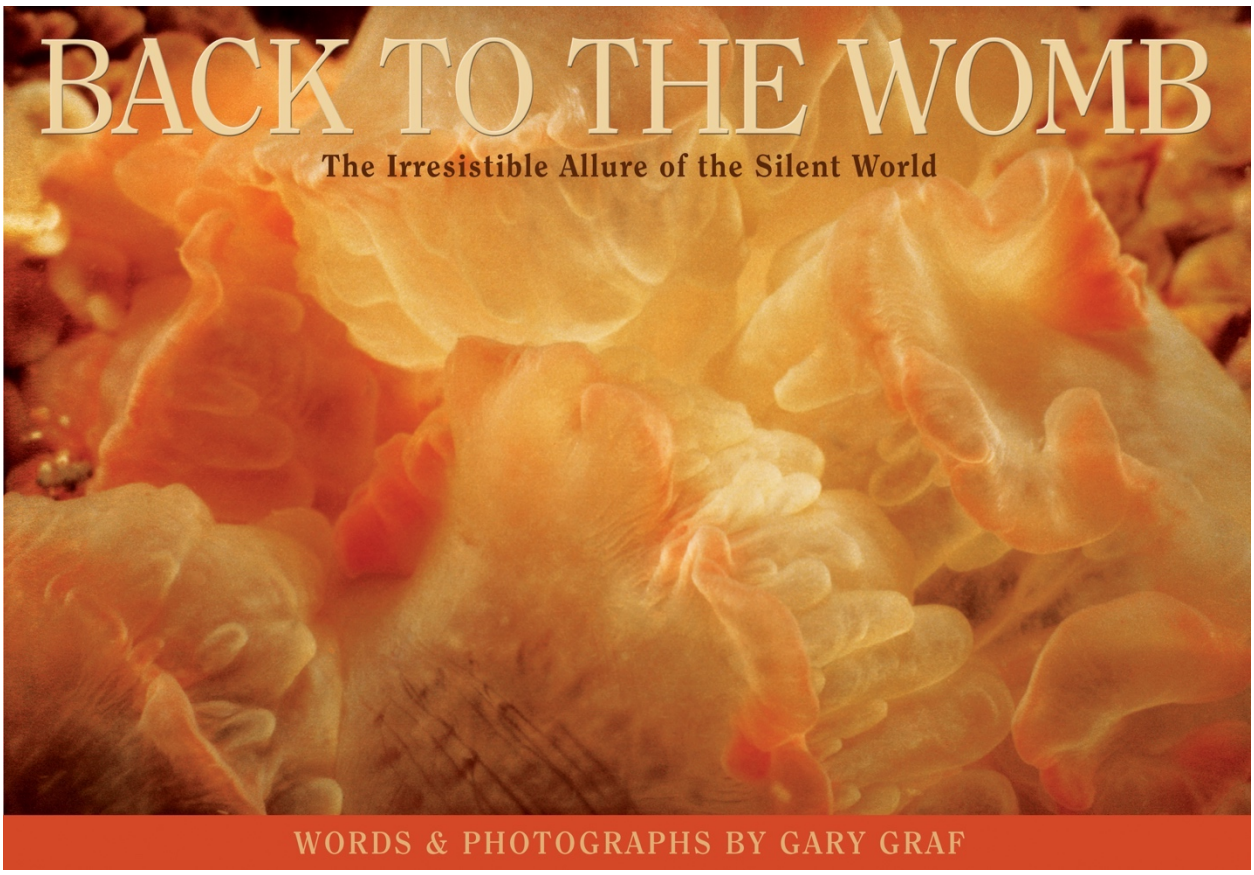

Note: This layout is something I was playing with way-back-when. I wanted the title and graphic to give some idea of the emotional attraction I've always felt for the underwater world and (most of) its denizens. By contrast, the titles of other coffee-table books featuring underwater photos tended to be dry and unimaginative with oh-so predictable blue hues invariably pervading their dust jackets.

I poured over many hundreds of my underwater photos before discovering this one. If you're wondering what you're looking at, it happens to be a macro shot of an extruded sea star stomach. Probably not what you were expecting, but you have to admit, it's also not like the cover of any other underwater photography book. Wry rather than dry.

In 1996-1997 I submitted sample pages and gallery photo dupes to Harry Abrams, Little Brown, Sierra Club Books and numerous other appropriate publishers in the States, as well as a host of literary agents. With one exception my material was soon returned accompanied by notes from the publishers. Most would call it an "interesting" project and recognise that the photography and writing were of "high quality." But then they'd go on to say something along the lines of, "it doesn't fill our current editorial needs." The exception was an enthusiastic agent in New York who shopped my manuscript around for about six months before eventually coming up for air.

I was somewhat mollified to learn that one rather significant reason for the universal rejection was financial. In those days publishing this kind of quality book required an initial outlay of some US$250,000. A quarter of a million dollars! A hefty sum to risk on an author the vast majority of potential buyers had never heard of.

Below is my manuscript illustrated with early scans of the photos accompanying the text. Gallery plates are not included here.

Gary Graf
13 Carefree Road
North Narrabeen NSW 2101
Australia
Phone (61-2) 9913-9357
himself@garygraf.com

text: 65,886 words
gallery plates: 160

BACK TO THE WOMB

The Irresistible Allure of the Silent World

DEDICATION

To my buddies.

"I have seen
A curious child, who dwelt upon a tract
Of inland ground, applying to his ear
The convolutions of a smooth-lipped shell,
To which, in silence hushed, his very soul
Listened intensely; and his countenance soon
Brightened with joy, for from within were heard
Murmurings, whereby the monitor expressed
Mysterious union with its native sea."

William Wordsworth
The Excursion (1814)

"The sea lies all around us... In its mysterious past it encompasses all the dim origins of life and receives in the end, after, it may be, many transmutations, the dead husks of that same life. For all at last returns to the sea - the beginning and the end."

Rachel Carson
The Sea Around Us (1951)

"I will go back to the great sweet mother,
Mother and lover of men, the sea."

Algernon Swinburne
The Triumph of Time (1866)

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PREFACE

Since this is ostensibly a picture book, some of you may feel inclined to skip the verbiage and go straight to the colorful fishes and pretty corals. However, because a successful photograph is supposed to be a reflection of the photographer's views, a personal interpretation of his or her subject, I figured a couple of you might be interested in how I came to feel the way I do about the underwater world. And a few others might be interested in how the sport of diving grew to enjoy its current popularity, at least from one early diver's perspective.

I took my first look through a faceplate in 1953, and I've been looking intently ever since. Considering that I also started fooling around with a camera at the same time, I suppose it was inevitable the two interests would someday be combined. That happened in 1964 while I was serving as a journalist in the Navy - one of our country's *writing* men. So far, I've shot underwater photographs in Japan, Grand Cayman, Belize, Australia, Truk Lagoon, Pohnpei, Yap, Palau, Western Samoa, Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, the Red Sea and Sudbury, Massachusetts.

In none of the gallery photos from any of these places will you spot a diver. An intentional omission. I don't find awkward, rubber-skinned (or even Lycra-swathed) amphibians with all sorts of dangling accoutrements particularly attractive. To me, they're intruders who look quite out of place in the marine environment. (Or anywhere else, for that matter.)

I view the taking of photographs underwater as a form of nature or wildlife photography. Divers tend to be redundant. Can you imagine some picture editor saying to Ansel Adams, when the great landscape photographer was alive and clicking, *Terrific pic of the waterfall, A.A., but do you have one with some tourists in it? Maybe a honeymoon couple, you know, for human interest*?

Now, while I have this personal aversion to photographing people interacting underwater, that doesn't mean they haven't played an important part in my 40-year obsession with diving. In this time quite a few fellow human beings have been involved in quite a few interesting episodes. Nothing particularly spectacular, mind you. Like I wasn't there when they probed the freshly wrecked *Andrea Dorea*. I've never been half eaten by a great white shark. I haven't even frolicked with humpbacked whales. Nevertheless, there have been some *interesting* times, and it's these I've anecdoted on the following pages as a means of providing some insights into the photographs and offering a few clues about how diving has evolved. For those of you who also happen to be underwater photographers, my years of experimenting, both failing and succeeding, just might make life a little easier and more productive for you. I hope so.

For those still wondering about the title - perhaps creationists, or maybe folks hoping for stimulation of another sort, I should explain. For quite some while, certain poetic souls (and not a few scientists) have likened the oceans to the amniotic fluid that protects us all in our mothers' wombs, evidence of our evolving from the sea. All I know is that I invariably experience an all-enveloping sense of calm and comfort when I sink beneath the surface, especially in warmer tropical waters. And I'm rarely all that anxious to leave.

1
SINK OR SWIM

My father had lured me into a false sense of security. I was four years old, and he'd been teaching me to swim, supporting my stomach with his hand as I kicked and flailed about with happy abandon. I'm not even sure I was all that interested in actually swimming. I found just splashing about like that lots of fun, a satisfying end in itself. However, good ol' Dad obviously felt I should have been making more progress. One day without warning he picked me up and threw me in over my head. I surfaced sputtering to hear him urging, *C'mon, swim to me. SWIM to me.*

I may have been young, but I wasn't stupid. I began a determined dog paddle and after a year or two reached him. As I hung on marveling at my new accomplishment, he threw me back into deep water, and I played spaniel again. Only this time he gave me more opportunity to practice my new-found skills. He kept backing up. Thus I left the ranks of non-swimmers to begin an almost life-long affinity with the water. In retrospect, I've a hunch it could have gone either way.

The scene of this and most of my youthful aquatic adventures was a quiet, Walden-like pond in Sudbury, Massachusetts, not far from Thoreau's celebrated retreat. Spring-fed with exceptionally clear waters, White Pond proved an idyllic spot for a kid to spend long, hot summer days.

There I would race various of my family and friends to a raft where I would bounce up and down on the diving board before launching myself into a tightly tucked cannonball. The idea, of course, was to create the mightiest splash imaginable, so as to soak as many unsuspecting sunbathers on the raft as possible. I was a resounding success. (That's me with the rubber stogie, my sister in the tube and the raft in the background.)

The worst part of each day came directly after lunch when for an hour I'd have to find something to do outside the water. We'd all been told that if we were to venture in before a full 60 minutes had dragged by, we'd get stomach cramps and drown. They explained to me that once you drowned, that was it; you couldn't go swimming any more. I didn't really understand this concept, but even the slightest chance of no more swimming proved incentive enough to keep me mostly dry for an hour. In the meantime I skipped rocks, explored the surrounding woods and bugged my mother. *Is it time yet? You sure your watch is working okay? I only* had *three sandwiches.*

Strangely enough, all my informal racing to the raft and gradually other points more distant led me to evolve a pretty decent freestyle stroke. I didn't find out how decent until, as a college freshman taking a mandatory swimming course, I was asked by the instructor, *Who was your coach?* Huh? *Who taught you to swim like that?* Nobody, I just learned. *Well, you have one of the most efficient swimming styles I've ever seen.* Sonuvagun.

2
I Can See

One evening when I was about nine, my father made a family announcement at the dinner table that really shook me. He had rented a cottage in Mattapoisett on Cape Cod *right near the ocean.* Oh-oh. I didn't want to go near any ocean. Lakes, ponds, rivers, any fresh water was fine with me; but the ocean - no way! I knew that beneath the surface of all that salt-flavored water lurked man-eating sharks, giant octopusses and a bunch more dangerous creatures I'd never had to concern myself with at White Pond.

So I made my family announcement, *I ain't going.* They tried to reason with me. They bade me to consider the great long beaches, the waves, the proximity of the shore to our cottage. I retorted, *What about sharks?* They said that there were no sharks there. But I read books. I knew sharks were EVERYWHERE! They said that I was as likely to get eaten by a shark as I was to have a plane crash on me. I decided not to hang around any airports either. Finally, my father served up his most telling argument, *You're going, and that's that. Finish your supper.*

I can admit it now, but you never would have wormed it out of me back then: the Cape, or more precisely Antassawomack, Mattapoisett Neck, Massachusetts, turned out pretty great. (With one headline-grabbing exception.) Buzzards Bay lay practically at our doorstep. There were two beaches, one in a small picturesque cove, the other stretching as far as my five-foot-high eye could see. Better yet, there were some salt

marshes cut by meandering creeks under whose banks hid delicious blue claw crabs. These juicy crustaceans fetched a quarter each from some ladies of advanced years and pronounced wrinkles who took the sun daily on the beach. Best of all, the place crawled with all kinds of fellow little people, some of whom had lately taken to modestly covering the small bumps just emerging on their bony chests. I may have been young, but I wasn't blind.

I soon befriended a trio of towheaded, freckled brothers from Waltham, not far from my own hometown of Belmont. One day they showed up at the beach with some amazing equipment that would swiftly change my young life: facemasks, snorkels and flippers. Stuff I'd never even seen before. I'm not sure now whether they rated their diving gear any more important than their other toys. But for me, after my first unblurred look beneath the surface through one of their faceplates, that gear became just about the most valuable thing a boy could own. Even better than a Hopalong Cassidy hat.

In reality, all I saw that summer was a lot of wave-rippled sand and clumps of seaweed-covered rocks. But I saw it clearly and that amounted to a kind of revelation. I certainly don't believe in any of that astrology nonsense, but I am a Pisces...

Anyway, I was hooked. I felt a bit like D'Artagnan, the fourth musketeer, that summer. Anywhere those three brothers went, I was sure to tag along. Anytime one of them tired of snorkeling, I jumped in to borrow his equipment. I combed the sandy stretches for conch shells. I tried stalking tautog, a local rock fish. I even got used to the eerie caresses of seaweed on my stomach as I hunted among the shallow rocks. And not once did I espy a shark, though I never became totally convinced they weren't out there eyeing me.

The Saturday after our vacation ended and we'd returned home to Belmont, I implored my father to take me to the same large sports store where the brothers three had bought their gear. I'd already checked our local hardware and sports shops. Not

only did they carry no diving equipment, they didn't even know where to get it. This was 1953. These were the pioneer days, folks.

My father responded to my enthusiasm, and that weekend I became the mighty proud owner of a gum rubber mask with an amber lens, a pair of light blue fins with bullfrogs on them and a snorkel with a caged ping pong ball. With the latter, water was supposed to push the ball against the top of the tube as you descended, sealing it off. The thing actually worked, but I would shortly learn that kelp could get tangled in the cage and maybe hold you down long enough for you to drown. I cut the cage off. Couldn't be too careful, even if the closest kelp bed was 3,000 miles away in the Pacific.

Now I had just one problem. The water was way too cold for swimming and would be for the next seven months. I tried testing my gear in the bathtub. The fins worked particularly well, but when my mother made me sponge everything up, I decided to do my diving vicariously for the time being...through magazines, catalogs and books. By careful and persistent perusal of some larger magazine racks, I was able to uncover early issues of 'Water World', 'Dive' and 'The Skin Diver'. Mainly, they featured articles on spearfishing in Florida and California, mostly illustrated with fuzzy shots of well-tanned macho types hefting huge groupers with entrails spilling from jagged spear holes. I poured over each precious issue and sent away to every advertiser who published a catalog. When you're a kid, especially an obsessed one, it's really great anticipating something in the mail. Funny though how you start searching the mail box the day after you sent away for something. Just to be sure.

I also haunted our town libraries, then those of all the surrounding towns. I quickly memorized any Dewey Decimal System number even remotely associated with diving, like: *359 Naval Forces & Warfare, 574.9 Marine Biology, 597 Cold-blooded Vertebrates, 623 Nautical Engineering,* etc.

Over the next few years I devoured all the classics; like *The Silent World, Diving to Adventure, To Hidden Depths* and *Free Diving*. I was enthralled by the exploits of the first scuba divers: Frédérick Dumas, Philippe Tailliez, Hans Hass, Dmitiri Rebikoff, Philippe

Diolé, Folco Quilici, that charming lady with a spear, Eugenie Clark, and, of course, the man who really began it all, Captain Jacques Yves Cousteau. Even then, more than 40 years ago, when I considered all that he'd already accomplished, I found it hard to believe this legend was not only living but continuing to explore new underwater horizons from his converted minesweeper *Calypso.* You'd be hard pressed to find many giants among men in recent years, but Cousteau must have been one.

Most of these books were liberally splashed with some of the earliest underwater photos, most in black & white. And while they suffer badly in comparison to those published today, they nonetheless held an aura of magic for me back then.

Something else magical back then were the days a bunch of us would play hooky and catch a trolley into Boston. The others had just one thing in mind: the strip shows in Scollay Square. I had a second priority. So I tried to make sure we'd leave early enough to have time to kill around Atlantic Avenue. Because on one of the wharves stood a building housing a classy boat outfitter called James Bliss & Son, which also happened to be one of the few, if only, places around that sold diving equipment. We would wander in, this motley assemblage of truants, and roam among all the stainless-steel fittings, teak ladders and ship-to-shore radios, so that one of us could gaze at and actually touch real Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatuses. Till everyone else decided the time had come to gaze at other things.

3
NAKED FEARING

After a third summer by the sea at Mattapoisett my folks decided to forego any more vacations there. Things just weren't the same after something that happened during our second year. One still August day the sea went flat. None of us had ever seen it so placid. You might say the Atlantic looked pacific. (Then again, you might not.) Later in the afternoon the sky turned an ominous gray. The next morning the wind had really come up. The local New Bedford radio station mentioned something about a severe nor'easter. Maybe they meant to avoid panic among their listeners. Even so, a number of wary boat owners gathered on the beach to pull their small craft way up past the high-tide mark. I still remember the scene clearly. It was unnaturally dark, rainy and gusty. I wore a thin poncho over a pair of shorts and the wind whipped the sand, driving it into my bare legs and causing a stinging sensation not unlike a swampful of mosquitoes on the rampage. As soon as we'd dragged the last boat up on rollers, everyone retreated home to catch the next weather bulletin. By this time some bright spark at the radio station had seen fit to put the situation into better perspective for all us listeners. They broke the news that what we had here was a bit more serious than previously reported. Hurricane Carol was headed straight for Cape Cod, ETA about noon. Several Paul Revere-types spread the word from cottage to cottage that

people were gathering well back from the shore in a large building that normally served as a combination general store, post office and community center.

Talk about pandemonium. Outside the shuttered windows the wind howled and the rain pelted. Inside was only slightly less tempestuous. Barking dogs, screeching cats, wailing babies and screaming kids competed for attention. Looking around I saw a whole lot of strained grinning and bearing. And a fair amount of naked fearing. After a couple of hours that seemed an eon or two longer, we sensed some abatement in the cacophony outside. Soon it seemed almost still. A daring few of us ventured outside to discover the sun shining. *Thank goodness, it's over,* sighed some. *Maybe not,* cautioned one or two others. The others were right. We were seeing the eye of the hurricane pass directly over us. As the sun disappeared, we retreated inside to go through the whole broadening experience again.

Eventually, Hurricane Carol finished with us and whirled on to wreak more havoc elsewhere. We inspected the damage. The two rows of cottages in front of ours had disappeared, as had the ones on either side. The bushes and shrubs that had hid us from the road were a memory. Debris some three to four feet high surrounded our

summer place. But it still stood...right where we'd left it. When we'd moved in the previous year, neighbors had confided to us that the old sea captain from whom we rented was something of a fanatic. *Bit touched in the head*, they suggested. It seems that when building the cottage, he'd embedded eyebolts into concrete pilings and actually bolted the house to the foundation. Said he didn't want his place floating away in a big

blow. I could see some of the people who had him pegged as a nutcase picking through the rubble that used to be their places.

We walked down to the beach. It was utterly empty, not a boat in sight. Later someone would find ours about a mile away, smack dab in the middle of some woods, completely seaworthy and virtually untouched. We could only guess that the seas had lifted it right over the treetops before receding. During our initial investigation at the beach the tide had gone out maybe half a mile, leaving bare all my prime snorkeling territory. If I'd thought it a mite sparse on sights to see before, what lay before me now was the most thorough form of desolation. Absolutely smooth sand and totally naked rocks. On the way back I noticed a telephone pole a few hundred yards from shore. The high-water mark was at least 15 feet up.

When we eventually drove around the Cape, I saw destruction I couldn't attempt to describe adequately. Unless you've experienced the forces of Nature at their most violent, you really can't picture it. I may have been young, but I was suitably impressed. And then some.

Like I said earlier, we did return for a third summer. But many of our friends didn't. They had nothing to return to. And where we used to go barefoot, we now had to wear sneakers. They'd cleaned up pretty well, carting away tons of rubble, but they couldn't get all the broken glass and other tiny sharp bits and pieces. However, they did manage to find all the toothpaste tubes. A pity, because during my post-hurricane reconnoitering the previous year, I'd discovered that something quite wonderful happened when one stomped on an uncapped family size tube of Pepsodent. This great, long, white column squirted out a good three feet. You should try it.

It wasn't just an excess of broken glass and a lack of toothpaste tubes that made that third summer pale in comparison to the first two. My parents had fewer people to talk to and socialize with. And my sister and I missed our friends. Her problem was even more acute, because some of her younger playmates seemed to think she was somehow to blame. My sister's name was Carol. (Still is, for that matter.) But worst of all,

underwater it looked like a lot of years would have to pass before things returned to normal.

4
Free at Last

So it was back to White Pond for our days by the water. My mother says of this period, which lasted another five summers or so, that what she mostly remembers of me was the top of this snorkel moving through the water, frequently disappearing for a minute or two to reappear with a spurt of water some distance off. She would spend her time speculating where I'd resurface... and occasionally *if* I'd resurface. Mothers are like that.

In looking back, I'm not sure what on that pond bottom held such lasting fascination. Certainly, searching among all the dead leaves to watch (and sometimes catch) tadpoles as they developed stage by stage into frogs was interesting. Much more rewarding than finding human detritus like the all-too ubiquitous beer cans. Not to mention suntan lotion bottles, bathing cap straps, plastic buckets and other unbiodegradable crap.

Of course, the fascination for me may simply have been the knowledge I was privy to a mysterious world that all those people on the beach were totally ignorant of. (It would be years before the first Cousteau special or Lloyd Bridges' *Sea Hunt* appeared on

television.) Whatever, I continued to dream of the day when I would finally strap a tank to my back and be able to go down farther and stay long enough to really see and experience this private world of mine.

My big chance came when I was fourteen. The family had accepted an invitation to weekend at a neighbor's summer house on Damariscotta Lake in Maine. Up there they introduced me to this great beer barrel of a man who also happened to be one of the early scuba divers in New England. He'd been told of my obsession, and we chatted awhile. I suppose what he was doing was testing me and my knowledge. But I'd done my homework, about five years-worth. We talked about embolisms and narcosis, single-stage vs two-stage regulators, hand signals and buddy-breathing, this and that. When I'd apparently satisfied him, he mentioned that he had a spare tank and asked whether I might like to join him for a dive. Nonchalantly jumping up and down, I allowed as how I didn't seem to have anything else on.

We couldn't quite tighten his harness to my size, so the tank tended to slide about on my back with the regulator bouncing off my head. But I hardly noticed. Even though Damariscotta offered very little more in the way of underwater scenery than a jumble of big boulders left behind by some ancient glacier on its retreat northward, I felt transported. Finally, I was swimming unrestricted underwater. No more having to limit my descent to 40 or 50 feet and no more having to return to the surface within two minutes. The sense of freedom so exhilarated me that I didn't want to come up, a sensation I've never quite gotten over. I had considered that with all the preparation I'd done to this moment, my very first scuba dive might seem something of an anti-climax. I need not have worried. Right then I vowed that in the not-too-distant future I would own my own tank and regulator. And it would fit.

Easier said than done. Scuba gear cost a lot of money and I was fresh out. In my early teens I'd had a paper route, but I spent those earnings paying my way across the States in the back of a truck, eating and sleeping by the side of the road. Twice. (But that's another story. Or two.) In high school I worked in an insurance company mail

room after school and during summer vacations. However, those wages were earmarked for college. Only after I entered the University of Massachusetts did I figure a way to save some money. I starved myself, more or less. My parents and I had reasoned that the cost of eating in the campus dining commons on weekends seemed excessive compared to the price of weekday meals. So we decided I should fend for myself Saturdays and Sundays at local Amherst diners, coffee shops, soup kitchens, etc.

Unbeknownst to my parents, what I would actually do was borrow a few extra sachets of sugar and those little boxes of cereals from the commons during the week. The milk would be coaxed from a coin-operated machine in the dormitory. I lost some weight and developed a real aversion to snaps, crackles and pops, but I saved money. When I went home for Easter vacation, I handed my mother my dirty laundry, borrowed the family car and headed for the closest dive shop. There I bought a 72 cu/in galvanized tank and a US Divers Mistral regulator. The Mistral was a direct descendent of the original single-stage reg invented in 1943 by a French industrial engineer named Émile Gagnan and a naval lieutenant by the name of Jacques Y. Cousteau.

I was dying to try it, but I'd promised my parents that I'd take a certification course first. After asking around at a couple of dive shops, I picked a YMCA course taught in a neighboring town. Set up by local pioneer Frank Scali, it was supposed to be the best available, and it may well have been. But because of all my years of reading and snorkeling, I encountered little new information. Perhaps sensing we needed something extra, the instructor gave me and one other quick-study an interesting exercise. The three of us started at one end of the pool and made a gradual ascent to the surface at the other end 75 feet away, all the while sharing one regulator. After we'd handled this fairly demanding buddy breathing exercise without any trouble on our first try, the instructor pretty much left us on our own to explore the bottom of the pool. Just as I have never dived anywhere outdoors, no matter how pristine-seeming the setting, without spotting a beer can, I can't remember ever seeing the bottom of a swimming pool back then without its share of band-aids.

5
THREE-BEER DIVES

Once I became a genuine, certified scuba diver, I discovered that I didn't know any others. No one to be my buddy. Fortunately, when I returned to UMass for the Spring semester, two students, with a little help from one of the phys ed instructors, were trying to start a scuba club. When the first meeting ended, I went up to them and offered my services. Shortly afterwards, they appointed me vice president, treasurer, safety officer, instructor, marketing manager, poster designer, etc. Concurrently.

At the time we established the UMass Scuba Club, we were competing for members with some 500 other clubs duly registered with the administration. Within a year ours had grown to be second largest, even though we charged a comparatively stiff entrance fee and annual dues, put each prospective member through a series of pretty tough tests and didn't have the benefit of Cousteau TV specials. As I understood it, we might have made it to No. 1 except that two other clubs combined to gain the largest membership. I really hustled during those two semesters. Keeping track of dues, chairing meetings, buying new club equipment, drawing posters, teaching classes, overseeing entrance qualifications, organizing dives, chasing new members and occasionally even diving. Probably my greatest coup during this period involved use of the Women's Phys Ed pool. We had started by using the pool in the Men's Phys Ed building for qualification tests and instruction. Called the Cage, this ancient edifice

lacked proper facilities for distaff divers. A pretty stupid situation. We realized perfectly well that the best way to enlist more male members was to have stacks of females aboard. Coincidentally, one of the newest buildings on campus belonged to the Women's Phys Ed Department. And they had a sparkling new Olympic-sized pool.

Unfortunately, one of the guys had already tried to gain permission from the woman in charge and failed. He reported back that she was a stubborn, narrow-minded old harridan. Or words to that effect. So I made an appointment and went to see her. I don't remember what I said, but I do know I practically oozed charm. After assuring her we wouldn't scratch her new tiles with our tanks and overcoming a few other perfectly justifiable worries, I obtained her okay. In return, I offered her free instruction and life membership in the University of Massachusetts Scuba Club. I may only have been a sophomore, but I was learning.

Recruitment began in earnest after that. Our next meeting attracted a fine turnout, but that's not why I'll never forget it. We gathered first in the spectator seats overlooking that shimmering new pool. Following my explanation of the four exercises required of potential new members, they adjourned to the changing rooms. They had to swim 12 lengths of the pool using any stroke they wanted, then a length underwater and another length towing someone in a cross-chest carry. The final test required them to surface-dive about 10 feet to the bottom and retrieve a heavy rubber brick.

As we waited for everyone to reappear, the pool echoed with the usual laughing, shouting and splashing. Then **SILENCE!** Everyone, male and female alike, was suddenly staring at this rather pretty brunette, one of the last to emerge from the changing area. I could easily see what took her so long. She had to squeeze a chest, not unlike the one that precedes Dolly Parton everywhere, into a black tank suit she must have borrowed from her undeveloped kid sister. I resolved then and there that this young lady would be a member of the UMass Scuba Club come hell or high water. (Sexism was a lot more acceptable back then.)

She fared fine on the long swim; her trouble began with the length underwater. She simply couldn't get down. No matter how hard she kicked and tried to pull herself under, her built-in Mae West would quickly bob her to the surface. While she struggled, I stood above on the diving board, staring down as dispassionately as I could. Eventually, she looked up and shrugged her shoulders. I gulped and asked whether she could at least keep her face under. She nodded. And that's how she did her length underwater. Next came her cross-chest carry, and we had a truly commendable number of red-blooded male volunteers. The girl she prudently chose to carry rode very high, in little danger of a mouthful of water. Then came the surface dive for the brick on the bottom. I'd already sent someone to find a weight belt.

The impressive brunette tried gamely without assistance, but only her top half would disappear. And then only for a second or two. So she put on the weight belt and made a little more downward progress. I sent for more weights. Finally, with the aid of about 10 pounds and a fierce flutter of kicks she groped her way to the bottom, grabbed the brick and struck out for the land of air. As she neared the surface, she lost her grip on the brick. And everyone moaned, *Oooohhh.* Then they looked at me. After what I considered a suitable time for deliberation, about a split second, I announced my verdict: *Close enough.* The place erupted in cheering.

I have other memories from UMass, though none that stands out quite like the girl in the black tank top. One thing I do remember clearly from those days was the smell of neoprene. Because sport diving had such a long teething stage, equipment remained pretty basic for quite awhile. Custom wetsuits were rare. So if you didn't fit the manufacturers' conception of Small, Medium, Large or, in a few instances, Extra Large, you were out of luck. Unless, of course, you fashioned your own. Besides being the best way to ensure a snug fit, this method proved much cheaper than an off-the-rack suit. Ever a major consideration of college students.

What we did was buy a big roll of 3/16" foam neoprene, spread it out on the floor of a dorm room and, trying to ignore the pungent smell, lie down on it. Then someone else

would chalk our outlines on it, top and bottom, leaving a bit extra for the thickness of torso and limbs. Two identical patterns would be cut. Before gluing them together, we'd have to clean a coating of talcum powder from the edges. The time-honored procedure involved squirting on lighter fluid then igniting it. I still can't understand how we avoided burning down Chadbourne Dorm.

Fire also played a part in another college episode, this one a little farther off campus. Six of us club members set off in a clapped-out Chevy to dive a mountain lake over the border in New Hampshire. Part way up a long incline the car caught altitude sickness and stuttered to a stop. When we lifted the hood, flames leapt out. And I leapt into action. Assuming command, I directed that the tanks be removed from the trunk. As the car's owner wailed about the fire consuming his pride and joy, I tried to explain how if they overheated, the tanks would take off like rockets, destroying everything in their paths. Then I suggested throwing sand from the road's shoulder to smother the fire. In a frenzy of scooping, everyone threw handful after handful onto the engine. It worked, but we had to waste an hour or so cleaning the engine before we could resume our journey. The whole rest of the trip I kept hearing what a stupid idea throwing the sand was. Bunch of ingrates.

Another trip to the New Hampshire mountains took us to Spofford Lake west of Keene near the Vermont border. It was a cloudy/bright April day, snow still lay in clumps on the ground and a thin layer of ice covered most of the lake. None of us had ever tried a dive beneath ice before, and we didn't know exactly what to expect. Compared to the way ice divers go about things today, our preparation might be seen as a little on the casual side. I think we brought an axe along, but no dry suits, lines, compasses, extra tanks or any other sort of special precautionary gear.

Fortunately, the ice had started melting (from the shore outward, as it normally does), so we could wade in and slide under the solid surface. I had one of those store-bought wetsuits. Most of me measured Medium, but not my arms or legs. The first sensation I became aware of was a distinct chilliness where my booties and pants didn't quite meet. Then as I submerged, the water quickly leaked in. I wouldn't be surprised if my gasp continued to echo around the White Mountains for hours. Jeez, it was cold.

The whole idea behind a wetsuit is to trap a layer of water between your skin and the suit so that your body heat can warm it up. In reality, especially in those days of ill-fitting, store-bought suits, even the slightest movement would bring in a stream of fresh, unheated water. And your body heat would dissipate in a hurry. Needless to say, on that particular April day I used a minimal flick of my fins to move about.

As per usual, I swam along mostly looking down. This way I discovered a clay jug of Glen Garry Scotch half buried in the mud. I dug it out and, although all that came out was silt, I still carried it along. (It later became a lamp.) I still don't know how I managed to hold on to the thing. I could barely grip my regulator. Lucky the Mistral was a two-hose type, which tended to keep the mouthpiece in place. My lips couldn't; they were numb. And that part of my face not covered by my hood or mask turned a really unusual shade of purple. As did two narrow rings of skin just above my ankles.

The first time I thought to look upward I saw something so brilliant it made all the discomfort worthwhile. The underside of the ice had partially melted, creating a seemingly endless crystalline formation. With the light washing through the thin layer of ice, it looked like millions of diamonds sparkling. This was the first time I fervently wished I had a camera. It never occurred to me that I was probably too numb to work any controls.

Another interesting, peculiarly New England dive took place in November at a quartz quarry in Lee, Massachusetts, near the New York border. With shear sides all around, it was a bit like diving in an 80-foot-deep swimming pool. And, strangely enough, the water wasn't that uncomfortable. Must have been a warm spring

somewhere. As with most quarries, what lay on the bottom held the real fascination. For many years this had been the place people in those parts chucked things they no longer needed. Big things, like horse-drawn carts. And little things, like murder weapons. I felt a little like an aquatic version of a bag lady rummaging through all the junk on the bottom.

By the time we surfaced, a moist snow had started to blanket the ground. Changing out of a clammy wet suit in a blizzard proved to be one of your more invigorating, character-building experiences. When we eventually made it back to campus, the heavens had dumped five inches.

As you can see, cold water diving was a way of life in those parts. We did have a secret weapon though, one that I took great delight in sharing with novice divers. As they'd sit in those spectator seats above the pool hanging on my every word, I'd reveal a foolproof way to get warm even in the iciest of waters. Beer. I explained that before each dive we 'seasoned' divers would have two or three bottles of the amber liquid. Then once in the water we'd let nature run its course, so to speak. I really enjoyed watching as looks of comprehension crossed their faces, followed by either a knowing grin or a look of utter horror, or somewhere in between. Once they'd reacted in the desired manner, I'd remind them to rinse their wetsuits well after each dive.

Nowadays, combining drinking and diving is a definite no-no. But back then we knew much less about how extended stays underwater affected our bodies. I think we suspected beer wasn't the best thing in the world for us, but neither was freezing our asses off.

Probably the most popular dive site in those days for the UMass Scuba Club was around an island just offshore at Manchester (now known as Manchester-by-the-Sea), Massachusetts, near fabled Marblehead. The frigate USS *New Hampshire* had been designed by the same man who created the *Constitution* ('Old Ironsides') and the *Constellation*. However, because of a few budgetary problems it was some time between when the keel was laid in 1818 and the day she was launched 46 years later in 1864.

Meanwhile, this warship missed a lot of action. By 1922, stripped, de-masted and renamed the *Granite State*, she was being towed to Bath, Maine, to be scrapped for her copper and hardwood. It wasn't to be. After catching fire, she parted from her towline and ran aground against Graves Island, sinking in about 30 feet. And there she lay forgotten until some divers discovered her in the 1950s.

Not so much a wreck as wreckage, the old frigate had quite an interesting treasure to yield. Namely, the spikes which had held her together. From four to 12 inches long, reputedly 95 percent pure copper and five percent gold and silver, with US clearly stamped on their flanks, they had been hand wrought in Paul Revere's foundry.

After struggling into our wetsuits and strapping on our tanks and weight belts, we would climb and stumble along granite cliffs for about 500 yards to a spot opposite the island. There we would gingerly make our way down, launch ourselves into what was invariably rough water and freeze. Particularly in winter. As cold and uncomfortable as Spofford Lake may have been, the ocean off Manchester could be even worse. Salt water, especially salt water being pushed and shoved around by fierce wave action isn't quick to freeze. But this sure as hell doesn't mean it can't become more than a little frigid. Even worse, the same fierce wave action made it quite impossible to keep the icy water from continually circulating inside our wetsuits. (The USS *New Hampshire* rated as a minimum three-beer dive.)

So, what motivated us and a lot of other divers to keep braving the elements and continue coming back to this inhospitable site? Greed. We couldn't collect enough of those spikes. As soon as we got near the wreckage, it was every diver for himself. Buddy, what buddy? On hands and knees we'd fan sand away. Or with masks only inches away we'd probe the endless crevices around the base of Graves Island, ever alert for those historic spikes. The first divers on the *New Hampshire* filled barrels with the things. Big barrels, too. Five years later we could count on averaging three or four spikes per diver. Plus a few ragged sheets of copper sheathing, which had been used to protect the hull from teredo worms (actually small bi-valved clams). Some other

personal finds included a small brass buckle and a gold key. Not exactly *Atocha* class, but then I didn't spend 16 years searching either.

Exiting the water along this rocky stretch amid crashing winter waves while weighed down with booty often turned out to be a shade more exciting than we would have preferred. But being buffeted about by the breakers, having gear damaged or lost, picking up some nasty scrapes and bruises all came with the territory. You become so philosophical after a year or two in college.

As the Scuba Club continued to monopolize my time, my studies suffered more and more. Within a year I'd flunked out. Even worse, I'd timed my departure rather badly. That disagreement in Vietnam had employers very hesitant about hiring anyone who might get drafted. And my mother didn't want me hanging around the house. Since I've never been much into marching, I didn't feel like waiting for the Army to get me. I joined the Navy. I figured the odds were a lot better in the Navy of being stationed somewhere I could get in some occasional diving.

6
SEEING THE WORLD ON THE CHEAP

I shot my first underwater picture in 1965, holding my breath in a hotel swimming pool in Atami, Japan. I'd just shelled out $62.95 at the Navy Exchange in Yokosuka for this revolutionary amphibious camera which, while no larger than a normal 35mm model, would actually work as deep as 150 feet. The original design belonged to a French-born Belgian engineer named Jean Guy Marie Joseph de Wouters d'Oplinter. (Just in case you're ever on a quiz program and the question arises.) A crewmember of the *Calypso*, DeWouters turned to his legendary captain for some help in marketing his camera. Although Cousteau named it after his renowned research vessel, the Calypso camera met with rather qualified success. In 1962 they sold the manufacturing rights to Nippon Kogaku, the makers of Nikon cameras. These crafty folks painted the Calypso all black and rechristened it Nikonos. Since then, many hundreds of thousands or the original and subsequent models have been sold. Virtually every serious underwater photographer anywhere owns or once owned at least one.

Back in that swimming pool I didn't give much thought to the future success of the Nikonos; I was much too busy attempting to photograph my buddy before either of us ran out of breath. Once I became convinced the camera actually worked, that it wasn't about to spring a leak, I figured an ocean baptismal appropriate.

Situated at the base of some steep but rather stunted mountains, Atami was a picturesque coastal resort city about 60 miles south of Tokyo. On my way down the hill from the hotel to the shore I saw hundreds of people who had come to partake of the mineral springs that put Atami on the map. They were as easy to recognize as tourists as we two round-eyes were. As they shuffled through the streets, they were all robed in kimonos none too subtly covered with the names of the hotels that provided them.

Before I could get wet I had to climb over rocks and some giant concrete Leggo pieces which were heaped together to form what looked like a pretty effective, albeit ugly breakwater. I snorkeled out to a likely spot and finished the roll on a few of the local finny denizens. When I got my film back, I was quite impressed. Not with my underwater photography skills (they were nonexistent), but with how well the Nikonos performed.

A combination of no local knowledge, no boat and no one to dive with kept me from any more subventures during my stay in Japan. However, my underwater camera did feature in one rather novel episode. On a very hot Sunday some friends and I decided to visit nearby Enoshima Beach to discover what fun in the sun Japanese-style was like. Considering the situation, I figured my elements-proof Nikonos an appropriate choice for recording the trip's highlights. TV news footage from the air had made Japanese beaches appear much like any others upon which I'd prostrated myself, except there were a few million more people and not quite as many blond heads. But on the ground

certain other differences became immediately apparent. For one thing, they didn't have sand. Instead, everyone sat around on this gooey, black, volcanic mud. Then there

were the *jo-sans*. While Japanese girls can look demurely devastating in kimonos, bikinis back then were best left to the likes of those bounteous Bondi Beach birds. (Sexism was once particularly acceptable in Japan, but times have changed.)

When we got back to the barracks, I headed for the shower room to wash off the muck. It wasn't a very private place. Everyone on the floor, and it was a large floor with lots of bunks, did his showering in a big open area with concrete walls, floor and ceiling (or for the nautically pedantic - bulkheads, deck and overhead). Rows of nozzles ran along the two longer facing walls, a few of them spewing water over some barracks-mates when in I walked with my soap and towel. And Nikonos. Where better to comply with the instructions that advised rinsing it with fresh water after each use? My logic seemed to escape these guys. They glanced over once, incuriously; then instantly again, incredulously. While one hand turned off the shower, the other grabbed the towel and

out they went, full speed ahead. I never did find out whether anyone summoned the Shore Patrol to deal with the pervert in the shower room.

7
GETTING HOOKED

Five years passed before I used the Nikonos the way its inventors had intended. By this time I was carving out my niche in the Manhattan advertising world. One Sunday in New York, while pouring over the Times travel section for some likely spot to spend part of my first annual vacation, I spotted a small ad for the Cayman Islands. I'd read several articles in the past about this trio of tiny Caribbean islands less than 500 miles from Miami. The consensus seemed to be that Grand Cayman rated about the best diving location in the whole wide world. Or thereabouts. 'Nuff said.

Then as today, the Caymans boasted one of the highest standards of living in the West Indies. Partly because the men, reputed to be the best sailors in the world, filled berths in many of the world's merchant navies and dutifully sent most of their generous wages home. But mainly this British crown colony owed its financial well-being to some inspired legislation that turned the islands into one of the world's most popular off-shore tax havens. When I first visited the miniscule capital of George Town, it already hosted a seemingly adequate 18 banks. Today, this little island, only 22 miles across at the widest point, accommodates more than 500 financial institutions.

Although diving in the Caymans has also become big business, catering to some 70,000 divers annually, back in 1970 there were only a few small operators nursing the industry through its infancy. But every halfway-bright diver visiting then knew it was

just a matter of time. The islands were too peaceful and stable. The waters too calm and clear. The undersea flora and fauna too rich and diverse. The islanders too friendly and helpful. The prices too, too reasonable.

Each summer for four years I spent most of my vacation time at a modest hotel called Sunset House. I doubt whether I could have chosen better. A family affair, Sunset House was run by an extremely helpful lady with a rather droll wit named Hebe Connors, her son Adrien Briggs and his wife Bonnie. The food was great. They catered primarily for divers. The prices were cheap ($13 a day that first year, including breakfast and dinner). And the ocean was right out back.

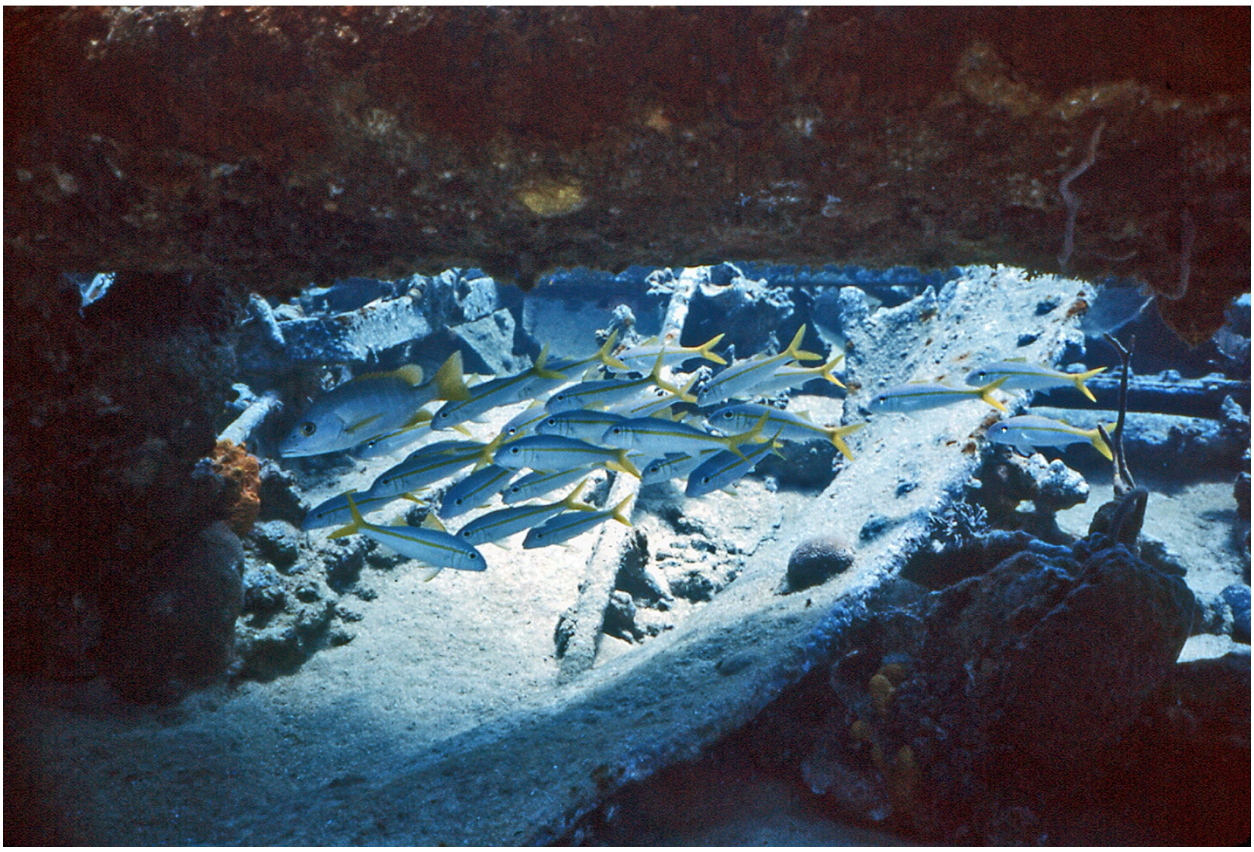
I'll never forget my first close-up look at Cayman waters. I'd been up all night, having had to catch a 1:30am flight from Kennedy to connect in Miami with a 7am flight aboard LACSA, the airline of Costa Rica. An hour and 20 minutes later the Viscount touched down on Grand Cayman. After shuffling through a cursory Customs check in the shack purporting to be the International Terminal, I caught a cab to Sunset House.

As I stood there being welcomed by Hebe, a guy ran in and announced he'd just caught a shark out back. So I excused myself to have a look. He'd caught himself a shark alright, a little three-foot lemon. But that wasn't what grabbed my attention. It was the water, perfectly calm and so crystal clear I could easily discern large coral heads and brilliantly colored reef fish gliding about. I came out of my trance, took a quick look at the shark and concluded any pals it might have had out there were too small to swallow me whole. I raced back to collect my bags and room key. In no time I had loaded the Nikonos, put on a bathing suit, grabbed my mask, fins and snorkel and headed water-ward. Until the day I flew out, I would only emerge to eat, sleep or get a fresh bottle of air. I averaged two tanks a day and snorkeled the rest of the time, trying to finish a roll of film on each dive. Not a particularly demanding task.

Once back in New York, after I'd had a chance to take a reasonably objective look at my shots, I decided that the exposures weren't too bad considering I'd yet to invest in an u/w light meter. But my composition generally left much to be desired. The standard Nikonos viewfinder made no allowance for parallax or precise focusing, and blurry, dorsal finless fish look every bit as incomplete as fuzzy, headless humans.
I realized that eventually I would have to get a housing for my Nikon F so I could enjoy the benefits of reflex viewing and ground-glass focusing. But that cost money, and I was still a struggling junior copywriter. In the meantime, by employing a little judicious editing I was able to put together a number of fairly decent shots. Enough so that towards the end of an evening in an East Side singles bar, I could invite a brand-new lady friend back to see my underwater slides. I may not have been young any longer, but I still couldn't afford etchings.

Next August I returned to Grand Cayman and Sunset House to spend my full vacation allotment of two weeks. I joined up there with a Swedish fellow named Leif, also on his own, and we explored some of Grand Cayman's most celebrated underwater scenery. Scattered over about five acres of George Town Harbour in only 15-35 feet of water were some good-sized chunks of probably the most-dived wreck in

the world. Originally a 375-foot steel-hulled Norwegian freighter, the *Balboa* sank during a hurricane in 1932. Because she posed something of a danger to navigation, local authorities dynamited her all over the sandy bottom. Some of the larger bits and pieces made interesting subject matter. A huge propeller, the boiler room and the iron ribs had all attracted a sizeable permanent fish population. And lots of transient



shutterbugs. Once upon a time, there was also a substantial community of sea urchins, but thousands of visiting divers, seeking to attract the tamer fish by offering fresh seafood, had decimated the numbers of these spiny echinoderms.

Nearby, not far offshore, behind the laundry, amid a fair bit of discarded rubbish, sat a second shallow wreck called the *Cali*. No one seemed too sure where she came from or when she went down. They did agree, however, that she was carrying a cargo of rice. She too was scattered about on the bottom and the locals said she was also dynamited. Personally, I prefer to believe she sprang a leak, sank and when the rice swelled, there occurred a tremendous underwater explosion which ruptured her hull and provided a feast for thousands of chopstick-wielding fish. Either way, the *Cali*

wasn't a bad dive, with decent visibility, plenty of small fish and a host of tiny, very colorful sessile creatures clinging to the various hunks of corroding metal.

Another popular dive spot Leif and I explored was Eden Rocks, an aptly named series of shallow coral heads that sometime in the distant past had grown over to form a maze of tunnels and caves. Since it was only a short swim from shore and just down the road from Sunset House, we put our tanks on our backs, the rest of our gear in the baskets of our rented bicycles and pedalled there. I reckon that you could have dived this area twice a day for months without becoming jaded, thanks to the huge diversity of flora, fauna and formations.

In those days no dive trip to Grand Cayman was considered complete without a day in North Sound. A bunch of divers would charter a large outboard-powered skiff from a Caymanian guide invariably named Ewbanks, like half the population of these islands seemed to be. (Something like Christian on Pitcairn and Norfolk Islands, I suppose.) First stop was a deep barrier reef stretching across the mouth of the sound. The Caymans are actually the tips of three huge submarine mountains, a geological feature that makes for some pretty spectacular drop-offs. After a descent of 80 to 100 feet we'd reach the edge of a wall. This nearly vertical face plunged down 600 feet or so before sloping and heading a further 6,000 feet to the bottom.

At 100 feet the growth was prolific and awesome, especially the sponges. All along the edge of the wall these primitive invertebrates protruded; every color, size and shape represented. Nearly as prominent were the soft coral Gorgonia and hydroids waving to and fro in the current. Closely resembling ferns, tree branches and other plants, they're actually animals; colonies of tiny coral polyps. Once we reached 120 feet, we kept a special lookout for large orangish branches. If we spotted one of good size, we were prepared to sacrifice whatever time it took (within decompression limits) to pry it loose. Because once the orange slime was removed, the coral's true color was revealed. Black. And once we turned over this black coral to a local craftsman, he would cut, fashion and polish it into absolutely beautiful, totally unique jewelry.

Another great buzz from these deep wall-dives came when I'd swim out from the edge, hang over the abyss, then try to identify the giant shapes gliding about another 100 feet below. It's probably just as well they didn't show the same curiosity about me. Occasionally, we'd see a large shark cruising along the edge of the drop-off, but not once did one approach within camera range. After awhile I started chasing them, but they inevitably swam off. I've since found such shyness common with most sharks and hence still don't have that many close-up pictures of what Australian divers call bities.

On one North Sound trip the party included a couple of school teachers who desperately wanted to see sharks. Swayed by their sincerity, our guide brought along some chum. Once we'd anchored, in it went closely followed by these two curious women. It must have worked. All of us who witnessed their return to the surface agree, implausible as it may sound, they never touched the side of the boat. They shot out of the water and thudded head-first onto the deck, tanks and all, just like in the cartoons. Adrenaline is a wondrous chemical.

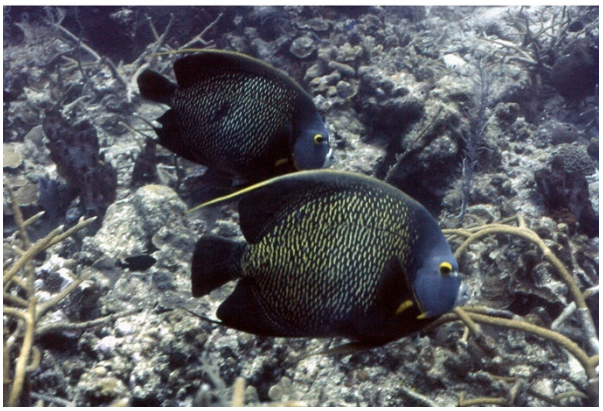
In any event, after the deep morning dive the North Sound itinerary included a snorkel dive within the very shallow lagoon so we could hunt for lunch. The main ingredient was conch. Whichever Ewbanks guide we had would knock a hole in the top of each shell we gave him, pull out the animal inside, then marinate and cook them all over an open fire. If someone got lucky and speared a grouper or snapper or wrestled a lobster from the rocks, it could turn into a regular feast. In those days conches abounded in the shallow sound waters, but at the rate the various Ewbanks boats required them, I should think these large shellfish would be something of an endangered species nowadays. No doubt they'd have been a lot safer if diving didn't create such a healthy appetite. You certainly wouldn't eat them otherwise: however much hot sauce you squirted on, the meat still tended to taste like rubber.

After lunch and a suitable surface interval to allow the nitrogen bubbles within us to shrink sufficiently, we'd return to the reef area for a dive at about 60 feet. This second year I enjoyed one of my best subventures ever. There were about eight of us, and as we

descended to a sandy area divided by intersecting stretches of reef, giant stingrays rose from the bottom and glided down the canyons to less populous regions. Moving on we saw a large shark prowling the edge of the drop-off, moving with all the grace and economy of a creature perfectly adapted to its environment. So perfectly that it's never bothered to evolve any further in 350 million years or so. We all just stared, eyes magnified even wider by our faceplates. Suddenly, a small school of four-foot-long amberjacks appeared. Without bothering to think about it, I swam over to them and found myself encircled by these magnificent silvery fish. They kept swimming round and round me as if trying to establish contact. I looked into their eyes and became quite conscious that they were looking back at me. I'd heard of this sort of behaviour with dolphins and whales, but they're mammals. These guys were mere fish. I took a few shots, which wasn't easy because of their size and proximity. Then I looked over to find everyone else a respectful distance away, taking pictures of me taking pictures of the jacks. Apparently, all my buddies felt content enough letting me be the sole representative in this close encounter of the submarine kind. Their loss. They never knew the sense of rapport I felt with those big, shiny fish with the eyes that looked back.

Undoubtedly, the most convenient dive for us who stayed at Sunset House lay right out back. Besides handiness, it offered lots of variety, which a sign at the water's edge requested you leave as is. Immediately off the iron shore (weathered limestone)

was a shallow reef with scattered clumps of brain, staghorn and elkhorn corals, as well as delicate sea fans and those ubiquitous sponges. Once the depth reached 60-80 feet, the reef became more cluttered with life. The growth was similar to that found shallower, but far more profuse. In one gully I discovered a field of basket sponges averaging about three feet in height, something I've yet to encounter anywhere else. In another spot was a pair of friendly French angelfish who would invariably come by to check me out whenever I was in their neighborhood. I met them the following year and again the one after that. In fact, there were several fish I recognized from year to year over four summers. I doubt whether they recognized me though. Successive raises back in New York meant I kept upgrading my diving gear.

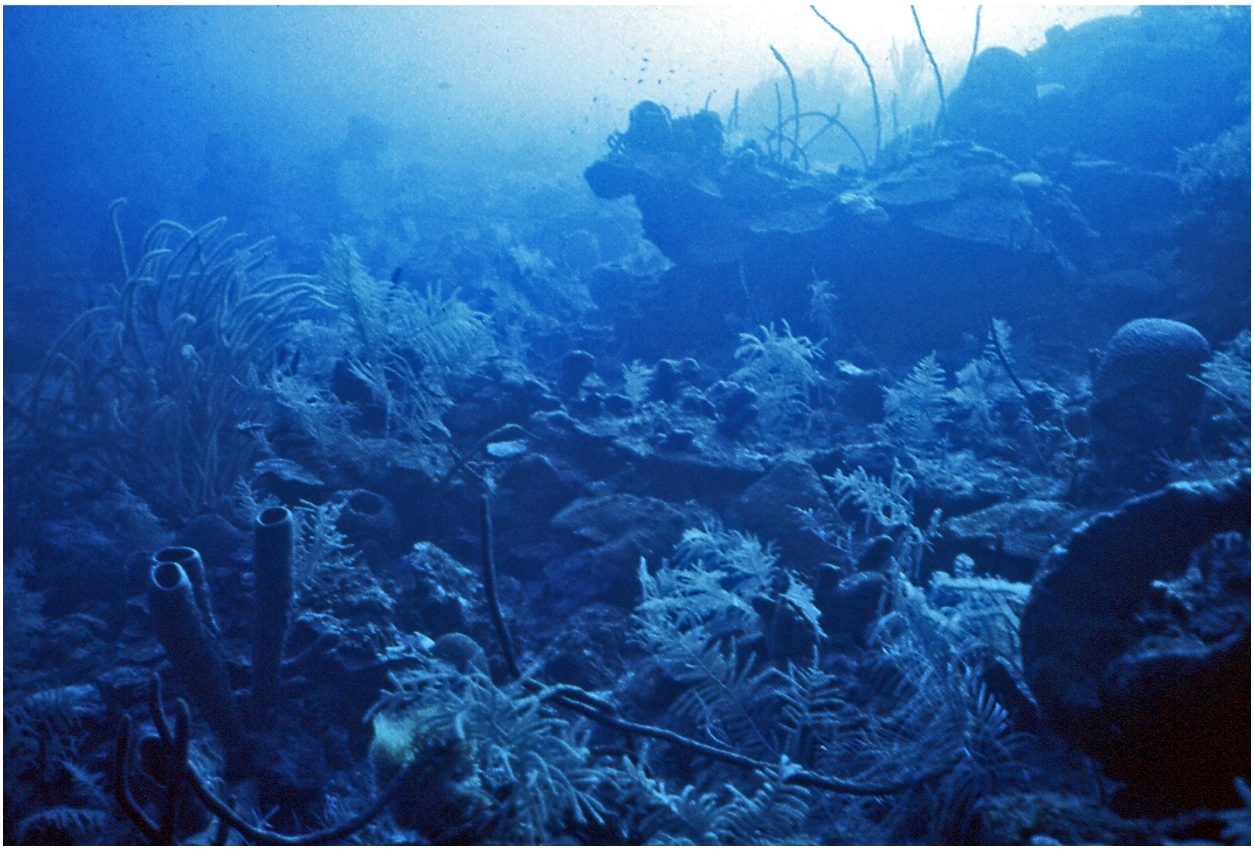


This middle reef, now called Sunset Reef, also proved an ideal spot for night dives. Close to shore in reasonably shallow water, it teemed with nocturnal marine life. I made my first after-hours subventure here and must admit to feeling some foreboding at first. Reliving childhood anxieties, I imagined that just beyond the range of my light a Disneyesque wall of unseen creatures was watching with large white cartoon eyes. However, the absolute magic of the underwater world at night quickly dispelled such images. I became aware of an overwhelming sense of stillness. Then as I went probing, I noticed that familiar things had undergone a sort of transformation. Many corals now had softened in appearance due to their polyps emerging to wave tiny tentacles in an effort to catch passing plankton. And most of the fish I'd come to expect during the day had retired under ledges and into holes for the night. Some parrotfish would secrete a mucus-like cocoon to wrap themselves in. Other fish, notably boxfish, seemed suspended in the water, fast asleep. No doubt why shots of them resting on divers' hands are not exactly rare.

Meanwhile, certain night-time predators were out looking for a feed. Quite large crabs. Exquisitely patterned and colored spiny lobsters. Octopus. Moray eels. And, most prevalent, urchins. During the day they tuck themselves away in holes and crevices in the reef. But at night they go walking on their hundreds of tiny feet. Probably the most spectacular animal on Sunset Reef was the basket sea star. Once it got dark, they stretched their interwoven arms to form a kind of net to snare passing food. I was shown one rock where four quite large basket stars of varying colors resided. When they stretched, their arms spanned at least three feet. After feeding (or as soon as our lights hit them), they wrapped themselves into tight balls and disappeared. Literally. Careful searches of that same rock during the day by the resident divemaster had yet to turn up a single basket star. But it's possible he didn't know what he was looking for.

The third level of reefs behind Sunset House began about 80 feet and sloped down another 15 feet or so to the edge of the drop-off. As with the North Sound barrier reef,

it seemed the deeper you went, the more profuse the growth. At this depth every square inch was covered with some type of living thing. Unquestionably, the star attraction would have to have been a gigantic sponge later named The Armchair. With a six-foot-wide mouth, it could easily accommodate a couple of divers with gear.



Shortly after sunrise one morning Leif and I swam out to the drop-off. When we arrived at The Armchair, I gestured for Leif to climb in so I could take a shot. (Yes, before I knew any better, I did snap the odd diver photo. And sometimes we did things we shouldn't have.) While composing I noticed we had company. A hammerhead shark was cruising back and forth just at the limit of my visibility. I felt somewhat uncomfortable for several reasons. The hammerhead looked about eight feet long. We were 120 feet down, some 150 yards off shore. It was about 7am, a favorite feeding time for predatory fish - some have theorized that it's because they can swim ahead of their shadows when the sun is low, but it probably has more to do with the fact that many reef fishes don't see too well in low-light conditions. Finally, I was using rented gear because a certain airline, which shall remain nameless (it was headed by a former

astronaut), had lost my luggage. Including my knife. I had been taught that whenever you dive in waters where sharks are common, you must take two precautions: 1) dive with a buddy and 2) carry a knife. So if you see a shark, you pull out your knife, cut your buddy and swim like hell. Just as I was about to snap Leif, I noticed the hammerhead had returned with a friend, a few feet longer. I pointed over Leif's shoulder. When he turned and spotted them, I took the picture. Notice how firmly he is gripping the edge of the sponge.

Everywhere I went underwater I carried my trusty Nikonos. For a little variety, the second year I experimented with infrared film, which produced some rather startling effects. Possibly because this weird film, to which Kodak didn't even assign a film

speed (ASA then, ISO now), reacts to heat as well as light, the slides tended to be more

contrasty than those shot on normal color film. Definition between lights and darks is much desired underwater. Because the quality of light penetrating the surface is diffused by all sorts tiny bits of suspended matter, both organic and inorganic, photographs look flat. As if that weren't restricting enough, colors are absorbed as you descend, usually the reds first, followed by oranges, yellows and greens; until everything is washed in hues of blue. The human brain manages to compensate somewhat for this all-pervasive mood indigo, but unfortunately the camera still remains a bit less sophisticated, despite all the recent advances. This trick of physics accounts for the reaction of many photographers when they get their first tropical underwater shots back, *Hey, it wasn't that blue down there! Kodak* (or *Fuji*, *Agfa*, *etc*.) *must have messed up*. Some sophisticated new filters and a special underwater film from Kodak have since appeared on the market, and they go a long way towards correcting this problem. Wish I had them then.

Back home in Manhattan I carefully went over the 14 rolls of film I'd shot. Most of it ended up in the waste basket. While I could see improvement, I could also see some distinct limitations. I would have to get more serious about this u/w photography business. Consequently, I decided to add to my equipment. I bought a cast aluminum housing for my Nikon F, a 24mm wide-angle lens and a 55mm micro lens, a Sekonic light meter and a 28mm lens for the Nikonos. Along with a big aluminum case to carry most of it in.

The following year I made reservations to return to Grand Cayman in June. But this time I decided to get in better shape so as to maximize my time below. I started doing Canadian Air Force Exercises, one of which involved my running in place on the thinly carpeted concrete floor of my apartment. After several weeks my right knee had become so painful, I went to see my doctor. He diagnosed bursitis, which he told me was the fancy name for water on the knee, and prescribed a pressure bandage and rest. But even though I used the bandage faithfully and immediately abandoned the

exercises, my knee didn't show much improvement. So the bandage accompanied me on the flight south.

Once back in Grand Cayman, I spent my two weeks trying out all my new equipment. Switching cameras and lenses. Trying this film and that, normal and infrared. Shooting wide shots of the *Balboa* and close-ups of French angelfish. Getting lucky and failing abysmally. Visiting all the old haunts and exploring a few new ones. And eventually noticing my knee had stopped hurting.

Most afternoons, after tending to my gear, I'd pull up a stool in Adrien's brand-new thatched bar, there to await the moment that gave Sunset House its name. In particular, we would wait for a natural phenomenon, which, though apparently not restricted to this spot, occurred often enough here to be considered normal. If clouds hung just above the setting sun, the very moment that orange ball dipped below the horizon we would see a green flash. I don't know what combination of atmospherics accounts for the green flash, but I do know I've seen it a number of times.

In any event, one late afternoon Adrien and I and a couple of locals were sitting around considering the creation of a new drink, a special Sunset House cocktail. We began concocting and sampling in earnest. The dedication we devoted to the task knew no bounds. After an afternoon or two Adrien happened on a recipe we all agreed was nothing short of sensational. And since it ended up sort of green in color, the most appropriate name was obvious. We dubbed it a Green Flash. I understand there are now Green Flashes in bars all over the island. In the true spirit of caring and sharing, I offer to you, dear reader, the original recipe. (Those who choose only to look at the photographs will just have to miss out.)

Into a cocktail shaker with ice pour equal parts of green
crème de menthe, Galliano, dark crème de cacao and
milk or cream. Shake and strain into a cocktail glass.
(You can also serve it on the rocks.)

I must warn you, however, that a Green Flash is deceiving. As easy to swallow as chocolate mint julip ice cream, this drink is mostly alcohol.

The regular postmortem back in New York revealed that reflex viewing made a helluva difference and indicated three major modifications: the addition of an electronic strobe light to reveal the true colors, a change of venue for a little variety and a pre-chosen buddy of the female persuasion (for obvious reasons).

8
MAIDEN VOYAGE TO VIRGIN REEFS

One of the most intriguing ads running in the travel section of 'Skin Diver Magazine' back in 1973 promoted a remote coral atoll off Belize called Glovers Reef. The most attractive part of the package was a five-day cruise aboard the motor cruiser *Laughing Bird*, discovering virgin reefs and exploring the famous Blue Hole that Cousteau filmed and wrote about. It sounded idyllic, and mostly it turned out that way. Mostly.

Buying the strobe proved no problem. Writing to Belize for further information was easy enough. However, taking care of the buddy business looked like a real hurdle. The lady with whom I then shared a good deal of my life not only didn't dive, she couldn't swim a stroke. So whenever I could turn the conversation, I'd rave on about the wonders of the Caribbean underwater world and, naturally enough, show my slides at the slightest sign of interest. Lo and behold, a combination of my rather overt sell job and her gutsy determination led to her taking swimming lessons. Then, even before her final pool session, she started a diving course. In less than two months she'd become a fully certified, if somewhat inexperienced, scuba diver.

I thought it wise to organize a few check-out dives. The first took place in May in a lake near Bear Mountain, New York. The water was still very, very cold. (Water temperatures tend to lag a couple of months behind air temperatures.) While we were

suiting up, my buddy discovered she'd forgotten her hood. In a misguided moment of chivalry, I offered her mine. In fact, I even insisted. I should have known better. As soon as we'd descended about 15 feet, the pain became excruciating. The best description I can offer is that my head felt like it was being squeezed in a giant vise. I aborted the dive. I may have been gallant, but I wasn't a galah (an Australian term which comes from a small cockatoo that doesn't behave too brightly).

For the next dive we drove to Sudbury, Massachusetts, and White Pond, the scene of all those wondrous youthful adventures. But this time I would experience the only real panic-type situation I've yet encountered underwater. Surprisingly, the pond looked pretty much the way I remembered it, right down to the relatively few cabins above and the dead leaves and tadpoles below. After taking some pictures in shallow water, I left the camera on the shore, and we descended to about 55 feet. Suddenly, my air supply cut off. I wasn't particularly worried. I'd often free-dived to this depth and hadn't been down long enough for much nitrogen to build up. I exhaled forcibly into my mouthpiece. Nothing. I tried the purge button. Nothing. I took out the mouthpiece and held it up. Nothing. I tried exhaling again with what little air I had left. Nothing. I swam over to my buddy and signalled that I was out of air. Nothing. (Later she would explain she thought I was kidding.) At this point I opted for an emergency ascent. On the way up, exhaling any remaining air to avoid the possibility of an embolism, I felt an eerie sensation that could only be the onset of panic. I stopped and ordered myself, *Relax, take it easy.* Then I started kicking again. Looking up, I thought the surface seemed a long, long way off. Eventually I made it.

So strenuously did I try to refill my oxygen-starved lungs, I ruptured some small blood vessels. When my buddy surfaced and looked at me, her eyes went quite wide.

I was still sucking air, a rather noisy and torturous business, and by this time my mask had filled with blood. I took it off, rinsed it out and gasped that I was fine. I don't think she believed me. I doubt whether I did. Just for the hell of it, I tried my regulator again. It worked fine. We swam to shore and got out of our gear. As I packed up, she ran to the nearest cabin, called the State Police and found out where the nearest recompression chamber was. The Children's Hospital in Boston, coincidentally where I was born. Then we hopped into her VW and she pretended she was Gene Hackman in *The French Connection*. Once we landed at the hospital, and I'd explained to a nurse what had happened, they had me sit around and wait to see whether any serious symptoms would crop up. When none did, they sent us on our way. I remember thinking that if the same thing had happened to someone a little less experienced, the result could well have been very different.

The third check-out dive was in a quarry in New Jersey. It was uneventful except that my newly purchased Rolex leaked. For years I'd dreamed of owning the ultimate in dive watches, this marvel of Swiss engineering guaranteed to 600 metres; and the damn thing leaked in 35 feet. My $75 Seiko had never given me any trouble. (And, to be fair, neither has my Rolex since having it fixed.)

Meanwhile, I resumed my Canadian Air Force Exercises. This time I tried running in place on a folded blanket with an elastic bandage wrapped around my knee. Even so, it eventually started to bother me even more than the previous year, to the point where I began wearing a bandage all day at work.

I was still wearing it on the day in July when we took off for the Central American country that only a few months earlier had been called British Honduras. So recent had been the change-over that the stamp in my passport read *British Honduras.* I wondered whether the Belize Government had gotten around to changing its letterheads. Certainly, nothing else seemed to have changed in the few hundred years the country had been around. The drive from the airport through the capital, Belize City, to the customs wharf didn't give much hint of any successful aid programs. While the

landscape bore a physical resemblance to Grand Cayman, the level of development didn't come close. Instead of neat, well-tended people, houses and automobiles, the clothes most Belizeans had on tended to be well worn to the point of ragged, their houses were ramshackle collections of discarded building materials on stilts and the few cars only just this side of rusting hulks - the ones that moved, that is.

One observation made no sense. Although there were neither movie houses nor TV aerials in sight, little kids were doing the 'Ali Shuffle'. Very competently, too. I know that at his peak the former heavyweight champ traveled widely, but I couldn't remember a visit to this impoverished third world country.

Perhaps the reason for the abject poverty we saw was a lack of purpose caused by a surfeit of national confusion. It could have started with their language. Although surrounded by Spanish-speaking countries, the official tongue here is English, a legacy of *their* colonial days. For practical purposes most of the mainly black and Mayan population of 180,000 are, to one degree or another, bilingual. Then there's the question of independence. While they had long clamored for autonomy, the people were very reluctant for the British to pull out altogether. Not with port-less Guatemala sitting just on the other side of the border poised to pounce. Geography poses another big problem. Impenetrable, inhospitable jungle covers most of inland Belize. And most of the coast is mangrove swamp. All of it is hot and steamy and practically guaranteed to affect one's metabolism and desire to bust one's hump.

The gleaming white hull of the *Laughing Bird* tied up at the wharf provided a welcome contrast to everything else we'd seen. Because she was undergoing some repairs, we had time to get acquainted with our fellow divers, three other Yanks who'd dived a number of Caribbean spots together, and to take a walk around. I brought my camera and took one shot that seemed to sum everything up. The subject was an imposing and rather unusual house set well back from the street. Somewhere between the time it had been built and the present, maintenance had ceased to be of paramount importance. The sign on the gate reflected what must have been the attitude of the owner. It read: **Dr. A.E.M. Perez Schofield M.D. Office Hours MON, THURS, SAT.** But the good doctor had scratched out **THURS**. However, he'd also suggested that he might be there Mon-Sat from 12.30 noon to 7pm. Like I said, confused.

Eventually, we got under way and the skipper and owner introduced himself: Gil Lomont. I'd read a bit of his history in the material we'd been sent. French-bred, he'd been a taxidermist with a shop in Golden, Colorado, when he read an article about fishing in British Honduras and decided then and there, *Stuff this.* It took awhile, but he and his wife Marsha arranged to lease part of a coral atoll named Glovers Reef from the government with the idea of building a diving resort. They arrived at Long Cay with some tools, a speargun, the clothes on their back, a great deal of resolve and little else. Guy speared breakfast, lunch and

dinner, and together they built a dozen cabins among the palms. And had their first child.

Our cruise from Belize City to Glovers Reef would cover some 75 miles, so I went forward to sacrifice my New York paleness to the Mayan sun god. Once we got outside the Belizean barrier reef and hit eight-foot seas, a couple of others sacrificed their lunches to Neptune. The Lomont's brochure turned out disarmingly accurate. Long Cay, part of the atoll and site of their resort, was a long coral island covered by tall palm trees. The wooden cabins were well-spaced with no toilets or hot water, but loads of privacy.

We spent our first day there having a look around and making a shallow check-out dive on a nearby reef. I had my Nikonos and grabbed a nice shot of a large grey angelfish.

After lunch we went around to the other side of the island and dived a drop-off much

like those at Grand Cayman. Only this one began at just 50 feet before plunging straight down another 2,000 feet.

The next morning we headed out to sea. Without the cook. He'd quit just before we arrived, and we would certainly miss him. The sun shone brightly, glistening off waters much calmer than the other day. Until lunch. Demonstrating a real knack for lousy timing, just as we hit open water one of the crew who was filling in appeared from the galley with fried bread and greasy ham.

We made Lighthouse Reef a bit after 3pm and dived a drop-off to about 75 feet. The growth reminded me of the Caymans, but the fish seemed far less timid, more curious. Probably because they'd never before seen divers, or, more to the point, divers with spears. We anchored in the island's lee and supped on barracuda, pineapples, cucumbers and warm Belikan, the local beer. (A word about Belikan, which translates *facing east.* Dreadful! I cannot remember ever before turning down a beer when thirsty. This stuff, whether warm, chilled or icy cold, tasted foul. I forwent any more the rest of the cruise.)

As we sat around exaggerating or inventing past diving experiences, Gil told us that the *Laughing Bird* we were aboard was not the original *Laughing Bird*. After buying the first one, a 55-foot, 35-ton steel hull yacht, Gil had been sailing it back from Miami when a storm blew him off course. Gil maintained that he stayed well away from Cuba, but one of Castro's gunboats must have been using different charts. *Laughing Bird* was confiscated and Gil tossed in jail. He was held incommunicado with just the clothes on his back. Only after a week of persistent nagging by the French ambassador did the Cuban Government release Gil and kick him out of the country, minus everything, including his shoes. Later he saw newspaper photos of Dr Castro entertaining some visiting heavies from Mother Russia on *Laughing Bird* numero uno. Seems there had been no suitable presidential yacht and one was needed for the occasion.

Gil also informed us that we five had the honor of making *Laughing Bird's* maiden dive cruise, commonly known as a shakedown. Although all did not go as smoothly

as it might have and the food left a great deal to be desired, the crew was friendly and able, the diving excellent. One particularly fortunate aspect of this initial voyage was our number. A full house would have meant 12 divers squeezed aboard a pretty cramped boat. Underwater it could have been worse with all these people spooking fish and spoiling shots.

After breakfast we headed for the famous Blue Hole, a 1,000-foot-wide, 400-foot-deep hole in the middle of a shallow lagoon. Once upon a time there had been a limestone plateau here well above the waterline. Inside, underground rivers carved out a huge cavern complete with stalactites hanging from the ceiling. As time passed and the seas rose, the cavern flooded and the ceiling collapsed, leaving behind a big round hole in the ocean of a decidedly darker shade of blue than the surrounding waters. Two years earlier Cousteau had anchored the *Calypso* nearby for a month to film a TV special. They even lowered a diving saucer inside to have a look at the bottom. And cut off one of the stalactites to learn what they could of the area's geological history. Today the Blue Hole is a national park where no marine growth, including stalactites, can be disturbed.

We were in the water by 10am, passing the edge of the hole at 30 feet and reaching the opening of the vertical shaft which led into the cave proper. The stalactites, some measuring a good 40 feet long, hung down like so many salamis in a New York delicatessen. A close look at the tip of one revealed a kind of growth unlike any I'd seen elsewhere. Something else I found noteworthy in the Blue Hole were the pronounced thermoclines, where one layer of water sits on another of a lower temperature. Because we dove without wet suits, descending from one to the next could be a real shock. During a break for lunch I snorkeled the crown of coral around the hole, skimming only a few inches over the branches of staghorn coral and getting some interesting shots.

After an afternoon dive in the Hole we anchored so that the boat swung directly over it. And that's where we spent the night.

And that's when it dawned on me that my knee wasn't bothering me anymore.

The next morning, following a third dive into the Hole, we set off for another cay about 20 miles away. Gil dropped anchor pretty much at random and down we went, confident that no other divers had preceded us. The fish actually did seem to behave differently, alternating between caution and curiosity. I spotted one large grouper, probably about 80 pounds, and followed him into a large cave. And froze. The whole cave was chock-a-block with his similarly huge cousins. You're going to have to take my word for this because I was so surprised, I forgot to take any pictures. It may have been just as well. A flash going off in such crowded quarters could have led to a panicky evacuation, and I was right in the doorway.

Later we anchored in the lee of a cay which must have fitted everyone's idea of a tropical island paradise, sans the dusky, bare-breasted lovelies. In a calm blue lagoon under a cloudless azure sky, we could clearly see sandy beaches and gently swaying

palms. One of the guys from New Jersey and I volunteered to row ashore and collect some coconuts. I'm really not particularly fond of coconuts, but I did want to make sure those native beauties weren't hiding in the undergrowth, too shy to paddle their canoes out to welcome us. Not too shy to greet us though, well before we waded ashore, were mosquitoes. Billions of them. Thankfully, I'd remembered the insect repellent and it actually kept them at bay. As we moved, so did the mosquitoes, always staying a couple of feet away, something else just like in the cartoons. I knew they were only waiting for the repellent to wear off. As we hurriedly picked up a few ripe coconuts, we could hear iguanas thrashing through the bushes around us. It couldn't have been native women, no human could have handled the fetid aura of that mangrove swamp or the deafening hum of the mosquitoes. Rowing back, we felt happy enough to leave this particular island paradise to someone else.

The next morning we dived another virgin reef about a mile away, spotting a rare school of ocean-going triggerfish. After a lunch of peanut butter and barracuda we travelled on to the wreck of the *Alps*, a cargo steamer which went down in 1917. Rough water meant a healthy coral growth and lots of fish. It also meant that getting good photos wasn't exactly easy. After the *Alps* we cruised back to Long Cay, made a night dive, then a nearby drop-off dive the next morning and went snorkeling for shells in the afternoon.

Following an uneventful cruise to Belize City, my buddy and I flew back to Miami and caught that same Viscount to Grand Cayman. While killing time waiting for a cab at the airport, I leafed through a Cayman Islands tourist brochure and was more than a little surprised to see one of my infrared shots of Adrien Briggs spread across two pages introducing an article on diving. My first published underwater photograph *and no credit line*. What had happened was I'd sent Adrien a few infrared duplicates because

he'd been curious about how they would come out. And when the publisher of this holiday guide asked him for some shots to illustrate their diving article, Adrien handed over all he had, mine included, and said help yourself.

My buddy and I spent the next week exploring the same ol' spots: Eden Rocks, the *Balboa*, North Sound, Sunset Reef; as well as some topside places of interest like the pirate graves (both Blackbeard and Henry Morgan were among the privateers to regularly visit awhile back); the Cayman Turtle Farm, where 70,000 green turtles were being bred; Pedro Castle (right), built in 1780 and the oldest known structure on the island; the Spott Bay bat cave, where you crawled in on hands and knees to hear (and smell) squeaking 'rat' bats; the little post office at Hell and the duty-free shops.

What made my diving different this time around was using the Nikon F coupled with a Subsea strobe. With such professional gear I had no more excuses. Finally, I could properly compose subjects I'd

become familiar with and reveal the color filtered out by the physical properties of the sea. And if I couldn't get a halfway decent shot, the blame rested with me.

Undoubtedly, the most challenging opportunities came during a night dive on Sunset Reef. So that I could compose and focus while looking through the lens, I taped my u/w light to the handle of my housing. Not an ideal situation, especially when it came to recording for posterity those aforementioned basket stars. The moment my light hit one it would say to itself, *Ah, morning already, better pack up*. And commence to fold its arms. Which meant I had to focus and shoot in a hurry.

When the two weeks in Belize and Grand Cayman were over, I'd exposed almost 700 shots, a good many with the benefit of artificial light. After studying them at some length, I reached several conclusions: underwater light, as long as it's diffused over a suitably wide area, is nearly indispensable in many cases; proper equipment considerably improves your chances of superior shots; there's no substitute for experience (of which I was still mighty shy) and, finally, making good photographs underwater is roughly 100 times harder than on the surface.

I also reached a conclusion about my knee, one that I shared with my doctor. I told him I believed that the pressure put on it during my deeper dives had somehow had a beneficial effect. He said he'd never heard of this sort of thing, but was sage enough not to rule out my theory altogether. But he really didn't show much interest.

After diving four years in this one area, I would be remiss not to mention one further conclusion I reached. My experiences and those of other divers I've talked with who have explored the same sites year after year all seem to parallel Cousteau's. When he talks about the environment suffering from the excesses of human progress and the

arrogance of Man, he does not exaggerate. In the Caymans I saw visibility fall off, fish populations decline and reefs become denuded. And I've yet to see any project worth the damage it has caused. I guess part of my reason in moving to Australia was the selfish desire to buy some time, to dive in waters still relatively pristine. Was I in for a shock.

9
DOWN UNDER DOWN UNDER

Migrating to Australia was no spur-of-the-moment thing. I'd made up my mind in high school that I wanted to live somewhere I could go diving every day of the year in reasonable comfort. Because working in advertising also had to be part of the equation, the natives wherever I settled down would have to speak English (or something approximating it). And I'd never cared much for crowds. Or pretence. But I didn't mind hedonism. These personal prerequisites narrowed my choice considerably. Sydney it would be.

While still in New York I managed to land a job with what was then the hottest creative agency in the Southern Hemisphere: Young & Rubicam, Sydney. I had figured that with all the expertise (and awards) I'd gained in the Big Apple, they'd only need me to come in two or three days a week, and the rest of the time I could do whatever turned me on, like dashing up to the Great Barrier Reef whenever the spirit moved me. I figured wrong. In fact, Y&R even requested my presence on the occasional weekend. You don't get to be the hottest shop without some effort.

Then, because of the ridiculously steep domestic air fares and exorbitant prices charged by the surprisingly few resorts and cruise boats catering for divers along Queensland's 1,200-mile underwater wonderland, those occasional jaunts northward became very occasional. Next to nonexistent actually. It wasn't only the money, there

was also the principle of the thing. I could fly to Fiji, stay in a top hotel and dive to my heart's content for maybe half the price.

On those weekends that were my own, I encountered the old problem of not knowing anyone who dived. So I sought out the best club around: South Pacific Divers. While I attended meetings pretty regularly and turned up for a number of outings with them, I ended up doing a lot less diving than I'd planned. However, the club members did introduce me to two great spots.

Lying a convenient 100 miles south of Sydney's sprawling suburbs we have Jervis Bay. Or J.B. to the initiate. I still enjoy the odd weekend jaunt down there. For good reason. Twenty-eight square miles of sparkling blue water surrounded by a magnificent mix of blindingly white beaches, rugged sandstone rock formations and natural bushland complete with genuine hopping kangaroos. In the early '70s when I first came to know the area, growth thereabouts had been reasonably gradual with no high-rise condos or flashing neon to uglify the landscape. Just a few small-to-tiny towns, a handful of resort bungalows and the requisite ration of this country's most ubiquitous resort feature: caravan (aka trailer) parks. For a little diversity, Jervis also accommodated a naval college, an aboriginal settlement, airfield and nature reserve.

Not unexpectedly, there's been some development, but, happily, pollution has been kept to a minimum. In the 200 years white man has been blackening the Australian coastal environment, Jervis Bay has remained relatively unsullied. It's been a near thing though. At one time or another the spoilers have put forth plans for a nuclear power station, petrochemical plant, oil refinery, steelworks, massive port facilities plus all their attendant industries. Just recently, the Royal Australian Navy wanted to establish a major base there. But in each instance concerned citizens have mounted successful campaigns to preserve Jervis and send all those potential destroyers skulking off to become someone else's problem.

And because the few gentle rivers that flow into Jervis Bay carry little silt and sediment, natural pollution is also kept to a minimum. On calm days visibility below

can reach 150 feet, but normally it's half that. Which still compares pretty favorably with that much-vaunted stretch up north.

On the ocean side, there are steep vertical underwater cliffs layered with shelves, gouged with caves and cut with canyons. Around the corner inside the Bay, eons of geological activity have left sub-littoral rocky reefs with myriad crevices, holes and overhanging ledges, all preferred habitats for hundreds of sedentary species as well as a pretty diverse fish population.

The bottom is mostly deep and sandy, dotted with tube worms, sea pens, mud oysters and king-sized beds of grinning, blue-eyed scallops. Along the foreshores where several small streams slowly empty, eel-grass meadows, mangroves and salt marshes provide the shelter for a few billion fish fry and produce the organic detritus that ultimately supports everything else in the Bay.

It used to be that as soon as the water temperatures started to rise, private boats would come bouncing across the Bay from several scattered launching ramps. Today, there are still a few independents, but professional dive operations have moved in as well - probably too many - to take rubber-skinned amphibians to any of the two dozen locations around Jervis. And one entrepreneurial type now makes a living taking tourists out to gawk at the resident bottlenose dolphins and fairy penguins.

Then, as today, one of the most popular dive sites lay at the base of the northern-more of the deep-water cliffs guarding the entrance to Jervis. Appropriately dubbed Point Perpendicular, this towering 300-foot rampart of Permian sandstone plunges almost straight down another 100-200 feet underwater. It was common to see a veritable flotilla of small craft stretched in an arc around the base of Point Perp, all sporting the nearly invisible blue and white Alpha flag. Several years ago, just when the boating public here was showing signs of recognizing the familiar red flag with the diagonal white stripe that divers had all been using internationally for more than 20 years, the Australian powers-that-be foisted that blue and white number on us. Such muddled thinking does give one pause.

But I digress.

Underneath those bobbing hulls at Point Perp lies a jumble of multi-storied sandstone blocks resembling nothing so much as a burgeoning metropolis right after a visit from some marauding monster in one of those old Japanese sci-fi flicks. A hodgepodge of deep caves undercut into the scarp, massive archways, stone staircases stepping down 200 feet, potholes, right-angled gutters and the occasional rock stack rising out of the sand. And covering it all, a gaudy richness of marine life to keep even the busiest shutterbug happily subsidizing Kodak or Fuji for years.

As far as I know, no marine biologists have identified any underwater creatures unique to Jervis Bay. However, J.B. does number among its regular residents many known only further north or south. In all, at least a thousand sessile species tumble over one another contending for a little place to call home. On some boulders the overcrowding rivals that on the hills of Hong Kong. Sponges of every color and configuration. Branch after branch of glorious rainbow-hued southern sea fans. Delicate bryozoans, their intricate patterns obviously the inspiration for designers of pasta. Fernlike hydroids in muted tints of fawn, pink and orange. Zoanthids with tentacles almost too brilliantly yellow to believe. Simple ascidians with bulbous bottle shapes and gaping red throats, many covered with their gorgeously colored and exquisitely patterned compound cousins. (Hard to believe that a kind of primitive backbone in their larval stage makes ascidians a distant relative of *Homo sapiens*.) Here and there, seeming slightly out of place because of their nonproliferation, sit solitary stony corals. Down deeper, feathery sea pens and slender sea whips wave back and forth, the latter often festooned with beautiful flowerlike anemones.

Then, of course, there are the finny creatures, thousands and thousands of them. Great clouds of schooling butterfly perch. Tiny darting blennies. Huge cruising groupers. Hovering bullseyes. Drifting squids. Patrolling wrasses. And the more lethargic sorts like scorpionfish, Port Jackson sharks and wobbegongs. Speaking of wobbies, I reckon the people in charge of naming the piscine inhabitants down under

Down Under really stretched their imaginations. Just listen to these: southern gobbleguts, painted stinkfish, big-headed gudgeon, one-spot puller, old wife, violet roughy (bit of a contradiction there), rubberlip morwong, nannygai, tassel-snouted flathead and for a particularly Aussie flavor, the bastard trumpeter. To name drop but a few.

It was at Point Perp, among all those gigantic boulders, that I had my first encounter with an animal I didn't even know existed. The Australian giant cuttlefish. The thing must have measured at least three and a half feet. And it wasn't bashful. As it moved towards me waving its sucker-lined tentacles, a question kept running and re-running through my mind: was this a full-grown adult or just a wee babe with a much bigger, very protective mommy or daddy lurking behind one of those huge rocks?

In the years since, I've often dived with these intriguing animals, and they're always welcome buddies. Their eyes, which are similar in construction to our own, look at you with apparent intelligence, belying the fact they're molluscs and, thus, closely related to clams, slugs and suchlike. They also possess the amazing ability to instantly flash from an iridescent blue-green to brilliant red-orange, a bit like a traffic light gone berserk. While some act painfully shy, retreating quickly under a handy ledge, others are less inhibited, following you about not unlike puppies. Once in awhile, usually during the mating season, one might move aggressively towards you with its two hunting tentacles raised. A couple of times I've seen other divers who reminded me of me the first time I sighted one. Previously unacquainted with *Sepia apama* and feeling a bit threatened, they'd do everything they could to suggest an inoffensive, even placatory demeanor. The same one you adopt when you're starting up the walk of a strange house and a giant rottweiler leaps out of the bushes, snarling and barking and otherwise intimating

you're not overly welcome. *Nice cuttlefish, niiice cuttlefish.*

Point Perpendicular is only one area of J.B. offering such an abundance of undersea life. Depending from which direction the wind is blowing, those next-to-invisible blue and white flags may also be barely seen all around Bowen Island. Sitting in the entrance to the Bay, this great big rock is another lush location where strobe lights don't seem to recycle quickly enough. When the wind is from the west to northwest, it's time to seek the protection of The Docks, a maze of shallow-water caves and tunnels attracting just about every fish species living in Jervis. The Docks rocks are bedecked with colors and variations ad infinitum. Especially striking here are clusters of glittering jewel anemones in hues of pink, orange and deep red.

Just around from The Docks lies a kelp bed which serves as one refuge for probably the most marvelous denizen of Jervis waters, *Phyllopteryx taeniolatus.* The weedy sea dragon. I'm pretty sure that if I were to describe one without supplying a photo, you'd be convinced I was writing under the influence of some powerful, mind-altering prohibited substance. Growing to about 15 inches, related to seahorses and pipefish and indigenous to Australia, the weedy sea dragon is protected by bony armor and an unusual but strangely successful camouflage. Although it has a few weedlike appendages to suggest it might be a piece of kelp, its coloring isn't what you'd call nondescript. More like garish. Weedy sea dragons have brilliant vermillion bodies with blue stripes and yellow polka dots (check out the Gallery photos). And a shape out of *Star Wars.* The funny thing is though, when hiding in the kelp, the animal blends in quite effectively. The best way to spot them is to watch the kelp wave back and forth in the swell and look for a strand that doesn't move with the rest.

As sensational as the diving inside may sound, I'm inclined to feel that the most impressive sites sit outside the Bay itself. On the seaward side there are huge caverns and tunnels, majestic rock formations and some awesome drop-offs. I remember well one subventure near a formation called Crocodile Head. A local diver had kindly offered to show me a cave that was then still a secret shared by only a few divers. On

the end of long, curving, yellow hookah hoses we swam down and into a tunnel under the cliffs.

The first thing I noticed were all the shovel-nosed crays hiding under ledges and tucked back into crevices. A lot of very tasty eating there. Moving on I espied a particularly good-sized scorpionfish resting on a ledge. As I maneuvered into position for a photograph, I glimpsed something else out of the corner of my mask. Something a whole lot bigger. On the same shelf, only a few feet away lay the largest wobbegong I'd ever seen, a good seven or eight feet worth. Normally these sharks are quite placid and only deign to attack divers who pester them, say, by pulling their tails. But when they are moved to chomp someone, their sharp, awl-like teeth leave rather nasty mutilating wounds. Since no wobbegong had yet so much as bared a single tooth at me, and I fully intended keeping my hands to myself, I took my shot of the scorpionfish and then slid along the ledge and propped myself right in front of the wobby. After my strobe flashed at it a second time, the big shark decided the sitting was over, lifted off and glided away. When my buddy and I were back aboard the boat getting out of our gear, he asked me whether he'd told me about the wobbegongs here. I replied, only that I might see some. Then he said he'd meant to warn me that the ones in this cave were extremely territorial and had bitten a couple of divers who'd gotten too close.

The second great spot South Pacific Divers introduced me to lay a further 100 or so miles south of Jervis Bay, offshore of a small, one-time shipbuilding port called Narooma, an Aboriginal word for clear, blue water. From what the guys in the club had told me, the waters hereabouts were not only clear, they teemed with life including sharks and turtles, even manta rays and tropical lionfish. But the main reason we undertook the five-hour drive from Sydney was the small colony of Australian fur seals on Montague Island. When they talked about diving with these marine mammals, my fellow club members' eyes would light up, their gestures become more animated, their voices increase in pitch. The upshot was, *If you haven't dived with seals, you don't know*

what you've been missing. And I certainly didn't feel like missing anything. I signed up for the next trip.

On that Saturday morning in Narooma, our last stop before heading some six nautical miles out to Montague was a local service station. As I stood next to the attendant who was bent over, pumping petrol - it would be quite awhile before anyone heard of self-service - he nodded at our equipment and volunteered as laconically as Paul Hogan at his most laid-back that he'd been a diver once. I showed polite interest, and he drawled on. Said, then one day he just stopped, gave away all his gear and never dived again. Pregnant pause. He'd hooked me, so I asked how come? He peered up at me, then out in the direction of Montague and continued deadpan as ever, he'd been taking abalone near the colony and suddenly the light just sort of shut off. He looked up: a great white *as big as the side of a barn* was between him and the surface. He couldn't believe how bloody massive the thing was. More silence as I stared out towards the island. Then he added, quite unnecessarily, that white pointers really enjoy making a meal of seals, to whom divers in black wet suits bore a reasonable likeness. I bet this guy would stand there inside the station every weekend with binoculars scanning, waiting for cars trailing dive boats to roll in so he could once again recount with studied understatement the abrupt end to his diving career. And then chortle to himself the rest of the week.

When diving Montague, the adventure starts almost immediately. Like many towns up and down the eastern coast of Australia, Narooma sits around an inlet. And like at many of these inlets, unrelenting wave action has created a sandbar that must be crossed to get outside. Some of these sandbars have achieved legendary status for their ability to disassemble boats and fracture bones. Underpowered vessels heavily laden with divers and their gear have proved particularly easy meat. And the Narooma sandbar enjoyed an especially notorious reputation among Sydney dive clubs. Stray fins, masks and other bits of gear were always washing up on the beaches around Wagonga Inlet.

The boat owners among South Pacific Divers each seemed to favor his own best way to 'cross the bar'. Fortunately, the captain of the boat in which I'd been allotted a seat knew his stuff. After studying the wave action for a few moments, he retreated back up the inlet, built up a head of steam and drove us through some breakers over the bar. We stood to as the other two boats in our party came bouncing across, the third one just barely. With the adrenaline now nicely percolating, we set out for Montague.

The proximity of a seal colony assaults several senses at once. You hear the occasional sound of enthusiastic barking. You smell the heady aroma of steaming hair and pungent body odor, rotting fish leftovers and negligent toilet training. You see the incongruous sight of huge lumps of glistening brown sausages lying hither and yon; under, around and all over big wave-smoothed boulders. As we anchored and put on the last of our gear, happy - nay, joyous - seals swam around the boat, waving flippers to greet us and seemingly encouraging us to hurry up. It occurred to me that these guys looked forward to visiting divers as much as that service station attendant. Only these guys didn't know the meaning of laconic.

Holding my camera, I fell over backwards into the water and, not spotting any escaping bubbles from the housing or strobe, went straight down about 20 feet. The performance was well under way. Seals to the left. Seals to the right. Seals rushing flat-out straight at me, veering away only at the last instant and leaving behind them a swirl of tiny bubbles.

I have to believe that someone must have coined the word 'frolic' to describe what I was now witnessing. They were born acrobats. And show-offs. Their grace and agility knew no bounds. They twisted and whirled, did flipper stands and somersaults, swam upside down and

practically inside-out. At speeds defying credibility. They would come up to me, their pointed snouts abristle with whiskers only inches away, their huge brown eyes shining with curiosity. And mischievousness. They would nudge me, as if to say, *Watch this!*, then execute yet another maneuver that would turn an F-18 pilot green. Let me tell you, seals know how to have fun.

If I had considered underwater photography a challenge up to now, these seals were making it abundantly clear, *you ain't seen nothing yet*. Because of their speed, agility and unpredictability - not to mention some rather murky green, un-Narooma water - capturing the moment on film became mostly a matter of luck. Further mitigating against a magic momento was a situation I've never seen before in descriptions of man-meets-seal encounters. I've already alluded to their lack of toilet training. Well, what they don't do on land, they do in the sea. Sometimes right in front of you. And, as you've no doubt heard, *it floats*. Everywhere. So be advised, part of the challenge of photographing these marine mammals is avoiding dirty, great turds hanging suspended in your shot. You read it here first.

Crossing the bar on the way back in came as something of an anti-climax. For us. We just sort of surfed right over it, as did the second boat. But the third one somehow got it wrong. It looked like a giant, invisible hand picked them up and flipped them over, spilling divers, gear and boat into the churning froth. We helped recover as much as we could. No one was seriously hurt, except for the usual damaged pride. The boat would need some work. And local beachcombers would have a fresh selection of dive gear to pick over in the coming days.

A third great New South Wales dive spot I found all by myself. I didn't have much choice. About the time I moved to a new apartment along the beaches to the north of Sydney, the officers of South Pacific Divers had decided to relocate meetings way to the west, a combination of moves that put just a little too much traveling distance between us. As a kind of parting gesture, I presented several designs to replace the old club emblem, which featured a shark super-imposed over the now-obsolete red and white

divers flag. At the same time I stressed the desirability of *positioning* South Pacific Divers to distinguish us from other dive clubs. I pointed out that many members were keen photographers and recommended one particular design that showed the silhouette of an underwater photographer against the new blue and white Alpha flag. After some discussion, they voted to accept my recommendations. Not only does the club continue to use my design 20 years later, the underwater photo contest they now run annually has become the most prestigious in the Australasian area.

But back to that third spot.

Lord Howe Island, a one-time volcano about 450 miles northeast of Sydney, had already inspired a small but enthusiastic support group among Down Under divers. I know you've probably heard it said before about numerous other destinations, but trust me, Lord Howe *is* unique. Less than seven miles long and under two across at its widest point, the island boasts the southernmost coral reef in the world with 94 different coral species and some 450 different fish, both tropical and temperate. And its one-off status doesn't stop there. Several species found at Lord Howe, both terrestrial and marine, are found nowhere else on earth. The island's rolling hills and deep, cool rainforests are free of snakes, stinging plants and insects that bite, a real rarity in Australia. The branches of one banyan tree spread more than six acres. The number of tourists at any one time is restricted to 393. Transportation presently amounts to 130 vehicles, 90 motorbikes and 600 bicycles. And to give you an idea of the pace of life, the speed limit is 15mph. Unique, right?

Well before dawn on a Sunday morning in January 1981 I joined some other divers at the airport in Sydney and we climbed aboard a Beechcraft Super King, one of those planes designed for people who can't make up their minds whether they want an aisle or window seat. Everyone got both. After a smooth trip highlighted by a lovely, pink sunrise through the starboard windows, we landed and were taken to the holiday lodge used by the tour operator. My heavier gear, which had been sent earlier, awaited me in my room. Next stop was a bicycle hire place where we all rented rusty bikes, paying $7 each for the week. Then

we rode along narrow, palm-lined roads, ducking under the fronds, to a general store where we stocked up on provisions: the dive package was pretty basic.

We made our first dive that afternoon, dividing ourselves between two Avon rubber boats. Their outboard motors would continue to give us trouble for the entire week, necessitating a number of venue changes and a few dives aborted altogether. You get what you pay for. Fortunately, the diving made up for other shortcomings. Because Lord Howe and a couple of nearby islands sit atop a submerged plateau more than 3,000 feet deep, we got the chance to do a combination of walls, caves, swim-throughs and pinnacles, as well as reefs, gutters and craters. And that meant we saw pelagics like trevally, kingfish and turtles along with reef creatures like bull rays, morays, painted crayfish and the practically ubiquitous Spanish dancers.

I had already checked out my fellow divers and spotted two with camera gear, so I suggested to the one who seemed the more serious that we buddy together. He took a look at my housing and with a knowing nod agreed. By that time experienced photographers had come to realize that buddying with a non-photographer didn't make anyone happy. Photographers, especially those with macro lens, move very slowly, constantly peering into holes and crevices for subject matter, and then, when finding something suitable, often spending many minutes waiting until everything's just right. I've even devoted entire dives to photographing a single subject. Meanwhile, non-photographer buddies will generally react in one of two ways. Most just get bored and gradually move further and further away until they disappear altogether. I used to experience some guilt pangs about this, like I was somehow letting them down. So I started warning them ahead of time. The other type of non-photographer buddy gets curious and just has to see what you find so interesting. Sometimes they'll get right above you so their fins rain sediment down all over whatever you're shooting. Other times they'll swim below you so their exhaled bubbles come streaming up into your shot. Then there are those clowns who crowd right in, jarring you as you're about to shoot or otherwise spooking the fish you've just spent

the last five minutes establishing some rapport with. If you don't believe a diver can yell through a regulator mouthpiece and be perfectly understood, you obviously have yet to screw up the carefully designed shot of an underwater photographer.

My new buddy at Lord Howe, a good-natured Tasmanian, and I would both go in the water and descend together. From there on, we usually wouldn't see each other again until we clambered back over the hard, black canvas gunwale, often some time apart. A couple of newly trained divers seemed generally shocked when they asked me where my buddy was and I just shrugged and gestured in the general direction of the water.

Speaking of buddies, this Lord Howe trip provided one more reason to be wary of them, particularly those you've never dived with before. On the second day Brian, one of the divers in our boat, complained of not feeling well on the way back to shore after a fairly deep dive. He mentioned a headache, nausea and tingling. A few of us suggested he go to the hospital, but he thought he'd give it until the next day. After some tests the doctors told him he had suffered a spinal bend and strongly suggested he curtail his diving forthwith. This advice he wisely heeded. Bit by bit what had actually happened emerged. His buddy, an intense, skinny fellow almost as new to the sport as he was to Brian, had gone through his air in near record time. So he swam straight over to Brian and indicated he wanted to buddy breathe. Brian immediately handed over his regulator. But when Brian wanted it back, this skinny guy's craving for more air led him to panic, and he headed for the surface, dragging Brian with him. The irony was that because of his thinner build and different metabolic rate, the skinny guy didn't get bent and continued diving with the rest of us over the following days while Brian killed time ashore. But the lean one did have a rough time finding anyone who wanted to buddy with him.

It turned out that our divemaster was only standing in for the regular divemaster, and the bends thing really spooked him. So from then on he became overly cautious in his choice of dive sites, picking only shallower, safer and generally less exciting spots.

On a more positive note, another buddy showed me a neat trick, *neat* being the operative word. The sixth day just offshore of a place called Old Gulch Beach found me,

if not diving with, at least in the general vicinity of a veteran diver from Canberra named Frank Poole. We were each exploring one spectacular rocky reef covered with specimens of just about every sessile animal I'd yet encountered when Frank beckoned to me. I swam closer and watched as he picked up a starfish, turned it over and pointed. The sea star had its stomach extruded and was devouring the animal inside a beautiful cowrie shell. Since the starfish obviously had no need for the leftover shell, it disappeared into Frank's BC pocket, all shiny and pre-cleaned.

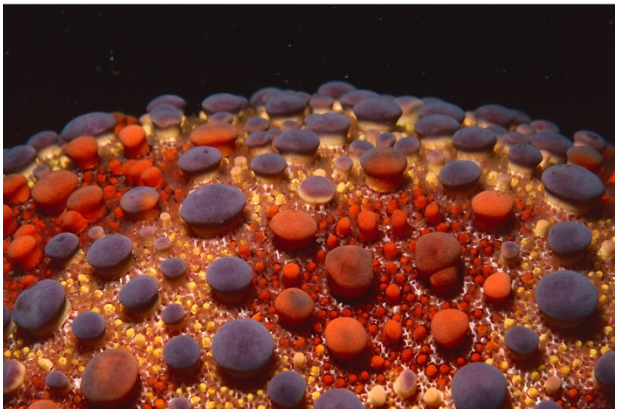
Whenever and wherever you go away on a dive trip, there's one thing alert divers are always on the look-out for. A fellow diver who happens to live near you, especially one with a boat. At Lord Howe I got very, very lucky. One of our group was an experienced diver named Gordon Malcolm, who lived on the Hawksbury River, a major waterway north of Sydney, and not that far from my beachside apartment. Somehow, I had the feeling the first time I laid eyes on Gordon that he'd turn out to be a really decent guy. This favorable impression probably had a lot to do with the fact that Gordon looked exactly like Santa Claus. He had the same generous belly, gray beard, balding pate, twinkling eyes and infectious grin. Plus a small aluminum skiff, called a 'tinny' in Australia.

Pointing to the spot where the Hawksbury empties into the Pacific is a finger of land locally called the Peninsula and dotted with a succession of small coastal suburbs known collectively as the Northern Beaches. Near the tip of the Peninsula on the protected side, a long, wooden pier leads back to a compact building housing the offices of a small seaplane air service, a dive shop, modest restaurant and snack bar. Here I would rendezvous with Gordon. Sometimes it would be just the two of us, other times we'd find room for as many as four other divers. On a few occasions we trailed his boat to Jervis Bay where we stayed in a caravan park that had a boat ramp.

We developed a weekend ritual. Every Saturday and Sunday morning I'd get up early and check the seas. If they didn't look too angry, I'd phone Gordon and he would pick me up at the dive shop as early as the tides would allow to help me avoid the

weekend traffic. Starting with Barrenjoey Head, each of the Peninsula's beaches is separated by tall, rocky headlands, the bases of which became our preferred sites. Hole in the Wall and Bangalley Head (right) between the beach communities of Avalon and Whale Beach became our favorites, particularly Bangalley, where we often encountered shovel-nosed crays, weedy sea dragons and a big, incredibly colorful starfish called a firebrick sea star. As you can imagine, composing a compelling photograph of a sea star takes some doing. I tried the usual macro abstracts and odd angles, even turning them over to shoot extruded stomachs before they could be withdrawn. Then I had an inspiration.

Usually, you do everything possible to avoid your flash reflecting off suspended particles, particularly when you angle the strobe to create a pitch-black background. However, I found a way to make backscatter work for me. Looking at some early shots of firebricks, I noticed that by selectively cropping the back of the starfish as it curled itself over a rock, the impression created was of a small portion of a much larger sphere. And combined with an inky black background dotted with bright white spots, you were suddenly looking at the curved surface of some very strange planet far out in space. So from then on, every time I spotted a firebrick I tried to get it to curl itself as symmetrically as possible over any handy object. Then I'd angle my strobe directly overhead and actually hope for a whole galaxy of backscatter. I came close a number of times, but it took me many shots on many rolls of film at Bangalley before I had the one I wanted. I titled it *NASA Photo*. (This is an early iteration. You'll find a more successful version in the Gallery.)



Another of our favored spots was a series of reefs right in the mouth of the Hawksbury called the Sponge Gardens. All the water movement here encouraged not only sponges, but lots of other sessile life, which in turn attracted lots of fish. Which in turn attracted lots of fishermen. Which in turn meant we'd usually find two or three anchors with healthy lengths of line attached on each dive. The best ones we'd salvage. On the subject on anchor lines, it was at the Sponge Gardens where I enjoyed my most pleasant encounters with giant cuttlefish. On several occasions I descended the anchor line to the bottom 80 feet below to find a cuttle waiting for me. Conscious of my role as a goodwill ambassador from an alien world and anxious to create a friendly image, I'd approach each of these amazing molluscs, remove my glove and gently scratch them between the eyes. Invariably, they would close their eyes and just sort of bask in the attention. When I'd decided I'd established rapport enough, I'd move off. On a couple of dives the cuttles played puppy and actually followed me until the time came for me to return to my world at the other end of the anchor line. I really wished I could stay or they could come with me. Incidentally, if you ever are lucky enough to dive with a cuttle, I've discovered a way to enhance the experience. Cuttlefish propel themselves by jetting water out through a funnel under their heads. When a cuttle wants to speed up or throttle down, it either widens or reduces the funnel opening. When it wants to change course, it swivels the funnel nozzle to point in the direction it was just leaving. Now if you put your hand under a cuttle, you can feel the jet of water pass across. An unusual, kind of intimate sensation. Can you believe it, I'm rhapsodizing about something related to a clam. I just hope my photos of them reflect how they affect me.

Near the Sponge Gardens on a large expanse of sand lies the wreck of a tugboat called the *Valiant*. Aside from some colorful growth and a few resident denizens, it doesn't amount to much in the way of wrecks. However, because it's handy and provides some variation to the other sites in the area, the *Valiant* has attracted plenty of divers since it went down in May 1981. The local dive shop owner and the first man to dive the *Valiant* once confided to me why he continues to find diving this wreck

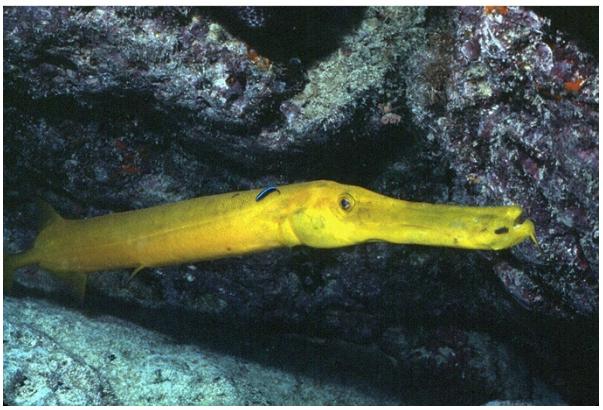
rewarding. He maintains a buoy attached to the *Valiant*, which provides both an easy way to locate it and something to tie dive boats to. From time to time, as his customers explore the *Valiant*, he is busy conducting a circular search pattern on the sand surrounding the wreck, directly under where the currents take his and other dive boats tied to his mooring. Figured it out yet? Divers, particularly new ones, particularly with chop bouncing the boat up and down, have a tendency to drop their gear - mask, fins and weights belts most commonly. And because these divers tend to be both out of air and at the limit of their decompression time, they have little choice but to bid the lost equipment farewell. I hasten to add that this operator is not alone in carrying out such periodic recovery programs. I've talked to others and they too have discovered this nifty method of replenishing hire gear.

After four years and 123 dives I pretty much stopped diving the Northern Beaches, for several reasons. I bought a house, not exactly a 'renovator's dream', but still one that needed much work. Gordon sold his beloved tinny to buy some land. And, most telling of all, I realized that I'd photographed everything worth photographing. From every angle. Under all conditions. Over and over.

In short, I had nothing left to say here.

10
FAMOUS FISH

In July 1975 I flew to the coastal town of Gladstone in Queensland and took a helicopter to Heron Island, then, believe it or not, one of only two resort islands (said to be) actually on the Great Barrier Reef. About 45 miles off Gladstone, Queensland, in the Capricorn Group, Heron is a low, tree-covered, tear-shaped coral cay about a mile in circumference. It also happens to be ringed by one of the friendliest reefs anywhere. Friendly, because the State Fisheries Department banned both spear and line fishing at a number of spots fringing the island. And because resident dive guides and their charges have been feeding some of the 1,150 species of fish for many years, particularly at one site just outside the harbor entrance called The Bommie. This renowned group of coral heads rises some 20-60 feet from the bottom to within a few feet of the surface. The fish here used to be the most famous in Australia. Because they were so tame, and because Heron was Australia's first underwater national park and one of the earliest organized dive resorts Down Under, they'd been photographed by nearly every visiting diver with a camera. Who then, of course, went on to write books and/or magazine



articles illustrated with his or her photos. There was a yellow trumpetfish that I'd seen at least a dozen times. Same with a harlequin tusk fish. When I finally ran across them, I felt like getting autographs. After *I* photographed them, of course.

As has oft been my wont, I endeavored to schedule my trip when I'd have the least company. The fewer fins stirring up silt and getting in the way, the better. This time I squeezed in between school holidays and an annual gathering of divers timed for the turtle egg-laying period. So on a number of dives it was just a guide and me. On a few other subventures I was joined by a pleasant young woman who worked as a purser for the cruise line that owns the Heron Island resort. On the rare occasions he could get free, Colin, one of the guys washing dishes in the kitchens, also came along. Some people don't seem to mind wrinkled hands.

Over the week I spent there, I made several dives at The Bommie. Even with consistently underfilled tanks, I still found myself advancing through a roll of film before I ran out of air. So I took to carrying two cameras below. Either my housed Nikon F and my trusty ol' Nikonos, or a new Nikon Super 8 movie camera and the Nikonos. On one morning dive I was in the water way before anyone else and saw something I'd waited my whole diving life to see. A giant manta ray. He came gliding through the coral heads as gracefully beautiful as any creature on this planet, his back gleaming black and his underside snowy white. As a measure of his status, something like the stars on a general's collar, he carried a full seven remoras on his belly, there to collect whatever crumbs his huge maw missed. I slowly moved closer with my movie camera, trying to capture his rhythmical undulations. The way his wings swept through the water reminded me of a skilled matador with his cape. All too soon the ray's magnificent performance was over, and he disappeared into the blue distance. I looked

around. No one else was in the water yet. No one else saw him. And since I only had time for the movie camera and this is a stills book, unfortunately, neither will you.

A sobering note. Wherever we dived around Heron, the visibility never exceeded about 60 feet. At the time, I chalked this up to some rainy weather and choppy seas. But later I determined that however deserved it reputation for spectacular color and variation of flora and fauna, the Great Barrier Reef cannot boast outstanding visibility. Sorry, Queensland Tourist Board, but it's true.

11
SNAKES ALIVE

Although what you're about to read did happen all right, I've decided to change most of the names of those involved to spare embarrassment. And minimize any opportunity for belated litigation.

* * *

Back in the mid-'70s only a handful of dive boat operations offered cruises along the Great Barrier Reef. And only one of these harbored any serious pretensions about being world class. The promotional leaflets called her "Australia's top diving charter boat." I'll call her *Little Polyp*. She measured nearly 80 feet in length, boasted all sorts of up-to-date navigational gizmos and ran on a pair of diesel engines that gave her a cruising speed approaching 11 knots.

According to those leaflets, there were six air-conditioned cabins for passengers, hot fresh-water showers, food "of the highest standard" and a licensed bar "augmented by a very well-stocked cellar." As an added attraction, *Little Polyp's* owner/captain (let's call him Willy Nilly) enjoyed something of a reputation as an expert on the waters of and around the GBR. Altogether, the set-up sounded very close to ideal. There seemed only one drawback: a cruise aboard this marvelous vessel cost an arm and a leg, at least as far as I was concerned. I won't say they were greedy. I mean you could suck all the

air you wanted absolutely free, but you did have to hire the tank you sucked it from. Plus your weight belt.

I'd been holding off signing up for a cruise for some time, but the Heron Island trip had whetted my appetite. Within three months I'd scrounged up enough money to just barely afford a *Little Polyp* cruise - as long as I drove rather than flew to Nopeen, the boat's home port on the Queensland coast. So I wrote, hoping that someone might have canceled at the last moment and left a berth. And they wrote back that yes, they could squeeze me in. I wouldn't find out how literally they meant that until the night we headed out to sea.

I set forth before sunrise one November Sunday for a leisurely drive north along an inland route called the New England Highway. For those of you who've never motored through the Australian bush, some of it can be quite pretty; rolling hills, grazing sheep and cattle, gum forests, the occasional small town, that sort of thing. However, it takes some getting used to, seeing brown where you expect green. The normal condition away from the coast tends to be dry. Things don't bend, they snap. Go further inland and you hit the Outback, which can mostly be described as desolate. And there's an awfully lot of it, which goes a long way toward explaining why nine-tenths of this country's population live along the coast.

Anyway, as I drove north toward a large country town called Tamworth, also known by thousands of avid fans as the Country Music Capital of Australia, I noticed most of the men in the passing cars and pickups wore hats. I reckoned they must be specially optioned vehicles with raised roofs. Think about it, when was the last time you could wear an Akubra inside a car? Then again, maybe they cut holes in the

seats. A lot of the locals waved as I passed. Actually, 'wave' might be stretching it a bit. What they'd do is laconically raise the index finger off the steering wheel maybe an inch, then lower it. I thought the first time or two that it must have been some sort of nervous tic or something. But everyone was doing it and none of them looked especially stressed out. So I did it back. When in Rome...

I made an interesting observation after crossing the Queensland border: the road signs (and I mean practically every one of them) had been peppered with bullets or shot. I put it down to boredom. You can drive a lot of miles here, particularly on one incredibly long, undeviatingly straight stretch called the Bruce Highway, without seeing a single thing of interest. Unless you're into cattle and/or car carcases, both belly up.

Speaking of cattle, around from the port town of Rockhampton you see a lot of Brahmans. And some of the bulls I encountered had a rather interesting, if unnerving, trick. They'd stand at the side of the road, looking amazingly ugly and roughly the size of a small barn, with a harem of maybe half a dozen cows behind them. As I'd come barreling along doing 100 or so miles an hour, the bull would judge when I was just near enough then start a slow, determined amble across the road, dutifully followed by his womenfolk. I had a choice, either slam on the brakes and pray, or try to maneuver around the bull. And pray. I really couldn't blame them for getting their jollies this way. They couldn't have had much else to do out here either. Besides, maybe once upon a time these same bulls had had to suffer the indignity of some yahoo in an oversized hat jumping on their back and raking their flanks with spurs while a bunch of gore-seeking onlookers yelled and screamed.

Further north on the way to another port town called Mackay, I could see about a hundred miles dead ahead (no exaggeration) that the sky seemed unnaturally grey. As I continued to chase that point the road kept vanishing into, the greyness darkened and became black clouds. Closer still, it became obvious the clouds were rising from the ground. I deduced *fire*. And started to wonder how I was going to get through it. I sure

as hell wasn't going to turn around and go back down that long and lonely, excruciatingly boring road. Not right away anyway. Noting the crop in the fields on either side of the road, I worked out that the fires must be man-made and that post-harvest cane burning was underway. After awhile I had no doubt: the air became saturated with the distinctly cloying smell of burnt sugar. I rolled up the windows and stuck to the road, passing through a series of thick palls before curving down some steep hills into Mackay. I had no reason to stop, so I didn't.

After spending a few pleasant days a little further north around Shute Harbour, a picturesque resort area (right), I felt refreshed enough to tackle the Bruce again. I started back early Friday morning. What I saw along the way reminded me of a time I found myself an onlooker at an Outback wedding reception at a hotel in Bourke, New South Wales. It was as you might expect. All the women congregated in one room while all the menfolk stood around in another whetting their whistles. Soon they got to bragging about how many kangaroos they'd been able to hit in one night with the bars on the fronts of their vehicles. Fittingly, they let the groom take top honors, with a claimed total of 142. Me, I saw the fresh remains of about a dozen on the way to Mackay.

Saturday evening around eight o'clock I reported aboard the *Little Polyp* and was shown to my cabin. Well, almost. The others got cabins, I was assigned this closet space with a bunk bed crammed in. And no air-conditioning, except a port hole, which was supposed to stay closed. But I wasn't totally alone. Someone else found himself in exactly the same situation: my roommate. He turned out to be Colin, the dishwasher from Heron. Talk about small (and cramped) worlds. Well, I thought as I shoved a bit of gear here and a bit more under there, we're bound to get some sort of discount.

We went into the lounge for drinks and to get acquainted with our fellow cruisers. Again, I thought, small world. I recognized a lady doctor whom I'd once met while taking an abbreviated marine biology course in Sydney. I didn't have any trouble remembering her. New to diving at that point, she managed to lose a fin in some rocks along the shore the first time we went into the water. And she didn't realize it until she was climbing out afterwards. I'd have thought swimming around in circles would have been a dead give-away. This time she'd brought her husband along, probably to swim behind her and keep count.

I was intrigued by another fellow cruiser, someone whose name I knew well but had never met. We'll call him Red Noworries. He ran a reptile park north of Sydney and was renowned for the number of times he'd been bitten by venomous snakes and survived. I suppose I might have been more impressed were his claim to fame the number of times he hadn't been bitten. A friend of Captain Willy's, Red brought with him a whole bunch of large fish tanks and a research assistant, many years his junior. It soon became known that they were aboard to collect sea snakes, then milk them and have the venom used to produce anti-venin to counter bites from the exceptionally lethal Tiger Snake. A more than worthwhile pursuit. The only catch was, neither of them would be. Catching, that is. They didn't dive, so they expected us fare-paying passengers to devote our holiday time to collecting said snakes for them. And they'd brought nets aplenty for everyone. But not me. To ask the money Captain Willy asked and expect guests to spend their precious time working for someone who sat around comparing notes with his cabin mate struck me as a tad too presumptuous.

As we stood around small-talking, another Aussie identity arrived, this one the one-time editor of a local dive magazine which didn't survive past the 11th issue. He too had a lady friend in tow. He apologized profusely, saying pressing family matters made it impossible for them to be our dive guides for this cruise. Then they left. I managed to hide my disappointment, mainly because I didn't have a clue they were even supposed to be aboard. I did idly wonder, though, why Colin and I couldn't have their cabin

instead of the closet we'd been given. Shortly thereafter we put out to sea. Captain Willy told us November was the best time of the year to dive the Great Barrier Reef. He also told us that it might be a bit rough along the way, and I must admit that I didn't sleep particularly well. I was too busy holding onto my bunk to keep from flying out.

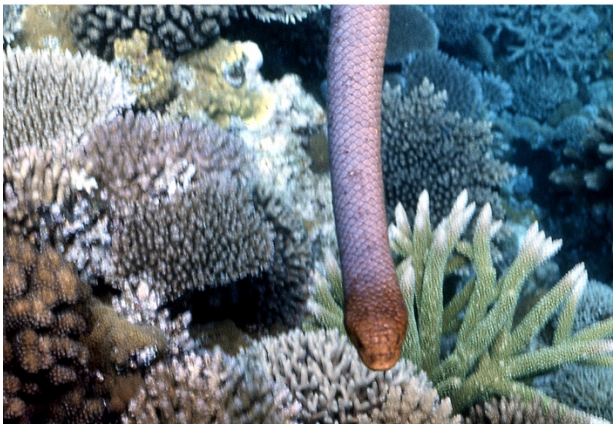
By morning the seas had calmed considerably, and we anchored in the Swain Reefs, some 120 miles off the coast south of Mackay and then one of the more popular diving areas of the GBR. While taking in some of the usual splendor associated with this natural wonder of the world, particularly the soft corals, I had my first encounter with a sea snake. Then my second. And third. And so on; they were all over the place. I thought, *how fortunate for Red*. Only after a few more dives in other areas with equally healthy snake populations did it dawn on me that we weren't fluking it.

On the afternoon dive Colin and I were joined by a third buddy, a decent sized remora or sucker fish, one of those parasites that attach themselves to large predators in the hope of picking up leftover scrapes of food. It stayed with us for most of the dive, and every once in awhile I'd turn around real fast, but I never spotted its former host. From the remora's size, probably just as well. That night, dinner was everything the leaflets promised.

The next day we tried another spot. More sea snakes and, as before, most were olive in color and about three feet in length. I remember when I'd first heard about these poisonous reptiles common to Indo-Pacific waters. The experts said they were extremely deadly, responsible for a good many human fatalities, with venom up to 10 times more deadly than a cobra's. So I immediately put them on my list of denizens of the deep that I didn't want anything to do with. Then I read in Cousteau's *The Living Sea* that sea snakes had very small mouths, and about the only place they could bite a human was through that thin bit of skin between the fingers. Athough not totally convinced, I clenched my fists and breathed a small sigh of relief. Then I saw a TV documentary that showed sea snakes, like any of their land-based cousins, could distend their jaws and bite damn near anything they wanted to. Once more, a wide

berth was in order. Next, I heard that they were generally quite passive, except during mating season, when they'd been known to have a go at divers. Okay, I definitely wouldn't dive around them when they were feeling horny.

In the years since, I've encountered sea snakes numerous times, and, basically, I find them pests. They have a lung which runs the length of their bodies, and it allows them to hold their breaths for a couple of hours or so. In the areas where we anchored with high populations of these reptiles, there always seemed to be one either headed for the surface or returning. If I happened to be in the way, their curiosity invariably got the best of them, and they'd sidle over for a closer look, usually attracted to reflections in the camera port or, more annoyingly, my faceplate. Once in awhile they'd wrap themselves around my legs. When I was looking into holes and crevices for good subject matter, I'd often find myself joined by an equally inquisitive sea snake checking out the same recesses for a quick snack. One time while concentrating on a shot, I felt this bumping against the knife on my thigh. When I looked down, there was a snake repeatedly hitting the shiny brass butt with its head. As I said, pests.



Aside from spotting those snakes and a few crown-of-thorns sea stars, these second morning and afternoon dives were pretty uneventful. Colin decided to snorkel around a bit, and I retired to our closet to reload my camera, bring my diary up to date and catch a few winks. Later, when I ventured out, I noticed we had moved to an overnight anchorage. What I didn't notice was Colin. I looked around the boat for him and asked whether anyone had seen him. Eventually, it became clear that he wasn't aboard, so I made that fact known to Captain Willy. He dug out some binoculars and looked back to the area where we'd been anchored. It was still within sight, but just barely. He made out Colin clinging to a marker spindle and waving wildly as the tide kept rising. Since Captain Willy reckoned it would be too

much trouble to weigh anchor, they put a rubber dingy into the water and putt-putted over to retrieve my closet mate. As they did, one of the deckhands was volunteering to anyone who would listen, *Hey, I checked the tanks and they were all there*. Which seemed an eminently good way to make sure *Little Polyp* didn't lose any tanks. Divers, evidently, were another matter. Dinner that night was quite good.

The diving over the next couple of days was also quite good. I was getting through film at a brisk rate. Red's tanks continued to fill with writhing reptiles. And I found some quite nice shells. In fact, Captain Willy, a collector of some note himself, was quite taken with a couple of my spider shells, saying one was the largest of that species he'd ever seen. He generously allowed me and a few other to put our molluscs in the boat's freezer. Of course, not doing so would have put some pressure on everyone's olfactory nerves. Yes, I know you're not supposed to take live shells, but there were a lot less divers back then and, for the most part, we weren't all that savvy about ecological concerns.

Meanwhile, for some reason dinner was progressively becoming more and more mediocre. We were also experiencing some trouble with the desalination equipment. As we ran short of fresh water, Captain Willy instituted rationing. First, he told us that rinsing gear other than regulators and cameras was verboten. Then we were down to one shower a day. Next, we weren't even supposed to rinse regs or cameras. Shower times were restricted, then eventually outlawed. I started wondering how much longer before we became forced to turn to the very well-stocked wine cellar for something to drink.

As all this was going on, we kept diving. And the diving kept on being excellent. I remember one afternoon subventure in particular. Colin and I were with a couple of other guys, and we saw a grouper that must have weighed about 100 pounds, then a terrum nearly as large, Then a good size turtle (above). At one point I noticed Colin swimming along with a sea snake right behind him, attracted by the shiny first stage of his regulator. I got a bit of a chuckle out of this, then happened to turn around and discovered another snake right behind my reg. A few minutes later we were suddenly joined by a bunch of grey reef sharks, a type of whaler and perhaps the most aggressive of all their ilk. I quickly counted: five. Uh-oh. A common belief back then was that sharks wouldn't bother you as long as there were more of you than them. Apparently, they weren't as primitive as the marine biologists made out. How could they be and still be able to count without even having fingers. I also remember another old bit of wisdom about how the only thing predictable about sharks is they're unpredictable. That I had no trouble believing. Especially when one of them broke away and came straight at Colin and me, really moving. It passed right between us, and, let me tell you, there wasn't all that much water separating us.

The next evening we held a kind of informal vote. The itinerary said we were supposed to venture out into the Coral Sea to Marion Reef, where visibility reputedly averaged 200 feet, and sharks were particularly common. The only problem was, the marine forecast for the area warned of 15-foot seas. I raised my hand with the 'what-the-hell' crowd and off we went. Can't say I was all that disappointed that those seas never materialized. The visibility was pretty spectacular. I could see as far as I could see, however far that was. And the sharks, they didn't let us down either.

On the way back through the Reef, Red decided to milk his snakes: my fellow guests had netted over a hundred of the pests. We anchored, and Red started coaxing the snakes one by one to sink their glistening fangs into a membrane stretched over the top of a glass. As he pressed their little heads, a tiny trickle of yellowish fluid would dribble down the side of the glass. To me, it seemed like a lot of effort for some fairly modest results. Meanwhile, Captain Willy went off the stern platform for what I believe was his first dive of the cruise. He was back in no time, wrestling with a huge, incredibly muscular snake. It took the efforts of several crewmembers to manhandle the thing aboard and then to hold it while Red milked. There was nothing modest about these results. It seemed to me that that one, five-foot snake had at least equalled the output of all his smaller cousins. Thus, I learned another lesson about sea snakes: stay way away from the big ones.

When we pulled back into Nopeen, it was time to gather up my gear, retrieve my shells and settle up. I went up to the freezer to collect my booty, particularly those two spiders that had so impressed Captain Willy. I searched all over that freezer, not that difficult since we eaten just about everything on board. I found all my shells but two. Guess which ones. Then I lined up at the table Captain Willy had set up on the dock. I was interested to see whether anyone received a discount for being unable to enjoy all the fresh water the leaflets boasted of. Nope. No one got any bonuses for catching sea snakes. Neither Colin nor I had any reduction for our unair-conditioned closet. And, no, Captain Willy had no idea what could have become of my shells. *Maybe someone took them by mistake*.

Little Polyp's next cruise was a special one that Captain Willy ran every once in awhile. Just for shell collectors. To only the most bountiful areas of the Reef.

12
OPERATION HAILSTONE

At this point a little history might be in order.

In 1920 the League of Nations handed over the Caroline, Marshall and Marianas islands in Micronesia to Japan, basically as a reward for being on the winning side in World War I. Although the Treaty of Versailles stated "...no military or naval bases shall be established in the territory," in a few years the Japanese would have imperialistic designs on the greater Pacific region. The only honorable thing to do was leave the League. This they did in 1934, immediately posting *No Trespassing* signs all over the place. One very prohibited area was Truk Lagoon in the Eastern Carolines.

After that December day of infamy at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese were already in a position to establish a command center and an anchorage at Truk. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the guy in charge of everything flying a rising sun ensign, made Truk his headquarters in August 1942. At one time 40,000 Japanese were stationed on the islands in the lagoon. They constructed more than 1,200 buildings, including a huge hospital, communications centers, barracks and repair shops. They also built fuel storage tanks, ammunition dumps, fortifications and anti-aircraft gun emplacements, seaplane and submarine bases and several deep-water anchorages. All these facilities plus the presence of the Commander of the Combined Fleet helped foster the belief that Truk was an impregnable fortress, a veritable Gibraltar of the Pacific.

By early 1944 Nimitiz's naval forces were well under way across the Pacific, systematically hitting one Japanese base after another. Task Force 58, one of the most powerful naval forces ever put together, commanded by Rear Admiral Marc A. Mitscher, had just devastated Kwajalein in the Marshalls. Looking at a chart, you wouldn't have to be a military genius to deduce that Truk's days were numbered.

Mitscher and his boss, Vice-Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, and the other allied planners had heard all that Gibraltar scuttlebutt, so they ruled out an amphibious assault. Since there wasn't any land handy for land-based aircraft, and since the Japanese fleet moorings were too far inside the lagoon for naval gunfire, they decided to try something unprecedented in the annals of naval warfare. An attack carried out solely by carrier aircraft.

Mitscher came prepared. His three task groups included nine carriers, six battleships, 10 cruisers plus assorted destroyers and submarines. Before sun-up on February 17, they were sitting about 90 miles from Truk, ready to launch Operation Hailstone. One after another, 72 Hellcat fighters catapulted off the carrier decks with orders to destroy enemy aircraft and gain control of the skies over the lagoon. Then a second wave of 18 Dauntless dive-bombers peppered the airfields with incendiaries and fragmentation bombs. Next came a wave of fighters, dive-bombers and torpedo bombers bent on sinking every ship in the lagoon. Such was their enthusiasm for the task at hand that a number of the pilots made a little more U.S. Naval history, continuing their carrier operations right through the night.

By the end of the second day, 30 waves of planes had flown 1,250 sorties, unloading 400 tons of bombs and aerial torpedoes - 15 times the ordinance dropped on December 7, 1941. They had destroyed 90 percent of the Japanese shore installations and all the airfields. They put more than 250 planes out of commission. And they sank or crippled more than 30 major vessels. Actually, the toll could have been higher, but the Japanese had spotted a reconnaissance plane a week or so earlier. The then-commander, Admiral Koga, put *ni* and *ni* together and hastily had his big warships make wakes for Palau.

In any event, that Gibraltar of the Pacific myth seemed well and truly exploded.

Not only did all this spectacular carnage go a long way toward ending the war in the Pacific, it also created the all-time greatest collection of artificial reefs anywhere in the underwater world.

* * *

I must have first read about the graveyard of sunken ships at Truk some 20-25 years earlier. The idea of all these huge wrecks resting in clear, tropical waters virtually untouched by plundering divers so intrigued me that I vowed to dive them one day. In late 1981 I got together with Bill Mulholland, a frequent buddy and a fellow expatriate American living in Australia. We gave our timing a bit of extra thought. I'd read about how the wrecks were covered by a thick layer of silt, so we wanted to try to pick a time when the conditions were favorable but the number of visitors minimal. As always, the fewer fins stirring everything up, the better. We chose mid-January, figuring most people would be back to work, still catching their breath from Christmas and New Year. And fresh out of spare cash.

Now, because this visit to Truk Lagoon was so important to me and because I wanted to cram in as much diving as possible, I decided to once again use the Canadian Air Force Exercises to improve my condition. But this time I meant to take every precaution I could think of. I invested in a quality pair of running shoes. I softened the surface I ran on. I wore a special knee bandage. And I still wound up hurting, worse than ever. So I would wear that bandage all the way to Truk, right up to the last day of diving.

When we rendezvoused at the hotel in Hawaii, we discovered that our entire tour group consisted of just the two of us plus one other diver from Houston. Normally these contingents tended to average 15 or so people. We three heartily congratulated each other on our good fortune. Then we found out there can be a drawback to being

this kind of lucky. The tour outfit we'd sent our money to, probably because they weren't making much (if any) profit, didn't exactly bust their collective butt for us. First, they hadn't made arrangements with the Honolulu hotel, which was part of the package we'd already paid for. (The vouchers they sent us were useless.) So the hotel insisted we pay again, and I was only reimbursed six months later after numerous letters and telexes. When we arrived at the Truk Continental Hotel, neither they nor the Blue Lagoon Dive Shop (whom we were supposed to be diving with) had been notified that the three of us were on the way. I must say, however, these people proved a lot more accommodating than that hotel in Honolulu.

A brief mention of the plane trip. It wasn't brief. After short stops at Johnston Island, Majuro, Kwajalein and Ponape (now Pohnpei) we reached Truk (now Chuuk). More than nine long, cramped hours later. Truk is not an island: it's a *district* in the Eastern Carolines about 2,500 miles west of Hawaii and seven degrees north of the Equator. Covering 180,000 square miles of ocean, Truk District includes 11 major islands and more than 100 smaller ones with a total population around 33,000. Although the district encompasses more than 100 separate atolls, none comes close to Truk Atoll in scope. Forty miles across and surrounded by one of the world's largest barrier reefs, Truk Lagoon would be something special even without what lies beneath the surface.

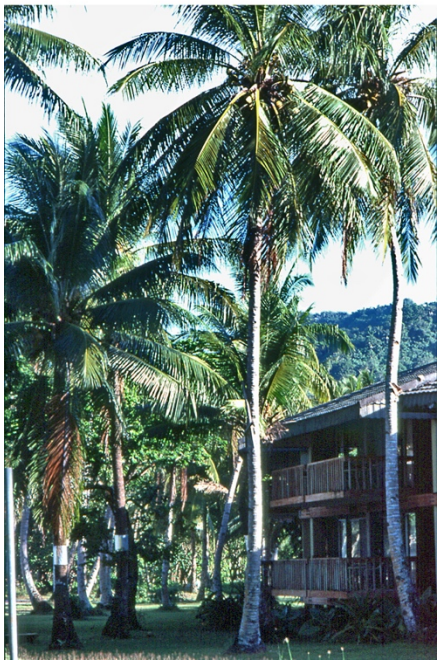
As our 727 came in to land at Moen, the district center, I could see the roughly circular lagoon. I tried to imagine it a million or so years earlier when it was still a big, mountainous mass. Not easy. Today, all that remains are a few of the highest peaks surrounded by an awful lot of water. I got out a map and tried to find some large shadowy shapes beneath the surface. Either the bottom, which reached 240 feet, was too distant or, more likely, I wasn't looking in the right places.

After shuffling through another of those cursory customs checks, we boarded the hotel bus for a 15-minute ride. Had the road been paved instead of a track of muddy

ruts, the trip probably would have taken just five minutes. As we bounced along, I took in the sights. The tropical vegetation provided lush evidence of Truk's average 100-inch annual rainfall. The barefoot women showed a preference for muumuu-type dresses of brilliant parrot-plumage hues. The men tended to wear long pants, sneakers and ersatz pro football shirts. The cars and light trucks we passed, even those only a year or two old, appeared to be in advanced stages of terminal corrosion. The dwellings ran the gamut. I saw a few carefully restored Japanese-style houses. Some cubistic structures of concrete blocks. And, most common, haphazard shanties of corrugated tin and wood. Perched on poles over the water were a number of small buildings that the cartoons usually depict with quarter-moons cut in their doors. A cheap but pretty effective plumbing system. In front of the less imposing abodes I spotted something I hadn't expected. Great piles of shiny beer cans.

I'd read how a couple of years earlier the women of Truk cleverly countered a growing drinking problem in the district by organizing a prohibition referendum. The clever part came in the timing of the voting. Sunday morning, when most of the menfolk were still too indisposed from the night before to participate. I asked our driver about the cans, and he explained that a booze black market now flourished. We would soon learn where to whisper *Joe sent me* and start our own more modest, less blatant piles of cans.

The Truk Continental proved a startling contrast to the rather laidback aspect of all we'd passed on the way. Carefully manicured, emerald green lawns with colorful



shrubs and rows of stately palms. Three low, sprawling buildings with full-length glass doors and balconies overlooking the lagoon. Wall-to-wall carpeting in the rooms and sashimi on the menu.

We rode out the next morning in one of Blue Lagoon's custom-built 18-footers, we three plus a helmsman and Kimiuo Aisek's son Gradvin as guide. *Le père* was widely acknowledged as the foremost expert on Truk wrecks. Our first one was the *Fujikawa* Maru, an aircraft transport which had been torpedoed and sunk upright in 120 feet. We tied up to a bit of superstructure conveniently sticking out of the water. The initial dive was planned for 30 minutes at 90 feet, exploring holds one and two. I went in with both my housed Nikon F and the Nikonos. As I started down the king posts, I could see this awesome form lying below, like the body of some dead leviathan. Then came the straight lines that betray something man-made in the midst of everything else natural. A collection of geometric shapes of varying shades of blue. Squares. Rectangles. Circles. They gradually resolved themselves into the bridge, different deck levels, open holds and hatches, cargo booms, ladders, railings, cables, piles of debris. And guns.

Several different impressions vied for center stage in my mind. The size was enormous. The books said 434 feet in length, but those are just numbers. I found it easier to think of the ship in terms of a football field, including one end zone. I figured we could easily spend weeks just investigating this one wreck. Then there was the quiet. Aside from the usual reassuring bubbling of used air, the clacking of shrimp and munching of parrotfish, the sensation was one of, to coin a phrase, deathly stillness. Exactly the opposite of what it must have been like that cacophonous day it went down. But in contrast to the somberness of the dead ship was the profusion of underwater life covering it. Just about anywhere light reached, something grew. Splashes of brilliant

color and fantastic shapes encrusted the *Fujikawa* from stem to stern. I couldn't help thinking that there was something very ironic about having all this beauty slowly but surely covering these weapons of war.

We swam into the *Fujikawa*'s holds, and I saw wingless Zeros, broken boxes of ammunition, warheads, gas masks, scattered bottles, oil drums and all kinds of good stuff worth taking home and putting on the mantle. Anyone who's dived wrecks denuded by souvenir seekers couldn't help but be gratified by the number of fantastic relics still lying around these ships and planes. Apparently, early divers displayed no qualms about plundering, and their larcenies had led the district administration to designate as historical monuments the "...ships, other vessels and aircraft, and any and all parts thereof, which formally belonged to or were a part of Armed Forces of Japan and were sunk to or otherwise deposited on the bottom of the Truk Lagoon prior to December 31, 1945."

According to Truk District Law 21-5, anyone removing any artifact would be subject to a $1,000 fine and/or six months in the calaboose. You were supposed to sign a declaration saying you had no intention of ripping off anything. And those mandatory guides weren't there just to guide you.

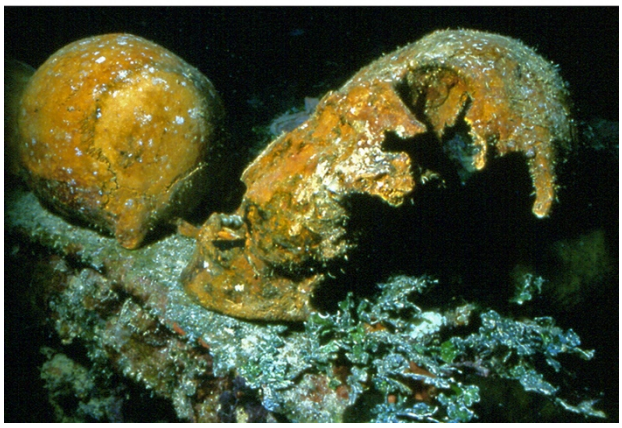
After the morning dive on the *Fujikawa* we motored over to Dublon, which the Japanese used as their main island. A short walk through some rain forest led us to the remains of what had been one of the largest hospitals in the Pacific. All we saw were crumbling walls and smelly piles of coconut meat.

Following some snorkeling around a subchaser called the *Fumizuki* Maru, we made our second dive on the *Fujikawa*'s bow, which rose to within 60 feet of the surface. Here we found really spectacular coral growth. And because we weren't too deep, I was more

aware of all the colors the invertebrates came in. One magnificent lemon-yellow tree coral so struck me, I took half a dozen shots as quickly as my strobe could recycle. And so went the well-established routine: a 30-minute dive to 90 feet in the morning, some snorkeling during a break for lunch and an afternoon dive to 60 feet for 30 minutes.

The second day we headed out to the second-most-popular Truk wreck, the still-oozing oil tanker *Shinkoku* Maru. The first thing I noticed here were all the finny creatures. Haughty batfish greeted us at the surface. On the way down we swam through vast schools of silvery baitfish. While exploring the wreck itself, I came upon jacks, gropers and clouds of small, colorful reef fish. It may have been my imagination, but it certainly seemed like we were to encounter far more fish on the wrecks that had not been carrying explosives.

Also plentiful on the *Shinkoku* were big, white blobs of plankton. The unusual density of micro-organisms (and not-so-microorganisms) here was probably due to the ship's position out in the middle of the lagoon. At this point Gradvin did his party trick for the tourists. He ducked into a compartment and emerged with three skulls and some femurs or ulnas or whatever for us to photograph. When we'd each taken token shots, back they went until the next intrepid subventurers swept down.

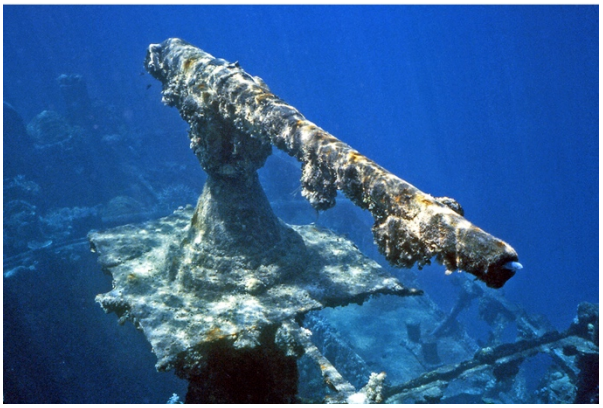


We returned to dive the stern after lunch. Again, 30 minutes at 60 feet. The coral encrusting the ship not only offered me superb subject matter, it was also providing marine biologists with stacks of useful data on invertebrate growth. In some cases,

official records reveal to the minute when a ship went down and thus the earliest moment anything could have started wreck bedecking.

The third morning we dived what in retrospect became my favorite wreck. The *Sankisan* Maru was a 365-foot munitions freighter which most likely went down with a good deal of noise. From bridge to stern nearly everything's been blown away. However, the three forward holds are intact. And loaded. Number one holds untidy heaps of cases and boxes of machine gun ammunition and warhead detonators. The policy of the administrators had long been to let seawater naturally defuse all the ordinance in the lagoon, but no one knew for sure just how far nature had taken its course. So I figured it was not a real good idea to start banging these detonators against the bulkheads.

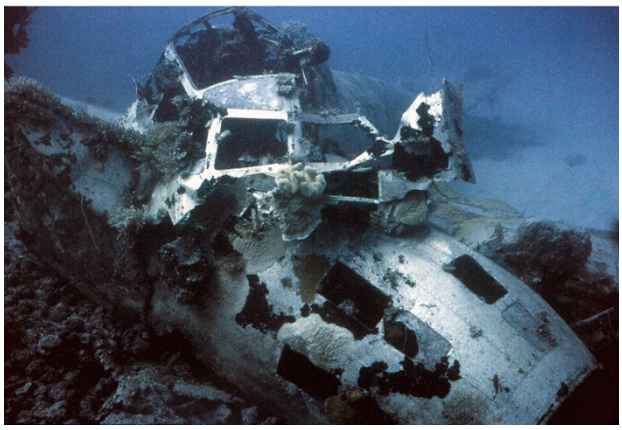
In the second hold I found bottles, cans, airplane engines and the skeletons of four trucks. Another six emaciated trucks sat on the deck above. Strangely, their tires didn't look too bad. As interesting as all this war materiel may have been, it was the coral growth that really took my breath away. The whole ship was festooned with 40 years-worth of corals and other invertebrates displaying the most gorgeous colors and intricate designs. It made me wonder whether that witch with the gingerbread house might have had a sister who brought her decorating talents down below. And to make the scene still more magic, the visibility was unquestionably the best we would experience: I'd estimate 100 feet. I shot both rolls in no time.



At lunchtime I snorkeled over, around and through the gunboat *Dai Na Hino* Maru using my Nikonos. I found this little wreck quite photogenic. Once I'd exhausted the picture possibilities (and myself from all the 40-foot free diving), I snorkeled closer to shore and discovered the remains of an airplane Gradvin didn't know existed. After the usual sandwich and orange soda, we made our 60-foot dive to the sub tender *Heian* Maru. Perhaps I had become blasé, but I found this one boring.

However, the following day we explored its sister tender, the *Rio de Janeiro* Maru. Resting on her starboard side, the ship's giant funnels, props, long companionways and cargo of different size warheads provided all sorts of excellent subject matter.

That afternoon we split our time at 60 feet between two plane wrecks, the first a Betty bomber G4M1. Aside from the absence of its two engines, this medium-sized bomber appears from the outside to be in reasonably good shape. It would seem the sessile life hereabouts isn't terribly fond of aluminum, because the plane's skin was mostly bare. I swam through an opening near the tail and forward to the cockpit where a yellow trumpetfish had settled in. From the rather radical rearrangement of the nose area, I expected the pilot would have experienced a none-too-gentle return to earth.



The second plane was an Emily H8K2, reputedly the finest flying boat in its class. With the emphasis on *boat*. At 92 feet it was big enough. And inside, the rib structure immediately reminded me of the ships we'd been diving the past several days. From a photographic standpoint both planes made very good subjects, in large part, I think,

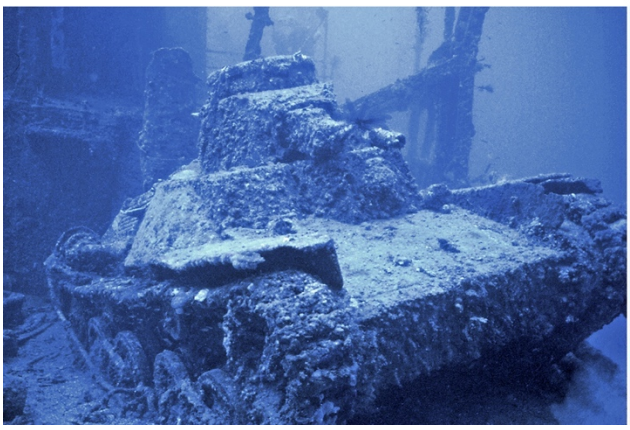
because you could get a much more complete sense of the entire craft. With the ships, no matter how hard one tried or how wide a lens one might use, their immense size and the limited visibility combined to restrict you from seeing anything more than a small part of some larger, undefined whole.

The next morning we set out for the *Yamagiri* Maru, a transport which was carrying some thirty 18-inch warheads destined for the big-daddy battleships *Yamato* and *Mushashi*. The largest shells turned out during the war, they were said to have a range of 20 miles. We heard that they were "believed to be stable." Most reassuring. Although *Yamagiri*, which translated means 'misty mountain', was hit by both bombs and torpedoes, she was in pretty good condition.

After snorkeling round looking for sea-type shells during lunch, we returned to the *Fujikawa* and its bridge. For the first time during all these dives I felt like I might have been intruding. We explored the bath area, complete with Japanese-style tiled tubs and Western-style urinals. Here the layer of sediment was particularly thick, and we had to move very carefully. I could just imagine the same dive with 15 pairs of fins swirling great brown clouds of silt everywhere. Because the island structure suffered heavy bombing, enough light floods in through huge jagged holes to create exceptional photo opportunities.

Following another dive on the *Shinkoku* where I spotted a spotted eagle ray amid the same snowstorm of white plankton, we dived a newly discovered wreck. Tentatively identified as the cargo ship *Kensho* Maru, this one really had a virgin feel about it. Mainly because no one had ripped off the bridge glasses, various pieces of china and a few other highly desirable odds and ends. I even noticed a nice branch of black coral at about 45 feet.

On our last day of diving we did things differently. Waiting until noon when the sun apogeed and afforded us maximum light, we made our only decompression dive. Fifteen minutes at 160 feet on the *San Furanshisuka* Maru with a one-minute stop at 20 feet and four minutes at 10. It turned out to be a fantastic dive, well worth the little extra effort. The 'San Francisco' had plenty to see. Three small tanks, the only type the



Japanese had. Trucks. Half-trucks. Hundreds of round anti-ship mines racked in neat rows on the deck. A coral-covered 75mm deck gun. I moved quickly from one subject to the next trying to record it all on both rolls of film. Because of the depth, the over-all bluish cast from the strobeless Nikonos seemed much more appropriate. And you know what other effect the depth had? My knee was no longer hurting.

That night we paid our fourth visit to the *Fujikawa* to see the flowers bloom. Very pretty, very peaceful. And a fitting way to end our diving at Truk Lagoon. As my underwater light picked out one beautiful cluster of coral after another, I found myself wondering whether Mitscher and his cohorts ever gave a thought to what they hath wrought.

Post Script: I ceased doing the Canadian Air Force Exercises. However, I would continue to tell other divers and several doctors about my knee's history, extending my theory to suggest that hyperbaric chambers could be beneficial in alleviating all sorts of similar injuries. In fact, a few years back I even phoned a doctor in charge of one of the Royal Australian Navy's hyperbaric units. He basically showed little interest and told

me this sort of thing really wasn't his area. As you might know, the use of hyperbaric chambers for medical problems beyond the bends is becoming more commonplace every day.

13

TRADE WINDS IN PARADISE

At some point during my formative years, an image of Samoa had come to represent the ultimate South-Sea-island paradise. I'm not sure why Samoa, probably an accumulation of references to the island group. In any event, when I decided in 1985 to explore the South Pacific beyond the bounds of Australia, Samoa immediately came to mind. My research didn't uncover much because, for some reason, tourism was not enthusiastically sought. I did discover that Western Samoa and American Samoa, though only a few miles apart, were quite different propositions. One was an independent democracy, the other basically a US Naval base. I'd had plenty of firsthand experience of the Navy's effect on its immediate surrounds elsewhere, so I picked Western Samoa. More specifically, the island of Upolu and a resort called Hideaway Beach, the only one with any sort of serious diving facility.

Getting there (and back) wasn't exactly half the fun. First, I had to delay my flight by a week because the Fijian government had seconded the plane to give Red Chinese chief Hu Yaobang a tour of the area. And when it came time to leave Western Samoa, I couldn't. The plane was 'broken'. Turned out, it had a cracked windshield. So I didn't get away for another 16 hours, and then only after a great deal of confusion and doubt.

The flight to Upolu, the most populous of the four major islands comprising Western Samoa, left Sydney about eight o'clock Sunday evening. After gassing up in Fiji and crossing the International Dateline, we arrived at Faleolo Airport just before six the

same morning. It was dark when the Boeing 737 screeched down, but by the time I'd cleared Customs, the sun had cleared the horizon.

My gear and I were collected by a mini bus from the Samoan Hideaway Beach Resort, which lay along Mulivai Beach some 45 minutes away on the other side of the island. We turned left out of the airport, past a few loose horses and straight into a pungent smoke haze, my first sign of the profound influence missionaries had had here since first arriving in 1830. The smoke came from cooking ovens. The Sabbath rated as such a special day, families would start preparing Sunday dinner first thing in the morning.

Peering through the smoke I spotted more evidence of the religious fervor that transformed these former head-hunters into one of the world's most modest, even prudish, peoples. (I'm now inclined to believe Margaret Mead's celebrated account of Samoan life, particularly the sexual mores, may have been heavily tempered by wishful thinking.) Virtually everyone - man, woman; young, old; fat, skinny - sported *lava lavas*, a colorfully patterned piece of cloth worn wrapped around the waist like a long skirt. I learned later that the missionaries had so impressed Samoans with the virtue of modesty that many islanders actually wore special lava lavas when bathing or showering.

We drove on, scattering dogs and chickens, pigs and piglets. Talk about free range. The road that took us to Hideaway was in amazing shape considering it dated back to World War II. Apparently, a bunch of bored US Navy Seabees, having nothing better to do, decided to see how fast they could lay down a road straight across the island.

As we passed one village after another - Upolo boasted more than 200 - I noticed that at least half the houses were the traditional open-sided *fales*, little more than some teak or mahogany poles spaced a yard or so apart, embedded around the edge of a concrete floor and topped by a thatched roof or, in many instances, a more contemporary galvanized version. Personal touches appeared in the form of brightly painted trim, equally colorful gardens and, oddly enough, rather ornate family graves.

Most villages had as their most prominent edifice a church (above right). It could be Congregational, Catholic, Methodist, Mormon or some other denomination, but it was prominent. In many cases, massive. And, in every case, totally incongruous.

The road continued by fields of stubby plants with large, heart-shaped leaves. Taro, the major cash and subsistence crop for Samoans. From the starchy tuberous roots they would make a stodgy bread, the main constituent of many a Samoan's diet. And the main reason for many a Samoan's stodgy appearance.

Eventually, we turned right at a church, down a dirt track and into the grounds of Hideaway. Under the palm trees sat nine duplex bungalows, their elliptical shapes and rows of louvered windows obviously patterned after the native fales. The beach lay only meters away, stretching left and right as far as you could see. Beyond, green as an emerald, the sandy lagoon. Then the fringing reef sending up white spume. And on the other side, the deep, blue ocean.

During the next fortnight I would have plenty of opportunities to see first-hand what stirred Robert Louis Stevenson and Rupert Brooks to write so rapturously of Western Samoa. Headed back towards shore after a dive, I'd often find myself staring transfixed, marveling at just how lovely Upolu was. On those too rare, sun-drenched days the islands seemed to glow between sea and sky; the lush,

green tropical vegetation blanketing the slopes that ran down to pristine white beaches lying between black volcanic cliffs. I had one recurring thought: this is the way it's supposed to be, this is precisely what a tropical South Seas island should look like. Even on rainy, grey days when Upolu sat shrouded in mist with the bright colors well dampened, even then the island was beautiful, but in a muted, mystical way.

Once settled into my room, I went looking for Mike Batterton and Cecily Newling, the young New Zealand couple who ran Hideaway's diving operation. It was they who broke the news about the trade winds. Springing up about 10 o'clock in the morning and dying down around four in the afternoon, the trades had been blowing for a couple of weeks when I arrived at the end of April.

Because of the winds, Mike and Cecily initiated a routine that saw us starting out to nearby reefs immediately after an early breakfast and again in the afternoon when the trades abated. Even so, the swells were usually heavy and the vis limited to about 50 feet. It got so I could prejudge each subventure from the surface, looking down to see how far I could see, how dramatically the fish were being swept back and forth and how much the coral had regenerated.

Mike said that a visiting marine biologist estimated the crown-of-thorns had feasted on the local coral about 10 years earlier. Because a reef theoretically takes some 40 years to regain its original splendor after such an infestation, the foundation was a colorless, shapeless rubble. By far, the most prevalent coral species were Acropora. Sprouting everywhere were smallish growths of most types of staghorn as well as bush, plate and knobby coral. Here and there, clumps of Stylophora, leaf, mushroom, honey-comb, mosaic and brain corals had begun to establish themselves. Soft corals like Gorgonia, sea whips, leather, opal bubble and tree corals, the latter generally deflated, were in evidence as well. I also spotted the occasional junior-sized giant clam (*Tridacna maxima*). Lots of large anemones. Several varieties of sea stars and urchins. Some zoanthids. But surprisingly few sponges.

If the corals and other invertebrates didn't prove as grand and profuse as I might have wished, I certainly couldn't carp about the fish life. At every dive site we encountered wall-to-wall finny creatures and more different species than I'd run across anywhere. An exporter of marine fishes for aquarium enthusiasts should have been able to become very rich in a very short time. It seemed the perfect place to beef up my rather limited collection of fish photos. Because fish, like all animals - including humans, try to maintain their own personal space around them, getting close isn't all that easy. However, a 105mm micro lens goes a long way towards solving the problem. Essentially, it's a close-up telephoto lens. Unfortunately, there are a couple of drawbacks. The further away from your subject underwater, the more suspended particles between you and it. And because the lens is both telephoto and micro, depth of field becomes severely limited. Naturally enough, on each occasion that I decided to concentrate on shooting fish with my 105mm lens, the swell and/or visibility proved especially bad.

Between dives I made a couple of trips with Mike and Cecily into Apia, the capital of Western Samoa. Along the way I saw sweeping vistas from the mountains; lava fields; rivers, lakes and waterfalls; coconut plantations; amazing tropical plants and kilometres of palm-fringed beaches. Apia itself was somewhat less spectacular. The main drag twisted along the waterfront, interrupted by some round-abouts. Lining one side stood the town's legacy of the old days as a South Seas trading port. Large, weathered wooded buildings bearing such historical names as Burns Philp, Morris Hedstrom and J.H. Carruthers. In between, more modern but considerably less distinguished, were the expected handicrafts shops, banks, travel agencies and airline offices. Restaurants and snack bars, including a pizza place. Plus hotels, most notably the celebrated Aggie Grey's.

By the way, there has been a widespread belief that the redoubtable Aggie served as inspiration for James Michener's Bloody Mary, a speculation she did little to discourage. If you've read *Tales of the South Pacific,* you may remember that Bloody Mary was

Tonkinese (Vietnamese), an ethnicity that contributed considerably to her persona. I was told that Aggie was half German, half Samoan. Whatever, she definitely bore no physical resemblance to Michener's memorable character.

On one Apia journey I brought my gear to dive Palolo Deep, Western Samoa's first marine reserve. The official government brochure, a rather dated looking publication, said "...Palolo Deep is typical of the hundred of deeps in the Western Samoa lagoons... and is noted for the beauty of its coral formations..." Unofficially, I heard that this 'natural' hole was actually created by dredging fill for the reclaimed part of Apia. After diving it, I knew which source I believed. I saw lots of fish, some scattered outcroppings of unspectacular corals, bunches of unusual zoanthids and tons and tons of loose silt.

The government had also developed a unique interpretation of the parliamentary system. The concept of one person, one vote didn't exist in Western Samoa. In line with a tradition some 2,000 years old, local authority rested with village chiefs called *matais*. Only a matai could vote. Of course, in a way he (or she) was representative, having been selected by the villagers. Matais were all-powerful. They made all decisions affecting the village, including the determination of punishment whenever a villager broke the law. The worst sentence was banishment. Not much of a solution because banished villagers generally would end up in a slum area near Apia, with the almost inevitable result that the petty crime rate in town was on the rise. At that point, the police force, such as it was, seemed to do little more than direct rush hour traffic. The one jail rarely housed any miscreants. By the same token, I didn't find any big, golden Ms, flashing neon or prideless natives with their hands out. (However, I've read recently that one can now supplement island fare with a Big Mac, if one so chooses.)

Mike and Cecily saved the best diving till last. On the final two days, we boosted the 15-foot Avon inflatable onto the roof of the Hideaway Hiace and drove to Alipata at the far eastern end of Upolu. Weeks earlier Mike and Cecily had explored the area and spotted a saddle formation rising to within three metres of the surface and not too far from shore. For reasons that would soon become obvious, they christened the place

Action Rock. And until I showed up, only one other diver had visited it. I had the honor of being the fourth. Even before we dropped anchor, it had started to look good. Within 20 or 25 feet of the boat a turtle lay basking on the surface. About 15 feet below, a large, sleek shape that could only be a shark was cruising around. And as we got directly over one of the ridges, we could see huge shoals of fish through the clearest water yet.

Mike and I hurried over the side, descending into dense clouds of blue and yellow fusiliers, big-eyed Trevally, large batfish and an unusual silvery fish that appeared to propel itself by flapping dorsal and ventral fins from side to side. I saw a large school of Moorish idols, a few of those bizarrely marked clown triggerfish and dozens of other colorful species. At maybe 50 feet there was a fine black coral tree covered with a corklike substance and lots of crinoids. The turtle flippered by for a closer look. Then the shark. From the surface Mike and Cecily had decided that it must be a blacktip reef shark, mainly because that happened to be the type they ran into almost exclusively in these waters. I couldn't see any black tip. Anywhere. What I could see was this two-metre eating machine which seemed a bit too interested in us. Our playmate was a whaler, the same shark that over the years I'd come to distrust implicitly. Mike said later that while I was wriggling headfirst into a hole photographing a gigantic moray, the shark displayed a disconcerting interest in my waving fins.

The next day there we were again. But this time we had gone north to Apia, hung a right and crossed Mafa Pass. Going this way we passed by unspoilt villages, through magnificent tropical vegetation, up a winding mountain track with panoramic look-outs and down to what I decided must be one of the most lovely palm-fringed shorelines anywhere in the South Pacific. Once more we plunged into vast schools of fusiliers, trevally and those fish with the weird swimming stroke, plus all the others in lesser numbers. Including that selfsame shark. A well-developed sense of territoriality probably fueled its fascination with us. Either that or hunger. However, following a few passes it appeared to lose interest and disappeared into the blue haze. We continued exploring and photographing the fantastic fauna. About 80 feet down Mike pointed out

an enormous old emperor angelfish. Judging from the way its mouth had grown up and out, I'd have to guess that the fish was about as ancient as they get. On the way back up we found the turtle sleeping in a cave. Naturally, we were both out of film.

We returned to Action Rock after lunch with freshly loaded cameras for a third exhilarating dive. This time the whaler showed up as soon as we entered the water, more aggressive than ever. It tried circling us, but we kept our backs to a wall. So it began a series of figure-eight maneuvers, each one bringing the shark a little nearer. Throwing caution to the waves, I swam out toward it, shooting one photo after another. But it showed itself to be less than intimidated and continued to close...until my strobe flashed brightly enough to cause the shark to flinch, at which point it turned tail, not to be seen again. The rest of the dive, while less eventful, provided plenty of photo opportunities, and I climbed back aboard the rubber boat feeling nicely sated. And thinking, about time.

Before closing the chapter on Western Samoa, I'd like to pass on a few observations, in case you're ever in the neighborhood. The Samoans I met seemed reserved at first, due, I believe, to a refreshing lack of presumptuousness. But they warmed as you came to know them, becoming as friendly, open and charming as any people anywhere.

No matter how extravagant their girths, Samoans moved with an assured grace that would have stirred envy in Fred Astaire. And because of intermarriage with Chinese and Solomon Islanders brought in as indentured servants to work on German plantations, some Western Samoans didn't look particularly Polynesian. Many were quite stunning.

Despite 150 years of missionary zeal, quite a few Samoans still entertained some pretty primitive beliefs. They were afraid of certain animals that might possess them. And young girls had a similar fear of old women. Many islanders still wouldn't travel over the mountains at night because *umus* (ghosts) might get them.

In the Samoan family unit the youngest child has been traditionally raised as a girl (regardless of how it was born) to care for *her* parents in their older years. This is one

of those customs visitors would definitely want to be familiar with.

After awhile I decided the best way to get a good, hearty laugh from a Samoan, was by trying something basic. Like falling off a log and breaking one's neck.

Samoans, like other Polynesians, place great stock in their kava ceremony, where all, including guests, are expected to drink the mild narcotic from a communal bowl. Their communal entertainment is called a *fia fia.* I witnessed two, staged by the staff of Hideaway. Forty-five minutes of strenuous singing and dancing capped by a fire dance. While many movements might be termed suggestive, it would seem the missionaries were quite successful in getting the Samoans to clean up their acts. Consider this excerpt from *The Encyclopedia of Samoa* published in 1907, "When this skilled dance was concluded...the males who had danced exchanged girdles and commenced a variety of antics and buffoonery which formed a prelude to the closing saturnalia, of which a description is inadmissible, but which was always received with shouts of laughter and approval from the onlookers."

Virtually everyone on Upolu, both white and native, would disclaim any knowledge of such 'night dances', but I had it on good authority that they were still being performed. But not widely. And with a minimum of pr. Probably another government plot to keep tourism down.

14

THE BEST, BUT...

Once you have a few years of diving under your weight belt, you get used to hearing a couple of questions over and over. First comes, *How deep have you gone?* Then, particularly from other divers, *Where's the best diving you've ever seen?* The answer to the first is irrelevant. Several times I've had the chance to bounce down to 200 feet, just for the sake of being able to say I'd done it. But for one reason or another, I've never got around to it. I've been to 180 feet several times, and I don't even remember why. (Who kept dive logs back then?) In my experience, most of what you'd ever want to see underwater requires a descent of no more than 60-80 feet, often half that. Wrecks tend to be an exception. But in a situation where going deeper means only more of the same, you're foolish to do so. Unless you're using today's mixed gases, you just reduce your time below by using up more air and absorbing more nitrogen, at the same time increasing risks normally associated with scuba diving.

I find the answer to the second question more equivocal. Just about every dive location boasts special, even unique, attributes. From the proliferation of feather duster worms around Hat Island in Vanuatu to the wrecks all over the floor of Truk Lagoon. Or from the friendly fish in the Red Sea to the friendly nationals in the Solomon Islands. But everything considered, the best diving I've ever seen has probably been in Papua New Guinea. Only I wasn't so sure at the time.

My first impression of PNG came at the airport in Port Moresby. Rather than air-conditioning to combat the heat and humidity, they relied on more than a hundred large tropical fans hanging from the ceiling. The same type that turned inexorably above a white-suited Sidney Greenstreet in those '40s movies. Of course, it would have helped had these fans actually been revolving. But, because of a none-too-rare power failure, they were motionless. And so were all the people sitting around on the floor, forlorn. We're talking upwards of a hundred here. A lot of them were guys in their late teens or twenties, seemingly in some sort of silent contest to determine who could present the most sullen countenance to the tourists bringing foreign exchange to their country. I could picture them dragging themselves upright at night and turning into *raskols* to rape, pillage and murder persons with fairer complexions. You're right, I'm not being overly charitable, but these crimes do occur here and to ignore this aspect of PNG would be to turn a blind eye. And that, to my way of thinking, would be somewhat remiss.

Better impressions will follow, but not immediately.

We were supposed to connect with a 3:30pm flight to Madang, but it had been changed without warning - to seven o'clock that evening. Welcome once again to the Third World. At one point, naturally enough, Nature called, and I sought relief behind the door marked MEN. The stench made my nostril hairs shrivel. The urinals had overflowed to cover the cement floor, and the walls were decorated with an impressive display of excrement. I half expected it to spell out, *Welcome to Papua New Guinea, Mr Tourist*. This, in the sole public toilet for gentlemen at the international airport in the capital of the country. Fifteen years earlier, Belize had seemed far more primitive, but nowhere near as filthy.

Eventually, we climbed aboard an Air Niugini Fokker 28 with a rather dynamic color scheme. Namely; lavender, burgundy and orange seats with green, red and brown curtains. Lest any hue or shade miss out, the cabin crew's uniforms accounted for the rest of the spectrum. After an otherwise uneventful flight, we were met and transported

to Jais Aben (meaning 'resting place' and pronounced YAYSS AH-BEHN) Resort. I should point out that 'we' were Bill Mulholland and his wife-to-be, Tina, and yours truly.

Following our long, tiring journey, we were directed straight to the dining area where we were heartened to discover they'd kept the Chicken Ranchero hot and the Beaujolais cool for us. We dug in with gusto. Afterwards, they drove us and our gear to our cabins. Bill and Tina's was relatively close. Relative to mine, that is. The owners, the Christensen Research Institute, set up by the same Christensen who made a fortune with Utah Mining, seemed loath to waste any of their 22 acres. Besides a few cabins intimately clustered around the main buildings, they'd strung out another 10 or so in a long, well-spaced line. Nothing like a good walk before breakfast to enhance one's appetite. Or to get one in condition for diving. Walking back with cameras and strobe after each subventure did temper this view after awhile.

After breakfast we motored out to a deep channel optimistically dubbed Magic Passage. The vis didn't amount to much, which was probably just as well, because there didn't seem to be much to see. A second morning dive, at one of those few thousand underwater outcrops around the world called Barracuda Point, was equally disappointing. Not only were the place's namesakes nowhere to be seen, neither were the hammerheads and grey reef sharks also meant to be regular visitors. However, after lunch the aptly named Eel Gardens had me whizzing through a roll of film in no time.

The good diving continued the next day, first at Planet Rock, a sea mount a short way out into the Bismarck Sea, then near a golf course in Madang Harbour and finally on the wreck of a B-25 Mitchell Bomber. Day three started with a return trip to Magic Passage, which proved a trifle truer to its name with schools of big pelagics. Between

two dives at the charmingly named Pig Island, we went into Madang to change some money. The town appeared civilized enough until you glanced down. The sidewalks from one end of town to the other looked like Rambo had recently stormed through, automatic weapons ablazing. Then it dawned on me that the local ordinances mustn't have included any prohibitions regarding spitting. The puddles of what looked like fresh blood were actually betel nut juice. Judging from the coverage, these citizens must have been some kind of prodigious chewers.

For our fourth day of diving, we climbed aboard a three-ton flatbed truck and headed up the North Coast to the wreck of the *Boston*, a WWII freighter cum minesweeper lying in 80 to 130 feet of water. We paid the nearest village one Kona (about a buck) per head for the privilege of diving their wreck, and it turned out to be easily worth the price of admission. Then we drove to another site for some snorkeling and lunch. On our way to a third spot we got very lucky, stumbling on some villagers


making final preparations for a *sing sing* - not one of those carefully staged shows for the tourists, but the real thing. We asked permission to go along and photograph, and the village people graciously acceded. It was all very colorful and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, even the women stuck off by themselves in a nearby building. When we asked why they weren't participating, we learned it had to do with a long-standing tradition: for them, it was that time of the month, and they were deemed unclean. Following an afternoon dive we headed back, making a detour to beat our way on foot through the jungle to an overgrown WWII Japanese airfield and some well-

hidden plane remains. We also paid a visit to an incredibly tidy village with some really terrific looking kids.

After two more days of good, if unspectacular, diving, we flew back to Moresby to catch another F-28 to Hoskins on Kimbe Bay on the island of New Britain. Knowing we had a bit of time in Moresby between flights, we had arranged for a tour of the PNG capital, starting at 8:45am. Our guide rolled up about 10 o'clock. Fortunately, we still had time to check out the major tourist attractions: the highly individualistic Parliament House, primitive National Museum, an artifacts shop and a place that did quite nice silk screening. Port Moresby turned out to be larger than I'd expected, with suburban homes and shops swarming over the surrounding hills. In one otherwise attractive neighborhood a number of impressive homes sat like mini-fortresses, alienated behind high wire fences, stone walls and roving guard dogs. Affluence had its price in Papua New Guinea.

The Fokker flew full to Hoskins, where Susan and Christine met and drove us in a cloud of dust some 45 minutes to Walindi, a 500-acre working palm oil plantation owned and operated by expatriate Aussie Max Benjamin and his wife, Cecilie. The impression we were guests in their own home began immediately with welcoming drinks and fruit in the lounge, which opened on to a small pool and a large hammock. We were invited to avail ourselves of beer and wine from the fridge in the kitchen, to feel free to use the library and videos and to just generally make ourselves right at home. I found a comfortable chair with a view of some horses cooling off in the shallow water. Behind them in the misty distance, separating the sea from the sky, hulked a range of imposing volcanoes. Not exactly like home, but not hard to take either.

Max told us that the diving operation at Walindi just kind of grew out of his own love for the sport. But lately he was giving some serious consideration to becoming more involved in catering for visitors such as us. A couple of years earlier he'd been laughing, making a handsome living from exporting palm oil, which, because of its lower cost, was widely used as an alternative to other vegetable oils. But now Max had a problem, one he could hardly have foreseen. Among it various properties, palm oil happened to be excessively high in cholesterol.

The next morning we headed out in Max's larger dive boat *Ema* for Walindi's premier pair of reefs, also named for the legendary South Seas queen. But we didn't get very far. Our boat apparently shared another trait with Queen Ema, she was prone to overheating. After several unsuccessful tries to cool her down, they switched us to smaller boats for a shorter journey to Susan's Ridge. We'd soon learn that most of the nearby sites bore the names of former or present female staff members. To give you an idea, that afternoon we dived Christine's Reef and the next morning found us on

Vanessa's Reef, followed by an afternoon dive on Susan's Reef, not to be confused with Susan's Ridge.

The next morning we again set off with high hopes for North and South Ema. This time a strong southerly chop turned us back, and we dived nearby Restoiff Island. It turned out to be a good thing we didn't try the longer trip, because Ema's gear box started to ail badly on the way back, forcing us to limp in to shore where Walindi's van picked us up for another dusty ride back to the plantation.

A couple of days later we tried for North Ema once more in two small boats. When the wind and chop picked up along the way, our divemaster offered us the option of continuing on or diving a closer reef. At this point, I, for one, felt more than a little frustrated and pushed the case for pressing on. The majority eventually ruled, *North Ema or bust!* Thankfully, the winds soon died and the seas flattened. Just as well, I'm sure I wouldn't have heard the end of it had we swamped. And sunk. After anchoring, we descended quickly to 140 feet and spent a fair while exploring this celebrated dive site. It wasn't half bad. We used up the rest of our air decompressing on the shallow part of North Ema. It was stunningly beautiful. A huge variety of corals, stony and soft. Teeming schools of brightly colored reef fish. And water as clear as any I could ever remember peering through. In the parlance of the day, I was stoked. Leaving my tank in the boat, I grabbed my Nikonos-V and went right back for a snorkel. In no time I returned to the boat, reloaded and ducked under to shoot a second roll. After lunch we made the short trip to South Ema and swam down to an assemblage of very large basket sponges. Unfortunately, they were all dying, apparently under attack from some form of bacteria. A real pity when you consider the hundreds of years it took for them to reach their size. We had company during this dive, five voracious batfish who had become used to regular handouts of soggy bread. On the way back the larger motor conked out, and we had to be towed. It took forever.

Max decided to try to atone for the sins of his various craft by personally escorting us to a favorite reef he hadn't dived in four years. It could best be described as

moribund. When we left the next day, I told Max, *Relax, I won't be writing any articles about our stay at Walindi*. Never said anything about books though.

Our next stop was Rabaul, at the eastern end of New Britain. Now, Rabaul I found exciting. Not the diving - that mainly focused on a few WWII wrecks in the murky harbor waters, and Truk Lagoon does spoil one. It also wasn't all the military facilities left behind by the Japanese more than 40 years earlier - rusty war matériel has never done much for me. No, what made Rabaul so exciting for me was the chance that the whole place could blow up, taking your humble writer along with it. Rabaul sat and quivered in the middle of some heavy-duty volcanic activity. Seismic readings were taken constantly. And local authorities had even deemed the risk of a major catastrophe so probable, they relocated the families of many workers 150 miles away. They got together on weekends. Ironically, with its sparkling harbor, steamy volcanos and frangipani-lined streets, Rabaul looked rather pleasant and picturesque. But I still felt quite happy to escape after a few days. As it turned out, of course, I had a good eight years leeway. Rabaul's next major eruption didn't occur until September 1994, causing a full-scale evacuation and burying the town under layers of pumice, ash and mud.

Back in Sydney after this trip I became aware of something a bit odd that would continue to happen after each diving vacation. When people would ask, *Did you have a good holiday,* I honestly couldn't answer them. Not until I'd had all my film processed. If I averaged two or three particularly good shots to a roll, I'd had a good trip. If not, I found myself being less enthusiastic in my evaluation. Certainly, if I were to describe my time in Papua New Guinea, mentioning the airport in Moresby, all the boat trouble in Walindi and the so-so diving in Rabaul, one would be slow to conclude, *Great vacation*. But when I got back my film, I discovered I'd actually had quite a good time. In fact, when I looked at the shots from Walindi, I remembered that despite the disappointment of not getting to North or South Ema until the next to last day, the other sites ranked with some of the best I'd ever seen. The more I thought about it, and the

closer I looked at my shots, the clearer it became that this just could have been the best diving vacation I'd ever experienced.

When I compared notes with Bill, we found we were of like minds. So next year we were winging our way back to Walindi. (Tina, not being a photographer, obviously didn't realize how good a time she'd had and stayed home.) When we landed in good old Port Moresby, we had to wait 20 minutes or so in the quickly warming plane while a fellow passenger, the returning PNG governor-general, inspected the troops rather casually lined up for him. After clearing Customs and re-checking our baggage, we boarded an Air Niugini Fokker and hopped over to Lae. As we waited near the terminal for those inbound to disembark and those headed for Hoskins and Rabaul to board, I glanced out the window. I have to tell you, I was pretty surprised to see all our gear being towed away by one of those baggage trailers. I didn't waste any time in pointing out the situation to a stewardess, who sort of shrugged her shoulders and said something like, *I don't know anything about that. You'll have to ask someone else*. Who? *I don't know that either.* So we took off without our stuff and that of four other divers also headed for Walindi.

Max met us at the airport and, when he heard what had happened to our gear, immediately set some wheels in motion. The next morning a domestic carrier dropped all our gear off at Hoskins where someone from Walindi collected it and deposited right outside our cabin. I set my cameras up in a record half-hour, and we headed out to Susan's Reef, then Restoiff Island. Everything looked pretty much the way we'd left it. Magnificent.

The next morning Cecilie took us back to North Ema and back down to 140 feet. We saw a hammerhead, millions of other fish and a forest of giant gorgonia. Then I snorkeled until lunchtime. That evening we heard something that felt unreal and

rather remote. The radio reported that the stock market in New York had taken one almighty plunge, encouraging markets around the world, including Sydney, to follow suit. We realized such an event had to be significant, but on a palm oil plantation in Papua New Guinea, we had trouble coming to grips with just how significant. So we had a few more SPs (for South Pacific, the excellent PNG beer) and headed off to bed.

Over the next few days I don't know whether the diving got any better, but it certainly didn't get any worse. Except for one thing: those big basket sponges had all succumbed to whatever was eating them. It's funny, a sponge is about as basic as the animal kingdom gets, but I still experienced a sense of sadness at their demise. Just a sentimental fool, I guess.

Besides several trips to North and South Ema and return visits to all of the previous year's spots, we dived a few new locations this time around. Kimbe Island. South Bay. Gaibo Reef. Joy's Reef. Tauwali. Tele 3. Anchor Reef. And the wreck of a WWII hospital ship in shallow water near shore. (Walindi boasts some 190 surveyed sites as of this writing.) At this last spot something a bit disconcerting occurred. A bunch of us were killing time after a dive waiting (and waiting) for a New Zealand photographer and his model/wife to finish their shooting. On shore a group of teenagers watched us. One of the guys, as if in a show of manhood, yelled out, *Go home, honky bastards!* A few others yelled in support, while the rest just stared, looking uncomfortable.

Up to this point New Britain had seemed immune to the resentment against foreigners so violently manifest in Moresby, Lae and, more recently, Madang. A couple of nights before on a Saturday, Joy, one of Walindi's more attractive divemasters, had invited me to join her and her cousin, Ruth, on a trip to the San Remo, the local happening place. About 10 o'clock we set off, me in the back as Joy drove and shared a bottle of SP with Ruth. We turned down a dirt path into a parking area full of small pick-ups and a lone Range Rover. Inside, the place looked like a church hall, except for the bar with its stainless fridges and SP signs. Against one wall I could see the disco equipment: a mike, cassette player and control board. Pin-ball machines stood in one

corner. Overhead hung two strands of red, blue, green and yellow light bulbs. Louvered windows all around let out the noise as they tried to let in cooler evening air. Scattered about the large room appeared to be roughly as many whites as blacks, mixing as though they'd been friends all their lives, as, indeed, many had. Strangely, the dancing could best be described as desultory. After working up a slight sweat with Ruth, I got to talking with one black guy, who, like many of the nationals I met in PNG, had been educated in Australia. He had a good job, one that involved some travelling, particularly to Lae. And he said that even being black, he felt too afraid there to venture out after dark. He always looked forward to returning to New Britain, believing the islands generally free of racial antagonism. He reckoned the worst such problems were in the mountains. But such sentiment could simply have grown from a long-standing prejudice between the Melanesians around the coast and the highland people, a separate race. In any event, there was no denying Papua New Guinea had racial problems, and they didn't seem to be improving.

Once I'd returned home and had my film processed, I discovered I'd had another excellent vacation in Papua New Guinea. So good that ever since when other divers ask me, *Where's the best diving you've ever seen*? I've answered, *PNG, specifically Walindi*. But when it comes to recommending a visit there, I've done so only with reservations. Particularly when the questioner happened to be female. The diving was spectacular, but a succession of ineffectual governments, more concerned with holding onto power and amassing foreign income from bounteous natural resources, had allowed the racial situation to worsen. No doubt, many divers who've visited PNG, experienced perfectly adequate airline service and enjoyed fine diving oblivious to underlying problems - thanks in large part to careful resort and dive boat operators. And it would be natural that they have then returned home to extol the virtues of the country. Nevertheless, I believe certain travel agents and travel writers, clearly with vested interests, should be taken to task for ignoring the potential dangers inherent in touring this emerging Pacific island nation.

15
WHAT ELSE COULD GO WRONG?

My first trip to the Solomon Islands turned out to be one mishap after another. It wasn't as disheartening as my later Red Sea sojourn, but it was definitely more of a downer than all the diving experiences that had preceded it. I'll describe it here in some detail as a kind of object lesson.

My buddy and I arrived at the domestic terminal of Sydney's Kingsford Smith Airport in plenty of time for the Ansett flight to Brisbane, where we were connecting with a SolAir flight to Honiara, the capital of the Solomons. The ground hostess behind the counter informed us that we were even earlier than we thought, explaining that the flight time had been changed from 6:55am to 7:15. We found this news more than a little concerning. Twenty minutes might not sound like much, but our travel agent, who should have notified us of the schedule change, had skimped on the interval time between flights. There was supposed to be a minimum hour and a half for international flights, and he'd just barely given us that. Moreover, in Brisbane the distance between the domestic and international terminals necessitated a bus or cab ride. That was after waiting for and claiming baggage, something we had in abundance. I raised the question of baggage with the Ansett hostess, and she told us that there was an earlier flight to Brisbane via Tamworth on which she could put our stuff but not us. That way it would be sitting there waiting for us. With the next flight to Honiara three days away,

I consulted my buddy, and we decided to let our gear fly without us. So it disappeared with the appropriate tags along the conveyor belt and through a hole in the wall.

But I had nagging doubts. Staring at the Departures board, I couldn't see how that other plane could land in Tamworth, hang around, then take off and still beat us to Brisbane. So I went back to the counter to double check. This time the hostess seemed less sure and summoned her supervisor. Between them they determined that the Tamworth plane would indeed reach Brisbane after us. They told me I would now have to go to the baggage area, identify our gear to a clerk and have him change the tags. I went through the door they pointed to and into a huge area full of luggage bins, racks and those little trailers that transfer the cargo between planes and terminal. Naturally enough, there was baggage everywhere. Tons of it, of every description imaginable. But there was also a method to this seeming madness, and when I told one fellow in uniform what I wanted to do and what flight our stuff was meant for, he took me straight to a bin where, lo and behold, I spotted a few familiar items. At this point the clerk remembered, Hey, Flight 46 leaves for Brisbane at seven o'clock. Fifteen minutes ahead of when we were supposed to depart. He offered to tag our bags for this flight. Puzzled, I questioned him further, and he assured me this flight would absolutely, positively get there first, bar plunging into the Pacific along the way. I said okay, but I wasn't truly convinced and went right back to the counter and inquired about this mysterious Flight 46. They told me that although there used to be one, it had been cancelled. So back I went through that same door to have that same clerk put our gear on our flight. At least with all this running back and forth I didn't have to sit and fret as the seconds ticked by until boarding time.

I felt better when the plane taxied away from the terminal on time, but my relief gradually disappeared during the 15 minutes we sat on the tarmac waiting for our turn to scream into the heavens. You ever notice how time passes more slowly the more often you glance at your watch to keep track of it? About 10 minutes out from Brisbane Airport our pilot announced that the runways had been closed due to fierce electrical

storms, and we would either circle for awhile or divert to Coolangatta, about 60 miles south, back the way we'd come. At the very last minute, the airport reopened, and we landed. Rushed to collect our baggage. Sprinted for the cab rank. Stewed in a queue. Then urged the driver to set a personal record to the International Terminal.

Qantas handled all departure procedures for SolAir, and their ground staff quickly checked our baggage and directed us to the Honiara gate. And off we went at a brisk walk to the security check. After I removed my film, we stuck our carry-on stuff on the little conveyor belt, and I asked the uniformed security cop to visually check my film, something I habitually did then when travelling, particularly if the film would be subjected to multiple checks coming and going. This man seemed personally offended and told me that his machine happened to be one of the latest and wouldn't do my film any damage. I'd read a number of articles in both photo and diving magazines that warned not to be too easily mollified by signs saying film was safe, mainly because the effects of X-rays could be cumulative. I mentioned this, and the security officer retorted in his best public servant manner that they'd done tests, and his machines didn't have any detrimental effect *even on video tape*. Since he apparently couldn't grasp the distinction between video and film, I found myself unconvinced. As he reluctantly started to open my individual film boxes, a fat, officious type in the same uniform waddled up to determine just what seemed to be the trouble. I was reminded of the Hollywood version of small-town Southern sheriffs. The first guy started to go through the whole thing all over again. At this point, everything got to be just a bit too much for my buddy. Charlotte was in the travel business, and she let them know she thought they were acting somewhat unreasonably. And that our plane could be leaving without us as they stood around wasting everyone's time. Or words to that effect. The fat one puffed himself up, a move that put his shirt buttons in some danger of popping loose, and cautioned us that we should be careful how we behaved towards them. Then with a touch of menace he mentioned that they were able to arrange for our luggage to

become lost, adding that such an eventuality took place with some frequency. On this note they released us and my film.

About the same time in Queensland a high-level investigation into police corruption was making headlines daily across the country. In the end a whole slew of cops went to jail, including the police commissioner, who also had to surrender his knighthood. But as we hurried to the gate, I didn't give much thought to the threat made to us because I couldn't see how the security guys would have the time to find our stuff and misdirect it. Our flight had already started boarding, but since several other Honiara-bound passengers had been on the same flight from Sydney as we, SolAir was quite prepared to hold the plane. Now they told us.

The flight to the Solomons' main international airport, known rather informally since WWII as Henderson Field, was uneventful. Like the previous year in Papua New Guinea, we had a returning governor-general aboard, but this one seemed a more down-to-earth sort, and he managed to disembark with a trifle less pomp and ceremony. He just walked down the steps and disappeared through a door. The rest of us trooped into the customs/immigration area for processing. Once we'd all crowded in out of the scorching sun, absolutely nothing happened; no one was going anywhere. Eventually the word filtered back that a crisis had arisen, leading to much to-ing and fro-ing and consulting. Because of the last-minute confusion back in Brisbane, someone hadn't filed all the proper paperwork, and we weren't officially cleared. So we milled around waiting for the airport officials to come to grips with the situation. Terrific. Charlotte and I were connecting with another flight due to leave in about 10 minutes. We learned one option being actively considered involved putting us back aboard the plane for a return flight to Brisbane. While the bureaucrats considered, and we speculated, the baggage handlers went about doing their thing. I wandered over to the claim area to see whether I could espy our stuff. One by one I spotted our belongings, feeling particularly reassured when I saw the case containing my camera housing and strobes. However, my barrel, the one item that should have been most obvious, was

nowhere to be seen. The same sort of watertight tub used by canoeists, it held my buoyancy jacket, our regulators, fins and a lot of other vital equipment, including the rechargeable batteries for my larger strobe. Because both 510-volt dry cells I had were very tired and unlikely to continue generating flashes before we logged our final dive, those ni-cads assumed extra importance. I asked the baggage inspector to have the plane's hold checked as well as the freight that had been off-loaded. In Western Samoa I'd had to rescue the same barrel from the freight room. But in Honiara, the search turned up nothing. Meanwhile, the powers-that-were magnanimously decided to let everyone enter the country. So I went off to see someone from SolAir to report my plight and fill out the necessary forms. They promised to check with Qantas in Brisbane.

The plane to Seghe had been held, mainly because without us and two other couples on the same flight from Australia, the 10-seater would have lifted off empty. We squeezed in with our gear stowed in the rear. I looked around. This little plane must have been a real veteran. You've heard about WWI planes being held together by baling wire and chewing gum? Well, I didn't see any wire, but I found the chewing gum. It was stuck between the window and its frame, presumably to keep things from rattling too badly. Pity they must have run out of gum before they finished. For the next 70 minutes we flew over scattered islands and atolls partially masked by wispy clouds

before softly touching down on a grassy runway. Seghe. We taxied past a few houses, curious locals, some chickens and a tiny shack which served as the terminal. I told the SolAir representative there about my missing barrel so that he could hopefully help follow up. A hit or miss proposition, since the radio, his only contact with Honiara, didn't always work. He said something about cloud cover. I also explained the situation to the woman from the resort who had come to transport us to Uepi. Basically, she didn't seem to give a damn. By way of assistance she said, *You'll*

have to pick it up when you get back to Brisbane. We all climbed into a pair of motorized canoes with our gear and bounced across Marovo Lagoon, the longest in the world, for nearly an hour, getting more and more damp as we bounced. We were met at the dock by the other guests; it was something of a tradition, going down to see how saturated the new arrivals had become. Charlotte and I stowed our gear in a large cabin and returned to the main building to get better acquainted over drinks and a bounteous dinner. The dour woman's husband, a retired Australian army colonel, ran the place, and he proved more than adept at playing the genial host. The conviviality came to an end at 10 o'clock when the generators powering everything in the resort went off. We learned that come dusk you never went anywhere without a flashlight.

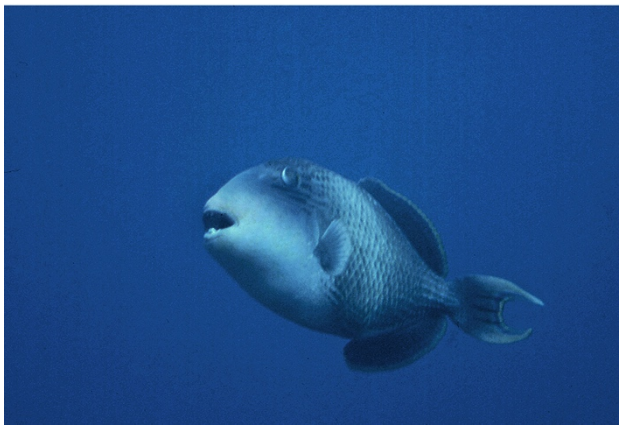
The next day dawned absolutely brilliant. And the view was surprisingly lovely. The Colonel fixed me up with some spare gear, and those of us diving took off in a couple of small motor boats around to the other side of the island. (Military history buffs might be interested to know that the water beneath us was part of The Slot.) Our destination was Landoro Reef, a fairly shallow area described in brochures as abundant with life. Although I thought it generally rather barren, I still found plenty of decent subject matter. In the afternoon heavy rain and wind turned the day bleaker. We dived 120 feet down a wall in the channel that ran between Uepi and a nearby island. When I returned to the cabin and opened my housing to change film, I noticed a couple of drops of water inside. I couldn't believe it. Leaks were something that happened to other divers; I was too careful. In some 24 years of photographing underwater, not A single drop of water had even penetrated any of my camera equipment. After a careful inspection I was unable to locate the source of the leak. I thought it might have been the film advance control, so I put an extra heavy coat of silicon on the stainless rod that passed through the housing. For dinner that night we had lobster tails. Just the tails. The bugs were so common, the cook couldn't see any sense in making us struggle to free the meat from the rest of it. It felt slightly decadent but tasted utterly delicious.

Another day, another mishap. I had a relatively new strobe, and when I turned it on before going over the side of the boat, the ready light didn't come on as it should have. It had worked fine when I tested it earlier in the cabin. As you'd expect, on this dive I saw all sorts of excellent subject matter: a crocodilefish, nice stony corals, huge fans, colorful tree corals and a picturesque cave. But in each case I would have needed the strobe light for proper exposure. Later in our cabin I opened the strobe and discovered the 300-volt battery was very hot to touch and oozing some sort of liquid. I removed it and tried a second battery. Again, no ready light, and the leaking continued even after the strobe was turned off. The strobe was useless, which meant my missing barrel with the ni-cad batteries for my other strobe became even more significant. When I opened

my camera housing, that too had leaked once again. As closely as I peered, I still couldn't be sure where the water was getting in, but I tried a few other home-remedies.

The next day I took the housing below empty to see whether I'd been able to solve the problem. Without the camera adding weight and displacing air, the housing became rather buoyant. It felt like holding on to a large balloon. At 100 feet the red warning light that detected moisture inside the housing came on, so I ascended to fiddle around some more. I took it back under that afternoon and the leaking continued, but not as badly. At twilight we went in again, and it turned out to be a marvelous subventure. I spotted a huge parrotfish asleep in its cocoon, two-inch spider crabs, several scorpionfish, three banded coral shrimp, numerous thorny oysters, red translucent-like cucumbers, solitary corals, a pair of lionfish and a trumpetfish. Wonderful subjects, but, of course, I had decided not to chance my camera.

The following day's mishap took me completely unaware. Seven of us, led by the Colonel, were leisurely exploring a shallow area of reefs called the Point. Here again, I carried my overly buoyant housing, which I continually checked for leaks. I was just swimming along, dividing my attention between the activity around the coral and my troublesome housing, generally minding my own business. Out of nowhere I felt a tremendous *THWACK* near my left temple. My immediate reaction was that I'd swum into an overhanging bit of reef. But I looked, and I wasn't even close. Then I thought someone above must have run into me with a tank. So I looked up, and there was no one there. In fact, the nearest diver was at least 20 feet away. The Colonel caught my eye and pointed to a fish, one of the many large, ugly titan triggerfish swimming erratically around this area. Then the Colonel slammed one fist into his other hand. I got the idea: I'd been blindsided by one of the most territorial and aggressive fish in the ocean.



Experienced marine aquarists will tell you never to put triggerfish, no matter how attractive (and some species are extraordinarily striking), into a tank with most other types of fish. Quite simply, the triggerfish will kill them. Later the Colonel told me how he saw this maniacal fish build up a head of steam, take aim and quite purposely slam into my head with its mouth open. Triggerfish have quite strong teeth, which they use for crunching crabs and urchins, when they're not busy chomping into skulls. My head really ached. But when I put my hand to the center of the pain, there didn't seem to be any blood. So I finished the dive.

Back at the resort's dive shop, I did find some blood. After showering and shampooing, I had the Colonel take a look at my head. He cut off a bit of hair and discovered a loose flap of skin he felt should be stitched, an operation he volunteered to perform. I'd noticed before that his hands seemed a bit shaky. I snuck another look, and they were trembling like an aspen in a heavy blow. In the nick of time he remembered that among our fellow divers we numbered a couple of trained nurses, Murray and Lisa. Murray had a good look at the triggerfish's handiwork and concluded that a few stitches were indeed in order. The resort first aid kit held the requisite instruments, so Murray set about cleaning my wound. As he did, he admitted that he'd never done any stitching before, but that he'd watched plenty of times. So I told him if he did a really good job, I had a pair of shorts that needed a button sewn on. (Which I did.) Then he completed his first-ever suture, followed almost immediately by his second-ever. From then on, following every dive Charlotte would administer four different medications. A judicious precaution because of the speed with which cuts, particularly on the head, could become septic in the tropics.

With the surgery over, a bunch of us clambered into aluminum boats to visit a few nearby villages and play tourist, maybe acquire a wood carving or two. People who know about such things regard the Solomon Islanders as the best carvers in the South Pacific. We'd been given some advice preparatory to our setting off. First and foremost, *Look for ebony*. The Solomons variety was particularly desirable but disappearing fast.

Various Asian interests had persuaded officials in Honiara that raping the country's hardwood resources, as they were doing elsewhere, was somehow in the government's best interests. From what I was told, similar arguments were used to gain fishing rights throughout the Solomons.

We also received advice about bargaining. It was expected but should only be tried in certain accents, one of which ain't Yank. Our adviser in this instance, an Australian who'd spent some time thereabouts, told how he'd once been about to buy a nice piece from a carver he knew fairly well. They'd agreed on 50 Australian dollars when a party of American tourists appeared in the village. The carver halted the deal and promised the Aussie to make another piece, even better. He then offered the carving in question to the American visitors for 800 US dollars, and one woman thought she'd wangled a marvelous bargain when she talked the carver down to US$400.

A third bit of advice involved John Wayne. Not the Duke; in the Solomons John Wayne also happened to be the name of a premier carver and a man with an international reputation. The advice was obvious enough: *Buy his stuff*.

Our first stop was a tiny island next to a much larger one. We tied up to a rickety dock and were greeted by an islander emerging from a dilapidated shack. He invited us in and we made our way past assorted flotsam, malnourished-looking dogs, scrawny chickens and several of the man's six kids. He was slight of build, seemed in his early- to mid-30s, had a knowing demeanor and a surprisingly good command of English. Figured it out by now? Our host was the legendary John Wayne, but, unfortunately, we'd timed our visit badly. He had just sent a large consignment of his most recent carvings to an exhibition in the States, so his stock was pretty depleted. I saw nothing I wanted, and the others felt the same. So we said our goodbyes and putt-putted over to the larger island, Telina. I learned later that John Wayne had grown up on this island, but when he decided to go against the long-standing custom of sharing the proceeds of his exceptional talents with his fellow villagers, they banished him to the little island.

We climbed a hill atop which sat a neat, thatch-roofed Seventh Day Adventists church. On the far slope more thatched buildings formed a village. I must say that from the admittedly limited view of Solomons life I was to have during my stay, I came away impressed. As Melanesians, they had the same racial heritage as most of the people I saw in Papua New Guinea, but the Solomon Islanders seemed more friendly and obliging. Judging from a few conversations, I imagined their education standards must have been relatively high. They maintained their villages well, keeping their surrounds neat and clean, if a trifle smoky. They also appeared healthy and well nourished. In short, I liked and admired them.

Near the bottom of the hill, close to the water, a table had been set up with carvings sitting on top and carvers standing behind. After critical perusal and one or two purchases, we were escorted to a private house, up some steps and into a sparsely furnished room with a linoleum floor upon which stood another table with carvings, these of quite good quality. I was taken by a small bust of some sort of native character carved from pinky-brown coral. I had Charlotte ask the price - I've never lost my American accent. Thirty dollars was the reply, so I asked Charlotte to offer $15. No counter offer was forthcoming, just a big smile and a shake of the head. We wandered away, out the door and down the steps. But I quite fancied that carving. Charlotte went back in with an offer of $20, and a deal was struck.

After stopping at another island for a quick lunch, we went on to a village called Chumbikopi for a show of singing and dancing. As we slid up the muddy shore, a mob of villagers wearing an incongruous mix of grass skirts, spears, shorts and wristwatches rushed us and leapt upon the boats. Achieving the desired reaction, they retreated to relish the confusion and shock generated by their enthusiastic greeting. I bet they lay awake at night grinning in anticipation of the next coming of white man. And white woman. As we recovered our equanimity, we were gifted with sun visors decorated with flowers, each apparently a one-off, then led by some waterfront properties (photo below), across a muddy field, past a volleyball net to some benches outside a school.

I looked inside the open window to see a pebbled floor, wooden benches and wall posters covering English grammar, basic mathematics, different sciences, etc. Everything appeared right up to date. Following a short introductory speech, we were

serenaded by a chorus of singers as half a dozen men pounded sticks into the ground. Next came a lemon juice refresher, which was a definite improvement on the usual kava. Then all the village men performed, followed by the women, the boys and the girls. A bit sexist but logical. Our guide from the resort offered a thank-you speech, and we all introduced ourselves: Peter, Heather, Murray, Lisa, Jennette, Ian, Kate, Charlotte, Gary. More carvings were offered for sale inside the school, then we made our way back to the boats for an uneventful return trip to Uepi. The Colonel told me he'd heard from Henderson, and there still wasn't any trace of my wayward barrel.

Over the next week I managed to more or less control the leak in the housing, partly with Yankee ingenuity, but mainly by staying fairly shallow where water pressure was reduced. Because of the dying strobe batteries, towards the end of dives I was regularly waiting as long as a minute between shots. Far from ideal, but still better than nothing. All the dives took place right around Uepi. Also somewhat limiting, but this too couldn't be helped. As with most islands in the South Pacific, the waters adjoining homes and villages belonged to the residents. To dive in their waters, you needed their permission. If they ever felt offended or slighted, permission would be denied. The same held true if a price couldn't be agreed on. It would seem successive regimes at Uepi, for one reason or another, had created a situation where they no longer had agreements with anyone in the area, so visitors had to restrict their diving to the waters immediately around the island. Fortunately, there was plenty to see. If my strobe could have recycled faster, I would have shot every roll in no time. As it was, I didn't do too badly.

The evening before we left, the Colonel put on a show. A resident pack of sharks known locally as graceful whalers lived nearby and for years had been fed kitchen scraps on a fairly regular basis. Resort staff carried a few buckets of fish heads and other delectables to the dock where they were tossed in. Almost immediately a group of sharks were vying for our leftovers. You couldn't help but marvel at how wonderfully well these fish handled their environment. A barracuda head would splash in and several torpedo shapes would launch themselves toward the surface, slit mouths gaping open to engulf the bit of fish. Soon the whalers were actually coming out of the water and grabbing the fishy morsels while still in the air. The action was fantastic - all flashing movement and crashing bodies, splashing noise and slashing teeth. Several times we watched as two sharks went after the same bit of fish and at the very last split second, through some sort of primitive understanding, one would give way. The Colonel told us how this show used to be staged with divers in the water. He went on to relate one story that had us shaking our heads.

About a year and a half earlier he'd had a group of six divers which he wanted the sharks to entertain. But one woman proved very reluctant. It took much coaxing and repeated assurances that nothing untoward would happen. Since they were dealing with whalers, I, too, might have been as sceptical as this woman. Eventually, she allowed herself to be convinced, and the Colonel led his charges into the channel to a spot under the dock and against the wall. The feeding frenzy duly commenced. Left, right and center, sharks were swallowing hunks of white fish meat. One not-terribly-discriminating whaler clamped his teeth into the bald head of one of the observers. Instantly realizing its mistake, the shark let go. But it was too late; the woman had witnessed the whole thing. When the buckets were empty, the show over and the actors retired, the Colonel brought the audience back to the surface. But a head count revealed someone was missing; no prizes for guessing who. The Colonel went back down and had a good look around. He couldn't find her, but he had a sneaking suspicion where she might be. He swam into a cave under the dock and there, braced against the far wall, eyes huge in her mask, was the reluctant lady. The Colonel beckoned to her to come out, and she shook her head emphatically. He beckoned again, and she shook her head again. So he went in and pulled her out and brought her back to the surface. There's a good chance she's never dived again. Meanwhile, the guy with the bald head was rubbing coral sand into his scalp. He explained to his querying mates that if he was going to be bitten in the head by a shark, he wanted some halfway decent scars to show for it. According to the Colonel, this guy was a doctor. Draw your own conclusions.

For those of you wondering what became of my barrel, the story continues. Back in Brisbane I checked with Qantas. No sign of it. For the next few weeks in Sydney I made numerous calls to Qantas, mainly to Brisbane. I sent them as complete a list of the contents as I could remember. As well, I sent faxes to a SolAir executive who'd also been a guest at Uepi. He had reassured me then that most missing baggage turned up within 48 hours, no matter where in the world it had flown to. He'd also said he would make sure I was reimbursed, since I wasn't insured. Later on, when he learned the

connecting flight from Sydney had been tardy, he decided that let him and SolAir off the hook. Like it was my fault. Eventually, Qantas offered me a token $500, which I refused. Meanwhile, I replaced all my missing equipment, an exercise that cost me several thousand dollars.

After about two and a half months I received a call from Qantas informing me that my barrel had been located in Keita, on the island of Bougainville, shoved into the back of a Bougainville Copper Mines company plane. They added that the only reason it had turned up at all was the plane was being sold, and someone had decided to conduct a thorough cleaning. Qantas said I could pick it up the next morning, a Saturday, about eight o'clock. So I drove the 20 miles from home to learn it hadn't made the plane but would definitely be there after 12 noon. I drove the 20 miles home. Then returned. I couldn't reclaim the barrel until I opened it in the presence of a customs official, which I did. When I unlocked the lid, everything appeared exactly as I'd packed it. So now I had two of most everything. And my ni-cad batteries.

Driving home I gave a bit more thought to that fat security officer in Brisbane and his threat. I remembered how quickly the Ansett baggage clerk had been able to find our stuff once he knew the flight. I remembered how long we'd waited while the rest of the people from the Sydney flight boarded the SolAir flight to Honiara. I remembered how I'd been told that lost luggage generally turned up within two days. And I considered just how unlikely it was that my barrel would end up hidden on a private plane on Bougainville.

And so ends this object lesson.

16
DYSENTERY & DISASTER IN THE DESERT

Ever since I was a kid and first read with wide-eyes the early exploits of pioneer diver Hans Hass and his buddies in the Red Sea, I'd wanted to see this fabled underwater wonderland for myself. It took about 35 years, but finally the opportunity presented itself. Unfortunately, all did not go the way I'd hoped. Even more disheartening, practically everything that went wrong didn't have to.

Once again it was Bill and Tina and me. We flew seven hours to Singapore, hung around Changi Airport for a couple more hours, then continued through the night to Cairo. As we neared the ancient North African city, the sky outside the windows began to redden. Looking down I could see a series of brilliant flames shooting a long way up and then, as clouds came between us, a warm glow. We'd reached the land of black gold. After 12 hours in the air, we landed and checked into the nearby Movenpick Hotel. The clock on the wall read 5 o'clock. On the counter were brochures for various tours of the surrounds. We signed up for one leaving in three hours. Talk about ambitious.

That same word could be used to describe Cairo traffic. So could *cacophonous*, *chaotic* and *deadly*. The main thoroughfares seemed to be divided into three lanes each way, but the city's resourceful drivers managed to cram in an extra two, the one by the curb being reserved for donkey carts and other slower moving vehicles. Every lane was

jammed, but never for any instant with the same combination of cars, cabs, buses, vans, trucks, Mopeds, bikes, what-have-you. Everyone cut in and out with total abandon and only an inch or two to spare. Rules of the road must have been next to non-existent. Like traffic lights: instead, they tended to rely on roundabouts, where it was every vehicle for itself.

The drivers seemed to possess an amazing ability to just miss. Though, judging from all the dents and scrapes, they had their fallible moments. They were constant and noisy exponents of their horns, which they used not as the occasional warning, *Get out of my way!* but as a means to continually inform other drivers, *I am here, look out for me*. And, as I said, they were everywhere. So too were policemen, well-armed ones. Lord (or Allah) knew their brief: there couldn't have been any such thing as a 'traffic infringement', because that's *all* there was. But I imagined if you did something flagrant enough to merit their attention, summary execution had to be a distinct possibility.

As if the traffic scene were not exhilarating enough, masses of pedestrians added further spice. Whether young or old, male or female, they all looked to be pretty agile - must have been a 'survival of the fittest' thing. They'd hop on and off buses in accordance with their own individual schedules. They'd dash across streets with little concern for the lethal machinery hurtling by them. In short, they'd risk their hides and survive by the skin of their teeth.

Where, you wonder, did they all come from? Well, roughly 16 million people called Cairo home at that point, and judging from the hundreds, maybe thousands of apartment buildings shoving their way into the brown sky, housing everyone must have been a monumental and unending problem. Trouble was, it looked like the guy in charge of urban planning went to lunch one day and never came back. Who could blame him, but what a mess he left behind. Block after block of accommodation of every description, usually from 10 to 16 floors, stuck here, there and everywhere; all seemingly in one stage or another of construction - except finished. And all looking a trifle dusty just like the rest of Cairo; not quite monochromatic but still pervasively tan.

After stopping by a couple of other hotels for more sightseers and our tour guide, a stylish Egyptian lady who asked to be called Sue, our tour bus eventually reached the Egyptian Museum. Designed in the neo-classical style by the French architect Marcel Dourgnon and built in 1900, it had been left to fall into a deplorable state of neglect. Great peelings of paint hung from the dirty walls and ceilings, crates littered the floors, and the presentations themselves were either slipshod or amateurish. Or both. Where George Bernard Shaw ruminated, *Youth is wasted on the young*, here the glory of what had been the greatest civilization of earth seemed to now be disintegrating in the hands of corrupt, uncaring and/or impotent public servants.

Our next stop was one of the many emporia near the Giza pyramids catering for tourists. Sue told us she had arranged a 'special group deal' with the owner, and he would give us the very best prices because we were her charges. I don't think anyone expected anyone else to believe this bunkum, but we all went through the motions. Next came lunch inside what purported to be a genuine Bedouin tent. I never realized those nomads had air-conditioning out in the desert: they must have toted around their own generators. Wouldn't want to be that camel. Here, as elsewhere in Egypt, I tried very hard to avoid water, ice cubes or anything uncooked to minimize my chances of severe gastric distress. Might as well have tried not hearing the horns downtown. The food tasted great though, whatever was living and multiplying like crazy inside it.

Now we were ready for that famous trio of pyramids with the nearby Sphinx. I'd heard how Cairo's suburbs had spread out, but I still found it disquieting to look between a bunch of partially completed up-market apartment blocks and see the only surviving wonder of the

world towering just behind them. Great views for some, I suppose. At least until someone built the next, closer row of apartments. Anyway, the Giza pyramids were just as dusty and crumbling as everything else, but a lot more imposing. I'd expected

the whole Great Pyramid experience, at least, to be fairly well organized; after all, this had been a world-class tourist attraction ever since the more fortunate in Europe first found the time to do something besides survive.

As a seemingly endless procession of buses disgorged camera-clickers from around the world into the large, dusty field of rubble designated as a parking area, a motley lot of camel owners importuned folks to pose atop their mangy ships of the desert with the pyramids forming a hazy backdrop. For a negotiable fee. The more enterprising even supplied cameras for those incredibly remiss visitors who neglected to bring their own. And that was it. No guides. No large cut-away illustrations and maps behind glass. No recorded messages. No anything else to make the tour more interesting or elucidating.

After a warning from Sue for those with weak hearts, bad backs or claustrophobia (much like you receive before entering Space Mountain at Disneyland), we headed for the nondescript entrance to the ancient tomb. If no one has told you what to expect, it can come as something of a surprise. No one had told me. Those early Egyptians must have been midgets. Or contortionists. The low ceiling meant you had to bend right over and then climb up a stiflingly hot tunnel inclined at about 45° until you eventually reached the room where Pharaoh Khufu had been left to spend eternity. He never made it of course; his mummified remains and the series of cases that enclosed them now rest in peace (and pieces) in the Egyptian Museum. All that's left in his pyramid is the built-in stone box into which everything else once fit, sort of like Russian dolls. If you personally have never made the tortuous climb, dear reader, please allow me to warn

you: over the decades urinating into that box has become some sort of rite of passage. It stunk to high heaven, which in a way was appropriate, I suppose.

Our next stop was the Sphinx, which Napoleon's troops did not once use for target practice as is still widely reported. The disfigurement took place sometime in the 14th or 15th century by unknown vandals who pried off the nose, which together with some pretty corrosive air pollution during more recent times left the big leonine creature with a crumbling, formless, even more enigmatic face. By the time we got there, restoration teams had scaffolding all over the place. Not a pretty picture. Our last official stop was an ancient synagogue in a remote part of town, where, according to mythology, Moses washed up. On the way back to the hotel we passed the City of the Dead, which was supposed to be off limits to everyone. However, many citizens without rent money find the old buildings a handy spot to squat. And have for generations.

A good night's sleep at this point would have come in handy, but my biological clock roused me at 2:30am. After breakfast Bill and Tina and I joined an organized tour of 12 other divers recently arrived from the States. We were all bound for Sharm el-Sheikh, on Na'ama Bay, where we would join the 80-foot *Ghazala I* (Arab for gazelle) for nine days of diving along the south-eastern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. We flew in an Egyptian Air DC-9 over sprawling rectangles of apartment blocks, followed by desert - flat at first, then hilly. Next came the sea, followed by more desert - the Sinai. After bouncing down we heaped an incredible amount of gear onto a mini-bus and headed off through mostly empty sand dunes, past a few isolated military posts and the odd sign directing us toward our destination, spelled at least three different ways. We turned toward the coast and suddenly came upon a series of modern resort complexes; so modern that construction of new ones was going on 24 hours a day. There were five hotels then, but last I heard, various developers had their sights set on 40 by the end of 1995. From what I could see, as fast as the accommodations could be built, German tourists would arrive by the jumbo load to fill them. Originally set up by Israelis during their occupation of the Sinai following the Six-Day War, the resort, when we visited,

was operated by Egyptians. At least the front people were: I was told Israelis still worked behind the scenes to keep things running reasonably smoothly.

We were transported first to the Ghazala Hotel, home of Sinai Divers, the group we were diving with. Up to this point I'd become used to modest resorts tucked away in secluded backwaters hosting maybe a dozen divers at a time. Sinai Divers was big, a tad brash and catered to many, many dozens of divers on a daily basis. All around me, coming and going, singly or in groups, both sexes and all ages, identified by the colorful gear they carried or the T-shirts they wore, were divers. Divers. And more divers. It looked like some kind of convention. I had an instant image of all their fins kicking up a massive cloud of silt that spread across entire reefs. Then I remembered we'd be on a boat, far away from these hordes. *Hah*.

After a brief welcome by Rolf Schmidt, along with Petra Roglin the owner of the entire operation, we were taken to the small wharf where *Ghazala I* was tied up. Incidentally, dive boats that put to sea for extended cruises had come to be known as live-aboards. Purpose-built for diving, *Ghazala* had three levels with six air-conditioned cabins accommodating a maximum of 16 guests, who shared four showers and toilets. She carried a crew of four or five and was powered by twin 430hp Caterpillar engines which gave her a speed of 12-14 knots.

With our gear already aboard we got underway, slowly weaving through a veritable armada of small craft that made me think someone must have placed an ad in the *Red Sea Times*:

WANTED
DIVE BOATS
ANY SIZE, ANY DESCRIPTION, ANY CONDITION
NO PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

I wondered for how long they could keep dredging up vessels to handle the passengers in all those bulging jumbos. We anchored at a nearby reef named The Tower for a check-out dive. With a few shallow coral heads rising from a sandy bottom, it looked like a pretty good spot for this sort of thing. We were greeted by a massive, typically inquisitive Napoleon wrasse with a remora, and I wondered whether I'd seen him before in 'National Geographic'. Untypically inquisitive were all the other reef fish. I had chosen a 105mm micro lens for piscine portraits on this first dive. The Red Sea had a reputation for colorful fishes, and if my library of underwater shots lacked one thing, it lacked fish photos. The only trouble here was, these fish were not only the tamest I'd ever encountered, they were also camera hogs. Unbelievably, they came *too* close. They more or less forced me to concentrate on a few sedentary subjects like a well disguised devil scorpionfish and some pretty tree corals. Even before surfacing, I had decided next dive to use my 55mm micro lens.

But I wouldn't be using my new SkinnyDipper dive computer. It had leaked due to a design fault, a not uncommon occurrence with the original model. Underwater computers were then revolutionizing the sport of scuba diving. Rather than basing decompression and residual nitrogen calculations on the deepest depth attained plus total descent and bottom time, these new dive computers took into account any time spent at shallower depths. Since most dives tend to have multi-level profiles, the computers were now allowing divers to both extend their subventures and to do more of them. Where safety-conscious resorts and dive boats used to offer two-tank dives a day, now they were providing as many as five. Needless to say, with a malfunctioning computer forcing me to resort to the old US Navy Decompression Tables, I was less than happy. I suspect similar sentiments might have been shared by others who'd experienced similar problems with their SkinnyDippers. The computer's manufacturer went out of business shortly thereafter. I passed up the night dive, opting instead for some much-needed sleep.

I mentioned earlier how I'd expected that we 15 boat-based divers would have our dive sites to ourselves. It didn't work out quite that way. What would happen, we'd arrive at a location and get in an early morning dive. But generally, by the time we'd finished breakfast, other boats from Na'ama Bay would show up and dump their amphibious cargo all over the place. By mid-morning it would be just like at the hotel: divers, divers and more divers. Apparently, all the best spots weren't all that far from Sharm el-Sheikh.

My camera problems began on the third day of diving. After breakfast I took my Nikonos-V with a 15mm lens down to the wreck of the *Dunraven*, lying upside down in about 100' of water. I'd taken only four or five shots when my strobe refused to fire. Back aboard *Ghazala* I discovered some drops of water in the camera's film compartment. After lunch I took my housed Nikon to a nearby reef and shot a variety of fish. When I opened the housing later, I found water again, but not too much. It seemed to be coming in through the focus control. Although the leak didn't seem too serious, I did begin to think I should have had someone knowledgeable about these things look at the housing after the Solomons trip the year before. Meanwhile, I heavily lubricated the stainless control rod with silicon and hoped for the best.

Cruising between locations, we never ventured too far from shore. About all there was to see in that direction was a lot of sand under a lot of sandy colored sky. Occasionally a scubby tree, a military outpost or a few campers provided relief from the bleak tableau. But just below the surface you could see every color going and an incredible variety of life. Staring out over the Sinai, I couldn't help but remember that about 12 months earlier, above reefs populated with a similar magnificence, I'd been looking at mangroves and lush tropical rain forest. Weird, huh?

We finally made it to the much-vaunted Ras Muhammad on our fifth day of diving. Famed ichthyologist Dr Eugenie Clark was once quoted as saying, *If I could only dive in one place in the world, I would choose Ras Muhammad*. Deciding some wide-angle shots might be appropriate, I switched my 15mm lens to the Nikonos III. And, because this earlier model didn't have a built-in light meter, I dug one out from my gear box. But for some reason, it wouldn't work; so I went in without it. Then after a couple of shots I noticed that the camera's film counter wasn't revolving. After breakfast I tried the same setup at nearby Shark Reef and this time discovered that the film advance seemed to be slipping. While we were below, an Egyptian patrol boat came along side so an official could board us to peruse all our passports. Ras Muhammad, besides being a mecca for divers, still qualified as a strategically sensitive area. On the remaining two dives that day I returned to using the housed Nikon.

Ever since we'd left Cairo, I'd been experiencing intestinal problems. And although I tried Pepto Bismol, which usually had the desired effect, and Lomotil, which in the past I'd come to rely on as instant cement, I was still spending about as much time in the head as underwater. But this was only a mild discomfort compared to the way I was about to feel. After dropping off a few divers who wanted to climb Mt Sinai, we moored at a spot called The Far Garden, where I stayed fairly shallow to shoot a 10th roll with the Nikon. After lunch I hopped aboard the Zodiac for a short ride to The Near Garden. While taking shots of my first-ever blue-spotted stingray, the Nikon's film advance started to resist. I turned the housing around to look inside and was actually shocked to see it about one-third full of water. Holding it upright to hopefully minimize the damage, I began an immediate ascent. On the way up I was already thinking: *All those years of waiting, all that money, all that distance, all these incredibly tame fish, and I was all out of cameras*. When I surfaced, the Zodiac looked like it was on the way back to *Ghazala*, so I swam to shore, emptied the housing, rewound the film and waited. I felt sick. We had seven more days of diving. At least 20 more rolls of film, some 720 chances to get great photographs. What a waste. Back aboard *Ghazala*, I put my housing in one bucket of

fresh water, then took my Nikon F apart and put it and the 55mm micro lens in another bucket. Such a sad sight; the camera that had served me so well for 25 years, lying there helpless. After several rinses, we put the housing, camera and lens in the engine room to let the extreme heat dry everything. Over the years any number of remedies have been put forward for drowned cameras, and this was the latest.

I decided to have a couple of beers that night. Now this amounted to nothing short of sheer desperation. Compared to how vile Beliken tasted at Glovers Reef, the local Egyptian brew, Stella, was only slightly more palatable. As far as we could find out, the only alien ale allowed in by Egyptian authorities was Heineken, and it was both rare and extremely expensive. I strongly suspected that Stella's brew master was a devout Muslim with a not-terribly-well-hidden agenda: *Convert the infidels to the joys of abstension by providing alcoholic refreshment akin to camel piss*. He came close.

The next day we dived two of three noted reefs in the Strait of Tiran: Jackson and Woodhouse. One of my fellow photographers, a Silver Spring (Maryland) surgeon and veteran diver named Dwight Smith, generously offered me the use of an old Nikonos III he carried as a backup. I was both gratified and much indebted. But while I did use it for a few dives, I didn't feel all that comfortable and went back to my Nikonos III. It sort of worked: the film counter wasn't turning, but the film seemed to be advancing. After three more days of excellent diving and numerous fine photo opportunities, *Ghazala I* returned to Sharm, off-loaded us and made ready to receive her next guests.

Bill and Tina and I bade farewell to the 12 American divers and checked into the Ghazala Hotel for another four days of diving with Sinai Divers. Only two years old, the place was already falling apart. My phone didn't work. The power and, thus, the air-conditioning were prone to suddenly dying. The lock on the balcony door was next to useless. The walls were badly stained. The mattress had no springs. The cupboard was a joke. The stool in front of the dresser was too large to fit underneath, and the mirror sat too low. The tiny shower didn't drain properly, and the wall was coming away. Plus, the toilet paper holder was cleverly positioned right next to the shower.

This led to continually soggy rolls, which, for reasons alluded to earlier, proved to be more than an occasional inconvenience.

Our boat was the *Ghazala II*, probably the pick of Na'ama armada. Our fellow divers were, in the main, some of those Germans from the jumbos. We went to the same old sites we'd visited aboard the original *Ghazala*, and they were just as marvelous as before. But this time I also had the chance to watch Germans dive. They swam in formation behind their guide, Helmet, a good 20 yards away from the reef and about as fast as their fiercely fluttering fins could propel them. Meanwhile, Bill and Tina and I dawdled behind, establishing a brief rapport with the fish and peering into the myriad cracks and crevices to enjoy some of the most rewarding aspects of this sport. Hard to figure the appeal for our distant companions.

The highlight of these daytrips came when I sighted a monstrous moray eel swimming around in broad daylight only 10 feet beneath the surface. Normally, morays only prey at night, but this guy must have figured that with a length somewhere around 10-12 feet, he was so big and strong that no one would mess with him. So I chased after him trying to get a shot. Obviously nonplussed, he disappeared into a hole in a large coral head. I hunted about and managed to find parts of him showing in holes all around the bommie, but nothing worth photographing.

The low light came when my Nikonos finally refused to work, and I decided to forego the final day's dive, whatever the location. It turned out to be, naturally enough, Ras Muhammad.

Before we could fly out from the Sinai, every single piece of luggage had to undergo examination by hand. One of the inspectors was an Egyptian army colonel. From his surly demeanor, I gathered that attending to such trivial chores probably wasn't the result of a promotion or any other recognition of outstanding service. He became strangely suspicious of my can of Edge shaving gel. To check it, he squirted some on a handy wall. When it started to foam, he jumped about a foot. Bill and Tina and I and a few other witnesses struggled to keep straight faces. To save his face, he looked about

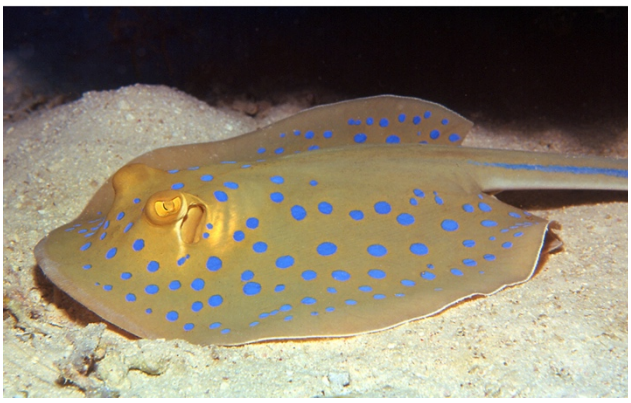
and spotted some well-dressed business types outside heading directly from their private plane to a large Mercedes on the tarmac, clearly eschewing customs. He moved quickly out a door to intercept them, and through the window we could see him vigorously attacking their self-importance. I've no idea how politically astute his harangue might have been, but it seemed to make him feel better. At least for the time being. It occurred to me that a similar display in the past could have resulted in his then-current duty. And I wondered where he could go from there. Mildly interesting sidenote: one of the first jobs I ever had in advertising in New York was helping launch Edge.

Back in Cairo, we stayed in the Marriott, part of which used to be King Farouk's palace. A new addition had brought the total number of rooms to 1,200. It was most grand. We signed up for two more tours of local tourist attractions. The first, that evening, took us to a gaudy boat restaurant where a listless belly dancer bumped and ground as we plowed up and down the Nile - Cairo under lights and away from the traffic looked much more appealing. The food was on a par with the dancing. Next morning we headed to the original stepped pyramid at Memphis - and you thought Graceland the only significant Memphis edifice. Then back to Giza to marvel at a giant cedar barge which had been buried with the pharoah - that fellow had some kind of ego. Our last attraction was the long running (and unchanged) night-time sound and light show - hard to imagine a script more trite and hackneyed and a presentation more boring and uninspired. I found my interest divided between an unidentified VIP I spotted with an armed escort and the unrelenting sound show put on by a pack of stray dogs.

On the way back to Sydney I took advantage of a special overnight program sponsored by several hotels in Singapore. The idea was simple enough: for a fantastically reasonable price, one could stay in a top hotel - mine had been selected the best in the world by some British travel magazine - and spend a few hours killing time before flying on. You probably wouldn't be surprised to learn that strategically placed beneath my hotel was a three-level shopping centre linked to two other hotels participating in the lay-over scheme. You don't suppose all those shops combined to subsidize our bargain-rate hotel rooms? Nah.

Comparing Cairo and Singapore was a bit like comparing black and white, off and on, push and pull. Where Cairo was ancient, filthy, noisy and utterly chaotic, Singapore was brand, spanking new, neat and tidy, nice and quiet and impeccably organized. Put another way, where Cairo was the scruffy, old, flatulent uncle who could never shut up, Singapore personified the anal retentive to end all anal-retentives. They really worked at it too. Drop a cigarette butt on the street and you could cop a $250 fine. Neglect to flush the urinal in a public toilet: same thing. The Singapore that Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene used to write about had soul. But that kind of earthiness apparently embarrassed former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. So he performed a kind of exorcism. Quaint old, Chinese and colonial, wooden and tile buildings were razed to be replaced by sterile towers of concrete and glass surrounded by green lawns and tropical plants. But things weren't just sterile, they were also incredibly practical. For example, the wide, dead-straight road leading from the airport has removable street lights in case an emergency runway is ever needed. In the end, I thought it easy to respect Singapore, but I doubted whether I'd ever be able to develop any sort of love affair with the place.

Once back in Sydney I added up the toll: one drowned computer, one broken light meter, one leaking Nikonos-V, one leaking Nikonos III, one drowned housing, one drowned Nikon F w/lens and one very empty bank account. Plus, virtually all the photos taken with the Nikonos III were next to useless. Ditto with the Nikonos-V.



The Nikon F had performed well as usual, but I'd only put a bit over 10 rolls through it. Surprisingly, although the last roll featuring the stingray had some scratches and water stains, I was able to salvage a couple of shots.

Of course, if I'd had the foresight to thoroughly check out all this equipment before I left, I could have saved all the grief. Another object lesson.

17
REVELATION

Following the Red Sea fiasco, I sent my housing to California and took my poor old Nikon F and the two Nikonos cameras to that same Sydney specialist that supposedly had fixed the Nikonos-V before. The technicians in the States diagnosed the cause of the housing leak as corrosion around the focus gear, which they immediately fixed for nothing. Repairing the three cameras took much longer and cost plenty. Over the next year or so, I found myself devoid of any real enthusiasm for diving. I'd somehow accumulated six weeks of vacation time, so Charlotte and I flew to the States to enjoy the fall foliage in New England; not to mention Utah, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona and California. The following year, still with no overwhelming yearning to dive, I used three-weeks vacation time to work with a builder, adding a spacious, 15-foot-high deck to the back of my house.

Four years after my ill-fated Red Sea trip, the old urges finally got to me again. After weighing up several possible destinations, I decided on two popular islands in Micronesia: Yap and Palau. Since Continental Airlines would be ending their service from Sydney to Guam in a couple of weeks, the timing seemed perfect. I dug out my cameras. The Nikon F that I used in the housing smelled moldy. The film advance on the Nikonos-V wouldn't budge. And the one on the Nikonos III skipped frames. Since I had no reason to expect the repairer would do the work properly this time either,

I took the three cameras elsewhere and paid to have the same faults rectified all over again. The F, with corrosion and overly lubricated parts, had to be practically rebuilt, which cost more than twice what I originally paid for the camera itself. Mind you, that was in 1965. I tested the empty housing to about 100 feet with no signs of any leak. The newly repaired Nikonos-V also seemed all right at depth, but the III didn't come back in time for any testing. I bought fresh 510-volt batteries for my larger strobe and figured I was in pretty good shape.

In line with the accepted advice on shooting Yap's famed manta rays, I made my first dive with the super-wide 15mm lens on the Nikonos-V. Aside from the three mantas we saw proving too shy for decent photos, everything else seemed to be going fine. Then, almost inevitably, my strobe started to act up, working only intermittently. Back in my room at the Manta Ray Bay Hotel I worked out that the problem actually lay with the camera: it was leaking. One down. Five days later at Peleliu Corner in Palau while using the Nikonos III for the first time, the film advance started to resist advancing, finally jamming. Something must have leaked, because when I looked into my 15mm lens, I saw this greenish-yellow water inside. Two down.

Happily, I encountered no mechanical problems with the housing or the reconditioned Nikon F. However, while hanging off Palau's Blue Corner, one of the most renowned underwater sites in the world for big pelagics and grey reef sharks, I experienced something of a revelation. Because of my personal aversion to shooting divers, I had worked my way to the end of the line of other folks in our group, then down another 20 feet. Sharks cruised everywhere - in front of me, above, below and, since I had moved out away from the wall, behind me. I don't think I'd ever seen so much action. At one point I heard a guide yelling through his mouthpiece, glanced up

and saw him pointing excitedly downward. So I descended to about 100 feet and there, another 20 feet below, was the first whale shark I'd ever seen. Earlier, I'd decided that wide-angle lenses, while often recommended for the sharks at the Blue Corner, wouldn't bring the action close enough. So I had on my next best option, a 55mm micro. Although I feel I'd made the right choice for shooting the grey reef sharks, this lens was next to useless for the 35-foot-long behemoth below me. After a lingering, rueful look, I returned to its smaller cousins. The trouble with photographing them was that I had to compose, focus, judge distance and select an f/stop, all in a second or two. Even when I panned, if the subject shark moved a foot closer or further away, I immediately had to reset my aperture. Needless to say, these sharks had a habit of never staying in the same place. It wasn't easy.

Reflecting in the boat afterwards, I started to seriously consider a more modern set-up: my revelation. Auto-focus, automatic film advance and a through-the-lens strobe started to make a lot of sense. But this meant upgrading to a new camera, new lenses, new housing and, eventually, new strobes. An expensive proposition in a recession. In time, however, I managed to put aside enough money to buy a Nikon N8008s camera with 60mm and 105mm auto-focus micro lenses and a 24-50mm auto-focus zoom lens. Plus an Aqua Vision Systems housing with various gears, ports and extension rings to accommodate everything.

For years I'd resisted this sort of change, pooh-poohing the later generations of automatic cameras as full of unnecessary features no real photographer would ever want to use. Boy, had I been misguided. Right after the bushfires that ravaged Sydney in January 1994 (and forced my evacuation from home), I decided to put my new 8008 through its paces to record the devastation. The auto-focus not only worked and worked quickly, it also possessed sharper eyesight than I did. The metering system, while not infallible, proved much more sophisticated than those I'd worked with up till then. The two micro lenses were fast too, affording me more exposure options. Using the new equipment took a bit of getting used to, but, because the designers made

everything pretty logical, I got the hang of it in no time. Aside from a reflexive thumb movement where the film advance lever should have been, I felt reasonably competent. More than that, I was soon having more fun photographing than I'd had in a long time. Instead of concerning myself with all the mechanical decisions necessary with manual cameras, now I could concentrate mainly on making photographs. I'd scoffed when reading this sort of comment in ads and articles, but I'd been wrong.

18
My Luck Finally Changes

As soon as I had the housing, I journeyed down to Jervis Bay for four check-out dives, followed by another couple a few weeks later off the Northern Beaches. Everything worked, even the zoom lens. I could feel the old enthusiasm flowing back. A few weeks later, Bill Mulholland and I, along with Rob Henderson, one of Sydney's most gifted stills photographers, were on our way to the Solomon Islands for nine days on an up-market live-aboard called MV *Bilikiki*.

Besides a new camera and a new buddy, one other significant change marked this return trip. In preparing for past visits to Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and the Solomons, I'd heeded health authorities who recommended taking both Chloroquin and Maloprin to help avoid malaria. The regimen involved taking the pills once a week two weeks before leaving, each week during your stay, then for four weeks after returning home. Unfortunately, in the past few years the disease had developed some new strains that were proving resistant to these and a couple of other popular antimalarials. Moreover, I'd been advised Maloprin could exhibit several rather nasty side effects, which convinced some people that risking malaria was the lesser of two evils. In any event, the very latest advice recommended preventative measures from dusk to dawn when the carrier anopheline mosquito came out to suck blood. If we couldn't avoid being abroad at this time, we should wear an insect repellent, long-

sleeve shirts, long pants and socks. And instead of antimalarials, we should now take antibiotic tablets, starting two days before, then each day throughout the stay and continuing every day for four weeks after leaving. As I understood it, the parasite eggs take about 28 days to develop, hence the continuing treatment. A second bit of advice from the health people warned that the Solomons had one of the most virulent strains of malaria anywhere on the tropical planet. A few years earlier a couple well-traveled in the region and well-known in Australian diving circles contracted cerebral malaria after visiting the Solomons. He pulled through, but she died in the hospital. Tragically, he felt so depressed about losing her, he eventually committed suicide. I knew them both from South Pacific Divers.

When we landed at Henderson Field, I felt like time had stood still. Nothing I could see had changed in the past six years. Except this time all my luggage turned up, possibly because I'd let them X-ray my film in Brisbane. Possibly. Rick Belmare, a partner in Bilikiki Cruises, met us and helped us clear customs. He also offered us a special deal. A couple of days before we left Sydney, SolAir had apparently sold a plane or given up its lease or something - details were sketchy. This necessitated an immediate change in flight schedules, which meant that instead of flying back to Sydney on a Friday, we now had to hang around Honiara until that Sunday. Rick's deal was an extra day's diving aboard *Bilikiki* for half the going rate. Bill, Rob and I were already making out pretty well, having been upgraded from the more economically priced MV *Spirit of Solomons* with no increase in cost. We would learn later that both boats were virtually the same, had the same facilities and visited the same spots. The only major difference, they had originally marketed *Spirit of Solomons* to nature and culture lovers, adventurers and/or Australian divers, while directing the advertising for *Bilikiki* to the more affluent American diving market. We weren't about to look this particular gift horse in the mouth and readily agreed. (With the emphasis on *greed*.)

SolAir's revised schedule also caused us to miss the boat by a day. But our travel agent had arranged for us to fly in another one of those twin-engine, 10-seater planes

to a small island in the Russells group where we'd catch up with *Bilikiki*. The half-hour flight over scattered islands and atolls was pleasant and the landing on the overgrown strip at Yandina quite smooth. There should be more grassy runways. We were then driven to a dock where a couple of *Bilikiki* crewmen waited to transfer us in a small aluminum runabout. We stepped aboard the 121-foot, 219-ton motor yacht just as everyone was finishing their third dive of the day. We were welcomed and assigned cabins by Jim Light and Kay Nevin, the couple who handled the diving side of the cruise, with Kay also running the galley. There were 10 staterooms in all, and we three each had one to ourselves. As I started down the ladder, the air-conditioning hit me like an iceberg. Because of the rather extreme temperature differences, we were advised to keep our camera gear topside to avoid condensation. With our stuff stowed, we went back up for a briefing on the house rules from Jim and Kay. They didn't want us to take any shells dead or alive, either the Mollusca kind or the World War II sort. We weren't to upset any creatures however fantastic a shot might result from a bit of stage managing. And so on and so forth. As they added more well-intended restrictions, I felt myself turning into an old-time diver. But I resisted the temptation to inform these young whippersnappers that this was *my* sport, had been for 40 years, and they should consider themselves damn fortunate I was letting them even participate. It wasn't that what they said generally didn't make sense, it was just that I'd started being a conservationist probably before they'd started diving. While we're on this subject, I have to tell you, I think many in the green movement go overboard. I mean, just how much harm can be done by taking a few dead sea shells? How many hermit crabs are going to homeless? Anyway, as the cruise progressed, I found Jim and Kay to be good people, fine divers and, in Jim's case, quite a talented photographer. Kay, an experienced photographer herself, was also a wonderful cook.

Since the boat couldn't anchor at many of the dive sites, but would have to either put down nearby or hold position by keeping the engine just barely ticking over, we would do most of our diving from specially designed, 21-foot dive tenders. The system

worked out really well. The two small boats would ferry us to a site never more than five minutes away, we'd fall in, complete our subventure, and the moment we'd surface, one of the boats would come to pick us up and return us to the mother ship. Even if only one of us was ready to return. And even if we went through a roll of film in 10 minutes. Or stayed shallow and remained below well over an hour. The crew would also load and unload our tanks and camera equipment. I was impressed at how well trained they appeared in terms of handing our rather delicate photographic stuff. After each dive, cameras and computers went into one of two large fresh water tanks reserved for them. We'd dip our other gear in another fresh water tank, then hop under a hot shower before selecting a freshly laundered towel from a handy stack. They even provided smaller towels for the camera gear. All terribly, terribly civilized and a long, long way from *Laughing Bird* and *Little Polyp.*

Our fellow divers included a tour group of underwater photographers comprised of four couples - one pair from England and the other three from the States; a former veteran of both the German and US armies; plus their tour leader, Stephen Frink. Among the three American couples were a mature-age law student studying for the bar, a pharmacologist and three doctors - you get the feeling medicos don't do anything but go on distant dive trips or tend their vineyards. Another two divers who'd also been upgraded from *Spirit of Solomons* completed the guest list. They hailed from Honolulu where both worked as tattoo artists along infamous Hotel Street. Counting Jim and Kay, 15 divers in all, with about as many crew; but the boat was so spacious, we could easily find a semi-private spot without resorting to hiding in a cabin. On either of the two large sundecks, in the lounge, on the dive deck or in the photo room. Dive resorts and live-aboards had begun offering E-6 slide processing some years earlier, but this was the first time I'd encountered it. And because of all the new gear I would be experimenting with, I certainly appreciated the opportunity to see some quick results so that I could immediately make any adjustments necessary. Those

shooting video could also view their efforts right away on the video equipment in the lounge.

Over the next 10 days we would dive sites in the Russell Islands, Marovo Lagoon, the Florida Islands and around a solitary coral atoll called Mary Island. Wherever we found ourselves, we would adhere pretty much to a daily schedule which began with an 8 o'clock dive after breakfast, another one at 11, a 2 o'clock dive after lunch, a fourth dive at five and, for those still up for it, a night dive after dinner. The first drink of the day, incidentally, automatically ended your diving until the next day.

The locations had great names, like: Njanjelakelau Island, Kokoana Passage, Losiolen Reef, Mbulo Wall, Matui Reef, Nembelau Rock, Toatalave Island, Hanesavo Point, Rogers Reef (after the local village chief), Tulaghi Switzer (after who knows who) and, or course, the ever-popular Barracuda Point.

Each spot seemed to have at least one specific attraction going for it. There was, indeed, a huge school of barracuda at Barracuda Point, and even more big jacks. Lionfish Reef had lionfish. And Hawkfish Reef, hawkfish. Speaking of which, it was while photographing a longnose hawkfish here that I discovered a shortcoming of the camera's auto-focus. Many of these highly photogenic fish liked to hide among the branches of black coral trees, but unfortunately, the thin strands of coral in the foreground confused the camera, and I found it next to impossible to focus on the fish, a pity because the shot could have been a particularly fine one. I came close, but I never got what I was after.

Lagoon Point near Mbulo Island could be relied on for a resident leaf scorpionfish: we actually saw two. And Losiloen Reef boasted a ribbon eel, which we never saw, and tiny coral hermit crabs, which lived in massive stony corals not far from the surface. Shooting these colorful crustacea no bigger than your thumbnail 1:1 with auto-focus and the 105mm lens in a bit of swell proved something of a challenge. Unlike other hermit crabs whose mobile homes allow them to walk and stalk food, these much smaller brethren are basically sedentary and rely on two long feelers with micro

filaments to snare passing plankton. Getting these feathery antennae and the crab's eyes in focus with a depth of field amounting to only about a quarter-inch while the swell shoved me about called for a fair bit of concentration. As with the hawkfish, I think I would have preferred a manual setting for this job.

On the last day, at a spot called Sandfly Passage in the Floridas, I saw my first tropical cuttlefish and was unimpressed. The ones back in Sydney were not only bigger and more colorful, but far more engaging. On the same dive some sharp-eyed individual spotted a large greenish-brown stonefish nestled among a bunch of coral. So, as had happened earlier with its distant relation, the leaf fish, we all politely lined up to await a turn to take a few shots of it. I remarked to Steve afterwards that this stonefish was only the second I'd ever seen, and he replied that it was his first. I thought that rather remarkable: there wouldn't be a lot of divers, if any, who have made more dives in more different exotic locations than Stephen Frink.

Apart from prevalent overcast and occasional rain, which particularly galled those looking for wide-angle shots, and the absence of anything big - Bill, Rob and I missed a saltwater crocodile in a cave on the first day because we were still in transit, the diving rated pretty good overall. Certainly, I was satisfied. I found plenty of subject matter, some affording me quite nice shots. The new camera and lenses in conjunction with the new housing allowed me more latitude than I'd ever enjoyed before. While the zoom has plenty of potential, I found more opportunities for macro work. Most of our fellow divers were very experienced and competent, which meant there was no reason to avoid the more challenging dives. The sites offered variety. The food was much better than expected. The cabins were roomy, if a trifle chilly. We had no shortage of water. The crew couldn't seem to stop helping. I mean, what more could you want?

After *Bilikiki* tied up in Honiara early Saturday morning, Bill, Rob and I said our farewells to the others and checked into the Mendana Hotel. Then spent the rest of the day seeing the sights, checking out handicrafts shops and dining out that evening in

a new restaurant co-owned and operated by that same SolAir executive who'd promised to look after me six years earlier. When we got back to the hotel after dinner, I turned on the TV to find out what had been going on in the world: we hadn't seen or heard a newscast since leaving Sydney. The reception was pretty poor, but the story monopolizing airtime came as something of a shock. The first image I managed to make out showed the Los Angeles district attorney and chief of police standing on some steps holding a press conference. From what they said, I gathered, implausible as it then sounded, that everyone's hero OJ Simpson had been arrested for murdering his wife and a friend. I couldn't help thinking, *that'll make an interesting court case*.

On Sunday morning we took an organized tour of World War II battlefields. Along the way we passed a couple of police vehicles belonging to the Australian-trained group responsible for defusing old bombs and ammunition. They expect the job to take another 50 years. As the sun beat down, we walked along Red Beach where US Marines landed on August 7, 1942, to capture a nearly completed Japanese airfield, which would have come in pretty handy for attacking Allied bases in other nearby island groups as well as cutting off supplies to Australia. Picking up where the Japanese left off, the Marines soon finished the airfield and named it in remembrance of Lt Col Lofton Henderson, a Marine dive bomber pilot who died during the Battle of Midway.

Further down the beach we saw where a nighttime invasion force of a thousand Japanese, bent on retaking the airfield, was decimated by waiting Marines in the misnamed Battle of the Tenaru River. We stood on Bloody Ridge (left) where Marine Lt Col Merritt 'Red Mike' Edson and his men repulsed another bunch of overconfident Japanese with designs on the airfield that had been taken from them (an episode obviously not unknown to James Jones, author of twice-filmed *The Thin Red Line*). We visited a few other sites, a modest museum and

finally the $1.5 million Skyline Ridge War Memorial overlooking Honiara. A series of marble slabs here lists the names of those who lost their lives in the Solomons 50 years earlier. Twenty-four hours later I was at my desk in Sydney working on a Pizza Hut commercial.

EPILOGUE

The revelation that spurred me to modernize my equipment has led, in turn, to a further revelation. I believe photography underwater is about to evolve, for several pretty understandable reasons. First, we'll be seeing a smaller percentage of divers buying still cameras: more and more are turning to videos, partly because the camcorders tend to be about the same price as good 35mm cameras, and housings can be a lot cheaper. Video set-ups are also more compact. They're easier to operate. And, because of all the movement underwater, they are probably far more appropriate for capturing the essence of the silent world. Even so, I won't be switching.

I see it as a question of control. Stills photography lets one be selective and thus bring back a more personal interpretation of that other world and its various denizens. However, for the past 10 years or so, I've seen very little new in the work of most diving photographers. Mainly, just copies of shots made by David Doubilet, Chris Newbert and a few others. While in the future we may see fewer dedicated stills photographers carting all their gear around the world, we should see much better results. Photographs that work, for all the same reasons that make great photographs above the surface work.

Much earlier in this book I talked about how challenging early photographers found it to take successful photos beneath the surface. First, everything was so new and different; we knew so little about the physical properties of the underwater world. We

had to learn about refraction and distortion. The pervasiveness of blue. Or the way many red and a few green subjects absorbed light. Cope with movement. And leaks.

We had to overcome limitations of our equipment. Cameras without SLR viewing. Housings with fixed ports, either flat or domed. Strobes with harsh lighting. We had to keep experimenting. Trying different films and filters Lenses and light sources.

Searching out the most colorful, unusual or photogenic subject matter meant we had to learn all over again how to look. In the early days often our first priority was simply to record the existence of a fish or invertebrate, or at the very least to make sure we had a shot in our own personal photo libraries. So we read books, watched documentaries and kept on diving and shooting. Inevitably, in time we have learned much, much more about the creatures below. Now we can anticipate behavior, and, thus, take a bit of time to set up photo opportunities.

Now we're ready.

It's taken me a lot of years to get around to doing this book. In the meantime, some of the work I thought I was pioneering turned up in books by other photographers. Not all that unexpected I suppose, but it did gall me the first time I set eyes on one particular book during a stay at Walindi. Up to that point, I thought I was blazing new trails, especially in abstract micro work. And there were some absolutely wonderful examples of my pioneering efforts in someone else's book. Anyway, I'm convinced underwater photography is about to move in a new direction. And I have every intention of being among the first to bring back examples of it. With any luck, the next book won't take quite so long.

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