm. Because they evolved in an environment with few natural predators, their sting has become so mild that snorkelers can drift among them safely, surrounded by one of nature's strangest experiments. Outside, Kakaban's walls return the story to the open sea. The reef drops into blue water, with slopes and ledges where barracuda gather, turtles pass, and reef fish move in dense, colourful layers. On some sites, yellowfin barracuda school in such numbers that the water seems to turn metallic.

Derawan: The night garden

Derawan is not loud about its treasures. It does not rise dramatically from the sea like an atoll wall or announce itself with famous channels. It is a gentler island, with sandy slopes, wooden jetties, turtle grass and village life close to the water. But ask a macro photographer about Derawan at night, and the answer changes. After sunset, the sand begins to move.

Beneath the jetty pilings and along the sandy slopes, the reef reveals its smaller, stranger citizens. Ghost pipefish hover like fragments of drifting weed. Warty frogfish sit motionless on sponges, so perfectly disguised that even after a guide points one out, it can take several seconds to see the animal. Decorator crabs carry pieces of the reef on their backs. Boxer crabs wave tiny anemones like dancers holding flowers. Flatworms glide over the sand in ribbons of colour. This is the other side of Borneo. After days of mantas, sharks, turtles and whale sharks, Derawan invites divers to slow down until the small world becomes enormous. A single coral head can hold enough life for half a dive. A patch of sand becomes a stage.

> "Borneo aboard the Arenui reminds divers why they fell in love with the ocean in the first place. Not because everything is guaranteed, because everything feels possible"


Barrel sponge

Every movement in the torch beam matters. Arenui's guides excel in these moments. Their role changes from leading a route to revealing a universe. A guest may swim over what looks like empty sand, only for the guide to stop, signal, and uncover a creature so strange it seems invented. Night diving here is not about distance, it is about attention.

Muaras and Mataha: The Japanese garden of the sea

South of Maratua, the itinerary can move into areas that feel even less written about, places known more by local guides, explorers and a handful of adventurous liveaboard guests than by the wider dive world.

Muaras Atoll is one of those names that seems to belong to the future of Indonesian diving. The reefs around it are spacious, healthy and still wonderfully quiet. Walls and slopes hold overhangs, soft corals, hard coral gardens and the possibility of passing pelagics. There is a sense here of being at the edge of the known map, not because the place is inaccessible, but because so few divers have spent enough time describing it. Then comes Mataha Island, south of Muaras. If Maratua is the heartbeat and Sangalaki is the ballet, Mataha is the garden.

The reef has an almost-designed quality, as though arranged by an artist with a love of symmetry and patience. Vast fields of cabbage and rose corals spread across the slope in layered formations, each coral plate overlapping the next like petals. From above, the reef resembles a Japanese botanical garden translated into coral: ordered yet organic, delicate yet immense. It is the kind of place where divers slow down instinctively.

West Sulawesi: Maputi and the coral cathedrals

The Best of Borneo and West Sulawesi itinerary adds a second world to the journey. After the atolls and islands of East Kalimantan, the reefs of Central and West Sulawesi bring a different texture - walls, islands, slopes and coral formations that often feel astonishingly pristine. This is still Indonesia, still the Coral Triangle, still the same vast marine engine of biodiversity, but the mood changes.

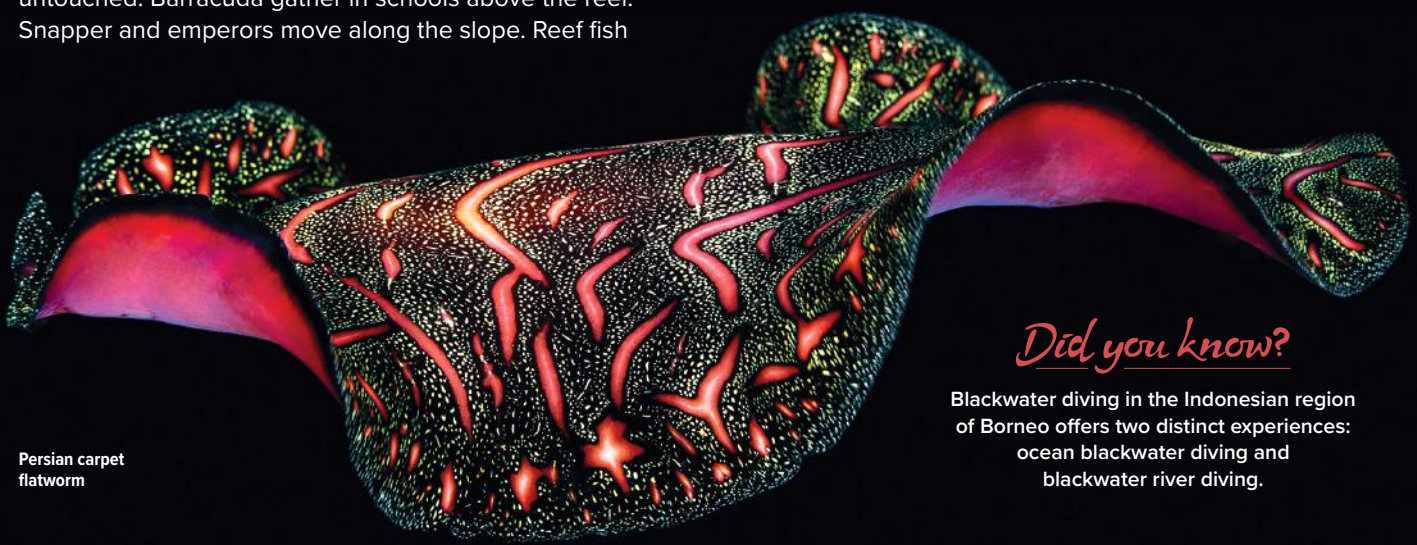
Maputi Island is one of the jewels. Underwater, Maputi feels spacious and alive. Coral formations rise in terraces and ridges, with hard corals so healthy they seem almost untouched. Barracuda gather in schools above the reef. Snapper and emperors move along the slope. Reef fish crowd the shallows, and in the right light the entire scene glows with the polished clarity of a place rarely disturbed.

At Maputi, marine life often behaves as if divers are a novelty rather than a routine. Schools hold their ground longer. Snapper drift closer. Barracuda turn and circle in the blue instead of vanishing at the first approach. For underwater photographers, this can mean generous moments: clean backgrounds, natural behavior, and wide-angle scenes that feel alive without being crowded.

The coral itself is the star. Some reefs impress with individual animals. Maputi impresses with structure. It has scale. Coral formations rise like architecture, creating the sensation of swimming through a submerged city built by centuries of patient growth.

Palu: The critter kingdom

Then Palu changes the lens again. After whale sharks, mantas, turtles, sharks and coral cathedrals, Palu invites divers into the strange and addictive world of muck diving. Here, the beauty is not always immediate. It reveals itself creature by creature, through the eyes of guides who understand that a plain slope can hide more wonders than a colorful reef. Black sand and silty bottoms may not look dramatic from the surface. Underwater, they are hunting grounds for photographers and naturalists. This is where the weird animals live - frogfish disguised as sponges, ghost pipefish floating beside crinoids, seahorses holding to tiny structures, cuttlefish shifting color in pulses, pipefish stretched like living threads across the bottom. Guests familiar with Lembeh Strait often understand Palu ▸


Persian carpet flatworm

Did you know?

Blackwater diving in the Indonesian region of Borneo offers two distinct experiences: ocean blackwater diving and blackwater river diving.

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quickly. One Arenui guest said it best: “Palu feels like Lembeh, but private”. That phrase captures the appeal. The sites can offer the same sense of oddity and discovery that has made North Sulawesi famous among macro photographers, but with the excitement of somewhere still emerging into the wider dive conversation.

Why Borneo now

Some destinations are famous because they have been promoted for decades. Others are famous because they deserve to be. Indonesian Borneo belongs to the second category.

The Derawan Archipelago and its surrounding waters have all the ingredients of a world-class dive destination - biodiversity, big animals, turtle nesting beaches, manta sites, whale shark encounters, macro habitats, atolls, walls, lagoons, marine lakes and coral gardens. What they have not had, until recently, is the same level of global attention as Indonesia’s more-established regions. That is changing, but slowly enough that the experience still feels special. There are places in the world where divers arrive after the legend has already hardened around them. Borneo offers something more exciting - the sense of a legend still being written.

Arenui’s presence here is part of that story. By bringing a boutique liveaboard experience to these waters, it opens the region to divers who want exploration without compromise. Guests can visit rarely dived reefs, encounter remarkable animals, and still return each day to comfort, cuisine and service that elevate the journey. The result is not simply a dive trip, it is a travel experience with texture. Borneo aboard the Arenui reminds divers why they fell in love with the ocean in the first place. Not because everything is guaranteed, because everything feels possible. ■



The sumptuous interior of the cabins



The inviting top deck of the Arenui

> “This is where the weird animals live - frogfish disguised as sponges, ghost pipefish floating beside crinoids, seahorses holding to tiny structures, cuttlefish shifting color in pulses, pipefish stretched like living threads across the bottom”

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SCUBA DIVER Q&A

JULIE ANDERSEN AND JAMIE POLLACK



We chat to the key people behind Shark Angels, the conservation organisation that seeks to protect sharks and our oceans by transforming fear into fascination, and passion into action

Photographs by Julie Anderson and Jamie Pollack

Q: As we always do with these Questions and Answer sessions, how did you first get into scuba diving?

A: Julie Andersen: I've always been drawn to the water. As a kid, you couldn't get me out of a lake, river or stream. I was forever catching guppies in jars, looking for frogs or swimming with my favorite mermen, my dad and grandpa.

When my dad learned to dive, I remember snorkeling above him in Bonaire wishing I could be closer to the action. As soon as I was old enough, I got certified, with my dad as my assistant instructor. Before long, our whole family was diving. We explored reefs in Belize, Myanmar, Hawaii, Tahiti and beyond, and those trips are still some of my favorite memories. At the time, I thought I'd found a hobby. Looking back, I'd found home.

A: Jamie Pollack: I was 12 when I looked down while snorkeling in Florida and saw scuba divers cruising along below me. I remember thinking, 'Whatever they're doing looks a whole lot more fun'.

Years later I was working at the New York National Boat Show when I walked past a booth advertising scuba lessons. I called my boyfriend, who's now my husband, and asked, "Want to learn to dive?" He said yes.

Thirty years later, we're still diving together. We've explored the world, made lifelong friends and, somewhere along the way, I built Shark Angels with Julie. I still get excited every time I giant stride off a boat. Even more so when I see a fin on the surface.

Q: Julie, you were running a successful marketing agency in Chicago working with clients such as Porsche and Citibank and then suddenly sold everything and moved to South Africa to throw yourself headlong into shark conservation. What was the catalyst for such a seismic shift?

A: Julie Andersen: People often think I changed careers. I don't think I ever did. I just took on the toughest client in the world. Like a lot of people, I grew up afraid of sharks. Then I met one.

Everything I'd been taught disappeared in a single encounter. I realized sharks didn't have an image problem because of who they were. They had a public relations problem because of what we'd been told they were. At the time I was helping companies build brands. One day I caught myself wondering, 'If marketing could impact buying behavior, couldn't it also convince them to care about an animal they absolutely loathe but desperately need?'

Jamie agreed - as a marketer, a passionate diver and, of course, a shark lover. So we partnered up. And I sold my business, my house and just about everything I owned and moved to South Africa.



Jamie Pollack and Julie Andersen, Founders of Shark Angels



Julie Andersen with her Dad, Bruce, on her first check out dive

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Julie with tiger sharks at Tiger Beach

> Shark Angels actually started in New York before I moved to South Africa. It grew out of one simple realization: sharks didn't just have a conservation problem. They had a perception problem



Jamie going cage diving in Guadalupe Mexico to see her first great white shark

Q: Shark Angels came into being after your move to South Africa, and a primary inspiration for its creation was the horrific shark-finning trade. You have been undercover in more than 20 countries to expose this global industry. Tell us more about your experiences.

A: Julie Andersen: One small correction. Shark Angels actually started in New York before I moved to South Africa. It grew out of one simple realization - sharks didn't just have a conservation problem. They had a perception problem. Going undercover only reinforced that.

Those were some of the hardest years of my life. I sorted protected whale shark and great white shark fins in markets, walked through football field-sized warehouses filled with bags of fins, watched thousands of sharks being landed in a single port in a single day, and saw what was happening to our oceans in real time. In many places, baby sharks were almost all that remained. We were literally fishing down the food chain. I remember the smell of those fishing markets and fin warehouses to this day - and I still choke back tears.

As difficult as that was, what struck me most wasn't what I was seeing. It was how few people knew it was happening.

My job became documenting it and using those images to change public opinion, build awareness and help drive



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Julie gathering evidence in the field



Julie in Toronto, the first North American city to go Fin Free thanks to the undercover footage she and Rob Stewart gathered

legislation. That work became an important part of the Fin Free movement and helped pass shark fin bans affecting more than 160 million people.

I’ve learned there are a lot of ways to save sharks. Science matters. Policy matters. Education matters.

But if you really want people to care enough to act, never underestimate the power of community, storytelling, grass roots action, and most importantly, personal experience.

Q: Jamie, you are Executive Director of Shark Angels. How did you come to be involved with the organization?

A: Jamie Pollack: Julie and I met through a New York City dive club after watching Sharkwater. Like a lot of people, we walked out thinking, ‘Someone needs to do something’.

Instead of waiting for someone else, which is zero our style, we organized Rob Stewart’s first US screening in Times Square. We brought Rob to New York for a Q&A, introduced the film to the dive community and, like divers tend to do, celebrated afterwards. Rob became a close friend and played a huge role in Shark Angels during those early years. And we played a huge role in his subsequent promotion and films as well as his conservation efforts.

Somewhere along the way Julie and I realized we made a pretty good team. We have completely different strengths, but they fit together remarkably well. And we are united in what can only be described as contagious passion.

As Rob used to say, you take your skills and your passion and combine them into your superpower. We’ve been doing that ever since.

Q: Why is shark conservation so important for our water planet, and what are some of the main campaigns and objectives of Shark Angels to aid these endangered species?

A: Julie Andersen: People ask me all the time, ‘Why sharks?’ It’s a fair question. There are a lot of species that need our help. Part of the answer is scientific. Sharks have spent more than 450 million years helping shape healthy oceans. Remove an apex predator and you don’t just lose a species. You begin changing the entire ecosystem beneath it.

But if I’m honest, that’s not why I chose them. Sea turtles, dolphins and whales already had millions of people speaking up for them. Sharks didn’t. They’d become the villains of the ocean, and I realized we weren’t going to save an animal people had been taught to fear. I was already an expert in changing perceptions, leveraging media, and driving behaviors. That’s exactly what sharks needed.

I’ve tried just about every form of conservation over the years, and I’ve learned they all have value. But if people don’t care, aren’t emotionally invested, none of them work for very long.

A: Jamie Pollack: Julie spends a lot of time thinking about the big picture. I’m usually asking, ‘Okay... what are we going to do about it? Not tomorrow. Right now!’

That’s what I love about Shark Angels. We don’t believe there’s one right way to help. Some people help us with outreach and education. Some join - or even develop - local campaigns. Some come on expeditions. Others simply introduce one more person to the truth about sharks.

One of my favorite programmes is our mentorship initiative. We give students real conservation experience they often can’t get in a classroom, and watching them discover they really can make a difference never gets old. They take that forward to make a real difference, which is exactly what we did all those years ago.

I think that’s what people are really looking for. They want to find their community, roll up their sleeves and know they’ve brought about change with their own two hands. If Shark Angels gives them that opportunity, and hooks them with the rush, we’ve done our job.



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Julie protesting shark nets in Shark Angel's 'Remove the Nets' campaign in South Africa

“ I've watched hundreds of people meet sharks for the first time, and the reaction is almost always the same. They climb back onto the boat smiling because whatever they expected, it wasn't that ”

Q: Divers have the chance to join Shark Angels on exciting trips around the globe, with adventures to shark hotspots Fiji, Palau and the Philippines scheduled for 2027. Tell us more about these trips, and what people can expect when they join you.

A: Julie Andersen: People think our trips are about sharks. They're really about perspective. I've watched hundreds of people meet sharks for the first time, and the reaction is almost always the same. They climb back onto the boat smiling because whatever they expected, it wasn't that. That's my favorite part.

Of course, you'll dive spectacular places and see incredible wildlife, but years later people rarely tell me how many sharks they saw. They tell me how they felt sharing the water with them. That changes people. And that fuels my conservationists' soul!

A: Jamie Pollack: Julie gets all philosophical about it. I'm just excited that everyone is finally underwater together.

Our trips are an absolute blast. People come by themselves all the time and leave with friends from all over the world. We dive, laugh, tell stories over dinner, somebody usually starts dancing, and shark trivia gets way more competitive than it should.

We also spend time supporting the local communities we visit because conservation doesn't stop when the dive ends. We engage in citizen science. We leave places better than we found them. I always tell people to come for the sharks. They usually come back because of the people.

Q: What is your most memorable diving experience?

A: Julie Andersen: Without question, it was my first close encounter with a scalloped hammerhead in Hawaii.

I was hanging on my safety stop when I had that unmistakable feeling I wasn't alone. I looked to my left and there she was, no more than six feet away.

I had grown up believing sharks were something to fear. Looking into her eyes, every one of those stories disappeared. She didn't see a threat. I didn't see a monster. She changed the direction of my life in a simple encounter and then with a flick of her tail, she disappeared.

I went to work for the sharks on that day, and met Jamie not long after.

A: Jamie Pollack: Mine lasted about three minutes.

I was in the Maldives watching nurse sharks mate, and it was complete chaos. Sand flying everywhere, sharks rolling over each other... I didn't know where to look first.

You spend enough time underwater and every once in a while, nature lets you witness something most people will never see. I just happened to be in exactly the right place at exactly the right time.



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Q: On the flipside, what is your worst diving memory?

A: Julie Andersen: Easy. One of my first dives.

My dad took me to Lake Michigan to dive a wreck. The thermocline hit around 26ft, the visibility was terrible and the water felt about 41 degrees F. I was in a farmer jane and jacket (14mm on parts of my body!). I actually hit the wreck with my head before I ever saw it.

Then some diver in a drysuit floated by looking perfectly comfortable while I was questioning all my life choices.

I surfaced, got seasick waiting for everyone else to finish, and announced I was never diving again. No one listened. Not even me. Thank goodness for second chances.

A: Jamie Pollack: Mine was around 90ft. I got caught in a down current at Cocos Island, and our Divemaster had to come rescue me. Not exactly my proudest moment.

The ocean has a funny way of reminding you who’s in charge. Stay calm, trust your training and don’t let your ego make decisions for you.

Julie (Again): Wait... I change my answer. The panic attack I had at 90ft in Cocos after being caught in a down current.

Apparently my brain edits out the bad dives. But both experiences taught me the same thing. Panic never helps. Slow down, breathe and think. That’s been surprisingly useful advice above water too.

And, let’s not give Cocos a bad rap. I’ve returned three times since. It’s worth every moment that’s questionable. Plus bad situations turn you into a better diver - and dive buddy. (This is when Jamie complains about how bad of one I am when I get distracted by sharks).



Julie freediving with a bull shark on a Shark Angels trip to Bimini



Jamie with a classroom she spoke at

Julie taking it to the field in Fiji



Q: What does the future hold for Shark Angels?

A: Julie Andersen: I’d love to put ourselves out of business. Seriously. The day people understand sharks, or at the very least, the critical role they play in the oceans, governments truly protect them because it’s the obvious thing to do, and kids grow up seeing them as remarkable wildlife instead of movie monsters, Shark Angels won’t be needed anymore. That would be our greatest success.

A: Jamie Pollack: I want as many people as possible to experience what we’ve been lucky enough to experience. More students finding their place in conservation. More divers meeting their first shark. More people discovering they can make a difference.

And yes... more trips. I’ve never watched someone climb back onto the boat after their first shark dive without the biggest grin on their face. Watching that never gets old. ■



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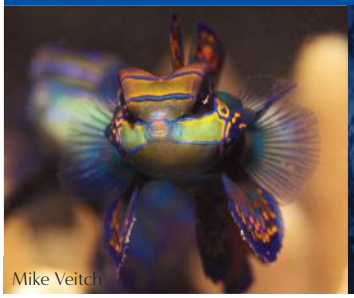
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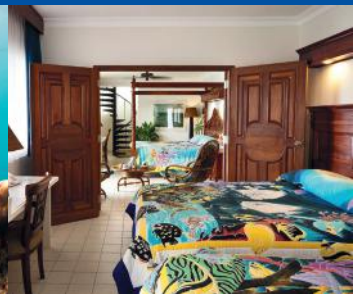
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> Sailing from Port Ghalib, it offers three dives a day rather than four, with later starts, shorter sailings and mainly coastal sites, so mornings don't begin in the dark and days aren't dominated by long crossings



Can a liveaboard really work for the whole family? Emperor Divers believes so, and in 2027 is launching a family-friendly liveaboard trip aboard the Emperor Asmaa exploring the southern Egyptian Red Sea

Photographs courtesy of Emperor Divers and Mark Evans

A Family AFFAIR



For those of us prone to a little nostalgia, there was a time when a family holiday meant getting away from it all. Leaving behind the routines of everyday life, spending time together and returning home with memories, and funny stories, that would be recalled at get-togethers for years to come.

These days, getting away from it all can be rather more complicated. Even on holiday, phones are rarely far from reach. Teenagers have their own digital worlds, parents are tempted to check work emails, and finding an activity that genuinely interests everyone can feel like an achievement in itself. But imagine spending a week where the biggest decisions revolve around which reef to explore, whether that was really a turtle you spotted beneath the boat, and who can identify the most-colorful fish.

It is an appealing prospect, and perhaps more achievable than many families realise. Liveaboard holidays have traditionally been associated with experienced divers, full-on schedules and remote offshore reefs, but there is another way to enjoy them, one that puts the family, rather than the number of dives, at the center of the experience.

Why it can work

For parents who dive, arranging a family holiday can be a familiar puzzle. A week at a beach resort might keep everyone happy, but it can mean parents disappearing for much of the day while children stay ashore. Or the adults sacrifice their underwater ambitions in favor of activities everyone can enjoy.

A liveaboard can bring everyone onto the same journey, whether they are experienced divers, beginners or snorkelers. Depending on the skill level of the family, one parent can dive while the other snorkels with the children. Or perhaps everyone can take specific courses that begin or develop their diving adventure. Everyone visits the same places and compares notes afterwards.

For younger children, simply putting on a mask and snorkel can be extraordinary. Fish appear in remarkable colors and patterns, turtles glide by and schools of fusiliers move in formation, while tiny creatures hide among the corals. It is one thing to watch marine life on television. It is quite another to encounter it yourself, with your parents or siblings there to share the excitement.

The experience doesn't end when everyone gets out of the water. There are photographs to compare, fish to identify and stories to exchange over lunch. A child who struggles to concentrate on a wildlife documentary at home can become fascinated by the behaviour of a fish they have just met.

And there is another attraction, particularly for families with teenagers. Life onboard offers an escape from some everyday distractions. Internet access can be limited, the usual routines disappear and the day revolves around the sea rather than social media. Onboard families share meals, play games and spend time together.

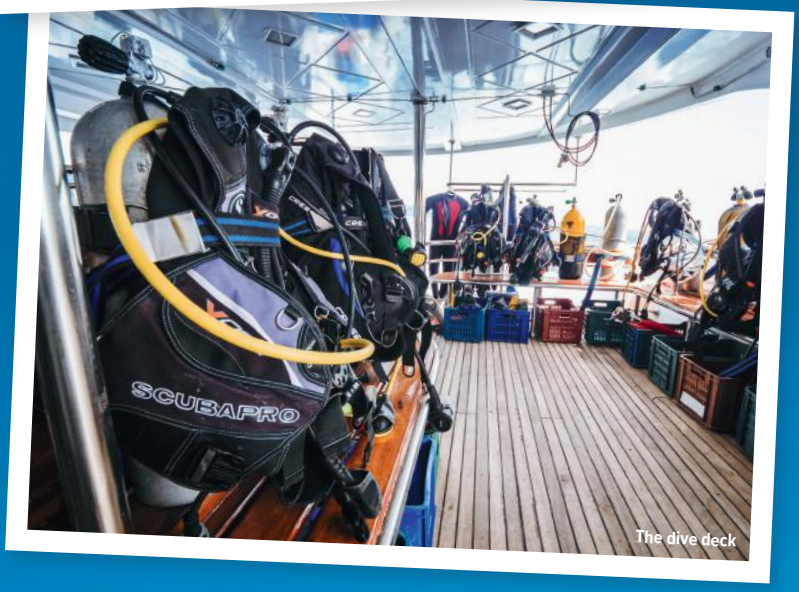
The practicalities

The pace - The biggest question is whether a liveaboard can genuinely suit children. Traditional itineraries can sometimes involve early starts, four dives a day and long crossings between offshore sites. They suit experienced divers, but not necessarily younger guests. Family-friendly trips tend to look different - later starts, shorter sailings, mainly coastal sites, and more time for snorkeling and relaxing.

Ages and activities – Minimum ages for diving experiences vary between operators, and need to be checked before booking. Many offer introductory experiences such as PADI Bubblemaker or Discover Scuba Diving for children from around eight, subject to the relevant requirements, while children who already hold a junior qualification can dive within their limits. Not every operator offers full entry-level courses onboard, so families hoping to certify may need to arrange that separately.



A liveaboard aimed at families



The dive deck

There are no separate boat excursions to arrange, no transfers between a dive center and a family hotel, and no need to split the holiday between the people who dive and those who don't.

The honest limitations

Much depends on the children themselves. A youngster who enjoys swimming, wildlife and exploring new places may find plenty to occupy them, while one who prefers organised entertainment, swimming pools and activities on land might be less enthusiastic.

A liveaboard doesn't offer the facilities or freedom of a large resort, and there is no nearby attraction to head off to if someone becomes bored. There will be moments when children want their own space, when parents need some peace and quiet, and when the inevitable family disagreements arise. For families whose children have little interest in the water, a conventional resort may offer more flexibility.

One example in practice

Emperor Divers' seven-night Southern Red Sea Family Adventure, launching in August 2027 aboard Emperor Asmaa, shows how an itinerary can be built around these priorities. Sailing from Port Ghalib, it offers three dives a day rather than four, with later starts, shorter sailings and mainly coastal sites, so mornings don't begin in the dark and days aren't dominated by long crossings. Around 85 per cent of the sites also offer snorkeling, which means non-divers visit the same reefs as the divers, while certified divers can still enjoy more than 16 dives over the week.

The wildlife is a big part of the appeal – and why this area was chosen. Wild spinner dolphins are one of the main attractions at Sataya, with responsible snorkeling encounters possible, and green turtles are regularly seen feeding on the seagrass at Marsa Shouna. Nobody can promise what a given dive or snorkel will reveal, but that uncertainty is part of the fun. It gives the whole family something to look out for.

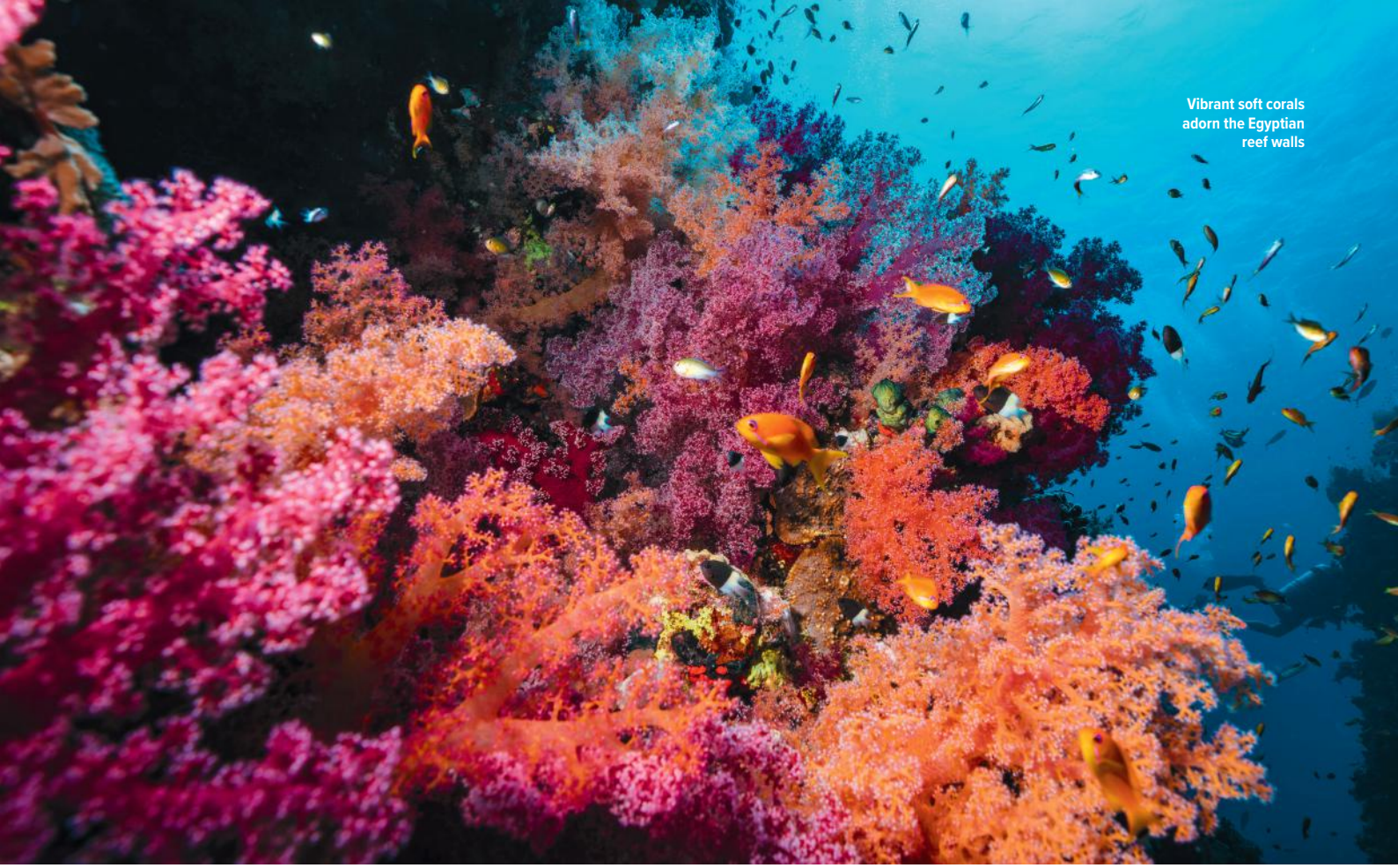
Cabins and supervision – Children typically share a cabin with their parents or guardians, so it is worth checking the available configurations. Supervision is also a parental responsibility. Younger children that can't dive with their parents shouldn't be left onboard without a responsible adult while others are in the water, so plan who is doing what, and when.

Water confidence – Confident swimming and snorkeling are important even for children who never touch scuba gear. A child who loves the water – or who learns to the love water - will be in their element.

Value – For families who love the water, there is a lot to be said for having everything in one package: accommodation, meals, diving, and travel between sites.



Emperor Asmaa



Vibrant soft corals adorn the Egyptian reef walls

> “There’s a conservation angle too - understanding why reefs need protecting means more after you’ve spent time exploring one. Games and free time are built in, so there’s room to relax, read or simply enjoy being on the boat”



The itinerary is perfecr for younger divers



Hawksbill turtle

Life onboard is designed to keep that shared curiosity going. Between dives and snorkeling sessions, the team runs marine-life presentations, practical activities and a species-identification challenge, so families can work together to name what they’ve seen and pay closer attention next time. There’s a conservation angle too - understanding why reefs need protecting means more after you’ve spent time exploring one. Games and free time are built in, so there’s room to relax, read or simply enjoy being on the boat without a schedule to keep.



Emperor Asmaa



Families can dive together



A relaxed trip to some of Egypt's best sites

With the days organised around the sea rather than screens, everyone is in the same place, doing broadly the same thing, and has the same stories to share by dinner. Because the boat has just 18 berths, around four families are expected on a typical departure. That gives children the chance to make friends, and gives parents some like-minded company too.

Where next?

A liveaboard won't suit every family, and the traditional kind of trip will always have its place for divers chasing remote reefs and maximum time underwater. But with the right itinerary, a family liveaboard offers something different - a holiday where diving remains central but doesn't dictate every activity.

There is the prospect of dolphins, turtles and colorful reefs, of introducing children to the underwater world, and perhaps of building a shared interest that lasts for years. There is also the simple pleasure of a week spent together, with plenty to talk about, laugh about, and remember.

And when everyone returns home, perhaps with hundreds of underwater photographs and a growing enthusiasm for marine life, there is every chance the question will be the same. Where are we going next? ■

Fun for all the family

Emperor Divers' first Southern Red Sea Family Adventure trip is running for seven nights from 21 August 2027. More information can be found by visiting: www.emperordivers.com

Since its foundation in 1992, Emperor Divers has built a reputation as one of the world's best diving operators. As well as the Red Sea, they have liveaboards in the Solomon Islands, Indonesia and the Maldives.



Heading out in a zodiac on a dive

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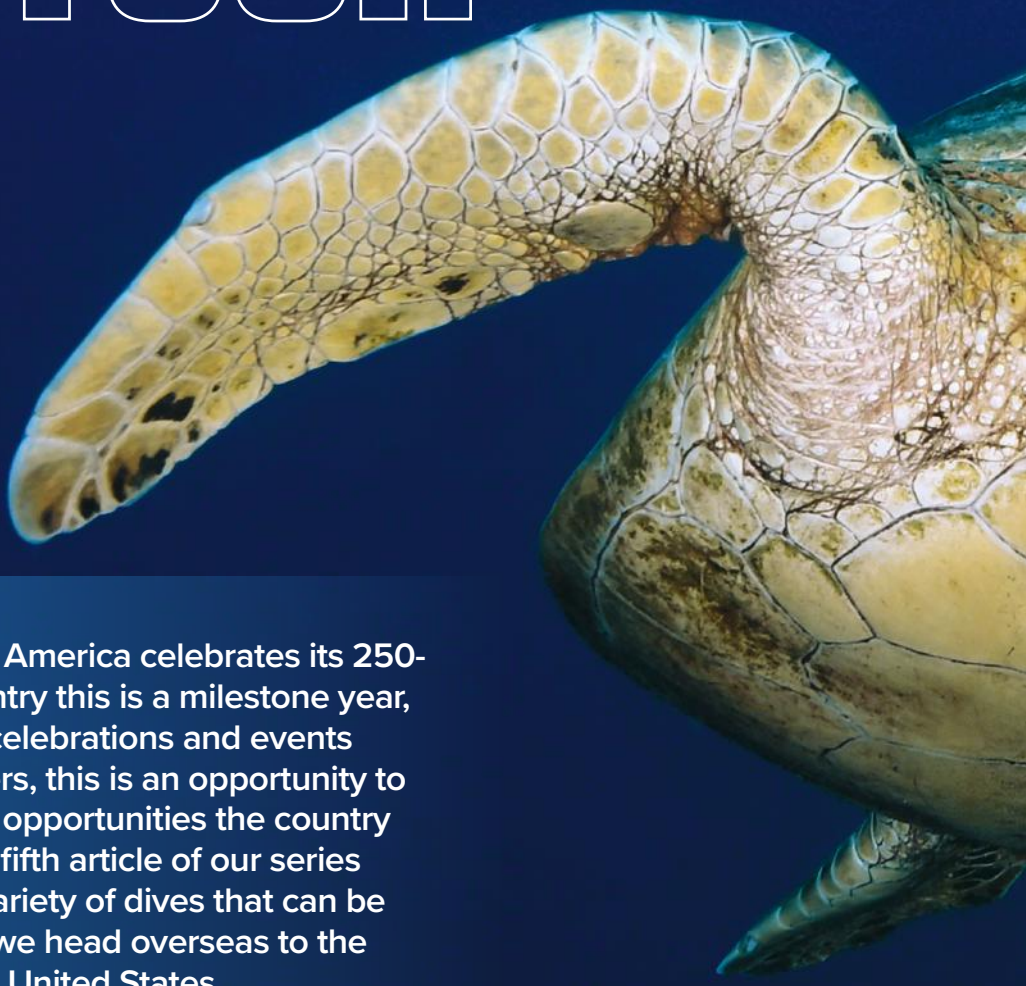


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PART FIVE



This year the United States of America celebrates its 250-year anniversary. For the country this is a milestone year, one that will be marked with celebrations and events throughout the land. For di-vers, this is an opportunity to explore the best scuba diving opportunities the country has to offer. This is the bonus fifth article of our series introducing you to the wide variety of dives that can be experienced in the USA, and we head overseas to the various other territories of the United States

Photographs by Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P Weaver

In the previous articles, we described some of the great variety of ecosystems and dive environments available in America, visited some of the most-iconic and historic shipwrecks in our waters and descended below the waves to seek out unique marine life encounters and unique dive sites. We will conclude our search for the Great American Dive by journeying beyond the 50 states to the various other territories of the United States. In many ways, these are the offshore frontiers of underwater USA.

Closest to continental United States are the US Virgin Islands of St Thomas, St John and St Croix.

St Thomas has long been a bustling tourist destination with great shopping, scenic beaches and iconic resorts. It also is home to several well-known dive sites.

Cow & Calf are two of the most-recognized dive sites in St Thomas. The underwater rocks break the surface and from a distance they resemble the backs of a whale and her calf, giving this site its name.

The site is large enough to be considered two distinct dive sites and are known for their rocky underwater structures, small caves and swim-throughs. These sites are within a nationally protected underwater preserve, so the corals and marine life are healthier than other sites in the area. The maximum depth is around 40ft, and divers will often spot nurse sharks, turtles and many of the commonly seen species of fish from this region. Because of the dramatic underwater terrain, many photographers that come here opt for wide-angle setups on their cameras. But Cow & Calf is also ideal for macro photographers.

On our dives here, we encountered a beautifully decorated leopard flatworm (Pseudobiceros pardalis) and the juveniles of several species of fish, including the longfin damselfish (Stegastes diencaeus). Neighboring St John is a much smaller island than St Thomas. Here, visitors to the USVI can enjoy a quieter experience but one that features great diving as well.

One site in particular, Carval Rock, is an advanced site because of its often-challenging currents. But the underwater topography makes it worth the effort. Deep boulder formations, rocky swim-throughs and abundant marine life attracted to the fast-moving water make for a memorable dive.

In search of more underwater adventure, we travelled to the island of St Croix, the third island belonging to the United States Virgin Islands, and headed straight for its most-iconic dive site -: The Frederiksted Pier.

After a giant stride step off the side of the pier into 15ft of warm, clear Caribbean water we swam a brief distance along a fairly nondescript bulkhead until we reached the first set of pilings... and our hearts nearly stopped in awe.

Did you know?

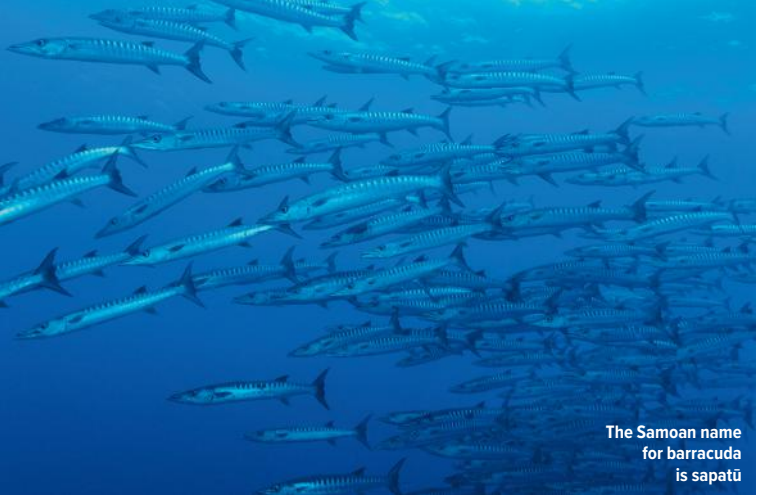
The Frederiksted Pier is one of the most popular dive sights on St Croix for a variety of reasons. It is an easy shore entry/exit making it accessable 24 hours and by and large it is a shallow dive, the majority of the pier is in 45ft or less.



> The combination of these two wrecks from two different World Wars in the same dive location makes this a unique dive destination for scuba divers


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The Samoan name for barracuda is sapatū



Warted egg cowry in American Samoa



Necklace starfish can be found in coral rubble and rocky reefs off Guam

There, shimmering in perfect unison in and around the coral and sponge-encrusted pilings was an enormous baitball of scad. The school of innumerable fish twisted and turned, morphing into myriad shapes and formations like an ever-changing underwater Rorschach test!

And then we spied the source of the baitball's fear - several three-foot-long tarpon, the large scales on their sides glinting in the sun and their black eyes intently sizing up the school of fish, were swimming beneath them. They would circle and then strike, moving into the ball and emerging with one of the hapless fish. The scad were mistaken in their perceived safety beneath the pier... the real danger came from below!

The Frederiksted Pier is a 1,526-foot-long deep water cruise ship pier located at the Ann E Abramson marine facility in the town of Frederiksted on the west side of St Croix. Although cruise ships are somewhat infrequent, the pier can accommodate vessels weighing up to 142,000 gross tons with drafts up to 29 feet. When the cruise ships do put into port here, taxis and buses are readily available for tours to other parts of the island and the pier and the sleepy town jump to life at these times. But when the ships are not here, the pier is quiet, the town is refreshingly empty and the underwater world of Frederiksted Pier beckons divers to explore.

We had planned two dives on this day, starting with a late-afternoon plunge followed by a night dive to capture the weird and wonderful nocturnal creatures of St Croix. Shortly after turning our attention away from the baitball, we encountered a shy seahorse peeking out from behind a small tube sponge. The pilings are adorned with colorful corals, sponges, hydroids, gorgonians and other sedentary organisms. Christmas tree worms abound, as do feather-dusters, and photographers can spend entire dives on one single piling captivated by a seemingly endless bounty of subjects.

Our first dive whet our appetites for the transformation into night, and our second dive began just as the sun was setting to the west. Immediately, we sensed a new dynamic beneath the pier. Many of the reef fish were tucked into nooks, crannies and crevices and were beginning a night of sleep while other creatures were just emerging for the night. A small octopus caught our attention, as did an ocellate swimming crab scurrying along the bottom.



The Frederiksted Pier in St Croix

> For truly adventurous divers, the Northern Mariana Islands, officially the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, creates numerous dive opportunities



A Caribbean reef shark turns to take a look at Cane Bay in the USVIs



Spotted cleaner shrimp from Cane Bay in St Croix



Sunset in St Thomas

We photographed the weirdly shaped arrow crab and came across a pair of banded coral shrimp, one with the greenish clutch of eggs easily visible in her translucent belly.

The supposed silent world of the ocean was anything but quiet as we tuned our ears to the snapping of popping of shrimp and other crustaceans. And, as we encountered the baitball again towards our exit, we could hear the rush of fish through the water as they twisted and turned into the night.

St Croix is home to many other dive sites, including Cane Bay and the Davis Bay Wall, but the Frederiksted Pier should be on the top of every diver's list.

Puerto Rico is not often thought of as a dive destination, but scuba divers who journey here looking for great diving often head to Desecheo Island, known for its clear waters, La Parguera's for its deep, dramatic wall dives, and the pristine marine life around Culebra and Vieques. All of these dive sites rival those in the nearby USVI for marine life and dramatic underwater terrain. The United States also owns territory in the Pacific, American Samoa, Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands all feature remote and exotic dive locations for the intrepid diver.

American Samoa is a six-hour flight from Hawaii and is very much an undiscovered gem. A group of six Polynesian islands located in the South Pacific, the territory is home to many of the same species endemic to other more well-known destinations in this region such as Tonga, the Cook Islands and French Polynesia. Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary is located here and was established to protect the abundant coral reefs, soft corals, and marine life thriving here. In addition to resplendent coral reefs and beautifully colored fish life, divers have encountered turtles, whales, sharks and porpoises at various times of the year.

The far-flung island of Guam is often associated with military installations and activities. It officially became a US territory in 1898 following the Spanish-American War after Spain ceded it to the US as part of the Treaty of Paris. It has served as a key military hub for the United States in the Pacific ever since.

On Guam, divers often find themselves diving shipwrecks, such as the Tokai Maru and the SMS Cormoran. The Tokai Maru was a Japanese passenger cargo ship that was sunk



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A cloud of baitfish beneath the Frederiksted Pier

in World War Two on 27 August 1943 in 130ft of water. The SMS Cormoran was a German cruiser scuttled by her crew on 7 April 1917 to avoid surrendering it to American forces upon the US entry into World War One. It was the first German ship sunk by the United States in World War One. The combination of these two wrecks from two different World Wars in the same dive location makes this a unique dive destination for scuba divers.

In Guam, however, the signature dive is The Blue Hole. Off the Orote Peninsula, a natural crevice creates a vertical shaft that opens at 50ft and empties at 130ft. With consistent 100-foot visibility and aggregations of large tuna, unicornfish, reef sharks, rays and turtles, this dive site is a must for experienced divers.

For truly adventurous divers, the Northern Mariana Islands, officially the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, creates numerous dive opportunities. This is an unincorporated territory of the United States consisting of 14 islands in the northwestern Pacific Ocean. Saipan, Tinian and Rota all have dive sites appropriate for all levels of dive experience. Saipan has exceptional diving, with caves, eagle ray cleaning stations and very healthy reefs on the dive menu. On Tinian, the dive sites are more remote and untouched with spectacular coral gardens and caves to explore. And Rota is known for its crystalline waters and historic wrecks, including the Shoun Maru, a World War Two Japanese cargo ship.

Our journeys in this five part-series have uncovered a plethora of diving opportunities throughout the United States and its territories. Reefs, kelp forests, shipwrecks, marine life encounters and bespoke and unusual dive opportunities can all be found here.

So, what is the great American Dive? Well, in truth, we can't decide and we believe that the Great American Dive is the next one! ■



Queen triggerfish in the USVIs



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Glorious GRENADA

Mark Evans makes a welcome return to the 'island of spice' to attend the annual Dive and Conservation Festival, which in 2025 was an expanded affair including more topside excursions mixed in with the superlative diving

Photographs by Mark Evans



> "The structure has become a haven for marine species, including schools of silversides, jacks, and tuna, with cup corals and sponges encrusting the hull"

Some of the sculptures have eerie glass eyes

Stepping out of the Maurice Bishop International Airport in Grenada, I felt like I had 'come home'. Having visited the island several times in the past 25 years, it was immediately familiar – that blast of Caribbean heat, the distinctive scent in the air, and the smiling face of Sheldon Noel from Royalty Taxi Tours, who has been one of the drivers tasked with carting journalists around Grenada for many years.

Grenada has been one of my favorite Caribbean diving destinations since my first visit way back in 1999 – the reefs are among the most healthy and 'fishy' in the region, and the plethora of shipwrecks have earned it the title of 'shipwreck capital of the Caribbean'. Like many British divers, I am a bit of a metalhead, so any location with a rich selection of wrecks ticks plenty of boxes for me.

But there is more to Grenada than just the diving. The island is swathed in lush green rainforest, and there is plenty to keep you occupied on your non-diving days, from hikes and mountain biking to off-road excursions, visits to historical sites like plantations and forts, and much more. The locals are friendly and welcoming, and the whole island just gives off pleasant vibes.

My most-recent trips have all coincided with the Dive and Conservation Festival, which seeks to showcase both the underwater and topside delights of Grenada, and its near-neighbor Carriacou. In 2025, the festival had definitely had a shot in the arm and featured more elements focused on eco-friendly initiatives and conservation projects across the island.

As with past Dive and Conservation Festivals, the tourist authority had invited a selection of VIPs to headline the event, taking part in panel discussions and presentations, going on dives, exploring the island, etc. I was joined in 2025 by famed explorer, cave diver, technical diver, photographer and film-maker Jill Heinerth, TV presenter and author Miranda Krestovnikoff, ocean advocate and snake/frog expert Billie Claire Harrison, and marine biologist and underwater photographer Nicolas Winkler.

We were being hosted in the Mount Cinnamon Beach and Wellness Resort, which spreads up a steep hillside at one end of the sprawling Grand Anse Beach, and offers stunning views across towards the capital St Georges.

The opening ceremony was also held at the resort, and featured introductions from the Nautical Development Manager (who was co-ordinating the event), the Grenada Scuba Dive Association (GSDA) and the Grenada Fund for Conservation (GFA), which has been leading several initiatives across the island which we would be seeing firsthand as the week progressed.



We went hunting for some of Grenada's frog species

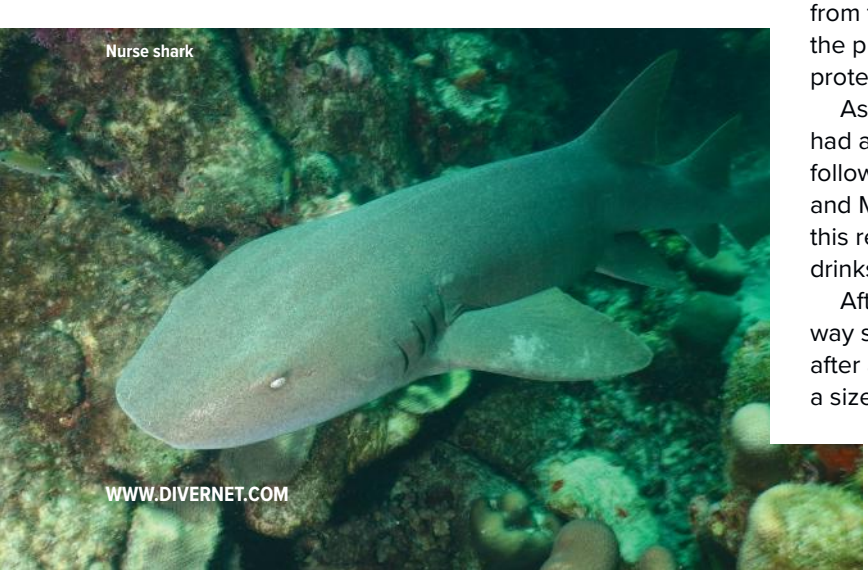


Nicolas with a lionfish

Before that lavish event, we managed to get a couple of dives in courtesy of Scuba West Indies. Julie Garnier and her team specifically chose two contrasting dive sites – Black Forest and Grand Mal - to show the threats facing Grenada's reefs. Both sites were rich in marine life but one was suffering from a thin layer of sediment from run-off from the land, with other man-made issues contributing to the problem, emphasising what works needs to be done to protect this natural wonder.

As mentioned above, this Dive and Conservation Festival had a strong focus on land-based projects, and so the following day the group met with sea moss farmers John and Merlyn in Soubise to understand the process of drying this red algae (sea moss) to produce wonderful nutritious drinks and ingredients that can be added to various recipes.

After the sea moss visit, the group then headed a short way south and conducted a clean up of a remote beach, and after an hour and a half of hot, sweaty graft, they'd collected a sizeable haul of rubbish. It just shows what a small ▸



Nurse shark



Coral-encrusted winch

> “Grenada is famed for being the location of the world’s first underwater sculpture park, and now Carriacou is home to one of the newest, titled A World Adrift”

collection of people can do with a bit of hard work, and it was heartening to hear of initiatives across the island trying to reduce litter, especially the plastic variety.

A much-deserved dinner and a few adult beverages at the West Indies Brewery rounded out a rewarding day.

We were up early the next day to catch a hopper flight over to sister island Carriacou to get a couple of dives in with Gary Ward and his team at Deefer Diving. First we headed to the renowned Sisters, a site known for strong currents and fantastic displays of sponge and coral growth. We found a few chunky invasive lionfish (which we are sure will be targeted on the next hunt), as well as vast shoals of chromis, snapper and the odd green moray eel and nurse shark.

Grenada is famed for being the location of the world’s first underwater sculpture park, and now Carriacou is home to one of the newest, titled A World Adrift. This consists of 30 origami boats (made of marine-grade stainless steel) and PH neutral green cement figures of children. According to sculptor Jason deCaires Taylor (who created Grenada’s sculpture park, as well as a host of others around the world), ‘A World Adrift showcases an evocative fleet of 30 boat sculptures, each navigated by a local schoolchild, symbolising the uncertain waters of the future’. Many of the figures are already showing good coverings of sponges and marine growth, and three of them have glass eyes, which can be quite unnerving!

The nearby Aquarium site was rich in juvenile species, and we also saw a nurse shark, eagle ray, a couple of octopus, nudibranchs, spotted drums, cow fish and spiny lobster.

A fantastic lunch at Paradise Beach Club - what a view! - rounded things off nicely before getting the leisurely ferry back to Grenada. The next day saw us wander down the hill from our rooms at Mount Cinnamon to Dive Grenada, handily located at the end of Grand Anse Beach. I was particularly looking forward to the first dive with owners Neal and Allie Mader, as we were returning to a wreck I first dived shortly after it went down in 2017.

The freighter Persia II went down on the ‘Atlantic side’ of Grenada, and I dived this when it was a ‘fresh’ wreck, soon after it sank while enroute past the island. It was a weird dive back then, diving on a vessel with no marine growth on it, and which had visibly only gone down. So I was intrigued to see how the marine life had colonised it in the years since.

The vis was not the usual blue that you get on the Atlantic side, instead it was a bit murky green, but there was next to no current, so we could explore at our leisure. A couple of nurse sharks were chilling in the rear superstructure and the whole wreck is now smothered in encrusting marine growth and vibrant sponges.

Dive two we were back round on the Caribbean side of the island to dive the Veronica L. This cargo ship has been on the bottom - in no less than three locations - for years,



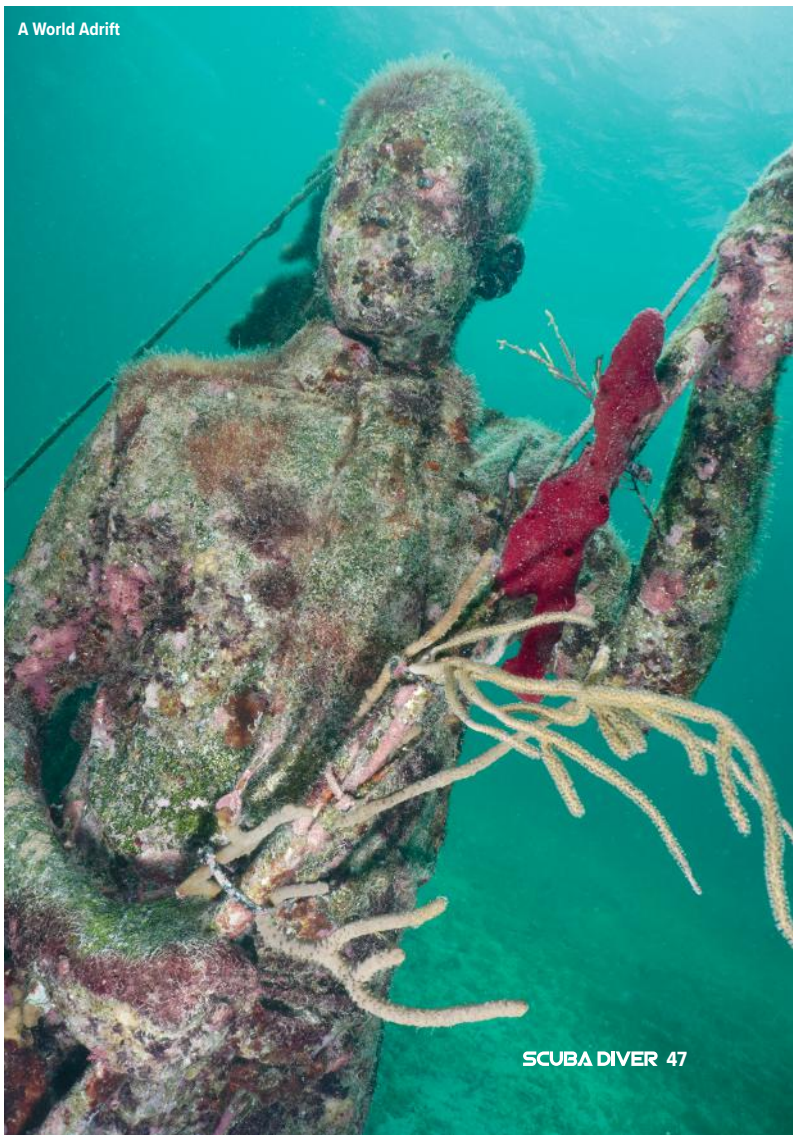
Miranda exploring the Veronica L...



...and swimming over the top of the Anina



Jill Heinerth cleaning up the beach



A World Adrift

and boasts a thick coating of marine life. Sitting in 16m, it is a great depth for any diver to enjoy.

In the evening, our group, as well as a selection of staff from the tourist authority, joined Billie Harrison to learn more about the critically endangered Grenada frog, and the island's other species. We then ventured up into Grand Etang to search for them first-hand, and found two different species of frog, stick insects, spiders, millipedes, and a tiny scorpion. This was a fantastic experience and I thoroughly recommend you give it a go if you are visiting the island.

We had a break from diving mid-week, and attended a day of presentations, panel discussions and more at the Grenada National Athletics Stadium. We heard about the latest initiatives from the Grenada Scuba Dive Association with President Julie Garnier, and the Grenada Fund for Conservation from Phil Saye, before the Grenada Tourist Authority's CEO Stacey Liburd and the Hon. Adrian Thomas, the Minister for Tourism, gave a speech. We also had a screening of Nicolas Winkler's film Open Season, which looks at the plight of sea turtles on Grenada, and efforts being made to protect them for future generations.

In the afternoon all of the VIPs took part in panel discussions ranging from what is being done to protect endangered species on the island, what makes Grenada such a hotspot for diving, and details of local conservation efforts to safeguard the island's unique ecosystems. It was great to see a host of schoolchildren attending the event, and actively getting involved in the conversations.

We were back in the water the next day with Aquanauts Grenada and the Geer family, and we had to get our 'marine hunter' vibe on as this was lionfish hunting day. These invasive species are wreaking havoc across the Caribbean, but in Grenada and Carriacou there have been determined efforts by the dive shops to try and keep the reefs and wrecks as 'lionfish-free' as possible.

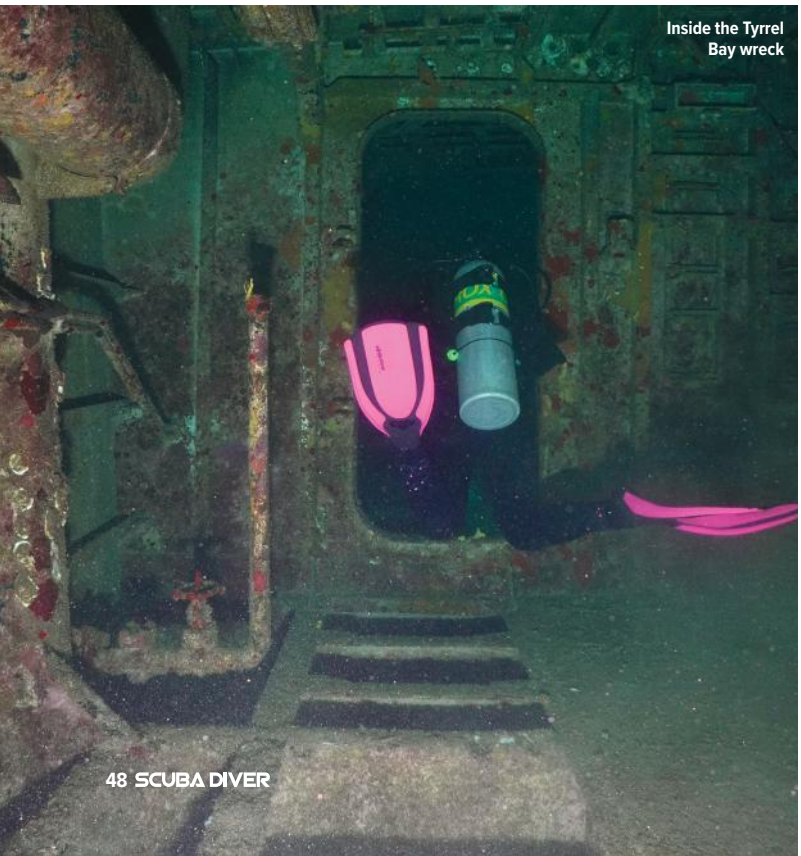
As is always the case, when the group specifically went looking for lionfish - which we'd been seeing in the odd cluster here and there on previous dives - there were not many to be seen. Which can be seen as a good thing!



Miranda, with Jill hovering overhead



Lizardfish



Inside the Tyrrel Bay wreck



Octopus

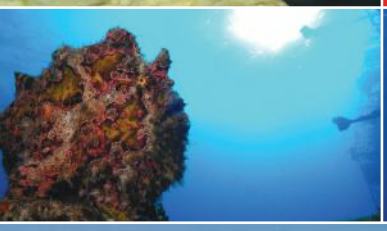
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We ended up searching around on Lighthouse Reef and then Shark Reef after an impromptu return to dock for forgotten fins from one of a fellow group of divers on board (always check you have your gear, people), but while the lionfish were few and far between, we saw a blacktip shark briefly, others in the party saw a turtle and a southern stingray, as well as a nurse shark, and a very inquisitive octopus.

Thankfully, our host dive center for the day had done some decent hunts for lionfish earlier and so they had plenty of filets for lionfish tacos at the Dodgy Dock restaurant. The chef demonstrated cooking techniques and served up delicious tacos. These fast-breeding fish are super-tasty, and the ultimate sustainable fish source in the Caribbean. I am not one for killing things unnecessarily, but every lionfish you spear and remove is helping the native marine life.

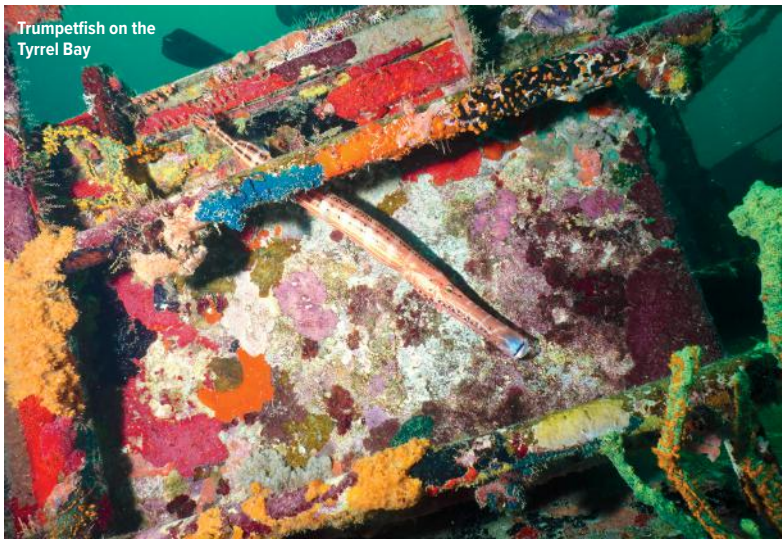
After our tasty lunch, we then headed to Woburn to see an impressive mangrove restoration project. From being decimated by Hurricane Ivan, the area has been cleared and replanted and is now a thriving habitat. Work continues at the site, and we joined Phil Saye to plant what is hoped will become new mangrove trees in the future. A newly constructed boardwalk here allows you to get out into the heart of the mangroves, and it is the ideal place for birdwatching. We saw over 20 species in less than 45 minutes.

We rounded out our Dive and Conservation Festival activities with Christine Finney and the team from Eco Dive. It was artificial reef day, so we headed first to what is probably my favorite wreck on the island - the Anina - and then went to the Tyrrel Bay patrol boat.

The MV Anina is a 196-foot container cargo vessel that is now located lying on its starboard side in 100ft. Originally built in East Germany in 1970 as the MS Trinwillershagen, it was intentionally scuttled on 21 March 2018 to serve as an artificial reef after having languished in the bay for several years. The structure has become a haven for marine species, including schools of silversides, jacks, and tuna, with cup corals and sponges encrusting the hull. You can explore inside the vast holds, and the engine room and superstructure is also accessible if you are suitably trained and equipped.


Phil Saye planting mangroves


French angelfish


Trumpetfish on the Tyrrel Bay

The Tyrrel Bay sinking was the result of a two-year public/private sector project, and when it was cleaned and prepared, thankfully many interesting features were left in-situ, including a safe, telephone, compasses, control panels and levers, and even a few toilets. I am pleased to say that all of these are still in place, albeit now with a healthy coating of marine growth, and fish and crustacean life has moved in – there was a large shoal of glassy sweeper in the bridge and upper superstructure, and a horde of tiny shrimp in the galley.

We were able to explore the neighboring reefs once we were done with the wrecks, and they were extremely colorful and teeming with fish life. A suitably epic final day of diving to round out the trip. In the evening we all descended on the Victory Bar for a farewell drinks reception, and it was great to see so many people – locals and tourists - turn up to mingle and chat.

Plans are already afoot to make future Dive and Conservation Festivals even bigger and better, with the aim of getting divers on to the island during the events to be active participants, so watch this space for more details. Grenada is an underrated dive destination in my opinion. It boasts a great selection of shipwrecks in depths to suit all levels of diver, the reefs are in fabulous condition with myriad varieties of marine life, and the island itself is an amazing place for a holiday in general. Time your visit to coincide with the Dive and Conservation Festival and get involved in all of the different elements on offer to make your trip even more special.



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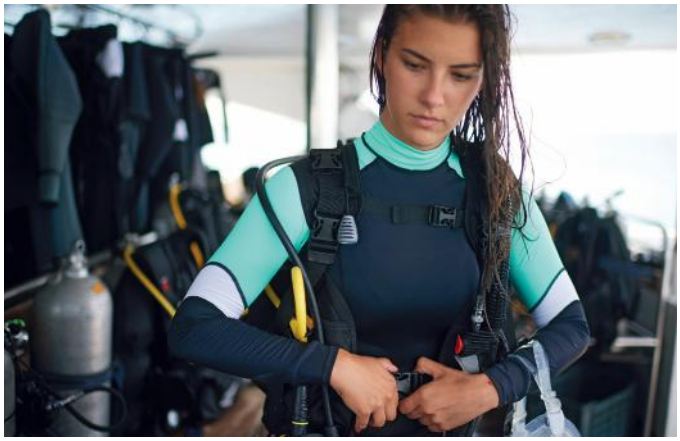
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PATENT FORAMEN OVALE (PFO)

The Divers Alert Network team takes a closer look at this congenital heart defect, and how it makes the risk of DCI greater for those who have a PFO

Patent foramen ovale (PFO) is a common congenital heart defect. It's a hole between the right and left sides of the heart. The foramen ovale is the wall separating the atria. Prior to birth, the foramen ovale has an opening that lets blood pass from the right to the left atrium. Shortly after birth this opening fuses. In about 27 percent of people, it fails to fuse completely.

With a patent foramen ovale, if the pressure in the right atrium rises above the pressure in the left atrium, blood can flow from the right to the left atrium (known as a right-to-left shunt or RLS). In divers, this may let gas bubbles from the venous blood (venous gas emboli or VGE) pass to the arterial side and cause decompression illness (DCI).



Patent Foramen Ovale and DCI Risk

Epidemiological studies show an association between PFO and certain types of neurological and cutaneous decompression illness (DCI). The risk of DCI is 2.5 times greater in divers with a PFO (and the risk of neurological DCI is 4 times greater). The overall risk of neurological DCI is still low, even in a person with a PFO. For some people, PFO is riskier than predicted. The goals of guidelines for PFO testing are to identify such individuals and manage their DCI risk.

Testing for Patent Foramen Ovale

You should have a PFO test if you have a history of more than one episode of DCI with cerebral, spinal, eighth cranial nerve or cutaneous manifestations. Neither noncutaneous manifestations of mild DCI nor isolated headaches after diving are indications for PFO screening.

- The testing must include bubble contrast, ideally combined with a transthoracic echocardiogram (TTE). The use of two-dimensional and color-flow echocardiography without bubble contrast is not adequate.
- The testing must attempt to provoke right-to-left shunting, including Valsalva release or sniffing, while the right atrium is densely opaque with bubble contrast.
- A spontaneous shunt without provocation or a significant provoked right-to-left shunt with VGE following diving is a risk factor for DCI with cerebral, spinal, vestibulocochlear or cutaneous manifestations.
- Smaller shunts are associated with a lower but poorly defined risk of DCI. The significance of minor degrees of RLS needs evaluation in the clinical setting that led to testing.

Positive PFO Test

Your diagnosis may be a PFO that is likely to increase DCI risk. If so, you can consider the following options in consultation with a diving physician:

- Stop diving.
- Dive more conservatively. Various strategies may reduce the risk of significant venous bubble formation after diving or the subsequent right-to-left shunting of bubbles across a PFO. It is best to discuss with a dive medicine expert the appropriateness of this approach and the strategies you can use. These may include:
  - Reducing dive times to well inside accepted no-decompression limits.
  - Doing only one dive per day.
  - Planning for air dives but breathing nitrox (while abiding by the actual gas' maximum operating depth).
  - Lengthening a safety stop or your decompression time at shallow stops.
  - Avoiding heavy exercise and unnecessary lifting or straining for at least three hours after diving.
- Close the PFO. Closing a PFO after an episode of DCI does not ensure that DCI will not occur again. All of the options require careful consideration of the risks and benefits and the clinical setting that led to screening.

Return to Diving After Closure

Following the closure of a PFO and before returning to diving, you should have a repeat bubble-contrast echocardiogram. This test should demonstrate shunt closure at a minimum of three months after the surgery. You should only resume diving once a test confirms closure of your PFO and you are no longer taking potent antiplatelet medication.

To learn more, visit 'Health & Medicine' at World.DAN.org



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The Forgotten Islands

This chain of remote islands and atolls in southern Maluku stretches from Wetar to Tanimbar, and has remained largely cut off from the outside world. This isolation has protected both the region's cultural heritage and some of Indonesia's most-untouched dive sites. Here, local communities continue to live according to age-old traditions, largely unaffected by modern tourism and global influences that have transformed the rest of Indonesia.

These scattered islands maintain deeply rooted customs passed down through generations, with daily life revolving around ancestral practices that remain vibrantly alive. Sumba stands out for its enduring animist beliefs, where ceremonies honoring ancestral spirits remain central to community life, a rarity in this predominantly Muslim and Christian nation. The Maluku islands showcase an even more complex heritage shaped by centuries of Spanish, German, Japanese and Dutch colonisation, creating a unique blend of customs, languages and monuments found nowhere else in Indonesia.

Below the surface, this isolation has created an equally remarkable frontier diving experience. The region features dramatic walls, pinnacles and coral gardens teeming with marine life, where divers encounter healthy coral systems, schools of barracuda, trevally and tuna, reef sharks, turtles and the occasional manta and mobula ray. Visibility often exceeds 100 feet, and strong currents attract pelagics while supporting vibrant coral growth. Limited liveaboard traffic means divers often have entire sites to themselves, creating an exclusive experience for divers seeking something truly off the beaten path. This rare combination of cultural authenticity above water and pristine marine environments below offers visitors a glimpse into Indonesian 'worlds' that have evolved independently, preserving traditions and ecosystems that have disappeared elsewhere in the rapidly modernising nation.

Here are some of the signature sites:

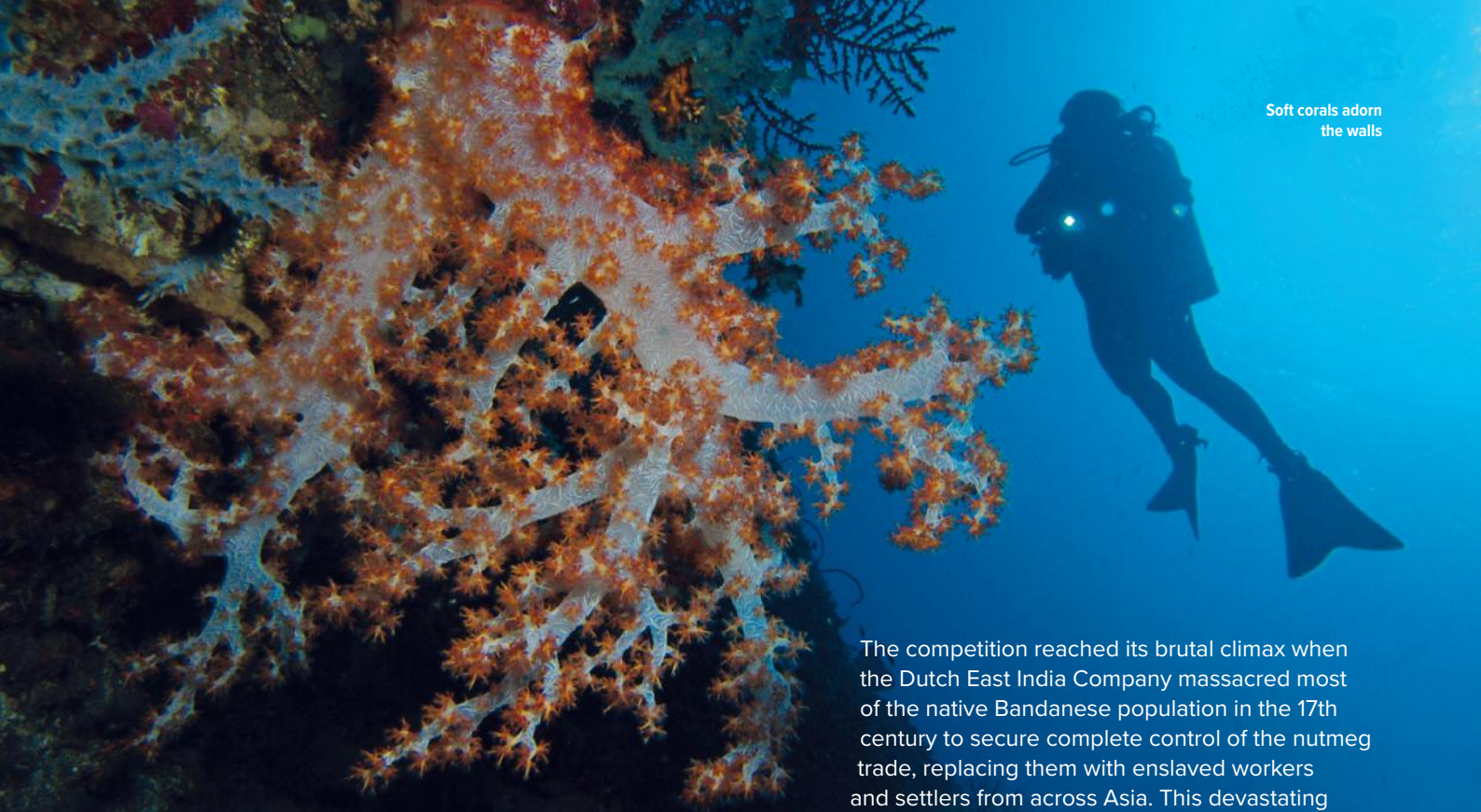
Tanjung Tutunnukea, Wetar Island - Here, barrel sponges reign supreme. This wall dive is an underwater sculpture garden where massive filter feeders of every conceivable shape dominate the landscape.

Underwater NEIGHBORHOODS

PART II

Sol Foo continues her 12-day journey on Solitude Adventurer through Indonesia's remote waters from Maumere to Ambon

Photographs by Pieter van den Abeele and Mark Evans



Soft corals adorn the walls

> “The same isolation that has preserved Indonesia’s incredible cultural diversity – allowing over 700 languages to flourish across the archipelago – has also protected these remote reefs from the homogenising effects of heavy diving pressure”

From towering cylindrical giants to sprawling, multi-chambered complexes, these sponges have claimed this territory as their own, thriving in the nutrient-rich currents that sweep across Wetar’s slopes. In the shallows, the entire bedrock is covered in toadstool leather corals (Genus Sarcophyton), Dead man’s finger corals (Alcyonium digitatum), and finger-like, candelabra-shaped corals.

Reong Island - The underwater topography shifts dramatically to reveal forests of black coral trees stretching into the blue. These ancient, non-photosynthetic corals create Gothic underwater cathedrals, their branching forms reaching upward like gnarled fingers. In deeper waters where light becomes scarce, they’ve established their dominion, creating an entirely different ecosystem from their shallow-water cousins.

Banda Sea

The Banda Islands hold a dramatic and turbulent place in world history as the only location on Earth where nutmeg naturally grew, making these tiny specks in the Banda Sea among the most-valuable real estate of the 16th and 17th centuries. This botanical monopoly sparked intense colonial rivalry between European powers, particularly the Portuguese and Dutch, who warred to control the lucrative spice trade that made nutmeg literally worth more than gold.

The competition reached its brutal climax when the Dutch East India Company massacred most of the native Bandanese population in the 17th century to secure complete control of the nutmeg trade, replacing them with enslaved workers and settlers from across Asia. This devastating history created the unique cultural landscape visible today, where colonial-era Fort Belgica and elegant Dutch mansions stand as haunting reminders of this dark chapter, now recognised by UNESCO as a significant mixed cultural and marine heritage site. Despite this tragic past, the Banda Islands have developed a resilient local culture shaped by centuries of Asian settlers who arrived seeking trade opportunities, creating a vibrant blend of traditions evident in the ongoing fishing practices and the bustling local markets in Banda Neira.

Below the surface, the Banda Sea offers some of the world’s most-exceptional diving, with the same remoteness that preserved its cultural heritage also protecting pristine underwater environments. The waters are exceptionally clear, with visibility often ranging from 60 to 120 feet, showing divers massive fields of healthy coral gardens, massive barrel sponges and vibrant sea fans that have flourished due to minimal human interference.

As part of the Coral Triangle, the global epicenter of marine biodiversity, these waters teem with life, from large schools of fusilier, snapper and surgeonfish, to impressive Napoleon wrasse and other substantial reef fish. This is where you can sight the native multi-spotted soapfish (Pogonoperca ocellata), and the rare and elusive comet fish (Calloplesiops altivelis). The region also caters to macro enthusiasts, particularly around Ambon, which is renowned for incredible muck diving opportunities to spot unique and colorful critters. The Banda Sea’s location on major migratory routes makes it particularly spectacular for pelagic encounters with schooling hammerheads, being a major draw for experienced divers, especially from late September to mid-October.

Diving conditions are generally favorable, with good to excellent visibility typically ranging from 50 to 130 feet, and water temperatures between a cool 78 to 84°F. Currents can vary from mild to strong, making these dives suitable for experienced divers seeking world-class wall diving in pristine, remote waters.





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Here are some of the signature sites:

Pulau Laut - Diving here offers a spectacular combination of dramatic volcanic topography and thriving marine biodiversity that showcases the best of what the Coral Triangle has to offer. The underwater landscape is dominated by sheer volcanic walls that plunge deep into the blue, punctuated by pinnacles, rock formations and steep drop-offs that create visually stunning dive sites. These walls are adorned with magnificent coral reefs featuring a vibrant blend of hard and soft corals, including massive sea fans, large barrel sponges, intricate branching corals and expansive brain corals that support incredibly healthy ecosystems. The notable coral species here in the shallows are the disc corals from the genus Lithophyllon (see sample image), scattered everywhere.

Nil Desperandum - As one of the Banda Sea's premier dive sites, the underwater topography and thrilling possibility of encountering schools of hammerhead sharks patrolling the deep is the major draw for advanced divers to this remote location. The site features impressive underwater ridges and steep walls that plunge into the depths, creating dynamic diving conditions best experienced as exhilarating drift dives along current-swept reefs. The walls support a thriving ecosystem teeming with life. Beyond the hammerheads, divers can observe a diverse array of reef fish like angelfish, parrotfish, trevally and fusiliers, along with moray eels tucked into crevices and decorator crabs camouflaged among the coral. The generally clear waters provide excellent visibility for photography and observation, making this a favorite spot for underwater photographers seeking to capture both wide-angle reef scenes and pelagic encounters.

Due to its remote location and challenging conditions with variable currents, Nil Desperandum is best suited for experienced divers and is most conveniently accessed by liveaboard, though it's also possible to reach via flights to Ambon followed by boat transfers. The optimal diving window runs from March to November, with comfortable water temperatures ranging from 77-84°F, offering ideal conditions for exploring this spectacular site.

Manuk Island - Aptly nicknamed Snake Island, the waters around the island offers one of the Banda Sea's most-unique and extraordinary diving experiences. The abundance of sea snakes weaving through the reefs are not found anywhere else around the archipelago. This remarkable site is where divers have witnessed an extraordinary hunting partnership between sea snakes and trevally, where the fish drive smaller prey into crevices for the snakes to capture, while any that escape the snakes' flee directly into the waiting jaws of the circling jacks - a rare example of interspecies cooperation in action.

The underwater topography is quite dramatic, the site's geothermal vents rising from the depths amid the coral reefs add an otherworldly dimension to the steep walls, impressive drop-offs and massive coral formations that extend into the depths. The island's isolation has kept its marine environment pristine and relatively untouched, offering divers a glimpse into a vibrantly healthy underwater world where pelagic species reign. Diving conditions are excellent during the peak season from October to April, with water temperatures ranging from 80 to 86°F.



Hard corals as far as the eye can see



Happy divers celebrating on their return to the boat



Bumphead parrotfish

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Black Rock - The site's underwater topography features dramatic seamounts that create unique habitats and serve as magnets for marine life. The high nutrient levels and dense plankton blooms fuel an incredibly productive ecosystem, supporting vast schools of fish that swirl around the reef structures that also attract hammerhead sharks, mantas, mobula rays, dolphins, and even whales during their seasonal migrations.

While the big animal encounters are a major draw, the site is equally rewarding for macro enthusiasts, with the healthy reef environment harboring an abundance of small critters and fascinating subjects for detailed photography. As with most premier Banda Sea sites, Black Rock is best accessed via liveaboard, allowing divers to fully experience this remote location and combine it with the region's other world-class dive sites.

Parallel Worlds of Diversity Above and Below the Waterline

What strikes me most profoundly about this journey is how Indonesia's marine specialisation mirrors its cultural diversity. Just as each island group developed distinct languages, cultures and traditions based on their unique geography and resources, each dive site has evolved its own dominant species and ecosystem based on local conditions.

This parallel extends beyond mere metaphor. The same isolation that has preserved Indonesia's incredible cultural diversity – allowing over 700 languages to flourish across the archipelago – has also protected these remote reefs from the homogenising effects of heavy diving pressure. Each site remains a distinct 'neighborhood' with its own character, its own dominant residents and its own story to tell.

As our liveaboard continues northeast toward Ambon, I find myself anticipating each new dive not just for the marine life I'll encounter, but for the unique community signature that each site will reveal – another piece in the magnificent puzzle of Indonesian diversity, both above and below the waves. ■



Honeycomb moray eel



Ready to head off on the next dive



Frogfish

About Solitude Adventurer

Solitude Adventurer operates year-round itineraries throughout Indonesia's most-pristine diving destinations, specialising in accessing remote sites that showcase the incredible marine diversity described here. Her experienced crew and dive guides understand the unique characteristics of each region, helping divers appreciate the subtle specialisations that make each underwater neighborhood distinct from one another. From the barrel sponge gardens of Wetar to the coral overhangs of Babylon Wall, Solitude Adventurer's commitment to exploring Indonesia's lesser-known waters ensures encounters with these specialised marine communities that few divers ever experience.

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#ASKMARK

#AskMark is our scuba diving Q&A section to answer your scuba diving questions. Have a burning question about buoyancy control, or big dreams of becoming a Divemaster? Mark Newman, a Pro Diver since 2009, is here to answer your questions and share his expert knowledge – no question is too basic or bizarre! **So, gear up, dive in, and let's #AskMark**



@afroguy26

#AskMark: On a liveaboard doing multiple dives a day, when's the best time to log each dive accurately without forgetting the details?



Most liveaboards fill out a logbook for the boat with dive sites and conditions, which often gets popular on the final day for those who have forgotten which dive sites they visited throughout the week. Personally, I still fill out a paper logbook. So I bring it with me for the dive briefing and fill in the basic information during the briefing. That way I can fill in the rest of the information whenever I can.

It's best to fill in your logbook as soon as you can after the dive to avoid forgetting details and nobody will bat an eye if you excuse yourself to fill in your logbook. It's even easier now with most computers connecting to an app on your phone, all you need to do is fill in the name of the dive site and what you saw. But if you find yourself forgetting, there's usually another diver or crew who can help you remember what dive sites you've visited.

@391wombat

#AskMark: What's your opinion on balanced rig diving in a wetsuit with non-ditchable weights? If your wing fails and you swim to the surface, how do you stay buoyant with no weight to ditch?

A balanced rig means your equipment isn't so negatively buoyant that you can't swim it to the surface if your BCD fails, and that's a sensible goal for any diver. In a wetsuit, the neoprene regains buoyancy as you ascend, so a properly weighted diver may become positively buoyant at the surface, and your cylinder becomes more buoyant throughout the dive. If only the power inflator has failed, you can still orally inflate the wing.

But if your BCD, especially early in the dive with a full, heavy cylinder, entirely non-ditchable weight could leave you struggling.

That's why I generally prefer some ditchable ballast when diving wet, unless the complete setup has been tested and proven manageable both underwater and at the surface. A DSMB may provide emergency flotation, but it shouldn't be your primary plan. If necessary, ditching the entire scuba unit remains the final option.

@jimbatten1927

#AskMark: If DIN is standard across much of the world, why is yoke still so common with overseas dive operators? How widespread is DIN really?

I believe one big factor is that divers often buy what their instructor taught them with. And because many dive schools in the US use yoke, it maintains its popularity. In places like Mexico, the Caribbean and other destinations that cater heavily to American tourists, yoke can still dominate simply because that's what most visiting divers arrive with and they invest in cylinder valves that match.



Operators want rental equipment that works for the greatest number of customers, so most of their regs will be yoke and it's expensive to replace all of their cylinder valves and regulators. So while DIN is becoming the more widespread system internationally, yoke is far from disappearing.



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PART ONE

The five rules of CAVE DIVING

The Maldives diving tragedy put cave diving front and center with the international media. Over the next three issues, experienced cave diver John Kendall explains why you should not go into caves until you understand why people die in them, and the importance of the Five Rules of Cave Diving

Photographs by John Kendall

The best cave divers aren't the ones who never encounter problems. They're the ones who plan every dive knowing that, one day, they will. We know why cave divers die. That's the strange thing. We have known for almost 50 years. The recent tragedy in the Maldives didn't make me question how cave divers die. We may never know every detail of what happened, and accident investigations deserve the time and care required to establish the facts rather than satisfy speculation. Instead, it made me think about a different question.

Why do we keep repeating the same patterns? Not just in the Maldives, but across the world. After half a century of structured cave-diving training, extraordinary advances in equipment, brighter lights, more-reliable regulators, better breathing gases and a vastly improved understanding of decompression and physiology, why do experienced cave divers still lose their lives? The answer is both reassuring and uncomfortable. We already know why.

Unlike many activities, cave diving has spent decades studying its own failures. The community has never shied away from asking difficult questions after a fatality - not to assign blame, but to understand what happened and, more importantly, why. Every accident report represents knowledge bought at the highest possible price. Ignoring those lessons dishonours the people who paid it.

That philosophy owes more than most people realise to one man. In 1979, Sheck Exley published Basic Cave Diving: A Blueprint for Survival. It is often remembered

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Instructor teaching students the importance of the line

> "In 1979, Sheck Exley published Basic Cave Diving: A Blueprint for Survival. It is often remembered as a training manual, but that description barely captures its significance"


Divers learning how to follow the line in the event of a silt out

as a training manual, but that description barely captures its significance. More than anything else, it was one of the first systematic analyses of cave-diving accidents. Exley asked an apparently simple question. 'Were these accidents random?' His conclusion was clear - they were not.

Divers became lost after losing the guideline. They exhausted their gas supplies. They ventured beyond the limits of their training. They dived deeper than was appropriate for the gases they were breathing. They relied on a single light source that eventually failed. The individual stories differed, but the underlying causes did not.

Those observations became the foundation of what we now know as the Five Rules of Cave Diving. It is tempting to think of those rules as traditions, or perhaps procedures handed down from one generation of cave divers to the next. They are neither. Each rule exists because somebody died without it. That distinction matters. The Five Rules were never written to stop things going wrong, they were written to preserve options when they did.

A guideline doesn't prevent a silt-out, it allows you to escape one. A gas reserve doesn't stop an emergency, it gives you time to solve it. Redundant lights don't prevent failures, they stop one failure becoming several. Everything about cave-diving safety comes back to one idea - preserving options.


A diver exploring the eerie beauty of a cave system

Over the last 50 years, cave diving has evolved enormously. Equipment has improved beyond anything Exley could have imagined. Modern LED lights are dramatically more reliable. Regulators have become more dependable. Navigation techniques are better understood. Research into breathing-gas density and carbon dioxide has fundamentally changed how many tech divers approach deep dives. In many respects, cave diving has never been safer - yet fatal accidents continue to occur.

When they're carefully analysed, the same themes repeatedly emerge. Sometimes one of the Five Rules has been ignored outright. More often, the rule wasn't broken - it was slowly bent, stretched or quietly rationalised because previous dives appeared to prove that doing so was acceptable. That observation points towards something Exley recognised long before the language existed to describe it - the greatest threat in cave diving has never been the cave itself, it has always been the diver.

Today we have names for many of those behaviours - normalisation of deviance, complacency, confirmation bias, authority gradients and risk compensation - but Exley had already recognised the patterns decades before human factors became a discipline in its own right. This article isn't really about the Five Rules, it's about why they continue ▸

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to matter. It's about why intelligent, capable and experienced divers still make decisions that, with the benefit of hindsight, appear difficult to understand.

Most importantly, it's about understanding that accidents are rarely caused by one catastrophic mistake. Far more often, they are the result of a series of small, reasonable decisions that quietly erode every margin of safety until none remain.

Experience doesn't make us immune. In fact, it can sometimes make us vulnerable. I've analysed every cylinder I've dived since I first started tech diving, regardless of what gas I expected it to contain. Air, nitrox, trimix - it didn't matter. Analysis was simply part of the process. Or so I thought.

One evening I was running late to teach a pool session for my local dive club. I rushed into the dive shed and discovered that every cylinder I owned contained trimix. There wasn't time to refill anything, so I grabbed the one with the highest oxygen content and lowest helium fraction and headed for the car. My wife - an excellent diver in her own right - looked at me and asked a simple question : "Are you going to analyse that?" My first instinct was to argue. It's only a 6ft-deep pool. It'll be fine. Instead, I stopped, picked up the analyser - less than two feet away - and checked the cylinder. It contained zero percent oxygen. A couple of weeks earlier I'd been interrupted halfway through mixing gas for a deep dive. I'd added the helium, taken a phone call and walked away before adding oxygen or topping the cylinder with air. I'd forgotten completely. Zero percent oxygen is going to ruin your day, regardless if you are standing in the shallow end of a swimming pool.



Caves often feature a warning sign to deter divers who are not cave trained

> "Over the last 50 years, cave diving has evolved enormously. Equipment has improved beyond anything Exley could have imagined"


Cave diver winding in their line at the end of the dive

That incident has stayed with me because it had nothing to do with technical knowledge. I knew exactly how to analyse a cylinder. I understood the consequences of breathing the wrong gas better than most people. The problem wasn't competence - it was complacency. Experience hadn't protected me from making a poor decision. If anything, it had quietly encouraged it.

That was a sobering reminder that expertise doesn't reduce the need for discipline, it increases it. Because the greatest danger isn't believing that nothing can go wrong, it's believing that it won't happen to you.

Patterns in the darkness

When Sheck Exley began analysing cave-diving fatalities, he wasn't looking for dramatic stories, he was looking for patterns. Cave diving had earned a reputation for being inherently dangerous. Fatalities were frequent enough that many people regarded them as an unavoidable consequence of entering an underwater cave. Exploration meant accepting risk, and sometimes people simply didn't come home. Exley questioned that assumption. What if these deaths weren't random? What if they were predictable?

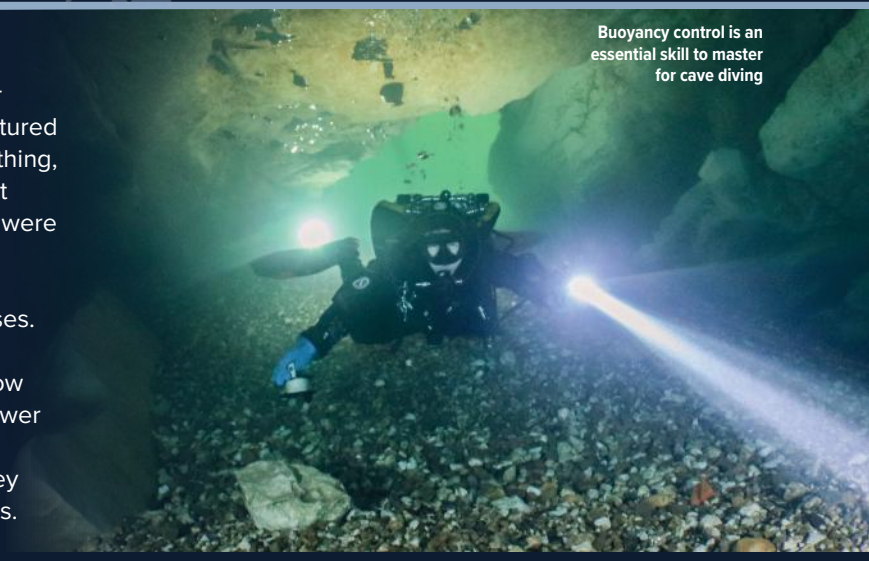
As accident reports accumulated, an uncomfortable picture emerged. Different caves, different divers and different circumstances often ended in remarkably similar ways. The details varied, but the underlying failures repeated themselves with surprising consistency. Some divers entered caves with little understanding of the

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environment. Others became disorientated after losing the guideline. Some exhausted their breathing gas after relatively minor problems delayed their exit. Others ventured deeper than was sensible for the gases they were breathing, or relied upon a single light source, only to discover that equipment eventually fails. None of these observations were revolutionary in isolation.

The breakthrough came from recognising that they weren't isolated failures at all. They were recurring causes. Rather than accepting fatalities as inevitable, the cave-diving community began asking a different question. How do we stop these failures from becoming fatal? The answer became the Five Rules of Cave Diving.

Notice what they are not. They are not traditions. They are not arbitrary standards imposed by training agencies. They are practical responses to recurring accident mechanisms. Every one exists because experience showed us what happens when it is missing.



Buoyancy control is an essential skill to master for cave diving

Training – learning to think, not just dive

The first pattern Exley identified was perhaps the most obvious. Many early cave-diving fatalities involved divers with little or no cave-specific training. That shouldn't surprise us.

From the perspective of an open-water diver, many cave entrances appear deceptively welcoming. Clear water, good visibility and a large opening can make the environment seem little different from swimming beneath an overhang. Of course, that illusion disappears the moment something goes wrong. In open water, the solution to most problems is simple - go up. Inside a cave, that option no longer exists.

Everything changes, navigation becomes critical, visibility can disappear in seconds. Minor mistakes become major emergencies because there is no direct route to the surface. That is why cave training isn't simply about learning new skills - it's about learning how to think.

The mechanics of buoyancy, propulsion and line following are relatively straightforward. Developing judgement takes much longer. One of the most-valuable lessons cave training teaches is recognising when not to continue.

The best cave divers I know are not the ones who complete every dive, They're the ones who are entirely comfortable turning one.

Personal reflection

When I first learnt to cave dive, I was obsessed with doing what my instructor wanted me to do correctly. It took me years to realise I was concentrating on the wrong thing. The instructor wasn't the challenge. The cave wasn't trying to catch me out. Both were simply there.

The real challenge was learning to think ahead rather than react. Proper planning, thorough team briefings and solid fundamental skills, gradually allowed me to stop worrying about individual tasks and start paying attention to the cave itself. Ironically, once I became less focused on the instructor, I became a much-better student.

The guideline – more than 'just a piece of string'

Few pieces of equipment are more misunderstood than the cave guideline. To non-cave divers, it looks almost laughably simple. It is, after all, just a length of nylon line. Until visibility disappears. Anyone who has experienced a genuine silt-out knows how completely the underwater world can change. One careless fin kick or one disturbance of fine clay can reduce perfect visibility to nothing in seconds. When that happens, the exit may be only a few feet away. Without a continuous guideline, it might as well be miles.

That is why cave divers become obsessive about line discipline. It's not there to help you find your way when everything is going well. It's there for when nothing is.

Personal reflection

One of the clearest demonstrations of that came during a long-term cave mapping project in the Lot region of France. Nearly 11 hours into a survey dive, after completing the deep work and most of our decompression, we were simply scootering towards the exit when we hit an abrupt wall of zero visibility. My teammate and I were heavily loaded with rebreathers, stage cylinders and scooters - we had enough momentum that we traveled several feet before stopping. There was no panic - training took over.

Without speaking, we both knew roughly where the guideline should be. We found the wall, located the line and re-established contact before making a slow exit by touch until the visibility gradually returned.

Only afterwards did we discover what had happened. Another team had entered an airbell and unknowingly dumped a huge quantity of fine clay into the water column.

Nobody had done anything reckless. They simply hadn't appreciated the consequences of their actions for another team. That incident permanently changed how we organised future projects. Surface work in the airbell stopped whenever long-range teams were still inside the cave.

The guideline had done exactly what it was designed to do - it had preserved options. ■

GEAR TEST EXTRA

Each issue, the Scuba Diver test team bring you the latest product and equipment releases from the dive industry. Cannot wait for the next edition? Keep up-to-date with all the latest gear news and reviews by heading over to the Scuba Diver YouTube channel!
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CRESSI SUB AQUAWING PLUS BCD - 80TH ANNIVERSARY



Mark Evans: Cressi Sub is the oldest diving equipment manufacturing company in the world, and as it celebrates an incredible 80 years in existence, it has released a line of colorful anniversary gear which certainly stands out from the crowd. The limited-edition Dive Yellow collection pays tribute to the history of the business, and embraces the vibrant color that best represents the brand. It also features the original Cressi logo.

There is a Dive Yellow version of the Cressi Aquawing Plus, a one-size-fits-all donut-style BCD. These backplate-and-wing BCDs are getting increasingly popular, especially ones like this, which come complete with integrated weight pockets, and non-dumpable trim pockets, as standard. Often these pockets are optional extras, which can add a couple of hundred dollars on to the basic price, so that is certainly worth bearing in mind.

The Aquawing Plus is a good-looking, yet subtle, set-up, which wears the Dive Yellow well. It is mostly back apart from the Cressi branding on the webbing, and some fairly low-key logos on the bladder and backpad. The light-grey Air-Net material that lines the shoulder straps and covers the back plate is soft and padded, drains quickly and is neutrally buoyant, but it also adds a splash of contrast between the black and yellow.

The Aqualung Plus comes with Cressi's industry-leading Modular Adjustment System (MAS), which offers a custom fit for both men and women - the continuous weave harness system allows you



to fine-tune the adjustment of your harness so that it fits snugly to the shape of your body. You simply tighten the shoulder straps by pulling the waist straps, then loosen them in seconds by releasing the waist buckle and pulling up on the shoulders.

This impressive adjustment range means you'll always get a perfect fit, whether you're drysuit diving or T-shirt diving, and I found it certainly makes getting the backplate-and-wing off at the end of the dive much easier than having to wriggle out of a non-adjustable webbing harness. If anything, it was quicker slackening off the shoulder straps on the Cressi than it is on my trusty Dive Rite Transpac II, which has standard pinch-clips.

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CRESSI SUB AQUAWING PLUS BCD - 80TH ANNIVERSARY

The donut shape air cell is compact and streamlined, and looks very minimalist when you are wearing it. The wing nestles neatly around the cylinder, and I found that it offered stable, reliable buoyancy, with the air migrating easily around the bladder, allowing for precise trim control. The small power inflator is efficient, both at filling the bladder and emptying it, and there is also a pull dump on the lower left side of the bladder.

A crotch strap ensures the BCD stays in place during your dive, and I liked that this secures with a pinch-clip – it means you can get the waist strap properly closed, and then just fasten the crotch strap in place afterwards. There is an anodized aluminum backplate hiding behind that padded backpad, though you can barely see it, and I liked the cut-away shape of this, which helps reduce unnecessary weight – essential for the traveling diver. However, for those who require it, there is an optional 6lb backplate bar available.

The aforementioned integrated weight pockets are securely attached to the backplate, and these have large D-rings built in (alongside the D-rings on the shoulder straps and the crotch strap). These mount so that the weight pocket slots in from the bottom of the pocket, and a pinch





clip holds them securely in place. This makes jettisoning them in an emergency a doddle – just squeeze the pinch clip and away they go. However, you just need to be a bit more careful when you are releasing them to hand up to a RIB, for instance, but a large loop on the top of the weight pocket helps facilitate this.

The trim weight pockets on the lower of the two cylinder bands allow for further adjustments to optimise buoyancy when you need to add additional weight, such as when you are in a drysuit.

The Aquawing Plus is a great choice for divers seeking a compact backplate and wing configuration that is already kitted out with integrated weight and trim weight pockets. In the Dive Yellow guise, it is an eye-catching 'old-school-style' piece of kit, with plenty of modern features, and it adjusts quickly and easily from warm-water wetsuit diving to cold-water drysuit adventures.
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Planning a family beach holiday is exciting, especially when it promises crystal-clear waters, colorful fish and unforgettable underwater adventures. Snorkeling is one of the best ways for children and adults to explore the marine world together, but choosing the right equipment can make all the difference between a magical experience and an uncomfortable one.

The best snorkeling gear for children and families should offer a comfortable fit, clear underwater vision, easy breathing, durability and, above all, safety. With so many snorkel masks, fins and full-face snorkel masks available, knowing what to look for can help parents make informed decisions and enjoy more time exploring the water together.

Why Choosing the Right Snorkeling Gear Matters

Children and adults have different needs when it comes to snorkeling equipment. A mask that fits an adult comfortably may leak on a child's smaller face, while oversized fins can make swimming tiring and difficult.

The right snorkeling gear helps the whole family feel more comfortable in the water. A well-fitting mask reduces leaks, an appropriately sized snorkel is easier to use, and correctly fitted fins can make swimming more efficient.

For children who are new to snorkeling, comfort is particularly important. Equipment that feels awkward or causes discomfort can quickly turn an exciting activity into a frustrating experience.

Choose a Mask That Fits Properly

A good mask is arguably the most important piece of snorkeling equipment. If it leaks, fogs excessively or presses uncomfortably against the face, the experience can quickly become unpleasant.

Children need masks designed for smaller faces rather than adult masks tightened to their limits. Look for a soft silicone skirt, an adjustable strap and a shape that sits comfortably around the eyes and nose.

Tempered-glass lenses are a popular choice for traditional snorkel masks because they offer good clarity and durability. However, the mask must be specifically designed for snorkeling, with appropriate construction and a suitable fit.

Before buying, carry out a simple fit test:

1. Ask your child to place the mask gently against their face without using the strap.
2. Check that the skirt sits evenly around the face and does not overlap the lips.



3. Ask them to inhale gently through the nose to create light suction.
4. Check whether the mask stays in place briefly without being held.
5. Make sure the nose pocket is comfortable and the mask does not press painfully against the bridge of the nose.

Don't Forget the Importance of Snorkeling Safety

The best snorkeling equipment is only part of a safe family experience. Even calm-looking water can present hazards, including currents, waves, boat traffic, cold temperatures and sudden changes in weather.

Before entering the sea, assess the conditions and choose a sheltered, suitable location. Follow local advice, observe warning signs and avoid areas with strong currents.

Of course, at locations like Anthony's Key Resort, you can opt to join one of their dedicated snorkel boats, where not only will you be expertly guided by one of their professional staff, but you will also be able to make use of their quality rental gear.

Final Thoughts

Choosing the best snorkeling gear for children and families is about much more than buying a mask, snorkel and pair of fins. It is about finding equipment that fits properly, suits each person's ability and helps everyone feel comfortable.

Start with a well-fitting mask, choose an appropriate snorkel, and add fins only when they suit the swimmer's needs. Most importantly, remember that good equipment supports a safe snorkeling experience but cannot replace swimming skills, suitable conditions or attentive adult supervision. With the right preparation, families can spend less time adjusting uncomfortable gear and more time enjoying the extraordinary marine life beneath the surface. ■

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